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An open letter to Keir Starmer and all Labour Members of Parliament

from

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Introduction: Poverty and inequality

David J. Hicks, Simon Winlow and Tracy Shildrick

Dear Keir Starmer and all Labour MPs,

It's been a year since you won power, after nearly 15 years of Conservative Party domination. When you assumed office some of us were hopeful. We hoped that a Labour government would put an end to austerity, invest in public services and embark upon a journey to drive up standards of living. Others amongst us did not have such high hopes and were pessimistic about your government's ability, and desire, to do anything more than continue implementing neoliberal policies that sow division and drive growing inequality.

What unites us now is a feeling of confusion, dismay and disappointment. The pessimists were correct in predicting that your government would uncritically accept the dogmas of neoliberalism and continue to implement policies that enrich elites, drive insecurity, and generally propel our nation further into decline.

Britain is profoundly economically unequal. Poverty and extreme wealth have been normalised. The UK has the highest rate of income inequality in Europe. The US is more economically unequal, but not by much (UK Parliament, 2025). In March 2025, it was reported in the UK Living Standards Review that the poorest households in the UK were financially poorer than the poorest households in Slovenia and Malta (UK Living Standards Review, 2025). Wage and wealth inequality have been encouraged to run to extremes. Over the last half century, policies introduced by both the major parties have driven this trend. Other policy decisions could have been taken that would have led us to a much better destination.

In Britain today, the old adage that wealth begets wealth remains strangely prescient. Growth in profits from private investment massively outstrip wage growth. Paid work no longer guarantees social inclusion. Millions in paid work barely make enough to meet their immediate material needs. The idea that growth will 'trickle down' and 'float all boats' has been proven time and time again to be totally false. A functioning economy needs growth, but under our current system the benefits of growth

tend to be captured by those already wealthy. Few serious attempts have been made to ensure that the benefits of growth are spread more evenly among the people.

What is driving these trends? Why is a nation as developed as Britain struggling to hold civil society together? In the years following Thatcher's rise of the leadership of the Conservative Party, neoliberalism shed its ideological skin and transformed itself into basic common sense, accepted by pragmatists and ideologues in all of the major parties. The state was judged to be ossified, stagnant and old-fashioned, while the market was imagined to be nimble, adaptive and efficient. The adoption of neoliberal policies across the political spectrum had significant ramifications for the nation and its people. Major industries were closed down and utilities were taken out of public ownership. Armitage (2014) notes that 'swathes of British energy, transport and utility networks are run by companies owned by other European governments'. In 2022, as concerns around sewage being dumped into our seas came to the fore, it was revealed that more than 70% of the English water industry is foreign owned (Leach *et al*., 2022). Privatisation and deregulation have led to corrosive corporate practices, such as a counterproductive focus on share values, huge pay rises for the executive class, little investment in infrastructure, disregard for maintenance, falling customer satisfaction, rising prices, wage suppression, loading key utilities with unsustainable debt, and minimal attention paid to employees' health and safety. The Grenfell fire is a noteworthy case in point. Ordinary people's safety was compromised, and their voices ignored amidst a culture absence of accountability and traditional accounts of corporate citizenship that prioritised profits above all else. The fire was both predictable and preventable. It should have been a turning point for the economic direction of our country.

The far right has historically made ground in times of economic insecurity and rising dissatisfaction – like these. When elites refuse to heed the call to change track, growing numbers become willing to look to the margins to identify political messages that explain their dissatisfaction and promise a radical change of direction (Winlow et al., 2017). The working class deserves, and desperately needs, determined political representation. The Labour Party was founded to carry out this task, and millions of working-class men and women continue to look to the left's core institutions for leadership and protection. Now is the time to strike out boldly in a different direction. The Labour Party at present seems determined to maintain a neoliberal consensus that has become enormously unpopular. The negative politics of the last two decades, where the core party political strategy has been to inspire marginally less anger and opprobrium than one's opponent, must be dispensed with. To win, Labour must create an image of a better Britain it hopes to create (Winlow and Hall, 2023). This better Britain cannot be just another facsimile of the Britain that exists now. The people want and expect significant changes to be made.

