Progressive politics, trust, and the 'good life'

Rebecca Goldsmith

The Starmer administration has been widely criticised for failing to articulate a positive vision of change. In this piece, Rebecca Goldsmith turns to an unlikely site of historical inspiration: the post-war Labour governments, in particular their appeals to popular desires for the 'good life'. Underlying the current government's problems, she argues, is a lack of faith in voters' capacity to grasp and respond to complex political argument. Such a mindset risks further alienating voters already displaying unprecedented levels of political disillusionment.

One of the recurring criticisms levelled at Keir Starmer concerns his lack of vision.[1] By 'vision', commentators are not generally lambasting a deficit of policies. Rather, Starmer has been criticised for failing to construct a positive vision of what his party's policies amount to, what they make possible. In short, he has failed to outline a vision of the 'good life'. His speeches are, by and large, full of the language of necessity; they lack a clear sense of where the country is headed, and the sort of lives that the government aspires to offer people.

In this regard, the 1945 Labour government might seem an odd place to look for inspiration. While arguably the most totemic Labour government in British history, Clement Attlee's administration has nevertheless been denigrated for its technocratic, moralising outlook which, in the eyes of some, proved post-war social democracy's undoing. The mid-century Labour Party stands accused of a blindness to popular aspirations that left it out of step with an era of rising affluence and materialism, and consequently out of office. Such failings are generally seen as epitomised in Douglas Jay's phrase that 'the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for the people than the people know themselves'.[2]

In fact, one of the most surprising findings from my research has been how adept Labour politicians in the 1940s were at appealing to desires for the 'good life'. During the Second World War, opinion pollsters and those conducting social surveys recorded widespread, recurring demands for social progress towards a society where all could enjoy fairer, better lives. Where British society had long been pockmarked by deep, structural inequalities, manifested in stark regional differences in health, employment and housing conditions, in wartime it came to be held that everyone had the right to expect a 'decent' quality of life.

Labour proved particularly skilful at narrating this shift in expectations. During the war, Labour ministers like Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison made speeches seeking to convince voters that they understood the public's demand for a high and rising standard of living, for an end to the era of 'mean streets'. Labour publicity material from this period is striking in the degree to which it centres the figure of the housewife, her desire for improved living conditions and specifically for cleaner, more modern and respectable housing. Such material is testament to the party's embrace of popular desires for the 'good life', its willingness to appeal to voters on their own terms, and the degree to which this enabled Labour to broaden its gendered appeal beyond a narrow, masculinist politics of production.

At the 1945 General Election, while the Conservatives offered vague commitments to 'rebuild Britain', Labour was more precise, declaring:

> *The nation wants food, work and homes. It wants more than that – it wants good food in plenty, useful work for all, and comfortable, labour-saving homes that take full advantage of the resources of modern science and productive industry. It wants a high and rising standard of living, security for all against a rainy day, an educational system that will give every boy and girl a chance to develop the best that it is in them... they deserve and must be assured a happier future.*[3]

The party's manifesto thus channelled and validated this wartime shift in popular expectations, emphasising that the public were entitled to demand the

'good life'. In office, the party implemented a wide range of policy reforms designed to see this ambitious, inclusive vision of social progress realised. Full employment may have been the result of a Fordist economy, as much as Keynesian fine-tuning on the part of the government, but Labour did implement a free, universal healthcare system provided by the state.[4] It also implemented a system of family allowances and continued rationing after the war, thereby ensuring a greater degree of economic security, more widely shared among the population, even in hard times. It embarked on an ambitious housing drive, albeit curtailed in pace by financial constraints as well as Aneurin Bevan's resolute commitment to building the high-quality houses, to rent, that he felt working-class families deserved.

And while moralism was by no means absent in these years, at the 1950 General Election Labour's campaign framed the economic gains of the past five years in decidedly consumerist terms, stressing the opportunity the (implicitly male) breadwinner had been afforded 'to buy the things' that previously had 'mocked him from shop windows'.[5] This appeal is striking, not least for the strong, lingering impression we have of Labour as being on the wrong side of debates about affluence and consumerism in the 1950s, appearing to denigrate and denounce the desires of working-class voters for new, material goods. Labour politicians in this period may not have been entirely at ease with popular consumerist impulses, but they nevertheless appeared willing to mobilise and harness such impulses in aid of the government's economic mission of national recovery.[6]

What is perhaps more striking is how quickly the Labour leadership appeared to revert to a paternalistic, censorious position. The experience of successive electoral defeats in the 1950s was surely influential. So too was the shifting nature of the working class itself, in the face of major structural changes to Britain's economy. But, in the last instance, it might be that Labour attitudes changed so quickly because they were simply defaulting to the party's norm. Some see the 1940s, not the 1950s, as the aberration – a time when the party temporarily learned to set aside the worst of its paternalistic impulses and instead embrace the desires of working-class people for greater security, dignity, and respectability. For once, the party appeared willing to appeal to voters on their own terms.

There are, of course, important differences between politics today and politics seventy-five years ago. Aside from (but surely related to) the structural, socio-cultural, and technological changes that separate Attlee's era from our own, one of the most important differences concerns average levels of trust in politics. As Gerry Stoker, Jonathan Moss, and Will Jennings have shown, the mid-twentieth century was by no means a 'golden age' in the public's attitude towards politicians.[7] But it was characterised by a much stronger faith in and respect for politics as an institution.

