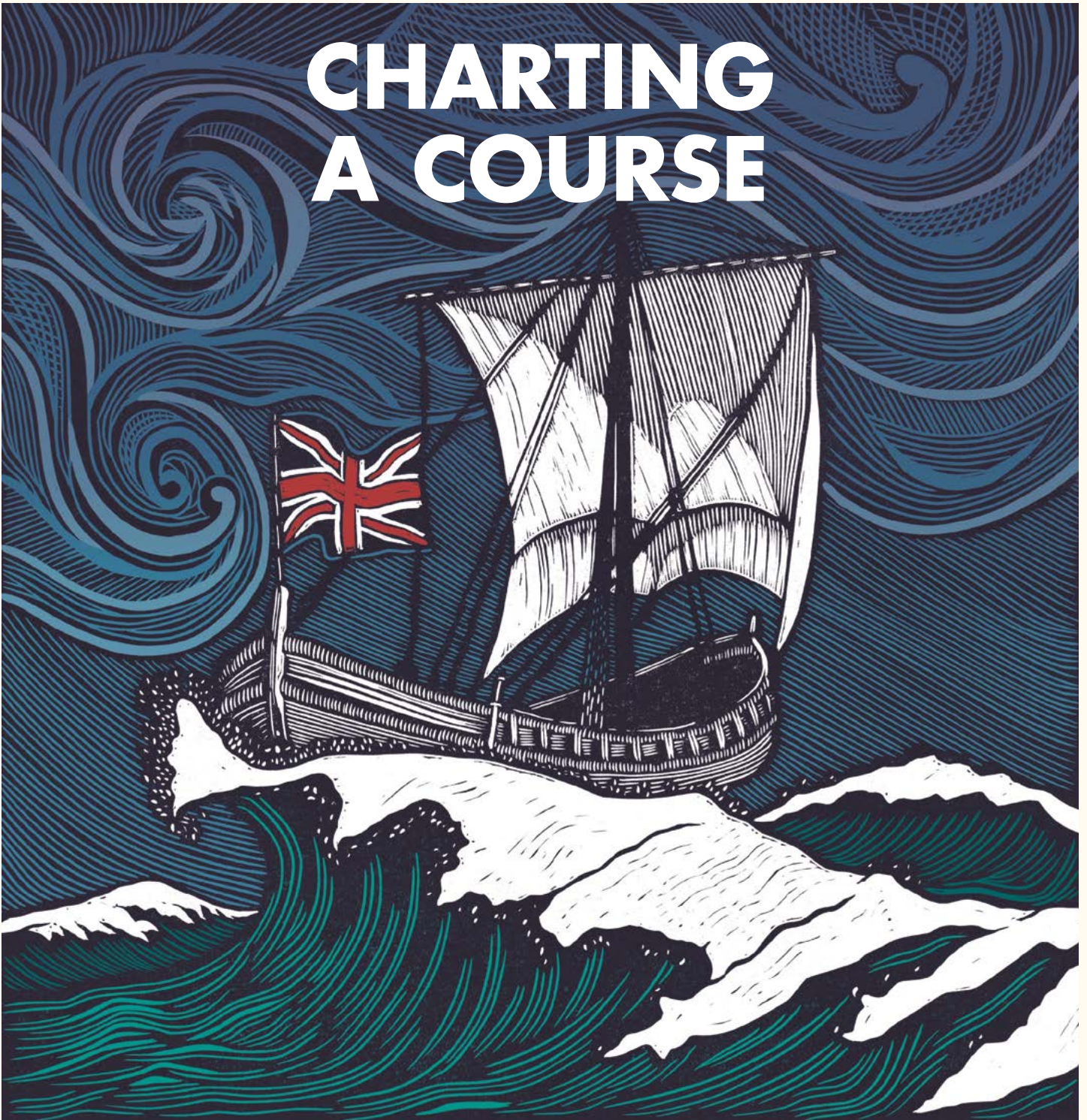


FABIAN REVIEW

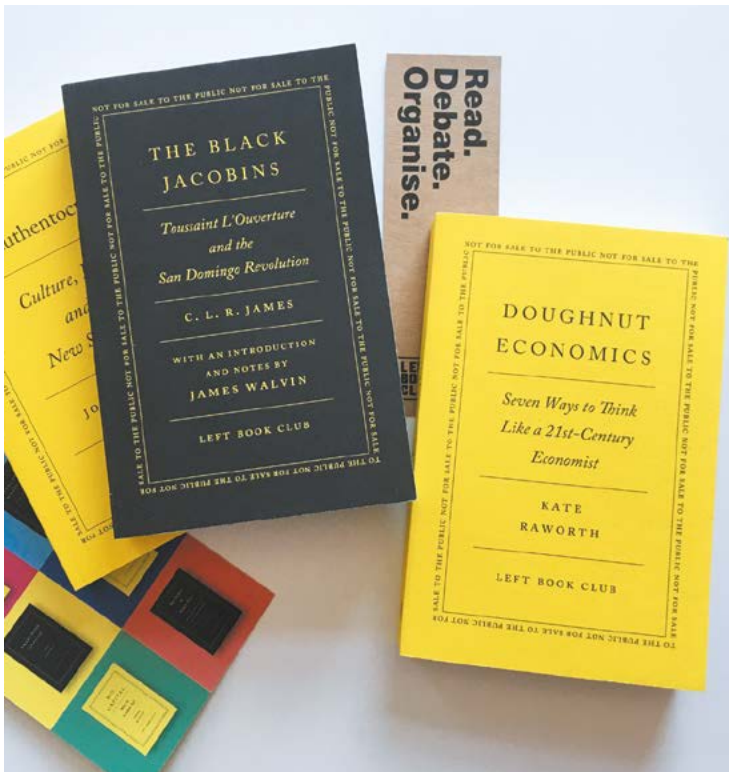
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CHARTING A COURSE



*Navigating a challenging world, with Nick Westcott, Victoria Honeyman,
Toni Haastrup and Stella Creasy MP **p10** / Alf Dubs on asylum seekers,
the Elgin marbles and Lords reform **p17** / Andrea Coomber calls
for courage on prisons **p20** / Richard Toye on Clement Attlee **p22***



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FABIAN REVIEW

Volume 135—No.4

		<u>Leader</u>	
<i>Andrew Harrop</i>	4	Navigating well	
		<u>Shortcuts</u>	
<i>Christina McAnea</i>	5	Going further	
<i>Alfred Slade</i>	5	A firmer line	
<i>Jessica Toale</i>	6	Restoring trust	
<i>Janet Daby MP</i>	7	Out of control	
<i>Derek Wood</i>	8	Building big	
<i>Paul Richards</i>	9	Time to crack down	
		<u>Cover story</u>	
<i>Nick Westcott</i>	10	International rescue	
<i>Victoria Honeyman</i>	12	The spectre of Trump	
<i>Toni Haastrup</i>	14	A true transformation	
<i>Stella Creasy MP</i>	16	Moving forward	
		<u>Interview</u>	
<i>Iggy Wood</i>	17	Peer pressure	
		<u>Feature</u>	
<i>Andrea Coomber</i>	20	Back from the brink	
<i>Richard Toye</i>	22	The hand of history	
<i>Katie Schmuecker</i>	24	Rock bottom	
<i>John Bowers</i>	26	Stopping the rot	
		<u>Books</u>	
<i>Rohan McWilliam</i>	29	The hope of the world	
		<u>Fabian Society section</u>	
	30	Publications round-up	
	31	Listings and the Fabian quiz	



FABIAN REVIEW

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Navigating well

The next Labour government will face big challenges abroad as well as at home.

It can be a force for good in the world, writes *Andrew Harrop*

THE LABOUR PREMIERSHIP of Tony Blair was one of extraordinary domestic achievement that changed Britain for the better. But Blair's time in office will always be remembered for its foreign policy errors in the wake of 9/11.

The lesson is that Labour prime ministers don't get to choose whether to focus on challenges at home or abroad. From the off, they have to be ready for both. They must pursue social and economic renewal but also make far-reaching diplomatic choices that will shape the country's place in the world – and define their own legacy. If Labour wins in 2024, Keir Starmer will therefore need to be ready to navigate the tortuous relationships and compromises of the international stage.

We already know the global landscape that will greet him will be far less benign than that of the late 1990s or early 2000s. The killings in Gaza are unlikely to be followed by even tentative steps towards a fair and lasting peace. The long-term resolve of Western countries to support Ukraine and deter Putin is in doubt. The combination of interdependency and strategic rivalry with China is a recipe for an unpredictable and risky relationship. Rich countries everywhere are struggling with new 21st century challenges, from undocumented mass migration to cyber security. And our collective action to limit global heating remains too little too late.

Then, throw in the plausible possibility of a second Trump presidency. If Starmer comes to office at the same time as Donald Trump, a Labour government will need to be ready for a US administration defined by chaos, isolationism and succour for extremism. There will be much that is outside the UK's control. We can expect populism and autocracy to be turbocharged around the world. Indeed, a Trump return would undoubtedly influence the choices the Conservatives make in the UK about their future direction.

But Labour's early choices can still shape things for the better. First, Labour can quickly forge a new foreign

and security pact with the EU, so that the UK and our closest allies work in lockstep, in a deep and structured partnership. On almost every critical global issue our interests and values align with those of Germany and France and we will have more influence together than apart.

Second, a Labour administration can bring predictability and professionalism to British foreign policy after years of chaos and incompetence, a period marked by constant ministerial turnover and the undermining of the civil service. New ministers should expect to be in post for most of a parliament so they can build close relations with their peers. In turn they should place trust in permanent officials to reinvigorate our once strong diplomatic and development capabilities. And they should keep structural changes to an absolute minimum, which unfortunately means ruling out a de-merger of the foreign and development departments unless there is an overwhelming case for change.

Third, Labour should make its international choices with reference to the future not the past, based on clearly articulated principles and priorities. The party cannot define itself in terms of the events of the last decade. The Brexit vote is receding into history fast. Forging a future economic relationship with the rest of Europe will be hard enough without allowing the right-wing media to scare Labour into believing that each pragmatic act of reintegration is a betrayal of working-class leave voters. Similarly, Jeremy Corbyn's time as Labour leader is a fading memory and Labour no longer needs to prove that Keir Starmer is his own man. The party should not be scared to say what it thinks on an issue like Gaza just to distance itself from the former leader's harmful views.

Few Labour figures come into politics because of their passion for global affairs. But Labour has always known that centre-left values matter overseas just as much as at home. The next Labour government will be a force for good in a troubled world. **F**

Shortcuts



GOING FURTHER

Labour should build on the success of the minimum wage –
Christina McAnea

One of the last Labour government's most enduring legacies, the minimum wage, turns 25 in 2024. It is right that we celebrate a policy that has lifted living standards for millions of the lowest-paid workers and guarantees them a wage uplift every single year. It is also right that we reflect on what the political and industrial wings of the Labour movement can achieve next when we push together to deliver for the low-paid.

Rodney Bickerstaffe, the general secretary of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and later of UNISON, led the campaign for a legally enforceable minimum rate of pay for the best part of 25 years. In 1998, the Minimum Wage Act was passed by the newly elected Labour government, with the first rate announced by the Low Pay Commission the following year. What started as Rodney's discussions with the few people who would listen snowballed to become one of the most successful policies in British politics. The Tory opposition and some business leaders threatened that the minimum wage would lead to unemployment and fewer job opportunities. But they were proved wrong, and the importance of the minimum wage gradually became clear. Rebadged by the Conservative government as the National Living Wage in 2015, the minimum wage is now on track to reach the government target of two-thirds of median hourly pay in 2024.

As it heads towards that target, the Labour movement is already working on how to build on its success and take on more of the challenges of low pay. The idea of a minimum wage – and the gradual recognition that the UK needed one – came out of the experience of people working

in public services in the 1970s. Sky-high inflation and failing government pay policy meant that many workers, particularly women and those working part-time, were facing sustained hardship. To build on the success of the minimum wage, we must listen to the priorities of the low-paid once again.

In the context of a devastating cost of living crisis, Labour's pledge to give a new remit to the Low Pay Commission, requiring it to take into account the cost of living when setting the rate in future years, is welcome news. However, the experience of low-paid UNISON members and wider data shows we need to address the problem of insufficient work hours too. ONS data shows that whilst the minimum wage has made great strides in tackling low hourly pay, low weekly pay remains an issue for nearly one in four workers. There are many reasons why lots of people want to work less than a full week and/or have the flexibility to pick up hours as and when they want them. But for far too many, it is not a matter of choice. UNISON's survey of social care workers revealed that:

- 77 per cent of staff would take more hours if they were available.
- 73 per cent of staff would prefer a typical full-time working week of approximately 37 hours if it were available.
- Contracted hours varied from week to week for three-quarters of staff.

