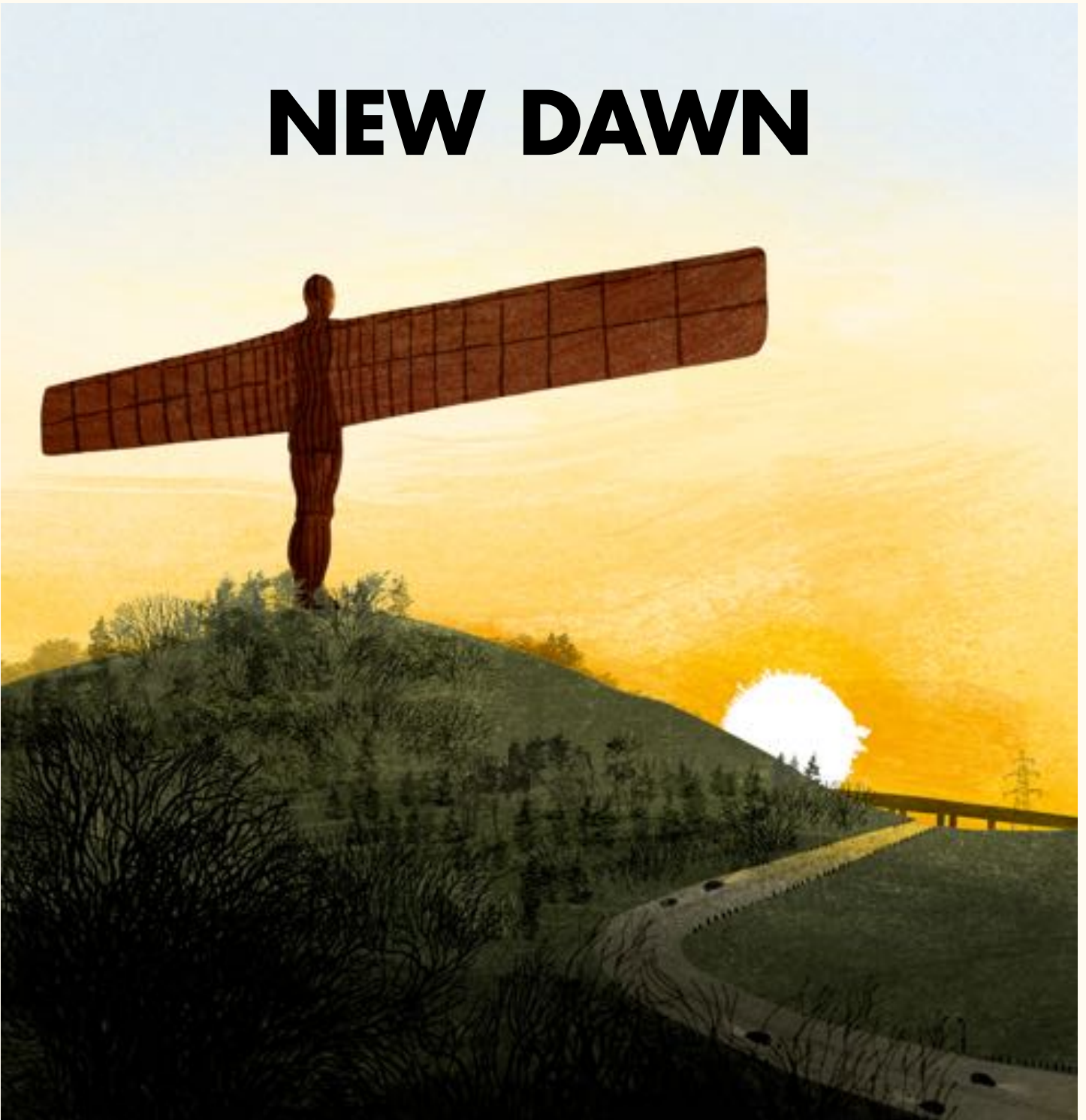


# FABIAN REVIEW

*The quarterly magazine of the Fabian Society*

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# NEW DAWN



*Labour's victory and the road ahead, with Paula Surridge, Colm Murphy and Fraser McMillan **p10** /  
How to help British arts and culture flourish, with Alison Cole, James Graham, Antony Gormley,  
Paul Richards and Josette Bushell-Mingo **p16** / Peter Apps on Labour and NATO **p25***

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# FABIAN REVIEW

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## FABIAN REVIEW

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## Turning point

The public have voted for change. Now Labour must deliver, writes *Andrew Harrop*

**I**t is a heady moment. After 14 years of national decline, Labour has returned to power. The prime minister and half the Cabinet are Fabian members. Our values and ideas, peppered through the manifesto, can at last become reality.

This election result was a rejection of Conservative chaos and extremism that held back prosperity, harmed our climate and deliberately sowed division. Instead, people voted for stable, grown-up government marked by integrity, compassion and ambition for the country.

Labour ministers have hit the ground running, proving that decisive action can cut through Tory torpor. The party has a huge mandate and should not hold back from using it. We know the Conservatives would not, if they were in the same position.

There is no need to tread on eggshells. Concerns about the supposed fragility of Labour's electoral coalition are overplayed when the Tories have barely 120 MPs. People who voted against the Conservatives knew they were ushering in a Labour government, even if they backed other parties.

The new government has promised big structural reform. In employment, the most significant expansion of labour rights since the 1970s. In transport, rail renationalisation and the return of bus franchising and municipal ownership. Planning reform on a scale unseen for decades. And starting the journey to a National Care Service, on which the Fabian Society has been advising the party.

If Labour can achieve its goals, it will transform the country. Ministers' stated aims include securing the fastest economic growth in the G7, decarbonising electricity by 2030, building 1.5m homes and halving regional health inequalities. These are huge ambitions and they may not come to pass. But it is better to try and fail than not to try at all. In the years ahead Labour's wellwishers will be there with fresh ideas to help keep such pledges on track.

On some questions Labour now needs to say more where the manifesto was light on detail. The party wants to reduce child poverty and prevent the need for food banks. But what are its yardsticks for success and what is the plan for getting there? How can Labour achieve its goal of closing the opportunity gap for children or raising family living standards? The government will need concrete targets and plans soon if it is to be able to tell people at the next election that they are better off under Labour.

The constraining factor is not political headroom but cash. The public finances are in a dire state and Rachel Reeves' first task is to avoid having to make more cuts. But there is no avoiding the fact that the public's expectations of Labour depend on extra spending. This is not ideological 'big state' posturing but a statement of reality. Many public services are on the brink of collapse and spending also has to rise to account for demographic change and the global security threat.

Forecasts for growth and tax revenues are unlikely to change much in the short term, which means Labour will need to strike an awkward balance between spending restraint, more borrowing and tax. In the autumn the party should sidestep its fiscal rules when it comes to borrowing for investments that create productive assets. And it should review taxes and tax loopholes that mainly affect affluent families and big business, while keeping its manifesto promises intact.

The jubilation of recent weeks will inevitably fade as Labour faces up to the hard dilemmas that arise from its dreadful inheritance. But ministers will approach tough choices with strong Fabian values, remembering that you can achieve more in a week of government than a decade of opposition. **F**



# Shortcuts



## COMMON GROUND

Labour has won a historic victory by restoring its connection with non-metropolitan Britain — *Ben Cooper*

Days after the devastating 2019 election defeat, the Fabian Society warned that Labour was “unlikely to return to a majority government in a single electoral cycle”. The party had a “mountain to climb”, the largest since Labour left office in 2010. This mountain was formed of 150 non-Labour constituencies, a list of marginals that became the bedrock of Fabian research for four and a half years – most obviously in our report *Winning 150*. To talk about winning 150 seats was seen by many as wildly optimistic at the time.

On 4 July, Labour won 139 of the seats profiled in *Winning 150* – and many more beyond that, as it secured a landslide victory. How did this happen?

It is difficult to understand why Labour won in 2024 without reference to why Labour lost in 2019. Five years ago, the party was rejected across vast swathes of non-metropolitan Britain. Labour’s voter coalition retreated to urban cores and university towns, detaching itself from the vast majority of towns, rural areas, and coastal communities. And, of course, Labour collapsed in Scotland.

Our research found that just 1.5 per cent of the most rural seats in Great Britain and 20 per cent of ‘Sea Wall’ coastal town seats in England and Wales elected a Labour MP in 2019. These were historic lows for the party, and they performed particularly badly with older people, homeowners, and Brexit voters – groups that are often over-represented in non-metropolitan areas.

Such detachment from vast swathes of Great Britain was a problem in itself for a party that aims to represent the whole country. Given our electoral system, it was also a severe electoral handicap. And

when just over three-quarters of the most marginal non-Labour seats in England and Wales (on the old boundaries) were in towns and rural areas, a failure to fix this non-metropolitan problem would keep Labour out of power.

Over the last four and a half years, the Fabian Society identified four key things Labour had to do to reverse the historic 2019 defeat and secure a majority as quickly as possible. Much of what we recommended was adopted as part of the party’s policy agenda and election campaign. For many Fabians the story will be a familiar one, but it is worth spelling out what the party got right and why.

First, Labour emphasised shared values. People value similar things, regardless of where they live – and Labour rooted its national campaign in this common ground.

Second, it focused on security – in the workplace, in local communities, and in an uncertain world. Even before Liz Truss’ premiership, people across the UK felt insecure. Focusing on security enabled Labour to unify different generations around a positive agenda for the future.

Third, it offered reassurance on fiscal responsibility and economic competence. Every public announcement had to show that Labour understood the importance of responsible finances, value for money, and running the economy well.

Fourth, it addressed specific concerns. Labour also needed to show it recognised the differences between places – and that it could address the disaffection that many non-metropolitan communities felt.

There should be no doubt that the election result was remarkable. Labour won many of the urban areas and university towns it did in 2019, regained many of the traditional swing seats that had voted Conservative since 2010, and defeated the Conservatives in seats they had represented for decades. Just as remarkable as the huge majority this yielded is the diverse and broad swathe of the country that Labour now represents. Indeed, in one election, Labour went from representing 2 per cent of the ‘most rural’ seats in Great Britain to 30 per cent. The party also increased its representation of the Sea Wall from 20 per cent to 60 per cent. In Scotland, Labour gained 36 seats and doubled its vote share – a rebuilding of the ‘first red wall’

that far surpassed expectations. And by becoming acceptable as a party of government to voters of many different political persuasions, Labour facilitated large-scale tactical voting that left the Conservatives with just 121 seats.

Labour won in 2024 because of a remarkable expansion in the diversity and efficiency of its voter coalition. By campaigning in ways that echoed our analysis, Labour persuaded enough voters in the right places to win – restoring its connection with non-metropolitan Britain as a result.

Now, having won an unprecedented majority, thoughts must turn to maintaining it at the next election. We at the Fabians will be focused on showing how this restored connection with non-metropolitan Britain can power Labour to a second term. **F**

*Ben Cooper is research manager at the Fabian Society*



## PARADIGM LOST

Labour’s nascent worldview reflects Fabian ideals — *Luke John Davies*

In 1930, Antonio Gramsci wrote: “The old world is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” He was describing an era when deregulated capitalism had been comprehensively shattered by an unprecedented global crash. The far-right was internationally virulent, the centre-right intellectually bankrupt and the far-left ineffectively strident. The centre-left was charged by default with the responsibility of forging a new paradigm for a new world.

Eventually we did so, and the Keynesian consensus dominated for a period the French still refer to as *Les Trente Glorieuses*. In 1979, when the Keynesian consensus itself collapsed, the right had a readymade answer in the form of neoliberalism. That neoliberal paradigm has atomised societies,

turning human beings into mere economic units. While living standards rose it was tolerated, but the inequalities and indecencies of rentier economics were laid bare by the 2008 crash. Globally, in democratic ways and demagogic ways, people are rebelling in the name of their own dignity. Sixteen years on from Lehman Brothers – the same gap as between the Wall Street Crash and Attlee’s election – we desperately need an answer for them that is more than just a collective shrug.

