



UNIVERSITY OF
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Heseltine Institute
for Public Policy,
Practice and Place

100 DAYS OF A NEW GOVERNMENT

REFLECTIONS ON PROGRESS

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Foreword



Professor Tim Jones, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liverpool

2024 has been a significant political year in both Liverpool City Region and the UK. The general election in July saw the first change of government in the UK for 14 years, with a promise of ‘change’ from the new Labour administration. Locally, Steve Rotheram was re-elected for a third term as Mayor for Liverpool City Region in May, with ambitious plans for our local economy, communities and public services. As the political landscape evolves, it is critical that we reflect on what these changes mean for our university, our city-region, and our partners across industry and civil society. It is vital, too, as a public institution, that we ensure that the strength of our research is deployed to help inform and influence these emerging policy agendas.

In March, our *Manifesto for Liverpool City Region*, led by the Heseltine Institute, helped to highlight some of the key challenges facing local and national policymakers and stimulate debate on the defining issues in this election year. In September, the Labour Party Annual Conference – held once again in Liverpool – was an opportunity for the university to engage with the new government and to showcase our research to ministers, parliamentarians, and policymakers from across the country. Meanwhile, the Heseltine Institute’s policy briefing series and partnership with the Liverpool City Region All-Party Parliamentary Group demonstrate our long-standing commitment to supporting evidence-based policymaking.

Building on this strong record of recent activity, I am delighted to endorse this latest publication, *100 Days of a New Government – Reflections on Progress*, which examines the performance of the new Labour government, as well as its implications for a range of policy areas that are crucial both to Liverpool City Region and the wider UK.

Drawing on the expertise of leading University of Liverpool researchers, this report again highlights our position at the leading edge of policy analysis, the depth of knowledge and insight available across the university, as well as the role that the university can (and must) play in helping to shape local and national policy agendas with high-quality evidence.

I wish to extend my gratitude to the many colleagues that have contributed to this publication, and in particular to the Heseltine Institute who have led its development. It is a document that not only represents a significant historical milestone in the life of the new government, but also our constant commitment to engagement and partnership with policymakers of all parties as we seek to collectively address the pressing issues facing our country, and our city-region.

Introduction

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place

Victory in July's General Election ended Labour's fourteen-year spell in opposition, delivering a large majority and a mandate for **'change'**. Now, after more than three months in office, the question for Keir Starmer and the new Labour government is: what does this change actually look like?

In many areas, the new government has sought to hit the ground running, and highlight the scale and pace of change now being delivered. The Prime Minister **claimed** in September that Labour has 'done more in 11 weeks than the Tories did in 11 years'. In its **first few weeks in office**, the government created a new National Wealth Fund to support investment across the country, announced a series of planning reforms to help accelerate housebuilding, introduced legislation to effectively nationalise rail and enhance rights for renters, and established Great British Energy as a publicly-owned energy company focused on facilitating the transition to net zero. Meanwhile, early Prime Ministerial **meetings with international counterparts** have sought to strengthen the United Kingdom's global reputation, especially with European partners.

However, the UK nonetheless faces significant challenges. The summer **riots** have emphasised the growing threat posed by **far-right extremism**, and highlighted intense **pressures** on the criminal justice and prison system. Public services are under strain, with the NHS in England **revealed** to now be in 'critical condition'. Economic **growth** has been sluggish since the Global Financial Crisis. Public finances are in disarray, with the Chancellor claiming a **'black hole'** of more than £20 billion was left by the previous government. At the same time, intensifying international conflicts threaten to further destabilise the global economy and **exacerbate** the cost of living crisis felt by many in the UK.

Faced with this level of challenge, how can the new government deliver change? The Labour manifesto committed to a **'mission-driven'** approach to government, with a focus on working across Whitehall departments in order to coordinate delivery of key policy priorities. However, the complexity of the contemporary policy landscape suggests that change cannot be delivered solely by strengthening **central government operations**. Instead, it will require genuine collaboration across the whole of the 'wider state sector', including devolved governments, combined and local authorities, and other public bodies.

Labour has a significant but fragile mandate. Over the last decade, the British electorate has shown itself to be more volatile than ever, and the threat of reactionary

populism remains increasingly present. Labour's own election victory, following deep defeat in 2019, only highlights the current unpredictability of electoral politics in the UK. Overcoming these difficulties will be crucial if the new government is to demonstrate that it can, indeed, deliver positive change that people – in Liverpool City Region and across the UK – feel in their everyday lives.