In comments on their working patterns, the dominant issue was the stress and worry caused by inadequate hours, leaving workers unable to pay bills on time. Many respondents mentioned the high costs of rent and energy bills, leaving them with very little remaining income to spend on food for them and their families.

They want flexibility, like most workers do, and they want a decent work life balance. But they want it within the bounds of the contractual security that many better-paid workers don't have to fight for.

Labour's commitment to scrap zero-hours contracts and give workers the right to a contract for the hours they do will help significantly. But it is the party's plans to introduce sectoral collective bargaining and

fair pay agreements, with the first in adult social care, that could have the greatest impact on the low paid. This should enable trade unions to negotiate with employers to give workers secure weekly hours, flexible working patterns, sick pay and bargaining power, as well as using the minimum wage as a benchmark to be improved on.

This represents a shift in approach to looking at the whole picture of low pay and not just pay rates. It is a theme that runs through a new UNISON publication, *Delivering Greater Security for the Low Paid*. As its contributors point out, wider measures, such as fair pay agreements, living hours, better sick pay provision and an improved benefit system, are needed to make the minimum wage even more effective in the period ahead. **F**

Christina McAnea is the general secretary of UNISON. Delivering Greater Security for the Low Paid: A Collection of Essays on the Future of the Minimum Wage is available to download at www.unison.org.uk



A FIRMER LINE

We must hold corporations responsible for the UK's obesity crisis – *Alfred Slade*

The UK has the third highest obesity rate in Europe, behind only Malta and Turkey. This is at least partly because, in Britain today, it is hard for people to enjoy a nutritious diet. This is especially true for those living in the most deprived communities: childhood obesity rates are twice as high in the poorest areas than the richest.

The costs to both people's health and the NHS are staggering. Five million people are living with diabetes; the NHS spends £6.5bn on obesity related illnesses; and obesity is poised to overtake smoking as the biggest preventable cause of cancer in women by 2030.



For too long, UK politics has treated public health as a leash that impairs people's freedom, rather than a shield that protects them from exploitation by commercial interests. Good health is the foundation of freedom – the freedom to live the best possible life, to be active, to be free from health problems and to work fulfilling jobs to the best of our ability. If we are serious about tackling inequalities, 'levelling up' or any other steps to make us a fairer and freer county, we need effective action on products that harm people's health.

Since 1991, we have had 14 government strategies and nearly 700 recommendations designed to reduce obesity. The result? Three decades of persistently rising obesity rates that have left two-thirds of the adult population living with a weight classified as obese or overweight, and two in five children leaving primary school above a healthy weight.

Why have these strategies failed? Researchers from the University of Cambridge found that the vast majority were never even implemented, largely thanks to industry lobbying and political pressure. The few that were implemented overwhelmingly focused on ideas that placed the burden onto individual people and schools – food education, cooking classes and public awareness campaigns. Indeed, until 2020 it was the official view of the government that obesity was a matter of personal responsibility that could be solved by "eating less and moving more".

This is completely at odds with scientific evidence, which clearly shows that this is primarily an issue of market failure. The commercial incentives for the food industry have led to unhealthy food being three times cheaper than healthy food

calorie-for-calorie, heavily marketed, and so widely available that it is almost unavoidable. Our food environment is broken – and we need to fix it if we are ever going to get to grips with obesity.

Many well-meaning people have promoted the idea of education and giving people information as part of the solution to the UK's vast levels of excess weight. However, this deflects attention away from the role of the food and drink industry, and back towards the responsibility of individuals living in an environment that is stacked against them.

After such a long record of failure, we need to move away from the tired, dogmatic thinking that has utterly failed to get a grip on this problem. We need to focus on smart, effective ideas that actually work; targeting the structural drivers of excess weight and shaping food environments to ensure that the healthy choice is the easy, affordable and accessible choice for everyone. That means putting a stop to the barrage of junk food advertising, including expanding the planned ban on junk food ads on TV and online to include outdoor advertising, which is heavily concentrated in deprived areas. It means changing planning laws to empower every community, not just the wealthiest, to create healthy high streets, with fewer unhealthy outlets and more healthy ones. And it means improving and actually enforcing school food standards to make sure that every child across the UK has a delicious, nutritious meal.

It also means building on the hugely successful soft drinks industry levy, which since 2017 has reduced sugar in soft drinks by over 30 per cent, without leading to a fall in sales. Even better, the money raised has been used to introduce programmes that

directly help feed disadvantaged children, like the National School Breakfast Club. Further industry levies would directly improve the nutritional value of food and drink products, whilst also raising funds that could be used on programmes that ensure all children can access healthy food from the earliest years of life.

If we are going to seriously tackle health inequalities, improve the nation's diet and reduce long-term pressure on the NHS, we can't be afraid to call out the elephant in the room – profit. It is time to stop asking individuals to solve a public health crisis and instead look to those with the most power to change it: the government and big business. **F**

Alfred Slade is the government affairs lead at the Obesity Health Alliance, a coalition of more than 50 health organisations, which advocates for policies to improve population health and address obesity



RESTORING TRUST

Introducing PR would change the way people feel about politics –
Jessica Toale

As a parliamentary candidate, I spend hours knocking on doors each week and, with my team, I speak to thousands of people every month. Over the past year this has given us a keen insight not only into the local issues that people care about, but also how they feel about politics in general.

There has never been a better time to be a Labour candidate. The reception is warm. Most people we speak to know the Conservatives have left the country in a mess. They talk about NHS waiting times, sky-high rents or mortgages. They worry about crime in their neighbourhoods and sewage being pumped into our rivers and seas at an alarming rate. Many tell us they have voted Conservative their whole life but can't do it again. This is an exciting window of opportunity for Labour – but it doesn't mean people will automatically vote for us. We still have a job to do to convince them that we are the credible alternative with a plan.

More worrying is the number of people who tell me they are not going to vote at all. They feel disillusioned with politics and the political classes. They do not feel represented or that their vote matters. They often say: “You’re all the same.” Come the next election, the greatest trick the Conservatives could pull is to convince voters that we are all as bad as each other and that no one will do a better job.

But we are not powerless to address this growing sense of disenfranchisement amongst voters. If Labour is fortunate enough to serve in government, we have the opportunity to improve the lives of working people and address complex challenges such as the cost of living crisis, health and social care, education and the environment. We also have the opportunity to address this growing sense of disenfranchisement and restore trust in politics with a package of electoral and constitutional reforms, including by introducing proportional representation.

There is a growing drumbeat for PR. At October’s Labour party conference, prominent figures from across the Labour movement spoke in favour of PR, from trade union general secretaries, NEC members, Labour mayors, MPs, MSPs and a wide range of my fellow prospective parliamentary candidates. A whopping 80 per cent of Labour members back PR and 90 per cent of CLPs in the South West region, where my constituency is based, have passed motions in favour.

And it is not just political types that favour PR. It is popular with swing voters and the general public. It certainly comes up on the doorsteps. According to polling by Labour Together, most voters think a proportional voting system would be the best way to improve trust. And it wins favour with a particularly important group – the key swing voters dubbed ‘Workington Man’ and ‘Stevenage Woman’.

By changing our electoral system and introducing PR we will be giving power back to local communities and restoring trust in politics. People will be able to see the direct impact of their vote and feel better represented by the outcome. This must go hand in hand with a programme of change that is core to getting Britain’s future back.

Of course, Labour will have to win this election on a first past the post system. So for those who argue turkeys don’t vote for Christmas, a change to our electoral system will actually benefit Labour and progressive parties. In 19 of the past 20 general elections,

most people voted for parties to the left of the Conservatives, but FPTP has meant that the Conservatives have governed for two-thirds of that time. It is easy to see why people don’t feel represented. FPTP has a built-in bias towards the Conservatives that means we end up with governments the majority did not vote for.

PR has longer term benefits as well. It leads to greater political stability – meaning projects like the HS2 rail project would get the stable governments they need to be delivered. Countries with PR have better outcomes in terms of income inequality, poverty reduction, climate action and gender and minority representation in their governments. And we know it works in Wales and Scotland.

To truly deliver transformational change in this country, Labour must address the flaws in our voting system and build greater levels of trust with the electorate. **F**

Jessica Toale is the Labour parliamentary candidate for Bournemouth West and a Labour councillor in Westminster



OUT OF CONTROL

Young people deserve a brighter future – *Janet Daby MP*

In parliament and in communities across our country, politicians rightly spend a lot of time considering how best to break down barriers for the next generation – it’s one of Labour’s five missions for government. So it is of course a failure when a child falls through the cracks in the system.

Our youth justice system is home to far too many of these children – children for whom the system hasn’t worked or for whom we must ensure effective intervention to get them back on the right track.

In the most extreme cases, this intervention may mean children serving a custodial sentence at a secure children’s home, secure training centre, or young offender institution (YOI).

These are often the last port of call after a child has been found to have committed a serious criminal offence. So where these interventions are used, they must work.

Not least to put children on the road to a better future, but also to deliver proper rehabilitation and create a safer society, less scarred by the horrors of crime.

Recent data released by the Ministry of Justice points to missed opportunities to do this.

Between April and June 2023, assaults in the Youth Custody Service increased by 6 per cent compared with the same period last year. Assaults on staff working in youth custody jumped by 33 per cent.

This should worry Conservative ministers sat in the Ministry of Justice.

Earlier in 2023, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons raised serious concerns over a young offender institution in Kent where staff had resorted to “completely segregating [children] to maintain safety”.

YOI Cookham Wood was issued with an urgent notification after an unannounced inspection found weapons were widely available and there were 583 conflicts among a detainee population of just 77 children.

This paints a bleak picture of youth custody on the Conservatives’ watch – one where control is being lost to chaos and where staff are being put in harm’s way.

The implications of this should worry us all. When violence takes hold, it threatens the ability of our justice system to deliver a safer and more secure Britain.

Of course, this snapshot simply points to a wider crisis engulfing the Tory criminal justice system. With prisons nearing capacity and media reports that the government is having to let violent criminals out early, the Justice Secretary stood in the House of Commons boasting about the government’s record on building prison places.

What the Justice Secretary failed to mention is that the Conservatives have woefully underdelivered on building the prison places they promised. With 10 Justice Secretaries in 10 years, they have focused on fighting each other instead of fighting for justice and keeping the British public safe. Where the Tories have failed, Labour will take action by ensuring the delivery of new, modern prison places.

In youth justice, Labour will deliver a renewed focus on prevention to crack down on high levels of violence in youth custody. By bringing together local services and targeting young people most at risk of being drawn into crime, Labour’s Young Futures programme will help children and young people access the support they need, and help to prevent them from being drawn into crime.

This demands joined-up, cross-government working. Labour's plan will develop a national network of Young Futures hubs and will embed youth workers in key areas, like A&E departments and police custody suites, as well as rolling out mentors in pupil referral units. These interventions will be strengthened by using existing measures more effectively, such as drawing on the benefits of community work, applying family interventions and improving enforcement, including the use of curfews. This means fewer children falling through the cracks and earlier intervention to get children back on track.

Preventative, victim-led approaches are at the heart of Labour's plan for youth justice. This includes identifying and cracking down on child criminal exploitation, tackling knife crime and addressing rising mental health issues – all in all, a major cross-government initiative to reform services for children and young people.

At the next election, the Labour party is offering the British people a mission-led government with a clear plan for delivery. It has never been more desperately needed to keep Britain's streets safe and to improve our broken justice system.

Most importantly, though, it has never been more desperately needed for our children and young people to get their future back. With a serious plan to prevent young people being drawn into crime in the first place, Labour will show its commitment to two of our core missions – breaking down the barriers to opportunity, and making Britain's streets safe. Britain deserves better – and Labour is determined to deliver it. **F**

Janet Daby is the Labour MP for Lewisham East and shadow minister for youth justice



BUILDING BIG

The story of the postwar new towns is an instructive one – *Derek Wood*

Keir Starmer's promise to build 1.5m houses over five years should he win the next election, at an annual rate of 300,000, relies on two policy proposals: the creation of new

towns and the 'bulldozing' of planning restrictions. Not for the first time, he is taking a leaf out of the book of the postwar Attlee government, an all-time model for getting things done.

The New Towns Act of 1946 gave birth to 11 new towns, including six around London. The first was Stevenage – and its story is illuminating.

Two years earlier, the Abercrombie Plan for Greater London had identified the need for new towns to relieve pressure on the centre. Stevenage was put forward as a leading candidate, a proposal endorsed and reinforced by the Attlee-appointed Reith Committee in January 1946. The speed at which events then unfolded will be hard for any government to beat. Lewis Silkin, the minister for town and country planning, introduced the New Towns Bill in parliament on 17 April. A week later, he sent letters to landowners in Stevenage asking whether they would like to sell their land to the government. Receiving no reply, he decided to address a public meeting in Stevenage town hall on 6 May. He made it clear that, once the bill had passed into law, Stevenage would be the site of a new town. The public at the meeting were equally clear about their opposition.

