

Moving right: the circus continues

One of the most basic roles of a political party is to campaign to win consent for your ideas - to convince the population that your ideas make sense. The right understands this very well. The preferred strategy of the current Labour leadership, on the other hand, seems largely based on adapting to the existing terrain. As a result, and in the face of constant campaigning by the populist right, ideas which once would have been considered outlandish have now entered the mainstream, and social-democratic ideas are being increasingly sidelined.

Attempts since 2010 by both Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn to return to - and refashion - some of the social-democratic policies that had been jettisoned by their New Labour predecessors were met with a barrage of abuse from the right. The response of the Starmer leadership has been to capitulate - and this is why he has so little of substance to offer as an alternative to the policies of the right. During its first six months in office, this absence of alternative policies has led the Starmer government to increasingly depend on a single idea - growth at all costs. And the economic and fiscal policies underpinning this drive for growth have in the main come straight from the classic playbook of neoliberalism - further deregulation and a return to austerity measures.

This is alarming on many fronts. First of all, the dire economic situation of the UK today directly results from such policies, so the strategy is almost bound to fail; and it also indicates the lessons of the 2008 financial crisis have not been learnt. Secondly, if Labour does not deliver meaningful change it will probably lose the next general election - perhaps unsurprisingly, it will be seen as no different from the Tories. And thirdly, there is a strong risk that the vacant space left by its failure to embrace more radical change will be gleefully occupied by an emboldened populist right, whether from a Tory party that has shifted even further to the right, or from a

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cross-party far-right coalition.

This brings us to the second major capitulation of the Starmer leadership. Its failure to think with flair, courage or imagination is not only evident in its economic and fiscal policies: it has also wholly succumbed to the view that current levels of immigration to the UK are a legitimate cause for concern. This has served to further entrench anti-migrant sentiment as part of everyday political common sense, and has ceded even more of the political landscape to the populist right.

Below we consider some of the context - including the many false assumptions and arguments - that underpin Labour's unwillingness to challenge dominant narratives and policies.

The perils of focus group politics

One of the assumptions underpinning Labour's current right-wing orientation, and its cautious/timid approach to transformative ideas, is a belief that the British public is fundamentally conservative, and that this conservatism cannot be changed. The role of political parties is therefore to respond, delivering policies conducive to pre-existing viewpoints.

Leaving aside questions of how people arrive at their viewpoints - including how they shift over time - opinion polls themselves do not bear out this assumption. Public opinion polling indicates that attitudes are to the left of the government on a number of issues, including welfare spending, immigration and climate change, as demonstrated, for example, by the results of recent British Social Attitudes surveys, in which both Labour and Conservative voters showed more positive views towards immigration over a twenty-year period.¹ 19 per cent of people now think that benefits recipients are undeserving, as opposed to 40 per cent in 2005; and there has been a modest rise in support for higher taxes to pay for welfare benefits.²

A majority of people think that climate change is an important issue, and, according to the Office for National Statistics, 76 per cent have reported making lifestyle changes to help tackle climate change.³ Supposedly divisive measures such as Low Traffic Neighbourhood schemes have turned out to be popular with local residents, according to research commissioned by the former Conservative government.⁴ 60 per cent of voters would back the youth mobility scheme with the European Union that Starmer is reluctant to adopt, and 55 per cent of voters

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would support free movement.⁵ In relation to Israel/Palestine, almost two thirds of British voters support a ceasefire, and support for the Israeli government's position is decreasing.⁶ However, the government is not responding to these shifts, precisely because they contradict its perceptions of the British public - and particularly the working class - as fundamentally conservative, especially on social issues.