Before the general election, the Heseltine Institute's ***Manifesto for Liverpool City Region*** highlighted areas where change is required – from addressing stark health inequalities and the cost of living crisis, to achieving net zero and reforming the social care system. This document revisits the ambition of our Manifesto, and assesses the progress made since Labour came to power just over 100 days ago. It showcases contributions from leading University of Liverpool researchers, offering renewed insight on issues of both local and national importance that are likely to dominate the remainder of this parliament.

Throughout, this publication emphasises the scale of challenge facing the UK, and the need for new approaches to achieve reform. As such, it also acts as a basis for further engagement and collaboration with policy partners, to help navigate these challenges effectively and develop necessary solutions, beyond the first 100 days and into the longer-term.

Economy



Dr Noemi Mantovan

“The Labour government has a difficult balancing act between delivering its plans for investment in public services, sticking to its manifesto commitments on taxes, and maintaining confidence from financial markets.”

The Labour government has embarked on an ambitious programme of work in its first 100 days with the aim of reshaping the UK economy. How Labour’s Manifesto plans for the economy will be implemented over the coming years remains uncertain, but there is potential for considerable positive effects on economic growth if Labour can increase investment while maintaining its self-imposed fiscal rules. The two most notable reforms announced so far with a potential impact on economic growth are the **Employment Rights Bill** and the creation of the **National Wealth Fund**.

The Employment Rights Bill introduces employment rights from day one, including parental and sick leave, and introduces reforms to probation periods, zero-hours contracts, and ‘fire and rehire’ practices. As a result, the bill could have significant implications for the relationship between companies and their workers. While some have expressed concern that strengthening employment rights could increase unemployment and hamper growth, there is **strong evidence that protection for workers actually results in higher levels of employment and improvements in productivity and growth**. Liverpool City Region currently has one of the lowest participation rates in the North West of England and an increase in employment protection and stability could attract people into the labour market who may have otherwise stayed out, with parents and caregivers being a primary example. While hiring is unlikely to pick up immediately after the passage of this Bill, the reforms could ease tightness in the labour market, which has resulted in challenges for companies seeking to grow and hire.

The establishment of the National Wealth Fund will provide £5.8bn in new money for investment, with a focus on clean energy. The fund, which takes on and expands the remit of the UK Infrastructure Bank founded in 2021, aims to mobilise at least £70bn of private capital, improving business investment and aligning government and public investment aims. The focus on green hydrogen, green steel, carbon capture,

gigafactories, and ports – coupled with a strategy focused on areas suffering from an undersupply of private finance, and greater partnership with local authorities in investing in Local Growth Plans – could help drive economic growth in Liverpool City Region and across the North of England.

However, these two policy initiatives have been launched in a challenging economic context. On fiscal policy, Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves have warned of ‘painful’ decisions needed to maintain spending on public services.

According to the **Institute for Fiscal Studies**, even with a possible increase in taxation, the promise to meet all day-to-day spending from revenues, without relaxing the deficit rule – which allows for additional borrowing only for capital investment – will be difficult to maintain. The Labour government has a difficult balancing act between delivering its plans for investment in public services, sticking to its manifesto commitments on taxes, and maintaining confidence from financial markets.

Author biography

Dr Noemi Mantovan is a Senior Lecturer in Economics at the University of Liverpool Management School. Her research is focused on labour economics, political economy and financial economics.

Energy



Professor Karl Whittle

“It is clear that energy policy is key to the government’s plans for investment and development, and increasing exports of both technology and knowledge.”

Since the Labour Party won the general election in July, the pace of change in energy policy has been dramatic and substantial across the board, with barely a week going by without a policy or new funding being announced. Whether it be the removal of the onshore wind ban, funding of carbon capture development in the North West, or the formation of GB Energy, changes are happening that will drive the UK to decarbonisation at an increased pace. As ‘Making Britain a Clean Energy Superpower’ is one of the five declared missions for the government, it is clear that energy policy is key to the government’s plans for investment and development within the UK, and increasing exports of both technology and knowledge.

However, this aspiration comes with challenges that are starting to be met. For example, a review of the National Energy Systems Operator, which is responsible for the planning and operation of the UK’s electricity grid, is being carried out to assess future requirements. One key area will be energy generation and the likely mix going forward. Getting this wrong will derail the transition. Clarification is needed on issues such as the role of GB Energy and the ideal mix of nuclear, offshore/onshore wind, solar, tidal, and other sources in developing a net zero grid by 2030, with increased demand compared with today.

