

FABIAN REVIEW

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CLASS OF 26



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FABIAN REVIEW

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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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Learning lessons

Voter's rejection of Labour at the local elections is cause for soul-searching
– but not despair, writes *Joe Dromey*

MOST GOVERNMENTS SUFFER at mid-term elections. Blair described the 2000 local election results – in which Labour lost 574 seats – as a wake-up call. Obama memorably dubbed his first mid-term results ‘a shellacking’. Both, though, recovered – and went on to win the next national election.

The results for Labour in May were something else. They went far beyond the usual mid-term blues. They felt existential.

Labour lost almost 1,500 seats. Hundreds of hard-working local councillors across England committed to their communities were turfed out through no fault of their own. Scottish Labour had approached the campaign with confidence, buoyed by excellent results in the general election and impressive byelection wins. But its hopes of unseating the SNP were dashed as the party finished neck and neck with Reform. The result in Wales was little short of catastrophic. In one of its historic heartlands, Labour was pushed into a poor third place behind Reform. This, let us remember, is a party which until recently had barely any representation in Wales – and whose former leader was banged-up last year for taking cash from one of Putin's cronies.

Reform was clearly the big winner across the UK. But its triumph was not due to Labour to Reform switchers. Instead, Labour lost swathes of voters to other progressive parties. This left the door open for Reform to stride through as they hoovered up votes from the Conservatives. For every 2024 Labour voter that backed Farage's party, more than six voted Green or Lib Dem. In many areas, Labour lost *seats* to Reform because they lost *voters* to the Greens and Lib Dems.

If Labour is to have any chance of recovering, it must learn from these defeats. Over the past few weeks, our Learning Lessons series has been providing a space for candidates and campaigners to share what they heard on the doorstep and where they think we should go next – from Brighton to Burnley and from Cardiff to Edinburgh.

At the time of writing, the voters of Makerfield are set to go to the polls in just a few days. This looks set to be one of the hardest-fought byelections in modern times, and undoubtedly the most consequential. Labour's chances are looking good. But it should give us great cause for concern that this is in part due to a split on the populist right, with nearly half of voters saying they are planning to vote either for Reform or for the even more extreme Restore party.

This contest is much more than just a byelection, of course; it is a precursor to a challenge for the Labour leadership. Yet a change of leader alone will not fix Labour's malaise. Instead – whatever happens this autumn – Labour will need to redouble its efforts to deliver the change that voters are yearning for, and it must seek to reunite its fractured electoral coalition.

The government must address the fundamental drivers of discontent that underly the current situation. Most prominent among these is the seemingly endless and energy-sapping cost-of-living crisis. We set out some ideas on how we can ensure people are better off by the next election in an accompanying edited collection.

Labour will also need big ideas for the second half of this parliament which demonstrate both our values and the difference we can make in government. Our other edited collection, on proposals for a national care service, sets out why this is an idea whose time has come.

The threat from the populist right is grave. But we should not be despondent or dejected. Reform is deeply polarising; it inspires strong support among some, but revulsion among many. Rather than offering solutions to the challenges we face, it offers only blame, division and rage. Its leading figures are untested, and we can show that they are unfit for office.

Labour still has a huge majority and three years left in this parliament. This presents the opportunity – and indeed the privilege – to put our values into practice. Let's seize it. ■

Shortcuts



*Labour
in turmoil*

A NEW HOPE

Rethinking our economic model can address the concerns of a dissatisfied public – *Miatta Fahnbulleh MP*

The results of the national and local elections were sobering for the Labour movement. The collapse of Labour strongholds across England, Wales and Scotland corroborated what many of us had heard on the doorstep for months. Those conversations revealed a visceral need for change in our country, but also a deeper loss of confidence and trust in our government's ability to deliver it.

Across our communities, the public mood is dominated by economic insecurity and frustration – the long shadow of nearly two decades of stagnating living standards. Real wages have barely increased for 14 years, while the costs of housing, energy, food and childcare have risen sharply. One in three families struggles to afford the essentials, and 30 per cent of children live in poverty. That is a hard statistic to believe – but it is true. The defining political challenge is clear: how do we raise living standards in the many communities that have been held back?

We must start with the limitations of an economic model that does not work for the majority of people. For too long, policy-makers assumed that economic growth alone would raise prosperity for everyone. While growth delivered gains for some, the benefits have been distributed unevenly, deepening inequality, increasing economic precarity, and weakening our social contract. If we

are to respond to the demand for change in our communities, progressive politics must confront this reality head on. That means forging a new social settlement where people are guaranteed the essentials to live well. Affordable housing, quality health and social care, childcare and education would create the foundations for people to get ahead.

This project will mean building a strategic state willing to shape markets and partner with the private sector to drive long-term investment in our communities. The transition to a low-carbon economy presents a generational opportunity in this regard. Large scale investment, backed by institutions such as Great British Energy, would create skilled jobs, rebuild local economies and reindustrialise parts of our economy. Stronger labour protections, secure work, and collective bargaining rights will ensure more of the benefits of this transformation flows to ordinary people.

It will also mean a radical shift of power away from Westminster. Centralised governance fails to reflect the differing needs of communities across the country. The economic priorities of London differ from those of the West Midlands or coastal communities, and policy must reflect those differences. Devolution must move towards genuine local control over investment, economic development and public services so that economic prosperity is felt in every part of the country.

If we do not grasp the opportunity to make these changes now, we face the unconscionable reality of a Reform government in 2029. Never has this challenge felt more pressing or urgent. As a party, we must not turn inwards, but instead have the right conversations about the policies we need to drive real change in this country, and unite around an agenda to achieve it. **F**

Miatta Fahnbulleh is the Labour MP for Peckham. She was previously a housing, local government and communities minister



DODGERS VS GIANTS

The British public want authenticity from Labour – *Stella Tsantekidou*

I love British people. Even the much-decried champagne socialists Labour is perpetually accused of harbouring. What exactly is the charge? Holding left-wing views while owning a second kitchen?

This is why I think McSweeney's plan to rebrand our goody two-shoes, bleeding heart liberal MPs as populist firebrands backfired. His strategy was the equivalent of taking your child to the slaughterhouse to see how her chicken nuggets are really made. Do you have a tougher child now? No, you have a lifelong vegan (Green voters), who refuses to turn up to family dinner (the Labour party). Thanks for nothing, Uncle Morgan!

What went wrong? We lost the vibes. We did so by making our politicians say things they didn't believe in. We obsessed over a handful of Westminster papers no one cares about. We treated disillusioned voters on both the left and the right as 'deplorables' while remaining convinced that we were the 'sensible,' ordained by the Gods of liberalism to save social democracy from 'extremism.' But who will save social democracy from our own bad faith?

Machiavelli identifies two types of politicians: the fox and the lion. The fox is the technocrat who manages through messaging and procedure. The lion acts directly and doesn't soften language to spare feelings. Trump and Brexit were both signals of exhaustion with technocratic management. The public wants lions: politicians who sound like ordinary people, not trained communicators.

Starmer's Labour let too many foxes in the henhouse and culled the lions who could have led us. Our charisma-dominated times demand authenticity. Whether you like it or not, Jeremy Corbyn had that, as does Nigel Farage. Keir Starmer is Temu Tony Blair, and we all know it. A factory



reset will convince no one. Send the Barbie Lawyer Ken back.

Nowhere are the pitfalls of an evasive approach to politics better illustrated than in immigration policy. The cynicism and opportunism of both sides of the party on this issue are a textbook example of a political movement completely divorced from its roots. The positions of both the soft left and the right can be explained by who each thinks poses the greater threat to their respective constituencies in the next general election bloodbath. Has neither of them considered making immigration policy based on what is best for the country? Here, I will do it for you.

To the Labour right: everyone is a child of immigrants and refugees. British people – people shaped by Austen and Dickens – don't like it when you speak like Danish politicians. To the Labour left: your duty is first and foremost to the British people. We immigrants came here because we love Britain and want to see it succeed. Visas are the least effective use of your humanitarian energy and resources.

Are we the baddies? Yes, but there is no time for sulking. We must admit to our delusions and hubris, and nurture the cubs who will make tomorrow's lions. **F**

Stella Tsantekidou is a writer. She is a columnist at LabourList and writes on Substack as the Human Carbohydrate



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FUTURE FOCUS

Labour must confront divisive politics head-on – Anna Gelderd MP

The 2026 local elections were very difficult for councillors, activists and the national Labour party. In the coming weeks and months, we need to digest what went wrong and work faster to deliver change across the country. It is clear that people are not yet feeling the benefits of the policies we have worked hard to introduce. We knew we would not change the state the Tories left the country in overnight, but now, nearly two years into our term, we need to ensure people can feel the benefits of a Labour government and feel hopeful for the future.

It is deeply concerning that Reform UK gained 1,452 additional seats. I am concerned about what local government will look like in areas where it was elected and how communities will be impacted. We know that the party lacks real solutions and that the views and actions of many candidates – now councillors – do not stand up to scrutiny.

My constituency, South East Cornwall, did not have local elections this year, so I was supporting campaigns in neighbouring constituencies. Many people on the doorstep said they had expected faster action from Labour, but they were also concerned about what Reform UK councillors would mean for their rights, finances, and healthcare provision.

It feels like people are being pitted against each other, fuelling grievances rather than focusing on solutions. Politics should be future-focused and about delivering for the people that we represent, not about stoking fear and division. That has always been the Labour tradition.

We have already seen Reform UK councillors and candidates suspended for racist comments and concerning conduct that is dangerous for women and girls. It is clear that these actions have no place in our society, especially when it comes to elected officials.

In my area, we have already experienced what this way of doing politics looks like. In last year's local elections, Reform UK gained the most seats but was unable to

form a ruling group. Since then, there have been internal fractures, with the leader and deputy leader resigning along with other councillors. Similar chaos has been seen in other parts of the country. Reform UK has demonstrated that it does not put delivery front and centre: it defaults to internal divisions rather than governing.

You could argue that these outcomes are inherent to populism itself. A populist party's winning coalition is built on the pretence of division: us versus them, a zero-sum game. This brand of politics may lead to support during elections, but it is not designed for leadership in a liberal democracy. It is always likely to result in strongman-style rule and authoritarian tendencies or dysfunction and collapse.

The populist system is built on undeliverable 'promises' of jam tomorrow, including the promise of more public services and considerably lower taxation, with the money supposedly found through efficiency drives in other areas. There is certainly room for more efficiency in local government, but not as the defining economic principle. This inevitably results in an unhappy voter base, further political turmoil, and polarisation.

We need to learn from these results, understand what the electorate is frustrated with, and confront divisive politics head-on. We need to represent the best of Labour, be clearer about who we are and what our values are.

Investment in our public services, keeping a cool head on the world stage, and delivering in local government are all key areas that Labour can demonstrate it takes seriously. We must use every minute of our time in government to deliver hope and stability and demonstrate competence in elected office. This will help rebuild trust in politics itself. Populism, whether left or right, offers only critiques, not answers. Labour must embody a future-focused, collaborative, community-based politics that brings us together as a country.

These results were very disappointing for us. We lost 1,498 community figures who worked diligently to support the people that they represented. However, we are still the largest party in local government, with many great councillors who will continue to work for their areas and their communities. With a cost-of-living crisis at home and conflict overseas, we must demonstrate that chaos is a barrier to everything other than more chaos. Let's go onwards, together, in our common endeavour. **F**

Anna Gelderd is the Labour MP for South East Cornwall



NEW DEAL

Labour must set out a hopeful vision to overcome its current woes

– *Jovan Owusu-Nepal*

Despite the near tropical heat of the summer of '24, there was never much of a honeymoon period for the government. Before long, Rachel Reeves had laid bare the realities of her economic inheritance: sluggish growth, high inflation and underinvestment in our key infrastructure. Just two years on, polls now suggest that Keir Starmer has surpassed Liz Truss as the most unpopular prime minister in modern political history. Fairly or unfairly, this has resulted in the peeling off of Labour's vote in recent elections.

It is hard not to feel sympathy for ministers, who by their own standards are following through with a solidly Labour agenda. The government has ended the two-child cap, lifting half a million children out of poverty. Train contracts reaching their natural expiration have now been brought into public ownership. Workers and renters have an enhanced package of rights, providing a greater distinction between exploitation and competition in both the

workplace and in the private rented sector. NHS waiting times are down and patient satisfaction up. Pride in Place funding has begun the process of community empowerment in our villages, towns and cities. And Starmer has kept Britain out of a catastrophic war, despite Trump's protestations.

It is hard to see Labour's record as entirely disastrous. Yet, unfortunately, this view has become hardened in the minds of the public and pundits. We must therefore seriously consider the ailments of Labour in office and collectively work towards a solution if we are to turn things around.

Labour's poor performance has exposed an underlying tragedy: values, vision and policy have become incoherent. For too long, the government has ruminated over the structural issues that limit our capacity, and in its timidity has only partially taken the bull by the horns. In the same spirit in which Thatcher embraced the power of economics to shape the 'hearts and minds of a society', this Labour government must begin to rearrange economic life in Britain to serve the needs of the many rather than the few.

In 1894, Walter Crane declared: 'The cause of Labour is the hope of the world'. In that statement, he was able to tie hope and circumstance together, articulating a value system that would thread the Labour movement together over the next 130 years. At the heart of his call to arms was a recognition that dignity and opportunity for all can contribute to a more hopeful future.

Hope is central to parties the across British political spectrum today. It would be foolish to pretend that Farage's nationalism does not instil some sense of hope in the

person who places all the country's ills at the feet of immigrants. On the other hand, Polanski's version of hope rests upon a loose belief that a big state, rather than an active one, will solve all domestic ills. While these platitudes may be seductive, real hope has to rest in efficient, effective and intentional delivery: an agenda which people recognise as a break with the political consensus that has defined Britain over the last 40 years, alongside a politics rooted in substantive policy rigour and an ideological anchor.

The recent Milburn review exemplifies the need for effective government. It is clear throughout the report that the government must rise to the challenge of a generation held in stasis. Given current projections of living standards those under the age of 40 today, it seems that the prosperity granted to those older generations may not trickle down to younger generations, leaving us all poorer.

