FABIAN REVIEW

The quarterly magazine of the Fabian Society

Summer 2023 / fabians.org.uk / £4.95

BRIGHT START

Making Britain a better place to grow up in, with Lindsey Macmillan, Jake Anders, Tommy Gale, Ben Cooper, and Sylvia McNamara ***p12*** */ John Healey MP stakes out Labour's defence credentials* ***p19*** */ Diana Johnson MP on how Labour can defeat toxic populism* ***p22***

Fabian membership + donation

For members who are in a position to give more to the society we offer three tiers of membership plus donation. Upgrade now to get a free ticket to our New Year conference.

COLE membership plus donation — £12 / month

All the benefits of standard membership plus: a Fabian Society branded canvas bag; a free ticket to either our new year or summer conference; invitation to an annual drinks reception; and regular personal updates from the general secretary.

CROSLAND membership plus donation — £30 / month

All the benefits of COLE plus: free tickets to all Fabian events; a printed copy of every Fabian report, sent to your home; and invitations to political breakfasts with leading figures on the left.

WEBB membership plus donation — £60 / month

All the benefits of CROSLAND plus: regular personal updates from leading Fabian parliamentarians; an annual dinner with the general secretary and Fabian parliamentarians; and special acknowledgement as a patron in our annual report and on our website.

For more information + to donate visit **fabians.org.uk/donate**

FABIAN REVIEW

Volume 135—No.2

FABIAN SOCIETY

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

Editor, Kate Murray
Cover illustration, James Lewis
Printed by Park Communications Ltd
Design designbysoapbox.com

ISSN 1356 1812
info@fabians.org.uk

FABIAN SOCIETY
61 Petty France
London SW1H 9EU
020 7227 4900 (main)
020 7976 7153 (fax)
info@fabians.org.uk
www.fabians.org.uk

© James Lewis

In our sights

The next Labour government will need both a long-term approach and an emergency response to the crises we face, writes *Andrew Harrop*

It is a summer of discontent. For more than a decade things in Britain have been going downhill gradually. Now it feels they are going downhill fast. Earnings are falling steeply in real terms, interest rates and rents are spiralling and pretty much every public service is under more pressure than at any time in living memory.

If Labour wins the next election, Keir Starmer will have to plan for both patient, long-term rebuilding and immediate turnaround. It will take a long time to put things right but some big steps will be required straight away – including things that can not necessarily be talked about before an election because they are too expensive for a costed manifesto.

On living standards and the economy, the sad truth is that the fundamentals will take time to change. In July the Fabian Society publishes proposals to reduce regional inequalities. We call for devolution of economic powers, planning reform and business support – as well as action to increase labour participation covering adult training, public transport and childcare. A closer relationship with the EU will of course boost our long-term prospects too.

But none of these things will come fast enough to deal with the sense of crisis. For people in the greatest need only rapid social security reform will cut it. A future government needs an immediate plan for benefit increases that target destitution, children's life chances and unaffordable housing costs.

On public services the tensions are the same. Years of underspending cannot be turned around quickly. Labour will need plans for long-term reform and investment, emphasising prevention, technology, infrastructure and strong management. These themes all feature in proposals for a National Care Service presented in June by the Fabian Society to Labour.

But public services will simply grind to a halt without stabilisation now. We need pay settlements sufficient to tackle labour shortages. In the Fabian National Care Service plan we call for everyone in adult social care to be paid at least the real living wage: the only plausible response to the system's current understaffing.

Economic and social pressures interlock of course. In the long run, we will only have the money we need for public services with rising earnings and tax revenues; and demand for healthcare will only be manageable if we can reduce illness caused by economic failure. In turn the economy will only prosper when public services succeed in gaps in life chances and ensuring that no one leaves school without the skills to succeed.

Immediately the left needs to prioritise public service interventions that will boost the economy fast. Why hasn't the government lasered in on cutting NHS waiting lists for people anxious to return to work? Or provided free occupational health services, as the Fabians recently proposed? Done right this would significantly boost employment and more than pay for itself.

The next government will face a difficult balance between unavoidable 'rescue' spending and investment in the future. Whenever possible Labour should plan to address economic and social goals together, spending in a way that combines patching and reform. Labour must also seek out alternatives to public expenditure.

The change the country needs will be achieved as much by shifting personal behaviours and business practices as through tax and spend. On issues from green transition to child development, job security to AI, and housebuilding to health inequalities, a powerful and purposeful regulatory state can help rescue Britain from its malaise. **F**

Shortcuts

NATIONAL TREASURE

The platinum jubilee of the NHS should inspire us to save it — *Paulette Hamilton MP*

This month marks the 75th anniversary of our National Health Service. Almost from its inception, the NHS has been a pillar of British society, and I am proud to have worked in it as a nurse for 25 years. At every point in our lives, the NHS supports us: when we are born, when we die, and at every milestone in between. It was founded on core principles that are just as relevant today as they were in 1948: that treatment is free at the point of access, that everyone receives help, regardless of wealth, and that services are provided based on need.

Sadly, in the 13 years since the last Labour government, we have seen a managed decline of our health service. Conservative neglect has left it a shell of its former self. There is currently a 20-year gap in healthy life expectancy between those who live in the most deprived parts of the country and those who live in the least, and more than 7 million people are currently waiting for NHS treatment. In my local communities of Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale, just as across the rest of the UK, people are finding it impossible to book a GP appointment, to have a routine operation or even to get an ambulance when they need one. As shadow health secretary Wes Streeting has said, 24 hours in A&E is no longer just a TV programme: it is a grim reality for people up and down the country.

The NHS workforce is teetering on a cliff edge, with almost every type of healthcare worker having been on strike this year. At the end of last year, the Royal College of Nursing, my old trade union and former employer, voted to hold the first nationwide nurses' strike in its 106-year history.

I worked in nursing and public health all my working life until I was elected to parliament. I also volunteered on the frontline during the pandemic. I know how soul-destroying it can be to go on duty and know that you will be struggling amid inadequate staffing levels for a nine- or 12-hour shift. Health workers dedicate their lives day in and day out to caring for others, but many are still living with the after-effects of having worked flat-out through the pandemic, all while trying to do the work of three or four people due to staff shortages.

Our social care system, too, is on its knees, and without fundamental reform bringing together health and social care, the pressures across both sectors are likely to get worse. There are 165,000 vacancies in social care and carers are leaving the sector in droves. Reforms have long been promised but are yet to be seen, and thousands of people are draining their life savings just to get a basic level of care. Unpaid carers are left to fill the gaps, and A&E departments are overflowing with people who cannot be discharged because they cannot access the care they need.

Then there is mental health. I volunteer as a lay manager at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, and I often see the impact of dwindling services and limited resources on residents across our city. Children and young people are facing terrible waiting times for urgent mental health care and many people in our communities are worrying more than ever about how to feed their families, heat their homes and keep their businesses going through a cost of living crisis.

I want the next generation to have better opportunities than I did. That is why Labour has a plan to build an NHS fit for the future by doubling the number of district nurses qualifying every year, training 5,000 new health visitors, creating an additional 10,000 nursing and midwifery places and guaranteeing mental health treatment within a month, paid for by abolishing the non-dom tax status.

When Aneurin Bevan spoke in parliament during the second reading of the National Health Service Bill, he said: "I believe it will lift the shadow from millions of homes. It will keep very many people alive who might otherwise be dead. It will relieve suffering. It will produce higher standards for the medical profession. It will be a great contribution towards the wellbeing of the common people of Great Britain."

He was right. But 75 years on, it is easy to forget how much we owe to the NHS. From post-war to post-pandemic, it has lived, suffered and struggled with us and, against all odds, it has survived thanks to the incredible staff keeping it going. It is now time that we do it and them justice and fight to save it. **F**

Paulette Hamilton is the Labour MP for Birmingham Erdington

BACK TO BASICS

A new royal commission could get to the heart of the UK's policing problems — *Unmesh Desai*

Policing in the UK is in a state of crisis. Polling across the country – but particularly in London – shows that there has been a collapse of trust and confidence in the police's ability to solve crime and protect the communities they serve. These issues strike at the heart of the principle of policing by consent. The Casey report and more recently the investigation into the Stephen Port murders have exposed these failures in particularly bleak fashion, providing demonstrable proof of the poor standard of service the Met is providing to Londoners, particularly to those from marginalised communities.

So what is going wrong? In part, the problem is that police forces across the country have been asked to do more with less, to police an ever more complex society without sufficient training and to perform the role of social worker as well as police officer. It should be a priority for a future Labour government to work with the police and other statutory partners to identify mission creep, establishing what needs to be done by the police and what functions

should be assigned elsewhere to improve outcomes for both the police service and the public.

The problems we see in policing are reflective of issues with other organisations and with the British criminal justice system more widely. As such, we need to look holistically: we need to scrutinise how policing interacts with the probation service, the prison service, the CPS, and even the NHS. The struggles of these other services have a knock-on effect on policing.

Notwithstanding these structural issues, in London, it is obvious that the Met needs fundamental and total reform. For too long Londoners have experienced an unacceptable level of service while also seeing reports of truly horrifying criminality and misconduct perpetrated by serving Met officers such as Wayne Couzens and David Carrick. It is no wonder that trust has collapsed as it has.

I was shocked at the depth of the issues highlighted in the Casey Review, but sadly those who have worked around policing for some time know that these issues are not new. There is a culture of institutional misogyny and racism at the Met and there are too many officers who can not get the basics right. There is also an epidemic of straightforward incompetence, from the non-recording of crimes to rape kits perishing because the fridge they are in is turned off. Such failures have consequences. Each instance means someone is denied justice and it further erodes trust and confidence in the police.

We need to look at the basic cornerstones of recruitment, retention, training, operational practices, and community engagement, and how policing with consent can underpin all of these. This is not new thinking, but doing it correctly and well is the issue. Some of the steps the new Met commissioner has taken have been positive, but his time as will be judged on whether he can get vetting right, whether he can improve outcome rates, especially with regard to sexual offences, and whether he can change the culture of the Met top to bottom. I sincerely hope he succeeds.

In his first appearance before the police and crime committee at the London Assembly, the commissioner spoke of "leading a renewal of policing by consent". This stuck with me, not only because it is an ambitious and commendable goal, but because it made me reflect about what policing by consent means in the modern era.

How well equipped is a force that was established 200 years ago, primarily to police public disorder, to deal with the complexities of the modern world? Of course, policing has moved on in that time, but when one considers the outcome rates for fraud or sexual offences, it begs the question of whether our police force as currently constituted is able to get a grip on the kind of crimes that are increasingly impacting our lives.

Consequently, I am calling for a royal commission on policing – the first since 1963. Sixty years on, the commission should reassess what policing by consent means in the modern era, looking at various policing and criminal justice issues in a holistic context, and addressing the fundamental, structural, and institutional questions that face modern policing in Britain. For example: should the Met be made a force for London only, with the national and international functions being given to a national body? Are 43 police forces too many? Should the City of London police be a specialist fraud service?

No option should be off the table when the singular goal is to restore trust and confidence in the police. Without that, our model of policing will continue to fall apart. **F**

Unmesh Desai is the London Assembly member for City and East London and Labour lead on policing at City Hall. He has been both chair and deputy chair of the police and crime committee

© Cbhuko Cribb/Unsplash

FOR OUR COUNTRY

Labour must build on its growing success in rural areas — *Martin Edobor*

The urban-rural divide has been a long-standing issue in British politics. In the 2019 general election, the Labour party once again suffered from a significant disconnect with rural communities. However, as we approach the 2024 general election, this dynamic shows signs of a positive shift.

A Fabian Society-YouGov survey conducted for the Fabian pamphlet Green and Pleasant found that 30 per cent of rural voters would now vote Labour – the same proportion who said they would vote Conservative. This represents a 10-point increase in rural support for Labour since the 2019 election.

More significantly, Labour has surged ahead in its 50 'significantly rural' target seats to lead the Conservatives by 18 points. Labour's brand is popular in these target seats, with more respondents saying that the party understood people in their local area than those who said it did not and more believing that Labour shared their values than thinking it did not.

Despite this upward trajectory under Keir Starmer's leadership, overcoming longstanding allegiance to the Tories in the rural heartlands is a considerable challenge. While rural voters show increasing willingness to consider Labour, the party must now craft a comprehensive rural policy agenda that not only addresses their unique needs but also combats scepticism about Labour's commitment to rural issues.

Quite simply, Labour needs a dedicated rural manifesto – a blueprint for rural prosperity outlining our commitment to rural communities. Such a manifesto could propose specific policies to address the needs and concerns of rural voters, outlining the opportunities a future Labour government would bring. It should exhibit the kinds of policies rural areas are unlikely to get from the Tories, such as:

- **Investment in broadband infrastructure.** In an increasingly digital world, fast and reliable internet access is not a luxury but a necessity.

Labour could champion this cause by pledging to invest in broadband infrastructure and promote digital literacy in rural areas.

- **Support for sustainable agriculture and rural entrepreneurship.** Labour should be clear about its backing for sustainable agriculture and rural entrepreneurship by committing to providing the necessary financial support and training for farmers to adopt eco-friendly practices and fostering rural businesses through grants and loans.
- **Investment in rural health and education infrastructure.** By spending on rural health and education infrastructure and promoting innovative solutions like telemedicine and online learning, Labour can help overcome the challenges of distance and ensure that everyone, no matter where they live, has access to the services they need.

As a former Labour parliamentary candidate in a rural constituency, I know firsthand that rural voters often feel their concerns are overlooked. They have the same hopes and aspirations as those in metropolitan areas, but we need to listen and provide a comprehensive offer rooted in Labour values.

The recent local election results have given Labour a strong platform to build on in rural areas. The party won significant seats on town, parish, and district councils across the country, increasing the number of local Labour representatives. This widespread representation is essential for ensuring that rural voices are heard and their concerns addressed. The newly elected Labour officials are a valuable asset to the party. They share the values of local voters and understand their unique challenges, and Labour-led councils allow voters to experience the real benefits of Labour politicians in power.

