FABIAN REVIEW

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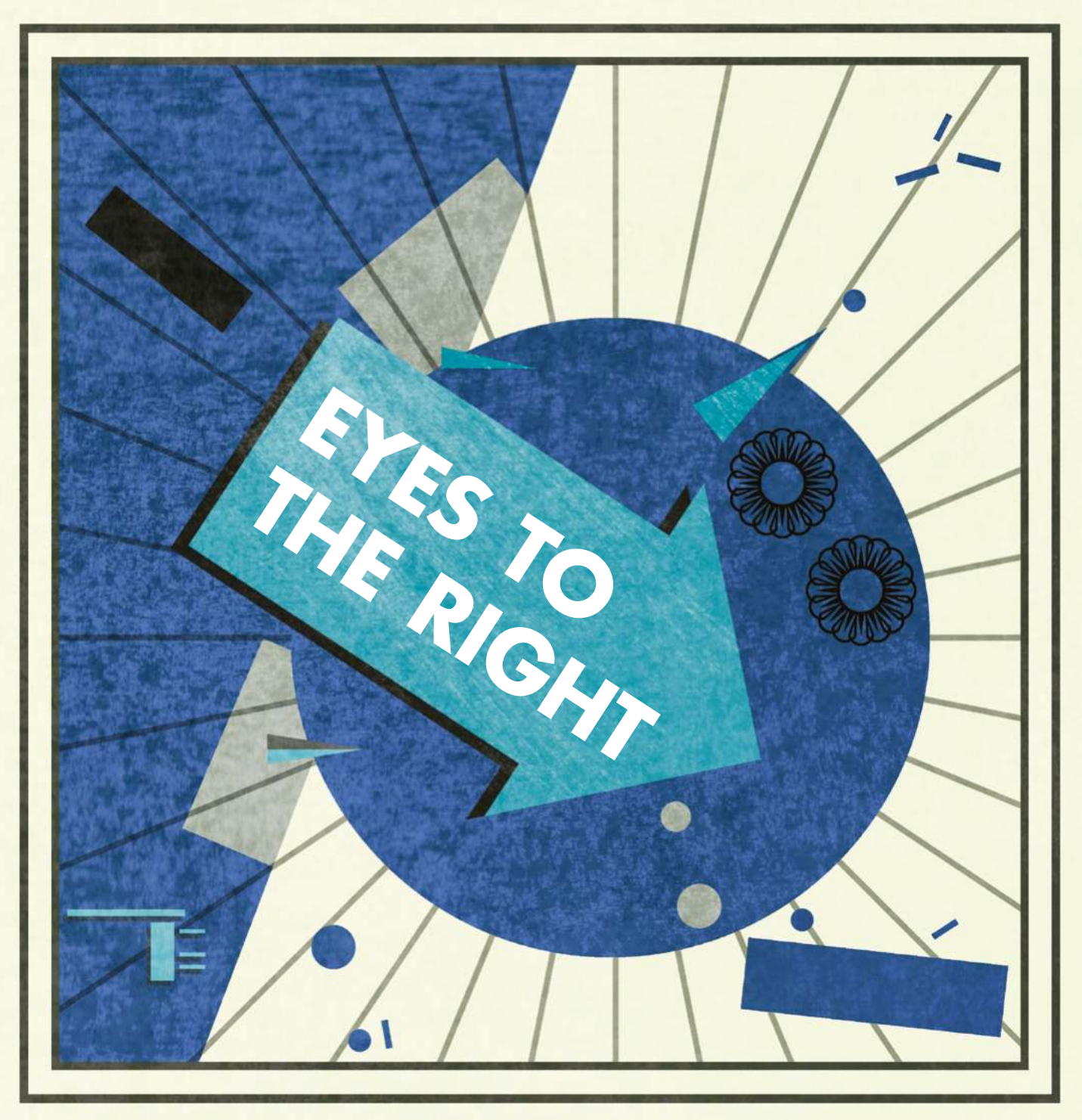

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FABIAN SOCIETY

FABIAN REVIEW
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Taking stock

Labour is rising to the challenge of government, writes *Luke Raikes*

The next election is several years away. Yet even now, some of the tectonic plates are sliding into place. Labour has been busy governing, while laying out weighty legislation in parliament, and all the while facing no small amount of hostility. But it must take time to understand these more fundamental shifts in the landscape, to make sure people feel the country has truly changed by the end of Labour's first term.

The fortunes of the Conservative party will be decisive in the next election. The 'natural party of government' is getting used to life in opposition; week after week, Tories face the unenviable task of returning to the scene of their own vandalism, and offering solutions for the repair job. And they are dogged, day-in, day-out, by the same question that once haunted Labour: "What would you do differently?"

Their task is altogether different from what Labour's once was. They tend to have more of the media on their side, which makes their life a little easier. But their defeat was unprecedented in living memory. And they face a battle on all fronts, needing to take on Reform, the Lib Dems and Labour in different parts of the country.

That said, Labour can't get too comfortable. The Conservatives are arguably the world's most successful political party. The last few years of Tory rule may have been farcical, but as a party it can be thoughtful, strategic and ruthless. In response, Labour must continue to repeat, all the way to the next election, that it is repairing the mess the previous government left. It makes for boring speeches and commentators will roll their eyes, but the party cannot relent.

For both parties, Reform is a common enemy. Their support may well sputter out, but they could also build momentum as an anti-establishment party through local, Scottish and Welsh elections in 2025 and 2026. How this plays out in the next general election will be crucial: will people currently intending to vote Reform instead vote Conservative, to punish the incumbent Labour government? Or will Reform undercut the Conservatives, particularly on immigration, and deprive them of their own momentum?

Labour will now have to manage the challenge of being an incumbent government. Electorates rightly punish any government that fails to deliver. But this challenge contains an opportunity: Labour can change the narrative by improving people's lives. By repairing public services, building infrastructure, and rebalancing the economy, Labour can replace people's sense that "everything is bad, and only getting worse" with "everything was bad, but now things are starting to look up."

It is always difficult to move into government; especially because being in power presents a wide target, even for supposedly 'friendly' voices, to attack. But it is made easier by clear forward momentum, which is why the government is right to refocus on the five missions and put living standards centre-stage. Forthcoming Fabian Society work will show how to secure buy-in, rewire government and communicate a clear story, so that by the next election people are genuinely better off, feel better off, and credit the government for improving their lives.

And despite how it has sometimes felt in recent months, this government has been incredibly active. Between the King's Speech and the Budget, there is a major agenda for change: bus franchising, employment rights, rail nationalisation, industrial strategy and English devolution to pick just a few. These are policies which Fabians, unions and other progressives have been championing for more than a decade. They are being written into law within the first year of this government.

There will be times in this parliament when it feels like the government is powerless. It will then be more important than ever to look back to those long years of opposition – of real powerlessness – and remember that Labour is no longer just an onlooker, carping from the sidelines. Labour is in government. It has the agency to both change the conversation, and change the country. **F**

Shortcuts

THE RIGHT TIME

Everyone needs fair access to leave from work — *Asli Atay Budak*

Today's workers are being asked to do the impossible. As the nature of work evolves and people are expected to work until later in life, they must manage intense careers while juggling caregiving and the demands of everyday life, all while facing an ever-receding pension age. In this context, the increasing health issues experienced by the workforce are unsurprising.

For more than a century, the labour movement fought hard for time-off rights like annual leave and parental leave. But with the prospect of working until 71 now on the table, we must ask: are our time-off policies keeping pace with our needs across our lifetimes? Do they provide enough breaks and at the right times, and does everyone get fair access to them?

The government's employment rights bill is a step forward, introducing day-one rights, eliminating qualifying periods for unpaid parental and paternity leave, and removing the three-day waiting period and lower earnings threshold for statutory sick pay.

Yet deeper inequalities in access to time off persist. Research from the Work Foundation found that employees earning below the UK average of £32,882 per year receive, on average, two fewer days of annual leave than those earning more. This leaves lower earners and those in insecure jobs at a disadvantage, caught in a cycle of inadequate leave and significant work pressures. This can stack up to a significant leave deficit across a lifetime.

Time-off rights are not just a 'perk' – they are essential. This is especially true when it comes to income protection for workers who fall ill. The UK offers one of the lowest rates of statutory sick pay in the OECD, replacing only 17 per cent of average weekly earnings. According to a recent Work Foundation survey, almost half of UK employers (47 per cent) pay only this statutory minimum, which is £116.75 a week up to 28 weeks. For people on low wages, who already often lack financial resilience, sickness brings with it a huge income cut.

The proposed removal of the lower earnings threshold for statutory sick pay is a welcome change that will help more than a million workers, but the fundamental issue remains: sick pay is simply too low to live on. The challenge, of course, lies in balancing the needs of the most vulnerable workers with the costs to employers, particularly the many small businesses that make up such a large share of our economy. Future policies must consider how to support these businesses in providing adequate leave – ensuring their workforce is supported through the hard times too.

Parental leave presents similar limitations. While the UK's unpaid maternity leave is often praised for its length, the income replacement is low – less than 50 per cent for individuals earning £500 per week. Fathers fare even worse – our two weeks of paid paternity leave is among the lowest leave entitlement in Europe. Failing to address these problems would be a huge missed opportunity for the government.

And there is also the issue of unpaid carers. More than 10.6 million people in the UK provide unpaid care, and this number is set to rise given that over nine million people are expected to live with health conditions by 2040. Countries like Germany already offer up to ten days of paid leave at 90 per cent of income for employees with caregiving responsibilities. The UK must adopt a similar model of flexible, paid leave to support carers if we want to prevent them from leaving the workforce all together.

As the way we work continues to evolve, and as labour market challenges grow, we need to update our time-off protections to reflect these changes. Every worker, regardless of income or their contractual terms, should have access to leave entitlements that enable them to live a healthy and rich life. As a society we all stand to benefit. **F**

Asli Atay Budak is a senior policy advisor at the Work Foundation, a thinktank affiliated with Lancaster University, and a participant in the Fabian Women's Network political and public life mentoring programme. The Work Foundation's report, Time Off: Redesigning Leave Policies to Support Longer, Healthier Working Lives, is available on the Lancaster University website

CRUEL AND UNNECESSARY

Landlords should not be able to pursue the guarantors of deceased tenants — *Helen Hayes MP*

One of the most important aspects of the role of an MP is casework. Largely unseen by the wider public, it is where the majority of our staff resources are focused, supporting constituents who are facing particular difficulties or hardships, making representations on their behalf and trying to secure an improvement in their circumstances. Casework is also a vital source of information on the impacts of government policy and legislation on individual lives.

Occasionally, there is a case that is so shocking and distressing that it demands not only individual representations on behalf of a constituent, but a campaign to change the law so that such a case can never happen again. Earlier this year, I was confronted by such a case. A constituent got in touch to tell me that his son, a student in his first year at university, had died by suicide – a desperate tragedy for any parent to have to endure. The young man had already signed a tenancy agreement for his second year at university, and his parents had signed a guarantor agreement in relation to the rent.

When my constituent contacted the letting agent to inform them that his son could no longer take up the tenancy because of his tragic death, he was informed that the guarantor agreement was still applicable, and that he and his wife would be held liable for the rent on a house in which his son would never be able to live. In the midst of unbearable grief and loss, my constituent was being pursued for rent, an additional worry and a hardship that no-one should ever have to endure.

I wrote to the letting agent on behalf of my constituent pointing out the desperately sad circumstances and asking them to waive the clause. They refused; so I raised the matter at prime minister's questions to palpable outrage. Oliver Dowden, who was standing in for Rishi Sunak, promised to follow up. He subsequently pointed to the Conservatives' renters reform bill as the opportunity for legislative change.

Not all guarantor agreements contain a clause which makes them applicable in the event of a tenant's death. Other letting agents contacted me to say that they explicitly did not include such clauses. And neither are they necessary, because the loss of rental income due to the death of a tenant is an insurable risk for landlords. Why should landlords be allowed to pursue bereaved relatives when the loss can be recovered from their insurer?

I tabled an amendment to the Tories' bill which would outlaw the application of guarantor agreements in the event of the death of a tenant. Despite warm words from government ministers, both in the Commons chamber and privately, the Conservative government failed to accept my amendment or to bring forward their own amendment in response. Then they chose not to progress the renter's reform bill before the general election, so that the bill fell when the election was called.

