EDITORIAL

Rita Hinden Memorial Lecture

Anneliese Dodds

Dr. Rita Hinden (1909-1971) was a socialist and internationalist activist who played an important role in the intellectual life of the mid-twentieth century Labour Party - most notably as founder of the Fabian Colonial Bureau, secretary of the Socialist Union, and editor of the influential journal *Socialist Commentary*. After her death, an earlier iteration of the Rita Hinden Memorial Lecture ran from 1972-1981, with speakers including David Marquand, Roy Jenkins, and Michael Young.

Renewal has chosen to revive this Lecture because we believe that Rita Hinden's life and work embodied a commitment to the kind of holistic, internationalist, and intellectually-engaged social democratic politics that we believe is needed today. Our first annual Rita Hinden lecture was given by Dr Anneliese Dodds MP in September 2025, and the full text, reproduced below, serves as the editorial for this double issue themed around Labour in power since 2024. The issue's lead editors were Rebecca Goldsmith, Morgan Jones and Neil Warner, with additional editing by David Klemperer.

The pamphlet 'Must Labour Lose' was produced by Rita Hinden along with Mark Abrams and Richard Rose in 1960, following what had been for many a shock general election loss in 1959. Since then, Labour has proved itself better at losing than winning. In the decades following 'Must Labour Lose', given this losing pattern, commentators asked if 1992 was 'Labour's last chance'[1] and whether Labour must 'Always Lose';[2] sought to understand 'Labour's Lost England'[3]; and considered across Europe 'Why the left loses'[4].

It may seem strange to focus on analyses of election losses, following 2024's election victory. In 1959, Labour had lost the last three general elections in a row; in 2024, we won with a landslide after four successive general election defeats. And back in 1959, Macmillan's claim that most people had 'never had it so good' resonated because it was true – hardly a view that can be taken now with the continuing cost-of-living crisis.

But I return now to Hinden's concerns, because of the central trend she analysed, as with those other examinations of Labour losses: the decline of class- and community-based loyalties to political parties, and the resultant challenge for Labour with a far more volatile and diverse electorate. Hinden suggested that acceptance and understanding of that change required a completely new perspective for Labour Party activists who found it hard to prise themselves away from old approaches and certainties, particularly those formed around class and community loyalty.

Electoral volatility is of course even more marked now, with the swing from the 2019 Labour nadir to 2024's landslide, and now the dominance in the polls of Farage's populist right party. The nightmare scenario that many of my SPD friends warned me of following recent German experience appears to have come to pass: a swing to social democracy followed by public discontent, seized upon by a populist right party, which ends up riding high in the polls, and a previously centre-right party tacking rightwards in response to the threat.

We are currently experiencing a change to British society and politics that is just as momentous as the reduction in class-based political affiliation that Hinden and her coauthors analysed. I give this lecture following a turbulent ten days for Labour, where the leadership has understandably tried to reassert control, using the well-worn lever of a reshuffle. But recent days have only underlined that, as Rafael Behr recently put it, "[f]ar from No. 10, Nigel Farage has been amassing power in the sprawling, networked space where 21st-century politics happens"[5].

That power involves a new fusion – a melding of the economic and the political power of big tech. As with Hinden's contemporaries in the late fifties and early sixties, many of the current generation of social democratic politicians do not find it easy to adapt to this new world. When I first got involved in party politics

I didn't even have email, let alone use social media. Now big tech is ubiquitous in our economics and our politics, challenging daily our ability to 'live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect'.

In response to Labour's current woes, our Prime Minister has been clear that the priority is 'delivery' – and 'delivery' and 'delivery'. Implementing policy changes that people can see and feel *is* critical – and always will be for all social democratic parties. For us politics is always a means to an end and never mainly about performance as it is for the populist right.

But while essential to win, delivering 'more stuff'—better services, more money in peoples' pockets, improved infrastructure, more effective border security—is not enough, and is also more challenging to achieve in the face of global economic headwinds. As a prerequisite not to lose, Labour has to adapt at lightning speed to politics' new world. That requires urgent action to protect our democracy, including working with global allies. It needs a reimagining of common endeavour, as tech's economic power rapidly increases. And it requires us as social democrats to show we're on the side of innovation *and* humans, with action to protect human relationships and control. In the rest of this lecture, I'll set out how we can get there.