In the transcript of the meeting, Silkin is recorded as saying: "I want to carry out a daring exercise in town planning ... it is going to be done." This was met with jeers, boos and cries of 'dictator'. He claimed that he had a duty to perform and would

not be deterred. If people were 'fractious and unreasonable', he would carry out his duty nonetheless. Cue at least one shout of 'Gestapo!'

Objections followed. A public inquiry was established to evaluate them, led by Arnold Morris. The inquiry took place in Stevenage over two days in October. Morris reported to Silkin on 8 November. Three days later, Silkin designated Stevenage as a new town.

That was not quite the end of the story. The decision was challenged in the High Court, with the main objection being that Silkin was irredeemably biased in favour of the scheme and therefore incapable of making a fair, balanced and proper decision. The Morris inquiry, for its part, was criticised as narrow and perfunctory.

The High Court upheld these objections, but they were overturned by the Court of Appeal. The case then went to the highest court at the time, the House of Lords, on 23 June 1947. The objectors' appeal was dismissed on 24 July, with a resounding vindication of the way in which Silkin had handled the whole affair. The entire process – from the Reith Committee's recommendation in January 1946 to the passing of the legislation, the public inquiry, and the collapse of the final legal challenge – was over in 19 months.

Can Keir Starmer match Attlee's achievement? We live in different times. To identify the location and size of new towns, there must be consultations between the local



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authorities and other affected bodies in the region. Once a decision is made, there will be no room for further obstruction or objection, but the project will depend on how easily consensus can be reached at that regional level. Rivalry between local authorities will not disappear overnight. And just as in Stevenage, the process will be subject to intense local public pressure, which is now a highly sophisticated operation. Elected representatives and conservation and amenity groups, with lawyers at the ready, will have their say. Silkin did not face quite as many hurdles. And yet, even after all of his efforts, families did not begin to move into Stevenage until 1951, the year of Attlee's second shortlived government.

Starmer is right to see the post-war new towns as a blueprint for success. The residents of all the new towns built under the Act of 1946 register a general satisfaction with the way in which their communities have developed and continue to grow, and the design and construction of new towns today can be expected to show some improvement on what town planners, architects and the construction industry could produce in the period after World War 2. But 300,000 houses annually from year one is a big ask. He will need that second term. **F**

Derek Wood KC is a barrister and chair of the North West London Law Centre. He was appointed a CBE in 1995 for services to property law



TIME TO CRACK DOWN

A theft epidemic is costing us all dear – *Paul Richards*

Britain is experiencing an epidemic of looting from shops. When I visited the Co-op in Worthing last month, on a visit with Usdaw, I heard some hair-raising stories. Food stolen to order. Thieves with shopping lists. The same faces appearing day after day. Looters walking out with trays of chocolate, baby formula, cheese, and booze. Shoppers left staring at empty shelves.

The police simply do not turn up. The police minister Chris Philp MP



©Yashs/flickr

suggested that shoppers should perform citizens' arrests, one of the most asinine and dangerous utterances ever to fall from the lips of a Tory minister.

Local restaurants are being supplied by thieves with olive oil, cheese and steaks, with their customers devouring the stolen goods without a thought. The Co-op Group says looting cost it £33m in the first half of 2023, with 175,000 incidents, or 1,000 a day – and that's just one company. The same goes for every supermarket and small business on the high street.

Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has announced a new, specific offence of assaulting a shopworker which is welcome, but most serial looters do not fear incarceration. In 2014, the Tories introduced a law meaning anyone charged with the theft of items under £200 did not need to attend court. Labour will revoke this – again welcome, but not enough of a deterrent.

As ever with public policy, this complex issue needs a complex range of interventions. We need a Cabinet-level working group to coordinate a war on looting. First, we need the police to respond to reports of looting. That will require a Labour government to deliver on its pledge for 13,000 more local police, with regular patrols and genuine neighbourhood teams with police, PCSOs, and special constables on the high streets. Chief constables need to devote operational resources to support retailers, including two-way radios, CCTV, and faster response times.

We need to disrupt the organised crime gangs that coordinate looting and distribute its spoils. Thirteen retailers, including Co-op, John Lewis, and Tesco, have funded Project Pegasus to direct police intelligence to disrupt crime gangs, for example with face recognition technology. Ministers have given only a paltry £30,000 which is risible given the scale of the challenge.

We need renewed efforts to disrupt the gangs, including online rogues' galleries of the offenders.

Much of the looted food ends up in local pubs and restaurants, or being sold on websites, at car boot sales, or in pub car parks. Trading standards offices have been cut to the bone, so we need to recruit new teams to identify goods stolen from retailers and prosecute those receiving or fencing stolen goods. There should be a fast track to court for those looting, directing looters, or profiting from looting. We need nightingale court sessions to get faster justice.

But that's just one half of the equation. Upstream, we need targeted interventions to tackle addiction issues which often fuel shoplifting. That means intervention through the health and mental health service systems to help people addicted to drugs and booze. More broadly, children (and their parents) need to be taught early that theft from shops has serious consequences and is not a victimless crime. Every school child should see a police officer at least once in their primary years, telling them shoplifting is wrong.

The instinct of Fabians might be to blame the cost of living crisis for the upsurge of retail crime. We might fall back on GB Shaw's words that "the greatest of crimes is poverty". This would be wrong. Most of the people robbing your local Co-op or independent retailer are not poor or hungry; they are part of sophisticated crime operations, stealing to plan, exploiting the retreat of the police from our public spaces, and laughing at the laxity of current laws. Labour must not wring its hands, but co-ordinate policies to stamp out looting. **F**

Paul Richards is the Labour & Co-operative candidate for Sussex police and crime commissioner, and serves on the Fabian Society executive committee

International rescue

In an increasingly precarious world, *Nick Westcott* assesses whether Labour is ready for the foreign policy challenges ahead



*Nick Westcott is professor of practice in diplomacy at SOAS University of London and a former diplomat working for the UK and EU. His latest book, *Imperialism and Development: the East African Groundnuts Scheme and its Legacy*, was published by James Currey in 2020*

WHICHEVER PARTY WINS the next election, there is a growing risk they will be faced with a destabilising world that demands immediate top-level attention. Would Labour be up to the foreign policy tasks that lie ahead?

In a worst case scenario, by late 2024 there could be a perfect storm of international crises: a Middle East riven by division as no progress is made on an Israel-Palestine peace process, while Iran becomes more assertive abroad as things get worse at home; a Ukraine war in which, through sheer attrition, Russia is beginning to get the upper hand; escalating tension over Taiwan and between China and India; growing floods of refugees from disintegrating states in Africa and the Middle East; the collapse of Argentina's economy and a world tipping into economic recession; and to top it all, a Trump victory in the US presidential election. It could look quite ugly.

Britain would be poorly placed to cope. On the economic and political sidelines of Europe, thanks to Brexit, with a shrunken aid budget and struggling trade, the country's main international contribution is currently in the realm of security, through NATO. But weak economic growth and spending cuts would leave Britain's military unable to project much power overseas – saddled with the costs of two unaffordable aircraft carriers, slow procurement of next-generation equipment, and a shrinking army.

So foreign policy will not be easy for an incoming government. Of course, Labour is used to this. In 1945, the war was won – but the economy was wrecked, the government broke and the empire disintegrating, all against the backdrop of a looming Cold War. In 1964, an ever-less competitive economy and a precipitous retreat from empire had been capped by France's refusal to let Britain into the Common Market. Only in 1997 was the world relatively benign.

But the capacity of today's Labour party to handle foreign policy has been weakened during its years out

of power. A paper by Professor Azeem Ibrahim in 2022 concluded that “the Labour party risks entering government unprepared and without the capacity to make significant foreign policy decisions”, a judgement repeated earlier this year.

To be effective internationally, Labour needs an experienced team, a clear policy, and good global connections. How do they match up?

Most British prime ministers arrive in No 10 giving top priority to their domestic agenda, but find themselves ineluctably dragged into foreign crises, summits and controversies. This is almost inevitable: the major international issues that affect Britain – relations with the US, Europe and China, Russia's war with Ukraine, Middle East peace, managing the global economy – require attention at the very top of government. Much of this cannot be delegated, so it is best to plan for it in advance.

Keir Starmer's international experience derives mainly from his human rights work and role as DPP, a position with a more global remit than you might think – I met him on a visit to Ghana in 2010, for example, when he was investigating a commercial corruption case. This year he has begun to enhance this experience, visiting Berlin in July to meet Chancellor Scholz; The Hague and Montreal in September, meeting Trudeau and other progressive leaders; and Paris the same month to meet President Macron. He also reportedly speaks regularly to Barack Obama.

But he needs people around him with experience of doing foreign policy in practice. Both the Labour front bench and Starmer's chief advisers are short on international experience. Hilary Benn served as International Development Secretary from 2003–7; Anneliese Dodds was a respected chair of the European Parliament's committee on economic and monetary affairs whilst serving as an MEP; Nick Thomas-Symonds taught US politics at Oxford; Chi Onwurah has a long-term interest in Africa;



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Emily Thornberry was shadow Foreign Secretary from 2016–2020; and a number of MPs maintain close links with the south Asian subcontinent. There is useful experience in the Lords too, where Lords Robertson, Mandelson and Baroness Ashton have all filled top international jobs. But none of these figures are currently in foreign policy roles.

The hope is that while relevant members of the shadow Cabinet may have little overseas experience, they should at least have time to prepare. David Lammy has been shadow Foreign Secretary since 2021 and has undertaken a series of detailed briefings from experts on a range of foreign policy issues. He published a substantive pamphlet for the Fabian Society in March, *Britain Reconnected*. John Healey has been shadow Defence Secretary since 2020; and Lisa Nandy, though only just appointed shadow development minister, filled the shadow foreign slot in 2020–21, before Lammy.

Of course, once in office, Labour would benefit from the resources of the state. The FCDO is still a Rolls-Royce service with many talented and experienced diplomats, but for some years now has lacked maintenance, fuel and a driver who knows where they are going. After a run of three disastrous foreign secretaries, James Cleverly brought to the office good sense, good manners and a willingness to work with rather than against his civil servants. But then he was replaced by David Cameron, a man with a reputation when prime minister for getting every major foreign policy call wrong. In foreign affairs, as in other areas of government, the chronic instability of ministerial posts has done Britain great damage. Our overseas interlocutors have ceased to know who will turn up next or what their policy will be.

To get the best value from Britain's diplomatic network and rebuild its international reputation, Labour will need to put in place a team at junior ministerial as well as Cabinet level that will stay in place for the duration of a government. This is the only way to build the personal relationships that are integral to effective diplomacy at the political level, as Lammy himself identifies.

In the meantime, Starmer needs a close adviser with practical international experience. This has been illustrated by his response to the Gaza crisis. This is a complex and delicate issue, with internal political sensitivities for the Labour party. But someone with experience of the Middle East peace process could have crafted a line on a ceasefire that would have been fair to both Israelis and Palestinians while avoiding an internal split and the risk of the Labour leadership appearing unsympathetic to dissenting views, both within the party and in many Muslim communities. That expertise was lacking.

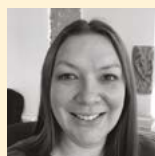
This was just a foretaste of the many similar issues that land on a prime minister's desk on a daily basis in No 10. To avoid a foreign policy that is merely fire-fighting, Labour also needs a clear strategy that will help steer the day-to-day decisions.

Lammy's Fabian pamphlet is a useful start, and Starmer himself has underlined his determination to negotiate a new relationship with Europe. But, for reasons I've outlined elsewhere, Labour needs something broader, simpler and clearer that will resonate with audiences at home and abroad. In essence, foreign policy is straightforward: know what your real national interests are and defend them; know who your friends are and stick with them; and be consistent and honest in your dealings with all. It is putting it into practice that's difficult. How tough should Britain be with China over its treatment of the Uyghurs? What can the British government do to prevent African states in the Sahel and the Horn disintegrating? How much support can we afford to give Ukraine? What is Britain's role in promoting peace in the Middle East? Where to begin the renegotiation with the EU?