The UK's first-past-the-post electoral system contributes to a tendency to focus on conservative voters to the exclusion of the rest of the public. Because elections are often decided in swing seats, there is a tendency to focus on swing voters, who are often addressed by polling companies as 'types' rather than as social beings, to whom they might apply a sociological analysis. These 'types' include the Essex Man of the 1980s, the Mondeo Man of the 1990s, the Workington Man or Woman of the 2019 general election and the Stevenage Woman of the 2024 election. In some cases these figures are aspirational and embrace a consumer lifestyle; in others, as with the Stevenage Woman, they are low-income and struggling financially. But what this cast of characters has in common is their cultural conservatism, their individualism and their apathy or in some cases antipathy towards politics. Targeted ads then address these 'types', aided by the increasing resort to social media dark-ads, so that different demographics see ads that are only visible to them - which makes it easier for political parties to say different, even contradictory, things to different people.⁷

Seeing the public as a set of marketing demographics is not the only reason for Labour's perception of the electorate as depoliticised and conservative. Its widespread set of assumptions about the working class as inherently culturally conservative, and especially as anti-immigration, is linked to a nostalgic hearkening back to the patriarchy and ethnic homogeneity of twentieth-century employment, rather than an understanding of the contemporary world of work. Starmer's repeated comments in the 2024 general election about being the son of a toolmaker evoke this vision of the working class, which, as John Clarke has argued, reproduces gendered conceptions of the dignity of labour and nostalgic narratives around the world of work.⁸ Jobs in the service industry, where many working-class people are employed (many of whom are female, Black or Asian, and many of whom are migrants) are often not seen as constituting proper working-class employment. It's also assumed that those with university degrees, no matter their job or their pay, are not working-class. Labour's discomfort with its popularity amongst graduates reflects anxieties that they are appealing to the wrong people and losing the right

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ones. These dated perceptions in turn produce lazy assumptions about the working class's inherent opposition to progressive ideas, anti-immigrant stance, and potential disposition to vote for Reform. Those of us who see migration or multiculturalism in positive terms are seen to be ignorant about the 'real world', and especially what working-class people really think. A series of anti-immigration policies and rhetoric has responded to this 'realism', as we will discuss later.

Labour's lack of connection with social movements

Labour's reactive, focus-group-driven approach is connected to a distancing from another central task of progressive political movements - community action to build coalitions and defend the marginalised, as seen in its discouragement of people from attending the counter-demonstrations to the far-right riots of August 2024.⁹ This is linked to the leadership's disengagement from any sense that the party is connected to a labour movement or to other social movements, in spite of the involvement of many Labour members in such movements, and its continuing receipt of trade union support.

In fact they frequently discipline members for participating in wider movements, particularly those campaigning for solidarity with Palestinians, anti-racism, or for progressive alliances.¹⁰ As Kevin Blowe commented in *Soundings* 86, some in the Labour leadership seem to think that politics happens in meeting rooms, rather than change coming from the grassroots or social movements.¹¹

Social movements are seen as being composed of out of touch, middle-class idealists, in line with the conceptions of the working class as outlined above. There is no sense that a political party should be taking a lead in public discussion, seeking to persuade people about its message, or engaging with people involved in civil society movements. As we have noted, this is particularly disastrous in the face of the constant messaging of the right.

During the election, Starmer was quoted in saying that he wanted to stay away from any policies that could be used in a Tory attack ad. There is a sense that potentially progressive or transformative ideas are seen as a liability and so are dismissed. The fear of the party being seen as aligned to the 'Loony Left' is clearly one reason for Starmer's distancing from the Corbyn leadership, and the dropping of so many of its potentially popular policies.¹²

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Wes Streeting, in particular, has promulgated a culture-war-lite approach on issues of equality. For example, in a speech in February 2025 he argued that, although he supports equality: ‘Sometimes there are some really daft things being done in the name of equality, diversity and inclusion’, and this has ‘undermined the cause’. Streeting apparently believes that many anti-racist campaigners are guilty of ‘anti-whiteness’, and this risks offending ‘the bloke up in Wigan who’s more likely to die earlier than his more affluent white counterparts down in London’.¹³ Arguing that those campaigning for gender or racial equality are in some way attacking the rights of ‘white working-class’ men - ‘all lives matter’ - is an old and discredited tactic.

Starmer still says he is a socialist, but his is a socialism that feels uncomfortable about tackling the excesses of capitalism, or questions of power, and has no sense of the need to campaign for change. On questions of immigration, he has also capitulated to the right, as we discuss in the next section.

