# CHARTIST

For democratic socialism

#319 November/December 2022

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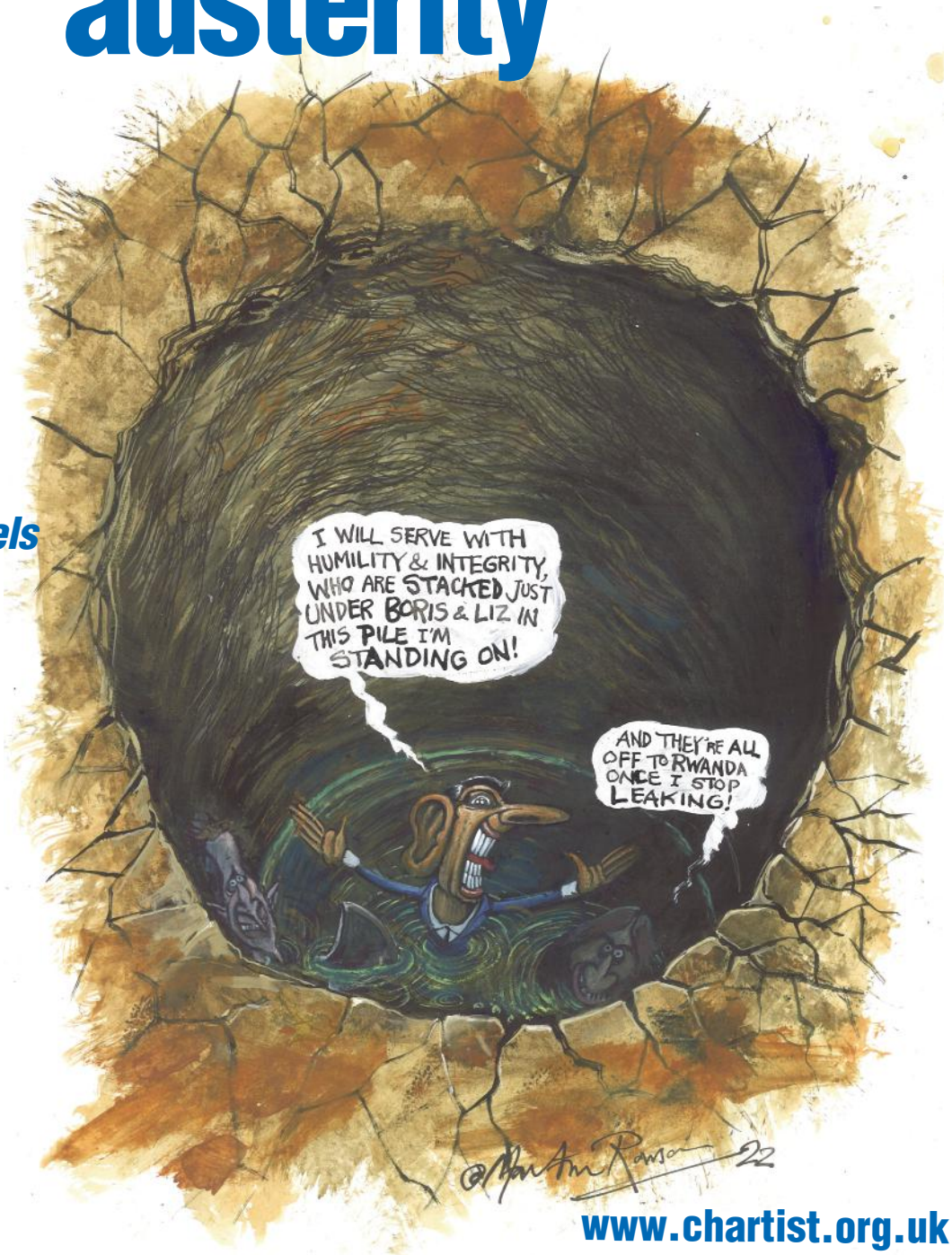
# Serving up more austerity



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CHARTIST
For democratic socialism

## Editorial Policy

The editorial policy of CHARTIST is to promote debate amongst people active in radical politics about the contemporary relevance of democratic socialism across the spectrum of politics, economics, science, philosophy, art, interpersonal relations – in short, the whole realm of social life.

Our concern is with both democracy and socialism. The history of the last century has made it abundantly clear that the mass of the population of the advanced capitalist countries will have no interest in any form of socialism which is not thoroughly democratic in its principles, its practices, its morality and its ideals. Yet the consequences of this deep attachment to democracy – one of the greatest advances of our epoch – are seldom reflected in the discussion and debates amongst active socialists.

CHARTIST is not a party publication. It brings together people who are interested in socialism, some of whom are active the Labour Party and the trade union movement. It is concerned to deepen and extend a dialogue with all other socialists and with activists from other movements involved in the struggle to find democratic alternatives to the oppression, exploitation and injustices of capitalism and class society

Signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of the EB

## Editorial Board



## Contacts

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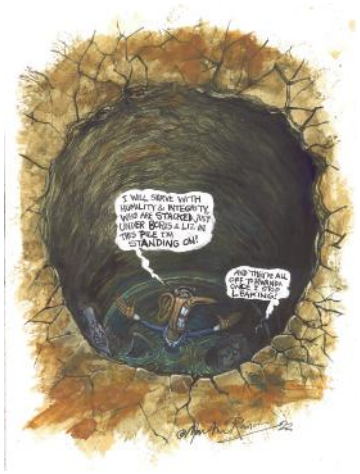



Cover by Martin Rowson


**CHARTIST**
FOR DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM
**Number 319** **November/December 2022**


## REGULARS

# Planetary Heating reaching Tipping Point

**Nigel Doggett** says human rights must also be an issue in Egypt as climate justice campaigners gear up for COP27

This year any momentum from COP26 in Glasgow has been overshadowed by the war in Ukraine and the UK economic crisis. Here in England, Boris Johnson's 'cakeism' gave us some ambitious targets and initiatives such as the nascent environmental land management schemes (ELMS) but no credible net-zero strategy. We saw Truss's quixotic quest for fracked shale gas, a dose of magical thinking on growth, a review of ELMS and a threatened bonfire of EU legacy environmental regulations. As I write it's unclear if such environmental vandalism will continue under Rishi Sunak, and (Oxford comma intended) grammar-pedant Environment Secretary Denise Coffey. Meanwhile, neither government nor media are paying sustained attention to preparations for COP27, starting in Eqypt on November 6th, with Rishi Sunak 'too busy' to attend.

We cannot afford to delay grasping the nettle of climate action: mean global temperature rises are likely to exceed 1.0C this year and late last month the UN environment agency reported "no credible pathway to 1.5C in place", projecting an eventual 2.5C rise as nations failed to upgrade their emissions targets since COP26. The latest IPCC Assessment Report (AR6 WGII) on Impacts says: 'Global warming, reaching 1.5°C in the near-term, would cause unavoidable increases in multiple climate hazards and present multiple risks to ecosystems and humans…' And in case anyone thinks it's too late, UCL emeritus professor Bill McGuire's 12th September Opinion piece in the Guardian was subtitled: 'the 1.5C global heating target is arbitrary and now unachievable - yet working to prevent every 0.1C rise can still give us hope'. We risk reaching sudden tipping points such as in the Amazon rainforests or Greenland ice shelf at any time, but these are not yet likely to seal the fate of our climate.

This year extreme climate events struck all the populated continents. Beyond Britain's summer drought, an unprecedented heatwave triggered wildfires in Spain and Portugal with over 100 deaths and Pakistan still struggles in the aftermath of devastating floods that killed well over 1500 people and displaced 50 million people (sic) out of 235 million. There is no longer any doubt of the cause, as the IPCC report confirms: 'Human-induced climate change, including more frequent and intense extreme events, has caused widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people, beyond natural climate variability'.

It is more urgent than ever to campaign for mitigation – ongoing reductions in carbon emissions by both reducing energy demand (e.g. insulation and efficiency) and replacing fossil fuels by renewable electricity with storage facilities. If there was any positive result of Putin's campaign of terror, the gas supply shut-offs galvanized European governments to accelerate the phase out of gas.

We see a tragic cascade effect where failure to mitigate emissions jeopardises adaptation measures, which worsens 'loss and damage' (L&D) from major disasters. So, as I argued in the Chartist 318 International Supplement, we need to focus more on impacts and the concept of L&D. Existing climate funding is available for both mitigation and adaptation, but not for dealing with the aftermath of disasters.

For years, while poorer nations suffer the worst disasters, governments in the global north have evaded any suggestion that they should accept responsibility for accumulated greenhouse gases. Whilst evidence for global heating only emerged late in the 20th century, emissions were a by-product of industrialisation; and the over-exploitation of the earth was apparent in the early 1970s Limits to Growth Report. These carried on regardless, with energy multinationals such as Exxon and BP in the forefront of obfuscation and denial. Climate negotiations are now complicated by rising carbon emissions in the BRICS and other fast developing nations who resist pressure to halt new fossil fuel developments, joined by new entrants such as Nigeria.

This theme has been raised ever since the 1989 Malé declaration at a small states conference on sea level rise. The L&D name, coined in 1991, first gained prominence at the 2009 Copenhagen COP.

At COP26 the 'Glasgow Dialogue' was established 'to discuss the arrangements for the funding of activities to avert, minimize and address loss and damage associated with the adverse impacts of climate change', running until 2024.

So what exactly is L&D? Loss is defined as irreversible, such as destroyed infrastructure and agricultural land, whereas damage is repairable, categorized as either economic or non-economic. Economic damage counts the financially measurable, favouring richer nations and regions, but intangible 'non-economic' damage such as mortality and mental illness can be more fundamental and also causes indirect huge economic costs.

As the case for decarbonisation has become mainstream in theory but not yet in practice, outright obstruction is led from the far right: assorted climate deniers, populists, culture warriors and authoritarians from the UKIP/Tory fringes through US Republicans, to Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orban's Hungary, Putin's Russia and Saudi Arabia. International solidarity, climate justice and economic justice are inextricably linked.

Last month in the Guardian Naomi Klein described how the Sisi regime in Egypt promotes, with a fantasy video, COP27 venue Sharm El-Sheikh as a 'green city' while crushing any dissent including climate campaigners. And in 'greenwashing a police state', what you might call a 21st century Potemkin village, Sisi is no doubt hoping a new generation of 'useful idiots' will fail to highlight the repression behind the façade. So campaigners including the UK Climate Justice Coalition called a Global Day of Action on November 6th for Climate Justice in solidarity with Egyptian groups at COP27. Climate campaigners are lined up alongside community activists in defence of nature, human rights and liberty. Divisions between greens and the mainstream left are dissolving as it is clear there IS no alternative: either we ride the green wave or we drown. C

**Nigel Doggett is a member of Chartist EB**

# Austerity with a vengeance

As the unedifying merry-go-round of Tory prime ministers stops at the third in three months, multi-millionaire Rishi Sunak looks set to return to austerity economics with a vengeance. Partly to rectify Liz Truss's mini-budget fiasco which produced a massive £50 billion black hole, we look set to endure further swingeing public service cuts in already depleted local government, education, housing and health, while it is uncertain pensions and benefits will remain protected as promised in the Tory manifesto.

The NHS, already bled from 12 years of real terms cuts, supported by dedicated but poorly paid staff with over 100,000 vacancies and still coping with the aftermath of Covid, struggles with an impoverished and understaffed social care service creating long ambulance delays and bed-blocking. Couple this with almost seven million people on hospital waiting lists and record 12 hour waiting times in A&E and it is clear that the NHS is far from safe in Tory hands and is vulnerable to ever growing privatisation.

This is a 'made in Britain' crisis with above 12% inflation, especially in energy and food, huge hikes in mortgages and rents and a sustained attack on trade unions seeking to protect shrinking real pay levels in the face of mounting living costs.

Tory media shout 'greedy workers' but it won't stick as TUC head **Frances O'Grady** argues in a keynote end-of-term interview highlighting the popular support enjoyed by rail and postal workers, dockers, barristers and nurses (in an historic first-time ballot for strike action). Insulting pay offers of 3% while the cap on bankers bonuses is lifted adds insult to injury. **Mick Whelan** of the train drivers union emphasises the last resort action by members after months of protracted negotiations while government plays Pontius Pilate.

**Prem Sikka** argues that the dogma-driven Tory right in pursuit of their small state, low tax blitzkrieg crashed the economy, resulting in further assaults on living standards. He examines the figures to argue that Labour must set out a radical tax and spend alternative.

While energy prices are tripling oil corporations like Shell make record untaxed billions in profits. A windfall tax is a no-brainer but it also raises the question of removing energy from the sphere of private profit. **Dave Toke** looks at the consequences of Tory privatisation in the 1980s while **Bryn Jones** provides a critical analysis of the idea of nationalisation. He argues different models of public ownership should be explored involving regional and local bodies to avoid the previous over-centralised bureaucratic system. Labour's Great British Energy plan could fall flat unless rooted in democratic structures and much more extensive in scope. **Paul Salveson** echoes this in his critique of the Tories hollow 'levelling up' rhetoric, calling for real regional devolution of resources and power.

The growth mantra of the Trussites with their discredited trickledown economic theories begs the big question: what kind of growth? The only growth we have seen under 12 years of Tory government has been in foodbanks, homelessness, child poverty, mental illness, sewage in our rivers and sea. What's needed is very different life-sustainable growth. Gross Domestic Product increases does not mean happier, healthier and longer lives as George Monbiot has argued in comparing the US with lower GDP states like Portugal and South Korea.

The United Nations warns that the planet is heading for catastrophe as targets for global emission reductions are missed, resulting in devasting floods, witness Pakistan, wildfires and drought, witness Somalia today with millions on a knife edge of life. The Big Powers- Russia, US and China, show little sign of dramatic reductions in fossil fuels while Sunak shows no sign of recognising the importance of climate and biodiversity action to protect life on earth. Licences for oil, gas and coal exploration are granted while green levies on fuel are scrapped. These policies along with the failure of the Prime Minister to attend COP27 in Egypt do not auger well for the outcome reports **Nigel Doggett**. From greenwash we have its twin sportswash, reports **Dave Lister**, with the staging of the World Cup in Qatar where hundreds of migrants have already died and continue to face ruthless exploitation while LGBTQ+ people face repression and prison.

**Starmer faced an easier opponent in Liz Truss. Sunak will force Labour to articulate a sharper alternative**

Blaming migrants and workers for the economic woes of capitalism in crisis characterises the populist ultra-right as it takes power in Sweden and Italy as reported by **Julie Ward** and **Andrea Pisauro** respectively. Britain is no stranger to migrant bashing says **Don Flynn** in his analysis of government hostile environment policies, likely to continue with rule-breaking Suella Braverman's reappointment as Home Secretary. Safe asylum seeker routes, an easier welcome to European and other migrant workers could both help ease workforce shortages and demonstrate an humanitarian face for Britain. This must be Labour's stance if we want to avoid the fate of Swedish and Italian social democrats who sought to appease nationalist flag-wavers and migrant bashers in their countries.

Meanwhile the war in Ukraine enters a further deadly phase as reported by **Mick Antoniw** and **Alena Ivanova**. Solidarity remains the key in terms of finance, medical aid and defensive weapons to push Putin out and restore peace and national sovereignty.

Starmer's Labour faced an easier opponent in Liz Truss. Sunak will force Labour to articulate a sharper economic and social alternative. Huge poll leads will drop. Living within our means, public spending cuts and wage restraint will be the mantras of the government but that will mean Labour has to be clearer about support for trade union strike action, a progressive tax and invest policy, on its green new deal, and stronger on wealth redistribution. Labour Party Conference made an historic commitment to electoral reform. That policy and other democratic reforms to our antiquated systems of governance need to be at the heart of our alternative.