As working-class social scientists, we believe we have a social responsibility to write this letter, and we urge you to adjust your course. You have a large majority and a mandate to embark upon a

series of deep interventions into our social and economic systems in order to improve equality, return a measure of economic security to the masses, and build the foundations of a new, forward-looking and optimistic society in which we can all thrive. Whether you recognise it or not, you have before you the tools needed to change things. You must ignore those who tell you nothing can be done. The 1945 Labour government implemented a series of policies that changed Britain for the better, and they did so in the shadow of a destructive war and a shattered economy. Given the problems our society faces now, we need a Labour government with similar levels of confidence and commitment and a clear determination to turn things around by acting in the popular interest.

This letter is not an attack on the Labour Party. We want to share with you our expertise about where we are now and what needs to change in the hope of encouraging you to take up your mandate and act in the popular interest. Only by embarking upon a historic programme of social improvement can you avoid inflicting greater harm upon your reputation in the eyes of ordinary people. We make the following arguments:

1. We have not run out of money
2. People need well-paid jobs and welfare when needed, not workfare at any cost
3. Build homes fit for purpose
4. Invest in local communities
5. The criminal justice system should represent popular interests and values
6. Listen to workers in the creative industries, to ensure working-class people are able to be a part of them

Of course, in a letter of this length, it is impossible for us to cover everything in detail – and, therefore, this list of arguments is by-no-means exhaustive. For example, this letter could have had sections on: the NHS; energy bills; the financial issues being faced by universities; the need to recognise and prepare for AI taking jobs; the mental health crisis; and, so much more. This letter doesn't have all the answers. However, it does provide some expertise and a plea for the Labour Party to offer something different, after decades of growing inequality.

1. We have not run out of money

Steve Hall and Simon Winlow

Socially injurious austerity is most commonly justified by the deeply flawed belief that, as a nation, we can 'run out of money'. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are a sovereign nation that issues its own fiat currency. We do not need to borrow it and nor do we need to take it from taxpayers before embarking upon public spending. The British State is the sole legitimate producer of British pounds.

Every pound currently in circulation, whether by government spending or licensed private bank credit, was once issued by the British state through its central bank. The current obsession with 'the deficit' is therefore a red herring, a facet of ideology that any government concerned with the public good should immediately dispense with. If the British state runs a large recurring deficit, it is because that money is currently in circulation, which is technically the government's net contribution to the money supply, has yet to be taken back by the government in the form of tax. The government doesn't have it because the British people have it.

The deficit is not the result of 'borrowing' private capital. Bonds are simply savings accounts offered to holders of reserve capital, nothing more. As for bond yields, Sweden, Switzerland and Japan - and even the European Central Bank - have offered bonds at zero or negative rates yet still prospered. There is no technical reason for a currency-issuing government to sell bonds to raise money for its spending and investment plans, and certainly no requirement to pay interest.

We must note that the government's money is not distributed evenly and overwhelmingly benefits the rich. For instance, after the 2008 crash close to £1 trillion was pumped into banks' reserve accounts as 'quantitative easing' to ensure liquidity and obviate bank failure, and each year a significant amount is spent on products supplied by corporate contractors such as BAE Systems. Taxation helps to control inflation and redistribute some of this money, but attempting to reduce the deficit means reducing the amount of money in circulation, therefore reducing aggregate demand and discouraging suppliers. Running a 'balanced budget' means forcing austerity and financial distress on ordinary taxpayers. Throughout western history, most attempts to 'balance the budget' have been closely followed by recessions or depressions.