Deliverology

In both the UK and the US, the need to deliver improvements speedily and meaningfully has been portrayed as the key to combating right-wing populism. This echoes previous analyses which have linked political disillusionment (often then associated with support for right populism) with stagnating or falling living standards. The aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis, in particular, has often been stressed as a defining moment where confidence in politics in industrialised nations fell to a permanently lower level[6].

Some more recent analyses link the appeal of populism less to just economic woes and more to general frustration at government ineffectiveness. Hence, Howell and Moe's book 'Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy' argues that it was ultimately the 'persistence of ineffective government' that led to support for the US populist right, with Democrats and liberals more generally being simply unable to deliver on citizens' expectations. Perhaps most trenchantly, the journalists Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson expand on this to suggest that those with liberal values should lose what they call a 'scarcity' mindset, where the role of government is to (re)distribute, and instead seek 'abundance' – increasing the supply of goods and services that people need, especially those derived from new and emerging technologies.

Some of the examples Klein and Thompson use to illustrate their argument would not look out of place in the UK. It takes little imagination to conjure UK equivalents of California's appallingly delayed high-speed rail project, or its failure to deliver much-needed housing, or San Fran's $1.7 million single public toilet (and no, the Blenheim Palace thieves hadn't relocated to the golden state). Their argument is that "[i]f liberals do not want Americans to turn to the false promise of strongmen, they need to offer the fruits of effective government. Redistribution is important. But it is not enough".

There is perhaps more than a hint of 'abundance'-style thinking in the Chancellor's striking depiction of regulators as a 'boot on the neck' of business. Klein and Thompson have been heavily critiqued in the US, not least because some have claimed that the logical outcome of their broadly-deregulatory view is DOGE's bonfire of civil servants and public responsibility. I would add that focussing only on supply can make sense if demand is high – which makes less sense when consumer confidence is low.

Nonetheless, there is much new 'stuff' that Labour is delivering, tangibly, now. Measures like additional childcare hours, free breakfast clubs, restrictions on the cost of school uniforms, extra free school meals, additional NHS appointments, the Gov.uk app, ending no-fault evictions, and building new and warmer homes will of course be noticed by their recipients. The biggest expansion of prison places since Queen Victoria will also be noticed by recipients, even if they don't like it! And if we can move beyond the innuendo, growth that you can feel in your pocket will be felt in peoples' pockets.

But with Labour's focus on fixing long-term problems as well as dealing with short-term crises, much change will necessarily only be felt in the years to come. Rachel Reeves' changes to fiscal rules to enable greater investment will see spades in the ground, more quickly than for HS2 and Californian high-speed rail – but not overnight. The measures in the Employment Rights Bill will further arrest the slide in returns to labour in the UK economy[7] – but this will take some time to be felt. The practical impact of changes to planning rules apparently will be felt in five years' rather than months' time[8]. And the degradation of public services left by the Conservatives, including everything from enormous NHS waiting lists to falling youth apprenticeships, coupled with the financial head-winds produced by global developments, will inevitably make delivery harder. To be blunt: some positive policy developments and improvements in delivery will take time to be felt, and risk being more than cancelled out by economic headwinds, during an era where electorates are increasingly impatient for change.

I have commented elsewhere on the fiscal challenges facing the government, and will not repeat myself here. Suffice to say, at a time when the UK's security

guarantees have effectively been removed and we must rearm, I believe it is important to level with the public—and indeed, the markets—about the need for tax increases for the best-off, rather than pretend we can respond purely through cuts or elusive growth. Securing a stronger fiscal position is in my view essential to enable the government to deliver more tangible change. But even this on its own would not be enough. Because while delivery is *necessary*, it is not *sufficient*. To say it again – delivering more stuff, or delivering stuff better, is not enough.

Moving fast and breaking democracy

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson[9] have argued that previous waves of technological development generally reinforced democratic political institutions[10]. Inclusive economic and political institutions were often necessary for the growth of industries, they suggested, by providing 'broad-based opportunities and incentives for people to invest, innovate, and engage in productivity-enhancing activities'[11], including the workforce in the case of mass manufacturing. So, while there have been blips and bumps, historically in most countries industrialisation has supported democracy and vice versa.