These cannot all be prescribed in advance – which is why clear principles and experienced advisers will be essential for Labour to cope with what the world throws at it after the next election. Which might always be sooner than we think. **F**

The spectre of Trump

Within a year, the US will have chosen its next president. *Victoria Honeyman* explores the challenges Britain – and Labour – could face with a re-elected president Trump



Victoria Honeyman is an associate professor of British politics at the University of Leeds

DONALD TRUMP'S INFLUENCE on the Republican party, and American politics generally, has been enormous. But it is not only in the domestic arena that he has left his mark. As America holds its breath for the upcoming presidential election in November 2024, the rest of the world is also watching avidly. Should Biden be re-elected, American overseas policy is likely to continue along its current course, but should Trump return to the White House, as some polling in key battleground states has begun to suggest, the relationship which the US enjoys with many nations will change again. For the UK, which considers itself America's 'special' friend, the stakes are particularly high.

Of course, Trump has been president previously, so he is not an entirely unknown quantity. What would a re-elected president Trump mean for the US-UK special relationship and for the UK's foreign policy more widely?

Trump's election in 2016 signalled the end of a cordial but fairly cool period in the US-UK partnership. For the eight years that Obama served as president, the 'special relationship' remained steady but could not be described as warm or close. Neither Gordon Brown nor David Cameron had close relations with the president. Obama's international focus was often on China and south east Asia, where the UK has minimal influence, reducing Britain's relevance and potentially undermining the privileged position of the 'special relationship'. To make matters worse, when the US and UK did attempt to coordinate, relations were not always smooth; for example, the House of Commons rejected the proposed joint US-UK Syrian bombing campaign in 2013, contributing to a rethink in Washington on their proposed

action. While Trump was not universally welcomed in the UK, there was some hope that his links to the UK through his family and business interests might mean the focus of US foreign policy would again return to Europe, and particularly the UK.

Trump's arrival in the White House came approximately seven months after the Brexit vote in the UK and David Cameron's resignation as prime minister. Theresa May, Cameron's successor, was completely preoccupied with Brexit and the necessary negotiations that entailed, both domestically and overseas. Trump expressed his support for Brexit, and the hope was that the two leaders, although extremely different in style, might be able to work effectively together to further the aims of their two nations internationally, potentially even signing a trade deal. Trump was invited for a state visit to the UK, an unusual step for a newly elected president, and May went to the US to speak to the Republican party about the links between them and the UK Conservatives. However, despite efforts to create a diplomatic friendship, the relationship between the two leaders was extremely difficult. A contributing factor was that the Trump administration was considered a security risk after details of the Manchester Arena bombing were leaked in the US before details had been released in the UK. Trump himself berated Theresa May privately and commented publicly on her handling of the Brexit negotiations, suggesting he would have done better.

The relationship became particularly strained in 2019, when confidential emails from the British ambassador to the US, Kim Darroch, were leaked. These emails, sent to the UK government to brief them on the US

Trump's election in 2016 signalled the end of a cordial but fairly cool period in the US-UK partnership

government, described the Trump administration as ‘clumsy and inept’, and the Trump administration refused to work with him again, causing Darroch to resign from his post.

Fundamentally, the chaos which surrounded the Trump administration, and Trump himself, made it very difficult for any kind of meaningful relationship to exist between the UK and US leaders. While other relationships between presidents and prime ministers have been cool, even difficult, the structural features of the US-UK special relationship, hardwired into the military and intelligence communities of the two nations, have generally continued to function. While this continued during the Trump administration, the instability of the relationship caused the relationship to be difficult publicly, something which is somewhat unusual. When Boris Johnson replaced Theresa May as UK prime minister, it was suggested that the two men might have a better relationship due to them both being somewhat

disruptive characters. However, this proved not to be the case, and the relationship continued to be difficult until Trump was replaced by Joe Biden. From that point on, the relationship did not necessarily improve enormously, but the stability which the Biden administration brought allowed it to stabilise and return to ‘normal service’.

The direction of policy, the response to crises, the interaction with important international groupings; all of these would be hugely challenging for any leader to manage with an individual like Trump

The presidential election is not the only one on the horizon, of course – and the result of the general election here could be significant. Labour prime ministers can often find it difficult to work with US presidents. The very best ‘special relationships’ tend to involve Conservative prime ministers, and there are a number of theories as to why this might be. It could be driven by the positioning of the Conservative party to the right of centre in UK

politics, so somewhat closer to both the Democrats and the Republicans in the US than the Labour party. It might simply be a numbers game – there have been more Conservative prime ministers than Labour ones and they have been in power for longer over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. Perhaps Conservative prime ministers find the relationship easier to handle, or are criticised less for good relationships. It could be pure coincidence. Whatever the reason, were Keir Starmer to be elected as the next prime minister of the UK, he would undoubtedly find a Trump administration hard to handle. However, were Rishi Sunak to remain in his post, he would find the job of managing Trump no less taxing. The direction of policy, the response to crises, the interaction with important international groupings; all of these would be hugely challenging for any leader to manage with an individual like Trump, as they were when he was president between 2017 and 2021. While a Biden administration might not be an ideal fit for either UK leader, it would certainly be a more predictable administration than the alternative – and predictability is something which the special relationship often relies upon to maintain its stability.

Should Trump be re-elected in 2024 – and there are some barriers in his way, not least an ongoing criminal trial – it is clear that instability would again return to the special relationship, but he will not break it. It is fundamentally too important to both nations; indeed, it is baked into their governing systems. However, difficult relationships, particularly where the US president is more unconventional and more erratic than the governing systems are designed to handle, can create a degree of chaos which is both hard to manage and hard to cope with. Regardless of which party wins the next UK general election, Trump would be a hard president to work with, and an even harder president to please. Should Biden win, there would still be difficult times to traverse and difficult issues to deal with, but the environment of those discussions and decisions would be far more stable and far less combative than with Trump as president. **F**



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A true transformation

Any feminist approach to foreign policy must take a holistic view, argues *Toni Haastrup*



Toni Haastrup is professor & chair of global politics in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Manchester. She is an ISRF Mid-Career Fellow and a 2022 recipient of the FLAX Foundation Emma Goldman Award

FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY (FFP) is a relatively new concept that has gained traction in recent years. While there is no single definition, all FFP countries seek to promote gender equality and women's rights in aspects of their external relations. Sweden's Social Democrats were the first to declare a commitment to FFP. In the last decade, several left-of-centre political parties in Europe have subsequently taken up the FFP cause. In the European Parliament, the Greens have demanded a European Union feminist foreign policy, and in the UK, the SNP has recently launched its feminist-informed approach to foreign policy. It isn't just in Europe; Canada adopted its version, the Feminist International Assistance Programme, not long after Sweden's declaration, while Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, and Chile have either adopted or declared an intent to adopt feminist foreign policies. In Africa, Libya and Liberia have both declared their intent to adopt feminist foreign policy and pro-gender approaches to foreign policy respectively.

With an increasing number of countries adopting FFP – although we might expect retrenchment given the rightward turn of nations including Sweden, Argentina

and the Netherlands – there is understandable curiosity about where the UK stands, especially since, inasmuch as foreign policy is a reserved issue, the Scottish commitment is limited in its reach. Unfortunately, Westminster under the current administration is a hostile environment when it comes to the possibility of truly feminist foreign policy.

Gender equality and women's rights are central to all existing FFPs. Crucially, however, feminist invocation in foreign policy suggests a normative shift, providing the possibility of a framework that requires us to rethink foreign policy holistically at the structural and programme levels. Feminists who have championed this new approach to foreign policy argue that it is an ethical orientation that seeks to challenge the prevailing structural hierarchies within the international system. As such, more than just investing in women's rights in other countries, mainly in the global South, FFP ought to consider a range of substantive factors that seek to transform an unequal world. For example, it should confront the role of colonialism in international relations and the implications for domestic policymaking; pay attention to how foreign policy practice may engender inequality within the global



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political system as a whole; rethink carceral immigration policies which consistently rob irregular migrants of their agency and humanity; and curtail the increasingly militarisation of global politics by checking arms sales, particularly to states whose activities invariably harm civilians. Fundamentally, when feminism meets foreign policy, where the latter has often reinforced hierarchical systems of oppression, the former should change it.

The current Conservative government would fail by this metric. So how about Labour? When Kate Osamor was shadow Secretary for International Development, she presented a vision of one dimension of FFP – a feminist approach to development. Premised on international social justice and reducing inequality, not just poverty, this approach prioritised the climate and ecological crises as well as peace and security. It acknowledged the incoherence of Conservative foreign policy, which advocates selling arms to Saudi Arabia while sending aid to Yemen, without regard for the UK's own complicity in this continuum of violence. Importantly, the approach was people-centred rather than driven by loosely defined 'interests.'

In this vision of development, human rights are non-negotiable, not inconveniences to be skirted. By prioritising peace and security, this vision of international development sought to provide refuge for those fleeing conflict. Importantly, the feminism deployed here aimed to tackle gender equality at home and abroad by naming and confronting patriarchy and other structural drivers of inequality within the global political economy, striving for gender justice, which Oxfam defines as: "The full equality and equity between women, men, LGBTQIA+, and non-binary people in all spheres of life, resulting in women jointly and on an equal basis with men defining and shaping the policies, structures and decisions that affect their lives and society as a whole."

Yet, because it was so squarely focused on development, it fell short of a full feminist foreign policy, sharing similarities with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Programme.

Under the current Labour leadership, the shape of future foreign policy is not yet clear. While Labour has always supported policies that promote women's rights in other countries, at home, little has been done to really work towards the transformation of systems of power that engender discrimination, like capitalism, militarism, and racism. A feminist orientation to foreign policy will only be convincing when Labour's foreign policy position puts people and international solidarity at the heart of what it proposes at home and abroad.

A willingness to shift to a feminist practice that is transformational and critiques structures of oppression perpetuated by the state itself is essential. UK Labour must actively challenge gendered subordination more broadly and resist being drawn into culture wars that harm the most vulnerable.

A feminist approach would see Labour supporting policies that promote peace and security for women affected by conflict

Feminism in foreign policy must be more than a branding exercise. Because feminism signals a very specific ethos, it is important that it is not simply used as a shorthand for gender equality promotion. At the same time, systematic attention to a gender equality agenda that is emancipatory for people of different gender identities at home and abroad is an important start. Championing intersectionality as a lens through which we can acknowledge the intersection of systems of oppressive power to disadvantage and discriminate against the most vulnerable groups globally must be central to any feminist approach to areas of foreign policy.

If these conditions are taken seriously by Labour leadership, there are measures that could potentially signal a Labour government's commitment to a feminist-informed foreign policy approach. First,

UK Labour should work to increase the representation of women in foreign policy decision-making positions such as ambassadors and diplomats. Second, as in the 2017 manifesto, working towards promoting peace and security through a gendered lens would involve full implementation of the UN's

'Women, Peace and Security' agenda including within the UK. This would mean, for example, repealing the Conservatives' reservations on Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention. This convention, which seeks to eradicate domestic violence and gender-based violence broadly, also obliges signatory states to protect migrant women. While opting out of this provision accords with the Conservative government's position on migration and migrants, it is discriminatory and signals a profound lack of care for some of the most vulnerable people in the world.

Moreover, a feminist approach would see Labour supporting policies that promote peace and security for women affected by conflict, which means a complete overhaul of the carceral and racist approach to refugee and asylum policies adopted by the Conservatives. It would mean a continuation of UK support to the participation of women in peace negotiations and peacekeeping operations. Moreover, a Labour government that works to address the root causes of conflict, such as poverty and inequality, will also help to tackle the impact of conflict-related insecurity which disproportionately affects women.

In general, feminist approaches to foreign policy can provide us with a useful framework of accountability for transforming global politics, especially by powerful states like the UK. FFP is not, however, truly feminist if it is merely used to provide the means to reinforce existing hierarchies by claiming a moral high ground. It is thus worth being cautious to ensure that, in the demand for those in power to integrate feminist-informed perspectives in their foreign policy-making and practice, we do not give them the tools to water down the liberatory demands of feminism to fit an existing uncritical agenda. ■

Moving forward

It is time to break the silence on Brexit, writes *Stella Creasy MP*



Stella Creasy is the Labour MP for Walthamstow and chair of the Labour Movement for Europe

BREXIT HAS REDEFINED possible outcomes for our nation for a generation – yet barely features in our shared political conversations. A weight dragging down our country, few are now prepared to defend it publicly without the caveat that this wasn't 'their idea' of Brexit. Many more grow frustrated given what they see as the obvious solution: to somehow reverse it overnight. Neither view stands up to the realities of the position the UK now finds itself in or is likely to alleviate the problems Brexit has caused.

As the fog of the pandemic clears, the real impact of Brexit has revealed itself. Eighty-three per cent of UK firms say Brexit has had a bigger impact on supply chains than Russia's war in Ukraine, rising energy costs or Covid-19. The NHS, already stretched to its limit, struggles with a lack of nurses and healthcare assistants. The loss of passporting rights – which allowed UK-based financial institutions to operate freely across the EU – has prompted many businesses to relocate. Indeed, Amsterdam overtook London as the largest financial trading centre in 2021. Travellers find what used to be easy is now almost unbearable – from the queues at border control to the exorbitant costs of pet passports, cutting ourselves off has proved costly and time-consuming.

