Starmer’s Labour is not a force for Good

Owen Wright, former Labour candidate for the Scottish Parliament, writes for Heckle [online journal of the Republican Socialist Platform, Scotland]

Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour party is not a party worth fighting for. Any Labour victory under his leadership risks entrenching many aspects of Conservative rule which he purports to oppose, and should be treated with fear and concern by all those left of the political centre. Labour now has no understanding of the UK’s deep underlying problems and this is reflected in the Starmer leadership’s deceptive political practices and increasing propensity to indulge in far-right rhetoric and dog-whistles.



Pictured: A leaflet promoting Owen Wright's candidacy in Dundee City East.

Though I am not originally from the UK, I consider myself to come from something like a 'Labour household'. I moved from France to Scotland to study in Dundee after finishing secondary school and, after a very brief stint in the Scottish Greens, joined Labour in autumn 2017, drawn by its platform and policies which appealed to my values of progressivism, international and social conscience.

Having gained campaigning experience through my students' association – at a time when the Brexit saga, the 2019 election and later the beginning of the Covid pandemic was unfolding – I decided to put myself forward as a Labour candidate and subsequently ran in my home constituency of Dundee East in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.

I'm still incredibly proud and grateful to my former Dundee CLP comrades for that opportunity. After the election, I continued to hold positions in my CLP, attended Labour's UK conference twice and acted as an agent for a successful candidate in the 2022 local elections.

Nonetheless, in November 2022, I decided to leave the Labour party. A number of things led to the 'breaking of the camel's back', which, in no particular order, I now want to set out for the record.

Transphobia

Having lived and worked with transgender people, the Labour party's failure to defend one of the most marginalised groups in British society today sickens me. Recently, Labour said it "welcomed" proposals from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to strip trans people of some of their current rights under the 2010 Equality Act. This was just days after the party tried to distance itself from trans issues

generally, citing the toxicity of the “debate” and its unattractiveness to the general public, which alone is cowardly – but even worse, in the same intervention, Starmer gave legitimacy to one of the spurious position that the rights of women and trans women are inherently in conflict.

This argument is regularly peddled by the most ardent of transphobes, from those in far-right circles to those appropriating the language of feminism, in order to drive a moral panic regarding trans women being in women’s spaces. This panic is based on the notion that trans women are just men pretending to be trans to take advantage of women. Similar arguments have been spread regarding trans children’s identity and presentation in schools, as well as LGBT+ education. Several Labour MPs have made those kinds of transphobic arguments, sometimes managing to pull the Labour leadership to their side.



Pictured: A placard from a trans rights demonstration in Dundee in 2023.

There is reason enough to believe that Starmer is a transphobe himself. He is on record trampling on Gillick competency,

effectively arguing that trans children should not be allowed to access treatment for gender dysphoria without their guardian's permission; children with transphobic parents or guardians should be trapped in suffering. He has advocated for schools to out trans children to their parents, again endangering those children unfortunate enough to have parents who do not accept them. These positions make little sense unless Starmer himself harbours an irrational fear of trans people or trans-ness. Labour's position under his leadership is nothing short of cowardice and stupidity at best, or open bigotry at worst.

The ghost of UKIP

Speaking of open bigotry, let's cast our minds back a few years to the days of the coalition government and the rise of Nigel Farage's UKIP, which was ultimately responsible for Brexit.

Like other fascists, UKIP liked to play a game of hide-and-seek – saying a highly controversial, often racialised statement about migrants, refugees or foreigners, and then hiding behind the language of 'legitimate concerns' and the thin veil of plausible deniability. The Brexit disaster is what we got from letting this fester. This was because politicians were incapable of steering the conversation away from migration and towards other issues underpinning the same 'concerns'.

I make no apology for saying that I do not think migration is a fully controllable variable in politics. Migration is a natural human phenomenon, often in response to developments in people's environments, those ranging from war, famine and drought, disease, etc. Even an economic downturn in a region of the world today can be a perfectly natural cause for someone to migrate. Migration is a fact of human life; to try and stop or control it on any kind of permanent basis seems to

me a fruitless task. I'm surprised the UK's political class hasn't given up on "fortress Britain" after meeting failure after failure over decades.

The likes of Farage and the far-right elements of the Conservative Party seem to me to be playing nothing but a massive con to drive up their popularity. Their goal was never to control migration but to whip up an angry population in the throes of deep, painful austerity to back them and their main political projects: Brexit, then followed by a steep and purposeful decline in our living standards. Labour's shameful surrender to that anti-migrant politics in 2015 only legitimised UKIP and likely cost Labour the election. The 2019 election firmly cemented the victory for the Conservative-Brexit camp.

During the height of the Covid pandemic, when migration was not in the spotlight of national politics, national sentiment on migration softened; polls began to show people in Britain seeing immigration as a boon, particularly as labour shortages took the media spotlight. In this time, Labour made absolutely no attempt to solidify those views, which could have blunted the resurgence last year of Conservative scapegoating tactics around migration and refugees. Instead, the Labour party is now again embracing UKIP language of 'concerns' with migration. In a BBC interview about NHS staff shortages, Starmer – referring not only to the NHS but the whole country – said "there are too many migrant workers".

Describing migrant workers as too numerous implies they are a problem, rather than people who benefit our society and should be welcome here. In the context of the NHS, where there are over 55,000 frontline nursing vacancies UK-wide, and over 130,000 overall vacancies in NHS England trusts, Starmer's simultaneous pledge to train 50,000 nurses and doctors while saying there are "too many" migrant workers in all sectors is also plainly incoherent.

The ghost of UKIP sits well in the Labour party and, with Starmer at the helm, it will haunt and poison our politics for the decade to come. The fact is Starmer's Labour is again ceding arguments to the far-right, based on 'concerns' elaborated to the far-right's benefit, not that of working people. As an immigrant who advocates for the rights of migrants, refugees and their right to a decent life like the rest of the country, I can't stay in or support a Labour party which blindly adopts such far-right rhetoric.



