FABIAN REVIEW

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How Labour can put the NHS back on track, with Alfred Slade, Mark Sculpher, Paulette Hamilton MP, Zack Hassan, Beccy Cooper MP and Sara Hyde ***p10***

Wes Streeting looks to the future ***p17*** */ Claire Ainsley on lessons from the US* ***p22***

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FABIAN REVIEW

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Leader

Joe Dromey **4** Labour's plan to fix the NHS

Shortcuts

Kirith Entwistle MP **5** Council housing
Aoife Donaghy **5** AI in the civil service
Ruth Ehrlich **6** Reforming the ECHR
Vittorio Trevitt **7** The Ghanaian general election
Romilly Greenhill **8** The effect of aid cuts
Sarah Russell MP **9** Australian home working

Cover story

Alfred Slade **10** Public health and populism
Mark Sculpher **12** Drug pricing
Paulette Hamilton MP **13** Primary and community care
Zack Hassan **14** Public ownership
Beccy Cooper MP **15** Sexual health
Sara Hyde **16** Health and local government

Interview

Iggy Wood **17** Wes Streeting on the 10-year plan

Feature

Michael Wheeler MP **20** Zero-hours contracts
Claire Ainsley **22** Lessons from America
David Lawrence **24** Growth and the environment
Anna Ganley **27** AI and authors
Luke Murphy MP **28** Living standards

Culture

Miles Ward **29** Books: Mark Perryman's The Starmer Symptom
Bradley Young **30** Music: Sam Fender's People Watching

Fabian Society section

31 The Fabian quiz
31 Listings

FABIAN SOCIETY

FABIAN REVIEW
Fabian Review is the quarterly journal of the Fabian Society. Like all publications of the Fabian Society, it represents not the collective view of the society, but only the views of the individual writers. The responsibility of the society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

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Picture of health

We must show the public that the NHS can be fixed, writes *Joe Dromey*

As Nye Bevan put it, no society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means. Bevan – who founded the National Health Service in the great postwar Labour government – saw it as 'a piece of real socialism': something that served an essential function, but also represented our values put into action, and our commitment to one another.

Labour has had a proud record on the NHS ever since. In 2010, when we left office, the NHS had both record high levels of investment and record high levels of satisfaction. But the NHS that we inherited a decade and a half later is very different: patients facing the desperate 8am scramble for an appointment; once diagnosed, a seemingly endless waiting list for treatment; and a workforce crisis, with exhausted staff and fractious industrial relations.

While the public remained committed to an NHS free at the point of use, too many felt that it was no longer there for them when they needed it. The NHS was one of the many things in our country that just seemed to be broken. Labour was elected on a mandate to get the NHS back on its feet, and fit for the future.

At a time when public finances have been under pressure, Labour has bet big on health. Much of the revenue raised in the last two budgets has been invested into the NHS, and the change in the fiscal rules enabled a huge increase in capital investment. This means we are finally able to invest in the diagnostic equipment of which we are so desperately short, and finally able to start fixing our crumbling hospitals.

The government has made significant progress in the first year and a half. Waiting lists are moving in the right direction, access to GP appointments is improving, and satisfaction has again started to increase. But – as the impending NHS winter crisis shows – there is much more to do.

Fixing the NHS is hugely important in and of itself. But it also has a much wider political importance. Few things matter more to Labour's electoral fortunes than the state of the NHS. At the last election, the electorate saw the NHS – along with the state of the economy – as the most important issue facing the country. As the party that founded the NHS, Labour has long been more trusted on health. And at a time when polls make grim reading, the NHS is one of the only areas where Labour remains the most trusted party.

But we cannot take this trust for granted. We need to be able to show that the NHS can be fixed; that it will be there for you and your family when you need it. If we do not, then we will not be able to make the case for the investment that it needs, and we will not be able to see off the challenge from the populist right, who argue that the model itself is not sustainable.

In this edition, we explore the future of our NHS. We quiz the health secretary – Wes Streeting – on his 10-year plan and his mission to save the NHS. Paulette Hamilton MP sets out how we can deliver the shift from hospital to community. Alfred Slade and Beccy Cooper MP discuss how we can deliver the transition from treatment to prevention through investing in public health in different spheres. The newly re-elected chair of the Fabian Society, Dr Sara Hyde, explores the role of local government in creating healthy places. Dr Zack Hassan shows how public ownership can keep costs down. And with the Trump administration seeking to jack up the prices we pay for medicines, we hear from Prof Mark Sculpher about how we can get a fair deal. **F**

Shortcuts

PUBLIC GOOD

To build stronger communities, the government needs new council houses – *Kirith Entwistle MP*

As the MP for Bolton North East, I'm honoured to speak for northern towns like mine. They are places rich in history, community spirit, and potential – yet all too often, they are overlooked in national debates.

When we speak about the challenges people face and the opportunities that we can create, the solutions must be grounded in what our communities actually need. Housing is the single biggest issue constituents raise with me. Every day, I speak to people who are at risk of homelessness; parents who fear their homes are a health hazard to their children; families who are packed into overcrowded properties; and young people trapped on waiting lists. So many people have put their lives on hold because they see no way forward in this housing shortage. In Bolton, I know from personal experience just how hard it can be to find the right home: one that's not just affordable, but provides dignity, stability, and opportunity.

This Labour government set ambitious housing targets for a reason. But these targets aren't enough on their own. We must consider not only how many homes we build, but what we build – and for whom. Simply expanding housebuilding, without changing the basic makeup of our housing stock, will not deliver genuinely affordable homes, at least in the short term. Right now, 1.3m households are stuck on waiting lists, and around 170,000 children are growing up in temporary accommodation. We cannot rely on speculative private developments to meet the scale of need in towns like Bolton.

Instead, we must put council housing at the core of our mission. Council homes were once the foundation of secure, affordable living for millions. We need to return to this principle. To do so, we must give local councils the tools, powers, and funding to plan and build homes directly. Rents must be linked to local incomes, and estates should be designed around the needs of families, not profit margins. To this end, the government should reform planning rules so that councils can prioritise social housing. Crucially, they need to be backed up with the skills and capacity to build well and build for the long term.

We also need to unlock smarter funding. Patient capital, strategic investment, and better borrowing rules can help us frontload investment where need is greatest. We must also make right to buy work for communities again by ensuring that every home sold is replaced like-for-like; currently, council housing stock is being drained year after year.

Even council and social homes can't just be about numbers on a spreadsheet. We need to design communities, not just 'units'. Families deserve neighbourhoods with pride, play, and purpose – not identikit estates with no personality, no facilities, and above all, nowhere to go. This is why homes and neighbourhoods need to be designed with wellbeing in mind, ensuring that everyone has access to green spaces and daylight. The pandemic showed us how profoundly these things affect our wellbeing.

To realise this vision, we must work with partners that share it. Velux, for example, has demonstrated how access to daylight and fresh air can improve wellbeing, while the Woodland Trust is helping to integrate green space and nature into urban design. Elsewhere, local social enterprises and colleges can create skills pipelines and job opportunities as we build. Let's plan with them in mind from day one.

Sustainability must also be front and centre. That means homes that are energy-efficient, low-carbon, and cost-effective to run. We must insist on insulation, ventilation, and daylight as standard. Nature-positive designs must be delivered, not just promised, with green corridors linking to parks, schools, and high streets. This is how we tackle the root causes of high energy bills and create healthier, greener communities.

I recently met with Watson Homes. Their Creams Mill development in Little Lever is linked with a broader restoration of a stretch of the Manchester-Bolton-Bury canal, which will benefit the whole community. When I asked about the importance of including solar panels and energy-efficiency measures as standard, they said something that has stayed with me: "These houses don't just need to be affordable to buy or to rent. They need to be affordable to live in." This is the attitude I want us to take forward as we build the next generation of homes.

Ultimately, this is about fairness. Northern towns like Bolton deserve the same opportunities to thrive as anywhere else in the UK. Success should be measured by shorter waiting lists, lower bills, and healthier, happier neighbourhoods. If we get this right, we won't just solve a housing crisis – we will unlock potential, for families, for communities, and for the North. It's time to build not just more homes, but better ones – and to give every town and future generations the chance to succeed. **F**

Kirith Entwistle is the Labour MP for Bolton North East

SOLID STATE

The public, and workers, are key to successfully embedding AI into the state – *Aoife Donaghy*

The government has pledged to "mainline AI into the veins" of the nation. This ambition can only succeed if the public and workers are key partners in the process.

The history of digital transformation is riddled with cautionary tales about what happens when the people affected are excluded from decisions. The National Programme for IT (NPfIT), which ran from 2002–2011, stands as a monument to such

failures. A lack of engagement tanked the project at a cost of more than £10bn.

By consulting neither the people who used public services nor the workers providing them, the government practically guaranteed poor decision making, inadequate services, and a significant loss of trust that left a promising project facing mass rejection.

With public distrust in AI rippling through the UK, history is at risk of repeating itself. Only 25 per cent of citizens trust the government with their personal data and only 30 per cent trust the UK government to use AI in a safe way. Such a significant lack of trust among the electorate does not bode well for the government's hopes of utilising AI to improve the efficiency of our public services. As the lead of a 2025 global study into trust, attitudes and use of AI puts it: "the public's trust of AI technologies…is central to sustained acceptance and adoption".

There have also been missed opportunities to secure buy-in from civil servants. A recent FDA survey of more than 2,000 civil servants discovered that, while the majority agree that AI tools and systems will improve how they serve the public, the implementation on the ground paints a different picture. 64 per cent stated that they had not been consulted on the use of AI in their work, with the majority of those not consulted saying that they wanted to be more involved in shaping how their departments adopt AI.

Consulting civil servants directly for their opinions and experiences also improves the likelihood of successful AI implementation. In the words of one FDA respondent, through consultation, civil servants can make "the use of AI feel more practicable, tangible and accessible…including to those who feel nervous about this change".

The case for engaging civil servants is straightforward. Some have argued, however, that extensive consultations of the public would be in tension with the government's ambition to roll out AI quickly. Running consultations often comes a steep cost, and analysing the responses is a time-consuming activity.

This needn't be the case. Examples from abroad and the UK show it is possible to engage effectively and efficiently – fittingly, by harnessing the power of AI.

Over 6,000 miles away in Taiwan, the pioneering 'cyber ambassador' and former digital affairs minister, Audrey Tang, has shown how AI can be co-governed with the people. She introduced AI to act as a facilitator in the Taiwanese 'alignment assembly' process, enabling hundreds of people to deliberate at once through real-time transcripts, minimising disruptions, and encouraging quiet participants to speak up.

In March 2024, one of these alignment assemblies took place over the course of just one afternoon, with 450 Taiwanese citizens producing regulation recommendations combatting online disinformation that would ultimately become law. This showcases how a quick online deliberation can build trust between the public and the government through the power of co-creation.

These digital democracy efforts have also begun to reach UK shores. The Waves project is currently embarking on the largest trial of AI-powered digital democracy in the UK to date. Integrating existing digital tools with new open-source technology, Waves seeks to simplify and bring down the cost of public deliberation for local government. The aim is to allow more of the public to come together to tackle contentious local issues, develop policies that work for them, and build trust in local government, starting with pilot councils in Camden and South Staffordshire.

The public, workers, and the policymaking process all benefit from greater consultation through deliberation efforts. For the public, such consultation engenders trust in government systems and empowers them with more direct access to shape the policies that will most significantly affect their lives. Policymaking is improved, as AI-enabled public deliberations produce effective summaries of group discussions, insights into public opinion and sharper insights into what tools are needed 'at the coalface'.

The work that civil servants produce, and their own working lives, can be improved by effective digital transformation. But effective transformation will not come without the kind of thoughtful consultation processes as described above. Heard early on, the views and experiences of civil servants can clear a path for a more seamless digital transition.

As another civil servant survey respondent put it: "involve us from the start". That's a message that the government should apply to both the public and public servants if they want AI to succeed in reforming the state. **F**

Aoife Donaghy recently collaborated with the Fabian Society on a civil service automation research project with the FDA trade union. She holds a master's in international public policy from Queen's University Belfast, where she focused on utilising deliberative democracy as a tool for better policymaking

DANGEROUS TERRITORY

The ECHR is crucial to defend the rights of the most vulnerable in the UK. The government should advocate for its reform, not its destruction – *Ruth Ehrlich*

In the early 1940s, the second world war was ripping Europe apart, wiping out whole communities and displacing tens of millions of people. At that moment, it might have appeared impossible that within a decade, international treaties would be drafted that sought to protect universal human rights.

Among these treaties was the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Signatory countries expressed their "profound belief in those fundamental freedoms which are the foundation of justice and peace in the world and are best maintained on the one hand by an effective political democracy and on the other by a common understanding and observance of the Human Rights upon which they depend".

Since then, the ECHR, along with the Human Rights Act (which allows us to enforce the ECHR in our domestic courts), has ensured that victims of abuse can seek safety and justice and upheld LGBTQ+ rights alongside religious rights.

Today, the ECHR dominates British headlines – but not for the way it enshrines protection from discrimination, or the right to freedom of expression. It is instead seen as something that stifles national sovereignty and thwarts immigration bills.

The ECHR once served as a convenient political scapegoat solely for right-wing outsiders. Increasingly, politicians of all stripes have taken up the cause. In doing so, they create the serious risk that we not only fail to protect those who so desperately seek safety on our shores, but turn our backs on agreements between like-minded countries that enshrine all of our rights and freedoms.