Another major challenge is how energy can be provided equitably to consumers, minimising negative impacts on those that cannot change to net zero sources easily. Zonal pricing has been considered an option, where cost is based on where customers are located, similar to petrol pricing. There are positives and negatives to this proposal. It is likely to reduce costs for consumers but may be perceived as raising costs for industry. Can this be managed equitably and efficiently, reducing the overall cost of energy?

Over the coming years, government should consider:

(a) Consistency in policy direction – continue the direction of travel, but avoid short term shocks, allowing private finance to invest and initiate projects, providing consistency on which technologies are being prioritised and certainty that there will be a return on investment.

(b) Pragmatic investment – big goals are good to base strategy on, but for the short to medium term, funding for projects should be pragmatic and based on what can be deliverable on time and in budget. The worst thing that can happen is an investment publicly fails due to a failure in a technology, or scope.

(c) Investment in training – moving from a carbon to a non-carbon based energy system requires the replacement of old technologies such as coal fired powered stations. Ensuring that skilled workers can migrate from one industry to another where there are already skills gaps, is key to the transition to a carbon free energy system. These skills will be required not only in the UK but across the world as other nations decarbonise.

(d) Continued engagement with the public on the transition and how impacts people – lack of engagement can entirely derail a strategy if public acceptance has not been considered and included. Government needs to ensure there is nobody left behind during the transition.

Author biography

Karl Whittle is Professor of Zero Carbon and Nuclear Energy at the University of Liverpool. He researches how net zero can be achieved using a range of technologies, including nuclear energy, hydrogen, wind, solar and tidal.

Higher Education



Professor Richard Black

“Without adequate funding, universities will not be able to maintain our estate, let alone invest in our future – we will not be able to drive economic development in our cities and regions.”

They say that a week is a long time in politics, but 100 days is not much time at all to address challenges in the higher education (HE) sector that are deep rooted. To summarise three principal challenges: HE has seen its unit of resource for home undergraduate students decline in real terms by 40% over the last decade; for every pound we spend on research, we recoup only 69p, down from 76p a decade ago; and income from international students that previously compensated for shortfalls on home students and research has shrunk over the last two years. This is in the face of hostile government and press rhetoric, and changes to the visa regime that have made the UK a much less attractive place to study. All of this matters because without adequate funding, universities will not be able to maintain our estate, let alone invest in the future; we will not be able to drive economic development in our cities and regions; nor will we be able to deliver the standard of education that our students rightly expect.

So how is the new government doing on these things?

On undergraduate fees, there have been some positive briefings that the government might allow these to rise with inflation – although no announcement has been made at the time of writing. This would be a welcome move, but it will not transform the finances of most universities. And it does nothing to alter other flaws in the system – including high costs for students in England and unnecessary and wasteful levels of competition between universities.

On research, the mood music is also positive. The new government has talked about committing to research funding for the long term, and the stability this would bring would be welcomed by many. However, the devil is in the detail of how that funding is allocated, and how much of the actual cost of research it pays for. In a system where ‘match’ funding is a requirement to secure government funding, there is an inbuilt advantage for richer universities in the ‘Golden Triangle’ which both have more resources and greater potential to leverage private sector match-funding. That limits the extent to which universities elsewhere can truly be ‘anchor’ institutions driving economic

growth in their regions; but it also means high quality research outside London and the South East is not fully mobilised to support national prosperity.

Meanwhile, on international students there has also been a welcome change of tone, but this still falls far short of an enthusiastic endorsement of the value of international student recruitment to the UK economy and society, and the kinds of visa changes that would make the UK an attractive destination again in key markets such as India. In the absence of such a shift, many UK universities have experienced a second year of shortfalls in international student recruitment, resulting in considerable strain on budgets, investment plans and staffing numbers. Nor is it clear that such an endorsement or relevant visa changes are likely.

So, a reasonable start, but there is much more that the new Labour government could do. One key problem is that none of the changes needed will come without either financial or political cost. However, the benefits of change for the Liverpool City Region could be substantial. The **University of Liverpool’s recent report highlighted its huge regional economic social and cultural impact**, which could be further enhanced with greater international student recruitment and targeted research funding to support regional priorities such as health and life sciences and materials innovation. Let us hope there is more to come.

Author biography

Professor Richard Black is Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Liverpool. An academic geographer and Professor of International Development, Richard is a Trustee of the Academy of Social Sciences and a Marshall Aid Commissioner. He writes here in a personal capacity.

Devolution



Professor Catherine Durose and Sue Jarvis

“Devolution is at its core a question about where power is held. What and how far the Labour government are willing to devolve will show whether it will actually govern differently.”