As they point out, in contrast with previous industrial revolutions, the current computerised automation revolution relies on an extremely small number of workers. The sociologist Shoshana Zuboff suggests this 'extreme structural independence from people' undermines the connection with inclusive institutions that was a feature of previous waves of industrialisation. In 2019, Zuboff suggested that this led to 'radical indifference', a value-free, technocratic approach to the development of Big Tech, with future profits the only goal: 'careless people' indeed, to use the title of the whistleblower Sarah Wynn-Williams' book. Now, however, Zuboff argues that there has been a fusion of the economic and political power of big tech. The bros don't only now 'move fast and break things' to make profit; they also seek to exercise political power.

Of course, I am being provocative by using terms like 'big tech' and 'tech bros'. Not every tech worker is a clone of Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg – far from it. There are many working in tech who are anything but indifferent to social and economic problems; who spend their whole lives working to solve these problems through innovation. And many leaders in tech are determined to raise the profile of the challenges it poses. One example is the CEO of AI company Anthropic, Dario Amodei. He has suggested that in the future AI could lead to a tenfold increase in the speed of medical discoveries, power measures to alleviate poverty, and massively improve mental health[12]. He has also, however, railed against viewing 'companies as unilaterally shaping the world' and against deregulation if it impacts the safety of AI and harms workers, and called for

governments to prepare for AI's economic consequences, especially for young workers. There is also a flourishing ecosystem of companies attempting to create (more) 'pro-social' social media and AI, from Bluesky to the revival of Tumblr, to new companies Mozi, Neptune, and Neya, to hackathons to develop 'AI for social good'.

Social media and AI have enormous potential to improve human wellbeing, improve our response to the climate crisis and build stronger communities. They can, indeed, be part of a future where 'power, wealth and opportunity' are spread. But in the hands of some bros and their right-wing allies, they are increasingly being used in a way that undermines democracy and removes, rather than enhances, citizens' control over their lives. In the rest of this lecture, I will set out how in my view Labour needs to approach these immense changes – and we need to start with protecting our democracy.

Free and fair

The left rather lacks a lexicon for speaking about protecting democracy. Too often discussions on this topic are only for the real enthusiasts. I hesitate to say this with many friends from Compass here, but such conversations generally seem to be erudite affairs, considering the merits of different variants of mixed-member electoral systems for example. They don't reflect the fundamental point of democracy – its radical promise. With a free and fair democracy, every person, whoever they are, has the power to choose their representative without fear or favour. When the Chartist Joseph Rayner Stephens rose to speak to demand the vote for all (men), he did so not in a library or a pamphlet but on Kersal Moor in Lancashire, to an excited crowd of 30,000. Chartism was a 'knife and fork, a bread and cheese' question. Not always a font of stirring rhetoric, the European Commission has adopted a 'democracy shield'. And in Moldova, across the Western Balkans and (of course) Ukraine, protecting democracy by countering disinformation has been described as part of 'hybrid warfare'.

Of course, the UK's current situation is not comparable to countries facing and subject to physical attack. But it is complacent to downplay the urgency of protecting our democracy – and to ignore how those seeking to undermine democracy are using democracy's own tools against it.

We must, first, change our language that allows the bros to paint themselves as on the side of freedom, including freedom of speech. In reality, they seek to restrict freedom of expression, by enabling harassment and silencing. This goes far beyond the treatment of elected politicians, where its extent has been well documented. Dame Sarah Khan's review of social cohesion, published a few weeks before the riots of summer 2024[13], showed that a majority of the public

believe that 'freedom-restricting harassment' has got worse in the last five years – and that many people who were not politicians or public figures had been subject to it. Extreme abuse, harassment, and invading privacy by publishing targets' personal details leads not to a flourishing online debate, but to individuals self-censoring.

To confidently counter this rise in self-censorship and buttress the cordon sanitaire against racists and authoritarians, we must, first, encourage discussion that lies *within* the cordon. That means stepping back before rushing to condemn – especially on issues like immigration, sex and gender, and crime, where the political right is determined to paint Labour as unwilling to listen to one 'side' of a non-existent divide.

