



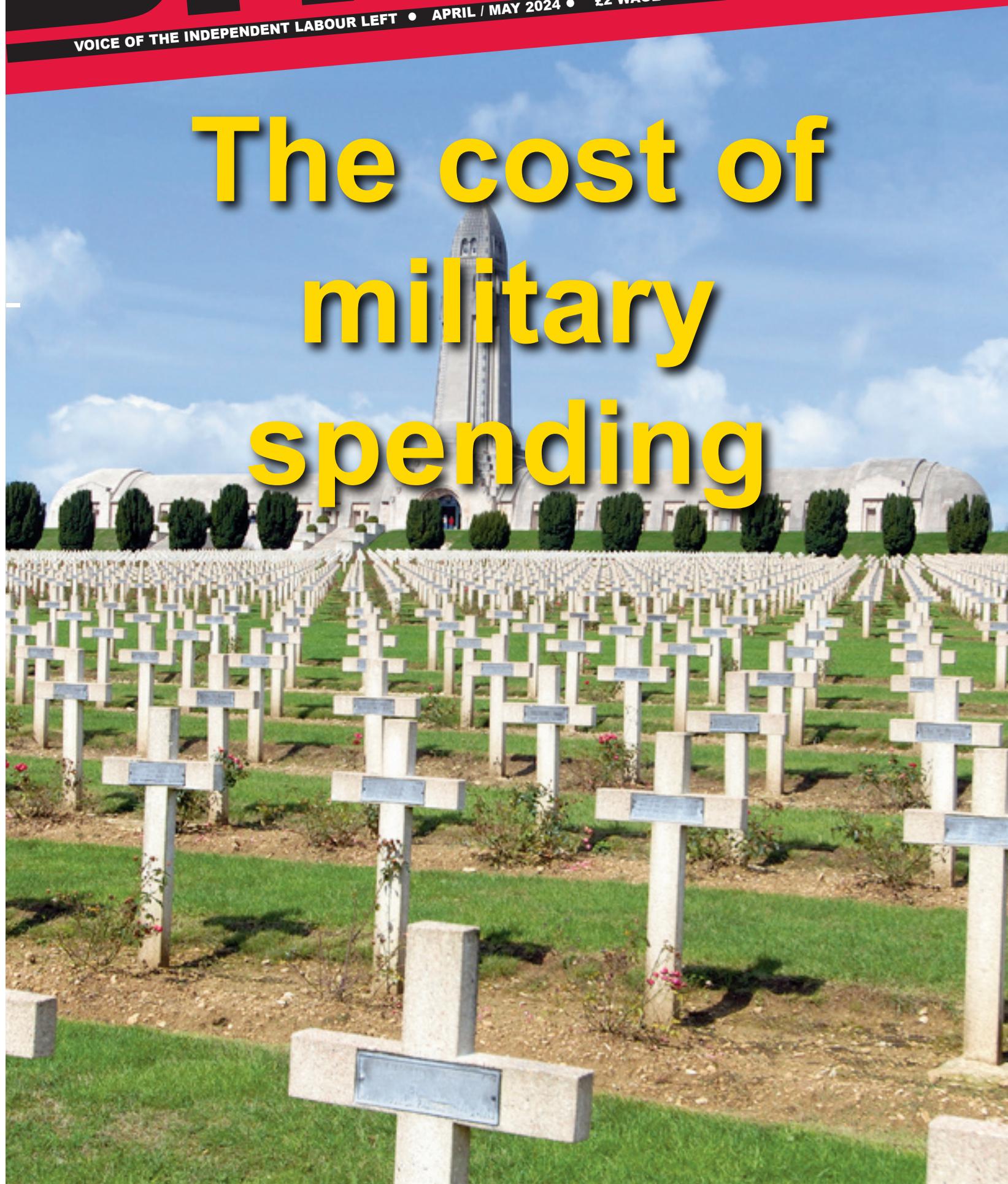
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The cost of military spending





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EDITORIAL



Cry ‘Havoc!’

“We fought World War I in Europe, we fought World War II in Europe, and if you dummies will let us, we’ll fight World War III in Europe.” So said retired US Navy admiral Gene La Rocque, who died in October 2016. To be fair, he was speaking ironically, and was actually campaigning against more war.

La Rocque’s memories of the Second World War, when he was bombed at Pearl Harbour amongst other horrific experiences, left him convinced of the waste and futility of war. He was warning us against it, and was particularly concerned about the martial inclinations of his own country.

We seem to be getting mired in an Orwellian nightmare of endless war to keep the proles in line. In a country as obsessed with World War II as Britain is, one would expect people to be able to remember who our actual allies were. But no - we’re told, in effect, that we’re at war with Eurasia, that Oceania has always been at war with Eurasia.

The US policy aim of ‘full spectrum dominance’ is leading to a constant slide to war. Who now recalls all the excitement about the ‘Peace Dividend’ that was to follow the ending of the Cold War? Certainly not the British government. Rishi Sunak (at the time of writing, the Tory Prime Minister) wants to

massively expand our military spending, and in particular, increase the number of nuclear warheads we possess. We already hold over 200, but in order to make a politician seem strong on defence, apparently we need even more.

The media agree that these weapons of mass destruction are to keep us safe, but the question has to be asked: if we had half as many warheads, would that make us half as safe? We would still have over 100, enough to wipe out every major city in the western hemisphere.

The constant beating of war drums obscures basic facts. A peace agreement was negotiated between Ukraine and Russia two years ago, but the US and (to our shame) UK governments, working together, refused to allow the Ukrainian government to go ahead with it. Now German military sources say that there are British troops stationed in Ukraine. If that’s true, we are already at war with Russia.

The leadership of the Labour Party is fully complicit with US foreign policy, which is basically that ‘Carthage must be destroyed’. In this, as in so much else, they are out of step with public opinion. The voters know that every death in war is a life wasted, a family devastated. We have to prevent it.

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Success of green energy

I was in my early twenties in 2010, fresh out of the financial crash, when I got my first post-Uni job working as a Customer Relations Manager for a German onshore wind turbine manufacturer, going round the UK meeting customers who had invested in onshore wind turbines and wanted to understand them better. At this time, the percentage of electricity coming from wind energy was 2%.

Fourteen years later with increased electricity demand, wind power is now providing close to 30% of the UK's electricity with 7,200 associated full time jobs. My role had moved on and I found myself as a Contracts Manager at the London Array offshore wind farm.

This was the largest offshore wind farm in the world from 2013-2018, providing enough electricity for 500,000 homes and providing hundreds of jobs in Thanet, one of the most deprived areas in the country.

The rapid growth in UK wind power is a huge success story for the decarbonisation of the UK and has allowed the current government to announce the closure of the last coal power station in October 2024, which is brilliant news.

However, issues remain with this booming industry, even as the UK

Clr Rob Yates, Margate Central ward, currently Mayor of Margate, tells the story of renewable energy and what it means for Labour.

teaches the rest of the world how it can work. We can also teach them what not to do.

One of the many failures of the Tory government was the sale of the Green Investment Bank to Macquarie Group in 2017. This wasn't widely reported, but the Green Investment Bank was the only opportunity for the UK to be an owner and beneficiary in the success of existing offshore wind farms.

It was bringing money into the exchequer, as opposed to overseas companies benefiting from our natural resource (wind). To make it worse, George Osborne knowingly sold the Green Investment Bank before its wind farm stakes had passed their construction phase, meaning he knowingly sold them off on the cheap, wiping millions from the sale value for our tax payers.

I even heard that the onshore assets that we as tax payers owned via the



Green Investment Bank, weren't even included in the sale price. If Labour want to learn from the huge success of the wind farm industry, then they must learn from its failures.

The Sovereign Wealth Fund from Rachel Reeves needs to include a stake in our growing offshore wind industry. In the words of Mariana Mazzucato, if we were willing in 2009 to socialize the risks of capitalism, then we must also be willing to socialize the rewards.

A Sovereign Wealth Fund would allow the UK to invest in the growing floating offshore wind, tidal, and wave technologies, and could be the start of a future success story akin to Norway's sovereign wealth fund, but in renewable technologies.





Plan for housing needed

Why is significant government action on housing desperately urgent? Here are five things that will happen under the new government after the election:

1. Spending on Housing Benefit will exceed £2bn a year. This is inevitable because rents have been rising a lot faster than incomes. But there have been contributing factors, notably the depletion of Council Housing and the growth of private tenancies. This is effectively the taxpayer boosting landlord profit.

2 Spending by local authorities on temporary accommodation for the homeless will also top £2bn a year. This is because numbers have been rising at a time when cheap solutions are drying up. And equally significantly because half the homeless will be in London. Much of the other half will arise in the other cities. This is the local taxpayers paying huge sums for often disgusting housing conditions.

3 The number of children in London living in so-called 'bed and breakfast' accommodation for the homeless will exceed 100,000. It's only used because, to use an old quote "There is no alternative". It is sometimes a better alternative than living in a van, or sharing with strangers. The bigger scandal is the number of mothers with babies placed there, who end up with a schoolchild still in that one room.

4 The number of new properties classed as 'affordable homes' in London will fall to less than a quarter of what the figure was just a year ago. Again, a complete collapse is happening nationwide but London is the extreme case. The crash has been coming since 2010. It's the Osborne plan, which I'll come back to below.

5 Over half the properties sold under the Right to Buy will be owned by pri-

Bernard Crofton, Ken Livingstone's housing advisor at the GLC, demands urgent action on housing from the next Government.

vate landlords. It was always inevitable. Back in the last months of the Major government, I warned the Commons Committee on Social Security of the effect of this, and its effect on Housing Benefits (point 1 above). The incoming government did nothing to stop it. And unsurprisingly nor, did the present Conservative one.

The landmark statistics above will inevitable happen. Not because of anything the new Government does, but because there is nothing they can do in time to push these avalanches back up the mountain. Let's take affordable housing as an example. What makes their home affordable for millions of households is Housing Benefit. In 2020 the current government froze rent levels that Benefit would cover.. One quarter of units rented from private landlords were within the permitted levels at the time: the figure is now one twentieth.

What about Social Landlords who own Housing Association and former Council housing? They were hobbled by George Osborne. Back in 2020 the Chancellor - or his advisors - had this cunning plan to make subsidy for social landlords the target of one of his budget cuts. Their subsidy traditionally comes in the form of payments towards the construction of new homes. He cut this by 60% and told them to make up the difference by increasing the rents and letting some of them at "market prices" or selling some to private owners. But simple economics have shredded his plan, if it was genuinely intended to work. The budgets of Social Landlords have been hemmed in by interest rates, and



inflation in building costs. Plus the demand for higher maintenance and remedial work post-Grenfell (not that they are not needed and hats off to Peter Apps whose book and articles exposed the needs). So the Osborne Plan has "reverse-decimated" new building in London (only a tenth of the programme survives) with similar trends starting to appear in the rest of the country.