As figures including Keir Starmer, Joe Biden, Jacinda Ardern and Olaf Scholz have begun to set out, social democracy in the 21st century will be a moral crusade for the cause of human dignity. That is not, in and of itself, anything new. We have long fought for roses as well as bread. As we attempt to forecast the contours of the coming paradigm it is the means to our ends that that we are reinventing. And we can begin to see the shape of things to be.

The first principle of the new paradigm is what Rachel Reeves has referred to as ‘securonomics’. Reeves has long promoted the ‘everyday economy’, prioritising the livelihoods and – crucially – the agency of ordinary people over headline GDP figures. That notion is now becoming mainstream. During the pandemic, people around the world saw the heavy lifting power of the state. They are now demanding that their governments apply the same strength to other challenges, having realised the market will never deliver in fields such as decarbonisation. That has led to the return of industrial strategies across the west, which are being used to deliver for ordinary people. Over 80 per cent of the funding from Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act has been spent in counties with below average income. It is levelling up as policy, not slogan.

The second emergent principle is progressive realism, outlined by David Lammy in his Fabian pamphlet on foreign policy but equally relevant to the domestic sphere. It means meeting the world as it is – clear-eyed, but remaining quietly radical as we resist the dehumanisation of individuals practiced by both the unfeeling market and the ‘computer says no’ state.

The third is a belief in the common good. People have become lonelier and less trusting as the atomisation of neoliberalism has driven them apart. We are a social species and we require communities to be truly human. The new paradigm must focus on knitting together the ravelled care of our frayed social fabric, by bringing us together around common, often local, goals and projects, away from social media spats and digital hate.



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This agenda has a marked similarity to aspects of Fabianism. Progressive realism requires gradualism, because it requires stability. The Conservatives have shifted in the last half-century from being the party of business – which needs predictability – to the party of finance, which thrives on disruption. Restoring an even keel will allow us to build progress in realistic and meaningful ways. And believing in the common good reflects a commitment to collectivism: the old insight that by the strength of our common endeavour we can achieve more than we achieve alone. Both concepts are core to the Fabian view of the world.

The old Fabianism, however, was oriented around the technocracy of a nationalising, centralised state. The agenda now being set out recognises that power is better when it is devolved. Less distance, and less elitism, makes for better policymaking and greater accountability. To that end, the new Fabianism must support and empower the institutions of collective self-help, especially trade unions, cooperatives, devolved administrations and local government.

This new paradigm is not fully formed. Which is fine – nor was Keynesianism on Roosevelt’s election, nor neoliberalism when Thatcher walked into Downing Street. But if it is to embody modern Fabian ideals, then it is up to us mould it. Our challenge has been set – now we must get to work. **F**

*Dr Luke John Davies was the Labour candidate for Aldridge-Brownhills at the election. He is a member of the Fabian Society executive and chair of Birmingham and West Midlands Fabians*



## HIGH STANDARDS

Labour must champion ethics in business as well as in public life —  
*Rachael Saunders*

Labour’s proposed ethics and integrity commission is a starting point for changing standards in public life – and it is much needed. Yet the opportunity for a Labour government to champion ethics is much broader. Business ethics matter too.

Keir Starmer, Rachel Reeves and Jonathan Reynolds have all spoken extensively about how partnership with business will be a key feature of Labour’s approach. A modern industrial strategy; Great British Energy, a new national energy champion; a national wealth fund to operate alongside private sector investment to manage risk and catalyse infrastructure projects; an industrial strategy council and a British infrastructure council. There is huge potential to combine the best of government knowledge and insight with business focus and investment. But any progress will be at risk without a plan to promote ethical standards and manage potential ethical crises with their business partners in government.

So let’s consider how things might look at few months into the new government. Imagine Rachel Reeves has delivered her

first budget, announcing limited new investment in schools and hospitals while committing resources to the tax breaks and subsidies that underpin an industrial strategy. She has also pledged resources for the green transition, much in the form of financial incentives for businesses to transform and deliver new and better products and services. Vital to Labour's ambitious growth targets this approach might be – but how, newly elected Labour MPs ask, will it generate investment in public services in their constituencies?

Then imagine that a few weeks later a business leader on the Industrial Strategy Council has a Bernard Looney-style scandal, connected to undeclared personal relationships. Or a CBI-style rape scandal erupts in one of the businesses benefiting from the new national wealth fund. Maybe a corruption scandal like those over PPE emerges as business and government seek to scale up the pace of change in response to the climate crisis – not a politician, but someone a couple of rungs down a supply chain guilty of dodgy procurement in receipt of public money. Those PLP members already impatient for public sector investment will start to rail against resources going into growth priorities, and there is a real risk that the government switches back into short-term, reactive decision-making, undermining the government's long-term strategic missions and destabilising business partnership governance.

This does not need to happen. The best businesses are conscious of their ethical

responsibilities and reputational risks and have clear structures and processes in place to manage them. These include a code of ethics setting out expectations and a commitment to a 'speak-up' culture, with non-retaliation and support for whistleblowers, robust investigations, monitoring of the key metrics of ethical culture with a board level dashboard, and ethics training. No organisation is perfect, but those that are any good respond to a crisis or challenge by learning and sharing openly, with clear consequences. How confident can we be that a Labour government and the businesses it must partner with have the shared purpose, values, and ethical standards that will be imperative to sustain the deep, long-term partnerships needed to deliver a project of national renewal?

There is a need for real change in our country. Only 38 per cent of respondents to the Institute of Business Ethics public attitudes survey in 2023 believe that business behaves ethically. The top ethical concerns are corporate tax avoidance – cited by 48 per cent of respondents – bribery and corruption – 28 per cent – and executive pay – 28 per cent, with environmental responsibility at 25 per cent and fair and open pricing of products and services at 18 per cent.

Meanwhile, the UK slumped to its lowest ever score in Transparency International's global Corruption Perceptions Index in 2023. It now sits at 20th place.

The attractiveness of the UK to businesses is predicated on our national reputation for stability and rule of law. Our global reputation is a vital part of driving increased inward investment.

We need new institutions to set expectations and address ethics across business and government. The proposed Ethics and Integrity commission could have an increased scope to cover businesses delivering public services and serving in public life, as well as politicians.

The election of a new government is an opportunity to broaden our ambitions and bring together business, government and civil society to reset expectations around ethics in public life in the broadest sense, and benefit from the relationships based on trust, rebuilt reputation and sense of national renewal that will flow from it. ■

*Rachael Saunders is the deputy director of the Institute of Business Ethics. She previously worked for Carers UK, UNISON and the TUC and is a former leader of the Labour group on Tower Hamlets council*



## FUNDING THE FUTURE

Green finance must play a crucial role in tackling climate change —  
*Emily Hickson*

With extreme weather events and record temperatures becoming more frequent, local councils are finding themselves on the frontline of climate change. This is why, starting with Bristol City Council in 2018, more than 80 per cent of councils have set a net-zero emissions strategy, with many targeting a date ahead of the national 2050 target. Despite this brave determination at local level, the last government's resolve faltered, evident in the rolling back of the internal combustion engine phase out mandate and heat pump incentives.

Nevertheless, local government targets and climate emergency plans remain. Achieving these goals and overcoming both technical and political barriers will require ingenuity. It will also require money, and lots of it. In 2021, Southwark, the borough I represent, calculated reaching net-zero will cost at least £3.92bn.

Where will these billions come from? This is the concern expressed by many councils, particularly considering diminishing budgets caused by year-on-year reduction in central government funding. A variety of approaches will be required, from large-scale energy projects with the private sector to innovative business models for retrofitting. We must embrace creative financial solutions not typically used by local authorities.

It is for this reason that earlier this year we launched 'Southwark Green Investment', allowing Southwark residents and businesses to invest in climate change projects, offering a 4.6 per cent return over five years. The initiative was quickly successful, reaching its £1m target five weeks early, with a record number of local residents and businesses raising 30.5 per cent of that total. This success demonstrates the strong local commitment to climate action.

However, borrowing £1m annually from residents, although cost-effective compared to borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board, is insufficient for our needs. Our biggest challenge, like many councils,





is decarbonising our council housing stock, which accounted for 83 per cent of our scope one and two emissions in 2023. Financing energy efficiency and generation on our estates solely from the council's budget is unfeasible due to high upfront costs. Creating attractive investment models for the private sector is also challenging due to the long timescale and uncertain returns on investment.

Given these challenges, how can the new Labour government put green finance for local government at the heart of its green prosperity plan?

One straightforward solution would be the continuation and expansion of schemes like the social housing decarbonisation fund (SHDF), making it more accessible by reforming the rigid match-funding criteria. While councils should complement central government funding, this requirement must consider the numerous other housing regulations councils must meet on fire safety and new homes, burdening their already stretched housing revenue accounts and making finding money for retrofit near impossible. A Labour government should also reduce competition between councils for grants, which wastes limited resources.

Yet clearly government grants alone will not cover the full cost of decarbonising our housing stock. Keir Starmer has declared that Labour will make the UK the "green finance capital of the world" and will "partner with business" to achieve this. Labour will need to signal it is providing concessionary capital, partly through grants like the SHDF, to attract this inward investment, de-risking investments like those in retrofitting and district heating.

It could also trial financial mechanisms that have worked for other sectors, such as guarantee schemes or 'contracts for difference' which can help housing associations secure cheaper debt. Labour has proposed delivering some of this funding through the National Wealth Fund but must clarify the type of investments it will make, the sectors it will target, and how local authorities can access this capital.

Additionally, councils need support to create green jobs and training programs for retrofitting and other decarbonisation activities. Currently too few of these skilled workers exist, leading to high prices and limited supply.

Much is to be done, but there is scope for optimism. Labour has already committed to delivering more power and decision-making to devolved and local authorities. It should see this commitment going hand in hand with its commitment to net-zero emissions.

The UK will fail to become the 'green finance capital of the world' without viable projects for investment, and local authorities are critical to designing and creating these projects. Only with robust local government involvement can green finance truly power the net-zero economy. **F**

*Emily Hickson is a Labour councillor in the London Borough of Southwark and deputy cabinet member for green finance*



## CHOPPY WATERS

A Black Sea Expeditionary Force would re-establish Britain on the international stage — *Alex Sobel MP*

There is no doubt that we are at a pivotal moment in the future of European security.

The invasion of Ukraine has consigned to us the immediate tasks of supplying military aid and training so they can prosecute the war; working on sanctions and seized assets; and starting reconstruction efforts in de-occupied and war-damaged areas of the country. However, we also need to plan for the future geopolitical and security issues facing Europe, particularly those concerning former Soviet republics wrestling with the choice between east and west and the malign influence of Russia in their internal affairs.

The development and expansion of NATO is one of the key issues. The Vilnius Summit Communique made clear the future of Ukraine is within the alliance. The timeline, and the need for Ukraine's military to be at NATO standard, are the two main sticking points. Both issues are interrelated and other countries in the Caucasus face similar challenges – Moldova, Georgia, Armenia.

In 2012, against the backdrop of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the UK led on the creation of a 'joint expeditionary force'. The resulting Joint Rapid Reaction Force – sometimes called the UK Joint Expeditionary Force or simply the JEF – brought together Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway, as well as then non-NATO members Finland and Sweden. The initiative sought to unite



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these allies into a single force that could then be deployed instantly for joint operations.