**CHARTIST AGM**
**Saturday 10 December**
**12.00-5.00pm online**
**Prem Sikka, Ann Black**
**Plus other speakers. Details on www.chartist.org.uk**

# Can Labour get on track?

As the Tories implode, it's time for some Labour fresh thinking on transport says **Paul Salveson**, citing plenty of regional good practice

Every aspect of government policy is in a state of chaos. Transport is no exception. Truss was already proving to be a disaster for transport, pursuing a pro-roads policy that was threatening to take us back to the 70s. What will emerge from the current shambles is anyone's guess, though one potentially positive outcome might be the scrapping of HS2, at least north of Birmingham. What I'd like to focus on here are the opportunities for Labour in crafting a progressive transport policy which is both deliverable and goes beyond the simplicities of ownership. We've had the experience of several train companies and it's debatable whether their performance has been that much better than the private operators. Success, failure or just mediocre performance is not reducible to whether a company is publicly owned or not.

Labour is already doing some quite exciting things on transport. Led by Wales and the Labour-controlled 'combined authorities' across England, particularly Liverpool, Greater Manchester, South and West Yorkshire and Tyne and Wear. West Midlands is an interesting case – a combined authority with a Tory mayor who is doing many of the things you'd expect a Labour leadership to do. What the combined authorities and the devolved nations demonstrate is that a progressive transport policy must recognise the complex and diverse world in which we're now in, with mayoral combined authorities getting on and doing positive things, with scope for doing more if they had the powers. Greater Manchester has already taken powers to control the bus network, reduce fares and potentially take control of stations. Labour has got to learn from these achievements and avoid the danger of going for a centralised approach in which the regions are side-lined.

This means ceding power to regional bodies within England (which Scotland and Wales already have). It doesn't make sense for local transport to benefit from strong combined authorities while neighbouring shire counties or poorly-resourced unitary authorities struggle on as best they can. The starting point for building a dynamic local and regional transport system, making the most of rail, bus and light rail, is having the right structures in place. The most sensible approach is to extend the existing 'combined authorities beyond their current boundaries to create a system of English regional government, which have elected authorities (rather than just elected mayors) in control. For example, the existing Greater Manchester authority should extend northwards to include what remains of 'Lancashire' – and perhaps re-christen it 'Lancastria'. Neighbouring Liverpool city region could take in a wider area.

**Greater Manchester has taken ontrol the local bus network**

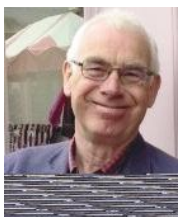
If the right structure is in place, the regions could make a big difference. Experience has already shown that some good things can happen even with existing relatively limited powers. Whilst Greater Manchester has majored on bus policy, neighbouring Liverpool has gone out and bought a whole fleet of new trains to operate on its Merseyrail network. This has resulted in getting trains that are one third cheaper than if the authority had relied on 'the market', i.e. the rolling stock leasing companies. They have also got new trains that are more passenger-friendly, the result of detailed consultation with passengers.

The next step is fairly obvious, and again Liverpool – and Wales - already offer a model – being directly responsible for the local rail network. Liverpool has long had responsibilities for franchising local services on the Merseyrail network but has only been able to contract with a private operator (Serco and Abellio). Wales, however, has taken its domestic passenger services in-house with a train operator owned by the Welsh Government. So has Scotland.

A Labour secretary of state for transport needs to support these initiatives with maximum energy and resist the temptation to re-create 'British Rail'. There needs to be a national network with a core InterCity network but there is scope for trying different approaches. In general, it makes sense for Network Rail to continue as the owner of the infrastructure. However, in some areas, it could partner with a train operator to provide a more unified rail operation which avoids some of the costs of duplication in a wide range of services. Try it in one or two areas first, e.g. Merseyside and West Midlands.

With longer distance InterCity services there is scope for looking at a range of social ownership options, ranging from state – owned route-based companies, such as we already have with LNER on the East Coast Main Line, to co-operative structures, e.g. for Great Western or the troubled West Coast Main Line, with employee and passenger ownership options. An incoming Labour government could do these things quite quickly and ensure long-term stability and investment which is what the railways desperately need. Leave freight alone, other than incentivising the operators through continuing low track access charges and capital grants for wagons and terminals which could go to local authorities.

Compared with rail, buses are easy and offer perhaps the biggest immediate gains. Franchise local networks but encourage social and municipal ownership - a few bus companies are still owned by local authorities and are doing very well. Finally, the big bullet to bite (!) is overall dependence on the car, if we're serious about really addressing climate change.



**Paul's new collection of short stories set on the railways of the North of England *Last Train from Blackstock Junction* is available from Platform 5 Publishing**

# Energy privatisation disaster

**David Toke** explains how public ownership of energy would have greatly reduced the scale of the UK energy crisis

The crises of high prices in the natural gas and electricity sectors would have been reduced if energy had not been privatised and liberalised in the 1980s. In the 1980s British National Oil Corporation and British Petroleum and British Gas were sold off. But if they were in public hands (as is the case with Norway's Equinor) then two things would be different. First, 100% of the profits would be going to the Government, not just the 0-to at most 65% rates that have been paid in recent years. These companies would also have contracted to give low price contracts to supply gas to British consumers. This is because before privatisation and liberalisation domestic gas consumers had priority access to gas from the then state-owned British Gas.

Crucially we would almost certainly have a lot more gas storage capacity than we have now, since it would have been by definition a political rather than a market choice. Energy storage capacities would have been decided on the basis of what benefited the country rather than individual energy companies. If we had as much storage as Germany, for example, we would be in substantially better shape. That is because Germany can buy up gas to be stored during the summer when international gas prices are much cheaper than in winter.

There would likely be more of the natural gas left in the North Sea, allowing more to be supplied at any given time. That is because natural gas stocks would not have been depleted so much. The end of British Gas's monopoly on gas in the 1980s opened the way for the operation of a lot of gas fired power stations in the 1990s, something that was pushed along by the privatisation and liberalisation of electricity markets after 1990. This depleted UK natural gas reserves at a much more rapid rate.

In Northern Europe the bulk of the oil, gas and electricity industries are state owned – Statkraft and Equinor in Norway, Vattenfall in Sweden and DONG (now called Orsted) in Denmark – all are engaged to a greater or lesser extent in renewable energy development. But they tender for renewable generation contracts in their own countries in competition with other companies. That helps in innovatory technologies in particular.

Alongside a state-owned CEGB, there might have been some licensing procedure involving competition for contracts to generate renewable energy from a variety of companies, just as today. This would be close to the present system we have now of CfDs (contracts for difference) whereby the Government gives direct contracts to the renewable energy developers based on paying a fixed price for the units of energy generation. Approaching half of the UK's offshore windfarms are owned by foreign companies already.

If public ownership of electricity had still been in place, we could have avoided the present mess wherein a lot of what are really cheap renewable projects are being paid the same as super-expensive power from gas fired power plants.

The Renewables Obligation (RO) was set up in 2002 to give a gloss of market based 'efficiency', but in reality this just allowed all sorts of companies, hedge funds, energy traders etc to cream off a lot of business. Using a fixed price system to pay energy generation would have saved consumers a lot of money. This is especially true today with sky-high prices for natural gas and power from gas fired power plants. The renewable projects are much cheaper in cost terms compared to gas fired power generation, but which are given the same prices.

So what are we left with? We would likely have had a much higher level of gas storage, which would have made a big difference. The Government would easily be able to tell the nationalised oil and gas industry to sell us gas at much lower prices than at present. We would have a position whereby the UK gas reserves would be less depleted, meaning that a higher proportion of natural gas was being supplied by our nationalised companies.

So, all in all, we can argue that the energy price crisis, whilst still bad, would have been much less severe than the terrible position we now face if the energy industries had remained in public hands.

I don't see much advantage in monopolies such as the transmission and distribution companies being privately owned. True, they have an incentive to reduce costs, and deliver their services with fewer costs, which means fewer employees mainly. But that looks like a trade-off between employing people and giving profits to shareholders, arguably also including having fewer people around to give a better service. Added to that the so-called competition in the retail supply sector has always been a joke. It's just too costly for the suppliers to market themselves to so many small consumers. As we know, it's the generation of energy which dictates the bulk of the prices. In fact, economic analysis of the results of privatisation of the electricity supply industry has concluded that its productivity is no better than that of other countries.

Of course, concluding that our energy situation would be much better if the energy situation had not been privatised and liberalised is one thing, but it is too late to stop the present crisis through nationalisation – that is because compensation would have to be paid at market rates – there are too many international treaties and lawyers to avoid that. But there is a strong case for selective public ownership to look after future national energy security.

**Dr David Toke, is Reader in Energy Politics, University of Aberdeen. His latest book is *Nuclear Power in Stagnation A Cultural Approach to Failed Expansion***

# Tories trash economy

**Prem Sikka** says the Tories have crashed the economy. We need a radical break from neoliberalism

The last few weeks have seen unprecedented economic and political turmoil in the UK. After 12 years of austerity and stagnation, the Conservative government trumpeted a new economic policy, an extreme version of the failed trickle-down-economics. It has been mauled by markets, and rebuked by economists, international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, US President Joe Biden and even by Conservative MPs and former Ministers, resulting in a spectacular retreat and abandonment of a mini-budget, without a vote in parliament. This is followed by the appointment of a third prime minister in three months.

How did we get to this? With disastrous government policies, the UK economy is in a perilous state. It is the only country amongst the G7 nations whose gross domestic product (GDP) is still smaller than the pre-pandemic level. With the Retail Price Index at 12.3%, the annual rate of inflation is the highest for forty years. At the official rate of 2.25%, the interest rate is at its highest for 14 years, pushing up the cost of personal, corporate and government debt. Taxes, as a proportion of the gross domestic product, are at their highest level for seventy years.

Since 2010, the Conservative government has imposed austerity policies, cutting real wages and running down public services to break the spirit of the working class and ready the public services for privatisation. Austerity reduced disposable income of the masses and weakened people's ability to rejuvenate the economy. Out of a population of 68 million, some 21 million adults survive on an annual income of less than £12,570, the thresholds for payment of income tax.

Anything that stood in the path of the Conservative ideology has been ruthlessly swept aside – parliament was illegally prorogued, Tory MPs who opposed Boris Johnson had their whip withdrawn, judges have been threatened, BBC neutered, Channel 4 threatened with privatisation, trade unions attacked and noisy protests criminalised.

Sunak and Hunt: Promises of spending cuts engraved in neoliberal economics

Despite the disaster of Brexit, economic and political failures, the Conservative government believed in its own hype of invincibility. On 6 September 2022, Liz Truss became the leader of the Conservative Party and replaced Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. During her leadership campaign she rejected redistribution of income and wealth. Instead, she espoused trickle-down economics which has often been popularised as the "horse-and-sparrow" economic theory. At its heart is the belief that if you feed the already well-fed horses more oats, something will pass to the roadside to feed the sparrows, which will then magically lay some golden eggs and solve all our problems. Lacking any empirical evidence to back the theory such economics have been thoroughly

The second pillar of Truss's campaign was the Laffer curve, which in a nutshell argues that by reducing the headline tax rates for corporations and the rich, governments somehow unleash growth, which in turns increase tax yields. There is little empirical evidence to support such simplistic theories, but they are a good rallying point for right-wing Conservatives. Truss's claims received little scrutiny from sycophantic media and influential voices within the party had already been neutered.

The task of presenting the mini budget, which the government dubbed its growth plan, fell to Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng who went on to set his own record. Kwarteng's tenure of 38 days, until 14 October 2022, was the second shortest as a Chancellor. Truss and Kwarteng had surrounded themselves with ultra right-wing think-tanks, such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Taxpayers' Alliance.

The growth plan unveiled on 23 September 2022 included reduction in the promised rate of corporation tax from 25% to 19%, abolition of the 45% band of income tax, a cut in the basic rate of income tax from 20% to 19% and reversal of the 1.25 percentage point hike in national insurance. On 24th September, the Daily Mail extolled

**Prem Sikka is a member of UK House of Lords and Emeritus Professor University of Essex and University of Sheffield**

the virtues of the budget with its headline "At Last! A True Tory Budget", but the euphoria soon melted.

The £45bn a year tax cuts were to be funded entirely by borrowing. Rather unusually, the Bank of England had not been informed of the government policy and it hiked the interest rate, which made money more expensive to borrow, The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) normally produces independent analysis of the budget, but had been side lined by the government. So, the budget was delivered without any analysis and crucial organs of the government had not been involved.

Markets were spooked. In May 2010 public debt stood at just over £1 trillion, and by August 2022 it ballooned to £2,427.5bn, about 96% of GDP. The additional borrowing, not to invest, but to fund tax cuts would have increased it even more. Standard & Poor's and Fitch downgraded UK government debt from 'stable' to 'negative'.

In the absence of any OBR analysis or a coherent growth plan, the value of the Pound plummeted to $1.03, the lowest ever. Some £300bn was wiped off the market value of stock and bond markets. The market price of government bonds declined sharply and the yields increased i.e. the implied interest rates rose sharply. In early September, mortgages were available at interest rates of 2.25%, but now rose sharply to over 5%. In view of the market turmoil lenders, including HSBC, Santander, Post Office, Skipton Building Society and Virgin Money, stopped making new mortgage offers and many already made were withdrawn. A house price crash loomed large.

The decline in gilt prices and related risk-management strategies affected pension funds. Many teetered on the verge of technical insolvency and their collapse would have imperilled pensions of millions of workers. The Bank of England propped-up the market through a £65bn gilt buying spree. The beleaguered Prime Minister and Chancellor now abandoned the abolition of the 45% band of income tax and defended the rest of the uncosted plan, but to no avail.

Then on 14th October Chancellor Kwarteng was sacked for implementing Prime Minister Truss's plan and policies. His budget was not put to parliamentary vote. Jeremy Hunt became the fourth Chancellor in four months. On 17th October, he shredded the Kwarteng budget, abandoned cuts in corporation tax and income tax. Liz Truss resigned as Prime Minister on 20th October, after just 45 days, and on 25th October former Chancellor Rishi Sunak became the third Prime Minister in three months. Chancellor Jeremy Hunt will present a new budget in November and public spending cuts, deeply engraved in neoliberal economics, are being mooted.

**Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng discussing their ill-fated 'Growth Plan'**

The turmoil provides fertile ground for developing new economic policies, but there is little evidence of any new thinking across the political spectrum. Neoliberalism seems to be the only game in town. In the absence of a general election, possibly until 2024, the UK economy is set to drift. There is unlikely to be any economic renaissance. Despite 12 years of low inflation, interest rates and corporate taxes, UK invested around 16.9% of its GDP in productive assets, the third lowest in the EU investment league. A major reason is that the masses lack good purchasing power to buy goods and services as income/wealth is concentrated in relatively few hands.

The wealthiest 10% of households have 43% of all wealth, and the bottom 50% has only 9%. 42% of the household disposable income goes to the top 20% of the population and the lowest 20% have only 7%. Redistribution is not on the agenda of any major political party. Workers are fighting back for higher wages with industrial action on the railways, ports, local councils, hospitals, mail and elsewhere. There may be some gains, but these are unlikely to be sufficient to fuel a consumer-led economic recovery.

The state is the key to economic reconstruction. Historically, private capital has shown little appetite for investing in new or high-risk industries. The state invested in biotechnology, information technology, aerospace, and rebuilt the railways, buses, gas, electricity, water, shipbuilding, steel, mining, engineering and other industries. This resulted in well-paid paid skilled and semi-skilled jobs. The most prosperous period in the post-Second World war economy coincided with active state involvement in the economy, but that is now positively discouraged by the neoliberal hegemony. Instead of being a creative force, the state has become a guarantor of corporate profits as seen by the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), outsourcing and privatisations.

