Editorial

Reconstructing adult education for the common good

John Holford

Through the last century, Labour governments – beginning with the very first in 1924 – built up a framework for the education of adults that aimed to be genuinely democratic and inclusive. It tried to enrich the quality of adults' lives by ensuring a broad range of educational opportunities was available – and supported from public funds. Courses would support people's individual growth, but also strengthen their communities and organisations. Education was about the whole person as a social being. In the words of the great socialist adult educator and social reformer, R. H. Tawney, it would be 'an education generous, inspiring and humane … not merely, as hitherto, for a small minority, but for all'.[1]

In the 1980s and 1990s, Conservative governments did their best to destroy this system. Adult education should no longer be about broad personal and social growth, but about economic competitiveness. Since then, governments of all persuasions have been in thrall to the same neoliberal view (sadly, the Labour governments of 1997-2010 were, in this respect, no exception),[2] and the assault on humane and democratic adult learning has never let up. For the neoliberal mind, what matters in the education of adults is not strengthening democracy, nor the quality of personal and community life, but 'learning to succeed' in an increasingly globalised marketplace. A good quality of life is not the right of all citizens, but something to be earned by individual effort.

This has led to a change in how people speak, and think, about adults' education. 'Lifelong learning' became the fashionable label. For a while, during the 1990s, a few optimists thought this might herald a more democratic 'learning society' for all. They were soon disabused. Despite much rhetoric about 'empowerment', lifelong learning turned out not to be a participative process, in which adult citizens actively shaped their own education, but the acquisition of 'skills' and 'competences' judged necessary (by employers) for success at work. Adults' agency was reduced, at best, to 'choice': selecting courses that would 'deliver' the 'skills' businesses thought workers would need to be 'employable'. A corollary emerged: how (and what) people should learn is best prescribed by businesses.

In the adult education system built up by Labour governments until the 1980s, adults themselves – as citizens of a democratic state – had significant power and influence. As students, they had a strong say in what and how they learnt – discussing it together with their tutor, making important decisions. Many became active creators of new forms of knowledge. Somewhere behind this lay a belief that in building an 'educated democracy', adult education itself must adopt democratic methods. To ensure education responded

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to the needs of the people at large, voluntary organisations and social movements were closely involved in provision: their concerns came to play a part in what was studied – so new knowledge was developed, relevant to the social problems of the day.

Of course, this adult education system was never perfect. Labour may have been its main political advocate, but much of the development happened under Conservative governments from the 1920s to the 1970s – and even under Labour administrations, it was always the 'poor cousin', under-resourced compared with schools, universities and even further education. But among professionals and students, debates on purpose and methods – in professional journals, in organisational meetings, in pubs and clubs – could be intense; and there were institutionalised channels of communication between these professional subcultures and government. Quite senior civil servants would, for instance, attend the annual meetings of the heads of university adult education (or 'extra-mural') departments, and of Workers' Educational Association (WEA) district secretaries, engaging in discussion about aims, priorities, methods and resources.

This fell a good way short of perfect democracy: as in any political system, vested interests, prejudices, cliques, inequalities of power were on display. Yet one feature stands out: there were extensive and institutionalised opportunities for dialogue. Little of this world survives. Few universities now retain adult education departments: those that do have been blandished or bludgeoned into offering modularised courses that deliver credits, articulate with required levels on qualifications frameworks, and meet pre-specified learning outcomes. The WEA has survived, but largely by accepting the rules of the new game. Programmes and staff are constantly at risk from precarious funding streams and changing policy fashion. Local authority adult education has likewise suffered from budget starvation. High course fees discourage, or preclude, all but the well-paid. In the few cases where subsidies mean fees are lower, or even waived, it is because the course directly helps a student become more 'employable'. Across the board, the curriculum offered has swung toward meeting the needs of business, and of individuals seeking work.