Ceding ground to the right

In November 2024, Keir Starmer stated that the previous government had been conducting an ‘open borders experiment’. The argument was that the Conservatives had deliberately ramped up numbers while promising to reduce them. This was presented as an example of both Tory duplicity and Tory inefficiency.¹⁴ There was not only a complete acceptance of the common-sense view of immigration as a problem: there was also a promise to be ‘tougher’ (more efficient) on numbers. During the election campaign, in an apparent attempt to win over potential Reform voters, Starmer had stated that Sunak (a British Asian) was the ‘the most liberal prime minister we’ve ever had on immigration’.¹⁵ In commenting on this speech Aditya Chakraborty wrote:

I can’t honestly imagine that a former human rights lawyer feels comfortable voicing such bigotry, let alone giving it the Downing Street stamp of approval. No doubt he’s been urged to do so by Labour strategists, whose chief concern is to woo ‘hero voters’, those who were once on the red team but long ago left to support Brexit or Boris Johnson or Farage. For the sake of an extra half point in the polls, Starmer’s team are quite happy to sacrifice basic decency.¹⁶

But Starmer has persisted with this politics in office. The current Labour government has ramped up deportations;¹⁷ and, in trademark style, Starmer has treated those

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crossing the channel in small boats as purely a matter for border enforcement.

Labour's response during the August 2024 riots was similarly focused on law and order. As Munit Mohammed comments in this issue, instead of tackling the racism underpinning the riots, it seemed that the government's main concern was to tell people 'to express their concerns in a different manner': 'If you're going to say these things, say them properly - don't go around causing violence'.

In this absence of political leadership from Labour, the right is too often able to set the narrative and agenda, and to dominate the news cycles with headlines; its outrageous and inflammatory comments produce a constant source of clickbait.

These sentiments are frequently left unchallenged by Labour (with some honourable exceptions). And Labour's equally weak narrative on the increasingly high levels of inequality in the UK further benefits the right. In failing to challenge individualised interpretations and narratives of inequality, it tacitly acquiesces in explanations based on blaming individual outsiders.

The broader environment for right-wing populism: the social and political effects of neoliberalism

The social and economic conditions which produce grievances are often conducive to right-wing narratives and interpretations - their analysis makes everything seem so immediate and simple, while left-wing interpretations are increasingly presented as outlandish and counter-intuitive. As common sense on so many issues is shifting, it becomes ever easier to blame immigrants and unemployed people rather than bankers and landlords for the cost-of-living crisis and deepening inequality. More complex arguments about the effects of neoliberal economics are rarely heard, hardly surprising given the complicity of New Labour and its successors in producing these effects. So people resort to simplistic explanations for the fact that work is becoming increasingly precarious and unequal - the gig economy is the ultimate expression of this. The financialisation of property and the economy, which has led to assets becoming more profitable than wages, is rarely offered as an explanatory framework.¹⁸ Labour's participation in so many aspects of the system that produces inequality prevents it from being able to offer alternative explanations.

Other processes associated with the long-term neoliberalisation of society

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have weakened alternative sources of opposition; these have included the professionalisation of many community organisations (such as trade unions, but also a number of feminist, anti-racist and LGBT+ organisations), and their turn to a servicing model. This in turn has had the effect of limiting the environments in which people can be exposed to an alternative political analysis, or practise solidarity, including across differences; and the situation has been exacerbated by restrictions on political messaging imposed by legislation such as the 2014 Lobbying Act, in combination with the precarity of voluntary sector funding. Meanwhile austerity cuts have led to the loss and privatisation of libraries, youth centres, community centres and other spaces where people can gather with others who do not share similar backgrounds. This means that people are more likely to retreat into the comfort zones of ethno-nationalism, traditional gender roles, heteronormativity, and other conservative and inward-looking conceptions of community and identity. Social media platforms - in some cases, the only places where people can gather - produce echo chambers where people do not encounter others from different backgrounds. The economic models of these platforms monetise distrust, division and conspiracy theories. Legacy media also amplifies these tendencies, facilitating contrarian columnists (such as Boris Johnson) and chat show hosts (including Farage) in making lucrative careers. These tendencies make it all the more important to find ways of contesting this terrain and trying to restore some of the networks and institutions that sustain social life.

