FABIAN REVIEW

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POLL POSITION

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FABIAN SOCIETY

FABIAN REVIEW
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Eyes on the prize

With power within its reach, Labour needs to make sure it adopts policies which are both practical and transformative, writes *Andrew Harrop*

For Labour members and supporters who have endured the last 13 years it is a heady moment. Suddenly everyone thinks the party is about to win.

Keir Starmer is treated as a future prime minister by journalists, business leaders and pillars of the establishment. Everyone from unaligned voters to Conservative backbenchers is expecting Labour to return to power.

Things certainly feel different here at the Fabians. The society has gone from producing interesting ideas for opposition politicians to debate at their leisure to publishing plans that a future government could actually make happen. Our seasoned contributors could soon be at the top of government, such as Rachel Reeves, who joined the society aged 18, or David Lammy, who publishes a Fabian pamphlet this month.

It is a bit like being the fan of an unfashionable football team that has been unexpectedly promoted to the premier league. There is certainly an influx of interest in the party. Groups that have ignored Labour for more than a decade are suddenly seeking to shape its thinking.

In recent months that has been particularly true when it comes to the Labour party's policy review, which has attracted lots of interest from outsiders unfamiliar with the obscure machinery of Labour internal democracy.

The review culminates later this year when the party will pull together its initial platform for the general election. A package will be hammered out in the summer for a vote at annual conference in October. This is the point of maximum leverage for the affiliated trade unions which will want to see their priorities at the heart of Labour's programme. Party members will also flex their muscles: their big fight will be on the party's position on electoral reform.

But the policy disagreements will be comradely, not toxic. Compromises will be found in a purposeful way because everyone involved has their eyes on the prize. They know that Labour's plans will have to pass a test of plausibility with the public and be possible to implement once the party is in government.

This reflects the practical socialism that has always been the hallmark of the Fabian Society. Current Fabian research is developing a plan to reduce regional inequalities by piecing together a jigsaw of small pragmatic measures. We are also conducting a review for Wes Streeting on how to create a National Care Service through a series of incremental reforms, not a single 'big bang' moment.

In March, the society presented another package of individually small policies that could stack up to something big. We made a series of proposals to improve paid leave schemes and benefits when people stop work, and we suggested they should be pulled together as a comprehensive new public offer for when earnings stop. We call it British employment insurance, and think it could be a new pillar of the welfare state.

When power is within reach, ideas need to be serious and implementable. But they also need to be big enough to inspire people's imagination and bring real change to their lives. The old Fabian recipe of incremental means towards radical ends has never been more important than when the Labour party is within touching distance of power. **F**

Shortcuts

THE GREEN BLUEPRINT

Fossil fuel dependence is harming us and the planet — *Tessa Khan*

The last year has laid bare the true cost of our reliance on fossil fuels: not only are oil and gas driving the climate crisis, but the rocketing price of these commodities, particularly gas, has spurred the worst cost of living crisis in the UK in a generation. Even with the billions being spent on an energy price cap, almost 7 million households are living in fuel poverty this winter.

Moreover, oil and gas companies have announced record-breaking profits: after seeing a substantial post-Covid recovery, BP, Shell, Equinor and other oil and gas declared even higher figures for last year, with Shell alone making £32bn in profit.

At the same time, the UK government continues to approve the development of new oil and gas fields in the North Sea and to hamper the development of our abundant renewable energy resources. Between our ongoing role as a major oil and gas producer in a climate crisis, scandalous levels of fuel poverty – including people living in freezing homes after being forcibly transferred to pre-payment meters – and the outrageous profits being banked by oil and gas companies, the need to fundamentally overhaul our energy systemhas never been more stark.

A Labour government not only has the responsibility to respond to these dual imperatives of climate and energy affordability; it also has the opportunity to position the UK as a global leader at a time when the US and EU are in a race to support the development of their green industries. The signs that it will embrace this opportunity are positive: the Labour party has announced that it will deliver a 100 per cent clean power system by 2030, which is five years earlier than the current government's target and would be the most ambitious clean power target of any major economy.

Further, Labour is right to argue that the loophole within the current windfall tax – which amounts to a £10.6bn write-down of the tax paid by the oil and gas industry in the UK – should be closed. Not only does the loophole, which provides tax relief to companies if they open up new oil and gas fields, further entrench our dependency on fossil fuels; it also forgoes a level of tax revenue that could provide an inflation-matching pay increase for every NHS worker and teacher in the UK for a year.

But to truly ensure a rapid and just transition in our energy system that protects the most vulnerable, there is more that a Labour government can and must do. First, Labour must ensure that the UK does not expand our existing oil and gas production. That means rejecting any new oil and gas developments, including the Rosebank oil field, which is currently awaiting government approval and which is the largest undeveloped oil field in the UK. At three times the size of the controversial and ultimately stalled Cambo field, burning the reserves in Rosebank would result in carbon emissions equivalent to the annual emissions of the world's 28 lowest-income countries put together.

Second, Labour must ensure that oil and gas workers and the communities that currently rely on the sector are at the centre of transition planning and that there are clear pathways out of high carbon jobs, making use of skills already within the workforce. This means investing in a supply chain for renewables here in the UK and creating a thriving domestic manufacturing base for the technologies and energy that the UK is ideally positioned to develop. Labour's plan to establish a publicly owned clean energy company is a step towards ensuring that the public benefits from our energy system, but it needs to encompass more of our energy system's infrastructure.

Finally, Labour's intention to create an 'anti-OPEC' alliance of countries dedicated to supporting and cooperating to expand renewable energy production is welcome, especially given the serious geopolitical consequences of our dependence on petro-states like Russia. Yet for a safe climate, the speed at which we transition away from oil and gas is no less important than the speed at which we scale up renewables, and so Labour should also join a club of countries that is committed to this transition: the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance. That would cement the UK's position as a global climate leader and create the international momentum that is needed for countries to stay on track towards a liveable climate.

In short, the rewards for an ambitious programme to transition the UK away from oil and gas are rich. At home, we can create thriving local and national economies that are built on the industries of the future. Globally, we can drive crucial momentum to ensure a safe climate for generations to come. **F**

Tessa Khan is a climate change lawyer and executive director of Uplift

HOMES TO HOUSES

To protect our communities, we need stricter regulation of short-term lets — *Rachael Maskell MP*

On 11 August 2008, airbedandbreakfast.com launched in San Francisco. The first guests were hosted by the founders themselves, sleeping in their living room during that year's Industrial Design Conference. As new companies go, it seemed harmless enough, if tragically reflective of the city's nascent housing shortage.

Fast forward more than 13 years, and the short-term holiday let industry is worth $57bn worldwide. Rather than a mere symptom of housing shortages, it is now a significant cause of them, with homes from village cottages to urban terraces being flipped over to short-term holiday lets in a wave of unconventional property investment. In the midst of the UK's housing crisis, we are seeing privately rented accommodation switch

use, accelerated by the tax changes on buy-to-let properties as landlords have realised the revenue potential from this industry. Others are scanning estate agents and hoovering up houses to host people taking a short break.

Holiday destinations have become particular hotspots for changes of use in an uncontrolled and unregulated market. In York, we saw a sharp post-pandemic surge in interest, peaking at over 2,000 properties marketed to weekend party groups and those looking for a break in our fantastic city. Ideal if you are seeking a good time away with friends and family – less ideal if you desperately need a home.

My office witnessed a sharp rise in renters being served section 21 eviction notices as landlords turned their homes over to tourists. Others who had faithfully saved for their mortgage found their longed-for home spiking in price. House prices in York rose a staggering 23 per cent last year, higher than anywhere in the country, as demand significantly outstripped supply. The knock-on effect on our city has been severe: locals have been forced to leave their city, leaving many businesses with a shortage of both workers and customers.

For those that remain, the weekend dread begins when the taxis pull up outside. The music reverberates through the walls, the unrestrained drinking leads to swearing and often profane conversation into the small hours. Parents try and protect their children, neighbours shut their windows and community stress notches up for yet another weekend. At worst, short-term lets have harboured drug dealers and pop-up brothels.

Housing matters. Communities matter. But local authorities have few powers to stop their communities being hollowed out.

© Glynne Hather/Flickr

Many holiday-let enterprises also qualify for small business rate relief, so do not even pay taxes.

Last year, I introduced a bill to the House of Commons to license these new businesses and give powers to local authorities to determine whether they should be there at all.

With a licensing scheme, local authorities would be able to establish control zones where no new short-term holiday lets could come into use. As in many European cities, they would be able to introduce a penalty for landlords whose guests did not adhere to the licensing conditions and ensure that properties abide by health and safety and environmental standards.

With local businesses struggling to recruit staff as housing pushes people out of their city, the support I have received has been comprehensive. Those working in the regulated B&B and guest house sectors, undercut by online platforms, also want full licensing of their competitors.

Yet my campaign has met with a muted response from the government. In December, the levelling up secretary announced that he would introduce a registration scheme. This would ensure that local authorities know where holiday lets are, and certain conditions would be applied to landlords, but the proposals fall far short of the necessary measures in my bill.

The government has said it will consult on the new proposals, although it will not say when. It will consider, among other things, the creation of a new 'use class'. This proposal has its challenges: while creating a requirement to apply for a change of use in order to convert a property to a short-term let might help stem the tide, once granted, such a use class would make it harder to revert a property back to residential use. It is also hard to see how hollowed-out planning departments will have the capacity to deal with more work.

My legislation would be simpler, yet more impactful and responsive, than the government's proposals. Akin to measures recently introduced in Scotland, it would provide a more comprehensive approach that is necessary to protect existing communities.

From rural and coastal to urban locations, my bill received widespread support. The government might have talked it out, but the campaign goes on. We need to protect our communities and we desperately need to protect our housing stock. If this government fails to legislate, at least we know a new government is on its way. **F**

Rachael Maskell is the Labour MP for York Central

EASING THE PRESSURE

Constitutional reform is necessary, but a written constitution would be a mistake — *Luke John Davies*

It is often said that, if you were going to organise the constitutional arrangements of a polity from scratch, you would never design it to look like the UK. We are one of only three countries, alongside New Zealand and Israel, which does not have a written constitution. Our system has evolved over the last 800 years, not as a continuous flow like a river, but rather moving the way mountainsides do, with sudden, dramatic earthquakes in response to huge build-ups of pressure under the surface. These earthquakes are the bedrock of our political history – Magna Carta, the Civil War, the Glorious Revolution, the Reform Acts, the 1911 Parliament Act, women's suffrage, devolution. Now, the pressure has built to a point where another landslide is inevitable.

Gordon Brown's Commission on the UK's Future and its report, A New Britain, represent an attempt to shape and direct this landslide. Much of the reporting on it has focused on the proposal to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with a House of the Nations and Regions, something which is long overdue. But many other proposals have found their way into the discussion, and they are often framed with the idea of a written UK constitution. This idea is fundamentally flawed.

Brown himself studiously avoids this trap, instead utilising the phrase 'constitutional statute' with a 'statement of purpose' incorporated into the legislation. That is because he knows that we are not, in fact, designing the constitutional arrangements of the UK from scratch, but rather evolving a settlement that has been around for eight centuries, and that is predicated on the concept of parliamentary sovereignty.

Parliamentary sovereignty, the notion that parliament is the supreme legal authority, with the ability to create or end any law and unbound by the decisions of any preceding parliament, is the most

important part of the UK constitution. It is this that a written constitution would upend. A written constitution would, by definition, be legally supreme over parliament. It would be a decision by one parliament that would bind all of its successors, and which would require a Supreme Court to interpret it – a body which would, therefore, also be above parliament. Such a change would be fraught with danger.

There are those who point out that the UK has had a Supreme Court since 2009, when it replaced the Law Lords. This court, however, cannot overturn primary legislation passed by parliament; nor is parliament bound by a declaration by the Supreme Court that a piece of legislation is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. It does not therefore violate parliamentary sovereignty and has not threatened the constitutional settlement of the UK.

Our unwritten constitution has allowed the UK to evolve over time. It has the flexibility to respond to the pressures under the surface. It also means that the method for resolving an impasse in our political decision-making is a general election, not the majority decision of a group small enough to be at a dinner party, however eminent. Those are both key strengths, as is the fact that, once a constitutional decision is made, it can be executed rapidly.

To give an example of the delays that can sometimes happen in a system with a written constitution, the US Congress passed a constitutional amendment to ban child labour in 1924, but it is still not in effect because it has not been ratified by two-thirds of the states. Would the devolved administrations be able to block constitutional amendments decided in Westminster in the same way? Under a written constitution, perhaps the assembly in Stormont could have blocked the legalisation of abortion across the UK, not just in Northern Ireland.