Labour cannot fall into same trap the Conservative party did, which, during its 14 years in office, failed to create a new generation of voters thanks to a fixation on property-owning pensioners. Labour must offer a new social-democratic promise to the under 40s, including bold action on housing. After decades of right to buy, we need to establish a level of council housebuilding not seen since the second world war. To round out its 'New Deal', this Labour government must seriously explore stamp duty relief, family tax credits, student loan reform and public transport affordability while rebalancing regional opportunities. ■

Jovan Owusu-Nepal is the cohost of the What's Left? podcast. He was Labour's candidate for Clacton in the 2024 general election



EVASIVE ACTION

While wealth taxes might sound appealing, the government would raise more by cracking down on tax avoidance – *Phil Brickell MP*

Those of us on the left tend to be united by one simple idea: individuals with the broadest shoulders should bear the heaviest

burden. At a time when public services are stretched, government debt is almost 100 per cent of GDP, and millions of working families are squeezed because of conflicts abroad, making sure the wealthiest contribute their fair share has seldom been more important. This is why proposals for annual wealth taxes deserve close scrutiny.

On paper, the siren call is attractive: impose a direct levy on multimillion-pound fortunes and raise billions of pounds for the Exchequer to spend on schools, hospitals and public infrastructure. The test of any tax policy, however, is not whether it sounds radical. It is whether it will actually work. I spent more than a decade countering tax evasion and other economic crimes in the banking sector, and it taught me an honest truth: a uniform wealth tax policy will not achieve its stated goals.

Just take a look overseas. The Wealth Tax Commission found that 12 OECD countries had wealth taxes in 1990. Fast forward to today, and only a handful remain. France abolished its broader wealth tax in 2018. Sweden repealed its version in 2007. Germany abandoned its own tax after constitutional and administrative problems. Denmark, Finland, Austria and Luxembourg scrapped theirs too.

Why? Because they repeatedly ran into the same problems: low receipts, high complexity, concerted avoidance and significant capital flight. When proponents of wealth taxes make claims about the amount of cash up for grabs, they assume there will be no behavioural response whatsoever. It's as if they expect the super rich will simply sit still and accept a new annual levy on their assets.

Some may, but most won't. Extreme wealth in 2026 is incredibly mobile. Just look at Reform UK's big money donors, based in Thailand and Hong Kong, who have been able to pump tens of millions of pounds into British politics without being resident in the UK or having tax obligations back home.

The super-rich have access to lawyers, accountants and offshore structures ordinary taxpayers can only dream of. They can relocate assets, change residency, exploit loopholes and restructure ownership using trusts, foundations and offshore accounts to minimise liabilities.

The solution is not to impose further taxes which will be aggressively avoided or even evaded. It is to increase our dismal tax take from the existing plethora of levies which already exist. Simply put: too much tax already owed goes uncollected.

HMRC estimates that the tax gap – the difference between what is owed and what is paid – stands at about £47bn. Small businesses account for around £28bn of missing tax revenue, followed by criminals and then the wealthy. That £28bn alone dwarfs many of the speculative projections attached to wealth taxes. At the same time, HMRC appears to not even know the scale of offshore tax abuse – an issue it urgently needs to address.

So why talk about inventing entirely new taxes when we seem unable to collect the ones we already have?

This is where the real debate should be. For years, Tory governments weakened tax enforcement capacity while allowing the tax code to become increasingly labyrinthine. They even went as far as abolishing the Office of Tax Simplification.

Meanwhile, sophisticated tax evasion schemes peddled by rogue advisors continue to operate through shell companies, opaque ownership structures and offshore arrangements. The imbalance is glaring: 'small fry' workers face relentless

scrutiny for minor mistakes while the wealthiest can often deploy armies of professional enablers to game the system.

The all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, which I chair, has outlined a far more credible route forward: properly investing in HMRC investigators, strengthening Companies House verification powers, improving beneficial ownership transparency, cracking down on dodgy tax advisors and expanding whistleblower incentives for exposing large-scale tax evasion. I am delighted that some of these proposals have already been adopted by the government, but I think we can and should go further.

These might not be flashy policies ripe for distillation into pithy soundbites. But they target the structural weaknesses that allow wealth to escape taxation in the first place. The choice is not between doing nothing and imposing a wealth tax. There is another path: simplify the system, close loopholes, strengthen enforcement and make sure existing taxes are actually paid. This may sound less radical. But if the goal is genuinely to make the richest pay their fair share and improve the lives of ordinary people, it is far more likely to work. ■

Phil Brickell is the MP for Bolton West and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax



TAXING TIMES

A land value tax could help reform Britain's broken economy – but tackling inequality will require a broader overhaul – *Joe Wright*

In the run up to the last budget, there was a surge in speculation about what taxes the chancellor might introduce to strengthen the UK's sclerotic economy, fund our crumbling public services and tackle the spiralling wealth inequality that has damaged our country. In the end, most of

the taxes on wealth reportedly considered by the Treasury were absent from the final budget.

One crucial change was the introduction of a marginally higher top rate of council tax – better known as the mansion tax. But Britain faces a crisis of inequality which the mansion tax is wholly insufficient to tackle. Equality Trust research shows that billionaire wealth has grown by 842 per cent since 1990, and the 50 richest families in the UK currently own more wealth than the poorest 34 million people.

It's clear that action needs to be taken – and fast. But the question remains – how?

Many people talk up the potential of a land value tax (LVT) – a tax on the unimproved value of land – which is often commended for promoting economic efficiency. Unlike business rates and council tax, which have very abrupt cliff edges and tax penalties for improving buildings, LVT has a smoother tax path, meaning it has less potential impact on behaviour. Since land is finite, taxing it is accompanied by little 'deadweight loss' on the economy and largely incentivises its best and most productive use. All this would promote economic growth, and, by and large, be progressive.

However, LVT is no silver bullet. If the government did want to introduce an LVT, it should be clear about what it is trying to achieve. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has explored, the case is strongest for LVT to replace business rates as part of a wider strategy to promote economic growth, but for replacing council tax the economic case is weaker. The Welsh government noted that the benefits of LVT are contingent on a wide range of factors, concluding: "outcomes vary and appear to depend more on tax rates, valuation, planning systems, and market conditions than on the tax base in land itself".

So while Tax Justice UK supports a LVT in principle, when it comes specifically to reforming council tax, we instead support the introduction of a proportional property tax. This would achieve many of the same equity and economic benefits while being easier to implement and administer.

The truth, however, is that a government concerned with meaningfully improving living standards and tackling inequality must look beyond land and property towards wealth in its entirety and most extreme. Land and property dominate the wealth profiles of the middle class, but forms a fairly small share of the wealth held by the richest 0.01 per cent's wealth, whose assets are concentrated in business and financial



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assets. LVT would shift the tax burden away from the poorest households, but would do little to increase the tax contribution from the super-wealthy or curb inequality.

If the government's goal is to reduce inequality, then, an annual wealth tax would be the most effective tax tool, as the 2020 Wealth Tax Commission found. This is why we are advocating for an annual tax on net assets over £10m, which would impact just 22,000 people in the UK but raise a huge £24bn a year – 60 times what the government's mansion tax is set to bring in. An annual wealth tax isn't just a way of raising revenue from the ultra-wealthy, but also a political and social signal that wealth should be redistributed through investment in public service, rather than hoarded by an elite few.

So how close are we to seeing reform of council tax and business rates? The recent local election results suggest some movement. In Wales, the Green party pledged to replace both with LVT, whilst Labour promised a root-and-branch reform of business rates. Labour and the Greens, along with Plaid Cymru, have also pledged a vacant land tax that applies to undeveloped land with planning permission. In Scotland, the Liberal Democrats have called for LVT to replace council tax, with the SNP and Greens promising comprehensive reform of the system.

With no clear majority in either parliament, and the Greens and Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power, LVT is well within sight in the devolved nations – especially in Wales, where much of the technical work has already been done.

In England, the picture is less bright. UK Liberal Democrat policy is for LVT to replace business rates, but Labour's huge majority makes it unlikely to be implemented in this parliament. Last year, the Treasury dismissed rumours that comprehensive council tax reform was on the table, saying that it would take too long and making change contingent on Labour winning a second term in office.

To unlock real, transformative change for people's lives, a fundamental rewiring of our tax system is required. It isn't clear that the current government possesses such a vision, but politicians of all stripes are increasingly recognising that a comprehensive overhaul is long overdue – and a unifying issue that voters care about. **F**

Joe Wright is policy and advocacy manager at Tax Justice UK. He previously worked for the Liberal Democrats and at the Treasury



EASY TARGET

If the government wants to avoid future 'bat tunnels', it should strengthen, not weaken, wildlife protections – *Kit Stoner*

In the past year, rhetoric suggesting that bats and other wildlife protections are barriers to planning and development has become increasingly common. The so-called 'HS2 bat tunnel' is perhaps the most prominent example of such discourse; yet in reality, it perfectly demonstrates the importance of considering nature fully at the start of the planning process to prevent avoidable delays and costs.

The first principle of the mitigation hierarchy is to avoid. This is often the best and least expensive option for development. Only when it is not possible are mitigation or compensation required.

If High Speed Two Ltd (HS2) and the government at the time had chosen to conduct a strategic environmental assessment at the beginning of the project, then alternative routes which avoided irreplaceable ancient woodland – which contains the rare Bechstein's bat and other wildlife – could have been identified. In this scenario, there would have been no need for the tunnel in the first place. If the government genuinely wants to prevent future 'bat tunnels', then, it should strengthen, not weaken, early-stage environmental planning to avoid costly mistakes.

The 'bat-bashing' instinct is deeply short-sighted. Bats play a vital role across all British ecosystems and in our economy. All 18 resident UK bat species feed on insects. This means a healthy population of bats reduces the need for pesticides, supporting more resilient farming systems while benefiting the natural environment and individuals. They are also highly sensitive to environmental change, making them important indicators of biodiversity health across the UK.

A declining bat population can be a signal of wider problems related to habitats, insect populations and landscape quality that affect many other species, including people.

Unfortunately, four of our native bat species are at risk of extinction, and all of them have undergone significant historical declines. Recent genetic research showed that one of our specialist woodland species, the barbastelle, has declined by 99 per cent over the past three to four centuries. These declines are the reason that bats and their roosts are protected by legislation, and we believe that it is this protection, along with positive conservation action and education, that has allowed slow signs of recovery for some of our bat species.

Bats are long-lived, and produce just one pup a year, or occasionally twins. All of our bat species are also site loyal and usually return to the same roosts or group of roosts year on year. This means that if roosts are destroyed and suitable alternative roosts are not provided, local populations can be severely affected or even destroyed.

These factors, alongside the fact that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach that would work on a site-specific level for all of our 18 bat species – with their complex life cycle needs – underpin our concerns about any move towards more generic 'strategic approaches' or off-site compensation becoming the norm as opposed to being used in exceptional circumstances.

The recent Planning and Infrastructure Act provides a legal framework (Environmental Delivery Plans or EDPs) which is based on this more generic approach. This approach misunderstands the ecological complexities of many species and is not suitable for bats or the habitats that they rely on. Future legislation must be genuinely evidence-based, and take into account the particular needs of species. Otherwise, we will not recover the nature that we have already lost and will miss crucial nature targets.

As Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta's landmark review on the economics of biodiversity argued, our economies are embedded within nature, not separate from it. Nature is not an optional extra to be considered after economic growth; it underpins prosperity, resilience and public wellbeing. **F**

Kit Stoner is chief executive officer at the Bat Conservation Trust

Common people

British elites may appear more ordinary and meritocratic than ever – but class privilege continues to shape who reaches the top, write *Sam Friedman* and *Aaron Reeves*



*Sam Friedman and Aaron Reeves are professors of sociology at LSE. They recently coauthored **Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite***



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COMplete rubbish!’ HENRY (NOT HIS REAL NAME) – a recently retired corporate lawyer – was visibly offended. For nearly two hours, he had talked amiably about his successful career in the City. But now, fairly instantly, the atmosphere had changed. We had just asked him a question we put to nearly a hundred and fifty people we interviewed for our book, *Born to Rule*: ‘Do you consider yourself a member of the British elite?’ The frustration in his response was palpable: ‘I consider myself to have been a successful professional. I don’t consider that elite... This belief that there is an elite that can dominate society, I have considerable doubts about that.’

But something felt a little incongruous about Henry’s outrage. Maybe it was that we were sitting in the ‘drawing room’ of his seven-bedroom townhouse in Bloomsbury, or that we knew his wealth placed him squarely among the top 1 per cent. Maybe it was the huge self-portrait of him that hung opposite us as we talked. Or maybe it was something about Henry’s background and life trajectory. His father held a very senior post in the civil service, as did his grandfather. He went to one of Britain’s most elite schools. He attended Oxford. And for more than 30 years he had been a senior partner at a ‘magic circle’ law firm.

Or maybe it was that as we spoke, and despite his protestations otherwise, it became abundantly clear that

Henry was hugely influential. His personal networks include the governor of the Bank of England and a former chancellor of the Exchequer, and he spoke of various times in his career when he had levered his position to lobby ministers. To us, Henry seemed the embodiment of the British elite – both in origin and destination. But clearly, and like the vast majority of the 150 people we interviewed, this is not how Henry saw himself.

Some of this is perhaps understandable. After all, ‘the elite’ are frequently invoked but rarely defined. Our work tried to address this fuzziness. Our definition of the British elite was rooted in *Who’s Who* – Britain’s longstanding catalogue of ‘influential and noteworthy’ individuals. For over 125 years, *Who’s Who* has captured a tiny (0.05 per cent of the UK population) public-facing elite based on those who have reached positions of national influence. MPs, peers, judges, ambassadors, FTSE100 CEOs, national newspaper editors and poet laureates are all included by virtue of their office.

But Henry wasn’t just disavowing ‘eliteness’. He was at pains to stress his ordinariness. He rejected the idea that privilege had had any significant role in his success, talked up his working-class ancestors, belittled his influence, and generally presented himself as an exemplar of a more meritocratic era in Britain.

Henry was not alone. Many of the people we interviewed mentioned some aspects of their upbringing but omitted others. They downplayed childhood experiences that might signal privilege, stressed the inexpensive nature of their private schooling, the periods of economic uncertainty their family had faced, or the working-class struggle of their grandparents. And it was telling that, when we surveyed over 3,000 entrants of *Who's Who*, we found that 43 per cent of those who told us they came from working-class backgrounds had actually grown up with parents in solidly middle-class professions.