Second, we have to act against rabbit-hole algorithms. The populist right is aided in its task by the design of much of social media in the 'attention economy'[14], privileging lurid, sensationalist content over more balanced material. Many bros suggest that their social media operates on the basis of consumer choice. Nick Clegg, for example, has argued that misinformation spreads ultimately because people 'like misinformation, we like lurid headlines, we like gossip [and] we like mischief'. In his words, 'Human beings are not always nice and never ever have been'. Platforms, per Clegg, are not responsible for the content that is shared by users and instead largely just reflect inherent demand for it. Yet 'choice' here is illusory, with extensive research indicating that if they could choose, users would choose not to be constantly pulled into upsetting but emotionally-gripping rabbit holes. This problem is, of course, turbocharged in services like X, where recommended material appears to privilege the voices of sensationalist commentators. The Online Safety's Act's measures to enable researchers to examine recommendation algorithms will be crucial here. Transparency may not, however, be enough. We should stand ready to act if platforms do not change their practices.

Another unchosen aspect of this new world is the pollution and downgrading of quality news. Free and fair elections need people to be able to make informed choices. More Brits now get their information about news from online sources than from television, radio, or newspapers[15]. In this context, the bros' inaction, and sometimes their actions as in Elon Musk's case, threaten freedom and fairness.

During the last Labour government, whatever was on the 'grid' of the government, or indeed of the opposition, had a fair chance of being at least covered in the six p.m. news, and back then, noticed (if not remembered) by many citizens. Now such 'grids' have only a peripheral relationship with the news most people see every day. This is particularly the case during election periods, with personalised advertising having flourished under the bros. Rather than a national

political conversation, we are increasingly kettled into echo chambers – with various degrees of connection to reality.

The Online Safety Act should improve some of the information environment, especially with its 'illegal content duties'. These duties include a requirement for all platforms to address and remove illegal content, including deception intended to change someone's vote. The Act also imposes duties on the largest platforms to allow adults to limit exposure to harmful content and to fulfil their own Terms of Service. While welcome, the latter is clearly less efficacious now that many platforms have watered down their Terms of Service. And overall, commitments to update the Act speedily must be held to, given the present assault on trustworthy news.

Indeed, while positive, the measures mentioned above do not add up to the emergency package that is needed to halt the degradation of information and protect what Demos have called our 'epistemic security'. As well as preventing disinformation we also urgently need action to promote trustworthy information itself. Demos' suggestions to require platforms to carry public interest news and to develop a proper definition of public interest news are therefore critical.

The promised new Elections and Democracy Bill will also be important. Proposals apparently within the bill cover a broad range of democratic reforms[16], from reducing voting age to strengthening the checks and controls on donations that will prevent foreign money being funnelled into our politics. Importantly, it will also strengthen the enforcement of digital imprints by centralising regulation under the Electoral Commission. This upgrade cannot come soon enough. Reading through the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, that complicated piece of legislation beknownst to all election agents, it struck me how the description of non-party campaigners felt like it related to a different age. Non-party political campaigners sound likely to be local environmental campaign groups or groups protesting library closures, not armies of Russian bots amplifying the hate-filled diatribes of racist commentators.

It is also positive that the Labour government is strengthening the Defending Democracy Taskforce, apparently moving beyond a focus purely on foreign interference and election periods, towards 'building resilience to interference such as in the online information environment'. But responsibilities to counter disinformation are scattered across government,[17] with the Cabinet Office, MHCLG, DCMS, and DSIT all involved. This mirrors the lack of joint working between policing and the Electoral Commission, which has been repeatedly and painfully exposed. There is an urgent need for this work to be brought together, as with the French VIGINUM agency. Ultimately, a Labour government *must* have the heft to require services to properly identify and manage material which could damage democracy, to take stronger action against political deepfakes, and provide genuine transpar-

ency around how significant incidents, especially during election periods, will be handled. It must also be confident in supporting the Department of Education's work on promoting critical thinking and digital literacy in schools.

Sticking with our friends (not the bros)

Last week, Nigel Farage held a reception in a private-members club in Washington. Attended by many high-ranking members of the Trump administration, it also gathered online influencers – and Jair Bolsonaro's son. The US has, of course, imposed swingeing sanctions on Brazil, in retaliation for its judiciary holding Bolsonaro senior to account for a failed coup[18].

I am relatively confident that attempts to water down the protections for children that are in the Online Safety Act will not succeed. But the populist right are currently pushing back hard against actions to curb their subversion of democracy—whether that be by storming government buildings as in Bolsonaro and Trump's case, or online—with the backing of their friends the bros. Their pushback is global. So our resistance must be too.