Change will have to come from grassroots. The crisis delivered by neoliberal economics has created space for workers, trade unions and civil society to provide leadership and rethink possibilities of new economics and emancipatory change. Without that the UK is likely to remain a low investment and low wage economy for the foreseeable future. **C**

# Labour's momentous 2022 decision to drop first past the post

**Mary Southcott** reports on the immediate past and the hoped for future of our voting system

Nearly a century ago, the 1926 Labour Conference dropped its support of Proportional Representation in favour of Alternative Vote. In practice it has been in support of first past the post since. On the afternoon of 26 September, 2022, Labour overwhelmingly supported PR to elect MPs, a long overdue response to a voting system which polarises our politics, encourages a blame game, fails to find solutions to problems which need to be addressed and disenfranchises all but a minority of switch voters in decreasing numbers of marginal target seats.

The tragedy that has resulted from minority support for parties in government, particularly ones with huge majorities created by the current system, is that we have binary, anti-consensus politics which allows government to exercise power without consent, and voters a choice between not necessarily the same two parties in 650 constituencies. This essentially discourages parties from working together even when they agree.

Will that change now Labour Conference has made this huge leap into the future, where politics will be done differently, every vote will count, and more often than not, give us government of the people, by the people, for the people?

In Sunday's Priority Ballot, Electoral Reform dropped from second in 2021 to fifth place, partly because Labour to Win and Momentum both recommended their own six resolutions, assuming that Electoral Reform, having topped the number of resolutions for the second year running, would automatically reach the conference floor.

Despite the vocal support of Mark Drakeford, Welsh Labour Leader, and Andy Burnham, Manchester's Mayor, and the understanding that Anas Sarwar, Scotland's Labour Leader, is in favour, journalists were briefed that whatever Conference decided nothing would happen, that this was not a priority or even more nuanced "this is not the time".


**Starmer – can no longer ignore calls to scrap first pas the post**

The ghosts of John Smith and Robin Cook were there when David Ward, the proposer of Composite 8, representing Ashford, a Blue Wall seat, once John Smith's Head of Policy, told Conference: "Labour's voice, Labour voters and Labour's purpose – to defend ordinary people – are being strangled by First Past the Post".

This year's vote was in favour because the Unite the Union Policy Conference, in October 2021, dropped its support for the status quo and allowed their delegation to interpret this as support for PR. The Unison decision in favour of PR at its 2022 national delegate conference and by its Labour Link was critical. There was no card vote to record the victory but there is video evidence of the overwhelming show of hands.

Those who have realised that this historic change has happened are asking what next? The majority of the Shadow Cabinet, the NEC, the Parliamentary Labour Party and Labour peers are not persuaded. So discussion needs to continue in Labour circles, in the unions, and indeed in Chartist, as one of the coalition partners in Labour for a New Democracy. Do read their new publication, Everything but the Commons.

There seems to be just as much work to be done between now and the General Election as was done in the last two years, which led to Labour dropping its support for winner takes all politics. Recalling Robin Cook's instruction that the role of Labour in government is to prepare for opposition, we need electoral reform wording in Labour's Manifesto, Labour candidates to put their support to make the next election the last fought under first past the post in their communications with the electorate, and legislation in the first term of a majority or minority Labour government.

The focus now switches to the National Policy Forum, where electoral reform has overwhelmingly topped the submissions in recent years despite not having an obvious home for policy discussion. The Safe and Secure Communities Commission brings together Home Affairs and Justice and encompasses the remit of the Cabinet Office.

It is likely that Gordon Brown's report will introduce new elections for a Senate, to replace the Lords, and regional councils in the English regions. These will need to be elected. We need to promote the wording we hope to see in the Manifesto.

Definitely, if we are not to miss this golden opportunity, Labour needs to have something to say about democracy. Would "Labour recognises that our current voting system has lost the support of the electorate and will address this in government" be anything like approaching an acceptable ask? If your answer is no, have your say! C

**Mary Southcott is a member of Bristol West CLP and Chartist EB**

# Enough is Enough

**Mick Whelan**, general secretary of ASLEF, the train drivers' union, explains why his members have been on strike this summer

Train drivers in ASLEF, which represents 96% of the train drivers in England, Scotland, and Wales, have taken four days of strike action so far this year. Not, as some commentators have suggested, a 'summer of discontent' but in what we see as a 'summer of solidarity' as workers in many different sectors take industrial action and offer each other support on picket lines up and down this country.

Because – as we have been saying at meetings this autumn – Enough is Enough.

Our drivers have been on strike – on Saturday 30 July; Saturday 13 August; Saturday 1 October; and Wednesday 5 October – at those privatised train companies which have refused to give our members, who have not had an increase since 2019, a pay rise.

We would, of course, much rather not be in this position. We don't want to go on strike – withdrawing your labour, although a fundamental human right, is always a last resort – we don't want to inconvenience passengers, and we don't want our members to lose money.

But the companies – and we can see the Tory government leading them on this – appear determined to force our hand.

Because they are telling train drivers to take a real terms pay cut. With inflation now running at 12.3% – and set, economists say, to go higher – they are, in effect, telling us that train drivers should be prepared to work just as hard, for just as long, but for considerably less, in real terms, in their pay packets. And that's not on.

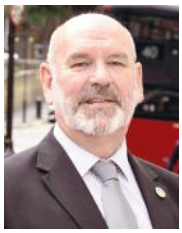
The companies with whom we are in dispute have not offered us a penny. It's outrageous that they expect us to put up with a real terms pay cut for a third year in a row. That's why we have been on strike. To persuade the companies to be sensible, to do the right thing, and to come and negotiate properly with us rather than claiming 'We don't have the money' – which they do – or blaming the government for 'not allowing us to pay you what you're worth' – which might well be true.


We want to do a deal. We have successfully negotiated pay deals with 11 train companies this year – DB Cargo; Eurostar; Freightliner Heavy Haul; Freightliner Intermodal; GB Railfreight; Grand Central; Merseyrail; MTR Elizabeth line; Nexus; PRE Metro Operations; and ScotRail – and are in dispute only with those companies which have failed to offer their drivers – our members – anything.

There are 13 of them – Avanti West Coast; Chiltern Railways; CrossCountry; East Midlands Railway; Greater Anglia; Great Western Railway; Hull Trains; LNER; London Overground; Northern Trains; Southeastern; TransPennine Express; and West Midlands Trains. Our members have voted overwhelmingly for action.

Some people try to say that strikes don't work. But they do! Our strikes have forced the train companies to come to the negotiating table and Anne-Marie Trevelyan, the Transport Secretary, has said – in what is perhaps a significant change in the mood music at the DfT – that she wants the 'railway family' to come together to sort things out.

Rail Minister Kevin Foster, speaking at the Rail Forum annual conference in Birmingham in October, said: 'It is, ultimately, the employers who the unions need to be talking to but both myself and the Secretary of State believe there is a deal to be done.'



**Mick Whelan has spent 38 years on the railway, and 38 years as an active trade unionist. He was elected general secretary in 2011 and is chair of TULO, (Labour Unions) which co-ordinates the activities of the 11 unions affiliated to the Labour Party**

No offers have yet been made. But we have made our case for an increase. They know what we want, where we stand, and what we are prepared to do if we do not get it.

In the past, we have been condemned for going on strike. But now people come up to me on the picket line and wish us well. Because everyone – well, almost everyone – is suffering now. Not the very rich, of course. Not the Tory Party donors. But ordinary hard-working people. That's why the government – and the employers – are losing the PR war. That's why so many of us are saying, Enough is Enough. Not just train drivers, but nurses, and care workers, and posties, and even barristers. Who got a pay rise of 15%! Who said strikes don't work? They do.

That's why the Tories are threatening yet more anti-union legislation. And why we need to stand firm, to stand shoulder to shoulder, first for a pay rise for every working man and woman, and then to see off the legislation this government wants to bring in on behalf of its donors, the bosses of Britain. C

# Creative social control

Is democracy and control of energy possible without nationalisation? **Bryn Jones** looks at the options for Labour


What should replace the UK's failing, privatised energy system? Apart from the Labour Party leadership, most left-wing opinion favours partial, or total, 'public ownership'. But what does this phrase actually mean: revival of nationalised industry-wide corporations answerable to the relevant government minister? Or combinations of community businesses owned and controlled by mixtures of local residents' schemes and those of local or regional councils? Or, what about a simpler, modest government investment in existing firms in order to acquire a controlling stake? An examination of the advantages and disadvantages of each of these options suggests the most politically and economically feasible form of 'energy democracy' (Sean Sweeney et al) may be reform of existing corporations. This should aim to make them more accountable, not only to the authority of the state, but to the wider society. However, this needn't be a one-size-fits-all model. It could also co-exist with other forms of community-owned or nationalised industry corporations.

Calls for new forms of public ownership often contain the adjective 'democratic'. But what would this democratic dimension consist of? Nationalised industries have been called 'democratic' simply because they have to report to an, allegedly, 'democratic' institution: the cabinet of the elected government. Past experience suggests that the democratic accountability in this model is limited. Representation of consumers, unions and other 'stakeholders', in the industry's decision-making was either sketchy or non-existent. All accountability had to pass through the pinch-point of the minister and her civil servants: institutions that have often been more susceptible to the lobbying of powerful political, financial and business interests than unions, civil society groups or consumers.

Indeed, it could be argued that even corporations listed on public stock exchanges have more democratic accountability to a 'public'. Albeit a public that is restricted to investors in its shares, in which the biggest shareholders have the most say. However, executives – the corporate controllers –have the capacity to stymie investors' demands. Apart from the ministers, who often act as their grudging bankers, do stakeholders have much more control over nationalised firms? In truth, in both the private and public sectors, formal ownership often fails to confer actual control of the enterprise's activities. Formal shareholder ownership may still allow managers of the enterprise to act like virtual owners because it is they who formulate and execute decisive policies. On the other hand campaigning groups have often been adept at using corporate governance to table motions that criticise, or influence specific policies. Gordon Brown had the opportunity to widen this influence when campaigners proposed reforms for more corporate transparency in the 2006 Companies Act. He declined to do so.

So what of Keir Starmer's much-lauded proposal for a Great British Energy (GBE) corpora-

**Bryn Jones is an officer of Bath and West Cooperative Party and co-editor of *Alternatives to Neoliberalism*, Policy Press 2017**

tion? This was received enthusiastically because it seemed, at last, to offer public ownership, albeit limited to the much-desired renewable alternatives to the fossil fuels industry. However, closer inspection suggests the caveats expressed in an earlier policy document, Labour's Policy on Energy, will limit GBE's scope and democratic character. That statement said: 'Labour will assess how better regulation can make these markets work better, as well as what role public ownership could play in parts of the energy system, provided it offers value for money; (and) is consistent with the fiscal rules.'

GBE will thus be subjected to similar Treasury controls to those that, according to some, handicapped the old nationalised industries. Moreover, GBE may not even have the rudimentary accountability of a nationalised industry. As reported by the Ecologist (28th September) it will be an 'independently-run firm' that 'is not about nationalisation. It's about introducing a new player into the market'. This sounds depressingly like the competitive markets mantra flogged to a bitter end by successive Tory governments.

The likelihood is that GBE will simply be a bit player alongside the fossil fuel giants, run at 'arms-length' from the government and therefore out of reach of genuine 'public' influence. It may even lack the limited participatory potential of the shareholder corporation. As a stand-alone company it could easily follow the path of previous state-owned businesses, like Remploy and British Nuclear Fuels: resort to private investment and eventually be sold off on the stock exchanges.

The UK energy 'market' is a creation of Tory government policy stretching back to the 1980s.The privatised firms that emerged from the national and regional energy supply boards eventually coalesced into the 'Big Six', and now 'Big Five' companies: British Gas, EDF Energy, E.ON, RWE , ScottishPower and SSE (owned by Ovo). Attempts at multiplying competition ended in near-disaster in the mini-crisis of 2019 and the global hike in prices in 2021. In all, 39 small providers failed and most of their customers were transferred to Big Five firms. Because of the semi-artificial system of market pricing only the big players can ride out the peaks and troughs of raw fuel prices. In the latest wholesale price surge the regulator, Ofgem, had to reorganise supplies to the customers of yet another failed firm, the seventh largest in the UK, Bulb Energy. This at a public cost of £1.7 billion.

Public ownership advocates, such as Labour for a Green New Deal and We Own It, have campaigned for an expansion of community ownership in the renewables sector. The thinking here is that local control, either by municipalities, or not-for-profit community businesses will stimulate popular support for non-fossil fuels, enhance economic democracy and supply energy freed from exploitation by profit-focussed corporations. This aspiration has already been checked on the continent by governments' preference for renewable energy to be supplied by the big firms operating massive wind farms and solar arrays. In the UK a private member's Local Electricity Bill to authorise licences for local providers, has been wending its way through Parliament since 2021. It makes no mention of the preferred type of business to operate such licences.

Eight municipally-owned energy supply UK companies have been set up but nearly all suffered financial losses and several, including the two biggest, Bristol and Nottingham, are closing down because of mushrooming costs largely related to unavailable local transmission networks and the costs of accessing the national grid. Clearly the elephant in all these rooms is the economic power of the Big Six and National Grid plc. Apart from remedial actions, such as the Electricity Bill, could these corporations be put under some form of public control? The late, unlamented, Johnson government planned to replace National Grid, owner of the energy transmission system with a publicly owned "future system operator" by 2024. However, Starmer has ruled out energy nationalisations. Perhaps because, in the present financial crisis, even relatively small costs could be politically damaging. If this assessment is correct then the most effective strategy would be state purchase of a controlling share interest. This should also be accompanied by changes to the Companies Act to empower other stakeholders as shareholders. Models to enhance such shareholders' rights have already been set out. Namely, by campaign groups Shareaction, more radically by ShareSoc and in my co-edited book (chapter 8, Alternatives to Neoliberalism). With more control of corporate executives, coalitions of progressive shareholders, such as pension funds and stakeholder-shareholder groups could then, with government support, prioritise cooperation with smaller, local enterprises, renewables over fossil fuels and fair but stable financial returns over opportunist profit maximisation.

Of the 'Big Five' energy supply firms three, Scottish Power, Eon and EDF, are owned or controlled by, respectively, Spanish, German and French companies. Which leaves only UK-based British Gas - owned by Centrica - and Scottish and Southern/Ovo - owned by a private entity, Imagination Industries Ltd. From an energy generation and distribution point of view, public ownership of British Gas/Centrica would be the easiest and most influential target. Outright nationalisation might be costly; it is currently capitalised at £4 billion. However, as it is a FTSE firm it has the conventional form of corporate governance. Securing a cheaper 51% controlling stake, accompanied by the kinds of governance reforms mentioned above, could be more effective than nationalisation and easier to enact than targeting the foreign-owned firm. As Centrica straddles both the generation and supply sides of the energy market it would also give stakeholders, and public authorities, considerable leverage to bring down retail prices and advance renewables over fossil fuels. The final piece in the jig-saw would be control of the presently privatised National Grid.

This control would make it easier for a constellation of community-owned enterprises (mutuals or Community Interest Companies) to provide renewable energy to their localities and further afield. Again, this new National Grid could be under direct state control or, better, as a multi-stakeholder public body, similar to Network Rail, which is overseen by rail company representatives; or better still, the Welsh water utility, Glas Cymru. You have no excuses Mr Starmer. If you choose some variation on these models you could maintain your official nationalisation-phobia, but also provide the critical accountability dimension which is essential to any concept of a 'public' ownership and control of this vital resource. **C**

# It's austerity, stupid

## **Morgan Jones** on the dubious benefits of social prescribing

We know why things happen. We have known since the late 19th century that carbon emissions at scale will heat the planet. We know overfishing drains our oceans of fish, and we know lack of sex education leads to more teen pregnancies, and we know access to clean water prevents cholera. Public policy making is not entirely straightforward, but neither is it a vast maze of obliquity where we can only blindly grope towards solutions. The world is complicated and interconnected. Does de- worming actually improve educational outcomes? But there are some parts of it that are, thankfully, quite simple, where cause and effect are aligned as a stone displacing water from a jug.