Liverpool City Region’s 2015 devolution ‘deal’ has enabled local innovation and ways of working that benefit the city region, along with enhancing its profile and influence at the national level. However, English devolution to date has progressed unevenly and there is a wider sense that it remains ‘**incomplete**’. Labour has come to power committed to extending devolution, but how?

At his first press conference as Prime Minister, Keir Starmer promised change in how the UK government would work with devolved governments, and quickly met with English elected regional mayors. We have several indicators of what change may look like. The influential think-tank **Labour Together** recently set out ways in which Mayoral Combined Authorities can be developed to support the delivery of Labour’s missions on growth, health, clean energy, opportunities and crime. In its 2024 general election **manifesto**, Labour committed to ‘landmark devolution legislation’, including deepening existing devolution settlements in England and establishing a new council of nations and regions. In 2022, former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in a **report** commissioned by Labour, set out recommendations which recognised the ‘appetite for more local power and voice’ and for devolution to be ‘built from the bottom up’.

So, what does this all add up to? Greater political alignment between the UK and devolved governments supports a cautious optimism that Labour will deliver on its expressed intentions. However, fundamental questions remain. Here, we consider three of these concerning power, vision and capacity.

Devolution is at its core a question about where power is held. What and how far the Labour government is willing to devolve will show whether it will actually **govern differently**. But now Labour has finally made its long-awaited return to power, will it really be willing to let go? There are already **whispers** of frustration that national priorities are being put ahead of giving local leaders control. These may only become louder as Labour comes under further political pressure

to deliver and may feel it needs to hold tightly onto power to do so.

Despite its various commitments, Labour’s vision for devolution remains unclear. City-regional devolution from the 2010s onwards has been driven by a relatively narrow agenda of promoting economic growth, and this place-based approach continues in the recently published Industrial Strategy Green Paper. But devolution has also become associated with a range of different ambitions, from building community power to better meeting local needs to delivering place-based democracy. This suggests a **tension** between the contractual approach to English devolution taken thus far, where city-regions need to demonstrate how they can deliver against centrally determined policy outcomes so they can secure delegated responsibilities, and broader aspirations towards a more fundamental reset in how the country is governed, which allows for greater local autonomy and difference. Sustaining this strategic ambiguity will likely be tested the longer Labour is in government.

The UK is a highly centralised nation, which in part has enabled the sustained diminishment of capacity at local and sub-national levels of government. Years of austerity and policy churn have undermined capacity for reform. Across a backdrop of severe financial stress, will national government invest in building local capacity – both resources and skills – as well as transferring powers and responsibility to maximise the full potential of devolution?

We await the English Devolution Bill to learn more. Much is promised and the potential is clear, but what will be delivered remains uncertain.

Author biographies

Catherine Durose is Professor of Public Policy and Co-Director of the Heseltine Institute, is recognised as a leading expert on urban governance and public policy, and has written widely on devolution.

Sue Jarvis is Co-Director of the Heseltine Institute and has senior leadership experience of devolution policy and public service delivery as a former director at Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and Knowsley Council.

Crime and Justice



Professor Barry Godfrey

“The problem with a prisons crisis is that most remedial action is too late since the prisons are already bulging. Addressing the justice system is likely to have a more significant impact.”

The current prisons crisis risks derailing the new government’s plans to reform the criminal justice system. The challenge for a new government which has inherited a prison overcrowding crisis, massive backlogs in the courts, and a crisis of legitimacy in the criminal justice system is to make changes quickly within tight financial constraints. Prison building programmes are expensive, and whilst governments can push costs down the road through private-sector partnership arrangements, these can be costly in the long-term. Proposals such as ‘offshoring’ prisoners to Rwanda, Estonia, and sea-barges, and digital solutions such as GPS-monitored house arrest, have implications for civil liberties. Cases, especially serious sexual assaults, need to be moved more quickly through the courts, and more prison places are needed to send those convicted, unless meaningful and acceptable alternatives to custody can be found.

Whilst criminologists (rightly) champion probation services, a massive extension of community sentences as an alternative to custody is almost as expensive as building a new prison estate. An extension to community sentences also risks alienating the public and can **increase concern amongst those who want ‘bad’ people to be kept ‘locked up’**. The public already distrust recent changes to the early release system which released thousands of prisoners on strict conditions less than halfway through their prison sentence. **Research proves that the vast majority of people released on conditional license do not reoffend, but some do, understandably causing adverse public reaction.** Perhaps legislating that non-violent offenders are released after serving a third of their sentence whilst violent or sex offenders serve all of it would square that circle?