There are good reasons to tax the super-rich. Money power of this kind is corrosive to democracy and society at large. That such huge fortunes have been accumulated while popular incomes have stagnated suggests ongoing policy failure. However, we do not need to tax the rich in order to spend money on public goods. We have the capacity to generate enough British pounds to purchase anything that is for sale in British pounds, including unused labour. The standard scare story is that a new era of concerted public spending will drive up inflation. This is, again, entirely false - as long as supply meets aggregate demand, inflation can be controlled. Investing in productive utilities, industry and services boosts supply. The current attempt to woo private equity has been an abject failure. Anyone with a detailed knowledge of where we are now must acknowledge that an ongoing refusal to spend and invest in the public interest has caused a predictable downturn in our infrastructure and across public space. Ordinary people can see decline around them every day.

2. People need well-paid jobs and welfare when needed, not workfare at any cost
   Tracy Shildrick

Paid work is the best way for people to live their lives and it is what most people want but our country no longer delivers for many working-class people. Working-class job opportunities have been denigrated and the jobs that keep the country running (for example, cleaning the corridors of Westminster, and keeping our security and food supplies going, serving in our supermarkets) are often not valued enough to offer employees job security, regular hours, or access to a decent 'real living wage'. Deregulation of the labour market has resulted in the UK having one of the highest rates of insecure and zero hours contracts in the OECD. Workers have often been treated with contempt as the high-profile case of P&O Ferries showed when workers were sacked in order to hire cheaper labour. The case was not an unusual nor was it an isolated one.

Welfare reform is high on the government's agenda for reform. Debate so far has focused on a 'work first' approach. Nobody would disagree that being able to support oneself via decent paid work is best (where possible), but the reality is that many work but remain in poverty. We live in country where ordinary people – often in paid jobs – have to resort to food banks, baby banks, clothing banks and even 'bed banks' to survive. Poverty in childhood has scarring effects throughout the life course and child poverty rates are embarrassingly high. For example, in the North East (where I am based) two thirds of the regions consistencies have a child poverty rate at or higher than the UK average of 31%. Two constituencies have the highest rates of child poverty in the North East. More than half of children (52%) in Middlesbrough and Thornaby East, followed by Newcastle Central and west (43%) (North East Child Poverty Commission, 2024)

Political debate has not really grappled with the rather large and unsightly elephant in the room, that our welfare system has for a long time had to prop up (top up) the wages of those in low paid and insecure work. This lets employers off the hook and adds significant cost to the welfare bill. The proliferation of zero hours contracts has exposed that the system cannot support those who are unable to access regular hours. The problems we face go deep and the scale of ill-health and disability is worrying (particularly amongst our young people). But this should be of no surprise. It's product of a political and economic model that values profits for some over the security and well-being of many of its citizens and keeps many of them, despite being in paid work, in poverty. It is worrying that so many work-aged people are now sick (and some of them not claiming any benefits) but life expectancy for those on low incomes has been in decline for a long time (Marmot 2020).

The depiction in political debate of people absent from the labour market and needing to be helped (pushed) into paid work does not reflect the reality of how many people are living. We also know the work-aged welfare system has become increasingly punitive. It is the most vulnerable in our

society – those who are unable to take paid jobs – who have paid the greatest price for the successive cuts to work aged benefits that have been made in the name of austerity. Even before the recent crises many people were struggling to survive and indeed, shamefully, many people didn't – and won't – survive.

In 2020 it was reported that officially there had been at least 69 suicides linked to DWP's handling of benefit claims, but Watchdog claims the true number of cases where benefit claimants have taken their own lives because of DWP actions could be much higher (Butler, 2020). These include Errol Graham, who died of starvation after his benefits were stopped because he failed to turn up for Job Centre appointments. The only food found in his flat were two tins of fish that were four years out of date. He weighed four and a half stones and died of starvation. More recently, in my home-town Middlesbrough, a severely disabled mother, Jodey Whiting, committed suicide after having been declared 'fit for work' and left notes that said she could not buy food or pay her bills. Her mother, Joy Dove, fought tirelessly to get DWP to take some responsibility over eight years since her death. In a relatively rare second inquest, which is only credit to her mother's determination, it was ruled that DWP had mistakenly removed her benefits (Brown, 2025). Research has also shown that over 330,000 people died as a result of austerity (Butler, 2022) and of course that is likely an underestimate. These are not isolated cases but endemic in a system that is not working for working class people.