To build on its success in the local elections, Labour must continue to engage with rural communities. The party must listen to voters' concerns and work to address them, ensuring that its policies are tailored to the specific needs of rural areas.

While the journey ahead is challenging, Labour is well positioned to bridge the urban-rural divide, ushering in a new inclusive and progressive era that leaves no voter behind. It is time, though, to get specific: what will change if rural voters put Labour in power? **F**

Dr Martin Edobor is an NHS GP and former Labour parliamentary candidate for Witham. He is the former chair of the Fabian Society

COMMON PURPOSE

We need to rebuild our social contract with the NHS — *Jessie Cunnett*

In recent years, the NHS has become defined by a common public narrative of negative stories which speak of difficulty, crisis, and failure. A recent study from the Health Foundation showed that the public are deeply negative about the state of the NHS, with only a third of people agreeing it is providing a good service and 63 per cent thinking that the general standard of care has fallen. Confidence in government to address these issues is staggeringly low at just 8 per cent in England. What is absolutely clear, however, is people's overwhelming ongoing commitment to the founding principles of the NHS, with nearly 90 per cent believing that the NHS should continue to be free at the point of delivery, funded through taxation.

But what is the NHS anyway? Nowadays it is no longer a single entity, but a complex web of thousands of contractual relationships. There are many consequences to this. One is that this contractual model puts an emphasis on the delivery of services to patients as individual consumers. The danger is, however, that as consumers we become passive recipients. The NHS does not easily allow us to vote with our feet and go somewhere better. As we sit patiently waiting our turn, occasionally having a moan to friends and family, but generally inert, we watch with a sense of helplessness as the quality and availability of care diminishes before our very eyes. Inevitably confidence is low, and there are signs that people are beginning to believe that the NHS is no longer fit for purpose. The shift towards a service-driven model seems to have left people feeling as if they are no longer part of the NHS but merely consumers of it.

Many years ago, I met a man at a training session I was delivering on how to influence decision-makers in the NHS. He had been a young adult at the close of the second world war when the idea of 'national health' free at the point of delivery was born. He spoke with passion and conviction of a time when people felt a sense of belonging within the NHS, a feeling that they were part of something, with a national agreement that nobody would sit by and watch their neighbour suffer through lack of access to health services because of their inability to pay. He spoke sadly, with great emotion, of the current situation where people didn't see their role in the NHS and were quick to pick it apart.

It is useful to think about the difference between the 'services' that people receive as part of the NHS and the 'social contract' with the public that sits behind those services. While services are essential to ensure we can all get the health and care we need, there is something fundamental about the social contract required to provide these services, through a collective agreement that everyone has the right to be able to access them free at the point of delivery.

Faced with the scale of the challenges ahead, there is no doubt that difficult decisions will need to be made. Decisions that will require honest conversations with the public about their part in the future of the NHS. In recent times, we have seen some incredible examples of shared endeavour. You only need to look at the volunteer response to Covid to see that there is still a huge appetite amongst people to help each other, to step up and to respond

© Tugce Gungormezleb/Unsplash

to a call to action for the benefit of society as a whole. There is great power in the galvanising forces of a common purpose.

So what if we were to introduce a 'National Health Contract' to ensure the success of our 'National Health Service'? A National Health Contract more accurately describes what the institution is, rather than what it does. It is about the principle, the commitment, the social contract of free health and care for all at the point of delivery. We could start with a national campaign that invites everyone to celebrate the part they play. From the doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists and all the other amazing people who play their part by pursuing a career in the NHS, to the contribution we all make through our commitment to fund the NHS so it is there for everyone.

In this way, we would all be able to reconnect with a sense of collective responsibility and pride. A feeling that we belong and that we are part of something bigger. The more we belong to something, the more we are invested in making it a success. By reigniting a sense of common purpose, collective ownership and national pride, we can all reach in and catch the NHS before it falls so we can all access the health and care we need to live healthy happy lives. F

Jessie Cunnett has 25 years' experience as a senior leader, director and independent consultant, specialising in patient, public, staff and stakeholder involvement in health and social care. She is a mentee on the latest Fabian Women's Network mentoring programme.

CULTURE CHANGE

Progressive regulatory reform will benefit us all — *Matt Bevington*

Regulation is the tool that Labour ministers would use more than any other in government. Tax and spend – fiscal policy – grabs the headlines, but it is regulation that translates these and other policies into practice. Collectively, UK 'fiscal events' in 2022 contained around 120 tax and spend measures. By contrast, there were almost 1,400 UK statutory instruments, a rough proxy for regulatory activity.

Some within the party may baulk at the idea of 'regulatory reform'. But Wes Streeting is absolutely right to say that "reform is not a Conservative word". Progressive regulatory reform is about the most transformative agenda the next Labour government could pursue.

The Conservatives have proven incapable of regulating well. In recent months, I have spoken to more than a dozen current and former politicians, officials and advisers to government with expertise on regulation. They included politically independent figures who have served under both Conservative and Labour governments, as well as those who led regulatory reform efforts under the last Labour government. The message was resounding: our regulatory system, like much else in British public life under the Conservatives, is in decline, driven by near-constant political instability and a collapse in governing standards.

The expert evidence is backed up by the data. Three features of regulation are vital: process, design and enforcement. On each of these, there is clear evidence of decay.

Proper regulatory process has withered under the Conservatives. In the final years of the last Labour government, the equivalent of around one in eight pieces of primary and secondary legislation received a full, published impact assessment. In 2022, it was one in 20. In-depth analysis and scrutiny have simply not been happening to anywhere near the same extent.

Even where recent impact assessments have been done, they have often been substandard. The government's own Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC), which analyses regulatory quality, said of the Retained EU Law Bill that the government "has not undertaken any substantive [cost-benefit] analysis to support the Bill" and rated the impact assessment "not fit for purpose". This is nothing short of astonishing for a bill of such wide-ranging importance. The RPC did not even receive an impact assessment for the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill until it had completed its Commons stages.

When designing legislation, time is crucial. Officials need the space to carry out proper analysis and carefully craft regulation to minimise costs and unintended consequences, as well as cater to the nuances of the activities and sectors being regulated. Under the Conservatives, there is evidence of much less careful consideration. Since 2015, an average of 3.4 bills per session have been fast-tracked through the Commons, more than double the number (1.5) under the last Labour government. And this is no quirk of recent years. Conservative governments before 1997 fast-tracked an even higher number of bills, so they can't blame Brexit and the pandemic.

Enforcement is a bin fire. Look at almost any enforcement body today and, more likely than not, they will be doing significantly less than in 2010. The Health and Safety Executive is a case in point. In 2022, it pursued 70 per cent fewer prosecutions than in 2010.

Non-compliance has not disappeared. Instead, more law-breaking is going unpunished. This is yet more evidence of the supposed "party of law and order" willing to turn a blind eye and the British public paying the price.

The Conservatives' failure on regulation is also bad for the economy. Economists and regulators stress the importance of regulatory quality to support economic growth. The idea that we simply need to cut regulation is, at best, simplistic. It is not, where the UK is concerned, mainly about 'less' but about 'better'. There is ample evidence that UK businesses do not want sweeping deregulation – just look at the government's own consultation on the Better Regulation Framework. They do, however, want better regulation and better regulators. That is what a Labour government should be focused on delivering.

The next Labour government will need to rebuild the regulatory ecosystem. Political gimmicks like "one-in, one-out" and "red tape challenges" don't work and, frankly, miss the point. There needs to be change to our institutions, process and culture. The Better Regulation Executive should be moved back to the Cabinet Office where it can better drive change from the centre. The RPC should be strengthened and provide broader oversight of and support to departments. The impact assessment process needs to be made more robust and post-implementation reviews should be much more routine.

Finally, there needs to be a shift in culture to place as much priority on improving the existing stock of regulation as bringing forward new ones. 'Regulatory reform' need not be a synonym for 'deregulation'. For Labour, it should mean high standards *and* higher growth. F

Matt Bevington is the practice director for regulatory and political due diligence at Global Counsel

A WINNING FORMULA

Only Labour has the concrete policies to transform Scotland and the UK — *Ian Murray MP*

While the complete implosion in the SNP may have begun when Nicola Sturgeon resigned as first minister in February, the seeds of discord were sown a long time ago. Most obviously, the resulting leadership contest exposed longstanding, bitter tensions between the party's left and right wings.

Until now, the party's knack for projecting a bright future while blaming present circumstances on everyone else has served them well electorally; but Scots are coming to realise that it is the SNP which has been in charge of their economy, their society, and their public services for 16 years now.

This poor record on day-to-day issues will be key to how Scottish Labour wins again. More and more voters are now expressing their displeasure at a record of failure: one in seven Scots on NHS waiting lists, ferry services with no boats and a rise in the attainment gap between the richest and poorest children. Nothing works better today than when the SNP took control more than a decade and a half ago. We are left with a government just as tired and incompetent as that in Westminster, incapable of even talking about, let alone delivering, the change we need.

For years, the SNP and the Tories have tried to paint each election in Scotland as a two-horse race. This is becoming untenable. Last year, Labour leapfrogged the Conservatives into second place at the council elections and this year we are snapping at the heels of the SNP.

Yet both the SNP and the Tories are still living in the past. Their reaction to Labour's strong showing in May's English council elections could have been lifted straight from the mid-2010s: the SNP claims that there is no difference between Labour and the Tories, and the Conservatives claim only they can stand up for the UK against a supposed "coalition of chaos". The electorate deserve better than this reheated spin.

Labour is different. Anas Sarwar and Keir Starmer have made Labour a political force in Scotland again – not least by ensuring that, to the envy of our opponents, we actually have policies. Former first minister Alex Salmond once promised that Scotland would become the "Saudi Arabia of renewables", but the Scottish Government last year sold off Scotland's wind energy capacity to Shell, BP and Vattenfall for only £700m; in contrast, Labour would double the number of clean energy jobs in Scotland. In addition, a Labour government in Westminster would quadruple offshore wind capacity across the UK, double it onshore and triple solar, giving us the armoury of a real green superpower. This would be done through a publicly owned energy company, GB Energy, allowing the public to own and benefit from the investment taxpayers make in greening our economy.

Across the country, voters have been expressing their desire for a competent government that has a plan to grow the economy, fix our public services and tackle the climate crisis. In my new role as general election campaign coordinator in Scotland, I know that we cannot take a single voter for granted. We need to be ready to speak to everyone across the country, showing them that a UK Labour government can deliver for Scotland. We need to demonstrate a positive policy platform that provides answers to voters' priorities. We need to restore faith in our democratic structures. And we need to show that we can deliver a stronger Scotland in a better Britain.

Of course polls can shift – and we can never rest on our laurels. But I have been reassured by our effective and passionate campaigners about the progress that we are making.

The future of Scotland and the rest of the UK relies on cooperation and hard work across our movement as we approach 2024. We will work hard for every vote and give people positive and hopeful reasons to vote Labour. But, as my political hero John Smith said, all we ask is for the opportunity to serve. Then we can really change lives for the better. **F**

Ian Murray is the Labour MP for Edinburgh South and Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland

© Victor Vic/Flickr

Après Rishi, le deluge?

A divided Conservative party is entering the next election period on an uncertain footing. *Tim Bale* explores whether anyone can steady the ship

Tim Bale is professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London and author of The Conservative Party after Brexit: Turmoil and Transformation, published by Polity

Discounting, for the moment, the media frenzy occasioned by Boris Johnson's bombshell resignation from the Commons in early June, British politics seems to have calmed down a bit since Rishi Sunak took over as prime minister. Sunak may share the Thatcherite, low-tax, low-spend, light-regulation instincts of Liz Truss, but he is far more fiscally conservative than his disastrous immediate predecessor. And while he may share Johnson's (and indeed Truss's) willingness to engage in populist politics, particularly on immigration, he is not by nature a rule-breaker. Moreover, his pitch to his party and to the electorate revolves around common-or-garden competence rather than ideological zeal or sheer force of personality – partly through inclination, partly because he can hardly be said to ooze charisma. But can a public tired of spectacle be persuaded that Sunak is a clean break? And if not, what next for the Tories?

With his reedy public school drawl, Sunak doesn't exactly exude authority. Indeed, this, plus one or two of the concessions he's made to his backbenchers, particularly on planning, has encouraged the Labour party to label him as not merely 'out of touch' but 'weak' – an impression reinforced by his tolerating some pretty patent freelancing by the likes of Suella Braverman in recent weeks.

Yet Sunak's willingness to choose discretion as the better part of valour when it comes to party management makes sense: divided parties tend not to win elections. And, in any case, he has his limits: he chose to face down the European Research Group over the Windsor framework, and in doing so exposed them as something of a spent force.

The fact that only 20 Tory MPs followed Johnson and Truss into the 'no' lobby back in March may have served as a warning to Johnson that he enjoyed far less support among his (now former) colleagues than he imagined – one reason, perhaps, why he chose to quit the Commons for fear that they would vote for a suspension that might have triggered a by-election, but also an explanation as to why, when he announced his decision, the clamour against the way he'd been treated was limited only to the hardest of his hardcore fans at Westminster. That does not mean Johnson won't be an ongoing thorn in Sunak's side over the next year or so, but it does mean Sunak need not (indeed, should not) try too hard to appease him.

Sunak also seems to be standing fairly firm on public sector strikes – to the obvious delight of the 'party in the media' (the proprietors, leader writers and op-ed writers of the Telegraph, the Mail, the Express and the Sun who are so integral to the Tory milieu). His supporters seem convinced that strikes inevitably spell trouble for a Labour party supposedly in hock to its 'union paymasters'.

Sunak seems to be standing fairly firm on public sector strikes, to the obvious delight of the 'party in the media'

A fair few Conservative MPs, with one eye on the opinion polls, have their doubts. The idea that nothing works in 'backlog Britain' is not one that they want to see take hold. If a Tory government can't sort things out, then voters, they reason, may well give Labour a go.