A new government should reintroduce a proper subsidy to build Social Housing. It will create jobs and boost the economy. But that will have little immediate impact on homelessness. They could, however, also allow Councils and Social landlords to buy up homes as the housing market slows down. Developers will not need to lay off workers waiting for house prices to rise. (see *Labour Briefing* February 2024 on how housebuilders deal with market forces).

These changes are not going to be an adequate substitute for proper building programmes. But they will help while a programme is assembled. The new government must arrive with a plan ready to go; there is no time for Inquiries or Green Papers. They will not be forgiven for a brilliant document but no turnaround in the worsening lives of the needy.



Climate of fear

In higher education, there has been a growing trend amongst universities to portray themselves as champions of Social Justice. That has seemed like a very good sales pitch in recent times. The youth of today's world care about such issues. They hunger for peace, justice, and action to address challenges like climate change. Often their role models are those who fight causes in the name of creating a better world.

Even before the current crisis in Gaza, a great many students supported the Palestinian cause. They saw the injustices of occupation and racial dehumanisation. Many called for an end to that, by peaceful means. And sometimes academics stood with them on the side of a sustainable, long-term peace. But since October 7th, as if that were the day history began anew, many academics have fallen silent on the subject of Palestine.

Meanwhile, students have been active in their resistance to what they see as not just a genocide but also what can be labelled as an Educide. So many schools and universities have been obliterated, possibly beyond repair, in the Gaza Strip. Added to that, a growing number of Palestinian academics have lost their lives, alongside artists, writers and scientists. This onslaught by Israel appears to have motives beyond military destruction. Many of the actions suggest that a very evident cultural destruction is at play here too.

Though students are taking action in various ways, the rest of academia needs to stand up too and state that what's happening in Gaza is seriously wrong. It is not just unethical. It is murderous and completely at odds with the espoused values of the West. Academia should be getting involved in the debate rather than turning away, pretending, that this is not the defining issue of the day. Of course, many are

P.Breen, Labour for Irish Unity, argues that the dreaming towers need to wake up, and soon.

involved but feel compelled to act under a shroud of secrecy, fearing for their positions or prospects. Speaking up might lead to accusations of antisemitism.

That could even happen when someone is Jewish. This is because of the conflation of antisemitism and support for social justice in Palestine. But such a climate of fear should have no place in academia. British universities market themselves as citadels of critical thinking. By being completely uncritical of Israel, in public, they are risking the reputation of everything they supposedly stand for.

The values that we should be teaching our students are those of criticality and the ability to think against the grain, when required. At every corner, we chastise those who engage in short cuts, easy routes, and fire fights. But even Generative AI and the infamous Chat GPT could surely tell us that longer-term strategies are needed here.

Somebody out there in western society needs to speak up against the road of endless war. And that's because such a path is not just catastrophic for Palestine, but bad for Israel too. It's also bad for the rest of the world because it's creating a massive schism of opinion between the global north and south. We're in severe danger of losing our status as a place, a nation of open debate and discussion; a beacon of education drawing tens of thousands of international students towards our universities every year. There are of course those though who will say that what's happening in Palestine is



Photo: iStock, JJ Farquitectos

not the intellectual business of academics. They are here to educate, not to pick sides in the most complex issue of the day. And to some extent, there is a case for such a position, but strangely not one voiced about Ukraine, Xinjiang, or many other conflicts, where many educators have pushed for peace and justice.

If we are afraid to speak up on the most important matter of the day, how can we expect our students to confidently master the criticality required of academia? We should be showing solidarity with their efforts to fight for social justice. This will be in the best interests of both Palestine and Israel in the long run. Academics, as opposed to politicians and the media, are expected to have a long view of issues.

And maybe some will say that they do, that they're just playing a waiting game. Maybe at the end of all this, we'll see an avalanche of papers, seminars, and talking shops – when it's safe to speak again, when a whole society lies buried under rubble. Then we can speak up for justice when the heat of battle is done, when it's fashionable again. For the sake of Palestine though, social justice and social consciousness needs to be in fashion right now in western academic circles.



Safety net needs urgent repair

In 2019 a damning UN report into UK poverty stated that the government has 'systematically and starkly eroded' the social safety net. Since then, the Tories' economic car crash has made things even worse.

According to the Tories' smaller state ideology, individuals and voluntary organisations should provide the safety net, rather than the state. The many horrendous consequences include a fall in real terms in benefits payments, 4.2 million children in poverty (source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation) and 3 million people using a food bank compared with only 60,000 in 2010.

The harsh reality of a withered welfare state is experienced daily by people claiming benefits needed for basic subsistence. The introduction of the Universal Credit (UC), was supposedly intended to simplify the benefit system, but has instead made the benefits system for many claimants more complicated, punitive and less generous.

There seems no let-up in the Tory attacks on welfare. Proposals were announced late last year to toughen even further the qualifying criteria for receiving a work-related benefit thus reducing the number of claimants who qualify for this component of UC. They are targeting in particular people with mobility and mental health conditions who struggle to leave the house.

There are 3 categories of employment status for claimants of universal credit. The claimant is either fit for work, or has limited capability for work (LCW), or has limited capability for work and work-related activity (LCWRA). LCW applies to claimants who will not have to look for work, but will need to take steps to prepare for work. The LCWRA category covers claimants who will not be asked to look for or prepare for work, because if the claimant under-

Barry Rodin, Orpington CLP, reports on the serious crisis caused by the Tories' cuts to welfare and benefits.

took work or a work-related activity their health condition or disability would result in a substantial risk to the claimant or others. These claimants may be eligible for an additional amount of £390 per month.

The benefit assessment changes the Tories are proposing will restrict the number of claimants getting UC and the additional amount for LCWRA. These changes are to be applied to new claimants from 2025. The LCWRA 'Substantial Risk' regulations will be amended to realign substantial risk with what the Government claim was its original intention of only applying in exceptional circumstances.

The LCWRA 'Mobilising' activity will be removed. The Government says this change is being made because 'new flexibilities in the labour market' enable many people with mobilising limitations or health conditions to undertake some form of tailored and personalised work-related activity with the right employer support.

In addition, the points awarded for the LCW 'Getting About' descriptors will be reduced. The cited reason is increasing home and remote working and thus less need to travel to a workplace. Apparently, limitations in getting about 'are less of a barrier to being able to work for some people.'

However, only 1 in 10 jobs advertised offer flexible working, including working from home. Many employers also still fail to support disabled people at work appropriately. For example, failing to put in place reasonable adjustments. Moreover, increasing numbers of employers are requesting their staff to

spend more time in the office. The Government's plans will have a devastating impact for those on lowest incomes. For instance, it will deprive people with severe health problems of £390 a month, pushing more into poverty.

Many people with serious health issues will also be required to take part in inappropriate work-related activity to get their benefit, or face being sanctioned. This is likely to damage many disabled people's health and wellbeing. The monthly £390 benefit should be extended to those who only have 'Limited Capability for Work (LCW)'. This would ensure that all those who are not fit for work due to ill health or disability get the extra money.

The assessment criteria for another key benefit Personal Independence Payment (PIP) are also attracting much criticism, especially in recognising progressive but variable conditions such as multiple sclerosis. The excellent survey and report 'Decade of Failure' by the Multiple Sclerosis Society highlights these issues with real-life case studies and practical solutions offered. (<https://www.mssociety.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/ms-enough>)

It is vital that the Labour Party election manifesto includes radical reforms to the benefits system to reverse the damage caused by austerity and benefits cuts. Instead of trying to outdo the Tories on 'fiscal responsibility', a fundamental objective for Labour should be to constantly campaign for and produce measures to improve the wellbeing of disabled and vulnerable people.



Organise and fight back

Matt Willgress



Just as this column was due to be filed, the widely reported comments from Tory donor Frank Hester that hearing Diane Abbott made him “want to hate all black women” and “should be shot,” became public knowledge.

Then, astonishingly, when the issue was debated in Parliament, Diane herself stood to speak 46 times only to be ignored and then told time had run out.

The days that followed saw widespread calls from across civil society and beyond for the Tories to disavow their £10 million of donations from the ghastly Hester, with some calling for it to be returned and others - such as former Labour Deputy Leader Harriet Harman - calling for it to be given to a charity nominated by Diane.

More importantly, there had been widespread and growing solidarity and support for Diane, including from - but not limited to - her own constituents, numerous black & BAME community leaders and groups, local and national trade unions, many Labour backbench MPS and former MPs from across the spectrum of opinion in the Party.

This included a 1000+ strong rally called in Hackney itself.

A powerful statement from the UCU union, for example, said, “we stand with Diane in her long-standing fight against racism and misogyny, just as Diane has stood unwaveringly

with trade unions for decades. We call for a full public apology, for Frank Hester to be investigated by police, and his donations to be returned, and for the Labour Party leadership to restore the whip.”

Also of significance, was that a number of these expressions of support have explicitly included the call for the Parliamentary Labour Party whip to be restored to Diane, and these have not been limited to the Left.

Ed Balls, to give just one example, said “she should be brought back following that apology and she should be supported and defended rather than left on her own, which is what’s happening at the moment.”

Former Political Secretary to Tony Blair, John McTernan repeated his previous calls for the whip to be restored, saying “Time to give Diane Abbott back the Labour whip. No better time to show solidarity!”

The case for the whip to be restored is strong - and Diane herself made clear to Keir Starmer that this was the move that could be made to genuinely support her, rather than a few words in Parliament.

As the co-convenor of Stand up to Racism Sabby Dhalu aptly put it, Diane “should not be left isolated and has a better track record on fighting racism than anyone else in the Labour Party. Racism is not a political football. Keir Starmer must restore the whip.”

The call has also received growing widespread support publicly, with numerous petitions and social media initiatives garnering support, including one petition which received over 5000 signatories in a day.

Majority grassroots opinion in the Labour and trade union movement is clearly that the whip should be restored, as a poll by ‘Labourlist’ indicated.

Whilst ignoring these calls, Labour engaged in shameless attempts to cash in on the racism towards Diane through a fundraising email - showing just how out of touch this leadership are with communities and labour movement activists across the country.

As a model motion for Labour movement bodies being widely circulated as *Briefing* goes to press says, “Diane Abbott is a trailblazer who deserves our full solidarity.”

Let's pledge to up the campaigning that can grow the pressure on Starmer.

Stand with Diane Abbott!