Today's elite may see itself as more meritocratic and down-to-earth, but do its claims of progressive social change stand up? The answer, our research suggests, is a resounding no. In fact, we show that there is a troubling disconnect between how elites like Henry seek to present themselves and what we find when we carefully analyse patterns of elite recruitment among the 125,000 *Who's Who* entrants who have shaped Britain since the turn of the 20th century.

Some of our statistics in this regard are fairly startling. It has been true since the 1890s that if you hail from the top 1 per cent of the wealth distribution you are about 20 times more likely to reach the British elite than others of your age. Similarly, even after a notable decline in their power, the alumni of the 'Clarendon schools' – our nine most elite private schools, including Eton, Harrow and Winchester – are still, today, 52 times more likely to reach the British elite than those who attend any other type of school. These schools may educate less than 0.2 per cent of all UK schoolchildren, but they have maintained a staggering hold over the political establishment over the past century – educating 67 per cent of all prime ministers and 53 per cent of the holders of the 'great offices of state' (PMs plus home secretaries, foreign secretaries and chancellors). And the most recent Oxbridge graduates for whom we have reliable data – that is, those born in the 1960s and early 1970s – were over 250 times more likely to reach the British elite than others born at the same time who did not attend university.

This does not mean that the British elite is a closed shop. Wealth, private schooling, and Oxbridge may provide a gilded pathway, but none are a guarantee of success. There have also been other important changes. Thirty-five per cent of new elites are now women (although our interviews underline the misogyny most have faced in reaching their positions) and there is modest progress on racial diversity (although only 1.5 per cent of the current elite are Black or Asian). Notwithstanding these changes, we think patterns of elite reproduction remain deeply concerning.

Certainly our findings provide a sobering corrective to the narrative that Britain is becoming, even slowly, a meritocracy. This really matters. In recent years, key policymakers like the Social Mobility Commission have shifted their focus away from elites and advocated for an emphasis on social mobility into lower tiers of the labour market. We would not dispute the need for a broader focus, but our research underlines how pivotal it is that we continue to tackle enduring social exclusivity at the very top. Ignoring it leaves the most

influential individuals dangerously unmoored from public scrutiny.

The reality of persistent elite reproduction also brings us back to the idea of ordinariness. If claims to ordinariness do not reflect a meaningful opening up within the British elite, then what exactly do they amount to? Our key argument is that there is a symbolic market for ordinariness in contemporary Britain. We ran a number of experiments where we asked the British public to rate imaginary elites, varying details about their background in one set of profiles, and details about their taste and lifestyle in the other, but keeping the rest of the profile the same. Strikingly, the public consistently uprated elites who they thought came from humble backgrounds or who they saw as culturally down-to-earth, viewing them as more relatable, intelligent, hard-working, even competent. Ordinariness, in other words, represents a rich form of cultural currency.

Uncovering persistent patterns in who reaches the top, then, is not just about puncturing elite claims to ordinariness. It also tells us something fundamental about the elites we get – and specifically how they think and behave. Our survey of current members of *Who's Who* shows that elites drawn from privileged backgrounds have distinct positions on many of the key issues of our times. Notably, they tilt significantly to the right compared to other elites. They are less likely to think we should increase taxes on the rich, less likely to prioritise reducing poverty, and less likely to think Britain is a racist country. Elites from working-class backgrounds orient the other way – they tilt to the economic left and are more culturally progressive. Moreover, women and elites of colour also think differently. Women are notably more progressive politically, whereas elites of colour are more radical on the need to address problems of racism and promote decolonial thinking.

Of course, attitudes do not necessarily translate into action. Over 40 per cent of the current Labour cabinet are from working-class backgrounds (versus 7 per cent in the last Tory cabinet) but it is possible that a more middle-class Labour cabinet would also have removed the two-child limit, introduced the Renter's Rights Act, and implemented the Employment Rights Act. Despite this ambiguity, our findings suggest that the stakes in tackling elite reproduction are not just about equality of opportunity. More fundamentally, they are about the sort of politics we want.

While it would be naïve to assume that greater diversity will automatically produce a radical ideological reorientation of the British elite, there are clearly ways in which women, working class people, and people of colour think differently from the affluent white men who have historically dominated the British elite. Indeed, the recent influx of historically marginalised groups appears to have produced a period of intra-elite conflict over gender, race, and the legacy of empire, precisely because these new elites do not accept the old consensus. Continuing to open up Britain's elite, then, is worthwhile. Over time, it may eventually create a critical mass able and willing to disrupt the entrenched class reproduction that has dominated Britain for centuries. ■

New party, old tricks?

Labour must rebuild politics from the ground up if it wants to develop the working-class MPs of the future, argues *Margaret Mullane MP*



Margaret Mullane is the Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham

THROUGHOUT MY TIME in politics, I have spoken about the poor representation of working-class people in the Labour party. I have consistently been met with a dismissive response. For many, talk of class in politics is “old hat”. My argument is that it runs through the very heart of who we are.

Debate is, of course, a strength, and the question “does it really matter?” needs to be addressed. First, though, we should appreciate the depth of the problem. “Hannah the plumber” was a winning slogan in the Gorton and Denton byelection. This is closely related to the fact that there is not another plumber across the entire Commons. If we look at the occupations of MPs, there aren’t many working-class parliamentarians in general.

For the working class, financial demands often make a career in politics seem unfeasible. If it was hard in the past, I would argue it is even harder now. It can be difficult to define the working class of modern Britain, but living from one payday to the next without security is an obvious indicator. Money is a barrier to success for many working-class people.

Communities like the one I come from and represent have been punished by Tory austerity, put on the back foot by the pandemic, and face a long road to any kind of meaningful recovery. Schools in working-class communities are often over budget; libraries, closed; grants for FE, gone; and degrees accompanied by years of debt. Working class people are often well represented in local councils, but to take the leap from councillor to MP is very difficult. It isn’t just money; it is also time, another commodity that working class communities have very little of. Where is the path to parliament?

Perhaps, in part, the answer lies in the structure of the Labour party itself. Membership numbers are in decline, and unless you are a councillor with skin in the game, I don’t blame people for cancelling their direct debit. Would you pay £73.68 per year to sit in a freezing cold hall after work to discuss politics? I am proud to have been picked through a full selection process by my constituency Labour party (CLP). The support I get from the CLP is

humbling. Dagenham and Rainham CLP is like a family, and it has taken years to build the relationships which form the foundations of our operation. Yet in the runup to the 2024 election, we all heard stories of CLPs wanting a local candidate but the party machine having other ideas. Favoured candidates were given seats. They were rarely working class and rarely from the communities they planned to represent.

Upon reflection, I think that the lack of working-class voices in parliament is why many poor decisions, out of step with ordinary people, have been made. Many of us speak to our constituents daily, and as a result get a raw and uncensored understanding of how policies will play out. Going forward Labour must listen, or risk making the same mistakes we made around Brexit. I operate a community model of politics which has a great reach in working class places. The model is built on bottom-up politics, starting with a survey in which I asked my constituents: “What’s up?” Meeting with knitting groups, men’s walking groups, faith groups, mother and toddler groups, dance schools – the list goes on – is key. Politics is seen in action, and then, with a bit of encouragement to stand as a councillor or MP, we see the rise of ordinary people in our politics. Many of my volunteers have joined the Labour party, and many are now councillors.

The new Pride in Place programme is a remarkable opportunity to develop this model. Finally, after someone realised that the streets of Dagenham and Rainham are not, in fact, paved with gold, we were awarded £20m over 10 years to transform one of the most deprived wards in my constituency. This is not going through a council committee or quango; local people will shape their own future.

With the right vision, Labour could rethink the offer to working class communities, and through this new level of empowerment we could create the working-class MPs of the future. The party needs to think about this seriously. My first recommendation is to adopt community politics as I have done. It is the only way to protect our towns and cities from the disaster of Reform and the Greens. ■

Trailblazers

The working-class solidarity exemplified by the Grunwick strike is necessary today, writes
Dawn Butler MP



Dawn Butler is the Labour MP for Brent East

THIS YEAR MARKS a significant milestone: the 50th anniversary of the Grunwick strike, a historic industrial dispute led by South Asian migrant women in my constituency, Brent East. Their story is a powerful lesson for modern Britain about solidarity, dignity and the transformative power of working people united across race, gender and class. In particular, Grunwick demonstrated the strength of migrant and ethnic minority workers, and the importance of having a trade union movement that stands with people of all backgrounds.

The courage of the predominantly Asian women who walked out of the Grunwick photo processing plant continues to amaze me. At the heart of the movement stood Jayaben Desai, whose determination, to this day, inspires many. She challenged brutal working conditions and anti-union employers, but also assumptions about who could lead industrial struggles. She was a true trailblazer.

The factory's migrant workers, most of whom were Indian women from East Africa, endured low pay, punishing hours and poor working conditions. Denied the right to union representation, they still organised. As a former GMB trade union official, I have always found this example exceptionally inspiring. Their struggle was far from easy. They faced arrests, violent clashes on the picket lines, and threats to their livelihoods – all in pursuit of dignity at work.

In July 1977, around 20,000 supporters and trade unionists gathered outside the factory in one of the largest mobilisations in British labour movement history. Miners, postal workers and trade unionists from every background joined them on the picket line. Grunwick brought together Asian migrant women and predominantly white trade unionists in an extraordinary display of working-class solidarity. It showed the very best of what Britain could be. This solidarity was vital, but it did not

come easy – it was hard-fought. Jayaben Desai made it clear that this movement was about how all workers were treated, saying: “the strike is not so much about pay – it is a strike about human dignity.”

I often emphasise my belief that fighting for somebody else's rights doesn't diminish my own. The Grunwick movement demonstrated this powerfully. It showed that the rights of migrant workers are inseparable from the rights of all workers. Today, it is important to renew this legacy. Labour must always champion the values that define our movement, ensuring trade unions remain central to all we do. Above all, the Labour movement must stay connected to the people it was created to represent.

The unions have always been the aspirational vehicle of the working class. Though much has changed since the 1970s, many of the same issues persist. Exploitative employers cause insecurity and division, while migrant workers remain disproportionately concentrated in low-paid positions with inadequate protections. Women still face discrimination and unequal treatment at work. Black, Asian and minority ethnic workers continue to experience pay gaps. The rise of insecure employment, agency labour and zero-hours contracts has recreated many of the vulnerabilities the Grunwick women fought against decades ago.

The government has taken important steps to address these issues through the landmark Employment Rights Act – the most transformative legislation for workers in a generation. The act strengthens employment rights and moves to ban exploitative zero-hours contracts. The government has also pledged mandatory ethnicity pay-gap reporting. But we cannot be complacent: we must go further to keep strengthening workers' rights.

This is particularly true because society has become increasingly polarised in recent years, with growing attempts by populists to divide communities against one another. Worryingly, Britain has seen increases in antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of racism and discrimination.

Against this backdrop, the example of Grunwick offers a powerful antidote: solidarity across communities has the potential to heal divisions. It reminds us that working-class unity is strongest when every worker's background, experience and identity is recognised and respected equally. That is why the dispute still matters so profoundly to the Labour party today. It reinforced that equality is equality: we cannot pick and choose.

The women of Grunwick may not have secured formal union recognition at the time, but they transformed the labour movement and inspired a generation of Black and Asian trade unionists and activists, myself included. Advancements that working people enjoy today rest on the shoulders of giants like Jayaben Desai. She helped prove that working people, standing together in unity, can reshape institutions and movements for the better. As we look to the future, we should remember the enduring truth that the Grunwick strikers taught Britain: an injustice to one is an injustice to all. ■

Worlds apart

The Gorton and Denton byelection exposed the hidden class dynamics shaping modern Britain, argues *Jeremy Gilbert*



Jeremy Gilbert is professor of cultural and political theory at the University of East London. He hosts three regular podcasts: #ACFM on Novara Media; Love is the Message; and Culture, Power, Politics.

THE GORTON AND DENTON BYELECTION will be remembered as a historic turning point for both Britain and the Labour party: the moment when Labour in England first faced a serious challenger to its left. One thing that made the occasion so resonant was the symbolically divided nature of the constituency. On one side, Gorton, a multicultural Manchester suburb with a large population of students and young graduates; on the other, Denton, a declining mill town with an ageing, mostly white, largely non-graduate citizenry. It's perhaps little surprise, then, that despite Hannah Spencer's victory, Denton elected a swathe of councillors from the far-right Reform UK just two months later.

The fact that this is unsurprising is itself worth reflecting on. All over Europe, North America, and even Australasia, the association of the far-right with post-industrial communities outside of big cities and with small ethnic minority populations has become a cliché. If anything, the UK has remained an outlier in this regard: even at the 2024 general election, Reform were weaker in traditional Labour strongholds than on the coasts.

What is 'class'?

The differences between such communities are often described with reference to some idea of 'class'. But what exactly does this mean? Low-paid graduates working in the public sector, often paying exorbitant rents to private landlords, are routinely referred to as 'middle class'. Yet retired homeowners living relatively comfortably, and completely securely, on stock-market linked pensions are described as 'working class' because they once had a manual trade – even though they haven't depended on wages for years.

Arguably, when most people think about class – if they think about it at all – they do so with reference to a complex, rather muddled combination of economic, cultural and social factors. Insofar as there is any coherent definition of what class is or how it works, it is probably still the case that, amongst non-academics, the most widely understood account is some version of the ideas of Marx and Engels, according to which social class in capitalist society depends on whether one has to work for a living or can derive enough income from profits, interest and rent. Of course, Marx and Engels' thinking on class

is actually much more sophisticated than that, and they never tried to formulate a single consistent definition of the concept. In fact, their conception of class was arguably not so different from that of many of their Victorian peers, who often understood society as divided into competing sets of 'interests': 'the landed interest', 'the commercial interest', industry, and labour.

Of course, this isn't the only way to conceptualise class in a modern society. Political scientists and journalists still routinely rely on a definition of class loosely based on the ideas of the early 20th-century social theorist Max Weber, filtered through a set of expectations and assumptions that were largely formulated in the 1950s and 1960s – an era when university graduates were scarce and their careers assumed to be supremely secure, when housing was affordable for almost everyone with a regular income, and when social status was assumed to be clearly tied to a universally-understood occupational hierarchy. This is the origin of the famous 'A, B, C1, C2, D, E' 'social grade classification system'. When I was a young Labour activist in the early 90s, it was still widely believed among Labour 'moderates' that old fashioned ideas like 'capitalism' and 'the ruling class' were giving way to a world in which it was middle-managers who held real power: another idea inherited from the 1960s, having been popularised by Anthony Crosland.