The arrival of tens of thousands of asylum seekers who have undertaken the perilous Channel crossing to reach the Kent coast, after which local authorities are obliged to house them at huge expense to the public purse, is likewise a double-edged sword for Sunak. There may well be votes to be had by painting Labour as 'soft on immigration', but unless he really does manage to 'stop the boats', then the Tories could be toast at the next election. After all, the myriad magic bullet solutions they routinely tout (Rwanda, criminalisation, increased police and intelligence cooperation with the French, etc) only serve to make the issue more and more salient, helping to ensure, unless by some miracle they actually work, that more and more voters lose faith in the government's ability to control the UK's borders.

Presumably, Sunak's focus on halting what he insists is 'illegal migration' has at least something to do with

a desperate desire to distract from official figures showing big increases in the numbers coming to the UK perfectly legally from outside the EU, many of them making up for a post-Brexit decline in migration from Europe. That development clearly worries many Conservatives; but the government's planned 'clamp-down' on the families of overseas students smacks of panic. True, the idea, routinely trotted out by Braverman, that demand for foreign labour might be lower if domestic employers could be persuaded to train Brits to do the jobs migrants currently do might not be quite so economically illiterate. But it nevertheless seems like wishful thinking – at least in the short to medium term. Nor is it easy to square with, say, a trade deal with India that might make it easier for citizens of that country to gain entry to the UK.

Whatever happens on that particular front, the idea that the UK could compensate for the increasingly tangible loss of trade with the EU by signing comprehensive FTAs with the world's biggest economies looks like even more of a pipedream. Sunak (to the chagrin of backbench Sinosceptics) may call for 'robust pragmatism' in dealing with China, for instance, but a lucrative trade deal is clearly not on the cards for years, even decades, to come. Nor is there much sign of even starting talks with the USA, nominally our closest ally, despite the UK's much-vaunted accession to the CPTPP trade agreement.

It is hard to believe that the prime minister, at least in his heart of hearts, doesn't know this. He must know, too, that for all the easing of the restrictions imposed on Britain's financial services sector after the global financial crisis of 2007/8, forecasts of the long-term hit to UK GDP from leaving the EU now look eminently reasonable – recent IMF revisions notwithstanding. Slower growth in turn means we will need higher tax rates to prevent public services falling into complete disrepair. However, neither a Brexiteer like Sunak nor any of those hoping eventually to climb the Conservatives' greasy pole after him can ever admit this publicly – and, given the emotional and ideological sunk costs involved, perhaps even to themselves.

The Conservatives might be tempted to take heart from the fact that they face a Labour party equally unwilling to call out Brexit for the failure that (as even Nigel Farage now admits) it so obviously is. Unfortunately for them, however, it looks as if the Opposition's vow of silence on the subject is doing it little or no harm among Remainers, while a fair proportion of Leave voters seem – on the evidence of both opinion polls and local election results – to be drifting back to Labour. Banging on about small boats, statues and sex organs may bring some of them back on board, but, unless real wages start rising and NHS waiting times start reducing in fairly short order, nowhere near enough of them to keep Keir Starmer out of Number 10 after the next election.

Which raises the question: who and what on earth comes next? While Sunak has done something to stem the bleeding and temper the madness of the last few years, he has – whatever the common wisdom – done precious little to haul the Conservative party kicking and screaming back into the mainstream. As a result, it remains a fundamentally unstable amalgam of neoliberalism on the economy and radical right-wing populism on cultural issues – not least because, whatever smoothly technocratic vibe his looks, manner, and background give off, this awkward synthesis reflects Sunak's own political convictions.

This, and the fact that generational replacement has ensured that the left of the Conservative party no longer has anything like the presence in parliament required to counter its rightward and populist drift, means that anyone with a serious chance of winning a post-defeat Tory leadership contest (including, of course, Boris Johnson, if he manages to secure a seat by then) will probably be obliged to offer more of the same – on steroids. Quite how long, in a country that is becoming more socially liberal, more multicultural and better educated with each passing year, it will take the party to realise that its current direction of travel is unlikely to prove a recipe for long-term success is anyone's guess. F

Equal access

Reforms to school and university admissions could transform the life chances of disadvantaged children and young people, as *Lindsey Macmillan* and *Jake Anders* explain

Lindsey Macmillan is professor of economics and the founding director of the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO) at University College London. She is a research fellow in the education and skills sector at the Institute for Fiscal Studies

Jake Anders is associate professor and deputy director of the Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO) at University College London. He is principal investigator of the COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities study (COSMO)

In theory, equality of opportunity is a core British value. Yet today, around 40 per cent of inequality within generations is passed on to the next generation. This opportunity divide is a result of the way we have chosen to structure our society currently makes it impossible.

Children from wealthier families receive multiple advantages throughout childhood, beginning as early as then the prenatal period, when they benefit from differential health investments. Such disparities continue through the early years, for example through home learning environments. By the time children start school, those from wealthier families are already ahead of their disadvantaged peers in terms of development.

At the UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising opportunities (CEPEO), we have shown that schooling perpetuates this drive towards inequality: education experiences account for around half of the inequality between those from wealthier and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The development gaps already present as a child enters the education system widen throughout school, through access to different quality schooling and sustained differences in the extent to which parents are able to invest time and money into their children's education.

It does not have to be this way. At its best, education can be a powerful force for equality. In this spirit, we recently launched New Opportunities, a set of evidence-based policy priorities for equalising opportunities.

Our policy priorities draw on the most rigorous evidence available to offer evidence-led policy solutions. As inequalities compound throughout life, our priorities span early years, school, tertiary education, and the labour market. In the current fiscal climate, we propose eight low-cost easily attainable changes. But to create meaningful change, we also propose six more ambitious reforms that tackle some of the huge structural inequalities that exist in our system. Here we highlight two of these: reforming admissions processes for schools and universities respectively. The challenges of the current system differs somewhat between these two areas, but both are vital areas for evidence-based policy reform.

Reforming school admissions

Pupils from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to attend schools that get better results in national tests. In London, pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) attend, on average, schools where 59 per cent of pupils achieve 5 or more passes at GCSE, compared to 65 per cent for non-FSM students. The gap is wider still outside London. Non-FSM students tend to attend schools where there is a greater chance of academic success, with significant implications for their future prospects.

People sometimes suggest that this is because less advantaged families differ in their approach to choosing schools. But analysis of families' preferences for secondary schools suggests this is not the main cause. Families of FSM pupils are only slightly more likely than more advantaged families to express a preference for only a single secondary school, or to make their closest school their first preference. This suggests little systematic difference in the degree of active engagement with school choice.

What, then, explains the difference? It is mainly driven by more affluent families being more likely to live closer to good schools combined with admissions rules that prioritise the distance from prospective pupils' homes. While this makes sense if all schools are equally good for all pupils, given disparities in school quality, it ends up limiting the ability of some pupils – disproportionately those from less advantaged backgrounds – to access the

best school to which they could reasonably travel. As a result, disadvantaged families are limited in their ability to access schools with their preferred characteristics.

This is particularly important because parents and pupils seem to do a good job of picking schools when given a choice. Pupils who get into their first choice school do better than if they attend one of their lower-ranked schools, and this boost is not explained by differences in average effectiveness between the two schools.

Grammar schools are another feature of our school admissions system that disrupt fair access to high-quality schools for all pupils. They are highly socially selective, with stark differences in selective schooling areas. Just 6 per cent of pupils from the most deprived backgrounds attend a grammar school. It is only in the top 10 per cent of the socioeconomic status distribution that more than half of students attend a grammar school. The top percentile group, however, has a grammar school attendance rate of 80 per cent.

This is not just because of correlations between academic attainment and socioeconomic status. Pupils with the same level of attainment in their end of Key Stage 2 tests (taken in the same school year as grammar school entry tests) are much more likely to attend a grammar school if they are from advantaged backgrounds. High-attaining young people from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to be taking the entry tests or are doing less well in those tests than we would expect from other measures of their attainment. This latter factor could well be explained by the big differences in private tutoring by family income.

And if you live in a grammar school area, then missing out on a place matters for your long-term life chances. High-attaining pupils who miss out are less likely to go on to university. If they do, their chances of attending a high-status university and achieving a good degree classification are lower compared to otherwise similar pupils who went to grammar schools.

Converting the remaining grammar schools into non-selective schools, then, would be a significant step towards educational equality (it is already prohibited to create new grammar schools). But there are other, less obvious reforms that we should make to school admissions. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that parents and pupils choose schools – not the other way around. However, given the realities of school capacity, it is more realistic to introduce requirements that counterbalance the current socioeconomic biases, such as requiring schools to prioritise applicants who are eligible for the pupil premium.

Post-qualification admissions

The UK is the only country in the world where young people apply to university before receiving their exam results, using instead grades predicted by their teachers.

But these predicted grades are inaccurate. Only 16 per cent of applicants achieve the A-level grades they were predicted, while 75 per cent are over-predicted. Moreover, among equally high-attaining students, students from disadvantaged backgrounds receive less generous predictions.

CEPEO research has shown that even when relying on advanced statistical methods, including 'machine learning', it is only possible to predict the grades of one in four students accurately from their attainment in previous years. Teachers are not to blame for inaccuracies in predicted grades – we are asking them to do an impossible task.

These systematic errors in predicted grades are important. That high-attaining disadvantaged students and state school students receive less generous grades than their more advantaged and independent school counterparts has consequences for their course application decisions. High-attaining disadvantaged students are more likely to 'undermatch' and enter less selective courses, leading to higher chances of dropping out, receiving a lower class degree, and earning less in the future.

The alternative to teacher predicted grades, used by every other major education system worldwide, is a post-qualification application (PQA) system. This would allow students to make university applications after receiving their A-level results. This system would be more accurate, fairer, and bring the UK in line with the rest of the world in allowing students to make these life-changing application decisions with all the relevant information in hand.

We can move towards PQA with minimal disruption to the current system. One possibility would be to condense the final exam period to four weeks and allow a shorter exam marking period of seven to eight weeks. Examinations would take place in early May. Students would return to school afterwards, receiving their results in mid-July, in time for an in-school 'applications week'. Universities would then have a month to process and make offers at the end of August, and students would have a short time to accept their favoured choice.

The path forward

Reforms to school and university admissions would both make a significant difference in equalising young people's opportunities to get the best possible education and, hence, the right start in life.

Reducing the importance of proximity in the school selection process, and, in doing so, the link between family income and school, could make a significant difference to life chances. Requiring schools to prioritise applicants who are eligible for the pupil premium, or, more radically, introducing a degree of random assignment of pupils to schools within certain areas are examples of ways to level this aspect of the education playing field.

Likewise, the achievable aim of a post-qualification admissions system for university would put paid to a system that denies young people the opportunity to have full information about their academic achievements before making life-changing decisions, and deliver a system in which their applications are assessed using their actual achievements.

These proposals are part of CEPEO's wider programme of policy priorities, all of which offer evidence-led, practical steps to move towards a society of more equal opportunities. In developing these, we are mindful of the challenge of competing priorities and fiscal challenges. We have focused on low-cost proposals, grounded in evidence, readily attainable, and substantively important to these aims. Both of these aspects of admissions reform are important elements of an agenda to create a more equitable society through education policy. **F**

A cautionary tale

Children's social care shows that 'accidental localism' is letting our communities down. We need a bold reimagining of how public services are delivered, argues *Tommy Gale*

Tommy Gale is a social worker and Labour councillor

On my second day as a newly qualified social worker, I got a call from the receptionist. She told me there was a 16-year-old boy downstairs with a suitcase, and he was asking for somewhere to stay.

Armed with a pen, paper and some advice from a more experienced colleague that there "isn't much of a process for this; just try to get him to go home", I strode downstairs and introduced myself to Kieran.* He said he had been sofa surfing for the last few weeks after his mum, Chantelle, locked him out of the house.

Bearing my colleague's advice in mind, I left Kieran at the office and drove to see Chantelle. Not best pleased to see me, she told me that she could not have him back in the house because he was in a gang, and rival gang members who knew their home address were making threats against him. Chantelle said that, although she wanted Kieran with her, she had to protect her younger daughter by putting him out the house. Children's social care had shut their case a couple of months before, the council's housing department had not replied to her emails asking to move, and she did not believe that we could do anything to help them.

I assured Chantelle that I would do my best to help get the right support so that they could move house and remain together as a family. In the meantime, a family friend agreed to take Kieran for a few nights.

The next day, in the absence of any proper process for families in this situation, a Google search yielded the name of an organisation offering intensive family therapy and mentoring for those at risk of imminent family breakdown. I also wrote a letter to the council's housing department asking them to help the family move. Neither approach worked. The family therapy was declined by a senior manager who said this work needed to be done via the child and adolescent mental health service family therapy team (waiting time: nine months). And, despite working in the same local authority as the housing team, we had no contact point, so my letter had to go through the generic council email address like everyone else's – to this day, it has never been answered.

When I updated Chantelle the following day, she said she was not surprised and hung up. I found Kieran in reception two hours later and, with nowhere else for him to go, we were left with no choice but to bring him into care. Instead of the family living together safely out of the area, Kieran lives in a 'semi-independent' placement which, given his additional needs and vulnerabilities, costs the local authority around £30,000 each month.

This kind of process and outcome is, unfortunately, typical of children's social care. Practice is worryingly improvised and inconsistent: children in comparable situations receive entirely different responses depending on which local authority area they live in, which social worker they are allocated, and what that social worker happens to find on Google. The system is wasteful, reactive and fragmented: budgets for preventative services are too low and local agencies do not work together, meaning children like Kieran, who could have stayed with his mum and sister with the right interventions, end up in care at enormous personal cost to them and financial cost to the taxpayer. And social workers, with caseloads too high to do meaningful work with families, are burnt out and leaving the profession in droves.