- Sign the petition at <https://action-network.org/petitions/restore-the-whip-to-diane-abbott>
- Read the supporting motion at <https://bit.ly/dianeabbottsolidarity-motion>
- Matt Willgress is the National Organiser of Arise – A Festival of Left Ideas.



Council funding crisis

The Local Government Information Unit's survey for 2024 (*The State of Local Government Finance for England, 2024*) records that over half of respondents said they were likely to declare 'effective bankruptcy' over the next five years, with 9% expecting to do so next year.

More than half of respondents drew on reserves this year and would do so next year. Among councils without social care responsibilities, housing and homelessness is the most serious short-term and long-term pressure.

Popular options for reform were multi-year financial settlements, ending competitive bids for funding, and 100% business rates retention by three quarters. Proposals for fixing local government finance command support across the sector.

Only 4% of respondents were confident about financial sustainability. 21% of respondents were looking to sell assets. 19 councils were granted "Exceptional Financial Support". This is the mother of all misnomers: 'support' which is in fact no support. It is merely permission to borrow or to sell off assets.

We can only presume this was granted to prevent more councils issuing section 114 notices in an election year. It will create a financial death spiral, as can be seen by the staggering cuts in Birmingham, combined with a 21% increase in council tax – paying more for less.

That 19 councils are in this position in one year is an indication of the scale of the crisis. As we say in our Open Letter there is no solution other than funding councils on the basis of annual assessment of social needs.

In response to the Budget, Cllr Stephen Houghton, chair of the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (SIGOMA), said: "The

In an update on their Open Letter calling for fair funding for local authorities so they can build, the Labour Campaign for Council Housing examines the LGIU's 2024 survey.

chancellor sticking to a 1% increase in public spending implies significant cuts for 'unprotected' departments such as local government over the coming years.

"At a time when local government finances are at breaking point, following a decade of cuts and rapidly rising demand-led pressures, further cuts would be devastating and push many councils to the brink of financial viability."

Rachel Reeves told the *Times* that Labour would stick with the 1% projection of Hunt's Autumn Statement. We don't know what spending she would propose for the "unprotected" departments since she has said that Labour won't decide on spending plans until after the General Election.

The OBR has estimated that these departments will face a 2.3% cut a year in real terms between 2025/26 and 2028/29. The purpose of Hunt stealing Labour's non-dom policy (costing £10 billion) was to push Labour further into a financial corner.

Given the leadership's refusal to tax wealth, when it comes into office it will be faced with the choice of a £19 billion cut in spending of "unprotected" departments, including local government, or else it will have to find more money from somewhere.

Asked how she would pay for Labour's public sector spending commitments such as school breakfast clubs and scanners for the NHS, Rachel Reeves said that the money would be found from 'savings' elsewhere; i.e. cuts. When Sophie Ridge demanded of Keir Starmer "Will you tax, borrow or be the

austerity Prime Minister?" he could not answer, other than generalities about increasing growth, boosted by changes to planning laws.

When the Labour leadership talks about the government having 'maxed out the credit card', that there's no 'magic money tree', they are talking as if a national economy was a family budget. This is just an excuse for austerity.

Yet even supporters of the leadership are calling on them to abandon this self-imposed straitjacket. Polly Toynbee called for equalisation of capital gains tax with income tax, whilst Will Hutton said that "The first step to our economic liberation is to tear up these crippling fiscal rules."

An unnamed MP told the *i.paper* "Labour is going to have to find some policies that strike out a different pathway forward for the country on the economy, or they will end up being the midwives of austerity 2.0 which will be a disaster for the country."

There can be no resolution of the local government or housing crises without a break from austerity. The Labour leadership's economic straitjacket underlines the importance of our campaign around the Open Letter. The message from across the labour movement should be that it is unacceptable for Labour to stick to Tory spending plans. The self-imposed economic straitjacket needs to be abandoned.

To sign the Open Letter, go to www.thelabourcampaignforcouncil-housing.org



Apres Drakeford, le deluge

I am writing this about five hours after the declaration of the result of the Welsh Labour leadership election. The party seems stunned by the result. It was clear that Mark Drakeford was too. We are now faced with the worst of all possible results. Vaughan Gething's narrow victory with 51.7% of the vote leaves Welsh Labour fractured and vulnerable.

Gething finds himself supported by a minority of both Labour Senedd and party members. It's been a divisive election and as Leighton Andrews, a former Welsh Education minister commented, 'Vaughan Gething will be the weakest First Minister since Alun Michael'.

His campaign was given a £200k donation by a company found guilty of breaking environmental law. To many electors a certain similarity appears between the Senedd and the instances of London Tory sleaze. The most common perception I am picking up from social media is that somehow the result has been fixed. Votes from Trade Unions such as Unison and Unite are seen as part of this process. And whilst I can't complain about certain rules of elections I have heard support from well respected comrades that this is far from the truth but others equally respected have presented an opposite view.

I am left on a wet Saturday fearing creeping Starmerisation of Welsh Labour with Gething being the transformative element. The overwhelming majority of members of Labour for an independent Wales supported Jeremy Miles who had presented an 'indy curious persona'. I suspect that a certain 'unionist' perspective can be correlated with many of Gething's Trade Union allies. Starmer's promise and the successful conference resolution of Welsh Labour for their own rule book and

Cllr Martyn Shrewsbury, Brecon, Radnor and Cwmtawe CLP, sees a gloomy future for the Left in Wales.

party devolution will be ignored or kicked further down the road. I fear that a re-heated and resurrected attitude to the Welsh National movement is about to be served up.

Already Plaid has been raising concerns about what happens next. Mark Drakeford built a wide radical coalition across progressive and left parties. With a lousy temper and a penchant for hot microphones Gething seems very unlikely to hold this together. I am seriously concerned that Welsh Labour could lose its dominance in Wales to Plaid after 102 years in power. Pressure from both Plaid and the Greens could well lead to Labour losing power in the Senedd elections of 2026. This will probably coincide with the mid term of a Starmer government in Westminster.

I am also worried that with this new administration we shall see the watering down or elimination of the 20mph speed limits within the populated areas of Wales. I note with interest in my own Constituency of Brecon, Radnor and Cwmtawe that our Parliamentary candidate is rapidly distancing himself from the policy of his own Welsh government on the requirement to grow trees on 10% of farming land. I expect to see him continue his flirtation with the powerful farming lobby by rejecting the speed limit of 20 mph. It's been a rather lousy Saturday both for the left in Wales and for Welsh Rugby. There could hardly be more negative and depressing results both sporting and political here today after the Ides of March.

And whilst I am writing about the farm-

ing protest here in Wales I notice clear evidence that the Far Right is seeking to piggy back its loathsome message upon this campaign. It's highly likely that a campaign by the Reform Party will be based around protests against green and environmental policies, against the 'woke' agenda, against migrants, LGBT and the school curriculum. The election result today makes the future uncertain, opaque and indeterminate. It's true that Jeremy Miles, the defeated candidate, was no Corbyn but he was more representative of Wales and its issues and concerns. I expect that the exodus of the Left from Labour will ratchet up a gear.

Here in my Constituency the Green Party has selected a young female candidate, committed to sustainability and social justice, who supports Palestinian rights and is married to a serving soldier. A perfect storm is being created for Labour to lose the left vote and throw away a Constituency not held by Labour since 1979. Sadly today I say, 'Apres Drakeford, le deluge.'

Welsh Labour is left with the worst of all worlds. As I watched at 10.15 this morning the mood was downbeat and flat. The result was given by the former Parliamentary Private Secretary to Keith himself and deputy leader of the Welsh Party Carolyn Harris. Some five years ago she defeated the excellent left winger Julie Morgan in similar circumstances with similar methods and support. A dictum of Marx's floats into my mind 'that history repeats itself first as tragedy then as farce.'



Vote for democracy

I am standing for re-election alongside the Grassroots Voice candidates, Mish Rahman, Gemma Bolton and Yasmine Darr. Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) are now able to nominate candidates for this year's NEC elections.

The Labour leadership have let members down. We were promised a bold and transformative policy agenda, alongside party unity. Instead, Starmer has abandoned party democracy and returned to the agenda of the status quo.

I joined Labour at a young age because I saw the damage the successive Tory governments of the 2010s inflicted on working-class communities like mine. After fourteen years of Tory austerity, this couldn't be more urgent.

Families left choosing between heating and eating, in-work poverty, bills, rents, travel and food costs have all sky rocketed and local services are struggling after more than a decade of real terms cuts. Meanwhile, from tax cuts to Tory corruption we've seen the richest 1% get even richer. Our government has embraced the politics of greed and turned the UK into a country of deep inequality.

2024 will be the year of the next Labour government. But we need a socialist Labour government. One which tackles inequality head on, with a bold manifesto committed to tackling 14 years of Tory government at the root. We need funding for public services including local councils and to bring greedy companies to heel by renationalising public services.

We urgently need a social housing building programme to address the

Jess Barnard, a members' representative on Labour's NEC and a former chair of Young Labour, explains the vital importance of this year's NEC elections.



housing emergency to give our families a secure future. We need ambitious climate justice and education policies and for Labour to put human rights at the heart of international policy. But we also need to do the work in our own party.

Our membership deserves representatives who are prepared to hold the party leadership accountable for its actions – not simply toe the leadership line. In recent years we have seen with increasing frequency, selection stitch ups and shutting down of democracy within our own party. The party is increasingly run by a narrow clique of people who have disregarded members, risking losing us our greatest asset.

During my term so far on Labour's NEC I have worked hard to hold the party leadership accountable and advocated tirelessly for the rights and policies supported by you, the members. The Labour Party is built on the

passion and campaigning power of our members. Our party can only thrive if it welcomes a diverse range of voices across every community.

Internal Labour party elections are an essential time to have your say as a Labour member, to make sure you elect NEC members who will stand up for party democracy and who will challenge the leader to deliver the change the country needs to see.

Alongside the GV4 I will continue pushing for a bold Labour government and a vibrant, diverse, democratic and socialist Labour party. You can help ensure that future by nominating me and the GV4 at your next CLP meeting.

Contact jessbarnardnec@gmail.com to let us know how your meeting went.

You can follow Jess on Facebook, Twitter/X and Instagram.



Yet another expulsion

Mike Cushman, JVL's membership secretary, has been expelled (or in the party's dystopian words, 'terminated') by the Labour Party. This came as little surprise to him as they first started investigating in 2017.

The first three investigations were based on claims that things he had said and written were antisemitic. When Mike challenged their interpretations, the Disputes Team realised how unsustainable they were and did not pursue them further.