For the UK, that must start with a closer relationship with the European Union when it comes to defending democracy. The EU's Digital Services Act, European Media Freedom Act, Digital Markets Act and Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising regulation together constitute a thorough framework to harness the potential of digital technologies for the economy and politics, while reducing its harms. They have already led to action, from the development of the 'Democracy Shield' to the Commission's investigation of X's recommendation algorithms, related to concerns that it is violating the Digital Services Act.

I have called for, as a first step, a structured dialogue between the EU and the UK on defending democracy – and am pleased to see that the May Summit called for joint work on countering hybrid threats and foreign interference. This must be deepened and accelerated – not least given that the EU's measures are being subject to the same kind of attack as the UK's. The TTPA, for example, is just one element of the EU's framework opposed by the bros. The TTPA provides regulators with far greater sight of the political content being provided to citizens. In July, Meta stated that in protest it would 'ban political ads' in retaliation, following Google's decision to do the same. This does not mean, of course, that the service will no longer serve up political material to users. Tiktok in theory 'bans' political ads, but many still run. Instead, it means that political ads will, on its services, be undetected and unregulated[19].

The pushback received by the EU has been replicated in a number of member states. France has been able to take some positive action, not least on combat-

ing disinformation and requiring Telegram to act against criminality on its platform. Most recently X has, however, refused to cooperate with French prosecutors who have demanded information on how X's algorithms operate.

Further afield, big tech has called for the US government to act against Australia's rules to require platforms to display trusted news[20] and criticised moves in Canada to support domestic content creators in streaming services[21]. There are also natural allies for the UK in the Global South. Brazil's stance against both Bolsonaro's authoritarianism and big tech disinformation, has led to an enormous pushback from the US. In Brazil and elsewhere, the bros have argued that their lack of action against disinformation is justified when *governments* are those calling for change, presenting big tech as somehow against authoritarianism. Yet it was, of course, Myanmar's armed forces who used Facebook to promote disinformation about Rohingya people that fuelled atrocities there – warnings of which were ignored by Facebook at the time[22].

The fusion of big tech and the populist right concentrates political and economic power. So safety can only be delivered in numbers. Resistance requires us to work with existing allies and new – above all, those nations and politicians who are also seeking to defend democracy.

The economic power of big tech

As well as its political power, big tech is increasingly exercising economic power as well. Some of this has been obscured by how it is described. Many social media tools, from Facebook to X and Whatsapp to Tiktok, appear 'free', as do Meta's Llama 2 AI and basic ChatGPT.

Of course, the reality is that when using social media, citizens gift big tech information about themselves, their friends, family, and associates that enables the targeted advertising that makes these tools profitable. AI, also, uses material generated by citizens – the source material for 'training' large language models. Yet this economic reality is often obscured by our use of these technologies and their description by big tech companies.

The costs of these technologies have also often been obscured, with little discussion of 'externalities' in this area beyond examining the environmental impact[23], and work by both the Molly Rose Foundation and the government itself on the cost-benefits of the Online Safety Act[24].

Some additional aspects of big tech have obscured its power within our economy. In many conventional analyses, big tech comprises a relatively small part of the economy. It employs relatively few people, occupies relatively little

real estate (aside from its increasing number of data centres), and pays relatively little tax.

In practice though, the economic power of big tech is substantial, especially given the influence of social media and AI on economic behaviour. Indeed, Shoshana Zuboff has suggested that while economic power "was once identified with the ownership of the means of production", in modern times power is identified with tech companies being able to modify behaviour, especially through the use of targeted advertising[25].

A mindset change is therefore urgently needed – to stop viewing many of these products as 'free', and instead understand that they derive their value from data given by citizens. We make them profitable either through our preferences and behaviour on social media, or the content we have created online which is then used as source material when training AI's large language models.

The ownership of value arising from big tech has only really been raised in relation to AI, and then most publicly in relation to the returns to recording artists. Those affected are not all, however, the Elton Johns of this world. For example, 'articles' about home-making and gardening[26] can easily be 'generated' using AI off the back of genuine created content, and then at great volume pumped onto sites like Pinterest. Food and hobby bloggers are, as a result, going out of business, while users must wade through tides of AI slop to find real, human-made posts. The economic value is captured by the slop farmer, unaware of whether the hundreds of 'recipes' he has posted will taste delicious or disgusting. Income evaporates for the often much lower-income person who came up with a dish, wrote up the recipe for it, photographed it, and posted about it[27].