Keir Starmer

ANOTHER FUTURE IS POSSIBLE

MY PLEDGES TO YOU

My promise to you is that I will maintain our radical values and work tirelessly to get Labour in to power – so that we can advance the interests of the people our Party was created to serve.
Based on the moral case for socialism, here is where I stand.

1. Economic justice	Increase income tax for the top 5% of earners, reverse the Tories' cuts in corporation tax and clamp down on tax avoidance, particularly of large corporations. No stepping back from our core principles.
2. Social justice	Abolish Universal Credit and end the Tories' cruel sanctions regime. Set a national goal for wellbeing to make health as important as GDP; invest in services that help shift to a preventative approach. Stand up for universal services and defend our NHS. Support the abolition of tuition fees and invest in lifelong learning.
3. Climate justice	Put the Green New Deal at the heart of everything we do. There is no issue more important to our future than the climate emergency. A Clean Air Act to tackle pollution locally. Demand international action on climate rights.
4. Promote peace and human rights	No more illegal wars. Introduce a Prevention of Military Intervention Act and put human rights at the heart of foreign policy. Review all UK arms sales and make us a force for international peace and justice.
5. Common ownership	Public services should be in public hands, not making profits for shareholders. Support common ownership of rail, mail, energy and water; end outsourcing out NHS, local government and justice system.
6. Defend migrants' rights	Full voting rights for EU nationals. Defend free movement as we leave the EU. An immigration system based on compassion and dignity. End indefinite detention and call for the closure of centres such as Yarl's Wood.
7. Strengthen workers' rights and trade unions	Work shoulder to shoulder with trade unions to stand up for working people, tackle insecure work and low pay. Repeal the Trade Union Act. Oppose Tory attacks on the right to take industrial action and the weakening of workplace rights.
8. Radical devolution of power, wealth and opportunity	Push power, wealth and opportunity away from Whitehall. A federal system to devolve powers – including through regional investment banks and control over regional industrial strategy. Abolish the House of Lords – replace it with an elected chamber or regions and nations.
9. Equality	Pull down obstacles that limit opportunities and talent. We are the party of the Equal Pay Act, Sure Start, BAME representation and the abolition of Section 28 – we must build on that for a new decade.
10. Effective opposition to the Tories	Forensic, effective opposition to the Tories in Parliament – linked up to our mass membership and a professional election operation. Never lost sight of the votes 'lent' to the Tories in 2019. Unite our party, promote pluralism and improve our culture. Robust action to eradicate the scourge of antisemitism. Maintain our collective link with the unions.

Promoted by Jenny Chapman on behalf of Keir Starmer, both at Acre House, 11-15 William Road, London, NW1 3ER

Pictured: Keir Starmer's 10 pledges in the 2020 Labour leadership contest.

Starmer is a persistent liar

Without reviewing them line-by-line, as many others have already done, we should be clear that Starmer has broken nearly all measurable pledges made during his campaign to become leader of the opposition.

Starmer sought to present himself to Labour members as ‘Corbynism but acceptable’ – giving the impression that he would take most of the radical, transformative policies of the previous leadership but sell them to the electorate more effectively than Jeremy Corbyn could. He has since trashed this impression and shown that it was something he invented for convenience during the campaign.

Both Starmer and his supporters argue that many of these radical policies are no longer feasible as the economic situation has changed due to the Covid crisis, but the timeline for this excuse doesn’t add up. By the end of the leadership contest in April 2020, the economic consequences of Covid were becoming clear domestically and internationally. Was Starmer economically clueless, bandying those promises without knowing if he’d be able to keep them, or did he lie to members? Neither possibility produces confidence.

This habit of lying about policy extends beyond the leadership contest. GB Energy, for example, has been presented by Starmer as a publicly-owned company built to compete with the private sector to bring prices down. On further examination, this seems duplicitous; it will not actually compete with the private sector but instead collaborate with it. According to Rachel Reeves, the shadow chancellor, Labour will throw £8 billion into green energy projects, but private sector investment will be required on top of that to make it viable.

The investments made by GB Energy will not be majority public-owned; the private sector will *still* have a controlling stake on the most vital material portions of green energy generation. As a result, GB Energy will do nothing to bring down energy prices – those who keep them high today, for profit, will still be in overall control of our energy sector infrastructure and generation.

Labour’s pledges on climate change suffer broadly from this sort of lying by omission as well. Starmer and Reeves’ pledge

to borrow £224 billion to invest in tackling climate change is subject to borrowing guidelines which closely match the Conservatives' own borrowing guidelines. If the economy under-performs or if inflation remains high, the actual figure borrowed and invested will be reduced. This does not inspire confidence or trust in Labour's ability to tackle the greatest problem humankind has ever faced. There is also a total lack of an international dimension to Labour's climate plans, which is crucial to reducing emissions worldwide. *(Edit: As this article was being reviewed for publication, Labour – without even being in office – proved the above by reducing the amount they are pledging to borrow for the first two to three years in office, for the very reasons suggested above.)*

On the NHS crisis, Starmer's Labour suggests the private healthcare sector has a pool of doctors, nurses and specialists ready to go. This is a fantasy; that pool of recruits doesn't exist for the private sector for the same reason it doesn't for the NHS. That is no accident, it would seem, as Starmer and his shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting, have taken donations from wealthy private healthcare executives. This explains Starmer's sudden change of heart on his earlier principle that healthcare and profit should not mix.

All in all, it's very easy to simply observe reasons to not trust Sir Keir Starmer. He has lied about his person, his intentions, and continues to present policies in a duplicitous fashion. How is this man any better in terms of fostering trust in politics than someone like Boris Johnson, who did very much of the same? How could I, as a Labour member, be honest about my party's policies to people at the doorstep when not even the party leader seems to ever be? The answer, to me, is that I could not.



Pictured: Owen Wright (left) with supporters of the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign at a Dundee rally marking the anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

The Labour left, Ukraine and Soviet-tinted nostalgia glasses

Another reason I left the Labour party was the 'Labour left' itself, which has proven itself thoroughly incapable of introspection or self-criticism, making blunder after blunder as a result.

