FABIAN REVIEW

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What a Labour government could achieve in 13 years, with Charles Clarke, Catherine West MP, Anas Sarwar MSP and more ***p10*** */ Andy Burnham on the devolution revolution* ***p16*** */ Katy Hayward explores what two elections might mean for Northern Ireland* ***p22*** */ Gary Smith on a new vision for industrial relations* ***p24***

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One Voice

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Future perfect?

The Conservatives have wasted their 13 years of power. If Labour has the same time in office, Britain could be transformed, writes *Andrew Harrop*

After 13 years the Conservatives' grip on power is loosening. What will future generations say about their legacy?

With Brexit, they impoverished the country and divided it, internally and from its nearest friends. They had no answers as British living standards underwent unprecedented stagnation. They drove every public service to the brink, with resources outstripped by rising need.

On the big issues their solutions bore no relation to the scale of the problems – whether on climate change, housing or regional inequality. Just providing the basics of safe schools and clean waterways has proved beyond them. The Conservatives will be remembered for a decade of inaction, chaos and division.

The Tory record stands in stark contrast to the achievements of the 1997 Labour government which also held office for 13 years. But it holds a warning for Keir Starmer's government-in-waiting too: success does not automatically follow from winning power.

So what should Labour hope to achieve if the British people one day entrust it with its own 13 years of power? How should a government hoping for several terms in office aim to shape the Britain of the 2030s?

Success will come by navigating the big changes we know are coming – global heating, the ageing population, new waves of technological change and a more divided, multipolar world.

By 2037, the country will need to be well on its way to net zero. That means Labour must deliver a clean power network, but also rapidly decarbonise where progress has so far been slow, including heating and food. We will also, sadly, need to be more resilient to extreme weather.

To tackle climate change and so many other challenges, the UK must once again be a force for international solidarity and cooperation, reintegrating with the EU and building new partnerships elsewhere. Who knows how the EU will evolve over the next few decades, and whether Britain will one day rejoin? But come what may, we must share and collaborate deeply with our nearest neighbours.

Another mark of success would be 13 years of consistently rising living standards. When it comes to the economy, there are many things that are outside a government's control. But Labour will be able to grow real earnings by pursuing long-term economic policies founded on predictability and partnership to deliver investment, infrastructure and innovation across the country.

Collective bargaining and stronger employment rights will ensure that workers share in the proceeds of growth. A massive programme of housebuilding will place more affordable homes close to jobs. And a purposeful rebuilding of social security and income replacement will bring decency and security to families facing tough times. Labour will have made progress if, in the late 2030s, there is much less poverty and if income and wealth gaps are smaller, both between top and bottom and between different parts of the country.

The party also needs to aim to close inequalities in care, health and lifetime opportunities. This will require the reshaping of public services. By the 2030s, gaping holes in public provision must be filled, including by developing comprehensive early years services, offering integrated lifelong learning to all workers, and founding a National Care Service.

Digitisation, reform and investment can also transform existing public services. The potential is there to combine astonishing technological advances with the dedication and skills of the public sector workforce: to create responsive, personalised, integrated public services across education, crime prevention, transport and healthcare.

The next Labour government will succeed when we have a society and communities where people are thriving and united. Better local environments, stronger mental health and wellbeing, more lifelong opportunity, and less suspicion and division. Success after 13 years of Labour in power would be a Britain that brings a good life to all. **F**

Shortcuts

COURAGE CALLS

It is time for reform of a law older than the Labour party — *Ellie Cumbo*

In June this year, Carla Foster was sentenced to 28 months in prison for unlawfully terminating her pregnancy after the legal time limit. The trial was highly publicised, and the eventual sentence criticised by many as too harsh. Foster had shown considerable remorse, posed no risk to the public and had three children. She successfully appealed, and in July the sentence was halved to 14 months, and suspended. Foster was freed.

That, to most of the commentators who initially took an interest, was the end of the matter. All agreed that this was a highly unusual and tragic case, and very unlikely to be repeated given the chaos and uncertainty of spring 2020, when Foster was becoming ever more desperate to end her pregnancy.

The justice system seemed to have done its job by enforcing the law put in place by Parliament and then by also preventing an excessive sentence. What was left to say? Yet for those with an interest in good government, and the need to make and maintain good law as part of that, this case should not be allowed to disappear from our collective memory. The lessons it has to teach should particularly concern the Labour party as it prepares to trade opposition – the art of prioritising the right issues – for government, where ministerial careers can just as easily implode like cheap concrete over the things you did not get around to doing as those you did.

The failure in the Foster case was a political one, not a legal one. The original trial judge cannot be blamed for having passed a sentence that was later held to be double the appropriate length. As he noted in his official remarks, there are no sentencing guidelines available for Foster's offence because it is so rare. All that he had to turn to, besides general principles of sentencing, was the words of the law itself: "Every woman who shall unlawfully administer to herself any poison or other noxious thing…with intent to procure… miscarriage…shall be guilty of felony, and being convicted thereof shall be liable to be kept in penal servitude for life."

Small wonder that those words fall strangely on modern ears. The law which governs this area dates back to Victorian times in the shape of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. This is not proof of irrelevance by itself, since the very same legislation contains our legal prohibitions on murder and assault. But the important point in respect of abortion is the vast changes in women's rights, public opinion and medical practice since then, including such developments as women gaining the vote, and the introduction of lawful abortion within the 24-week time limit (originally 28 weeks) in the 1967 Abortion Act. Penal servitude itself was abolished in 1948. And yet no government has looked again in more than 160 years at a law that has the potential to send a woman to prison for the rest of her life.

Whatever view one takes on whether women who have illegal abortions should continue to be criminalised – and the Foster case revealed polarised views, which did not necessarily correspond to whether or not people considered themselves generally pro-choice – it is surely beyond question that this part of our law is in need of an update.

The sentencing, at least, would not be difficult to fix. The government could get it done before the next election, either by bringing in a new maximum sentence as part of its more loudly trumpeted legislation on criminal justice, or asking the Sentencing Council to create a dedicated guideline. But there are also questions for a prospective new Labour government, which as yet has not committed itself to any reform or modernisation of a law that is older than the party itself.

In government, there should be no no-go areas. Stepping away from contentious subjects even as the law is seen to be falling into confusion is not an option. Labour has tacitly acknowledged as much by announcing its new plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act – one of the most divisive issues of our time. Other similarly challenging subjects, such as the campaign to liberalise surrogacy law, are also waiting in the wings.

After 13 years out of power, is Labour ready to make the toughest of decisions and step willingly into the thorniest of public debates? It is not only judges, but the many women who could see themselves in Carla Foster's shoes, who will be hoping so. **F**

Ellie Cumbo works in law and justice policy and is currently a policy fellow at Labour Together

VALUING EVERY VOICE

Speaking skills should not be the preserve of the most privileged — *Isobel Plant*

"I feel it is important that everyone feels like they have a voice, and not hide away from speaking up." So a reception class student recently told me at one of our oracy schools. Even at such a young age, they intuitively understood the value of communication skills. Thankfully, politicians now seem to be catching on too. At Voice 21, the national oracy education charity, we were overjoyed to hear Keir Starmer's pledge that "oracy is a skill that can and must be taught" in our schools, and that the "ability to speak well and express yourself should be something that every child is entitled to and every child should master".

Oracy is the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and engage with others through spoken language. It is as much about listening as it is about speaking, and by putting it at the heart of school curriculum reform, we can send a strong message about valuing every voice in our society.

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Oracy is not about elocution, learning to speak 'properly' or knowing how to win a debate. Instead, it is about equipping young people with the confidence to formulate logical arguments, present their ideas, listen to different viewpoints and build social connections. It is a fundamental mechanism for social mobility and for ensuring every voice in our society is valued and listened to. For students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, oracy is critical, not only to succeed in school but in their future life outside the classroom.

Spoken language is one of the strongest predictors of a child's future life chances, but not every child gets a chance to develop this crucial skill. On starting school, disadvantaged children's spoken language development is significantly lower than their more advantaged peers. This gap grows through school – from just a few months aged six to five years' difference at age 14. On leaving school, children with poor communication skills are less likely to find employment and more likely to suffer from mental health difficulties. Teaching oracy explicitly can close this equity gap in school and improve academic outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. For early years, the impact can be as much as seven months additional progress; for primary schools, six months; and for secondary schools, five.

As well as supporting academic success, oracy education is critical to thriving in life after school. Employers are crying out for strong communication skills. The NFER's Skills Imperative 2035 research, which identified six essential employment skills anticipated to be most in-demand in the future, named communication at number one. In the workplace, spoken language is critical to 'getting in' and 'getting on'– whether articulating your motivations and experience at an interview; building relationships and collaborating as a team; proposing innovative thinking and new ideas; or delivering an effective presentation or negotiation. In the age of AI, our ability to connect and communicate with one another is core to what it means to be human and essential to building a high performing workforce and economy.

What could universal oracy education mean for our society at large? By equipping all young people, no matter their background, with the skills to express themselves and engage with others, we can develop their confidence to find and use their voice. We can let them know their voice matters, is valued and can play a part in shaping their future, as well as that of their community and wider society. As Starmer said: "Speaking and listening opens up a lifetime of empowerment – a chance for those who too often feel invisible in their own country to be heard." Developing strong communication skills should not be left to chance; nor should it be the preserve of the privileged seven per cent of children who can afford to attend private school, where these skills are routinely taught and honed.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to feel the devastating impact not only of school closures during the pandemic, now compounded by the current cost of living crisis. If we want to empower young people to overcome barriers, realise their future potential and transform their place in the world around them, we must give them the literal and metaphorical voice to do so. This is why oracy is an educational imperative. **F**

Isobel Plant is head of engagement at the oracy education charity Voice 21

DRIVING FORWARD

Cash will be needed to address the crisis on our buses — *Graham Chapman*

Bus travel in the UK is transport's poor relation. That is probably because it is not a preferred middle-class mode of transport: it is certainly not the choice of politicians or most journalists. As a result, it does not receive the obsessive attention that either road or rail command. Yet as a country, we make 4.5 billion bus journeys a year, compared with 1.7 billion rail journeys.

Bus services in the UK are facing a crisis. Even before Covid, bus usage was stagnating. Since the pandemic, numbers have not recovered, reaching only between 80 and 90 per cent of their pre-Covid levels.

To give it some credit, the government has put £1.7bn into various bus grants to keep the network flowing, and has incentivised investment in new electric bus fleets. Its latest initiative, the £2 single fare cap in England, has had some success – mainly in rural areas – but is unlikely to turn things around. Government efforts seem to be geared towards cushioning decline rather than providing a basis for a relaunch.

This is evidenced by the reluctance of many companies to take long-term decisions. Many are revising and reducing their bids for government funding to electrify their fleets, and there is reduced investment in depots and the extremely expensive infrastructure required to supply electricity, with the life cycle of existing diesel fleets instead being prolonged. Companies are reducing routes both in terms of frequency and network – all signs of a declining industry, uncertain about its future.

Needless to say, this makes a nonsense of the role buses were predicted to play in the government's levelling up policy. It also poses problems for Labour. Keir Starmer's party, though, has a better understanding of the stagnation of current national bus policy and the importance of bus travel both to communities and the economy. In response, it has come up with a two-part approach.

The first part is to encourage franchising. Franchising means that fares, timetables and routes are no longer at the discretion of the operator but are set by the locally elected transport authority – council, mayor, or combined authority. It already exists in London, and, after much difficulty, is now being implemented in Manchester by its elected mayor, Andy Burnham. Labour's second policy strand is to relax the restriction on local authorities from setting up their own new municipal bus companies.

But herein lies the rub. There is no doubt that the most satisfactory way of running a bus company is via public ownership. A testimony to this is the success of Nottingham City Transport (regular winners of the UK Bus Operator of the Year award, with the highest passenger satisfaction levels in the UK) and the other nine municipal bus companies. However, what Labour's approach has failed to recognise is that the concepts of franchising and municipal bus companies are not always compatible.

Franchising in its current form will allow the big non-municipal players in the bus market to undercut any municipal undertaking, both new and existing. The nascent municipals are particularly vulnerable. They will not be able to take advantage of the economies of scale enjoyed by the large private undertakings. The private sector will also not be required to provide the hugely expensive but legitimate pension benefits expected of a municipal undertaking; nor will it respect the same level of working conditions or levels of compliance as local authorities.

Lastly, there is the fundamental problem with the franchising regime: by setting the fares and routes, and wielding such extensive control, the franchising authority will automatically be transferring the financial risk back to the public sector. With limited funding available to local government and little prospect of serious improvement, for many it may be a financial risk too far.

What conclusions can we draw?

First, we need to separate out the two processes. If an area wants to establish a municipal bus operation, or already benefits from a municipally owned service, it should be able to opt out of franchising.

Second, if a council or combined authority wishes to establish its own bus company, the best way to do so is to purchase part or all of a going concern. The obstacles to creating a company from scratch are so rebarbative as to condemn the initiative from the start.

And third, if an area opts for franchising, then there has to be a substantial and enhanced 'quality' basis to the franchise – for example, in relation to fleet renewal or staff conditions – as well as some financial risk sharing in order to prevent undercutting of the municipal option.

Finally – and critically – we need to consider the degree to which the post-Covid industry can survive without long-term subsidies, given the shrinkage in the customer base, the additional capital requirements, and added fuel costs, and the extent to which any government can afford to maintain, let alone expand, that subsidy.

Given the financial commitment required to sustain even the existing infrastructure and the potential cost of the new proposals, it will be interesting to see what Rachel Reeves has to say about the matter. F

Graham Chapman is a Labour councillor in Nottingham and chair of Nottingham's municipal bus company, Nottingham City Transport

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COMMUNITY GOALS

A footballing success story has lessons for councils and communities — *Basit Mahmood*

A fairytale story of success against the odds; one of grit, determination and a refusal to lie down and die even when things looked entirely impossible. That's the story of Luton Town, a football club whose narrative stands in stark contrast to the glitz, glamour and obsession with multi-million-pound record breaking TV deals and transfers that we are so often used to in football.

For Luton Town's story is intertwined with that of its local community, a predominantly working-class town that has shown equal grit and determination to carry on when things got tough. The success of Luton Town in making it into the Premier League, rising from non-league near-oblivion just a few years ago, is one in which so many in the Luton community played a part. Unlike so many football clubs whose sheer wealth has insulated them from their local communities, Luton has embedded itself in the town, lifting not only itself but also the communities it serves. It has sought to improve not only the economic wellbeing of its community, but also social cohesion in a diverse town where the far right has sought to pit communities against one another.