Most agree that this is a grim state of affairs. Indeed, almost every study, review and inquiry for at least the last 30 years – the government's current Stable Homes, Built on Love strategy being the most recent iteration – has concluded the same thing: we need a system focused on prevention, with better joined-up local services and good social workers with manageable caseloads.

The fact that these conclusions have remained unchanged for decades implies there is something wrong

* Names have been changed.

with the system as a whole. Although children's social care falls under the Department for Education at a national level, it has always been overshadowed by the department's primary focus: schools. In 2010, Michael Gove pointedly renamed the DfE – previously the Department for Children, Schools and Families – to signal the focus of the department would be specifically on schools and education, not fuzzy ideas about helping kids. In light of this relative lack of national interest, thinking around children's social care has been subject to what might best be described as an accidental localism. Provided only with a highly generalised set of principles, underresourced officers in our messy and inconsistent local government system are largely left to their own devices to design and deliver effective children's social care in their area. The result is a piecemeal approach where every local authority in the country starts virtually from scratch. With some notable exceptions, this does not end well.

Indeed, a comparison to our school system illustrates how strange this set-up really is. Imagine there was no national curriculum and staff at each school were responsible for designing and teaching a school-specific scheme of work, for each subject and age group, almost entirely from scratch. This would be an absurdly inefficient and ineffective way of running a nationwide service for millions of children. Nonetheless, it isn't far off how things work in children's social care with its current accidental and ill-defined system of local delivery.

This fuzzy localism explains many of the issues we saw in Kieran's case. The improvised practice of social workers, like my googling of services for Kieran's family, results from the lack of evidence-based policies and proper guidance beyond generalised threshold documents written by non-specialist council officers. Fragmented responses are explained by the chaotic and inconsistent set-up of local government and public services more widely. Kieran's case – in theory coordinated by children's social care from a single local authority – involved input from an NHS mental health trust that falls across three local authorities, a police basic command unit that covers two local authorities, the city-wide Mayor of London's violence reduction unit, and a local authority housing department which is not linked to its own children's social care department. Finally, the unbelievable waste of £30,000 a month on a care placement – avoidable with relatively minimal upfront investment – is the result of a vicious cycle of underinvestment and poor local decision-making. Action for Children research has shown that the 29 per cent reduction in children's services funding between 2010–18 resulted in a 49 per cent cut to early intervention budgets and a 12 per cent increase in late intervention crisis spending, as local authorities cut 'unessential' early spending. The subsequent rise in demand for care places, in combination with a procurement system in which local councils compete against each other for private care placements, corners individual authorities into paying extortionate rates for often poor provision.

Real change will require a government willing to commit to a bold reimagining of how public services are delivered. Specifically, we need to rethink the current model of accidental localism where local authorities, hollowed out and too small to have a realistic chance of success, are dumped with the vast majority of service design and delivery in areas like children's social care.

Central to this will be a coherent plan for rebuilding our missing tier of governance: regional government. Rather than asking individual local authorities to do everything themselves, allowing councils to pool resources and key functions would give them a realistic prospect of delivering the changes that are so badly needed.

This could have a huge impact on children's social care. First, it would increase the chances of making 'multi-agency working' something more than a paper exercise by aligning high-level children's services decision makers with the other agencies already operating at a regional level, like NHS trusts and police basic command units. Second, it would allow the pooling of policymaking and delivery strategies into properly resourced teams with the capacity and expertise to translate national policy into excellent regional strategies, rather than fragmented individual local authority plans. Finally, regional cooperation would allow local authorities to benefit from economies of scale in the commissioning of local services, including care placements, instead of driving up prices by competing against each other.

This rebuilding of the 'middle tier' for children's social care has already seen success in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), where policymaking, commissioning and delivery have been more extensively pooled across the 10 local authorities. The GMCA's complex safeguarding hub, for instance, has brought resources from the participating local authorities together to tackle exploitation and youth violence. It has created a centralised hub with Greater Manchester Police, NHS services, children's social care, and voluntary groups where support is given to local community teams of a far higher standard than if this were done individually. The outcome of Kieran's case could have been very different if there had been an ability to get NHS services, like CAMHS family therapy, involved early to avoid breakdown, or a proper regional gangs strategy with buy-in from different agencies which might have helped stop him getting into trouble in the first place.

Children's social care is a cautionary tale of what happens when our messy system of local government gets stuck, and the devastating impact this can have on some of our most vulnerable children and families. But, with exciting examples like that of Manchester emerging, it is also a touchstone for what a renewed approach to regionalism could look like in practice.

Gordon Brown's New Britain report is exciting in its vision for a more regionalised future, but now Labour needs to build on this framework. If the party is to deliver a transformational domestic policy agenda, making local and regional government work will be key. It would be all too easy for Labour to do what successive governments have done: focus on creating good ideas centrally without systematically changing the structures required to make them work in practice. A meaningful legacy of the next Labour government would be to break this cycle and deliver once-in-a-generation reform of our public services. F

Closing the gap

The 25th anniversary of Sure Start reminds us that good public services change lives, writes *Ben Cooper*

Ben Cooper is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society

In the United Kingdom today, at least one million babies and toddlers live in poverty. Parents struggle to afford daily essential purchases such as nappies and formula milk. Finding the money for larger items, such as buggies, can plunge a family into debt and crisis.

What happens to someone when they are a baby or toddler often defines their entire future. There is a clear link to between a lack of income during childhood and lower educational attainment, physical health, emotional development, and wellbeing. In 2022, just 48 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals in England reached a good level of development at the end of reception – compared to 69 per cent of their better off peers. Even starker, someone born today in the most deprived areas of our country can expect to spend around 19 fewer years in good health than someone born in the most affluent – and will lead, on average, a shorter life overall.

The best antidote to poverty is to provide families with more money directly through the social security system. But good public services can also make a big difference. For example, Hackney and Newham have been able to almost close the educational attainment gap between those on free school meals and their peers by, among other things, maintaining substantial investment in children's centres and providing free meals to all nursery children. The evidence is clear: investment in high-quality, accessible, and well-funded services for parents, babies, and toddlers can tackle inequalities and help every child to grow up happy, healthy and successful.

The evidence is clear: investment in high-quality services for parents, babies, and toddlers can tackle inequalities

We need only look to the last Labour government for proof of this, as the 25th anniversary of Sure Start should remind us. Announced by David Blunkett in June 1998, Sure Start sought to provide "comprehensive support for pre-school children who face the greatest disadvantage", including childcare, family support, education, and healthcare.

This one-stop shop for families with under-fives worked. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found Sure Start reduced hospitalisations, supported safer home environments, and tackled behavioural problems. For young people in disadvantaged areas, the largest benefits, such as improved health and wellbeing, were often only felt in adolescence – demonstrating that the real success of tackling poverty's impact in the early years is realised as people grow up.

Some 13 years of Conservative-led governments have seen a very different approach to early years policy.

Most obviously, austerity has been catastrophic for early years services. In government, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats essentially dismantled Sure Start. They forced 1,000 centres across England to close, while services in the remaining centres were dramatically reduced. This hurt families in poorer places more than those in richer ones. Spending per young person on Sure Start and children's services fell significantly in the most deprived councils between 2010–11 and 2020–21, while it rose in the least deprived ones.

Compounding the problem, the services that remain have moved away from supporting families with babies and toddlers. Recently, the government announced £300m to invest in family hubs, delivering an array of services for families with children from conception to age 19 (or to 25 in the case of those with disabled children). While this may sound positive, it introduces major problems. An offer to every child and young person under the age of 19 and their families risks crowding out support and funding for our youngest, poorest children. We cannot expect family hubs to dedicate as much time, space or resources to early years services or tackling the impact of child poverty. Many communities will actually see their Sure Start centre replaced, and so will lose the only public service for under-fives and their families.

This forms part of a broader pattern: under the Tories, even those interventions that in principle should contribute towards a fairer society have tended to widen inequality. Government-funded childcare, for example, can be a powerful tool to tackle inequalities before a child starts school by improving educational attainment and development. But the evidence suggests that the current model has actually widened educational inequalities. This is because more childcare funding goes to policies that benefit higher income families (31 per cent) than is spent explicitly on supporting low-income families (20 per cent). Things are likely to get worse with the recent proposed expansion of free hours for families: just 20 per cent of households earning less than £20,000 will benefit, compared to 80 per cent of those earning more than £45,000.

Labour should prioritise services for the one million babies and toddlers that grow up in poverty. Just as the party is seeking to learn from best practice around the world on childcare, it should look to centre-left politicians globally who have prioritised tackling child poverty and its devastating impact.

Following the 2017 election in New Zealand, the issue was seen as so politically important that Jacinda Ardern created a new minister for child poverty reduction – and then assigned herself to the brief. Her government then delivered a substantial boost to childcare and early health services. In the US, Joe Biden has pushed for significant investment in early years services throughout his presidency, securing over $40bn additional investment for childcare, Head Start (the American equivalent of Sure Start), and early childhood home visits in the American Rescue Plan Act 2021. In Spain, the socialist prime minister, Pedro Sanchez, described tackling child poverty as 'an absolute priority' and in March 2023 announced almost €200m extra to support disadvantaged families to access early years services.

Labour must draw on these examples to build a credible plan to tackle child poverty and its devastating impact that can be launched on day one of a new government. However, while Labour members are rightly proud of Sure Start, we should not seek merely to roll back the clock. There are numerous challenges facing young children, their parents and families that were unimaginable 25 years ago. We now know a lot more about what works and what doesn't, and we have a greater understanding of the services that families need than we did in the past. In any case, tight fiscal constraints means an immediate return to the scale of early years' investment when Labour left office in 2010 is impossible. A difficult financial climate requires maximising the benefit of every pound spent, which in turn requires targeting public spending towards babies and toddlers living in poverty and the most disadvantaged areas first. Labour's existing commitment to overhauling childcare is important, but it is simply not enough.

Rather than tearing down the piecemeal infrastructure of family hubs once in government, Labour should transform it into a dedicated early years service. Reforming who Family Hubs are for, and the support they provide, will be much easier than starting from scratch. The most significant change would be a specific focus on early years: family hubs should not aim to support every young person up to the age of 19, many of whom would be better supported through schools, colleges and youth provision. Instead, it should seek to support every family from conception to age five. A comprehensive and non-stigmatising service, with an open door for all families, is the best way to reach the most disadvantaged and those who need the most help. And this service needs to be resilient. The demise of Sure Start under the coalition government demonstrated that whatever Labour does build in the future must have stronger foundations and be more difficult to dismantle by future Conservative administrations.

A Labour government should establish a national entitlement to early years services, combining universal help, targeted interventions, and integrated services. This entitlement should be co-produced with families who will use services, and could include access to baby and parental mental and physical health services, parenting support programmes, childcare, and help on the home learning environment. There should be an emphasis on peer-to-peer support that encourages parents, grandparents, and carers to provide mutual help and advice to new parents.

While Labour members are rightly proud of Sure Start, we should not seek merely to roll back the clock

Such a national entitlement cannot be delivered from Westminster alone. Communities have different needs, and delivery of the national offer will need to accommodate them. Local councils should therefore lead and shape this service to meet those needs, working with local families and other organisations to do so.

There is no avoiding it: this service will cost money. But investing in early years services is a key part of any strategy for sound public finances. The evidence suggests that such investment saves public services money slightly in the short term, and more significantly over the longer term, as the next generation grows up and have children themselves.

If Labour is not able to provide all the resources it wants to in year one, it could start with the most disadvantaged communities. Indeed, Sure Start was rolled out in phases: first in 60 areas in 1999, in 250 by 2002, and eventually reaching more than 3,600 centres by 2010 as more funding was unlocked.

As Labour looks towards government, it must prepare serious solutions to poverty for the under-fives and their families. The 25th anniversary of Sure Start is a reminder that good public services change lives – and that there are one million babies and toddlers who urgently need a Labour government. F

A national scandal

The pandemic had a profound impact on children in the early years, writes *Sylvia McNamara*

Sylvia McNamara is a Labour councillor in Camden. She was formerly a director of education in Croydon and Birmingham

The Covid-19 pandemic was, first and foremost, a human tragedy. It cut short hundreds of thousands of lives in the UK alone. It also had profound economic and social impacts, many of which are well-documented. But there is one aspect which has so far received little attention: the effect on children in the early years of their life.

Research I carried out with my fellow councillor, Jenny Headlam-Wells, sheds new light on this troubling legacy. Our findings suggest that three-year-olds are likely to be held back throughout their schooling because they missed out during Covid lockdowns.

We interviewed a total of 49 officers and early years practitioners – including teachers, two headteachers and nursery workers. We found that they were deeply concerned about functioning levels of children post-pandemic compared to similar aged children from similar backgrounds pre-pandemic. They talked about children having language difficulties of a type and form that they had not encountered before.

One told us: "We have two children who are completely non-verbal – no language at all – and these are not from families whose first language is not English. They just haven't developed any language during the pandemic, and the rest have very little language. Compared to two years ago they are at a much lower level."

Another said: "We have had lots of referrals for speech and language – stammers, speech delay, dyspraxia – we never had this before."

They noted that whilst all children were impacted in this way, those from disadvantaged backgrounds were impacted more negatively, and were taking much longer to adjust, so that the gap between advantaged children and disadvantaged children – which, pre-pandemic, had been closing more quickly than the national average in Camden – was widening again.

Even more shocking was the impact on other areas of children's development. Challenges included playing with other children, not winning in a game, listening to others, turn taking, using stairs, washing hands, putting coats and shoes on, and being generally afraid of the outdoors.

This, in turn, was having an impact on the practitioners themselves. We were heartbroken by their desperation at being unable to deliver what the children needed.

Practitioners knew that some children needed specific interventions to help with sound production, for example, because they had worked and trained with qualified speech therapists. However, not only were staffing shortages preventing them from offering such interventions, but the sheer number of children needing this help meant they would not have had the physical space required.