Whether you ask Nigel Farage or the majority of the public who now say Brexit was a mistake, most agree it is not going well. Rishi Sunak continues to make feeble claims that there are benefits, but government policy tells a different story. The Windsor Agreement, the decision to rejoin Horizon, attempts to negotiate youth visas; all suggest that even this government is trying to restore our fractured relationship with Europe. It is telling that those who seek to defend Brexit talk in generalities not specifics – of possibilities and benefits, not outcomes and objectives.

Recognising the problems Brexit has created is not the same as calling for it to be reversed – a process that could take years, and in a still-divided country, holds little chance of being sustained. The idea that our membership could be reinstated quickly is a fantasy; substantive negotiations would be required on both Schengen arrangements and joining the Euro. Businesses struggling with paperwork and workers who don't have an EU passport require much more urgent help to avoid being put out of action. The window of opportunity in which change can make a meaningful difference is narrowing daily as companies slowly but surely relocate jobs and factories to the mainland continent.

Labour must show it recognises this timescale, using the renegotiation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement in 2026 to limit the damage done by walking away from our most important trading market. British Chambers of Commerce research shows 77 per cent of firms trading with the EU said the deal was not helping them to increase sales and more than half reported difficulties in adapting to the new rules for exporting goods. A veterinary agreement is just the start – the goal must be to secure as much direct access to the single market as possible. With Europe showing flexibility – whether through the deal done with Moldova or the Windsor Agreement – those who believe we must be either all in or all out are mistaken. We could also sign up to the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean Convention, reducing the bureaucracy that rules of origin requirements demand, a move that could also protect our electric car industry as well as manufacturing. Whilst some talk of a 'creatives visa' programme, it is difficult to see why Europe would single out one sector for an exemption. Conversely a youth travel visa, rejoining Erasmus and work visa reforms make sense for all sides – including voters in the 'red wall' who agree individuals should be able to travel to and from the UK for work and study purposes.

Even before the next election, Labour can help by rejecting measures that will add further harm. The government intends to apply a £43 per consignment cost to cross the border into the UK to cover processing costs now we are out of the EU. Due to be implemented in January 2024, it has been delayed five times in a tacit admission of the negative impact it will have on supply chains and so inflation. Similarly, the government argues the use of automatic passport gates means a proposed new visa entry system will be painless, but the practicalities of checking every visa will mean longer queues and more paperwork costs.

Seven years on, it is still seen as received wisdom that Britain must let Brexit play out for the benefit of those who voted for it, whatever the impact. Without leadership this leaves the British public paying a heavy price – and politicians trying to find their way around problems rather than solving them. If it wins the next election, Labour can make radical change happen without fundamentally changing this status quo – but just as it is possible to tie one's shoelaces without using your hands, it will be hard work. If, instead, we are ambitious about rebuilding our relationship with our neighbours, Labour won't just meet its missions for government: it will exceed them. ■

Alf Dubs talks to *Iggy Wood* about asylum seekers, the Elgin Marbles and holding the government to account

PEER

PRESSURE

IMEET ALF DUBS the day after his 91st birthday. It seems to be a requirement for people interviewing him to say he seems much younger than his years; but there really is no getting around it. The effect is only amplified by the presence of a student on work experience – at one point, when I call the House of Lords ‘reactionary’, they share a glance like two schoolchildren at the back of a classroom.

Dubs is exceptionally nice – when I say I’ve never seen the House of Lords chamber, he insists that I visit at his invitation, and when I leave, he tells me to drop by soon: “you know where I am now!” and, in a rather fatherly way, makes sure I safely navigate the strange airlock-style compartments that shunt you back out onto Millbank. What he is not is polite – or perhaps just not obsequious in the way that politicians can be. It was apparent from his expression when he thought I was asking a silly question long before I finished it.

The story of Dubs’ life is well-trodden, but worth recounting. Born in Prague six years before Nazi Germany annexed the Sudetenland, the first step in its eventual occupation of the entirety of Czechoslovakia, he was one of 669 children saved by Nicholas Winton, a British stockbroker. Winton helped these children – almost all, like Dubs, having Jewish heritage – escape to Britain via the Netherlands as part of the wider Kindertransport rescue effort.

Living in a flat in Belsize Park with his father, who escaped the day the Germans invaded Prague, Alf did not see his mother for two months. Most of the Kindertransport children, of course, never saw their parents again.

The British government had originally intended the Kindertransport scheme to be a very temporary arrangement – much of Nicholas Winton’s work involved securing the requisite £50 per child to fund their eventual return, which the British government insisted on. Yet, like many Jewish refugees, Alf stayed in Britain. Was there any question of returning to Czechoslovakia?

“Well, almost everybody we knew had either fled the country or ended up in the camps. At that point my mother already had a job here. We had nowhere to live [in Prague] – our flat had gone. The communists were about to take over the country.

“And, you know, most people didn’t go back, once the communists took over.”

He and his mother had very different experiences of life in Britain.

“My mum had quite a difficult time. She had a job – she was number two [at] the council. Her boss left and she acted up for six months, they advertised the job, she applied; they turned her down, appointed nobody, and she acted up for another six months, again applied. They again turned her down and didn’t appoint anybody.

“[And] she heard one of the interview panel say: ‘You’re not giving a job to that bloody foreigner’. I was not quite old enough to be supportive. You know, she was absolutely distraught.

“There wasn’t nearly as much antipathy that I was aware of; they thought I was odd, rather than someone to be hostile to.”

Dubs went on to a long career in politics: MP for Battersea from 1979 to 1987 and then in the House of Lords for 30 years, with a stint as Fabian Society chair too (he is now vice-president of the society). I ask him whether the hostile attitudes his mother experienced undermine the tendency of people in Britain to look back on the Kindertransport as a time when the UK stepped up to the plate. He doesn’t seem to think so; or at least, he thinks that such a programme would be hard to imagine today.

“If you read the Hansard [the record of parliamentary debates], there was opposition in 1938. But on the whole, [the UK] took 10,000 unaccompanied children in less than a year.”

Importantly, he says, “there weren’t government ministers attacking people who arrived here.” And he argues that this trend continued until very recently.

“After the Hungarian revolution in ‘56, there was quite a welcome for [Hungarian refugees]. And then we had the East African Asians, and then we had Vietnamese ‘boat people’, and then we had Bosnians. So there wasn’t that hostility. There was no leading government minister who said: ‘These people should be kept out.’ I think it got bad in the years after Brexit.”

Given that anti-immigration campaigners tend to present themselves as the envoys of a ‘silent majority’ of Britons, this is an interesting point: is public opinion, at least in part, downstream from politicians?

“I think that’s right. I think when you get senior ministers expressing hostility, then that does have an effect on the willingness of local communities. And I would argue that at the moment, we’re in a battle for public opinion.

“When I moved my amendment in 2016 [the so-called Dubs Amendment, which called for unaccompanied child refugees in Europe to be able to join relatives in the UK], I think what tipped the balance was that public opinion woke up... stimulated by the pictures on television of a little Syrian boy called Alan Kurdi who drowned on a Mediterranean beach.”

“When the cameras are there, and people are told what’s going on, people tend to become more supportive, against those government ministers arguing the other way. So it’s a battle for public opinion.”

Of course, the UK is not the only country in the western world to have experienced a palpable shift in government rhetoric about immigrants in general, and asylum seekers in particular.

“I’m afraid we’re seeing all over continental Europe the extreme right-wing parties doing very well. Poland is an exception; they’ve gone the other way.

“It’s in Slovakia. Hungary was always like that. It’s in Austria, Italy, and France.

“What we’re seeing is this happening in many European countries: there is an extreme right wing, anti-immigrant, anti-asylum movement. And in a way, Suella Braverman may be a part of that.”

I point out that, in light of all this, Labour’s response might be thought to be a little muted, focusing on the practical problems with Tory policy rather than making a positive case for immigration and the right to asylum. Should they be doing more?

“I think it wouldn’t be very healthy for politics or for human rights if the next election [was] a shabby sort of squabble about the rights of asylum seekers or even about immigration. It would be very divisive, so I hope it won’t happen – but I think the Tories are pushing towards wanting that to happen.

“From our point of view, having a Labour government would be a lot better than the present one – probably not good enough for some of us, but a lot better. I think Yvette Cooper would do a good job.”

Now I embark on the first of the aforementioned silly questions. The risk, I say, is that you might end up like the last Labour government, to which many people trace back the negative attention given to asylum seekers specifically. David Blunkett, for example, coordinated the timing of asylum policy announcements with the Sun, which was running an anti-refugee campaign.

“It’s a long time ago. It’s 13 years ago since there was a Labour government, and what you’re talking about is [even longer] ago.

“It’s a long time ago and things have changed quite a bit since then. You can’t have 13 years of Tory government and then start harking back to things that [New] Labour did.”

I suspect he won’t be quite so conciliatory should Labour get into government, however. He’s prepared to talk about Britain’s responsibilities to refugees in a way that no frontbencher could ever get away with.

“We’re 17th out of 18 in relation to size in taking asylum seekers, so we’re actually not doing terribly well.”

“We can decide who we want in terms of our job market, but to asylum seekers, we really do have an obligation. And the government is trying to renege on that obligation.”

This touches on a broader point: Dubs is adamant that the right to asylum must be maintained as clearly distinct from migration in general.

“If people don’t have a right under the Geneva convention, then unless they qualify in another way, I think they have to go. You can’t protect the rights of the victims of persecution, war and torture unless you don’t allow to stay people who are not victims. It’s uncomfortable, but I think it’s the only way.”

Dubs’ willingness to talk about Britain’s failure to pull its weight highlights a counterintuitive feature of life under a Tory government: it’s often opposition politicians in the Lords, rather than the Commons, who have the most freedom to criticise the Conservatives’ slide into right-wing populism. This seems, on the face of it, at odds with the anachronistic veneer of the ermine-clad upper house.

“First of all, there is pomp in the Lords, but on a day-to-day basis it’s as much of a working place as the Commons,” Dubs says.

“I think it’s partly that the procedures and structures of the Lords lend themselves more to opposition to government legislation. There’s far more scope in the Lords procedure for even individual backbenchers to move amendments and generally get stuck in on an issue.

“So I think it’s partly that, and partly that the government doesn’t have a majority. If it keeps putting in more people it will soon have one, but...if we, and the Lib Dems, and some of the crossbenchers vote together, you can normally win the day.

“It’s very difficult. I mean it’s handy at the moment, that we can defeat the government, and we can challenge them much more than the Commons is able to challenge them. But I just think it’s very difficult in a democracy to justify an appointed [house] with no accountability.”

“When there was a byelection some years ago I spent the day tramping round South London and I was getting an earful about jobs, schools, housing, the health service, planning – you name it.

“And I came back, no one else had been down at this byelection, and they were all sheltered from it. I don’t think that slides. I think when people make decisions about other people’s lives, they have to justify themselves and be accountable.”

Is he disappointed, then, that Keir Starmer has rowed back on the policy of scrapping the House of Lords? This is, judging by his reaction, a second silly question.

“No, he hasn’t rowed back on it. I think he’s said it’s not a first-term issue. You can’t have it as a first-term issue because I don’t think voters would say after all the awfulness – the cost of living, inflation, all the things we’re going through – [you should now] spend the best part of two or three years [on] constitutional reform.”

The newest member of the House of Lords, of course, is one David Cameron, who seems to evoke just a glimmer of nostalgia in Dubs for a better class of Tory.





“If I was in the Commons I’d be very angry. Having said that, that sort of performance at questions [the day before] was so much better – he showed up the other ministers. I don’t agree with him, but he did pretty well.

“I think it’s time we had someone on the international stage who behaves like a grown-up politician.”

This sets Cameron in stark contrast, in Dubs’ eyes, with the current PM, who, the preceding weekend, had cancelled a meeting with the Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, over the latter’s renewed calls for the repatriation of the Parthenon marbles.

“Our prime minister behaved like a spoilt child – I mean, what a thing, to refuse to meet the Greek prime minister, how insulting.

“It really demeaned this country.

“I do think we should consider giving them back to Greece...It matters so much to [them]. It’s part of their national soul.”

Throughout our interview, I get the sense that Dubs can’t or won’t drop the doctrine of collective responsibility that he would have had to live by when he was a junior minister – especially given that his role was in the Northern Ireland Office during the later stages of the Good Friday agreement negotiations. Even where he clearly disagrees with the leadership, he’s reluctant to bring those differences out into the open or contradict party policy. As we’re winding down, however, he asks: “do you want me to be outrageous?”