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The realities of capitalism

Few of these assumptions seem to obtain today. A university professor in the 2020s can enjoy as little job security as a junior office-worker (I should know...), and for much of the population, media celebrity seems to have more value than any traditional idea of social, economic or professional status. In the 'asset economy', inheritance is more likely to determine your future than success at school or work. Corporate managers, and even prime ministers, seem to be the servants of the financial markets.

In the late 20th century, social theorists like Pierre Bourdieu developed sophisticated models to explain how different sources of status and power interacted and mapped onto each other in complex ways: from actual wealth and economic resources to 'cultural capital' derived from education, learning, style and aesthetic expertise. And as the century drew to a close, some sociologists grew sceptical that 'class' was still a useful way to think about social inequality at all. Others developed increasingly sophisticated ways of segmenting the population into multiple niche groups defined by shared careers, cultures, and localities (see, for example the BBC's Great British Class Project). Today, however, in a world where the arts are more dominated by privately-educated people than they were in the 1940s, and where a PhD contributes less to lifetime earnings than a few bitcoins, it looks to many observers as if it is Marx's understanding of class that has stood the test of time: it's ultimately access to resources that determines what your life is like, how much power you have, and how much other people listen to you.

The attractions of such a model to progressives become obvious if we compare it to the way in which commentators on the right are trying to conceptualise the relationship between economies, culture and politics. In his 2023 book *Values, Voice and Virtue*, Matt Goodwin, then an academic and later Reform UK's candidate in Gorton and Denton, set out how he believed Britain's culture and politics had changed since the 1970s. What is striking about Goodwin's account is that he effectively puts forward a model of class where access to assets and material resources play no role whatsoever in determining who has power and status. In Goodwin's world, a cosmopolitan cultural elite – including, it would seem, everyone from a primary school teaching assistant with a degree to the director general of the BBC – lords it over a benighted 'people'. The latter category seems to include anyone who dislikes foreigners, however large their house or investment portfolio may be. For Goodwin, class has

seemingly nothing to do with economics; it is entirely a question of the differing 'values' held by a liberal elite and the oppressed masses of Brexit Britain.

The healing power of class struggle

That this odd way of conceptualising class has become central to the politics of right-wing populism should both interest us and worry us. Many in Labour's 'moderate' and 'soft left' traditions have often preferred to avoid such divisive thinking at all, instead appealing to some idea of shared 'values' as the basis for a political programme and ignoring ideas of class altogether. But in a world of Gortons and Dentons, it should be obvious why this approach will be inadequate. The cultural differences between such communities are real and difficult to bridge, and their 'values' are not necessarily reconcilable because of the very different ways in which they experience and think about the lived realities of economic inequality. Where those communities might be reconcilable is precisely at the level of their shared economic, material interests: as workers ('by hand or by brain', as the original

Clause 4 of the Labour party constitution put it), as public-services users, and as citizens who have been disempowered by 50 years of concentrating corporate power.

There is no question that the lived reality of class, and its various political implications, are complex, multidimensional and multi-faceted. If we really want to understand class, then we must draw on multiple intellectual traditions. But in a situation like our present one, it is worth keeping in mind the simple explanatory and rhetorical power of the arguments that animated the earliest socialists: without confronting the power of capital, there can be

no equality and no democracy; and it is in the process of such confrontation that 'class consciousness' can overcome cultural differences. If Labour wants to begin healing some of the divisions scarring our society, then it may have to take a more confrontational attitude towards their causes.

In recent decades, Labour leaders (including Corbyn) have been understandably coy about naming corporations, the city and institutions such as the developer lobby as enemies. But much of the emotional power of Goodwin's brand of populism comes from channelling people's genuine sense of disempowerment towards harmless and inappropriate targets: 'woke culture', young people, immigrants. Labour might find that the only way to beat this brand of populism is by naming some enemies of its own, and doing so explicitly in the language of class. ■

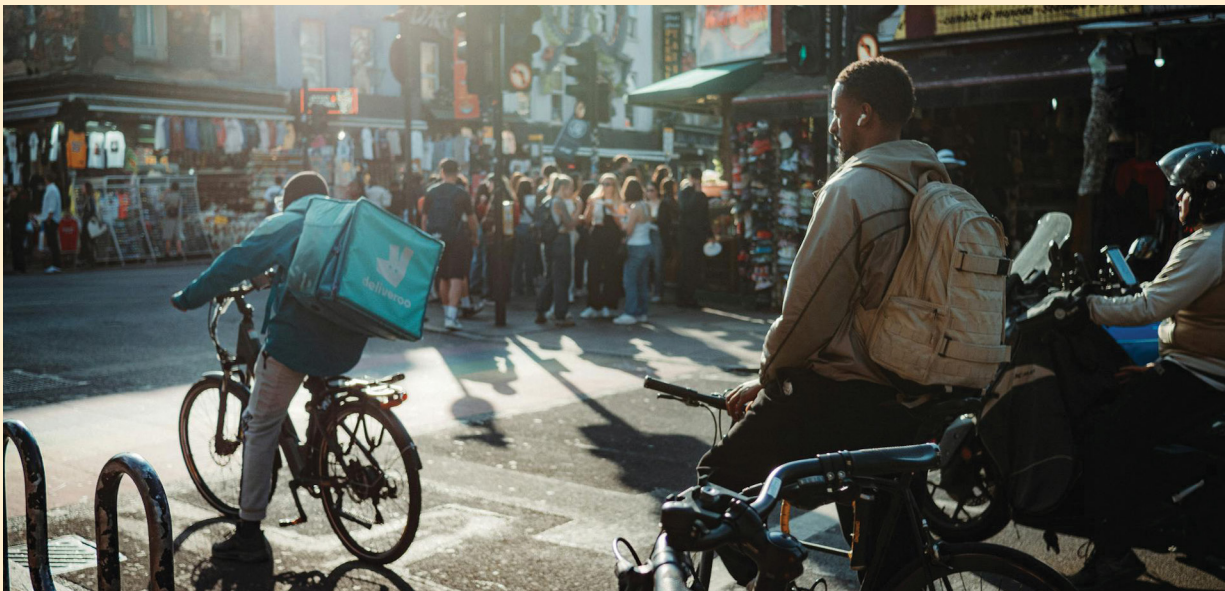
There is no question that the lived reality of class, and its various political implications, are complex, multidimensional and multi-faceted. If we really want to understand class, then we must draw on multiple intellectual traditions

True heroes

Reconnecting with today's working-class voters is the only route for Labour to rebuild its winning electoral coalition, writes *Claire Ainsley*



Claire Ainsley is director of the Project on Center-Left Renewal at the Progressive Policy Institute and was executive director of policy for Labour under Keir Starmer 2020-22. She is the author of the 2018 book 'The New Working Class: how to win hearts, minds and votes'.



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WHATEVER HAPPENS OVER the coming weeks and months with the Labour leadership, it is inevitable that there will be an intense debate about the necessary electoral strategy to recover from a terrible set of local and devolved nations' election results in May.

Labour's successful attempt in 2024 to form an electoral coalition of swing voters in the towns and suburbs and urban progressives in the cities fell apart in the recent elections. The Greens won a swathe of younger, urban areas, and Reform UK won in more working-class places. Labour's 2024 vote was reduced to 17 per cent under pressure from the Greens, Reform UK and the nationalists in Wales and Scotland.

It is entirely possible that a portion of Green-leaning voters could be persuaded to vote Labour in the future with a more left-wing offer. But to do so would be a mistake, electorally and in policy. British elections are decided by a party – usually the Conservatives – winning over a critical mass of today's working-class voters in the towns and suburbs of each of our nations who make up the majority of the electorate.

In the turnaround of Labour's fortunes led by Keir Starmer in opposition, Labour sought to understand and reconnect with those voters who had voted for Boris Johnson's Conservatives in 2019 or stopped voting Labour several elections before. At this mid-term low in May 2026, our path to recovery starts with understanding and reconnecting with them again. In doing so, we can learn from examples of mid-term recovery from Australia and the US.

The Australian Labor party won re-election last year with an increased parliamentary majority, having suffered a decline in public support during the middle of their first term and the loss of a referendum on the creation of a body to represent indigenous Australians. Coming out of this referendum, the Australian Labor party learnt the right lessons: in government, it had lost its clear focus on the everyday concerns of ordinary Australians. It refocused its energy on the cost of living and providing visible symbols of progress, like the rollout of urgent care centres. The party then framed the general election as a choice about the future, using those visible symbols

as examples of delivery. The prime minister, Anthony Albanese, emphasised his background and credentials as a leader able to stand up for ordinary Australians in the face of global insecurity, in contrast to his opponent, Peter Dutton. In many ways, the ALP recaptured the winning formula of their 2021 federal campaign which the Labour party here learned so much from in opposition.

The US's Democrats offer an earlier example of mid-term turnaround. Bill Clinton – and indeed the Democratic party – were written off as no-hopers after suffering a dreadful set of midterms in 1994. But like the ALP in 2025, the Democrats learned the right lessons from the defeat and reoriented towards working Americans, introducing reforms to tackle crime and boost the economy while ruthlessly exploiting the Republicans' policy divisions. The party turned it around while in government and went on to win in 1998.

What both examples of a mid-term recovery show is that the only path to success is to understand and speak for the voters who put you into power. In the UK, that strategy was central to Labour's recovery from the 2019 election defeat. We recognised that Labour was no longer representing the people for whom the party had been set up to represent, today's working class, and whilst the party needed a cross-class coalition to win, it was working-class voters that felt we no longer spoke for them. But we also understood that the working class in Britain has fundamentally changed as we have moved away from our industrial past. The working class today is much more diverse than the stereotype of an older man working in manufacturing. Our electoral strategy was intended to speak to the new working class in the towns and suburbs – which is multiethnic and includes more women than men – and chart a course for a changed Britain that more urban, liberal voters could get behind, too.

We operationalised this focus on today's working-class voters through the development of Labour's 'hero voter' strategy, devised by Keir Starmer's director of strategy Deborah Mattinson, who had years of experience in getting the Labour party to understand the public and speak for it rather than speaking to itself.

Structural changes to the British economy over the past forty years have seen a decrease in the size of the traditional working class, but have also created a new working class of people in low to middle income jobs, primarily working in services, and much more diverse than its historical predecessors. Labour's path to a parliamentary majority involved understanding modern class dynamics and the millions for whom the changing nature of the British economy had made life more insecure.

These voters were not to be dismissed or belittled – hence calling them “hero voters” to orient the party towards them. A sizable proportion of them had voted ‘Leave’ at the Brexit referendum, often because they wanted to see change to a status quo that had left them feeling financially insecure. They wanted to see better jobs, wages and economic opportunities, more respect and attention given to their places and communities, and better public services. For many, immigration had become the prism through which they saw other issues, particularly where they were apparent constraints over resources.

By 2023, enough of those who had voted for Johnson's Conservatives felt let down to put Labour consistently ahead in the opinion polls amongst this critical group. Together with voters from more affluent groups who had pulled away from the Conservatives, and Labour's existing support, Labour had the makings of the parliamentary majority that went on to be achieved at the general election in July 2024.

Labour drew together these different groups by making ‘change’ the central theme of its election campaign. The major priority across all voter groups was tackling the cost of living, which Labour had led the Tories on by calling for action like the windfall tax on energy companies to pay for a rebate on bills. Labour made its long-term approach part of its pitch to an electorate exhausted by the constant chaos of different Conservative leaders. A rebuild of public services was promised through pledges on bringing down NHS waiting lists and recruiting teachers.

Labour vowed to control borders where the Tories had failed to do so.

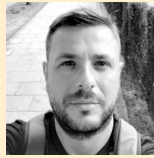
Yet in government, it has proved much more difficult to hold together the country and the diversity of voters behind Labour's 2024 victory, as so clearly evidenced in the recent local and devolved election results. The UK is not unusual in this: many developed democracies are now characterised by a multi-party politics which reflects the fragmentation of a society transformed through deindustrialisation.

The route to success for centre-left parties, and for Labour in the UK, is to seize an agenda which captures this mood of change and resonates with a significant number of today's working-class voters and urban liberals. By reconnecting with those voters who feel let down, and being the champion of change once again, as the ALP and Democrats have done before, Labour can find its way back. But the party has to be clear that there is no route to parliamentary majorities that does not include understanding and speaking for today's working class voters. ■

By reconnecting with those voters who feel let down and being the champion of change once again, as the Australian Labour party has done, Labour can find its way back

Class act

The left often fixates on politicians' working-class origins – but where they end up may matter more, writes *Vladimir Bortun*



Dr Vladimir Bortun is a Lecturer in Politics at St. John's College, University of Oxford. His current research focus on the class project of far-right parties in Britain and beyond

THERE IS A TENDENCY IN DEBATES about political representation to look backwards. We ask where politicians came from: whether they grew up in a council house, whether their parents worked in factories, and, most of all, whether they can credibly claim a working-class upbringing. This is, in fact, a sensible instinct: as my own research shows, these questions matter, and not just symbolically. Class origin, as it turns out, remains one of the most important influences on how politicians make sense of world.

If we stop there, however, we risk missing the most consequential part of the story. While origins do shape political dispositions, it is class destination – where politicians end up, economically and socially – that might ultimately structure their interests and policy preferences. If we are serious about representation, we need to shift our focus accordingly.

The enduring imprint of class origin

In interviews with British MPs, a consistent pattern emerges across partisan lines: politicians locate the roots of their political outlook in their upbringing. Particularly in the case of former Labour MPs from working class origins, family background, financial insecurity, and early exposure to inequality leave a durable imprint. Class origin provides a moral grammar – a way of interpreting fairness, opportunity, and the role of the state.

This is no trivial matter. Politicians from working-class origins often describe themselves as more attuned to redistribution, more sceptical of market outcomes, and more supportive of collective provision than colleagues from more privileged backgrounds. These effects persist even after similar educational and career trajectories. Evidence suggests the same is true for the population as a whole.



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At the level of political narrative, too, class origin has become increasingly salient. In a professionalised political class, where occupational diversity has narrowed, emotive origin stories are increasingly mobilised. They are meant to signal authenticity, ground claims to representation, and provide a language through which politicians connect to voters. Starmer's now infamous toolmaker father may come to mind, but – as my recent research finds – it is Reform candidates who seem particularly keen to mobilise their 'humble origins' to manufacture relatability among disillusioned working-class voters. After all, the claim to be on the side of "ordinary people" and against the "out-of-touch elites" remains the crux of populism.