Thankfully, the new Labour government made the new renters' rights bill a priority. The legislation will deliver a step change in the security of private tenancies. I have again tabled an amendment to outlaw the application of guarantor agreements in the event of the death of a tenant.

My amendment was debated in the line-by-line scrutiny stage in early November. I am encouraged that the housing minister, Matthew Pennycook, said: "The government [has] been considering this issue closely and in detail. We take it very seriously, and I am extremely sympathetic to the issues raised."

The bill will now be debated in the House of Lords before returning to the Commons for the report stage debate. I will continue to pursue my amendment, and I am heartened by the government's positive engagement on this issue, which sits in stark contrast to the previous Conservative government's approach.

I hope that the whole House will be able to agree that no-one who is grieving the loss of a loved one should be pursued for the payment of that loved one's rent, and that my constituents will be able to take some small comfort from knowing that in response to their son's death, their MP sought concrete action to change the law to protect others from ever suffering the same distress and hardship. **F**

Helen Hayes is the Labour MP for Dulwich and West Norwood

MORAL IMPERATIVE

Our immigration detention system is harming LGBTQI+ people — *Minesh Parekh*

"I didn't think anything could be worse than prison, but this is."

That's how one of our service users described being held in an immigration detention centre.

Sadly, while polling suggests widespread support for people seeking asylum in the UK, people who arrive seeking protection are met with cruel laws and policies that make their lives harder, including being locked up indefinitely in harmful detention centres.

Immigration detention is the practice of locking people up while their immigration status is being resolved. People in detention are detained administratively, rather than being punished for any crime. However, detention centres are becoming increasingly prison-like, often run by private security companies for profit, while people are held in horrible conditions.

Detention is harmful for anyone, but LGBTQI+ people face significant additional risk of harm, including harassment and abuse from staff and other residents. For LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum who have experienced violence, torture and imprisonment in their country of origin, detention can be retraumatising: a former service user from Cameroon told us: "[I] got flashbacks of everything I've been through in Africa. I've been free for two or three years and then here I am back in a cell".

The people Rainbow Migration supports have fled persecution in their countries of origin, and deserve safety and sanctuary in the UK. Our goal is to work towards an asylum and immigration system that treats LGBTQI+ people fairly and with dignity.

Central to Labour's pitch in the general election campaign was its focus on sorting out the UK's public finances, having inherited a projected overspend of £22bn. As it looks to find savings, the government will have to make some difficult decisions; but reforming immigration detention should be an easy choice to make, because

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the current system is both counterproductive and costly. The detention estate under the last government was estimated to cost between £3bn and £6bn per year, which Yvette Cooper, then shadow Home Secretary, said demonstrated the "Conservatives [were] in total chaos on asylum."

Indeed, in response to the Conservative government's 2023 Illegal Migration Act, Cooper highlighted that it costs £7,000 per person to keep someone in detention for 40 days, more than double the current average cost of keeping people elsewhere in the asylum system. "Where are the hundreds of millions of pounds for the detention plan going to come from, and where are these detention facilities going to come from?" she asked.

This was the right question. It is shockingly cruel to lock up people fleeing persecution; it also costs far more than the more humane alternatives available.

It was therefore sad to see Yvette Cooper once in government announce plans to grow the size of the detention estate, looking to find nearly 300 extra places to detain people seeking asylum. The government has pledged to prioritise fiscal responsibility. It should therefore reconsider its decision to double down on the harmful status quo.

There is an alternative. In 2018, as part of its response to Stephen Shaw's review of the detention of vulnerable people, Theresa May's government introduced a series of pilot schemes to offer community-based support to people who would otherwise be at risk of detention. The first of these saw women who would have been held at Yarl's Wood detention centre instead being housed within communities and receiving wraparound support from a local charity.

The Home Office press release at the time advocated a deliberate reduction in the use of detention and the development of alternatives; Sajid Javid even told parliament that he was considering ending indefinite immigration detention and working with charities and communities to develop alternatives.

The two initial pilots the government carried out were independently evaluated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on behalf of the government. That evaluation found that alternative models were "cheaper and [offered] better value for money compared with the costs of detaining asylum seekers", and that "by building on the networks and experience of civil society, [they] were able to better support asylum-seekers' access to services and quality advice."

Angela Eagle, Labour's minister for border security and asylum, has said that she will "keep under review the feasibility of alternatives to detention pilots, taking account of effectiveness and cost efficiency", as the new government looks to reset the asylum policy landscape.

We at Rainbow Migration believe that the rollout of a new alternative to detention pilots would demonstrate that building a fairer asylum system can coincide with its ambitions for fiscal responsibility. Introducing a community-based scheme would move us one step closer to being a country that no longer locks up LGBTQI+ people in places they aren't safe.

People voted for the new government for change. The new government could deliver a real departure from division and chaos by working to create a fairer asylum system. **F**

Minesh Parekh is a policy and public affairs manager at Rainbow Migration, which is coordinating the No Pride in Detention campaign to bring an end to the detention of LGBTQI+ people in the UK

PIER REVIEW

The UK's piers demand a new approach from central government — *Patrick Hurley MP*

My Southport constituency shares many traits with other coastal towns across the UK: a beach, a promenade, arcade games, a theme park – and, unfortunately, a cash-strapped council. After 14 years of Tory austerity, the local authority can't afford to repair the pier that serves as our most important attraction.

Southport's much-loved Victorian pier has been closed for two years. This might not sound like a big deal, but it is a significant barrier to progress for a town like mine, which relies on tourist income from people coming to traverse the second-longest pier in the country.

Nearly two centuries of problematic repairs and renovations, along with fires in 1897, 1933, and 1959, and a storm in 1989, make up the pier's turbulent history. Its current closure for safety reasons is just the latest crisis, but possibly the most costly yet, with repairs estimated at the start of 2024 at £15m, with ongoing additional maintenance costs.

This is not just an acute funding issue, however. Nor is it unique to Southport. According to the National Piers Society, there are 62 seaside piers in Great Britain, with many in poor condition due to decades of inadequate upkeep. By their very nature, piers are high-risk structures that face threats from fires, storms, tidal surges, and natural erosion. Many struggle to be financially sustainable, and efforts at commercialising them individually have had mixed results. They are, essentially, Victorian follies, albeit ones that are well-loved and important to their local economies. The state of our piers requires and deserves serious thinking.

I propose creating a national body to take ownership of all existing piers under a non-profit framework. Whether this would be managed by the government or modelled after organisations like the National Trust is up for discussion. It's a very Fabian solution, one that harks


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back to the spirit of the age in which the society was founded and in which many piers were originally built. Equally, it reflects the new Labour government's mandate to pursue a mission-driven approach to government to tackle the difficult economic inheritance we were given.

Currently, ownership of our piers varies; some are held by local authorities, others are privately owned, and some are managed by nonprofits working with external partners. Southport's pier has been under local authority ownership for many years. But in the post-austerity era, where council budgets have been severely cut and services are already stretched thin, it is vanishingly unlikely that any council would prioritise funding a pier's renovation over essential services like children's welfare or adult social care.

By bringing piers into common ownership at a national level, they could benefit from economies of scale, consistent supply chains, sharing best practices among towns, and developing sustainable business models with a unified commercialisation strategy. We have seen this in action before: the National Trust, for example, is funded through donations, fees, and trading income which is put back into conserving and improving our countryside, buildings and gardens. A not-for-profit national organisation could still adopt a commercial approach, and for our piers, this may be the necessary solution for long-term financial sustainability.

State funding would still be needed at some level to help keep these landmarks in a good state of repair. Placing responsibility for refurbishment in the hands of a national body—rather than a patchwork of councils, community groups, and private owners – could help to ensure that this funding goes where it is most needed.

Coastal communities have faced significant economic hardship in recent decades. For Labour's pledge for a decade of national renewal to hold true, there is no better way to show commitment to these areas than by combining a positive approach to our seaside heritage with a modernised, collaborative strategy to rejuvenate our left-behind coastal towns. Let's bring our piers into common ownership and ensure that the best days for our seaside towns lie ahead. **F**

Patrick Hurley is the Labour MP for Southport

CROWN DUELS

We need to talk about the monarchy — *Ken Ritchie*

The Fabian Society's Commission on the Future of the Monarchy concluded there was little point in discussing the case for abolishing the monarchy because it enjoyed so much popular support. That, however, was back in 2003 – and much has happened since.

Nowadays, the popularity of the monarchy is a myth. Polls suggest that more people want an elected head of state than the proportion of the electorate which backed a Labour government. A majority of Labour voters, a majority of those under 50, a majority of those in Scotland and in London, and a majority of remain voters would prefer an elected head of state over a monarch. It is only amongst the over 50s and those who voted Brexit that support for the monarchy remains relatively strong. Whether or not Labour feels ready to take a position on the monarchy, it would be a mistake not to recognise the significance of this shift in public opinion. If the electorate is not fussed about having a monarchy, there is no reason why Labour should be, and that allows more reasoned questioning of the case for the institution.

Labour and the monarchy are not natural partners. Labour stands for equality and democracy, whereas the monarchy symbolises a society in which hereditary privilege, rank, class and titles are important. The monarchy may seem a harmless relic of feudal times, but it is not without political influence and its imperial image does not fit well with our Commonwealth role. Its costs have been rising while government finances are under stress, and recent revelations about how the duchies – centuries-old institutions which earn money for the King and Prince of Wales – have been taking money from public services and the defence budget have caused a lot of anger.

The biggest problem with the monarchy is its influence on our national mindset. It normalises the idea that inherited wealth, privilege and influence are part of a natural order. Royal branding is to be found everywhere – in the armed services, our national institutions, our major charities and even on our favourite cereals. The government we have elected is His Majesty's government, and our MPs cannot represent us until they have sworn allegiance to the king. The message it conveys is clear: Britain may be our country in the sense that we live here, but it doesn't belong to us – there is an establishment, centred around the monarchy, of people more important than ourselves and they are the ones in charge.

Labour has come into power promising change: it wants a society of active citizens who feel engaged in decisions about the type of society they want to live in. This will always be difficult while we have, as a central pillar of our constitution, a monarchy which downplays the role of citizens.

There is therefore a strong argument that Labour would be better off without the monarchy. Yet we have not reached a point at which Labour could commit itself to republicanism without unleashing the fury of the right-wing media, as well as the wrath of some within its own ranks who have not yet accepted the case for republicanism. As such, the task for those of us who seek change is to lay the groundwork by initiating a serious debate on what sort of society we are trying to create and what sort of head of state such a society would need. Fabians, in particular, should revive the work our society started in 1996 with the publication of Paul Richards'

excellent Long to Reign Over Us? At the time, with the approach of a general election, the pamphlet's message fell largely on deaf ears, but its critique of the monarchy is as apposite today as it was in 1996.

Seven years later, the society's Commission on the Future of the Monarchy was not prepared to contemplate a future *without* the monarchy. However, it produced an impressive list of recommendations, many of which tally with the contemporary proposals of Labour for a Republic, including changing the oath of allegiance, making the monarchy subject to the Freedom of Information Act and other legislation, setting its budget in the same way as other government bodies and removing its role and influence from political decision-making.

While these reforms would improve administrative efficiency and constitutional clarity, they would also be hugely important in opening up the discussions we need on the monarchy. Currently, we are stuck with the idea that, because we've always had a monarchy, it would be unpatriotic to challenge it. But in discussing the monarchy, we are debating an institution which perpetuates inequality and social divisions and which undermines our status as equal citizens. That is why many of the founding members of the Labour party were staunch republicans, and why Labour must now welcome debates on the monarchy and its future. **F**

Ken Ritchie is secretary of Labour for a Republic

THIS DANCE IS YOUR DANCE

The government can reinforce its commitment to our living heritage through the school curriculum — *Flora Dodd*

In March this year, the UK ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In doing so, the UK has committed to ensuring that it safeguards and promotes its most at-risk intangible cultural heritage, or 'living heritage' as it is sometimes known. UNESCO considers intangible cultural heritage to include oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and skills concerning nature and the universe; and the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. In the UK context, this might include generations-old traditions such as morris dancing, alongside contemporary cultural events like Notting Hill Carnival.