Why, then, is a written constitution even up for discussion? At least part of the problem is that recent governments have pushed an 800-year-old constitutional framework to its limits. David Cameron's time in office will be remembered for a series of reckless gambles in the form of the AV referendum, the Fixed Term Parliament Act, the Scottish independence referendum and the Brexit referendum. The combined result of the Fixed Term Parliament Act and the Brexit referendum came close to breaking the British constitution entirely. Boris Johnson, on the other hand, did not so much gamble with constitutional conventions as ignore them entirely, which has naturally led to calls for a written constitution in an attempt to make them enforceable.

As Brown laid out, the constitutional conventions of the UK do need reinforcing. But doing so in the form of a written constitution would break our political system in ways which are difficult even to imagine. We did not need a written constitution to end the absolute monarchy, establish the primacy of the Commons or give women the right to vote. It would be a profound mistake to think that we need one now. **F**

Luke John Davies is chair of the Birmingham and West Midlands Fabians and a member of the Fabian Society executive committee

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Early Fabians gave us the blueprint to end food poverty — *Andrew Forsey*

A decade has passed since MPs and peers created parliament's first all-party group on hunger in Britain. In that time, the group has produced ample evidence on how the social evil of hunger can be abolished. Now it is time for Labour to plan for its next government, with a three-part strategy to eliminate the need for food banks by 2030. Interestingly – though somewhat depressingly – all three parts of his strategy closely reflect the work of early Fabians in the 19th and 20th centuries.

First, we should establish, in the words of Beatrice Webb, a 'national minimum'. This would place a duty on the state to preserve certain standards of living below which no one is allowed to fall – let alone be shoved beneath. Such a minimum must form the bedrock of an anti-hunger strategy, as it did in the Webbs' campaign for the prevention of destitution.

Here the signs are already encouraging. The Report of the Commission on the UK's Future, commissioned by Keir Starmer, recommends placing a new legal duty on the state to ensure "no person shall be left destitute". Such a duty would prohibit the state from pursuing policies which leave people reliant food banks, including the present regime of benefit sanctions and the high rate of deductions from universal credit.

Second, we can draw inspiration from Hubert Bland, a founding Fabian who, in 1905, published a tract outlining "a plan for the state feeding of schoolchildren". Today, an incoming Labour government would need to strengthen the nutritional safety net by encouraging take-up and coverage of both free school meals and Healthy Start, an NHS scheme through which families on low incomes with children under the age of four receive at least £4.25 a week toward fruit, vegetables, and milk. The best estimates suggest that around 200,000 children in England are eligible but not registered for free school meals; a similar number of babies and young children are missing out on their Healthy Start entitlement. A Labour government should give all local authorities the tools they need automatically to identify and then register all eligible children for free school meals (with an opt-out function for families who do not wish to be registered). For Healthy Start, it is central government departments that know which children are eligible, and upon whom those tools would need to be bestowed. Taken together, these two measures could boost family budgets to the tune of more than £100m a year.

Questions around eligibility, too, would need to be addressed by an incoming Labour government. At present, around 800,000 poorer children are disqualified from free school meals, usually because their parents are disqualified from applying on income grounds. For instance, to claim free school meals based on receipt of universal credit, your household income from work must be less than £7,400 per year. As a result, many poor people in employment cannot get free school meals for their children, including many working in retail, care, teaching, the postal service, and even the police. Similar exclusions can be found in the Healthy Start scheme.

Hubert Bland provided a simple solution: "All children, destitute or not, should be fed, and fed without charge". London mayor Sadiq Khan has already moved towards this radical plan, guaranteeing free lunches for all primary school children for a year. It remains to be seen whether universal free school meals could become a national policy.

The third part of Labour's anti-hunger strategy should aim to transform the role and characteristics of community food

provision in our country by moving it away from crisis support and food parcels and towards co-operative food clubs characterised by dignity, belonging, and mutual self-help.

In his study of the first century of co-operative bodies, eminent Fabian GDH Cole remarked that they "remained a movement of the better-off workers". Yet, where co-op shops were concerned, the Webbs could see the potential for them to gain wider popularity – and they have been vindicated today. Feeding Britain supports a network of 250 food clubs, such as pantries and social supermarkets, which are successfully extending the reach of co-operative principles further down the income distribution. They help people stretch their budgets further, offering good food at relatively cheap prices and even credit union services. An innovation fund to accelerate the development of these community-led initiatives would play a key role in making good food more affordable and accessible for people on lower incomes, and in cementing the shift from 'food bank' to 'food club'.

Tory austerity has taken us back in time. As a result, policies which the early Fabians might have seen as merely a good start are still needed today. Fortunately for all of us, hope is on the horizon: if Labour wins the next general election, three policies – a national minimum to underpin household incomes, a stronger nutritional safety net, and support for new forms of mutual self-help – could end the need for food banks once more. **F**

Andrew Forsey is the director of Feeding Britain

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Communities nationwide can learn from how Manchester tackled street violence — *Erinma Bell*

Violent street conflict is a blight on our nation. In February, the Office for National Statistics released new figures showing that the number of fatal stabbings in England and Wales is at the highest level since records began. Gun crime has fallen nationwide over the last decade, but mainly because of a dramatic drop in London – in two-thirds of the country, it continues to rise. As you might expect, there are no easy solutions to the bloodshed we are seeing; but here in Manchester, we have begun to take steps in the direction of peace.

© Manchester photos/Wikimedia Commons

I have found that social capital is essential to achieving lasting change and resolving violent street conflicts. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals and communities to work together for mutual benefit. In order to build social capital and promote peace, we must focus on peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping.

Peacemaking is the process of resolving conflicts through negotiation and diplomacy. This can be done through formal negotiations between leaders and representatives of conflicting groups, as well as informal dialogue and mediation between individuals and communities. Peacemaking efforts must be inclusive and involve all parties affected by the conflict.

Peacebuilding is the process of creating the conditions necessary for sustainable peace. This includes addressing the root causes of conflicts, such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination. It also involves building institutions and systems that promote justice and human rights, as well as supporting economic development and education. Community policing, youth empowerment and education, and increasing access to resources and opportunities are all good examples of peacebuilding.

Peacekeeping is the process of maintaining peace after it has been established. This includes monitoring and enforcing agreements, as well as providing security and humanitarian assistance. It also involves working with communities to address issues that could lead to future conflicts.

Peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping require the active involvement of all members of society. Rather than relying solely on central government or international bodies, we should emphasize the role of grassroots organizations and individuals in creating lasting and meaningful change. My own organisation, CARISMA Services, is a grassroots organisation which successfully galvanised individuals to address local issues around gun and gang crime and creating change, contributing to a 92 per cent reduction in gang-related gun discharges in the Metropolitan and Trafford divisions of Manchester in 2008, when local gun crime was at its height.

Our organisation strategically placed itself as the bridge between different key stakeholders, giving us the ability to tailor our approach to specific local conditions and build trust and support of community members. The change brought about by this strategy was undeniable. For example, we called a truce between two neighbouring communities, and delivered a week of peace every year for ten years – PeaceWeek.

We found that relying on government or international bodies often hindered our work; unfortunately, they simply do not have the same level of knowledge or understanding of local conditions,

and are not able to respond as quickly or effectively to changing circumstances. In response to these shortcomings, we created a way to raise unrestricted funds independently via our awards night, the Out Standing Social Behaviour Awards or OSBAs (a play on ASBOs).

Through my work over the years, I have found that true, sustainable change can only come from the community level – from the bottom up. For example, in 2007 I persuaded Tony Blair to come to Manchester and meet with community activists in Manchester about gun crime rather than simply attending a gun summit in London. Top-down approaches only achieve short-term solutions.

The effectiveness of grassroots activism means that no-one needs to feel powerless. Those who want to see safer streets should get involved with local organizations, and support community-led initiatives, community participation and ownership in creating lasting change. If you want to see change you have to be part of it. Or as we would say up north, you've got to be in it to win it.

Grassroots organizations and individuals are key actors in creating sustainable change, and their engagement and empowerment is crucial for the success of any peace building initiative. Building social capital is essential to achieving lasting peace and resolving violent street conflicts. We must focus on peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping, while also addressing the root causes of conflicts and creating inclusive and just systems and institutions. By working together and investing in our communities, we can create a more peaceful and equitable society for all. F

Professor Erinma Bell MBE is a community peace activist and a Labour councillor for Moss Side in Manchester

THE RIGHT BEAT

Labour can take the lead on policing and crime — *Jonathan Hinder*

At the 2019 general election, crime was ranked the third most important issue by the British public, and, according to YouGov, the Conservatives were trusted to handle it best by a majority of two to one over Labour.

The Labour party has often seemed squeamish about discussing crime. It is, of course, important to recognise the many historical and contemporary injustices perpetrated by police and the reactionary culture which has too often been pervasive in forces across the country. Nonetheless, crime disproportionately affects those working-class communities we seek to represent – not least the many post-industrial seats that were lost in 2019 – and so we must grasp policing as a Labour issue. We can be mindful of the past while being hopeful for the future police service that we, on the left, can create – a modern, intelligent and compassionate police service of which we can be proud.

There is a huge political space available on crime and policing, because the Conservatives' record over 13 years has been one of dismal failure. Throughout the 2010s, neighbourhood teams were scrapped and redeployed to emergency response teams as officer numbers plummeted. Only one in 20 crimes are now solved. Victims of the most serious crimes wait years for their cases to be heard, along with the 62,000 others stuck in the backlog. Under the last Labour government, investment in neighbourhood policing was prioritised: each area had its own team, led by a sergeant. Now, small towns typically only have one PC dedicated to neighbourhood policing.

Westminster journalists often refer to political parties running a 'crime week' – typically focusing on crime briefly before moving back to those issues considered more central to the political debate. Given the Tory record since 2010, it should be 'crime week' every week between now and the next general election for Labour. And who better to state the case with credibility than Keir Starmer, a former Director of Public Prosecutions?

The Tory failure on crime is closely linked to the broader decline of our public services. Officers across the country understand that their day-to-day work has been dramatically altered by the cuts to other services, even if this is still poorly understood by the public. With mental health provision wholly inadequate, the ambulance service on its knees, and children's services stretched, policing has been called upon to fill the huge gaps in our social safety net.

A Labour government should reconsider what the police's role should be in responding to those in mental health crisis, or to the thousands of children who are reported missing from the care system every year. Investing in those public services better placed to deal with such issues would not only be more effective; it would also free up officers' time to focus on tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. This is what communities want to see. While policing will always be varied by its very nature, the need to define its increasingly blurred role has never been more pressing.

Having lost 20,000 officers in under ten years, the new officers recruited since 2019 are welcome. But this recruitment drive has been rushed and delivered haphazardly to meet a political deadline. Meanwhile, voluntary resignations have tripled in a decade, leaving the policing workforce both inexperienced and ill-equipped to deal with the challenges facing modern policing, such as fraud and cybercrime. Labour's commitment to recruit another 13,000 police officers and staff presents an exciting opportunity to take a more considered and targeted approach to police recruitment, based on the policing challenges of the modern era.

Labour has now drawn level with the Conservatives on which party is trusted by the public to tackle crime best. If we can maintain a clear focus on this issue, we will reap the electoral rewards – and then we can build a reformed, effective police service in government. F

Jonathan Hinder is head of alumni at Police Now and a former police inspector

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Leading questions

Does Labour's lead in the polls reflect enthusiastic support from voters – or just growing dislike of the Conservatives? *Paula Surridge* takes a look

Paula Surridge is a professor of political sociology at the University of Bristol and deputy director of the ESRC-funded initiative UK in a Changing Europe

The Labour party is ahead in the polls, with the current gap wide enough for even the most cautious of commentators to believe that it is likely there will be a Labour government after the next UK general election. There are, however, reasons to be cautious about this lead, and differing explanations for its roots.

While the large polling margin now seen, which implies an electoral wipeout for the Conservatives, opened up in October 2022, a Labour lead has been the result of more or less every poll conducted since December 2021. The origins of Labour's lead, then, do not lie solely in the brief premiership of Liz Truss but rather in the falling apart of that of Boris Johnson. That is to say, Labour's lead is not only down to a single Conservative PM crashing the economy, but attributable to the wider actions of the party – or, perhaps more accurately, the parties of the party. Partygate (the revelations of gatherings held in number 10 during the lockdown) damaged Boris Johnson's reputation in particular, but also tarnished the Tories as a whole. The premiership of Liz Truss then did more damage to the Conservative brand, particularly to perceptions of economic competence and sound financial decision-making. Together, they angered voters, and damaged the reputation of the Conservative party to the point where it has not polled consistently above 30 per cent of the vote for the last six months.