The greatest example of this is its reaction to the Russian war on Ukraine, which has left me dumbfounded. While Putin, a near-dictator, made a blood-and-soil speech about Ukraine and its supposed non-existence on the eve of his invasion of the country, the Labour left still could not recognise that as fascism. Instead, many elements of the Labour party's left flank backed the Russian line that NATO is as responsible for this war as Russia. As much as I am not in favour of NATO overall, any such claims can only be qualified as bogus and attempted justification for the invasion.

While initially I thought this was a legitimate response to

genuine concern about escalation of the conflict – as I too spent weeks in anxiety about the possible launch and detonation of nuclear weapons – it became impossible, in the face of escalating Russian war crimes and genocidal acts, to view the repetition of Kremlin talking points as defensible. This became a factor in my eventual decision to leave the party.

With the exception of John McDonnell, who now supports arms for Ukraine and backs the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, the Labour left has yet to learn from these mistakes. To be relevant in the 21st century, the Labour left must clearly move itself away from Cold War-era geopolitical analysis.

Beyond this, however, the left of the Labour party has also yet to realise that the battle within the party has already been lost. The Starmer leadership is doing all it can to avoid having new left-wing MPs in its next, probably quite sizeable, parliamentary cohort. Moves to restore the electoral college for leadership elections may eventually ensure a left-wing upstart like Corbyn can't take part in a Labour leadership election again, let alone win. The right of the Labour party is on a crusade to eliminate or at least fully suppress the left of the party.

Recently, Labour has actively prevented the incumbent mayor for North of Tyne, left-winger Jamie Driscoll, from running for North East mayor without clear justification. The notion that the Labour leadership are seeking to purge the left of their party from political positions is exemplified here. The ways the left of the Labour party can resist such a move are in practice, non-existent.

Momentum's argument that left-wingers can stay, fight and win internally falls flat when recognising that the real systemic power of the Labour party doesn't lie with its membership but with the upper ranks of its parliamentary party. The size or prevalence of the left-wing membership doesn't matter, as it

can be – and regularly is – completely ignored by the parliamentary cohort and leadership.

The left in Britain needs to undergo a process of intense introspection and re-establishment outside of the Labour party or it could well cease to exist as a political force entirely. That Momentum and others on the left of the Labour party do not acknowledge this necessity shows how naïve they have become about their systemic position, leaving them perpetually aimless and incapable of achieving their overarching political goals, many of which I share.

Conclusion

It took agonising weeks of thought to lead me to the conclusion that the Labour party is no longer the force for good that I thought it was. The only people for whom it is now reliable are those who already have wealth and social and material power. Most of us – no matter the size of our payslip, whether we rely on foodbanks or not, or whether we consider ourselves 'Labour at heart' – are not these people. There is no shame in calling Labour out for their abandonment of us.

I hope that this state of affairs one day changes again. Hope is not something often repaid in our politics, however, so the only thing left for me, as well as no doubt many others, was action, and that action was to leave the Labour party. I recommend others who care about the truth and honesty in progressive politics do the same; it may be the only way to show our discontent. And perhaps, something new can be born out of it, with time.

Owen Wright is a former Labour member who ran as the party's candidate in Dundee City East in the 2021 Holyrood elections.

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The Labour-Plaid deal is the faintest outline of a Wales beyond neoliberalism

"On the surface, the deal announced this week between the two parties represents a real break with the status quo" *writes Sam Coates in an article on the website blog of* ***Undod****, the non-party Welsh socialist organisation supporting independence.*

"Bringing in rent controls, caps on second homes and new state-owned companies would mean a dramatic break with the idea that the 'market knows best', and that direct government action to protect people and communities is needed.

While Welsh Labour has traded on the mirage of ‘clear red water’, the reality has been a government that talks radical and acts slowly. The recently published *The Welsh Way* (with numerous contributions from Undod members) has finally laid bare the myth of Wales being more progressive than the rest of the UK.

Free lunches for all primary school children is a deserved victory for the alliance of civil society campaigners that have worked so hard. But any socialist government should never have let food poverty grow on its watch in the first place. It will cost something to implement, but fundamentally it doesn’t challenge any powerful interests in Welsh society.

That’s why the plans on second and holiday homes seem most significant. This is where the agreement does the most to challenge the rule of the market, but in most other areas the commitments are vague and could easily be left to gather dust in Cardiff Bay – like so many past promises.

Plans to cap the number of second homes, and using the planning system to stop the spread is the first real commitment to say that people and communities matter more than private profit. That makes it an even greater victory for Cymdeithas yr Iaith and other friends, and communities that have tirelessly fought for their very existence.

On a smaller scale, the very mention of rent controls, while currently weak, is a testament to groups like ACORN that have sprung up during the pandemic to organise working people. Plans for a community food strategy are encouraging and will hopefully lead to public procurement of locally produced food. Every school and hospital in Wales should be serving local produce.

As family farms are bought up for corporate carbon offsetting, the absence of land reform is disappointing. As Robat Idris outlines for Undod, this is essential to ensure Wales

meets its climate change obligations whilst strengthening rural communities.

For everyone who wants a Wales that puts people before profit, this deal is the very start of that struggle, not the end. It represents the faintest outline of a Wales beyond neoliberalism that we must fight together to bring into full view. While only independence can create a Wales where our people not only survive, but thrive, this is a step to make full use of the powers our government already has.

Contrast this Labour-Plaid agreement, with the neoliberal announcement made by Keir Starmer this week. It's clear that there is desire in Wales for something better, and that the union won't offer that.

Powerful interests like the landlord lobby will do everything they can to stop this shift in our political direction, so it's up to us to pile the pressure on politicians. We must say 'go further' 'do it now, not after yet another investigation' and not give them the benefit of the doubt that has allowed so much inaction from Cardiff Bay over the past two decades.

We will work with whoever wants to take advantage of this new opening. And we'll demand the radical action needed to realise the vision of this deal – join Undod today to be part of it."