Why is the UK is only just ratifying a 20-year-old treaty? It is a valid question. By the time Britain joined the convention, 182 of the UN's 193 member states had already committed to protecting their own intangible cultural heritage. Yet as late as 2020, a civil society minister told the Lords that she had "not seen any compelling business case" for doing so. This represents a failure to appreciate the wide-ranging impact living heritage can have: as UNESCO argues, an understanding and appreciation of living heritage can aid intercultural dialogue and encourage respect for others' beliefs, and contribute to a sense of community, identity and continuity. Importantly, living heritage not only encompasses traditions from the past: it represents contemporary, diverse practices too.

To fulfil our duties under the convention, the first task is to make our intangible heritage at least somewhat tangible. Between December 2023 and February 2024, Rishi Sunak's Conservative government launched a consultation, focusing on 'defining and identifying intangible cultural heritage in the UK'; but we are still waiting for its findings. Along with the ratification itself, this represented a positive step amidst Conservative rhetoric and policies which harmed the cultural, heritage and arts sector.

Labour's election heralded a notable positive shift in the way the arts, culture and heritage are discussed. The prime minister and the culture secretary have both spoken about the impact engaging with the arts had upon their lives, and the power of culture to enrich, unify, and provide solace and meaning. Yet there is much more work to do. Living heritage is severely affected by the wider arts and culture sector's well-documented financial and workforce struggles. The National Lottery Heritage Fund has identified a few common threats, including the closure of community spaces where living heritage can be practiced, a lack of training and learning opportunities, and economic and market issues (eg practitioners being unable to find a workshop, make a living from their practice, or acquire the necessary funds to train others in their field).

My own interest in our living heritage was inherited from my parents, who both enjoy folk music and dance from across the British Isles. They introduced me to these activities from an early age, and through my involvement with folk dance groups, I have made close friends, travelled to compete in transatlantic dance competitions and developed a curiosity for folk traditions around the world. I was lucky to have been introduced to the UK folk scene by the lottery that is parental cultural influence. But discovering and benefiting from our living heritage should not be left to chance.

Earlier this year, the Arts and Creative Industries Policy Unit, based at the Fabian Society, proposed that the teaching of Britain's intangible cultural heritage should be incorporated into a reformed national curriculum, as part of a suite of other arts and cultural education policies. We believe that everyone should have access to culture and all the opportunities it offers, and that this begins in schools. As an interdisciplinary topic, learning about living heritage – through both theoretical and practical means – teaches respect, curiosity and tolerance of Britain's rich, diverse cultural landscape. It aids children's understanding of how our lives have been shaped by evolving traditions, and how future generations might inherit both traditional and contemporary practices.

States who ratify the 2003 convention are 'encouraged to adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures' aimed at promoting and facilitating access to living heritage, and strengthening institutions for the training, management, expression and performance of the same. What better way to do so than to ensure that all children can participate in our rich cultural heritage from an early age?

At a moment when the public sphere is characterised by culture wars and discussions about the UK's post-Brexit identity, it feels pertinent to celebrate and protect British culture as an inclusive, representative and evolving act of expression and community connection – and it is now in Labour's legislative power to do so. Embracing the UNESCO convention is a first step in celebrating our living heritage, and it will be fascinating to see which practices end up on the UK's protected list. Whatever they are, Labour can ensure they remain alive and relevant by giving every child the opportunity to enjoy them.

Flora Dodd is a researcher in the Arts and Creative Industries Policy Unit

Blue funk

The Conservative party faces a difficult road to recovery. But talk of an existential crisis is overblown, argues *Will Prescott*

Dr Will Prescott is a senior researcher at the centre-right thinktank Bright Blue. He previously completed a DPhil in the interwar history of the Conservative party at the University of Oxford

Having suffered their worst ever result at July's general election and with their reputation for good governance trashed by scandals and policy failures, the Tories find themselves in a sorry state. Some even warn that the party is at risk of extinction or, at least, faces a very long spell in the wilderness. However, while the party's challenges going forward remain immense, the history of the democratic world's oldest and most successful political party shows that all is not lost. Indeed, if they play their cards wisely, the Tories could recover more quickly than expected.

There is no sugarcoating the mess in which the Conservative party finds itself. Not only did the 2024 general election see it reduced to its smallest ever share of the vote, a dismal 24 per cent, but it lost over two-thirds of its House of Commons seats. There are now just 121 Tory MPs in the 650-member chamber.

Compounding this problem, the Tories' vote share has been eaten away from both the left and the right. On the one hand, Reform UK has attacked the Conservatives for not doing enough to reduce irregular migration. While gaining just five Commons seats, Reform, by splitting the right-wing vote, cost the Tories up to 80 seats.

On other hand, the Liberal Democrats threaten to snatch more Conservative seats if the Tories swerve too far to the right, on top of the 60 they seized in July. With the Liberal Democrats unlikely to form another coalition with the Tories following their catastrophic 2015 election result, it is difficult to see a path back to government without reclaiming these seats. This has led some to claim that a Labour-Liberal Democrat bloc could lock the Tories out of power for years.

The Tories' most recent spell in opposition also hardly gives cause for optimism. The party's humiliating loss at the 1997 general election, which reduced it to 165 seats – until recently its worst result since 1906 – saw it condemned to 13 years in the wilderness. Battered by internal divisions, leadership problems and a reputation for being 'the nasty party,' the Tories struggled to land blows against Labour and its popular leader, Tony Blair. Making it even harder, by accepting the Thatcherite economic model inherited from the 1979–1997 Conservative government, Labour effectively blocked the Tories from occupying the centre ground of British politics and beat the Conservatives at their own game.

Only after 13 years, four leaders and a global financial crisis did the Conservatives return to power. Even then, they still needed to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, having failed to secure an outright majority at the 2010 general election.

Fortunately for the Conservatives, at least some of the factors behind the Tories' post-1997 troubles seem unlikely to recur. First, a return to power was then made problematic by unprecedented levels of economic growth under Labour. Annual GDP growth averaged 3 per cent between 1993 and 2007. A return to such growth levels seems improbable, at least based on current projections.

Second, the current Labour leadership enjoys none of the enthusiasm that greeted Tony Blair's arrival in Downing Street, with Keir Starmer already experiencing the largest post-election fall in approval ratings of any British prime minister in the modern era. While it is still very early days, a greater opening is likely to exist for Tory recovery in the next few years than was the case last time round.

Earlier spells in opposition illustrate how the Conservatives can capitalise on political openings. Under Winston Churchill, it took just six years to regain power following the disastrous loss at the 1945 general election, during which they lost more than half their seats to Clement Attlee's Labour party.

That recovery occurred despite the Attlee government's formidable legislative record, which included presiding over the establishment of the modern welfare state, the creation of the National Health Service and the nationalisation of large swathes of the economy. It also occurred despite the record of the previous Tory-dominated administration, the 1931–40 national government, which was tainted in popular memory for its perceived inability to deal with the Great Depression at home and failed appeasement policy abroad.

This recovery was due in large part to the Tories' ability to present themselves to the electorate as moderates who could be trusted with the new social services. Accepting reality, Conservatives made no effort to repeal Labour measures that, while not to their liking, were simply impractical to undo. Thus, the Conservatives pledged not to touch the newly-created National Health Service (NHS), even though they had opposed the legislation introducing it. This was not least because the NHS proved popular with middle-class Tory voters, who found themselves liberated from growing medical bills.

The second pillar of Tory recovery was tackling growing voter frustration with postwar austerity. This struck a chord, particularly with those sick of Labour's unwillingness to abandon wartime rationing. The Labour government also seemed unable to build enough new homes to ease the large postwar shortages – an issue with echoes in the present day. Especially significant was the target, first announced at the 1950 Conservative party conference, to build 300,000 new homes per year. Indeed, so iconic was this pledge that Conservatives recycled it for the 2019 Conservative manifesto. Combined with promises to abolish rationing, an ambitious agenda on housing helped the Tories reduce Labour's majority to a barely workable six seats at the 1950 general election, and finally pushed them over the line when another election was held the following year.

Looking even further back, to the Edwardian period, one can see that the Tories' current problem of multiple parties lining up against them is neither unprecedented nor fatal. Between the Tories' disastrous 1906 election loss, which saw them decline from 402 to just 157 Commons seats, and the outbreak of the First World War, the Conservatives found themselves effectively locked out of power by a progressive alliance between the then-dominant Liberals and the newly created Labour party. Under this arrangement, Liberals and Labour candidates would typically avoid running against each other at general elections. Despite the Tories recovering to equal the Liberals in terms of seats at the December 1910 election (272 apiece), there was little prospect of a Tory government being formed against this bloc.

Yet the Tories were far from finished, and their opponents' unity far from ironclad. Exploiting bitter Liberal divisions during and after the first world war, Labour seized its chance and turned on the Liberals to become the dominant force on the left. Meanwhile, the Tories seized their own chance to ally with moderate Liberals and stage a remarkable electoral recovery without significantly revising the party's ideology. Consequently, the Conservatives would only be out of government for two very brief stints during the 1918–39 interwar period (1924 and 1929–31).

While the Tories' most recent spell in opposition was deeply traumatic, the party's history shows that it is premature to assume it will remain trapped in opposition, let alone disappear altogether

While the Tories' most recent spell in opposition was deeply traumatic, the party's history shows that it is premature to assume it will remain trapped in opposition, let alone disappear altogether. There is no guarantee that the current anti-Tory bloc will hold, especially as pressures on the new government continue to mount. So if Labour fails to address cost-of-living concerns on issues such as housing – and if, in response, the Tories can provide credible policy responses – they could yet give Labour a run for its money in five years' time. F

Right flank

Reform threatens our seats – but also our soul, argues *Mark Rusling*

Mark Rusling is a Labour and Co-operative councillor in Sheffield Brightside & Hillsborough

On a rainy October afternoon, we had just posted a photo of our latest door knocking session in Shiregreen, north-east Sheffield. The first Facebook comment dropped in:"Big turn out for the rip-off Tory party that. Just imagine if a member of Reform was to turn up. Btw I voted for your granny killers, never again".

The Reform threat to Labour in Yorkshire is well-known. Back in winter 2015, just months before the EU referendum, I warned in an article in the Fabian Review: "Labour will join the other parties in pushing 'In', leaving only UKIP arguing 'Out', and equating an 'In' vote with a thumbs-up to mass immigration". This is exactly what happened. For many former Labour voters, UKIP became associated with standing up for Britain, leaving Labour as the party for people who are 'not quite like you'. And in the years which followed, the threat shifted, but it did not go away. Like the Terminator hauling itself to its feet again and again, UKIP dissolved and the Brexit party grew; the Brexit party dissolved and Reform grew.

Now there are more Yorkshire seats which have a Labour MP where Reform sits in second place (14) than there are Tory or Liberal Democrat MPs in the whole county. There are also seats like Sheffield Brightside & Hillsborough in which Reform did not get their act together to stand, but which are in the party's sights. Turnout in the constituency in July's general election was just 45 per cent and more than 500 voters simply wrote an angry capitalised 'Reform' across their ballot paper. The threat is real.

Four out of five – what is the threat we face?

The Reform threat is about more than our seats – it is about our soul. Labour was founded as a collaboration between working-class trade unionists and middle-class socialists. Both wings of the movement are vital to our mission, but one in particular is threatened by Reform.

2024 was the first election in which working-class voters showed weaker support for Labour (33 per cent) than middle-class voters (36 per cent). At the same time, Reform gained one in five working-class votes, but only one in 10 middle-class votes. Those working-class Reform voters are profoundly pessimistic. The anti-extremist campaign group Hope Not Hate found that only 21 per cent of them are optimistic about the future, and 92 per cent felt that politicians "don't listen to people like me".

This must be a wake-up call: we have to start listening. Labour Together's Christabel Cooper was right to argue in the last Fabian Review that "while a more successful Reform party could damage Labour, the threat [they pose] to the Conservatives could be existential". But if Reform peel off one of our wings, they will do more than threaten our tenure in seats like Sheffield Brightside & Hillsborough. They will change the very bargain on which our party was founded more than 120 years ago.

'Mardy bums' – who are we talking about?

We should focus our efforts on two groups of voters, which I have named the RRRs and the IIIs.