The problem is that when we look at politicians' actual economic policy preferences, they overwhelmingly reflect their class destinations – mostly professional-managerial or petty bourgeois – rather than origins. In general, they are pro-business rather than pro-worker.

What about what politicians actually do?

If we take a materialist understanding of class seriously, then, the key question is not whether someone once grew up working class, but whether they currently depend on selling their labour to make ends meet. Being working class is first and foremost about economic dependence before it is a job title or cultural identity. Many politicians who grew up in working-class households no longer occupy that social position. They have accumulated assets, built highly paid careers, and entered social worlds that distance them materially from the conditions they once experienced and which many of their voters still do. Their class destination has shifted, and with it their interests. This process can play out in complex, and perhaps counterintuitive, ways: the same research that demonstrated the lingering effects of early socialisation found that "upward mobility from the working class is associated with increased conservatism".

As substantiated by an emerging body of empirical evidence, when looking at politicians' occupation prior to coming into office, not only are they significantly more privileged than the average person, but their class destinations condition the direction of their policymaking. In other words, what matters is who the politicians are now rather than who they were when they were growing up. Class destination might even determine where a politician can land a job after their time in office. While this strand of the "revolving door" literature is still rather underdeveloped, it has shown, for example, that "finance ministers, especially from left-wing parties, are more

likely to be hired by financial entities in the future if they please their future employers through deregulatory policies during their time in office."

In other words, without enough working-class politicians, policies risk being calibrated to median or elite experiences. With only about 3-5 per cent of politicians across OECD democracies today entering politics from working-class jobs (despite such jobs making up 56-58 per cent of the Labour force), perhaps it is not surprising that said democracies persistently fail to tackle socioeconomic inequalities. This, in turn, creates openings for demagogic challengers who can claim to speak for "ordinary people" even when their policy platforms and track record are just more of the same.

Rethinking representation

What follows from this is not that class origin is irrelevant. It continues to shape political outlooks in important ways. But clearly it is not enough. If we care about representation, we need to pay greater attention to class destination: the current economic position of politicians, including their sources of income and living conditions. The main practical implication is to create pathways into politics for people in working-class occupations. Indeed, why not establish a mandatory quota for elected representatives from working class occupation? This would have to be coupled with closer scrutiny of the material interests of political elites rather than taking claims of identity at face value.

But even that might not be enough. The simple fact is that parliament is an institutional environment that rewards conformity. Beyond financial or career incentives, party discipline and the broader gravitational pull of elite norms all constrain how far the political dispositions of elected representatives translate into policy. Politicians are not merely selected from particular backgrounds, but over time are also re-socialised into a relatively narrow set of perspectives which tend to defend and reproduce the status quo. As Jean Jaurès put it a long time ago, "There is more in common between two parliamentarians, one of whom is a socialist, than between two socialists, one of whom is a parliamentarian."

There is much more to this question, then, than the class backgrounds of individual politicians. To build genuine, fully-fledged democracy, we must re-establish the institutional links between the working class and its political representatives, through parties, unions, and civic organisations that can anchor those representatives in the material conditions and lived experiences of those they represent. ■

It is not that class origin is irrelevant. It continues to shape political outlooks in important ways. But clearly it is not enough

KEY STAGE

Bridget Phillipson's brief concerns inequality in all its forms. She talks to *Iggy Wood* about her vision for a fairer Britain



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WHAT DO I HAVE IN COMMON with Gemma Collins? Well, we've both been spotted at Sugar Hut, a Brentwood nightclub famed for its 'premium' prices and unnerving number of Buddha statues. And now, we've both interviewed Bridget Phillipson.

This interview, will, I suspect, cause less of a furore. Phillipson's video with 'the GC' – who made her name on ITV's *The Only Way is Essex* – prompted a social media pile-on with a distinct note of classism. Collins talked about her love for Richard III and the importance of every kid leaving school with a skillset; this didn't matter to the angry commenters. "I did think there was an awful lot of snobbery about [it]," says Phillipson. "They just said it was outrageous without offering any rationale. I thought she was incredibly focused, a lot of fun, and [she] reaches parents and young people that I just cannot reach. Her message about working hard at school, finding what you're good at, sticking at it, overcoming the odds... that's far more powerful coming from Gemma Collins than it ever would be from any politician. [Now] when I share content about breakfast clubs, or Best Start family hubs, or the National Year of Reading, we're reaching a bigger audience because of the work we've done with people like Gemma."

The connection between education and class runs deep. Phillipson tells me that she sees the "unique" role of Labour governments as breaking the link between someone's background and their destiny. "The Labour party has always been about giving people the freedom to be who they want to be and to live the lives that they want to live, but all too often that is constrained by socioeconomic background. What I've been seeking to do, particularly through the schools white paper, is to address some of the big challenges we see around white working-class kids in particular, and the big gap we see in their attainment at school."

The plight of white working-class kids must resonate with Phillipson: she had a tough upbringing, raised by her single mother in the town of Washington in Tyne and Wear. "We didn't have a huge amount, but I had a loving family who supported me, who wanted me to achieve; who, despite a lack of material goods, valued education and gave me all the love and support that I needed."

"I think we often, on the left, shy away from talking about the importance of family and giving children the best start. That's not about making judgments about family shape or size – brilliant families come in many different shapes and sizes: single parent families, same sex couples, foster families. This is about the love that we give to the children that we care for." In policy terms, she links this focus on family to the flagship Best Start programme, which will establish 'family hubs' across the country by 2028. She points out that, in terms of tackling inequality, waiting until children start school is too late: by that point, significant attainment gaps have already opened up.

Early intervention is also a hallmark of Phillipson's proposed changes to the special educational needs and disabilities (Send) system. Send reform was always going to be near the top of an incoming education secretary's inbox; the status quo is patently broken, with devastating consequences for children, parents, schools and local authorities. Currently, the system revolves around education, health and care plans (EHCPs), which set out what support a particular child should receive, and which are legally binding on local authorities. Since their introduction in 2014, a vicious cycle has emerged: as the number of children with EHCPs has increased, funding available for lower-level Send support outside of EHCPs has been eroded, creating strong incentives for ever more parents



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to pursue an EHCP. The government's proposals maintain EHCPs, but introduce parallel, tiered individual support plans (ISPs), with only children on the highest ISP tiers also receiving an EHCP. The basic idea is to shift responsibility from councils to schools, gradually reduce the number of children receiving new EHCPs, and increase SEND support for children without them.

The shift towards school-led support is not without its risks – teachers are already severely overworked. Nevertheless, the response from the sector has been cautiously positive, especially among frontline healthcare professionals. If Phillipson really has threaded the needle on this fraught issue, it will rank as one of the more impressive achievements of any Labour minister. But she is not complacent. "It would be a mistake to believe that somehow it's job done. People welcoming the approach is wonderful, but we now have to deliver for children. We have to make that change happen in our schools, in our health system, and we will also have to legislate for the change that we want to bring, and that's far from easy."

Many parents – even those sympathetic to the changes in principle – are worried. After the reforms as they stand, children who have only an ISP will not be able to seek legal recourse if they feel their child's needs are not being met. Phillipson emphasises the importance of the consultation in this regard. "We're carefully considering all of this. When I said to parents, this is a genuine consultation, and we'll listen, I meant it. We are going to reflect seriously where parents have raised areas where they want reassurance that this will be a better system

**"You have to be both willing
to take on board reasonable
challenge, but not so thin-skinned
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with stronger support, and that is absolutely the intention: a better system with stronger support, with stronger protection, with more children who can access what they need, not a stripping away of support or fewer rights for children." She also reiterates the point that parents tend to be so focused on EHCPs precisely because the current system places so much emphasis on them. As she puts it: "No parent emerges into the world thinking 'what I desperately want for my child is an EHCP'."

Part of the problem is that families have been failed before. "The scepticism that parents have had, quite reasonably, is that they were promised a better system back in 2014. The promise of that system never materialized, despite the good intentions of those who delivered those changes." She also acknowledges concerns that her plans amount to a cost-saving exercise, an idea she is keen to dispel. "I was clear right from the off: this is about better outcomes for children... even if money were no object, the system isn't working."

While she takes pains to underline her commitment to the consultation process, Phillipson is likely to stick to the key principles set out in the white paper: in a government infamous for flip-flops, she has been responsible for a notable lack of U-turns. Whether on Gemma Collins or VAT on private school fees, she is willing to stand her ground. Take this tweet from 2024: "Our state schools need teachers more than private schools need embossed stationery. Our children need mental health support more than private schools need new pools. Our students need careers advice more than private schools need AstroTurf pitches." Cogent; political; values-based – could other ministers learn something from her approach? "I do stand my ground, but only where I know it's in the interests of children... you have to be both willing to take on board reasonable challenge, but not so thin-skinned that you let some of the nonsense affect you too much."

Yet Phillipson, who holds the women and equalities brief alongside education, won't be drawn on the process by which just about every politician in the Western world has simultaneously changed their mind on trans rights – in the late 2010s, the consensus on trans inclusion stretched from Theresa May to Donald Trump – although she does bemoan that "we've ended up with a very polarised debate". She recently presented the Equality and Human Rights Commission's new code of practice to parliament, which, according to the government, "provides guidance to make the law clearer for service providers and others" while "ensuring everyone can access services safely, free from harassment, and with dignity." Many LGBTQ+ campaigners disagree. Nadia Whittome, the MP for Nottingham East, argues that the guidance "will exclude trans people from services and facilities that they have long used without issue, putting them at increased risk of harassment and violence, and effectively pushing them out of public life."

Phillipson believes that this is an area which involves a 'balance of rights,' and underlines her commitment to protecting trans people from abuse and harassment. "The majority of the public recognize that you can treat trans people with respect and that there's no need to be needlessly antagonistic or abusive, whilst at the same

time recognizing that there are times when women-only spaces are necessary and right. The responsibility that I've had leading this work as the minister and in bringing forward the code of practice is to... [make] sure that the code is workable, practical, and robust, and will stand the test of time."

A strange feature of today's debate around trans rights is that it centres on the interpretation of legislation written over a decade ago – or, in the case of the regulations which govern the facilities employers must provide, more than 30 years ago. Isn't the obvious solution new legislation? Phillipson doesn't think so. "I don't believe that would be the answer.

I think the Equality Act gives us the basis for the protections that trans people continue to enjoy, as well as the rights that women continue to hold in our society. There are practical considerations arising out of the supreme court ruling, and the EHRC sets out what service providers and others need to do in order to make sure that everyone gets the support they need. It is right that we ensure that trans people's human rights are upheld and respected, but we also need to uphold the human rights of women. This can't be seen as a zero-sum game."

The crucial background for Phillipson – who used to run a women's refuge – is the "genuine fear that women face owing to the nature and the severity of male violence across society," although she emphasises that trans people are not responsible for this misogynistic violence.

"That is the context in which women live their lives every day: worrying about walking back when it's late from the station, worrying about whether they'll experience violence in a relationship, worrying about being vulnerable or unconscious in a hospital ward [that] there might be men present. I think it is about more understanding across the board as to the experiences of others, and making sure that we are a society where everyone is valued, welcomed, and accepted for who they are, that they can live their lives free from intimidation, and with the dignity and respect that we all deserve."

Phillipson is clear that she has "always believed that trans people should be free to live their lives without prejudice, discrimination, [or] hatred." But it is notable that, in her defence of the rights of trans people on the one hand, and women on the other, she tacitly implies that these are two separate groups, and that 'women-only spaces' definitionally exclude trans women. This position is now unlikely to see much pushback from within Labour. Many Labour politicians, including the soft-left lodestar Andy Burnham, seem to have internalised last year's supreme court judgement – which was theoretically limited in scope to the meaning of 'sex' in the Equalities

Act, but is often treated by policymakers as some sort of divine proclamation on sex and gender.

University funding is another part of the education brief that has reached crisis point. When I was a 17-year-old applying to go to university, I was told that there was no need to worry about my student loan repayments because the repayment threshold would go up in line with average earnings. Instead, it has been repeatedly frozen, with a particularly consequential freeze instituted by Boris Johnson in 2021. Rachel Reeves will increase the threshold next year but then freeze it until 2030. As a result of the freezes, the highest earners are likely to pay

less, but most graduates will pay a much greater sum over the course of their lifetime than they would have expected when they took out the loan. According to the IFS, for a middle-earner the cost is probably around £20,000. Martin Lewis, the consumer rights activist, has accused governments of acting in a way that no commercial lender would be allowed to. More broadly, the policy seems to be yet another breach of the inter-generational social contract.

Phillipson seems to appreciate that this situation is, in isolation, unfair, but stands by the decision to re-freeze the threshold. "I'd be the first to admit that there are big problems with the system that we've inherited, but there are big problems that we've inherited right across the board, not least around child poverty. We're investing £3bn in lifting the two-child limit [which] we could have invested in a boost to the student finance system, but that wouldn't have been the Labour approach that I would want to see." As for the social contract, she points out that the government's retail policies elsewhere. "Many of those graduates who have plan 2 loans are also the people that will benefit from the big expansion in social affordable housing; from the housebuilding that we want to achieve in the private sector, too. [And] many of those graduates are now in their 30s and thinking about starting a family and putting down roots... they get the big expansion in childcare and early years education."

Some analysts think that, as a Starmer loyalist, a change of Labour leader could put Phillipson's position at risk – especially if the next leader is, as expected, drawn from the soft left. I'm not sure it's so simple. Most obviously, she was the first cabinet minister to break ranks to support Andy Burnham's return to parliament; more substantially, she is clearly not the unreconstructed Blairite many painted her as early in her career. A future leader, looking to build a cabinet willing to put the 'deliver' in 'deliverism,' may find they don't need to look too far. ■

Iggly Wood is the editor of the Fabian Review

"I think it is about more understanding across the board as to the experiences of others, and making sure that we are a society where everyone is valued, welcomed, and accepted for who they are, that they can live their lives free from intimidation, and with the dignity and respect that we all deserve"

By design

The intensifying blockade of Cuba is pushing the island into a crisis – the government must defend international law and support an urgent humanitarian response, argues *Liz Snape*



Liz Snape is assistant general secretary at Unison

The intensification of the US blockade of Cuba is having a catastrophic impact on the island's 10 million people. Access to fuel has been almost entirely cut off since President Trump announced an end to the export of oil from Venezuela on 11 January. This was followed by an executive order on 29 January threatening tariffs against any other countries that attempt to supply the island with fuel. Unions across the world, including Unison, have condemned this brazen attempt to impose regime change by denying Cuba's people the right to food, water and essential public services.