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In Welsh. Original: https://undod.cymru/cy/2021/11/23/y-fargen-rhwng-llafur-a-plaid-ywr-amlinelliad-gwelwaf-o-gymru-y-tu-hwnt-i-neoryddfrydiaeth/#respond

Y fargen rhwng Llafur a Plaid yw'r amlinelliad gwelwaf o Gymru y tu hwnt i neoryddfrydiaeth

Ar yr wyneb, mae'r fargen a gyhoeddwyd yr wythnos hon rhwng y ddwy blaid yn cynrychioli toriad go iawn gyda pethau fel y mae nhw. Byddai dod â rheolaethau rhent, capiau ar ail gartrefi a sefydlu cwmnïau newydd sy'n eiddo i'r wladwriaeth yn golygu toriad dramatig gyda'r syniad mai'r 'farchnad sy'n gwybod orau', a bod angen gweithredu uniongyrchol gan y llywodraeth i amddiffyn pobl a chymunedau.

Tra bod Llafur Cymru wedi manteisio ar y rhith o 'ddŵr coch clir', y realiti fu llywodraeth sy'n siarad yn radical ond yn gweithredu'n araf. Mae *The Welsh Way* a gyhoeddwyd yn ddiweddar (gyda nifer o gyfraniadau gan aelodau Undod) wedi dangos yn derfynol mai myth yw fod Cymru yn fwy blaengar na gweddill y Deyrnas Gyfunol.

Mae cinio am ddim i bob plentyn ysgol gynradd yn fuddugoliaeth haeddiannol i gynghrair o ymgyrchwyr cymdeithas sifil sydd wedi gweithio mor galed. Ond ni ddylai unrhyw lywodraeth sosialaidd erioed fod wedi gadael i dlodi bwyd gynyddu dan ei goruchwyliaeth yn y lle cyntaf. Bydd yn costio i'w weithredu, ond yn y bôn nid yw'n herio unrhyw fuddiannau pwerus yng nghymdeithas Cymru.

Dyna pam mae'r cynlluniau ar gyfer ail gartrefi a chartrefi gwyliau yn ymddangos yn hynod o arwyddocaol. Dyma lle mae'r cytundeb yn gwneud y mwyaf i herio rheol y farchnad, ond yn y rhan fwyaf o feysydd eraill mae'r ymrwymiadau'n amwys a byddai'n hawdd eu gadael i gasglu llwch ym Mae Caerdydd – fel cymaint o addewidion yn y gorffennol.

Cynlluniau i roi cap ar nifer yr ail gartrefi, a defnyddio'r system gynllunio i atal eu lledaeniad yw'r gwir ymrwymiad cyntaf i ddatgan bod pobl a chymunedau o bwys mwy nag elw preifat. Mae hynny'n ei gwneud yn fuddugoliaeth hyd yn oed yn fwy i Gymdeithas yr Iaith a chyfeillion eraill, a chymunedau sydd wedi ymladd yn ddiflino am eu bodolaeth.

Ar raddfa lai, mae hyd yn oed sôn am reolaethau rhent, er eu bod yn wan ar hyn o bryd, yn dyst i grwpiau fel ACORN sydd wedi codi yn ystod y pandemig i drefnu gweithiwyr. Mae cynlluniau ar gyfer strategaeth bwyd cymunedol yn galonogol a gobeithio y byddant yn arwain at gaffael cyhoeddus o fwyd a gynhyrchir yn lleol. Dylai pob ysgol ac ysbyty yng Nghymru fod yn gweini cynnyrch lleol.

Wrth i ffermydd teuluol gael eu prynu ar gyfer gwrthbwyso carbon corfforaethol, mae'r diffyg sôn am ddiwygio tir yn siomedig. Fel y mae Robat Idris wedi amlinellu mewn erthygl ar gyfer Undod, mae hyn yn hanfodol i sicrhau bod Cymru yn cyflawni ei rhwymedigaethau newid yn yr hinsawdd tra'n cryfhau cymunedau gwledig.

I bawb sydd eisiau Cymru sy'n rhoi pobl o flaen elw, dim ond dechrau'r frwydr yw'r fargen hon, nid y diwedd. Mae'n cynrychioli'r amlinelliad gwelwaf o Gymru y tu hwnt i neoryddfrydiaeth y mae'n rhaid i ni ei ymladd gyda'n gilydd er mwyn ei sylweddoli yn llawn. Er mai dim ond annibyniaeth all greu Cymru lle mae ein pobl nid yn unig yn goroesi, ond yn ffynnu, mae hwn yn gam i wneud defnydd llawn o'r pwerau sydd gan ein llywodraeth eisoes.

Cyferbynnwch y cytundeb Llafur-Plaid hwn, gyda'r cyhoeddiad neoryddfrydol a wnaed gan Keir Starmer yr wythnos hon. Mae'n amlwg bod awydd yng Nghymru am rywbeth gwell, ac nad yw'r undeb yn cynnig hynny.

Bydd buddiannau pwerus fel undeb y landlordiaid yn gwneud popeth o fewn eu gallu i atal y newid hwn i'n cyfeiriad

gwleidyddol, felly mae pentyrru'r pwysau ar wleidyddion i fyny i ni. Rhaid inni ddweud 'ewch ymhellach' 'gwnewch hynny nawr, nid ar ôl ymchwiliad arall eto' a pheidio â rhoi budd yr amheuaeth iddynt sydd wedi caniatáu cymaint o ddiffyg gweithredu o Fae Caerdydd dros y ddau ddegawd diwethaf.

Byddwn yn gweithio gyda phwy bynnag sydd am fanteisio ar yr agoriad newydd hwn. A byddwn yn mynnu y gweithredu radical sydd ei angen i wireddu gweledigaeth y fargen hon – ymunwch ag Undod heddiw i fod yn rhan ohoni.

Wales's new Climate Change Ministry bodes well for the future – possibly

Red-Green Labour's Sean Thompson gives a cautious welcome to Welsh Labour's plans.

In May's Welsh Senedd elections, Labour equalled its best result since the Welsh Assembly was established in 1999, winning 30 of the Senedd's 60 seats. Labour's manifesto had contained a number of modest, but welcome pledges, including the banning of most single use plastics, the creation of a new national forest stretching the length of the country from North to South and a moratorium on planning permission for large incineration facilities. During the election campaign, the First Minister, Mark Drakeford had repeatedly declared that if re-elected, he would *'embed our response to the climate and nature emergency in everything we do'*.

