

OPINION

POWER, LAND AND PIE

Fourteen years of Tory government is over. Sunak is gone, and his predecessor as Prime Minister, whose 49-day tenure was as disastrous as *The Land* predicted, capped her sparkling career by struggling to find her way offstage after unexpectedly losing her very safe seat.

Many will remember watching joyfully as a similar fate famously befell Michael Portillo in May 1997. The roots of this magazine lie in lively resistance to policies of the Thatcher and Major governments, and we are happy to have veterans of those epic struggles among our readers. Yet beyond Labour Party circles, there is no great sense of hope and elation this time around.

Some, remembering just how wrong things went with Blair, will be rightly concerned that the man who sent troops to Iraq is influencing the new PM as he refuses to condemn the Gaza genocide, and pushes for military spending to rise further.

For others the very idea of celebrating anything that ever happens in Westminster probably belongs firmly to the previous century. Cynicism and disinterest are now rife, and understandably so. The last decade has plumbed previously unfathomable depths of venality, mendacity and sheer incompetence. Only 52 percent of UK adults voted in the July 2024 general election, the lowest participation since universal suffrage was introduced in 1928.

But it's still not quite true that "all politicians are the same". There genuinely has been a change, and given the astonishing debacles of recent years, this is more than welcome. One key policy areas in which surely things "can only get better" is climate and energy. So what might the new incumbents do?

It seems a very long time ago now that Ed Miliband unexpectedly defeated his slicker and more neoliberal brother David to become Labour party leader, only to then be cruelly laid low by a bacon sandwich in the 2015 election. What the rightwing press did to him seemed appalling, until they got their teeth into Jeremy Corbyn.

Miliband returns to government as Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, a very similar role to the one he held under Gordon Brown way back in 2010. This move has been welcomed by environmental groups, who have long seen him as an ally. Other MPs appointed to his team also seem serious about the issues.¹

Labour has promised a "zero carbon electricity system" by 2030. This would involve "doubling onshore wind, tripling solar power, and quadrupling offshore wind" by the same date. As part of this Miliband has said he intends to "unleash a UK solar rooftop revolution" by finally introducing some kind of solar-related standards for new-build properties, and easing regulations that stop them being fitted on existing homes.

Detail on this is awaited as we go to press. Will the dots be joined between rooftop solar and the more heavily flagged plans for new towns and greenbelt housebuilding? Will the government be able to stand up to the Home Builders' Federation this time around? What about self-build?

Solar Revolution?

The new minister has also moved fast to approve three schemes for large-scale solar farms on agricultural land, which had been blocked or delayed by the previous government. These approvals have stoked controversy both over fire risks from on-site storage (sodium ion batteries rather than lithium might help with that) and more seriously, over land use issues.



Previous protests against the 621 hectare Sunnica scheme on the Suffolk / Cambridgeshire border have bizarrely been fronted by Matt Hancock. Yes, that Matt Hancock. The celebrated champion of ordinary people against profiteering corporations wrote a firm letter on House of Commons stationery opposing the scheme back in January, when he was still a local MP. Was he concerned about food sovereignty and loss of agricultural land? Not so much. His key objection seemed to be that it "could cause harm to the local horse racing industry" by being visible from the Jockey Club's Limekilns training gallops near Newmarket. Coincidentally, it seems he is currently in the running for a job as CEO of the British Horseracing Authority.

As Miliband and the NFU point out, many farmers are eyeing solar farms as profitable 'diversification'. There are however good reasons not to go too far in this direction. It might be harder to organise, but solar panels should be sited on rooftops wherever possible. This is entirely possible, and should go well beyond incentivising private householders. The UK has an estimated 250,000 hectares of south-facing commercial roof space. Meanwhile, if revolutionary amounts of panels really need to be installed at ground level, it also has around 125,000 hectares of golf courses.



An old slogan (this was Edinburgh in 2022, during COP27) but still a good one. More pie will make things worse, not better.

Clean Power

Miliband has already ruled out approving the applications in his in-tray from oil companies seeking to explore new fields in the North Sea, though he has also made clear that no existing oil and gas licenses will be revoked. The Tories' effective ban on onshore wind power has also been rescinded. Government support has been withdrawn from the ludicrous proposal for a new coal mine in Cumbria, following the very welcome court ruling that new extractive energy projects must be judged according to the carbon produced when the fuel is burnt, not just those arising from digging it up (see page 7).

Labour's misguided enthusiasm for nuclear power continues though, spurred on as usual by unions such as the GMB who represent workers in the industry. The party's manifesto blithely included nuclear along with renewables as "clean power", promising to "ensure the long-term security of the sector, extend the lifetime of existing plants, and get Hinkley Point C over the line". It also expressed support for new reactors including both Sizewell C and Small Modular Reactors.

A new publicly-owned company, Great British Energy, with £8.3 billion of initial funding, will apparently "deliver power back to the British people". This sounds good, though it remains unclear whether this will actually involve public ownership of electricity generation assets, or merely channel public funds into projects majority owned by the private sector. Figures from the renewables sector have already expressed concerns about being bundled in with nuclear. It would be a catastrophic mistake for those billions (and potentially more) to get shovelled into the pockets of nuclear power corporations who are, as always, demanding state subsidy for their uneconomic white elephants.

Escaping The Net

There is scope for a new government with a big majority to be a lot bolder. A recent report from Leeds University examined whether the UK could actually meet its existing 'net zero by 2050' target by genuinely reducing emissions, without including fanciful offsetting figures or relying on hypothetical future 'carbon removal' technologies.²

This turned out to be entirely possible, as long as energy demand was reduced by 40 percent. Given this, the report's authors politely wonder, why has no UK government ever actually set any targets for demand reduction?

The obvious elephant in the room here is not a white one. It's home insulation, the perennial Cinderella of energy policy. Nearly ten million people in Britain live in poorly insulated homes, and fixing this would save vast amounts of energy and money, not to mention the public health benefits. Labour did initially promise to insulate 19 million homes over a decade, pledging £6 billion a year to do so. They abandoned this pledge once it looked likely they would get into power. It needs to be reinstated as soon as possible.

Pie In The Sky

At a deeper level, the problem is that those who worship at the altar of Economic Growth cry "heresy!" at the idea of deliberately *reducing* demand for anything. The current Labour leadership were already believers, but their faith has no doubt been strengthened by the hundreds of meetings senior figures in the party have held over the last year with corporate lobbyists, financial institutions and business groups.³

Keir Starmer seems even more committed than Blair to the thoroughly discredited idea that continually 'growing the pie' will magically make everyone's slice bigger, without ever having to offend the rich by taxing their wealth, or taking any other redistributive measures. As has often been pointed out, for a party claiming to serve the interests of people rather than those of capital to adopt this strategy is not just cowardly, but nonsensical. It is even more incoherent in the context of environmental policy, since no economy can grow forever on a finite planet.

The four new Green MPs will no doubt point this out wherever possible, but their job will be hard, and their influence limited. Overall while there is definitely good news, the need for action and campaigning beyond Parliament is undiminished. Ed Miliband would be well advised to have a word with Starmer about repealing the Tory anti-protest laws currently hobbling those trying to help.

Mike Hannis

1. <https://www.desmog.com/2024/07/10/meet-the-labour-governments-new-climate-team/>

2. <http://climate.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Targets-for-effective-climate-mitigation-governance-in-the-UK-report-by-CEU.pdf>

3. www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/lovebombed-by-lobbyists-how-starmer-labour-became-the-party-of-big-business/