Luton's story is one that underlines the importance of anchor institutions – large organisations which have a significant stake in their local communities and are unlikely to relocate. Anchor institutions possess sizeable assets that can be used to support health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities. They can contribute to wider outcomes in their local area, whether that be through staff recruitment, their purchasing and investment power or their outreach work.

In Luton Town's case, its outreach has included a community trust, which works tirelessly with the local community, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to help raise aspirations and improve life chances. Around 44 per cent of those who engaged with the trust live in neighbourhoods amongst the top 30 per cent most deprived in the UK, and 70 per cent live in the top 40 per cent most deprived. The trust's latest impact assessment report found that for every £1 spent to deliver its programmes during 2015, approximately £4.60 was generated in social cost savings to the local community.

The trust also delivers more than 70 free hours of curriculum PE classes every week, which reach over 200 school children each day.

Of course, other football clubs engage in outreach work, but what makes Luton special is its minority fan ownership, which has helped to ensure that it is rooted within the communities it serves and understands the challenges facing people in the town.

But football clubs are just one form of community anchor institution: others include local authorities, NHS trusts, universities, trade unions and large local businesses. Their potential needs further harnessing if we are to transform outcomes for local communities at a time of public sector cutbacks.

Both local and national government have a vital role to play in supporting anchor institutions to boost their local economies and improve social cohesion. Local authorities should place this kind of community wealth building at the heart of their economic plans and strategies, and appoint a cabinet lead or deputy mayor for co-operatives and community wealth

building to ensure the focus on anchor institutions is maintained.

On a national level, the Co-operative party has set out improvements to procurement rules, such as ensuring that public bodies publish their social value priorities and the weighting of their contracts, which would increase the flow of wealth back into local communities.

More also needs to be done to shift the focus away from what external providers can do for communities to focusing on what local institutions are already doing, so that they can be supported to further improve their communities.

The story of Luton Town FC shows how an institution rooted in its community, through its ownership or ethos, can improve local outcomes. Anchor institutions have a vital role to play in transforming local communities and their power needs to be harnessed. **F**

Basit Mahmood is the editor of Left Foot Forward and a Labour councillor in Luton

A SORRY SAGA

Barges are not a solution to the asylum crisis — *Lloyd Hatton*

The saga of the Bibby Stockholm barge is emblematic of this Conservative government. A senseless and unworkable policy, chaotically implemented, which almost immediately becomes the target of derision.

I was born and grew up in Weymouth, the seaside town which looks out to Portland harbour where the barge is now moored. Unsurprisingly, my friends, family and neighbours are all opposed to its use as floating accommodation for asylum seekers. I have been out campaigning in the area and the barge is the top concern raised with Labour party activists.

The situation is doubly frustrating when you consider that public services and the local economy have received such a raw deal from successive Conservative governments. A nearby community hospital has seen many of its key services suspended since the pandemic. Local schools are struggling to balance the books while raising standards. High streets and small businesses have been hit hard by the cost of living crisis. Police stations have been shuttered and bus routes and train schedules stripped back. Essential services which we all rely upon have been decimated.

Across the constituency voters feel frustrated and ignored. The Home Secretary was able to ram the barge scheme through without any effective opposition from the local MP. For 13 years, the Conservatives have had no understanding of how their misrule has negatively impacted coastal communities. The Bibby Stockholm is symbolic of this neglect.

There is huge potential in coastal communities like Weymouth and Portland, but it is not being realised. The current government is more interested in using our town to host political gimmicks and wage culture wars than unleashing that potential.

As the asylum crisis rumbles on, it is important for the Labour party to lead the debate while the government flounders. We must repeatedly highlight that, as well as being inhumane and unsafe, the barge categorically fails to achieve the government's stated aim – to reduce the financial cost of the asylum crisis.

Earlier this year, an extortionate £1.6bn deal was struck to supply three barges. To date only one barge has arrived, raising immediate questions about value for money, and its installation was repeatedly delayed, which will mean additional bills.

Since the Bibby Stockholm's arrival, not only has it been flagged as a potential fire risk, but legionella bacteria has been found in the water system, sparking the evacuation of the first asylum seekers to have been moved on board. Any repair works needed to avert a catastrophic fire or public health crisis will be costly. Mercifully, the Fire Brigades Union and the Labour mayor of Portland have shown real leadership, bringing forward legal challenges to block this floating hazard.

The public purse has also been paying the privately owned port millions of pounds to host a boat that has sat empty for the summer. To make matters worse, Dorset's cash-strapped local authority has been tasked with providing some key services for asylum seekers, but national government has failed to set out exactly how it will meet these costs.

The Home Office is burning through public money, all while local services are cut to the bone and economic growth is choked off. This wasteful scheme should have no place in Weymouth and Portland – nor anywhere else.

In stark contrast, Labour's Home Affairs team has already set out a practical five-point plan for tackling the asylum crisis and for closing down the barges, hotels and army bases that are being used, at great expense, to house asylum seekers. For many coastal communities looking on in horror, Labour's cost-effective alternative is the light at the end of the tunnel. Labour's shadow frontbench now has a golden opportunity to robustly articulate how an incoming Labour government would bring this humanitarian crisis under control and stem the indefensible squandering of taxpayers' money.

Conservative politicians often weaponise memorable and snappy slogans. Who could forget 'Take Back Control' and then 'Get Brexit Done'? It is now time for Labour to deploy a similarly laser-focused political message. One which sums up our approach, inspires public confidence, and addresses the frustration felt locally.

That message should be 'Shut It Down'. Because the barge is cruel and unfit for purpose. Because it is a hideous waste of taxpayers' money which could instead be invested into coastal communities. And because the local community has been ignored for far too long.

The Bibby Stockholm barge is the inevitable end-point of 13 years of Conservative failure. An incoming Labour government can hit the reset button – ending this disastrous scheme once and for all. F

Lloyd Hatton is a Labour councillor in the London borough of Camden and a community campaigner

UNCERTAIN TERRAIN

The Saudi-Iran deal may not be the end of Yemen's problems — *William Figueroa*

The China-brokered Iran-Saudi normalisation deal has been lauded by many for driving a 'wave of reconciliation' across the region, especially after the local rehabilitation of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, and discussions of a detente between Iran and Egypt and between Saudi Arabia and Israel. But perhaps the most tantalising scenario was the possibility that the agreement might lead to a lasting peace in Yemen, which has been caught in a deadly conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Iranian-backed militant political movement ʾAnṣār Allāh (Supporters of God), popularly known as the Houthis, since 2015. The war has cost the Saudi state billions of dollars, led to the loss of over 350,000 lives, and created a serious humanitarian crisis in the country. A ceasefire was signed in 2022, but although the guns have stopped firing, the potential for a resumption of violence remains lurking beneath the surface. So what can we expect from Beijing's efforts to play peacemaker in the region?

Assessing the impact of China's policy on the war requires us to answer two questions: first, to what extent was the agreement the result of China's influence, and second, to what extent will the agreement impact the prospect for peace in Yemen? As far as the first question goes, the answer is quite clear: China played a critical role in bringing the deal across the finish line, but the groundwork for it was laid by the two states themselves, and their motivations had little to do with Beijing. One of the main drivers of Saudi Arabia's desire to negotiate with Iran was the escalating cost of the war coupled with the lack of any real results. The conflict was causing the state to haemorrhage money at an alarming rate – money needed to carry out Mohammad bin Salman's ambitious Vision 2030 project. And after seven years of fighting, the Houthis seemed more entrenched, not less. The first signs of Saudi willingness to negotiate came just one month after a major drone strike brought nearly half the kingdom's oil production temporarily offline, simultaneously demonstrating the ineffectiveness of Saudi strategy and the inability of the United States to prevent such attacks.

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To put it simply, Saudi Arabia seems to have decided it was losing the war, and was seeking a way out long before Beijing came along. While China was instrumental in bringing the two parties to the table, it is likely that Riyadh would have found a way to save face and reduce its military commitments regardless. The Saudis likely think the Chinese will provide a safeguard against potential attempts by Iran to reignite the conflict, but the reality is that Iranian officials are as eager to withdraw as the Saudis are, especially given the ongoing civil unrest and economic turmoil in the country, and have less influence over the Houthis than imagined.

While China brought both parties to the table, it notably did not involve the Houthis, and the immediate reaction from the country has been less than encouraging. Speaking just after the agreement was announced, a Houthi spokesperson said that the Houthis were not 'suboordinate' to Tehran and that "resolving the Yemen issue [can only be achieved through negotiations] between Sanaa and Riyadh, and not Tehran and Riyadh." Since then, negotiations that began the month after the agreement was announced have collapsed, and the Houthis are refusing to negotiate with the Saudi-appointed government in Sanaa, who they call 'mercenaries' of the Saudi-led coalition, despite urging from both the United States and China. While the fragile peace has more or less held, there are signs that violence could break out once again, with the government warning of military escalation by the Houthis, and the Houthis threatening a renewed civil war over the issue of unpaid civil servant salaries.

In short, the issues that threaten to drive continued conflict in Yemen are ones over which the Chinese have little control. In fact, they are issues that few people outside of Yemen or Saudi Arabia have any influence over whatsoever. When it comes to non-payment of civil service salaries, for example, what can Beijing and Washington truly do? More fundamentally, the political and economic grievances that sparked the conflict to begin with have largely gone unaddressed, and after effectively winning a draw-out fight of attrition against a heavily-armed, well-funded adversary, why would the Houthis surrender their position and accept less than what they demand? China, for its part, seems to be willing to hedge its bets, work with all sides, and position itself to be the economic partner of choice for reconstruction when the dust settles. We shouldn't expect more than that. F

Dr William Figueroa is an assistant professor of the history and theory of international relations at the University of Groningen

Britain 2037

Thirteen seems to be a special number for British governments. New Labour governed from 1997 to 2010, and the Conservatives have been in power for the 13 years since. The Fabian Review asked a group of politicians, experts and campaigners to set out what a Labour government could achieve in the same amount of time. Then, a second set of authors writes to us from 2037, 13 years after Rishi Sunak called an election in the spring of 2024 – heralding a brighter, more prosperous Britain.

Charles Clarke
on rebuilding the state

The past 13 years of Conservative government have eroded the confidence of millions of people in our essential institutions and in the basic fairness of our society. NHS waiting lists are unacceptably long; post-Covid, our education system has lost its vitality; the transport system is riven by incoherence and inconsistency; and the criminal justice system has lost the confidence of the population it serves.

As such, the top priority for the incoming Labour government is to restore confidence in and stabilise these core dimensions of every household's basic existence. Resources and political energy have to be targeted, with the needs of the consumer at the forefront. This is the foundation upon which our country's growth and productivity will be rebuilt.

The second stage of Labour's plan for power will involve three big reforms, each of which, in its own way, is at least as great a challenge as the establishment of the NHS and the welfare state in the 1940s. They are:

- The creation of coherent, high-quality education and care for children between the ages of 0 and 5. Labour's Sure Start programme was an immense and popular step in this direction which the Conservatives vandalised.
- The establishment of a system of long-term social care in old age in order to give the whole population confidence in their futures.
- Root and branch reform of housing to ensure that individuals and families get the housing they need at the appropriate phase of their life.

Each of these ambitions need resources, and what all three have in common is that the resources need to be fairly provided by a combination of public and private money. People already spend large amounts on these things without getting good value because of the incoherence with which they are currently organised.

That means facing up to the incompetence of our whole system of taxation and public spending in order to ensure that the people's money is spent on the purposes to which they give value.

Labour will green our national life and reform our local government and parliamentary institutions so they serve the needs of the country. And Britain needs to rediscover the respected place in the world which it lost after 2010, largely but not only because of Brexit. **F**

Charles Clarke was Home Secretary from 2004–6 under Tony Blair

Catherine West MP
on foreign affairs

More than a decade of failed Tory prime ministers and endless rounds of economic mismanagement has left our country poorer, more unequal, and with a growing sense of national malaise.

This is particularly true in foreign affairs. Boris Johnson and his followers often talked of 'Global Britain', but the truth was very different. Under Johnson, Truss, and Sunak, the British government threatened to break international law, abandoned our global leadership on climate action, and walked away from the top table, with Rishi Sunak skipping the keynote UN gathering of world leaders in September.

We can – and we should – do better. Under a Labour government, the next 13 years can offer a renewed sense of optimism and conviction for Britain's future.

David Lammy, the shadow Foreign Secretary, has outlined our ambitions to reconnect Britain with the world and put climate action at the centre of Labour's foreign policy, alongside reinstating our respect for international norms, ensuring global corporations pay their fair share and defending multilateralism. Taken together, these priorities point towards a Britain which, by 2037, will have returned to the global stage as a confident and reliable partner, world leading in climate diplomacy and giving hope to a new generation. **F**

Catherine West is the Labour MP for Hornsey and Wood Green and a shadow minister in Labour's foreign affairs team

Pat Cullen
on healthcare

The next general election will be a pivotal moment for the future of nursing. By 2037, we must ensure that we have fair pay for nursing and safe staffing ratios in a well-functioning NHS in every UK nation. It is what our patients and nursing staff deserve.

In 2022, nursing staff took industrial action for the first time in the RCN's 107-year history. After years of under-investment and real-terms pay cuts, nursing staff felt they had been pushed to the edge. There are over 40,000 vacant nursing posts in the NHS in England alone, which has created unsafe conditions, with far too few nursing staff per patient. This leads to a vicious cycle; taken together with a lack of career progression and professional development, such conditions mean that more nursing staff leave the profession. Recruitment is suffering, too – students are being put off ever entering nursing because they will be saddled with high student debt and a salary out of line with their skills.

All political parties should be aware of the changes our profession needs to see when writing their next manifestos and we will be unapologetic in our asks. Regardless of which rosette those in charge wear for the next 13 years, we need to ensure that training, safe ratios, and pay are addressed so that we can begin to rebuild our nursing workforce.