The fourth attempt falsely alleged that Mike was a member of LAW, Labour Against the Witch Hunt. When he pointed out this was untrue and asked for evidence they resorted to alleging "support for a proscribed organisation": guilt by association. The party claims an unchallengeable right to define what constitutes support.

The charges were received on 30 January. Mike's response was sent in on 5 February: 'I do not dispute the veracity of the examples but I do challenge the interpretation you put upon them. I am committed to the importance of open political debate in society generally and inside the Labour Party in particular.'

'We will not develop our ideas if people are scared to speak. I am also passionate in defence of adherence to natural justice in all domains. The tragedy insufficient care and attention to fair process causes can be seen in the pain inflicted in cases from Orgreave to Hillsborough to Windrush to Horizon.'

'There is good evidence that allegations of antisemitism in the Labour Party have been used to suppress free speech and pursued through abuses of natural justice. You may believe I am mistaken but that we differ in our understanding is not sufficient reason

Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL) have issued the following statement about the expulsion of Mike Cushman.

for disciplining me for reasonably held beliefs... I did not support Labour Against the Witch Hunt with whom I have, for this purpose irrelevant, political differences. We do, however, have points of agreement and I was pleased to be able to use the opportunities they gave me in instances where our views overlapped to promote my, not their, views on matters of concern...

'Because of the fear induced by overstated allegations of antisemitism in the Labour Party and elsewhere, platforms for advancing arguments around freedom of speech on Palestine and Israel are highly restricted...

'It is important to recognise that I am not being investigated for anything I have said or any views I am assumed to hold, only for whom I am alleged to support. This is guilt by association, a tactic that had its natural home in the US House Un-American Activities Committee and should have no place in the Labour Party.'

'For the record it is not my view that the Labour Party is free of antisemitism. We exist within a society that is pervaded by discriminatory and prejudiced beliefs and these beliefs infiltrate our party.'

'However, it is my view, based upon my own observation and considerable well validated research by others, that antisemitism is neither the most significant problem of bigotry facing the party nor is the party the locus of the greatest problems of antisemitism.'

'The disproportionate attention paid to it, both by our enemies but sadly also by some elements inside our party, has

played a major part in denying our country the Labour Governments it desperately needs; a view that is validated by the findings of the Forde Report. The EHRC in their report on our party explicitly stated that expressing an opinion on "the scale of antisemitism within the Party" is covered by Article 10 of the ECHR.'

'I also find the way you have pursued this allegation distasteful. The way you have substituted one claim with another suggests you have decided a priori to pursue me because I am a vocal and well known Jewish anti-Zionist... The three-to-six-year delay suggests that my membership of the party has not been a threat to our electoral chances or reputation, otherwise you would have taken more urgent action.'

The termination notice was received on 6 March. Mike submitted a subject access request to see all the documentation held by the party referring to him. The party eventually supplied an extensive dossier. Surprisingly, none of the items in the dossier referred to any discussion of a decision to investigate him, even in a highly redacted form.

It would seem that a member of the disputes team arrived at work on the morning of 30 January and spontaneously and without consultation or prior discussion decided to issue a notice of allegation. When Mike queried this with the Party's data controller he received no response.



UPHILL STRUGGLE

Kevin Flack



Welsh lessons

It doesn't bode well for a future Labour Government that Defra Shadow Secretary Steve Reed appears panicked by a farmers' tractor protest in Wales.

The Welsh Government under Mark Drakeford has been tackling climate change seriously with measures such as the 20mph speed limit and proposals to rewild 20 percent of agricultural land with trees.

The proposals for tree planting are part of the Sustainable Farming Scheme, which is just at the consultation stage but already Reed told the *New Statesman*, "We have no intentions to replicate the Welsh proposals across England...I'm hoping the Welsh government is going to listen to (the protests) and will amend their proposals."

Following the ULEZ panic after the Uxbridge by-election it makes you wonder if Starmer's government will back down at the first sign of a right-wing protest at any positive environmental plans.

Rural rentals

The Campaign for Protection of Rural England (CPRE) has welcomed new proposals for short-term lets that are slashing affordable rental options in rural areas.

From the summer, there will be requirements for planning permission and a mandatory national register with local authorities having the power to regulate them.

CPRE highlights that the problems have worsened as, "the explosion in the number of homes marketed for Airbnb-style short-term lets is strangling rural communities. The worsening housing crisis is felt most acutely in rural areas which is why we've been calling for rapid action from the government. We want everyone in the countryside to have a fair chance in life, whatever their circumstances."

Decent homes

Speaking to my local Labour Party, Shadow Defra Minister Sue Hayman highlighted the housing problems facing those living in the countryside, as "twice the number of non-decent homes in rural compared to urban" areas.

She also promised Labour would investigate solutions to the lack of bus services, suggesting that as companies are demanding too high subsidies, pilots of community buses and dial-a-rides would be tested.

Co-op Party leads the way

With a possible Labour Government approaching, it would do well to plan implementation of the recommendations in last year's Co-op Party Rural Commission.

Its detailed approach to solving problems facing rural areas include 42 proposals including rural-proofing government policies; more power to the lowest-tiers of local government such as parish and town councils; community wealth

building funds and ensuring rural tourism is sustainable.

Its Commissioners included former MP and Campaign Group stalwart David Drew and Tiverton Labour's tour-de-force Liz Pole. The report is on the Co-op website and forms probably the most comprehensive plan for our rural areas that has been produced so far.

Blue hedges

Last month the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) carried out its regular 'frighten the government' opinion poll which put Labour ahead in a majority of the 100 most rural parliamentary seats - what *Farmers' Weekly* has termed the "blue hedge."

However, delving down into the details of the poll shows that an average of under 100 people appear to have been surveyed in the selected seats and 35% of those polled were "don't knows," who traditionally mostly move back to their previous party come an election – in this case the Tories.

This poll and others showing Labour on over 20% leads predict the party winning places like the Isle of Wight and Chichester. Sorry to end on a downer, but no, comrades, this isn't going to happen.

Kevin Flack has left the hustle and bustle of the Kent hop fields to report from the New Forest. Future articles may disproportionately mention broadband connectivity.



Vote rigging in Pakistan

Under the Pakistani constitution, once the government's tenure ends an interim government is selected to organise the National and Provincial elections. But the Election Commission of Pakistan finally announced a date for the elections for 8th February 2024, almost four months after they should have been held, possibly because of pressure from the IMF and the United States.

It would appear the delay was not to do with lack of funds or security staff, alleged cases of civil unrest and winter snows in the highlands and mountains. It is suggested it was due to the programme for rehabilitation of the previous PM and family members who were in self-exile in the UK.

It is again alleged that a deal was made with the establishment (army) that allowed Nawaz Sharif to return as a prodigal son to be transported from Islamabad airport by helicopter to Lahore, and to the Minar-e-Pakistan, a monument built at the site where the All-India Muslim League passed the Lahore resolution in March 1940.



The site is conducive to holding large public gatherings. Here Mr Nawaz Sharif and his daughter made speeches in front of a disappointing number of supporters.

The establishment / judiciary in the interim was disproportionate in their

Our Pakistan correspondent Malik reports on the intimidation and ballot rigging against Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) - Pakistan Movement for Justice - in the recent elections.

treatment of Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif. Nawaz was allowed to roam free on bail while the cases against him were expunged and original decisions taken by Supreme Court judges were declared unsafe or overturned.

Imran was locked up and tried in jail by the army and civil judges for the increasing number of cases against him. In one case of breaches of state security and one for fraud he was sentenced to 24 years and an additional 7 years for a fraudulent marriage under sharia law. Imran Khan was disqualified and cannot hold public office or stand as a candidate in national or provincial elections.

Further measures taken to discourage Imran's party from contesting the elections included: imprisonment of his workers; removal of the party (PTI) name and his election symbol the cricket bat from the ballot paper; harassment and intimidation of candidates from his party, who then sought to contest the election as independents. This included arrest without charge, physical violence and attacks on their families.

Two thirds of the independent candidates had their nomination papers forcibly taken by the police or rejected



Photo: France 24

outright by the election commission. The vast majority were able to get redress from the high court and succeeded in filing their papers.

Despite not being allowed airtime on mainstream media or any mention of his name or the party on any of 90 satellite TV channels or the just under 5000 cable operators and the 210 FM stations, the PTI/Independents were able to organise through social media activists and mobile phones, often with the internet being down or blocked.

Imran Khan's Independents were advised by their leaders not to leave the polling stations after the count without collecting Form 45, a document that confirms the numbers of votes cast for each candidate and forms the base for Form 47 which is then completed, and the result announced within 24 hours.

The results from the Form 45s indicated a huge win for the Independents but the Form 47s were delayed by the Election Commission, in some cases up to 3 weeks. The result according to Form 45 for the National Assembly on the night were as follows: PTI/Independents 183 seats. This included in Punjab 115 out of 139, in Sindh 19 out of 61, in Khyber



Round the World

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:an elections

Pakhtunkhwa 42 out of 44, in Baluchistan 4 out of 16 and Islamabad 3 out of 3. In some cases, the candidates had to go to court to appeal their cases.

For example, all three seats in Islamabad were won by PTI/Independents but were awarded to Nawaz Sharif's party. This was overturned on appeal to the courts. Since the initial appeals by large numbers of disgruntled candidates the Supreme Court has chosen to ignore these appeals.

The final result was still not complete some three weeks after the election. In addition, the 70 discretionary seats for women and minorities that are awarded on a percentage basis of the total number of seats secured by each party are in dispute.

Pakistan People's Party 54 seats.

Since none of the parties achieved the threshold of 169 seats, a coalition government has been agreed between the PML(N) and the PPP. The Prime Minister will be Mr Shahbaz Sharif (younger brother of Nawaz Sharif) from the PML(N) and the president will be Mr Asif Zardari (widower of Benazir Bhutto) from PPP.

The Provincial Assemblies' results have been announced. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, PTI/Independents have won 91 seats and the other three parties have taken 16 seats. In Baluchistan the party that will form a government is the PPP with the greater number of seats in the 65-member assembly. The Punjab

province has been claimed by the PML(N) and the Sindh Province by PPP.

International media have expressed their concerns about the legitimacy of the Pakistan elections although this is unlikely to be sustained considering

the possible recognition of the new government of Shabaz Sharif who was PM previously with the PDM coalition government that replaced Imran Khan in 2022.

It is almost a foregone conclusion that the US will recognise this government and that the IMF will be persuaded to bail out Pakistan's bankrupt economy for another two years. The conditions imposed by the IMF are likely to be unpalatable for the people of Pakistan



Nawaz Sharif

Photo: Al Jazeera

Since PTI was not allowed to contest as a party and because independents do not benefit from this discretionary allowance the other parties are at distinct advantage when the final numbers are announced.