The Conservative and Reform UK narrative is that only leaving the ECHR will allow the UK to control its borders and enjoy national sovereignty. The government is now scrambling to find a policy that both protects our human rights frameworks

and sends a message that it is tough on immigration.

The prime minister knows full well that leaving the ECHR will not stop small boats from crossing the channel. Neither will it allow mass deportations of people without regular immigration status. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has found against the UK in just 13 deportation cases in 45 years, but this gets little media attention.

The uncomfortable truth is that the asylum backlog has soared in recent years in large part because of Brexit. The Dublin rules, which we were part of as a member of the EU, facilitated removals of people arriving in the UK to EU countries through which they initially passed. Also, when we left the EU, we lost our access to funding for asylum and immigration initiatives. This should serve as a crucial reminder that the UK cannot act in isolation, and that only international cooperation can help the government meet its policy objectives while guaranteeing the protection of refugee rights.

To achieve what Reform UK is promising, the UK would have to do much more than just leave the ECHR. We would need to leave a host of other conventions and treaties, including the Refugee Convention 1951 and the UN Convention Against Torture. We would also need to repeal our domestic legislation, including the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010. Picking apart the ECHR would thus lead to the unravelling of every human rights protection we take for granted – leaving us with very few ways to protect our rights and to hold the powerful to account.

Reform of the ECHR is possible. The convention was written as a living instrument, meaning that the rights protected within it can develop over time as social norms and social conditions change. We can work with our European partners to make the convention fit for purpose while maintaining its integrity and the rights it grants to all of us. Multilateral reform is the best way to ensure that reforms are sustainable and rights-respecting, and that the international cooperation underpinning the convention remains strong.

But alongside this, the government must tell the story of the ECHR: not only that leaving would not solve the problems that certain political actors say it would, but that the ECHR has protected and advanced the rights of everyone in the UK. It helped bring justice to Hillsborough families, allowed LGBTQ+ people to serve in our military, and protects us every day by placing positive obligations on councils, care homes and schools to safeguard our rights.

This is the story that Labour must tell to protect our rights – a story which foregrounds not just those seeking sanctuary in the UK, but everyone who lives here. F

Ruth Ehrlich is head of policy & campaigns at Liberty, an advocacy and membership organisation

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GLIMMER OF HOPE

After 30 years of authoritarian rule, Bobi Wine offers Uganda a renewed vision of social democracy – *Vittorio Trevitt*

Since 1986, the Republic of Uganda has endured the authoritarian presidency of Yoweri Museveni, whose long tenure has been marked by corruption, human rights violations, and a failure to achieve significant economic development. Uganda remains a relatively poor country, just as it was when Museveni first came to power during a civil war. Similar situations are sadly common throughout Africa, where nations like Eritrea, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of the Congo have been led by the same figures for decades. In 2017, however, a political earthquake shook the nation when a new figure emerged – one who continues to provide the biggest challenge of Museveni's tenure. That figure was Bobi Wine.

Raised in an underprivileged part of the capital, Kampala, Bobi Wine, born Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, was already a well-known public figure through his career as a singer, with his music often reflecting social concerns. He entered the political arena by standing successfully as an independent candidate during a local election in 2017. Three years later, Wine set up the National Unity Platform (NUP), a self-described social democratic party.

Prior to national elections held in 2021, the first that he contested as a presidential contender, Wine voiced his support (characteristically through one of his many songs) for an expansionary economic programme aimed at reducing living costs while delivering tax relief and better pay. Wine's background added a sense of authenticity to his campaign, with his personal experience of poverty giving him, to the minds of many, a stronger understanding of the needs of poor Ugandans and what must be done to improve their lives.

The elections were far from peaceful, with several of Wine's supporters killed. Wine himself was fired upon and jailed. This was nothing new for Wine, who has on many occasions been arrested and even suffered torture. Protestors calling for Wine's freedom were met by a security

clampdown, which led to multiple deaths. Unsurprisingly, Museveni was declared the winner. Wine cried foul, a position substantiated by the fact that, alongside other irregularities, the electoral commission failed to include results from hundreds of polling stations.

Nevertheless, the NUP won enough seats to become the largest opposition party. This revealed the extent to which the progressivism embodied by Wine and the NUP resonated with many, and cemented him and his followers as permanent fixtures in the political landscape. Encouragingly, many younger Ugandans have followed Wine's example by becoming politically involved.

Nor have his presidential aspirations been dampened. Wine is standing again in January's elections on a radical, people-centred platform which calls for essential services like water and healthcare to be made universal rights. The NUP manifesto also includes other noteworthy pledges, including the creation of 10m employment opportunities, the provision of free uniforms and meals for primary schoolchildren, the development of rural cooperatives, and an expansion of social assistance and access to financial services. Its emphasis on improving quality of life for Ugandans reflects the principles of social democracy and reflects Wine's commitment to building a better society for Uganda's poor, the struggles of whom he often highlights in his speeches.

As expected, Wine and the NUP have operated in a climate of fear. Earlier this year, Wine became the subject of an online threat from Museveni's own son (the head of the Ugandan military), while his bodyguard was detained and reportedly tortured. Recently, Wine had to cancel planned rallies in one area when his intended route was blocked by security. Despite all this, the NUP managed to successfully raise a large sum as part of a fundraising drive, and in May its ranks were swelled by the admission of multiple defecting parliamentarians; a sign, perhaps, that politicians can see which way the political winds are blowing.

While the election is unlikely to be free and fair, then, Wine's enduring popularity means that there is still an opportunity for the NUP to finally bring the Museveni era to a close – and, in the process, usher in a new social democratic age for the people of Uganda. **F**

Vittorio Trevitt is a researcher and writer in the humanities

GRAVE RESPONSIBILITY

The UK aid cuts will cost lives, with consequences for us all – *Romilly Greenhill*

Between 2015 and 2020, 15.6 million children worldwide were able to attend school and receive a decent education thanks to UK aid funding. In that same period, UK aid helped one person access lifesaving humanitarian assistance every 4.8 seconds, and, between 2015 and 2018, it vaccinated one child every 1.2 seconds. UK aid saves lives – and builds a safer, healthier, and more equitable world for us all.

The Johnson government began the trend of cutting the UK aid budget. This year saw further cuts by a Labour government to fund an uplift in defence spending. These decisions have put at risk not just lives, but the progress previously made.

Evidence shows that the UK public is concerned about global instability, inequality, and conflict: one in three people donate, take action or engage with these issues. These cuts undermine the public's values, as well as Labour's 2024 manifesto pledge to rebuild Britain's reputation on international development. Alongside the termination of USAID and cuts by Germany, France and others, UK aid cuts signify a critical trend that risks the lives of millions.

As more stories of natural disasters, conflicts and instability dominate our headlines, the impacts of UK aid cuts are already being felt. In Somalia, health programmes are at risk of closure, and women and girls risk losing access to sexual and reproductive healthcare across Asia. Cuts to an education programme in Syria could leave a generation of children unable to recover from conflict, proving that not even the most fragile and conflict-affected communities will be spared.

In fact, the government's own assessment shows education and health programmes will be hit hardest. Women and girls will be severely impacted: cuts to a peace and security programme may result in up to 50 fewer new women-led organisations working to build peace in conflict-affected countries.

USAID cuts have already left local health systems decimated, including in South Sudan, where one hospital in Bor state now has just two staff remaining after losing $500k in funding. Mothers are forced to bring severely malnourished children to a ward which has no oxygen or IV fluids to give.

The UK's recent pledge to the Global Fund, which fights malaria, Aids and tuberculosis in over 100 countries, marks a 15 per cent fall from its previous commitment, despite co-hosting the replenishment summit with South Africa in November. Following more than two decades of progress, a future free of Aids is within reach – with Aids-related deaths in 2024 down by 56 per cent since 2010. Now, however, funding crises have put this future further off, and progress towards the global commitment of ending Aids as a public health threat by 2030 has been set dangerously off-track.

However, the damage isn't limited to countries receiving UK aid. Beyond fulfilling our duty to help people, UK aid also delivers mutual benefits and protects the UK's national interests. Investing in conflict prevention reduces the number of people forced to flee their homes, while health funding strengthens our ability to anticipate and respond to diseases that cross borders, as the global Ebola response highlights.

Cutting official development assistance (ODA) has also impacted our standing on the global stage. I have heard first hand from diplomats from around the world who are urgently calling on richer countries to meet their commitments to finance development. The UK used to answer these calls – now, we are leading the retreat and eroding our influence on the world stage.

With the deepest cuts still to be implemented, it is essential that the UK government protects what remains of the UK aid budget, and ensures these funds are spent where they will have the most impact. The legal objective of UK aid – global poverty reduction – must be kept front of mind.

In 2024-25, £2.2bn of the UK aid budget was diverted to cover costs for asylum-seekers in the country, meaning the actual amount for overseas spending will fall to just 0.24 per cent of GNI in 2027/2028. Whilst support for asylum seekers is important, more cost-effective solutions – such as community housing – must replace

costly private contracts which drain funds intended for tackling global poverty.

The UK must commit to a development agenda across all areas of finance and policy, to restore our reputation as a reliable international partner, and rebuild the trust of voters, who are tired of broken promises from successive governments.

UK aid's importance cannot be overstated – beyond the numbers, it is a lifeline for millions of people in need of vital resources to build a better, safer future. Walking away from our pledges not only undermines the fight against global poverty and security, but also threatens Britain's place in the world. F

Romilly Greenhill is the CEO of Bond, the UK network for organisations working in international development

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Australia shows what the right to home working could look like – *Sarah Russell MP*

Australia is having a moment when it comes to socially progressive policy. Its ban on social media for under-16s has achieved international prominence – and considerable envy from British parents battling with our children's smartphone habits. But Australia isn't just ahead in creating safer tech. The Labor premier of Victoria, Jacinta Allan, has announced that she will create a right to work from home two days a week for any worker whose job can reasonably be done from home. Allan said: "Enshrining work from home in law means this life-changing practice isn't something you or your loved ones have to politely ask for. It's a right you'll be entitled to."

Allan has said that this is popular with parents; reduces commuting costs, putting money back into people's pockets; and reduces congestion.

Voters like it a lot – and Labor voters *really* like it. Polls in August 2025 showed up to 64 per cent of voters backed the move, and some think it has contributed to a 10-point rise in support for the Victorian government since the start of the year. It is a major wedge issue for Allan in her battle against the Liberals in the 2026 state elections.

© Emily Kulich

Australian businesses have responded with predictable negativity, with many stating they won't establish businesses based in Melbourne, or that they will flee the state. Yet Victoria has a service-based economy, and large numbers of workers already have hybrid working arrangements.

In the UK, full-time, university educated workers already work an average of 1.8 days per week from home. Here, however, there have been 'return to work' mandates on either a full time or part time basis by several major companies in the last two years. Boots, Goldman Sachs, Morrisons and Amazon are all now requiring full-time office presence.

Women with caring responsibilities are the group who most value the ability to work from home. Researchers at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership found that women and parents were most likely to resist strict return mandates, with 55 per cent of women saying they would seek a new job if required to return to the office full-time.

Requiring women with children or those with disabilities to return to the office full time might well be a breach of some of the UK's more complex discrimination laws. Employers are ignoring the legal position, and do not seem bothered by the obvious gendered impact on their senior management pipeline.

Australian law is better for families and workers in other ways, too. The Australian government requires all employees to have a compulsory pension provision, and the employer contribution is a mandatory 12 per cent, versus 3 per cent in the UK. Working parents can share 24 weeks of parental leave pay at the national minimum wage, paid for by the government, and they get their pension contributions for the period as well. Both parents can share the pay and can take up to 12 months each of unpaid leave, or up to 24 months with employer agreement.

In the UK, parental leave is paid for slightly longer, and initially at a higher rate (90 per cent of pay for six weeks), but after that, at only about 40 per cent of the minimum wage. A recent petition about raising the rate of statutory maternity and paternity leave in the UK to the level of the minimum wage received over 100k signatures and was debated in parliament. This, and the declining birth rate, show what people think of statutory maternity/parental leave pay of £187 per week.

The speed of proposed change in Australia is impressive. Jacinta Allan opened a consultation on the details of the hybrid working measures for less than two months from August 2025, and promised legislation in 2026. Our government must be envious of the pace that can be achieved if you do not need to get legislation past an obdurate, Tory-dominated House of Lords.

There is currently an open public consultation on making it harder to dismiss pregnant women and those on maternity leave – much needed, given that approximately 74,000 women a year lose their jobs when pregnant or on maternity leave. The government has also opened an 18 month consultation on improving paternity and maternity leave pay and entitlements.

The new Victorian law could help move workplaces out of the Victorian age. Not by requiring a revolution, but by creating a floor that most good employers with a consciousness of gendered outcomes already adhere to. Australian Labor is showing what government can do for families in an Anglophone country – popularly, and at pace. F

Sarah Russell is the Labour MP for Congleton and a member of the Fabian Society's executive committee

Shoot for the moon

Public health interventions are some of the clearest examples of effective government – as a result, they can help contain the rise of populism, writes *Alfred Slade*

Alfred Slade is the government affairs lead at the Obesity Health Alliance

Houston, we have Ozempic. That was the essence of the media response to the government's 'moonshot' to end obesity, which formed part of the NHS 10 Year Plan released in July. The 'moonshot' was the centrepiece of the 'sickness to prevention' shift, one of three that make up the structure of the plan.