Internationally, British business no longer cuts the ice that it once did; it has, nevertheless, proved remarkably effective in peddling the myth at home that employers that are best fitted to determine what people learn. Business has persuaded 'policymakers' that targeting provision and opportunities toward its own needs would 'drive up' the number of adults participating in education or training. One leading example: in 2004, Gordon Brown as chancellor of the Exchequer commissioned Lord Leitch, former chief executive of Zurich Financial Services, to lead what became known as the Leitch review of skills. This recommended that 'the UK commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020'. The prescription for achieving this was 'strengthening the voice of employers' with a 'focus on economically valuable skills' that 'provide real returns … in the labour market for individuals and employers'.[3]

Twenty years on from Leitch, it is clear that reducing adult education to 'skills for jobs', and giving employers ever more say, has done no good at all. British business continues to languish: while Britain's per capita GDP was broadly similar to the USA's in 2004, and well above Germany's, it is now significantly smaller than both.[4] In the UK, adults' participation in learning peaked in the early 2000s, and has roughly halved since (across the European Union, it has nearly doubled).[5] Total spending on adult education and apprenticeships fell by 38 per cent in the decade from 2010; spending on classroom-based adult education halved. The numbers of adult learners taking low-level qualifications fell disastrously (by 50 per cent at level 2 and below, by 33 per cent at level 3).[6] Wider adult education – that addresses the full range of personal and community life – falls below the statistical radar (data are no longer collected), but is clearly a pale shadow of what was offered two or three decades ago. Far from developing 'a new learning culture, a culture of lifelong learning for all'[7] – the aim of the late 1990s – adult learning provision has been shattered, and participation is now pitiful. Yet despite all evidence, no one will challenge the mantra that lifelong learning must be 'skills-focused' and 'employer-led'.

We need to break out of this spiral of decline. Under a new Labour government with a commanding majority in parliament (albeit only one-third of the popular vote) we have the chance to think afresh. This special issue of *FORUM* explores why a comprehensive system of lifelong learning must encompass 'generous and humane' provision of adult education for all. We aim to reignite debate. Adult education is an essential ingredient in creating a resilient, tolerant and democratic civil society. It enables individuals, and their families, to extend and deepen their understanding of the world, of cultures, of their fellow-citizens and what they think and believe. (Of course, it also enhances productivity; but if that is all it tries to do, it fails even at that.) We hope to empower ministers in the new government, but also all those who develop and carry through educational policies, to imagine and construct a system of adult education that comes closer to meeting *all* the needs of 21st century citizens – not just those of employers and people's working lives.

The fevered summer of 2024

We have recently had an object lesson in why this matters. Our civil society and our democracy are tottering. Just a few months ago, in early August 2024, cities and towns across Britain and Northern Ireland were rocked by right-wing violence: Sir Keir Starmer, newly installed as prime minister, labelled it 'far-right thuggery'. The targets were immigrants, asylum-seekers, Muslims, people with brown skins or 'different' identities. Libraries, community centres, citizens' advice bureaux and other institutions built up for the common good suffered collateral – or perhaps intentional – damage. This

was 'not a protest that just got out of hand', Starmer said a month into his premiership, but people 'absolutely bent on violence'.[8] Riot police were deployed, hundreds arrested, courts and prisons were lined up to dispense rapid justice.

Old news now. But why did it happen? For some, calls for 'explanation', seeking 'causes', seems too close to justifying violence. The focus is on organisation and propaganda: the social media, the role of 'influencers' such as 'Tommy Robinson' (Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) and Elon Musk, even (though much of the media skirts this) the peddling of racist tropes and 'dog-whistle' rhetoric under the Tories. The grotesque power of such fanatical, extreme-right language is clear. Yet as postmortems grow, more in-depth explanation is required.

The far right – Nigel Farage, the Reform Party, and its 'wannabe fascist'[9] allies – has a specious but sophisticated version ready. A 'new middle-class graduate elite', attached to 'liberal cosmopolitan if not radically progressive values', has lost touch with 'traditionalists': 'people from the working class, the non-graduate majority and older generations who can remember Britain before the revolution'. The new elite 'imposed' this 'revolution' between 1979 and 2016. It was a 'deeply transformative and highly destabilizing project' that opened Britain's economy to 'a new and very disruptive model of hyper-globalization', and its borders to an 'unprecedented era of mass immigration'. It also 'opened up and hollowed out' our national democracy, 'handing much greater power, influence and control to supranational institutions'.[10] The rise of the right – 'populism', the Brexit vote, Boris Johnson's election victory – is a reaction to this.