We are therefore very far indeed from Klein and Thompson's arresting vision of an imagined 'abundant' green and technology-enabled San Fran in 2050, where 'AI is built on the collective knowledge of humanity, *and so* [my emphasis] its profits are shared'[28].

The Government has taken steps to remedy some of these issues, with (albeit controversial) work ongoing on how to support creatives and their intellectual property; efforts to back homegrown or 'sovereign' UK AI; and the use of AI to streamline and improve the quality of government processes.

I would argue, however, that a much broader mindset shift is needed – and necessary, for citizens to have greater control over big tech given its economic power. First, as mentioned above, intentional action is needed now concerning the impact of AI on entry-level jobs – a process which cannot be prevented but which must surely be managed[29]. Second, the promotion of innovation must

come with a purpose, with incentives to support the greater public good, as the IPPR has suggested with its recommendations that government back AI which helps support national missions[30].

Third, government must recognise that big tech is often a monopoly – and treat it as such. Some commentators, in this regard, have suggested that a key response must be for citizens themselves to take control of their data. In this vein lie the practical suggestions about how to protect personal privacy detailed by Carissa Veliz in her book on why 'privacy is power', and the legal case won against Meta by the human rights campaigner Tanya O'Carroll, who demanded that Facebook stop sharing her private information with advertisers.

But the ubiquity of these services means that there is a limit to what individuals can achieve[31]. As O'Carroll has made clear, leaving Facebook would have removed her from connections with family and friends. As the Labour MP Josh Simons has suggested, this ubiquity, as well as big tech's pivotal role in organising information, means it should no longer be viewed as a collection of separate businesses providing free services, but instead as monopolies which have profound public implications[32].

Faced with a monopoly, governments can do broadly three things: regulate to protect the public, break companies up, or support challengers. I have discussed regulation already so will not go over that again now. When it comes to countering market concentration, there has been strikingly little public debate in the UK on antitrust issues, especially compared with the US and some European countries. I want to quote, here, a commentator on these matters from Germany. He stated that, when it comes to the "market concentration" that is, in his words, "turning [the German] media system upside down", "[i]n this respect, [he said] we will fight the overreaching state, but also cartels and monopolies... [w]e need competition, we need openness, we need diversity." Not a social democrat, or a liberal, or a left-wing academic, or activist, but Wolfram Weimer, a former editor of extremely conservative newspapers and a CDU-nominated minister. Just as arguments for monopoly on the basis of innovation have been rejected in other areas, so they should be here (not least because big tech has often innovated purely through acquisition – often of British start-ups).

The third possible government response to monopoly is, as mentioned, to support challengers. While work on sovereign AI is important, we have not seen this extending to social media. I have met dozens of tech entrepreneurs and enthusiasts working on pro-social social media, many of them people who have left big tech in disgust. But the reality is that many of their companies are doomed to failure without the ability to scale rapidly – which is a nigh-impossible challenge given the market power of existing businesses. Now, I would argue, is the time when government can look to remedy this. Imagine, for example,

what could happen if the government announced a competition for new forms of pro-social social media for teenagers. The winning services could be provided for free to youth services and schools. Advertising from local shops and services and central government (e.g. public health information) could support the economic model. But none of this can happen without the state getting in the way and supporting alternatives to the current behemoths.

Democracy for humans

Fifteen miles from my home lies Enslow hill. In 1596 it was the scene of a barbaric act, where two men were hung, drawn, and quartered, while their two friends were tortured to death in the Tower of London. This was for supporting the attempted 'Revolution of Otmoor' – a protest against the enclosure of farmland that until recent years had been there for all to use. Otmoor now stands empty of humans, but filled with birds; it is held by the RSPB in trust, and anyone can go there, for free, and experience its beauty.

I recently stumbled across Richard Muir's history of the English village. Time and again, reading that book I was struck by what I would call the *first* tragedy of the commons. Not the second tragedy, set out by Elinor Ostrom – the failure to properly govern resources that should be held for all[33]. The first tragedy involved the taking of resources – land, in the case of the enclosures, which until then had *not been owned by anyone*. Arguably, the enclosures meant that the connection between human beings and the land they lived on and used for their livelihoods was irreparably severed.

