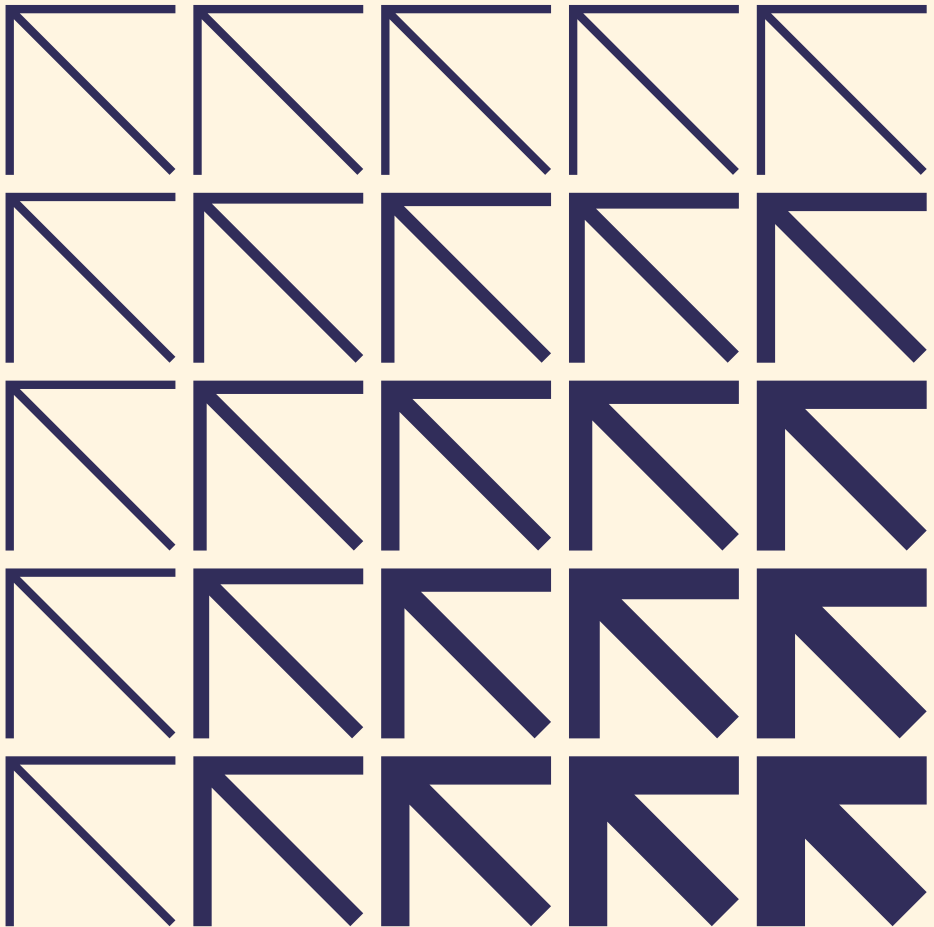


What is the left for?

The case for a politics of reciprocity



About the Decade of National Renewal programme

Decade of National Renewal is IPPR's flagship programme to rethink progressive politics in a fast-changing and dangerous world.

As they always have in the past, progressives need not only policy fixes and good instincts, but a deep analysis of how the world has changed and a big argument about the society they're looking to build. Too often, all around the world, progressives have struggled to do that and, as a result, to bring people with them.

Decade of National Renewal is about changing that, setting out a new politics based on reciprocity and citizenship, where the state does more for people and asks us to do more for each other in return. Applying that logic to the big new economic, social and political challenges for progressives is what Decade of National Renewal is all about: building the shared rights, responsibilities, and institutions which give meaning to progressive politics.

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IPPR's Decade of National Renewal advisory group draws together rich expertise from across the progressive spectrum – from culture, business and media, as well as politics and academia

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Summary

↖ **Liberal democratic capitalism has failed to give many people good lives, and the future looks less promising than the past.** Our economy is failing to deliver better jobs, higher wages and access to the essentials for too many people. Politics feels like something done to people, not with them, or for them, and most people deeply distrust politicians, the government, and the capacity of the state to make meaningful change.