The JEF's principal geographic area of interest stretches across the Arctic, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea regions. All these regions face Russia and have seen an increase in Russian naval activity, including in proximity to important shipping lanes in the Atlantic and the Baltic. The climate crisis and retreating ice sheets also mean that, unfortunately, new sea routes are opening in the Arctic. These changes, however, pale in comparison to what we have seen in the Black Sea, where disruption will ultimately mean hundreds of millions are unable to receive wheat and other staples.

Working with our allies – most notably Ukraine – the UK should look to establish a new expeditionary force focusing on the Black Sea and Mediterranean shipping lanes. This new joint force could extend to those nations looking to the west who are reliant on the Black Sea ports to trade with Europe and beyond.

This Black Sea Expeditionary Force (BSEF) should take a 'human security' approach. Human security is about the security of individuals and communities as well as about the security of states and borders. It is about both physical security – the direct threats posed by terrorists or war, for example – and material security against poverty, disease, and climate catastrophe. In a global context, a human security approach is about spreading the rule of law and human rights, and having the kind of emergency services that can address crises



such as pandemics, genocide and ethnic cleansing, flooding or famine – all of which become more likely should the Black Sea region become destabilised.

Countries surrounding the Black Sea and the Mediterranean have specific security issues such a force could address. Different countries' capabilities and specialities should be utilised to strengthen the totality of BSEF members' security in areas such as cyber-security, climate adaptation and humanitarian aid, as well as traditional military security.

Like the JEF, the Black Sea Expeditionary Force should be designed to complement other international frameworks and avoid duplication; it would be coherent with the NATO Framework Nations Concept and use NATO standards and doctrine as its baseline. It would be used to support UN, NATO or other multinational or coalition operations in peacetime or crisis and as a gateway to NATO membership.

Both David Lammy and John Healey have showed leadership on Ukraine, as well as a deep understanding that it is necessary to look beyond the current crisis and develop a clear outlook and strategy – something that has been absent from UK defence and foreign policy in recent years. Establishing a Black Sea Expeditionary Force with allies would embody this approach and re-establish the UK as a thought leader on foreign and defence policy. **F**

*Alex Sobel MP is the Labour MP for Leeds Central and Headingley and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine*



## A CRUCIAL START

Labour has much to do to fix British education — *Chris Harris*

Labour's election should herald the start of a new era in our education system. However, there are significant barriers to change. Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, has inherited a system fractured by different types of schools and an overloaded curriculum with a narrow focus on factual knowledge, neglecting both many pupils' talents and the development of social and emotional and thinking

skills. The current structures reinforce the separation of pupils into social class silos, and embed values of competition and stark individualism rather than cooperation and supportive personalisation. And, needless to say, all education is underfunded. There is much work to do.

The Labour offer is characterised by good intentions, including a focus on early years learning, breakfast clubs, paying more attention to social skills, reviewing the curriculum and removing some tax benefits from private schools – using the funds to train new teachers. However, in addition to these pledges, we put forward a series of proposals based on an analysis of what is currently working – and what is not working. They are based on our 2023 briefing paper, Labour's Preparation for Government: Establishing Commissions, Maximising Impact During the First Hundred Days and Beyond.

A staffing and recruitment crisis is at the heart of many of the problems we see. The June 2023 DfE workforce survey found 40,000 teachers had resigned from state schools during the year and unfilled teaching vacancies were at an all-time high. At least part of the problem is that teachers' professionalism has been undermined. Many leave because they feel that they have no agency, and are being turned into 'deliverers' of a curriculum developed by politicians who do not understand education or the needs of pupils.

To train thousands of new teachers, we recommend a commission engaging headteachers and teacher-training providers to deliver a rapid scaling-up of recruitment and provision.

To help develop and share good practice, we recommend the recognition of teachers who develop quality practice, like the now-defunct regional and national teaching awards. Making cutting-edge practice easily available through DfE training podcasts and video podcasts is also essential. These measures would provide recognition to innovators and early adopters, such as Brighton and Hove City Council's environmental literacy initiative 'Our City, Our World'.

Modern technologies can be harnessed further to ensure initial training opportunities are available to all, including those in remote, rural and coastal communities, and to support experienced teachers to teach in new subject areas. To address the loss of access to qualifications for the 140,000 children currently out of school and other adults who have been left behind we recommend establishing 'National Open

School' provision, coordinating the work of current providers and local authority 'virtual schools' coupled with scholarships to complement paid-for provision ensuring lifelong access and upskilling to all. Online further education and school provision in Australia provide examples of what can be achieved.

At the moment, the inspection and accountability system places a dead hand on curriculum development and the application of learning theory. Accountability structures tightly limit innovation and the creativity of teachers. An inspection and advice service could be expected to demonstrate a positive impact on learning standards which Ofsted, according to National Audit Office reports, does not. Ofsted should be renamed, replaced or given a complete overhaul with an ongoing role as a school improvement partner, giving advice and sharing good practice.

The current curriculum is clearly not fit for purpose. There need to be more flexibility and interdisciplinary units of work that go beyond fixed subject boundaries. Students have very little choice to pursue their own pathways at key stage 4, since schools are bound by the restrictions of the English baccalaureate. Vocational-academic parity is nowhere close to being achieved, and the curriculum needs to be preparing young people for the skills and jobs of the future. Additionally, students need to be taught life skills, and to be given an understanding of democracy and the political systems that underpin it.

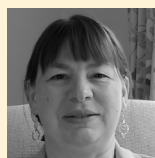
There is so much to change. We argue that commissions provide a route to rapid evidence-based developments. In 1997, independent commissions in specific policy areas were created by Labour to bring together different stakeholders to produce reports outlining policy issues, solutions and interventions. This inclusive, consensual, independent approach makes it more difficult for the press or the Tories to undermine proposals. A good first step for Labour would be to create an overarching Crown Commission to oversee education.

It is essential that the Labour government does not merely tinker with Tory policies and structures that promote competition, individualism, and fixed views of what constitutes 'education'. Its goals should be more ambitious, and its tools more systematic; we should accept nothing less than a revolution in education. **F**

*Chris Harris is a member of the Fabian education member policy group. Professor Marilyn Leask and Brian Matthews contributed to this article*

# Scratching the surface

Labour's election win was unusual in more ways than one – the party will need to plan carefully if it is to win another, writes *Paula Surridge*



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

A resounding victory setting Labour up for five years or more of power, or an unenthusiastic electorate picking the best of a bad lot? It really depends on who you ask.

Labour focused its campaign on winning the votes where it mattered politically, turning electoral geography – often assumed to be a weakness for the party – into a key strength. The party widened, rather than deepened, its appeal. This was necessary because the places where it needed to win votes are disproportionately populated by the social groups that had turned away from the party in 2019.

Labour's support fell in groups where it had retained strength in 2019 – most notably among young women and those from Asian ethnic groups. The Conservatives, on the other hand, lost support heavily in the key groups they had won from Labour in 2019. Based on post-election polling by FocalData, the party lost more than 25 percentage points among voters aged 45 and over and those in social grades C2, D and E. Support for the Conservatives among the 'working class' fell to less than half the level of 2019. But Labour was not the key beneficiary; the party made some small advances in all these groups, but most of these votes instead went to Reform UK.

In terms of vote share, Labour's performance must be viewed as a disappointment. Initial post-election estimates suggest, among those who voted at both elections, that Labour retained around three quarters of its 2019 vote. The quarter who did not vote for the party in 2024 are a mix of those on the left who had only temporarily realigned with Labour during the Corbyn era (estimated at around seven per cent of the 2019 vote), those who voted tactically for Liberal Democrat candidates (around five per cent) and those who were attracted by the anti-system rhetoric of Reform UK (around three per cent).

With turnout at an almost historic low, there is also likely to be a significant group who felt that victory was assured and so didn't vote at all; but we do not yet have a strong estimate of the size of this group.

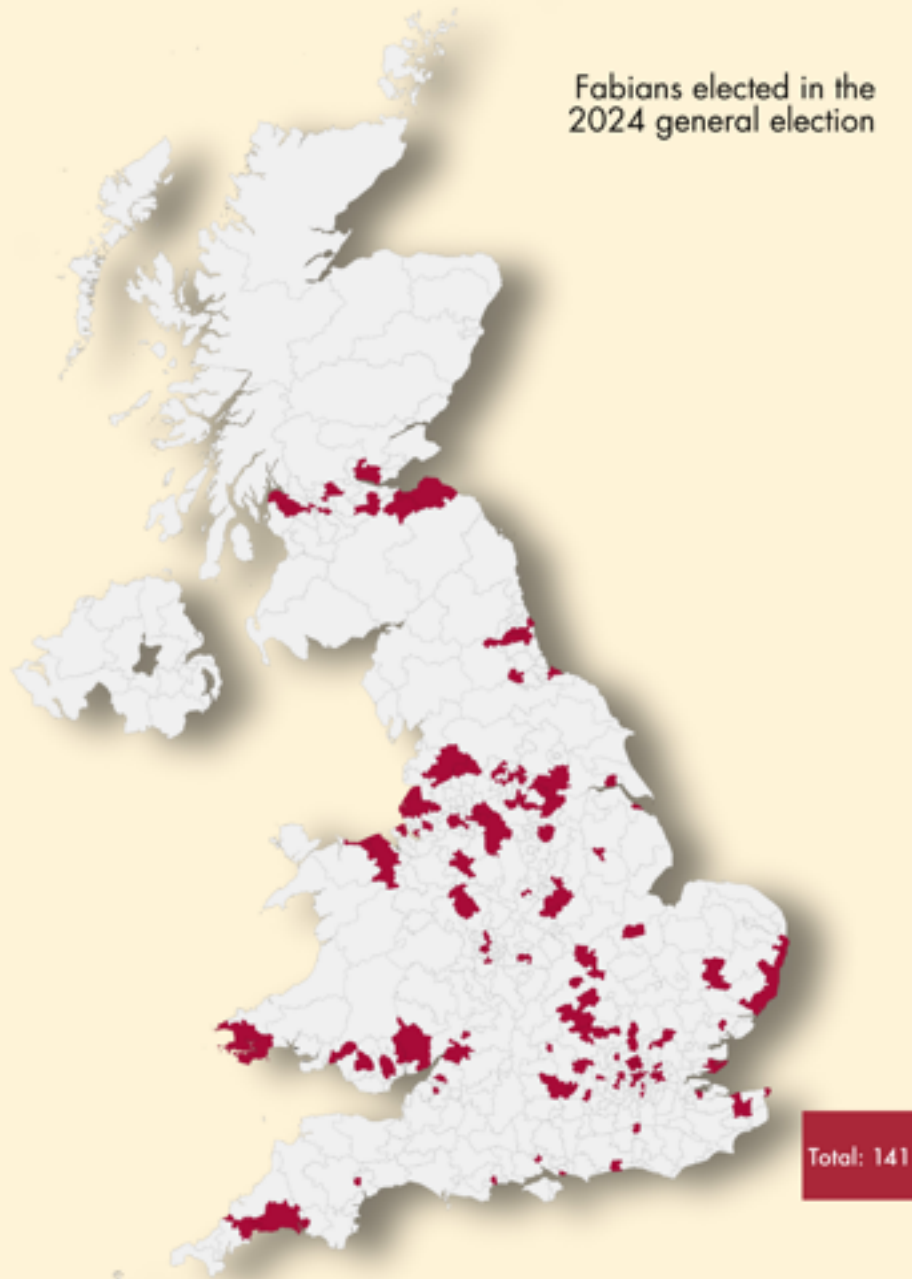
It is likely that those who did not vote – particularly those who had voted in previous elections – are an important part of a future strategy for Labour. It is easy to think they were just turned off by an election everyone thought was a foregone conclusion, but deeper reflection on the connections between voters and politics is needed. At a key moment, given the opportunity to remove a very unpopular government, a large part of the electorate shrugged and carried on with their day.