Among the simplest of all such action/consequence pairings is austerity. When you cut public services, the things designed to support communities and public health, the public services get worse, and accordingly, public health will decline. This is the story of the last 12 years in the UK. The definitive guide to the Conservative record in government is the Marmot review, which documents how life expectancy has stalled- in some places reversed- over 12 years of austerity rule.

At the core of the welfare state in the UK is the NHS, which after 12 years of cuts is a late stage Jenga tower of an institution. Stripped of all stability, it is barely completing many of its basic functions, failing outright to complete others. In July, if you had a heart attack or a stroke, you would wait three times the target time for an ambulance. And yet the Tories, for a set of reasons to do with the cultural role and political popularity of the NHS, profess to love the health service. During the pandemic, they incited us all to clap for carers. Platitudes about the NHS remain at the core of any given Tory platform.

Into this strange space, professing to love a thing you are destroying, cutting all else around it so that more and more of the state falls onto one beleaguered arm, steps social prescribing. Broadly, this is the act of having the NHS, usually GPs, prescribe things that are not medicine. It has been on the rise in the UK over the last decade (the NHS's long term plan pledges resources for a large expansion of social prescribing). This often means exercise, or community activities. The NHS website gives a list of examples of activities which might be social prescribed: "volunteering, arts activities, group learning, gardening, befriending, cookery, healthy eating advice and a range of sports". These are the kind of things that everyone knows to be, generally speaking, good for you, and that, entirely incidentally, it might have been easier to access for free before local authorities were subject to austerity and had their budgets cut by as much as 42%.

James, a junior doctor in the south of England, is blunt about his views on social prescribing as a function of austerity. "Being unwell shouldn't be a precondition to accessing something that a generation ago was just seen as a basic service. There are so few of these council services now, there's a fair chance soon the ones that are GP related might be the only oneswhen getting a limited allotment relies upon getting a limited GP appointment, it's just bottlenecks all the way down". He cites Paracelus ("All things are poisons, for there is nothing without poisonous qualities. It is only the dose which makes a thing poison"), saying, "You need a doctor to prescribe things, because they have the clinical judgment to make that assessment. What's the poisonous dose of community gardening, or aqua aerobics?".

There is also, crucially, much to suggest that social prescribing has a negligible impact on actual health outcomes.

With social prescribing, then, Tory governments show their hand. They have taken away things that are good for everyone, which has had a massively negative impact on public health. Knowing this they are using the one permissible arm of the state to drip feed these nice, healthy things back to those most in need. The most egregious example of this came in August, when it was reported that the government was considering allowing GPs to prescribe energy bill reductions to patients. There is no one who would not be better off with a warm home and without the stress of how to pay for it. This is dazzlingly obvious. What social prescribing has always been for this government is a means of prescribing exemption from their own policies.

With Jeremy Hunt, who championed the programmes as health secretary between 2012 and 2018, back to the fore of politics and in control of the public purse, it seems unlikely that social prescribing will be going anywhere. C

**Morgan Jones is a contributing editor of Renewal and a member of Camberwell and Peckham CLP**

# Policing in the dock

**Unmesh Desai** on the devastating report into the racism and sexism at work in the London Metropolitan police

There is a crisis of confidence in policing across the UK. Surveys show that the public's trust in the police's ability to do a good job, solve crime, and protect the communities they serve has steadily declined in the past few years. Nowhere is this more true than in London, where data from the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime shows that fewer than half of Londoners have trust and confidence in the Met. This is even lower among specific communities such as the black community or among women.

This poses a severe challenge for the Met and more widely for policing in this country. We operate a model of policing by consent, where the unique powers of the police come from the support of communities they police. Where policing is done with the community, not imposed upon it from above. A lack of trust and confidence therefore threatens the legitimacy of our whole system. This begs the question, how has this crisis of confidence developed, and what are our ways out of it?

At the time of writing there are seven police forces across the country in "special measures". Whilst there will be locally specific problems to each force, there are patterns across many of the forces. Often these forces are poor at providing updates and advice to victims, they are poor at identifying and responding to warning signs both in potential victims and in potential perpetrators, and they are poor at recording data around crime and interventions. These are all concerns that certainly apply to the Met.

Notwithstanding the obvious need for these forces to improve their services, and which in the Met's case we will be closely scrutinising at City Hall, these patterns are reflective of the growing complexity of police work. When Robert Peel founded the service back in July 1829, the force was mainly concerned with preventing public disorder. Gradually their concerns have shifted and changed, and the police are rightly now expected to respond to crime in every aspect of our lives, including in an ever-increasing digital space that they frankly - if one considers the outcome rate for fraud cases - aren't even close to getting a grip on.


**Child Q Protest - Stoke Newington police Station**

We cannot talk about trust and confidence in the Met without discussing the high-profile scandals that have engulfed the force in the past few years. The murder of Sarah Everard by a serving officer appalled and frightened women in the capital, and the response of the Met to this incident was woefully inadequate. The Daniel Morgan Inquiry Panel exposed the Met as "institutionally corrupt" and the ensuing report pointed out glaring issues with how the Met vets candidates, how it deals with evidence and how it handles informants. The police handling of the murders of four young gay men by Stephen Port and the subsequent inquest exposed critical issues regarding how LGBT communities are policed. And finally, the terrible overuse of the power to strip search children, particularly black and ethnic minority children, which was exposed due to the treatment of Child Q and the Black Lives Matter movement highlighted the over-policing and the under-protection that black and ethnic minority communities have too long faced. These incidents shook policing in London to its core, we are still dealing with their ramifications, and the Met needs to be cognisant of this on its mission to move forward and rebuild trust.

So where do we go from here? The country has changed dramatically in all ways since 1964 when we last had a Royal Commission on Policing. I personally believe another is desperately needed now and something an incoming Labour government needs to look into. Issues such as whether there are too many police forces (43), whether the Met should be a London police service with its many national functions to be divested to a revamped National Crime Agency, and associated issues such as police complaints and accountability procedures need to be urgently looked at in a holistic way.

What does policing with consent mean in today's world? Ultimately, the basic concept is still one of taking your local community with you. How you recruit, train and retain officers to reflect our diverse society and ensure operational practices are fair, proportionate and non-discriminatory are key challenges. Above all, consulting with and reporting to the community you police, through democratically elected representatives and representative community consultative groups, is key to restoring trust and confidence. Equally important is the need to respond effectively to the day-to-day concerns of crimes such as ASB and burglaries, and work with partner agencies to vastly improve reporting, arrest, prosecution, conviction and support systems, particularly for crimes like domestic abuse. Trust can only be rebuilt from a victim-orientated perspective. A tall order - but policing has never faced so many challenges. C

**Unmesh Desai is a Labour GLA member for East London**

# We have to get the message o

Trade unions face their biggest challenge in a generation. The cost of living crisis with rampant inflat numbers of trade unionists. **Frances O'Grady**, the Trade Union Congress's retiring general secretary assess the successes and current challenges facing the movement? **Mike Davis** spoke to her

Twelve years of a Tory government is a challenge in itself with four, maybe five, prime ministers, a Brexit referendum and Covid19 being huge challenges. We face a more rapacious form of capitalism and now we have big tech capitalism, surveillance capitalism which is radically transforming working lives and relations between boss and worker. A key lesson is that all our talk about internationalism isn't just sentimental talk but an urgent priority for working people across borders.

"We have some fantastic initiatives against Amazon and Starbucks. Getting deals with these corporations with high labour turnover is tough. Nevertheless, unions are making breakthroughs on this front. We've been inundated with governments and companies wanting to divide workers, whether it be across industries, between white and black, men and women, so it's important workers stick together. There are times in history when just sticking together is a big achievement."

So what have been the major achievements? "The trade union movement proved its worth during the pandemic. Trade unions representing workers proved themselves critical to keeping the country running. Many of us were sceptical workers would get just rewards. But we have seen quite a number of strike ballots which would not have happened without trade unions. We secured the furlough scheme which protected 12 million workers."

"We believe workers are stronger when they keep together. This is a way to get a better deal. So our role is to coordinate. We exist to do this. It happens on many different levels: bringing together unions in particular industries; workers in outsourced companies, in privatised industries. We have the convening power to bring unions together to share tactics on what works best, the synchronisation of action. What we are witnessing is a wave of workers, many who have never been on strike before, balloting for action. We have set up an organising hub at the TUC developing digital tools to help unions get the best possible turnout and yes votes in ballots. I love the concept of how we do this. It's a combination of using the best techniques of digital organising alongside face to face, voice to voice organising to turn people out.

"Tory governments may be introducing thresholds to stop workers taking action but we are determined to support workers organising for action. We can beat them. We just have to be smarter. There is also a new mood in the country. Our role is to build public support whether in media or local communities. For the most part this is not about workers achieving pay increases. It is just about defending what we have already got."

**We are less bothered about MPs having their picture taken on a picket line than tackling the root causes of the cost of living crisis**

Labour and the unions have been joined at the hip since the Party's formation 120 years ago. There is popular support for many of the recent strikes so what should the parliamentary opposition be doing. Should MPs be joining picket lines?

"We want to see a Labour government because if we don't we are going to have more kids going to school hungry, more people homeless, more pensioners freezing because they can't afford heating. There is a social justice question here. Also, we want a Labour government because it is important that people understand this mob won't be here for ever. We've seen the opportunism of many companies using hire and fire used against the very same workers who had been working to keep the lights on, to keep us safe. It's disgusting.

"We also need a Labour government because the balance of power has swung mightily into the hands of bad employers. There are international rights and principles: collective bargaining, the right to organise, the right to withdraw your labour. These must be defended at all costs. Unions campaigned very hard for the New Deal for Workers, that would get shot of zero hours contracts, fire and rehire, other forms of insecure employment but also deliver a fair pay agreement, collective rights to have your pay negotiated by a trade union, starting of course with social care where a majority of women are on less than £10 an hour. What I want is a party that is self-confident about standing up for working people and their unions. it's not so much about being seen on picket lines but a party that is proud of unions.

"We are less bothered about MPs having their picture taken on a picket line than tackling the root causes of the cost of living crisis. It is not just about getting a fair wage but about a fair share of the wealth cre-

# out that trade unionism works

tion and tougher government anti-union laws is a gauntlet that has been picked up by growing
y, has been in the job for nearly ten years. She has been the first women in the post. How does she

ated.

"What I want is a party that is talking about the causes of the cost of living crisis and what needs to change so that people get a fair deal. Of course, I want politicians of any party to see that it is wrong to remove the cap on bankers' bonuses while keeping the lid on nurses pay. How hard is it to see the injustice of this? I've spoken to people who have never been on strike before who are more courageous in a way than our activists. They are walking through their fear to take action to do what they feel is right, not just for their families but also for their workmates. That takes enormous courage and you have to be pushed to the absolute limits to do that, especially when we're talking about key workers. They are dedicated to what they are doing. They are not just in it for the money, unlike the bankers and boardrooms. They are in it because they care. "

Women played a huge role in getting people through the pandemic. Yet they are still paid less than men in many fields of work. There are more women at work than ever. Trade union membership has increased amongst women while male membership declines. As someone who Woman's Hour rated the 11th most powerful woman in Britain what has and can be done?

"I'm delighted our two biggest unions are led by women. One of those is overwhelmingly made up of women members. You may ask why has it taken so long. We now have a situation that demonstrates that women can represent men as well as women. Clearly having more women in positions of power does not itself change the culture. We have been very vocal on sexual harassment and why it needs to stop. We've done a lot of training, especially at leader level. Sexual harassment is about power. Our big survey shows over half of women have experienced it and so many walk off the job rather than report it, because they believe nobody will do anything about it."

**Would you put your head above the parapet if you're on a zero hours contract and you've got to feed your family?**

And what of the problem of old domestic relations reasserting themselves. Who does what in the home and the sharing of responsibilities?

"I have been very worried that there is a return to the 1950s, with secrecy around pay and an expectation that women will take on the home schooling during Covid and all the picking up and dropping off, that double shift. We seem to be going backwards, not forwards.

"What I'm pleased about is we have secured core status in the Covid enquiry. We have an amazing QC. We want that enquiry to address some of these structural issues. We've worked closely with the Bereaved Families campaign. We have to address the structural inequalities that saw care workers wrapping themselves in black plastic bags because they were not considered worthy to be provided with adequate PPE. We saw Tories giving their mates contracts for millions while care workers, shop workers, transport workers were left defenceless. What does that say about who and what we value.? We're determined to shine a light on these issues in the enquiry and we are now part of that inner circle that gives us access to papers. This is the mother of all truth and justice campaigns."

Despite twelve years of austerity overall trade union membership continues to decline. Why do you think this is happening and is the situation changing?

"There are telephone directories written on this. The framework of law making it harder for workers to organise is a factor. A mushrooming of small workplaces which makes the economics of organising harder. Plus the massive growth in insecure contracts. We see a 400 % turnover of staff every year. This helps discipline the workforce. Would you put your head above the parapet if you're on a zero hours contract and you've got to feed your family? It has this disciplinary effect on people. In the last four or five years we have had modest growth of union membership. It's modest. We saw lots of people turn to unions during the Covid crisis, not just on pay but for health and safety. It really mattered and unions are the best defenders on that front.

"One of the things I enjoyed most was setting up the Organising Academy. It's bringing excitement into the job of organising. It is still the best job in the world. We can be brilliant negotiators but unless you have got the workforce organised it does not matter how good your arguments are, you need the power of organisation behind you. The OA has developed into training for reps and leadership work but the time is ripe for another big push, because we have a more receptive public than we have had for some time. We have a

younger generation of organisers who have nothing to lose. And what great leaders they will make."

And what of empowering the voice of workers in the workplace?

"I know its ambitious in the current environment but it's important we keep that vision that workers can be architects not just bees. We have to train ourselves. Sharon Graham has talked very eloquently about understanding how the company works, how much money they are making, getting every detail. We are the experts on our own companies, our own industries. I'm a believer in strategic public ownership and alternative models of ownership, not just nationalisation. It can be golden shares, local ownership, there are all sorts of ways to do this, so we must keep that debate alive. It's important for us and our own sense of importance that we have a seat at the table. I make no apologies for that. We should have seats at every table where decisions are taken that affect our lives. We have intelligence and wisdom to bring.

"Also, why our fight against restrictive anti-union legislation is so important is because unless we have the right for workers to organise and withdraw their labour then the rest sounds like a pipe dream. In my experience people want to feel proud of the work that they do and the organisation that they work for and that's why trade unionism can't stop at terms and conditions. We have a much bigger role to play."

The day after we spoke she was named as a new Labour peer. As for her legacy, she made a resounding call.

"At a personal level I want anyone who has been shut out of power to know we can do it. Whether it's young women, experienced Black representatives or anybody who has felt a bit on the outside, come on in: you can do it. That's my message.

"We are collectivists. We know none of this is possible just by individuals. It's the collective effort that wins through. So, any legacy passing on is: are you up for the fight and ready to win? You're a steward for the spirit of the movement. That's ultimately what I am passing on. There is no individual achievement in the trade union movement." C

**Remember November 2nd mass lobby and rally in Westminster to protect the right to strike and the People's Assembly demonstration on 5th November**

# No pandering to the right

## Labour needs to act now to make a defence of the rights of migrants and refugees a key part of its programme for government argues **Don Flynn**

The sound of jaws crashing to the floor in amazement has echoed across the country in recent weeks as the entire population looks on at the sight of a government blowing itself up. On the left of the political spectrum the quivering hope that the Conservative omnishambles will gift the man at the top of the Labour party an election victory he could scarcely have hoped for even twelve months ago is becoming irresistible. All they have to do is cleave to the line of being 'sensible' and the public will sweep them to power sometime in the next couple of years.