Such fine words are to be expected during election campaigns, but all too frequently disappointingly little is done to put them into practice. However, within a week Drakeford announced a major reorganisation of his administration, creating a powerful new Ministry for Climate Change, which has responsibility for transport, housing, planning, regeneration, energy and environment. The Minister and Deputy Minister are, respectively, Julie James and Lee Waters, both on the left of the party, and their key role is stated as being to *'ensure all Welsh Government policy on new infrastructure projects, energy schemes, and planning decisions can meet environmental targets and be justified in the context of Wales' current and future climate challenges'*. In an early indication of how the new ministry may combine policy areas with the climate crisis in mind, Drakeford announced a commitment to build 20,000 new social homes for rent that will be built to zero-carbon standards, piloting the use of new design and production methods and making use of the underused resource of Welsh timber, currently largely used for pulp.

On 15 June, the administration's Programme for Government was published, laying out its delivery plan for the next 5 years. Lee Waters has been quite open about his view that the Ministry for Climate Change's plans are extremely modest in the light of the scale and urgency of the climate crisis,

nonetheless they mark a significant step forward both in ambition and recognising the need for a properly integrated programme. In addition to the policies already mentioned, the 2021-26 action plan includes the following main commitments:

- Legislating to abolish the use of more commonly littered single use plastics.
- Introducing a Clean Air Act for Wales, consistent with WHO guidance.
- Maintaining the policy of opposing the extraction of fossil fuels in Wales.
- Supporting the Wales TUC proposals for union members to become Green Reps, with the same rights as H&S Reps, in the workplace.
- Aiming for a 30% target for working remotely.
- Implementing a new 10-year Wales Infrastructure Investment Plan for a zero-carbon economy.
- Reviving the Swansea Tidal Lagoon project as part of a wider'Tidal Lagoon Challenge' and supporting initiatives that can make Wales a centre of emerging tide and wave technologies.
- Expanding renewable energy generation by public bodies and community groups in Wales by over 100MW by 2026, as well as supporting other community-led initiatives, such as cooperative housing and community land trusts.
- Lifting the ban on local authorities setting up new municipal bus companies, expanding flexible demand-responsive travel across Wales, making 20mph the default speed limit in residential areas throughout Wales and hitting a target of at least 45% of journeys by sustainable modes by 2040.
- Delivering good quality jobs and training through the housing retrofit programme, using local supply chains.

There is much else in the Programme to applaud; strengthening the protections for ancient woodlands, funding additional flood protection for more than 45,000 homes and delivering

nature-based flood management in all major river catchments, to expand wetland and woodland habitats, creating a new system of farm support and developing a Wales Community Food Strategy, as well as a commitment to *'explore options for workers to take an ownership stake in our national transport assets'*. However, as ever, words are cheap. Some of the commitments are not entirely in the Welsh Government's gift, others will, at the very least, be at the very boundaries of the government's powers – or even beyond them.

For example, the commitment to work towards 30% of office based workers working remotely makes a lot of sense in terms of both encouraging more employment in the valleys of south east Wales or the isolated rural communities of mid and north Wales, as well as helping to reduce the congestion in the major urban areas (pre-Covid, Cardiff had to deal with an influx of over 80,000 commuter vehicles a day, while the antiquated rail services were unbearably overcrowded). However, while the government is proposing a number of sensible measures, such as developing new remote working hubs in former mining communities, they are going to be dependent not only on co-operation – and probably co-funding – with cash strapped local councils, but also on the co-operation of employers. Wales has the largest proportion of its workforce in the public sector of any part of Britain, so getting the active support of local authorities, the NHS and the Higher Education sector is going to be key to the success of the policy.

Supporting, the Wales TUC proposals for Green Reps in the workplace is laudable, however it is beyond the Welsh Government's devolved powers to enforce it. It will require the government, as part of its Social Partnership policy, to include this reform in the package of fair employment measures it will be seeking to 'persuade' employers to accept through the leverage of its (along with the NHS and Higher Education) public procurement muscle.

A number of important measures, such as ensuring that Wales gets its fair share of the *Shared Prosperity Fund* and the so-called *Levelling Up Fund* from Whitehall and getting a fair share of vital rail infrastructure and R&D investment for Wales, rely on the the Tories being prepared to spread largesse to the ungrateful Welsh in the manner of Lady Bountiful – an eventuality it would be unwise to hold one's breath waiting for. And relaunching the Swansea Tidal Lagoon (as it were) would almost certainly require the Treasury (motto: 'Out of my cold dead hand…') to relax its grip on the Welsh Government's borrowing limits.

The Tories have always been hostile to the direction that even its current very limited devolved powers have taken Wales, and the performance of the Welsh Government and NHS during the Covid crisis in contrast to the fiasco in England has clearly intensified that hostility. The Westminster Government has already demonstrated that it intends to use the funds meant to replace those from the EU that were devolved to the Welsh Government, that have been so important to the poorest parts of Wales, itself, with (up to now) no consultation with the Welsh Government. Johnson has even threatened that the Westminster Government might seek to impose the environmentally disastrous M4 Extension project, rejected eighteen months ago by the Welsh Government, on Wales as though it was a colony of England (luckily, this idea is about as workable as Johnson's other wheezes, like the Scotland-Ireland bridge). But in these circumstances, the Welsh Government's hope that, for example, the under-funded Health and Safety Executive might be devolved to Wales is probably a pipe dream.

Even where the Welsh Government has both the powers and the funding to implement its programme there remains the question of whether it will, in practice, do so. Its record of delivery is patchy. For example, for some years the Welsh Government has – rhetorically at least – had a progressive policy of

increasing tree cover in Wales. Since January 2008, under the ‘Plant!’ scheme, a tree has been planted for very child born in Wales (and since 2014, another has been planted in Mbale, Uganda) and the government has had a target of planting 2,000 hectares of new woodland each year. However, since 2013 new woodland has averaged less than 1,000 hectares a year and in 2019/20 just 80 hectares were planted, though the Climate Change Commission estimates that tree planting in Wales needs to be moving towards 5,000 hectares a year if we are to achieve 24% woodland cover by 2050. Given that the idea of a National Forest is Mark Drakeford’s personal vision, one can only hope that the government gets its act together in the most dramatic fashion over the next couple of years.