For many years, we have been undervalued and undermined. We have been subject to unprecedented challenges, including a global pandemic that came on the back of NHS underfunding and years of below inflation pay deals. The 13 years to Britain 2037 cannot be like the last 13. **F**

Pat Cullen is general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing

Jatinder Hayre
on the NHS

Third world medicine in a first world country: it's 2023, and this is the state of the NHS after 13 years of Conservative mismanagement. Under the previous Labour government, the NHS was the jewel of the nation and the envy of the world. Now, our beloved health system is suffering from challenges historic in magnitude: an ever-growing waiting list of 7.6 million, each individual representing a person suffering and the total number representing a nation in ill-health; a workforce crisis, with a shortage of 12,000 hospital doctors and 50,000 nurses; and record underfunding, the likes of which have never been seen in any developed nation. Never before has a government been so contemptuous of the health of its nation. Through equal-parts incompetence and ideology, our NHS has been understaffed, underfunded and underappreciated.

There is one hope: Labour. Only a Labour government can heal a broken health system and a nation that is suffering. The architects of the NHS can also engineer its healing.

So, let's look forward to 2037. Labour has won its third successive term in parliament with a respectable working majority. The last 13 years have seen record investment into the NHS; medical school places have doubled, as has the number of trained nurses; the NHS is thoroughly digitalised, with integrated AI workflow; and GPs can be accessed within two days – unheard of in the Conservative years. The NHS has been restored to its rightful place as a national treasure: a source of unifying pride for the nation.

The fight for the survival of the NHS after the regressive decade of Conservative government was two-pronged, relying on both restoration and revolution. The basic restoration of of the NHS had to take place first. Then, 13 years of Labour revolutionised the NHS, with predictive medicine, genomic therapies, and innovative imaging – and, perhaps more significantly, a paradigm shift towards preventative medicine and tackling health inequity across all domains. **F**

Jatinder Hayre is an NHS doctor, health inequalities researcher and journalist. He is a national spokesperson for Keep Our NHS Public

Melanie Smallman
on the environment

2037 is a key date for the UK. As per legislation passed in April 2020, it is the legally mandated target for reducing carbon emissions by 78 per cent compared to 1990 levels. Although it passed said legislation, the current Tory government is making negligible progress, risking us being left behind in the global race for a low carbon economy and the growth it will bring. The first 13 years of a Labour government, then, will be crucial for our planet – and for our economy.

Under Labour's Green Prosperity plan, by 2037 the UK will have had clean electricity for seven years already, with the publicly owned GB Energy helping deliver clean electricity nine times cheaper than imported fossil fuels. Bills will be stable and low for households and business. And with public investment in the green economy having reached £28bn a year, around 1m new green (and unionised) jobs will have been created, with more in the pipeline as the private sector releases capital to invest further in our low-carbon future. Energy independence will also be transforming foreign relations, with the UK no longer reliant on oil imports from unstable or authoritarian regions and environmental standards built into international trade negotiations.

After 13 years of Labour government, the UK should be winning the global race for the green industries of the future, growing the economy in all parts of the UK and leading the struggle to save our planet. **F**

Melanie Smallman is a former chair of SERA and a member of the Labour party national policy forum

Anas Sarwar MSP
on Scotland

Scotland, 2037: a Scottish Labour government at Holyrood is working hand in hand with Keir Starmer's government at Westminster, devolving power into our communities and leaving the politics of division in the past. GB Energy, headquartered in Scotland, has made Britain a clean energy superpower, cut bills across the UK and delivered thousands of green jobs to Scotland. Poverty has been tackled head-on, with Labour's New Deal for Working People putting money in the pockets of millions of workers and ending unfair working practices. And once more, the Scottish economy is growing, with government working together with businesses and workers to make Scotland a great place to live, work and do business in.

But how do we get there? Scotland in 2023 is a very different place. After 16 years of SNP control in Holyrood and 13 years of Tory failure at Westminster, the very foundations of our society are crumbing. Our NHS is on life support, with 1 in 7 Scots on waiting lists. Economic growth in Scotland is lagging behind the meagre growth seen elsewhere in the UK. Homelessness – almost eradicated by the last Labour government – is once more on the rise.

And everywhere, the SNP and the Tories are stoking the politics of division and culture war to distract from their failings. After the last period of prolonged Tory rule, Labour said that 'things could only get better'. Frankly, it is hard to see how things could get any worse than they are now.

It will fall to the entire Labour movement to pull together to create the fairer, greener and more prosperous United Kingdom of the future by addressing the priorities of the British people. We must put the cost of living crisis front and centre of our plans for the country, forcing down bills and putting more money back in the pockets of working people. We must be bold in delivering the publicly-owned energy company that we need to put our country at the vanguard of the green energy revolution and end our dependence on despots like Vladimir Putin.

And we must be clear that we can only deliver better public services by working with businesses to grow the economy – we cannot tax our way out of economic decline.

The scale of the task before us is indisputable. But every time that this country has needed Labour, whether amidst the rubble of the second world war or the privations of the Thatcher-Major period, we have delivered the change that we need.

Let's get to work, so that once more we can make Scotland the country we all know it can be. **F**

Anas Sarwar MSP is leader of Scottish Labour

Eloise Sacares
on climate adaptation

Climate change is happening. Even as Labour tries to reduce emissions and mitigate its impact, the party must recognise that some degree of climate change is now inevitable.

As a result, Labour must think about what the future will look like, accept that the UK is woefully underprepared, and set out robust adaptation policies.

By 2037, even with significant global progress towards net zero, the UK will have more frequent and severe flooding, heatwaves, and drought. This kind of extreme weather threatens the fundamentals of our everyday lives, and the poorest in society will suffer most.

First, health. In the future, extreme heat could risk the health of those people most exposed to it, like builders and kitchen staff. We currently have a legal minimum working temperature, but no maximum. This is something Labour could consider.

Second, infrastructure. We must reduce water demand and leakage, and increase supply – not least by ensuring water companies pay, rather than profit, when they fail to adapt. 'Natural infrastructure', like trees, swales and rain gardens will be important to reduce flooding and overheating in urban areas, as well as improving wellbeing and absorbing carbon.

Third, homes. Labour's plans to improve energy efficiency through retrofitting should also include measures to adapt to climate change, ensuring that homes do not overheat in summer. And they should consider tightening planning rules, to ensure new-build homes don't require costly retrofit in years to come.

Climate change now poses a very real risk to our health, our infrastructure and our homes. By 2037, we could either be facing the consequences of business as usual, or have built a climate-adapted Britain. It is up to the UK to choose its path. **F**

Eloise Sacares is a researcher at the Fabian Society

Rory Palmer
on crime and policing

Come 2037, it will be more than 40 years since 'tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime' became the lodestar of Labour's approach to criminal justice. This approach will be just as relevant in the 2020s – and 2030s – as it was then. The Conservatives have broken our criminal justice system.

Keir Starmer's Labour is meeting peoples' expectations head on. People expect visible, properly-resourced neighbourhood policing and a criminal justice system that does what it is meant to do: secure justice for victims through solving crimes and ensuring perpetrators are punished.

So to 2037: 13 years in office will have seen the next Labour government deliver falls in crime, a rebuilding of neighbourhood policing and the ambitious renewal of the criminal justice system.

There are more police, with 13,000 new frontline recruits on the beat, equipped with the modern resources needed to ensure policing is responsive to the complex digital challenges of the 2020s and 2030s.

Labour's missions to halve violence against women and girls and halve knife crime have been driven through cross-government approaches, underpinned legislatively and through new specialist units.

Progress has been secured year on year in these crucial missions. People feel safer, and confidence in the police is on a consistently upward trajectory. Through a whole-society approach and empowering local systems, Labour has broken the costly cycle of reoffending. The collapse in charge rates has been reversed through innovative joint arrangements between the police and Crown Prosecution Service and the Victims' Commissioner has new powers to strengthen support for victims.

Recognising the grave state injustices of the past, Labour has put a Hillsborough law on the statute book.

After 13 years of decisive leadership and intelligent statecraft, the next Labour government will have secured what the public expect: safer streets, properly-resourced, responsive neighbourhood policing and a rebuilt, effective justice system. **F**

Rory Palmer is the Labour and Co-op candidate for police & crime commissioner in Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland

Julie Ward
on Europe

The EU is likely to look radically different by 2037, with a swathe of new members including Ukraine, Moldova and possibly Georgia, as well as the remaining Balkan states, whose isolation outside the bloc is increasingly problematic given the Kremlin's imperial ambitions. The broader international picture will be different too: the EU-ACP partnership looks set to usurp the Commonwealth as former colonies, taking a lead from Barbados, loose the shackles of British sovereignty.

What could this mean for the UK? Cut off from our nearest neighbours, we already struggle to exert significant influence at an international level. The fabled 'pork markets' of China and other hyped-up trade deals have failed to generate the lucrative returns promised by Brexiteers. A generation of young people denied opportunities afforded by Erasmus+ will demand its reinstatement along with freedom of movement.

The Labour party must therefore play catch-up with a public who increasingly favour rejoining the EU. Cooperation with Scottish, Welsh and Irish independence parties will be necessary for a functional government (with a possible referendum on Irish reunification and a new Scottish indepdence referendum) and this will come with pro-EU conditions.

The path to rejoining will be slow, not least because the bloc will be more cohesive, and so less inclined to entertain an unreliable and temperamental partner. A Labour government's first task must be to rebuild trust. Appointments to key positions such as Europe minister will be hugely important.

By 2037, most Brexit harms could be undone – for one, the inappropriately named Windsor Framework could be replaced with a new St Brigid's Framework, in honour of the patron saint who supported abortion on demand (and could turn water into beer!). We would be back in the customs union and single market, Erasmus+ and Creative Europe. Newry and Dundalk would be named joint European Capitals of Culture. We would regain key roles within Horizon research programmes. Furthermore, Labour could lead the way on creating safe and legal routes for all those seeking sanctuary across Europe, thereby ending the obsession with small boats, floating prisons and deportation flights for good, setting new European and international humanitarian standards. **F**

Julie Ward is a former Labour MEP for North West England

The Labour party must play catch-up with a public who increasingly favour rejoining the EU

Keir Mather MP
on industrial strategy

If Labour earns the right to govern for 13 years, we will have the opportunity to implement a modern industrial strategy to build economic growth, protect UK interests and enable British firms to compete on the world stage.

Getting there will require genuine partnership between business, government and trade unions. A Labour government will build this new consensus on deeds, not words.

Reforming business rates and the apprenticeship levy will allow firms to play their part, investing more in innovation and equipping workers with futureproofed skills. The New Deal for Working People will empower trade unions to fight for growth that is both pro-business and pro-worker. Our Green Prosperity Plan and commitment to make, sell and buy more in Britain will enable a Labour government to rebuild our industrial base, win the race to net zero, and protect our energy supply from autocrats.

Right now, UK firms are suffering under a rudderless government too weak to deal with labour shortages, supply chain disruption and price hikes that define the cost-of-doing-business crisis. In 13 years, Labour could offer an antidote to this chaos, providing UK PLC with a long term industrial strategy, regulatory certainty, and reassurance that we share their ambition to lead the world in green investment, AI and advanced manufacturing.

The opportunities for business in the next two decades are Britain's for the taking. It will be the duty of a Labour government to seize them. **F**

Keir Mather is the Labour MP for Selby and Ainsty

Letters from a better Britain

Miatta Fahnbulleh
on devolution

Twenty years on from the Brexit referendum, the slogan 'take back control' finally has meaning in communities across the country. Rising living standards have been sustained for a decade, and communities which for so long were held back by Tory economic failure are on the rise. People are beginning to feel that they have a real stake in the economy, and can feel the benefits when it does well. Homes are being built; new bus, tram and rail networks are connecting the country; and our neighbourhoods, towns and cities have a new lease of life.

The catalyst was a new Labour government, determined to reverse 13 years of decline, pushing through a radical programme of devolution in its first 100 days. The 'Take Back Control' Bill, as it was popularly know, was bold, brave and decisive. It devolved a third of Labour's £28bn a year green investment pledge to local areas alongside new tax powers and control over education, skills, employment support, energy, housing, planning and local transport.

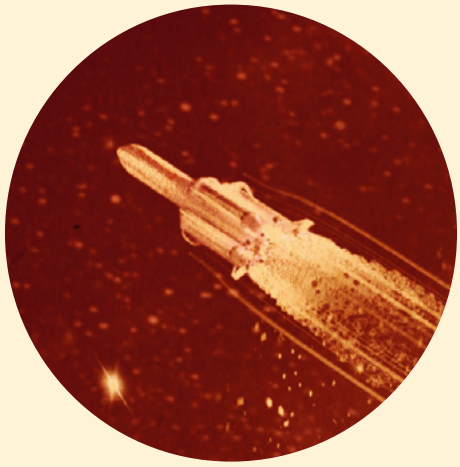
In return for these powers, a new generation of directly elected regional mayors – supported by combined authorities – were tasked with driving economic change in their communities. New partnerships with local businesses, trade unions, public institutions, and community groups were forged to drive the place-based economic revival. Local leaders successfully used the procurement and investment power of the local state to create new green industries and rebuild local services – unlocking millions of good jobs that pay decent wages. And through a boom in cooperatives & community ownership, people in every community have a direct stake in the new industries and services that have sprung up. People feel power and agency for the first time over the foundations that shape their lives. And the promise of change feels real. **F**

Miatta Fahnbulleh is chief executive of the New Economics Foundation and Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for Camberwell and Peckham

Lis Wallace
on global justice

To understand the Britain of 2037 – a Britain that has enjoyed 13 years of Labour government – you must look beyond our shores, and beyond Europe, to the rest of the world.

Because 2037, and Britain's place in it, has been moulded by our ability to respond to the global challenges and opportunities of the present era. The threats of climate change, food insecurity, pandemics, instability and conflict have been mitigated, reversing the decline during the first decades of this millennium. What changed was that under 13 years of an internationalist, progressive Labour government, Britain pushed for a fairer and more equal global system.



By reorienting British foreign policy to be more respectful and solidaristic, particularly with the global south, the UK helped bring about a more equitable and prosperous future for all. By supporting African countries to harness renewable energy sources, a greener future now lies ahead. Reforms of the development finance system, supported by the UK, have unlocked huge sums of money for low-and-middle-income countries to build resilience and invest in infrastructure. By adopting a 'prevention is better than cure' approach to humanitarian crises, Britain has helped avert emergencies. By promoting partnerships that build global health security and endorsing efforts to manufacture vaccines on the African continent, it has helped ensure the world as a whole can respond to health threats more effectively, wherever they are, creating a more equitable, healthier and prosperous world for all.