The government needs a longer and shorter-term strategy, regardless of the length of its term of office. Governments can leave legacies of change even if they can't make all the changes themselves.

3. <u>Build homes fit for purpose</u>
   Kate Haddow

Like 17% of the UK population (Abraham, 2023), I live in social housing. I have lived in a block of multistorey flats in the North East of England for the last twelve years with my partner. In 2024, the flats were condemned by the local authority as they were considered to no longer be economically viable and will be demolished in the 'near' future. Although we will be rehoused, we do not know when, where, or what kind of property we will be offered. Our situation speaks to the wider issues of social housing with 20,560 social homes lost in 2024, primarily through Right to Buy sales and demolitions (Shelter, 2024).

The matters we face, such as precarity and the threat of homelessness, are far from unique to many in our society today and are a condemnation of the social housing terrain in the UK. Many are at risk of homelessness. The number of people recorded as homeless is at its highest ever and over 1.3 million people are waiting to be housed (Moore, 2025), trapped with rogue landlords or living in poor

quality social housing beset with problems. These issues can be traced back to policies implemented decades ago and the successive government's failure to take action around the need for more affordable and good quality social housing.

By building more social housing, we will provide people with a basis for a good life that would suppress many other issues, such as poor health, poverty, and homelessness. Over the last 40 years, policies such as the Right to Buy scheme have seen a dramatic reduction in local authority housing stock. Since the policy was implemented, we are feeling the effects more than ever, not only due to the lack of houses available, but what the policy has done to the rental sector. Social historian Jon Boughton (2018) argues the policy has been disastrous for the housing landscape in the UK. This is because when most first-generation Right to Buy homeowners move on or pass away, the homes generally tend to be sold on rather than inherited and a large portion of this housing stock gets purchased by private landlords. These landlords are charging high rates to private tenants in some of the most poorly maintained properties across the UK.

Social housing can, and does, operate successfully. Other countries, such as Austria, particularly the capital, Vienna, have long been praised for their strong social housing model (Wolfgang, 2013). What can be learnt then from Vienna's successful social housing model?

Vienna's social housing ensures broad access to the population, with 60% of people living in social housing or subsidised schemes (Oltermann, 2024). Unlike in the UK, where social housing is deemed for the poorest, which has created a stigma around those living in social housing and social housing itself. Vienna imposes minimal requirements for accessing social housing, which is based on a cap on income and is built for limited profit, ensuring continued investment and funding for social housing.

Vienna's social housing often focuses on good quality, with access to green spaces and communal areas such as parks, open courtyards, and gardens benefiting the wellbeing of residents and encouraging community development, social integration, and interaction amongst residents. Social housing areas also comprise a mixture of residents from different social and economic backgrounds, with some apartments at different costs creating a mixed community (Wolfgang, 2013). This also removes the stigma attached to social housing (Kossl, 2022). Vienna's policy on housing also encompasses involvement from experts ensuring high-quality housing rather than selecting the least expensive housing projects (Hernández-Morales, 2022).

In summary, social housing forms the foundation for working-class people to live a good life and empowers them to be a part of society. Social housing should not just be confined to those facing homelessness, but the working-class. This can only be achieved by building more social housing and abolishing the shambolic Right to Buy policy. The Labour Party has historically championed social housing, such as the Homes for All policy and Homes Fit for Heroes. I urge all members of the Labour

Party to revisit their predecessors' ideas of social housing and the importance of social housing for the working-class. Remember whom you claim to represent.

4. Invest in local communities

   Laura J. Minor

Our communities are the bedrock of society, formed not merely through physical structures but the vital web of social connections, shared resources, and collective participation that give meaning to people's lives. Yet, after years of austerity, many local authorities have been stripped of their capacity to support community wellbeing, with funding cuts averaging 76% since 2010 (Mulcahy, 2024).

These cuts have devastated local services, closed community spaces, and undermined the social infrastructure that once sustained our neighbourhoods. The impact has been particularly severe in already disadvantaged areas – widening inequalities and leaving many communities struggling to meet even basic needs. When citizens can no longer access libraries, youth centres, or public spaces, the very fabric of community life begins to unravel.