“I think health and social care is a such a crucial issue, and I’m not sure we can ever deal with it... until we find a way to put more money in.

“There’s an ageing population, and a growing population. And this is not Labour party policy, but I think that if we had an increase in income tax hypothecated for health and social care, and you said to people that every extra penny will go straight into health and care...most [people] might well accept that.”

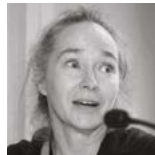
It’s refreshing to hear a Labour grandee be so candid on the topic. For all the party talks about being upfront with the British public about the need to take difficult decisions, they’re very reluctant to admit that more money might be needed for public services. And Dubs is right; with an ageing population, and medical technology improving all the time – which is great news for patients, but is accompanied by an increase in costs rather than a reduction – it’s difficult to see any way around spending more money.

On our way out, Dubs tells me he reckons he can make it to the Lords chamber in four or five minutes, which is sounds to me like remarkably good going. And then, suddenly, I’m back out in the cold; looking at my watch, I’m surprised to see that what felt like 20 minutes has in fact been over an hour. I’m exhausted; Alf Dubs, I suspect, isn’t. ■

Iggy Wood is assistant editor of the Fabian Review

Back from the brink

Our prison system is in crisis. Labour needs to put it right, writes *Andrea Coomber*



Andrea Coomber KC (Hon.) is chief executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, the world's oldest prison reform charity

TOUGHER SENTENCES', 'PUNISH offenders', 'lock up dangerous criminals for longer'. Used to the point of redundancy, these sentiments could have been plucked from any Justice Secretary's speech, any party's manifesto, or any party leader's conference speech – but this time they were found in the King's Speech, delivered in early November 2023. That the same rhetoric and priorities have been used continuously over the past decade, while the situation in our prisons has so dramatically deteriorated, illuminates why a fresh perspective and renewed focus is required.

Keir Starmer often speaks of "13 years of decline". Nowhere is this more evident than in our criminal justice system. If Labour comes into power at the next election, it will inherit a prison and probation service on its knees. It is crucial that Labour does not fall prey to the same short-sighted, pandering policies that have defined prison policy for too long, and instead looks to creating a system that is fit for purpose.

To paint a picture of the current situation, in October, the prison population passed 88,000 – the highest number ever recorded. The government's own projections indicate that it could climb to as high as 106,300 by March 2027. That would be a 36 per cent increase in six years.

The spaces to accommodate all these people simply do not exist. The latest figures published by the Ministry of Justice show that over 70 per cent of all prisons are at or over capacity. To give some examples, Leeds prison currently contains a staggering 452 people more than it is designed to safely hold. Wandsworth – a prison now notorious for failings that led to a recent high-profile escape – has 1,576 men crammed into a building made for 964. The system is bursting at the seams.

The number of people in prison on remand – awaiting trial or sentence – is at its highest level for at least 50 years. Most of these people will be acquitted at trial or sentenced to less time than they have served. It is perhaps little

wonder that they have the highest rates of suicide in the prison estate.

Ministers' meddling, which for a time included restricting moves to open prisons, has left people languishing in the system. Almost 3,000 people remain in prison on imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentences, which were abolished more than a decade ago, though not retrospectively. Given a tariff by the judge, but requiring release by the Parole Board, all but a handful of people serving an IPP sentence are years over their tariff, many of them by more than a decade. To give some sense of the injustice, one of our members received a one-year IPP and has now been in prison for 19 years.

As for women's prisons, a report published in February on HMP Eastwood Park found that in the previous six months, around a third of its inmates had self-harmed, 86 per cent said they were experiencing mental ill-health and there had been two self-inflicted deaths since 2019. The inspectorate said the prison was "failing in its most basic duty – to keep the women safe".

And what of the rehabilitation and education these overcrowded prisons are meant to provide? Week after week, inspectors at HM Inspectorate of Prisons publish reports documenting the woeful circumstances that people in prison are subject to. Certain themes crop up almost every time – staff shortages, violence, terrible living conditions, and no access to work, education or training. Someone in prison self-harms at least once every eight minutes, which is perhaps unsurprising given that most are locked up in dire conditions, often for up to 23 hours a day.

It is not just prisons. Probation is also in crisis. Probation services are overburdened and under-resourced, with numbers of people in probation continuing to grow all while funding decreases. Thanks to Chris Grayling, privatisation in 2014 decimated what was a well-functioning and effective probation service. Where the service had previously

been based in and catered to local communities through a network of probation trusts, the part-privatisation did away with those crucial local connections and instead handed contracts to private companies with little expertise, who in turn did not adequately train staff or fund services. Although the change was reversed, the service has been unable to return to its previous community-based model.

For a Labour party planning its manifesto, these crises could provide fertile ground for robust policy effecting long-lasting change. A future government could take seriously the Ministry of Justice's own research, which shows that community sentences are more effective in reducing reoffending than short prison terms. It could move to prevent people being recalled to prison unnecessarily for administrative reasons, such as missed appointments. It could tackle the growing number of people on remand. In addition, a government looking to showcase its investment in communities could finally return probation to its pre-privatisation roots by prioritising local service delivery that works alongside local police and local authorities. Perhaps most fundamentally, it could lead a sensible national conversation about sentencing. Prison sentences have increased dramatically over the past 25 years, for an ever-growing list of offences, but there is no evidence that longer sentences

deter offending, and reoffending rates suggest that prison feeds, rather than interrupts, crime.

At a time when the cost of living dominates public attention, renewed focus on prisons and probation could save much-needed public funds. An ineffective justice system means that reoffending cost the government a staggering £18bn in 2016. As it stands, the prison system is a drain on other public services and a massive cost to the public purse. By significantly reducing the numbers of

people behind bars, the money currently being poured into prisons could instead be used to invest in housing, education and jobs. Homelessness, domestic violence and abuse, neglect, substance misuse and poverty are the root causes sweeping people into the justice system. If Labour is

serious about combatting crime, it needs to focus attention and resources where they will make a difference.

Decades of reactionary, populist criminal justice policy mean that any incoming government will face a system on a cliff edge, with little room for manoeuvre. Labour has an opportunity to bring the system back from the brink, but only if short-termism is abandoned in favour of a long-term vision for achieving safer communities. Given the emotive issues at stake, this will require political courage. Labour will need to follow the overwhelming evidence in favour of a smaller, more purposeful and humane prison system. ■

If Labour is serious about combatting crime, it needs to focus attention and resources where they will make a difference



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The hand of history

The achievements of the 1945 government still have much to teach Labour today, as *Richard Toye* explains



*Richard Toye is professor of modern history at the University of Exeter and the author of more than 20 books. His most recent, *Age of Hope: Labour, 1945, and the Birth of Modern Britain*, was published this year by Bloomsbury Continuum*

CLEMENT ATTLEE WAS a man of few words, but the ones that he used were frequently very effective. When, prior to the 1945 election, the socialist intellectual Harold Laski urged him to resign as Labour leader in the interests of the party, he responded simply: "Thank you for your letter, contents of which have been noted."

Attlee's style of politics would not be easily reproducible in modern conditions. Curt, clipped, and often monosyllabic, he seemed far from media friendly, even as his party mastered the latest publicity techniques. Having become leader of the opposition apparently by default, his lack of obvious charisma was one of the reasons that some, like Laski, had wanted to get rid of him. Yet as prime minister, he gained in stature – and his authority, when he chose to exercise it, was key to his capacity to keep the government on track.

Although Attlee is often described as an underrated prime minister, in fact he scores highly in surveys of political experts, and his reputation amongst historians is enviable. The question today is whether the Labour party can learn much from its own post-war successes, given that conditions have changed so radically in the meantime. I believe that it can – though this must be based not simply on nostalgia but on careful attention to what worked, what did not work, and why. And, before

any attempt to learn from the past, we must be precise about the ways in which our current context is different.

John Cole, as a cub reporter, once took down a statement Attlee dictated 'without hesitation or amendment', killing off a misleading newspaper story that he was willing to bring an end to the partition of Ireland. It would be wrong to romanticise the often highly partisan 1940s press; the anecdote itself is proof that, then as now, the media could make things up out of whole cloth. At the same time, politicians then stood a much better chance of having their words fully and accurately reported. Attlee would have been bemused and distressed by 24/7 news and the social media whirl.

The technology of the time was challenging enough to him as things stood. His press secretary, Francis Williams, did persuade him to have a news agency ticker tape service installed in No 10, offering the incentive that it would help the prime minister keep up with the cricket.

The following week, Attlee came to Williams in a state of confusion: "Francis, Francis! You know my cricket machine at the Cabinet door? When I checked it just now for the lunchtime score at Lord's it was ticking out the decisions and subjects discussed at the Cabinet meeting this morning. How can it do that? What's going on around here?"

As prime minister, Attlee gained in stature – and his authority, when he chose to exercise it, was key to his capacity to keep the government on track



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Yet it would be a mistake to assume that with Trumpism, fake news, Brexit, and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, today's world is incomparably more complex and difficult than that with which Attlee and his colleagues had to deal. Labour came to power on the assumption that a socialist government would find it easier to handle the Soviets than the Conservatives would. Yet Stalin and Molotov were in no mood to give quarter to a British empire ruled by social democrats, a group which they loathed with a vengeance. Researching and writing *Age of Hope* drove home to me the emotional horror of the fact that no sooner had the second world war finished than the prospect of the third appeared on the horizon.

Scholars have often blamed the fact that the Attlee government had only a short tenure in office on a combination of ideological exhaustion, personality clashes, and factional disagreements. Although there is much to be said for such explanations, we should not underestimate the psychological impact of the Cold War in weakening the appetite for further domestic change. This was, after all, a conflict that threatened to go nuclear. The young Tony Benn fought and won a byelection in Bristol in November 1950. On polling day, he was too busy to listen to the news. It was only later that he learned of the 'devastating threat' that had emerged from Washington: "That day President Truman said, almost casually, that he might use an atomic bomb in the Korean War."

Although historians have spilt much ink arguing about which of the major powers was most responsible for the outbreak of the Cold War, we should perhaps

(in the light of Ukraine) give more credit to the actors on *both* sides for the fact that more direct military conflict was avoided. The next Labour government, too, will be operating in an unstable world, and it will likely not get credit from the public for the arduous task of preventing or minimising future crises. Attlee's record does show, though, that it is possible to advance ambitious reforms at home, even in times of straitened finances and international upheaval.

Attlee's placid demeanour – often compared to that of a schoolmaster or bank manager – was an important element of his success. While he was in office, the Conservatives sharpened their rhetoric against the workers and claimed that the government was acting only in the interests of this single class. In an obituary piece, the Labour MP Woodrow Wyatt told readers that it was due to Attlee 'that Labour's social revolution was accepted by the middle classes.' Nationalisation, the NHS, and Indian independence might not have seemed like much to *New Statesman* readers in 1967, the year of Attlee's death: "but it was a hell of a packet then. If it had been accompanied by provocative language, by jeering at middle-class conventions, there could have been upheaval. But Attlee made it sound so respectable, if not dull, that he soothed his opponents and even made his followers, frequently to their irritation, think nothing was happening."

The same technique may not wash in 2023. Still, it is important to remember that, if Labour is to win the next election and to stay in power for a decent time thereafter, it will be necessary to appeal positively to some former Tory voters and to lull others into staying at home. A leader who succeeds in doing this should not instantly be accused of betrayal.

This is not to say that one should avoid criticisms of a new Labour government and its inevitable imperfections; only that the critique should be nuanced. The Attlee ministry had plenty of weaknesses. Although it deserves credit for recognising the necessity of Indian independence, its overall imperial record was distinctly mixed. The strong economic performance at home, while certainly a rebuke to those who had criticised nationalisation, rested in part upon continued colonial exploitation. Labour also missed an opportunity to abolish capital punishment (although it did away with the sentence of whipping, at least outside of prisons). Many of the social and racial attitudes of key ministers such as Herbert Morrison should make us feel profoundly uncomfortable in the here and now.

Most people, if asked to state the Attlee government's greatest legacy, would name the NHS. But health occupied very little space in the 1945 manifesto. Socialists then were much less interested in creating a welfare state than in reforming society so that mere 'ambulance and salvage work' (as Morrison put it) would become less and less needed. Labour's true success lay in its framing the choice voters faced at the ballot box not as collectivism versus the free market, but rather as public versus private control of the economy. By 1951, when the party lost power, it had ceased to be able to refresh and renew this theme. It is, however, a theme that is very much worth resurrecting today – and when the speechwriters get to work on it, history can genuinely help. ■

Rock bottom

Destitution is on the rise. Labour needs a plan for hardship, writes *Katie Schmuecker*



Katie Schmuecker is principal policy adviser at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

PARENTS SURVIVING ON one meal a day so that their kids can eat; people having to turn to charity because they can't afford basic items like toilet roll and washing powder; teachers up and down the country keeping food and toiletries in their bottom drawer because they know children in their class will need it. These visceral signs of hardship are becoming more and more common in this country. We continue to break records for food bank use, and the number of people experiencing destitution is the highest it's been since the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and Heriot-Watt University started monitoring it in 2015.