The country's heavy reliance on oil has led to its ageing infrastructure grinding to a halt. In early March, when I spoke to the country's ambassador, she described a deep crisis that had resulted in economic paralysis spreading across every part of the island, including its public services. Even back then, babies were being delivered by torchlight. Months later, the situation has worsened significantly. There are frequent power outages and a crisis in health-care, including a backlog of more than 96,000 surgical procedures (11,000 of them for children). Food shortages are severe, water and good sanitation are in poor supply, and critical public services such as waste collection and transport are collapsing.

Tourism has declined dramatically as a result of the crisis, cutting off one of the most important sources of foreign currency. Moreover, pressure on Latin American governments to terminate health agreements with the

Cuban health service has damaged both the Cuban economy and public healthcare in the wider region.

Unions from South, Central and North America have been particularly active in their opposition to the blockade, with members of Public Services International playing a key role. They are also lobbying their own governments to defend international law, continue trade relations with Cuba and ensure the delivery of all contractual and humanitarian goods.

Unison has responded to the crisis and the requests of our partners in the region by making a commitment to send a 28-tonne container of rice, lentils and other critical food supplies to the island. The union's branches and members are already donating generously to help gather as many emergency supplies as possible.

This latest appeal, responding to Cuba's most critical needs, builds on years of solidarity between our union and the island's people. In recent years, that has taken the form of the Cuba Vive medical appeal, with Unison branches contributing towards essential medical supplies and equipment, which are often unavailable due to the blockade.

First imposed in 1960, shortly after the 1959 revolution, US economic restrictions have undermined Cuba's economy and development ever since. Despite this, the population has been able to build and sustain healthcare and education systems that at times have rivalled the best in the world. But these systems, including Cuba's export of world class health professionals, are now on the brink of collapse, requiring an urgent international response.

Restrictions on Cuba have been varied under previous US administrations. Those imposed recently, and those enacted during President Trump's first term in office, have been the most harmful for decades.

The UN has repeatedly highlighted the damaging impact of the blockade. On 7 May, UN experts called for an end to the "energy starvation" of Cuba, describing it as an "unlawful blockade" and arguing that it is "not only disrupting daily life but also undermining the enjoyment of a wide range of human rights".

For 33 consecutive years, the UN general assembly passed resolutions calling for an end to the blockade, most recently in October 2025. In the context of Trump's sustained assault on international law and the multilateral system, however, this global response has done little to mitigate this US-manufactured humanitarian crisis.

Unison will continue supporting the calls of public service unions in the region for an end to arbitrary, immoral sanctions. We need governments, including our own, to take measures that will uphold international law and ensure an appropriate international response. This means supporting multilateral institutions to prevent a deeper humanitarian crisis, ensuring trade relations can continue and defending the sovereignty of the Cuban people. ■

Tourism has declined dramatically as a result of the crisis, cutting off one of the most important sources of foreign currency

Fertile ground

Farming co-operatives are key to food security and a fairer, more sustainable agricultural sector, writes *Jim MacMahon*



Jim MacMahon is the Labour and Co-operative MP for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton. He was former minister of state for local government and English devolution



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CO-OPERATIVES ARE BRITAIN'S secret weapon – indeed, a bit *too* secret. While valued and championed by those who understand their power, co-ops are still not widely recognised as a mainstream economic force. This is a serious mistake. All the evidence shows that, across the economy, co-ops are more resilient, longer lasting and more equitable than comparable business models. Their success lies in the fact that they root wealth in local communities, giving ordinary people a share and a stake in the economy around them. And in agriculture, they offer a practical solution to the issues that have plagued our food security system for years.

In these uncertain times, we must accept that food security is national security. As a result, the security of our supply chains is critical, as are ownership and resilience. Yet British farmers are currently dealing with rising energy costs, volatile global markets, labour shortages and the growing impact of climate change. More worryingly, extreme weather events, from flooding to drought, are becoming more common and more severe.

Meanwhile, long and fragile supply chains leave the UK exposed to international instability in a way that increasingly feels unsustainable. The reality is that our food system has become highly concentrated, heavily dependent on imports and too vulnerable to shocks beyond our control. Unfortunately, it is the poorest who often shoulder these shocks.

Agricultural co-operatives provide a practical answer to many of these problems because they allow farmers to share risk collectively rather than facing it alone. By pooling resources, farmers are able to secure better prices on inputs such as feed, fertiliser and machinery. They can also jointly invest in storage, processing and distribution infrastructure that would otherwise be inaccessible to smaller producers.

Most importantly, co-operatives strengthen farmers' bargaining power, which helps ensure that more of the value generated by food production remains with producers rather than being absorbed elsewhere in the food supply chain. This is especially important because of the acute economic pressures facing farmers. The Farming Profitability Review found that almost a third of English farms operated at a loss in 2023/24. In this context, co-operation is not simply an ethical preference or an ideological project; it is an economic necessity. If we want farming to remain viable for future generations, particularly for smaller and medium-sized farms, we must support models that improve resilience and profitability at the same time.

The Co-operative party recently published a comprehensive package of recommendations which set out how to make the most of the co-operative model in UK agriculture. The timing is important: Defra is currently drafting a 25-year farming roadmap to set out its vision

for the future of farming. The roadmap must include a clear role for agricultural co-operatives, including ambitious growth targets for the sector and ministerial oversight for their delivery. If our aim is to create a more sustainable farming sector, then taking the co-operative model seriously is key.

Such ambition can only be realised by concrete action. Co-operatives across the economy have long suffered from a lack of business development support, leaving them to navigate a complicated and outdated regulatory environment. For the model to grow and thrive, in agriculture as well as in other sectors, specific co-operative development support is needed. We already have a cross-government manifesto commitment to double the size of the co-operative sector; a new development unit within Defra, tasked with identifying barriers to growth for agricultural co-ops, could significantly contribute to meeting this commitment.

There is also a compelling environmental case for co-operative agriculture. The transition to more sustainable and regenerative farming methods often requires significant upfront investment, experimentation and knowledge sharing. Co-operatives make this transition easier by spreading both costs and risks across multiple producers. The Co-operative party report highlights examples such as the First Milk co-op: the overwhelming majority of First Milk members now operate regenerative farm plans. Elsewhere in Europe, collaborative farming initiatives have demonstrated substantial reductions in input costs while improving environmental outcomes.

These successes are important: the challenge facing agriculture is not simply producing enough food but doing so in a way that is compatible with long-term environmental sustainability. The climate crisis is already reshaping farming conditions across the world. Co-operatives can help farmers adapt through shared learning, collective planning and coordinated investment in climate resilience measures. Whether through renewable energy projects, water management systems or more sustainable land use practices, collective ownership gives farmers the ability to think beyond short-term survival and towards long-term stewardship.

International comparisons make clear what can be achieved when governments take co-operative development seriously. In countries such as the Netherlands and France, agricultural co-operatives are deeply embedded within national food systems and account for a far greater share of agricultural turnover than in the UK. These countries have demonstrated that co-operatives are not a fringe alternative, but a mainstream and competitive business model, capable of delivering innovation, efficiency and economic growth. They benefit from stronger institutional support, better access to finance and closer integration between government, universities and the agricultural sector.

The UK could follow a similar path, but doing so will require political will. To take one example, public procurement could become a powerful tool for strengthening co-operative supply chains. Schools, hospitals and other public institutions should be encouraged to source more

The climate crisis is already reshaping farming conditions across the world. Co-operatives can help farmers adapt through shared learning, collective planning and coordinated investment in climate resilience measures

food from farmer-led co-operatives to support local economies while improving food security. Likewise, there is a strong argument for restoring targeted funding mechanisms that help producers invest in innovation and sustainability, particularly within horticulture, where supply chain vulnerabilities are becoming increasingly visible.

We also need farmers to understand the benefits of co-operatives and how they can be applied to their work. Agricultural colleges and universities will be key; the government should ensure that detail on the co-operative model and its application to agriculture are included in their syllabuses. There is also a strong case, alongside better development support, for an advisory service for agricultural co-operatives; this is already under consideration in Scotland. If we agree the co-operative model has a part to play in creating a stronger and more sustainable farming future, we have to create the most enabling environment possible for it to be used in practice.

At its heart, though, this debate is about more than agriculture. It is ultimately about what kind of economy we want to build. Co-operatives represent a fundamentally different approach to economic organisation, one rooted in democratic ownership, long-term thinking and shared prosperity. In an era where many people feel disconnected from economic power and frustrated by growing inequality, co-operatives offer a model that puts people back at the centre of the economy. Agricultural co-operatives show how this principle can work in practice. They demonstrate that economic efficiency and democratic ownership are not incompatible, but mutually reinforcing. They prove that businesses can be both competitive and community-focused. Above all, they remind us that resilience is not built through concentration and centralisation alone, but through participation, collaboration and local control.

With crisis comes opportunity. One key critique of our time in government so far is our inability to respond to crises with sufficient boldness – in the face of economic shocks outside our control, we have been too ready to find safety in the status quo. But rarely do we have stronger public consent for change than in the face of a crisis. With food inflation set to rise once more this year, we have an opportunity to fundamentally rewire our economy – and create a system where unconventional and alternative models can thrive. ■

Spot the difference

Changes to the student finance system could help so-called ‘Neets’,
writes *Helen Carasso*



Dr Helen Carasso is an honorary Norham Fellow at the University of Oxford's Department of Education. Her book, Every Student Has Their Price: the neoliberal remaking of English higher education, co-authored with Roger Brown, will be published by Bristol University Press in February 2027.

THE PREDICTION IN Alan Milburn's recently-published interim report *Young People and Work* that there would soon be over one million people aged 16-24 in the UK not in education, employment or training (the so-called Neets) has since been confirmed by the Office for National Statistics. This means that more than one in eight young people are starting their adult lives facing the challenges of finding their place within their community without the focus and support that work or study can provide.

Over 60 per cent of young people in this ‘Neet’ group are categorised as ‘economically inactive’. The underlying causes are clearly complex, and social and health factors no doubt play their part. But questions about education are fundamental. What role should education play? What modes of delivery and funding can reduce the links between educational and social disadvantage in childhood and the likelihood of becoming ‘Neet’? And what types of courses should be offered that suit the needs and interests of both students and potential employers?

From January 2027, student funding will be delivered as a lifelong learning entitlement (LLE) in an attempt to move beyond the traditional model of post-compulsory education in England, in which school or college is followed immediately by a full-time, award-bearing course. The combination of fee and maintenance loans currently offered to those on a three- or four-year degree will also be available to people studying accredited ‘units’ (equivalent to at least 30 of the 360 credits required for a full undergraduate award) at approved providers. Adults in England will therefore be able to draw on loans equivalent to four years of undergraduate study at any point until they are 60.

The flexible patterns of study that the LLE will support offer the potential for people to update their skills and knowledge as the field in which they are working

develops. This is intended to increase take-up of degree-level education and training, whether in module-level chunks over a number of years or as a full course. It has also been suggested by some specialists that this ‘bite-sized’ approach to post-compulsory education will widen participation in higher education by reducing barriers for those who are daunted by the prospect of an average graduate debt of over £53,000.

This hope is certainly consistent with the evidence that has been built up over two decades of research showing that debt-aversion has greater impacts on the choices made by potential students who are older, are single parents, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

In theory, then, the LLE sounds as if it should be a surefire policy success for the government (even though it was originally mooted by its predecessors). And in one sense at least, it is unlikely to fail: from next year, all loans for full undergraduate degree courses will operate under this model, meaning that some 1.25 million borrowers will automatically be signed up. As a result, it should avoid the initial inertia seen when the apprenticeship levy (AL) was introduced in 2017.

Under the AL scheme, employers with wage bills over £3m paid a sum equal to 0.5 per cent of those wages into a central fund. Employers could then draw on this fund to support apprenticeships for new or existing employees at any level up to a masters degree. In the early years of the AL, however, take-up was limited, resulting in £604m in unspent funds (24 per cent of the total pot) being reclaimed by HM Treasury in 2020/21.

Following adjustments to arrangements for learners, and wider changes in study patterns post-pandemic, just 1 per cent of the fund is now routinely unused, and the government has felt able to remove support for masters-level qualifications – which had been characterised

Debt-aversion has greater impacts on the choices made by potential students who are older, are single parents, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds

(perhaps unfairly) as giving support to middle-managers undertaking MBAs – from eligibility for AL funding. Since April, the renamed growth and skills levy can be used to support education from GCSE level through to degree apprenticeships and sub-degree units supporting ‘critical skills’ (such as AI and battery manufacturing).

With the experience of the AL in mind, the question now is whether higher education in England is ready to accommodate the government’s wider ambitions for the LLE through its support for short courses as well as degrees. A recent pilot of such courses carried out by the Office for Students (OfS), however, raised as many questions as it answered.

The pilot shared an award of £2m between 22 providers to develop a total of 96 short courses. It was hoped that around 2,400 learners would enrol on at least one of these during the 2022-2023 academic year. In fact, just 125 people enrolled, and only 17 courses across 10 institutions proved viable to run. Almost half of the students who did enrol were funded by their employers. Among the remaining 62 students, two-thirds took advantage of the new-style loan modelled on the forthcoming LLE, and 33 of those learners said they would not have been on the course were it not for the LLE-style funding.

In terms of raw percentages, the outcomes of this trial could be presented as encouraging, but the unavoidable issue is the incredibly low levels of demand for short units of sub-degree level study. Furthermore, more than two-thirds of learners already had an undergraduate degree. This is not necessarily a concern in the context of lifelong learning and upskilling. The pilot does raise questions, however, about the extent to which the LLE will widen participation in higher education, especially considering that the proportion of students with a declared disability or learning condition, and the share from a minority ethnic background, were both consistent with the current participation rates for these groups.

With such small take-up, it would be wrong to make long-term predictions about the impact (or lack thereof) of the LLE from this one pilot. It does, however, raise questions about whether there is actually a demand for a more flexible model of study and, as a result, the extent to which higher education providers are likely to take the risk of investing in the development, marketing and operation of such courses.