There are many reasons to resist this line of reasoning. The definition of being sensible at the present time seems to be pledging a commitment to work within the confines of whatever the bond markets are prepared to tolerate when it comes to fiscal policy. That means austerity and, as Keir Starmer strongly hinted in his speech to the TUC annual congress in October, the Labour leadership will not be raising any objections to that.

Raising resistance to the grim prospect of another decade of stagnant wages and reduced public services will mean coming up with a programme of massive state-led investment in infrastructure and the sort of next generation industry which the UK hasn't seen hide nor hair of over the past two decades, and all this keeping to the mark of net zero carbon emission by 2050. Needed are the funds for what will function as the sort of national enterprise board Labour attempted to establish in the mid-1970s, but in a version that will challenge the assumption that economic growth is all about restoring profitability and ramping up the returns that go to private investors.

That would be the big, bold move needed from Labour that stands a chance of persuading voters that the party in government isn't just a pinkish version of whatever Jeremy Hunt has already embarked on. But other fronts need to be opened up in order to challenge the orthodoxy of the past years. A high priority here is democratic reform of the constitution, with the House of Lords replaced by an elected second chamber and proportional representation becoming the standard way to elect all political rep-

**Don Flynn is Chartist managing editor and was founder of Migrants Rights Network**

resentatives, from MPs to regional and local councillors. A Labour government acting in the interests of ordinary citizens would need to demonstrate to the institutions managing the global economy that its fiscal and industrial reforms enjoy the support of voters, and thereby provide a shield against movements of capital intended to destabilise its programme for change.

In tough times the skirmishing between the political factions will carry on with intense vigour and a reforming leftist government will have to meet the challenge of the cultural warriors working with the currents of nationalistic identity politics. The areas where the threats will be most direct have been mapped out and the reactionary politics rehearsed enough times to know that the question of immigration will be front and centre in the efforts of the right to claw back a way forward.

Left activism in recent times has made it clear the rights of migrants and refugees is a non-negotiable part of its stance. The implications of 'hostile environment' policies, long known to the communities in which migrant people live, long ago broke out of that confined area of privileged knowledge as the realities of control policies which produced the Windrush scandal, among others, saturated the public domain. Since then the experience of the Covid pandemic, in which we were obliged to consider migrants in the role of key workers making sacrifices to get the country through a bad time, have swung the pendulum further in the direction of a fairer hearing to the people who have been doing the work.

The hard right of the Conservative party have been quick to consider the implications for their political appeal if the general public cease to be animated by the idea of immigrants as unwanted freeloaders. The home secretaryships of Priti Patel and Suella Braverman marked out the ground for a comeback for anti-immigrant sentiment with their campaign for the fast-track deportation of refugees to Rwanda. But if this earned the approval of their constituency in the Conservative party, still puce faced at the very idea that foreigners might assert a right to cross a UK border, there is no clear evidence that it ignited a return to the negative perception of migrants which existed in the final years of the Blair government.

At the time of writing nothing concrete has been revealed about the so-called 'relaxation' of immigration regulations which the hapless Liz Truss was supposed to favour in order to support her dash for growth. The little we do know had to be gleamed from the reaction of Suella Braverman, when in the role of home secretary, to the talk of new entry routes being opened that would have facilitated the entry of, possibly, hundreds of thousands of people wanting to take up jobs in a labour market very keen to receive them. Her petulant resignation and return to the backbenchers could well serve as a point for the regroupment of the Tory far right. Then a future assault on a government which, whether for purely pragmatic reasons to boost growth or a principled defence of migrant and refugee rights, decides to dial-down the xenophobic rhetoric and open the space for a rights-based approach to managing the movement of people.

Labour's position on how it will face up to these questions has so far been dismal. Shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves has looked to score debating points by condemning the Conservative government over the past period for failing to deal with what she was unfazed about referring to as 'illegal migration'. The fact that the 'illegal migrants' in the sights of these governments has included Caribbean pensioners with forty years residence in the country, paying taxes and raising families, and tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the effects of the disastrous interventions in the politics of their home countries favoured by British and other western governments, has not registered as an issue that needs considering by the person who is likely to occupy No 11 Downing Street in the event of a Labour victory.

But good news is on the horizon. The TUC congress in Brighton passed a resolution moved with a passionate speech by the PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka, condemning the government's Nationality and Borders Act, describing it as "…a vicious piece of legislation designed to whip up racism." It went on to condemn policies which strip British people of their nationality, with a disproportionate impact on Black British citizens. The thrust of a principled position capable of withstanding the future assault of an anti-immigrant right attempting a resurgence is being worked out in the labour movement – just not among the Labour party high ups who ought to be doing the bulk of the heavy lifting on the issue. C

# Football's unwelcome dirty truths

## **Dave Lister** on the scandalous background to the Qatar World Cup

**Heavily exploited migrant workers building Qatar's stadium**

In 2010 the bizarre decision was made to award the 2022 World Cup finals to Qatar, one of the hottest countries in the world. Many people believed that there was considerable corruption involved in this decision, as with the previous award to Russia. Corruption in football at an international level is rife and the acquittal of leading figures Sepp Blatter and Michel Platini following their recent trial in Switzerland was perhaps unexpected.

New stadiums had to be constructed in Qatar and the World Cup finals were moved to November 2022 to avoid the worst of the heat, disrupting the football season in many countries. Pete Pattison in the Guardian, among others, has focused on the harsh conditions faced by those building the new stadiums and by other migrant workers there. Qatar and other Gulf states operate the kafala system, which gives employers control over migrant workers' job and residential conditions. Workers have long hours, up to 12 a day in searing heat, and there have been more than 6500 deaths since 2010. Pattison has pointed out that Qatar has failed to investigate many of these deaths, which are attributed to 'natural causes', cardiac or respiratory failure. Steve Cockburn of Amnesty International commented on this: "When relatively young and healthy men die suddenly after working long hours in extreme heat, it raises serious questions about the safety of working conditions in Qatar". Failure to properly investigate deaths means that cases are not identified as work-related, allowing companies to avoid paying compensation to workers' families.

Living conditions for migrant workers are atrocious; they are provided with cramped dormitories. Pattison quotes one saying that mattresses are infested with bed bugs and there is little water or toilet provision. Another said "We had no electricity or air-conditioning and were not allowed to leave the compound". The workers, mainly from South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, are escaping unemployment or even lower wages and often take on debts to enable them to move to Qatar, resulting in their being trapped in this employment, unable to change job or leave the country. Their families are often dependent on their earnings, and in the event of their death can be left without financial support and may be harassed to meet the debt that the deceased breadwinner has incurred.

Following international pressure some reforms were implemented. A minimum wage was introduced, but only the equivalent of £1 an hour plus food and lodging, and exit permit requirements, which prevented workers from leaving the country, were waived. But Human Rights Watch reported that these measures have rarely been enforced. To add insult to injury, in September thousands of migrant workers were forced to return home, many facing joblessness, unable to support their families, and with huge debts.

There are also issues for gay football fans. The England gay supporters group has stated that its members are currently unwilling to attend the World Cup finals. Qatar has said that gay and transgender supporters are welcome but they will need to adhere to local customs. Homosexuality is illegal in Qatar with up to seven years imprisonment for those convicted of charges in relation to this. Sepp Blatter said in 2010 that gay supporters could attend but should refrain from sex. Other challenges are the high cost of accommodation and uncertainty over the consumption of alcohol, an essential requirement for many football supporters.

Money issues in football range even wider this. Top clubs, particularly in England, have been bought up by Arab, American and Russian owners (Man City, Chelsea, Newcastle, Liverpool, Arsenal, Paris St Germain) or by offshore finance (Spurs). Only last season a plan to create a super league for which top clubs did not need to qualify by finishing high in their domestic league, was only scuppered by a heartening display of fan power in England. (The same thing did not happen in Spain or Italy). Nobody seems to question the idea that players, however highly paid, are bought and sold, unlike in most other sports. So far women's football, which appears to be taking off here after England's European cup success, has avoided many of the faults of the men's game. It also must be said that despite its structural issues the men's game is producing some high-quality football. My final word on the premier league season is COYS (Come on You Spurs). **C**

**Dave Lister is a member of Brent Central CLP and Chartist EB**

# Making the case for migration

**Julie Ward** says it was anti-migrant rhetoric that enabled the right to take power in Sweden

Sweden's outgoing Social Democratic Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson, gave a frank account of the September elections in her country whilst speaking at a panel in Berlin during the recent PES Congress. Despite increasing their share of the votes, the SDP and the Greens fell victim to the increasing polarisation of politics, with the Left and Centre parties losing critical support. These four parties had agreed to work together as a bloc and, despite the SDP winning the highest number of votes across the country, collectively they were unable to garner sufficient votes to counter a surge of support for the far-right Swedish Democrats whose vote share rose to 20.5%, making them the second largest party in the Riksdag. Unwilling to go into coalition with a party that has its roots in the neo-nazi movement Andersson resigned as Prime Minister.

Meanwhile, the centre right parties (Moderates, Liberals and Christian Democrats) had already established an informal alliance with the Swedish Democrats in late 2021 with a view to presenting Ulf Kristersson, leader of the Moderate Party, as candidate for Prime Minister. Whilst the Swedish Democrats will have no ministerial positions they wield enormous power behind the scenes, contributing to an anti-immigration, nationalistic 63 page co-operation programme called the Tidö Agreement negotiated following the elections.

The agreement sees a roll back of Sweden's existing ambitious carbon reduction targets, lower taxes, an expansion of prison and police services, and grant caps for people on welfare benefits. There is a radical shift on migration policy making it harder for people to seek asylum and settle in the country, with a focus on transit centres, deportations, revocation of residence permits and stricter rules about family migration and asylum. The nationalistic agenda extends to the sphere of education, culture and media with a plan to create a Swedish 'cultural canon' which is likely to exclude the contribution of those with mixed heritage.

Sweden's elections took place against a tumultuous backdrop of events at home and abroad, with

**Swedish Democrats leader Jimmie Åkesson – far right kingmkaker of the governing alliance**

Putin's war against Ukraine forcing the country to confront the issue of NATO membership. Along with Sanna Marin (the socialist Prime Minister of Finland), Andersson made the application to join NATO in May, reversing the position usually held by left parties in Sweden. In a country increasingly concerned about security one would have thought Andersson's strong leadership in a time of international crisis would draw more support. But the Swedes had other things on their minds in addition to the Russian threat.

Sweden's unique approach to the management of Covid saw a 'business as usual' approach with limited restrictions in order to keep the economy going. Individual freedom is highly valued in the country and protected by law. By and large people approved of the independent Public Health Agency's approach, but statistics show that 47% of Covid-related deaths occurred in nursing homes and Stefan Löfven, who was the SDP Prime Minister at the beginning of the pandemic, came in for some criticism for not acting swiftly enough.

Scenes of life carrying on as normal in Stockholm with young people enjoying social time in cafés, were frequently broadcast in news bulletins around the world whilst many other countries endured strict lockdowns and were therefore perceived as better at protecting their elderly. Stockholm and other urban areas with large populations of younger voters maintained their support for the SDP in the recent election whereas rural areas and older voters turned to conservative and extreme right wing forces. Whilst the state's Covid response was not a major factor for the majority of voters the close result reveals a divided electorate. Sweden's high standard of living may indeed have played a minor role in the outcome of the election as the 80+ (females) age group was the second largest voting group after the18-25 (males) age group.

But the issue which appears to have dominated the election campaign was not in fact Covid or the war in Ukraine but migration, with Sweden's record of doing more than its fair share in respect of receiving refugees deemed by some as unsustainable and by others as a dangerous folly.

In her speech to fellow PES members in Berlin, Andersson focused on the need to examine the success of right wing extremists in communicating their simplistic xenophobic messages that foreigners are to blame for falling living standards and rising crime. It's a proven formula that has worked in the UK, Hungary, Poland and Italy, with the French maintaining a near-perpetual flirtation with the extreme right. How to counter this racist, right-wing, populist narrative must be at the forefront of the PES European election campaign strategy. With less than two years to go Socialists and Democrats across Europe need to make both the economic case for migration and the compassionate case for asylum in a joined-up world with climate change contributing to increased migration along with conflict, increasing inequality and deep-rooted poverty. With authoritarian, anti-democratic and populist forces on the rise everywhere, clear messaging backed by strong social policies is crucial for a population increasingly fearful of losing the comfortable life they have come to enjoy as part of the post-war European project. C

**Julie Ward was a North West England MEP and is a member of Chartist EB**

# Mussolini fan takes over as Italian Prime Minister

**Andrea Pisauro** on how post fascist Meloni ended Berlusconi reign and foiled the left

For the first time in its history, Italy is going to be led by a woman. Last Saturday Giorgia Meloni took her oath of office in front of the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella wearing a black shirt. The colour echoed the shirts of the fascist mob that marched towards Rome to install the government of Benito Mussolini, almost 100 years ago. She didn't mind the coincidence. As the leader of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), a party whose roots trace back to the post-fascist tradition, many Italians minded it very much indeed.

In fact, an absolute majority of Italians who turned up to vote on the 25th September didn't want Meloni to be Prime Minister. Unfortunately, they split their support in three major blocks: 26% of them supporting the centre-left coalition led by former PM Enrico Letta, 15.5% supporting the Five Star Movement led by former PM Giuseppe Conte and 8% supporting a centrist list led by former PM Matteo Renzi. The bad blood among these former leaders was sufficient to split the progressive electorate enough to propel the right-wing coalition to victory.

This is because Italians have a very complicated electoral law, whereby a third of the Parliament is elected through first-past-the-post constituencies, 80% of which were won by Right wing parties, who fielded unitary candidates, who had an easy ride against the multiple progressive candidates. Meanwhile, in the two thirds of Parliament elected proportionally, the combined vote of the right-wing parties was just 44%, in fact, down 6% (a few hundred thousand votes) from the European elections in 2019. The victory of the Right is thus largely down to a self-inflicted defeat of the Left.

The divisions on the progressive front were not just down to personalities. Class and geography were the major predictors of the vote, with young, poor and working people in the South voting in huge numbers for the Five Star Movement, whilst the predominantly old middle class in the North and centre of Italy mostly voting Partito Democratico, the largest party in the centre-left coalition. Centrist support was highest among the well-off in city centres. An ecosocialist list allied to the PD obtained 3.5%, mostly from young precarious workers, electing a small contingent of working class MPs, including migrant trade-unionist Aboubakar Soumayoro.


Policy differences in the progressive camp were hardly insurmountable. With all parties being broadly favourable to extending migrant rights, supporting Ukraine and the EU, the major differences related to the socio-economic agenda. Renzi's centrist list wanted to scrap an unemployment benefit which, according to him, was "immoral". The Five-Star-Movement, which introduced it when they entered a populist alliance with Salvini's league in 2018, campaigned vigorously to defend it.

The big novelties of these elections were two. It was the first election in 15 years to deliver a clear majority and a clear mandate to govern, as both the general elections of 2013 and 2018 resulted in hung Parliaments and were characterised by profound political instability with six different governments in just nine years. Second, Giorgia Meloni won the leadership of the Italian right (and with it, that of the country), ending the 30 years domination of Silvio Berlusconi. Her party won 26% against Berlusconi's Forza Italia at 8%, more than tripling his share.

Notoriously sexist and misogynist, Berlusconi didn't take this lightly. He was caught on camera writing a note where he described Meloni as "opinionated, bossy, arrogant and offensive" as she refused to appoint as minister a controversial woman who aided Berlusconi's past sex trafficking. Yet more than half of his MPs favoured continuing the coalition and Berlusconi had to abide. Whilst Forza Italia is crucial for the new government's majority, it is unlikely that Berlusconi will have the force to pull its support. The new foreign minister and vice-premier Antonio Tajani (a former European Commissioner and president of the European Parliament) is the de-facto leader of the parliamentary party and Berlusconi is 86 years old. An audio recording of him justifying Putin's war in Ukraine, which was passed to newspapers last week, is likely to marginalise him even further.