Perhaps the real story is this: Labour's victory was possible because voters are increasingly volatile. They are volatile because they no longer feel attachments to political parties. In the past, voter loyalty was a powerful predictor of voter turnout. Going forward, political parties will need to discover how to persuade people to vote for them without such loyalty. Treading 'softly' on the lives of voters may be a solution, but showing that politics can improve people's day to day lives could have much greater impact. Taking office gives Labour the chance to try.

Whether the resounding victory in terms of seats or the less impressive victory in terms of vote share provides the template for the next election will depend on how voters react to their new government and how the parties play the hands they have been dealt. The story of British politics over the last 20 years has often been framed in terms of its relationship with the EU, but it has also been a story of the rise, fall, collapse and rebirth of smaller parties. The 2024 election was no different. A strong showing from all the small parties in opposition and a collapse of the SNP in Scotland produced an election difficult to understand through the lens of a simple Labour-Conservative competition. Should this remain the case going into the next election, then it may be that Labour's 34 per cent is a winning vote share yet again. But if any of the smaller parties collapse, merge or withdraw from the electoral landscape, it will be the party best poised to pick up the fragments they leave behind that will likely prosper. ■

# On the march

Fabian MPs were elected from Newquay to Dunfermline.  
*Rory O'Brien*, the Fabian Society's partnerships and events manager, maps their achievements





# Governing to win

Incoherent policy lost the Tories the election.  
Labour must act quickly to avoid a similar fate,  
writes *Colm Murphy*



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

It is a lazy generalisation that the Labour party is incapable of enjoying its own success. But there is a grain of truth to it. On the night of the massive 1997 landslide, Tony Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell wrote in his diary that he felt 'flat' and 'deflated'. In 2024, one of the biggest landslide majorities in British political history was greeted by worried reflections about its resilience.

Blair, of course, went on to win two further elections. But today, such anxieties are far from groundless: this is a 'Jenga' majority. Its peak is high, but the base is full of holes. Collapse is a distinct possibility.

What, then, should our new government do to shore up its electoral position? No doubt there will be voices calling for a 'permanent state of campaigning'. Yet while it is true that successful statecraft requires governments to think strategically about the next election and to sell policy successes, I would make a simpler suggestion: to secure re-election, there is no substitute for a coherent policy agenda.

The previous government illustrates this point perfectly. For the Conservatives, this election has been a calamity. With 121 MPs, the party has fallen to its lowest number of Commons seats in its modern history – lower even than the 156 returned during the 1906 Liberal landslide.

How did the Conservative government engineer such a catastrophe? Disasters have many parents. But it mattered that the outgoing government had ceased to govern by polling day. Instead, it chased short-term headlines in the vain hope that doing so might improve dire polling figures. Its morally offensive and incompetent pursuit of the Rwanda scheme was characteristic.

As the journalist Stephen Bush argued during the campaign, a dire Conservative result was the unavoidable consequence of the government's "lack of focus and grip" on public services. Fighting an election with historically high net immigration, record NHS waiting

lists, and overflowing prisons is nothing short of suicidal when your core voter is a socially conservative pensioner. Rishi Sunak's decision to use scant financial and political capital to cut taxes – rather than, for example, resolving the junior doctors' strikes – was calamitous.

Public service collapse had been, of course, the nemesis of Conservative hubris since 2010. We can summarise the era of Conservative-led government through three agendas: austerity, Brexit, and 'levelling up'. All failed, at least when judged by what their advocates promised.

Admittedly, global factors were partly to blame. The pandemic and the outbreak of conflicts in Eurasia certainly contributed to the state of the country at the end of their tenure.

Even so, their record was poor. George Osborne consistently missed his deficit reduction targets despite starving the country of investment at a time of record low interest rates. Crises that derailed the Conservative government in the 2020s, such as local government bankruptcies and a collapsing legal system, were directly attributable to dubious legacy of their 2010-15 predecessor.

Sunak's problems similarly stemmed from the incoherence of more recent bequests from his party. Boris Johnson's combination of 'levelling up' and 'get Brexit done' was a potent electoral pitch in 2019, one which signalled a break from austerity. However, it combined pledges for low taxes *and* 'levelling up', lower migration *and* public service renewal, all while the government ripped up the country's growth model by exiting the single market and customs union. Johnson's campaign secured a winning coalition. But it bequeathed a fatally incoherent governing agenda.

The new Labour government should be wary of this danger. There is no guarantee that the Conservatives will 'own' the dysfunctions afflicting the UK in the 2020s for long.



© Keir Starmer/Flickr

An instructive period in this regard is the 1970s. Marked, like today, by political fragmentation, inflation, geopolitical disorder and energy transition, the decade also witnessed two successive governments collapsing under the weight of their own contradictions.

The first was Ted Heath's Conservative government. Initially promising market-liberal reforms, the government panicked when unemployment rose and undertook fiscal stimulus – just before the 1973–4 oil crisis. Rapid inflation and further unemployment duly followed. In desperation, the government turned to nationalisation and 'incomes and prices' policies. This panicked handbrake turn towards interventionist corporatism pleased nobody: neither unions nor businesses; neither the right nor the left. Its incoherent approach buckled under the pressure of the miners' strike, the three-day week, and the 1974 'Who Governs?' election.

The second was Jim Callaghan's Labour government. Callaghan and his predecessor Harold Wilson promised a 'social contract': voluntary union wage restraint to control runaway inflation in return for the 'social wage' of public services investment. Yet the 1970s Labour party was increasingly riven by factionalism, with the NEC and the Cabinet sketching out wildly divergent policies. The party also split over EEC membership during the 1975 referendum, and over devolution in Scotland and Wales. Then, after the 1976 IMF crisis, the 'social wage' was slashed through Denis

Healey's cuts; the 'social contract' became nothing more than a method for suppressing the wages of trade unionists and public sector workers to control inflation. The contradiction between the promises of 1974 and the reality by 1978 was unsustainable. The 'winter of discontent' followed.

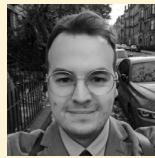
Starmer's government should take note. As has been pointed out elsewhere, the constituent parts of Labour's 2024 manifesto do not add up without some rather big assumptions. The manifesto promised clean power by 2030, the renewal of the NHS, an attack on class barriers, and an increase in defence spending – all worthy goals in an era of geopolitical fragmentation, an ageing society, and the climate emergency.

However, it also pledged to uphold fiscal rules on spending and debt and ruled out (or failed to specify) major increases in taxation. This is not inevitably incoherent. Labour squared the circle during the campaign by promising higher tax revenues and private sector investment from revived economic growth. Indeed, the new government has taken early steps on this front, particularly on planning reform.

Nonetheless, successful governments plan for all eventualities. If growth fails to arrive, and if Starmer's government does not wish to collapse under the weight of its policy contradictions, it should develop a plan B. Put more bluntly: Starmer and Rachel Reeves may soon struggle to ignore the question of tax. **F**

# A seismic shift

The SNP has been knocked from its perch – whether it can recover will depend on Keir Starmer as much as John Swinney, argues *Fraser McMillan*



*Fraser McMillan is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Sciences. Since 2021 he has been a member of the Scottish Election Study team.*

As the electoral map of Great Britain turned red in the early hours of the 5 July and Sir Keir Starmer's Labour party prepared for government, it soon became evident that Scottish voters had opted for a seat at the table. Having dominated elections north of the border at every level of government in the decade since the 2014 independence referendum, the Scottish National Party was dislodged by Scottish Labour all over the densely populated central belt. The nationalists lost dozens of two-way fights to their centre-left rivals, retaining just eight of 48 (notional) seats and narrowly winning one from the Scottish Conservatives.

Their vote share shrunk by a third, dropping from an imperious 45 per cent four short years ago to only 30. With the party's support distributed evenly across Scotland, the vagaries of first past the post translated this relatively narrow second place to Labour's 35.3 per cent into catastrophic seat losses.

Both supporters and critics of the SNP tend to view this outcome as the chickens of a 17-year tenure in office at Holyrood finally coming home to roost. Where these groups differ is over the extent to which this reversal in fortunes is self-inflicted. The seemingly inevitable tendency for incumbent parties to lose support over time is known to political scientists as the "cost of governing", and the SNP's apparent ability to evade paying much of an electoral price after nearly two decades in power represents an interesting research puzzle. But the party couldn't defy political gravity forever, and two crucial dynamics explain its reversal in fortunes since a strong showing at the last Holyrood election in 2021.

The first is widespread public dissatisfaction with incumbents on both sides of the border. Most SNP politicians would bristle if told they had anything in common with the Conservatives, but the Scottish electorate used this ballot to send a message to both of the parties that have governed Scotland for the last decade and a half. Scottish voters have become increasingly willing to point

the finger at the devolved government for perceived public policy failures, with the excuse that A&E wait times or falling educational standards were ultimately Westminster's fault wearing increasingly thin. According to Scottish Election Study (SES) survey data, in 2021, 34 per cent of Scots thought the devolved administration was doing a bad job. By June 2024, that number had risen to 55 per cent. Whether this was down to perceived policy performance or the SNP's well-documented infighting, party finance scandals and rapid-fire changes of leadership – from Nicola Sturgeon to Humza Yousaf, and then to returning veteran John Swinney – Scots are no longer content with the government at Bute House. Swinney has been in the job for just weeks and has a mountain to climb to reverse the perception that his party is out of its depth.

The second key element is a secular decline in the salience of constitutional issues. Ten years on from the referendum that reshaped Scottish electoral politics, the influence of the independence issue is fading. Again, the shift since the last devolved election in 2021 is striking. At that contest, 88 per cent of pro-independence voters cast their constituency ballot for the SNP. This near-monopoly on the Yes-supporting half of the electorate formed the bedrock of the party's electoral success. In 2024, although final SES figures were not available at the time of writing, just 72 per cent of Yes supporters indicated they would vote SNP before the general election. The fracturing of the pro-indy coalition is ominous for the nationalists ahead of the 2026 Holyrood vote, though the residual strength of support for Scottish independence might offer some consolation.

These factors – competence and constitution – are, of course, closely intertwined. For the past year, SES data has consistently shown that, when asked about their priority for the then-hypothetical 2024 general election, voters prioritised a change of government at Westminster



over the constitutional configuration of the result. Indeed, preliminary data from our 2024 pre-election survey suggests that this tradeoff was decisive among pro-indy voters. Just 29 per cent of those whose main motivation was to get rid of the UK-wide Conservative government indicated they would vote SNP, compared to 89 per cent of those who prioritised maximising support for independence.

Such a connection between the constitution and valence politics – as well as the fluidity of voting behaviour across devolved and reserved levels – is nothing new. The SNP first came to power at Holyrood in 2007 on the back of its apparent ability to “stand up for Scotland”, a perception facilitated by its stance on independence. In 2014, Scottish independence was ultimately blocked by voters who had no objection to the idea in principle but found the proposition too economically risky. More recently, during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the view that Nicola Sturgeon’s Scottish Government was doing a much better job handling the crisis than Boris Johnson’s UK administration gave the Yes side and the SNP a sustained boost in opinion polling.

Going forward, the SNP may find it harder to convince voters it is “standing up for Scotland”. To put it bluntly, the SNP, and the independence movement more widely, benefit when Holyrood is seen to be doing a better job than Westminster. But this is the first time a pro-independence majority at Holyrood will coexist with a Labour government

at Westminster – one that is likely to be much more stable than the post-Brexit Conservatives while pursuing policies with widespread support in Scotland.