The left's analysis must be different. Yet there are inescapable realities. Substantial sections of the people – of the poor, the excluded, the 'left behind' – have suffered from half a century of neoliberalism. Inequalities have grown vastly: they are geographical and educational as well as social and economic. The welfare state built up during the first half of the 20th century, albeit inadequate, offered a better present and a brighter future to millions; today, starved of resources, it too often replicates the insecurities of the market. Productive industry, and the large-scale, relatively full and secure employment it supported, has been largely extinguished; instead we have a 'service economy' offering insecure and ill-paid employment to many, though rich benefits to a few (mainly in south-east England).[11]

The 'excluded' are excluded not only from secure jobs, income, decent (or any) housing and education. They are not only ill-supported by increasingly rundown health and social services. They are also denied 'voice' – power, influence, a say in how their society is run, any sense of 'ownership'. This applies at just about every level: at work (for those who have it), in the community (what's left of it), in their relations with all aspects of the state – above all health and social services, where so much 'support' is dehumanised, outsourced to call centres and 'artificial intelligence'.

The case for adult education is in part – though by no means only – that it provides

a route to 'voice' for ordinary people. For the most excluded, this may start with developing self-confidence and skills – to speak up in a meeting, for instance, or to compose a reasoned email. For others, learning may be part of making a more sustained contribution to civil society – such as running an organisation. For others again, education may be an end in itself – learning to paint, or studying Milton's poetry or the history of France. The point is that all of these contribute to a richer culture and a stronger civil society, and to the common good,

Civil society, voice and democracy

The uncomfortable fact, however, is that the destruction of industry and escalating inequalities have marched in step with the destruction of civil society. Trade union membership is a powerful indicator. In 1950 there were 9.3 million union members in the UK. In 1980 there were 13.2 million. By 2021, there were only 6.7 million – marginally higher than the previous year, but otherwise the lowest since before the Second World War. This is stark enough, but still more revealing are the figures for 'union density' (the proportion of the working population who are members of trade unions). Through the 1960s and 1970s, this was between 40 and 50 per cent: it peaked at 52 per cent in 1980. It has fallen almost continuously ever since: headlong under the Thatcher and Major governments; less precipitately, but still pretty steadily, since 1997. In 2022 it was just 22.2 per cent.[12]

This matters partly because union membership is one of the more continuous and reliable indicators of the membership of voluntary organisations more generally. But unions are important in themselves: foundational institutions of a democratic society. Writing during the Second World War, Sir Richard Livingstone – one of the most influential public intellectuals of his day – observed that the trade union was a 'great school of citizenship'. In unions, he wrote:

> Several millions of Englishmen learn to subordinate private wishes and opinions to a common policy, and a mass of individuals becomes a disciplined army. A strike may be inconvenient or even unjustifiable, but men who will throw up their work and livelihood for a common cause, possibly against their desire or even their judgment, have learnt one at least of the lessons of social education – how to act as a community.[13]

He was writing during 1942 – probably before the battle of El Alamein in late October and early November, certainly before the Soviet victory at Stalingrad. The date signifies: the war against fascism – for democracy – was far from won. But so does the writer. Politically, Livingstone was a pillar of the establishment, vice-chancellor of two universities, president of an Oxford college, no radical – 'a very good man but a mild-mannered Tory',

one of his more left-wing contemporaries observed.[14] Even for Livingstone, however, trade unions would be an essential element if a nation, democratic and resilient, were to win the war against fascism and be reconstructed thereafter.

He was similarly positive about other institutions in what might today be labelled 'civil society' or the 'voluntary' or 'not-for-profit' sector. Lip-service aplenty has been paid to these over recent decades. David Cameron, notoriously, enlisted them in his 'big society' – they would fill the gaps left by an austerity-diminished welfare state. (In a warped way, Cameron was right: food banks, the soup kitchens of our time, hardly existed in 2010.)[15] For Livingstone, voluntary organisations, clubs and associations, national and local, are the fabric of democracy – not because they deliver services, but because they are 'schools of citizenship'.[16] In clubs, societies and unions, people discuss and contribute to decisions; they 'learn to play a part in the community, make a contribution to it, often accept the decision of a majority which goes against our private interests, opinions or desires'.[17]

A lot has been written about civil society since Livingstone, but his emphasis on voluntary organisations and their contribution has stood the test of time. There are, of course, a host of profoundly important questions today. What does civil society, and voluntary organisation, look like in an age of global social media and artificial intelligence? How can any organisation prioritise dialogue, or be democratic, when its members seldom if ever meet in person – interacting mainly through the cramped interfaces offered by Zoom, Teams and their rivals? How do civil society organisations preserve their autonomy when they are so often audited to distraction, 'delivering' some government service that the welfare state would once have provided? Yet civil society's role in sustaining democracy and citizenship remains foundational.