If Labour forms the next government, it is going to need a plan for reducing hardship in our country – otherwise the grim records will keep on coming. Failing to act to address such severe levels of hardship would be both an offence to Labour's values and an impediment to progress on its five missions.

Visible signs of hardship fuel people's sense of a broken society. What is more, there is a potential electoral advantage to be gained from taking this issue seriously. But it will require rapid mobilisation behind an urgent plan.

Deepening poverty and destitution

Hardship is intensifying in our country. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the number of people experiencing destitution, unable to afford to meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed. JRF and Heriot-Watt University's work shows this most severe form of hardship has more than doubled in the last five years, to reach a shameful 3.8 million people experiencing destitution at some point in 2022. This includes one million children – a figure that has almost tripled in the same period.

A major driver of the destitution we see in our communities has been the series of cuts and freezes that have chipped away at the adequacy of our social security system. More than seven in 10 of the people experiencing

destitution receive social security payments, demonstrating they are no longer doing the basic job of protecting people from severe hardship. Layer on top of that sharp increases in price of essentials, rising levels of household debt, a housing crisis, increasingly rationed public services and a growing number of migrants who are not entitled to help in a crisis because they have 'no recourse to public funds'. It is hardly surprising that destitution is rising.



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Zooming out a little, we see a broader backdrop of deepening poverty. While the headline rate of relative poverty may have been stubbornly static over the last 20 years, the number of people pushed deep below the poverty line is increasing.

This is hardship on a scale that cannot be ignored. Not only is it morally wrong; it is also destructive. A cold damp home and insufficient food is bad for physical health. The constant stress of trying to meet your basic physical needs wears away at mental health, erodes social connections and makes it harder for children to learn and thrive. In turn, these outcomes increase demand on our public services and prevent people from reaching their full potential.

Voters want to hear compassion – and see a plan

The cost of living remains a top issue in the eyes of the electorate. What is more, JRF's work with swing voters in key seats shows people are deeply concerned about current levels of hardship. They see poverty in communities around them and affecting people they know, and they don't think it belongs in a country like ours.

Concerningly for our political leaders, they also do not think either party is taking hardship seriously, either by talking about it with the empathy and compassion they want to hear or developing a credible plan to change the situation. With voters seeing little to distinguish the two main parties on this issue, there is an opportunity for the party that develops a distinct, emotive and powerful pitch to the electorate on an issue where they want to hear more. Doing this in the pre-election period will also build a mandate for action in a post-election period.

Low-cost immediate actions setting us on a path to long-term reform

If we want to build a society where people can thrive, we need to fix the foundations with a plan to tackle rising hardship. Shifting the dial will require some fundamental structural changes, such as more good jobs, genuinely affordable housing and a social security system that guarantees people can at least afford life's essentials – like food, utility bills and basic toiletries.

But the urgency of rising levels of hardship requires immediate action that will ease hardship now, while also setting us on the path of longer-term reform. Here are five relatively low-cost areas for action that will get things moving in the right direction:

- 1. Tackle the sharp edges in the social security system that drive hardship.** It would be relatively quick, low-cost and impactful to lower the amount that can be deducted from benefits to repay debts – which leaves an already inadequate rate of benefits lower still. The same would be true of reforming the five-week wait for an initial Universal Credit payment or reducing the severity and prevalence of sanctions in the social security system. In parallel to these quick fixes, work could begin on addressing the inadequacy of social security by laying the groundwork for an 'essentials guarantee', to ensure the basic rate of benefits is always enough to afford life's essentials. Low-cost first steps would include introducing a protected minimum amount into the system, so there is a floor below which deductions and caps

cannot reduce support, and establishing an independent process to advise on the target level for the guarantee.

- 2. Set out a renewed ambition to end homelessness,** which has been rising fast. The experience of 'Everyone In' during the pandemic shows what is possible with focus and determination, and we should take inspiration from movements like Built for Zero which are driving down homelessness in parts of the United States. This aim could be reinforced by speeding up and strengthening the introduction of protections for renters against eviction.
- 3. Tighten up and enforce employee rights,** with more secure contract types becoming the norm, more notice of shifts and compensation for shifts cancelled at short notice. JRF's work shows people with temporary jobs or those paid by the hour or task are more likely to be pushed deeper into poverty and less likely to exit from it. This should be complemented by reorienting employment support to prize engagement and motivation – rather than compulsion and threat. This would help deliver higher employment among disabled people and those with caring responsibilities, many of whom want to work but struggle to find good jobs to suit their circumstances.
- 4. Plug the gap in crisis support at the local level in England.** Funding cuts meant that by 2022, 35 local authorities had no local welfare assistance scheme whatsoever. The £1bn Household Support Fund, introduced during the pandemic and continued through the cost-of-living crisis, has proved vital to bolstering local crisis support. It must be made permanent and knitted together with practical help and advice to get people back on their feet, unlocking the wealth of energy, creativity and relationships in communities which brings people purpose and connection. Having someone and somewhere to turn to when times are tough helps protect people from hardship.
- 5. Better protection for everyone in our communities.** Asylum seekers are at especially high risk of destitution. Allowing people to work after six months would enable people to support themselves and contribute. In addition, on being granted refugee status, the 'move on' period from asylum accommodation (currently a minimum of 7 days) should be extended to reduce homelessness.

Under New Labour, the Social Exclusion Unit and National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal heralded a keen focus on the social issues inherited by Labour in 1997. How these policies were approached were of their time and would need to look different today. But the statement of intent, and mobilisation behind it, should serve as inspiration to any future Labour government.

Tackling hardship must be the foundation of any strategy for economic growth, tackling barriers to opportunity and taking a preventative approach to public services. Without a plan, the grim records on levels of hardship will keep on being broken. ■

Stopping the rot

Recent scandals have eroded public trust in government.
John Bowers sets out how Labour should respond



John Bowers KC is the principal of Brasenose College, Oxford and the author of Downward Spiral, which will be published by Manchester University Press in April 2024

STANDARDS IN PUBLIC life have declined over recent years. They did so particularly steeply under the rulebreaker-in-chief, Boris Johnson, but that he is no longer resident in No 10 is far from enough. It is an understatement to say, as the Committee on Standards in Public Life does, that: “The existing standards framework is not functioning as well as it should.” The ethical timbers have rotted, and we need something to replace the old wood. We have witnessed so many ‘gates’ – partygate, Zahawigate, Raabgate, the dismissal of permanent secretaries and the Greensill imbroglio. And those touched by scandal seem to have profited, with knight-hoods for Gavin Williamson and Priti Patel, and a Cabinet recall for Lord Cameron.

Reformers ranging from the Constitution Unit to Nigel Boardman (who produced a report in response to the Greensill scandal), the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs committee have made proposals about what should be done. Yet Sunak’s government has been tepid in its response. Labour has a real opportunity to act.

The landscape of standards regulation today is complex and confusing to most in the ‘Westminster village’, let alone those outside it. The patchwork of codes and regulators, many of them derived from the Nolan Report on Standards in Public Life in the 1990s, reflects the historical development of ethics regulation in the UK, where a scandal may prompt institutional innovation in one particular area while others are reformed only incrementally over decades. The ‘system’ has grown up in an unplanned way, and although sometimes pragmatism is better than even the finest architectures, that is not so in this case. It is a hodgepodge.

We need a full reconsideration, a new broad canvas: no less than a new ethical social contract. There are too many cheques and not enough balances.

A slippery slope

There is a strong argument that the current standards malaise is linked to something else that may itself be even more threatening: populism, traced back, at least in part,

to the deep Brexit fracture. This created acrimonious scenes in parliament and beyond, adding extra toxin to the mix.

Perhaps the Brexit fissure undermined the standards that were traditionally inherent (and embedded) in the public sector. Or perhaps these already sinking standards created the perfect breeding ground for the populist bacillus. Either way, a group of politicians who want to rail against the establishment and are suspicious of ‘experts’ gained ground.

The thin tissue of trust has corroded. Once lost, it is difficult to regain. Yet we should try: the decline in ethical standards puts the future of our democracy and the very rule of law at risk. Standards should not be an optional afterthought; they need to be central to public life. As Lord Evans puts it, we need ethical buoyancy. For this, rules are necessary but not sufficient, because it is as much about culture as rules. Both need to be embedded in some material tangible way.

The decline in ethical standards puts the future of our democracy and the very rule of law at risk

We need a new Nolan-style review, in the form of a Speaker’s conference or commission, to locate an ethical consensus. The Speaker is a figure above politics who could convene the right mixture of politicians

and outsiders to do the job. The review should consider how best to embed integrity and consider both tighter regulation and cultural change. It must assess what has gone wrong and seek to gain all-party agreement on the way forward, taking the issue out of day-to-day politics and entrenching high ethical standards. The new ethics regime will require a more legalistic approach than we have been used to. Judges are normally careful to keep out of politics. But judges have a vital role to play in any new settlement, as surveys show they still have the broad trust of the public. Of course, the more legalistic things are, the longer delays will be. There will be a balance to be struck.

The new system should involve a fresh commitment to restore Nolan ethics – but it should also go further, to ensure as far as possible that they cannot be undermined again as they were during Johnson’s tenure. It must mean a more sober culture, where standards are burnished, where there is more leadership by example and fewer apparent prizes, promotions and honours for finding loopholes and breaking or twisting the rules.

Ultimately, we need to create a climate in which what you can get away with is no longer the predominant ‘ideology’. This requires real-world deterrent sanctions which are largely absent today from the ethical regulators.

Under-regulated politicians are tempted to behave badly and Johnson’s government showed what this can mean.

A statutory footing

The various ethical bodies should all be placed on a firm statutory footing so that we have in effect an ethical constitution. Currently there are too many bodies and they have too few powers.

So, what would a new landscape look like? Let’s start with the basics. Impressionistically (and there is probably no scientific way of assessing this), one might conclude that the best and brightest do not now go into politics or the civil service. There is a feeling of mediocrity and mendacity about some of those who do and rise to the top. There is no one presently in the Cabinet of the calibre (and hinterland) of Roy Jenkins, Tony Crosland, Robin Cook or Kenneth Baker. Ministers change portfolio with dizzying speed.

One likely reason for the lack of talent is that the pay of public servants lags behind that in the private sector. Politicians are expected to maintain high standards while many of those with whom they went to university are cashing in at big banks, sometimes contributing to financial instability, and in some cases enabling tax avoidance and supporting kleptocrats. It is in the overall public interest that good people enter public service. This can only be done with a general increase in public sector rewards. The pay of MPs is well out of line with, for example, school heads and hospital consultants.

A one-time increase in remuneration should be combined with draconian rules on outside interests for politicians, with real sanctions for the most serious breaches. Being an MP should be recognised as a full-time occupation (as it surely is if done properly). There are only a few (good) jobs which can appropriately be combined with being a MP – part-time writing, for instance – and these should be listed as exceptions. Any others should only be permitted at the discretion of the Speaker’s Council on application by MPs.

The prime minister

The Johnson period showed how inappropriate it is for the prime minister to be so central to the standards landscape. They are both initiator and judge, largely as a result of conventions and without statutory backing.

The prime minister must have the final say over who becomes a minister and (in general) who is dismissed from that role. But there should be a high hurdle, enshrined in law, for the PM to surmount if they do not abide by a decision of the Independent Adviser. For instance, they might be required to give a detailed and public written determination justifying why they have not done so. This would be subject to scrutiny by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee or indeed by judicial review in the most egregious circumstances.

Enforcement of the ministerial code should be strengthened. Ministers should swear an oath to abide by it. It should have the same legal basis as its companion

codes for civil servants and special advisers. This does not mean that *all* of its content needs to gain the force of law.

The ethical regulators

Designing ethical bodies is not easy, but it is fair to say that if one were starting from scratch, one would not begin from where we are now. Transparency International UK found there were more than 60 separate “specialist enforcement, prevention, investigative and oversight agencies involved in the policing of offences directed against corrupt behaviour” – and these only for behaviour that is actually criminal.

1. Various authorities and committees designed to regulate public life in the years after the Nolan inquiry and to maintain checks and balances in the system are now toothless. Some appear to be toothless by design, and perhaps are even necessarily toothless, given the central doctrine in our unwritten constitution that the Crown in Parliament is the sovereign power. But you do not have to be a cynic to say that it is in the interest of those regulated (ie MPs and others in positions of power and influence) for their regulators to be weak and divided. Under a new system the regulators adjudicating on ethical standards should be independent, so that any adjudication is by disinterested persons.
2. Those accused should have the right to be heard and to appeal after an initial decision is made.
3. There should be as little attendant bureaucracy as possible.
4. Regulation must not be centralised exclusively in the person of the prime minister as gatekeeper.