Riot sceptic – Redistributor – Reformers (RRRs)

Hope Not Hate found that 20 per cent of July's Reform voters believe that the summer rioters bear no responsibility for their actions. These voters are out of our reach – and should stay there. Most of these voters came to Reform from the Tories, or via UKIP/Brexit party.

However, 53 per cent of Reformers believe that governments should do more to redistribute wealth. Many of these voters will have found their way to Reform

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from Labour via a belief in, and then a disillusionment with, Boris Johnson. It is these RRR voters whom we must attract back.

Impatient – Immigration-sceptic – Non-Identitarians (IIIs)

The 'III' voters are those who stuck with Labour in 2024 (or returned from a brief Boris detour), but who are Reform-curious. Two in five of July's Labour voters feel that immigration numbers are currently too high. They fear for their public services and the nature of their communities, but white identity is not important to them – these views cut across class and ethnic lines.

But IIIs are impatient – very impatient. 50 per cent of Britons, but 73 per cent of Labour voters, believe Labour will make a noticeable difference to the cost of living in two years. On the NHS, it's 46 per cent of all Britons and 65 per cent of Labour voters. Tangible change will have to be delivered in the first term of government if the Reform-curious aren't to become Reform-converts.

Brick by brick – what is to be done?

Here are four suggestions for winning back the RRRs and keeping the IIIs.

1. Restore the link between hard work and a decent life. Stagnant wages and higher costs for food, energy and housing are the top concerns for RRRs and IIIs (and for many others). We should prioritise raising the pay of the lowest earners, including through rewarding work over wealth in the tax system. Raising the minimum wage in the Budget was a good start.
2. Create faith in the education system. The Tories have left us the worst of all worlds – fewer young people going to university, and reduced status and pay for non-graduate jobs. Alongside the review of the school curriculum, we need a new system of post-16 education which works for all young people. This covers the curriculum: why do we force young people to study plumbing or Shakespeare? Why not both? And also basic fairness: why are there are no schools with sixth forms in the poorer north of Sheffield but seven in the wealthier south-west?
3. Restore faith in the immigration system. People claiming asylum are not the same as economic migrants. We give asylum because we are civilised; we allow migration because our economy and public services need it. Both require a system which makes quick, fair and transparent decisions, and which enforces those decisions.
4. Symbols and style matter. If we are to attract support from Britons across Britain, we have to show that we actually like Britain (warts and all). So why were there no Union flags at the counter-protests organised by the left in response to the summer riots? If we cede patriotism to Reform, we will also cede RRRs and IIIs.

Voters in Brightside & Hillsborough and across Yorkshire want the same things as those in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan who rejected the Democrats in November. They want a decent life – economic growth is irrelevant if you can't afford to buy a pack of butter. They see images of families in dinghies crossing the Channel, or wading across the Rio Grande, and conclude that the immigration system is broken. They see their taxes going up but still can't get a doctor's appointment. They are angry, and rightly so.

Fighting Reform is not an optional extra. Britons are looking for solutions and Farage and friends spin a beguiling web of fairy tales, blaming others for our national mess. This is a web we must break if we are to retain our seats as well as our soul. **F**

Benched

With the Tories out of power after 14 years, *Hannah White* and *Catherine Haddon* reflect on the institution of the opposition in the UK system

Hannah White is the director and CEO of the Institute for Government

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In the UK, the opposition is assigned three main roles: to oppose the government, to criticise it, and to seek to replace it. This constitutional position was formalised in the 1930s with the first statutory recognition of the leader of the opposition when they were awarded a salary. The existence, and empowerment, of opposition to government is seen as a central concept of British democracy.

Nevertheless, the surviving Conservative MPs who moved across the house following July's election are likely to have had a rude awakening. The UK's opposition parties are massively disempowered in comparison to the governing party (or parties), including in terms of their access to both information about government policy and the civil service. As MPs, opposition members can put questions to the government and interrogate its representatives in parliament, but they have nothing like the same resources to be able to develop policy positions on what the government is doing, let alone develop their own policies.

All opposition parties receive public funding to perform their parliamentary role, allocated based on a formula calculated according to each party's electoral success in terms of seats and votes. All parties with more than two MPs get additional support to develop policy. But they get very little specific support to set themselves up in opposition, often being left to arrive in some recently vacated rooms on the parliamentary estate and work out for themselves how to be effective.

The biggest impediment to being effective as an opposition party is the lack of control you have over the parliamentary agenda. Notionally, opposition whips work with government whips via the 'usual channels' to agree things like how long the Commons will spend scrutinising particular pieces of legislation, but in practice, all the power over such decisions sits with the government. This means it can be hard to ensure time is spent on your priorities as an opposition, rather than the things that the government wants to talk about.

To be an effective opposition, then, Badenoch and her party will need to make the most of the opportunities the Conservatives are afforded in recognition of its official opposition status. In the chamber, these include the right of the leader of the official opposition to ask questions of the prime minister, and for the shadow cabinet to speak in response to government statements and to participate in bill debates. The official opposition gets the lion's share of these opportunities, which can provide visibility at high profile moments, while other opposition parties have to fight for the remaining scraps of parliamentary time. The official opposition also has the right to provide candidates for deputy speaker and participate in the governance of the Commons, which gives them some limited influence over the running of parliament.

One of the most important opportunities for opposition parties to hold the government to account is for their MPs to sit on select committees. By convention the Public Accounts Committee – which scrutinises government spending – is always chaired by a member of the official opposition; in September, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown assumed the role. Other chairs and seats are allocated according to the party make-up of the Commons. Committees provide an opportunity to ask challenging questions of ministers in public, but also to develop constructive recommendations and – for individuals – to build the cross-party relationships that are so crucial to advancing your priorities as an MP in parliament.

While the largest opposition party's main job day to day may be to critique and hold the government to account, their constitutional role also includes being a government-in-waiting. The current official opposition has the benefit of recent experience in government, but for oppositions who have been out of power for longer there is little support to prepare to take over if the electorate was to call upon them. Throughout its history, the Institute for Government has sought to fill this gap by supporting oppositions to prepare for the possibility of power, but there is much more that could be done. It is in the interests of the country to ensure the opposition is given the resources it needs to do the job that the country asks of it. **F**

True blue

Kemi Badenoch will have to walk a political tightrope, writes *Mark Garnett*

Dr Mark Garnett is a senior lecturer in politics at Lancaster University. His book Keeping the Red Flag Flying: The Labour Party in Opposition since 1922, coauthored with Gavin Hyman and Richard Johnson, is published by Polity

Visiting a party's conference after a crushing electoral defeat would usually be an impolite intrusion into private grief. But the Conservative party does not do grief. After the 1997 New Labour landslide, its activists descended on Blackpool to visit their wrath on their hapless parliamentary representatives. And this year, despite an even more comprehensive rout less than three months earlier, the 2024 conference in Birmingham was marked by barely-suppressed euphoria.

Apart from glee at Labour's initial difficulties, the 2024 Tories were anticipating the selection of a new leader, which duly dominated the conference – not so much a 'beauty contest', as it was billed, as a fiesta of flattery. Such occasions almost make party membership seem worthwhile; they permit the faithful to fantasise that the whole world is still watching them.

In theory, Conservative MPs still exercise a 'gatekeeping' role in the leadership process, reducing a cast of candidates – more numerous nowadays, in inverse proportion to the attractions of the top job – to two. But while the keepers might still be in place, the gates have long gone. In the preliminary rounds, MPs vote with more than one eye on the improbable preferences of their constituency members. As a direct consequence, the Conservative parliamentary party has been complicit in saddling itself with leaders (Duncan Smith, Johnson, Truss) whose defects only became more glaring on closer acquaintance.

The system is not guaranteed to fail. Whatever we might now think, David Cameron was a defensible choice in 2005. Arguably, the same could be said of the 2024 winner, Kemi Badenoch. On paper, her campaign pitches were unsurprising and uninspiring, amounting to a promise to make the Conservative party 'Conservative' again. However, she seems to be that rarest of political specimens – an interesting right-wing ideologue, equipped with a degree of critical intelligence.

In normal circumstances, the Conservative party does not do critical intelligence. It swoons at the sight of a second-class classicist, but usually weeds out egg-headed leadership hopefuls – Lord Hailsham and Enoch Powell in bygone days and (for argument's sake) Michael Gove – at the first symptom of wayward judgement. The most brilliant of them all, Iain Macleod, was blackballed for being 'too clever by half'.

Presumably, among the reasons for Badenoch's underwhelming endorsement from the members was a suspicion that she might be clever. In the 2022 leadership contest, Liz Truss was supported by more than 81,000 members; Badenoch's tally, from a reduced electorate, was less than 54,000, or around 57 per cent. The gospels tell us that a rickety shed divided against itself cannot stand, and the battle lines for the next leadership contest were discernible in Badenoch's attempts to drum up something worthy of the name 'shadow Cabinet'. She has been forced to give her defeated rival, Robert Jenrick, a post which allows him to pursue his dreary vendetta against the 'foreign' European Court of Human Rights.

However, before the familiar faction-fighting gets underway, Badenoch will be given a few months to halt the exodus of Conservative members and supporters to Nigel Farage and Reform UK. This battle might already have been lost; but if not, Badenoch is much better equipped than her predecessors to fight for the right. Her hatred of progressive thinking in any manifestation consigns Michael Howard, and even Duncan Smith, to the ranks of the 'wokerati'. Her verbal incontinence might provide her shrunken party with the oxygen of publicity, sometimes in a positive way. She is, after all, consistently unpredictable – more than can be said for Mr Farage.

In theory, at least, Badenoch could also pose a serious challenge to Sir Keir Starmer. She is certainly more likely than Jenrick to score points at PMQs. If Labour's teething difficulties persist, Badenoch could bank her right-wing credentials and win a hearing from British voters as a constructive critic. However, she won the Conservative leadership precisely because of her scorn for centrism. Talking right, then tacking towards the crucial middle ground in time for the next election, would open up more space for Reform UK, while drawing fire from members of her own party whose notions of 'Conservatism' make Liz Truss look like Edward Heath.

Badenoch can only succeed – or, indeed, outlast her probation – if she persuades her party to save itself. At present, it is doomed by its presumed divine right to rule. The smaller it gets, the more certain it is that the rest of the country is wrong. There are all too many signs that Badenoch shares these views. If so, she could turn out to be Labour's best electoral asset. F

Groundhog day

Trump's victory must prompt soul-searching among the US's liberal establishment, writes *Katie Gaddini*

Dr Katie Gaddini is an asssociate professor of sociology at UCL and a visiting scholar at Stanford University. She works on religion, gender, and politics, and is currently writing a book on American Christian women and conservative politics from 1970 to the present

On 6 November, the world awoke to the news that Donald Trump had been re-elected as president of the United States. Not only did Trump decisively win the electoral college vote, but he also won the popular vote, the first time a Republican candidate has done so in 20 years. Republicans took majority control of the Senate and maintained their dominance in the House of Representatives. Combined with a conservative supermajority on the supreme court, the US will be ruled for the next four years, at the federal level at least, by the right. As a result, Trump will likely have an easier time reshaping governmental departments, introducing stricter immigration controls, restricting transgender rights and imposing tariffs.

While many on the left have been quick to blame Kamala Harris, a more generous analysis might focus instead on why Trump remains so popular with the American electorate. Donald Trump has retained his image as an antiestablishment, anti-elitist figure, even though he has now been in politics for nearly a decade. In his second administration, Trump seems determined to appoint other outsiders to his cabinet, including Elon Musk, Robert F Kennedy Jr. and Linda McMahon. Conservatives I have interviewed across the country admire Trump's commitment to disrupting "business as usual" in US politics and see it as one of his most laudable qualities.

Trump's antiestablishment brand bleeds into another key element of his popularity: positioning himself as a fighter under attack. This was exemplified most poignantly by images of the now president-elect with blood streaming down his cheek and a determined fist punching the air after the first of two assassination attempts.