Adult education: 'voice' for the voiceless

Livingstone is largely forgotten today, but what this 'mild-mannered Tory' wrote was pretty mainstream stuff during and after the Second World War. It was mainstream partly because people had seen the rise of Nazism and fascism in Europe, realised how evil it was, and saw that only an educated, engaged and democratic nation could resist it.[18]

It was also mainstream, however, because of a long-term and emancipatory adult education project – an ideological, or in Gramscian terms, a hegemonic project – driven by the left and the rise of labour that sought to build an 'educated democracy'. We can trace its history in many locations: in Victorian 'university extension', in the WEA (founded in 1903), in universities' acceptance – responding to WEA pressure – that they should offer 'tutorial classes' for working-class adults in industrial towns.[19]

A critical contribution had come in 1919. With nearly a million British working-

class lives lost, and hundreds of thousands more maimed, during the First World War, prime minister David Lloyd George set up a Ministry of Reconstruction to plan a 'land fit for heroes'. (Lloyd George was a master of stirring words; his rhetoric was not always realised.) One of the new ministry's arms was an adult education committee, and a year after the war ended it issued its ground-breaking *Final Report.*[20] In 400 printed pages this set out why adult education mattered and why much more was needed. Among the reasons were major political questions of the day (whether to nationalise key industries, how to reform the House of Lords, how to 'shake off the baser sort of politician … the secret funds and the sale of honours'): 'Is it not manifest that a democracy which has to solve these questions must be an educated democracy?'. [21]

The report's 'necessary conclusion' was 'that adult education must be regarded not as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there', nor as important only during 'a short span of early manhood'. It was 'a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship', which must be 'both universal and lifelong' and 'spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community'.[22] While provision never achieved this, the 1919 report's egalitarian arguments became widely accepted principles in what participants – students and tutors – often called the adult education *movement*.

It is worth re-emphasising that when this movement emerged, the labour and women's movements were pressing for a more democratic system of government. It was only in 1918 that all adult men aged 21 and over became able to vote, and a further decade before women achieved the right on the same basis. For several years before the First World War, labour and suffrage unrest threatened the established order. 1917 brought the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Peace brought similar, if briefer, experiments in socialist government across Europe – and, through the 1920s and 1930s, authoritarian regimes of the right were on the rise. Adult education, growing in this world, did not take democracy for granted.

Reconstructing adult education for the common good

If we were able to reconstruct adult education for the common good, what would it look like? This issue of *FORUM* does not try to answer this question, but seeks to discuss – and to illustrate – what an answer might include. We start with a clear position: as when Lloyd George set up a government ministry for this purpose, 'reconstruction' does not mean building a replica of what used to be. In any case, one of the strengths of 20th century adult education was its capacity to innovate in response to new conditions. The world has changed; adult education for the future must be fit for the future. Yet many of the contributors to this issue appreciate what has been lost, and seek to rebuild an adult education system – even a movement – that carries forward the best of past approaches and traditions, as well as incorporating the new.

Adult education today may be much reduced, but it survives. A recent overview of the position in England describes it as:

> An especially varied sector encompassing 200 providers, 10,000 venues, 15,000 staff and around 500,000 learners, according to sector body HOLEX. But it only has a budget of £215 million a year (almost unchanged since 2005), which amounts to less than one per cent of the entire post-18 education and skills budget (for context, 84 per cent of that budget goes to universities).[23]

Though this summary excludes some provision for adults, such as by universities – the Open University, for instance, is by any reasonable measure a major provider of education to adults – its picture carries the kernel of truth. The challenge confronting our society is how to reconstruct a system of adult education for the common good that builds on these too-threadbare foundations.