In modern times, our data—our preferences, our 'likes', our behaviour, where we go, what we eat, what we buy, what we write—has arguably been 'enclosed' by big tech. Indeed, the capture goes even further, to cover the tenets of human psychology.

AI, as mentioned above, has enormous potential to boost economic growth and help humankind face up to the climate crisis. But as social democrats, we need to be clear that AI is ultimately parasitic on our collective endeavours. While it can substitute for some, it cannot replace them all.

For that reason, I would, finally, argue that government urgently needs to stop devaluing human relationships. That may sound like a bombastic statement. But in all the recent debates around public service reform and deliverology, I have been struck by how few of them focus on what so often really matters for the quality of services – the connection between the people who use them, and the people who deliver them. Some have argued that so-called 'relational public services' are blocked by a new public management mindset,[34] but I

would argue that they can also be blocked by inappropriate and overly general uses of AI.

I predict that the treatment of citizens, including as service-users, by AI tools will become an increasingly contentious area of public policy. If bureaucracies become increasingly and literally faceless, peoples' suspicion of government could grow deeper still. We already see the development of unintended consequences from existing uses of AI. The realistic nature of 'chat' with 'chatbots' now suggests a real person is behind the content of messages. Indeed, this has even been encouraged by the creation of so-called 'AI companions', available to users from the age of twelve from xAI. Paranoia can be encouraged, as well as acting on self-destructive thoughts. A growing number of cases suggest this worrying trend, with the tragic teenagers Adam Raine and Sewell Setzer III both discussing with AI chatbots, from ChatGPT and CharacterAI respectively, their plans to end their own lives. Some have suggested that special models of AI should be developed for children, which will only discuss topics such as academic work with them. But adults, too, have been affected by the fact that AI can reinforce delusional thinking, as with the tragic murder of Suzanne Eberson Adams by her son who also took his own life. In the words of the psychologist Dr Keith Sakata, "[p]sychosis thrives when reality stops pushing back, and AI can really just soften that wall".

Humans must be there to help reality push back, especially in the delivery of public services to vulnerable people. And overall, we as Labour must be clear that we are always on the side of citizens – in every case, and everywhere. This must include being clear that humans bring value to our lives in ways that technology can never do.

Labour mustn't lose

I started this lecture with Rita Hinden's pamphlet, with Richard Rose and Mark Abrams, which considered why Labour had lost the 1959 election. Despite Labour's victory last year, I have explained here why we again face an enormous challenge, one of generational significance not just for Labour but for social democracy as a whole.

As well as Hinden's pamphlet, the 1959 defeat also precipitated Hugh Gaitskell to (unsuccessfully) try to remove the then Clause 4 from Labour's constitution, with its commitment to 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange'. While signalling a momentous change, the Clause 4 adopted in 1995 still of course emphasises "common endeavour" leading to a broader distribution of 'power, wealth and opportunity'.

I have argued here that big tech has until relatively recently been viewed as an area devoid of common endeavour, where individualist bros can shape our economics at will. Now, of course, they are also trying, with populist right politicians, to shape our politics. The bros themselves have long been aware of the potential political impact of big tech. As Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google has said, 'almost nothing, short of a biological virus, can scale as quickly, efficiently, or aggressively as these technology platforms, and this makes the people who build, control, and use them powerful too'.

There is much that Labour must do now, to win. By delivering, delivering, and delivering, it will change people's lives – but governing better and trying to offer more stuff will not be enough. To avoid losing, we must do all of this *and* what is set out here. We must act to protect our fragile democracy, developing global networks as strong as those of the populist right. We must cease treating big tech as delivering free services like manna from heaven, and by properly understanding its role in our economy, harness its promise while reducing its harms. And we must always be the voice for humans, rather than being mouthpieces for those who use human relationships and what humans produce as the means to generate commercial opportunities.

For all those reasons, Labour mustn't lose. The choice is social democracy, or the bros.

Anneliese Dodds has been the Labour and Co-op MP for Oxford East since 2017.