The results based on the Form 47 results reduced the PTI/Independents seats in the National Assembly and in the Provincial Assemblies: PTI/Independents 102, The Muslim League (Nawaz) 73 seats, The



Pakistan Parliament building, home to the Senate and the National Assembly

with rising fuel prices and falling exports and little prospect of inward investment because of the uncertain political and economic situation in the country.

Pakistan is strategically important to the US who have no access to Iran and Afghanistan, they are also keen to prevent China's Belt Road initiative that allows access to the Arabian sea via the Gwadar deep water port. The current route for Chinese exports to the rest of the world is long, dangerous and vulnerable to disruption by the US and their local allies enroute.

The US is also keen to patch up relations between Pakistan and India which is seen as an ally against China and a significant commercial partner. This is unlikely since India is a member of BRICS and the historical animosity between India and Pakistan is over territory that is of strategic importance to India.

With protests still going on about vote rigging and jerrymandering it will take some time for the dust to settle. PTI is effectively reduced to holding the KPK province and Baluchistan province has the potential to return to political unrest and some political commentators have made comparisons with the 1971 election that resulted in Bangladesh separating from Pakistan.

In the meantime the Iranians, the Chinese and the US have recognised the new government.

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Protect access to justice

The government has just been consulting on reintroducing fees in the employment tribunals (ETs). If this becomes law, employees and workers will have to pay a single fee of £55 – whether they are bringing the case by themselves or as part of a group – when seeking to enforce their employment rights against their employer. An appeal to the employment appeal tribunal (EAT) by the party challenging an ET decision will also attract a fee of £55.

Employment tribunals – or industrial tribunals as they were known until 1998 – were set up in the 1970s to provide employees and workers with an informal and accessible forum for the enforcement of employment rights. Employment law has developed considerably since the inception of the industrial tribunals, and the ET and EAT have jurisdiction to determine more than 70 types of employment claim. Each party has had to bear their own legal costs and these new proposals will not change that.

Unfortunately, the burden of fees to challenge an employer still rests on the shoulders of the worker/employee, even where they are successful. The ability of the winning party to recoup their fee, or indeed the costs of pursuing (or defending) a claim, is a missed opportunity.

Before fees were introduced in 2013, the ETs registered 59,000 cases (individual or multiple claims) in 2012/13. This dropped to 28,000 cases in the following year. After the Supreme Court quashed the fees order, the number of cases increased from 18,000 in 2016/17 to 33,000 cases in 2022/23. Interestingly, case numbers remain below pre-fee levels.

Under the previous regime, fees ranged from £160 to £1,600. Fees

UNISON's head of legal services, Shantha David, reports on the government's proposals to reintroduce employment tribunal fees.

were challenged in the courts by UNISON and, following a four-year legal battle – when ET claims dropped by about 69% – the Supreme Court agreed that the unaffordable fees order breached the constitutional right of access to the courts, which was essential to the rule of law and was guaranteed by Magna Carta.

The court ordered the government to reimburse about £35m in fees paid by claimants. To date, only £18.6m in fees and interest has actually been refunded, according to HM Courts & Tribunal Service's annual report for 2022-23.

Given the government's previous experience of ET fees, the Ministry of Justice has admitted that the 2013 scheme struck the wrong balance between recouping the costs of running the service and protecting access to justice. When fees were in place, the annual cost of running the ETs and EATS was £65.8m. Costs for 2022-23 totalled £80m.

This time around, the ministry has stated that its rationale for fees in the ET and EAT is "to relieve some of the cost to the general taxpayer by requiring tribunal users to pay for the tribunal system, where they can afford to do so".

There is to be help with the fees scheme – the lord chancellor will have an exceptional power to remit fees. It is



worth noting, however, that this exceptional power was exercised only 31 times between 2015-16, when some 86,130 individual claims (note – not cases) were presented.

In summary then, is it really worth the time and effort of recruiting additional administrative staff to collect fees? Particularly at a time when there are administrative shortages at the ET and EAT, and calls and emails are still being left unanswered. The new fee regime is forecast to generate £1.3m-£1.7m a year from 2025-26 onwards, with an estimated income of £0.6m-£0.7m from implementation in November 2024 to March 2025.

The consultation, which closed on 25th March, does not indicate if these are net or gross sums. Assuming they are net, then this new scheme will only cover only about 1%-2% of the total costs of running the tribunals. What is the point of the scheme, then, other than to be (once more) an impediment to access to justice?

This article first appeared in the Law Society Gazette



Budget fails schools

In March Chancellor Jeremy Hunt delivered his spring Budget – a Budget that shows just how little this government cares about public services and education. There's no more money for existing schools and colleges. Nothing for our members pay or staffing provision. No extra funding to fix our crumbling buildings. It isn't enough. What Jeremy Hunt announced only scratches the surface of what schools need.

Our School Cuts campaign knew that schools needed £12.2 billion just to start reversing the impact of 14 years of government cuts. Instead, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt has committed nothing to reverse the cuts. The Chancellor pledged to build 15 new schools for students with special educational needs and disabilities.

But he's allocated just £105 million – that's nothing close to addressing the £4.6 billion in real terms cuts to SEND funding. of government cuts. Instead, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt committed only £105 million to fund 15 schools for children with SEND. That's not even 1 per cent of what's needed.

We know the conditions that our children are learning in. These are not the standards that should be tolerable for one of the richest countries in the world. Teachers are having to pay for supplies out of pocket. Students with SEND are not getting the support they need to thrive. And the concrete ceilings of some schools are so unstable that they pose a risk to life. Our School Cuts campaign is telling the government that they can't keep cutting funding for schools and that our children's education cannot keep getting the short end of the stick.

Once again, this government has shown that it does not care about the crisis that threatens to paralyse our schools and colleges. By providing

Daniel Kebede, General Secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), says the Budget has nowhere near enough to rectify the damage from 14 years of government cuts.



nothing to solve the problems in our schools and colleges, Jeremy Hunt shows a complete lack of concern for the teacher and support staff recruitment and retention crisis, the growing class sizes, the decrepit state of our school buildings. In October, the Prime Minister said that education was "the best economic policy" but hasn't put a penny extra towards it since.

Our School Cuts campaign has uncovered the inescapable fact that 70 per cent of schools have less funding in real terms than in 2010. Despite the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation, rising fuel bills and soaring costs, most schools have less to play with than 14 years ago.

Even after his Budget announcement of £105 million for special free schools, the Chancellor plans to cut capital investment in education by more than 10 per cent in cash terms next year – down from £7 billion to £6.2 billion. Does Jeremy Hunt think we just can't count? There are huge pay cuts against inflation for teachers and support staff, leading to an exodus from the profession. Workload is sky-high

and many schools are in deficit, with class sizes at record levels and a crisis in SEND funding.

The underfunding of education has created huge recruitment and retention problems, with teacher recruitment targets missed by huge amounts and widespread subject specialist shortages. While government ministers spout platitudes about excellence and Gillian Keegan says she's doing a '***** good job', our schools and colleges have to deal with the consequences – and so do the nation's children.

This government has no strategy to solve the problems in our schools and colleges or close the disadvantage gap for pupils. Child poverty has soared on their watch. Jeremy Hunt says he wants a "high skills, high wage" economy, so he should put his money where mouth is and invest more in education to deliver what he says the country needs.



Protests in Catalonia

In Spain, the past years have seen a stark criminalization of protest driven by political entities and the Spanish justice system, leading to serious repercussions for those exercising their fundamental rights to assembly and demonstration.

This pattern has not only repeatedly infringed upon the freedom of expression for singers and actors, but has also obstructed the right to information for media professionals, censored theatre plays, persecuted Catalan pro-independence movements, the feminist movement, the movement for housing rights, anti-racism, environmental activism, and undermined the right to strike and union freedom.

Today, we witness a new escalation against the Right to Protest, as 11 Catalan activists face persecution and investigations for terrorism in the Tsunami Democràtic case. In response the civil society states that: the investigation conducted by the Spanish National High Court / Supreme Court against Tsunami Democràtic constitutes a direct assault on the exercise of fundamental rights, notably the right to assembly and freedom of expression, and the freedom of information.

It stands as a new example of the extensive application of the criminal code in the criminalization of protest. Legitimately and democratically, thousands of people took to the streets to voice their disapproval of a sentence that unjustly condemned political and social leaders to imprisonment.

A sentence that had also been criticized by both the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Council of Europe, alongside numerous international

Protesting, demonstrating and mobilizing are fundamental rights, not terrorist activities, say Catalan independence activists in Omnium Cultural.



human rights organizations. Under the motto "sit and talk" by Tsunami Democràtic, the citizen mobilizations aimed at fostering dialogue.

They were conducted in adherence to nonviolent principles, constituting a legitimate exercise of the right to protest protected by international human rights law and domestic legal statutes.

The National Court's decision to investigate political representatives, journalists, and members of civil society for terrorism in the current context reveals a clear effort to weaken the Spanish government and the parliamentary majority in the processing of the Amnesty Law.

This intrusion by the judiciary into the legislative sphere weakens democracy and the will of citizens, as expressed through their votes on July 23. The investigation of a peaceful movement for terrorism with the exclusive purpose of criminalizing protest, constraining fundamental rights, and silencing political dissent

is an authoritarian act that constricts the space for civil society and poses a threat to democratic principles and the rule of law.

This act of criminalization exerts a deterrent effect on society at large, as it targets the primary mechanism through which various groups and organizations, spanning unions, feminists, environmentalists, independence supporters, anti-racists, and any other social movement, defend their rights and freedoms.

As individuals and organizations dedicated to building a more just society and considering the right to protest an essential mechanism to drive social changes, we call for the necessary measures to be taken to stop the misuse of the justice system in a renewed political persecution directed at social mobilizations and the exercise of fundamental rights.

We demand the withdrawal of terrorism charges. Protesting is not Terrorism.



Round the World



US pressures Venezuela

As Venezuela announces its next presidential election for 28 July, President Biden is keeping the pressure on by renewing for a further year the "Declaration of National Emergency" against it. The declaration says Venezuela "poses an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." First imposed by President Obama, this Executive Order enables the US to impose an array of sanctions against Venezuela in a drive to achieve 'regime change'.

In all, 930 coercive measures that are illegal under international law have been applied amounting to a fully-fledged blockade. While Venezuela's mining, banking and food import sectors have all been sanctioned, its oil sector has been the US Treasury Department's main target in an attempt to starve the country of foreign income. The result has been a drastic fall in output and income since the first sanctions were imposed.