Britain in 2037 is more appreciated by the global community; we are their partner of choice. Not only have progressive international policies shifted power, tackled inequalities and transformed the future for so many around the world, but British people are safer, healthier and wealthier as a result. **F**

Lis Wallace is director of UK policy and advocacy at The ONE Campaign

Jeni Tennison
on digitalisation

It's hard to believe the tech we rely on in 2037 hadn't been invented when Labour came to power. And hard to remember how out-of-control everything felt, with anti-AI strikes, data-centre-driven water shortages and election-compromising deep-fakes – not to mention vague threats of extinction – making us feel that tech was something we could only react to, never shape. How did the Labour government turn it around?

First, it didn't just believe that artificial intelligence could be used for public good, but insisted it had to be. Scorning market-driven hype cycles, Labour targeted digital public-sector procurement and research and development spending to focus on the most important problems, including the climate crisis and improving quality of life. It invested in public connectivity, data centres, and digital and data infrastructure, with subsidies at the community level, making tech development easier and cheaper as well as returning value to the public purse.

Second, it made people power a reality. We've all seen coverage of the national citizen assemblies, from the seminal Democracy Digitised, now more than a decade old, to last year's somewhat controversial AI for a Healthy Britain. Closer to home, many of us have participated in deliberations about digital adoption in our workplaces, schools and communities. Having a powerful say has helped us understand tech and enabled us to welcome it on our own terms.

Finally, re-establishing the UK's international reputation has paid off in the tech

space, and we've played a useful role in brokering concrete global agreements to ban lethal autonomous weapons, crack down on deepfakes and reward creators. It's a far cry from Sunak's tech-bro posturing and the exclusionary 'Global AI Safety Summit' of 2023.

It hasn't all been smooth sailing. But we've had clear leadership, a bold vision, and ministers who are both passionate and sceptical about technology. The last 13 years have rebalanced the relationship between people and technology: no longer resigned or fearful, we are free to embrace innovation with optimism. F

Jeni Tennison is the founder and executive director of Connected by Data. She is also co-chair of the data governance working group at the Global Partnership on AI

Paul Martin
on housing

When Starmer's Labour government came to power, housing was a major national problem, affecting almost everyone in a way it had not done since 1945.

Labour set as its strategic aim "a decent home for all," and recognised that average earnings and the typical cost of housing had to converge as soon as possible.

Ministers and local councillors were determined to press ahead. They knew that increasing the supply of high-quality homes was crucial and set about tackling the key obstacles: a lack of skilled labour and shortages of materials.

Priority was given to building affordable council properties with the twin aims of meeting the needs of the poorest and helping to bring down the cost of private renting.

At national level, ministers drew on the lessons of a century before, examining the failures and successes of early 20th-century legislation. They decided that the market would not provide unless it was politically directed and driven, so they led a task force which brought together construction firms, trade unions and training centres committed to their programme.

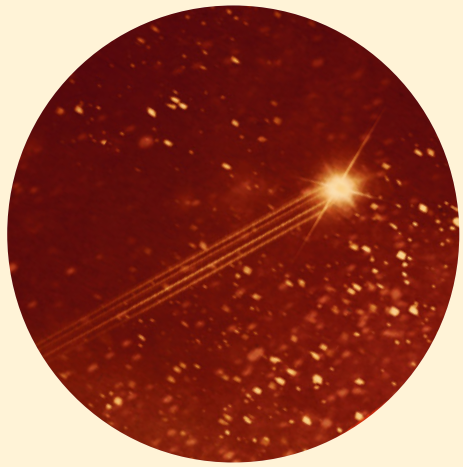
After far too long out of power, Labour ministers and local councillors quickly relearned how to make good things happen and at speed.

As well as funding new-builds, Labour set about the key task of retrofitting older homes, ensuring that funding streams were focused, legal frameworks were fit for purpose and environmental standards would be met.

British people today, the overwhelming majority of whom live in secure, high-quality and affordable housing, have Labour to thank: it met the challenge of the era. F

Paul Martin is policy lead for the Labour Housing Group

Praful Nargund
on skills and training



After a sustained period of progressive government, much has changed for the better for people in the UK. Thirteen years of Labour government have delivered a growing, green economy, and a transformation in public services. Satisfaction rates for the NHS are at record highs. Inequality has decreased and opportunity has been hardwired into the system of school, college, university, and work. The 'class ceiling' has been smashed and the country has experienced a skills revolution.

At the heart of this change was comprehensive reform to education and training. The starting point for incoming Labour ministers back in 2024 was getting a solid grip on the skills agenda. The Tories had failed dismally on skilling the workforce. They had cut funding for further education, messed up apprenticeships, botched T-levels, and presided over chaos in the universities. They left office with many British workers lacking the right skills to face the future.

Labour knew that education and training had to match economic needs and therefore had to be as flexible and fluid as the fast-changing economy itself. No more false divides between education, training, and apprenticeships, and no more snobbery and stigma attached to 'vocational' pathways. No more sclerotic bureaucracy. No more silos.

The new national skills taskforce – Skills England – proved a guiding force for the skills revolution, and was soon emulated across the devolved nations. Unions, employers and providers sat around the table together to drive forward the skills revolution.

The Labour government leaned into advances in technology, ensuring that technology became a liberator rather than a master. Just like Labour in the 'white heat' of the 1960s, Labour embraced the opportunities that could be extended to all. A new era of lifelong learning emerged, with every generation learning the digital skills to adapt to the new challenges of work. Britain solidified its position as a world-leader in AI and digital tech, overcoming the lottery of background and birth to release new innovation, improved productivity and growth.

Putting businesses and trade unions at the heart of the process proved effective. The system flexed to the needs of employers – more short courses, more modular courses and a transformation of the apprenticeship levy. Revamping the schools curriculum and creating an energetic new careers advice service for all young people was another positive reform.

The measure which most changed public attitudes towards apprenticeships, especially among potential recruits, was introducing an apprentice minimum wage in line with the national minimum wage. With this single act, the government signalled that we value apprentices and apprenticeships. As notable economists showed, including the Fabian Society's own report in 2028, the upfront cost of a minimum wage for apprentices was recouped many times over in returns to the economy.

Lastly, Labour's skills revolution has played a significant part in greening the British economy. For decades, the talk of 'green jobs' had been woolly and unfulfilled. Now at last, British workers could receive real skills training in the jobs that a green economy demands. From construction workers building zero-carbon homes, to insulators retrofitting buildings, to urban farmers, to entrepreneurs in the fields of fashion, recycling, design or renewables, British workers got the skills to get on. F

Praful Nargund is an entrepreneur and campaigner on skills. He is part of the Labour party's Council of Skills Advisors and a Labour councillor in the London Borough of Islington

LOCAL HERO

The transformation of Britain will begin at the regional level, Andy Burnham tells *Kate Murray*

When the change the country so desperately needs finally comes, it might arrive not with great fanfare in a King's Speech, but on the back of a Manchester bus. For, according to Greater Manchester's mayor Andy Burnham, the introduction of the Bee Network – Greater Manchester's new integrated transport system – is a sign of better things ahead, not just for the region's commuters but for people right across the country. Burnham says the new network, due to launch just after we speak for this interview, shows just what devolving power out of Westminster can do.

"English devolution in the city regions is coming of age," he explains. "When buses here go back under public control, I think it will send a message to all parts of England that devolution is changing the governance of the country. It's changing the way big important services are run. And actually it's the first time that a big decision of that kind has been made outside of Whitehall."

Devolution, Burnham argues, offers a fresh vision for a country battered by austerity, the cost of living crisis and a crumbling public realm. "Devolution is the gateway to more hope. Because if people feel there's something they can do, even though times are tough, and that there's a greater sense of possibility or agency at the local level, that actually helps build hope," he says. "So this move that Greater Manchester is making to take control of buses, I think that should be like a bit of light in the gloom: 'well hang on a minute, why can't we retake control of rail? Why can't we retake control of other essential services? Why can't we have more locally owned energy of the kind that Labour signalled at the conference last year?'"

Burnham famously made the move into regional government in 2017 after 16 years as a Labour MP, including a stint as health secretary. His national profile means he's always asked (including by me) whether he will return to national politics. But doesn't the question itself underline one of the problems with devolved government in that it is consistently undervalued in comparison with Westminster?

"It's a mentality that we all share to some degree, which we've all grown up with, which is that Westminster is the only show in town," Burnham admits. "I honestly think it's a really outdated mentality. Because the 21st century is going to be more about change driven by cities and city regions – bottom-up change. The kind of thinking that says everything has to be controlled and legislated for I don't think ever particularly worked but it really won't work in the 21st century. England, and I would say the rest of the UK, is crying out for deeper devolution."

For himself, Burnham says he will definitely stand for a third term as mayor – and in doing so help Westminster to reform itself.

"I think this phase of my political journey is best served in establishing a new tier of governance for England, and properly establishing it rather than doing half a job," he says. "I have nothing against Westminster but I think increasingly Westminster needs to reform itself by giving more power to places like Greater Manchester. So we create the opportunity for the reform of Westminster."

Burnham's 'bottom-up' perspective includes a rejection of national one-size-fits-all policies in favour of a more personalised approach.

Take housing, for example, where Greater Manchester has created the 'bed every night' scheme to tackle rough sleeping and has, along with Liverpool and the West Midlands, adopted a 'housing first' approach, which focuses on providing a stable home for vulnerable individuals before addressing other support needs.

"Homelessness is an issue that is experienced very differently when you're sitting where I am, as opposed to sitting in Westminster or Whitehall," Burnham says. "It's devastating for anybody to spend even one night out on the streets because that does catastrophic damage to physical and mental health – it's got to be viewed as a health emergency. I think when you're working from the bottom up, you look at issues like that differently. I always say you see names, not numbers."

"When you're working from the bottom up, you look at issues like homelessness differently. I always say you see names, not numbers"

He adds: "With housing first, if you set people up to succeed and you give them the time and space to recover, they will recover. If you leave people trapped in the tyranny of the benefit rules and the housing allocation rules, the way that those rules conflict with people's recovery path means that you end up constantly paying for crisis and failure."

Of course, a preventative approach is all well and good. But too often, the rhetoric around levelling up or more local decision-making is undermined by a lack of resources. And the crisis in funding for local authorities – which are in Burnham's words the 'bedrock' of devolution – makes change at a local and regional level much more difficult.

"I've been in national government, and I've now been in local government. What I would say is, in my experience, national government wastes far more money than local government. Local government takes a long-term place-based approach. National government deals in short-term initiatives, gimmicks. Often things don't last the term – when a minister goes on the merry-go-round, then the whole thing changes and something else comes in."

Burnham believes the attitude towards local government needs to change, with an end to the 'supreme arrogance' coming out of London – a phrase which seems particularly apt in light of the row over the Manchester leg of HS2.

"It's interesting to sit from my perspective and see actually how wasteful national government is [with] people's time and their morale. Making us bid all the

time – it's debilitating," he says. "We've got to the point now where councils have been bidding in to build things like public toilets through the levelling up fund. Surely councils should have a level of funding in their base budget to provide essential facilities in their local areas. But no, they've become the sort of thing that you've got to bid for."

"That distrust of local government began in the 1980s and I think has continued pretty much ever since," he adds. "We did some things when we were in government to reverse it, but not enough I would say. I think you've got to start thinking of local councils in a different way. They can't carry on as they as they are."

On a more positive note, Burnham points to the contribution of all of the city region mayors in shifting the national debate. "I think we've changed the conversation with regard to regional fairness, and in time, it will benefit people everywhere for the regions to be heard more powerfully in Whitehall and in the national media," he says. "There is just a huge disparity between life in some parts of the country compared to others. That sense of two countries and the unfairness that comes from that is a big problem for Britain. The cohesion of the country is weakened by that sense that things are unequal. I think mayors have started to correct that."

"I fell out of love with the Westminster obsession with point scoring and who's up and who's down"

Burnham has made transport a priority because, he stresses, it is crucial not only for growth and investment but also for the quality of people's everyday lives. Should he be elected for a third term, he says he will focus on skills and the 'poor relation' of our current education system – technical education.

"We've had a situation for decades where technical education has been allowed to be a distinctly second-class option and where young people have been left without really knowing what their options are. They're just left to find their own way if they're not on that university route. And that is a generator of inequality."

"I think what we're beginning to do is roll back the 1980s and the deregulation and the fragmentation that that [era] brought – the idea that everything needs to be broken up. I think what we're doing is glueing it all back together again. So we've glued the transport system back together again. And then the next one is to start to look at doing the same for skills and technical education. Getting people working as part of networks and systems as opposed to this idea that everyone's got to compete to the nth degree. It's not worked, it really hasn't worked."

With a general election on the horizon, Burnham is hopeful that Labour in power will give city mayors more tools to make change in their areas. But is he worried about the party increasingly boxing itself in on future spending? As a veteran of the last Labour government, he says not. "It's good discipline – I remember [the same] discipline pre-97. I think only making a commitment when you know you can fund it is not a bad principle."

What he would like to see from Labour, however, is a commitment to spending to save when it can. "You do need to indicate your priorities as far as resources allow," he says. "You could take an issue like the two-child [benefit] rule. When you sit where I am, you can actually see the extra cost that that creates. The two-child rule, when you combine it with the benefit cap and the freeze on local housing allowance, is forcing thousands of families into temporary accommodation. There's been a massive rise in family homelessness across the country. So actually, those policies, if you look at it in the round, they don't actually save money."

The Burnham approach, then, would involve a greater focus on prevention, as well as more devolution to allow money to be spent more effectively. The Department for Work and Pensions budget is one example, he believes, where devolving spending could lead to much better returns. If the next Labour government wants to be a reforming government, it should be looking at such a place-based approach. "If you're talking about an era of constrained resources and if you are talking about the need to reform public services, as I'm hearing shadow ministers say, it shouldn't be going back to the reform of the 2000s, which was seen as a byword for outsourcing and privatisation. It should be to go in the opposite direction, to bring things back in-house, but then integrate them to create a place-based approach to public services."