The next few years will therefore exert an outsized influence on the country’s ultimate constitutional destiny, even with legal and political routes to a referendum slammed shut for the foreseeable future. If Labour fails to make a dent in support for independence or the SNP successfully claims credit for any improvements to public services and Scotland’s economic performance, it is likely the issue will rear its head again. It is not tinkering with constitutional arrangements that will ultimately save the union; rather, it is making the UK a country worth living in.

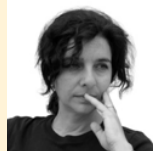
For now, though, it is important to digest that the 2024 general election is the first time since 2010 that the Scottish National Party has failed to win a nationally contested election north of the border. Whether they can avoid the same fate at Holyrood in 2026 may prove to be largely out of John Swinney’s hands. But nominally pro-independence Scots who opted in to the Starmer project will expect results, and the honeymoon is unlikely to last as long as two years. In that time, the SNP needs to show that it has internalised what voters told it in early July and identify clear areas of difference with Labour in office. If “standing up for Scotland” is what propelled the nationalists to power in the first place, it is the only thing that will sustain them into a third decade. **F**



© Keir Starmer/Flickr

# Creative force

The arts can play a central role in giving our young people a brighter future, writes *Alison Cole*



*Alison Cole is director of the arts and creative industries policy unit at the Fabian Society*

Amid the febrile excitement of the election campaign and a Labour victory, children across the country have been quietly awaiting their exam results. When their results come in, the dramatic decline in the take-up of arts subjects in our schools will again be starkly evident. Latest figures show that the percentage of pupils taking GCSEs in art subjects has fallen by 50 per cent since 2010, with 41 per cent of schools not offering music GCSE at all.

At the same time, our creative industries have continued to punch way above their weight and prove themselves among the most resilient of the UK's economic sectors. They represent 5.7 per cent of the UK's gross value added (GVA), a measure of the value of the goods and services produced in the economy. As Lord Bragg highlighted in a Lords debate earlier this year, the arts generate more revenue than the life sciences, aerospace and construction industries combined. The sector has been growing 60 per cent faster than the wider economy. Additionally, our cultural organisations are globally deployed as some of the most effective weapons in Britain's 'soft power' arsenal. And the arts, from music to museums, have been shown to be fundamental to health and wellbeing; they are now 'socially prescribed' to help cure a raft of societal and medical ills.

Yet the last government chose to denigrate the arts and downgrade creative education. Not only have arts subjects been excluded from school accountability measures (including the E-Baccalaureate and Progress 8), but last year saw the launch of a particularly crass offensive against 'low-value' and 'rip-off' arts and humanities degrees, just two years after higher education funding for arts courses had been cut by 50 per cent. The assault was ramped up during the election campaign, with Rishi

Sunak vowing to close down courses that were "letting young people down". This was especially baffling at a time when employers have determined that the factor they most value is creativity. The World Economic Forum, too, views creativity and empathy as being as important as AI for the jobs of the future.

Our independent arts and creative industries thinktank was established at the Fabian Society in November 2023 to help inform and support Labour's policy development in this area. My small team is passionate about the brief and brings different lived experience of the arts to the table – ranging from the visual arts to music, literature and theatre. We know that the arts play a vital role in building life skills such as confidence, critical thinking, perceptiveness, and persistence, and help us navigate life's ups and downs, as well as bringing inspiration and joy. We also know that human ingenuity often springs from a heady cocktail of arts and science in combination and cooperation.

This belief is shared by our new prime minister, Keir Starmer MP, who was a young scholar at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. His keynote speech at the Labour Creatives conference on 14 March was widely considered to be the best speech on the arts that a Labour leader has delivered. Charlotte Higgins wrote in the Guardian: "He talked about the arts as something enriching, personal, transformational."

"Everyone here will know that feeling," Starmer said, "of losing yourself and finding something new in that space art creates. These encounters with art and culture change us forever. They certainly changed me forever." He sees the arts as a source of individual and collective transformation as well as significant drivers of economic growth. The Labour manifesto promises a review of the national curriculum to bring back creative education, with

**The arts play a vital role in building life skills such as confidence, critical thinking, perceptiveness, and persistence, and help us navigate life's ups and downs**



© Anita Cavalcanti/Unsplash

an immediate change to the accountability measures that school performance is judged by (which currently exclude the arts).

It will be a long road back, and the new government will have to urgently address the loss of specialist arts teachers in state schools. We need nothing short of a Lord Kitchener-style campaign to recruit an ‘army’ of teachers, including a fast-track Teach First scheme for the arts. And we need people to be able to experience the arts and be offered creative opportunities wherever they live and whatever their backgrounds.

Our Fabian special unit is focused on helping to inform Labour policy in this area, looking at how we can help embed arts in a reformed national curriculum as well as in breakfast clubs and wrap-around care; widen access to art, building on Labour’s landmark free museum and gallery admission policy and promoting an open-data policy for museums; provide support for artists by investing in a ‘circular’ skills and talent pipeline; boost libraries as both cultural and community hubs; and create new funding models and public-private partnerships to establish a high-functioning ecosystem. We worked closely with the shadow culture team, feeding into the Labour Creatives conference and accompanying booklet. Our approach has been framed by Keir Starmer’s overarching mission of national renewal, with its five core missions, and is all about delivering impactful cross-department agendas.

In his 2023 Labour conference speech, Keir Starmer spelled out the magnitude of the challenges ahead: “If you

think our job in 1997 was to rebuild a crumbling public realm; that in 1964 it was to modernise an economy left behind by the pace of technology; in 1945, to build a new Britain out of the trauma of collective sacrifice; then in 2024, it will have to be all three.”

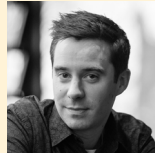
Our policy work draws on the lessons of 1945, 1964, and 1997 – all key years for Labour reforming agendas. In 1946, Arts Council Britain was founded; in 1965, art minister Jennie Lee’s seminal White Paper embedded arts in education and ensured equality of access and opportunity across the country; in 1997, ‘Cool Britannia’ helped unleash the power of the creative industries, building on Labour’s introduction of free admission to national museums and augmenting Britain’s ‘soft power’. In 2024, the arts must be harnessed as one of the most powerful engines of change, by a government that has made ‘Change’ its mandate.

When our children receive their exam results, they need to know that all their talents and abilities will be valued. “The insights of science and engineering are, of course, crucial to addressing many of the world’s most urgent problems,” two art deans at MIT argued in a 2021 Times Higher Education Supplement article. “But science and engineering operate within human societies, and serve the world best when informed by the cultural, political, spatial, and economic complexities of human existence and ways of inhabiting the earth.” This is one of the many reasons why the arts matter: and surely now, they matter even more. They must be a central part of the mission for national renewal. **F**



# The task ahead

Rejuvenating the arts must be central to Labour's transforming mission, writes *James Graham*



*James Graham OBE is a playwright. His 2023 play, Dear England, won Best New Play at the 2024 Laurence Olivier Awards. Dear England will return to the National Theatre in 2025*

**L**abour landslides have tended to go hand in hand with defining cultural periods in our national life. The latest might give hope that another significant cultural moment is just around the corner, if the political focus can be found.

The 1997 victory was of course defined by the Brit Pop explosion and the Cool Britannia brand. But it was also a time when British filmmakers were cleaning up at the Oscars and theatre was revitalised with an eruption of new writing.

Beatlemania, which coincided with Wilson's landslide of 1966 (a year also etched into the mind of every England football fan) soundtracked a 'golden age' in the arts thanks to the dedication of the arts minister, Jennie Lee, who introduced the first ever White Paper on culture.

And out of the devastation of war in 1945 came the establishment of the Arts Council, built to establish art's place in the everyday lives of citizens.

Today, culture's place in the hierarchy of British politics is one of many contradictions. The creative industries have often been the UK's fastest growing sector, and yet government investment has been systematically cut over a decade, to the point where much of it is teetering on the brink of collapse. It is one of the last areas where Britain can be said to lead the world, and yet the DCMS saw 14 ministers pass through its doors since 2010, suggesting it is not a portfolio with much weight in Westminster.

And most importantly, in an age suffering from the fraying of our social fabric, the collapse of physical communities, plummeting levels of mental health, and a dramatic rise in social isolation, the arts measurably contribute to emotional wellbeing, self-esteem and a sense of place to an outsized extent given the tiny percentage of government expenditure they receive.

So what should the new Labour administration do to not only capitalise on culture's economic and social benefits, but to once and for all liberate the arts from their silo on the periphery of policy, and cement their role in areas from health and education to levelling up?

## **Commit to returning arts to the core curriculum**

Among the most damaging trends of recent years has been the stealth withdrawal of creative subjects from state schools – just as they have risen in the private sector.

A quarter of all state-sector arts teachers have been lost, and as spending per pupil dropped by 10 per cent, 'unaffordable' choirs and school plays disappeared with them. Music has suffered the most. Families earning less than £28,000 a year are now half as likely to learn an instrument as those earning higher. How have we allowed a situation to materialise where creativity in British schools has become a luxury of the middle – or indeed, upper – classes?

The Ebacc contains no arts subject. That means students and parents are being told there is no value in them. Small wonder, then, that take up of arts subjects at GCSE has fallen by a whopping 40 per cent. In higher education, these subjects are now on life support.

Growing up in an economically deprived red wall town, I took the first steps to becoming a playwright and screenwriter only because my comprehensive school put on school plays. But pupils who go on to have a career in the arts are far from the only ones who benefit. This is also about building the audiences of the future by introducing people to different cultural modes. As a bonus, plays and films may help cultivate the longer-than-a-TikTok attention span required for complex work, and drama in schools encourages empathy and understanding for different points of view.

As we restore arts to their rightful place in the curriculum, we should consider which artists and writers pupils will get the most out of. Plays written in Old English are important, but can be off-putting for some. Exciting modern works can be just as high quality, but offer a more accessible way in for young people.

## **Put culture at the heart of levelling up**

The biggest unspoken crisis heading down the tracks is the rapid hollowing out of town centres. The death of the high street is not only an economic disaster,

but a social one: in large parts of the county, people's isolation is exacerbated by the absence of places to gather – to simply 'be'.

With Amazon and eBay not going anywhere, it won't be retail that rides in to save the day. Isn't the answer a revival of live music, comedy, gigs, theatre and cinema? The live, collective experiences that you'll never be able to deliver to your door?

Such a rejuvenation will require a national strategy. Keir Starmer gets this. His Creative Conference in the spring spoke to a passion for popular access to art in deprived areas. This is not some utopian vision: in communities like mine, the social clubs and welfare centres used to provide weekly entertainment via gig circuits, adult learning classes, painting – you name it.

We have to find a language to counter the perception that art is a luxury indulgence rather than a potential answer to our big social challenges.

### Revolutionise local authority funding

The drastic cuts to council budgets have, understandably, left city halls with tough decisions. The 'easy', knee-jerk reaction is to cut culture.

In my own home city of Nottingham, the council has just cut its arts funding by 100 per cent. Every single penny – gone. In the aggregate, such decisions mean that local arts organisations in poorer areas struggle to survive, whereas in wealthier parts of the country,

they thrive. This in turn creates a vicious cycle in which future artists and audiences start to be drawn solely from one demographic.

Culture is one of the greatest economic multipliers – for every £1 invested it can return up to £5 to the local economy. At a minimum, Labour should protect local arts budgets; even better would be to fund local authorities sufficiently so that such protection is not needed.

### Make the case for public service broadcasters

Our American counterparts think we in Britain are absolutely mad. A licence? To watch TV?

Yet the only reason the UK has been able to keep up with the Hollywood and Silicon Valley machines is the work of organisations like the BBC, which has a public service remit to find, train and amplify British voices and British stories, taking risks that the commercial sector cannot.

Both the left and the right rejoice in giving the BBC a kicking, but without it, you would quickly notice the disappearance of British work as American streaming services – whose remit is to create shows with broad international appeal – became the only game in town.