These shocks to the reputation of the Conservative party and its leaders have been layered on top of a cost of living crisis and meltdown in the health service. As stories proliferate of patients waiting for ambulances that do not arrive and medicines that are not available, there is a pervasive sense of government failure.

The conclusion implied by this account of events is that the lead Labour enjoys is as much, if not more, due to the actions of the Conservative government than those of the Labour party. Does this matter?

There are some who argue that what we are seeing in the polls is anti-Conservative sentiment, and an expression of dissatisfaction with both individuals and the government more generally in their handling of key issues. It is perfectly normal to expect voters to punish governments that are overseeing, if not responsible for, economic crises and reductions in their standards of living.

If we were only seeing anti-Conservative sentiment, we might expect to see much greater fragmentation of the Conservative vote – and especially voters switching to third parties

However, if we were only seeing anti-Conservative sentiment, we might expect to see much greater fragmentation of the Conservative vote – and especially voters switching to third parties such as the Liberal Democrats, Reform UK and the Greens to register their anger or protest at the government. But we are not seeing patterns quite like that. Instead, the two largest flows of the vote are from Conservative voting in 2019 to undecided – in a recent YouGov poll, almost a quarter

There is also a crucial element of self-fulfilling prophecy: the public are coming to expect a Labour government after the next election. This is evident in party messaging

of 2019 Conservative voters say they are currently unsure how they will vote, compared to only 10 per cent of 2019 Labour voters – and from Conservative in 2019 to the Labour party: the same poll found 14 per cent of 2019 Conservative voters currently intending to vote Labour. Much smaller proportions of 2019 Conservative voters are switching to other parties; perhaps surprisingly, the same poll has just one in 20 moving to the Liberal Democrats and fewer than one in 10 moving to Reform UK.

When reporting so-called 'headline' voting intention, most pollsters omit those who are currently undecided. This means that the high level of indecision among Conservative voters is likely to lead to some polls overstating the 'real' Labour lead, since we know that during the heat of an election campaign many of these undecided voters will return to the party they voted for previously. To win the kind of convincing majority some are currently predicting, Labour will need some of these undecided voters not to return to the Conservatives. It is worth noting, though, that Opinium, which uses a different methodology to calculate its headline vote intention which accounts for this tendency for undecided voters to return 'home', still shows a large Labour lead (16 percentage points in the most recent poll at the time of writing).

And, more to the point, a high level of indecision among Conservative voters has been a feature of UK polling for some time now. The very large recent leads are a result of direct movement of voters from a Conservative vote in 2019 to a Labour vote intention.

Despite this good news for Labour, other evidence suggests that there may not be huge enthusiasm for the party's brand and its leader, Keir Starmer. Focus group evidence is often mixed, and more people say they are unsure whether Starmer or Sunak would make the best PM than opt for either one of them. How should we interpret these patterns?

It seems that the anti-Conservative sentiment is directed towards a change of government, and while people may not yet be hugely enthusiastic about the prospect of a Labour government, they are increasingly sure they do not want a Conservative one, and so are willing to vote for Labour as the only viable alternative government on offer. Much could change in the period between now and the next election; no one who has followed British politics closely since 2016 could think there is no chance of a turnaround. But in the current polling, it is the Conservatives who have the mountain to climb.

Overlapping crises continue to damage the Conservative party, and their effects are unlikely to fully abate before a general election must be called. While inflation is likely to come down, prices will remain high. The NHS strikes may be resolved before then, but the NHS will continue to have long waiting lists, and people's negative experiences will continue to resonate. It seems unlikely things being a little less bad will be sufficient to turn around public opinion.

There is also a crucial element of self-fulfilling prophecy: the public are coming to expect a Labour government after the next election. This is evident in party messaging, with the Labour party now regularly talking about the 'next Labour government'. Last summer, despite the persistent lead for Labour in the polls, the public were more likely to believe the next election would return a Conservative majority than a Labour one. This has now shifted: the most recent figures from the YouGov tracker on this question show that more than half the public expect a Labour majority government after the next election, while fewer than one in 10 expect a Conservative one. Expectations are powerful – though not infallible – and this is another piece of good news for Labour.

For Labour's prospects at the next general election, it may not matter too much whether people are voting for them or against the Conservatives. But it will matter for their prospects in government, and for any hope of staying in power beyond a first term. If people are seeking change, then setting out a programme that is distinct from that currently on offer will be important; delivering it, and demonstrating clear improvements in the core areas people are most concerned about, will be even more so. **F**

Pressing the issue

The UK press has long been a bogeyman of progressive politics – but was it really 'the Sun wot won it'? *Florian Foos* explores

Dr. Florian Foos is an associate professor in political behaviour in the Department of Government at LSE. He is an expert on election campaigns in Britain and Europe. A member of the Evidence in Governance and Politics network, he has 10 years of experience conducting randomised control trials with political parties and campaigns in six countries, including with Labour in Britain

Labour leaders have exhibited varied responses to the UK press. Tony Blair had an intuitive understanding of the power of the tabloid media, and chose to accommodate it, if at times uneasily. Jeremy Corbyn, in contrast, chose to ignore both right-wing and some mainstream titles during his leadership, betting that social media and alternative media would provide a counterweight. Starmer's Labour has decided to re-engage, while attempting to avoid the excessive closeness during the New Labour years documented by the Leveson report. As Labour appears closer to power than at any time during the past 13 years, what do we know about the media's ability to shape public opinion today? And what can parties and governments learn from political science research if they want to effectively shape public opinion in their favour?

Thirty years ago, when Labour was, as now, in opposition, political scientists were generally sceptical of the notion that media outlets were a powerful force for shaping public opinion. After all, voters choose which papers they read: a left-wing liberal is likely to favour the Guardian over the Mail, and a copy of the Morning Star will very rarely find its way into the hands of a true-blue Tory. Since then, with media markets fragmenting further and social media algorithms tailoring content to our political leaning, how much space is left for media outlets to influence voters?

There are current trends that deserve attention: for one, the number of campaigning TV channels in Britain is growing, and most of them are located on the right of the political spectrum. While GB News was roundly mocked for its amateurish production values, the launch of Murdoch's TalkTV has been smoother and both channels appear to have found a comparably small, but growing, audience.

Moreover, robust evidence has accumulated over recent years that is changing the scientific consensus on media outlets' abilities to shape public opinion. We also know more about the circumstances under which influence is likely to materialise. Empirical evidence from different countries suggests that media outlets, especially on the right, do indeed influence viewers. Fox News in the United States is the most important case study, and for good reason: research examining the roll-out of the network, and a study by Berkeley and Yale Professors David Broockman and Josh Kalla that experimentally incentivised some Fox viewers to watch CNN instead, both found that consuming Fox News makes voters and legislators take more right-wing positions.

The effects identified by this research could have profound implications for the UK. Not only have we seen a growth in Fox-inspired TV channels, but Britain has the most significant right-wing tabloid media of any country in the world. Thanks to Prince Harry's bestseller, their unscrupulous methods and potential influence are in the spotlight again, 10 years after Leveson and Hacked-Off. But beyond the rich-and-famous, do tabloids matter politically? Studies found that the Sun switching its endorsement from the Conservatives to New Labour in 1997, and back to Cameron's Conservatives in 2009, affected readers' voting intentions. Moreover, in a study of public opinion towards British European Union membership conducted with my colleague Daniel Bischof, I found that the ongoing boycott of the Sun in Merseyside – beginning in 1989 in response to the

Not only have we seen a growth in Fox-inspired TV channels, but Britain has the most significant right-wing tabloid media of any country in the world

tabloid's reporting on the Hillsborough disaster, in which the paper blamed the disaster on fans and made shocking false allegations about fan behaviour – led to a significant reduction in Euroscepticism and bolstered the 2016 Remain vote in the area.

It seems, then, that under certain conditions a change in media slant or media consumption can shape public opinion. What are these conditions? Our research suggests that campaigning tabloid media appear to be most successful in shaping public opinion when they push on relatively low salience issues and do so persistently for a long period of time. In the late 1980s, the European Union was generally not at the top of voters' minds. What issues are comparable today? Certainly not issues such as inflation or mortgages. In contrast, the debate around transgender rights is a good current example of how campaigning right-wing media outlets attempt to influence public opinion on issues that are relatively low on the list of voter priorities.

If elected, Labour politicians from the prime minister to backbenchers should feel more confident about using media appearances to influence public opinion

Another factor is the format and content of different media products. It is fair to assume that, prior to the boycott, many read the Sun not because of its Euroscepticism, but because of its football coverage and gossip; slanted political news came to readers as a by-product, bypassing concerns that readers select the papers they want to read on political grounds.

How about social media? Should Labour worry about the likes of Cambridge Analytica and the Conservatives' ability to spend big on digital ads? The best empirical evidence we have from the United States suggests that digital ads have minimal or very small effects on behaviour. That applies to vote choice, but limited evidence from England also suggests that progressive causes such as voter registration are not exempt (although we recently showed that SMS text messages appear to work when sent by local government). While digital ads are probably not the game changer that some campaigns and marketing agencies appear to believe they are, it would be beneficial to produce more robust evidence in the UK. And the evidence that exists on ads certainly does not mean that there are no worrying trends on social media, like the spread of misinformation, fake content and online hate speech, which are real and deserve sustained political attention. Political scientists have much to say on these questions, and have suggested practical interventions to counter some of the worst problems.

What are the implications of research on media influence for Labour? And what can the wider Labour movement do to engage with the media landscape as it currently exists and shape public opinion in the future? Our study of post-Hillsborough Merseyside suggests that communities coming together to change the media landscape can be a powerful force. But the Sun boycott is, of course, the result of a specific event and unlikely to be replicated at scale elsewhere. As a result, in the short term, Starmer's decision to take the media landscape as a given and present Labour's best case on various mainstream platforms is without serious alternative. If elected, Labour politicians from the prime minister to backbenchers should feel more confident about using media appearances to influence public opinion, even on issues where voters might not yet entirely agree with them. The political scientist Gabriel Lenz showed that, in some instances, voters first decide which party or politician to support and then change their views on specific issues accordingly; it seems, then, that voters are more willing to follow their party or party leader than most politicians assume. If in government, Labour will also have the chance to scrutinize and potentially address some of the most problematic tendencies in the British media landscape. It should revisit 'Leveson 2', the cancelled second part of the Leveson inquiry, which was due to examine corporate governance at news organisations and the relationship between journalists and the police. Media regulations in Britain remain relatively weak, especially compared to other European democracies, and there is ample evidence of continued wrongdoing. If this inquiry could be expanded to look at social media companies as well, as some Conservative politicians have suggested in the past, that would be a welcome development.

Research further suggests that Labour should continue to invest in real-life encounters with voters. In 2014, I conducted several studies with Labour parliamentary candidate Rowenna Davis on political persuasion. The evidence was promising back then and has since been replicated in a different country, Germany. Parliamentary candidates can change how voters view them and their party by building relationships and listening to voters' concerns and grievances. Going beyond the Labour party, the broader Labour movement in Britain should attempt to engage voters on political issues that they care about, ranging from economic issues and union rights, to immigration and the type of relationship the UK will have with the EU. There is scientific evidence from the United States that these conversations persuade voters. While some of these topics might be deemed too difficult for the party to address in opposition, independent groups within the broader Labour movement should feel free to go out and make the case. If they do so, they should team up with researchers who can evaluate the impact of these conversations.

While media titles are powerful in Britain, and Labour needs to engage to be able to govern again, Labour should not underestimate its ability to change voter opinion. This might take place though the media, or circumvent it: as we approach the next election, talking to voters directly is what Labour parliamentary candidates and members will be doing day-in and day-out on the doorstep. Either way, taking voters and their views seriously and engaging with them might still be one of the most powerful tools that a party has in its arsenal. It should be high on the agenda for the next election and beyond. F

The voice of the people

Does opinion polling have too big a role in shaping Labour policy? *Chris Curtis* argues that it is right to listen to the public

Chris Curtis is a pollster at Opinium, having previously worked at YouGov. He has worked with a range of organisations including trade unions, think tanks, charities, and the Labour party. He is Labour's parliamentary candidate for Milton Keynes North at the next election

Having worked in polling for nearly a decade, I am familiar with the criticism our work has faced, mainly concerning accuracy following the polling errors in the 2015 election and the EU referendum. Around the mid-2010s, some even spoke of the 'death of polling', a refrain which we heard again following a surprisingly strong Democrat performance in the 2022 US midterm elections.