Prisons need to be places where reform starts, and these processes could be further strengthened following release, with supported housing, help into employment and re-building familial relationships. These moves would help to reduce high reoffending rates of 60% for short-term prisoners but would take time to have any effect on the prison population.

The problem with a prison crisis is that most remedial action is already too late since the prisons are already bulging. Therefore, addressing the justice system is likely to have a more significant impact. The new Sentencing Bill could grant magistrates increased powers to deal with more serious offences, which would relieve the backed-up Crown Courts, but risks adding more prisoners. Prisoners sentenced by magistrates currently account for only 6% of the prison population, but cases are dealt with more swiftly, which could cause a short-term surge in the prison population. In addition to extending sentencing powers to 12 months, legislation would need to remove magistrates’ power to impose sentences of 6 months or less; and all non-violent first-time offenders would need to receive a community penalty rather than custodial sentence. These measures taken together would reduce the overall prison population and, importantly, would do so very quickly. That might provide immediate short-term relief for overpopulated prisons such as HMPs Liverpool and Altcourse whilst providing the government some breathing space to embed some of the longer-term progressive steps that would bring about positive systemic change.

Author biography

Barry Godfrey is a Professor in the School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool. His research focuses on comparative criminology, particularly international crime history; desistance studies; and longitudinal studies of offending.

Artificial Intelligence



Professor Katie Atkinson

“Even in the absence of specific UK AI regulation, adoption is starting to accelerate in the private sector and many companies are now writing their own AI strategies and internal AI governance policies.”

The new Labour government entered office against the backdrop of the Sunak government’s **‘pro innovation approach’ to artificial intelligence (AI) regulation**. The appetite seemingly persists in the new government to support the development and rollout of AI, with the **Labour Party’s manifesto** on this agenda stating:

‘We will ensure our industrial strategy supports the development of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) sector, removing planning barriers to new datacentres. And we will create a National Data Library to bring together existing research programmes and help deliver data-driven public services, whilst maintaining strong safeguards and ensuring all of the public benefit.’

This statement covers matters of regulation, Research and Development (R&D) support and transformation of public services. On regulation, reference was made in the government’s first **King’s Speech** to establishing *‘the appropriate legislation to place requirements on those working to develop the most powerful artificial intelligence models’*, although details are still to be ironed out on balancing the benefits of AI with the necessary safeguards for responsible development and use.

On R&D, there is widespread acknowledgement that well-curated data is the essential foundation to being able to make use of modern AI tools, so the commitment to creating a National Data Library will be welcome news to researchers and workers in academia and the public sector who are currently struggling to adopt new AI tools due to a lack of access to high-quality data. Contrast this, for example, with the **open, curated court data available from the European Court of Human Rights** for which no comparable resource exists in the UK.

Finally, on the transformation of public services, the government clearly sees opportunities for productivity gains through the rollout of AI in public services work. The government is being urged on with this agenda through organisations such as **the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change**.

The statements on AI that have been made so far by the new government demonstrate a positive attitude towards grasping opportunities that are presented by today’s highly capable AI tools. There are, however, many specific policy details still to be laid out. Stakeholders will be seeking clarity on how policies will be delivered and address areas such as investment in R&D for AI, the strength of the legislative guardrails being put in place to ensure AI safety without stifling innovation, and consideration of the consequences of the latest tech in terms of upskilling workers and changing the jobs landscape. It is essential that there is strong government engagement on the topic of AI since other countries are advancing their own AI strategies, and the UK needs to remain competitive given the profound changes that AI is expected to have on so many different aspects of society.

Even in the absence of specific AI regulation, adoption is starting to accelerate in the private sector and many companies are now writing their own AI strategies and internal AI governance policies. Whilst existing legislation governing corporate responsibility is plentiful, to respond to the new due diligence challenges posed by the capabilities and potential pitfalls of using AI, in both the private and public sectors, other countries have felt the need to introduce AI-specific legislation – the European Union’s AI Act being a key prominent example. Given the recent swift pace of technical developments in AI, which can reasonably be assumed to continue, the need for clarity on the UK legislative position, and how interventionist this will be, has become a pressing matter.

Author biography

Katie Atkinson is Professor of Computer Science, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Sustainability Research at the University of Liverpool. She has been conducting foundational and interdisciplinary research on artificial intelligence for over 20 years, with her key areas of research being in the fields of computational models of argument and AI & Law, has published over one hundred and fifty articles in peer-reviewed conference proceedings and journals, and has also applied her work in a variety of industrial projects.

Immigration



Professor Alex Balch

“There is a need for the government to affirm and speak up for the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, and act quickly to remedy the damage created by UK immigration policies.”