Recent research by Rex & Campbell (2022) reveals the devastating impact of austerity on local cultural services, with cuts to funding ranging from 1% to a staggering 94% across different authorities between 2009/10 and 2018/2019. This variation demonstrates that austerity is not a uniform experience but rather a policy that has been implemented with widely differing impacts across communities. Cultural services – including museums, libraries, and community arts – are essential components of local identity and social cohesion, yet they have been among the most vulnerable to cuts due to their non-statutory status.

The Local Government Information Unit also paints an alarming picture: only 4% of senior council figures express confidence in the sustainability of council finances, with over half believing their councils face effective bankruptcy within five years. Alongside this, it was found that only 8% of respondents were happy with the performance of the central government in considering local government issues when making national policy decisions (Stride and Woods, 2024). This financial precarity and lack of confidence threaten the very foundations of local democracy and community support.

We urge you to recognise that community organisations are crucial 'cogs of connection' (Locality, 2020: 5) in rebuilding our social fabric. This is especially critical given the current financial outlook for local authorities. Recent research by Macikene, Pugh and Studdert (2024) confirms that councils are trapped in a 'hand to mouth funding model', which creates perverse incentives to cut budgets incrementally rather than invest in sustainable, preventative approaches. Their findings reveal

how councils are increasingly ‘a slave to markets’, with rising costs for essential services like social care and temporary housing, while having diminished control over quality. Your government’s commitment to mission-driven government - ‘focusing on ambitious, measurable, long-term objectives’ and developing a new style of governing that is ‘more joined up, pushes power out to communities and harnesses new technology’ - is an important one.

This approach offers an opportunity to build a new partnership with communities. These organisations already play key roles in local economic development, particularly in disadvantaged areas - generating and retaining wealth, creating local jobs, and providing employment and skills training (Armstrong, n.d.).

We call on you to implement a substantial, long-term funding settlement for local government that reverses the damage of the past fourteen years. Wilson (2024) argues that those in areas considered ‘left behind’ often experience a ‘symbolic distance’ from local political systems, similar to what they feel toward Westminster. Many communities don’t trust local democratic institutions to accurately represent their interests any more than they trust the central government. This challenge is further highlighted in Hickson’s (2024) recent report on double devolution, which warns that simply transferring power to local levels without strengthening community foundations risks exacerbating inequalities rather than alleviating them. The report cautions that without first addressing critical concerns, double devolution may be perceived as ‘responsibilisation’ – implicitly blaming citizens for circumstances created by national policy choices while ‘pushing these responsibilities on to ill-equipped communities’ (p. 15). True devolution must start with localisation, pluralism, and, most importantly, a phased approach.

5. <u>The criminal justice system should represent popular interests and values</u>
   David Hockey

Expanding the prison system to accommodate a larger prison population, is a policy that is counter-productive in several ways. Firstly, whilst there will always be people who commit crimes not related to financial benefit, reducing crime is best achieved through social equality.

Research has shown that the imprisonment rate for the ten most deprived local authorities in England (of which six are located in the North West) was ten times greater (307 prisoners per 100,000) than that of the ten least deprived local authorities in England (30 per 100,000; *see* Jones, Hart & Scott, 2021). The more public money that is spent on the prison system, the more perceived need there is for it, as we have seen over recent years with sentence inflation as well as the expanding prison population.

Clearly, the CJS is disproportionately used on sectors of the working class. Whilst social class and poverty is not a causational to committing crime, it is correlational at least. The risk is that those from the middle-class are always better placed to take-up these supervisory roles in the CJS, such as probation officers and management staff across the prison estate, than those from the working-class backgrounds mostly commonly found in the prison service.