This crisis is overblown. Apart from anything, such discussion obscures the variety of performances across the sector. My agency, Opinium, has been more accurate than most: we correctly predicted that the UK was going to vote Leave in 2016, and called every party's vote share correctly in the 2019 election apart from the Greens', which we overstated by 1 per cent. Last year, we also accurately predicted that Liz Truss would storm to victory among Conservative party members, producing a more accurate projection than all our competitors.

There are, though, more fundamental criticisms of polling. For some, the problem with opinion polls is not their accuracy, but rather their impact on our politics. Tony Benn, the veteran left-wing MP, was particularly vocal: "I did not enter the Labour party 47 years ago to have our manifesto written by Dr Mori, Dr Gallup and Mr Harris."

In response to such criticisms, we must remember what polling is for. It is not solely about how people will vote in a general election. Such research is important, but most of the work we do is about trying to understand the problems people are facing, the causes of those issues, their barriers to success, and what can be done so that everyone's life can be happier and more fulfilled.

An early example of this type of work was conducted at the turn of the 20th century by Seebohm Rowntree, founder of the York branch of the Fabian Society. After visiting every working-class household in York, his findings showed that more than a quarter of families were living in poverty, mostly caused by structural factors such as low wages and insecure work. This challenged the widely held view at the time that the poor were responsible for their own plight.

The methodologies we use have changed dramatically since then, but our aim remains the same: to better understand the country we live in. This often involves challenging the misconceptions of those in power and listening to the voices of those who are frequently ignored. Of course, we should also be trying to make those in power more representative of the country, so that a wider range of voices feed directly into our decision-making process. But the complexities of a diverse country like the UK will never be fully captured by 650 parliamentarians. How many MPs, for example, are private tenants?

Last year, I worked with the Renters Reform Coalition on a project to better understand the issues renters face in the private sector. It showed the negative impacts that low quality housing and rising rents was having on tenants' quality of life, as well as wide support for a range of pro-tenant policies. Or consider Opinium's annual Multicultural Britain survey, which seeks to better understand the views and life experiences of minority ethnic Britons.

Of course, politics isn't about documenting people's problems, but about fixing them. It is here that Tony Benn might have more of a point. Henry Ford, when asked about the development of his namesake car, quipped: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." People know the issues they face, but they do not necessarily know what the best solutions are. Most do not have the time – or indeed the will – to become experts in all areas of policy.

This is why political parties will always have a leadership role in developing well-thought-out, innovative policy solutions. For example, take the minimum wage, now an accepted part of UK labour policy. If you had asked voters in 1990 how low pay could be addressed, few would have suggested a pay floor. It took years of campaigning – first under Neil Kinnock, but especially during the Blair leadership – to cement the minimum wage as a sensible policy in the public consciousness.

The left must remember, though, that even here polling has a role to play: finding the most effective way to promote solutions to voters. The right employs polls and focus groups to sell ideas that divide and hold back our country; it would be a dereliction of duty for us not to use these same techniques to promote policies that unite Britain and take our country forward.

As a social democrat, I have dedicated my career to providing accurate data on what the country thinks, feels, and does. In the fight to change this country for the better, we need not fear Mr Harris and Dr Mori – quite the opposite; social research and opinion polls are some of the best tools we have to ensure that our policy platform addresses the most pressing issues in people's lives. **F**

A national consensus

Public support for strikes reflects the need for fairness, writes *Will Snell*

Will Snell is chief executive of the Fairness Foundation. Its report, Striking A Nerve, is available from www.fairnessfoundation.com

The late Jo Cox MP was right when she declared: "We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."

But there is undoubtedly potential to build a more united society still. The concept of fairness can help with that mission, bringing people together around a shared vision of what a good society looks like.

When we launched the Fairness Foundation in late 2021, we developed a five-pointed definition of fairness: fair essentials, fair opportunities, fair rewards, fair exchange and fair treatment. Polling conducted in April 2022 suggested that most people agreed with us, regardless of their political leanings.

It is crucial to tap into this latent consensus. As More in Common, the organisation set up in the wake of Jo Cox's tragic murder, has argued: "There is a consensus on the need to address inequality that transcends political divisions and reflects majority views… most believe that the economy does not afford enough opportunity for those who work hard and want to get ahead."

Our aim is to demonstrate that, in a range of areas, the public is more united – and more supportive of bold action by governments to build a fairer society – than politicians, the media and people in general believe to be the case.

To this end, we recently researched a politically salient but challenging topic: attitudes to the ongoing wave of strikes. The polling we commissioned broadly echoed the splits that others had found – that Labour voters were more supportive than Conservative voters, and that strikes by nurses, emergency workers and teachers attracted more support than walkouts by university staff, civil servants and highway workers.

However, we did find evidence of consensus in how people think about the broader issues behind the strikes. We asked how much people agreed with a set of fairness arguments for and against strikes and found surprising levels of agreement across political lines. For example, 72 per cent of 2019 Conservative voters and 81 per cent of Labour voters agreed that "pay gaps between ordinary workers and chief executives have grown too large". Large majorities of both groups agreed that most of the new wealth that is being created is going to people who are already wealthy (61 per cent of Conservative voters, 79 per cent of Labour voters); that some workers are paid less than they need to get by for a decent standard of living (62 per cent of Conservative voters, 78 per cent of Labour voters); and that workers' pay is not keeping up with inflation, so they are earning less than they used to (68 per cent of Conservative voters, 79 per cent of Labour voters).

What to make of these findings? We asked Martin O'Neill, professor of political philosophy at the University of York, for his take. His view was that the data "gives us a striking, and strikingly bleak, snapshot of a country that is now systematically failing to deliver for its citizens on even the most basic standards of fairness and social justice", and that the research presented "a picture of a society in which the social contract between individuals and the state has effectively broken down".

We agree; there is now a clear and substantial majority in this country who recognise not only the existence but also the severity and urgency of these problems. Even Conservative politicians are beginning to wake up: judging by the recent softening of the government's negotiating tactics with those unions that have the strongest public support, it seems to be coming to the belated realisation that the public does not buy its attempt to blame strike action on the unions, even after weeks of on-off disruption.

In the short term, we think Labour can take a bolder line on its public narrative around the strikes

What does this mean for Labour? In the short term, we think that it can take a bolder line on its public narrative around the strikes, based on a confidence that public concern about the underlying issues is high, even if support for the strikes themselves is variable. In the medium term, we hope to provide more evidence of stronger-than-expected public support for a range of bold policy solutions that a potential future Labour government might consider. Some solutions will flow directly from Keir Starmer's "five bold missions for a better Britain", while others will complement them. Underlying them all, we believe, is the power of fairness to build a new national consensus. **F**

Jonathan Reynolds is on the front line in Labour's battle to win the hearts and minds of Britain's businesses. It is lucky for the party, then, that the Shadow Secretary of State for Business and Industrial Strategy is, according to one retailer quoted in a recent article in The Grocer magazine, the 'nicest man in the world'.

Reynolds, as you might expect, is far too nice to bring this glowing tribute up himself. But it is clear that he relishes the challenge of convincing the business community that Labour is on their side. "It's busy but I love it. I have always wanted to do this job for us," he says. "I've done lots of jobs with a business-facing part, especially the role of the shadow city minister for four years, but I've always thought Labour could do business engagement a bit better than it has done in the past."

His passion for the brief is rooted, he adds, in his own background. Brought up in Sunderland and now representing Stalybridge and Hyde in greater Manchester, he has seen first-hand the impact of deindustrialisation and manufacturing decline.

"It's really difficult everywhere you look, but I honestly believe a Labour government could do so much better," he says. "I think having a personal background like mine is really important to getting that right."

This is not just about electability. We genuinely believe we cannot fulfil our objectives unless there is a strong relationship with the private sector

The reaction of the business world to Labour's latest 'prawn cocktail offensive' – the name is an echo of the similar campaign run by New Labour in the 1990s – is very warm, according to Reynolds. But he insists building a new relationship with business is not a question of electoral positioning.

"What I'm desperately trying to get across to people is that this is not just about electability or some sort of more moderate pitch. It's that we genuinely believe we cannot fulfil our objectives unless there is a strong relationship with the private sector," he says. "One of the major problems we face is that the UK has the lowest business investment in the G7. There are lots of reasons for that and

WINNING FRIENDS

As Labour's envoy to British business, it's up to Jonathan Reynolds to get employers onside in the fight against low wages and sluggish growth. They're friendlier than you might think, he tells *Kate Murray*

the lack of political stability has certainly been a factor. I just think in [an] economy where 80 per cent of people work in the private sector, if you haven't got a good pitch to them, you're not going to succeed on employment or living standards or wages."

Labour's industrial strategy, launched back in September, is centred around the notion of partnership between the state, business and trade unions to deliver the growth the country needs. This pro-business, pro-worker approach is based, Reynolds explains, on a 'very simple observation'. "If I go to any major business or industrial facility in this country, I'll obviously talk to the union reps privately in some part of that meeting. And what they will tell me is 90 per cent the same as what the management will tell me they want from government, which is long-term political commitment. They want government to care. They don't want the government to run the business, but they want them to care about the jobs in that sector."

But partnership with business should not mean ditching Labour principles, Reynolds insists, especially since the employers he talks to are often sympathetic to the party's reform platform. Take, for example, the party's pledge to strengthen workers' rights. "People know we're the Labour party, they know we're going to have an interest in that area," he says. "I think that when you see scandals like P&O ferries, a lot of business people were horrified by that. That's not the outlook they've got and it's not how they want people to think about British business. I think in many of the sectors that we're talking to, they have an employment offer which is far in excess of the kind of minimum standards we're looking to put in."

"I know of all the things we're offering, this might be one where there's more questions as we get to the election," he adds. "But I don't feel there's a pushback against the point that, in recent years, in the relationship between state, business and individual, we've seen some business models that have put too great a transfer of things onto the individual or onto the state."

Industrial strategies of the past, both here and abroad, have often focused on manufacturing or high-profile sectors like technology. Reynolds says that Labour's approach is more all-encompassing, targeting industries beyond those like automotive or aerospace which lend themselves to photo opportunities in high-vis jackets.

"Our industrial strategy talks about the care sector, it talks about the need for sectors like hospitality and

retail to be a part of it. I think that is the kind of focus any Labour government needs," he says. "These are the sectors which actually employ the vast majority of people. You can point to individual policy successes, but has there been that kind of consistent approach, saying: 'we value these sectors and we want to see overtime pay [and] terms and conditions raised in them for the benefit of the economy as a whole'?"

Labour's strategy includes initiatives designed to boost growth and provide more clarity for business, from reforming business rates to establishing an industrial strategy council to oversee the government's efforts. But it would also involve creating what Reynolds calls a 'total business environment' that would demand changes in areas such planning to help businesses succeed.

"We're completely inconsistent in the UK on that," Reynolds claims. "Even not necessarily Labour-friendly people will say to me they don't know what this country is trying to be post-Brexit and after 13 years of Conservative government. I honestly think if you got a Tory MP who was elected at the same time as me in 2010 to candidly tell you how they feel about the position Britain's in after 13 years of Conservative government, even after allowing for a pandemic and the war in Ukraine, I think privately most of them are horrified by the state of the economy."

Key to Labour's success if it forms the next government will be making Britain competitive again, a task made more difficult both by Brexit and by Joe Biden's multi-billion investment in green industries in the US through his Inflation Reduction Act. "Biden is now one of the most consequential presidents in US history, not just because of the scale of the economic move but the political project that sits behind it," Reynolds says. "It changes the world, it changes supply chains, it changes the attractiveness of other destinations. The EU is going to respond to that and a significant relaxation of the state aid rules seems essential."

He adds: "I ask business people 'where do you think the UK government is on this?' and they really don't know. I think the government is pretty much frozen. We're not going to compete with the sheer fiscal firepower of the Inflation Reduction Act because it's huge sums of money. But we have to recognise that there are things that will make the UK more attractive, using our natural advantages to level the playing field a bit."

But if the UK is now less competitive, surely Labour could address that by reversing the self-inflicted harm of Brexit? Reynolds understands that sentiment, but says it would not be helpful to revisit leaving the EU. "I totally understand how people feel because this has become such a strongly held thing and it's a badge of identity, whichever stance people took on it," he says. "People often say something to me on the lines of 'you know, when's Labour going to be more politically brave?' But if your critique of this government and the current British economy is that we have got the lowest business investment in the G7, the kind of uncertainty you are kicking off by reopening the whole debate is not going to fix that, it's going to make it worse – and then you've gone from a period of you know, six or seven years to maybe 16 or 20 where people are so uncertain about what's going to happen."