The besieged-yet-triumphant narrative that Trump espouses weaves together symbolic and material elements that carried great purchase in this election. On a symbolic level, many Americans feel slighted by what they perceive as an intolerant, elitist left more concerned with identity politics than rising inflation. President Biden's speech right before the election, in which he called Trump supporters 'garbage,' can't have helped in this regard, with echoes of Hillary Clinton's infamous 'deplorables' speech. This dynamic plays out on a smaller scale, too. In my own research, I've observed a groundswell of young people gravitating to the Trump camp as early as secondary school after being bullied for their conservative beliefs.

The liberal media's negative reporting on Trump, combined with the ongoing lawsuits and criminal charges against him, have allied him with wide-ranging groups of Americans. Some Black men, for example, resonated with a candidate who also claims to face an unjust criminal justice system; an unprecedented 21 per cent voted Republican. And white evangelicals, who have thrived on a sense of being embattled in a secular society for decades, see in Trump a politician who understands them, looking past his many un-Christian traits by equating him with flawed figures from the Bible such as King David.

During his campaign, Trump spun the country's high inflation rates and economic inequality into a larger story of unfairness. For the large swathes of the American populace crushed under the inequality wrought by late capitalism, this message struck a chord. Rather than blame capitalism, of course, Trump doubled down on it, promising an 'economic boom' under his leadership.

His sweeping victory should force a reevaluation across various sectors of liberal America. Senior Democrats must reconsider their party's priorities and strategies to avoid another bruising loss in the midterms. For the liberal media, this moment necessitates a reassessment of how they report on politics. Even some of the best media outlets inundated readers for months with headlines predicting that the election was a "dead heat" that could tip either way. They were wrong. And out of touch.

And for many left-of-centre Americans, after years of despising conservatives, and hoping they would just go away, the moment has arrived in which they find themselves at a crossroads. They can either continue with contempt for another four years (maybe more) or lean into curiosity about their fellow Americans, with whom they vehemently disagree, but who wield a tremendous influence over their country. **F**

Danger ahead

Trump's victory should serve as a warning to Labour, write *Stephen Beer* and *Patrick Diamond*

Stephen Beer writes on economic policy based on a career in responsible investment management spanning three decades. He is a former Labour parliamentary candidate and former constituency chair

Patrick Diamond is professor of public policy at Queen Mary, University of London, and director of the Mile End Institute. He is a former special adviser in the prime minister's policy unit and local councillor in the London Borough of Southwark

Donald Trump's resounding victory in the United States is a wake-up call for progressive politicians everywhere, including in the UK. Trump not only won the presidency convincingly, but his party now has control of both houses of Congress, a major political achievement. Much is being written about where it all went wrong for the Democrats as the incumbent party. The Labour party must avoid being a UK version of the one-term Biden administration it once admired.

The scale of the fiscal, economic and political challenge facing the UK Labour government is unprecedented. That much was clear before the election, but it has become even more apparent since. There is barely a public institution in Britain that is not operating in crisis mode, engulfed by scandal: people dying unnecessarily because the NHS cannot treat them quickly enough, despite more doctors and nurses than before the pandemic; transport improvements delayed, and even when commissioned, with costs well over budget; defence procurement that squanders taxpayers' money without delivering the security needed. Achieving improvements in one policy sector often requires politically contentious reform elsewhere: for instance, to drive up NHS performance, a major overhaul of social care is needed, yet no proposals have been implemented for over a decade (Labour's pre-election call for a Royal Commission has yet to be enacted). No wonder the government has had such a testing first hundred days in office.

This was the inauspicious context for the autumn budget. Heralded in advance as laying the foundations for Labour's mission of delivering the highest sustained growth in the G7, and an antidote to the doom and gloom conveyed since July, its focus was on buying more fiscal time for a growth and reform strategy to be devised in the Treasury. Yet as Trump's victory shows, Labour may not have the luxury of time given the strength of the populist insurgency afflicting rich democracies.

Labour's strategy is to be blunt with the nation about the inevitable pain ahead. The budget was accompanied by stern declarations that raising the tax burden to historic levels was a necessary evil, while improvements in public services would inevitably take time. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) projected a short-term boost to the economy, pushing it above capacity and so increasing the risk of inflation, before growth falls back to a steady 1.5 per cent per annum. Worryingly, the OBR forecast a decline in business investment over the lifetime of the parliament, with public sector investment only stimulating growth after the next election.

The budget has inevitably faced criticism. It makes a series of much-needed tough decisions including updating the fiscal rules and laying out a plan to sustainably increase public sector investment in the UK after years of Conservative indecision. There is a particularly significant boost in operational funding for the NHS.

Nevertheless, while Labour's package of fiscal reforms required a coherent ideological rationale, ministers had to work hard to explain it in the days afterwards. The explanations given for raising taxes were largely technocratic, 'there is no alternative', rather than constructed as necessary choices to overcome enduring economic inequalities. Little was said about what kind of society Labour sought to create, and how life for individuals and families would be better as a consequence of the budgetary measures.

More fundamentally, the Starmer government is confronting strong economic headwinds. The cold, hard fact is that the outlook for UK productivity remains poor. As a consequence, as it stands, there are fewer resources to improve wages and invest in the public services we need. With Trump threatening policies such as prohibitive tariffs on UK exports (the National Institute for Economic and Social Research forecast that new US tariffs on Britain, the EU and China could halve the UK growth rate


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by 2029), there is a risk that growth deteriorates further, entailing even more difficult choices ahead on tax and public spending.

The government requires a coherent view of structural change in the world economy, taking account of factors from energy security to new technology, in which a serious approach to economic policy can be grounded. Deregulation and the liberalisation of planning controls advocated by the prime minister are important, but only part of the growth story: the UK government needs to unleash dynamism and innovation at the technological frontier across all of the UK's burgeoning growth sectors. Meanwhile, the likely isolationism of Trump 2.0 and his potentially conditional support for NATO means the UK will have to spend a higher proportion of GDP on defence by the end of the parliament, reversing the cold war peace dividend of the last 40 years.

In our recent pamphlet, Power and Prosperity, published by the Fabian Society, we argue that Labour needs a coherent policy agenda and uplifting story to see it through the hard times ahead. This political narrative must allow Labour to explain its actions clearly to voters, while helping ministers and their advisers to take principled decisions, however unpopular. Labour should root its agenda in values, drawing from ethical socialist doctrine that prioritises above all else the capacity of the individual to flourish in the community, focused on fairness and the equal worth of all.

Meanwhile, the fundamental importance of a flourishing civil society has been neglected: as the economist, Raghu Rajan highlights, we need civil society to operate as a 'third pillar' to counter-balance the power of markets and states, ensuring the vulnerable are protected from the disruptions wrought by globalisation and new technology. Supporting the civic realm includes investing in families to better manage the growing care burden in ageing societies, while cultivating intergenerational solidarity: in Power and Prosperity, we propose formal payments through the tax and benefits system to grandparents who do childcare work for family and neighbours. It also means defending borders from illegal migration.

Biden failed to properly articulate that sense of community and underplayed how his economic plan was helping workers and communities, leading to an inevitable focus on high inflation as food and gas prices soared in the wake of the pandemic. After a promising start to her campaign for the presidency, Kamala Harris abandoned a forward-looking economic agenda and lacked any credible plan to reform government to ensure public bureaucracies delivered for citizens, not vested interests. Retaining a political message anchored in hard-edged reforms is vital to prevent this Labour government in Britain from being a centre-left one-term anomaly.

There is little doubt that ideology still matters in UK politics. Without it, the Labour government will lack a clear political identity while its message will be framed by its opponents. If the party approaches the next election without a convincing story to tell accompanied by substantive governing achievements, a more hostile narrative will prevail: the emphasis will be on the cost of living crisis still being felt, with inflation and interest rates not yet low enough, job security yet to improve, higher operating costs for businesses, public services failing and out of touch with people while taking more of their money in taxes, alongside a visible decline on the world stage as the defence sector resists change. Many of these elements undoubtedly contributed to Harris's defeat in the US.

While it is wrong to believe that economic growth will solve all of the government's political problems, economic expansion felt in people's wallets and their day to day experience is without doubt a powerful antidote to populist cynicism. Yet growth that is both fairer and more sustainable will require the radical transformation of our economy. That may impose costs in the short term, and it will require greater willingness to tackle vested interests and curtail rent-seeking behaviours that inhibit investment in the productive capacity of the economy. We know that raising productivity is not easy. Almost certainly, stronger economic ties to the EU single market will be required as a spur to innovation and competitiveness, particularly in a world where the US is imposing additional trade barriers. The UK public sector will have to operate very differently so it can deliver for citizens during an era of fiscal constraint. Meanwhile, Labour must remain focused on what matters to people and families, refusing to be distracted by forms of identity politics that cultivate resentment and merely fuel greater polarisation.

This Labour government is still relatively new in office, and it is led by politicians of energy, talent and conviction. There is time to refocus on its missions and the mechanisms to deliver them, to put in place the elements for another election victory and subsequent term in office. We know that the price of failure would be high, not least if a Labour defeat were to pave the way for a UK equivalent of Donald Trump's administration. In these circumstances, there is not a moment to lose. **F**

The authors' recent Fabian Society pamphlet, Power and Prosperity: How a Radical Labour Government Can Transform Britain, is available to download at www.fabians.org.uk
This article represents the authors' personal opinions.

Striking a chord

The fight to reform streaming must go on, writes *Naomi Pohl*

Naomi Pohl was elected general secretary of the Musicians' Union in March 2022. She is the first woman elected to the role in the union's almost 130 year history

The Musicians' Union here in the UK, and other musicians' unions around the globe, have been fighting for a fair deal from music streaming since it began. The road has been long, with various twists and turns, but are we any closer to achieving our goal?

It is doubly important to answer this question in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. When Covid hit the UK and caused live music, recording studios and other musicians' workplaces to go dark, musicians were fighting for survival; the Musicians' Union was their voice. The MU worked hard, alongside other creative industry bodies, to get workplaces reopened safely and lobby for government support. That support came for some creative industry stakeholders with the Cultural Relief Fund, furlough scheme and self-employed income support scheme (SEISS), but 30 to 40 per cent of musicians fell through the gaps and received nothing. The MU set up a hardship fund and charities like Help Musicians UK also kicked into gear with urgent grants, but these were minimal in relation to the millions lost through cancelled work. It was a crisis on a scale never imagined and many musicians lost their homes, depleted their savings pots and had to seek alternative work outside of music.

At this time, the MU's work to address a lack of fair streaming royalties took on a new significance and additional vigour. The launch of Tom Gray's #BrokenRecord campaign, subsequently complemented by the MU and the Ivors Academys' campaign to #FixStreaming, was a turning point. A petition, a government inquiry, and a select committee report later, the government funded a research study, bringing together industry representatives to agree codes of practice to establish what musicians are being paid from streaming and ensure that payments reach those they are due to. They also eventually set up a Creator Remuneration Working Group (CRWG) which has met several times this year and will continue to meet until either a voluntary industry agreement is reached, or there is a conclusive failure to agree, in which case the government will consider interventions.

The MU is joined at the CRWG meetings by The Ivors Academy, representing songwriters and composers, the Music Managers Forum (MMF), Featured Artists Coalition (FAC) and the Music Producers Guild. Together we represent the interests of music makers, and we have worked hard to ensure we present a united front in those meetings. We are up against representatives of major and independent record labels, music publishers and the streaming platforms themselves.

Our objectives are fourfold. First, a modern digital royalty rate for all featured artists. Artists locked into older deals are often getting tiny payments because their labels are applying low CD royalty rates to streams. This isn't right. Modern deals offer 25 to 30 per cent royalties and this should be applied to all artists regardless of when they were signed.

Second, there should be guaranteed royalties for all performers who appear on a sound recording, including session or 'backing' musicians. If a recording is broadcast on the radio or played in public, the performer receives guaranteed royalties through a collecting society. However, this isn't true for streaming. So the 40 session musicians on Ed Sheeran's Perfect, which streams more than a million times a day, receive no royalties from those streams. This is inequitable and unsustainable, and that fact is being recognised across the world.

We already have a session musicians fund here in the UK for recordings that are over 50 years old, which is managed by collecting society PPL. So the principle and the framework already exists here – we just need to extend it.

Third, we need rights of contract adjustment and rights reversion, which are already available to music-makers in the US and some EU territories. These rights would allow music-makers to reclaim copyrights previously assigned to business partners after an agreed period. No music-maker should be tied into a deal for their lifetime without the ability to take back control of their music or renegotiate outdated terms.