The localised approach which Burnham advocates extends beyond services. His decision to U-turn on a vehicle charging zone for Greater Manchester because of the cost of living crisis has been controversial: some have argued that he was proved right by the unpopularity of London mayor Sadiq Khan's ULEZ scheme and its role in the Uxbridge by-election defeat. Others have seen the decision as an abdication of the fight for clean air. But Burnham suggests it was actually a sign of his place-based philosophy. "I'm ambitious and radical on public transport," he says. "I actually think that is our route to clean air – and I personally believe that's a better route for us. We're different from London – the London context is very different from ours."

So is Burnham a pragmatist or a radical? It depends, he says – and the joy of being Greater Manchester mayor means he can be both.

"I'm actually in the end interested in progress and change," he says. "I actually fell out of love with the Westminster obsession with the game and the point scoring and who's up and who's down. I really in the end didn't feel I could achieve what I wanted to achieve through politics by living in that world. I also felt increasingly that Westminster makes a fraud out of good people. Because you've got to toe the party line, you've got to follow the whip. It can have an effect on people where you end up looking like something you're actually not.

"This job allows me to be ambitious, radical, pragmatic – and gradual, which I need to be, because I can't change everything overnight." **F**

Kate Murray is editor of the Fabian Review

The home environment affects a child's development more than any other factor. The impact of poverty, especially, can be profound. Homes without enough food, stimulation, and with strained relationships frequently leave a lasting negative impact.

Child poverty has become increasingly common over the past decade, and during the cost of living crisis, already dire circumstances have been made worse. This panel will discuss ways to give children the best possible start by encouraging positive development in the critical first 1001 days of a child's life, and the role of policymakers in achieving such a vision.

Join the Fabian Society and UNICEF UK at Labour party conference to discuss these issues with Shadow Minister for Early Years Helen Hayes MP at 11am, Monday 9 October, Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool

Back to the future

Is Starmer another Blair? That might be the wrong question, writes *Colm Murphy*

Dr Colm Murphy is a lecturer in British politics at Queen Mary University of London. His book, Futures of Socialism: 'Modernisation', the Labour Party, and the British Left, 1973–1997, is published by Cambridge University Press.

Political journalists are herd animals. Like deer bolting at the sound of a snapped twig, they have consulted the polls, glanced at their calendars, and have now begun urgent attempts to divine the worldview of the likely future prime minister, Keir Starmer.

Articles about Starmer's 'vision', or lack thereof, did the initial heavy lifting. However, writers on Starmer's Labour have also turned to the living past. From the Times to the Guardian, New Statesman to the Spectator, comparisons with Tony Blair, and speculation about his enduring influence, have become a recurring trope.

It is true that, as the only Labour leader to have won an election still with us, Blair haunts Starmer. Moreover, neither has discouraged the comparison, even sharing a stage in July. Veterans of the New Labour era, such as Deborah Mattinson and Pat McFadden, are in positions of influence over electoral strategy and macroeconomics, while Blair himself intervenes on everything from AI to net zero. Looming over the upcoming wrangling about the 2024 manifesto is Gordon Brown's review of devolution and the House of Lords.

Yet any historical parallel has the potential to mislead if stripped of relevant context. This is a particular danger with something as mythologised and contested as New Labour. It is also a danger if we define the analogy too narrowly, a risk one might take by speaking of "Clause IV on steroids", or by reading 2024 through the essay question "1992 or 1997?"

New histories of New Labour

My new book, Futures of Socialism, shows that we must look further back, into the 1970s and 1980s, to understand both where New Labour came from and what its emergence meant for social democracy in Britain, past and present. It offers a fresh, original account of Labour's 'modernisation' debates from 1973 to the 1997 landslide.

As Fabians will know well, 'modernisation' is the catch-all phrase for Labour's trajectory after it ceded power to Margaret Thatcher in 1979. It usually refers to the reforms of Neil Kinnock, John Smith, and especially of Blair and Brown. This 'modernisation' has well-known, well-worn staging posts: the 1983 electoral disaster, Kinnock's battles with Militant, the adoption of the red rose logo, Clause IV, the landslide.

These were pivotal moments, and Labour undoubtedly needed to adapt to social, economic, and cultural change. But this story endures partly thanks to New Labour's creators, who saw themselves as modernisers overcoming the bastions of 'Old Labour' to save the party. It also persists because Blair's critics found it convenient to attack a 'vanguard' of right-wing 'modernisers' for abandoning socialism.

Rather than rehearse these old, factionalised stories of New Labour as either salvation or betrayal, I went back to the archives. Diving into the vibrant, fractious, and now quite strange world of the left at the close of the millennium, the book tracks political and ideological change using various sources: the papers of politicians, parties, and pressure groups; newspaper and periodical back catalogues; and the many, many books and pamphlets on the "future of the left".

One telling example comes courtesy of John Rentoul, the Independent's veteran columnist and Blair's biographer. In 1989, he wrote an essay for New Socialist, Labour's now defunct in-house journal. Rentoul was responding to Kinnock's policy review, another of those well-known landmarks in Labour's 'modernisation'. The Review dropped nationalisation pledges, shifted tack on European integration, and abandoned unilateral nuclear disarmament.

Rentoul's essay explored alternative manifestos for 'modern socialism'. In one playful passage, he imagined the year 2000. Whom, he asked, will Neil Kinnock, now 'Grandfather of the Nation', praise in hindsight? Potential candidates included the "market socialist philosophers of the Fabian Society", Patricia Hewitt, Giles Radice, Gordon Brown, Austin Mitchell, Ben Pimlott, Carmen Callil, and the publication Samizdat.

Some of these names are familiar characters in Labour's 'modernisation' – Brown most obviously. But many others

are not. Carmen Callil, the founder of the feminist press Virago? Austin Mitchell, the Eurosceptic Croslandite MP? The now long-forgotten intellectual journal Samizdat? In 1989, Rentoul did not know which would become significant. Nor did anyone else.

Many modernisers

Rentoul's essay illustrates a wider point. In the late 20th century, British socialism confronted profound threats, opportunities, and transformations: electoral defeats, neoliberal advances, globalisation, deindustrialisation, European integration, changing gender roles and a new politics of race. Scores of thinkers and politicians thus argued that Labour must 'modernise'.

Importantly, they came up with *different* answers and competed for influence. Kinnock, Smith, Blair, and Brown were among them. But so were politicians from Frances Morrell to Michael Meacher, and outsiders including consultants, trade unionists, academics, feminist theorists, journalists, think tankers, and campaigners.

What does this suggest? For one thing, that New Labour was not the inevitable outcome of 'modernisation'. Had the dice fallen differently, the left could plausibly have taken another modernising path. In the late 1980s, for example, the 'modernisers' included the Labour MP Bryan Gould. A Eurosceptic and committed Keynesian – so not very New Labour – he tapped into fashionable neo-corporatist ideas to advocate employee share ownership plans and consumer empowerment, and receiving glowing coverage in the New Statesman and Marxism Today as a result.

New Labour was not the inevitable outcome of 'modernisation'. Had the dice fallen differently, the left could have taken another path

Similarly, early 1990s 'modernisers' included centre-left feminist policymakers like Hewitt and her parliamentarian ally Harriet Harman. Stressing changing gender relations in the labour market and the family, they argued that a modernised left should refocus its social policy towards flexible workers and women.

Futures of Socialism does not just recover old ideas from obscurity. It is a political history: it asks why some ideas shape powerful people, and why others do not. One chapter explains why scattered arguments that linked modernisation to 1980s antiracist politics did not catch on within the upper echelons of the party.

In addition, Futures of Socialism overhauls our understanding of New Labour itself. It uncovers direct links between this pluralistic ideological ferment and Blair and Brown's policy platform.

For instance, New Labour's sweeping claims about 'globalisation' as a driver of modernisation were anticipated by 1970s socialist economists, such as the Bennite-adjacent thinker Stuart Holland. Its historic constitutional reforms – brand-new parliaments and assemblies in Edinburgh and Cardiff, the Human Rights Act – owed much to campaigns to modernise the constitution after 1987. Finally, New Labour's focus on the 'knowledge economy' drew from an entrenched social-democratic obsession with modernising the economy.

All of this has implications. It is still true, and still important, that Blair and Brown conceded significant ground to the ascendant neoliberal right in their quest for power. Nonetheless, it is historically untenable to frame New Labour as merely a surrender to Thatcherism – or, indeed, as simply a fatalistic response to constraints. It was one product, if not the inevitable result, of this collective reinvention of social democracy.

Lessons?

What can this history tell us about Starmer's Labour today? In a LabourList article on Starmer's perceived lack of vision earlier this year, I identified two takeaways.

First, if it is too entrenched, a vision can become a millstone. Futures of Socialism catalogues many politicians getting trapped in agendas that outlived their initial plausibility. The Alternative Economic Strategy (1973–83) is one example; New Labour's pre-2008 celebration of the London financial sector's 'innovation' is another. Starmer's office should avoid cornering themselves into an overly rigid agenda.

Second, a plausible and coherent vision will, by strategic necessity, emphasise some ideas and shut down others. The left often has a surfeit of policies. The usually more urgent question for an opposition leader is what to champion, and what to cull.

These two takeaways are challenging to reconcile. Any solution will be politically controversial: we will all give different answers to the second question. We cannot discount the role of contingency (or dumb luck) either. But strategically speaking, it would be wise for Starmer's team to disentangle these competing logics by first staking out their territory for the next election campaign, and then preparing the ground for a potentially changed context, whether before or after 2024.

Today, Labour's agenda seems most developed on the green transition, backed up by pledges on industrial policy and significant – if watered-down – spending commitments. There is also an emerging agenda in areas from planning reform to workers' rights. In an interesting break from Blair, Starmer has pointedly chosen to speak the language of class.

However, there are reasons why critics, such as James Butler in the London Review of Books, speak of Starmer's 'radiant ambiguity'. Labour's policy offer on the NHS, post-Brexit trade, care work, migration, welfare, higher education, prisons, and public sector pay is underresourced and underdeveloped, and in some cases divisive. There are also tensions between different aspects of Labour's agenda, such as devolution and planning reform, or investment and macroeconomic credibility. All could become derailing or defining crises.

Starmer won't keep everyone happy. If he does win power, though, he should keep some old think tank reports in a drawer – and not just from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, but also from the Fabians, the IPPR, Demos, and Common Wealth. In time, he may need them. **F**

New dynamics

Katy Hayward explores what two new governments might mean for Northern Ireland – and why it matters

Katy Hayward is professor of political sociology at Queen's University Belfast. She is a former senior fellow of UK in a Changing Europe and is currently a Europe's Futures Fellow as part of a partnership between ERSTE Stiftung and the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM).

Despite the political chaos that followed in its wake, the governments of both the UK and Ireland have been remarkably static since the financial crisis. The Conservatives have been in government in Westminster for 13 years; in Dublin, Fine Gael has clung onto power since 2011, albeit reliant on horse-trading with their rivals-turned-partners, Fianna Fáil. But all that may be about to change. The next general election in the Republic of Ireland is due by March 2025, but it may well come earlier – perhaps even before the United Kingdom's. If the elections in each country lead to new parties holding power in Dublin and London, the interaction between the two will produce unfamiliar political dynamics in Northern Ireland. The fallout could be damaging for both the UK and Ireland unless properly anticipated and managed.

Northern Ireland, of course, is becoming all too used to not having a governing executive of its own. If we understand the present impasse in Stormont as rooted in unionist anxiety about the integrity of the UK union, it is clear that Northern Ireland's current crises are connected to the anticipated results of the next general elections.

Sinn Féin has maintained a considerable lead over all other parties in Irish opinion polls for over two years; indeed, the gap between them is now typically more than double that at the 2020 general election, when it won the most votes. The party's success then provoked shock and consternation – to such a degree that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil took the unprecedented step of going into government together, along with the Green Party, to keep Sinn Féin out. If the party's victory is even more decisive next time, it could be morally – not to say practically – difficult for the other parties to stand in its way.

Sinn Féin is becoming used to shattering established electoral patterns. It emerged from the 2022 and 2023 elections in Northern Ireland as the largest party in terms of both vote share and seats – in the case of vote share, by a considerable distance. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)'s decision to block the functioning of the Northern Ireland Assembly and formation of an Executive does not diminish the significance of such results; indeed, it only makes it more likely to see them repeated, as voters of different hues express frustration at DUP tactics by casting a vote for Sinn Féin. Moreover, data from the NI Life and Times Survey (NILT) shows that, quite logically, support for devolution is declining in the absence of functioning devolved institutions.

For unionists of all shades, accepting power-sharing with Sinn Féin in a Northern Ireland Executive is one thing – the power of any one party is held in check by that of the others – but having them as a sovereign government south of the border is quite another. According to 2022 NILT data, unionist distrust of the Irish government is already fairly high (54 per cent); so too is their distrust of the British government (42 per cent). Such distrust is likely to immediately grow should Sinn Féin or Labour win power. This is likely to weaken the willingness and capacity of unionists to be accommodating, as is necessary for power-sharing to work.

For unionists, accepting power-sharing with Sinn Féin is one thing – but having them as a sovereign government south of the border is quite another

All this underlines the vulnerability of the institutions set out in the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Voters north of the border broadly accept the need for reform, but this would require multi-party talks. Any such negotiations would necessarily also involve the Irish and British governments. In the past, both have been able to act as relatively 'impartial' arbiters because their parties have had no presence in the NI Assembly. Experience shows that a successful outcome depends on the common position held by the British and Irish governments. If Sinn Féin were in power in the south, some of the unwritten assumptions and 'ways of doing' such negotiations would have to change. Even agreeing on this would be an early diplomatic challenge.

Post-election discomfort may not sit with unionists alone. If there were two changes of government,

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the SDLP might for the first time feel more affiliation with the governing party in London than in Dublin. The SDLP is at the heart of the constitutional Irish nationalist tradition shared by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Irish Labour. The 1998 Agreement reflects much of what the parties jointly fostered as common principles, rejecting the use of violence to achieve political objectives. The Irish government's negotiators of 1998 admitted that part of their motivation was to curb the political rise of Sinn Féin as well as to remove the military threat of the IRA. It was not anticipated that, 25 years on, the party would be the largest in both jurisdictions on the island.

Sinn Féin, in contrast, saw that possibility and planned for it. Its supporters view electoral success in the Republic as a vital step towards realising their aspiration for unity. Their sense of confidence may be further boosted by the mere fact of a Labour government in the UK, notwithstanding the fact that, in recent years, the decisions of the Conservative party and DUP have inadvertently done wonders for Sinn Féin's prospects. A Sinn Féin government in Dublin would consider it politically necessary to be seen to prepare the ground for unity and will be explicit about its wish to see the break-up of the UK, albeit through 'democratic and peaceful means'.