Instead of relitigating Brexit, then, Reynolds says Labour will be concentrating on areas like making food exports easier, smoothing touring rights for creative industries and rejoining the Horizon Europe science programme. "All of these things are completely deliverable and mutually in the interest of Europe as well," he says. "I think that's a way to proceed which cooperates with our friends and neighbours in a way I think people reading this interview will want to see. Focusing on these kinds of trade issues rather than the constitutional questions of a single market and customs union is a much better, clearer way forward and gives us a chance as a country to move on."

We have had to earn the right to be given a hearing and the engagement we've had with businesses is a big part of that

First, though, there is the little matter of a general election to win. Reynolds is clear that a sixth Conservative prime minister in a row would be a disaster for the UK economy. He is under no illusions about the scale of the challenge, but believes Labour is now well-placed for an election victory.

"The electoral challenge is immense. To come from a 2019 result to winning has never really been done before by any political party in the UK," he says. "But I do think one of the changes we've seen is that we have a much more volatile electorate – there are more people up for grabs in the general election than ever before.

"Although the government has clearly had problems – we've had three prime ministers in a year – I don't think we're the kind of country where support just automatically switches from the governing party to the main opposition. I think we have had to earn the right to be given a hearing and I do think a lot of the preparation and the engagement we've had with businesses is a big part of that."

If Labour does pull it off, Reynolds says it will be a government full of ambition. "What I think Keir has done with his mission speech on the economy, and this huge aspiration to have the highest sustained growth in the G7, gives us something which is more than the sum of the individual policy parts. I want people to be looking at it saying 'wow, that's a big commitment from Labour – can they really do it?' That's the vision – and I think increasingly, a lot of businesses and a lot of people want to contribute and be a part of that."

At the heart of that ambition will be a better future for places like Sunderland and Greater Manchester. "Labour governments have to do many good things, but I think our story about good work and good wages has got to be the soul of the next Labour government. That's what I want to be involved in delivering." **F**

Kate Murray is the editor of the Fabian Review

Lessons learned?

Now is the time to start preparing for the next pandemic, writes *Sanjush Dalmia*

Sanjush Dalmia is an executive committee member of Scientists for Labour

The legacy of Covid is all around us: over £250bn in direct economic losses, widened inequalities, and our public services on their knees. Could anyone have predicted a crisis so devastating? As it happens, the last Labour government under Gordon Brown did. Fifteen years ago, the Cabinet Office published the first edition of the National Risk Register, identifying a pandemic as the most significant risk to Britain's national security.

The pandemic preparedness measures taken under succeeding prime ministers, however, were not proportional to the severity of this risk. On biological security, like most world leaders, Cameron, May and Johnson simply did not do enough. It is likely that Sunak will join them on this list, but with the risk of pandemics rising due to climate change, and future pandemics threatening to be even deadlier and more economically damaging, it is vital that Keir Starmer does not.

If governments have been aware of the risk from pandemics for so long, why has action been insufficient? One answer is a problem Starmer has identified – 'sticking plaster politics'. Governments have long focused on short-term solutions to immediate problems, failing to see the bigger picture. Risks which are spread across decades struggle to compete with issues that fit more neatly into five-year (or recently in Britain, much shorter) election cycles. With this 'sticking plaster' politics comes a shallow view of fiscal responsibility, narrowly focused on cutting spending in the short term, sacrificing our economic resilience in the long term.

How might we reverse this 'sticking plaster' approach to politics? Starmer's answer is a mission-based approach to government which could extend beyond election cycles. In line with this thinking, a Labour mission on pandemic preparedness, focused on R&D policy and foreign policy, could transform our biological security and ensure economic stability.

Preparing for events like pandemics which have little precedent is, however, a complicated task. One potential trap is to prepare for the 'previous war' instead of the next one; we must be cautious when deciding what lessons we can and cannot learn from the last pandemic. Covid vaccines were developed astonishingly fast because of the hard work of researchers around the world, with some of the most vital work taking place long before Covid emerged. But when we look towards future pandemics, the development of vaccines at this speed, or even at all, is far from guaranteed without greater action. Biology is complicated, and even today, we lack effective vaccines for diseases like bird flu, SARS and Zika. It would be dangerous for our leaders to assume that we are already capable of developing vaccines against any new threat.

Fortunately, we know exactly what areas of R&D we need to invest in to protect against future pandemics. These include 'vaccine platforms' (like mRNA vaccines) and 'broad spectrum antivirals', both of which could be used against many different threats, and 'clinical metagenomics', which doctors could use to identify the specific bug causing an infection at the bedside, ensuring that new threats are detected faster.

Importantly, we would not have to wait until a new threat emerges to reap the returns on many of these investments. After using the technology to develop a Covid vaccine, BioNTech is now exploring the use of mRNA vaccines against cancer. Broad spectrum antivirals could help fight existing viruses, like the flu, the common cold and RSV. Clinical metagenomics could help doctors prescribe better-targeted antibiotics for bacterial infections, helping tackle antibiotic resistance. So while an R&D mission on biological security would boost our pandemic preparedness, it would also improve the health of our ageing workforce.

On foreign policy, David Lammy has set a welcome goal of building resilience to 21st century threats, and with new infectious diseases becoming increasingly common, a foreign policy mission on pandemic preparedness will be important to achieve this aim. Labour could learn from the USA's leadership in this area. Understanding that an epidemic abroad could rapidly become an economic and humanitarian catastrophe at home, the USA has invested heavily in global pandemic preparedness, including by establishing the Global Health Security Agenda in 2014, which brought together 44 countries to improve pandemic preparedness. Under a Labour government, Britain must show similar leadership. Beyond more investment in the multilateral organisations that keep us safe, Britain could lead the charge to establish a legally binding WHO pandemic accord, and work towards a COP-like annual conference on global health security.

As things stand, Labour's promises to grow the economy and expand the NHS workforce, while important, will not be enough to secure us against future pandemics. Countries with more physicians, more nurses and stronger economies than Britain suffered similar devastation during Covid. As we edge closer to the next election, we need bold policies targeted towards the greatest threats to our society.

Surveys from after the pandemic suggest that the public rightly sees disease prevention and pandemic preparedness as a security issue. For all of Labour's successes in turning around its previously poor reputation on the economy, it has not yet managed the same on security. A national mission to transform our biological security could help Labour finally prove to the electorate that it can better the Conservatives on the foremost responsibility of any government – keeping its citizens safe. **F**

A precious resource

The poorest in our society are not just at the bottom of the pile financially. They are also short of another valuable commodity – time. *Sasjkia Otto* explains

Sasjkia Otto is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society

Our free time is under attack. Even before the pandemic, six in 10 people said they were struggling to keep their life organised. The most obvious culprits are familiar to us. For one, the UK has a longer full-time working week than any EU country. And for women, especially, childcare is a huge time sink: women spend 67 per cent more time than men on unpaid childcare. But apart from these, our free time is also being consumed by more and more unpaid work, or 'life admin', which governments and companies load onto citizens as part of cost-cutting efforts – with those on lower incomes the worst affected.

Being poor is time-consuming

Each day, people earning less than £1,700 per month spend the equivalent of half a shift – nearly 3.5 hours – on unpaid work excluding childcare. This is an hour more than those earning more than £3,300, and 40 minutes more than those earning between £1,700 and £3,300. Disabled people also spend half an hour more than non-disabled people on unpaid work. Clearly, time poverty is not felt equally.

And time inequality has been increasing, with the average time spent on unpaid work holding broadly steady for the highest earners and non-disabled people, while increasing for the rest.

This work is comprised of small but obligatory activities like chasing service providers and querying bills – often normalised as 'life admin' – that tend to accumulate if you have less money or if you have additional needs associated with disability. In 2018, 46 per cent of people said they wished they could spend less time on these activities. Yet government and corporate action – or lack thereof – is perpetuating time deprivation.

Government cuts make people time poor

A lot of government decisions rely on people having the right knowledge and enough power to bring that knowledge to bear. Clearly, that tends to favour people who are more well-off. One government scheme, for example, allowed families in the south east to apply for reductions in their water bills to compensate for higher costs following the region's water meter installation programme. Sixty per cent of eligible households missed out, and those in richer areas, who were more likely to actively engage with their utility bills, benefited most.

Despite this, government policy often adds additional pressure on lower earners to use their time to save money. For example, the recent energy bills support scheme applied savings directly to the accounts of customers who pay their bills via direct debit. By contrast, those on pre-payment meters had to take the time to apply for a voucher, many of whom had been forced onto pre-payment meters by court order. Two million energy support vouchers, totalling £125m, remain unclaimed.

Poorer people are more likely to interact with government services, and so pay for government cuts with their time. The complex and highly conditional benefits application process takes a significant amount of time to navigate and comply with, creating a deterrent that means millions of families are losing out on thousands of pounds each in benefits. The government has now stopped publishing statistics on benefits take-up.

The government has also removed disability benefits support for those with some capacity to work and cut

Daily time spent on unpaid household work (excluding childcare), by income

Source: ONS

per-person adult social care funding by 12 per cent between 2011 and 2019. This is despite the higher living costs of disabled people, amounting to an estimated £581 per month according to the charity Scope. The immediate effect of these cuts is of course financial – but they also make disabled people and their families time poor, as they have to spend more time on meeting their additional needs. Alongside outsized NHS waiting lists in poorer areas, this has only increased the barriers to finding work.

Customers pay with their time

We know the financial poverty premium means poorer households spent an average of £478 extra on essential goods and services in 2019. This is the equivalent of about an hour's work per week on minimum wage. The time poverty premium is less well understood, but those earning less than £1,700 per month spend seven hours per week more on unpaid work than those earning more than £3,300.

Consider one common household task: laundry. There is a clear financial poverty premium here: the campaign Fair by Design estimates that a £309 washing machine will cost someone forced to pay on credit £60 extra. Some two million people do not own a washing machine at all, and so need use a launderette; for them, laundry costs 2,561 per cent more. But there is also a time poverty premium: lower earners spend more time shopping around to find cheaper products, and are more likely to be affected by planned obsolescence. Using the launderette, or handwashing, are even more time-costly.

Time poverty is also exploited online. Companies use algorithms and predatory personalised pricing to narrow the range of affordable products and services people can find online unless they invest time in an exhaustive search. In the US, Amazon is currently subject to a class action lawsuit amid claims of price-gouging essentials during the pandemic, and an antitrust suit which accuses them of penalising businesses who offered lower prices on other sites.

Lower earners are often at the mercy of a small number of budget product and service providers, who can name their terms unless customers have time to mount a challenge. This is playing out across essential sectors including affordable housing, where residents are fighting service charge increases of up to 2,000 per cent and spend years trying to be heard on critical disrepairs issues such as mould.

Time is money… and happiness

People on lower incomes actually spend less time in directly paid work, due in part to the UK's working culture, which tends to reward extreme hours with higher pay. But time-intensive problems they must tackle outside the workplace add up to more than the sum of their parts and create a significant barrier to escaping poverty.

Research has shown that the kind of juggling and stress about scarcity that poor people face can affect decision-making and impact productivity. Moreover, the vicious cycle of spending time to save money robs people of time and energy to invest in their wellbeing or improving their financial situation.

People who are time-poor are more prone to relationship difficulties and health problems. And while spending money to save time improves happiness, it is the richest who can most easily save time on household tasks. In 2021, the UK's top decile of earners spent 11 times more on average than the lowest decile on cleaning services, and 10 times more on takeaways.

Time poverty also has implications for career development. Working students struggle with both extracurricular and curricular involvement, and those without the support and networks that come with affluence will spend more time seeking work.

Time is a public policy issue

Time is one of the major political and economic issues of our time. Yet it is currently a neglected consideration in government policy and delivery.

There have been some isolated interventions, such as the FCA's new consumer duty, which aims to ensure that customers are not hindered from acting in their own interests or subjected to unnecessary delay and stress. This is due to come into force this summer. It is true, too, that the Treasury's Green Book guidance on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects incorporates some aspects of time in economic modelling by recognising the social impact of changes in travel time.

But we should be going much further. An incoming Labour government will need a time poverty strategy that actively seeks to save citizens' time. As part of this, the party should consider the effects of the time cost to citizens as part of cost-benefit analyses and impact assessments for new investment and legislation. This should be separated from monetary value, which cannot account adequately for the loss of this finite resource.

A time poverty strategy would be broad reaching, but should prioritise the following:

- Use good design principles to remove friction when people access public services – including applying support automatically wherever possible and simplifying applications and appointment processes.
- Review how time poverty is preventing people from participating in labour markets, and how active labour market policies could help address this.
- Ensure regulators have appropriate mandates and powers to give due weight to time as a consumer harm in market investigations and remedies.
- Review the UK's legal framework to streamline redress processes and empower citizens to access appropriate compensation for unreasonable loss of time.