Estimates of yearly losses of state oil revenue vary between \$15 and \$30 billion. The impact on the population in 2017-18 alone has been estimated to have been at least 40,000 deaths. By early 2020, former UN Special Rapporteur Alfred de Zayas had upped that estimate to over 100,000 deaths. The view of current UN Special Rapporteur, Dr Alena Douhan, is that "overall, in Venezuela, unilateral sanctions have generated food insecurity and affected all other aspects of life, from education to healthcare."

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and its impact on oil and gas supplies has forced Biden to row back in October 2023 from Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Venezuela by temporarily lifting sanctions primarily affecting Venezuela's oil, gas and mining sectors. But the suspension came

Tim Young, Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, opposes the US renewal of sanctions against Venezuela.

with a warning that the US is prepared to reimpose them at any time, should the Venezuelan government "fail to follow through on their commitments."

These are agreements made in Barbados following dialogue between the Maduro government and the opposition 'Unitary Platform'. The Barbados Agreement set out conditions for the 2024 presidential elections. Rejecting any "political violence" against Venezuela or its state institutions, it laid out twelve points concerning the presidential vote. These included holding the election in the latter half of 2024, updating the electoral registry, promoting a balanced media coverage and publicly recognising the results. Both sides agreed to invite international observers from organisations including the African Union, the European Union and the Carter Center.

The agreement also dealt with electoral guarantees for candidates, including allowing all candidates being allowed to stand provided they do not break the law or the Venezuelan Constitution. Any person currently barred from standing could appeal to the Supreme Court for a case review. This included far-right politician Maria Corina Machado, the Unitary Platform's presidential candidate. She is banned from holding political office for 15 years for, amongst other things, supporting US sanctions and the US-backed 'interim government' of Juan Guaidó.

When the Supreme Court ratified her ban on standing for office the US immediately revoked the licence for Venezuelan state-owned gold mining firm Minerven to engage in internation-

al gold trading. It further threatened to reimpose the oil and gas sector sanctions if the Maduro government did not fulfil what the US said were its commitments. It is unclear whether the right-wing opposition parties will rally round Machado or choose an entirely different candidate to support. Her victory in the opposition primary was a murky affair for several reasons. Unlike other primaries, it was not run by the CNE but by Machado's own non-governmental organisation Súmate, which has received funding from the US National Endowment for Democracy agency.

Manual voting only was used, there was no auditing of results and all election materials were destroyed after polling stations closed. The reported turnout of 2.3 million with 90% of votes cast for Machado was widely queried, including by a number of opposition leaders and activists. Several potential presidential candidates from the opposition didn't participate. Even if they had, the opposition's standing is poor. A recent survey by Hinterlaces, a reliable and well-known pollster, has revealed that only 9% of Venezuelans support the opposition parties.

The Venezuelan government will continue with a dialogue that saw over 40 political organisations contribute ideas for the presidential election process. What the right-wing opposition's next step will be is unclear. So far the US has not declared the election fraudulent months in advance, as it did with the presidential election in 2018. But if Maduro wins, declaring the election illegitimate is still an option for the US, no matter what conditions it is run under.



Basque elections

On February 22, the Lehendakari (President) of the Basque Autonomous Community (presiding over a government coalition between the Basque Nationalist Party and the Basque branch of the Spanish Socialist Party) called for elections on April 21.

Those elections come when an increasing number of voices are rising to criticise the deterioration of some of the most relevant institutions of the Basque autonomy, like the health service, the Basque autonomous police, and others.

The sense of exhaustion from a model of autonomy comes from the feeling that there is a setback on the most progressive policies developed during the 80s and the 90s together with a model of governance that does not create any thrill among the Basque society and younger generations. This is coming together with the increase of support of young and mid-age generations for the proposals of the Basque pro-independence movement.

A proposal that combines the need or demand for a new political status for the Basque Country with the demand of the need for a progressive agenda that will respond from the institution to the new challenges the Basque Country faces in terms of health, care, environmental challenges, energy transition, or equality. It combines a social and national agenda as some indivisible aspirations.

This tendency was seen in the last local and Navarre elec-

Basque lawyer Urko Aiartzaz Azurtza reports that the coming elections present an opportunity for pro-independence forces in the region.

tions. In those elections, EH Bildu obtained 365,000 votes in the three provinces of the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre and 1,395 councillors, becoming the

largest party in the South Basque Country (the Basque territory under Spanish rule; the North Basque Country is the territory under French rule).

This tendency repeated in the General Elections when EH Bildu obtained one seat more, becoming the most significant representation in Madrid (one seat ahead of the Basque Nationalist Party). Several polls show this tendency can increase in the next elections, predicting a possible tie between the Basque Nationalist Party and EH Bildu on seats - 27 or 28 seats each from 75.

But the most relevant aspect is that EH Bildu has become, according to some polls, the party with which people identify politically more (25.9%). After that, the PNV had 24.4%, and the Spanish Socialist Party had 10.2%. At the same time, it is the party to whom voters are most loyal (86% of loyalty). It is the most popular among people under 45-50 years old.

Regenerated riverside in Bilbao

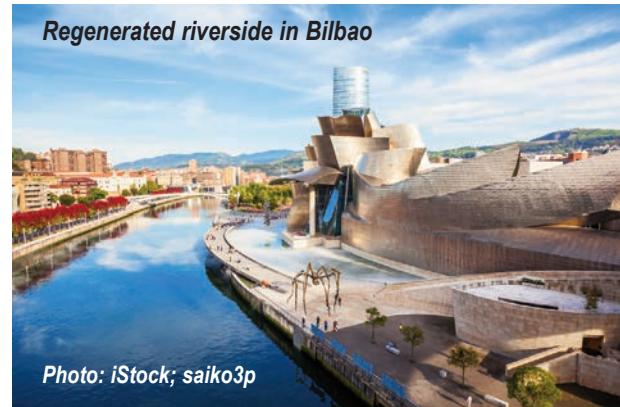
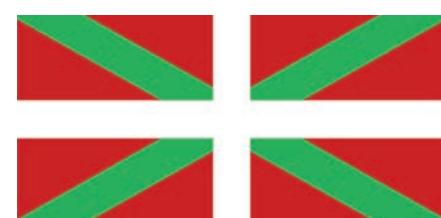


Photo: iStock; saiko3p

Of course, not all is about elections and votes. The big challenge for the pro-independence forces after those elections will be to open the discussion for a new political status for the Basque Country again.

Firstly it should take place among Basque forces in the Basque parliament so that we can grasp the opportunity of a Spanish Government needing the support of the Basque, Catalan and Galician forces in Madrid. We can try to reach out a new dispensation that will put our Country closer than ever in recent history from achieving our ultimate goal of Independence and social justice.

April 21 can be a new step in the right direction for our beloved Country.





BACK FOR GOOD

Keith Veness

Last issue I wrote about the fact that the Co-operative movement was an integral part of working class life when I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. The Co-op was the largest farmer in the UK. It was the largest milk delivery service. It had one of the largest building societies and an associated bank and insurance society.

It had a devolved structure that consisted of many local and regional societies that covered the shops and retail arms, based on cities, towns and districts. Some had literally hundreds of thousands of members and others were very small and local. In the London area there were a number of small local societies and three "big beasts".

North of the River Thames was the London Co-operative Society covering what is now 18 London Boroughs. South of the River were two big societies - the South Suburban which covered South West London and reached down to Croydon.

South East London was home to the most venerable of the London societies, the Woolwich Arsenal Society. It was founded in the 1880s and originally based on the workforce of the Royal Arsenal armaments factories. It cov-

ered what are now a group of London Boroughs and also reached out into Kent.

It played a role in the creation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 and was the Co-op directly affiliated to the Labour Party rather than through the Co-operative Party. The latter emerged in the 1920s when the Co-operative movement felt Labour



wasn't representing its interests fully. To everyone's amazement, probably including its own, it got a couple of dozen MPs elected. The Labour leadership panicked and did the deal we still have today whereby the Co-op can sponsor a number of candidates who stand as "Labour and Co-operative" ones.

Yet all was not well in a movement with 13 million members. The rise of the supermarkets, more consumer choice and a squeeze on profit margins left the Co-op looking old fashioned and stale in the "swinging 60s".



The right wing of both the Co-op and Labour parties thought ditching the name, stopping the divi and substituting blue stamps for it (in an attempt to copy Green Shield) and various other supposed trendy moves was the answer. In fact most of them were disastrous. We lost the battle to keep the name Co-operative Building Society and had the meaningless title of Nationwide instead but won the far more important battle to keep it as a mutual that belonged to its members.

Thatcher and her cronies managed to demutualise old established societies like Abbey National, the Halifax and the Woolwich but all the attempts by various corporate raiders to get their grubby paws on the Nationwide failed because all the members had a democratic vote and were not prepared to have their society booted about on the deregulated Stock Exchange.

Today the Co-operative ideal is as relevant now as it was for Rochdale Pioneers in Toad Lane in 1844. Pure food, no trucking, bulk purchases and democratic control should be the guiding lights of co-operatives still. Co-operation and mutuality are socialist principles and any socialist society could and should incorporate them.



Portugal: neo-fascists gain

In this year of so many significant elections, improbably, Portugal has made the news. And for all the wrong reasons. The European country that endured the longest period of fascist rule in the 20th Century voted in big numbers for Chega, a party that I have to describe as neo-fascist. A party dominated by Andre Ventura, a far right chancer, mini-me to Donald Trump, always on the telly, a rentaquote racist populist. And on the eve of Liberation Day, the 50th anniversary of the bloodless Carnation Revolution. How do we make sense of this?

If I start by setting the scene. A General Election was held on Sunday, 10th March, following the resignation of Antonio Costa the 'socialist' Prime Minister over alleged corruption. PS could have elected a new leader, simply replaced Costa and carried on in government. The election was called by Marcel de Sousa, the country's elected president ('Marcelo' as he is universally known, much as Christiano Ronaldo shall always be known as 'Christiano').

It was the second time in three years that he has done this. Marcelo is a devout Catholic, who fought a high-



profile campaign against legalising abortion in Portugal back in the day. A president who always likes to be the story, a president close to the social democrats, who were the beneficiaries of his intervention. Imagine King Brian doing this in the UK! Although, of

Portugal correspondent Steve Price has disappointing news from the recent Portuguese elections.

course, there has never been the whiff of corruption with the Tories, who look about to change their leader for third time!

The result was a stalemate, with the AD (Democratic Alliance), a hastily formed centre-right marriage of electoral convenience, beating the PS (Socialist Party) by the smallest of margins. Both parties got 29% of the vote. But depressingly, support for Chega soared to 19%. Personally, I would have voted for the BE (Bloco Esquerra) who stood on a platform very similar to Corbyn's 2017 Manifesto. Disappointingly, the far/ "real" left slipped back a little again. Until very recently BE had polled at over 10%.