They also knew that because the children had missed out on activities – such as the 'rhyme time'-type singing activities that 18-month to two-year-olds would typically do with grandparents or at sessions in the local leisure centre or library – they needed 'catch-up' time to express themselves and practice vocabulary through creative play. Yet the government catch-up strategy comprised more of the same in the form of more phonics. Phonics form the first national standardised assessment test (SAT) that young children do, typically at the age of seven.

Schools are measured by Ofsted and parents on how well their children do in the SATs, so nurseries attached to primary schools come under a lot of pressure by headteachers to get their children 'phonic ready' as they enter reception class as four or five-year-olds.

What practitioners wanted was for the government to publicly recognise that this cohort of children have been badly impacted by Covid and are still behind in their development. More specifically, they need a national catch-up period which is not focused on phonics.

Practitioners were also clear that they needed more staff, including experienced early years professionals, speech therapists to work with parents and children, and nursery nurses and teaching assistants. Thanks to real-terms government funding cuts in education, schools are making classes bigger at a time when they should be smaller. The average pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools and nurseries is currently 26.7. It was 17.2 in 2010/11. The pay is so poor for teaching assistants that many have left to get jobs in supermarkets.

Finally, practitioners want to have the children for longer. As one told us: "We want central government to look at early years funding – there is not enough. It's such a wasted opportunity when there is so much we could do."

What is happening in Camden is happening across the country. We have a cohort of children, who, it appears, will move through the school system permanently scarred and disadvantaged as a result of Covid with no-one taking any real notice. This is a national scandal. F

SHORING UP THE DEFENCE

Keeping our country safe and standing up for our armed forces reflect core Labour values, John Healey tells *Iggy Wood*

I AM SURPRISED TO see John Healey through the security glass at Westminster's Portcullis House. Rather than send a parliamentary staffer, he has come to pick me up from the waiting area himself – a rarity for MPs, and unheard of for frontbenchers. But after 26 years in parliament, perhaps any residual sense of self-importance has worn off. Or perhaps it was never there to begin with: in a career spanning nearly three decades, including nine years as a minister in the New Labour governments, John Healey has rarely courted either controversy or the limelight.

It is easy to see how this understated approach might have been appealing to Keir Starmer when he was looking to appoint a shadow secretary of state for defence in April 2020. By the time of the 2019 election, Labour were 25 points behind the Tories on defence and security; vagueness about Trident renewal and support for NATO had proven to be red meat for then-leader Jeremy Corbyn's opponents. Starmer needed a safe pair of hands, and in Healey, found someone who has successfully navigated a lengthy political career upset-free.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Healey making any sort of gaffe. He is measured, and scarcely stops smiling, including when I ask him about the shadow cabinet split over repealing the Public Order Act, which has given law enforcement unprecedented powers to crack down on public protest. (The week before, David Lammy, the shadow foreign secretary, had said that it might take up too much parliamentary time.) Unexpectedly, Healey comes right out and says it: the Tories are engaging in "hard right virtue-signalling" – and it didn't do them any good in the local elections.

"[Labour] focused on people's concerns and pressures on the cost of living, and their worries about getting access to the NHS because of the lack of staff stemming from decisions the Tories over 13 years have made on the NHS. They were talking about small boats and demonstrators with placards and superglue.

"That's all they talked about in their local elections campaign and they lost over 1,000 seats. In the end, the ballot box doesn't lie."

That Healey is willing to be more forthright on the issue than other senior Labour figures makes sense on paper – for one thing, in his pre-parliamentary days, he was a member of Amnesty and Liberty. Is this an odd profile for a shadow defence minister? Not if you see defence, as Healey does, as a key part of the wider Labour project.

"The first duty of any government is to defend the country and keep citizens safe," he says.

"And in the end, we are the party of public service, and those who serve in our armed forces – that's the ultimate public service."

© PA Images/Alamy

As you might expect, Healey is keen to stress Labour's return to the mainstream on issues of defence. He points out Labour's role in setting up NATO after the second world war – "a history and association we're very proud of still today" – and in establishing an independent nuclear deterrent – "to which we remain totally committed." But there are also signs of something more interesting: a distinctively Labour approach to defence.

"Not all of the focus of Labour support for Ukraine or standing against Russia has been led in parliament. We've had some of our trade unions active in the Ukraine solidarity campaign, unions like the GMB, ASLEF, the National Union of Mineworkers. We've had Labour MPs that have driven vans with medical supplies out to Ukraine. There's been a broad labour movement support for the leadership that Keir has demonstrated on defence and on Ukraine in particular."

This is an interesting point – perhaps foreign policy, which so divided Labour during the Corbyn years, could now be a source of unity.

Looking at the public response, Healey's drive to integrate defence into Labour's broader vision is going spectacularly well. When he was given the brief in April 2020, there was a full 30-point gap between the Conservatives and Labour on defence and security, with 43 per cent of people thinking that the Tories would do a better job. That gap now sits at 10 points, and at times has been as low as three. What might that mean for Labour come next year?

"Defence will never win elections. But if we had not worked at closing that gap, and we've still got more to do, then defence could have been part of losing the next election like it was in 2019 and like it has been in previous elections.

"In December 2019, when we went into the election, there was a bigger gap in the public's trust in Labour on defence and security than there was on economic management."

Rebuilding trust with the British public is one thing; doing the same internationally might prove more of a challenge. Healey tells me that the UK is still suffering the effects of the Johnson and Truss administrations on the world stage.

The Truss premiership, in particular, had significant defence implications. "It damaged Britain's reputation and status abroad. [It damaged] the confidence that other

allied countries could have in Britain as a reliable ally and a stable country," he says.

Interestingly, the only time Healey looks even a little uncomfortable is when I suggest that the long delays plaguing UK assistance suggest that, despite widespread public support for Ukraine, the government is beginning to waver.

"I'm proud of the UK leadership [on] help for Ukraine. It isn't just that we have often been early movers in providing weapons training and other support. Ukraine has reminded us, which we'd lost sight of under the Tories – under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss – that allies matter. And just as important has been our influence, and encouraging other countries to do more as well. So what I want to be able to say in six months' time is the UK has still led efforts to stand by Ukraine and provide them with what they need to defend their country and see off Putin's invasion."

But he adds: "What worries me is signs of a loss of momentum behind that UK support, that momentum may be flagging. The defence secretary has not made a statement in the House of Commons on Ukraine since January. Britain has made no new commitment of weapons or support for Ukraine since February. There is no 2023 'plan for Ukraine' covering military, diplomatic, and humanitarian help, despite that first being promised back in August."

"Zelensky has made [it] really clear: he needs more support, more military aid, he needs it quickly – and he needs it in order to mount what must become a successful counter-offensive against the Russians."

Ukraine has reminded us, which we'd lost sight of under Johnson and Truss, that allies matter

After a conversation with Healey, it becomes difficult to remember why the Conservatives are traditionally seen as the party of the military. Perhaps less immediately visible than in more public-facing sectors, spending cuts to the army under the banner of austerity have led to a massive reduction in personnel – from around 100,000 throughout the New Labour years to fewer than 77,000 as of January this year. And, despite the outbreak of the largest European conflict since the second world war, military chiefs are pressing ahead with further reductions, with a planned army size of around 73,000 by 2025.

"It's cost cutting. It's cost cutting like it's been for 13 years.

"When Labour left government in 2010, we were spending 2.5 per cent of national income on defence. That's a level that's never been matched [since] – or got anywhere close to. We're bumping along just above the NATO two per cent threshold."

"And so I see this plan, still in place, to cut the British army to its smallest size since Napoleonic days as driven by costs, and the need to cut costs, not driven by the risks that we face.

"Quite honestly, you just need to listen to [defence secretary] Ben Wallace. He admitted in the House of Commons to me the other day that they've hollowed out and underfunded the forces."

Such a plan will also leave us out of step with our NATO allies, Healey says.

"Putin's invasion 440 days ago was an electric shock to the military mindset – [to] defence planning for NATO in particular, but more widely. Since that day in February, 22 other NATO nations have rebooted their defence spending. Within days, you had Scholz in Germany announcing an extra €100bn, plus a lift in their baseline, in the Zeitenwende speech; you've had Macron making the same commitment in France; you've got Poland, Lithuania, Estonia now spending over 3 per cent of GDP. Poland just hit 4 per cent this year. That rebooting of thinking about defence and security – not just now to support Ukraine, but in the expectation that we face an aggressive Russia, with or without Putin, over the next decade – is a fundamental rethink that we've still not done in this country."

Just as damning of the government is that, in addition to his role as shadow defence minister, Healey is also effectively having to act as MP for the armed forces.

"We've been giving voice in recent months to service families who just can't get their accommodation fixed. They're living with water coming through their kids' bedrooms, mould on the walls, broken boilers. One in three service families are in accommodation awaiting repair. More than 4,000 service personnel are in accommodation which is so bad the MoD isn't even charging them rent. But they don't have a voice because they're serving."

"The long and the short of this is: it has never been the top priority of the military or political leaders in the last 13 years. If it was it would have been fixed."

It seems to me that, for Healey, the old 'lions led by donkeys' cliché rings true today. In the evacuation operations in Afghanistan and Sudan, for instance, Healey says, "the crisis military response was magnificent."

"But in both cases, it appears to have caught the British government unprepared.

"From Sudan, there are serious questions about how other countries, even before the ceasefire was in place, were able to get their nationals, their citizens, out and we appeared to be playing catch-up."

Those suffering as a result of Tory rule may not have too long to wait. The turnaround in public support for Labour on defence has been mirrored across the board, and a majority government is a realistic prospect for the first time in years. An obvious driver of this shift is the legacy of the Truss administration, but Healey thinks the role of Keir Starmer cannot be overlooked.

"When he took over in April 2020, he set out to do in five years, one parliament, what Kinnock, Smith and Blair did over 14 years. Any comparison of now with 1992 to 1997 is flawed – the comparison is 1983–97."

If Labour can finally get it over the line, Healey's long hiatus from government will be over. Is he looking forward to it? "Opposition is pants," he tells me. "Absolutely nothing to recommend it at all." F

Iggy Wood is editorial assistant at the Fabian Society

A better way

To take on toxic populism from both the right and the left, mainstream Labour must build on its core values, writes *Diana Johnson MP*

Diana Johnson is Labour MP for Kingston upon Hull North. She chairs the home affairs select committee

Populism is hardly new. It was, for example, the rarely acknowledged fourth ingredient of Thatcherism, mediating the tensions between its other elements – nationalism, market economics and social conservatism.

But over the past decade, a potent new populism has become a force in Western politics. It has been especially noticeable since the referendums on Scottish independence and Brexit and has seen the rise of political 'outsiders' such as Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbyn.

The common characteristics of the recent resurgence are easily recognised. Understanding how to challenge it is more complicated.

At the centre of the new populism lie the raging 'culture wars' between and within political parties, accompanied by a growing authoritarianism. Fake news and obsessive crank conspiracy theories are manufactured about supposed self-interested controlling elites. The furore around '15-minute cities' is one of the latest examples. There is too a rejection of science in areas such as climate change, vaccines and human biology. Experts generally and the 'mainstream' independent news media are objects of hostility. 'Defund the BBC' is an ongoing campaign.

This breed of identity politics is about inflaming and prolonging divisions rather than bringing people together to solve problems: in essence it means disrupting rather than governing – whatever the cost. Fears and insecurities are exploited and targeted groups are scapegoated. Populists often rewrite history, hankering after 'golden age' myths from centuries past. They are usually isolationists – always better apart than together.

Populism creates a climate where antisemitism, misogyny and other prejudices thrive and the threat of political violence festers. The disturbing echoes of the 1930s are obvious. What has helped this toxic culture to spread? Building on 30 years of 24-hour rolling news, over the past decade social media has amplified the 'trolling' influence of populists and helped them to network. Dubious 'news' sources, some purely online, reinforce prejudices, radicalise and feed polarisation.

Mainstream progressives find ourselves in a culture war against two main sources of this populism – the hard right and the hard left – united in a 'horseshoe' alliance against us. Brexit's ally was 'Lexit'. Both extremes have their own political correctness and cancel culture, launching ritual 'pile-ons' against heretics.

Tories resisting 'bring back Boris' and 'national conservatism' have recently been on the receiving end. In Labour's case, it was directed against those who were unconvinced that the cult of Corbyn had solutions for beating austerity.

Fundamentalist cults infiltrate mainstream parties whose values they do not share to drive out non-believers. They seek power, but avoid real responsibility. Rules do not apply to them.

Often presenting themselves as persecuted, voiceless outsiders, once populists assume any position of power, one-way loyalty is demanded – without debate or dissent. We must just 'respect the mandate'.

Once populists assume any position of power, one-way loyalty is demanded

Until their revolution arrives, the populist left agitate from the fringes, trying to drag Labour there with them, with empty gestures, platitudes and sanctimonious slogans. Their most significant accomplishment is making it more difficult to keep right-wing populists from power. It is not radical or even progressive for Labour to wallow indulgently in this comfort zone culture of impotence, irrelevance and futile protest.

At best, this populism leads to chaos, recrimination about betrayals and infighting. At worst, corruption proliferates and the pillars upon which our hard-won freedoms stand – democracy, the rule of law and equality before that law – are undermined.

Naturally, these fundamentalists never accept that they have failed because, so they claim, their ideas have never been tried; or they were thwarted by treacherous conspiracy. Defeat is always denied.

Liz Truss recently held the 'left-wing economic establishment' and the 'Whitehall blob' responsible for her crash. Meanwhile, in 2019, parliamentary Labour party 'centrists' and others were blamed for Labour's worst general election rout since 1935. Any suggestion that, as an overall package, Labour offered a less popular populism than Boris Johnson is dismissed to this day. Apparently, "we won the argument".

Confronting this toxicity requires more than PR skills. A deeper, broader political response is essential. The starting point for mainstream Labour is to assert who we are and what we believe in. Our party was formed at the beginning of the 20th century to seek majority Labour governments through the extended franchise and parliamentary democracy that our movement's pioneers fought to establish. The aim was to secure social and economic reforms for the many, unachievable through trade union activism alone – nor by voting Liberal.