These macro-level changes are also experienced in people's everyday lives: as Wendy Brown has argued, there is 'hardly a contemporary activity or sphere of life unstriated by tiers or classes of access dependent on wealth'.¹⁹ There is an aggressive hustle culture in the workplace (where everyone increasingly sees themselves as sole operators); while a culture of individualism imbues many other aspects of life - relationships, families, the home, health: influencers, celebrities and wellness industry gurus exhort us all to 'be the best version of ourselves'.

Within this neoliberal, individualist culture, it becomes difficult to understand the importance of universal welfare benefits and the value of paying tax for them. Instead, the logic seems to be: why should you pay tax for other people's benefits when you haven't got enough money yourself and nobody is helping you? It's then easier to see public services, and society more generally, as part of a zero-sum game: it's them or me. This is another area where Labour has conceded ground, as

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evidenced by their refusal to lift the two-child benefit cap. It is no longer making the case for universal provision, and seems content with the idea that welfare benefits are a residual, last-resort fund for the most desperate, rather than a service in which everyone has a stake.

In the absence of a wider structural critique, personalised forms of politics are also present in liberal positions, including on issues such as anti-racism: the discussion so often focuses on whether or not someone has made a racist comment, rather than an understanding of racism as being baked into systems and structures. And, as Richard Seymour has argued, the personalised nature of this politics makes it vulnerable to co-option by the right: it becomes possible to claim that white males have been discriminated against, or that the wealthy are resented by those who have not been successful in life.²⁰ Personalised politics also means that the wealthy backgrounds of Donald Trump or Nigel Farage do not prevent them from being seen as belonging to the 'people': pointing out the contradictions in their position requires a structural critique. In the search for people to blame - rather than an understanding of structural causes - it is much easier to punch down than punch up: most people rarely encounter billionaires or politicians in their everyday lives - or at least they certainly come across them much less often than immigrants or unemployed people.

In these circumstances it has become more difficult to conceive of ideas such as solidarity and equality; and thus easier for the right to redirect people's experiences of inequality, housing crises or inflation towards identitarian anxieties around loss of entitlement (whiteness, masculinity, national identity, etc). Phil Burton Cartledge has termed this manoeuvre 'negative class consciousness': the right speaks to grievances but instead of offering constructive solutions redirects blame towards scapegoats.²¹

Hostility to immigrants is a classic feature of the propaganda of the right: as Nira Yuval Davis notes, a lack of trust in government leads people to define themselves through alternative communities of belonging based on a fear of outsiders rather than anger towards the real sources of people's suffering.²² Immigration is at the heart of the right's conspiracy theories, including the Great Replacement Theory. It is also central to the notion, heavily promoted by Elon Musk and others, that perpetrating sexual violence against (white) women is a phenomenon uniquely perpetrated by Asian men (while having little to say on high-profile predators such as Jeffery Epstein or Dominique Pelicot). Labour rarely challenges these right-wing

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narratives on immigration (though it did in the end challenge Musk - after he attacked Starmer's record as DPP and said Jess Phillips deserved to be in jail - so there is a limit somewhere ...).

As we have seen with Elon Musk and Donald Trump's numerous interventions into British politics, the far right is global. It is also very well-funded, particularly by the most predatory groups - finance capital, property tycoons, fossil fuels, Silicon Valley monopolies, primarily those which might benefit from further deregulation.²³ Notably, this situation does not undermine claims by populist politicians to speak for the people.