To improve the chances for working-class people, stop creating roles through these historically established policies that are all too often filled by those from the middle-class. According to the Office of National statistics, overall, young people from a higher professional background (47%) still had significantly better chances of participating in HE than people from other socio-economic backgrounds (including those from a lower professional background). However, from 2021 to 2022, the HE participation gap between those from the higher professional and the lower working-classes has remained roughly the same: 30 percentage points in 2021 to 26 percentage point difference in 2022. When people are in the CJS and are faced with professionals fulfilling their duties, the arm's length dealing, the professional boundaries and selective sharing, the accents, mannerisms and ideologies, serve as a very stark reminder of their place in society. This also applies to their families, who will also come into contact with the same professionals. Whilst such professionals are only doing their jobs, the differences maintain an invisible barrier to aspirations and confidence to believe in personal progression. The process reinforces the status quo. Divert that public money to localised initiatives that are led by local people from working-class backgrounds and that will reduce some of the crime we have, as well as inspire more of those people to realise their dreams can be ambitions and can be achievable.

6. <u>Listen to workers in the creative industries, to ensure working-class people are able to be a part of them</u>
   Laura J. Minor

The UK's creative industries have been heralded as an economic success story, contributing £108 billion to the economy in 2021 and growing more than one and a half times faster than the wider economy from 2010 to 2019 (DCMS, 2023). However, this narrative overlooks the growing crisis of precarity and exploitation that creative workers themselves face. Behind the glamorised image of creative careers lies a harsher reality: insecure employment, stagnant wages, and systematic class-based exclusion.

The situation for working-class creative workers is particularly dire. Recent data from the Creative Industries Policy Evidence Centre reveals a stark picture: just 8% of the Film, TV, and Radio workforce come from working-class backgrounds – the lowest figure in over a decade (McAndrew et

al., 2024; Stephenson, 2024). Studies have shown that individuals from these backgrounds are excluded at every stage of their careers (Carey et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2016; Oakley et al., 2017; Brook et al., 2018). In response to these shocking figures, the Creative Diversity Network has committed to better tracking socio-economic diversity by adding class-focused questions to its 2024 Diamond survey. However, measurement alone will not solve this crisis.

From 2019-2020, 32% of the creative industries workforce as a whole was self-employed (including freelancers), compared with 16% of the UK workforce, leaving them vulnerable to contract cancellations, late payments, and lacking basic employment protections (Easton and Beckett, 2021). The sector's celebrated growth has failed to translate into improved working conditions, as researchers document how "the need to work for free is commonplace" in creative industries. Moreover, "even when paid, entry-level wages (and sometimes the wages of more senior staff) were reported to be extremely low", with many "creative workers taking pay cuts to pursue their creative interests or accepting less-desirable roles that offered more significant and secure earnings" (Carey, O' Brien and Gable, 2021). The structural problems extend to education, where "creative FE enrolments are declining in all parts of the UK, and at a faster rate than average across all subject disciplines", suggesting that young people are not being nurtured into creative pathways (Carey, Giles and Hickman, 2024).

Your government's approach to the creative industries appears to be focused primarily on commercial growth metrics while neglecting the deteriorating conditions of the workforce that sustains them. Recent policy decisions exemplify this misplaced priority. Your reluctance to implement a levy on streaming giants like Netflix represents a missed opportunity to reinvest platform profits into supporting British creative talent and production infrastructure. Meanwhile, your government's enthusiastic embrace of artificial intelligence in creative production threatens to further undermine workers' livelihoods without adequate consultation or protection measures.

True support for creative industries must begin by listening to creative workers themselves about the challenges they face and the solutions they propose. This means establishing meaningful consultation mechanisms with worker organisations, implementing robust employment protections for freelancers, addressing the class barriers that exclude talented individuals from creative careers, and ensuring that the industry's economic success translates into decent working conditions for all. Only by centring workers' voices can we build a creative sector that is both economically vibrant and socially just.