This agenda is about the fair distribution of our most precious resource. It concerns real practical problems that people – and especially our poorest citizens – face every day. Remedies for time inequality could be an effective and inexpensive way to help people take back control of their lives. Will Labour rise to the challenge? **F**

The coal wall

A US state where working-class voters shifted dramatically rightwards might hold lessons for Labour's attempts to regain the red wall, writes *James Slater*

James Slater studied US history & politics at UCL and is a Labour councillor in Camden

If you'd asked an American in 1921, they might have described West Virginia, which Donald Trump won by nearly 40 points in 2020, as a hotbed of radical labour organising. Mining families to this day speak of the Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest labour uprising in US history (and the largest armed uprising of any kind since the Civil War), when their forefathers faced off against heavily armed police and strikebreakers and even faced aerial bombardment. That battle ended in defeat, but the pro-labour administration of Franklin D Roosevelt in the 1930s shifted the balance towards workers. Union membership rocketed, and as the unions gained influence, Democrats benefited, running the state House and Senate continuously from 1932 to 2014.

As recently as 1996, President Clinton cruised to re-election by a 15-point margin statewide. But Democratic fortunes changed in 2000. Republicans painted Al Gore, a southern centrist, as an out-of-touch environmentalist in a state dependent on coal. Bush narrowly won, denying Gore the five crucial electoral college votes he needed. Since then, Democrats have been relegated to the sidelines: Biden received less than 30 per cent of the vote in the state, and a Democratic presidential candidate has not won a single one of West Virginia's 55 counties since 2008.

However, at state and local level, the picture is intriguingly mixed. Most obviously, one of two senators – Joe Manchin – is a Democrat. Several counties still elect Democrats to county-wide positions, and in many areas that Trump won easily, registered Democrats outnumber Republicans. In an increasingly polarised America, results like this are becoming rare, and I wanted to investigate. So last summer I travelled to Boone County, a proud working-class Appalachian community in the southern coalfields. In Boone County, 45 per cent of voters remain registered Democrats compared to 29 per cent Republican. And despite Donald Trump winning by 54 points in 2016, Manchin took nearly 60 per cent of the vote in the midterm elections two years later.

Of the 15 registered Democrats I interviewed, just seven voted for Biden. The other eight did not see themselves as Republicans, who they still saw as representing the rich. Instead, they were cultural, old-school Democrats, unlike the modern party, which they see as too liberal, city-focused and anti-coal. Their economically moderate but socially conservative viewpoints were once common in union politics and mainstream among Democrats. From their perspective, it is not that they've abandoned the party so much as that the party has abandoned them.

While Trump chalked up huge wins here in 2016 and 2020, there were warning signs for him should he attempt a comeback in 2024. Most of the people I spoke to had voted for Trump and supported his policies, believing him to be "refreshingly honest". They liked that he said what he thought and believed he was the force for change America needed. But the majority disliked his abrasive personality, "mean tweets" and bullying behaviour, which went against their courteous Appalachian culture. Many said they would refuse to vote for him again, but they were unlikely to support a Democrat instead.

It was interesting that Trump's appeal had not filtered down to other Republicans. In fact, locally, it was Democrats who had retained their New Deal-era popularity. While there was disdain for the national party, West Virginia Democrats were seen as different. They focused on 'bread-and-butter' local issues, from jobs to healthcare, rather than cultural issues. Local Democrats

were, in their words, more reasonable, less radical and less 'woke'.

They included Ron Stollings, a state senator from Boone County respected across the political divide. He continued to represent the county long after the massive swing towards Republicans at the national level in the early 2010s, only losing his seat in November 2022 after his district was redrawn outside of Boone. A local family doctor, raised in the county town, he has huge name recognition. He is a traditional West Virginian Democrat, and his focus on health was key in an area so badly hit by the opioid epidemic and with issues accessing rural healthcare.

Another popular politician is Manchin, widely known as the Senate's most conservative Democrat. While his middle-of-the-road approach frustrates national Democrats, many here appreciate it; Morning Consult data showed Manchin getting the largest approval rating improvement of any senator in 2021. Voters respect his moderate stances and bipartisan approach, which they said reflected West Virginian values.

Manchin's background in coal and record on miners' healthcare and pensions were also important. Among those I spoke to, he had detractors on both sides of the aisle, but his Democratic critics reluctantly admitted that he was doing what a Democrat in West Virginia had to do, and his Republican enemies liked how he "caused havoc among the liberals".

Local Democrats explained the rise of Republicans as a result of "God, guns, gays, abortion… and coal". The first four are national issues, which the Republicans increasingly fight elections on here, an area where evangelicals are the largest bloc. I found most voters strongly supportive of the Second Amendment, but a significant minority advocated gun control. The interesting split was on abortion, where a slim majority were pro-choice, some because they thought a woman should choose for herself, and others because they thought the government should not interfere.

Of utmost importance, though, was the perception of a 'war on coal' being waged by national Democrats. While employment in the county's 13 remaining mines has fallen dramatically, criticising coal was seen by those I spoke to as attacking Boone County and its way of life. Locals have pride in the county's heritage, vivid memories of its heyday, and a determination to stand by retired miners. The region's future was a contested topic: some wanting coal jobs to return, others embracing diversification, and some wanting to move towards green energy.

How Democrats perform in working-class communities is vital for their future. One key race will come this November when Andy Beshear, the incumbent Democratic Governor of Kentucky, stands for re-election in a deeply Republican state. His campaign focuses on local issues, such as bringing manufacturing and investment to Kentucky, and he must win support from the eastern coalfields for re-election. And next year, Senate control will depend on whether Democrats can hold their seats in West Virginia, Montana and Ohio. Trump won them all twice, but strong Democratic incumbents have won in the past with support from working-class energy sector workers.

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Given the closely balanced nature of American politics, how these communities vote has huge implications. Rural, working-class America needs champions who can reverse their fortunes. If the Democrats fail to understand these areas and their people, a crucial part of their electoral coalition will be lost for good.

Closer to home, comparisons have been drawn between the working-class voters of Appalachia and voters living in the Red Wall here in the UK. While such comparisons should be approached with caution, my research produced four key takeaways for the left:

- Stick to the basics. Democrats were most successful when they campaigned on their traditional kitchen-table issues: a good education, affordable healthcare, and well-paying jobs. People in Boone County wanted leadership on healthcare and the economy, natural given the devastation wreaked the opioid epidemic.

- Local matters most. Areas have identities, and people want champions for them. Manchin's latest opponent was from another state and was portrayed as a carpetbagger. For most, politics is local, and they cared more about their community than the White House. Manchin won by downplaying national issues and being laser-focused on healthcare, opioids and jobs.

- Be positive. Hillary Clinton said in 2016 that she would put coal miners out of jobs. It was part of a longer answer on the energy transition and the need for training, infrastructure and investment, but it inevitably gave the impression that she was out-of-touch. Manchin had greater success by striking an optimistic tone focused on a brighter future for the state.

- Work with unions. Money is flowing into West Virginia from infrastructure and clean energy legislation. The Biden administration has strongly incentivised companies to hire union workers. With union jobs offering better pay, conditions and rights, Democrats should continue to boost union power and recreate the working-class coalitions they once had. **F**

In control

Defence procurement is a battle that Labour needs to win, as *Margaret Pinder* explains

Margaret Pinder is a solicitor who has worked in procurement law and partnering on major public sector infrastructure projects. She stood as Labour's candidate for Beverley and Holderness in the 2015 general election

In 2015, the then prime minister, David Cameron, boasted that he had brought the defence budget back in balance, overcoming, he claimed, a black hole from 2010 that was "bigger than the entire defence budget for that year". In effect he was fulfilling one of the 10 rules of defence reviews set out by Professors Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman in their 2015 paper for The Royal Institute of International Affairs: "On completion of a review, the government will claim to have gained control of defence inflation and cost overruns."

Yet, as Labour revealed in in September last year, there is an ongoing crisis in budget management within the Ministry of Defence. As shadow defence secretary John Healey put it: "Ministers have lost control of costs and contracts, and the defence secretary has no plan to get a grip [on] problems."

The figures are indeed alarming. Ten programmes have seen costs escalate by at least £7.5bn in the past year, with 42 out of 45 projects rated "amber" (experiencing significant issues) or "red" (delivery unachievable as currently envisaged).

Many of the higher profile examples of these are easy to identify –take, for instance, the design problems with the Ajax light tank, or the Protector drone programme, which, as of January this year, was five years late and £530m over budget. These, however, are just the tip of the iceberg: procurement problems are endemic at every level of the MoD.

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report on major defence equipment contracts published in November last year found a catalogue of failings across every aspect of procurement from programme conception to projected cost, and from contract negotiation to realisation and delivery. Findings included a general lack of transparency in procurement practice. There is no routine value monitoring or value management, with too many contracts procured non-competitively even where no considerations of national security apply. Contract negotiations fail to reliably produce a fair distribution of risks and rewards, and there are few consequences for suppliers for poor performance. Within the budget, funds allocated for new and existing capacity have been diverted into running cost commitments such as pensions and child-care payments. Another significant problem highlighted in the committee's report is an inability to recruit and retain skilled staff.

When looking for efficiency savings, the current government tends to default to cuts to the workforce, staff costs often being one of the largest areas of expenditure. But in the case of the MoD, capital costs not only hugely outstrip staffing and wider running costs, but increased by 43 per cent in the 2020 budget compared to just 2 per cent for running costs.

Efficiencies achieved through cuts to a skilled workforce can, in many cases, be matched – if not exceeded – through better, leaner procurement practice. Of course, the former is easy to implement; the latter far less so. The most compelling argument for better procurement practice is that it can achieve long-term savings as opposed to a one-off reduction in spend – and a corresponding loss of expertise in the running of public sector programmes with long-term impact on delivery. Simply put, there is no downside to achieving efficiencies through improved procurement practice. Since the MoD spends so much through procurement and capital spending, it is the government department most likely to realise significant benefits from improvements. The question is: why should defence procurement be so singularly resistant to what would appear to be self-evident good practice in other departments?

Affordability has driven decision-making in defence since the start of the Cold War, but affordability is a political judgement. There is one line of argument that capability reduction is not made inevitable by the force of economic circumstances and that government always has a choice regarding resource allocation for defence. But for any government, especially a Labour government with a strong commitment to delivering important domestic programmes such as the NHS, early years support, and improved public infrastructure, budget constraints are unavoidable.

Given the current parlous state of the public sector within a faltering economy, managing defence spending could prove an exceptionally large thorn in the next Labour government's side. In 2009 the National Audit Office declared that the defence procurement programme was: "consistently unaffordable." Clearly nothing has changed in the interim to ameliorate that judgement.

The standard procurement model does not sit easily within the realm of defence, which is subject to a number of unique, context-specific considerations. These include the prevailing monopsony, with the products and services of several sellers being sought by a single monolithic buyer: the MoD is by far the largest customer to the UK arms industry.

Uncertainty afflicts both sides of the procurement equation. Given the specialist nature of the evolving challenges in defence and the highly sophisticated technical response needed, the MoD cannot be expected at the start of many processes to have anything other a speculative grasp of what is needed. That, in turn, means the supplier has much work to do to establish firmer specification and feasibility. Development and production can constitute an exceptionally high percentage of life cycle costs of any new programme. Most capital defence cost increases occur from initial concept to the award of contract, rising to as much as 60 per cent, and these costs are all too often absorbed by the MoD rather than reasonably managed with suppliers. Off-the-shelf purchases could be used more often, where viable, for which the cost of development has already been absorbed by the supplier.

But to say defence procurement is exceptionally complex is not a reason to except it from the requirement that it be done well.

The concept of partnering – a collaborative management approach that encourages openness and trust between parties to a contract – first entered official government parlance with the 1993 White Paper on procurement, and defence has not been excluded from this practice. However, the 2022 Committee of Public Accounts report found that, although the MOD talks of partnering, this has not translated well into actual practice. Furthermore, while past performance of suppliers can be taken into account in awarding public sector contracts, there is little evidence that either this, or any realistic competitive tendering, is part of current defence procurement strategy.

But these are not the only issues. Disruptive technologies have attracted significant R&D spend, and they certainly play a role as the military's focus has shifted from conventional defence of the state to proactively addressing security challenges across the international arena such as terrorism and rogue states. However, the outbreak of a conventional war on the ground (and in the skies) of Ukraine just over a year ago should serve as a caution against relying on such technologies alone.

There are other issues specific to defence. Unanimity of approach between the services – army, navy, air force – can be hard to maintain, as each individual service will tend to prioritise its own needs over a commitment to defence overall. Then there is the need to attract and retain skilled staff either from within the services or through civilian recruitment.