Conclusion

The failure to recognise the role of the political party in campaigning to change public opinion - something the right could never be accused of - is a huge problem for Labour. If you are too cautious to promote the idea that big corporations and wealthy people should pay more tax (and that lower income people should not be paying a higher proportion of their income on tax than those in the top income deciles); or that most people need to be supported with welfare payments at some point in their lives; or that a vibrant multicultural society is a good society; or that regulating businesses that are damaging the planet or avoiding tax is necessary - the list could go on - you will end up trapped inside the political terrain of the right and won't be able to make a difference when in government. In the end, there is no point in winning elections if you can't make a difference when you are in power. To do this, you have to campaign, not just in election time but all the time, to win people over to your own ideas - or, as Gramsci and Stuart Hall would say: to seek to change the prevailing common sense.²⁴

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Notes

1. <https://natcen.ac.uk/how-are-attitudes-immigration-britain-changing>.
2. <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/bsa-40-poverty>.
3. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/publicandbusinessattitudestotheenvironmentandclimatechangegreatbritain/2024>.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/mar/08/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-generally-popular-report-ordered-by-sunak-finds>.

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5. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-youth-mobility-vote-brexite-b2679574.html>; <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-poll-free-movement-eu-reset-b2663254.html>.
6. <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/48675-british-attitudes-to-the-israel-gaza-conflict-february-2024-update>.
7. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/why-its-time-to-shine-a-light-on-dark-ads-online/>.
8. John Clarke, 'Change! (in moderation): Labourism, Starmer and the conjuncture', *Soundings* 87, summer 2024.
9. <https://news.sky.com/video/uk-riots-minister-warns-the-police-will-be-coming-for-you-with-weekend-protests-expected-13193756>.
10. High profile cases include Diane Abbott, Faiza Shaeen, Lloyd Russell Moyle and Neal Lawson. For grassroots cases see sites such as <https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/justice-4-labour-party-members/> and <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/>.
11. Kirsten Forkert talks to Kevin Blowe in *Soundings* 86, spring 2024. Free to view at: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2024-issue-86/abstract-9906/>.
12. For example, as Andy Cumbers argued in 'The return of public ownership amidst neoliberal mutation', *Soundings* 87, Summer 2024: 'It is important ... to stress that during the past forty years public ownership has always been more popular among ordinary citizens than among political and economic elites'.
13. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/feb/04/nhs-diversity-dei-practices-hindered-misguided-approaches-wes-streting>.
14. 'Record migration figures show Tories were running "open borders experiment" after Brexit', *Guardian*. 28 November 2024.
15. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/04/sunak-and-starmer-scrap-over-tax-and-immigration-in-heated-first-tv-debate>.
16. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/19/keir-starmer-nigel-farage-prime-minister-reform>.
17. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/dec/15/deportations-reach-five-year-high-despite-concerns-of-rights-groups>.
18. As Thomas Piketty argued in *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, Harvard University Press, 2014.
19. Wendy Brown, *In the ruins of neoliberalism: the rise of antidemocratic politics in the West*, Columbia University Press 2019, p176.
20. <https://novaramedia.com/2024/12/30/identity-politics-is-dead-and-the-far-right-knows-it/>.
21. Phil Burton Cartledge, 'Negative class consciousness': <https://averypublicsociologist.blogspot.com/2021/03/negative-class-consciousness.html>. There is a growing diagonalist tendency that involves being left on economics and right on social issues. Conservative commentator Matthew Goodwin is an example of this. Reform's opportunistic opposition to the winter fuel payment cuts could be understood as corresponding to this tendency, but their free-market liberalism (e.g. Farage

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calling for the NHS to be abolished) contradicts this. Within Europe, Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement Nationale* (formerly the *Front Nationale*) and Sahra Wagenacht's *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* simultaneously call for public services to be funded while taking hardline positions on immigration.

22. Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Trust, bordering and necro-racism', in this issue.

23. GB News received £60m in funding, with £40m coming from Legatum, a Dubai-based private investment firm, and Paul Marshall, a British hedge fund manager. James Hoskings (who holds numerous fossil fuel investments) gave over £2m to Reform UK. The investigative journalism site DeSmog pointed out that in 2023, Reform UK received reforms from numerous donors with fossil fuel industry links and with a history of climate science denial. Elon Musk has paid Reform MPs Farage, Lee Anderson and Rupert Lowe to post on X.

24. See, for example, Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea, 'Common-sense neoliberalism', *Soundings* 55, Winter 2013. Free-to-view at: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2013-issue-55/abstract-7411/>.