We need to talk not only about the Attlee government creating the NHS, but also about Labour's role in setting up NATO and playing a key part in the cause of freedom before 1945. We should be proud of many aspects of our past, learning from it without living in it.

Labour today is a modernising, progressive and patriotic social democratic party, working to establish our timeless values as the centre ground. At our best, Labour is the party of the active enabling state, of equality through levelling up, of meeting both need and aspiration – and not one at the expense of the other. This means, for example, having equal enthusiasm for expanding home ownership and building new council homes.

As we approach the election, Labour must build confidence that we can deliver our pledges – for example, that local families on council waiting lists will be prioritised for the promised new-build homes.

In government, combating the different varieties of populism will be even more challenging. It will require competence, honesty and transparency about the tough choices we face and clarity about how long progress will take – whether that be training doctors or renovating schools.

Rights and responsibilities must apply throughout society. Labour should exhibit more consistency in our values in areas such as human rights than populists ever could, striving to advance equalities together and not one at the expense of another. Labour must be clear on the limits of the free market and the state. Whether it is banking, consumer protection or migration, markets require regulation.

Fighting populism means a huge reality check. A successful Labour government will not build Utopia, even in 15 years. We will inherit disharmony, dysfunction and decline. The Tories will leave behind a food bank-dependent Britain of debt, squandered potential and broken promises. Generational progress has stalled and life expectancy for the least privileged has worsened since 2010.

Labour will need clear priorities for what needs changing first, both because of the parliamentary time it will take and the taxpayers' money it will require. After the experience with hunting reform in the early noughties, while not downplaying the need for constitutional

© Benjamin Elliott/Unsplash

modernisation, do we really want a first-term Labour government to get bogged down in issues such as Lords reform or the quest for the perfect electoral system? Not when that government will be judged on getting the basics of normal life working again.

Obtaining an appointment to see a GP or an NHS dentist, reliable train and bus services, affordable utility bills, action against anti-social behaviour, cleaner rivers – these are the sort of everyday life issues on which Labour will be judged. Our reforming fervour must focus on them.

We must confront the harsh economic reality that plans to make the wealthiest pay their fair share will only be enough to kickstart Labour's first-term investment in the NHS, education and green energy. Going further and turning round the fall in living standards will require a growing, more productive economy with stable low inflation.

This in turn requires every region to contribute more to boosting growth. Transformative Canary Wharf-scale public and private investment must proceed in places like the Humber estuary, whatever happens on regional devolution.

After decades of emphasis on globalisation, we need a focus on national self-sufficiency and resilience in important areas like food, steel, energy and defence. Yet at the same time, trading relationships with the EU must be repaired.

Labour will inherit a stagnant economy of 'maxed-out' borrowing, where tax revenues fall short of what is needed to provide a modern welfare state, strong public services and renewed infrastructure. Working families already have the highest overall tax burden since the 1940s. How fairly tax revenue is raised and how effectively it is spent are more relevant to the cause of social justice than the size of the state and public spending.

Investing early to save later, achieving economies of scale and cutting waste will all be key as we relentlessly focus our spending on taking forward Labour's priorities. To adapt famous words from the Clinton era, to defeat populism it's not just the economy, stupid. It's the results too. **F**

Power play

Labour's vision for the next election can be one of empowerment and emancipation, as *Hannah McHugh* explains

Hannah McHugh is a Labour councillor, a PhD researcher at University College London and the chair of the Fabian Law and Constitution Policy Group. She spoke at the launch event for Liam Byrne MP's Fabian Society pamphlet, Reclaiming Freedom, which is available at www.fabians.org.uk

The Labour party is continually asked: what is your vision for the next election? To answer this, we need to do two things: connect Labour's values with the values of voters and show that a Labour government is the answer to the everyday problems people face.

We must stop retaliating so reactively to Tory attacks. Instead, it is time to own our story. At the National Conservatism conference in May, Suella Braverman once again tried to set the narrative for us, arguing that the left "sees the purpose of politics as to eradicate the existence of inequality, even if that comes at the expense of individual liberty and human flourishing". She went on to claim that the left could "only sell its vision for the future by making people feel terrible about our past".

It is time to speak up and speak clearly: this could not be further from the ambitious, hopeful and freedom-enhancing vision of the Labour party. Liam Byrne MP recently argued in a Fabian Society pamphlet that the left must reclaim its place as the champion of freedom. He is absolutely correct. What is more: we are the party of power.

The two concepts are codependent: to be free requires power. We can think of freedom as not being subject to arbitrary control or constraints – whether by an exploitative employer, a profiteering gas supplier, or a government that rushes laws through parliament with little scrutiny. We are unfree when we do not have the ability to speak for ourselves, when we cannot participate in public decision-making or when we do not have control over who we are subject to. Freedom is – like social justice and equality – dependent on having power and opportunity. We must move away from a narrow neoliberal conception that tries to blend freedom with the idealised notion of the free market, and towards a 'neo-republican' understanding that emphasises power, and allows us to see how freedom has been eroded under the Tories.

Once we have clarified the relationship between freedom and power, we can see that freedom does not mean rolling back the state. It means empowerment. It means emancipation. It means being free to do and achieve what matters to you. This government has given freedom to a select few cronies and taken it away from ordinary people. The language of freedom lets us call this out. We should make it clear that we will protect people's real freedoms to access work, housing, healthcare, education, skills, community life and justice.

Recent elections have taught us a lot about the public mood towards freedom and power. 'Take back control' was a call to give power back to people who feel they have lost it. 'Levelling up' was so impactful as a slogan because of the overcentralisation of power in London and Westminster. But what the Tories are disguising is that, with 13 years of cuts and gutting government, they have been dismantling ordinary people's power and undermining freedom. Brexit was a vote to bring power back to people. Yet the government that promised to bring that power back instead concentrated it in the hands of an elite few. Labour's vision is to do the opposite.

We are not free just because we vote in elections. Our freedom is made possible by three pillars of our democracy that give citizens power. Each one of these pillars has been attacked, wobbled, and weakened in recent years. We need to defend them.

First, *free and fair* elections. The Electoral Commission has lost its independence, and voter ID requirements have meant that up to 2 million people will be denied their freedom to vote. This is disenfranchisement on an industrial scale and a shameless power grab.

Second, independent judicial institutions with enough integrity to uphold and protect citizen's rights. We have seen increasing attacks on the judiciary including the prorogation scandal, the undermining of judicial review, attacks on 'lefty lawyers' and degradation of the legal aid system and courts. In just 12 years, 48 per cent of legal aid firms have closed. Far too many people are no longer free to access justice.

Third, civil and political rights. Rights are a key tool in protecting our freedoms from power-hungry governments. We have lost and are losing our freedoms to protest and to strike; and now, our basic human rights are under threat. Some citizens can now even have their nationality revoked under the Nationality and Borders Act.

Reaffirming freedom, however, cannot just be a constitutional question. When people complain about a lack of power, I doubt that many of them refer to the constitution. What comes up? Poorly paid jobs, access to GP services, energy bills. These are the real freedoms and powers that we need to hand back. Our modern economy, in its

current form, constrains real freedoms. Precarious or zero-hours employment deprives people of the ability to have family time, to create community bonds, to maintain good health.

Crucially, imbalances of power and economic or social imbalances go hand in hand. We do not have equal freedom to participate in work or to access healthcare or safe and secure housing. Gordon Brown's Commission on the UK's Future has made important advances in getting to grips with this problem and proposing real solutions. It calls for spreading power and opportunity more equally throughout the country. It has recognised that with the right powers in the right places, we can unlock the potential for growth and prosperity in every part of the country, and in doing so, revive people's faith in politics. The commission's report paves the way for Labour to hand power back to people – to move decision-making closest to those affected by the decisions. At the same time, Lisa Nandy MP has said that her levelling up agenda will be a great rebalancing of power and opportunity.

Labour's vision is to transform everyday people's lives by putting power in their hands. We will do this by reducing inequality, supporting growth, and widening opportunities. This is real freedom.

We need to root these transformative policies in a consistent narrative and stop letting our opponents frame the discourse. Take the growth agenda as an example. In the name of growth – under the fantastically short-lived Truss government – our economic, social and international integrity was undermined, all in the interests of the most privileged. Labour's growth agenda, in contrast, is rooted in the fundamental British value of fairness. Like the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, we contend that growth isn't valuable in itself; rather, the success of a society is to be evaluated primarily by the freedoms that members of that society enjoy. Our growth agenda is not for the one per cent, but is connected to the real freedoms that will transform people's lives.

Right now, power and freedom are held unequally in this country. Power and freedom should not only belong to privileged people, classes or groups. The only supposedly new freedom that the Tories put in their much heralded but now scrapped Bill of Rights – which might more accurately have been called the Rights Removal Bill – related to freedom of speech. But the bill, while explicitly seeking to improve the freedom of speech of the government, at the same time took away the power of the most vulnerable to have their case heard in a court of law or to access justice. It was patently clear whose freedom of speech this bill was designed to protect and whose it was designed to remove.

This is the moment for us to seize this narrative and take it to the next general election. We are living in a changing era. We are experiencing a climate revolution, a digital revolution and the transformation of work. We need new powers and protections to embrace this moment of change and to harness our potential.

We were only in government for just over 30 of the last 120 years, and we secured social revolutions in healthcare, workers' rights and emancipation of women and LGBT communities. Now we could be the party of 21st century freedoms and powers. Real, tangible freedoms – like access to work, housing, education, community life and a clean environment – would be transformative.

Spreading our message using the language of freedom can tap into the real experiences of voters who have lost their social, economic and political power. To rebuild the integrity of our country, we will put power back into people's hands. By reclaiming the narrative, we can connect with voters' values, with Britain's identity, and seize our changing era. **F**

© Alex Lee/Unsplash

Sea change

Worthing is exactly the sort of seat Labour will need to win to form a majority government at the next election. Since Labour's dramatic victory in the council election last year, *Beccy Cooper* has served as leader of the council. She explains what went right, and what the national party can learn

Dr Beccy Cooper is a public health consultant and leader of Worthing Borough Council. In 2017, she became the first Labour councillor elected to Worthing Council in 41 years

Worthing has a Labour council?

This is the incredulous response that the Worthing Labour group has slowly become used to over the past year. Despite its proximity to our much funkier neighbour, Brighton, our coastal Sussex town was for a long time known locally as 'God's waiting room'. Worthing Labour party was effectively three blokes sat round a kitchen table drawing lots as to which one would suffer the misfortune of putting their face on a leaflet for the annual council elections.

But over time, green – or rather red – shoots appeared. The three blokes were joined by disaffected locals, families and younger people moving into the area who thought that it was time for a change. We rolled up our sleeves and got to work: year-round door knocking; street stalls; getting involved with and building new community projects; listening to residents tell us what was happening in their lives and how the council was helping (or not). Meanwhile, the Conservative administration was busy conserving itself behind the locked doors of the town hall, out of ideas and with fingers firmly in ears.

From winning our first council seat in 41 years in 2017 to taking control of the council with 23 seats in 2022, we built up a picture of who was living in our town, what their needs were, where the big problems were coming up time and again and what a Labour council could offer in response.

I doubt that it will come as any surprise that our main priorities are social housing (we don't have any); urban greening – Worthing is a classic seaside town, buried under concrete and forgotten about from the 70s onwards; economic regeneration – our coastal version of the Preston model builds our climate emergency response into community wealth building, featuring a green business park, green skills building, and more; and a sustainable transport network (Worthing and the surrounding coastal areas are flat and urban – walking, cycling and public transport should be a no brainer).

In our first year of office, our priorities have sometimes had to take a back seat to the brick wall, slap-in-the-face-with-a-wet-fish cost of living emergency that has pervaded all aspects of our council work, and, as in the rest of the country, has seen many of our residents tightening their already tight belts. It has been a year of hard graft both within and without the council, from frontline foodbanks to providing increased housing support and benefits, which pushed our budget to the very limit. We were, frankly, relieved to have a balanced budget this March.

The cost of living crisis, combined with an ever more inept and embarrassing Tory government in Westminster, meant that this May many Tory councillors across the country followed their Worthing colleagues in exiting stage right, with residents exercising their electoral muscle in favour of Labour, Lib Dem and even Green councils. For Labour councils, this has the additional pressure of being a potential portent of things to come in an anticipated 2024 general election. But how to bridge the local conversation of who can run your council services with the national debate on who you should trust to run your country?

While we got to work, the Conservative administration was busy conserving itself behind the locked doors of the town hall

My own ward, Marine, was seen as true blue right up to the moment we won our first seat in 2017. It is fairly affluent, and has many residents in the expensive bit nearest the sea who would be pretty stereotypical Tory voters of old: business owning or retired, and generally white, middle class and older, in Worthing to enjoy a quiet life by the coast. The Tories took their postal votes and

© Gary J Stearman/Unsplash

enjoyed years of success without ever asking their voters how they were getting on.

When we started knocking doors in this Tory stronghold, we found people who had not been listened to in decades. As you might expect, they had a lot to say – most of all that they wanted their town to be taken care of and to be a safe place to live. As the conversations went on, many of them expressed and agreed with the idea that a safe, cared-for town is a place where all members of the community have a warm, decent home; where elderly people can put their heating on without fear of going into arrears on their energy bill; where parents can feed their children decent food, bought from decent wages in a good job; where people of all ages can meet in public spaces that are clean and green and make them proud to call this place home; and where our sea and our air is unpolluted, allowing us to be healthy and our natural environment to thrive. In other words, the Tory voters of old wanted a fair, green town and they were willing to help us to create that.

My experience of the 2017 and 2019 general elections was that these local positive conversations were often undermined by the perceptions of politicians in Westminster. This is not at all surprising given the amount of media coverage that national policy receives and the messages that people digest via their social media feed.