If Meloni manages to keep in line her other vice-premier Salvini, whose League also polled at 8% (halving its share compared to 2018), her government can last. Contrary to Renzi, she is unlikely to wage war against the poor, but she will firmly stand for the interest of big business. Similarly with Orban in Hungary and Duda in Poland her far-right national conservatism has explicitly reactionary views about the family and the place of women in society as well as an inflammatory xenophobic narrative. Culture wars and hostility towards migrant and LGBTQ people will be the key narratives she will push whilst trying to reduce taxes for self-employed and business owners, the key demographics in her electoral base.a

In the short term, the Italian Left is unlikely to prove a challenge to the government. The divisions between the populist Five Star Movement and the moderate Partito Democratico are deep and no unifying figure is likely to emerge anytime soon. Yet, a civic, cultural and social backlash to Meloni's reactionary agenda is bound to develop in Italian squares. Italian progressives must seize that moment. C

**Andrea Pisauro is a researcher in neuroscience at the University of Birmingham and member of the Itlalian eco-socialist collective Manifesto di Londre**

# Ukraine – battered but pushing back against Putin

**Mick Antoniw** on the urgent necessity to extend solidarity with Ukraine


As the winter approaches the war in Ukraine resulting from Russia's illegal invasion begins a new phase, which will surely test the solidarity of the West and Europe and all those countries supporting Ukraine. It will also severely test Putin and his cohort of supporters in the Kremlin and his ability to retain power.

Russia is losing the war. Ukrainian forces are not only recovering territory but they are moving closer, step by step, to liberating the only major city that it has been able to occupy, Kherson. If this happens, it is the end of the Kerch Bridge, the re-isolation of Crimea and a weakening of Russian unitary dominance in the Black and Azov seas. It also frees up Ukrainian forces to begin the liberation of Donbas and Crimea. Putin nevertheless remains in a superior economic position. Unlike Ukraine, he has oil and gas revenues to fund his war but his need to conscript civilians and to finance the replacement of his devastated and creaking military infrastructure is beginning to fragment the Federation and those former Soviet Asian countries who are now equally concerned about the nationalistic rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin and Russian media.

Putin and his model of authoritarian centralised government is beginning to lose its grip. The conscription process has become a farce, exacerbating ethnic tensions between those countries and regions who see themselves disproportionately providing conscripts for the imminent flow of body bags from the Ukrainian front. Economic sanctions are impacting and Putin's leadership, once unquestioned, is now beginning to be seen as failing and increasingly dependent on repression by state security forces. China and India, such important potential allies, both hesitate, anxious about the economic impact of the war on their own economies and uncertainty around Putin's ability to achieve any credible victory and an end to the war.

So Ukraine must continue to be provided with the heavy weaponry and technology it needs to defend itself and to defeat Putin by liberating the country including the occupied territories. It must also have the financial and economic support that is essential to surviving the winter.

The UK has rightly been a consistent supporter of Ukraine and it is important to recognise this, whatever the motivation or geo-political interests of the government. For most of the left in the UK there is now a growing recognition that Putin's attack and invasion of an independent sovereign country is wholly unacceptable and must be opposed. Solidarity with the people of Ukraine is beginning to go much further with the increasing recognition that Russia has become a fascist state and that the war against Putin has now taken on the identity of an anti-fascist war. Residual claims from parts of the left that somehow this is all a consequence of NATO expansionism are delusional and to all intents and purposes discredited. Yet there are those who maintain an almost evangelical belief that opposing what they see as Western imperialism justifies their ignoring Russian imperialism and fascism. Indeed, as we witnessed through Brexit in the UK and elsewhere in Europe and America, the political positioning and common ground between the far right and far left has never been closer and become an embarrassing ideological infantilism.

The failure of the British Trades Union Congress to adopt any genuine leadership by supporting Ukrainian workers and their trade unions is probably a consequence of the undue influence of those elements within the trade union movement at a senior level, that have fallen into the anti-NATO/western imperialism trap. It has however, fortunately, been countered by a growing number of individual organisations and trade unions who have begun to develop their own direct links and forms of solidarity.

Over the coming months there is an opportunity to strengthen links with the Ukrainian trade unions and progressive organisations whose members are defending their country on the front line with their lives. We need to press both for continued military, financial and medical support and to start planning for the re-construction of Ukraine once victory has been achieved. There will be a need to support those calling for social reform and an end to the influence of oligarchy. The hundreds of billions of pounds worth of Russian assets and funds frozen by the West now need to be secured and allocated for use by Ukraine for reconstruction, economic reform and reparations, and the European Union must finally admit Ukraine to its membership.

The siren calls from vested political and economic interests calling for a peace, which Putin will never deliver, must be resisted. We must remember the lessons from the past. Fascism cannot be appeased, only defeated. Solidarity is about giving genuine support when it is most needed. That moment is now. In Ukraine workers are sacrificing their lives to defend their and our freedom. We have only one choice over the coming winter: solidarity. C

**Mick Antoniw is a member of the Welsh Senedd**

# Solidarity vital to expel Russia

With power cuts threatened **Alena Ivanova** reports on a recent visit to Kyiv where despite an imbalance between military and worker's rights the need for financial and moral support remains vital

The war in Ukraine continues to dominate headlines, with Ukraine's counter-offensive and Putin's nuclear threats especially prominent. While the focus is primarily on the extreme costs to human lives and the economy as a result of the Russian invasion, Ukraine's labour movement is both fighting at the front and fighting to defend and extend rights and protections for all. As it struggles to continue to fund its military resistance, however, the Ukrainian government and Parliament have passed and propose to pass emergency measures dramatically weakening employment rights and social provisions.

With rising inflation, energy insecurity and urgent need for more military and humanitarian support, Ukraine needs our solidarity more than ever. At the same time, global powers are already initiating discussions about reconstruction and pushing their agendas - but what kind of Ukraine are Ukrainians bravely fighting for?

In August this year I had the opportunity to visit Kyiv for the first time as part of a small delegation organised by the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign. Our main task was to offer unconditional solidarity to comrades fighting for survival, as well as to meet with trade unions and left groups in Ukraine and discuss recent developments in the war, workers rights and the future reconstruction of Ukraine. This is a brief account of the visit and meetings we had with representatives of the labour movement.

Our starting point in discussions was the full involvement of the whole labour movement in the war effort. Trade unionists are fighting, volunteering for the defence force, assisting with evacuations, treating the wounded, providing humanitarian aid and are united in their aim to win. They need the political, moral and financial support of trade unions globally.

Beyond the frontlines, the economic situation on the ground is dire indeed. More than a third of workers have lost their employment, wages have dropped by 20% already and inflation is at around 25% with predictions it may reach 30% by the end of the year.

War-damaged Kyiv

Russian forces continue to attack survival infrastructure, including heating supplies for citizens in various cities and many worry that the winter ahead will be even more difficult with people plunged into poverty and with interrupted heating. At the same time, a third of all Ukrainians have been forced from their homes - 7.6 million people have now left the country and depend on patchy and varying support programmes across the world with no indication of an end to their forced exile. There are over seven million people who are now internally displaced, meaning they are forced into temporary housing, mass shelters, rented accommodation whose cost is constantly increasing or sharing with family or friends leading to overcrowding and increased tensions within families.

In times of such a crisis we could expect the Ukrainian government to put in place provisions for a streamlined war-time economy, take control of industrial production to provide for the needs of the military and the civilian population, and introduce measures to freeze spiralling costs for ordinary people. While social payments continue to be provided, there is not enough support for workers impacted by loss of income, or indeed for workers who are injured in the course of performing their employment. Rail unions and teachers' unions for example report that the compensation their members and their families receive in case of accident or fatality while at work are much lower than those for soldiers. Instead, the government is forcing through sweeping reforms that decimate workers' rights, prepare to cut social payments through reforms of insurance funds and adopt regressive tax cuts.

What's more, trade unions and civil society are restricted in what they can do to oppose these measures due to martial law, and their capacity and resources are severely stretched with all the humanitarian support they are constantly providing to their members.

The government's vision of an extreme liberalisation of the economy must not be used as an excuse to deny our comrades help, however. Indeed it is our duty to take up their struggle and do what we can to put external pressure on Ukrainian authorities through international trade unions, through our own political representatives to make sure workers' rights, social justice and the wellbeing of ordinary people in Ukraine are prioritised in all future reconstruction plans.

But we must also not forget that the quickest way to ending the suffering of millions is through immediate and full withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine's territory. It is therefore imperative to ensure the Ukrainian resistance forces have the resources they need to achieve this, and in the present situation as trade unionists that would mean supporting our comrades financially as well as morally. Please join Ukraine Solidarity Campaign and find more ways you can help. C

**Alena Ivanova is an organiser for Another Europe is Possible**

# Watching the denialists

## **Victor Anderson** reports on MP Watch, a new initiative to target global warming deniers

There used to be an organisation called the 'Democracy Users' Network'. The idea was that there are untapped opportunities within the current official system, often because people are alienated from the whole set-up, or unaware that these opportunities exist. It can also feel daunting of course to take on big issues, or big enemies, by yourself.

MP Watch has developed from some of the same thinking – but this time combined with acute worry about the climate crisis. Although it should now be very obvious that the climate crisis is real, there are still some MPs who either simply deny its existence, or (because it enables them to deny they are denialists) consistently oppose doing anything to tackle or respond to it.

Some have banded together as the Net Zero Scrutiny Group (NZSG). All except one, Graham Stringer, who is a Labour MP in Manchester, are Conservatives, and some of those are ex-UKIP. Under the Truss administration, they gained influence because Truss appointed to influential advisor positions many people from 'free market' think-tanks, many of which are linked to climate denial organisations and funders in the USA.

MP Watch is a new national network inspired initially by Steve Baker Watch. Steve Baker was a very active backbench MP in the fight between 'soft' and 'hard' versions of Brexit, a key organiser of the victorious hard side. He now has a job in the Government as Minister of State for Northern Ireland. He was also until recently a trustee of the Global Warming Policy Foundation – the climate denial arm of the Tufton Street thinktanks. It was he and Craig Macinlay who started the NZSG group of MPs aligned with it.

A group of his constituents in Wycombe got together to form Steve Baker Watch to monitor and campaign against what he was saying about climate. They have written to him, held numerous vigils outside his constituency offices, leafletted in the high street in High Wycombe, bought space to write articles in the local paper, canvassed door-to-door, and had their activities reported in local and national newspapers. Since then, two other constituency groups have sprung up, targeting Craig Macinlay in South Thanet and Robert Courts in Witney. There are plans for more, including in Graham Stringer's constituency in Blackley & Broughton and Jacob Rees-Mogg in North-East Somerset.

The national network will help in coordinating messaging, publicity, and campaigning activities, as well as encourage and support the setting up of new constituency groups. Let MP Watch know if you would like to be involved, and/or think your MP should be targeted on this issue. MP Watch is particularly interested in hearing from people in the following constituencies where they want to start up new groups: Shipley, Workington, Blackley & Broughton, Ashfield, Hastings & Rye, Blackpool South, Fareham and NE Somerset.

Contact them through their website: mpwatch.org

**Victor Anderson is a member of Chartist EB**

# Labour dodges big issues on Europe

## **Julie Ward** on the Party of European Socialists Congress

A handful of British Labour members including the highly competent Chi Onwurah, attended the PES (30th anniversary) Congress which took place in Berlin over two days in October, hosted by the governing German SPD. The Congress heard from heads of state and government including German chancellor Olaf Scholz.

PES has 33 full members from the 27 EU Member States plus Norway and UK. There are 14 associate parties including Fatah (Palestine), Meretz (Israel) and the CHP and HDP opposition parties in Turkey, plus 14 observer parties from countries such Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Moldova and several Balkan states.

With the next European elections on the horizon much of the focus was on how to win sufficient support to become the biggest group in the European Parliament with the greatest number of commissioners. The Congress motto, "With Courage For Europe", was intended to focus minds on the campaign ahead in the context of the war and Putin's weaponisation of energy supplies with the resulting global crises and geo-political shifts.

Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela and UK Labour's Anneliese Dodds seemed to forget they were addressing an international gathering and defaulted to detailed domestic agendas as if addressing audiences back home. It was a disappointing performance from Dodds who previously served as a Labour MEP. Speaking on a panel entitled 'Respect in the World' she failed to answer a specific question about what EU-UK co-operation might look like under a Labour government. There was nothing from Dodds about common security or participation in Horizon Europe, the high-value cutting-edge scientific research programme where we previously led the field, and no mention of the hugely popular Erasmus+ education and youth exchange programme. Neither did the Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities mention gender equality which was high on everyone else's agenda thanks to PES Women President Zita Gurmai's tireless high level campaigning. PES Women conducted their business immediately before the main Congress and Jackie Jones, former Welsh Labour MEP, was elected to the Executive Bureau. Disappointingly there were no UK Labour candidates for the main PES executive body. If we are to rebuild strong relationships with our closest allies we should strive for a seat at every table. The loss of Labour MEPs is lamented by our friends in Europe with Brexit serving to weaken the EU, emboldening Putin in the process.

Most of the speakers affirmed strong support for Ukraine including the supply of defensive weapons and help with post-war reconstruction, with the final Congress resolution reflecting this common position.

**Julie Ward was a Labour MEP 2014-2020**

# Light Years Away

**Paul Salveson** on Tony Blair's thinker

**Another World is Possible**
**Geoff Mulgan**
**Hurst £20**

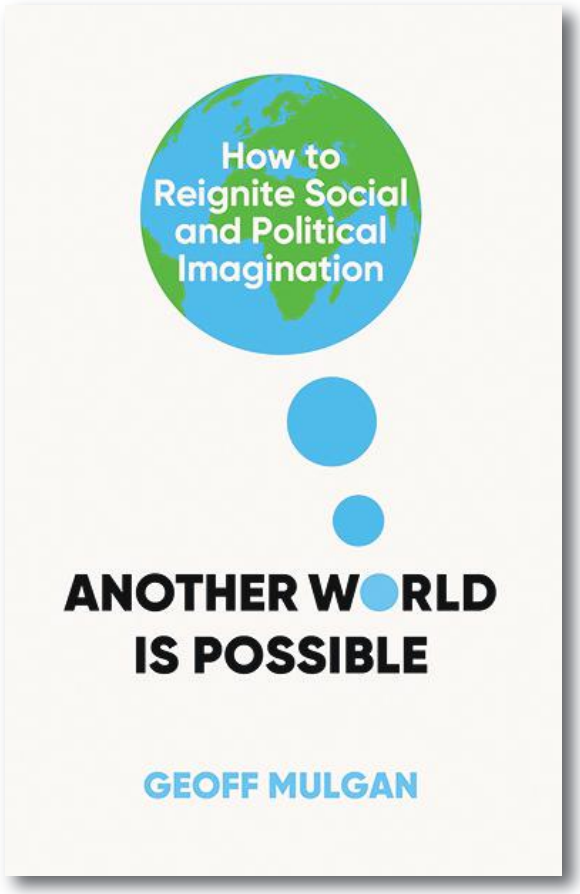
Geoff Mulgan is one of the most interesting political writers around today. His work is relevant to anyone with a political brain who isn't stuck in old certainties of right and left. His latest book, A*nother World is Possible – How to Reignite Social and Political Imagination* - couldn't be more timely, for reasons I hardly need to stress. The argument is really quite simple. For whatever reason/s we have lost the ability to look to the future and imagine a different (obviously, better) world. Mulgan asks: "how could we become better at imagining the society in which we might like to live a generation or two from now?"