In the first article in this issue, 'Adult education and whose common good?', Sharon Clancy and Cilla Ross explore the notion of 'common good' in relation to adult education. They draw on the experiences of working-class family members who were social learners and autodidacts, and who engaged in learning for their own sake and for what they believed to be the common good. Using diaries, letters and interviews, they reflect on how these learners used the lens of class to do this, but they pose an important question: in the less 'binary' world of today, where identities appear more fragmented and individualistic, and less shaped by class, is an adult education for the common good either relevant or possible?

The second article is one of two in which academics from working-class origins use their autobiographies to demonstrate the importance of adult education. Lisa Mckenzie uses autoethnography and personal experience to explore how class inequality and education remain connected. Working-class students still encounter prejudices and feelings of exclusion in universities. She argues that policies on inclusion and exclusion are inadequate, and that a working-class lens – the experiences of working-class learners and teachers – should be valued pedagogically, rather than devalued and treated as 'baggage' to be left behind.

In 'Engaging citizens: the Kent miners and workers' education for the common good', Linden West undertakes what he calls 'backward travelling', revisiting the history of workers' education in a mining community. He sees this as an important part of our contemporary struggle to reinvigorate notions of the common good and popular education. The focus of his paper is the complexities of working-class history, disparaged in neoliberal condescension and oversimplified in some progressive thought. Its history of contention and struggle nevertheless contains, he argues, rich experiments in dialogical, democratic and cooperative learning.

Vicky Duckworth's contribution, 'Education for social justice: everyone should have

the right to learn', is the second of the papers in which an academic of working-class origin uses her autobiography to explore the significance of adult education. She draws on her own story which, she believes, catalysed her own commitment to activism and to devote herself to research that offers a platform for voices, often historically silenced, to be heard and to challenge inequity in its many forms.

In his article, Gary McCulloch discusses why Brian Simon – historian, founder of *FORUM* and communist activist, renowned for his work on adult working-class education in 19th and early 20th-century England – devoted so little attention to adult education in the volumes of his classic history of British education covering the period after 1920. During his writing of the final volume, the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci was published in English and became widely influential, not least on Simon himself. McCulloch traces Simon's approach to adult education and explores why he did not develop a more fully Gramscian version of the history of adult education.

Angela Bate's 'Foundations for folk at Fircroft: reality driven competencies' is the first of three contributions drawn from a remarkable institution: Fircroft College of Adult Education in Birmingham. She shows how this adult residential college addresses the needs of adult learners who face barriers such as trauma, homelessness and unemployment, and are far from ready for the labour market. Fircroft offers a transformative learning model that enables adult learners to gain the skills and confidence needed to progress educationally, and to contribute to society and the economy. Bate uses the college's experiences to raise questions about the new Labour government's aim, through Skills England, to align training with labour-market needs, empower local leaders and enhance support for job seekers.

Fircroft is a 'social justice' college which aims to 'promote social and climate/environmental justice'. In the second of the contributions stemming from its work, we include Dawood Sadiq's moving poem, Fircroft, inspired by his participation as a student on its green changemakers programme.

Zoe Mabbs and Holly Henderson give an account of introducing the tradition of communal singing to Fircroft's students and staff. Although Fircroft has its roots in the Danish folk high school movement, where communal singing is a strong tradition, the practice has not been used in the college for many years. The authors explain the reasons for introducing the tradition and reflect on their experiences, identifying some of the challenges of developing truly inclusive collective practices.

The three contributions from Fircroft are illustrated with pictures of the college, its grounds, and its staff and students. These give some sense of the cooperative, inclusive and welcoming community adult education can provide. They also suggest what might be achieved – how many lives might be enriched – if funding for 'generous and humane' adult education were to become … more generous.

Jean Barr's article is a fascinating account, by a lifelong adult educator, of what she

learned about Britain's history of Empire and slavery, inspired by a chest she inherited from a great-great uncle. A few families, even today, shore up their wealth in clever but ordinary ways. Using methods of inquiry often taught in adult education, she shows how much 'public knowledge' on land, wealth and inheritance remains 'undiscovered' and resistant to public scrutiny.

The final five articles focus on aspects of provision today, and what may be required to reconstruct it for the common good. Tom Wilson explores trade unions' provision of learning for their members. This has a long history, but after two decades of decline it flourished when the 1997-2010 Labour governments introduced the Union Learning Fund (ULF) and legal rights for union learning representatives. The ULF helped millions of working people, including the most disadvantaged, encouraged employers to invest more in training, promoted economic growth and rebuilt a key element of adult learning. If, as he proposes, the new Labour government is to introduce a new and stronger ULF, what lessons might it learn from the experiences of the first?