Notes

1. Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell and John Curtice, eds., with Bridget Taylor, *Labour's last chance?: the 1992 election and beyond,* Dartmouth,1994.
2. Denis MacShane, *Must Labour Always Lose?*, Claret Press, 2021.
3. Sebastian Payne, *Broken Heartlands: a journey through Labour's Lost England*, Macmillan, 2021.
4. Rob Manwaring and Paul Kennedy, eds., *Why the left loses – the decline of the centre left in comparative perspective,* Policy Press, 2017.
5. Rafael Behr, 'While Starmer struggles with a broken system in Westminster, real power keeps leaking elsewhere', The Guardian, 4 September 2024.
6. Perhaps most consistently by Joe Stiglitz.
7. Building on the positive impact of previous minimum wage increases.
8. Even if, wrongly in my view, assessments of this and other growth-shaping factors have (via their impact on OBR projections) shaped the calibration of current fiscal policy choices.
9. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The origins of power, prosperity and poverty,* Profile books, 2013; Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty,* Penguin, 2019.
10. In agriculture-dominated economies, for example, attempts by workers to demand better

conditions would often fail, because agricultural workers are spread out geographically. In contrast, manufacturing needed greater workforce engagement to deliver improved productivity – leading to the more inclusive economic institutions of successful industrialised nations.

11. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *The Narrow Corridor*, Penguin, 2019 p145.
12. Dario Amodei, 'Machines of Loving Grace', www.darioamodei.com, October 2024.
13. Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, The Khan Review: executive summary, key findings and recommendations, www.gov.uk, 25 March 2024.
14. See Michael Goldhaber's website and particularly 'Attention work vs Knowledge work' for an interesting discussion of this.
15. Albeit traditional news sources are still rated as more trustworthy, accurate and impartial. 'Top trends from our latest look at the UK's news habits', ofcom.org.uk, 21 July 2025.
16. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 'Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections', www.gov.uk, 17 July 2025.
17. William Dixon, 'Why the UK Now Needs a National Disinformation Agency', Royal United Services Institute, September 2025.
18. Ione Wells, 'Trial of Brazil's ex-President Bolsonaro enters final phase', www.bbc.com, September 2025.
19. In Meta's words: 'For example, the TTPA places extensive restrictions on ad targeting and delivery which would restrict how political and social issue advertisers can reach their audiences and lead to people seeing less relevant ads on our platforms'. So interestingly, in its rejection of the TTPA's requirements, Meta doubles down on claims that users see ads that are 'relevant' to them when they are personalised – when in reality, what they promote are ads which are likely to hold people's attention.
20. Rob Nicholls, 'Australia's 'coercive' news media rules are the latest targets of US trade ire', www.theconversation.com, March 2025.
21. Anja Karadeglija, 'CRTC's CanCon rules could worsen trade conflict: U.S. business groups', National Post, Jan 21 2025.
22. Chad de Guzman, 'Meta's Facebook Algorithms "Proactively" Promoted Violence Against the Rohingya, New Amnesty International Report Asserts', Time, September 2022.
23. Adam Clark, 'Data centres: planning policy, sustainability, and resilience', House of Commons Library, November 2025.
24. The Molly Rose Foundation has suggested that a 15 per cent reduction in online harms could deliver £4 billion in annualised economic return. The government's own impact assessment of the Online Safety Act argued that the costs of compliance with the Act would be outweighed by the benefits if it only prevented 1.3 per cent of internet-based harms, to the tune of £345 million.
25. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Profile, 2019, p379.
26. Maggie Harrison Dupré, 'Slop Farmer Boasts About How He Uses AI to Flood Social Media With Garbage to Trick Older Women', www.futurism.com, May 7 2025.
27. In response, Pinterest has introduced AI labels and a detection system; but rightly admits itself that 'detection isn't perfect'.
28. Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance: How we build a better future*, Profile Books, 2025.
29. 'Up to 8 million UK jobs at risk from AI unless government acts, finds IPPR', www.ippr.org, March 2024.
30. Carsten Jung and Bhargav Srinivasa Desikan, 'The direction of AI innovation in the UK: Insights from a new database and a roadmap for reform', IPPR, April 2025.
31. As indeed Veliz acknowledges, setting out recommendations for government as well as for individuals in her engaging book.

32. Josh Simons, *Algorithms for the People: Democracy in the Age of AI*, Princeton University Press, 2023.
33. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: the Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
34. Toby Lowe and Mark Smith, 'Relational public service can tackle hardship in neighbourhoods', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, April 2024.