Conclusion: You must break from neoliberalism

Simon Winlow and David J. Hicks

Many of the social processes outlined above have reduced opportunities for working-class people to move into politics. Many of the left's institutions are now dominated by men and women who hail from middle-class backgrounds. Our society is still wracked by structured forms of disadvantage that actively impede the lives of the poor and fetter our national economy. There is some truth to the claim that class is not felt to the same extent as in years gone by. However, there is no doubt that the working class – understood in socio-economic rather than cultural terms – is very much still an important feature of British society. Field-leading social analysis suggests that the broad working class continues to represent well over 50% of the overall population. In fact, when the traditional working class (14%), emergent service workers (19%), the precariat (15%) and new affluent workers (15%) are bunched together (Savage, 2015), we begin to see that any political parties that attempts to speak to the shared interests and concerns of these groups has much to gain. Any party willing to allow men and women from the working-class to take up leadership positions within the party similarly stands to gain.

Over many years, the Labour Party has taken working-class support for granted. The results were painfully predictable. Working-class support for the Labour Party is at a historic low (*see* Winlow and Hall, 2023). It seems that the Labour Party made the mistake of believing the working-class had nowhere else to go, and that the party's energies would be better spent fighting to establish a beachhead among graduates and the new middle class (ibid). Of course, the willingness of the Labour Party to cast aside its historic relationship with the working class also reflects its gradual absorption into the edifice of global neoliberalism. With scant regard for the reality of long-running economic trends, various representatives of New Labour were fond of saying that Thatcher had won the economic argument. All major parties adopted her ruthless approach to reducing state involvement in the formal economy while making the nation unnecessarily reliant upon private investment capital. Thatcher recognised that New Labour was her most important legacy (ibid). When your opponents adopt your policies and rhetoric, a genuine victory has been achieved. For decades now, the actual policy differences between Labour and the Conservatives have been minimal. Democratic politics has, as a result, been increasingly shaped by perception, personality contests, 'vibes' and 'messaging'. As genuine ideological contestation has drained out of the system, many voters have become understandably apathetic and disinterested in party politics. Heath (2016: 1054) also notes that, "when there are clear ideological differences between the parties there is greater incentive to vote than when there are only minor differences, in which case it does not matter so much which party wins." Apathy impedes the vitality of democratic political systems, and apathy grows when visions of a better society are abandoned in favour of a general acceptance that what currently exists is the best we can hope for.

There is also the issue of representation. The Labour Party is clearly mindful of the importance of appearing broadly representative of the public at large. However, it does not appear particularly concerned by the virtual disappearance of the working class from the political stage. The Labour Party was formed to advance the interests of the working class. It grew in strength as it fought to boost popular standards of living. The Labour Party should be proud of its historical roots, and it should seek to rekindle its broken relationship with the broad working class. It makes practical sense for it to do so. To be the party of the working class is to be the party of the great majority of the British population. To advocate for improved popular standards of living is a great and noble undertaking. For years, representatives from the industrial working class were at the forefront of the Labour Party and most of the major trade unions. Those days are gone, but there is no reason why the Labour Party should accept this state of affairs. There is great talent in the working class. Having committed representatives of the working class on Labour's front bench – and allowing them to talk passionately about what needs to change to make our nation fairer and more just - is one obvious way of communicating to the general public that Labour has turned a corner and is once again ready to commit itself to the common good.

Policy convergence and a lack of choice in mainstream politics have discouraged people from actively participating in politics. Evans & Tilley (2017: 175) suggest that voters who no longer feel represented by a party they have previously supported have three options: vote for the opposing party, vote for a new party, or don't vote at all. Their research found that the poorer sections of British society are most likely to choose the third option: "If it is not possible for me to express my identity or preferences because no parties represent that identity or preference, then why would I vote?" However, with the increasing popularity of far-right political opinions and figures, disillusionment and disregard for politics may not last long. In desperation for an alternative, more-and-more voters are being swayed by populists from the right rather than from the left. The Labour Party must offer the electorate something other than the continuation of economic policies which have seen the majority get poorer. The Labour Party must return to economic matters, and it must break from neoliberalism. The Labour Party must be the alternative that huge swathes of the electorate are waiting for. It has the tools it needs to hand. It need only look to its own history for inspiration.

Yours Faithfully,

A group of concerned working-class social scientists

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