Nevertheless, there will be no rush to a border poll. Sinn Féin will be wary of 'scaring the horses' of non-aligned voters in Northern Ireland (whose votes they would need in such a referendum) and of foreign governments and investors. Besides, the decision on the timing of a border poll would lie in the hands of the British government.

According to the 1998 Agreement, should it look likely that a referendum on unification would receive majority support in Northern Ireland, the British government is obliged to call one. Peter Kyle, when shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, said that, if in power, Labour would set out the criteria to assess whether such a majority exists. How that judgement would be made is currently unknown. On polling data? Votes in the NI Assembly (were it sitting)? First preference votes in elections? Or perhaps a combination of these and other factors? Whatever decision is made will likely have tangible consequences for Northern Ireland politics. For example, if weight is given to an Assembly vote, it will incentivise nationalist participation and could make unionists more wary of the same (see above); or if first preference votes are to be counted as a sign of views on unification, Sinn Féin may receive fewer 'protest' votes. We can be sure that the Irish government would be scrutinising the process of determining such criteria closely, not least because Sinn Féin would be aiming to meet them.

The scope for diplomatic awkwardness is vast. The Labour government would be dealing, on the one hand, with Sinn Féin ministers in a devolved government within the UK and, on the other, with them as government of a neighbouring state. Internal party communication and coordination in Sinn Féin is notoriously tight. Across the water, communication and coordination from and within Whitehall (especially between the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign Office) on devolution-related matters will need to be rapidly improved. This could benefit the cohesion of the whole UK, although sensitivity should be shown to the uniqueness of Northern Ireland's situation. The independence of its civil service, for example, will remain important to preserve.

Another way in which Northern Ireland blurs the lines between devolved affairs and foreign affairs is through the Windsor Framework. New governments in the UK and Ireland would prompt adjustments to both relationships with the EU. Labour's Five Point Plan 'to make Brexit work' includes a veterinary agreement with the EU on agriproducts. This would ease border control frictions, not only across the GB-EU border but also for GB-NI movement of goods. In this case, many of the special arrangements for Northern Ireland that remain a cause of concern for unionists would fade away. It would also benefit wider internal UK relations in both practical and political terms.

Should Sinn Féin and Labour both win, uncertainty will persist and complexity will grow, but we should not anticipate an earthquake in British-Irish relations. The foundation of their relationship must remain the Good Friday Agreement. In 1998, the governments committed "to the protection of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights in their respective jurisdictions". Those principles and protections are under greater pressure than at any other time in the post-war period. For Labour and Sinn Féin to hold true to them would be in the interests of both the UK and Ireland and their constitutional futures, whatever they may be. **F**

Ambitious vision

A Labour government could be the catalyst for a new era of organised labour, writes *Gary Smith*

Gary Smith is general secretary of the GMB union. He was previously the union's Scotland secretary.

The strikes that rocked employers and the political establishment in 2023 did not represent a return to a bygone era, as some have claimed. These demonstrations of worker power represent the start of something new.

Not before time. It is increasingly hard to deny that our country is in decline. The UK may have been the birthplace of the industrial revolution, but we are now better known for leading the charge towards deindustrialisation. Surviving industries are buckling under unsustainable energy costs while the promised 'green jobs of the future' have failed to materialise. The neglect of our industrial base is cruelly exposed as industrial-scale war returns to Europe.

As the UK's economy fragmented, organised Labour suffered. Under any sensible analysis, the decline of the trade union movement should have set alarm bells ringing in Westminster and Whitehall. Collective bargaining is the only effective mechanism for ensuring the fair distribution of wealth at source, and the fragmentation of the UK's system of industrial relations has opened the door to a wider hollowing out of our economy.

If alarm bells did ring, they went unheeded, and we can see the effects all around us. Real wages are lower than they were 15 years ago. The income and wealth gap between the richest 1 per cent and the rest of the country is widening. In the public sector, workers have endured the sharpest pay cuts since records began; unsurprisingly, vacancy rates are now at critical levels. The failure to invest enough is fuelling voters' dissatisfaction, and the underfunding of our schools, councils, and hospitals is a drag on the economic growth that the country needs.

The country is crying out for better, but the industrial relations rules and structures that we operate within are not fit for the challenge. This failure has serious consequences for us all, and it poses big questions for a Labour party on the cusp, hopefully, of forming the next government.

There are other important problems that Labour will have to contend with. Manufacturers are constrained by exceptionally high energy costs and the terms of a bad Brexit agreement. Key manufacturing and engineering skills are being lost, and investment is increasingly attracted overseas. Our essential infrastructure, unprotected by weak regulation, has been opened up to private equity profiteers – with predictable consequences for sectors from utilities to high street retail and social care. People who depend on those services and the workers who supply them are all paying the price.

Labour's challenge now is to reshape the economy in a way that strengthens workers' voices in the workplace and wider society

The UK's publicly listed companies are increasingly dominated by overseas shareholders. Already, we have one of the lowest levels of domestic ownership in the OECD. Workers – and even management – are disempowered as a result. Investment decisions are more likely to go overseas.

In other words, the 'productivity puzzle' – much studied by politicians – is not such a mystery to GMB's members. Radical change is needed if the UK is to break

out of its diminishing cycle of low wages, low investment, and low growth.

A Labour party in power will have to actively embed pro-union policies in its industrial strategy. It would at least have an example to build on. Under Joe Biden in the US, federal subsidies are tied to the creation of good, unionised jobs, and his administration is delivering record growth in manufacturing employment. I've heard directly from our sisters and brothers in the US labour movement about how these successful policies were designed with unions round the table. Ahead of next year's presidential election, these policies represent perhaps the best bulwark against the political disenchantment, so crucial to the election of Trump, that follows in deindustrialisation's wake.

Biden has also sought to extend as an object of policy "the dignity and respect that comes with the right to union organize and collectively bargain". Workers are represented in trade talks, for example. The contrast with Conservative ministers, who often seem to be prisoners to past conflicts and an ideological hostility to unions, could not be starker.

We should not seek a carbon copy of the Democrats' agenda – our national circumstances are too different. But Biden's approach points to the almost wartime scale of the response that our shared challenges demand.

Neither should we seek a rerun of relations after 1997. The last Labour government instituted some important new rights after the near-dismantling of our industrial relations framework under Thatcher and Major, but lacked a clear vision for the role of trade unions. Some of the advances made between 1997 and 2010 have since been unpicked. As a result, our industrial relations system remains calcified and archaic.

There are, though, reasons to be optimistic. Labour party conference is due to debate the final National Policy Forum report, the last stop on the road to the manifesto. GMB was part of the discussions that led to its final draft. While no document will satisfy everyone, we must not lose sight of the historic importance of its commitments: electronic balloting; a right of access to organise in workplaces; enhanced redress for equal pay injustices; new bargaining structures covering more than two million low-paid workers in social care and schools; reforming the statutory recognition process, the weaknesses of which are ruthlessly exploited by employers like Amazon; and a voice for workers in the making of economic, industrial, and trade policy. All these pledges are essential foundations for a modern industrial relations framework.

This is not about trying to turn the clock backwards. Society and the world of work have changed profoundly since 1979. We need something new. Labour's challenge now is to reshape the economy in a way that strengthens workers' voices in the workplace and wider society. That is the route to a better, growing economy, where the proceeds of labour are shared by all.

Our union is a critical friend, and we do not hesitate in our criticism when it is due. GMB is challenging local authorities which shamefully permitted pay structures that discriminated against women, including in some Labour-run areas. In my view, Labour is yet to set out a wholly convincing plan for how it would address the critical challenges of energy sustainability and security. In any case, we are clear that we do not look to political or institutional saviours. The infrastructure of trade union education and the vitality of our democratic structures can only be rebuilt and strengthened by our own efforts. Organised labour does not solely exist to secure redress against workplace injustices – trade unions advance working people's interests everywhere.

But Keir Starmer's pledge to use the power of state procurement to advance union recognition, and Rachel Reeves's articulation of an agenda based on strengthening our economic security, are welcome signs that Labour is listening. As we approach the election, GMB's members are looking to Labour as a credible alternative party of government.

Labour has set its own aim of securing economic growth based on investment, skills, and higher wages. It is an ambitious and necessary commitment and to realise this aim, Labour should make the rejuvenation of workers' self-organisation an essential objective of its political economy.

As it approaches what may be its last conference before the election, Labour should articulate a vision for how the New Deal for Working People will prepare the way for the industrial relations framework of the future. GMB's members, and the country, are waiting. **F**

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A progressive shift

Women have been switching to Labour in increasing numbers – but many of their votes are still up for grabs. *Christabel Cooper* explains

Christabel Cooper is director of research at Labour Together and a former Labour councillor in Hammersmith and Fulham

In their paper, Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World, American academics Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris identified a trend that played out across the developed world. In the immediate post-war period women had tended to disproportionately vote for right-wing parties and men had disproportionately voted for left-wing parties. But as women moved into higher education and paid employment in greater numbers, this gender gap reversed. Women became more likely than men to vote for progressive parties.

This was certainly the case in America. From 1980 onwards, the Republican party moved strongly to the right on social issues, such as abortion, where men and women are often divided. As a result, women voters – who had backed the Republicans up until this point – turned to the Democrats, with women disproportionately voting for the Democratic candidate in presidential elections from 1980 onwards.

But in the UK, a similar shift did not happen. Although Britain might often feel like a divided nation, polarisation around social issues in the UK is in fact far lower than in the United States. The Conservatives in government did not adopt extreme positions on issues like abortion or the death penalty. Particularly in the post-Thatcher era, a relatively liberal social consensus existed between the New Labour and Cameron governments. Arguably there was too little ideological difference between the two parties on social issues to persuade women voters to start backing Labour. It is also worth noting that the Conservatives have provided Britain with all of its female prime ministers. New Labour's landslide victories saw Labour win many more votes than the Conservatives, amongst both women and men. However, in 1997, Labour was still winning more of its votes from men. Following the 2005 and 2010 elections, where the percentage of men and women voting Labour nearly equalised, David Cameron re-opened the gender gap in 2015, with women representing 54 per cent of all Conservative voters.

Labour's lead over the Conservatives is 28 points among women, compared to 22 points among men

It was not until the following election that the pattern began to change. In both 2017 and 2019, Labour won a significantly larger proportion of its votes from women, while the Conservatives won most of theirs from men. This trend continues to the present day. Labour Together's polling shows that Labour's lead over the Conservatives is 28 points among women compared to 22 points among men.

This turnaround has received surprisingly little attention. Commentators have often looked to demography to help explain the recent convulsions in British politics. They have chronicled the gradual breakdown of the historic relationship between social class and voting behaviour. They have explored how voting habits have become polarised around age, with younger voters now overwhelmingly backing Labour and older voters overwhelmingly supporting the Conservatives. Many have also noted the shift in the politics of university graduates who used to lean Conservative, but now mostly vote Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green. The shift in the voting intention of women, however, has gone largely unnoticed.

To understand why women are now turning to the Labour party, we carried out two waves of polling. We found three principal reasons why women are now disproportionately backing Labour: financial insecurity, issue prioritisation and a growing ideological difference between young men and young women.

Financial insecurity

Financial insecurity pushes voters towards Labour. In Red Wall, Red Herring? Economic Insecurity and Voter Intention in Britain, a report for the Nuffield Politics Research Centre, Jane Green and Roosmarijn de Greus illustrated that a lack of economic security is linked with voting Labour and, conversely, that being economically secure drives voters towards the Conservatives. Our polling showed that those who feel "very worried" about

their finances are nearly six times more likely to vote Labour than Conservative.

The polling also showed that women are more likely to report financial insecurity than men (58 per cent say they are worried or very worried about their finances, compared to 49 per cent of men). Overall women are a little more pessimistic than men about the likelihood of the UK's financial position worsening over the next 12 months. This heightened sense of financial insecurity among women accounts for some of the disproportionate support Labour currently enjoys among women.

Issue prioritisation

Men and women also tend to prioritise different issues. In our survey, respondents were asked to name the most important issues facing Britain today. There is a long history of women citing healthcare and education as more of a priority than men, and our data shows significant gaps between the percentage of men and women who believe these are among the most important issues facing the country. Women are also more likely than men to prioritise social care. Men, meanwhile, were more likely to prioritise the economy, defence and immigration.

We looked at which issues the public thought Labour would handle better than the Conservatives. There is a clear pattern in which the issues on which Labour leads the Conservatives by wide margins are the ones prioritised by women rather than men. For instance, Labour has enormous leads on health (42 points), social care (41 points) and education (27 points). In areas which men tend to prioritise over women, such as immigration and the economy, Labour's lead is under 10 points.

Attitudes among the younger generation

Although women of all ages are more likely to support Labour than men of a similar age, this is particularly true of young women. Seventy per cent of young women aged 18 to 24 intend to vote Labour compared to 53 per cent of young men. When we looked at left-right economic views among men and women who are over the age of 25, we found little difference between them. Similarly, there was no significant differences in attitudes along a liberal-authoritarian axis in this age group. But this is not true for the youngest group of voters. In their attitudes to both economics and society, young women are more progressive than young men. This helps explain why 18 to 24-year-old men are now twice as likely to vote Conservative than young women, and three times more likely to support Reform.

Again, this pattern forms part of an international trend. In America, young women are now significantly more liberal than young men. And worryingly, across Europe, young men are much more likely than young women to support far-right or populist right parties.

Why women will be crucial to the next election

Finally, it is important to note that women voters are much more likely than men to answer 'don't know' when asked about their voting intention (23 per cent of women say that they 'don't know', compared to 13 per cent of men). Crucially, this does not mean that they are less likely to vote, just that they are more likely to make their minds up closer to a general election. Most of the undecided voters that Labour needs to win over during a general election campaign will be women. Currently, the votes of around 5 million women are still up for grabs – more than enough to turn the result of that election.

In America, an increasingly deep polarisation over social and cultural issues is driving women towards the Democrats. In the UK, women's disproportionate support for Labour is driven less by ideology (except among the youngest voters) and more by financial insecurity and the belief that Labour is better at dealing with the issues they care about – particularly on public services. This makes women's support contingent on Labour continuing to put forward a more convincing offer than the Conservatives on these issues. An economic recovery by the time of the next election could reduce financial insecurity and could pull many of the 5 million 'don't knows' back towards the government.