The Conservative Right's idea of 'the future' has always tended to be backward-looking. Leaving Europe has been the latest 'big idea', but the idea of a future Britain is very much about going back to how it was, in a world before the EU and – for many – before immigrants. Is the Left any better? Our 'golden age' was the years of post-war Austerity and the Labour Government of Clem Attlee. It was a highly statist politics, which was what was needed to recover from the horrors and destruction of the Second World War. Yet there are quite a few who still think that political and economic model is what the country needs today.

A key part of Mulgan's argument is that ideas don't often just 'pop up' from nowhere, the brainchild of some great man or woman: "Individuals and teams flourish best in a vibrant milieu that brings together comment and criticism, competition with peers, and the feedback of an informed audience."

Mulgan was a key figure in the 'New Labour' experiment under Tony Blair. He headed up the Number 10 Policy Unit so knows a bit about how Government works and how policies are shaped. Incidentally, it's a reflection on the paucity of political thinking on today's Left that mentioning Mulgan's role under the Blair Government would instantly damn him for all eternity.

He is highly critical of contemporary social democracy, with an agenda lacking in that imagination he promotes, limited to modest (and getting more and more modest by the day) policies. "Tepid oppositionism blames everything possible on capitalism or neoliberalism, a comfortable space which requires no serious self-criticism." Timid incrementalism advocates keeping everything as it is but with a few modest tweaks. This is a comfortable space in another sense, in that it requires so little change. Historic defensiveness protects the interests of particular groups – those with influence in the parties – against any changes that could weaken them, for example a group of workers resisting any use of new technology that could reduce their numbers.




Keir Starmer, and the Labour Party as a whole, need to read and reflect on what he is saying. The sort of imagination he advocates is light years away from that timid politics that bases itself on what London politicians imagine northern working-class voters are thinking at any particular moment in time.

There is one small problem I have with the book, the age-old challenge (posed by Mao-Tse-Tung I seem to remember) about 'where correct ideas come from?', or what are the networks and institutions that can encourage the sort of progressive imaginative thinking he advocates? It's a particular issue for the North of England, where we have become used to policies being dumped on us by politicians based in Westminster and civil servants in Whitehall.

Whilst Scotland and Wales have developed alternative intellectual bases, the North of England (bigger than Scotland and Wales combined, though it isn't about size) has very little. IPPR North does a good job but it's influence is limited. The Hannah Mitchell Foundation, which had so much potential, is running out of puff. The universities are the obvious source of imaginative thinking but too often a university can be an island of ideas, not connecting with the world around it.

Imagine the potential for a progressive local authority linking up with its university and local business and voluntary sector to work out how their town or city could look in twenty years? Or even a group of universities collaborating with regional partners on a shared vision for their region? Mulgan, rightly, isn't prescriptive on what his 'competing political imaginaries' might be, but does toss a few ideas out. But it's more the process of thinking through a desirable future that he stresses.

# Inequality-new cleavages emerging

**Don Flynn** on the politics of wealth

**The Return of Inequality: Social Change and the Weight of the Past**
**Mike Savage**
**Harvard University Press £28.95**

Research and agitation around the issue of growing inequality, from the authors of *Spirit Level* through to the dense tomes of Thomas Piketty, have reflected the hopes of left wing social scientists that a space for a fight back against the plundering of the ultra-wealthy might now be possible.

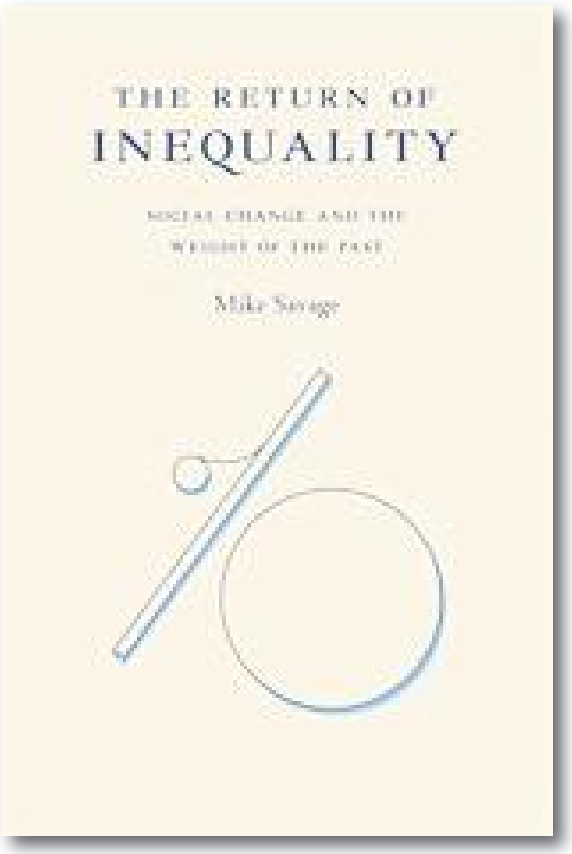
It has not worked out quite so straightforwardly. Inequality has turned out to be a flittering phantom of an issue, undoubtedly generating anxiety but showing little evidence of popular support for the measures needed to bring about a reduction of its inequities.

This work by sociologist Mike Savage goes someway to help us understand why growing inequality has not generated the sense of grievance that brings people out onto the streets.

Much of the evidence for the division of populations into a 99 percent who supposedly stand against an avaricious 1 percent which is grabbing all the spoils draws on statistics about income and the earnings of an elite which have expanded up to the upper reaches of the stratosphere. Savage points out that concentrating on income inequality obscures the fact that the disproportionate gains by the elite have gone hand-in-hand with satisfactory growth of earnings across a large swathe of the population, extending all the way to those above the bottom three deciles, when admittedly things get a lot more difficult.

The core of the book's argument is that it is inequality measured by wealth, rather than income, which has the most significant implications for the shape of the economy and society. Wealth accumulates from assets which, unlike income, are not so sensitive to market exchanges and which represents the grip that historical forces have over the present. Wealth inequality allows unearned income, understood in economics as 'rent', to come fully into view.

Shifting the focus from income inequality to wealth brings the predicament of a different segment of the population into the mix as the critically aggrieved. The radicalism of wage earners is too easily curbed by a salary increase which, though lagging behind the 1 percent, is still enough to support the idea that progress is being made. But when wealth is the measure what is revealed is not just how little of it some groups have, but also the mechanisms which facilitate their deprivation.




Treasure, acquired by way of the grip that history has on the present, shows itself up in the social forces that sustain its accumulation over longer periods of time. Wealth acquisition derived from gender discrimination, imperialism and racism supports the prediction that the people who have fewer, (or zero), capital assets are women in general, nations that have suffered under the yoke of colonialism, and ethnic groups tainted by this imperial order and made the subject of racial injustice. That is pretty well the way the cookie crumbled in reality.

Much of Savage's work concerns the trajectory of social science and the tools it has and is devising to reveal what results from inequality. Leaning on Bourdieu's field analysis he shows that this covers not just economic outcomes but also the cultural features of the social formation. Politics is an aspect of this, and the question is posed as to whether an adequate response to inequality is still represented by the division of liberal democratic societies into 'merchant' parties which stand for elite interests, and reformist currents which aim for redistribution in line with the needs of 'outsiders'. He argues that time is up on this particular social cleavage.

The reinforcement of the grip of history over the present means that relatively recent developments, like the liberal democratic national-state capable of delivering social cohesion across class divides, are being eclipsed by a return to imperial formations. The nation is once again not much more than a springboard which the elite classes use to propel themselves into an ascendancy derived from a prominent ranking within the world order of economic and social forces.

When this was last so obviously the case, in the 18th and 19th centuries, democratic politics took the form of a footloose kind of radicalism rather than the class-based parties which acted on behalf of vested interests in either the fields of business or redistribution. If that is the case, then wealth inequality will predict that the currents most likely to be drawn into the radical camp will be those who feel disadvantages arising as a consequence of environmental degradation, imperial plunder, gender and racial injustice.

# Accounting for failure in Afghanistan

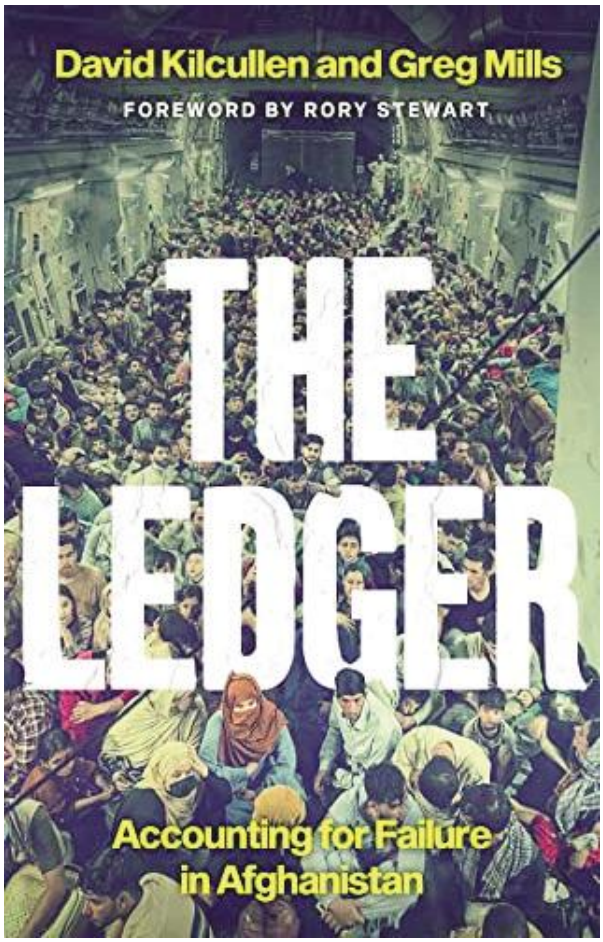
**Duncan Bowie** on an analysis of defeat

**The Ledger**
**David Kilcullen and Greg Mills**
**Hurst £14.99**

There will no doubt be other books on the failure of Western intervention in Afghanistan, but as an analysis of the last 20 years and the culmination in the disaster of US withdrawal and Taliban victory, events in our recent memory, this will be hard to beat. The two authors, one Australian, the other South African, are policy analysts who have spent time in Afghanistan in various advisory roles. A forward is provided by British MP and Afghanistan veteran Rory Stewart which in itself is well worth reading. Neither US or other coalition members including the UK seemed to have learnt from the history of other interventions in Afghanistan, most significantly the Russian intervention – the authors make reference to the earlier work of Sir Roderic Braithwaite, former UK ambassador to Russia on the experience of the Russian occupation and defeat by the Mujahideen - *Afgantsy*.

After a detailed narrative of the events of the last twenty years, the two authors draw up a ledger of lessons which should have been learnt – thus the book's title, and draw comparisons with western interventions in other countries including Iraq and Mali. They contrast western failures with what is seen as a positive example of locally managed emergence from civil war to stable statehood – that of Somaliland.

Trump and Biden come in for justifiable criticism, the first for negotiating directly with the Taliban and ignoring the Afghan government, the latter for the overnight withdrawal without even notifying coalition allies, never mind the Afghan army. Both were to deny that building a stable governance framework was a US objective, the withdrawal was to show that the only American priority was avoiding the deaths of anymore Americans and that if the Afghans wanted to fight amongst themselves, that was not America's problem. Interestingly one of the few military commanders who sought to focus on development rather than on just killing Talibanis and their sympathisers was Sir Nick Carter, until recently the UK chief of defence staff.




Pakistan is criticised for the extent of support it has given the Taliban, without which they could not have survived as an organisation to re-emerge as a political and military force and fill the vacuum left by the collapsing Ghanied government. Western leaders underestimated the potential of the Taliban and moreover grossly overestimated the capacity (and willingness) of the Afghan army to continue fighting without American support. This was not just a failure of intelligence but self-deception on a staggering scale.

The authors are strongly critical of the massive aid programme which is seen as facilitating corrupt governance with little or no benefit to the Afghan population, while most aid agencies as well as politicians and military leaders failed to recognise the extent of support for the Taliban amongst the mainly rural Afghan population, who saw both the Afghan government and the western intervention as the problem not the solution and who did not welcome the western liberalism imported into the urban centres, notably Kabul.

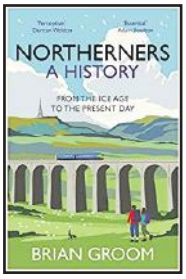
The Taliban victory is seen as a boost to the ambitions of jihadis in other countries, notably in the Sahel, and East and Southern Africa, where fundamentalist Islamic militancy continues to grow. The Ledger provides a set of DO'S and DON'T'S for any future 'international' intervention in a civil war, and a warning that intervention, however well intentioned, tends to make matters worse rather than better. This should be a manual for politicians, military leaders and aid workers seeking to operate in any 'failing state'.

Also just published is the biography of the Mujahadeen leader Ahmad Shah Massoud by the veteran journalist Sandy Gall under the somewhat misleading title *Afghan Napoleon*. This provides the story of how the Mujahadeen drove out the Soviets. This now seems like ancient history and it is perhaps regrettable that Gall did not publish this book twenty years ago, as this would have been useful reading for the more recent generation of UK and UK military commanders and politicians, many of whom thought that a war in Afghanistan could be won. Massoud was assassinated just two days before the Al Quaida attack on New York's twin towers. His son, Ahmad Massoud is now leading the so-called Afghan national Resistance against the Taliban in the Panjeer valley.

# Journalistic account with gaps

**Paul Salveson** on a mix bag

**Northerners – a History**
**Brian Groom**
**Harper North**




Brain Groom's book is the latest in a number of thoughtful books about 'The North', following on from work by Martin Wainwright, Tom Hazeldine and Sebastian Payne. It describes itself as a 'history' but Brian Groom isn't really a historian. He's a very good journalist (formerly with the FT) with an 'historical imagination' and makes good use of a wide range of sources.

I read the book when it was first published and enjoyed it. A second reading left me a bit more uneasy. Part of the book's problem is that it doesn't know what to put in and what to leave out. It claims to be a history 'from the Ice Age to the Present Day', which is an impossible task in the space of about 400 pages. As a result, the first quarter of the book is based on established work which adds very little to anyone's historical understanding.

It gets better from Chapter 11 ('Why The North?') but sometimes struggles to avoid being a bit trite. We are told at the start of the above chapter that "Life in the Industrial revolution could be tough," which is hardly a novel insight. The author rightly devotes attention to immigration and slavery, reflecting contemporary political and historical interest. Yet he is silent on our home grown slaves, the half-timers who worked in the mills and factories from the ages of nine and ten. The chapter on 'Northern Women' says little about working class women in the North and the collective role they played in the fight for the vote and in trade union struggles. In addition to 'great men' in history we have a few 'great women' added on.

There's a chapter on the Luddites and Chartism, with the silly title 'Trouble at th'Mill' (probably, I suspect, at the instigation of the publisher), which essentially puts working class radicalism down to a few uncoordinated outbursts. The work of *E.P. Thompson in The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963 and the starting point for any understanding of Northern working class radicalism in the 1820s, isn't even referenced. For a general overview such as this, other gaps are surprising. John Walton's magisterial *Lancashire – A Social History* isn't even shown in the bibliography.

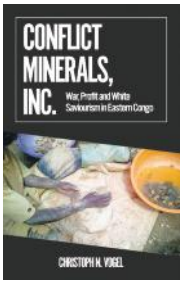
So that's the down side but it's a good read and covers a lot of ground. I particularly enjoyed his chapter on culture- 'Engineers or Poets?' - and that on language and dialect , 'Divided Tongues'. The North is a big place and really comprises (at least) three regions – the North-East, Yorkshire and the North-West. There is a 'Northern' identity within that and the North needs to get better at working together. The recent united response by Northern newspapers in response to concerns about the dropping of 'levelling-up' policies by Truss and Sunak (see 'Points and Crossings') is an example of how the North can work together in its shared interest.