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On the demand side, there are the students themselves, but also employers. The large majority of students on the pilot who were in work had their study funded by their employers as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). However, follow-up interviews indicated that many firms hoped that, once these courses became established, their contribution could be taken from the AL.

What, though, of potential students on the new-style units? Will those who are concerned about graduate debt or unsure whether they want to study at degree level feel more confident to enrol on a 30 credit unit that potentially represents part of a degree? While taking one or two such modules may serve as a toe in the water for some, it remains unclear whether learners will be able to accumulate credits over time – potentially across multiple providers – and then have them evaluated together as equivalent to a single, coherent degree programme.

For at least three decades, there have been calls within the sector for universities to operate a common credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) scheme. Admirable as the underlying ambition is, any credible implementation would have to accommodate the differences in course content, pedagogic approaches, and forms of assessment that are core to the English model of course validation on an institution-by-institution basis. And that is to say nothing of the secure, reliable, GDPR-compliant storage of records at a national level that would be needed.

Major changes will also be necessary in universities and colleges that do not already offer short courses. In addition to reviewing and restructuring their own student records system, they will need to consider how to recruit and work with learners who may only be engaged with the institution for a few months. Recruitment will need to target a much wider group of possible applicants and lead to many more enrolments, which is significantly more labour- and resource-intensive than campaigns to attract people to sign up for longer periods. Regular induction periods will also be needed throughout the year, and institutions will need to consider which teaching and assessment processes might be more suitable for those who have not been in formal education for some time.

These are just some of the adjustments that institutions will need to make if they are to work successfully with those who enter higher education through the more flexible patterns of study that the LLE is intended to encourage. The financial and reputational risks are substantial, and providers ignore them at their peril if they decide to design and offer shorter accredited courses. With 43 per cent of institutions last year forecasting deficits, many simply lack the seedcorn funds needed to underpin investment in this form of delivery.

The slow start to take-up of the apprenticeship levy is evidence – if any were needed – that it would be unfair to write off the LLE just because of the limitations of its pilot. Yet the question remains: how is the government going to support and incentivise universities and colleges to take the lead in helping almost one million Neets to start their working lives? There will be many principals and vice-chancellors looking to Milburn’s final report, when it is published later this year, for an answer to that question. ■

New age

Through successful redistributive policies, Brazil's President Lula may have created a rod for his own back, argues *Andreza Aruska de Souza Santos*



Dr Andreza Aruska de Souza Santos is the director of the Brazil Institute at King's College London

IN 2013, I WAS CONDUCTING MY PhD FIELDWORK in Brazil when I interviewed the head of the geography department at a top-tier university. At the end of the interview, she asked me how to obtain a scholarship because she was trying to start a PhD abroad. My head spun: the head of the department only had a master's degree.

This was the peak of a period of rapid university expansion. New faculty positions and student places were quickly filled. The link between being well educated and being well off weakened surprisingly quickly. For the previous generation, a university degree was not only incredibly rare but also a passport to a better future. Today, education is still a necessary condition for prosperity, but it is no longer sufficient. Brazilians from different social classes increasingly invest in appearance, branded goods, gyms, social media visibility, and online betting platforms in pursuit of prosperity and status, often confusing consumption with investment. Without a clear pathway to prosperity, debt-financed consumption has become part of a cycle of aspiration and frustration. Debt, alongside unfulfilled professional aspirations, frequently results in political disillusionment, apathy, or radicalisation. In a society marked by deep-seated inequalities and intense social media connectivity, the experience of economic gains and losses is far removed from what macroeconomic indicators alone may express.

This is the social backdrop against which Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva approaches the end of his third presidential term.

During Lula's first two terms, and particularly during Dilma Rousseff's first mandate, investment in education expanded significantly. The promise was clear: higher education would provide access to better employment and consolidate the emergence of a new middle class. Universities expanded into the interior of the country, educational credit programmes widened access to private higher education, conditional cash transfer programmes reduced extreme poverty, and initiatives targeting child labour increased school attendance. Public sector hiring and wages also expanded during this period.

Brazil thrived in an environment of near full employment and robust economic growth. For a brief moment, the country appeared less like "the country of the future"

and more like the country of the present. The 2000s became synonymous with social mobility.

Yet social mobility also produced inflationary pressures, particularly in housing. Much of Brazil's economic expansion between 2002 and 2012 was financed by the global commodities boom. Rising prices for soy, iron ore and oil increased export revenues, strengthened the Brazilian real and boosted domestic consumption. A strong currency enabled Brazilians to travel abroad and purchase imported goods at unprecedented rates. Simultaneously, low unemployment and rising incomes fuelled a dramatic increase in real estate prices. A three-bedroom flat in a central area of Brasília that cost 300,000 reais in 2003 could frequently fetch 1m just a few years later.

Salaries, however, did not rise at the same pace. This disconnect meant that urban expansion accelerated as middle-class families moved further from city centres in search of affordable housing. Gated residential developments emerged in peripheral areas that often lacked basic infrastructure such as asphalted roads, postal delivery, sanitation, reliable internet and telephone signal. Families could afford smartphones for the first time while simultaneously finding themselves spending five hours a day commuting without good internet signal because of congestion in Brazil's major cities.

The contradictions of the country's growth model became increasingly visible. The protests of 2013 symbolised the exhaustion of that cycle. What began as demonstrations against public transport fare increases rapidly evolved into a broader expression of dissatisfaction with declining purchasing power, deteriorating public services and rising living costs. Transportation became the perfect symbol of the Brazilian dilemma: increased access to housing that was further away. The quality of life acquired in the early 2000s was already in decline in the 2010s.

At the same time, the end of the commodities supercycle weakened the Brazilian real and reduced household purchasing power. Brazilians who had become accustomed to international travel, imported goods and expanding consumption now experienced stagnation and decline. Prices and expectations did not fall back.

The political consequences were severe. The 2013 protests, caused in part by fake news disseminated across social media, contributed to the erosion of Dilma Rousseff's government, culminating in her impeachment in 2016. Distrust in political institutions and frustration with economic decline helped propel Jair Bolsonaro to power in 2018 as voters searched for rupture and renewal. Bolsonaro ultimately failed to deliver economic stability or institutional cohesion. Brazil also endured one of the world's worst Covid-19 fatality rates, due in large part to government failures, resulting in a prolonged school closures and deep political polarisation.

When Lula returned to office in 2023, Brazilians were not only voting against Bolsonaro or for Lula; many were also voting for the memory of the early 2000s (see recent research by Laura Carvalho and Guilherme Klein Martins). The aspirations of Brazilians have not necessarily adapted to the structural transformations of the economy – a mismatch with profound political consequences. The dream of secure employment, home ownership, healthcare, leisure time and upward mobility remains as universal in Brazil as elsewhere. What has changed, however, are the economic conditions through which these aspirations can realistically be achieved.

The global and domestic economic context had fundamentally shifted. Food prices have surged globally, and the conditions that sustained Brazil's earlier consumption boom no longer exist. As a result, Lula cannot reproduce the material experience of prosperity that defined his earlier administrations.

The labour market itself has also changed profoundly. A university degree, although necessary, is not sufficient to achieve stable employment, and new generations do not enjoy the same opportunities as their parents. Employment itself increasingly fails to provide social protection. Brazil has witnessed the rapid expansion of "PJtização", the widespread practice of hiring one-person companies instead of a worker, thus exempting employers from labour obligations such as paid leave, pensions and social security contributions.

Work that is not employment, and incomes that no longer provide a pathway to a better life, have reshaped how Brazilians perceive the state. Historically, the Brazilian left linked the legitimacy of the state to labour protections: paid holidays, limits on working hours, weekly rest and collective bargaining rights. In a country marked by a long history of slavery and inequality, labour regulation became central to citizenship itself. Citizenship was therefore understood through a labour badge, a stable salary, formal employment and legal protections guaranteed by the state.

One of the clearest expressions of the Workers' party (PT) project was the formalisation of domestic labour. Under PT governments, domestic workers gained expanded labour protections, including regulated working hours, overtime pay, pensions and social security rights. In political and symbolic terms, this mattered enormously. In a society historically shaped by racial hierarchy and servitude, bringing domestic workers into the framework of formal labour law represented a form of democratic inclusion.

Yet the contemporary labour market has moved in a different direction. Many domestic workers now prefer to work independently across several households rather than remaining tied to a single employer through a formal contract. Through Instagram and WhatsApp, some advertise services directly, build personal brands, attract clients and negotiate their own schedules and rates. Earning by the hour across multiple homes can generate substantially higher incomes than traditional registered employment. In this context, the language of the traditional left – labour protections, unionisation, formal contracts and social security contributions – increasingly feels distant from the economic logic through which many Brazilians now navigate daily life.

Today, many workers view taxation and regulation not as protections but as obstacles to survival. Rather than relying on public healthcare or education, many aspire to earn enough to purchase these services privately. The left call them precarious workers; the right call them entrepreneurs. This is not just language. It represents a transformation that flies in the face of a left long centred on unions, taxation, and redistribution. Significant numbers of Brazilians have even migrated to neighbouring Paraguay in search of lower taxes and lower living costs.

Lula's government has attempted to respond to these pressures. Its proposed tax reforms aim to exempt lower-income Brazilians from income tax while increasing taxation on higher earners and dividends. Yet progressive tax reform remains difficult in a country where wealthier individuals possess multiple mechanisms for tax avoidance. Brazil's congress, which is controlled by opposition parties, wants fiscal austerity and reduced public spending, which risks undermining the redistributive programmes historically associated with the Workers' party: public healthcare, education and cash transfer schemes.

One of Lula's emblematic policies is the end of '6x1' (six working days and one day of rest), a working routine that is for obvious reasons heavy on the body. However essential, giving workers two days of paid rest flies in the face of the uberization of the economy and a liberal and right-wing congress that tends to favour the interests of companies.

The central question, then, is not whether Brazil implemented redistribution under Lula. It clearly did. Social programmes expanded access to education, reduced extreme poverty, widened racial and gender inclusion, and increased consumption capacity among lower-income Brazilians. The more difficult question is how these achievements were and are experienced in everyday life. For many Brazilians, home ownership in central urban areas has become unattainable. Cars and fuel are increasingly expensive. Around 78 per cent of Brazilian households are currently indebted. In such conditions, it becomes difficult for families to look at incumbent governments with optimism or enthusiasm, regardless of broader macroeconomic indicators.

Lula succeeded in improving Brazilian society. What remains uncertain is whether Brazil's economic structure can sustain the expectations those improvements created. ■

Striking a balance

Contribution and integration must be central to Labour's story about immigration, insists *Thom Brooks*



*Thom Brooks is the principal of Collingwood College and professor of law, ethics and government at Durham University. His Fabian pamphlet *New Arrivals: A Fair Immigration Plan* for Labour won the Fabian Society's Jenny Jeger Prize in 2022.*

FOR TOO LONG, the politics of migration in Britain has been framed almost entirely around numbers, control and enforcement. These issues matter: it is vital that control over our borders is restored following the post-Brexit 'Boriswave,' and we need better enforcement of our immigration rules. Keir Starmer's Labour has already turned the situation around, with net migration significantly down and removals at new highs.

Yet the government has not managed to shift the dial in terms of public confidence. This strongly suggests that raw numbers are not the full story, and the resulting reactionary populism threatens our proudly diverse country. It is time for a shift in emphasis to a more proactive agenda of national belonging. At its heart, this shift will require us to say clearly that integration matters.

Integration is not the same as cultural conformity. It is rather a civic project rooted in shared British values, mutual obligations, contribution, and participation in common national life. Most people instinctively support this project. They believe Britain benefits from diversity, but see shared norms, responsibilities and responsive public institutions as necessary conditions for strong communities. Such a balance has not been well articulated in mainstream politics: frequently, the sense is that someone must choose between being pro-diversity and pro-shared norms.

Labour is uniquely placed to fill this gap. The party's best traditions have always combined solidarity with reciprocity. The call for a clearer 'contribution test' — linking belonging more explicitly to contribution to society — is something I have previously argued for in a Fabian pamphlet precisely because it offers a language of fairness and inclusion.

The question, however, is not simply rhetorical. Britain's civic infrastructure has weakened over many years. Local associations, youth organisations, libraries, community groups and public spaces that once helped bring people together have declined or disappeared altogether. Integration rarely happens because of slogans or ministerial speeches. It happens through everyday interactions, shared experiences and common civic participation. Integration is a two-way street, and a serious Labour agenda should therefore focus on rebuilding the institutions that sustain cohesion in practice.

One important step would be developing clearer local integration barometers so that central government and local authorities can better spot where social fragmentation may be emerging. We measure economic performance carefully; we should take social cohesion just as seriously. Indicators could include measures of civic participation, social trust, volunteering, educational integration and perceptions of belonging.

A second step should be creating an Integration and Social Cohesion Commission. There used to be a similar body, the Migration Impacts Forum, co-led by the Home Office and the culture and local government ministry. It brought together a membership drawn from local authorities, NHS trusts, policymakers and academics to review the impact of migration on local communities and make recommendations for how demographic changes might be mitigated. Its disappearance in 2010 broadly correlates with increasing public concern about migration. We need a new body with similar independence to help advise the government about how we can manage impact and integration better, led by those with first-hand expertise.

Labour should also consider replacing purely time-based residency thresholds for settlement with measurable integration benchmarks — such as progressing on English language requirements, employment, or civic contribution — in a new British integration contract. This would transform settlement from a passive process to a structured civic transition.

A new Life in the UK test is also long overdue. It currently resembles a bad pub quiz, with 'correct' answers that are factually untrue and an arbitrary knowledge test. The new test must have values at its heart. Building on Australia's recent change to its test, every individual test should include questions about shared values which must all be answered correctly to pass.

Finally, we should celebrate our citizenship more positively and prominently, including with a new bank holiday — perhaps a UK Day to follow Remembrance Sunday — where we come together to celebrate our Britishness. At the same time, Labour should champion stronger civic infrastructure nationally and locally. That means renewed support for youth engagement, community leadership programmes, public legal education, citizenship initiatives and institutions capable of fostering shared civic understanding across different backgrounds and generations.