For places such as Worthing, where there are two potentially winnable seats for Labour, the key will be to show up on the doorstep with national policies that we can easily demonstrate will allow our local communities to thrive. From education to health and social care, transport to environment, housing to sport and leisure, our local residents want to know that we understand the cost of living issues that have kicked their feet from under them and that we have a plan to redress the unfairness and the imbalances.

Our voting public are not the 0.1 per cent. They are the people down my road who are looking after their grandchildren while their daughter works two jobs to cover the rent. They are the family across the street who have an Italian mum who is still unsure about her place here after Brexit. They are the retired couple on the seafront, scared of the young people in the hoodies on their street corner (who, as it turns out, have literally nowhere else to go after 8pm on a Friday evening).

National elections can be won by both enabling and building on the work of local politicians to reduce inequalities across our cities, towns and villages. A brave national policy to realise real devolution of power and resources to local structures would allow communities to build trust with local politicians. Making the case that you might elect your MP to make sure your local decision-making bodies have the power and the funding that they need to ensure your hometown is fair and thriving would be a groundbreaking pitch – and a far cry from the political rhetoric of late, where power is concentrated in Westminster and local governments enter a Hunger Games-style tournament for levelling up scraps. There will, of course, be national and global issues that cannot be devolved; but even these will have an impact at the local level – indeed, if an issue did not have an impact at the local level, who would care about it? If we understand this relationship, then we can draw a direct line between ensuring our communities are fair, green and welcoming and the work of our MPs in Westminster addressing issues like immigration or funding public services.

In an election, you are only as good as your candidates, your comms and the team you have on the ground. Local elections are great foundations for building these cornerstones. Local council and community work can also foster the narratives that allow brave, potentially transformative national policy to be translated into living, breathing pragmatism that improves our everyday lives. F

Silent majority

A commitment to animal welfare is one of the strongest signs politicians can give that they are on the public's side, argues *Jonathan Birch*

Jonathan Birch is a professor at the Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science, London School of Economics and principal investigator on the Foundations of Animal Sentience project

In 1822, the UK passed the world's first ever animal welfare law: the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act, or "Martin's Act", which protected a small number of animals from extreme abuses. Two hundred years later, we passed one of the world's newest: the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, often known simply as the Sentience Act. The new act creates a duty on ministers to pay all due regard to animals as sentient beings. I advised the government on the wording of the new act, recommending the inclusion of some invertebrates, such as octopuses.

It is fair to say there has since been a loss of momentum since then. The Sentience Act was intended to be the foundation stone in an ambitious action plan. Yet in May, the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, a core piece of the programme, was dropped by the government after having been stalled for over a year. When I talk to policymakers in this area, I no longer get a clear sense of a shared agenda. Labour should make the drive towards higher standards a key priority – not only for the sake of animals, but for the sake of its electoral chances. Here are five principles that should be at the heart of that mission.

Animal welfare is part of who we are

Animal welfare is sometimes seen as a marginal policy area: a worthy topic, yes, but not a major election issue. I think this misses something big. It is true that, in showpiece debates during election campaigns, animal welfare is often overshadowed by the economy and public services. But few other issues cut so directly to the heart of who we are and what kind of society we want to live in.

To see what I mean, just imagine a party going into the next election promising to bring back foxhunting. Its campaign would instantly implode. In 2017, Theresa May found that even a promise of a free vote on the issue was politically damaging, and the idea was ultimately dropped. I am not sure any other policy area has the power to corrode a party's prospects so quickly. The truth is that animal welfare is a key part of our identity as a country: we respect animals and we want to move forwards on animal welfare, not backwards. To go into an election promising to roll back progress is to show that you do not understand one of the most widely shared British values.

Conversely, a strong, demonstrable commitment to animal welfare is one of the most powerful advantages a party can give itself in an election battle. To put clear water between yourself and your opponents in this area is, politically speaking, incredibly valuable. This was one of the things Labour got right in the 1990s and 2000s.

It was also – it must be said – something Boris Johnson got right. In his first speech as prime minister, he expressed his desire to "promote the welfare of animals that has always been so close to the hearts of the British people". He understood the political centrality of animal welfare, even if the path from words to actions was rather tortuous. It is far from clear his successors share this instinct, leaving Labour and other opposition parties with a chance to make political headway.

In the case of farming, animal welfare improvements are 'win-win-win': animals benefit, consumers benefit and producers benefit

High welfare standards are in everyone's interest

Animal welfare is not a zero-sum game in which human interests are pitted against the interests of other animals. Nor is it about pitting urban interests against rural interests. It is about promoting our common interest. There is a deep human need to relate to other animals in a positive way and to treat them with care and respect. Good law and regulation form part of how we can achieve this.

In the case of farming, animal welfare improvements are 'win-win-win': animals benefit, consumers benefit and producers benefit. British farmers want to be supported in maintaining high welfare standards. They don't want a global race to the bottom in which they are forced to compromise on welfare in the name of efficiency. A model of high welfare standards combined with clear, reliable, prominent labelling helps everyone.

New technologies must be used responsibly

Traditional selective breeding has been a mixed blessing, leading to great efficiency gains but also to terrible welfare problems. Over the past 60 years, we have bred chickens to grow at three times their natural speed to more than three times their natural weight, going from birth to slaughter in under 40 days – so fast that their legs and hearts cannot easily support them, leading to serious health problems in the last few weeks of life. I have never heard anyone express support for such practices, and yet they have quietly become normalised. The right approach is that being taken by major supermarkets in the Netherlands and by Marks & Spencer: phasing out these breeds in favour of slower growing ones. We need stronger incentives for supermarkets to do the right thing.

The picture is being complicated further by genome editing: directly changing the genetics of breeds using technologies such as CRISPR. Newly legalised by the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023, this has the potential to help with these problems – but also the potential to make them much, much worse. Proper regulation is crucial to ensure the technology is used responsibly. In a recent report, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics called for a traffic light system in which independent experts classify breeds as red, amber, or green, where 'red' implies the welfare problems inherent to that breed are so severe it should be discontinued, and those breeds at risk of falling into the red zone categorised as amber. Without something like this, we risk sleepwalking into an animal welfare disaster. Genome editing has the potential to turbocharge selective breeding, creating the potential for current trends to accelerate.

Animal welfare counts for every department

The motivation for the Sentience Act was the concern that other animals often get overlooked in policymaking. Consider the Treasury's Green Book, a 148-page guide to policy evaluation intended for use throughout the civil service. It does not contain the word 'animal' (there are, by contrast, about 100 mentions of the environment). The fear is that, although the environment gets remembered (a good thing, of course), individual animals are forgotten. Policies receive environmental impact assessments but never animal welfare impact assessments.

And yet there are countless ways in which policies can affect animal welfare. Take trade deals: a rushed trade deal can allow cheaper, lower-welfare products to flood the market. Not what the public wants, and not the right thing to do. We need ways of systematically assessing the impact on animals of our policy decisions. It needs to become a normal part of policy evaluation right across government.

Britain has a global leadership role

It pains me to see Britain falling behind other countries on a range of animal welfare issues. Sweden, Norway and Switzerland have all banned the routine use of farrowing crates (in which pregnant sows are confined from around five days before giving birth until around 28 days after). Switzerland has also banned the live boiling of crustaceans without prior stunning, joining Norway, New Zealand, Austria, and parts of Australia and Italy. California's Proposition 12, recently upheld by the US Supreme Court, bans not just gestation crates, veal crates and battery cages (going beyond UK law on the last of these issues) but also bans the *import* of the products of these practices from anywhere in the world. That shift from regulating welfare locally to regulating imports is crucial, because it stops local producers suffering for their higher welfare standards by being undercut. This is the only realistic way to stop the global race to the bottom nobody wants.

The current government has, in the past, mooted banning imports of foie gras and fur, but the plans appear to have been dropped. Labour, when writing its 2024 manifesto, should think about how to exert control over the welfare standards of the products that flow across our borders. We have the ability to prevent the sale of products such as white veal and farmed octopus and the power to stop live animals from being exported from the UK for fattening or slaughter. We should use the power we have.

As things stand, we can still count ourselves leaders on animal welfare. The Animal Protection Index, which reviews animal law around the world, puts us in a small top category with five other countries (Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria). We have something to take pride in, then – but also something to lose.

In fact, our ambitions should go beyond just keeping up with the leading group. This is an area in which we can be pioneers, developing new models of regulation that other countries want to emulate. The issues here – selective breeding, genome editing, policy evaluation, regulating imports and exports, and protecting sentient invertebrates – are all areas in which we are well placed to clear new paths. **F**

© Sam Aylard/Unsplash

Books

Fair share

Egalitarian optimism of the past should give today's Labour food for thought, finds *Stewart Lansley*

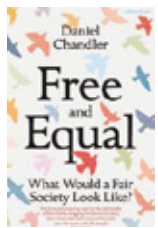
Stewart Lansley is the author of The Richer, The Poorer, How Britain Enriched the Few and Failed the Poor

Daniel Chandler's Free and Equal is a bold attempt to resuscitate the ideas of John Rawls. A towering figure in political philosophy, Rawls argued that society should be organised to maximise the life chances of the most disadvantaged. Inequality should only be sanctioned when it benefits the least well off, while decisions about social justice should be made as if from behind a 'veil of ignorance' preventing each person from knowing their own societal position.

Rawls has been both feted and debated in academic circles. Yet, as Chandler acknowledges, he has had minimal impact on the course of social change since the 1971 publication of his masterwork, A Theory of Justice. This is in part because his utopian thinking is too abstract to be readily transferable to practical politics. Then there is timing: his book was published at the tail end of the postwar era of egalitarian optimism, a period that led to the historic, if short-lived, achievement of peak equality in Britain in the late 1970s. With the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganism, it would instead be the godfather of neoliberalism, Friedrich Hayek, who became the philosopher-in-chief for the generation of anti-equality political leaders that followed.

In this timely and optimistic book, Chandler sets out ways to reassert Rawls's relevance across a range of contemporary issues. It is Rawls, he argues, who Labour should turn to for a blueprint for power. The Labour party was forged with a commitment to greater equality. It was the central guiding principle of the 1945 Attlee government's transformative social reforms and remained a key goal of the Wilson governments of the 1960s and 1970s. New Labour, in contrast, downgraded the party's egalitarianism. Tony Blair largely accepted the neoliberal case for large income and wealth gaps. He set about raising the income floor, but by ignoring the bias to inequality embedded in Britain's economic and social model, this fell short of a sustainable attack on impoverishment. "The commitment of the Labour party to equality is rather like the singing of the Red Flag at its gatherings," warned the distinguished economist Tony Atkinson in 1983. "All regard it as part of a cherished heritage, but those on the platform often seem to have forgotten the words."

Whether Keir Starmer returns Labour to the egalitarian fold ought to be one of the big political issues of the time. The shift towards levels of wealth and income concentration last seen in the decade preceding the second world war, has had a deeply malign effect on the economy and society in general. The mechanisms used in service of personal enrichment at the top, with companies turned into the personal fiefdoms of a small financial and business elite, have contributed to Britain's low-wage, low-productivity, low-investment economy.



Free and Equal: What Should a Fair Society Look Like?
Daniel Chandler, (Allen Lane, 2023)

So should Rawlsian utopianism be Labour's primary inspiration in the pursuit of a better society? The case for greater equality, and how to achieve it, can be traced to a range of pre-Rawlsian thinkers, from the eminent historian and Christian socialist RH Tawney to the Nobel Laureate James Meade. Chandler mentions both, but only in passing, even though they had an important influence on Rawls. Chandler's list of proposals for tackling economic inequality – from higher property taxes and a citizen's wealth fund to a guaranteed income floor through a universal basic income – also draw less on Rawls than on a mix of earlier and contemporary thinkers.

Writing in the post-war decades, Meade expanded on the work of earlier figures to challenge the emphasis on private property rights. He advocated a property-owning democracy for all by raising the share of national wealth held in common. He also set out a workable plan for achieving it. Even a mild version of his proposal for a socially owned capital fund – one that could have been financed by the North Sea oil bonanza – would have been a powerful and inbuilt force for equality.

Labour flirted – briefly – with Meade's ideas. In 1973, an opposition Green Paper, Capital and Equality, set out a new framework for socialising a proportion of private wealth. Those behind the document included Barbara Castle and Labour's longstanding economic adviser Nicholas Kaldor. The paper's ideas for reforming capitalism through greater workplace democracy and power- and wealth-sharing had moved on from those of 1945. If they had been implemented, they could have taken post-war social democracy to a higher level. In the event, the Green Paper's radical roadmap failed to resurface in office.

Opportunities for progressive political shifts are rare and cannot afford to be missed. With Britain facing multiple crises and a public hungry for a fairer society, the timing could hardly be better for Labour to re-embrace its egalitarian roots and revisit the ideas of Britain's long line of pro-equality thinkers, including Rawls. F

On the right track

July marks the 90th anniversary of the creation of London Transport. It was a quintessentially Fabian project, writes *Niall Devitt*

Niall Devitt is a researcher specialising in modern British political and transport history. The first part of his major new history of the London Underground, Underground Railway, will be published later this year by Pen and Sword

By the turn of the 20th century the railways of the nation were at their zenith. Both locomotives and coaches were becoming works of exquisite mechanical perfection, a colourful railway vision famously immortalised in ES Nesbit's Railway Children in 1905. With over 123 separate competing railway companies, this was the height of the laissez-faire competitive system, one watched over by the light-touch regulatory hand of the Board of Trade, which only really intervened after tragic events forced it to act.

This era memorably featured the first 'ton' – that is, a speed of 100mph – for a steam locomotive when the GWR's City of Truro charged down Wellington Bank, Somerset on 9 May 1904. Although a celebrated moment, the Great Western Railway knew full well that the public would view such high-speed exploits as reckless, with those on board sworn to secrecy by the company's management at Paddington. The intense competition for a finite amount of traffic would end in tragedy two years later, as a series of high-speed derailments cast rampant competition on the nation's railways in an unfavourable light. At Salisbury on 1 July 1906, 28 passengers were killed on the London and South Western Railway, with the accident the result of an utterly pointless race to reach London. Next came a mysterious high speed derailment at Grantham on the Great Northern Railway, with 14 killed, while a similar derailment the next year at Shrewsbury on the London and North Western Railway would claim a further 18 lives. This shocking series of accidents was blamed in the press on an underregulated and overly competitive railway system. Questions began to be asked whether private ownership was the most efficient and safe way to run a national railway system, a situation increasingly at odds with other European nations. By 1913 the number of workers killed or seriously injured on the railways in Britain had increased to over 30,000 a year.