The book is a useful overview of more recent times and Blair's creation of the regional development agencies. For all their flaws and lack of accountability they did much good work. The book covers Labour's catastrophic performance in the 2019 General Election and the creation of the myth around the 'red wall' constituencies. So, overall, a mixed bag but a worthwhile read. Hopefully it will stimulate further work on aspects of northern history, which seems to be in the doldrums at the moment, though Kate Fox's W*here There's Muck There's Brass*, also published by Harper North, offers hope.

# War and profit in Eastern Congo

**Nigel Watt** on regulating the supply chain

**Conflict Minerals Inc**
**Christoph N. Vogel**
**Hurst £20**




The provinces of North and South Kivu in the east of Democratic Republic of Congo, are the source of many important minerals – coltan, gold, and tin in particular. Katanga, further south, is the source of cobalt and copper. The Kivus have also been the crucible of several wars and multiple Mai-Mai militias continue to create serious instability.

Western capitalists (and strangely this book does not mention China which is now the biggest customer) want to buy these minerals at low cost and have been persuaded by well meaning campaigns not to buy what has been certified as 'conflict minerals'. This book points out at great length that the complexity of the Congo is not understood. Mining, the author insists, is not the only cause of conflicts, though it can help finance them. There are ethnic and political causes, many resulting from contradictions dating from colonial times. The Congo, he writes, is seen as a kind of blank space where there is corruption, few rules and Africans fight each other and where "white saviours" can come in with their colonial mindsets, their vision of "Orientalism," and sort things out.

To ensure that the source of minerals is conflict free, structures have been created, notably the International Tin Supply Chain Initiative which try to identify their source, certify it and to minimise corruption. However, the constant pressure from the importers is to maximise profits. The effect has not been beneficial to the artisanal miners organised in co-operatives who struggle to make a living by selling to traders what they dig up and refine - even though these minerals are not often the cause or result of conflict. This has been confirmed by the International Peace Information Service (IPIS). The small guys lose out to bigger companies who can use their weight to try to create local monopolies. There is also the danger that the general impression that anything from the Congo is tainted with conflict can cause importers to look to other countries and thus further impoverish the Congolese miners.

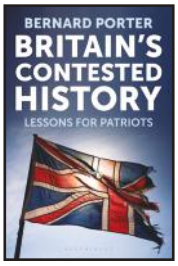
This book is based on very thorough research and provides a lot of detail about the mining areas and the different agents of conflict. There is mention of how mining "has eroded non-mining livelihoods…unmade the equilibrium of agriculture, cattle herding, timber, craft and trade." Vogel has a clear post-colonial vision and strongly criticises the ignorance and prejudice of Westerners. Unfortunately for me, he writes in an unnecessarily academic style which makes this book a hard read.

# Contesting contestation

**Dave Lister** on a historian's curious retrospective

**Britain's Contested History - Lessons for Patriots**
**Bernard Porter**
**Bloomsbury**

This is the first time that I have had to say that I do not recommend a book for Chartist readers. This book is fine for people who may not know much about modern history or politics, but regrettably contains rather a lot of platitudes, repetition and questionable judgements. At the same time if you look very carefully there are some useful insights to be found such as that the physical arrangements in Parliament "with government and opposition ranged on benches against each other" reinforces the adversarial nature of British politics and that the European Research Group do not do research because they have already settled on their position.




Porter covers the period since the Napoleonic Wars. He believes that there is a good patriotism which focuses on the positives in Britain's past such as, for him, winning two world wars and the Napoleonic Wars and campaigning for social justice and political rights and the importance of dissent in British history, protest and rebellion. Bad patriots are those who ignore the misdeeds committed in Britain's colonies and do not understand the advantages of Britain's membership of the EU.

Good things are positive British values, liberalism and social democracy, economic, industrial and scientific progress and achievements in literature and sport. Bad things are the squalor of nineteenth century industrial towns, harsh penal laws and oppression in Ireland and the colonies, Brexit and Johnson.

There are obsessions with Eton, cricket and Brexit. Apparently, Eton's mode of education is responsible for the conduct of current Tory politicians. There are frequent references to how wonderful cricket is, with the hope that our European friends will finally embrace it. For a book on Britain's "contested history" there is a great deal about Brexit and the Johnson Government, none of which we would disagree with but none of which actually adds to our understanding of them.

Porter believes that there was more integrity in the past in British politics. Ministers resigned in certain circumstances, whereas today they prefer to brazen it out. He also claims that ministers did not lie to Parliament. This is not credible as examples such as the so-called weapons of mass destruction, Profumo's lies and Eden's over Suez spring to mind. What is probably new is the scale of the lying. As a Scottish politician said: "If Johnson said it was raining, I would go outside and check."

What is not considered is the effect of flag-waving events on people' consciousness. The Last Night of the Proms and the Platinum Jubilee may appear harmless but how far does all that Union Jack waving feed into the 'Make Britain Great Again' agenda?

Lucy Powell suggested in an article in the Observer (5 May) that Labour is now the truly patriotic party with its espousing of British values and support for British institutions like the BBC and Channel Four.

Bernard Porter has his heart in the right place and is surely capable of writing a much better book than this, as he has done before. Love of your country can be a positive thing but can clearly be transformed into something far from positive. Porter is at least on to a good point that patriotism does not preclude membership of beneficial international partnerships.

# Of slaughter and corruption

**Bob Newland** on a novel with a dramatic mix

**The Elephant Conspiracy**
**Peter Hain**
**Muswell Press £14.99**

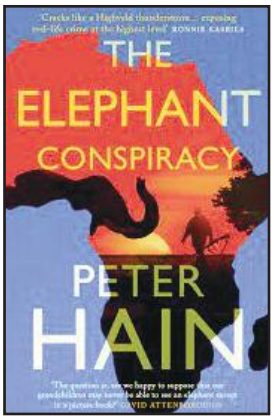
Chartist Readers may be familiar with Peter Hain's previous novel *The Rhino Conspiracy* (reviewed in Chartist #306). This sequel is equally if not more thrilling. The author brings his love and expertise on the fight against apartheid and the troubles in Northern Ireland to fill the novel with realistic but exciting events firmly based in the current South African struggle against corruption and state capture.

The background is provided by the terrible toll on elephants across southern Africa as they, like the rhinos of Hain's previous novel, are threatened with extinction at the hands of international criminal cartels. Familiar characters include Thandi, the young hero working with 'the veteran' a thinly disguised Ronnie Kasrils, former Head of Intelligence of the ANCs armed wing uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and campaigning British MP Bob Richards - clearly Peter Hain himself.

Characters from South Africa today can also be identified although many appear under unfamiliar names. Another character from the Rhino Conspiracy is 'the Sniper', a defender of game reserves against poachers, who acquires an extraordinary new role. New faces also appear including 'Komal', recognisable as Kasrils' fighting wife Amina by those who know her.

The story proceeds at an amazing pace combining the slaughter of elephants, corruption and international money laundering in a dramatic mix. It ends with an incredible turn of events only to be discovered by those who read the book.

With this, the second of his novels, Peter Hain confirms himself as




a brilliant writer of fiction alongside his 20 other non-fiction books. The story ends with a powerful reinforcement of the possibility of a better future for his beloved people of South Africa who have suffered so much under the yolk of colonialism, apartheid and their legacy of corruption. This hope I share with him.

I heartily recommend this book which so successfully combines the reality of today's South Africa and outstanding issues for the Island of Ireland.

# How remote politics wrecked Britain

**Hugh Gault** on the underdog's perspective

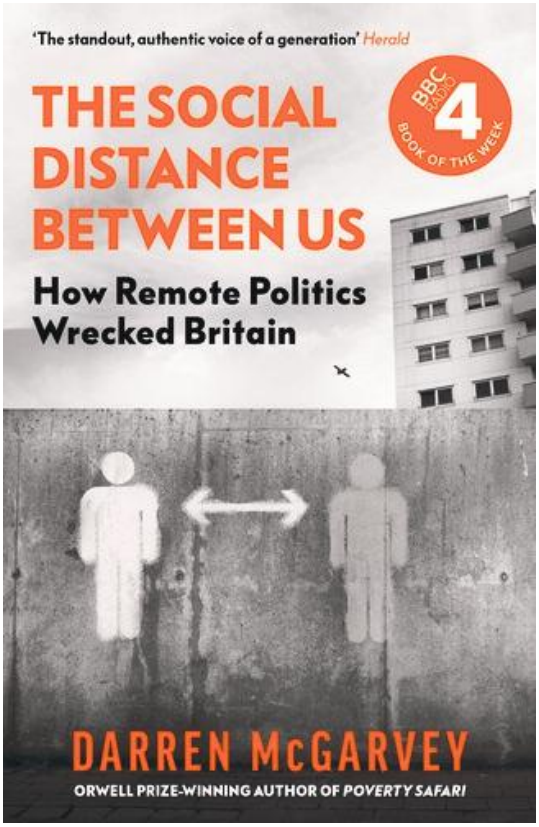
**The Social Distance Between Us**
**Darren McGarvey**
**Ebury Press £20**

As might be expected from the author of *Poverty Safari*, his influential and successful winner of the 2018 Orwell prize, this is a radical and polemical book that has many of the same strengths. It is a combination of lived experience, McGarvey's own and other people's, his original thinking and more conventional, if no less radical, analyses of the state of Britain today.

McGarvey puts himself in the position of the excluded, the underdog and tells their stories from their perspective. That he is able to do so is often because he has undergone the same or similar experiences himself, or if he has not, can make the emotional connection and empathise. Consequently, he frequently challenges society's preconceptions. This is at the heart of his aim, not least because in his view society is structured to meet the needs of the privileged, the entitled, the few, and is biased against the many whose voices are rarely heard, not least because they are forced to work flat out simply to meet basic needs. Even when their voice is occasionally heard the default reaction is for it to be suppressed. Ken Loach's recent films come to mind. After all, any society according equivalent weight to the views of its discontents, rather than assuming that the contents are the overwhelming majority, neither could nor should survive in its current form.

Educational opportunity and decent housing are at the centre of human needs, a roof over your head and the chance to develop skills of hand and brain that will support you and your family in the future. But many never get the chance of either. The Thatcher Right to Buy legacy has ensured that the norm for many is private renting, often sub-standard and over-priced. Education has also been subjected to market forces. In both cases the message is 'Keep up or ship out'.

It is McGarvey's contention that UK democracy depends, indeed thrives, on the 'proximity gap' whereby those who have the responsibility and power, political or bureaucratic, to resolve problems are too distanced from them to understand properly the issues or their impact. Consequently, society fails its most vulnerable. Getting close, appreciating the reality as it is experienced, would be threatening to the existing structure of society. The alternative would be to listen and hear, rather than filter out, the views of the disabled, the sick, the badly housed, the homeless, the addict. But even that, let's face it, would be too time-consuming.




Yet it could be different, as was evident in the Covid pandemic when rough sleepers were rapidly housed. The motive may have been 'to break the chains of transmission' and prevent 'the NHS being overwhelmed' but good governance and an effective bureaucratic response came together in everybody's interest. Unfortunately, it has not been sustained once the national imperative has passed.

McGarvey is an original thinker, often left-field as well as left-wing, so it is somewhat carping to complain about an excess of originality. Yet from time to time this undermines his otherwise convincing arguments. He conflates the 'proximity gap' with social class, and while in general the poor and 'working class' are disadvantaged from birth, this is not always so. Mitigating factors, especially perhaps family expectations and behaviours, can override the negative influences of peers, school and community for some. In another instance he asserts that some private schools share the profit from low-risk investments with the wealthy parents whose up-front payment of fees enabled this. One or two instances may have come to his attention but these, one hopes, must be the exception. The crucial issue is the charitable status granted to private schools and the benefits of being VAT exempt compared to the state sector.

Yet overall his arguments about the inherent benefits of networks of influence ring true. Historians are often struck by the recurrence of the same names, not just aristocratic or landed, across the generations, and Anthony Sampson's books *The Changing Anatomy of Britain and Who Runs This Place?* demonstrate how these also percolate across politics, the professions and the media. McGarvey makes some telling observations about the limits of entitlement and over-confidence with respect to Boris Johnson, while the wealth of Blair's son demonstrates how the benefits of a turbo-charged start trickle down the generations.

Neither *Poverty Safari* nor this book have any footnotes. While this might be due to current (and arguably lamentable) trends within publishing, it mattered less in the earlier book that retailed McGarvey's experiences. It matters very much, however, when arguments become assertions and the reader is asked to take these on trust.

It would not be true to say that 'all UK life is here', but much of it is. McGarvey has given them a voice - but will it be heard?

# Tories can frack off

Cat Smith is Labour MP for Lancaster

The last act of the Truss government was to push through a pro-fracking bill in breach of the Tory manifesto pledge. **Cat Smith** explains why fracking would spell disaster for many areas

The 2019 General Election doesn't throw up many happy memories for me, but I will never forget being stood in the cold and in the dark on Preston New Road in Lancashire speaking to broadcast media about the surprise Tory announcement that they would enact a moratorium on fracking. It was a game changer in Lancashire where I am an MP. Locals who were vehemently opposed to fracking suddenly had reason to give the Tories a hearing and many switched their votes to them on this basis.

That was an election promise for votes that has now been ditched. They promised not to support fracking unless science categorically showed it could be done safely. But our shortlived Prime Minister seemed to have the same disregard for keeping her word as her predecessor. Despite the science categorically showing that fracking is risky, environmentally damaging and a relatively fruitless method for extracting energy, ex-PM Truss thought she knew better and u-turned (she did this a lot) to overturn the fracking moratorium.

The government's weak defence is that action is needed in face of the current energy crisis. Yes! Action is needed, however, there is no evidence that fracking will lower gas prices. The energy markets are set up so that gas from fracking would go to the highest bidder, making no impact on individual bills. Chris Cornelius, the founder of fracking company Caudrilla said – "even if the UK were to generate significant gas, we are not likely to see lower gas prices – any more than living next to a farm would mean paying less for milk".

He went on to say that no sensible investors would risk fracking in the UK, with its challenging geology making it commercially unviable. The decision therefore appears to have been taken for ideological reasons rather than based on any form of evidence. Truss operated in an evidence-free orbit.

A fracking disaster

When fracking commenced in Lancashire in 2018, over two months we experienced 57 earth tremors. It was impossible to predict the probability or size of tremors. But rather than adopt a safety-first approach, the Tories' response to this looks as if it is going to be to increase the level of seismic activities allowed at fracking sites. In addition to earth tremors, fracking also uses vast amounts of energy and water in extraction and produces toxic chemicals in the English countryside.

Polling suggests only 17% of the public support fracking and as a Lancashire MP I know first hand how strong the opposition is to fracking from the communities most directly affected. Despite previously promising fracking would only happen with local consent, the government are now refusing to comment on issues of local approval and are instead having discussions about bypassing planning permissions.

At this point I should say the Welsh Labour Government follow the science and back the Welsh people in banning fracking there. Oh, how I wish we had a Labour government in Westminster to protect my constituents!

At a time of climate emergency, we need a government that demonstrates national and international leadership – not just when world leaders were in Glasgow for COP26. Instead, the Tories are demonstrating a reckless dismissal of our climate responsibilities.

There are numerous cheaper and safer options for producing clean, renewable energy. Renewables are around nine times cheaper than gas-fired power stations, and a much faster way of delivering energy directly to homes. Real solutions to the energy crisis do exist, but the government is choosing to ignore them. The government has essentially banned offshore wind and is now hindering the development of solar power. The failure of the government to make the morally, scientifically and economically right choice represents a blatant disregard for science and common sense that has become characteristic of the Conservative Party.

In contrast a future Labour Government would create GB Energy, a publicly owned energy company that will invest in green technologies. This goes alongside pledges to quadruple offshore wind, triple solar power and double onshore wind capacity with an aim of delivering a fossil fuel free electricity system by 2030. We need a government that treats the climate emergency with the seriousness it warrants. And looking at the evidence, this can only be a Labour government. C