Jonathan Michie's article discusses how universities in Britain can rebuild their work in adult education. Some are doing so, by placing lifelong learning at the centre of their university strategy. But this requires investment, and Britain's university sector is facing a financial squeeze. Some universities think even modest investments are unaffordable, and Michie argues that government must step in to ensure that opportunities are not lost. Many of the government's own priorities – from overcoming the well-being and mental health crisis, to boosting innovation and productivity, to tackling the climate crisis – are, he suggests, far more likely to be delivered if we can usher in a new era of adult education and lifelong learning.

In 'Adult learning within reach: the WEA as a social justice charity', Simon Parkinson, the WEA general secretary and chief executive, shows that participating in adult learning brings a range of benefits for individuals and communities which are not just educational but include better health, increased participation in community activities, and increased confidence and critical thinking. Yet, he points out, these are not always recognised and rewarded. He believes that if national and regional policymakers recognise adult learning as integral to strategies on inequality and building stronger communities, and organisations such as the WEA were better recognised as charities with a social justice mission, their impact could be greater still.

Sharon Clancy and Iain Jones provide a personal, reflective and insightful account of their work on a research circle, initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic, aimed at 'fostering community, democracy and dialogue'. They ask how their work and collaborative engagement has been shaped by resistance to 'hollowed out' forms of lifelong learning that have marginalised, or forgotten, radical forms of adult education that shaped their own work practices and thinking. They do this while showing how, within the 'hyper-professionalised' world of higher education today, their developing

friendship provided space for reflection and critical examination of their own practices. They express a 'collective hope' that they are 'contributing to the democratic educational space for learning that *FORUM* holds together'.

In the final article, provocatively entitled 'Towards people's palaces of culture?', the doyen of adult education, Sir Alan Tuckett, shows that although governmental and independent reviews have, for over 50 years, provided remarkably consistent advice to government on strengthening adult education, they have had little impact on policy or provision. Since the early 2000s, under the influence of neoliberal thinking, UK policymaking has seen post-school education as simply a tool to support the economic policies of the Treasury. This has had devastating consequences for adults' participation in learning. At the same time, Tuckett argues, the end of ring-fenced funding for adults in further and higher education has seen a decline and disappearance of provision for adult part-time and community-based adult learning. In order to recover stability of provision, to revitalise local authorities' role and to make adult learning again a source of joy and personal fulfilment, he proposes relocating responsibility for community-based adult learning to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

The special issue concludes with a letter from Colin Richards and Frank Norris on the reform of educational inspection in England – a topic of significance to educators of adults as well as educators of children, and two reviews of recent books: a postwar history of Cambridge University's adult education by Mark Freeman, and a history of a short-term residential college for adults, and its remarkable leader, by Sharon Clancy.

Notes

1. R. H. Tawney, 'A national college of All Souls', in his *The Attack and Other Papers*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1953 (1917), pp29-34.

2. For a critical account of New Labour and adult learning, see J. Holford & T. Welikala, ' "Renaissance" without enlightenment: New Labour's "Learning Age" 1997–2010', in E. Saar, O.B. Ure & J. Holford (eds), *Lifelong learning in Europe: national patterns and challenges*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2013, pp140-164: https://nottingham-repository.worktribe.com/output/1004471.

3. A. Leitch, *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – world class skills*, London, Stationery Office (with permission of HM Treasury on behalf of the Controller of HMSO), 2006, pp3-4, 138.

4. C. Emmerson, P. Johnson & N. Ridpath, *The Conservatives and the Economy, 2010–24*, London, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/conservatives-and-economy-2010-24.

5. Two surveys have measured the proportion of adults who participate in learning activities over this period. They use different definitions of 'learning' and somewhat

different methodologies. Their absolute figures therefore differ, but the trends are the same in both. The 'Adult participation in learning' survey, conducted annually by the Learning & Work Institute (formerly the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education), records a fall in participation from 46 per cent of the adult population in 2001 to 33 per cent in 2019: https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/lifelong-learning/adult-participation-in-learning-survey/rates-of-adult-participation-in-learning/ (figures for 2020 and since are not comparable, a different methodology having been used during and after the Covid-19 pandemic). As measured by the Eurostat Labour Force Survey, participation in the UK fell from a high of 29.0 per cent in 2004 to 14.8 per cent in 2019; across the EU as a whole, it rose from 7.1 per cent to 10.8 per cent over the same period: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey.