↖ **A new global alliance of right-wing authoritarians and oligarchs is exploiting this crisis.** The authoritarian right, backed by tech oligarchs, are using wealth as a political weapon and tearing apart progressive achievements and democratic norms. These oligarchs are fuelling far-right ethnonationalism and trying to reshape what it means to belong in the UK. The left must fight back – but it also needs to put forward a compelling alternative.

↖ **Progressive politicians have, for the past 30 years, leaned too far into an agenda of individualism over collectivism.** The left's historic successes, from the creation of the NHS to the minimum wage, were driven by cross-class coalitions. But the left has increasingly backed away from collectivism. This is seen in the embrace of neoliberalism and the privatisation of public assets and services, in the adoption of a shallow form of identity politics over building bridges between groups, and the transformation of citizens into consumers when they encounter the state.

↖ **Now we need to reach back to our roots and build a new, collectivist progressive project.** We should build a new politics of democratic citizenship which brings people together by emphasising their shared interests and values. This project will need to tackle oligarchs and concentrated wealth and power. It should offer people more rights and more duties in a deeper, mutual form of progressive citizenship. It must build new social and economic institutions to provide people with what they need – and involve them in developing and managing them, so they have more of a stake in their own lives.

↖ **Decline is not inevitable** – the future can look better than the past if we develop a new collective, reciprocal politics. We call for reciprocity, where the state should do more for us, and ask more in return.

The burning platform

We are facing a profound crisis of our politics. The signs of distress – of anger – are everywhere.

Distrust permeates every conversation about politics, whether it's with a student in Manchester, a care worker in Aberystwyth, or an electrician in Grimsby. For many, politics seems like an irrelevance; it makes no difference to their lives, or makes it worse, so it's not worth participating in. Those who do turn up at the ballot box cycle through political parties in a desperate search for change; at this point *any* change.

An industry of commentators and thinkers has emerged, seeking to diagnose how we got here. This is a vibrant and contested debate. But, in truth, the basic, underlying answer is simple: for too many people, liberal democratic capitalism has failed to deliver what matters most to them – the good lives it implicitly promised people.

Too many people have insecure work, stagnating wages, rising costs and a future that looks less promising than the past. Communities feel more atomised, more strung out, more polarised. And, yet, when they pull the democratic levers that are supposed to give them control and agency, nothing happens. Politics feels like something done to them not *for* and *with* them.

In short, *progress*, in the UK and other advanced liberal democracies, which once seemed inevitable, feels like it has slowed to a stop.

This is a profound challenge to all forms of mainstream politics, whether on the right or the left. Together, these political parties and movements have been the joint authors of the status quo over the last century. But it is particularly acute for progressive politics. After all, it's in the name: we believe in, and exist to deliver, *progress*, for everyone, not just the privileged few.

Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that political parties on the left are experiencing an existential crisis. Caught between the world they thought existed – and the ideas and institutions that built it – and the new era that is now emerging, which demands a new set of solutions, they have struggled to answer even the most basic question: *who and what do they stand for?*

Unlike the left, the radical right has shown itself capable of telling a clear and compelling story – however repellent and inaccurate – of who it's for and against; of how we got here and how we get out of it. They are using people's anger to fuel xenophobia, division and hatred.

The task for progressives is clear. The platform of norms, ideas and institutions that the status quo is built on is burning. The radical right is gleefully adding fuel to the fire, knowing they will benefit from the carnage. In this context, progressives could try dousing the flames and protecting what is left of the platform. There is certainly much worth preserving. But a return to the status quo simply won't cut it. We must remember that the left is for progress that benefits the many, not just the rich – that we stand for justice and equality. So, what then? Progressives must rapidly build a new platform – and new *project* – capable of inspiring hope and delivering that progress once again.

Against oligarchy

The easy answer for the left would be to focus wholly on what we're against: the enemies of progress. And the left has seemingly been given a gift in that respect: Trump, Milei, Musk, Koch, Thiel. Can you imagine a group of less likeable cartoon villains? This new global alliance of political and economic actors – hostile to the norms, regulations, and culture of liberal democracies, and the egalitarian achievements of the left – has become more confident and more present in public life.