A Labour government should find a way to make this case, and the others above, in an admittedly difficult climate. The rewards – economically, socially, reputationally, and yes, even emotionally and mentally – could be immeasurable. **F**



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# PUBLIC FIGURES

Antony Gormley's sculptures inhabit not only galleries but rooftops, rivers, and mountains around the world. The Fabian Review asked him what Labour should do to nurture Britain's ailing arts and culture sector

## **What would you urge the new government to do for the arts?**

Support arts education! Recent governments have withdrawn funding, apparently on the assumption that the arts just get on by themselves and that we are all naturally good at art. In fact, we are still riding on this country's incredible history of nurturing art in schools and universities. There was a tradition, recently lost, that significant artists would teach at them.

Where now will alternatives to 'business as usual' come from? Art schools offer the best liberal education, combining critical thinking and physically engaged making. They are a seedbed for new forms of expression that respond to and provoke cultural change, nurturing creatives who will employ people rather than seeking employment within the given structures of capital.

We need these original thinkers and makers to face the biggest challenges of our species: climate emergency and inequality.

## **From the Angel of the North to the beaches of Crosby, your work has become a much-loved part of the UK landscape. How do you think art tells our national story?**

Art long ago escaped from the confines of national identity – an outmoded and dangerous concept that we must move away from. The plurality of voices evidenced

in the rehanging of Tate Britain speaks to the many makers and languages of culture.

The making of the Angel was an extraordinary adventure that owed everything to Gateshead Council's commitment to art being part of the city's life. It was a great privilege to collaborate with shipwrights to make this work that embodies the skills of the North East and the long relationship between coal, iron and shipbuilding. The Angel was never made as a national symbol but as a focal point for a community's belief in its own future. I have been humbled by the degree to which the Angel has been taken into the hearts of the people of the North East and has been so widely accepted as an evocation of a tough but open-armed northern spirit.

## **What is the value of the arts for young people and how best can we nurture their interest in them?**

Art is a fundamental human need and right. Give a child under six the means of making a mark and a surface to work on and it will be hard to stop them. This early eagerness and pleasure can be destroyed by self-consciousness that comes from both school and parental pressures that value 'doing well' over original creativity. We need to value those early marks as signs that we are not victims of an already-made world but that we are all making one together. The level of self-confidence and self-determination that comes from the recognition of making something that was not there before is irreplaceable.





**How should we best balance the need for both excellence and relevance in the arts - and counter the narrative that some arts are for the elite, not the masses?**

Get a bag of clay and sit around the kitchen table making creatures, or anything you like, and see how both the silence and conversation change – how it brings people together. Making and responding to art in all its forms is open to everyone, especially if we can nurture the creativity in each other. The notion that art is only for those who have the leisure and wealth to pursue it has

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to be countered by the argument that art is fundamental to both our nature and our survival. It's one of the great joys in human life, like sport and food. It is the tool by which we evolve our sensibilities and sense our embeddedness within life in all its forms. The commodification of art has separated us from its naturalness. Human creativity is part of the continual renewal and unfolding of life: art and evolution go hand in hand – we are all makers of the future.

**What's been your own political journey? Do you consider yourself a politically engaged artist?**

It is impossible not to be political; even apathy is a kind of political statement. We need to restructure our politics so that we can actively address the most urgent challenges of today, like the climate emergency, by involving individuals who have direct experience of those issues and who can deal with them within the context of an ever more fluid social order.

I want my sculpture to be open to all. A work like Another Place [Gormley's installation of 100 cast iron figures on Crosby Beach in Merseyside] asks materialised questions: 'What is a sculpture?' 'What is a person?' It objectifies migration at the core of the human story and asks, 'What is our relationship to land, sea and air?' I have been touched by people expressing how its appearance and disappearance under the changing tides have allowed them to deal with loss.

**What is art's role in navigating an increasingly fragile and polarised world?**

Art toes no line! It can achieve unexpected things and create alternative worlds, some will be good and some will be bad – it's for the viewers to choose. Art can give hope, heal, give voice to those that are silenced, and create spaces in which engagement and cross-fertilisation can happen. I would like the open spaces of art to be the agora of the present.

**What sort of country would you like to see us have become by the end of the next parliament?**

A kinder place that does not constantly refer to its greatness in the past but recognises an ability to listen and be part of the work of making a more open society. This is more important than attempting to bolster ideas of nationhood.

I think we should admit that Brexit has not worked economically, socially or educationally, and that it is holding us back. We need to urgently return to working closely with Europe. We need to celebrate the diversity in this country and push back against the uniformity of an 'English' identity. We need to remember that the Thames was once the tributary of the Rhine, and that we have Norse, Norman and Saxon in our gene pool, as well as Celt and Pict. We may believe that we have left Europe, but Europe has not left us.

I want our country to be a place that those brave people who have been forced to leave their loved ones and places of origin can call home. We seem to have forgotten that we have a rich history in this regard. We should treat the sea not as a barrier, but as a bridge. **F**

# Capturing the moment

*Paul Richards* presents a dramatic production in three acts



*Paul Richards is a member of the Fabian Society executive and was a parliamentary candidate in the 2024 general election*

## **Act One: The Festival of Britain**

Without the Attlee government, and especially Herbert Morrison, the 1951 Festival of Britain might have been a nostalgic rear-view look to Victoria and Empire. Instead, Morrison turned it into a celebration of British invention, science, engineering, design and architecture. It was dubbed the 'tonic' for a war-ravaged and rationed nation. Thousands flocked to the South Bank, and events across the UK, as the antidote to the grim, smoky, bomb-damaged realities of 1940s Britain.

Labour's landslide election victory in May 1945 was anchored on a simple premise – you won the war, now win the peace. Winning the peace required the same

tools as winning the war: meticulous planning, bold decisions, scientific advances, and a national mission. The Festival of Britain was a celebration of housing estates, social progress, and what historian (and Labour peer) Kenneth O Morgan called the 'inventiveness and genius of British scientists and technologists'. Despite Morrison's reluctance to make it 'political', the festival was imbued with post-war Labour values and ideals. It chimed with the national mood in a way that, for example, the Dome in 1999 did not.

The degree to which the Festival of Britain was linked in the popular consciousness to Labour notions of progress and planning was clear in Winston Churchill's



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reaction to it. On returning to Downing Street in 1951, Churchill ordered the Skylon – the 300-foot high cigar-shaped structure which symbolised the Festival – to be sold off for scrap. Nothing remains of the Skylon except the restaurant bearing its name.

### Act Two: The Swinging Sixties

Labour's defeat in 1951 heralded 13 years of Tory government, with constant changes of prime minister, a lurid sex scandal, and a growing sense of public dismay. Harold Wilson was the inheritor of this national desire for change. He was born before the Battle of the Somme, was head boy of his grammar school, went and taught at Oxford, and claimed to like HP sauce and tinned salmon. Wilson was an unlikely tribune for the Swinging Sixties, and yet that was what he became.

He made a blatant attempt to capture the zeitgeist by awarding the Beatles MBEs in 1965. According to Lennon, the band got stoned in the Buckingham Palace toilets before the Queen pinned gongs on their chests. In response to Wilson's recognition of the Fab Four, several recipients of medals returned them in protest.

Far more significant than Wilson's transparent PR was his legislative programme. Thanks to Roy Jenkins, a raft of laws were introduced or amended to liberalise society, from ending capital punishment, decriminalisation of sex between men, abolition of theatre censorship, and reform of the divorce laws. Wilson appointed Jennie Lee as Minister for the Arts, who then set up the Open University. Labour also established the National Film and Television School at Beaconsfield.

Labour's 1964–70 government coincided neatly with the explosion in pop art, modernism, Carnaby Street, and the best music ever made. Wilson gave 18 to 21-year-olds the vote in 1969, just as many of them were turning against Labour as the party of the establishment. The Wilson governments, with their whiff of liberalism, their Post Office Tower and Ministry of Technology, and their egalitarianism, were as Sixties as Lulu or Geoff Hurst.

### Act Three: Cool Britannia

By the mid-1990s, Britain was once again the centre of the cultural universe. As the Conservative government swirled in a whirlpool of sleaze, a cultural vortex arose. Blur, Oasis, Pulp, Sleeper, Elastica and Echobelly pumped out singles and packed out stadiums and together forged Britpop. The Young British Artists (YBAs) ventured from the Colony Room just long enough to rock the art world.

Blair dazzled us with talk of the 'information super-highway' which Labour would route through every school. Patsy and Liam snuggled under a Union Jack

duvet on the cover of Vanity Fair. Football almost came home – and Labour certainly did. The election victory in May 1997 was itself a cultural event like the first moon landings: a moment of national inflection when the old was defeated and the new was born.

Blair was 43 when he walked into No 10. He played the guitar and wanted to be a rock star. At a series of Number 10 receptions, he drew in Vivienne Westwood, Ralph Fiennes, Lenny Henry, Felix Dennis, Nick Hornby, Helen Mirren, Ben Elton, Nick Park, Harry Enfield and famously Noel Gallagher, who with a nod to his hero John Lennon, took drugs in the loos. This was the most overt attempt to co-opt cultural icons into a political project since Wilson gave the Beatles their MBEs.

One of New Labour's first moves after the landslide in 1997 was to repurpose the old Department for National Heritage into the new Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. If ever a 'machinery of government' rebadging signalled a change of trajectory, it was this – doing away with a department that reeked of dusty museums and stately homes and instead establishing a new artistic powerhouse. Chris Smith served as culture secretary throughout the first term, with free museums as his significant legacy. Like Attlee and Wilson, Blair understood both the need for governments to promote the arts and the tantalising possibility that arts can promote the government.

### Epilogue...

Attlee and Morrison successfully used cultural events to reinforce a post-war consensus that arguably lasted until 1979. Wilson and Jenkins rode the wave of societal shifts and the white heat of technology. Blair captured the mood of the mid-90s as surely as Geri Halliwell's Union Jack minidress. Can this new Labour government, still smelling of fresh paint, garner an encore?

Keir Starmer must embrace the technology that shapes our national culture, respect our artistic institutions, empower artists to shape new horizons, and form a creative partnership between ministers and musicians, designers, directors, architects, actors, and the people who entertain, create, and dream.

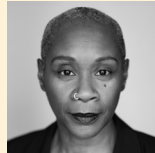
Previous Labour governments can provide inspiration on how to change cultures, and also serve as a warning: in 1951 Labour lost the election; by the late 60s, Wilson had lost the room over Vietnam and devaluation, and by 2000 the Dome was a national joke. The moment to capture the zeitgeist is fleeting. To ride the waves of rapid cultural, social and technological change, rather than be buffeted by them, Starmer must act swiftly and decisively. He will be defined by the next 24 months. In two or three years' time, the cultural caravan will have moved on. **F**

**The election victory in May 1997 was itself a cultural event, like the first moon landings: a moment of national inflection when the old was defeated and the new was born**



# Open to all

The arts should not be the preserve of a privileged few, writes *Josette Bushell-Mingo*



*Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE is the principal at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama*

**A**s a new government arrives in Westminster, I have been reflecting on the state of the industries I represent – the arts and higher education – as well as the state of our country.

Much is in flux, but I have never been more convinced that the arts and education have the power to effect positive change, to help us bridge divides, to reinvigorate our communities and to recognise our shared humanity.

There is a simple business case for properly supporting our arts and education sectors. Jobs in the creative industries are highly skilled and in high demand. They are also key drivers of economic growth. The UK creative industries collectively contribute £125bn to the economy, with the sector growing at a rate that exceeds the national average by more than a factor of three. UK higher education performs similarly, contributing more than £130bn. And both have a clear role to play in supporting growth and employment in regional economies.