Defence spending has historically shown itself to be hard to predict (or subject to over-optimistic projections). Defence inflation almost always exceeds cost increases elsewhere in the economy, but there is consistent failure to allow for this in the interests of keeping predicted costs low in response to immediate political considerations.

In 2019, an MoD acquisition specialist gave the following gloomy assessment of current defence spending: "We are…allowing ourselves to be sucked…into a piece of financial fiction, that means the most likely outcome [is that], at some stage, we will have a bust of some quite sizable proportion in the ability to finance what has been positioned through government as a defence plan."

Labour must ensure that bust does not happen under its watch and move quickly to address the problems afflicting defence procurement. Effective reform of defence spending may not sit front and centre of Labour's declared missions, but it is imperative that it is addressed with seriousness and skill when we are in government. **F**

Switching track

We need a revolution in transport planning that truly learns the lessons of the past, writes *Robin Hickman*

Robin Hickman is professor in transport and city planning at the Bartlett School of Planning, UCL

The Reshaping of British Railways – commonly known as the Beeching report after its author, Dr Richard Beeching – was published in 1963. It is now 60 years old and represents one of the largest mistakes ever made in British transport planning.

Of course, this judgement is made today, in the context of very different public policy priorities. In particular, environmental and social sustainability objectives have become critical and need to be considered in shaping infrastructure investments. But the Beeching debacle has left more than a regrettable legacy. It has also left us lessons – lessons which policymakers are yet to learn. Of all the issues likely to trouble a Starmer government if Labour wins the next election, transport planning will be one of the most crucial to get right. What might be the included in a new, progressive transport strategy? To succeed, Labour can draw on recent good practice, especially from abroad; but crucially, it must also learn the right lessons from past mistakes.

The Beeching report was published eight years after the launch of a railway modernisation plan which was perceived as failing to stem the losses of British Rail. For the first time ever, a national overview of the rail network was produced; but the infamous recommendation was for closure of much of the rail network across Great Britain. It begins with a backhanded compliment: "The changes proposed are intended to shape the railways to meet present day requirements by enabling them to provide as much of the total transport of the country as they can provide well." The implicit – and pre-emptive – conclusion was that rail was not appropriate for much of the country, particularly for frequently stopping services serving the smaller urban areas and more inaccessible locations.

The extent of recommended closures was dramatic: 2,363 stations (55 per cent) and 8,000 km of railway lines (30 per cent of route miles). The majority of closures were implemented as planned, with many connections lost between urban areas (e.g. the Great Central Mainline from London Marylebone to Leicester and Sheffield, the Woodhead line between Manchester and Sheffield, the Oxford-Cambridge Varsity Line), and linkages to rural communities and coastal resorts (e.g. in Cornwall, North Devon, East Anglia and the Lake District). The rail closures meant that many locations were left with no rail connections. Public transport usage fell dramatically, and there were wider socio-demographic effects, including population change. Thousands of jobs in British Rail were lost.

The context for Beeching was rising car ownership, more road usage and increased road freight haulage – and heavy governmental support for increased motorisation. There was a possibility that public transport by rail could be substituted by bus, but replacement services were never fully planned or funded, and so provision remained woefully inadequate. Bus deregulation from 1986 onwards led to further disintegration of bus services, and socially necessary public transport provision has declined even further. The private car became the only choice for travel in many locations as a direct impact of the Beeching cuts and subsequent public policy applying market principles to all of the modes except cars – which remain very heavily state supported.

It is no great surprise that, 60 years on, we are still suffering: the economic analysis used by Beeching was wholly inappropriate for the task, failing to quantify the environmental and social benefits of an extensive rail network. A narrow economic analysis assessed each line for passenger and freight flow relative to operating costs and revenue from passenger fares. Any lines that were deemed 'uneconomic' were put forward for closure. 50 per cent of stations were assessed as contributing to only two per cent of revenue – and they were hence deemed ineffective. This analysis overlooked many issues, such as the social capital and social mobility benefits of rail connections from disparate locations, and the environmental problems of reduced use of public transport and increased motorisation. There were no recommendations on safeguarding the lost rail corridors

for potential future use, and important sections were lost to redevelopment.

While it was put forward as a comprehensive and objective assessment, hiding under the surface were many normative assumptions – most importantly support for motorisation. Beeching failed to apply any similar cost-benefit analysis to highway projects. He could also have assessed highway usage relative to the cost of building, operating and passenger revenue. Highways were allowed to operate with no direct access charges applied; instead, indirect taxation was used via a low level of fuel taxes that did not cover even the environmental costs.

Given how readily apparent these issues are, we might look back at Beeching and think him simply incompetent. But that is not the full picture – not least because we are making much the same mistakes today. There has been no effective national transport strategy since John Prescott in 1998 – only failed experiments in rail privatisation and bus deregulation, marginal investments in active travel (walking and cycling), and a continually weakened system of spatial planning. We have lived through successive wasted decades for sustainable transport and spatial planning. Instead, the political choice has been made to continually and significantly invest in the highway system – as the totem of individualised travel and so-called freedom of choice. In contemporary times, this continues via the Road Investment Strategies 1 and 2, despite the many adverse impacts of motorisation. RIS3 is currently being planned by Highways England, amounting to further billions of road investment.

There have been some local community objections and campaigns for improved public transport. A small number of railway lines and stations have reopened (such as the Valley Line from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff and the Waverley line from Edinburgh to Galashiels and Tweedbank), some as heritage railways, others as corridors for light rapid transit (the Midland Metro), and some routes have been incorporated into the National Cycle Network. There are many more lines that could be reopened, and new routes could be opened in other locations. But, thanks to Beeching, the public have largely become used to organising their lives around use of the private car.

The Beeching report and subsequent support for motorisation has left us with a mammoth task in urban areas and regions – almost all contexts are very car dependent and use of the car has become normalised for most people. The critical lesson is that decisions about public investment in transport systems, including new highway, public transport and wider projects, should not resemble a book-balancing exercise in the style of small-business accounting. Instead, projects should be assessed against multiple and changing public policy goals. Sustainability objectives, including environmental and social goals, should frame transport planning and project appraisal. More specifically, public transport does not need to be self-sustaining from farebox revenue, because it provides public goods above and beyond the benefit afforded to individuals. Increased car usage, on the other hand, has led to many very significant adverse problems, including high energy consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, dire air quality, traffic casualties, obesity relating to inactive travel, and vehicle-dominated cities, towns and rural areas. Perhaps we can understand the civil servants of the postwar period for neglecting these issues – but with 60 years of damning evidence behind us, we should not be so generous to policymakers today.

The challenge for public policy is to shape and implement a more comprehensive and progressive transport planning approach. Part of this will require changes to the discipline of transport planning, including revised approaches to strategy development and project prioritisation. There should be much less investment – indeed, a moratorium – on highway building. RIS3, in particular, is inconsistent with current climate change and environmental commitments and should be cancelled. Evaluating transport planning projects on the basis of environmental and social equity goals would produce a very different list of projects: new railway connections; light rapid transit or tramway projects in urban areas, including in communities requiring regeneration; extensive, segregated cycle networks across all cities and towns; street space reallocated away from the car to public transport, cycling and walking; new public spaces; and traffic demand management. Such a list recasts transport policy as less a problem to be solved than a remarkable tool with which we can support our most important policy objectives.

Sixty years on from the Beeching Report, we need a revolution in transport planning, with environmental and social sustainability objectives framing the projects that gain funding, facilitated by intensive participation and deliberation over local strategies to ensure greater public involvement in decision-making. It is this level of ambition that is required to reshape public transport and cycling and walking networks, and to progress to more sustainable travel behaviours. **F**

Books

For the few

A new book on modern capitalism asks the political and economic elites to reform themselves, finds *Iggy Wood*

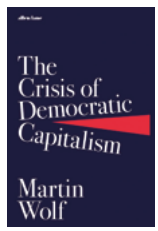
Iggy Wood is editorial assistant at the Fabian Society

A spectre is haunting Martin Wolf – the spectre of populism. This book is, at its heart, a response to the rise of anti-establishment politics, and especially Donald Trump. Unlike more reflexive anti-populists, however, Wolf's aim is to understand the problems that have made demagogues so attractive.

His deconstruction of the current Western malaise is fearless and unconstrained by the dogmas of modern economics. He is scathing about the financial sector, which he argues provides very little social value, and robustly defends higher taxes, which he contends are unlikely to have any negative impact on growth. He also makes clear that the crisis of democracy goes much deeper than many centrist commentators allow: Trump or no Trump, the role of money in politics means that the US is well on the way to becoming a 'blatant plutocracy'.

Wolf convincingly argues that the decline of the industrial working class in rich countries, which he centres in his account of 21st century politics, was largely a result of technological advances rather than international trade. The profound implication of this is that there is no going back, no matter how many trade deals someone like Trump rips up: we can't uninvent strip mining or the computer. In this and other ways, his account is firmly rooted in the present, leaving no room for either of the two main intellectual camps of the modern Labour party – those who want to return to the 1960s and those who want to return to the 1990s.

This excellent analysis of the challenges facing the Western world, however, sits within an overall argument that leaves much to be desired. Oddly at first glance, Wolf affords much less respect to the critics of capitalism than to the critics of democracy. Socialism is dismissed rather glibly, with frequent references to Venezuela and simplistic logic. "[Under socialism,] those who control the state will also control the economy. Since they will control both the economy and the government, they will control politics. There can then be no fair competition either for political power or in economic activity." From this argument alone, democratic socialism is determined to be a 'chimera.' In contrast, Jason Brennan's 'epistocracy' – or rule by the knowledgeable – is fully explained and given serious consideration, although ultimately rejected.



The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism
Martin Wolf,
(Allen Lane, £30)

The source of this lopsidedness is that, ironically for a book about democracy, it is essentially addressed to political and economic elites, who tend to need more convincing about the advantages of democracy than the wonders of capitalism. It is reasonable for Wolf to write for this audience, given his argument that our democracy is barely functional, but this is no Beveridge report, ripe for adaptation into a popular programme. This is where, on his own terms, Wolf is weakest: having rejected populism in all its forms, he is reliant on the elites he is so critical of to reform themselves. This has happened before – Franklin D Roosevelt and Otto von Bismarck are important examples – but seems a faint hope now, not least because, for Wolf, our elites are morally and spiritually sick.

Short shrift is given to ideas that he knows his intended audience is likely to disagree with. Universal basic income (a 'delusion') and the degrowth movement are given a less than fair hearing. In the case of UBI, this is particularly puzzling, given that Wolf thinks that with the advent of artificial intelligence most humans could conceivably become "as economically irrelevant as the horse". If democracy does survive in a world without work, what are people meant to vote for other than redistribution on a massive scale?

In a similar vein, it is remarkable that in a 400-page book about democratic capitalism some of the most obvious tensions between the two concepts are left unexplored. For example, most people have little power to challenge their employer. Do we really live in a democracy if we spend a third of our lives in a mini-dictatorship?

Wolf's book should be required reading for the politicians, journalists and businesspeople it is aimed at. No doubt an economy and society organised along the lines Wolf advocates for would be far more resilient and prosperous than what we have now. And indeed, if our elites fail to listen, Wolf argues there is a very real risk they will be deposed by a populist in the vein of Trump or Le Pen. For the rest of us, it is a useful, incisive and remarkably engaging guide to the modern economy – but one that leaves us with little to do except cross our fingers and hope. **F**

Passion without a plan

The Independent Labour Party's anniversary gives us the chance to reflect on why it was created, what it stood for, and why it failed, writes *Paul Richards*

Paul Richards is author of Labour's Revival and is a former chair of the Fabian Society

One hundred and thirty years ago, delegates met in Bradford to create a new political party anchored in the trade unions, committed to common ownership, and dedicated to working-class representation.

There was a big row about what to call the new party. Some wanted the word 'socialist' in the title; others believed it would put people off. Katharine St John Conway, a Fabian and the only woman elected to the ILP's committee, spoke in favour of rejecting the word 'socialist' because the workers were yet to be converted. She won the argument, and the 'Independent Labour Party' was born.

One of the significant social forces which created the ILP was the rise of trade unionism in the 1880s and 1890s. These 'new unions' represented workers in the dirty and dangerous industries of late-Victorian Britain, from the gasworks and match factories to the docks. Ben Tillett, the leader of the great dock strike of 1889, was a delegate to the founding conference. A few months before the ILP's conference, Bradford had seen huge demonstrations in support of the strikers, mostly women and girls, at Manningham Mills.