Oligarchic interests stand behind these men. They take the form of powerful technology platforms, many of which remain under the exceptional personal control of their original founders; opaque forms of private wealth, that are allergic to public reporting, regulation and tax; patrimonial political leaders who dissolve the distinction between public office and family business; and far-right conspiracists supported by deep wells of private wealth.

This class insists on its own exceptional status and impunity. It aims to push the balance of power between capital and labour firmly towards the former, and to reverse the achievements of feminism and anti-racism. It espouses climate scepticism, because there is still too much money to be made from fossil fuels and because they believe

that extreme wealth will allow them to escape the worst effects of planetary decline. And it claims the right of extremely wealthy white men to act as they please, while the rest of the world suffers the consequences. Some progressive organisations, like the Tony Blair Institute, are flirting with these oligarchs and undermining the left's fight.

This new and pernicious variety of capitalism centres on high concentrations of private wealth, with very small groups of unaccountable beneficiaries. Wealth is used not for productive investment, innovation and risk-taking, but as a means to seize assets, public goods, and political agendas. This goes beyond mere rent-seeking. It is the use of wealth as a political weapon: extreme freedom for the small minority, achieved through coercion of the vast majority.

This movement is not just attacking the achievements of the progressive left but also liberals. The rising authoritarianism in many liberal (and former liberal) democracies sees the independence of the judiciary, media, civil service and scientific establishment come under attack. Cornerstones of post-1945 internationalism, including human rights, multilateral government and NATO, are being challenged, based on new ethnonational hierarchies, with white populations at the top.

Confronting this reality and accepting that this is the face of the enemy is necessary and clarifying: we know who and what we are against. But we can't stay in the comfort zone of opposition. We must have a clear, forward looking and hopeful *proposition*.

Progress, together

We can do more than fight back. Progressive politics should be unashamedly future-oriented. This is what it means to care about progress: it's a commitment to make the future materially better than the past for more people. But we can't build something better without understanding where progressive politics has contributed to the failure of the status quo. It's not enough to blame the right. The left has been successful both at the ballot box and in the battle of ideas. It is not a witness to the present crisis, but an influential actor in it.

Historically, the greatest progressive achievements have been won through common struggle and collective action. Giving women and working people the vote. Abolishing child labour, a shorter working day, a minimum wage, sick and maternity pay. Gay rights, civil rights and women's rights. The creation of universal public services like the NHS. Together, they changed what people could expect of the state and each other and became new common sense.

These towering achievements, which have transformed hundreds of millions of lives, have a few common features that define successful progressive politics. They sought to reform, not to protect the status quo. They were deeply moral, not merely technocratic. They marshalled the state as a counterbalance to private interests. But crucially: *they were collectivising not individualising, bringing people together across lines of class, gender, race and sexuality in pursuit of a common cause.*

Progressive politics requires us to work together to imagine and then bring about a new future. *We must act together.* Without a sense of shared destiny and common identity, the world looks narrow and other worlds are inconceivable. People feel powerless and progressive policies are seen as extractive: tax is theft, regulations are constraints, and public duties are burdens.

But, when built and tended to, at every scale, from the neighbourhood through to the nation state, collectives can be sources of pride, purpose, meaning and hope – and we can achieve outcomes that would not be possible alone. Informal and formal principles of mutuality – that if everybody contributes, everybody benefits – have been the energy that has driven progressive politics.

This points to where the left has gone wrong. Progressive governments, parties and movements have championed, and in some cases delivered, real change in people's lives. We should not dismiss whole swathes of progressive government, such as New Labour between 1997 and 2010, as a failure. But we must confront the fact that progressive politicians have too often chosen individualism over collectivism.

Economically, we increasingly trusted markets to deliver outcomes that once depended on collective institutions. This can be seen in the privatisation of collective assets such as housing and public utilities; in the marketisation of public services and means-testing of once universal welfare payments; and in the increasingly transactional,

retail and delivery approach to democracy and statecraft. It's also present in the embrace of a growth model that leaned too readily into financialised globalisation and individual human capital over collectivism and democratic industrial policy.