Collectively, we have repeatedly tried to make this case; but the lack of consistency in government leadership has sent a clear message about our perceived value. For far too long, the arts and non-STEM education have been treated as the preserve of a privileged few. With less investment in our sectors from central government, many of our institutions are now on the verge of closing; those that have survived are facing increasing financial pressure and some are being forced to limit their offer. This is an acute crisis which, over time, will leave us with a cultural output that fails to reflect our society and so feels stale. The answer is to protect arts and education as fundamental human rights.

We must recognise that access to arts education in childhood contributes to creativity and wellbeing, grows confidence and improves educational outcomes across subjects. Then, we must work to ensure that every child, regardless of background, has access to high quality arts provision delivered by a specialist teacher. This will require a commitment to funding specialist teacher training, as well as the vision to embed the arts more fully into the national curriculum.

Local councils must also be supported and empowered to prioritise the arts and cultural provision that will, in turn, drive growth and create jobs in their local areas. And support for regional and touring theatres must be revisited.

Financial concerns create barriers for students who are thinking about accessing higher education – and particularly in creative subjects. To help redress this, further support is needed via realistically costed maintenance loans, maintenance and support grants, and additional support for ‘first in family’ students. At Central, we have recently removed undergraduate audition fees in a bid to help ensure those who are not from well-off backgrounds are not disadvantaged. This is a small but important step. We hope it will encourage wider discussions in the industry about how we can make our spaces more welcoming, accessible and equitable.

Finally, small, specialist and practice-based higher education providers in the arts need reassurance that they will no longer be pitted against their partners in STEM and encouraged to work alongside and with them. For years, we have been told that the humanities and creative subjects are not as ‘strategically important’ as STEM subjects. Yet our work has always coexisted with and complemented science and technology, as my past students now working in creative roles within hospitals, the criminal justice system, sports sciences, environmental sustainability and technology well know. Creativity and creative thinking are as important to a career in biochemistry, medicine or agriculture as they are to one within the arts.

We ask Labour to prioritise these things – access, diversity, equity and creativity – as it sets its priorities for the coming term. Meet with us, visit our venues and institutions, speak with our students, and work alongside us to help our industries grow.

With this commitment, we will continue to nurture the forward-thinking creative leaders who will shape and drive the creative economy of the future. **F**

# Frontline politics

In the face of huge global security challenges, the new government must stand firm, argues *Peter Apps*



*Peter Apps is a columnist covering defence and security issues, a British Army reservist and author of *Deterring Armageddon: A Biography of NATO*, published by Headline Books*

As newly elected prime minister Clement Attlee prepared to head to Potsdam to meet Truman and Stalin after Labour's unexpected landslide election win in May 1945, he realised there was one figure in particular that he wanted by his side as Britain transitioned from defeating Hitler to facing down the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

"I thought affairs were going to be pretty difficult," Attlee later said. "And a heavy tank was going to be required rather than a sniper."

The 'heavy tank' on Labour's frontbench at the time was Ernest Bevin, who had left school at the age of 11 as the first member of his family to read and had gone on to found the Transport and General Workers' Union and to serve as Britain's minister of labour in Churchill's wartime coalition government.

With Attlee as PM and Bevin as foreign secretary, Britain's post-war Labour government kickstarted the process of building binding alliances with European nations and the United States that ultimately led to the creation of NATO in April 1949. They also began the process of building the UK's independent nuclear deterrent, concluding that without one the country would simply be too vulnerable to the vagaries of decision-making in the United States.

In an echo of 1945, within days of the 2024 election, Britain's new prime minister, Keir Starmer, and foreign secretary, David Lammy, found themselves propelled into the international limelight at NATO's 75th anniversary leaders' summit in Washington DC. And just like in 1945, Britain's allies, adversaries and assortment of other nations have been seeking to get the measure of this new government when it comes to foreign affairs and matters of defence.

Like Attlee's Labour, Starmer's team focused their campaign on domestic pledges to rebuild a broken country that had already decided it needed change. But also like that government, they find themselves taking power at a time when rising international tensions

demand attention. As Starmer put it on the campaign trail in June, the UK is entering a "new age of insecurity". Whether a new Labour government can cope with this – neither under nor overreacting – will almost certainly be one of the key tests on which history judges its success. As we have seen with internal divisions over Gaza, such questions rarely have particularly simple answers.

What is clear is that the threat is growing. On one single day, May 23 – the day after Rishi Sunak announced an early election – China launched unexpected snap military drills to 'punish' Taiwan after it elected a new leader opposed to 'reunification' with the mainland. Simultaneously, on NATO's eastern flank, Russian authorities removed buoys marking the border with Estonia on the Narva river – barely 100 miles from the headquarters of the UK-led alliance battle group tasked to protect that country.

These are just the latest episodes in a years-long trend towards disorder. Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, China's increasingly aggressive actions, Israel's resistance to international pressure over Gaza and a host of other conflicts, including in Sudan and Myanmar, point to an increasingly fragmented world in which pre-existing norms and rules are being tested and torn up. Whether or not Donald Trump returns to the White House after US elections in November, the United States now views its unambiguous strategic priority as prioritising Asia and confronting China, forcing European nations to take responsibility for their own defence in a way not seen in recent history.

Most US and European foreign policy experts believe the real risk of significant conflict – at worst a global war – will come later in the 2020s, once China has built the military forces it believes that it might need to successfully invade Taiwan and once the Kremlin has further restocked its military from losses in Ukraine. But there are also a variety of ways in which a new, potentially catastrophic crisis could erupt at any time. Despite that, nothing about defence or foreign affairs – aside from

a new “border security command” to “stop the boats” – made Starmer’s key pre-election list of six pages. Nor was anything national security-related beyond a collapse of prisons in a leaked list of potential crises drawn up by Starmer’s chief of staff Sue Gray.

Lammy and his foreign policy team, however, have spent much of the last year preparing the ground for post-election crises, taking advantage of Labour’s better relations than the Tories with the Biden administration and many European leaders. Lammy was in Washington in May, where he also stressed Labour’s common ground with many Republicans over strong defence with an obvious eye to managing relations with any future Donald Trump administration. Lammy also visited Kyiv several times, as did John Healey and Stephen Doughty, now Secretary of State for Defence and Europe minister respectively; they were escorted by Ukrainian special forces to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and his top officials.

At the Munich Security Conference in February – attended by foreign secretary David Cameron but not Sunak himself – Starmer was treated effectively as UK leader-in-waiting, meeting a host of senior figures including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, German chancellor Olaf Scholz, Estonian prime minister Kaja Kallas and European commission president Ursula von der Leyen. The line that “economic security is domestic security” was repeated on May 21 at foreign policy think tank Chatham House by Lammy and Rachel Reeves, mere hours before the surprise announcement of the election.

For the first time in recent history, during the campaign Labour frequently polled better than the Tories on defence and security – and the Chatham House event showcased a bullish frontbench team at home with awkward questions, including on the recognition of Palestine, potential International Criminal Court action against Israel and future relations with an ascendent China.

In April, Lammy outlined in *Foreign Affairs* magazine an approach of ‘progressive pragmatism’, embracing compromise when necessary but still guided by clear values. That, he suggested, could open the door to both engagement with China when possible and confrontation when required; working towards a long-term peace in the Middle East in conjunction with European partners, some of which have now recognised Palestine as an independent state; and continuing to work to shore up international law.

That last point was seized upon by some Tories, keen to present the Labour frontbench – particularly human rights lawyers Starmer and Lammy – as secretly committed to dismantling national sovereignty and allowing unelected international bureaucrats and lawyers to punish British allies such as Israel. But, as heroes of the last Labour government might remind us, proving too willing to tear

up the international rule book in the name of “national security” can also bring its risks.

On defence and security, Starmer’s campaign offered a stark departure from Labour under Corbyn, with 17 former military candidates running, the highest in recent history. That included several with extremely credible military reputations – particularly Al Carns, now veterans minister, who resigned his regular commission as a full colonel in the Royal Marines to contest Selly Oak; former army intelligence officer and tech executive Louise Jones in North-East Derbyshire; and ex-wing commander Calvin Bailey, who led RAF personnel in the 2021 evacuation from Kabul. That should help give Labour a solid bench of national security expertise in office – a solid line of “heavy tanks”, in the words of Attlee.

The frontbench team – which also includes armed forces minister Luke Pollard – dramatically stepped up engagement with the UK defence industry before the election, with talk of a ‘defence industrial strategy’ designed to bolster Britain’s industrial resilience while building up defences. Whether putting money into major equipment programmes is the right answer is another question. The latest US defence budget, which is set to raise the salaries of the lowest-paid military members by 20 per cent in an attempt to stave off a recruitment and retention crisis, offers an alternative approach that Britain might have something to learn from. Even in an era of fast-evolving technology and drones, retaining good people should be the top priority.

In a February speech to Policy Exchange, (then-shadow) defence secretary

John Healey made it clear that Labour’s defence reforms will not be restricted to funding equipment. He is planning a root-and-branch reform of the Ministry of Defence, including multiple measures defence insiders have suggested for years, such as making the Chief of Defence Staff – the nation’s most senior military officer – the direct boss of service chiefs, and a reworking of central military command structures and systems.

For all Labour’s hard work since Starmer took over as leader, the Tories had still hoped to regain what they saw as their historic advantage over Labour on defence. Sunak’s decision to skip the D-Day celebrations early demolished hopes of that early in the campaign. In a speech in mid-May that, with hindsight, marked the beginning of his doomed re-election campaign, Sunak outlined what he said was the most dangerous world in a generation. “We will keep this country safe and Keir Starmer’s actions demonstrate he won’t be able to do that,” he said, pointing to what he claimed were both repeated shifting promises by the Labour leader and a failure to commit immediately to raise defence spending to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product by 2030.

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Labour has pledged to reach that level, but only when economic conditions permit – a similarly vague pledge to that made repeatedly by the German government. Whether the rapidly worsening global security situation will permit that flexibility, however, appears more doubtful by the week. While retaining its position as the sixth-largest defence spender in the world, a significant proportion of that is consumed by the nuclear deterrent and Britain’s two aircraft carriers. That has had a serious effect on the size of Britain’s army, air force and remaining surface fleet, the elements likely to be most important in blunting any conventional Russian attack on Eastern Europe.

Balancing these priorities – including what further growth in defence spending might be necessary, and where it might be put – will be the focus of a new strategic defence review in Labour’s first year in government. Few believe Britain can afford to do without its nuclear deterrent in the current era – particularly in an environment where a US withdrawal from Europe is now much less unthinkable. France – which retains both ballistic missile submarines and an air-launched tactical nuclear capability – is already putting forward its atomic arms as the potential centrepiece of a European Union atomic deterrent. Britain will need to consider how it engages with that, as well as its existing NATO commitments.

Then there is the complex ‘national service’ question, tied intrinsically not just to the size of the British army in peacetime but also its ability to grow in crisis and regenerate. Increasingly, European nations are concluding that the ability to mobilise their industry and human capital in time of war is as important in deterring Russia as nuclear capabilities – but this is a long way from where British defence thinking has been in recent decades.

The second half of the year may well see one or more European countries sending much more significant numbers of troops to train and deliver support on the ground within Ukraine, inevitably raising questions as to whether Britain might do likewise. The two other NATO nations leading battle groups in the Baltic states, Germany and Canada, have both agreed to roughly double or triple their existing forces there by 2027, a pledge notably not matched by the last Conservative UK government.

France, Germany and Poland have all adopted rather different approaches to both Ukraine and defending Eastern Europe – but they have also formed the “Weimar Triangle” between them, positioning themselves as the three most significant national decision-makers on defence and security matters on the mainland European continent.