It is good news for Labour that the UK is now in line with other developed democracies, where women have moved from supporting right-wing parties to supporting progressive ones. But in Britain, left-wing parties cannot take the support of women voters for granted. Their votes must always be fought for and won. **F**

How men and women prioritise issues

Blue shading indicates that women prioritise this issue more than men. Red shading indicates that men prioritise this issue more than women.

	Female	Male	Difference
Cost of living	64.3	58.1	6.2
Health	45.9	37.0	8.9
Economy	44.4	48.4	–4.0
Energy supply	30.8	34.1	–3.3
Immigration	24.6	27.9	–3.4
Environment	23.5	22.1	1.4
Social care	21.5	13.7	7.7
Brexit	14.6	17.7	–3.1
Housing	13.6	11.4	2.2
Education	13.4	8.3	5.1
Crime	11.6	12.0	–0.4
Defence and security	7.4	11.2	–3.9
Tax	7.0	9.7	–2.7
Childcare	6.1	3.8	2.3
Welfare	5.8	5.8	0.0
Pensions	5.5	6.2	–0.8
Job security	3.7	2.7	1.1
Transport	2.5	3.1	–0.6

Golden rules

Labour is determined to show it cares about sound public finances. But to sustain its programme in government, it must show its vision for the future too, argues *Stephen Beer*

Stephen Beer has been a leader in ethical investment in the City of London for the past 30 years. Currently leading on climate engagement for a large investment company, his previous roles include chief investment officer for the Methodist Church. This essay represents his personal opinion.

"I agree that public services need more money, but why is it taking so long?" That was the question I addressed in a campaign leaflet when I was a parliamentary candidate in 2001. My answer? "We had to get the economy into shape first. Now local schools, hospitals, and transport services are getting the funding they need. That will only continue under Labour."

Such was the backdrop against which we fought that election, defending the huge majority won four years previously yet dealing with the frustration from the public at the slow pace of change. The campaign began inauspiciously. I remember listening to the news while driving between campaign sessions on the day of the manifesto launch. The prime minister, Tony Blair, had been challenged on NHS failures by a member of the public in front of cameras; the Home Secretary was slow handclapped at a Police Federation conference; and, to top it all off, the deputy prime minister punched a protester who had hit him with an egg. And these were the professionals. I admit I felt a bit better about my own campaign.

The pressure to respond to public pressure for change was keenly felt. After years of restraint, Labour needed to show it had taken the necessary economic measures to enable higher public spending. Sometimes spending pledges were rolled up together, which soon sparked some cynicism. Labour's business manifesto highlighted a promised £180bn spending on transport, where the infrastructure was clearly failing. On closer inspection, this sum was spread over 10 years and included private investment. The effect on some voters was actually negative. Nevertheless, what mattered was that Labour was saying it was going to increase spending on vital public services. And, winning that vital second term, it did.

Labour's first term in office for 18 years had been characterised by following Conservative party spending plans at the beginning, subsequently keeping spending restrained, and following fiscal rules which only permitted additional borrowing for investment or, for current spending, balanced over the cycle. Labour had been determined to show it could be trusted on the economy. It beat the Conservatives on economic competence measures in opinion polls after the disastrous exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and, for those times, high levels of government debt, but no one knew how durable that lead was. In the run-up to the 1997 election the question hung over the party – would it be prudent once actually in power? Everything was committed to demonstrating the answer was yes. Fail at that and Labour would fail to deliver its progressive vision for society.

So far, the progressive party is progressively outlining what it will not do. Spending pledges are kept to a minimum

Labour today is taking a similar approach. Spending pledges are kept to a minimum. So far, the progressive party is progressively outlining what it will not do. It will not, at first, invest £28bn a year in pursuit of net zero; it will not raise the burden of taxation beyond Conservative plans; it will not introduce a wealth tax. It will not, so to speak, scare the horses.

Central to Labour's economic message is a commitment to fiscal rules designed, in shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves's words, to "bind the next Labour government to ensure we always spend wisely and keep debt under control". These rules will include targeting a current budget surplus, with day-to-day spending at least covered by tax revenues, and, crucially, aiming to ensure that government debt is falling as a proportion of GDP

©Keir Starmer/Flickr

by the end of one parliament. This latter constraint affects investment as well as current spending; Labour will borrow to invest in infrastructure only so long as it can simultaneously meet its target of falling net debt/GDP. There is a qualification – the targets get suspended if there is a fiscal shock, such as a financial crisis or deep recession. There is also an indication of future direction, with Labour stating it will consider government debt alongside public sector assets, to resist the temptation of a Thatcher-style fire sale of assets to push down debt.

The current government also has fiscal rules, which have been revised over the years. The key difference is that the borrowing target allows for a 3 per cent deficit by the fifth year of the forecast period, covering current and investment spending. This is a rolling target – just like tomorrow, five years hence never comes.

The reason for having fiscal rules is they can help establish economic credibility if people believe the government will at least attempt to abide by them. They help establish financial trust, keeping investors interested in buying government debt (bonds, known as gilts). If investors do not believe the government is much bothered about targets, borrowing costs will rise and so more tax will be spent on interest bills instead of health and education and other services. Sterling could fall against other currencies, helping drive inflation higher. Having won a reputation for prudence, Labour squandered it in opposition and needs to rebuild it, probably more so than does the government. Fiscal rules matter.

However, fiscal rules are not science. The state of the public finances is constantly changing. Twice a year the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) publishes new projections as it assesses government policy. This can see politicians and commentators arguing over (relatively) small differences in projections five years out, only to see their assertions wiped out by new forecasts and assumptions a few months later. Periodically, the Office for National Statistics substantially revises its GDP data for past years, as it has done recently for the pandemic period. Fiscal rules matter but the certainty they provide is less in the eventual outcome and more in the strength of the commitment to sensible economic policy.

Today, the economic backdrop is discouraging. High inflation remains, for now. It was kickstarted by higher energy prices linked to the war in Ukraine and supply bottlenecks as the world recovered from the pandemic. It was fuelled by loose monetary policy from the Bank of England and other central banks. Its persistence has meant households could not absorb the hit to real incomes without pushing for higher pay rises, especially since savings accumulated during Covid years are running down. With a confused Bank of England raising interest rates and winter approaching, the outlook is uncertain even if it is currently likely that inflation will be lower next year. Longer term projections for public finances are grim.

The economy is in the doldrums, and even if growth picks up, higher growth cannot be sustained without higher productivity, which has so far failed to appear. Lack of business investment, partly linked to corporate pay structures, the lack of a meaningful industrial strategy for years, and the ongoing damage from Brexit are key culprits. The economic mismanagement and absence of long-term thinking has led to negative feedback loops. Lower growth means lower tax revenue and lower economic potential, meaning fewer resources for investment, further depressing growth, and fewer resources to spend on education, health, and other public services, leading to drags on the economy and increasing need. While political games were played, the UK economy was busily travelling on a downward spiral.

As in the 1990s, our public services are suffering, despite the best efforts of those within them. Health outcomes are deteriorating, with long waiting lists, exacerbated by strikes, which means of course more suffering for many and reduced life expectancy for some. Education services are variable and insufficient. Our justice system is underfunded and inefficient, leading to all sorts of problems in society. There is a long list of other services desperately in need of more funding too. It is no wonder the closure of schools and other buildings at risk of collapse seems symbolic.

And something curious has happened. Lower public spending, 'unserious' politics, and unknown other factors have led to a general malaise in our institutions, public and private. Almost every week we are discovering our services have hidden and facilitated bad behaviour, poor practices, wasteful procurement, and a sort of political myopia when it comes to understanding what the public expects of them. People will always make mistakes, that is natural, but there is something else going on; a sort of infectious institutional incapability.

It will therefore be no surprise if people conclude that with a Labour victory "things can only get better". Enthusiasm and expectations could be high. And it is

likely that the reorientation of power will change perspectives on what is possible. A decent majority, which needs to be hard fought for, could in itself promote a longer term mindset in the machineries of government. Yet the flip side of running a 1997 election playbook could be a 1998–2001 government playbook – MPs crying in the lobbies as they have to support hard choices and angry voters blaming Labour.

Labour needs to be clear about what kind of country we can be. Before the 1997 election, Labour shook off some of its statist, corporatist, and Marxist mentality and rediscovered its ethical socialist roots. It emphasised the value of the individual, thriving in a vibrant community. Such a narrative today should be about more than simply describing desirable policies. It should speak to people's experience and hopes and it is necessary not only because it is rooted in attractive values but also to sustain the party's project in government. It should describe the political and economic journey on which Labour wants to guide the country and remind us all of where we are starting from.

Such a narrative needs to go some way beyond a commitment to sound finances, which – although essential – does not help voters understand how difficult decisions are being made. Sound finances should not be seen as a prudent means to more spending but an important component of a progressive economic policy which understands we live in a dynamic market economy.

In government, Labour will need a framework around which to make decisions about spending priorities, built around Keir Starmer's "Five missions for a better Britain". The pull of managerialism will be strong; Labour succumbed to this at times when last in power. Ministers find themselves taking reasonable but all-very-difficult decisions on individual issues, aligned with the perspective of public institutions but detached from the perspective and expectations of the electorate. The result can come across as patronising hand-wringing.

Furthermore, while public sector reform does have accompanying costs – both financial and (at first) political – Labour should not wait. There is a mood for change. Driving reform takes firm political commitment, a clear sense of the destination, and a theory of change about why it is necessary and how it will work. Bold announcements at the beginning of a term of office are essential to set the tone and pace. In addition, such are the needs in health and other sectors that special purpose task forces should be established to drive outcomes and show what is possible – for example getting waiting lists down, sorting out social care to free hospital capacity, and boosting access to tutors in schools. Finally, the only way ahead long term is to improve investment spending.

Hard decisions cannot be wished away and to make them Labour needs to be in power. Being very clear that Labour cares about sound public finances is essential. Being clear about our vision for the future and resolute in our determination to get there is vital too. And, of course, having made its case and been disciplined with the public finances, Labour did win the 2001 election overwhelmingly. **F**

Standing firm

The Taliban must not be allowed to take advantage of international aid, argues *Peymana Assad*

Peymana Assad represents Roxeth on the London Borough of Harrow Council. Peymana came to the UK as a child refugee, and upon her election in 2018, became the first person of Afghan origin elected to public office in the UK. She is the cofounder and cochair of the Labour Foreign Policy Group and a former parliamentary candidate

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban rolled into Kabul and forcefully toppled the internationally recognised government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. As the Taliban took down the tricolour Afghan flag and replaced it with their so-called 'Islamic' white flag at the Afghan presidential palace, allowing Al Jazeera to film their fighters sitting at President Ashraf Ghani's desk, swift sanctions were placed on Afghanistan by the US and UN, with the US freezing the central bank reserves of Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) held in New York to the tune of $9.4bn.

Since that day, however, the UN and the Biden administration have relaxed sanctions to allow international aid into the country, amounting to more than $2bn since the Taliban takeover. They have also allowed people to lawfully transfer money to civil servants, including ministries now led by Taliban regime officials.

To an extent, this relaxation is understandable. The Taliban's forceful takeover plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented scale. Estimates indicate that more than half of the country's population of 40 million requires essential food provision.

Diplomatic engagement has been the key line coming out of the EU, UN, Qatar and Pakistan – with some going as far as arguing for recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan.

Yet all the while the Taliban continues to impose draconian measures on Afghans, especially women and girls: a ban on girls' education, on working in certain jobs, on accessing parks, public baths, and swimming pools, on travelling without a male guardian, on colourful or cultural dress, and on appearing on certain radio and TV shows. The mortality rate has surged in the wake of this assault on their rights. On top of all this, we have witnessed the assassination of former government officials, journalists, musicians and especially members of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

In the wake of all of this, the question many friends of Afghanistan have been asking is this: why are the US, the UN and international partners continuing to send money to the Taliban regime? On August 8 this year, the US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) stated: "The Taliban have effectively infiltrated and influenced most UN-managed assistance programming." It confirms the many reports coming from activists on the ground that aid is being systematically diverted into Taliban hands.

In response to calls for a harsher approach, we are constantly told that aid is not political; that it is purely humanitarian and must continue in the face of severe human suffering to help Afghans; that some aid might be being diverted into Taliban hands, but not all aid. International NGOs continue to lobby western governments asking them not to tie aid to political conditions.

But aid has always been political. Since the second world war and the Marshall Plan, we have sent aid because it aligns with our values of a worldwide community, of collective responsibility, and of internationalism. When we step away from these moral principles, seeing aid simply as a sticking plaster for human suffering, we fail to consider the long-term damage that unconditional aid can do to the potential progress of a country. We also risk outright contradictions: since the Taliban issued a decree in December 2022 prohibiting the employment of women in NGOs, the UN has been functioning in violation of its fundamental principle of non-discrimination, which is enshrined in the UN Charter.

It is true that there is a balance to be struck: making aid conditional would risk perpetuating a system of power and privilege that upholds western nations above countries like Afghanistan, a country that has been at the forefront of so-called 'great games' between competing empires. But in the circumstances, can we really justify continuing to send $40m a week to a regime that prioritises funding the lavish lifestyles of Taliban regime officials, brainwashes children to become suicide bombers, imposes political and social restrictions on the rights of women and girls and kills its political opponents? In order to curtail arbitrary western power over Afghanistan, those who advocate for unconditional aid would have us uphold the power the Taliban has over ordinary Afghans.

This is dangerous, not only for Afghanistan, but also for the international community. We are in the process of creating a role model for religious extremist groups across the world: cut a deal with the west, and you will be allowed to consolidate your power, with taxpayers in the US and elsewhere footing the bill.