Finally, we are calling for the song and songwriter to be valued more highly. At the moment, 30 per cent of streaming revenue goes to the platform, 55 per cent to the record label (who will pay a royalty to signed artists) and only 15 per cent to the song and songwriter.

We don't have a deal on any of these issues yet and the work continues. This is a David and Goliath fight; individual workers against major international corporations. We know we can #FixStreaming – and indeed that we have to, or otherwise we risk losing our world-leading musician community for good. **F**

Managed decline

Labour's post-election polling slump is not as straightforward as it may seem, argues *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

Is the Labour party in trouble in the polls? You might be forgiven for thinking so as the 'mission-led' government returns after the winter recess to begin work on a new set of 'milestones.' But it might not be as bad as it seems.

The 2024 parliament is different from those that went before – and not only for having a large Labour majority. It is unusual in the representation of smaller parties, in the size of the government majority and in the relationship between the size of that majority and the share of the vote won by the governing party. All of these are important for how government and politics will play out over the coming parliament. But they are also key to understanding public attitudes.

Whether the fragmentation in party support is here to stay, or will reset as it did after the 2015 election, remains to be seen. But to understand public opinion between now and the next, still distant, general election, this fragmentation is the critical context. It is rare for voters to view governments that they did not personally vote for in a positive light. Among those who cast a ballot in July, for every Labour voter there are two who voted for another party – and every Labour voter is matched by a voter who rejected all of the three largest parties now represented at Westminster. The election also saw a record low turnout, further reducing the proportion of the public who actively supported the government at the ballot box. It should not then be a surprise if we find relatively low levels of support for the government among the public.

Longer-term trends in approval ratings for governments suggest that even when there has been a stronger level of support for the governing party at the previous general election, this doesn't always translate into a reliably positive reception from the public. Analysing how long it took for new prime ministers to have their first polling deficit, Rob Ford's Swingometer Substack showed that it is common for this to occur within the first six months in office. Many previous leaders, including both Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron, went behind in the polls relatively early in their premierships but regained both their polling lead and the keys to number 10.

The 2024 general election was the most polled ever. In the final two weeks of the campaign alone, more than 50 opinion polls were conducted by polling companies that are members of the British Polling Council (BPC). Eighteen BPC members produced 'final' predictions. In contrast, the period since the election has seen a polling drought – not unusual in the circumstances (a large majority, a change in the leader of the opposition and a need for reflection on the performance of the polls themselves). This is important context for any discussion of Labour's polling. At the time of writing, just six of the 18 polling companies had published a vote intention poll for the next general election. Of these, only More in Common found a Conservative lead, a small but consistent one since Kemi Badenoch was elected leader.

© Number 10

Notwithstanding the relative lack of polls – including, at the time of writing, none from Ipsos, Survation or Yougov – those that we do have seem to show a modest recovery for the Conservatives and a small dip in Labour support. These are not unusual changes in a post-election landscape where the losing side have gone on to choose a new leader, although they are perhaps more significant when starting from a relatively low base. Headline Labour support appears to be gradually eroding, but this is as much to do with the persistence of the vote shares for the smaller parties as with a Conservative recovery. It points to a new political landscape where the combined share of the vote for the main parties struggles to reach sixty per cent and there is competition with other parties on both the left and right.

A slightly larger number of the BPC members, including Ipsos and Yougov, have published leadership approval ratings. These are usually presented as 'net' figures of those with a positive view of a leader minus those with a negative view. Favourability for Starmer is in resolutely negative territory – more voters have a negative than positive view of his leadership.

Is this cause for concern? Perhaps, but whether this can be seen as a specifically post-election concern depends critically on the starting point. The Ipsos time series of 'net satisfaction' with party leaders shows Starmer's rating as leader of the opposition as negative from May 2021 right through to June 2024, only briefly turning positive immediately after the election. Much then depends on the baseline. Focusing on the post-election period there is certainly a fall from a post-election high of +7. But based across the entire period of Starmer's leadership, net ratings in the most recent poll (November 2024) are still slightly above the previous low seen April 2024 and equal to those seen in May 2021 (-31 and -29 respectively).

As politics is increasingly a matter of choice rather than habit for an electorate that has weaker ties to parties than in previous generations, relative ratings become more important than absolute popularity. The same Ipsos series of leader satisfaction ratings shows that across the last parliament Boris Johnson's net satisfaction rating only briefly peaked above zero, during the early days of the pandemic. Crucially, it fell below Starmer's satisfaction rating in November 2021 and did not recover under new leadership.

New leaders often bring with them a satisfaction 'bounce'; Liz Truss very briefly improved Johnson's -45 to a -2. The first rating for Kemi Badenoch is also negative, at -18, albeit an improvement of the final ratings for her immediate predecessors but lower than either Liz Truss or Rishi Sunak began their tenure. And on the question of who would make the best PM, the current PM retains a significant lead.

To really grasp the nettle, though, is to ask if these questions are fit for purpose in a fragmenting and unpredictable party system. It is possible, if not likely, that we will see some polls putting Reform UK in second place in terms of vote share over the course of this parliament. At times during the previous election campaign some models suggested that the Liberal Democrats might take second place in terms of seats. Should the 'best prime minister' question offer a wider range of options? Are questions which ask those who would never consider voting for a particular party about their satisfaction with its leader useful?

We do not really know what 'good' polling would look like in a fragmenting party system

Is the government in trouble in the polls? It is perhaps too early to say, with a limited polling base post-election. But perhaps, even when we have more data, we will be unable to answer the question. We do not really know what 'good' polling would look like in a fragmenting party system. It may be enough to simply be the least bad option for an electorate disillusioned with politics and distrustful of politicians. But there are dangers in relying on the weaknesses of others, dangers which give urgency to the government's project to reconnect with voters and deliver real change in people's lives. F

Close to home

Services based in the community and focused on patients can fix the NHS, write *Tim Reed* and *John Havard*

Tim Reed is a Suffolk GP with experience in developing patient services from the bottom up

Dr John Havard has been a partner at Saxmundham Health for 38 years. He is a previous Health Service Journal Award winner

Keir Starmer and Wes Streeting have articulated what patients and staff already know – that the NHS is "broken but not beaten".

Patients struggle to access almost all services. Ara Darzi, who has just led an investigation into NHS performance, found A&E departments to be in an "awful state" and cancer mortality to be "appreciably higher" than similar countries. Waiting lists are rising, capital investment is lacking and public satisfaction is at a record low. Staff are exhausted and productivity is falling. Many employees have lost confidence in the ability of politicians and managers to fix things.

Despite these issues, there remains strong public support for the core principles of the NHS: universal coverage, free care at the point of use and funding through general taxation. The system retains the services of many skilled, experienced and committed clinicians and staff.

How have we reached this point?

Patients are more informed and demanding, rightly expecting more from medical care. The population is ageing, and long-term conditions and mental health problems are surging, particularly among children. Lifestyle conditions including obesity are on the rise. All this has resulted in rising demand from a society in distress.

Policy errors in Westminster have compounded the problems. The 2012 Health & Social Care Act fragmented community services and added complexity and cost. The decade of austerity which followed starved services of funding, and political leaders channelled most of what funding the NHS did receive into secondary care. Primary care, once the cornerstone of the NHS model, has been left critically degraded, with static numbers of GPs and a halving of district nurses and health visitors over the past 15 years. There is now frequently no GP available to knit together the many strands of a patient's care. Faced with hollowed-out community provision, patients turn to A&E, NHS 111, or 999, despite most cases being manageable in a community setting, leading to overcrowded emergency departments and avoidable, expensive admissions to hospital.

The centralised system's benefits of efficiency, uniformity, and cost control have become outweighed by bureaucracy, complexity and resistance to change.

The stage is set for change

With so many difficulties, some may argue the NHS is no longer sustainable, but we do not accept this position. The new administration has recognised the situation and some of its early pronouncements suggest thinking along the right lines – moving care into the community, working closely with social care, developing neighbourhood practices, and fostering the "family doctor" with her low-tech, high volume, patient-centred approach.

However, history shows that solutions are unlikely to come from the top. Few top-down reorganisations are successful, and some are damaging. We advocate for an evolutionary bottom-up approach, building on existing infrastructure like GP surgeries, federations, and integrated neighbourhood teams, which combine community services and social care. The role of government is to devolve control, and enable and incentivise change from the bottom up, rather than to prescribe solutions itself.

Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) present an opportunity to look at the system in the round. However, hospitals usually dominate these organisations, sometimes pursuing their own interests at the expense of wider goals. There must be a method of mandating funds to reach community services.

This is a 10-year rebuild, so achieving cross-party support is crucial. There may be an argument for government deciding funding levels, and for replacing the semi-autonomous NHS England – which has presided over the widespread collapse of services – with an operationally fully independent body overseeing the health system akin to the way in which the Monetary Policy Committee sets interest rates.

What would a community-based NHS look like?

Nye Bevan's vision for community-based care remains relevant today. For most people, the GP practice is the preferred setting for receiving medical and social care. An integrated neighbourhood practice would bring together mental health, social care, district nurses, health visitors, pharmacists, GPs, paramedics, physios and many others to work in a single community health team under one roof, using a common IT system.

GP surgeries have a proven history of success in the NHS and offer the natural platform for evolution into integrated neighbourhood practices. Patients should have one or two named GPs responsible for their care, supported by a wider multidisciplinary team able to deliver comprehensive, holistic and personalised care.

In contrast to the fragmented nature of care at present – where, seeking urgent care, patients may call 111 or 999, attend A&E, a walk-in centre, a minor injury unit or an urgent treatment centre – this set-up would allow for the management of the full spectrum of ailments, emergencies, routine care, prevention, minor surgery, chronic conditions, social and mental health issues all in one place, by a single team of clinicians usually known to the patient.

Some community services – such as out of hours urgent care, outpatients and diagnostics – have to be delivered on a larger scale. These could be delivered to populations of around 250,000 patients each by community hubs owned and run by the neighbourhood practices.

With neighbourhood practices and hubs staffed and funded to deliver the full spectrum of medical, social and mental health care 24/7, the hospital would become a referral-only destination dealing solely with those conditions requiring resource-intensive care.

Community practices should operate as not-for-profit entities, independent from top-down management and wholly subcontracted to the NHS. Their independence would offer the opportunity to move away from the current failed, bureaucratic and expensive system of clinical governance with its top-down targets, inspections, performance management, mandatory training, pathways and guidelines. In its place will come accountability to, and involvement of, patients and communities through practice and hub-based systems such as multidisciplinary training, patient involvement, systems review, mentoring, significant event reviews, peer involvement and audit.

Research supports Wes Streeting's call for continuity of care in these neighbourhood practices. According to a published study of 5 million patients in Norway, long-term relationships with a named GP reduce the need for emergency services, hospital admissions, and even mortality by up to a startling 25 per cent to 30 per cent. The longer the relationship, the more marked the effect.

Most of the community estate will need to be rebuilt to accommodate these enlarged neighbourhood practice teams. A decent working environment, adequate staffing levels and governance designed to improve patient care would help start to restore staff morale.

Where is the money coming from?

At present we are admitting the wrong patients to hospital, spending money on governance which does not work and running numerous different community agencies. The cost of managing patients in hospitals is much higher than community-based care. An elderly patient admitted with confusion due to a urinary infection could incur NHS costs of several thousands of pounds. A child with a fever attending A&E might generate costs of hundreds. Many of these cases could be managed for a few tens of pounds closer to home in a community setting. Emergency admissions represent a major financial burden, accounting for about 40 per cent of all hospital admissions and costing around £17bn annually – more than the entire primary care budget of about £14bn.

As community care has withered, patients have been treated in hospital instead and emergency hospital admissions have doubled since the early 2000s. With sufficient community resources, it would be feasible to reduce such admissions by a third, releasing £6bn – enough to build 500 brand new neighbourhood practices every single year and still have enough left over to increase the primary care staff budget by 50 per cent.

Currently, ambulance and NHS 111 calls are triaged by non-medically trained operators using algorithms erring on the side of caution, often resulting in emergency admissions for cases which could have been managed in the community. By having clinicians at neighbourhood practices and community hubs take over the 111 function, and by integrating ambulance response with hubs, many emergency admissions could be avoided whilst releasing further substantial funds from the £3bn allocated to ambulance and NHS 111 services.