This transactional approach to society contributed to progressives over-indexing on shallow identity politics and individualism at the expense of broader coalition building. We became more effective at advancing individual rights – and made some essential progress while doing so – but we often failed to connect those rights across different classes and groups of people. In the process, we encouraged people to see the world through the lens of individualism and undermined our capacity to argue for a progressive economic project.

Put simply: we, on the left, have come to treat *citizens like consumers*. We have tended to preferences and demands, but not set out any obligations or offered agency. People want to be better off. But it is also clear that people want something more from politics: they want to be authors of their own lives and to be part of a bigger 'us' that comes with identity, pride and connection.

The new right gets this: they are increasingly, often explicitly, collectivist. This is a hateful ethno-nationalist collectivism, bound by blood, but a collectivism, nonetheless. They have a story of shared identity, of pride in nationalism, and a collective project. No doubt, it is exclusionary, divisive, morally bankrupt, and incapable of addressing the problems we face today. But it is infinitely more powerful than a progressive politics of 'vote left to get a tumble dryer'. So, the task going forward for progressives is clear.

As ethnonationalism re-emerges as a defining characteristic of the right, we must build a collective project capable of bringing different people together. We need a more compelling account of what it means to belong, not through blood or heritage, but through shared values, interests, institutions, and a state that's capable of providing for us. This project requires us to recognise the different experiences people face, while refusing the idea that politics is simply a competition between groups. Our task is to reject division and build a broader sense of 'us': a shared democratic project that can unite people across lines of class, gender, race, sexuality and place around a common cause. In this moment, we need more Attlee than Blair.

Collectivism tomorrow

Delivering on the historical promise of progressive politics in this moment is challenging. There are strong headwinds against a politics of collectivism in the form of three mega-trends that are reshaping politics and society.

The end of high growth: since 1945, the policy goals of the left and its ideals of progress have often depended on one indicator: economic growth, historically surpassing 2 per cent per year. This was crucial because growth directly delivered progress (increased incomes, good jobs) for many people and communities, and because it created economic space for predistribution and redistribution.

But it is now nearly two decades since the UK experienced sustained economic growth. Added to this has been a succession of shocks to the UK's economy, disrupting the various ties that bind it to the rest of the world. Brexit, then the Covid-19 pandemic, then the Ukraine war, then a tariff war with the US and now the Iran war have all pushed up prices and created a prolonged cost-of-living crisis.

This has created a zero-sum politics: where for one person to gain, another must lose. In this world, politics simply becomes a game of picking winners and losers. And with lower growth rates comes less fiscal space to compensate losers; meaning the ratio of winners and losers shifts decisively towards the latter.

The left can, and must, pursue higher – and better – economic growth. In the UK, this is achievable: there is significant evidence that the UK has untapped growth potential. But we cannot kid ourselves. There will be no return to pre-2008 growth rates. This was underpinned by an unsustainable housing and financial bubble, a benign international environment and a younger population.

To navigate this low-growth world, progressives need to build a new collectivism: this is the only way to navigate the hard choices – tax rises and reforms to entitlements, to name just two – that this world will demand of us. And the growth we do achieve must be more fairly and sustainably shared across people, places and generations, which will require greater and deeper reserves of collectivism.

The new public sphere: over the same period that economic growth has faltered, the mass adoption of the smartphone and social media have dramatically altered our sense of one another

and the nation. These new technologies have the potential to be deeply democratising, as they end the gatekeeping of a small number of often very conservative and elitist media institutions that have had sway over the public realm.

However, in reality, this shift in our online lives has had a deleterious impact on citizens and democracy. In a world where ‘for you’ algorithms determine what we see and what we don’t, the new media landscape has personalised and privatised our political and social information. This is an inherent barrier to collectivism: if we don’t live in the same worlds, how can we build solidarity?