Senior Labour figures have made it clear they intend to deepen relations with the European Union, including potentially signing a memorandum of understanding on defence. That will be valuable but may also include hard choices – including to what extent a UK Labour government is prepared to sign up to joint EU standards and procurement, particularly if that has an impact on other key relationships like the AUKUS partnership with the US and Australia. For now, however, the signs appear to be that European partners want to talk. So, almost certainly, will the Australians, South Koreans and Japanese, with a range of partnerships available – some of which may inevitably limit the UK pursuing others.

The new Labour government may face some of the greatest national security challenges of any since 1945. It will need to live up to its illustrious predecessor if it is to maintain political credibility, and, more importantly, keep this country safe. ■



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# Top of the agenda

Criminal justice has once again been a key election issue. *Sam Julius* sets out why prison reform should now be a priority



*Sam Julius is head of influence and communications at Clinks, the national infrastructure charity which supports, promotes and advocates for the voluntary sector working with people in the criminal justice system and their families*

Criminal justice policy has always been hotly contested political terrain, no matter the colour of government. Appearing tough on crime produces favourable tabloid headlines and is viewed as a vote-winner at the ballot box. Accordingly, the system has been buffeted by an ongoing rhetorical and legislative arms race by the two main parties, culminating in England & Wales having the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe.

As new justice secretary Shabana Mahmood's speech a week after taking office indicated, at a macro level, our prisons are in crisis: overcrowded and understaffed, without the necessary resources to effectively rehabilitate the people inside them. Two-thirds of our prisons are overcrowded. According to the Prison Reform Trust, there are 10 per cent fewer staff – despite efforts to increase prison officer recruitment – than there were in 2010. Vital experience is being lost. As of June 2023, 30 per cent of band 3–5 prison officers had less than two years' experience, up from 19 per cent in 2017.

The impact of this crisis is clear. Government statistics show that self-harm incidents increased across prisons for men and women, up 17 per cent (in the 12 months to September) overall. Over the same period, the rate of assaults increased by 14 per cent. The rate of assault by prisoners on staff was up 10 per cent. In the most recent quarter of available data, there was a 23 per cent increase in deaths in custody. Without prison regimes that are safe and secure, and that offer an environment in which people are able to access the services they need to support their rehabilitation, then what are prisons really for?

**Reoffending rates remain stubbornly high, with approximately a quarter of people released from custody in 2021/22 going on to reoffend**

In the Chief Inspector of Prisons' latest annual report, he made clear that "far too many prisons [are] continuing to operate greatly reduced regimes in the last year." The result is people being left, locked in their cells, for significant periods of time. This greatly reduces the amount of purposeful activity that can be undertaken – including through education and work – key to supporting a person's successful reintegration back into society on their release.

Given these conditions, is it any wonder that reoffending rates remain stubbornly high, with approximately a quarter of people released from custody in 2021/22 going on to reoffend? This figure is significantly higher for people serving short custodial sentences – standing at over 50 per cent. The economic impact of reoffending is monumental, with a recent Ministry of Justice study estimating the annual cost of reoffending as approximately £18bn. The costs of imprisonment itself are equally significant. The study found that in 2021/22, expenditure on prisons was approximately £47,000 per prisoner, or £3.8bn per year. This is a similar amount to what the last government was proposing spending on a new prison-building programme.

Beyond the clear economic impact, there is the social and human impact. High reoffending rates mean more victims of crime, and more individuals, families and communities devastated by the consequences.

## **Shining a light – education in prisons**

When looking at the educational attainment of people in prison, it is clear that fundamental reform is needed. As the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Charlie Taylor, detailed

in a recent blog: “Research suggests that more than 50 per cent [of people in prison] are functionally illiterate.” Looking at the Ministry of Justice’s own data, we find that 28 per cent of people in prisons taking an initial assessment had a learning difficulty or disability. The true number, given that assessments aren’t required for everyone entering prison, is likely to be much higher. And a little over half of all people in prison have just one qualification, compared to 85 per cent of the general population. It’s not difficult to understand why – as Jon Collins, chief executive of the Prisoners’ Education Trust, sets out in a paper for Clinks’ evidence library, 42 per cent of people in prison “reported that they had been expelled or permanently excluded from school.”

Low educational attainment is just one of a range of what policy wonks refer to as ‘social factors of disadvantage’ that impact upon people in prison. Beyond education, we know that many people in prison have experienced multiple disadvantage throughout their lives, contributing to the circumstances that have ended with a prison sentence. Perhaps the most shaming aspect of our current system is the racial disproportionality that runs rife throughout criminal justice, with black people making up 3 per cent of the general population but 13 per cent of all people in prison. Supporting people who have experienced multiple disadvantage and tackling racial disproportionality, where it exists, must form part of any answer to this crisis.

### What next?

Why would a different approach, one that seeks to address the underlying causes of crime, be more effective in actually reducing crime? With the appointment of James Timpson, a long-time advocate for reform, as prisons minister, what policy levers are available to him? And why should a change of approach be a policy priority for the new government?

Essentially, we need long-term plan over short-term politicking. The criminal justice system continues to be used as a political football, much to the detriment of so many. A prison system that is too stretched to provide a genuinely rehabilitative environment is simply going to store up problems further down the line. We are spending a disproportionate amount of money – approximately £4bn – on one part of the system, prison places, that is failing to do what it is there for. This failure creates the need for additional resources to address issues when people are released from prison. By filling up our prisons, and to quote from a much-used metaphor amongst the voluntary sector working in criminal justice, we are sending people towards a “powerful stream of crime from which it is difficult to escape.” Sticking with the metaphors, think of the criminal justice system as a bicycle, and policymakers using the right gears for the right circumstances.

This long-term plan could include the following elements: first, drastically reducing the numbers of people in prison by taking a public health approach that seeks to understand and address the underlying causes of crime. This approach would frontload investment into the early parts of the system, focusing on early intervention, effective diversion, targeted support for young people at risk of getting involved in crime – all geared towards addressing



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the underlying causes of crime, such as poverty, homelessness and substance misuse. To reduce the size of the prison population, suspending short sentences is a start. Further measures are available including a ramping up of community alternatives that are proven to be more effective at reducing reoffending than shorter sentences. And to support people given community sentences, properly resourced community provision that leans on the expertise of the voluntary sector can ensure that the support is there to move people away from the system by addressing any unmet needs. Exploring a broader implementation of the existing early release scheme is another option.

Casting our attention to the work going on in prisons, there needs to be renewed focus on effectively equipping people to thrive when they are released back into the community. There are many examples of good practice, including organisations which pay people in prison a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work, helping people to save money for their release; or organisations which provide wraparound support to people in prison, supporting them to gain confidence and skills while in prison, and employment on release.

None of the above should be dismissed as pie in the sky utopianism. It can form part of a pragmatic and eminently achievable reform programme that lifts our criminal justice system off its knees. Doing so must be a priority for us all, because success means fewer people caught up in the consequences of crime, safer communities and the freeing up of resources much better spent on addressing the inequalities that so impact our society. ■



# Books

## Lessons from a life

The leadership of John Smith should be an inspiration to the politicians of today, writes *Kate Murray*



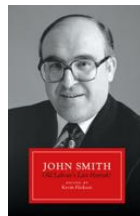
*Kate Murray is the editor of the Fabian Review*

The Labour party is 20 per cent ahead of the Conservatives in the opinion polls. The Tories are mired in scandal and internal strife, while Labour has shown it has changed after recovering from a shattering election defeat. But questions are being asked about whether it has the policies to match the scale of the challenges facing the country – and if so, how it will pay for them. It all sounds pretty familiar – but this is not a snapshot from the election campaign we have all just lived through. Instead it's a description of the fortunes of the Labour party 30 years ago under its then leader John Smith.

In a series of essays, the contributors to Kevin Hickson's new book paint a vivid picture of Smith, his values and the way he was shaping Labour before his untimely death in 1994.

In the years since, Smith's leadership has undergone several reappraisals. Many have seen him as the best prime minister we never had. Others, however, have argued that he did not go far or fast enough in modernising the party and would at best have won one election before losing to a resurgent Conservative party. In their eyes he was too cautious, too 'old Labour' and too wedded to the idea of 'one last heave' to get over the line into Number 10.

This book presents strong arguments against the modernisers' claims. Politics professor Wyn Grant, in a chapter on Smith's economic policy, takes down the 'myth' of Smith's shadow budget in 1992, blamed by some on Labour's modernising wing for the election defeat that year. And David Ward, who served as Smith's head of policy, is even more forthright. Had Smith lived, he writes, his certain election victory "would have denied New Labour its self-serving mythology that only their rebranded version of Labour could have won in 1997".



**John Smith:  
Old Labour's  
Last Hurrah?,**  
Kevin Hickson (ed)  
(Biteback  
Publishing, £25)

But did Smith have a strong vision of his own for the party and the country? Ben Williams argues that Smith would not have been as bold as Blair on social policy, while Joseph Tiplady underlines how he stuck fast to Labour's traditional approach to education. But on constitutional reform, devolution and Europe, the case for Smith's radicalism is stronger. He argued for replacing the "out-of-date idea of an all-powerful nation state with a new and dynamic framework of government", one which empowered decision-making at municipal, regional, national and European levels and put the citizen centre-stage. As Jasper Miles puts it: "It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Smith, of all Labour's post-war leaders, was most at ease with widespread constitutional reform."

How Smith would have put his ideas into practice in government is, though, merely speculation. We can argue, as some do here, over whether Smith would have kept the UK out of the Iraq war, or raised income tax to put more money into redistribution and public services. Yet ultimately the value of reflecting on Smith's life surely lies in what his approach to politics can teach us today. And here, the book has plenty to offer. We learn not just of Smith's skill in the Commons, or his success in keeping the party together, but of his overriding commitment to the pursuit of social justice. Reminiscences from Ward and Ann Taylor, who served in his shadow cabinet, give a real insight into his character. Bryan Gould, who fought him for the leadership, may write of Smith that "if innovation, inspiration, bringing about change and reform, shaking things up was your bag, then look elsewhere", but he nonetheless pays tribute to a "good and decent man".

Today, when public trust in politicians is so low, Smith's way of carrying out the business of politics remains an inspiration to those who have followed him into public service. **F**

# Listings

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## BOURNEMOUTH

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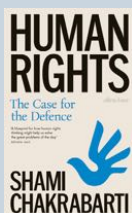
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## THE FABIAN QUIZ

### HUMAN RIGHTS

Shami Chakrabarti



Human rights are a young concept. Only in the wake of the horrors of the second world war and the Holocaust could the notion of inalienable rights common to every person on the planet be cemented.

Since then, at least in the UK, those who work to safeguard the rights of their fellow human beings have found themselves slowly dragged into our all-encompassing culture war. Never mind that the Human Rights Act was crucial to winning justice for the victims of the Hillsborough disaster, or holding the police to account for their failure to stop serial rapist John Worboys, say the Braverman crowd. Because it stopped the government from shipping desperate refugees off to Rwanda, it's got to go.

One of the few silver linings of Liz Truss' premiership was that previous Tory legislation to overhaul the 1998 act was shelved. But those who would see Britain abandon its commitment to universal rights haven't gone anywhere. The

most prominent critics are among those vying to be the next Conservative leader.

Into this fray steps the Labour peer and leading British human rights defender Shami Chakrabarti. Rooted in history, but addressing the problems of today – including AI and climate change – Chakrabarti mounts a thoughtful defence of human rights based on a commitment to dignity and equality.

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

*Four Freedoms was a series of paintings produced by which American artist?*

Please email your answer and your address to [review@fabian-society.org.uk](mailto:review@fabian-society.org.uk)

**ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED  
NO LATER THAN 15 AUGUST 2024.**



# 141 FABIANAS



# ELECTED