It includes a welcome focus on both increasing access to treatment services for obesity (for those that this is medically appropriate for) and preventing as many people as possible getting to the stage of needing treatment in the first place. The most significant announcement is the creation of a system so that supermarkets and other large food companies must honestly and accurately report what they sell – and using that data to mandate a shift to selling more healthy food and less junk. If implemented correctly, this would be a gamechanger for public health.

However, much of what journalists asked us afterwards boiled down to: "but why do we need any of this nanny state stuff, now that we have these shiny new weight loss drugs?" The answer is simple: when people come off the drugs, almost everyone will regain almost all of the weight they have lost within two years. We cannot medicate the two-thirds of UK adults that have a weight classified as overweight or obese indefinitely.

This would still be true if the significant costs – including of both the drugs themselves and the crucial wrap-around support (dietary, physical and psychological) necessary to make them safe and effective – were to fall dramatically. At current cost levels, it is optimistic even to hope that we will be able to expand services to all those living with the most severe obesity and associated conditions, for whom treatment is indisputably the most important intervention, even if it will be needed for life.

Mercifully, the government has not gone down the same rabbit holes as the press. But this media response reflect a wider attitude towards "traditional" public health in this country – that it is at best well-meaning but ineffective, and at worst an intrusive and politically unpalatable approach that breeds anti-government resentment. I say 'wider' not to suggest that such sentiments are popular: while I have heard such attitudes expressed by journalists and politicians alike, very rarely have I ever heard them from the public.

Likewise, I hear the term "nanny state" from politicos and the press on a daily basis. Ask yourself: how often have you heard a your non-Westminster friends use this phrase? Libertarianism is almost non-existent among the British public, whether on the left or right. From tiny focus groups to giant citizen engagement exercises like last year's Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, the public is clear: they are deeply concerned about what the food they eat is doing to their health and they want the government to do something about it. And they certainly do not trust the large corporations that make almost everything we eat.

However, one roadblock comes up time and time again – cynicism. As with so many issues, from education and defence to policing, the public is deeply sceptical that the current political system or politicians of any stripe are capable of or even interested in making their lives better. They say they want the government to improve the UK's food – but they often follow it up with "but they'd never do that" or "they'll just mess it up".

This lack of faith in the ability of the state to deliver tangible improvements to people's lives is poisonous, not just when trying to deal with a specific issue like obesity, but to democracy itself. A belief that the current political system cannot, or will not, serve the needs of ordinary people leaves them to reach for alternatives, no matter how unpleasant they may be. It is no coincidence that these views were most strongly felt amongst voter groups that are turning away from the traditional parties to insurgent movements on both left and right.

The answer to countering this feeling involves looking at where government policy has actually, tangibly improved people's lives and learning the lessons of success. And, contrary to the perceptions of those in the Westminster bubble, there is no clearer place to start than public health.

We should start with smoking. From nearly half the country in the 1970s to less than 12 per cent today, we have successfully slashed rates of tobacco use and delivered immeasurable improvements in people's health and the sustainability of the NHS. And we did this through decades of effective government policymaking, from tobacco taxes, smoking cessation services, regulation on advertising and finally the Blair government's indoor smoking ban. Today, we stand on the brink of passing legislation that will one day end smoking once and for all.

But Britain's public health successes don't stop there. Teenage pregnancy rates fell almost 70 per cent between 2007 and 2021, with the greatest benefits seen in the most deprived communities. To anyone that was a teenager in the late 2000s, this seems almost unimaginable. Most impressively of all, there is now a realistic possibility that we will be able to end the onward transmission of HIV in England by 2030. This would be the first time a transmissible disease has been halted without a vaccine. It would stand alongside the near eradication of polio and massive falls in infant and maternal mortality rates as among the greatest health achievements in human history.

The government's 'moonshot' to end obesity can, and should, be the next groundbreaking public health success, following in the footsteps of these incredible achievements. To do that, it must learn the lessons of these successes.

First – and most importantly – we did not expect education or "public awareness" alone to end smoking or teen pregnancy. Such interventions have an important role to play, but fundamentally, they place the responsibility on the shoulders of individuals and ignore structural issues like money, convenience and predatory marketing from companies with a financial interest in selling things that harm people's health. It is welcome that, for the first time, we are starting to see government look beyond individual behaviour change alone as the focus of obesity policy.

Second, we did not allow the foxes to be involved in designing the henhouse. Most notably, on tobacco, the incredible public health successes came only after the tobacco industry was cut out of designing policy. Slowly but surely, big tobacco was denied the access it needed to subvert regulations, culminating in the World Health Organisation's article 5.3 declaration, which placed obligations on countries to deny big tobacco access to government policymaking. Perhaps something similar is needed for 'big food'.

Third, and finally, past policymakers understood both the benefits and limitations of technology. Vaping technology has been instrumental in helping people stop smoking, and PrEP medication has been a gamechanger for HIV. But these powerful technological tools are used to improve, not replace, efforts to prevent conditions from arising in the first place. And, as we have seen with the rise of vaping in children that have never smoked tobacco, if not carefully managed, some of these technologies can be subverted for harmful uses. We would do well to remember this when thinking about the future role of new weight loss medications.

Taking on board these three lessons will allow the government's 'moonshot' to actually land. In doing so, it will deliver unprecedented improvements in people's health, reduce massive pressure on the NHS, and help stem the huge flow of working-age people out of the workforce due to preventable health conditions.

But these are not the only reasons that it must succeed. To rebuild people's faith in democratic government and quell the rise of populism, we need to demonstrate that our current system of government is capable of delivering for ordinary people. Making the 'moonshot' a success is a vital way of showing that our democracy is capable of putting people's health above powerful commercial interests. **F**

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Strong medicine

The UK already overpays for branded drugs – the government must resist pressure for further price rises, writes *Mark Sculpher*

Professor Mark Sculpher is the director of the Centre for Health Economics at the University of York

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) in England is a world leader in evaluating the effectiveness of pharmaceuticals, distinguishing products which enhance length and quality of life from those offering little more than existing cheap medicines. It does this adroitly in the face of the often weak and uncertain evidence which the clinical studies regulators accept for licensing.

While Nice is good at understanding the extra health benefit drugs provide – albeit usually with much uncertainty – the UK system fails to get value for money from new medicines. Research has shown that NHS expenditure in general represents very good value of money. For example, we know that it costs less than £10,000 for the NHS to improve health by one additional year of healthy life. But Nice's 'cost effectiveness thresholds' mean the NHS generally pays much more than this for the health benefits new drugs offer. Nice commonly pays £30,000 per additional year of healthy life – and sometimes £50,000 or higher. Some of this spending is clawed back from companies through complex rebates, which do not differentiate between manufacturers based on their drugs' effectiveness, and which only apply to new medicines after three years of Nice approval.

In principle, the NHS could get value for money from medicines when their patents lapse, and generic products enter the market. But evidence shows that, even when you factor in competition from generics, the NHS often gets little or no long-term value from the medicines Nice evaluates. This is not an abstract accounting issue: paying too much for new medicines takes funding away from highly effective interventions which the NHS is currently unable to provide to all those in need. Consider, for example, the long waiting times for elective surgery and mental health services, which exacerbate the large numbers of people who are economically inactive.

There is an urgent need for a medicines payment framework which, while incentivising R&D, is fairer to NHS patients. However, the pressure over recent months has been to spend more, rather than less, on medicines. Pharma companies have been pushing for increased Nice thresholds and lower rebates. They argue that prices are higher and access to new drugs better elsewhere in Europe, and threaten to reduce their investment in the UK unless payments increase markedly.

How credible is this threat? Multinational pharmaceutical companies have options for where to locate their manufacturing and R&D, as has been reflected in recent decisions. However, investment decisions are driven by their anticipated effect on profits. It defies logic that drug payment policies in the UK – which accounts for less than 4 per cent of the international pharmaceutical market – are a strong influence on R&D returns.

Instead, investment decisions are driven by the size and quality of the life sciences workforce and government support for R&D. There is also evidence to suggest that Trump's 'most favoured nation' initiative may be pulling investment to the US.

Despite the weakness of the industry's case, it is oft-repeated and has recently been echoed by some in government. On top of this has come pressure from the Trump administration, as part of trade negotiations between the UK and US, for increases in NHS expenditure on US medicines. Unsurprisingly, Trump has found common cause with US pharma, arguing that Europe receives a free ride on US-funded R&D. The reality is that the fragmented US health system fails to link the prices it pays for medicines to the benefits they provide. High prices incentivise the development of more drugs with low efficacy, resulting in pushback on prices from better organised European health systems.

To withstand the tsunami of pressure rolling in from the US and the pharmaceutical lobby, the government must take a sober look at the numbers. Recent analysis suggests that increased drug expenditure of £1bn would – by taking resources away from more cost-effective treatments – result in over 4,500 additional deaths and a loss of nearly 120,000 years in good health annually. This would certainly have knock-on effects, both for the public sector more widely – for example, by increasing local authority adult social care costs by £130m – and on the economy as a whole, to the tune of at least £6bn. The total loss would be the equivalent of 77 per cent of UK pharmaceutical exports, or nearly half the contribution pharma makes to GDP.

Earlier this year, the government rejected UK pharma's demand for £2.5bn additional expenditure on branded drugs. The announcement at the start of December seems to suggest the government has now given way to US firms, although we do not yet have all the details. The evidence indicates a need for a robust position in trade negotiations with the US, alongside a long-term plan for fair medicines pricing for the NHS. The government may well find the NHS depends on it. **F**

Frontline

A sustainable health service needs a proactive, community-first approach backed by significant investment, argues *Paulette Hamilton MP*

Paulette Hamilton is the Labour MP for Birmingham Erdington and the vice-chair of the health and social care select committee. She was previously an NHS nurse

Having spent 25 years on the frontline of the NHS – first as a nurse walking the streets of my community, and later in public health leadership – I have always understood that primary and community care are the beating heart of our National Health Service. They are the foundation upon which everything else is built, and their strength ultimately determines the health of our nation. That is why the government's new 10-year health plan, with its ambition to shift care into the community, is so important. For decades, we have discussed this "left shift", the vital move towards more preventive and proactive care. Now, we must finally make it a reality for every patient in every corner of the country.

This shift is more than a matter of policy; it is a clinical and moral imperative that I have witnessed firsthand. Without it, we are simply managing a decline, allowing waiting lists to grow and conditions to worsen until they require costly, complex interventions. I think of the many women I have encountered living with fibroids, a condition that affects 80 per cent of women by the age of 50. When we fail to provide timely check-ups and screenings in the community, what begins as a manageable issue can spiral into a life-altering crisis. All too often, the result is devastating fertility issues and poor treatment outcomes, often culminating in a hysterectomy that an earlier diagnosis could have prevented. This is the human cost of delay. Poorer patient outcomes, severe symptoms, a reduced quality of life, and immense personal suffering, all alongside a far greater financial burden on the system.

This failure creates a ripple effect that strains every part of the NHS. In the Birmingham constituency I represent, I see how delayed diagnosis and treatment lead directly to increased complications, a reduced quality of life, and a higher long-term cost of care. When patients cannot access their local GP or community nurse, they understandably turn to our emergency departments for non-urgent issues. This leads to the overcrowding and long waits we so often read about, which reduce our capacity for genuine emergencies and create a vicious cycle of crisis management. It is a model that exhausts our dedicated staff and fails the very people it is designed to serve. A strong primary care system, focused on that "left shift," is what breaks this cycle. It ensures patients receive preventive care, early interventions, and timely treatment, leading to far better health outcomes and greater satisfaction.

The 10-year plan provides a strong framework, but we must be honest about the challenges we face. The gravitational pull of acute hospital spending is powerful, and without specific, protected investment for community services, we risk repeating the mistakes of the past. Our focus must be on anchoring care within neighbourhoods, creating integrated teams where GPs, pharmacists, social workers, and mental health specialists work together under one roof. This is not just a theoretical ideal; it is a vision already being realised in cities like mine, as I saw during a recent visit to the Washwood Heath Health and Wellbeing Centre in East Birmingham. There, person-centred holistic care is delivered by neighbourhood multidisciplinary teams, proving that this is the future we can, and must, build. We have also seen this model succeed in places like north-east London, where women's health hubs have dramatically reduced waiting times for gynaecological care.

If we fail to move towards prevention and early intervention, costs will continue to spiral

The alternative is simply unsustainable. If we fail to move towards prevention and early intervention, costs will continue to spiral, waiting lists will grow, and patient outcomes will worsen. Should primary care services remain underfunded and disconnected, the left-shift will fail, and the broader system reform will inevitably stall.

This is our moment to move from rhetoric to reality. We must empower clinical leadership and ensure sustainable funding follows the patient directly into the community. It is about embracing a population health perspective, recognising that true health is shaped by factors far beyond the clinic walls. The 10-year plan is our opportunity to finally build an NHS that is not solely about treating sickness, but about actively promoting health and wellbeing in every community. We must have the courage to make that left shift, to strengthen the heart of the NHS, and to create a service that is sustainable, effective, and truly there for everyone when they need it most. **F**

Common good

To secure the NHS's future, policymakers must ensure that public ownership remains at its heart, argues *Zack Hassan*

Dr Zack Hassan is a resident doctor and the host of the YouTube channel Healthy Discussions

Free at the point of use. Taxpayer-funded. The NHS is dear to the nation because of these principles. In recent years, though, public discourse has neglected the third principle: public ownership. What may seem like an administrative technicality in fact has a significant impact – from how the NHS delivers services to who reaps the rewards of innovation. Wes Streeting has said the NHS must reform or die. Whether it can or not will depend on taking public ownership seriously.