Afghans are currently trying to survive some of the worst humanitarian conditions in living memory. To secure their future, we need to take drastic action that brings about drastic change – the Taliban, who have caused this suffering, cannot be rewarded for doing so. We can push for change using the current leverage and power we have; that power starts and ends with money. **F**

Books

In search of hope

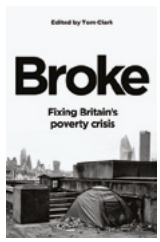
Empathy and ambition will be key to fixing broken Britain, writes *Kate Murray*

Kate Murray is editor of the Fabian Review

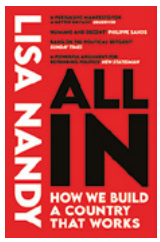
If, like me, you're increasingly enraged by the mess the Conservatives have made of Britain, then Broke, a collection of essays on poverty, will fuel your anger. In a series of pieces documenting life for those on the breadline, we see the profound human impact of the last 13 years of Tory rule. The volunteer who broke down in tears when she had to use the food bank she helped run because of universal credit delays. The disabled mother who only eats one meal a day so there is enough food for her son. The care worker forced to switch between holiday lets and hotels after being evicted from her home.

These are powerful stories, beautifully told by some of the country's leading writers on social policy. Tom Clark, who edited the collection, rightly says that such human stories can cut through where statistics and data cannot. "It takes confrontation with an individual human being to force a reckoning with an emergency," he writes. Emergency does not feel like hyperbole here: thanks to the underfunding of the welfare state, people across Britain are struggling to find affordable housing, to feed themselves, to heat their home, or to escape the loan sharks who force them to live in fear.

Several of the contributors take aim at the 'strivers versus shirkers' narrative which has facilitated the assault on the standards of living of the most vulnerable. Yet at times the stories play a little bit too much to the narrative of the 'deserving' poor. These are good people, working hard who fall on hard times through ill health, bad luck or the vagaries of a difficult system – and there are thousands like them up and down the country. But I would have liked to read a little more about the so-called 'undeserving' poor – those who never had a chance to reach for a better life or who have been broken by the circumstances into which they were born and who spiral into despair or criminality as a result. They deserve a stake in our political discourse too, not just negative headlines in the tabloids.



Broke: Fixing Britain's Poverty Crisis
Tom Clark (ed), Biteback Publishing, £14.99



All In: How we Build a Country that Works
Lisa Nandy, HarperNorth, £9.99

There is much to spark fury in Broke, but there is hope too. Kerry Hudson, the writer who contributes the foreword, says the collection should be seen as a "tool, as a point of connection, as a challenge". And Clark, in his conclusion, offers some recommendations for change, from ratcheting up benefits to building more social homes. Beyond policy reform though, there's a compelling call for more empathy for those at the bottom of the pile.

Hope and empathy are to be found in abundance in All In, Lisa Nandy's vision for a fairer Britain, which has just been published in paperback. Nandy takes us on a journey, from her Wigan constituency to the Arab Spring and from a successful campaign to save a local pub to the Beijing Olympics, with plenty of points inbetween. Her belief is that people have an "optimism and ambition for family, community and country that is presently unmatched by politicians" and that their desire for a bigger stake in the system "could propel us towards a better future". It is an engaging vision, even if, given the ambitious range of topics she takes on, Nandy does not always nail her targets. Her defence of the right to buy is one such instance. But where the book works really well is in weaving in a range of anecdotes from Nandy's upbringing and then her political journey to bring her arguments to life. And the central message of the book is an optimistic one: we can be a self-confident country with an ambition that is "big and generous, not small and petty".

Nandy was until recently Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities where her focus on giving communities a stake in their future resonated with the task of fixing broken Britain. The recent reshuffle saw her moved to international development – let's hope her voice can make itself heard there too. F

History makers

It is 100 years since the first Labour government took office. *Peter Clar*k tells the story of the men who changed politics forever.

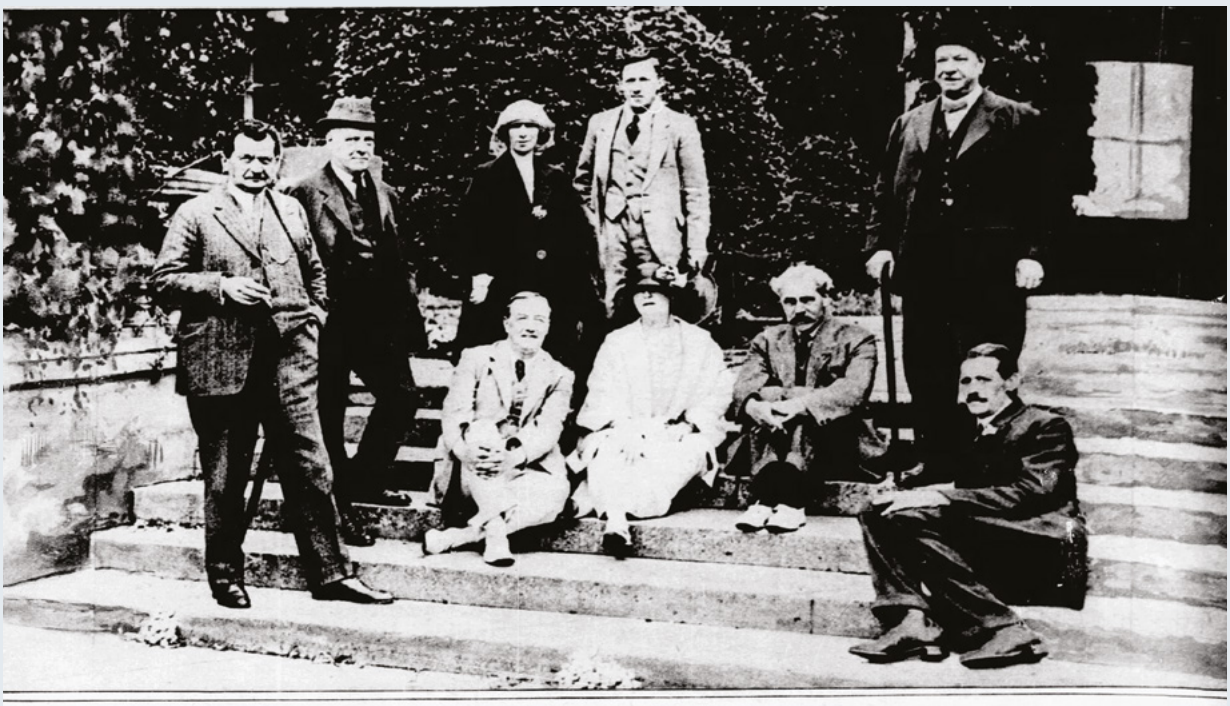
Peter Clark is a writer and translator, and research associate at SOAS, University of London. The Men of 1924 is published, priced £20, by Haus Publishing

"It had come at last! Few of us who had toiled through the years to achieve this object had expected to see it realised in our lifetime."

With these words, Philip Snowden, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the first Labour government of 1924, recorded his euphoria on taking office.

It was a triumphant moment in the story of the Labour party, but it was also a major turning point in modern British political history. For the first time, the government was no longer overwhelmingly made up of well-to-do, public school, Oxbridge-educated men. A class barrier was smashed. And the Labour party was displacing the Liberals as the progressive force in British politics. This was all the more remarkable because 10 years earlier the Labour party had had only 70 MPs. They were seen (and saw themselves) largely as a trade union pressure group – and they had been deeply divided over Britain's involvement in the first world war.

Four years after the fighting began, the leader of the Labour party was leader of His Majesty's opposition. And five years and two months after that, Labour was forming a government under Ramsay MacDonald.



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ENGLISH LABOR PARTY'S "BIG SEVEN" comprises the leaders who have served to bring that organization to the present zenith of its career. This photograph, including two women prominent in Laborite circles, was taken on the occasion of a recent rally conducted by the party. Left to right (standing): Otto Wells, Canon Adderly, Mr. and Mrs. Shinwell, and Will Thorn. Seated: Arthur Henderson, the Countess of Warwick, Ramsey MacDonald, and Rudolf Brietscheid. (Photograph from Wide World.)

Because he later formed the National Government in collaboration with Conservatives and Liberals in 1931, MacDonald has been reviled by the left without being embraced by the right. Clement Attlee, not a man for hyperbole, described MacDonald's action in 1931 as the greatest act of treachery in political history. But if we review his career up to 1924, we see great achievements, organisational ability, a tactical and strategic vision, personality and mass appeal. His faults were already there in 1924 – vanity, susceptibility to flattery, a prickliness and a taste for the good life. After 1924 these faults became clearer, and were accompanied by a decline in health, physical and mental.

My book, The Men of 1924, relates the story of the first Labour government. I have focused on the 20 men (yes, men – Labour was to smash the gender barrier later) who formed the Cabinet. It included former Liberals, former Conservatives, trade unionists and socialists. Even the majority that had roots in the Labour movement was divided. One of the crop of Labour ministers, JH Thomas, denied he was a socialist – saying he had not read 'any of those bloody books'. It was MacDonald, with his charm and charisma, who held them together. There were no resignations or sackings.

The Fabian Society provided a lot of the intellectual heft of this first Labour government. The prime minister had been a member since the 1880s. Two members of the Cabinet, Sidney Webb and Sydney Olivier, were contributors to Fabian Essays in Socialism, published 35 years earlier. And in the seven years leading up to 1924, Sidney Webb had been assiduous in reorganising the party and in providing coherent national policies. But although there were branches throughout the country, the Fabian Society was mainly middle-class and London-based, while the Labour movement overall was rooted in working-class and trade union activism, with its geographical bases in Scotland and northern England.

The first world war provided the catalyst for Labour's ascent to power. By the later stages of the war, Labour had resolved the split of 1914, and by 1915 members of the Labour party, notably Arthur Henderson and JR Clynes, were ministers in the wartime coalition governments. The work of MacDonald, Henderson and Sidney Webb turned the Labour party into a national political party rather than a body representing sectional interests.

Yet Labour's first govenment lasted just nine months. It held office in a hung parliament and could have been defeated at any time. Its main achievement was a Housing Act that developed the concept and reality of council houses. It also changed the atmosphere of international relations. Britain recognised the Soviet Union and Germany was no longer treated as a guilty nation.

The work of MacDonald, Henderson and Webb turned Labour into a national political party

When Labour was defeated in a Commons vote and the general election that followed, spirits in the Labour party nonetheless remained high. More people voted Labour than ever before. A Labour government had become a reality and it could happen again. It was part of the furniture of British politics. As the secretary of the party, Arthur Henderson, said shortly after the 1924 election defeat: "We still remained on the threshold of power. Labour in office but not in power was an interesting, useful, and instructive experiment. It gave added prestige to Labour as well as training and experience in administration to a good proportion of the personnel of the parliamentary Labour party. From a House of Commons standpoint, Labour has nothing to fear at the prospect of finding itself responsible, at no distant date, for the conduct of national affairs as a free and independent agent." **F**

Noticeboard

SCOTTISH FABIANS CONFERENCE and UK AGM
Saturday 18 November, 10am to 5pm
Central Hall, 2 West Tollcross, Edinburgh EH3 9BP

Speakers include Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar MSP. Includes a short AGM starting at 4pm. Online access to the AGM is available for members unable to attend in person.

AGM business
- Apologies
- Minutes of the 2022 AGM
- Matters arising
- In memoriam
- Chair's report
- General secretary's report
- Reports from Fabian sections
- Treasurer's report
- Approval of annual report 2022/23
- Appointment of auditors
- Jenny Jeger prize for writing
- Date of next AGM
- Any other business

More details will be available on the Fabian Society website: www.fabians.org.uk

ELECTIONS
The online ballot for the Fabian Society executive committee runs from 15 September to 20 October. Candidate statements and links to the online ballot have been sent out by email. If you have not received a ballot email, **please email or call to request a ballot immediately**.

All paid-up members who joined before 17 May are entitled to vote. Members eligible to vote in the Young Fabians elections will receive a separate online ballot.

Queries should be sent to membership@fabians.org.uk

Listings

ANNOUNCEMENT

Fabian Society events
Some Fabian Society events are still being held online. Keep an eye on our website for news of up-to-date activities and contact your local society for ways to stay involved.

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

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

BRIGHTON and 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 Fabian Society offices, 61 Petty France, London SW1H 9EU
londonfabians.org.uk
Contact Michael Weatherburn at michael.weatherburn@gmail.com

CHISWICK and 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 FABIANS
Contact Andrew Gilbert at alphasilk@gmail.com

FINCHLEY
Contact David Beere djbeere@btinternet.com or Sam Jacobs samljacobs@outlook.com

GRIMSBY
Contact Pat Holland at hollandpat@hotmail.com

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

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

HAVERING
Meetings at 273 South Street, Romford RM1 2BE (at junction with Brentwood Rd)
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 Jonathan Theobald at jontheo@pm.me

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

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

YORK
Contact Mary Cannon at yorkfabiansociety@gmail.com

THE FABIAN QUIZ

THE NEW LEVIATHANS

John Gray

In 1989, with an optimism – or perhaps an arrogance – that has since made him the archetypal example of liberal delusion, Francis Fukuyama posited that he was witnessing 'the end of history'. In a process stretching back to the French Revolution, he said, liberal democracy had confirmed itself as "the final form of human government".

As late as the early 2010s, you could find many in the corridors of power who agreed with Fukuyama's basic premise. But since then, an antidemocratic backlash embodied by Modi, Trump and Bolsonaro globally, and at least flirted with by the Conservatives in the UK, as well as the advent of a devastating war in Europe, has shaken the assumptions of western civil society to the core.

In his new book, John Gray excoriates this liberal complacency, and paints a bleak picture of what awaits us, cautioning against seeing contemporary tyranny and violence as an aberration. The future, he says, is likely to be "global anarchy". Drawing upon the work of Thomas Hobbes, he challenges the received wisdom of societal progress – and the very notion of 'humanity' itself.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
In Bill Watterson's classic comic strip, Hobbes was what kind of animal?

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

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 10 NOVEMBER 2023.

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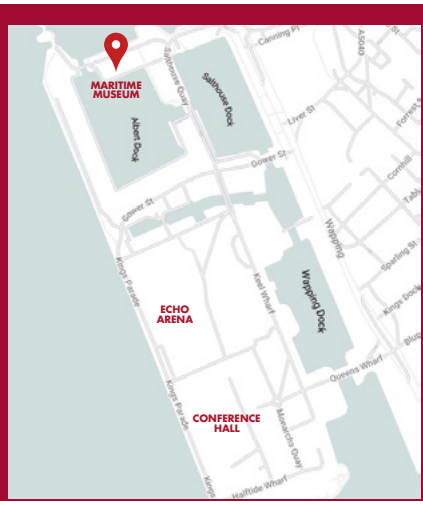

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