Another example: the Welsh Government has been committed to a desperately needed green housing retrofit programme for some years. 32% of homes in Wales were built before 1919, we have some of the oldest and least thermally efficient homes in Europe, and there are currently over 250,000 households living in fuel poverty.

But while the Welsh Government has implemented a number of worthwhile initiatives to address these issues, including its Warm Homes Programme, the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and most recently the Optimised Retrofit Programme, these initiatives have largely involved social housing, not privately let or owner occupied homes, though both of those latter sectors are on average in poorer condition. A major programme is needed to retrofit all existing homes in Wales to at least an EPC ‘B’ rating within the next ten years that would not only tackle both greenhouse gas emissions and fuel poverty, but would create thousands of new, well paid, unionised jobs (10,000 FTE jobs a year over 15 years, according to the Institute of Welsh Affairs).

However, as with many of the commitments in the Programme for Government, no targets or timescales for the housing retrofit programme have been published, just statements of good

intentions, although given the speed at which the programme has been put together and published since the election in May, that is not entirely surprising. It is vital, though, that those statements of intent are transformed into practical action over the coming months.

Despite the Welsh Government's less than stellar environmental performance record, the relative modesty of the environmental goals in its new Programme for Government and the increasingly problematic issue of its limited legislative and financial powers under the current devolution settlement, there are reasons to be optimistic. The creation of a new Ministry explicitly concerned with the climate crisis that is responsible for most of the key areas where radical change is needed – including transport, housing, environment and energy – is potentially extraordinarily important. The fact that Drakeford has put this Ministry in the charge of two of his key supporters – both firmly on the left of the party when the majority of Labour MSs (Senedd Members) are on the right – is a hopeful sign that radical action that challenges the status quo may start to creep onto the political agenda.

And evidence that that hope is not totally unfounded was provided on 21 June when Lee Waters announced that all new road building programmes in Wales have been frozen with immediate effect in order to be subject to an independent review. In his announcement, Waters said: *'I don't think people realise the amount we have to do. Since 1990 we have reduced emissions by 32% and by the end of the decade we have to more than double that and it's up again by 2040. We really do have to ramp up what we have been doing. In 10 years, we need to achieve more than the last 30 and in those years we have done the relatively easy things, there is no low hanging fruit. If we're going to hit this target we're going to have to do things differently.'*

When asked what he would say to people who face regular traffic jams on the roads where schemes have been halted, he

said: *'If we do nothing, we are facing catastrophic consequences for our communities. A lot of this is going to be uncomfortable change and it's not going to be easy and I am not pretending there's simple answers. There will be tensions and will be contradictions, we need to make it easier for people to do things that help us tackle climate change…For most people, the reality is that using public transport is not easy and isn't attractive and we need to change that to make it easier. We can't do that if we're spending all our money on road building. We have reached the point where we have to confront the fact we can't keep doing what we have always done'.*

Republished from RedGreen Labour

Leonard resigns, as Starmer abandons Scotland's voters

This article was originally published on the Socialist Resistance website.

Richard Leonard has bowed to the inevitable and resigned as Scottish Labour Party leader, just 16 weeks before the most critical Scottish Parliament elections since devolution on 6 May.

The choreographed move coordinated by the office of the UK Labour leader, Keir Starmer, continuing his purge of the Party of any apparent remnants of supporters of Jeremy Corbyn came on 14 January. *Mike Picken* reports from Scotland.

Purge of Corbyn associates

Leonard's departure comes after three years of desultory

performance at the helm of Scottish Labour. He was narrowly elected in 2017 as an associate of left wing former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Following Keir Starmer's consolidation as new leader of the Labour Party in April 2020 and the subsequent ongoing purge of Corbyn associates, Leonard was hanging by a thread.

Since his election, Leonard faced repeated opposition from within the 23-strong Labour group of Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). He fought off one major public attempt to remove him in September 2020, when several MSPs worked through the press to undermine his position. But, having tabled a motion of no confidence, they judged they did not yet have enough support on the Scottish Executive Committee (SEC) and withdrew their motion before the vote. This followed the disqualification of the right-wing controlled Labour Students' organisation representatives across the whole of Labour due to financial misconduct, which unexpectedly reduced the votes of those supporting "no confidence" on the SEC at the time.

Starmer demands "Get Brexit Done!"

Starmer in London and Leonard's opponents in Scotland were looking for another opportunity and the apparent public split in December 2020 over the respective votes on Brexit legislation in the UK Parliament in London and Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh made this more urgent.

Starmer, one of the most argumentatively anti-Brexit of Labour MPs under Jeremy Corbyn, is now apparently becoming the strongest Brexit supporter in the Labour Party as leader.

As the Johnson government's trade negotiations with the EU faltered during the autumn, over the UK's intransigent opposition to any remaining vestiges of the EU within the rest of the British state (outside the occupied six counties in the north of Ireland which to all intents and purposes remain part of the EU), Starmer forced Labour to adopt the previous 2019

pro-Brexit line of Johnson and N Farage and even shamefully adopted “Get Brexit Done!” as an official campaign slogan.

He tried to force Labour MPs in the Westminster Parliament to vote for Johnson’s miserable eleventh hour Brexit trade deal. Although nearly 40 Labour MPs defied Starmer’s whip, the sole surviving Labour MP in Scotland, Ian Murray, previously an outspoken opponent of Brexit and of Leonard, trooped meekly into the Westminster lobbies with the Tories to give Johnson a massive “hard Brexit” majority.

The Scottish National Party (SNP), which since 2015 has had the vast majority of Westminster MPs from Scotland and is the third largest party in the House of Commons, called instead for continuing opposition to the Brexit deal and an extension of the ‘transition period’ to avoid massive economic dislocation in the middle of the pandemic.

Scots MPs formed the main contingent of those voting against Johnson’s squalid deal at Westminster, reflecting the 62% vote for Remain. Opposition to Brexit is now about 75% according to recent polls in Scotland.