Folding the numerous community agencies into each individual community neighbourhood practice would save on duplicated management structures, obviate cumbersome referral processes and could increase clinician productivity to primary care levels – which are best-in-class across the NHS. At present, several agencies may be working with the same patient. Integrating these services within neighbourhood practices, under the leadership of a GP, would streamline care and reduce costs, improve coordination and clinical leadership, and ensure patients receive holistic, integrated care.

The illustrations above demonstrate there is adequate money to provide excellent patient care through a single, unified, independent community team approach using a low-tech, relationship-based medical model.

What next?

To realise this vision, Streeting's 10-year plan should consider a number of key changes. We must address staff morale and pay, rebuild the community estate, adopt new forms of governance involving patients and communities, as well as training and attracting back large numbers of staff. The NHS must become less centralised with power devolved to patients, communities and their neighbourhood practices and hubs. The dominant position of hospitals in ICSs requires reform.

None of this is beyond us and the principles are straight forward. It is time for inspired and selfless leadership such as that which Nye Bevan, a hero for many of us, showed more than 80 years ago. **F**

Comparing notes

It's time to end the corrosive effects of big money on our political system, writes *Jem Mills-Sheehy*

Jem Mills-Sheehy Jem is a senior policy officer at Transparency International UK, working on its engagament with parliament and civil society. He previously worked at the Institute for Government in both research and fundraising positions

Politics in the UK has never been more expensive. As reports emerge of Elon Musk considering a staggering £78m gift to Nigel Farage's Reform – which would represent the largest single donation in British history – we are once again confronted with the stark reality of how the ultra-rich seek to shape the political agenda.

Musk's potential contribution is just the latest chapter in an ever-worsening arms race in Westminster. Our recent report, Cheques and Balances: Countering the Influence of Big Money in UK Politics found that in 2023, UK political parties raised an eye-watering £85m from private donations alone. This represents more than a doubling of their haul from 2001 when campaign finance rules began, a clear sign that political competition now relies more than ever on the willingness of the wealthiest to bankroll their preferred candidates.

The dangers of this reliance on wealthy donors are real. The ever-growing appetite for money from the political class can threaten the very integrity of our democracy. From buying influence, access, and even honours, big money threatens to sever the link between politicians and the communities they are elected to represent. Something a Labour government, elected on a platform of restoring trust in politics, will no doubt be keen to address.

Lessons from abroad

Not every country faces these problems. Take Canada, for example. There, they have strict donation limits to curb the influence of big money in politics. Individuals are only allowed to donate up to $1,750 CAD (around £1,000) to a political party, and there are also caps on how much candidates can spend during a campaign. Closer to home, Ireland imposes an annual limit of €2,500 on campaign donations. Canada and Ireland are not alone, with half of all OECC countries having similar caps.

The UK remains a worrying outlier. While there are spending limits in place for political parties and candidates, they are far too high to create any real constraint on big money's influence. There are also no restrictions on how much a single donor can contribute, leaving the door wide open for a Musk-like figure to freely bankroll a political party – and enjoy the influence and favours they can expect in return.

The potential influx of big money to one political party is likely to increase the pressure on others to fundraise, with parties feeling that they must spend more and more just to keep up. Although the Electoral Commission is yet to publish the total cost of the 2024 election, it is expected to be the most expensive in recent history.

Yet as comparable countries around the world increasingly seek to limit the amount of money in their political system, the UK is doing the exact opposite. In 2023, the Conservative government increased national spending limits for parties' election campaigns from £19m to £34m. Our new research found that, when including other campaign costs not covered by the cap, major elections could now cost political parties between £75m and £100m.

A broken system

The huge sums entering our politics create a deeply uneven playing field between those contesting elections and encourage parties to rely on a tiny pool of mega-donors. Of the £85m raised in 2023 in donations from private sources, more than 66 per cent came from just 19 mega-donors giving £1m or more. A single Conservative donor, Frank Hester, accounted for one in every eight pounds spent during that year.

Unsurprisingly, a recent YouGov poll revealed that 79 per cent of the public believe wealthy donors are trying to buy influence through their political contributions.

The UK's poor regulation of political finance means that, despite rules designed to prevent it, foreign money can freely flow into our politics. Our recent research, for instance, identified 10 shell companies that have donated £10.9m despite not turning a profit or conducting legitimate business in the UK – a requirement for making political donations. This is on top of the £4.6m that foreign governments, parliaments and state-linked groups have donated to MPs since 2001, raising real questions about foreign influence.

The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that almost a third (£28.6m) of these questionable funds are effectively untraceable because, despite parliament introducing new transparency rules in 2010, they are donated via unincorporated associations that hide the true source of the funds. This continued reliance by political parties on large donations from the anonymous mega-rich reinforces the perception that democracy merely works to advance the interests of a wealthy few, those with both a vested interest and deep enough pockets to influence decision-making at the highest levels. Any government intent on reversing the continued decline of public trust in politics must address this imbalance as a priority.

A path forward

Upon entering Number 10, Keir Starmer declared: "The fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era." We agree. That's why it's important that Labour counters the seemingly unstoppable rise of big money entering our political system and keeps democracy in the hands of the communities it is meant to serve. As Labour peer Lord Khan recently noted, the recent increase in spending limits has meant that "a lot of people are spending time fundraising when they should be serving their communities" – something that can only quicken the decline in public faith in our political system. By reducing the amount each party can spend, the pressures to fundraise – and the accompanying risks – would decrease with it. Ignoring the problem while it is not in the headlines may be tempting for the government of the day – especially since parties that have recently won large majorities may find it easier to fundraise – but recent history has shown time and again that the issue can come back to haunt them when the pressure of the electoral cycle inevitably increases.

It's important that Labour counters the seemingly unstoppable rise of big money entering our political system

Just six months into this new parliament, there is still so much to play for. Now is the time for a new Labour government to show it has learned from the mistakes of its American counterparts and predecessors. Tackling this issue early on could win the government credit in the eyes of a sceptical and increasingly distrustful electorate.

Stopping the scandals before they happen can keep politics out of the news for all the right reasons, and begin the long-overdue process of restoring the public's faith in our political system. F

Fair and equal

Artificial intelligence could help power Britain's growth – but only if it is well-regulated. *Reema Patel* explains

Reema Patel is a researcher with expertise in participatory methods, leading Elgon Social. She is based at the Digital Good Network, and an associate fellow of the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence. She previously co-founded the Ada Lovelace Institute

Artificial intelligence has the potential to transform our economy and society. A recent sector study led by Perspective Economics for the UK government has found that there are more than 3,000 AI companies in the UK, generating more than £10bn in revenues, employing more than 60,000 people in AI-related roles, and contributing £5.8bn in gross value added (GVA). In our public services, AI could help increase efficiency and improve decision-making, including in healthcare, where AI-powered diagnostics tools can help with early disease detection and the effective allocation of healthcare resources.

Naturally, there are challenges as well as opportunities. If Britain is to become more productive and maintain international competitiveness, we will likely need a workforce with the skills to develop, adopt, use and diffuse AI. Yet we are already beginning to see stark AI inequalities emerge, with the golden triangle in London, Cambridge, and Oxford leading the way in 'AI skills clusters' and lower levels of investment, uptake and skills in the rest of the country. In the same way that we plan for a just climate transition, we need to consider what a just AI transition for workers and workforces might look like so that no workforce, region, industry or sector is left behind. This will require large-scale investment in AI skills development programmes, particularly for workers in those industries at risk of displacement by automation.

But there are more insidious problems to overcome, too. The arrival of ChatGPT marked a turning point in the development of generative AI – which facilitates the creation of content and ideas – with significant implications for Britain's creative, writing and research industries. Generative AI, which is largely trained on datasets scraped from the web, risks undermining the rights and livelihoods of the very creators it relies upon for training data. Generative AI also creates fertile ground for the development of deepfakes and misleading content, with particular risks for the quality and accuracy of information in science, health and politics. There are longstanding concerns around privacy and data security, too, since AI systems often rely on large volumes of personal data. The recent claims that race scientists accessed UK Biobank data, for instance, illustrate the lack of safeguards when it comes to our data and therefore the AI trained on data sets. This is all to say that if left unregulated, or even under regulated, AI is not without its fair share of risks and challenges.

AI tools and technologies can also obscure difficult choices that should be made by politicians and policymakers. There is a risk of deference towards technologies that are being used to make social and political choices about our society – from the question of who should receive a vaccine, to the question of how best to award an examination score.

In many different areas, existing biases can reinforce and 'automate' inequality – for instance, through the use of facial recognition and other biometric technologies that disproportionately target underrepresented and low-income communities; or through the use of healthcare technologies that disproportionately affect minoritised and racialised communities due to a lack of access to relevant healthcare data (used to train the models). Bias and discrimination remain problematic, with evidence that certain algorithms reproduce or even amplify social biases present in their training data. The digital and AI divide risks replicating existing social inequalities and even reinforcing them further given how AI is used as a tool to structure and categorise different parts of society. The implications for civil liberties are profound. How can

we get the balance right – securing proportionate data use, management and collection to improve outcomes, while preventing the outright societal surveillance of all groups for all purposes?

In the context of public services, there is growing concern about the increasing power and agency which large, unaccountable technology companies can exert over public sector decision-making through the development and use of technology. This emerging AI landscape, fraught with risk as well as possibility, highlights the importance of government investment in responsible AI development and, above all, in regulation to realise AI's benefits while protecting individuals and society. It will be important to, as science, research and innovation minister Patrick Vallance indicated, 'regulate to innovate'. We need to balance regulation with innovation to create a safe, trustworthy and productive AI ecosystem. The UK has, in world leading institutes such as the Alan Turing Institute, Ada Lovelace Institute, the AI Safety Institute and pioneers such as the NHS AI Lab, everything it needs to position itself as a leader in responsible AI, supporting long-term productivity while upholding public trust. We just need the governance to help create the right enabling conditions for what Professor Mariana Mazzucato has described as 'mission-oriented innovation' in AI development.

What might some of those enabling conditions look like? The forthcoming AI bill has the potential to position responsible AI governance as essential for both ethical integrity and economic progress in the UK. It marks an opportunity to strengthen parliament's role in ensuring that the development of AI aligns with broader public interest goals, such as equity, economic progress and public service. The bill could also help establish new standards and expectations for the development, use and procurement of AI; to develop protections for communities disproportionately or unequally impacted by AI; and to develop robust quality assurance processes for both data use and collection, as well as the outcomes that emerge from AI tools and technologies. International frameworks such as the EU's AI Act can provide inspiration.

One critical lever currently lacking in existing frameworks, including in the EU, is participatory engagement with the communities most likely to be either benefiting from or being impacted by AI tools and technologies. This matters, if the large-scale benefits AI can bring are to be underpinned by public confidence, legitimacy and trust, rather than, as is currently often the case, resistance to new technologies. We do not have to look too far for examples of innovation here in the UK. A wide range of participatory initiatives, such as citizen juries, worker observatories, citizen assemblies and co-design workshops, are already being supported by initiatives such as the Digital Good Network, Connected by Data, and Responsible AI UK. Such initiatives are promoting citizen voices in shaping AI policies, use and development and creating new models for government and AI developers to engage with impacted communities. The new government could formalise its commitment to such approaches in the AI Bill, and could consider a new duty to involve and consult people likely to be affected by AI tools and technologies.

To conclude, a just AI transition for all demands a proactive approach to governance that maintains a fine balance between appreciating the economic and social benefits of AI and guarding against the inherent risks. The government has a unique opportunity with the AI bill to set standards that not only foster innovation but also prioritise the interests and needs of people impacted by AI, equity, and public safety. Learning from international frameworks, such as the EU's AI Act, and championing participatory approaches will be essential to creating a UK AI ecosystem that reflects public values and upholds trust. The new AI bill marks an opportunity to set the right regulatory conditions in place. Can the government make the most of it? **F**

Books

Against the tide

A new book on the populist right shows how Badenoch and Reform might be countered – but Labour will have to be bold if it is to be successful, finds *Kate Murray*

Kate Murray is the editor of the Fabian Review

Labour's election victory this summer was one of the few bright spots for centre-left politics across the world. Italy is governed by a coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy party; in Hungary, Viktor Orban is serving a fourth term; last year, Geert Wilder's right-wing Party for Freedom became the biggest party in the Netherlands for the first time – and, of course, just last month Donald Trump swept to victory in the US presidential election. The UK, despite Starmer's thumping win, is not immune from the scourge of right-wing populism. The Tories are recovering in the opinion polls and under Kemi Badenoch a party which has shifted further to the right over recent years, ramping up its culture war rhetoric, is unlikely to change tack any time soon. Meanwhile Reform, boosted by the support of Elon Musk, is now talking big about its future electoral prospects.