Public money, private wealth: how the NHS gives assets away

A decline in public ownership has excluded the NHS from benefitting from innovations it has helped to create. In 1997, Frank Hester created SystmOne, a GP-based IT system that is still widely used today. Despite benefitting from a variety of public investments – including seed funding via Bradford Health Authority, favoured status under the £12.7bn National Programme for IT (NPfIT), and subsidised expansion through the GP Systems of Choice (GPSoC) framework – SystmOne remains entirely privately owned by Hester's company, The Phoenix Partnership (TPP). The NHS paid for its creation, paid for its spread, and pays to use it – yet owns not a single share. While Hester became a billionaire, the taxpayer got a £400m bill.

The dangers of this logic get worse at scale. When the coalition government introduced the internal market in 2012, the aim was efficiency through competition. The Darzi report commissioned by the Labour government, however, found that the real result was cost-cutting, duplication of work by competing teams, and a proliferation of business models designed to extract wealth from the state. The Tory health secretary, Andrew Lansley, had assumed public ownership was the problem. Thirteen years later, should we not be wondering if the opposite was true?

Public ownership is a competitive advantage

As the case against public ownership has fallen apart, the case for expanding it has only grown stronger. Seventy-five years of NHS data has become an extremely valuable public asset, especially to AI companies keen to buy access to ever larger datasets to train their models. Without defending public ownership, we could see that data (and our leverage) given away. On the other hand, a policy of a public stake in successful innovations would not only provide the NHS with a revenue stream; it would provide risk-averse NHS trusts with a hard incentive to open up to innovation – a win-win situation. The NHS is often treated as a drain on public finances. In fact, it could be our biggest ticket to growth during an AI boom.

Examples of a public-equity approach are in their infancy around the UK. In the case of Sensyne, the shares the NHS received in exchange for data offered an immediate financial return – and had finance executives been savvy enough to sell its stake when the share price peaked, it would have been lucrative. North of the border, the Innoscot initiative has generated £250,000 in royalties from spin-off companies for NHS Scotland, and a portfolio value of over £30m. Whitehall could go even further by modifying the NHS Clinical Entrepreneur programme and NHS Innovation Accelerator. Why not retain a 5-15 per cent stake in spin-offs in exchange for generous provision of business development support, data access, and scaling-up fast-tracks? Encouraging such efforts could harness the NHS's talented human capital, and build on our competitive advantages in entrepreneurship and research, while retaining the proceeds and intellectual property within the public space. Post-Brexit, the time to push our advantages globally is now.

Ownership is power; renting is false economy

Two futures face the NHS. In one, the principle of public ownership continues to be diluted. The NHS ends up renting back its assets it has given away, like an aristocrat that has had to sell the family silver. It has less bargaining power, because of its dependence on the private sector to innovate. And there is no incentive – except financial – for different providers and systems to talk to each other.

The alternative future is one where public ownership corrects for perverse market incentives. Because the state owns the products and technologies it relies on, it has an interest in reducing, not inflating, long-term costs. Because it has oversight of how different systems work together, the health service soles its productivity crisis. And with a slick development pipeline from clinicians to global markets, Britain's historic weakness in commercialising British inventions is reversed.

The NHS is at a crossroads. Every missed opportunity to build state capacity today locks in private dependence tomorrow. The more we outsource control of NHS platforms, software, and knowledge, the harder it will become to reform anything at all. Public ownership has always been part of the NHS's DNA. Policymakers need to remember it is also the key to its future. **F**

Prophylactic measures

Our sexual health services are in a worrying state – the government cannot afford to ignore them, writes *Beccy Cooper* MP

Dr Beccy Cooper is the Labour MP for Worthing and a public health doctor. She was previously the leader for Worthing council. She is a member of the health and social care select committee

As both a public health doctor and a member of the health and social care select committee, I am fortunate in being able to examine in detail the various aspects of our UK health service. Unfortunately, we are all too often presented with services that are struggling to flourish due to years of underfunding and one too many restructures.

A recent session looking at sexual health services was a particularly stark example. The expert witnesses described a system with funding split between health and local government as well as both national and local commissioning structures. Unsurprisingly, this has led to confusion, inefficiencies and a fragmentation of patient care. One example stood out as particularly shocking: a woman who was unable to receive a hormonal coil fitting in a sexual health clinic due to commissioning limitations, despite the clinic having the capacity and expertise to deliver the service. Instead, she was passed between providers and left facing potential delays of up to two years.

Another example of the disjointed and inequitable current system is in the use of postal testing kits, which are made available in some parts of the country in order to plug gaps in the system. Given chronic underfunding and resource pressures, this can be an effective way to meet demand, but ultimately remains a postcode lottery. Supplies of postal tests run out on a daily basis, while the lack of online options, such as click-and-collect, only serves to exacerbate health inequalities, particularly among those for whom home delivery may not be viable due to privacy concerns.

There has also been a worrying decline in condom use, a rise in sexually transmitted infections, reduced uptake of hormonal contraceptive methods and an increased reliance on emergency contraception. Social media may have influenced these trends, where young people encounter misinformation and can struggle to discern factual content. Negative narratives from social media influencers significantly affect young people's choices, particularly regarding hormonal contraception.

National sexual health campaigns need to be rooted in lived experience, cultural relevance and sensitivity to their target demographic. A recent example of a national campaign which fell well short of those criteria had photos with faces obscured by emojis, which only served to contribute to stigma surrounding sexual health.

The sexual health workforce is coming under increasing strain, with one-third of specialists expected to retire by 2028. There are also recruitment and training challenges. The training pathway for sexual and reproductive healthcare specialists is six years post-foundation, and sees intense competition: the committee heard that there were 1,400 applicants for just 14 posts this year.

Negative narratives from social media influencers significantly affect young people's choices

This picture is clearly appalling and unacceptable. Workforce requirements need to be modelled and accounted for in the upcoming health workforce strategy and communication and campaigns must be prioritised to counter the large amount of misinformation being spread across digital platforms.

The unanimous call from the experts who gave evidence was for a national strategy to clearly determine commissioning responsibilities and provide fair, evenly distributed and sustainable funding. This call was in fact already made by the health select committee – in 2019 – but was entirely ignored by the government of the day. We cannot afford to make the same mistake.

As a Labour MP and a public health doctor, hearing the depth of malfunction in an area as critical as sexual health is concerning and galvanising in equal measure. Reducing health inequalities and improving the overall health of our population is a cornerstone of ensuring this country can thrive and future generations can reach their potential. Along with my colleagues on the committee, I will be pressing the government hard to achieve just that. F

Super-sized impact

Place-making by local authorities is pivotal to public health, writes *Sara Hyde*

Cllr Dr Sara Hyde is the executive member for health and social care at Islington council and the chair of the Fabian Society.

As a local authority, much of our health work is about collaborating closely with NHS partners and the well-established voluntary sector. In the arena of public health, though, local authorities are more directly responsible for the health outcomes of all our residents, both as commissioners and distributors of ring-fenced central government funding, and by utilising the full range of local authority powers across planning, licensing and other place-making tools.

In Islington, public health is core to our mission to enable a more equal borough. Across our public health work this year, we considered how local environments shape residents' health and wellbeing, noting four particular elements: housing, the public realm, the commercial environment and climate change. This short article will focus on one element – the commercial environment – and our work to address the commercial determinants of health in food, alcohol and gambling.

Food

Healthy, affordable food is essential for healthy development in childhood and for good physical health throughout life. We are a densely populated borough with easy, 24-hour access to food sellers. However, the cost-of-living crisis, including the food price rises of recent years, coupled with the availability and marketing of unhealthy food, have contributed to an obesogenic environment. At last count, there were 297 fast food shops in Islington. As a borough we face the dual, interconnected issues of proliferating ultra-processed and high fat, sugar and/or salt (HFSS) foods and food insecurity. We have led the way with a successful buffer zone policy for hot food takeaways near secondary schools; a similar policy was adopted in the National Planning Policy Framework in December 2024. We continue our work to support local businesses to be healthier and work with our 'anchor institutions' to see how we can collaboratively reduce ultra-processed and HFSS foods on their premises.

Alcohol

The borough has high levels of alcohol-related harm. The estimated cost in the NHS, social care, crime and disorder and the wider economy was approximately £137m in 2022 As well as the obvious immediate potential harms of drinking, alcohol contributes to longer term health conditions including liver disease and some forms of cancer. Local authorities can use their planning and licensing policies to mitigate these harms. In Islington, we have identified six areas that already have a high concentration of licensed premises as 'cumulative impact areas'. The council has to consider this cumulative impact when assessing new license applications. Since 2015, we have also used an 'alcohol licensing tool'. It assesses four elements: proximity to other licensed premises, alcohol-related ambulance callouts, alcohol-related hospital admissions, and alcohol-related crimes and antisocial behaviour. The licensing committee can then help shape applications accordingly.

Gambling

The UK gambling industry was worth an estimated £15bn in 2022/23 Gambling addiction and related problems are psychological health issues, though understanding of this is often poor. There is growing awareness of wider gambling harms. Suicidal ideation, attempts and deaths are at least twice as common in adults who have problematic gambling habit* In our borough, venues in more deprived areas still proliferate alongside widespread online gambling. Under the Gambling Act 2005, as a local authority we are forced to 'aim to permit' gambling venues – even when councillors and communities are against them. As a council, we have the tightest controls possible via licensing and planning, and public health funding ensures that the lived experience-led nonprofit, BetKnowMore, is available weekly for referrals from those who are gambling addicted, supporting a loved one, or otherwise experiencing gambling harms. Quite simply, however, the national legislation needs to change to mitigate the worst harms to our communities.

Health in all policies

To make our communities healthier for all, we have adopted a 'health in all policies' approach and updated our local plan to address concerns about location and concentration across all three of the above themes. This enables us to resist proposed development when it would create an unacceptable concentration of, eg, takeaways or gambling venues, establishing thresholds that cannot be breached. All planning applications for such venues require a health impact assessment which can form the basis of a refusal. Islington is just one council, but alongside many others, it does provide proof of concept: working collaboratively across council departments, local authorities can leverage their planning, licensing and other statutory powers to positively impact the commercial determinants of health. **F**

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Wes Streeting has one of the toughest jobs in politics: putting the NHS back on track. He talks to Iggy Wood about Labour's 10-year plan – and how he pushes for change from inside the cabinet

Politicians today often seem to exist at the whim of political winds; plankton variously transported and dispatched by forces beyond their control or comprehension. Wes Streeting, in contrast, has always had an air of intent.

This deliberateness is the now-rare mark of the true political heavyweight: you can already imagine reading his doorstop, mononymous political biography, STREETING. He has even had his obligatory brush with political disaster. In 2024, he won his seat only narrowly, coming in fewer than 600 votes ahead of Leanne Mohamad, an independent candidate who campaigned on a pro-Palestine platform.

The theme of the chapter about late 2025 will surely be conflict. On the one hand, Streeting has just secured a trade deal with the US after months of Maga grandstanding; on the other, the BMA has just announced more resident doctor strikes. Such substantive struggles have been supplemented by more farcical affairs – in particular, the briefing campaign launched against him, allegedly by Number 10 operatives, in mid-November.

All the while, Streeting is trying to deliver on Labour's 10-year plan for the NHS, one of the most ambitious reform programmes in recent history. The plan sets out three shifts – from hospital to community; from analogue to digital; from sickness to prevention – which cumulatively promise to make the health service 'fit for the future'.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the plan is the self-described 'big bet' on AI, which offers the promise of significant productivity improvements. For Streeting, though, the question is not merely about efficiency.

"For me, this is a moment in the world's history for which Labour politics are the answer.

"This a revolution that could work for the many or it is a revolution that could work for the privileged few. So this isn't a 'stop, start' question or a 'yes, no' question. This is a classic 'many, few' question. Is this going to be a revolution that works in the interest of the many, or is this a revolution that's going to work in the interest of the privileged few?

"We could play in the shallow end and say that this revolution is all about improving back-office processes and productivity and efficiency.

"We will absolutely do those things. In fact, I was looking at a pretty startling and encouraging stat: ambient voice technology used across nine London sites is freeing up 30 per cent of clinicians' documentation time, which they can then spend on patient care.

"But what if we went a step further, and said: actually, this is about making sure that patients from working-class backgrounds like mine have the same ease and convenience… that people from privileged backgrounds can enjoy?"

Streeting sounds refreshingly political – ideological, even.

"I sort of feel at times... we can come across as the maintenance department of the country.

"The problem with presenting yourself [this way] is that someone else can easily come along say: 'yeah, we can fix that, and we can do it cheaper'. We have to show that you can't just pick any old political party to come in. You need to have a values-driven approach. And what we're fundamentally driving at with a 10-year plan is what John Prescott would have called traditional values in a modern setting."

While it may have started life as a New Labour formulation, the phrase 'for the many, not the few' is now fundamentally associated with the Corbyn project. Yet Streeting has riffed on it three or four times in the first five minutes of our conversation. Taken together with his recent comments at NHS England's LGBTQ+ conference,

at which he railed against racism and transphobia, and his recent congratulation of New York mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, it's not difficult to see why some people suspect he is 'tacking left' – a suggestion intrinsically linked to speculation around his leadership ambitions.