Uniting the bodies

To resolve the current confusion, one possibility is a single ethics commission to regulate ethical standards throughout government. Standards bodies are not an alternative to elected democracy but a single organisation could more easily go head-to-head with government if it needed to than a whole series of separate weaker regulators.

There are questions about such an ‘all-in’ model, both around accountability and how it would fit into our parliamentary system. It would have the disadvantage of a single point of vulnerability, so that if it failed or became corrupted the whole system would fail.

A single commission would still have to operate multiple codes, because they are applicable to different sets of people and separate circumstances. A well-resourced commission could, however, surely solve this conundrum. It would be well-placed to offer opinions on areas of overlap or dispute between codes, so avoiding issues falling through the cracks or being subject to multiple investigations, as occurred with Greensill.

A variation on this theme would involve an overarching ethics commission that would not mean the abolition of existing bodies. This commission could in the case of each particular scandal determine which body should be

the lead investigator or whether it itself was in the best position to investigate. This is the model I favour.

Currently, we see a number of organisations looking at the same issue. As it happened, the views of the various committees considering Greensill cohered – but what if they had diverged markedly? The allegations about No 10 refurbishment were looked at both by Lord Geidt as the Independent Advisor and by the Electoral Commission, with different results. When Richard Sharp's appointment as chair of the BBC was under scrutiny, there were reports by the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, the Commissioner of Public Appointments and the BBC itself.

The key advantage of the model I propose would be to avoid several separate investigations and hearings being set up in an ad hoc manner. The overarching ethics regulator could determine which organisation would take the lead, depending on the circumstances of the particular case. The specialist panels would retain their respective jurisdictions.

There would be a common pool of investigators, and the commission would have the power to access any evidence it needed. Clear sanctions would be available for breaches of the code that it operated, so that the prime minister would no longer be judge and jury of the conduct of ministers.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life

The CSPL should remain as an overarching convening body and policy exchange, and should regularly review the efficacy and scope of the other bodies. Its informal but essential role is to present a consensus viewpoint (including former frontline politicians), and it can do a deep dive into particular issues. It may call upon expert analysis and evidence and has built up quite a following over the decades.

The CSPL could become the body that directs which organ should be involved in particular investigations rather than setting up another organisation. There is at present an informal network of regulators, but this should be put on a firmer footing. A list of retired High Court judges should be kept who could be brought in to supervise significant investigations as necessary.

ACOBA

The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments should be abolished in its present form and streamlined. The advisory part of the Committee on Business Appointments should be jettisoned, to emphasise that it is a body with legal powers of enforcement. The replacement statutory organisation should be given proper investigative powers and a protected budget.

The committee should employ a fully independent staff so that they are no longer supported by seconded civil servants. The new 'COBA' also needs power to obtain all relevant documents from ministers and civil servants and all of their subsequent employing companies or organisations after leaving office. This should be on a statutory basis, to be enforced by an injunction in the event of breach and fines. Only then can they take a view of what they will actually be doing for the new employer. The aspirant employee should have the ability to appeal

to the Upper Tribunal, an established quasi-court with various jurisdictions.

Public appointments

The rules enforced by the commissioner in this area are currently generally decent, but the scope of them leaves a dangerous penumbra of uncertainty, and the sanctions are very weak. The yawning gap at present concerns the absence from scrutiny of non-executive directors of government departments and the figures known as tsars.

But more than that is required to restore confidence: a Public Appointments Commission (PAC) to supervise all public appointments and provide independent interview panels. This would be on the model of the Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC), which has generally been a success. The JAC only puts forward for each role one candidate to the Lord Chancellor, who then has a veto power (although this has never been used, so far as is known).

The PAC would be comprised of retired judges, senior civil servants and those who have worked in the National Audit Office. It should have the power to investigate public appointments as an appeal body from a revised Public Appointments Committee, which itself should also take over the work of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Ministers should only be involved in public appointments at the beginning and end of the process, not throughout as they are now, and they should explain why they reject the outcome of the independent process if they do. They should be expected to answer to the relevant select committee, which can supervise.

The new body would be given more legal powers, the rules administered should be statutory and it should be able to order independent investigations into public appointments, with full powers to access documents such as a court would have.

The Independent Adviser on Ministerial Interests

Under the model I propose, there should continue to be such an adviser, but that person's nomination should be approved by parliament. The independent adviser's function should have a statutory basis and operate more like the Parliamentary Standards Commissioner, who possesses an independent power to investigate. The independent adviser should only be dismissed if a select committee agrees, as is the position for the head of the Office of Budgetary Responsibility.

Conclusion

A decay in standards is in the air. The cynical view that all politicians are liars and cheats needs to be dissipated. Very few in fact are. Even if the public do not care about standards, the prime minister should, as previous occupants of the job before Johnson did. Indeed it should be a job requirement. The Johnson government showed itself unwilling to tackle the ethical issues and the decline in standards, to the extent of not responding with any positivity to what seemed to be relatively uncontroversial CSPL reports. The Johnson government was atrocious; a Starmer government has a real chance to stop the rot. **F**

Books

The hope of the world

A new history of Labour makes the case for an ethical and pluralist party, finds *Rohan McWilliam*



Rohan McWilliam is co-director of the Labour History Research Unit at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

The Labour party formed its first government in 1924. Labour's tragedy is that, looking back over the last 100 years, the history of the party in opposition is a much larger subject than its history in government. The left likes to talk about the 'forward march of Labour'. It would be more accurate to talk about the forward march of the Conservatives. In his new history of Labour, Jon Cruddas, the MP for Dagenham and Rainham, seeks to explain why this has been so.

Many of us waited a long time for Jon Cruddas to write a book, given his status as an important thinker on the left. Now, in the course of just three years, we have two volumes to consider. *A Century of Labour* works as a great companion volume to *The Dignity of Labour* (published in 2021). Given that Cruddas is (sadly) stepping down at the next election, taken together the books constitute a political testament, in which his central concern is why modern social democracy has often been so oddly soulless, lacking a conception of the good or ethical life. Labour seems to have become decoupled from labour, the world of work that (at its best) provides citizens with a sense of identity and meaning.

The new book traces the development of the party from Ramsay MacDonald to Keir Starmer, but this historical account serves a larger argument. For Cruddas, Labour has continually lacked an agreed answer to the question of what it is for. This is not just because of the division between left and right (the orthodox interpretation). Instead, he argues, political debates within Labour have been based around three competing views of justice. One seeks to expand welfare, a second supports liberty and human rights, whilst a third is about the promotion of virtue and the ethical life. The conflict between these approaches explains why Labour has had a shapeshifting quality. Cruddas argues that the party only succeeds when the three approaches work together. In his view the two governments that managed this were those run by Clement Attlee and Tony Blair (although only in the first term, in the case of the latter). Too often the party has



A Century of Labour
Jon Cruddas
(Polity Press, £25)

essentially focused on welfare, opting for cash transfers from one section of the population to another. However worthwhile this might be, Cruddas argues that it reduces Labour to offering blandly technocratic solutions. He praises the Attlee government but notes how it did little about industrial democracy and workers' control (which may explain why over time supporters became less concerned with public ownership). Implicitly, he argues that the party has suffered from an excess of Fabianism.

The book starts with a rather critical assessment of Keir Starmer because of his apparent lack of a moral compass. Rather surprisingly, when we get to the Starmer years at the end, there is a more sympathetic analysis. Cruddas detects in Starmer's strategy a clear attempt to re-engineer Labour's relationship with the working class (heavily damaged in the 2019 election), turning his back on the preoccupations of the metropolitan left. Starmer rejects the view that nothing can be done about the decline of the traditional working class. Instead, he holds that better working-class jobs are needed in order to get to net zero. Britain's weak productivity also requires a vigorous partnership with business. We are promised an active attempt to kickstart growth through public investment in infrastructure and the environment.

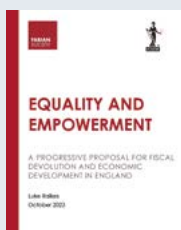
Cruddas's typology of the three views of justice gives the book a welcome clarity. One wonders, however, if they are as distinct from each other as they appear here. More convincing is his argument that a focus on simple cash transfers funded by economic growth provided the party with a problem after the 2008 financial crash. The party has struggled since then to explain how it can reactivate social democracy when there is no money available. Cruddas also persuades us that Labour works best when it is pluralist (drawing on different, if sometimes contradictory, intellectual currents within the party) and propelled by a strong ethical sense. The book commences with Walter Crane's claim in 1894 that: "The cause of Labour is the hope of the world". In 2024 that remains the case. **F**

PUBLICATIONS ROUND-UP

Informing the debate

Recent Fabian publications tackle some of the key challenges for the next Labour government

AS WE MOVE into what is very likely to be a general election year, debate over Labour's policy offer is intensifying. The Fabian Society has made a number of contributions over the past few months, on everything from devolution to the NHS and from the economy to climate change.



In **Equality and Empowerment**, Fabian research director Luke Raikes set out the progressive case for devolving public spending, arguing that a stable economic development funding stream for combined authorities and councils would boost growth and tackle inequality. As Raikes pointed out, just 5 per cent of tax is controlled at a sub-national level in the UK, compared to 13 per cent in France and 31 per cent in Germany. Fiscal devolution would address regional inequality while at the same time allowing central government to focus on what it does best.



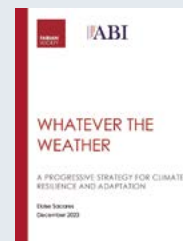
Meanwhile, in **Working Nein to Five**, Fabian senior researcher Sasjka Otto looked at our approach to working time, comparing the UK's poor work-life balance with Germany, which has the lowest average working hours in the OECD. The report argued that government should enhance minimum statutory rights, strengthen the social safety net with

better sick pay and parental leave, establish institutions to drive down working time, and empower workers through collective bargaining.



Electoral politics was the focus of **The Final Furlong** by Fabian Society senior researcher Ben Cooper and researcher Eloise Sacares. Featuring polling of target voters, the report found voters are ready for change and eager for a Labour majority.

Sacares was also the author of another Fabian research report, this time on adapting our homes and workplaces to climate change. Among the recommendations in **Whatever the Weather** is a new maximum indoor working temperature; a duty on landlords to prevent overheated homes and tougher climate resilience requirements for infrastructure providers.



The economy was the focus of **In Tandem**, a pamphlet co-authored by Michael Jacobs, Robert Calvert Jump, Jo Michell and Frank van Lerven. In it, they called for a new Economic Policy Coordination Committee to bridge the gap between the Treasury and the Bank of England and so improve economic policymaking.



"Over the coming decades, UK governments will confront increasingly complex and interconnected policy challenges, including an ageing society, household and geographic inequalities, political fragmentation and, above all, a deepening climate and nature crisis," they wrote. "In these circumstances, getting our economic institutions to work in tandem will surely become not just desirable in theory, but increasingly unavoidable in practice."

In **By the People, With the People**, Charlotte Augst and Paul Corrigan set out ways for the NHS to become a better partner to people and communities in their health. The publication complemented the approach put forward by Kim Leadbeater MP in her pamphlet, **Healthy Britain**, earlier this year.



Showcasing a number of examples of good practice around the country, Augst and Corrigan argued that changing the NHS for the better is possible. **F**

All publications are available to download from www.fabians.org.uk.

Listings

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS

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THE FABIAN QUIZ

THE MACHINE AGE

Robert Skidelsky



The poor, misunderstood Luddites. In the midst of falling living standards, the Napoleonic Wars and escalating conflict with the United States, skilled textile work-

ers were confronted with economic redundancy and the very real prospect of destitution. The proximate cause was the automated machinery increasingly adopted by mill owners. Were they wrong to think that their only recourse was sabotage?

In the present day, their movement is a byword for closedmindedness, but once the new wave of technology starts eliminating jobs on a larger scale, perhaps the mythical Ned Ludd will ride again. This is one of the scenarios Robert Skidelsky examines in his new book, *The Machine Age*, a meditation on our relationship with machines grounded in the history of technology dating back to the first tools of rock and bone.

Skidelsky situates humanity in a complex technological framework of its own creation and calls for the recognition of technology as “a system of ideas rather than as a necessity”. If we fail to do so, he argues, we will yield our agency to the machine – in all likelihood, permanently.

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

In James Whale's 1931 film Frankenstein, which English actor, known as "...the Uncanny", plays the artificial creature assembled and animated by the titular scientist?

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



ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 15 FEBRUARY 2024.

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