Nobody seems very sure what happens next. I should add that there are still overseas votes to be counted from ex-pat Portuguese that could slightly tilt the numbers. The two largest parties are both saying they will not form a pact with Chega. The situation looks very unstable, though we can never trust the so called centre right not to do some sort of deal with the far right.

They have no principles, for them it's all about power. The AD leader Montenegro is already trying to sound tough, promising a tax cutting budget, and daring PS and Chega to vote it down. The main grouping in AD are the ones who implemented 'Coalition like' austerity in the early 2010's. The Socialist Party had been in power for eight years. They are to the left of Keith Starver's



proto-government. More communitarian and statist, generally shunning the neo liberal consensus that has prevailed elsewhere in Europe. The economy has been doing okay, but there are real problems. Problems exploited by the social democrats and by Chega. For all its many strengths, it's basically a low wage economy, which loses some of its 'brightest and best' graduates, and some of its doctors and nurses to other European countries. Including the UK.

The cost of living crisis has hit Portugal, but without the vicious severity experienced by our class in the UK. The country has a falling population, with fairly liberal migration, with workers coming in not only from Europe (under free movement), but from Ukraine, from China and India, from its former colonial 'possessions' Brazil and Cape Verde. Migration, economic competition, pressure on health services, and on housing has led to genuine frustration, anger and resentment which the right have exploited here.

It's hard to see anything other than another election within two years. It will be interesting to see how the parties perform in the upcoming European Elections...



Budget we should have had

Budget analysis in the media focuses on two questions: 1. The Chancellor has defined some so-called Fiscal Rules for him/herself – does the Budget conform to these self-imposed rules? 2. What is the short-term impact – ignoring wider economic impact – of the personal tax changes?

But the problems the UK faces today are increasingly clear: our economy is in bad shape, both relative to historic trends and in comparison with what used to be our peers; our public services – even the NHS – have been brought to the brink of failure; and our government is doing nothing to protect the environment.

GDP per capita is now more than 15% lower than it would have been if we had continued on the 1980-2010 trend (a trend which included the impact of the Global Financial Crisis).

For most citizens, this has translated into their income being lower than it should be: the median earner earns over 25% less than they could have expected to be earning, and less (after inflation) than they earned in 2010! This level of sustained mass impoverishment has not been seen in the UK since the 1920s.

The NHS, which just a decade ago was rated as the world's best health-care system, is now on the brink of failure. Our rivers and coastal waters are increasingly polluted with sewage and the government is rowing back on its already inadequate plans to combat climate change.

This government has been systematically transforming the UK into a Plunder State in which “tax-funded spending is fine, as long as we can direct it to whom we want and as long as the tax burden does not fall on the wealthiest.”

The 99% Organisation has deconstructed the spring Budget, and has advice for the Chancellor on how he could benefit us all. If only he had taken it.

The Budget does little to change that: it will not deliver growth; it will not help ordinary people; it will not rebuild public services and it will not tackle the climate emergency.

The UK GDP is the sum of four components. If any one of these grows, that contributes to growth in the economy; and if any one of them shrinks, that constrains growth in the economy. The four components are: public (or government) spending; household spending (or consumption); business investment; plus trade surplus (or a negative figure if, like the UK, you run a trade deficit).

If you wanted to prevent growth, you would take steps to undermine all four of these components. And that is what this government has done over the last 14 years, and what it continues to do in this Budget. What would a responsible Chancellor have done?

Unfortunately, in the UK, talking about increasing public spending has become taboo – the myth that “there is no money” has become so widely spread. But as we pointed out, it is nonsense – the government can create money – and it does in huge quantities, via the Bank of England, whenever it needs to.

We now have the highest tax rates for 70 years yet our public services are on their knees. So where has all our money gone? Because our economy has grown so slowly, but need has continued to grow at historic rates, the same level of public services cost a higher proportion of GDP. Also, there is a staggering level of ‘leakage’ – what

should be public money – that is the cost of a Plunder State.

Because HMRC has been so under-resourced, avoided tax is estimated at £2.7 billion per annum; evaded tax (that is the illegal one) is estimated at £4.6 billion per annum; and uncollected tax at £35 billion per annum. Recently, we have seen COVID fraud at £7 billion per annum; and general fraud, estimated at £25 billion per annum.

Then there is taxing capital gains at the same rate as earned income, which could generate a further £30 billion per annum. A wealth tax could raise up to £70 billion per annum. Public money given to the railways totalled £21.1 billion in FYE March 2023.

And what about turning some or all of the £64 billion per annum of government grants to business into equity purchases and starting to build a sovereign wealth fund?

In total, if all the leaks were completely plugged, the benefit to UK citizens in general would be a truly staggering £250 billion per annum. Now, of course, identifying these leaks is easier than actually plugging them all. But £60 billion per annum could be realised from a combination of these sources.

£60 billion per annum would be enough to produce a radical reforming Budget that did tackle the nation's problems without increasing taxes on ordinary working people.



Everybody's beautiful

The Wellcome Collection is housed in a gorgeous building, next to Friends Meeting House, literally over the road from Euston station. It's not really 'on the tourist trail' and it's an absolute gem. They have regular temporary exhibitions that I can highly recommend.

Their latest is 'The Cult of Beauty' and the day I went it was very busy, with mostly quite young, female visitors. The blurb sets the scene: 'Ideals of beauty have existed in every culture and era. Philosophers look to define beauty, artists try to capture it, scientists innovate to achieve it. Around the world, beauty is constantly seen as an ideal worthy of going to great lengths to achieve. But what are the driving forces that lead us to believe in a myth of universal beauty, despite its evolving nature?

'Featuring over 200 items, including historical objects, artworks, films and new commissions, the exhibition considers the influence of morality, status, health, age, race and gender on the evolution of ideas about beauty. We invite you to question established norms and reflect on more inclusive definitions of beauty.'



Culture Vulture Steve Price has mixed feelings about the Wellcome Collection's free exhibition on the concept of beauty, which runs till 28th April.

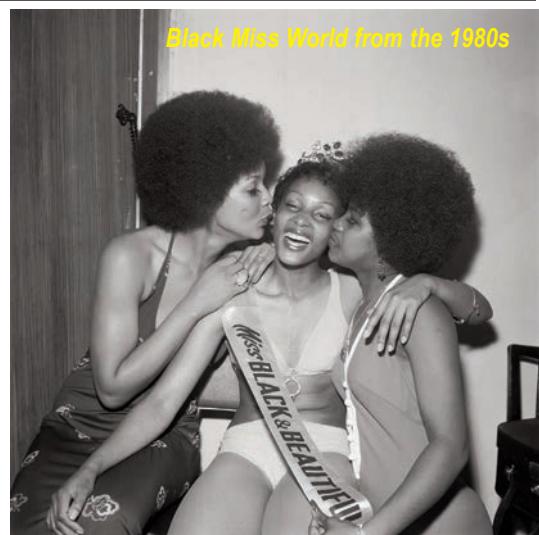
Except that really it doesn't, but more of that later. The exhibition is organised around three sections – the ideals of beauty, the industry of beauty and subverting beauty. I did enjoy the exhibition. One supposedly liberal newspaper is positively gushing, and gave it 5 stars.

It starts with some classical takes on beauty, the Egyptians and the Romans. The first sculpture you see is that of the ancient Egyptian Nefertiti, with her exquisite swan's neck and heavily kohled brows and eyes. There's a gorgeous black Krishna from Guadeloupe 1745, and equally stunning Chinese court ladies from 1878. Elsewhere, misogyny rules, for example the 17th Century print of husbands taking their old/ugly wives to a windmill to be "improved" through grinding. Oooph!

Predictably perhaps, we have Barbie, Vogue, Hollywood and Miss World. But then also and more contemporarily, Black Miss World, and we touch on sexuality and trans. This exhibition ends with the full shock of a facelift, implicitly asking - why would you even do this? Personally, I have some serious reservations, much of which might fall under the heading: where's the politics?

1. It's actually a-historical, and not remotely anthropological. Have they never heard of Margaret Mead? What about how notions of 'beauty' change over time, about cultures where being

Black Miss World from the 1980s



'fat' was revered as a sign of wealth/beauty, all those classically 'voluptuous' nudes, Twiggy the anorexic model, dysmorphia, all the victims of fashion.

2. Whence feminism and politics? Seemingly, no awareness of 'The Male Gaze' (John Berger), nothing set in a cultural, political framework. Germaine Greer, Suzie Orbach and the American feminists.

3. And what about the men? Are men not 'beautiful?' Alain Delain, Mohammed Ali, David Bowie, pretty boy Leonardo, Robert Mapplethorpe?

The great irony is that before entering the exhibition, I checked out the bookshop, and immediately came upon 'Disobedient Bodies: Reclaim Your Unruly Beauty' by Emma Dabiri. A genuinely radical book, referencing Marx and Engels and much else. Hmm...



Tackling the polls

OK, I'm not entirely stupid. I know he's only brought this book out because of the imminent London elections. And it's not badly written, it 'sounds' like him talking as you read it. So either he has a very good ghost writer, or he did indeed take time out from his busy schedule of saving the world to write it himself.

Given the sub-title though, I really would have liked more on fighting the climate emergency and less 'me, me' me'. I suppose that was too much to hope for. The structure of the book is based on what Khan says are the main obstacles to green policies: fatalism, apathy, cynicism, deprioritisation, hostility, cost and gridlock.

Those are the chapter headings, but the largely chronological treatment means that the chapter on fatalism is mostly about Khan's early life and the development of his belief that he is God's gift to London, the following chapter on apathy is mostly about the campaign to get elected as Mayor, and further chapters are defences of his Mayoral policies.