Apart from anything: if Mamdani were British, he would hardly be Streeting's natural ally, would he? He grins.

"Zohran Mamdani didn't stand on a platform of healthcare free at the point of use, which is my platform. So yes, I am to the left of Zohran Mamdani on that issue.

"More seriously, people might not always agree with me, but they do know where I stand… I am a conviction politician.

"I run into difficult arguments because that's the job of political leadership: to make sure that you are helping the country through some of the thorny and difficult issues, not just on issues of cozy consensus.

"I have been bemused, to put it mildly, that people have seen some of the things I've said as kind of tacking one way or another. On Gaza, for example… I was calling for targeted sanctions against illegal Israeli settlements and the recognition of a Palestinian state when I was an opposition MP and Jeremy Corbyn was leader. And I don't think anyone would suggest for a moment I was trying to ingratiate myself with Jeremy Corbyn.

"I [also] pushed hard as a member of the cabinet and as part of the child poverty taskforce for us to end the two-child limit, because child poverty is the single biggest issue I care about in politics."

It must be tricky being a conviction politician as a member of the cabinet, though. What about people who say, for example: 'You're a member of a government that won't call what's been happening in Gaza a genocide. That's a red line for me, no matter what your personal opinions may be'?

"I think there's no doubt that Labour lost support at the last general election on this issue. I was very clear in advance of the general election that that was likely to be the case. I warned very early… in the shadow cabinet, that the rhetoric coming out of Israel's leaders looked like a government that was preparing for the sorts of military activity that we would consider to be unacceptable and disproportionate, and far beyond reasonable self-defence or the targeting of Hamas. And so it's come to pass. But I'm really proud of the fact that since we've been in government, we have led the way on recognition of a Palestinian state, and I think the UK deserves some credit for the international leadership we've shown on this issue.

"There are certainly people to our left who want to use this issue as a wedge issue and strike a radical pose. I'm more interested in making sure that we can build a just and sustainable and lasting peace. And there is a difference between the language of the protester and the language of the diplomat.

"I know which of the two gets the most done, so while I have enormous respect for people who have been out either protesting or fundraising on this issue, who have done so peacefully and within the law, I also think that ultimately, the prime minister and David Lammy have done an awful lot of diplomatic heavy lifting that has helped us to get to where we are today, which is a ceasefire, and the glimmer of hope for peace."

Diplomacy is one thing, but what about leverage? What about sanctions?

"We've sanctioned members of the Israeli government. We have sanctioned Israeli settlers. We've enforced arms export controls. So I don't think… you know, this government has taken real action, and that is not without controversy, and it's not without cost… but I think we've ultimately done the right thing."

Gaza is not the only issue presenting Labour with a challenge from the left. Streeting is a particular target of anger over the government's attitude towards trans rights. Does he see why some trans people were expecting more of a shift when Labour won power – and now feel betrayed?

"Yes, bluntly. [I understand] how people in my community feel because for most of my lifetime, LGBT equality has moved in the right direction. We have become more inclusive as a country, we have become more accepting as a country, and particularly the last Labour government changed laws, hearts and minds.

"It felt like things were moving in the right direction, and then suddenly, arguments that we thought had been won are now being contested. And trans people are at the wrong end of a whole number of statistics in terms of hate crime, mental ill health and discrimination. And I can understand why, when a Labour health secretary came in and upheld a ban that was put in place by his predecessor on puberty blockers, trans people would

have kind of stopped and thought: 'is this government one that is supportive of and inclusive of trans people?'

"While I understand that, I have absolutely no regrets at all that it was the right thing to do. I have to act on the basis of clinical advice… and what I think is most shocking about all of this is that for many years, puberty blockers have been prescribed to children for gender dysphoria without sufficient evidence, without good clinical trials, and with potentially detrimental longer-term consequences for their health, and I find that shocking."

To the fury of the Telegraph's gender studies desk, a clinical trial led by scholars at King's College London is now scheduled to take place. It has been welcomed, if a little guardedly, by Hilary Cass, the author of the report which prompted the ban. Cass placed a lot of emphasis on double-blind, randomised controlled trials as the gold standard of evidence. The KCL trial is not one of these – for pretty obvious reasons, if you think about what a double-blind trial for puberty blockers would look like – but it is large-scale enough, and carefully designed enough, that it could win over some sceptics.

"Now… I'm receiving a huge amount of criticism from people who supported me on the original ban, and think that the trial is the wrong thing to do.

"I don't mind saying that I am uncomfortable with this… I do think, for what it's worth, that… the clinical governance and the thought and effort that's gone into the clinical trial will make it extremely robust, with the welfare and wellbeing of children at the heart of it. But I'm not entirely comfortable about it."

One of the most striking statements in the 10-year plan is that the NHS must 'reform or die', a phrase that has met with accusations of alarmism. Streeting, however, disagrees.

"When I say the NHS needs to reform or die, I'm not presenting that as an agnostic, offering a neutral choice. I want the NHS not only to survive, but to thrive, and the values of the NHS to thrive, in the 21st-century.

"The Reform party make no bones about the fact they want to see an insurance-based system. They don't believe in the NHS. You've got Kemi Badenoch, as well, saying we need a debate about the funding model. So this is now seriously contested for the first time since the Tories voted against the foundation of the NHS 22 times and the BMA marched against it.

"It's all right for Nigel Farage – Mr. Money Bags can afford to pay for insurance. But most people in this country cannot.

"I think it is an amazing thing that I had one of the world's best surgeons and cutting-edge technology to do my kidney cancer treatment, and at no point, with all the other things I was worried about, did I ever worry about the bill.

"There's a fun selection of Green party and Your Party memes that suggest I want to privatize the NHS. Over my dead body. I believe in the NHS as a publicly-owned public service, free at the point of use."

The missing link here, though, is money. Right-wingers love to talk up the advantages of social insurance systems in France and the Netherlands, which now boast better results than the NHS across a range of criteria. The truth, however, is that these countries just spend a lot more per person. And as far as I can gather, the rough consensus from the health sector is that the 10-year plan is an excellent, ambitious document, but one which may not have the resources to make it a reality. Can we ever hope to compete with, say, France – which spends about 26 per cent more on healthcare per capita?

"We are investing more, but we've also got to modernise, and that's why you've got to do investment and modernization to get the results. That's at the heart of the 10-year plan."

But surely he would like more money – especially in the context of striking resident doctors?

"If the public finances are tight, which they are, the NHS will always be a priority for a Labour government, but modernisation is having to do more of the heavy lifting.

"I would also say, though, that even if the chancellor found billions down the back of her sofa, we can't just spend our way out of this crisis.

"The Tories threw lots of money at the NHS without results. The last Labour government did investment and modernisation and delivered the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history. So that's the approach that we're taking."

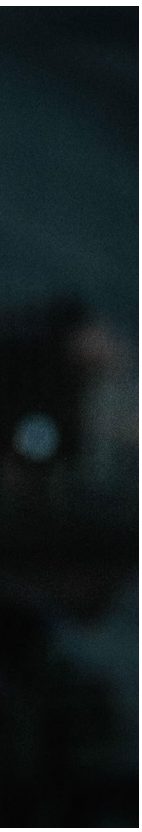
New Labour's health secretaries had more than 2.4 per cent annual spending growth to play with, though, didn't they?

"People shouldn't underestimate the scale of what we're trying to achieve here. I'm trying to deliver performance improvement on a scale exceeding New Labour at the height of their success with not as much of an improvement in spending power from year to year. But we are doing it.

"Waiting lists are coming down for the first time in 15 years. We have a reform plan for waiting times… I believe [we] will achieve 18 weeks by the end of this parliament in terms of waiting times, down from 18 months when we came in. [This is] at the same time as improving access to general practice, improving services at the touch of button via the NHS app, rebuilding NHS dentistry and improving mental health services. We will not have it all done over the course of [this] parliament, but I want to be able to go into the next general election showing that the NHS is well down the road to recovery and asking people to give us a chance to finish the job, rather than hand the keys to Reform to crash the car."

It is strange that Streeting's eloquence is deployed against him – often being used to suggest insincerity. To my mind it's just the opposite: it is much easier to speak fluently when you're expressing your opinion rather than having to remember what your opinion is meant to be. In other words: it's hard to fake a worldview.

Streeting's moderation is not a product of triangulation; he's just a moderate. The question, then, is not what sort of a politician Wes Streeting is. There is no enigma to unravel, and far less 4D chess being played than by some of his 'soft left' counterparts. It is whether the sort of politician he is – a new public management-influenced, liberal, modernising social democrat; a Third Way true-believer – is compatible with the unforgiving environment of 2020s Britain. **F**



Zero tolerance

Labour's plan to offer guaranteed hours contracts to all workers will be transformational – but only if we get it right, writes *Michael Wheeler MP*

Michael Wheeler is the Labour MP for Worsley and Eccles, chair of the Usdaw parliamentary group and treasurer of the Trade Union Group of Labour MPs. Before entering parliament, he served as political officer for Usdaw, the retail union

Last year, I was proud to stand on a manifesto which committed to a ban on exploitative zero-hour contracts as part of Labour's Plan to Make Work Pay. It is nothing short of a national scandal that there are now more than a million people employed on zero-hours contracts across the UK economy, including over 100,000 in the retail sector.

This represents the very worst of what's become known as *one-sided flexibility*. Too much of the flexibility at work belongs to the employer, not the employee.

In retail and hospitality, zero-hour contracts are just the tip of the iceberg of the wider problem of low hours. Even where workers do have a contracted number of hours, they are often on a short-hours contract, with many working between 10-20 hours more than their contract every week.

As with zero-hours contracts, these 'extra' hours can be taken away without notice, leaving workers unable to plan their finances or childcare. What's more, these overtime hours count for nothing when applying for a mortgage or taking out a loan.

It is vital that the right to guaranteed hours is a right to have rather than a right to request

When my union Usdaw surveyed their members, thousands responded to say how much pressure this places on them and their families. One response really stood out to me: "Work can take hours off me when they feel like it. I live in fear that my hours will go 'back to contracted' … [I] would find it hard to live as I am living at my means now. I have asked for a full-time contract on many occasions to just be told that it is not possible."

The employment rights bill is the first step in giving all workers the right to a contract that reflects the hours they regularly work, as promised in Labour's Plan To Make Work Pay. This right will bake in the predictability and financial security those hours represent.

However, several hurdles remain before workers can start benefiting from this new right, including the House of Lords and secondary legislation.

It is vital that the right to guaranteed hours is a *right to have* rather than a *right to request*. We know from experience – particularly in the case of the statutory right to request flexible working hours – that a request-based system simply does not work. Research has shown that up to one in three flexible working requests are refused, with employers making liberal use of the permitted "business reasons" for refusal. Crucially, the figures for refusal do not include workers who felt unable even to make a request, or those who were unaware of their rights in the first place. This worker-employer power imbalance was noted by the independent Low Pay Commission (LPC) following an intensive review into one-sided flexibility: "The issue is not about a worker requesting a change to the amount of work they do, but rather the proper recognition of their normal hours. Workers, already worried about raising issues in the workplace, because of fears of employer retaliation, are less likely to raise a 'request' – so the right needs to be stronger than this."

The truth is that a right to request, in whatever form that takes, is not a right at all. Labour's employment rights bill recognises this, and incorporates a real right to have, subject to what is likely to be complex secondary legislation.

It may come as no surprise to hear that both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives in the House of Lords have aligned themselves with unscrupulous bosses by repeatedly trying to undermine the provisions. Their amendments would transform Labour's plan into a right to request or allow workers to "opt out" from being offered a normal-hours contract. We cannot allow unelected opposition peers to water down the clear manifesto promise that was endorsed by the electorate at the general election.

Once the bill receives royal assent, attention will move to the secondary legislation, which it relies heavily on. This legislation will be complex and technical, making it imperative the government gets it right. Failure to do so would make this new right at best ineffective, and at worst, leave some of the most vulnerable workers worse off than they are now.

There are two key questions the new regulations need to answer. First, which workers will have the right to a guaranteed hours contract? Second, how will 'hours regularly worked' be calculated?

The wording of the bill allows the government to make the right available only to workers already contracted to fewer than a certain number of hours. Further, it allows the government to exclude groups of workers via statutory instrument.

Business has, as expected, lobbied the government to make the right available to as few workers as possible. This includes setting the hours limit as low as possible. The limit has been euphemistically referred to as "low hours", even in the government's own document, Next Steps to Make Work Pay.

Moreover, during the committee stage, a Conservative probing amendment proposed introducing the right for only those workers currently contracted to work two hours a week or fewer – hours so low that even they admitted it would be "ridiculous". Similarly, some lobby groups have proposed excluding entire sectors, including hospitality.

To do either of these things would not deliver on promises made to the electorate in the Plan to Make Work Pay.

The government has said that there will be a consultation on what constitutes a "low hours" contract. Nevertheless, as these details are considered, we must keep two questions at the forefront of our mind: how the measures will be implemented in the real world, and whether they might have unintended consequences or behaviours that undermine what we are trying to achieve.