Much contemporary political commentary concerns the fact that the public's trust in politicians of all stripes is at an historic low. This is an inescapable, alarming feature of politics today – not a problem exclusive to the centre left, but an especially daunting obstacle for parties which put their faith in incremental reforms driven by government to effect positive change. It is a problem that deserves and requires serious attention and mitigation. But part of that task involves recognising, and placing under equal scrutiny, the reverse phenomenon. If there is a through-line from debates in the 1950s to the 2020s, it surely concerns the trust that politicians feel able to place in the public. Where some Labour politicians in previous generations disapproved of voters' spending habits (particularly working-class voters and women), doubting their capacity to act responsibly and sensibly *outside* the political arena, today's Labour government appears to doubt the public's ability to grasp and respond to complex political arguments. Labour politicians seem to lack confidence in voters' capacity to appreciate that times are tough and that the government is faced with difficult choices.

Coming into office in 1945, the first ever majority Labour government faced an immensely difficult set of economic circumstances. Having marshalled an impressively broad coalition of voters, it encountered inevitable trade-offs and necessary sacrifices. Despite that, as we have already seen, Labour ministers were decisive in owning these decisions. Albeit less redistributive compared to other social democratic governments on the continent, in its policy choices after 1945 the Labour government made clear who its supporters were – whose interests would, if necessary, be sacrificed first, and last, on the grounds of fairness and economic justice. Not only that, while in office Labour devoted serious effort to communicating these choices to electors – seeking to maintain as broad an electoral coalition as possible, while making clear the short-term sacrifices required for future reward.[8]

Labour may have lost the 1951 General Election, but this defeat owed as much to the vicissitudes of the electoral system (and specifically the changes to constituency boundaries implemented as part of the 1949 Redistribution of Seats Act – arguably another lesson for our times, the need for government to take an active interest in constitutional reform) as it did to the actions of the Labour government. There was, undoubtedly, some disillusionment with Labour, particularly among middle-class voters. Nevertheless, Labour secured its highest ever share of the popular vote in 1951.[9] As the historian Ross McKibbin has argued, most of the gains made by Labour in 1945 were, consequently, permanent; a monumental achievement given the dire economic circumstances that had confronted the party upon assuming office.[10] Much of the credit for this achievement must surely be laid at the feet of the clarity, consistency, and effort behind the government's messaging.

This is a striking contrast to the current Labour government's response to a challenging economic climate, as laid bare in the fall-out from its attempts to

impose substantial welfare cuts. Despite the claim that such cuts were necessary to make the welfare system fairer and more effective (a 'moral imperative', the Prime Minister insisted), the government's intentions were ultimately undone by transparent falsity of its rationale – the fact that such policy changes were quite clearly being pushed through as a means of balancing the books and satisfying the government's self-imposed strictures on tax. All this smacks not only of a lack of sure-footedness, in terms of who this government is for, but also of an inability to be honest with voters and to face up to the trade-offs required by the current global economic (and geopolitical) outlook.

There have, admittedly, been some signs of a more positive approach in this regard, a more concerted effort to prove that progressive politicians in this country are in touch with the realities of voters' lives. In his 2023 Labour Party conference speech, Keir Starmer referenced the material and emotional impact of the cost-of-living crisis, suggesting that 'Days out, meals out, holidays [are] the first things people cut back on. Picking up a treat in the supermarket just to put it back on the shelf'.[11] As this example suggests, however, such attempts have generally been haphazard and sporadic, falling short of a more consistent, and more ambitious, approach that would involve placing real faith in the rational and intellectual capacities of the public once more. There is a real risk here that the government's approach ends up deepening the evident crisis of public trust in politics.

Centre-left politicians need to be realistic about how much the public want to engage with politics, as well as the unique ideological and communication challenges of politics in the 2020s. But that should not come at the cost of idealism, particularly in terms of what they imagine the public want for their lives. Otherwise, their low expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When we know that voters increasingly value authenticity in politicians, the least politicians can do is aspire to raise the low bar those voters have set.

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Notes

1. For a recent example, see Stephen Bush's piece, 'Starmer needs to get serious about governing – and quick', www.ft.com, 24 Oct 2025.
2. Douglas Jay, *The Socialist Case*, Faber and Faber Limited, 1937, p317.
3. F. W. S. Craig (ed.), 'Let Us Face the Future', Labour Manifesto 1945, *British General Election Manifestos 1918-1966,* Political Reference Publications, 1970, pp98-99.

4. On this point, see Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Renewal editors reflect on the meaning of social democracy', www.renewal.org.uk, May 31 2025.
5. The Labour Party, *We Believe in Britain*, p5, 1950; Labour History Archive and Study Centre, 1950 General Election collection, JN.1055.A6 324.
6. In 1948, G. D. H. Cole claimed that 'in the long run, the strongest persuasion will perhaps come from the spreading realisation that upon high production depends the standard of living of the whole people': G. D. H. Cole, 'The Socialisation Programme for Industry' in D. Munro, *Socialism: The British Way*, London, p47, 1948, quoted in S. Fielding, '"To Make Men and Women Better Than They Are": Labour and the Building of Socialism', in J. Fyrth (ed.), *Labour's Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995, p22.
7. Jonathan Moss, Nick Clarke, Will Jennings, *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction and the Rise of Anti-Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
8. Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life in Britain from Beveridge to Brexit*, Oxford University Press, 2017.
9. David Edgerton, 'Labour didn't lose its red wall – it never had one', www.theguardian.com, 9 July 2021.
10. Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951,* Oxford University Press, 2010, p181.
11. Keir Starmer, Conference Speech, labour.org.uk, 2023.