Labour has an opportunity to transform Britain for the better. We can make significant progress if ready to stand up for our values and vision. If we do not, our opponents will not hesitate to impose their alternative — with longstanding consequences that don't bear thinking about. ■

Minor majors

Recruiting under-16s into the armed forces is costly, inefficient and outdated – if Britain wants a modern, professional military, it should end the enlistment of children, writes *Jim Patrick Wyke*



Jim Patrick Wyke is a campaign and advocacy coordinator for the Child Rights International Network (CRIN)

BITAIN REMAINS AN INTERNATIONAL OUTLIER in enlisting 16 and 17-year-olds – defined by the UN as children – into its armed forces. Globally, three-quarters of countries have a minimum age for military recruitment of 18 or higher. In fact, the UK is the only major military power, the only country in Europe, and the only permanent member of the UN security council to still allow enlistment from age 16.

Yet over the past decade, under-18 recruits have made up over 30 per cent of the army's annual intake. The UK's choice to bolster one-third of its military with children is brutal, costly, and largely ineffective in terms of improving the country's national security.

There are significant risks in placing under-18s in a military environment. Over the past decade, numerous cases of mistreatment have come to light, including the violent abuse of recruits and serious sexual offences. The mental health impacts of under-18 recruitment are also stark, with disproportionate rates of long-term mental health problems and higher suicide rates.

The recruitment of under-18s is expensive and inefficient. It necessitates resources that an all-adult recruitment model would not, including the provision of formal education and child-specific safeguarding measures. This makes the cost for each under-18 recruit around 75 per cent higher than that of an adult recruit. The savings of a transition to an all-adult recruitment model for the armed forces are estimated at up to £94m per year – around five times the amount that the army spends on advertising.

In addition to the cost burden, children require longer training and slower deployment. The UK rightly does not deploy soldiers until they are 18. However, in practical terms, this means that a 16-year-old recruit on the infantry training programme remains in training for more than double the time of an adult, and a third of each yearly intake cannot be deployed for the first two years of their careers. Given that the army is particularly reliant on under-18 recruits for filling out frontline combat positions, the UK's national security is being actively weakened by the continued recruitment of under-18s in a time of crisis.

The education offered to under-18 recruits is also problematic. The armed forces are the only UK employer to be exempt from the requirements of the Education and Skills Act. As a result, education falls short of national

minimum standards, both in terms of courses offered and the minimum hours required in the classroom. Recruits are offered only Functional Skills courses (which are below the GCSE standard) in English, Maths and ICT, without the opportunity to take or resit GCSEs.

This is particularly strange given that the army requires GCSE or higher qualifications for approximately half of all regular army positions, explicitly excluding Functional Skills qualifications. The army thus fails to provide under-18 recruits with the necessary qualifications to fully succeed in an army career.

The army has examined the possibility of transitioning to a full-time education model but has concluded that it could not afford to do so. As a result, the current halfway house persists, in which the army offers the bare minimum education but fails to meet national requirements or support career progression.

Instead of joining the army at 16, these children would likely continue in civilian education, expanding their qualifications and enabling greater career progression should they still want to join at 18. The army's current recruitment model not only disrupts under-18s education, but also limits and narrows the available talent pool.

Under-18 recruits find themselves limited to roles requiring the least qualifications, primarily frontline combat roles. These positions have an increased likelihood of physical or psychological trauma and of being killed. An adult recruitment model would provide a better-educated, more flexible pool of recruits, able to fill a wider range of roles and more likely to stay in the forces long term.

The military recruitment of minors is costly, inefficient and operationally unsound, harming UK military readiness. It fails the recruits it purports to offer opportunity to – even leaving them vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse.

In an era of complex security challenges and professional armed forces, the reliance on 16-year-old recruits is an anachronism we can ill afford. Transitioning to all-adult recruitment would save money, reduce wasteful turnover, and channel resources more effectively. If we are to improve resilience and readiness and ensure consistency with international standards, the time for an all-adult military is now. ■

Untapped potential

Disabled people face barriers in training, education and employment – removing them would drive economic growth, writes *Louie Freeman-Bassett*



Louie Freeman-Bassett is the director of communications at Disability Policy Centre

THE UK HAS Faced a productivity problem for decades. According to the Productivity Institute, we have been below the European average since around 2010. Despite some recent positive signs, low productivity remains the core cause of our sluggish economic growth.

Labour made growth the single most important part of its offer to the British electorate at the last general election, and has continued to highlight its importance throughout its time in power. And while external shocks resulting from conflicts around the world have negatively impacted the UK economy, at the next election, the government will ultimately be judged on economic growth and the sense of stability and hope that stem from it.

In such dire economic and political conditions, you might assume the government would want to pull on all levers available to get the economy firing again. But measures that help disabled people are mostly portrayed as a drag on growth.

This is, of course, political. A tough stance on welfare has become a rite of passage for politicians seeking to appear serious and prudent with public finances. But it misses a golden opportunity to unlock the potential of the disabled workforce – potential that we believe is currently lying dormant across the country.

The reasons for this underutilisation are often systematic failings throughout the course of a disabled person's education, training and employment. The result is frequently poorer life chances and significantly lower living standards.

Let us start with schooling. A review by the Department for Education last year found that slower progress is

common among pupils with all types of special educational needs and disabilities (Send). Just 24 per cent of Send pupils attain key stage 2 reading, writing and maths expectations compared with 74 per cent of those with no identified special educational needs. Additional research we conducted in 2021 found that 46 per cent of disabled people remained undiagnosed throughout their time at school.

The government's recent Send reforms deserve some credit. We welcomed the increases in support for mainstream schools, colleges and early years education – which amounted to more than £4bn – alongside 60,000 additional specialist school places and £200m for teacher training. Yet gaps remain, particularly around EHCPs and ensuring the principle of inclusion.

Unfortunately, problems persist into the world of work. Here, frustratingly, we find policies in place which we believe to be effective but are in the process of being dismantled by the government. Access to Work, for instance, is the flagship programme designed to help disabled people get a job or stay in work by offering workplace equipment, support towards travel where public transport is inaccessible, or an interpreter or support worker. Our recent research found that it helps keep up to 50,000 disabled people in work and is highly cost-effective, saving the taxpayer nearly £70m. Despite this, there have been reports in recent months of unofficial changes to Access to Work guidance and a sharp spike in cuts to people's support. The National Audit Office estimates there are more than 32,000 outstanding payments, which is leaving many customers in serious financial distress.

Employers are also failing to maximise the benefit from tools available to them to better support disabled people in work. Occupational health (OH) services, for example, are meant to help disabled employees stay in work by enabling OH professionals to advise on adjustments, manage absences and support returns to work. But they are often perceived as costly and administratively burdensome by employers, which limits uptake. We have previously proposed that the government can better incentivise employers by 'super-deducting' occupational health by at least 110 per cent for two years.

Not all of these issues around disability and employment can be laid at the door of the government. Deeply ingrained stigma within business culture serves to hold disabled people back from leadership positions that would otherwise likely help to reform the culture they operate in. Last year, we spoke to a range of disabled business leaders who echoed this sentiment, highlighting the significant loss to individual businesses from failing to recognise the talents of disabled people.

Laid out like this, it is easy to see the hurdles disabled people face throughout their lives that reinforce systemic barriers and reduce life chances. Simply removing some of the barriers we have outlined here would make a significant difference to the lives of many disabled people, providing more secure and more meaningful employment while also boosting the economy. This government, and those that follow, should learn this lesson – and recognise that improving opportunities for disabled people is a secret weapon in the drive for greater economic growth. ■

Books

Shifting loyalties

As Reform UK cleans up in Tory heartlands, *Miles Ward* revisits a 2021 book analysing Conservative decline – and asks: ‘could it happen to us?’



Miles Ward is the membership, digital, and editorial officer at the Fabian Society

Open any broadsheet and you could be forgiven for thinking that Britain has descended into anarchy. Commentators routinely declare that the country is ‘ungovernable’, pointing to the collapse of the traditional two-party political system, the rise of populism, and an increasingly polarised electorate.

Such diagnoses tacitly imply that these crises are simply random rather than the culmination of decades of political upheaval.

In 2021, Phil Burton-Cartledge tried to take a more comprehensive view in his book *The Party's Over*, which charts the rise and fall of the once-mighty Conservative party. A sociologist by training, he asks a simple but important question: could the Conservative party reproduce the social base that sustained it for so long? Three years later, the answer is looking clearer. Reform UK continues to erode Conservative support while the economic and social conditions which once held its coalition together continue to fray. What once appeared a temporary electoral setback is looking more profound.

To understand the realignment of Tory voters, Burton-Cartledge takes us back to the 1980s and the transformative impact of Thatcherism on British society. His account rests on a well-worn but compelling narrative: the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. Britain moved from an economy centred on mass production, strong trade unions and Keynesian consensus towards an economy characterised by globalised supply chains, flexible labour markets and the growing primacy of finance capital. In short, the country shifted from an industrial society to an information economy.

Where Burton-Cartledge is at his strongest is in demonstrating how this economic transformation helped transform political identities. Most important is his conception of a ‘two-nation’ Britain. Thatcher didn’t just deregulate markets; she set out to “change the heart and soul” of the country. Policies such as right-to-buy reconfigured material interests and helped construct a new electoral coalition.



The Party's Over

Phil Burton-Cartledge

(Verso Books, £11.99)

Burton-Cartledge is less concerned with New Labour, but he identifies a point of continuity: on Stuart Hall’s conception of ‘authoritarian populism’, he argues that both parties appealed to ‘law and order’ in order to manage political crises. Under Thatcher, this manifested itself in confrontations with organised labour, and the construction of internal ‘enemies’ within. Under Blair, there was a different frame, with an emphasis on personal responsibility, crime and antisocial behaviour (think Asbos). Meanwhile, New Labour was building its own social base through the expansion of higher education and the promotion of the creative industries: graduates concentrated in the public, professional and creative sectors. This is the group Maurice Glasman has, somewhat unfairly, labelled the ‘lanyard class’.

This inheritance is highly relevant for Labour’s current predicament. Efforts to rerun the law-and-order playbook and maintain credibility on issues such as immigration and security have resulted in crackdowns on the right to protest and civil liberties which sit uneasily alongside the expectations of its younger, socially liberal base. This has contributed to a fragmentation of support and drift towards parties such as the Greens and Liberal Democrats.

The book is less convincing when it comes to the transformation of digital politics. Burton-Cartledge excels in his analysis of how the Conservatives built their electoral coalition, but offers less insight into the contemporary attention economy. New populist insurgents increasingly rely on digital networks that allow them to bypass many of the traditional institutions that once mediated political life.

The Party's Over is a useful tool to understand the current political moment. Burton-Cartledge shows how political coalitions are constructed, maintained and unravelled. Ultimately, his analysis serves as a warning: if the decline of the most successful party in modern political history stemmed from its inability to reproduce its social base, it would be foolish to assume Labour is immune to the same fate. Unless it takes action, Burton-Cartledge may find himself writing a political obituary to Labour. ■

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

Getting stuck in

As Labour approaches the midpoint of its first term in office, Fabian Society research has been feeding into three of the government's most high-profile agendas: housebuilding, NHS digitisation, and AI.



IN **ANATOMY OF SUCCESS**, published in March, senior researcher Sasjka Otto explored the potential of digital technology in the NHS, drawing on lessons from past modernisation initiatives. Every government since New Labour has pledged that innovation will revolutionise the NHS. Many observers, however, have grown wary after repeated attempts at digitisation

have either overpromised or underdelivered. This scepticism has fuelled accusations of “hype” around claims about what new technologies can deliver for patients. More recently, with the rise of AI, concerns have emerged that poorly implemented technology could exacerbate health inequalities and even harm patients. Otto identified the key decisions the government must get right if it wants to achieve its health goals over the next decade and deliver world-class care to all.

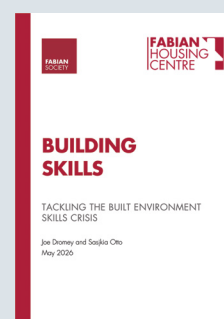
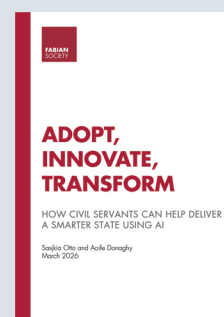


In **Housing the Future**, published by the Fabian Housing centre, research manager (and head of the centre) Ben Cooper set out how the next Scottish government should use its powers to deliver a significant increase in housebuilding rates to tackle the housing emergency. He analysed why Scotland hasn't built enough since 2007 – including restrictive

national planning policy and a lack of resources in the planning system – and drew on Scottish public attitudes towards the housing emergency and housebuilding to set out an ambitious set of solutions to ensure enough good quality homes are built.

Then, in **Adopt, Innovate, Transform**, Sasjka Otto turned to the role of AI in the civil service. Drawing on survey data and insights from focus groups, her report examined the challenges civil servants face in shaping the government's AI agenda.

Finally, in May, another Fabian Housing Centre publication turned to the skilled workforce needed to deliver Labour's housing promises. Construction faces a large and growing skills crisis, which threatens to undermine our ability to build the homes and infrastructure we need. **Building Skills**, by Fabian general secretary Joe Dromey and Sasjka Otto, explored the causes of the construction skills crisis and outlined a workforce and skills strategy for the sector. Recommendations included apprenticeship grants for employed and training providers and the introduction of a Work and Train Visa. **F**



Listings

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS

Meetings at Birmingham Friends Meeting House.

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BOURNEMOUTH

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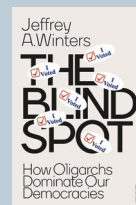
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THE FABIAN QUIZ

THE BLIND SPOT

Jeffrey A Winters



The wealthy and powerful few have dominated most of human history. This has rarely been more true than it is today – the gulf between oligarchs and the average citizen

is vastly larger than any divide that existed during European serfdom or the slave society of imperial Rome. The question Jeffrey Winters asks is: how is this possible in a democracy?

In *The Blind Spot*, Winters delivers an urgent, incisive account of how we reached this era of in-your-face oligarchy, exposing how modern democracy was designed to protect the interests of the ultra-rich. Tracing the evolution of oligarchy through the democratic era, he demonstrates how the power of the wealthy is not a flaw in our democracy: it was built into its very foundations.

All hope is not lost, however. Winters offers a series of bold ideas on how this balance maybe shifted, charting a path forward through some of the most testing of times.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:

Elon Musk founded an online bank in 1999. What was it called? (Clue: he is not the most original thinker.)

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

**ANSWERS MUST BE
RECEIVED NO LATER
THAN 10 AUGUST 2026**