For example, if the figure is any lower than full-time, or indeed lower than 48 hours per week, it is likely to significantly distort the labour market. A 'low hours' provision of, for instance, eight hours per week would simply result in a replacement of zero hours contracts with eight-hour contracts. Not only that, but it could also result in employers who typically offer 10-hour contracts choosing to offer eight-hour contracts, which would now be seen as a legally endorsed floor.

It is important to remember that workers will only be entitled to a contract which reflects their *current* working patterns. This means that employers need not worry about hiring someone to work part-time, only for them to demand more hours than they have been working. Labour's legislation provides a right to predictability and security, not to more hours.

If only a certain subset of workers are entitled to the right, employers could circumvent the new provisions by offering overtime only to those who are not entitled to guaranteed-hours contracts. This will leave some of the lowest paid workers worse off, primarily women, workers of colour, and disabled workers. These are the very people whose circumstances we are trying to improve.

Unions have been clear throughout the development of this policy that the hours a worker is entitled to should be based on an average of the preceding 12 weeks. Whilst the government has already accepted that the first reference period will be based on a 12-week average, they are to consult on the length and frequency of subsequent reference periods.

Maintaining the 12-week reference period is deceptively important. If the reference period is too long, it undermines the right. If it is too short, it could make the right impractical and subject to factors such as seasonal variations in workload. There is also a long-established precedent in employment law of defining an average work week over a 12-week reference period.

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Without consecutive reference periods, employers are likely to 'game the system' by giving workers a low number of hours over the first 12 weeks of employment before subsequently increasing the number of hours of work. Also, the growth of algorithmic scheduling will make it much easier for employers to manipulate hours, so it is vital that the legislation guards against this. We should remember the government's crucial promise in Make Work Pay: "We have an ongoing commitment to protect the integrity of these policies and will put in place anti-avoidance measures where necessary."

The employment rights bill and the New Deal for Working People are some of the Labour government's most popular policies. More than that, they are Labour values in action. Employment law is complex and regulation-heavy, and so much of the bill is still left to be clarified by statutory instrument. In the case of an entirely new right like guaranteed hours, which is specifically designed to tackle the workplace power imbalance and end one-sided flexibility, any loophole left open or regulation incorrectly calibrated risks undermining the right as a whole.

Analysis of the official labour market survey shows that there are up to 2.4 million workers on variable forms of contract who could benefit from the provisions on guaranteed hours *if* they are done right. If they are not, then the millions who voted for a transformation in employment rights will be left at the mercy of unscrupulous employers – a situation we must work to avoid to the utmost of our ability. **F**

Bottom line

The Democrats' recent successes across the Atlantic show that a dogged focus on affordability can defeat the right, argues *Claire Ainsley*

Claire Ainsley is director of the Project on Centre-Left Renewal at the Progressive Policy Institute. She was director of policy to Keir Starmer from 2020–22

November's US elections were Donald Trump's first real electoral test since he swept to victory for the second time a year ago, and they produced plenty of results for the Republicans to be concerned about. The Democratic party did about as well as it could hope for, especially so given the party is without a central figure who could lead the opposition to Trump and crystallise to voters what the Democrats stand for.

The dynamic Zohran Mamdani attracted most of the attention this side of the Atlantic with his stunning win to become the new mayor of New York City, gaining plaudits from prominent Labour politicians including his London counterpart Sadiq Khan and members of the parliamentary Labour party. Mamdani's campaign has been admired for its ground and social media mobilisation, especially when centre-left parties seem to be behind the populist right when it comes to commanding online attention.

The elections of two new Democrat governors in Virginia and New Jersey, however, may tell us more about what is happening in America than winning the mayoralty in a state that hasn't voted Republican for 40 years. Abigail Spanberger took back the Virginia governorship from the Republicans, winning by 15 points, and Rep. Mikie Sherrill won by 13 points in New Jersey. At the 2024 presidential election, Kamala Harris won Virginia by just 5 points and New Jersey by 6 points. She won New York City by nearly 40 points.

Both Spanberger and Sherrill made inroads with the voters the Democrats will have to win over to succeed at next year's major mid-term elections and in the race for the White House in 2028. Both won independents, including voters who supported Trump last year. They made important gains in exurban, small town and rural communities. Spanberger outperformed the last Democrat candidate among non-college voters, the critical constituency that Trump has focused on and which makes up a majority in America, unlike in these states, which had a higher share of college-educated voters than the national average. Among Latino voters, who along with Black Americans reduced their backing for the Democrats at the last election, support for the Democratic candidates grew by 9 points in New Jersey and 5 points in Virginia. Black American voters also shifted toward the Democrats.

Turnout in the races was up, which included Democrats gaining their biggest majority in the state legislature since 1989, as Trump appears to have motivated Democrats to get out to vote. It is the first sign that Trump's high disapproval ratings are turning into votes against him and his administration. In New York City, turnout surged to more than two million voters, though Mamdani lost non-college voters to the former Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo, who had been plagued with scandal. As we know well in the UK Labour party, who we appeal to, and where, is often decisive. The watchout with Mamdani's victory is that what happens in New York City is not reflective of the rest of America, which is unlikely to elect someone who self-describes as a democratic socialist and whose policy platform of government grocery stores and new taxes on the wealthy is to the left of the mainstream.

By contrast, Spanberger and Sherill ran on more pragmatic positions, focussing on lowering living costs with more affordable housing, holding energy costs down, and access to healthcare. They describe themselves as "security moms" – Spanberger was a CIA agent and Sherrill flew helicopters for the navy – and distanced themselves from some of the identity politics championed by the progressive left. Their moderate positioning and pragmatic solutions acted as a foil to their opponents' attacks and won over the voters they needed.

Spanberger, Sherill and Mamdani all focused on affordability and the cost of living, which continues to be the biggest issue for Americans. Trump's approval ratings on the economy are low; his voters are already concerned he's paid insufficient attention to the area he made the central pitch of his presidential campaign. They

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are divided on tariffs and unimpressed by the recent government shutdown, for which Republicans – who control both the Senate and the House in addition to the presidency – seem to have taken most of the political heat.

While Democrats were energised by the election results, they know they have work to do to be competitive in the states that voted for Trump – states which they will need in order to regain control of Congress in the 2026 mid-terms and in 2028 presidential elections. A good result against a divisive incumbent is not necessarily a prelude to larger success.

After their presidential election defeat in 2024, the Democratic party was in poor standing with voters. Since then, there are not that many signs that the fundamentals in how the Democrats are perceived have improved.

A comprehensive election review that the Progressive Policy Institute undertook with the aid of Keir Starmer's former director of strategy, Deborah Mattinson, found that the voters the Democrats need most – non-college educated voters on low and middle incomes – said the Democrats were less likely to be on their side than the Republicans, and were seen as incompetent, weak, unpatriotic, out of touch, and extreme. Sixty-eight per cent said Democrats had "moved too far left," with only 47 per cent saying Republicans had "moved too far right." They felt Trump would be more likely than Harris to stand up to the extremists in his own party, which was echoed even amongst her supporters. In the research we have done since the election, little has changed about the negative perceptions of the Democrats.

As we know from our experience with Labour after the 2019 general election defeat, voters need to believe the party has changed before they will give its ideas and representatives a hearing. Like the Democrats today, Labour's central electoral challenge was with working-class voters who they had moved away from, and without whom Labour – and the Democrats – could not win durable majorities. The Democrats know they need to address these fundamentals to be truly competitive at the next sets of elections. Even if the mid-terms produce a strong result for the Democrats, it does not mean they are a shoo-in for the White House.

The Democrats can learn from candidates who have already won – not just at these most recent elections, but from those Democrats who won in states which simultaneously voted for Trump. The lessons from those candidates, whose teams were interviewed for PPI's 'Build Back Belief', which sets out a roadmap from winning centre-left parties and candidates, is that they have to represent the change these voters are crying out for. They are discontented with the status quo and want authentic candidates who will stand up for them. They want champions of their place, who have practical solutions to the everyday challenges they face on affordability and the cost of living more than anything else. And they want to have hope for the future too – hope that they, and the next generation, will have opportunities to get on.

Now that Mamdani, Spanberger and Sherrill have the chance to serve, they will find, as Labour is finding in the UK, that voters expect visible delivery of local, tangible evidence that government can deliver for them. In the can-do approach of the winners from centre-left parties around the world, the message is clear: get on with showing that we can be the practical agents of change they are looking for. F

Growing pains?

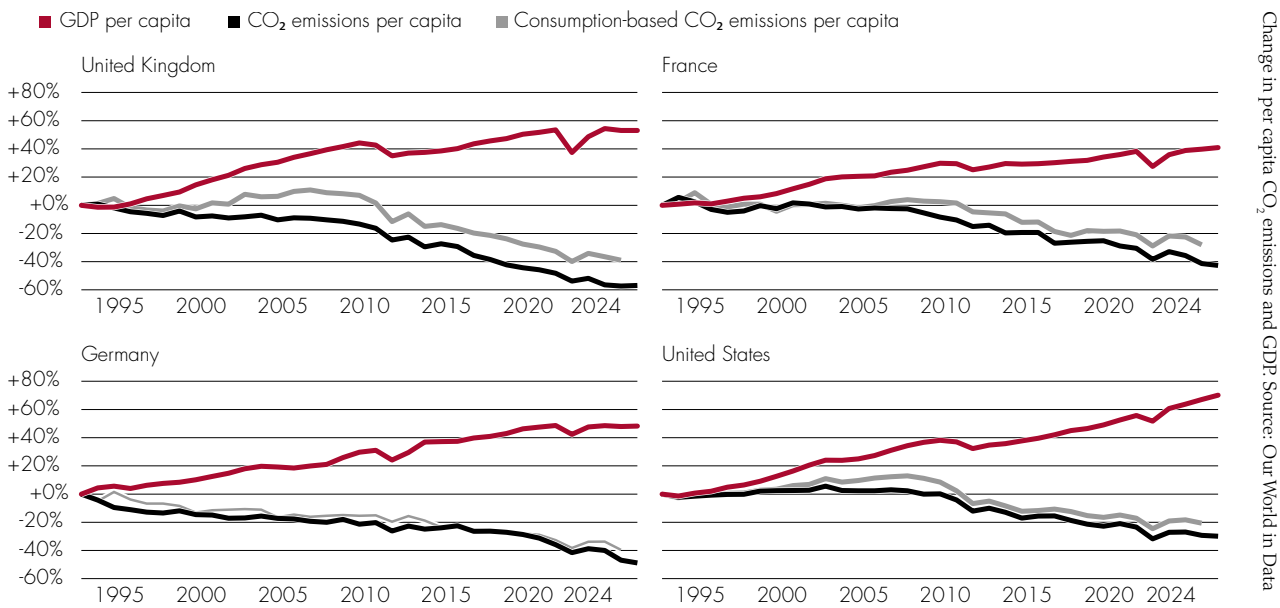
The truism that economic growth threatens the climate may not be so true after all, writes *David Lawrence*

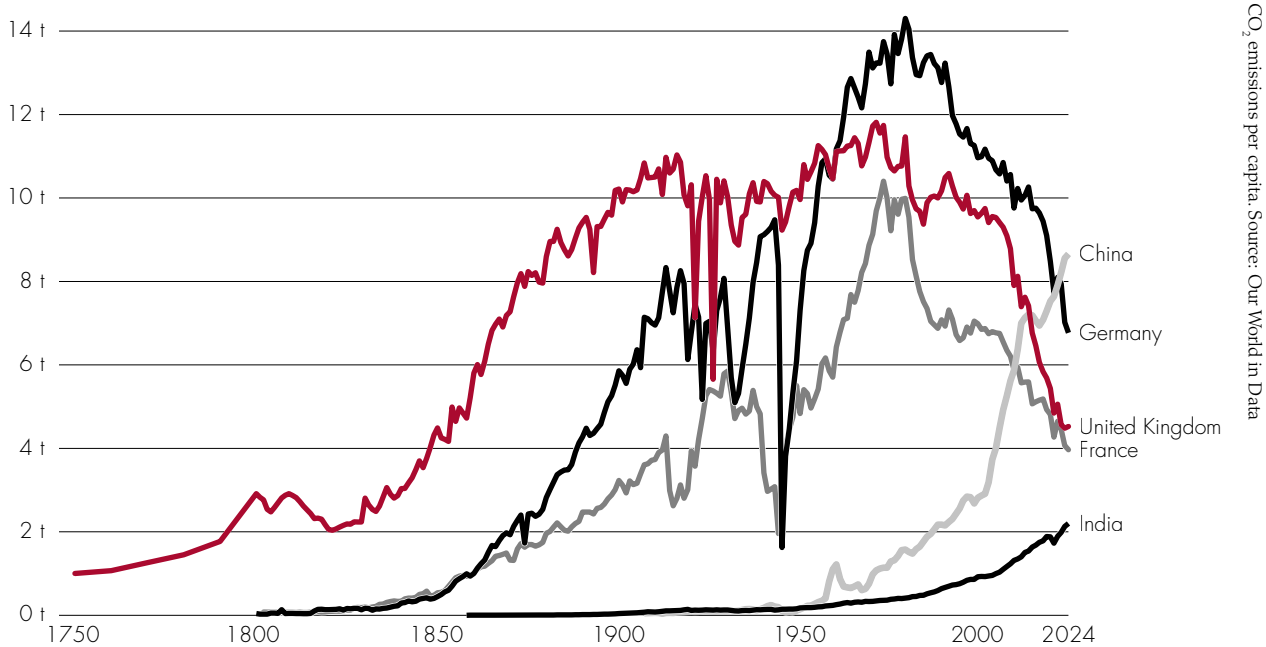
David Lawrence is the cofounder of the Centre for British Progress. He was previously a research fellow at Chatham house and a parliamentary candidate for the Labour party.