Thousands upon thousands of words have been written trying to explain the populist phenomenon: commentators have picked apart voter demographics and attitudes and pored over leaders' policy pronouncements. But in this book, Jon Bloomfield and David Edgar have attempted something slightly different – a short and accessible history of the populist right and how we might best counter it.

They argue that what we see today has its roots firmly in the 1980s, when the post-war political settlement – and the alliance between social democrats and social liberals – began to give way to the forces of rampant free markets, globalisation and rising inequality. The process continued under Tony Blair and Bill Clinton and their Third Way politics: indeed Blair's approach, they write, "wasn't a more right-wing version of social democracy but rather, a clean break from it". And after the global financial crisis, working-class voters who felt alienated from their traditional political home started to look to a populist right which, thanks to its messages on Brexit, immigration and supposed 'woke' ideology, began to hoover up votes.

The Little Black Book of the Populist Right
Jon Bloomfield and David Edgar
(Byline Books, £9.99)

Bloomfield, an honorary research fellow at the University of Birmingham, and Edgar, a celebrated playwright, take on the myths spread by the populist right and its key supporters in academia and the media. For one thing, the 'liberal elite' just does not exist in the way the right would have us believe. As the authors put it: "The vast majority of people who believe in women's and LGBT+ rights, anti-racism and the need to combat climate change do not own hedge funds or head to Davos by private jet every winter." For another thing, the populist right does not represent public opinion in the way that they claim. In the UK, the public has been getting more liberal over time, not less.

So where next for the progressives who want to challenge the toxic appeal of the populist right? Bloomfield and Edgar have some solid suggestions. First off, progressives must be bold in carving out "a new social settlement that would tackle the gross inequalities, wealth disparities and high-carbon excesses that have escalated across the West". With investment in public services, green initiatives and jobs, the left could rebuild its relationship with communities who feel left behind. Here, Labour has so far been more cautious than many, including the authors, would like.

On migration, the book argues against following the right's hard line. Instead we should manage migration to match economic needs and ensure that our multicultural communities work well. There is also an interesting call for a 'covenant for towns' which would guarantee all areas the public services, education and other facilities their citizens should have the right to expect.

Inevitably, the brevity of the book means some of these themes are not as developed as fully as one might like. But as a primer on the toxic populism of the right, it has much to commend it. And as a blueprint for a progressive future, there is much that our new government could take on board. **F**

Words of wisdom

Paul Richards picks some of his favourite speeches by Fabians past and present

Paul Richards is treasurer of the Fabian Society. His latest book,How to Write a Parliamentary Speech, is out now, published by Biteback

The Fabian Society was founded in 1884 to permeate British institutions with evolutionary socialism. Its tools were hard facts, fashioned into compelling arguments by rigorous prose. This is not to say Fabianism was bloodless. There was room for outrage, pity, passion, and anger at the state of the world. This blend of facts plus passion (what Aristotle would call logos plus pathos) is of course clear in the vast back catalogue of Fabian pamphlets.

The Fabian tradition is also built on the spoken word: in noisy debates, in labour halls, at summer schools and weekend conferences, and of course in parliament. Fabians have been standing for parliament in every election since the 1880s. Yet is possible to place too much emphasis on public speaking. A helpful Fabian tract in 1895 offered a warning (which has stood the test of time):

"How to Lose an Election is very simple. You will be sure to lose if you devote your energies to 1. Shouting at meetings, 2. Alienating all sympathizers who don't yet call themselves Socialists, 3· Spending all your time talking in the committee-rooms; 4. Betting that you will win. (If at the same time you NEGLECT ALL ORGANIZATION)."

It continues:

"Plenty of political meetings should be held; but don't trust to these to win an election. The candidate who has the biggest and most enthusiastic meetings is often at the bottom of the poll. Meetings are necessary to educate and stir up the people, but Canvassing gets Votes."

Wait, rallies don't win elections?

Nevertheless, oratory has proved to be a powerful tool in the hands of Fabians, particularly in parliament. The first recorded mention of the Fabians in a parliamentary debate was in May 1890, in the House of Lords, when Earl Wemyss fulminated against 'socialistic' legislation while naming George Bernard Shaw "as the ablest writer and the best reasoner upon the Socialistic question". The Earl provided the House with a definition of Fabianism, should they be unaware of this dangerous six-year-old creed:

"I had better say what "Fabian" means. As explained to me, it means that this Society does not look to revolution to make its ways prevail, but trusts to Fabian tactics, to silent influences, and the potent action of legislation."

Guilty as charged, your Lordship.

Presumably to his dismay, Fabians have been speaking in Parliament ever since, from Sidney Webb to Keir Starmer. The first three women to be elected as Labour MPs in 1923 – Susan Lawrence, Dorothy Jewson, and Margaret Bondfield – were all Fabians. In the 1945 landslide, Zena Parker, wife of lifelong Fabian John Parker, said the new parliamentary Labour party looked like a Fabian Society school. The roll call since 1900 includes everyone from Ramsay MacDonald to Tony Benn, from Robin Cook to Rachel Reeves. Their speeches have helped to shape the country and drive forward progress. As illustration, here are five Fabians permeating parliament with the arguments for socialism:

First, Margaret Bondfield (1873–1953) attacking the government in 1924 for mass unemployment, especially among the women who had worked in factories while the men were at the front:

"The points on which I wish to address this… have a great deal to do with the suffering that is going on in this country at the present time amongst unemployed women. Unemployment amongst women, I recognise, is only a small part of a very large problem, but at the same time those of us who have to face these unemployed women day after day realise that for the unemployed women it is the most vital question before the country, and my criticism of the government is, that in this small problem

there was much that could have been done to mitigate the lot of the women, with very little expense, but with a certain amount of administrative common sense, and they have consistently refused to do that little."

Half a century later, Education Secretary Shirley Williams (1930–2021) made the case for comprehensive schools and against the divisive 11-plus in 1978:

"There are boys and girls today who would never have had an opportunity in the past to go to university or a polytechnic because the necessary examinations would not have been available to them, but who today are attending those institutions because they went to comprehensive schools. Today, comprehensive schools provide a range of courses which allows those pupils who mature later to take examinations. The truth is that parental choice is immensely widened by comprehensive schools and not immensely narrowed."

I was lucky enough to be in the public gallery to hear Chris Smith MP (1951–) debating socialism with a phalanx of Thatcherites in December 1991. He railed against their belief 'there is no such thing as society' and evoked the radical William Godwin:

"There is such a thing as society. It is extremely important that the government realises that and take into account the needs of the community as a whole as well as those of individuals. William Godwin's treatise, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice – I realise that political justice is a foreign concept to Conservative members – was written in 1793. It contains these words, which are still relevant today: 'Democracy restores to man a consciousness of his value, teaches him, by the removal of authority and oppression, to listen only to the suggestions of reason'. Would that that were true of Conservative members. Godwin said that democracy 'gives him confidence to treat all other men with frankness and simplicity, and induces him to regard them no longer as enemies against whom to be upon his guard, but as brethren whom it becomes him to assist'. That text could stand as a fundamental tenet of the democratic socialism which my party espouses and which will guide a Labour government."

It was a memorable debate for me because, rarely for parliament, it represented a clash of philosophies rather than narrow debates about legislation.

Dianne Hayter (1949–) was Fabian general secretary from 1976 to 1982, and joined the House of Lords in 2010. That year, she spoke in support of women's equality:

"Unless we enable women to study and flourish and to be supported by nurseries, flexible working and good care provision not simply for their children but also for elderly relatives, today's generation of bright young things will not occupy high office when their time comes. But what do we see from the government? Support for children is being cut by £2bn. There are cuts in Sure Start, maternity grants, health in pregnancy grants, child benefit and tax credits. Who do we think will be harmed by those? It is no way to produce the leaders of the future. Women are losing out on their chance to serve, but… society also is losing out on the chance of having women as decision-makers. We cannot just want change; we cannot just wait for change; we must work for it."

Last in our selective sampler of Fabians speaking in parliament is Alf Dubs (1932–) who was Fabian chair in 1994. As a beneficiary of the Kindertransport, Lord Dubs has made many great speeches to oppose the Conservatives' immigration and asylum policies. But this is him on the 75th anniversary of the NHS:

"My Lords, exactly 75 years ago today, I was as a child ill in Stockport infirmary, and I am totally taken by the memories of that day. In the morning, the consultant came by with his entourage of doctors, matrons, and so on. Consultants were very important in those days; they still are, but in those days, one did not speak unless one was spoken to. I said to him: 'Excuse me– I have a question to ask.' He turned around. 'What is it?' 'Are we having a party today?' He asked: 'What for?' I said: 'The hospital is ours – it's a great day.' He was not very impressed and walked on. Later on, they asked me at the other end of the ward: 'What's going on?' and I explained how the hospital was ours and what a great day it was. It was a privilege to be ill on the day the health service started."

Poverty and unemployment. Equality and opportunity. Democracy and social change. These have been Fabian themes for a century or more

Poverty and unemployment. Equality and opportunity. Democracy and social change. These have been Fabian themes for a century or more. A society dedicated to spreading the socialist message through argument and evidence has used parliament to great effect. I could have chosen Ellen Wilkinson, Harold Wilson, Tony Crosland, Denis Healey, Giles Radice, Neil Kinnock, Gordon Brown, or a hundred others.

We can peruse Hansard for great speeches establishing the National Health Service, the Open University, the national minimum wage, free museums, Sure Start, and the other legislation that civilises our society. From these pages of the official record, we can hear the Fabian voice – rational, insistent, passionate, and clear.

Following the Starmer landslide in July, there are 141 Fabians elected to the House of Commons, with scores more in the Lords. Many are now ministers, making the changes that the country so desperately needs. Half the Cabinet are paid-up members of the Fabian Society. When it comes to great Fabian parliamentary speeches, in this Fabian moment, perhaps the best is yet to come. **F**

Listings

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS
Meetings at Birmingham Friends Meeting House
Contact Luke John Davies:
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BOURNEMOUTH
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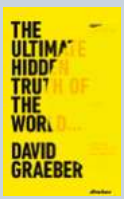
THE FABIAN QUIZ

THE ULTIMATE HIDDEN TRUTH OF THE WORLD...

David Graeber



Anarchism! The propaganda of the deed! The scourge of tsars and industrialists alike! The purest expression of the worker's right to freedom, untrammelled by leader or party!

That is, until it was crushed brutally and repeatedly, by the forces of capital, fascism and communism alike. The elimination of Spanish anarchists by Franco and the USSR marked the end of anarchism's period of influence, at least in Europe. By the 1970s, the most visible traces of what had once been a defining political current were almost entirely cultural, with the Sex Pistol's Anarchy in the UK and the post-punk band the Durutti Column – whose name is a misspelled tribute to an anarchist military unit – tracing a chalk outline around the cadaver of a dead movement.

But in the early 2010s, for the first time in more than a century, the financial crisis, the Occupy movement, and the books of David Graeber – including Debt, The Democracy Project, and Bullshit Jobs – helped make anarchism, if not exactly mainstream, at least relevant.

Graeber died suddenly in 2020. This posthumous collection of essays and interviews brings together some of Graeber's most important work – and suggests a new current in his thinking, cut tragically short.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
Which domestic animal links the Industrial Workers of the World; the first cabaret venue; The Simpsons?

Please email your answer and your address to iggy.wood@fabians.org.uk

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 15 FEBRUARY 2025.

BRITAIN2030

FABIAN SOCIETY NEW YEAR CONFERENCE

SATURDAY 25 JANUARY

CENTRAL LONDON

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