The new UK government has emphasised its intention to ‘fix the foundations’. On immigration and asylum, it has started to address some of the obvious issues it has inherited, but more fundamental structural problems will require time and an alternative approach to resolve. Most notably, it has dropped the cruel, expensive and ineffective Rwanda plan and started to reduce backlogs in asylum claims that perpetuate harms for many thousands of people seeking protection. But it has quickly demonstrated an unwillingness to challenge right-wing media narratives on these topics. It has echoed the previous government’s emphasis on reducing net migration numbers and continued with a law and order approach, leaving many problematic aspects of the immigration system intact. Any optimism that the new government might adopt a new approach offering protection and safe routes to those seeking sanctuary has gone, with **regular news reports** of people dying trying to cross the channel.

The main nuance is in the style of communication around immigration, where familiar sounding policy plans on ‘Border Security Command’ and stopping the **‘vile trade in human lives’** is combined with the language of justice and ‘properly managed migration’ – a throwback to the New Labour equation of ‘tough but fair’ now repeated by governments of all stripes. These are early days, however, and the opportunity is there to do things differently in the coming weeks, months and years. Will the recently announced Employment Rights Bill, for example, include a new ‘Fair Work Agency’ (as promised by Labour before the election) to help those migrants on sponsored health and care worker visas who currently suffer **exploitation** and separation from their families?

For cities like Liverpool, which were marked by racist violence following the murders of children in Southport, but also hosted **anti-racist counter-protests**, choices about language on immigration and asylum are very important. But even more urgent is the need for the government to affirm and speak up for the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, and act quickly to remedy the damage created by UK immigration policies past and present, as outlined in the **report on the historical roots of the Windrush scandal**.

Author biography

Alex Balch is a Professor at the Department of Politics at the University of Liverpool. His research focuses on the politics and policy of immigration, and on efforts to combat forced labour and human trafficking.

Planning



Dr Olivier Sykes

“Planning is perhaps higher on the ‘mainstream’ political agenda than it has been for a long time. Planners feel there is a policy window to place issues that ‘matter to planners’ on the agenda.”

Planning is periodically ‘rediscovered’ by governments searching for a mechanism by which to address pressing societal challenges or – as has often been the case over recent decades – a scapegoat to explain the poor results of their governing choices. The governments of 2010–2024 pursued a plethora of planning reforms. These ranged from abolishing formalised strategic planning and promoting more localism, to deregulating aspects of planning to allow the conversion of many commercial and other buildings into new homes, to promises to ‘tear it down and start again’ and radically overhaul the whole system.

All of these reforms were set against a background of cuts to local government budgets and subsequent decline in capacity. The number of local government planners shrank by a quarter from 2009–2020, whilst in 2023 only 33% of adopted local plans in England were under 5 years old and 29% were over 10 years old. Today the new government is committed to delivering economic growth, tackling long term housing issues, and delivering environmental agendas such as net zero and biodiversity recovery. Planning is perhaps higher on the ‘mainstream’ political agenda than it has been for a long time. Planners feel there is a policy window to place issues that ‘matter to planners’ such as the need to rebuild forms of strategic ‘larger than local’ planning on the agenda. However, there will also be need for the new government to guard against repeating past mistakes such as the ‘four Rs’ of **planning in a failing state identified by myself and John Sturzaker in our recent book**.

It should avoid overblown **rhetoric** which blames planning and planners for policy failures such as sluggish housing delivery when their causes are complex and the product of multi-agency outcomes. This rapidly becomes tedious and demoralising for those trying to operate the planning system and deliver the sought after results.

Excessive **rapidity** and constant reforms of legislation and policy are exhausting and waste time and resources, distracting from the real challenges faced

by communities. Planning and its systems are also complex. Poorly thought through or rushed initiatives can have unintended consequences and create ‘trip wires’ with political consequences as they work their way through the system, as previous governments have discovered to their cost. To get a planning system which supports its objectives, and which society needs, the government should take its time in introducing reform and take counsel from those who operate and use the planning system.

Inadequate **resourcing** has led to the hollowing out of local authority planning departments and the staffing of statutory consultees. Plans to recruit 300 additional planners are a good start but this only represents about one additional planner per local authority in England. The government will need to find ways of supporting more people into the planning profession.

Past deregulatory policies have resulted in **regressive outcomes** and development which neglects, or worse, exacerbates the social position and unmet needs of some members of society. Planning exists to attempt to balance the different outcomes of development, and this will need to be recognised even as the government pursues growth as its overriding objective.