One of the best arguments against economic growth is the impact it has on the environment. Or, at least, it was one of the best arguments until about 2009. Since then, at least for developed economies, the reverse has been true: higher growth is now associated with reduced carbon emissions. For a Labour government that is "obsessed" with growth, but has also set itself strict climate targets, this is surely welcome news.

To address a potential objection head-on, the reductions in emissions among advanced economies are *not* because of "outsourcing" carbon-intensive production to poorer countries. The graphs below include "consumption-based" emissions, shown by the light grey line in each, which have also fallen relatively consistently, even as GDP per capita has increased.

The general story is a hill-shaped curve: as poor countries industrialise and move away from agrarian economies, GDP emissions per capita rise rapidly. But as developed economies grow, per capita emissions begin to fall again. We can track this pathway for several countries at different stages of the journey. China and India's per capita emissions continue to rise, but their trajectories do not look so different to those of Britain, France and Germany 100-150 years ago.





CO_2 emissions per capita. Source: Our World in Data

Why do richer countries experience this reduction in emissions? There are several reasons, but the underlying story is that richer states can invest their wealth in decarbonisation. They can afford to move away from fossil fuels towards greener alternatives, such as wind and solar, and electrify more of the economy. This decarbonisation is not necessarily altruistic: many greener technologies, from nuclear to high-speed rail, are more efficient in the long run, but require more upfront investment. Green technologies are also often better for air quality and public health, and can reduce geopolitical dependence on the Middle East (for oil) and Russia (for gas). Advanced economies also tend to have better regulations, including clean air laws; incentives to encourage decarbonisation (like emissions trading) and discourage waste; better management of demand; more recycling; and more efficient transport and appliances.

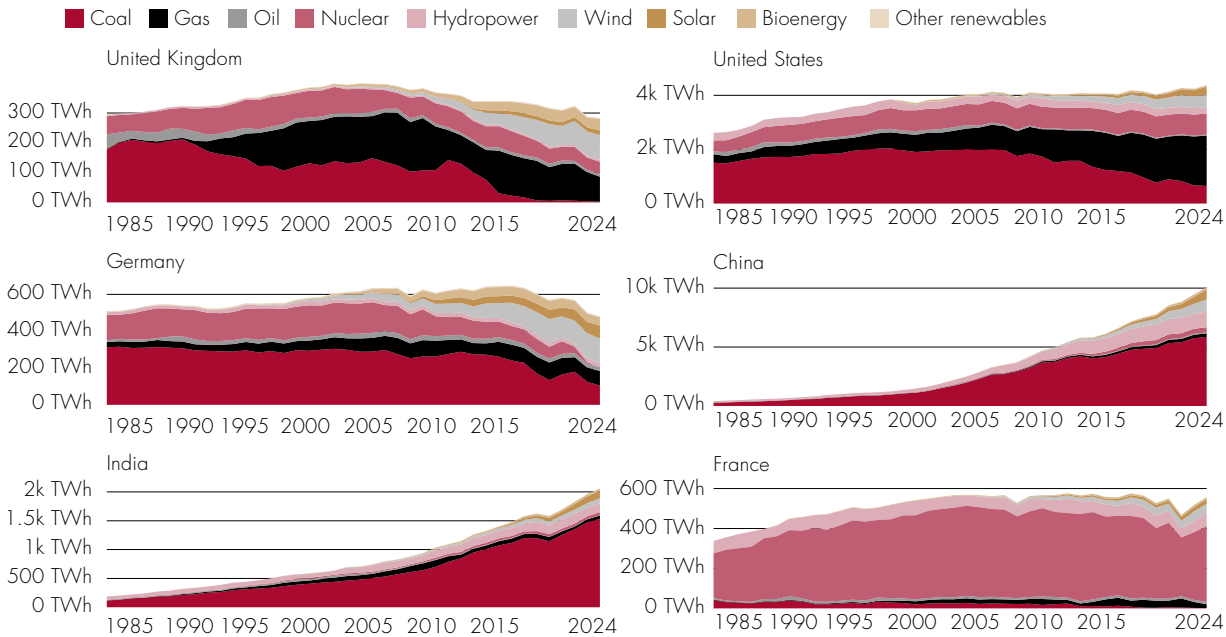
A similar story holds at a household level. In any economy, as a poor family becomes richer, their carbon emissions tend to increase: they may buy a second car or heat a larger home, fly more, and eat things like carbon-intensive steak. But as medium-income households become richer, their emissions can plateau and even fall. They might insulate their homes or buy energy-efficient appliances, reducing energy consumption. They may move away from fossil fuels altogether by switching to electric cars, heat pumps and solar panels – which are largely the preserve of wealthier consumers, at least in western countries. In fact, in Britain, wealthier households are more likely to take the train and cycle, and rely less on cars to get around.

Globally, the most notable trend towards decarbonisation has been in electricity generation. In this respect, the UK is a leader: coal use for electricity has fallen to zero, and gas is gradually being replaced by wind and solar. Even if Ed Miliband does not hit his goal of clean power by 2030, UK electricity use is already mostly from non-fossil fuel sources. The main challenge now is moving more consumption onto the grid – switching from petrol to electric cars, and gas boilers to heat pumps. Perhaps counterintuitively, increased electricity demand at the right times (ie not during winter peaks) can *reduce* the cost of electricity per unit, since it means that there is more revenue to cover large transmission and other fixed costs. The cost of renewables, at the margin and at the right times, is small: we should make the most of this.

Germany and the US, while more reliant on fossil fuels, have seen similar reductions. China, despite investing heavily in renewables, is still dependent on coal, as is India, which has a more typical 'energy mix' for an industrialising country. France, which made a savvy early bet on nuclear, has had a close to carbon-free grid for decades.

The point here is not to shame emerging economies: they are following the exact same fossil use path as the UK, US and most of Europe during our periods of industrialisation. Indeed, wealthy western countries are far more to blame for the climate crisis than non-western emerging or middle-income countries. The point is that for wealthy countries like the UK, growth is not only negatively correlated with carbon emissions, but may be actively helpful for decarbonisation. It would be a mistake to claim that the solution for climate change is for wealthy, western countries to grow less, as is advocated by some 'degrowthers', and indeed many more mainstream progressives.

To make this more concrete, consider the biggest barriers to reducing emissions in Britain. Two of the biggest sources are domestic transport – ie petrol cars – and "buildings and product uses," which mainly refers to gas-based heating of buildings. In both cases, we *already have* the technology to go green. Electric cars not only exist, but are in many ways a superior product to petrol



Electricity production by source. Source: Our World in Data

cars – they're quieter, accelerate quicker and, in the long run, can cost less to run. Similarly, heat pumps could entirely replace gas boilers, with the bonus that they can provide air cooling in the summer as well as heating in the winter.

But in both cases, the biggest barrier to EV and heat pump adoption in Britain is cost. Households struggle to cover the upfront cost of buying an electric car or heat pump, even though running costs for both can be low. The British state does not have enough fiscal headroom to subsidise EVs and heat pumps, or invest in the infrastructure for charging points across the country. With a couple of exceptions, the countries with the highest EV adoption in Europe tend to be the wealthiest: places like Norway, the Netherlands and Switzerland have far higher adoption than Italy, Spain and Greece. Likewise, it is the wealthiest households that are most able to pay for a heat pump, or install solar panels on their homes.

Wealthier countries with greater state capacity can also invest in greener infrastructure across the board. Investment might be in production (subsidising nuclear or wind farms, for instance); grid connections and transmission; adoption of technologies such as EVs and heat pumps; or better demand management (ie, using insulation, batteries, smart meters and incentives to balance the grid).

Growth can also change our lifestyles in ways that reduce emissions. Investing in bicycle lanes, trains, trams and metros can transform our cities by reducing car dependence. The housing policies which are best for growth – such as residential annexes, street votes, and resident-led estate renewal – tend to be good for reducing emissions too, because they focus on densifying urban areas, which encourages walking and public transport over car use. Densification tends to mean more homes taking up less land, using less energy, and connecting workers to higher productivity jobs and delivering a high quality of life. Sprawl is the enemy of both growth and conservation.

Then there are more speculative, innovative ways in which growth can help the green transition. As an economy grows, so does the amount spent on research into green technologies. A breakthrough in nuclear fusion, sustainable aviation fuel or next generation geothermal energy could be transformative for helping countries go green – and speed up the transition in developing economies, too. New research could even reduce the carbon impact of agriculture if we find better alternatives to meat.

All this means that there need be no conflict between tackling climate change and the pro-growth, "build baby build" agenda that has been embraced and espoused by this government – so long as we build in the right ways. This should be good news for everyone – eco-warriors and 'yimbys' alike. But taking advantage of this alignment of interests will require change from both sides of the debate.

Those of us who care about growth should stop framing it as being in conflict with environmental objectives. Environmentalists, for their part, should welcome higher GDP, and focus their efforts on ensuring this GDP is "spent" on decarbonisation. In particular, environmental groups should welcome several pro-growth planning reforms, such as those that encourage densification, which reduces urban sprawl and increases average home efficiency. They should also support making it easier to build renewable energy, nuclear, grid connections, transmission and public transport – the infrastructure of modern, green economies.

It will always be tempting for politicians to have a fight. Sometimes, it's helpful to have an enemy – whether it's "builders versus blockers", or the bats and newts that increased costs for HS2. But true leadership means identifying win-wins: policies that can command broad, durable support. When it comes to growth and climate action, a free lunch is on the table: we just need to grasp it. **F**

Great exploitations

The government needs to introduce tighter regulations to protect authors' copyright against AI, argues *Anna Ganley*

Anna Ganley is the chief executive of the Society of Authors

Next year is the national year of reading. Its aim: to change the national reading culture for good. It is a bold and necessary move given the steep decline in long-form reading amongst young people, which is already manifesting as a sharp fall in adulthood reading rates.

This is only one chapter in the story of the gradual erosion of literary culture through the dominance of digital platforms, inconsistent library provision, and declining author earnings. If action is not taken now, the next chapter will tell a story of ever-expanding use of AI-generated content, which is prone to errors and bias and which is based on the unauthorised – and, I would contend, illegal – use of copyrighted materials.

Authors are not against generative AI as a tool; they are against their work being stolen. In the US, we've already seen multiple lawsuits, like the Bartz v. Anthropic AI case, which allege the industrial-scale use of authors' copyright-protected works without permission or payment. Similar legal actions could soon reach the UK courts. Yet authors and rightsholders should not be in this position. Without government support, the onus is on the individual to seek costly, time-consuming legal redress against tech giants equipped with slick legal teams.

If legal action is the only route to seek fairness and justice, authors will take the fight to big tech. Yet this is a sucker punch for authors already facing precarious careers and low incomes. It is also a step backwards in terms of diversity and the much-needed plurality of voices within the publishing ecosystem. As one of government's eight growth sectors, the creative industries need government action as a matter of urgency.

The AI explosion represents a triple blow for authors. First, their works have been pirated and hosted on shadow libraries online. Second, tech companies have trained their large language models on copyright-protected works. Third, these models generate derivative works 'in the style of' the original works. As there is currently no mandatory requirement for transparency when it comes to AI training data, authors and other creators don't know whether or how their works have been used, which means it's almost impossible to seek redress.

Earlier this year, we called out the tech giant, Meta, for their alleged use of pirated content from the 'Lib Gen' shadow library to train its Llama 3 large language model. Along with the Creators' Rights Alliance, we wrote to over 70 tech companies to ask them to train their systems the right and ethical way, but we got very few responses.

Those companies that did respond said a licence wasn't required on the basis of 'fair use'. We disagree, because both 'fair use' and 'fair dealing' (the UK's version) can only be used in a handful of specific, non-commercial cases.

Ninety-three per cent of our members have said that generative AI presents an existential threat to their profession. In the last 16 years, there has been a 60 per cent decrease in author earnings and, in our recent member survey, 86 per cent of authors told us that their earnings have been affected by generative AI.

Our literary translators are the canaries in the coalmine. They are swiftly seeing their livelihoods decimated, and are now being asked to correct machine-translated texts rather than translating from scratch. Literary translation is not simply the verbatim change from one language to another; it's the human retelling of a story into a different language, complete with all the nuances that a machine cannot detect, including changes in idiom and cultural references.

It is not just writers and translators who are affected. It is also illustrators, script writers, audio narrators, voiceover artists, actors and photographers – all of whom are seeing their work, voices, faces and likenesses being taken without permission or payment. Over a third of our illustrators have already lost commissions to AI-generated content, with losses across the industry of around £9,262 per creator.

What we need from government is simple: a regulatory framework that includes the mandatory disclosure of the specific materials used to train generative AI models, with auditable records of how personal data and copyright-protected data has been collected and used. We need transparency around how generative AI systems operate and make decisions. We need clear labelling of AI-generated outputs, and international consistency, because this is a global technology.

Authors and creators are the cornerstone of the creative industries, and without original content, generative AI models have nothing to be trained on. So, hear our cry: we desperately need transparency and regulation to prevent tech companies from acting above the law.