Increasingly it was felt – and not just by socialists and the rail workers' unions – that some form of public ownership was the sensible long-term solution for the nation's railways and especially for London's financially struggling underground railways. As part of this emerging consensus, David Lloyd George as president of the Board of Trade would memorably advocate nationalisation at the official opening in 1907 of the Great Northern, Piccadilly and Brompton Railway, today's Piccadilly line.

The shallow 'cut and cover' Metropolitan Railway had first opened in January 1863, with eventually a multitude of private companies operating services over what would become the modern Metropolitan, District, Circle and London Overground system of lines. The later deep-level electric tube lines of the capital rapidly sprung up in the capital over a 20-year period after 1890. All were private initiatives designed to compete directly with a multitude of horse-drawn and later petrol omnibus services, the existing Victorian suburban rail system, as well as new electric tram cars. The new lines struggled to pay dividends, while passengers proved extremely reluctant to frequent the new deep-level electric tube lines; a dark, noisy and smelly foreign environment in the bowels of the metropolis.

In April 1906, the financier and new chairman of the troubled UERL, Sir Edgar Speyer, along with his deputy Sir George Gibb, dined with the highly politically influential early Fabians Beatrice and Sidney Webb at their home in Hampstead to discuss the feasibility of the UERL group of companies being taken over as a public company by the London County Council. In return for an immediate and substantial financial input of £5m, County Hall would gain complete ownership of the underground in 30 to 40 years' time, while Speyer also offered to repay the loan at a generous 4 per per cent interest. He was in effect offering public ownership tomorrow, if the LCC would intervene to save the day. To the Webbs, the proposal was still well wide of the mark given the scale of the problem. However, their discussion proved to be far from the last time when Fabian thought would shape the future of London's transport.

A 'Railway Nationalisation Society' supported by the trade unions had already gained adherents in the 1890s, while the widely read 1912 book The Case for Railway Nationalisation by a Fabian, Albert Emil Davies, had argued: "Owing to the absurd overlapping of the railway companies, with their ridiculous duplication of boards of directors, general managers, solicitors, auditors and the like, with unnecessary duplication of railway stations, rolling stock, with the employment of thousands of unnecessary officials…millions of pounds are wasted annually." It is an argument that still has great resonance today with Britain's shattered national railway system.

As for the Webbs, they were far from finished with the problems of London's tubular railway system. They

© Wikimedia Commons

continued to mull over the issues, concluding correctly that unfettered competition, with omnibus, tram and train all at war with each other, lay at the heart of the problem. If all could be welded together, or as it was later known, 'integrated' under the auspices of a publicly owned board, one not burdened by being beholden to acquisitive shareholders, a sensible and workable solution to the long-term transport needs of the capital could be found.

By being prepared to be pragmatic and willing to court all shades of political opinion, the Fabians won a hardworking and politically adept advocate for public ownership in the young MP for Hackney South, Herbert Morrison. As early as 1920 as leader of the London Labour party, he would demand that the government introduce a 'transport board' to cure the capital's transport ills, a call he would repeat from the opposition benches until he entered government as minister for transport under the second Labour government of Ramsay McDonald in May 1929.

An astute Beatrice Webb observed in her diary in October 1929 that: "The only outstanding minister is Morrison, with his transport schemes". In a statement in the Commons in December that year, Morrison declared he was preparing to apply public ownership to solve the problems of wasteful competition in public transport in the capital. The only genuinely radical policy of the second Labour government and a classic example of Fabian socialism, the plan was greeted with a 'shudder' by alarmed Conservative MPs. The organisation that would eventually emerge as the London Passenger Transport Board in July 1933 was quintessentially Fabian in its structure, a successful takeover of numerous competing private passenger operators all within a 50-mile radius of Charing Cross.

While Morrison did not expect private shareholders to become Fabian socialists overnight, this was never to be a Soviet-style 'smash and grab' nationalisation; instead, the minister was offering all shareholders a very reasonable compensatory deal in the form of a newly created LPTB shares.

It was still to prove a prolonged and bitter fight to get the legislation safely on the statute book, not helped by the collapse of the Labour government in August 1931. Luckily, Morrison's careful cultivation of Liberal MPs would see his Liberal successor John Pybus finally secure royal assent in April 1933 for a modified version of Morrison's original proposal. In all essentials Morrison's Fabian thinking was still explicit in the framing of the legislation. In a series of lectures held at the LSE in early 1934, the vice-chairman of the board, Frank Pick, would reveal how much had been taken over by the LPTB: "Five railway companies, fourteen municipally owned tramway undertakings, three company-owned tramway undertakings, sixty-six omnibus and coach companies and the whole or part of not less sixty-nine other omnibus and coach companies." In hindsight, given the scale of the task involved, as well as the unfavourable political and economic climate, it was an extraordinary achievement.

As many as 75,000 staff became state employees on the 1 July 1933, on significantly better wages and with enhanced working conditions, and trade union recognition from day one. A deeply engrained safety culture permeated the entire culture of the new organisation. In addition, all staff had access to welfare services, staff development through excellent training and courses, and sporting, cultural and leisure pursuits.

A decade later, a once critical Times concluded: "London Transport can proudly boast of being the greatest urban transport system in the world…it has set an example to other public corporations offering essential services to the public, now or in the future."

Morrison's hopes for outright nationalisation of London's and the wider nation's transport services would finally be fulfilled in 1948. But sadly, his seminal achievement in creating London Transport has been largely lost in a sea of ink fetishising the Underground's pioneering architecture and design. His was a successful, pragmatic Fabian approach that has subsequently been copied right across the globe, while a modern TfL contains the same DNA it had back in 1933. For those planning for a future Starmer government who want to tame out of control post-1979 private monopolies, once again in an unfavourable economic climate, there is much to be gained by looking at Morrison's achievements. **F**

Offering solutions

Fabian research offers fresh ideas for social care, the fight against poverty and support for those who are not working

Labour has been talking about a National Care Service since the days of Gordon Brown's government. But there has been little detailed work on how such a service should be set up, regulated and run. The Fabian Society's new report, Support Guaranteed, sets out for the first time what a National Care Service might look like and how it could transform the landscape for those adults who need care, for their families and for the workforce who look after them.

Fabian general secretary Andrew Harrop and senior researcher Ben Cooper, who wrote the report, have developed a set of principles which they believe should guide the development of a new national service for England. It should, they say, offer choice and control for individuals and their families. It should be local and place-based but nationally consistent, accessible, high quality and diverse.

The report, supported by Unison, also sets out 10 'building blocks' which will make for an effective national service. They include new entitlements for care workers, such as a fair pay agreement with a sector-wide minimum wage and employment conditions. Those with lived experience of care should be involved in co-production: designing the service and helping to ensure it is properly scrutinised.

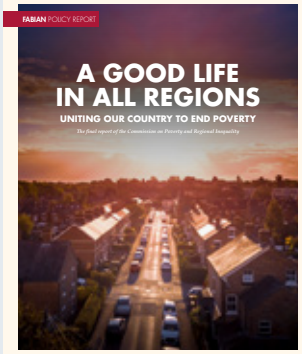
There would be changes for providers too: a stronger public service relationship with 'licensed' independent providers; better regulation, standardised pricing for care and an enhanced role for public sector and non-profit provision.

In the face of a national social care emergency, building a National Care Service cannot happen overnight. As the report says: "First steps are needed immediately after the next general election to stabilise care services and to ensure that people start to see initial improvements quickly. But the process of building the National Care Service will be a long-term project that is likely to take up to a decade to complete."

Low regional growth has meant many parts of the country are plagued by poverty. But in supposedly more prosperous parts of the country, like London and the south east, where growth is higher, it is that very prosperity which has fuelled inequality. The Commission on Poverty and Regional Inequality, convened by the Fabian Society, has spent the last 18 months looking at the issue and its final report, A Good Life in all Regions: Uniting our Country to End Poverty, is launched this month. The commission's report sets out a series of proposals on everything from devolving power to reforming buses and from childcare to social housing.

Commission chair Nick Forbes says: "Poverty is inexcusable, wherever in the country it is entrenched. We cannot shrug off low regional economic growth, like that of the north east, as inevitable. And nor can we allow high regional growth to have such consequences for our poorest, as it does in London. Together we can build a prosperous future for all our regions. A future where people, wherever they live, have access to the things they need to live a good life: well-paid, high-quality jobs, reliable buses, accessible childcare and affordable homes."

The commission was funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Trust for London, City of London and Dartmouth Street Trust.



In Time of Need, published in March and supported by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, takes on the thorny issue of how to replace incomes when earnings stop. Current provisions for people who are not working, whether it be because they have left their job, they are sick or have just become a parent, often fall short of what is needed. In this report, authors Andrew Harrop, Howard Reed and Eloise Sacares make the case for a complete overhaul. They propose a new plank of the welfare state, British employment insurance, which would consist of a combination of paid leave from employers and state insurance benefits. "The proposal would return the UK to routinely providing income protection on the basis of people's earnings as was the case from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s" they say.

All three reports are available to download from the Fabian website. **F**

Noticeboard

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND SCOTTISH FABIANS CONFERENCE – SATURDAY 18 NOVEMBER

The Fabian Society AGM will take place on Saturday 18 November 2023. The meeting will take place in Edinburgh as part of a one-day Scottish Fabians conference. Remote digital access to the AGM will be available for members who are unable to attend in person.

Any full member of the society or a local Fabian society may submit a motion for the AGM by 8 September 2023. Motions will be published online and in the autumn issue of the Fabian Review and amendments will be invited with a deadline of 13 October 2021.

For more information contact membership@fabians.org.uk or 0207 227 4904.

FABIAN SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ELECTION 2023

The Fabian Society is proud to be a democratically governed member-led organisation. Every two years our executive committee is elected by our membership to direct the work of the society and to represent members' interests.

This year we introduce new candidate categories to encourage a broader, more geographically diverse range of EC representatives.

NOTICE OF ELECTION

The executive committee ballot will take place between 15 September and 20 October 2023.

The ballot will take place online only – except for members who request a paper ballot.

If we have your email address, access to the online ballot will be issued by email. If you are receiving emails from us now you do not need to take any action. If you are not receiving our weekly Fabian News email please register an email address with us before 6 September.

Members will be reminded of the election in the autumn Fabian Review. Members who are unable to access the balloting website will be able to request a paper ballot.

Membership inquiries: membership@fabians.org.uk or 020 7227 4900 / 4904.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Members of the society are invited to nominate themselves for election to the executive committee. We strongly encourage all members to consider standing. Nominations should be sent to membership@fabians.org.uk. Please write the position nominated for in the subject line of the email.

Nominees should submit a statement in support of their nomination, including information about themselves and their activities within the society of not more than 70 words. The closing date for nominations is 9am on 15 August.

Nominations are invited for:

- Six ordinary members
- Four Westminster parliamentarians
- One elected politician from Scotland
- One elected politician from Wales
- One elected politician from English regional government
- One local government convenor (who shall be an elected councillor)
- One local Fabian Societies convenor
- One honorary treasurer

Candidates for the position of local Fabian Societies convenor must be nominated by a paid-up local Fabian Society. All other positions are by self-nomination.

If you are interested in standing you are invited to email gensec@fabians.org.uk for information about the responsibilities. At least two of the six ordinary members must be under the age of 31 at the AGM on Saturday 18 November 2023. You need to have been a member of the society before 17 May 2023 to be eligible to stand and vote in the elections.

YOUNG FABIAN AND FABIAN WOMEN'S NETWORK ELECTIONS

The Young Fabians and Fabian Women's Network are also holding elections for their executives. For full details see www.youngfabians.org.uk and www.fabianwomen.org.uk

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
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 at sue.davidson17@gmail.com

HARTLEPOOL
Meetings at Hartlepool Labour party offices, 23 South Road, TS26 9HD
Contact Helen Howson at 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

SOUTHAMPTON
Contact the secretary, Barney Jones at sotonfabians@gmail.com

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

THE FABIAN QUIZ

EDIBLE ECONOMICS
Ha-Joon Chang

For a British audience raised on the thin gruel of neoliberalism, Ha-Joon Chang's exploration of a wider variety of economic thought might look as intimidating as an overlong takeaway menu.

Push past the discomfort, though, and you'll be rewarded: Chang's third serving of unorthodox economics since his 2010 breakthrough, 23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism, represents the South Korean economist at the zenith of his influence. Variations of his arguments, once dismissed by mainstream commentators, now underpin much of Western policy, especially on trade.

Selected for Radio 4's Book of the Week, Edible Economics explores Chang's ideas through the lens of food, with dishes like southern gumbo and dotori mook kicking off discussions about the hidden cost of care work and South Korean protectionism in the mid-20th century. With the economic worldview of Thatcher and New Labour now looking well past its sell-by date, Chang's new book offers up transformative economic policy at its most digestible.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
The antifascist anthem Bella Ciao was originally sung by labourers producing what foodstuff?

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

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 5 AUGUST 2023.

Discover beautiful editions of the best radical writing, carefully chosen for you. Plus author events, fantastic discounts and merch, from just £9.99/month.

The Left Book Club was founded in 1936 to oppose war, inequality and fascism. Join us today and help support political education.

Every month we'll send you carefully selected books on politics, economy, society and culture by the world's leading radical authors. You'll also get access to reading groups and events, plus you can chat to other members using our community app.

LEFT BOOK CLUB

Join or gift membership from just £9.99 / month

www.leftbookclub.com