6. L. Sibieta, I. Tahir & B. Waltmann, *Adult education: the past, present and future*, London, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/adult-education-past-present-and-future.

7. This aim, set out in the first report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, *Learning for the Twenty-First Century* (London, Department for Education and Employment, 1997, p3), was quoted as an epigraph to the opening chapter of the Labour government's green paper *The Learning Age*, Cm 3790, London, HMSO, 1998.

8. Reuters, 'UK PM Starmer condemns far-right for violence after Southport killings', 1 August 2024: https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-pm-starmer-condemns-far-right-violence-after-southport-killings-2024-08-01/.

9. I adopt this term from F. Finchelstein, *The Wannabe Fascists: a guide to understanding the greatest threat to democracy*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2024.

10. This poisonous case is argued eloquently by M. Goodwin, *Values, Voice and Virtue: the new British politics*, London, Penguin, 2023; the quotations are from pp16, 33, 66-67.

11. See, e.g., D. Dorling, *Shattered Nation: inequality and the geography of a failing state*, London, Verso, 2023.

12. Union density rose slightly (to 22.4 per cent) in 2023. Figures from OECD (https://data-explorer.oecd.org/) and Department for Business & Trade, '*Trade union membership, UK 1995-2023: Statistical Bulletin*', London, Department for Business & Trade, 2024: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/665db15a0c8f88e868d334b8/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995_to_2023_Statistical_Bulletin.pdf.

13. R. Livingstone, *Education for a World Adrift*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1943, p152.

14. A. D. Lindsay, quoted in J. A. Blyth, *University Adult Education 1908-1958: the unique tradition*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1983, p161.

15. B. Francis-Devine, *Food banks in the UK*, London, House of Commons Library, 2024: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8585/CBP-8585.pdf.

16. Livingstone, 1943, op. cit., p 150.

17. R. Livingstone, *Some Tasks for Education*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1946, p41.

18. Support for adult education stretched politically from far-left to at least centre-right. Sir Winston Churchill's encomium ('no branch of our vast educational system … should more attract … the aid and encouragement of the State than adult education … The appetite of adults to be shown the foundations and processes of thought will never be denied by a British Administration cherishing the continuity of our Island life', 'Letter to Sir Vincent Tewson', *Report of Proceedings at the 85th Annual Trades Union Congress*, London, TUC, 1953, pp173-174) has been widely quoted – often, though too seldom successfully, by adult educators facing the rapacity of Tory governments. Of course, many adult students thought themselves deeply non-political – just students.

19. The best overall account is still probably J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790-1960: a study in the history of the English adult education movement*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961; other important contributions include: R. Fieldhouse et al., *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, Leicester, NIACE, 1996; S. Rowbotham, 'Travellers in a strange country: responses of working class students to the university extension movement 1873-1910', *History Workshop* 12, 1981, pp 62-95; J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 3rd edition, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2021.

20. The Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee was chaired by A. L. Smith, master of Balliol College, Oxford – a firm prewar advocate of adult education at Oxford. On the membership of this committee, see F. J. Taylor, 'The making of the 1919 report', *Studies in Adult Education* 8, 2, pp134-148 (reprinted in H. Wiltshire, J. Taylor & B. Jennings (eds), *The 1919 Report: the final and interim report of the adult education committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction 1918-1919*, Nottingham, University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education, 1980, pp25-36). The Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2019, chaired by Dame Helen Ghosh, also master of Balliol) aimed to reassert its perspectives for the current century. The final and interim reports of the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, together with the Centenary Commission on Adult Education's Report, are available at https://centenarycommission.org/.

21. Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee, *Final Report*, Cmd 321, London, HMSO, 1919, pp1-2.

22. Ibid., p 5.

23. J. Staufenberg, 'The dismantling of a sector: adult education in crisis', *FE Week* 400, 30 September 2022, pp18-22.