Author biography

Dr Olivier Sykes is Discipline Lead for Planning and a Senior Lecturer in European Spatial Planning at the University of Liverpool. His research focuses primarily on the international and comparative dimensions of urban and territorial planning, and related fields of urban and regional policy.

Cost of Living



Professor Lydia Hayes

“National economic renewal will not happen without a brave policy agenda that prioritises the needs of people who lack power, including those who cannot currently afford to access the essentials of life.”

Over its first 100 days in power, public confidence in Labour has rapidly **worn thin** and millions of people continue to feel the weight of low income, stress and hardship. Labour has set its intention to attract and inspire investment through clear messaging to markets about economic stability and security. But national economic renewal will not happen without a brave policy agenda that prioritises the needs of people who lack power: including those who cannot currently afford to access the essentials of life.

The UK’s working age population is **the sickest in the developed world**, insecure work is at a record high, and real **incomes and productivity** continue to be at historic lows. The Bank of England has warned escalating war in the Middle East risks a further **serious impact** on the cost of living, including rising food costs. By the end of 2024, the price of domestic gas and electricity will be **40% higher** in the UK than it was just three years ago. Around the world, studies have shown that government support is **crucial** to prevent ill-health and illness due to energy poverty.

To date, the most controversial of Labour’s decisions in government include the unexpected withdrawal of up to £300 winter fuel support from the majority of pensioners and the retention of the two-child limit on family welfare support. Both these measures risk increasing poverty amongst highly vulnerable groups.

The government has acted quickly to settle public sector pay disputes, providing above inflation offers after years of real-terms wage erosion. However, over 80% of workers are employed in the private sector and **job growth** continues to be focused in low wage and insecure work. The government promptly published its **Employment Rights Bill** as evidence of its commitment to improve terms and conditions of work across the economy. The most radical elements of the bill will restore sectoral collective bargaining for School Support Staff and introduce collective bargaining between unions and employers across the Adult social care sector. This responds to long-standing campaigns built on **research with care workers** and **subsequent recommendations** published in Liverpool. The Employment Rights Bill includes measures that improve the legal environment for trade unions, but do

not go far enough to meet the UK’s existing obligations in **international labour law**. Its reforms to individual employment rights are characterised by a lack of bravery. For example, reforms to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) broaden the range of workers who will be entitled to SSP, but the core problem of the low rate at which SSP is set remains unaddressed. Hence, despite the bill, statutory sick pay in the UK will remain amongst the least generous in **the world**.

My **recently published research** explores the contribution of insecure and poor quality jobs to growing problems of food insecurity and poor mental health among working age people. The new government’s aim to get **2 million more people in work** is ambitious and appears to be premised on increased employment rates among people with disabilities or on long-term sickness leave.

The lesson of the first 100 days is that Labour must be much braver in building law and policy that invests in improving mental and physical health at a whole-population level as well as addressing issues of low income. A holistic approach, that addresses the quality of the economy alongside the quality of public health, will be required to relieve poverty and improve living standards.

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Sustainable Mobility



Dr Alex Nurse

“Comments by the new Transport Secretary have indicated a desire to shift away from the ‘culture wars’ that characterised the previous government’s approach to transport.”

Ahead of the election, a solitary mention of ‘Active Travel’ (i.e. travelling by self-powered walking or wheeling) in the Labour manifesto might allow one to think a new Labour government was not making sustainable mobility a high priority. However, since coming to power, comments by the new Transport Secretary, Louise Haigh, paint a different picture. Crucially, Haigh has indicated a **desire to shift away from the ‘culture wars’** that characterised the previous government’s approach to transport, and undermined confidence in delivering active travel schemes.

Once in office, Haigh has said that the Department for Transport (DfT) are ‘certainly not shying away from the target of getting 50% [of] short journeys walking and cycling’, and have indicated they will renew backing for initiatives such as Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and 20mph zones, rather than trying to undermine them. Crucially, DfT has also said it wants to return control of these schemes to local authorities – rather than effectively banning them, as happened under the Conservatives.

The comments from Louise Haigh and DfT have seemingly gone down very well with transport planners and commentators. The promise to local authorities of ‘air cover’ from central government will be supported by transport planners who were previously left high and dry when implementing active travel schemes.

Naturally, there is an element of caution – particularly against the broader narrative of economic restraint emanating from the Treasury. Equally, observers of this agenda have witnessed many false dawns in the last 15 years and can be, justifiably, cynical until they see change happening. Ultimately, whilst the government is setting the right tone, as always, actions will speak louder than words.