However, the upsurge in trade unionism highlighted the limitations of strikes without political power. The Liberal party establishment was largely on the side of the employers. (It was the Liberals from whom the ILP delegates wanted 'independence.') The new trade unionists saw few members of parliament who looked or sounded like them, with the exception of the MP for West Ham South, Keir Hardie, elected in 1892. The obvious conclusion was that the workers needed representation in parliament.

As the dispute over nomenclature suggests, the practical demand for representation was mirrored by a revival in socialism, in all its myriad forms. The 1880s and 1890s saw the medievalist utopianism of William Morris' News from Nowhere and Robert Blatchford's Merrie England, the quasi-Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the mysticism of the Fellowship of the New Life and the establishment of rather more successful organisation it spawned, the Fabian Society. A late-Victorian socialist would spend their time at countless meetings, public lectures and weekend schools, reading the Clarion, listening to George Bernard Shaw or Eleanor Marx, and debating proportional representation, the 'servant question', rational dress, and vegetarianism.

The ILP adopted a fierce and noisy commitment to 'socialism', without dedicating too much effort to what that might mean. The fledgling party's political repertoire echoed evangelical Christianity, with hymns, sermons and the emphasis on 'conversion'. But like the Christian church, the ILP was riven with doctrinal schism from the get-go. The socialism was 'ethical' as opposed to 'scientific' or 'gradualist', but as the historian James Hinton put it: "ethical socialism served as a substitute for any coherent attempt to relate the practical politics of the party to its socialist goals".

At the coming-of-age conference of the ILP in April 1914, the chair reported that "in the youth of the party there were many mistaken opinions concerning its aims and its foundations…" And herein lay the seeds of the ILP's destruction. The great historian of Labour's political thought Geoffrey Foote wrote: "The intellectual abstractions and legal nostrums of socialist theory were regarded, at least initially, as distinctly inferior to the genuine and honest feelings of nobility and dignity offered by a socialist morality."

This conspicuous absence of a patiently constructed theory meant an absence of the policy ideas which might have flowed from such foundations. This, despite the partial cross-over in membership, marked the biggest difference in approach between the ILP and the Fabians.

In its first decades, the ILP could contain within the walls of its very broad church Clement Attlee and R. Palme Dutt; George Lansbury and Philip Snowdon; Sylvia Pankhurst and George Orwell; Ellen Wilkinson and Oswald Mosley. A third of the first-ever Labour cabinet in 1924 carried an ILP membership card, including the prime minister Ramsay MacDonald.

This eclectic melange was reflected throughout the party's few thousand members, and the fundamentalist disagreements that followed. On the biggest issues of the day – the war with the Kaiser, the Russian Revolution, the great depression – the ILP split again and again. In 1931, the ILP split over whether to disaffiliate from the Labour party. When it did the following year, Aneurin Bevan called it a decision to remain 'pure, but impotent'. Out in the cold, the ILP's membership slumped to under five thousand by 1935, as members drifted away to the Communists and other left-wing factions. There was some traffic in the opposite direction: Trotsky

instructed his British followers to enter the ILP, which they did, including Ted Grant.

But by the 1930s, the ILP was in terminal decline, largely because of its ideological confusion. Here is Foote again: "Horrified by the ugliness and ruthless brutality of capitalism, the political thought of the Ethical Socialists was utopian in the worst sense of the word. It was basically a withdrawal from the world and, as such, it was impossible to translate into the practical politics of government".

The ILP's socialism was the socialism of the loud rally, the fiery speech, the home-made placard, and the protest. It refused to negotiate with the realities of the world war and economic slump, nor compromise with the difficult decisions of a Labour government. It was swifter to shout 'traitor' than concoct a useful idea.

In the first election it contested in 1895, the ILP had put up 28 candidates; all of them lost. (To make matters worse, Keir Hardie lost his seat, mostly, according to Henry Pelling, because he had spent so much time campaigning for ILP candidates in other seats.) Beatrice Webb, still enamoured with the strategy of 'permeation' of the Liberal party, wrote in her diary that "the ILP has completed its suicide".

It turned out to be a premature death notice. The ILP continued to provide a campaigning momentum for the labour movement, and was notably present in Farringdon in 1900, when the Labour Representation Committee – modern Labour's forerunner – was created. On the big call, to give up on the Liberals and start a 'Labour' party, the ILP got it right. The ILP provided the activists, and some of the methodology, for many of Labour's election campaigns thereafter. Somehow it limped into the 1970s before winding up.

But ultimately it failed, both in terms of electoral success and in terms of founding the New Jerusalem. It self-identified as the social conscience of the Labour party, like Jiminy Cricket in a Lenin cap, without an invitation to do so. The ILP serves as a reminder that while passion is a vital part of our politics, so is having a plan.

The Fabian Society, for all the catcalls of being 'right-wing' or 'middle-class' or, worst of all, 'moderate', demonstrably contributed more to social progress in 20th century Britain than did the ILP. Fabianism – democratic, progressive, dispassionate, rational, calm, and anchored in the facts – has proved more durable, and has offered more utility to the Labour party, than the ILP or any of the parties-within-the-party that followed. F

OBITUARY

Ian Taylor had a remarkable record of service to his local Fabian society

Ian Taylor, who died last November at the age of 76, was secretary of Bournemouth and District Fabian Society for more than 53 years.

Ian was born in Bournemouth and on leaving school he worked for a local firm of solicitors land conveyancing for seven years. At the age of 27, he was accepted by Reading University as a mature student. After graduation he gained a postgraduate certificate of education at Brunel University.

Subsequently, he was employed as a lecturer at Basingstoke college and Southampton University, and then at Bournemouth and Poole college until he retired at the age of 65. New legislation meant that he could not be compulsorily retired and with the assistance of his trade union fought and won an early case for age discrimination, an achievement he was very proud of. After retirement he supervised language students both at several local language schools and Bournemouth University.

At the age of 16, Ian joined Bournemouth East Labour party, and within months was elected as assistant secretary: he recounted how this was in effect a 'mugging' as he was now required to address by hand the literature envelopes for every voter in the constituency, some 60,000.

Later he became secretary of Bournemouth East CLP, a post he held continuously for 18 years. He successfully arranged for both constituency parties in Bournemouth to merge shortly after 2000, and in doing so was responsible for their continuing to be an effective party administrative presence in the area. At the merger he decided not to run as secretary, believing 18 years was enough (but was elected membership secretary, a post he held with only a short break until his death). He had decided to concentrate on the Fabian Society, which was very dear to his heart.

In an increasing rarity today, apart from the short time at Reading and Brunel universities, Ian spent his whole life at the same address. His work and experience was greatly appreciated at all levels within the Labour party and Fabian Society.

Roger Luffman, outgoing treasurer of Bournemouth Fabian Society

Deborah Stoate, formerly local societies officer at the Fabian Society, adds: Ian was a fount of knowledge about the Bournemouth society and was proud of the fact that it was originally founded in 1892 – one of the earliest local societies in the country. The town's links with the Fabian Society were deep: it was the temporary home of Beatrice Webb and many prominent Fabians holidayed there at the Vegetarian Holiday Centre.

The current Bournemouth Society was refounded in 1996 with secretary Ian Taylor continuing to run it, attracting national figures from all shades of Labour, including Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Jeremy Corbyn, which is no small achievement. He did miss some though. Tony Blair had agreed to be guest of honour at the society's 100th birthday dinner, but Ian felt unable to accept, as none of the dates offered included a Friday – the society's regular meeting day. Mr Blair now finds himself among the few leading members of the 1997 government not to have addressed the Bournemouth society and received a souvenir tortoise mug.

Ian was more than the secretary of Bournemouth and District Fabian Society. Efficient, dedicated and enthusiastic, he was the Bournemouth local society, and it is not an exaggeration to say that he gave his life to it. F

Listings

BIRMINGHAM & WEST MIDLANDS
Meetings at Birmingham Friends Meeting House
birminghamfabians.org
Contact Luke John Davies at bhamfabians@gmail.com

BOURNEMOUTH & DISTRICT
Meetings at the Friends Meeting House, Bournemouth BH5 1AH

BRIGHTON & HOVE
Meetings at Friends Meeting House, Ship Street, Brighton BN1 1AF
Contact Stephen Ottaway at stephenottaway1@gmail.com

CARDIFF
Contact Jonathan Evans at wyneevans@phonecoop.coop

CENTRAL LONDON
Meetings at 61 Petty France, London SW1H 9EU
Contact Michael Weatherburn at michael.weatherburn@gmail.com

CHISWICK & WEST LONDON
Meetings at the Raphael Room, St Michael and All Angels Church, Bath Road, London W4 1TT
Contact Alison Baker at a.m.baker@blueyonder.co.uk

COLCHESTER
Meetings at the Hexagonal Room, Quaker Meeting House, 6 Church Street, Colchester
Contact Maurice Austin at maurice.austin@phonecoop.coop

COUNTY DURHAM
21 May: Kevan Jones MP on austerity spending in County Durham and the North East by the coalition and Conservative governments.
25 June: Tim Blackman, vice chancellor of Open University, on higher education and further education: lessons from devolution.
Meetings at St. John's Hall, Meadowfield, Durham
Contact Professor Alan Townsend at alan.townsend1939@gmail.com

CROYDON AND SUTTON
Meetings at 50 Waverley Avenue, Sutton, SM1 3JY
Contact Philip Robinson, probinson525@btinternet.com

DERBY
Contact Lucy Rigby, lucycmrigby@hotmail.com

ENFIELD
Contact Andrew Gilbert at alphasilk@gmail.com

FINCHLEY
Meetings at the Greek Cypriot Community Centre, 2 Britannia Road, N12 9RU
In the process of rebuilding/reforming – contact Mike Barker for more information: michael.w.barker.t21@btinternet.com
For general enquiries, contact Mike Walsh at mike.walsh44@ntlworld.com

GRIMSBY
Contact Pat Holland at hollandpat@hotmail.com

HARINGEY
Contact Sue Davidson, sue.davidson17@gmail.com

HARTLEPOOL
Meetings at Hartlepool Labour party offices, 23 South Road, TS26 9HD
Contact Helen Howson, secretaryhartlepoolfabians@gmail.com

HAVERING
Meetings at 273 South Street, Romford RM1 2BE
Contact Davis Marshall at haveringfabians@outlook.com

NEWHAM
Contact John Morris at jj-morris@outlook.com

NORFOLK
Contact Stephen McNair at politics@stephenmcnair.uk

NORTH EAST LONDON
nelondonfabians.org
Contact: nelondonfabians@outlook.com

NORTHUMBRIA AREA
Contact Pat Hobson at pathobson@hotmail.com

PETERBOROUGH
Meetings at Dragonfly Hotel, Thorpe Meadows, PE3 6GA
Contact Brian Keegan at brian@keeganpeterborough.com

REDCAR AND CLEVELAND
Contact Sarah Freeney, sarahelizabeth30@yahoo.co.uk

TYNESIDE SOUTH
Meetings at Lookout Communal Pub in Fort Street, South Shields
Contact Paul Freeman at southtynesidefabians@gmail.com

YORK
Contact Mary Cannon at yorkfabiansociety@gmail.com

DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

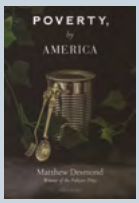
Giles Radice: his legacy

Labour Lords and the Fabian Society are hosting a commemorative meeting about Lord Radice, former MP, peer, Fabian and author on Wednesday 12 July at 6pm in Committee Room 10 at the House of Commons.

Chaired by Fabian vice-president Baroness Dianne Hayter, Giles Radice's intellectual and political activity will be remembered by Lord George Robertson, Lord Roger Liddle, Professor Patrick Diamond and Lord Roy Kennedy, chair of the Fabian Society.

THE FABIAN QUIZ

POVERTY, BY AMERICA
Matthew Desmond



The US is the richest country on earth – and has been so for more than 100 years. What has it done with this century of economic dominance? For many of its people, not much, argues Matthew Desmond. One in seven Americans live below the poverty line, and poverty reduction has flatlined since the late 1960s.

For Desmond, this represents a completely avoidable failure: we already know how to eliminate poverty, and the US has the resources to do it. The only thing missing is a lack of political will, caused, at least in part, by the deeply flawed stories we tell ourselves about why some people have more than others.

In this striking analysis of American destitution, both liberals and conservatives are in the firing line. Neither insurmountable structural issues nor personal failings can account for poverty; only the choices we make about our society can. It is time for Americans – especially rich ones – to put themselves back in the narrative about how people become poor.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) put an estimated 1.1 million American children into poverty. Which US president, who campaigned on the promise to 'end welfare as we know it', signed it into law?

Please email your answer and your address to review@fabian-society.org.uk

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 5 MAY 2023.

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