Starmer sees Labour taking a hard line in favour of Brexit as a way to ‘win back’ the dozens of former Labour seats in northern England lost by Labour in 2019, the so-called ‘red wall’ that were allegedly lost because of Brexit. In fact many of these seats were lost because of neglect over decades by the Labour Party and the reality is that in taking such a hard line pro-Brexit position, lining up with the Tories, Starmer is definitely consigning Scottish Labour to electoral oblivion in May.

The Scottish Parliament and Government, led by the SNP since 2007, attempted to intervene in the Brexit negotiations particularly over fishing and free movement but was kept out by Johnson Because Brexit significantly affects devolved matters, the Scottish Parliament and the devolved legislatures

in Wales and the north of Ireland were asked by the UK government to give a 'legislative consent' to the Westminster bill. Not only did the Scottish parliament overwhelmingly refuse this , so too did the Welsh Senedd, where Labour are the leading party, and the Northern Ireland Assembly in the occupied six counties. This left the Brexit deal as an England-only affair imposed on the population of rest of the British state.

Scottish and Welsh Labour parties had to oppose the Brexit legislation in the devolved parliaments to avoid losing face, while Starmer was pressing Westminster Labour strongly to support it to 'win back the red wall'. A press release issued by Leonard about why Scottish Labour was voting a differently to UK Labour attracted huge controversy making Labour look stupid, and gave Starmer the excuse he was looking for to move openly to ditch him.

Secret meeting organises coup

According to *The Times* and confirmed by a wide range of sources, Starmertold Leonard he had "no confidence" in him. On the evening of Wednesday January 13, Starmer hosted a secret online meeting to which Leonard was not invited, though private millionaire Labour donors and Ian Murray were. A deal brokered by trades unions apparently saw Leonard resign the next day with immediate effect, but guaranteed him a place at the top of one of Scottish Labour's regional lists for the Holyrood elections in May – in apparent contradiction of the Scottish Labour policy of putting women at the head of all lists. This guarantees Leonard one of Scottish Labour's dwindling number of seats in the Scottish Parliament and an MSP's salary of £65k for the next four years.

While Leonard went along with the pretence that this was a personal decision taken over Xmas in his vacuous resignation statement, (link) the shoddy 'deal' produced outrage from Leonard-supporting left wing MSP Neil Findlay who attacked

Leonard's opponents as "flinching cowards and sneering traitors" (link) (a reference to the words of the "Red Flag", the longstanding anthem of the Labour Party ritually sung at Labour's conferences but completely ignored by Labour leaders other than Corbyn).

Findlay held explosive interviews including on BBC Scotland's TV News programme The Nine and radio programme Good Morning Scotland attacking Leonard's opponents of Leonard for their manoeuvres. Findlay is an outspoken Corbyn supporter but is standing down from the Scottish Parliament, and the organisation he leads within Scottish Labour, the neo-Stalinist Campaign for Socialism, has been increasingly ineffectual.

While Richard Leonard has been identified by the mainstream press as a Corbyn supporter and this constituted a major reason for his purge, the reality is actually more complex. Leonard is a fairly committed left social democrat supporting action on workers' rights and environmental issues, genuinely liked by people who work with him, including opponents. But his decades working in the trade union bureaucracy have led to a politically cautious approach, seeking to work through "backroom deals" and attempted careful presentation. This is the very opposite of what was Corbyn and his many supporters in the party represented. In the right wing atmosphere of the Scottish Labour Party, Leonard failed to win support for his equivocal role.

Scottish Labour was the only part of the Labour Party where in 2016 full members failed to vote for Jeremy Corbyn. Leonard only won by a few hundred votes against his opponent a year later, right wing businessman Anas Sarwar. By the time of the election of a deputy leader in 2020, it was clear that the majority of Scottish Labour Party members had moved to the right and the devoted Blair-supporting MSP, Jackie Baillie, easily won nearly 60% of the membership vote against the challenge by left wing Glasgow councillor Matt Kerr.

Leonard's base of support was less within the Corbyn supporting minority within the party membership and relied on the financial weight of the affiliated trade unions after decades working as a paid official. And a majority of trade unions in Scotland are not affiliated to Labour.

Leonard also committed a number of major gaffes in his lacklustre appearances in the Scottish Parliament against the more visibly competent First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon of the SNP, running a high profile Covid presence. In interventions over measures to lockdown hospitality during the Covid crisis, he accused the SNP of behaving like temperance leaders by restricting alcohol sales and put forward a bizarre claim of the SNP treating the industry like "Sodom and Gomorrah". Voters were unable to tell whether he was for or against tighter measures to suppress Covid.

Sturgeon easily ran rings round him, even though on many occasions she said they shared a similar outlook and that she wanted to work with him. In the febrile tribal politics adopted by Scottish Labour, Leonard repeatedly called on the SNP government to undertake things they had already demonstrably done, while his fiscal demands for more expenditure were easily rebuffed by the SNP saying that due to the UK government's treatment of the Scottish government, only independence could achieve what he was demanding. While Labour swung between being for and against Brexit, leaving Scottish voters breathless, they failed to hit home against the SNP's unconditional support for EU policies especially when it came to the SNP using state-aid policies as an excuse for not intervening to defend Scottish workers.

Under Leonard, the Scottish Labour manifesto for the 2019 general election dropped the Scottish party conference's opposition to renewal of the Scottish-based Trident nuclear weapons system, to adopt the UK party policy of spending up to 200 billion pounds upgrading Britain's nuclear weapons of mass destruction. For a long period Scottish public opinion has

been strongly against the Trident system and nuclear weapons, but Scottish Labour now backs it.

By the time of Leonard's removal on 14 January, it was clear that the unions could not support him any longer and thus they brokered a backroom deal for him to vacate the leadership while staying in the Parliament.

Dismal electoral performance of Scottish Labour

As well as Brexit and the wish to purge Corbyn supporters, the ostensible reason for Starmer seeking to ditch Leonard was the dismal electoral performance of Scottish Labour. But the collapse of support for Scottish Labour started well before Leonard became leader.