Before the election, I set out what I thought some of the top priorities for government should be, including provision of more segregated cycle lanes, tackling pavement parking and making walking safer. Ultimately, the single biggest challenge facing transport policymakers over the next decade is how to

wean society off cars. The future of transport is more than a basic argument about achieving net zero. For example, the average car commuter wastes **50 hours** every year sat in traffic – and electric vehicles won’t fix that. More walking and cycling, and greater public transport ridership are central to solving this puzzle.

There are also other areas the government should prioritise. Taking the example of **Scotland**, we need to be braver in tackling the scourge of pavement parking – as all too often selfishly parked cars can block footpaths, crossings, and even the roadway itself making it less desirable to walk and cycle. This is something some English cities (e.g. Bristol) are beginning to consider within their existing powers, but a clear steer from national government will make this much easier.

It is also plainly obvious the role that the school run plays in contributing to congestion, and the accompanying emissions. It should be a national mission, supported across the whole of government (e.g. Department for Education, Department for Health and DfT), to set a lifetime of good habits by encouraging as many children (and their parents) as possible to walk or cycle to school. We should consider it as a downpayment on their future.

Author biography

Dr Alex Nurse is a Senior Lecturer in Urban Planning at the University of Liverpool. His research interests cover urban cycling and active travel more broadly, alongside city and regional governance.

Democracy and Trust



Professor Stuart Wilks-Heeg

“Restoring trust in democracy is not a ‘first 100 days’ task. It would be absurd to expect a new government to find solutions to such deep-rooted challenges within a matter of months. However, it is instructive to compare Labour’s agenda for democratic renewal to those advanced by previous governments.”

Much has been said about Labour’s inheritance with respect to the economy, public finances and public services. Far less consideration has been given to the democratic balance sheet sat on the new government’s desk. It does not make for happy reading.

Just ahead of the 2024 General Election, the **British Social Attitudes** survey reported **record lows** in a range of measures of trust and confidence in government. Conducted annually since 1983, the 41st edition of the survey found that 58% of the public would almost never trust politicians to tell the truth and that 79% felt that Britain’s system of government could be improved either ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’.

Similar low points have been seen on these indicators before, during the Brexit deadlock in 2019, or following the MPs’ expenses scandal. However, to say that ‘we’ve been here before’ is hardly reassuring. That a general election taking place in the context of such negative public sentiment should register a turnout of 59.7%, the **second lowest since 1945**, should also set alarm bells ringing.

Restoring trust in democracy is not a ‘first 100 days’ task. It would be absurd to expect a new government to find solutions to such deep-rooted challenges within a matter of months. However, it is instructive to compare Labour’s agenda for democratic renewal to those advanced by previous governments that came to office amid deep public dissatisfaction about politics and government.

In 1997, Tony Blair’s Labour government spearheaded an **ambitious constitutional reform** agenda, partly in response to growing public disquiet about standards in public life. In 2010, David Cameron’s coalition government took a similar approach, with public anger over MPs’ expenses serving as the driver for a **fresh wave of political reforms**.

There is no such sense of urgency under Keir Starmer’s premiership. The **King’s Speech** following the election promised to remove hereditary peers from the House of Lords and alluded briefly and vaguely to strengthening the integrity of elections and encouraging wide democratic participation. Blink and you really would have missed it.

Admittedly, there is little evidence that **constitutional reform alone** can restore trust in democracy. However, the absence of an agenda for democratic renewal is surprising. Periods of ‘scandal’ in British politics since the 1970s, particularly those centred on concerns about the integrity of politicians and public officials, have consistently ushered in new institutional arrangements designed to improve transparency and accountability. There has been no shortage of similar scandals in recent years. Yet, **no reform agenda** has emerged in response.

Institutional reforms are not entirely absent. The English Devolution Bill should accelerate the task of filling gaps in the current patchwork of combined authorities. Devolution has **long-term potential** to help restore trust in politics. But the Bill is framed as a centrepiece of Labour’s plans to boost economic growth, not as a constitutional reform.

Ultimately, faith in the political system improves **when it delivers** for a majority of the population. Economic performance and access to health care matter more to trust in democracy than the electoral system or MPs having second jobs. Labour’s **‘five missions’** for government could do far more than any political reform to persuade more of the public that Britain’s system of government is working. Whether Britain’s current system of government can deliver those missions is another question entirely.

Author biography

Stuart Wilks-Heeg is Professor of Politics at the University of Liverpool. He has written widely on UK elections, local government and local politics and was the Director of the Democratic Audit of the UK from 2009–2013.

About the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place

The Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

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