The UK has a gold standard copyright framework. We don't need any changes to it. What we need is for big tech to act within the law. And we need government's help to achieve this. **F**

Unity of purpose

Living standards must be at the heart of Labour's offer to the public, writes *Luke Murphy MP*

Luke Murphy is the Labour MP for Basingstoke, a member of the treasury select committee and co-convenor of the Living Standards Coalition

Over the next few years, the Labour government must pursue the mission of raising living standards and crushing the cost of living with an almost religious fervour. No voter, family or community should be left in any doubt that this government will clear any path, overcome any hurdle, and walk through any wall to put more money back in their pocket.

During the last Conservative-led parliament, living standards fell for the first time since the Victorian era. The Conservatives brought about this decline through a failure to tackle the root causes of rising prices from energy to housing and accepting our economy's poor productivity, consistent cuts, caps and freezes to working-age benefits, and, because of Liz Truss' catastrophic leadership, a hike in mortgage rates that people are still feeling whether they're renewing their mortgage or have fixed a new rate over the past few years.

The November budget was a pivotal moment – reducing the immediate pressures of the cost of living more than any other budget in living memory. Cutting energy bills by £150, freezing rail fares, and the fuel duty freeze will all provide short term relief to families across the country and take half a percentage point off inflation early in 2026 too. The chancellor's removal of the two-child benefit cap will lift 450,000 children out of poverty – the largest reduction in child poverty within a parliament on record. All of this builds on the extension of free childcare and free school meals, the introduction of breakfast clubs, school-based nurseries, and the rollout of Best Start in Life hubs, not to mention another welcome increase in the minimum wage.

But we must be in no doubt that there is still much more to do over the course of this parliament. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) finds that, in contrast to the last, Real Household Disposable Income (RHDI) will increase over the course of this parliament. But the increase will be small relative to previous parliaments since the second world war. Meanwhile, modelling by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation – using a measure that, among other things, takes account of housing costs – paints a bleaker picture.

Recent work by Labour Together underlines the necessity of focusing on the cost of living. Using a unique approach to assessing national priorities, it concludes that the British public's primary concern is the high cost of living, which represents a "foundational, unifying" issue. Work by Ipsos, YouGov and the IPPR reinforces the importance of tackling the cost of living, with the IPPR finding that the public believe the government is both "to blame for, and responsible for 'solving', high prices." In the public perception, the government is the chief cause of the high cost of living, ahead of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, Brexit or global trade wars.

The government could take inspiration from progressive leadership overseas. The IPPR point to action by both the Australian Labor Party and the French government. From pursuing small reductions in energy bills and student debt reduction to action on food prices, progressive governments abroad have shown that small actions across a range of areas can add up to a compelling picture for voters of a government relentlessly focused on their key priority – the money in their pocket.

We need to replicate this, ensuring that tackling the cost of living is their political north star. A bold, long-term living standards strategy must sit at the heart of our plan for growth. This could include appointing a new living standards minister or setting up a new cabinet committee. The minister or committee could be charged with delivering the government's living standards strategy, assessing new major policies against their impact on the cost of living, assisting departments across government in sharpening their focus on the issue, and helping with communicating the government's action to improve living standards.

With energy a top priority for voters, immediate action should be taken to build on the cut to energy bills in the budget. Since 2021, energy network companies have made around £4bn in excess profits, paid for by our constituents in their bills. These profits are not tied to performance or consumer benefit, but to higher-than-expected inflation, allowing companies to recover borrowing costs far above their real costs. Worse still, these windfalls are expected to continue. The government and the regulator Ofgem must bear down on these excessive profits and return the benefits to our constituents.

Whatever the political and economic challenges that we face at home and abroad, improving living standards must remain the guiding principle of this Labour government – both to stay true to our values and to demonstrate, in people's daily lives, the real difference a Labour government can make. **F**

Books

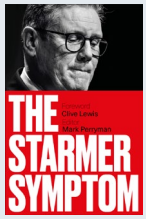
Morbid Symptoms

Perryman's contributors expose the blind spots of Starmerism, but fall short of offering a universal solution, writes *Miles Ward*

Miles Ward is the membership, digital and editorial officer at the Fabians

Keir Starmer's oft-quoted assertion that "there is no such thing as Starmerism" puzzles half the commentariat, myself included. We simply can't make sense of it. Thankfully, Mark Perryman has assembled a carefully selected group of activists, academics, and journalists to deconstruct this claim, while analysing Labour's first year in power in over a decade. This approach reflects Perryman's background: he previously served on the board of the 20th century theoretical magazine Marxism Today. The Starmer Symptom continues in this tradition by bringing together a broad church of contributors to examine the social, historical and political forces that shape the project now associated with his leadership.

In recent months, this marketplace has become somewhat saturated, from Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrund's Get In to its darker sibling, The Fraud by Paul Holden. Yet the appetite for insights into Starmer's meteoric rise has become almost insatiable. What sets The Starmer Symptom apart is its exploration of the Gramscian maxim that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born", a liminal moment marked by "morbid symptoms". While some readers may be tempted to switch off at this point, the essays reveal a more grounded purpose: to offer a set of coordinates for a left seeking to understand itself in a shifting political landscape, and to pose questions about how Labour might reorient itself towards a common goal.



The Starmer Symptom
Edited by Mark Perryman
(Pluto Press, £16.99)

Clive Lewis, the veteran leftwing MP, opens the book with a foreword lamenting the collapse of the democratic potential of the Corbyn movement. For him, The Starmer Symptom lies in Labour's centralised managerialism – a straitjacket that locks the party into economic orthodoxy, and limits its ability to confront the existential threats of ecological collapse and economic inequality. If this sounds familiar, it might be because it mirrors the critique offered by Zack Polanski's Green party – raising the question of whether, in fact, Labour is Lewis's true political home.

Lewis's most incisive passages focus on the Labour party's unwillingness to form electoral pacts or take electoral reform seriously. This thread is further developed by contributors including Neal Lawson and Jeremy Gilbert, both instrumental in the establishment of Labour's new faction, Mainstream – a soft-left network with its sights firmly set on shifting the UK's political economy. In their view, the fragmentation of the political system is symptomatic of short-term solutions to long-term crises. The only way forward, they argue, is a strategic move towards pluralism and proportional representation. A "progressive alliance" as Gilbert calls it, is certainly a glimmer of hope, particularly in the face of Reform, currently enjoying a surge in the polls.

Elsewhere, the scope broadens. Emma Burnell focuses on the party's tendency to descend into factional infighting – a critique which is useful in understanding the current plight of the left. Offering a counterbalance to Lewis, Burnell addresses the weaknesses of Corbyn's leadership, particularly in its failure to deal with antisemitism: a flashpoint that, in her reading, laid bare the factional and increasingly ideological nature of the project. She argues that it was this "brittle tunnel vision" that ultimately bled out into the public sphere, contributing to Labour's dramatic – albeit unsurprising – electoral loss in 2019.

What, then, is the cure? Burnell demands an end to factional infighting. Labour, she says, should focus on governance rather than abstract ideology. This may be difficult: our first-past the-post system often ensures Labour majorities are short and rare, reinforcing a tendency for power to become tightly centralised whenever it is in government. And, if Labour hopes to mobilise a broader electoral coalition, a universalising ideology is needed – it simply cannot rely on technocratic competence alone.

At a moment when Labour's leadership faces a set of unusually tight institutional and economic constraints, this collection offers a useful, if sometimes unforgiving roadmap for thinking about the pressures of governing. Readers seeking an intellectually ambitious critique of the crisis of Labourism will find much to like; those closer to the centre of the party may find some of its analysis gratuitous, particularly where the contributors overlook the pragmatic nature of the compromises made by Labour in office. Although the book fails to provide a one-size-fits-all solution, Perryman's contributors certainly ask the right questions; I just hope the right people are listening. F

Music

Close to home

Sam Fender's latest album captures a positive vision of working-class English solidarity, finds *Bradley Young*

Bradley Young is events and operations officer at the Fabian Society

An award-winning, chart-topping sensation, determined to anglicise heartland rock. Yet also a proletarian son of the soil, deeply informed by post-industrial plights. Sam Fender is exceptional and authentic, a balance brought vividly into focus on his third studio album, People Watching (2025).

Like Fender, I call North Tyneside home. My hometown borders his, though our circles never crossed. Still, we share a cultural inheritance: a pride in a place forged by labour, sustained by tight-knit communities and predisposed to benevolence over cynicism.

This inheritance echoes through Fender's music. Both historical and urgently modern, his songwriting chronicles without ever surrendering to it. Themes like poverty, disillusion and infirmity appear not as endpoints but backdrops against which social bonds form. Amid struggle, he finds solidarity; from powerlessness, collective strength. It is a communitarian sensibility that belongs unmistakably to the post-industrial North.

Fender has never shied away from politics. If Hypersonic Missiles (2019) raged against contemporary capitalism with adolescent urgency, Seventeen Going Under (2021) marked a more reflective, narrative-driven take on class struggle. People Watching, his shortest album, reveals an artist in full command of his craft, moulding the political and personal into clear, affecting messages.

The title track opens with striking piano chords and a Dire Straits synth. "I people-watch on the way back home," Fender sings, drawing comfort from their humanity. Written for a late maternal figure, the track rails against austerity policies imposed upon her care: "The place was fallin' to bits; understaffed and overruled by callous hands." The chorus roars, returning to the refuge that communities offer even when institutions fail.

Later, in Chin Up, Fender confronts imposter syndrome. With vocals soaring, radiant and emotional, he sketches scenes of broken homes, cold rooms and souls crying behind closed doors. Lingering in their sorrow, he finds assurance in his own. He's reminded of what drives him, as well as the privilege and responsibility he now holds. Moving through a glimmering, dreamlike soundscape, the next track, Wild Long Lie, explores alienation and addiction. Referencing Boris Johnson's performative police raids and the war of drugs, the song considers how political choices have traumatised lives, alienating people not only from themselves but from others. The chorus, repeating "back to the bathroom," emphasises the relentless cycle of addiction and the bittersweet pull of returning home. This widening lens links to Crumbling Empire, where, over pacey acoustic plucks, Fender unpacks the erosion of meaningful work through intimate portraits: a rail-yard job "degraded" after privatisation; a mother who delivered "most of the kids in this town," and a stepdad, once in the army, left homeless. People graft, follow the rules and are repaid with precarity.

People Watching
Sam Fender
(Polydor Records)

Intimacy and its absence is a central theme. Arm's Length studies what closeness means in an age of swiping right. Over a pulsing rhythm, Fender charts the anxiety of letting someone in while trying to stay whole. "Do you have to know me; know me inside out?" he asks. A harmonica cuts across the outro, conveying the rush of newfound love. Fender warms to this theme in Rein Me In. Unfolding like a conversation, the lyrics negotiate the fragile line between independence and connection – one voice pleading for space, the other for closeness. In the newly-released deluxe edition, Olivia Dean's ethereal vocals add a weightless beauty to the exchange. Together, these tracks insist that human connection means stomaching the vulnerability that makes such connection possible.

Murmuring over an eerie organ, TV Dinner is blunt and confrontational. Fender inspects the commodification of his career, calling himself a "grass-fed little cash cow." By the third verse, whispers erupt into polemic yells. Railing against the fetishisation of working-class experiences, it's a rare moment of unfiltered cynicism, and one of Fender's most honest accounts of how inequality breeds animosity. In contrast, the next track places Fender back in the context of the community which created him. Something Heavy rolls along a folky rhythm, shadowing troubled spirits as they stumble through a night out. Noticing the patrons around him, Fender senses the town's morale thinning and its atmosphere thickened by depression. Against this bleakness, the chorus: "Everybody here's got something heavy; I'll shoulder it a while if you just want a night off."

The album closes with soul-stirring brass in Remember My Name, in which Fender channels the love and care his grandfather showed his grandmother during her struggles with dementia. It is a tender finale that leaves us with an anchoring message: meaning is not measured by wealth or status, but in the bonds we forge and sustain through time, hardship and devotion.

At a moment when the scars of austerity run deep and the theatrics of nationalist posturing grow louder, Fender gestures toward a quieter, more compelling form of belonging: our communities. People Watching reminds us that real resilience and hope come from looking out for each other, appreciating the differences in our lives and standing together through hardship. **F**

Listings

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS
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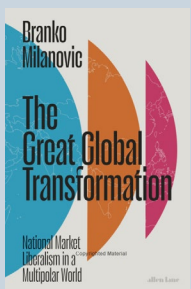
fabiansttw@btinternet.com

YORK
Contact Mary Cannon:
yorkfabiansociety@gmail.com

THE FABIAN QUIZ

The Great Global Transformation

Branko Milanovic



Within living memory, the course of world politics seemed to be tending in an uneventful direction. This ennui was reflected in popular culture, especially in the west: the period between the collapse of the Soviet union and the 9/11 attacks produced a slew of films taking boredom as a central premise, including Office Space, Fight Club, and Being John Malkovich.

That era is now over. The world is increasingly violent, with more battle deaths in recent years than at any time since the second world war, and trade blocs, tariff wars, economic sanctions, and nationalism all on the rise.

Grand historical theories are a little unfashionable these days, but at this juncture, a wholesale rethink seems appropriate. No one is better positioned to do so than world-leading scholar of income inequality Branko Milanovic, in this, one of the FT's Books of the Year.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
In a much-parodied scene, the characters of Office Space destroy which office appliance?

Please email your answer and your address to miles.ward@fabians.org.uk

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 15 FEBRUARY 2026.

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