And he's certainly got some achievements to be proud of. I just found it a bit strange that he seems to think that air pollution measures are the be all and end all of fighting climate change in London. Now, I'm not saying the air isn't filthy nor that it can just be left to kill us all. I

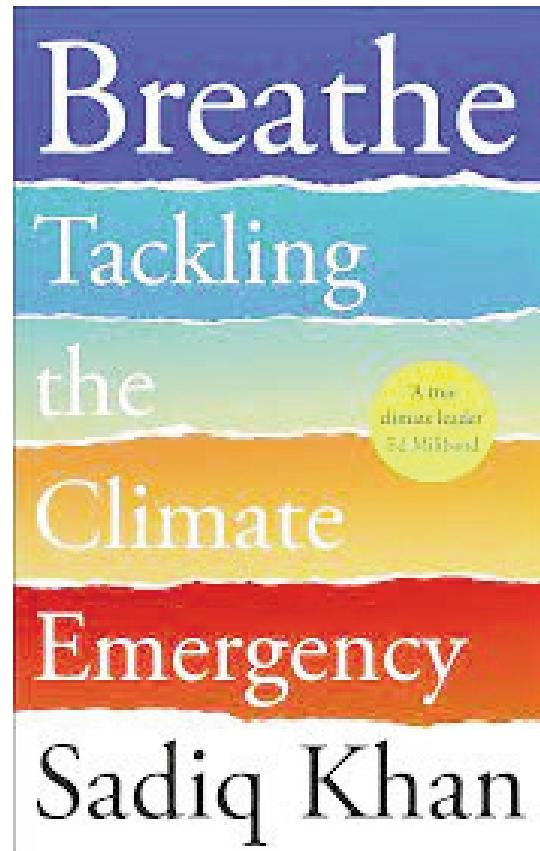
Christine Shawcroft reviews *Breathe: Tackling the Climate Emergency* by Sadiq Khan, Hutchinson Heinemann, £16.99.

developed asthma as an adult just as Khan did (I didn't know he had until I read the book).

When we were campaigning in my community against the third Blackwall Crossing, a huge bridge that would have acted as a flyover with my kids' primary school directly underneath it, a planning officer told us not to worry about the ensuing pollution because the area was so polluted already that we wouldn't notice any difference!

So I agree with him that it's very important - and also that he's done an excellent job in fighting it. But tackling the climate emergency it ain't.

For a book that's been written by a politician (we assume) it's also a bit short on politics. Jeremy Corbyn gets a quick brush off, with a brief acknowledgment that he was at one point Labour Leader, but adding that he brought 'a certain amount of baggage'. I suppose SK doesn't want to annoy all the London lefties who are cur-



ently delivering his leaflets. I had to laugh though, when he mentioned elections after 2020 and said how popular Keir Starmer is with the voters. That would be the Starmer who threw you under the bus when the voters of Uxbridge were less than impressed with the expansion of the ULEZ, would it Sadiq? Maybe you should rewrite the chapter on hostility. And include another one on the folly of abandoning green policies at the national level.

For all that though, it's not a bad read.



Letters

Dear Labour Briefing,

The furore around the sexist and racist abuse of Diane Abbot broke as we were going to press. I have personally been appalled and outraged by the abuse heaped on a comrade who has been such a stalwart. We only have space for this letter and will doubtless return in more detail to this matter in future issues. I had known Diane on and off in various left causes in the late '70s and early '80s such as the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, Liberation and other similar campaigns. In 1980 I went to work for Hackney Council and became NUPE branch secretary in 1983. We were affiliated as a union branch to both Hackney constituencies. My union branch eventually had 1200 members and we affiliated the maximum of five delegates to each GC.

After all the hoo-ha about defections to the SDP, Hackney North and Stoke Newington CLP selected Ernie Roberts - a long time left winger and former Assistant General Secretary of the engineering union. Ernie was in his late 60s when selected and very soon started to show worrying signs of memory loss and confusion. When re-selection

came around in 1985/6, our branch nominated Ernie and mandated our five delegates. I noticed that Diane was shortlisted as there was now a requirement to have at least one woman on every shortlist. I met with our five delegates next morning and was astonished to hear that Ernie had been deselected and Diane was now the PPC. All of my delegates, five white men - some of whom were not very enlightened - had voted for Diane. Ernie gave a shambling and incoherent speech whereas Diane came over as a fighter who guaranteed to work with unions, the community groups and the various ethnic groups in the Borough.

I am happy to say she kept that pledge over the years I was in Hackney. She supported the unions on various picket lines, demonstrations and on the various miscarriages of justice cases like the East Ham 2 and the Sam Hallam campaign. In my later years I went back to work "on the tools" and became an Estate Safety Officer dealing with crime and disorder on our council estates. Lots of these were wracked by drugs and firearms. I worked closely with various Police units to tackle this and Diane chaired a



committee of black and minority ethical leaders in Hackney to deal with this. I addressed these meetings on a couple of occasions. My most vivid memory was of Diane addressing a meeting of black mothers on the issue of their sons having firearms. She said she knew mothers protect their sons but when it came to guns Diane said simply "shop them" if you want your children to be alive next year. Get guns out of our communities. Very brave but effective. Diane is a model local campaigner who must be defended against the attacks from both inside and outside the Labour Party.

**Keith Veness
South Thanet**

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Periscope



We couldn't have put it better ourselves

Here we have a Twitter (does anyone actually call it 'X'?) post which asks some very

 Will Hayward
@WillHayCardiff

Two questions about Vaughan Gething election that need answering.

1. How much money is left over? It automatically goes to the Labour Party, I know many MSs aren't happy that £ is going into their coffers.
2. What was the split in terms of votes from members and affiliates for each candidate? The released this in 2018 but I haven't seen it this time. I have heard JM got 57% of member votes.

I have asked these questions and will post when I hear back.

9:25 AM · Mar 18, 2024 · 5,162 Views

pertinent questions arising from the Welsh leadership election.

We are yet to see any answers. More power to your elbow, Will Hayward.



Another brick in the wall
Housing expert Bernard Crofton (see page 5 of this issue) also has this to say about a course he attended many years ago:

'A personal anecdote from half a century ago. I did a short Architectural Course with about 30 others on the layout of housing schemes; our "finishing project" was to do the best layout for a development of houses for sale on a specific plot of land, abutting a

Council housing estate but surrounded by commercial areas.

'I and one other participant (from a local authority's Planning Department) integrated the two residential areas, with play areas etc for the general public, not as buffers from the council tenants.

'All the rest of the class provided physical barriers between the two residential areas (but not with the business parks). More than half did this with a high wall, like East Berlin or parts of Northern Ireland. In the debates that followed, there was one constant (but unsubstantiated) argument: sale prices would be lower without a wall. Same spend, less profit.'

Hmm, that explains a lot.



Fiddling while NHS burns

The honourable and upstanding leadership of the Royal College of Physicians seem to have hit a bit of a bump in the road recently.

Briefing's regular reader will be aware of the Tory government's plan to de-skill the NHS by taking on lots of Physician Associates (PAs) who don't have the training or the experience of 'proper' doctors, and are much cheaper as a result.

Patients are often unaware that they aren't seeing a qual-

ified doctor, and tragically there have been deaths when people have been misdiagnosed by a PA and sent home.

The RCP, being a conservative with a small 'c' outfit, naturally want to support the Conservative with a large 'C' mob. So they've provided stats to a recent meeting which purport to show that doctors in general support the use of PAs.

Only problem was, they added the 'don't knows' to those in favour to produce the reported majority. We're quite sure this was entirely by accident, of course.



Shoot the messenger

Tory MPs, not so much the men in blue suits as the men in brown trousers, are panicking about their deeply unpopular Leader, and thinking seriously about orchestrating another coup and installing yet another unelected Prime Minister.

Many Tory MPs are indeed more popular (among Tory Party members, that is) than the filthy rich occupant of Number 10. But that's probably because they aren't currently carrying the can for the party's dreadful policies.

Always willing to help, we've got some advice to Tory MPs, their shrinking membership, and even more shrinking voter support. It's not so much the Leader you need to ditch, as the nasty, divisive austerity policies you've inflicted on us.



BEHAVING BADLY

Christine Shawcroft

When I moved a 'Wages not Weapons' resolution at my GC last year, I was accused of wanting to surrender to Russia! Like Russian soldiers with snow on their boots are about to land at Dover. Yet economist Michael Burke has pointed out that our military spending is higher than that of several other NATO countries combined (one of them being Germany) and they're all a lot closer to Russia than we are.

However, having a realistic assessment of the threat from Russia (only one country on this planet has a policy of 'full spectrum dominance', and it isn't them) certainly doesn't mean one is blind to its many faults. There are around 600 political prisoners in Russia. Exact figures are hard to come by, they don't exactly get published in annual reports.

But recently I was at a local CND webinar and one of the advertised speakers, peace activist Boris Kagarlitsky, had just been re-arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. They only let him out from a previous incarceration last December - a Russian version of the Cat and Mouse Act used against the suffragettes.

Then there are the extra-judicial killings, of which the most recent is that of Alexei Navalny. Praised by the western media as a principled anti-corruption crusader, evidence is now coming to light that he was a rather nasty racist rabble rouser. However, I don't think the racism is what sealed his fate with Putin, rather the fact that

he was leading the opposition and standing against him.

And yet all these killings and imprisonments are completely unnecessary. I wonder if I might be permitted to give Mr Putin some advice? It might even save some lives and allow some people to keep their liberty. The fact is Vlad, (I can call you Vlad, right?) you don't have to kill or imprison your opponents. There are much better, cheaper ways of dealing with them.

Look at what happened in this country a few years ago. The British Establishment took their eye off the ball for a few months and - lo and behold! - a socialist was elected as leader of the Labour Party. The powers that be scoffed, and said he wouldn't last more than a few weeks. Right wing Labour MPs rose up and tried to get him to resign. The Tories, certain of a great victory against such a useless opponent, called a General Election.

Then our revolution really kicked off. People queued around the block in the pouring rain to hear Jeremy speak. Thousands of young people in the crowd at Glastonbury chanted his name. People smiled at me on the Tube for wearing pro-Jeremy T-shirts. The staff and customers in shops all wanted to talk about Jeremy when they saw my badge, and say how much they supported him.

And you know what? Everyone called him Jeremy. Nobody said 'Mr Corbyn'. Labour gained over 20

points in the opinion polls in a matter of weeks and came within a whisker of winning the election and taking power.

Having had a change of trousers, the Establishment realised they had a serious threat on their hands and would have to deal with it. Did they put Jeremy in prison? Did they assassinate him? No, they did something far more effective. They told lies, and they twisted everything he said. Using the BBC and the *Guardian* as their cheerleaders, they accused a lifelong anti-racist campaigner of racism. It became an accepted 'fact', repeated everywhere in the media, that Corbyn was racist and presided over a racist party.

And it worked! Just over two short years after a stunning election campaign and mass Corbynmania, Jeremy's name was mud, a dirty word in the papers and a liability on the doorstep, with predictable electoral consequences. So, Vladimir, do you see how easy it is? I'm sure your control over the Russian media is just as complete as that of the British Establishment's. You could take a leaf out of their book.

Think of the money you could save on penal colonies and death squads. None of those come cheap. And then, having saved a great deal of cash (and lives, but I don't expect you care about that) you can do what the rulers of this country do with it. Don't bother about housing, schools or hospitals, they don't. You can spend it on nuclear weapons, just like they do.