Labour was the dominant party in Scotland over many decades, regularly sending up to 50 MPs to the Westminster parliament. Labour introduced devolution and the recreation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 (after an earlier attempt in 1979 was defeated by a small "anti devolution" minority of Labour MPs blocking with the Tories to sabotage the democratic process). Labour saw devolution of the highly centralised British state as the opportunity to "see off" the electoral challenge of the independence-supporting SNP. But Labour's own record in government was badly tainted by the Iraq war in 2003 and the pro-austerity policies of the Blair/Brown days – in Scotland this was reflected by major privatisation of public services.

Labour were ousted from the Scottish government (then called "Executive") in 2007, when the SNP overtook them in the more proportional elections for the Parliament. But Labour managed to take the majority of seats in Scotland at Westminster in 2010 because of the undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system where Scots voted tactically for Labour to keep the Tories out. They assumed voters would just return to them.

By the 2011 Holyrood elections, the SNP were able to use the more proportional system to win an unexpected majority and to press their demands for a referendum on Scottish independence. Then Tory Prime Minister David Cameron eagerly agreed to a referendum in 2012 at a time when independence was showing around 25% in the polls. Labour entered into an alliance with the Tories under the slogan “Better Together” to defend the unionism of the British state. But Scottish voters, particularly working class Labour voters, increasingly saw independence as an alternative to austerity policies of London that had been imposed on Scotland undemocratically. Support for independence soared to 45% in the referendum of 2014.

Although defeated in the referendum, a mass independence movement was mobilised and in 2015 voters wiped out both the Tories and Labour, returning 56 out of 59 SNP MPs to Westminster. Labour learnt no lessons from this and continued to espouse the Unionist cause, despite the Brexit referendum in 2016 when Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, opposing the xenophobic campaign against free movement by the Tory and UKIP Brexiteers.

Labour slumped to third place in the Holyrood elections of 2016 and while the SNP went from a majority to a minority government, their vote share actually increased. Labour won back a few Westminster seats in Scotland in the general election of 2017 when Corbyn’s left wing programme massively increased Labour’s appeal (though only an increase of a few tens of thousands of votes in Scotland, compared to over a million in England), but they lost all these gains in 2019 on the back of an ambiguous policy on Brexit and continuing growth in support for independence. A few Corbyn supporters like John McDonnell held out the possibility of Labour accepting self-determination for Scotland, upholding the right of the Scottish Parliament to determine whether and when to hold a referendum. But this received a hostile reception from

the leadership of Scottish Labour and some on the left across the pro-union Labour Party. Scottish Labour also lost control of all its councils in 2017, including the city of Glasgow which it had controlled for over forty years.

Majority for Independence

Throughout the last year opinion polls have repeatedly shown a majority for independence in Scotland – the latest two polls put support at 57-58%. The SNP are showing over 50% support for first-past-the-post seats, giving them the strong likelihood of a majority government in May, committed to a second independence referendum in the near future. Together with the pro-independence Scottish Green Party picking up regional list seats, the next Scottish Parliament looks set to have a clear pro-independence majority – that will be ignored by Boris Johnson's government at Westminster, backed by Labour leader Starmer.

Starmer made a major speech in January setting out his opposition to a second independence referendum in favour of a campaign for a more radical devolution or federalism policy aiming to prop up the failed British state. Scottish voters have heard all this before – in "the vow" made by Labour and Tory leaders claiming to boost the role of Scottish governance within the UK as a desperate attempt to stop independence voting in 2014. The "vow" was symbolised in the figurehead of 'yesterday's man', former Labour prime minister Gordon Brown, who has now been appointed by Starmer to head up a Labour devolution campaign that has no discernible policies and cannot be delivered without support in England.

The imposition of hard Brexit on Scotland has been the hugely unpopular result of the 'vow' – rejection of Scotland's vote on the EU and ignoring any views of the Scottish government or parliament. Boris Johnson has made clear his views that devolution was a "disaster" and that he intends to continue to ignore Scottish opinion.

Scottish Labour's newly appointed constitutional policy spokesperson, Anas Sarwar, caused consternation within the party when he said Labour would be against any independence referendum being held in "the next five years" – a made-up on-the-hoof policy never adopted by Scottish Labour and standing against the views of the Scottish Trade Union Conference (STUC) and Labour's largest Scottish affiliate Unison, both of which back an independence referendum being solely up to the Scottish Parliament.

Fishing crisis

Hard Brexit has in recent days provoked a huge crisis in the fishing industries – one of Scotland's largest economic areas – as tonnes of Scottish fishing products sit rotting in lorries unable to get to their traditional EU markets. Tory cabinet member Jacob Rees-Mogg's response that "at least the fish are British and happier", together with the revelation that the Tory fishing minister had not even read the Brexit deal before voting with it because she was "too busy with nativity", has poured fuel on the flames of Scottish opinion as thousands of jobs are threatened by Tory Brexit.

But it is Labour's commitment to working with the Tories and supporting their hated policies that will continue to further its electoral collapse in Scotland – voting for Brexit, supporting nuclear weapons, undemocratically refusing an independence referendum, and unconditional support for the union. Starmer appeared with a union flag behind him on a recent TV broadcast to emphasise this commitment.

As many in Scotland are pointing out – it's the Labour message that's the problem not the messenger!

The contest for Leonard's replacement is unlikely to produce any sparks, as the likes of Anas Sarwar and Jackie Baillie are the frontrunners to compete for the mantle of "Starmer's Champion in Scotland" – or "running the junior branch office"

as many in the independence movement put it.

MSP Monica Lennon has been touted as a possible runner due to her recent high profile successful campaign to make Scotland the first country in the world to distribute free sanitary products for women and girls. However, Lennon is among only a few who support separating the Scottish Labour Party from the UK party and had defended the right of the Scottish Parliament to determine an independence referendum. She is therefore unlikely to attract significant support and the Starmer leadership will seek to ensure she fails.

Unless Labour makes a dramatic change of policy on both independence and Brexit, the Scottish party seems set to confine itself further to the margins of politics, whoever emerges as the eleventh leader in twenty years.

15 January 2021