Moreover, the network effect of social media has led to monopoly platforms, which have been weaponised by the political right – and in the case of Elon Musk at X, taken over entirely. Collectivist possibilities are being dismantled by images and videos that paint society as broken, violent and racially divided. The use of AI to spread fake news and images may make things worse, eroding trust and denying us the possibility of a shared reality.

What exacerbates this is the decline of local spaces for in-person interaction and community formation. The places where people come together: churches, unions, pubs, social clubs, high streets. Left politics rests on the ability to forge identification with each other – to relate – which is more difficult when people have nothing to leave their homes for. Travel up and down the UK today, to our villages, towns and cities, and you will see the decline in our public square. Towns that grew around pits or factories have suffered even more, with the loss of jobs and communities, as well as spaces.

This has been worsened by the hollowing out of local government. Once it was a site of democratic agency: communities could shape their surroundings, build civic institutions and exercise collective power. Today, depleted by austerity and fiscal constraint, councils are consumed by crisis management; meeting the ever-growing costs of statutory responsibilities with nothing left over. Austerity shrank the state, and it shrank what we imagine the state can do.

Progressives will have to combat this – by putting place at the heart of state reform, being bolder in regulating social media and building alternative shared spaces, both virtual and real – if we want a politics of mutuality rather than division to prevail.

An age of instability: our political assumptions about the future are usually based on the past, and many were formed in an era of stability that historians called the Golden Age of Capitalism, which lasted from the end of the second world war until the 1970s. In comparison, we're now developing our politics in an era of instability. A series of intersecting shocks have disrupted our political, economic and social systems in profound ways. Since the financial crash, we have experienced a global pandemic and new conflict in Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America.

This conflict is likely to continue. We are now in a post-US world. There is no longer a responsible, benign global policeman (if there ever was). We are in the middle of a great power competition, which is driving an emergent world order where the strong will do what they can and the weak will suffer what they must. Launching Operation Epic Fury, the US secretary of war explained "we are punching them while they're down, which is exactly how it should be".¹

The planet is heating up. Human-induced environmental change is occurring at an unprecedented scale and pace and the window of opportunity to avoid the worst version of this crisis is rapidly closing. The consequences of this are now going to be felt more viscerally, hitting our systems with greater frequency and scale, including large-scale involuntary migration, conflict, famine, and natural disasters. On the left, we need to be thinking about how to share risk and protect each other in an age of climate breakdown – rather than allowing protection to be determined by wealth, leaving most people to suffer.

Finally, the technological revolution, which is accelerating and is likely to transform societies in profound ways. This transformation could be positive: liberating people from mundane work, democratising knowledge, speeding up invention. But we are deeply dependent on American technology companies, and we need to develop our own alternatives – with our allies in Europe and beyond. We can't tackle the oligarchy if our public services are built on their technology, and our productivity depends on adopting their AI models.

1 Smith D (2026) "A very dangerous person": alarm as Pete Hegseth revels in carnage of Iran war', *Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/mar/08/pete-hegseth-pentagon-trump-iran>

For the UK to benefit from the technological revolution, we need to take part in it, on our own terms.² If we don't take control, we'll see people and whole industries out of work, and more concentrations of wealth, opportunity and power. Shocks and crises can be unifying or they can be polarising. To be handled effectively, they always demand more of collectivism: for people to come together and share risks, protect each other, and rebuild our country. The age of instability will demand more of the state: it will need to invest more, intervene more, defend more, and tax more. These are all downstream of the solidarity and collectivism that makes risk-sharing and redistribution feasible in the first place.

A new politics of collectivism

In this profoundly exciting, terrifying world we find ourselves in, how can progressives persuade people we can thrive together? How can we construct new majorities in the face of fragmentation? How can we offer hope and optimism, to counter the right's fear and despair? How can we build bridges to the future, even as our opponents build a wall around an imagined past?

These are the questions that IPPR's Decade of National Renewal programme has set out to answer. This pamphlet doesn't profess to have all the answers. But we believe that we can build a new *progressive project* capable of transforming society, founded on *democratic citizenship* which we all contribute to, and benefit from, together.

We deliberately define this **democratic citizenship** broadly: politically, socially, and economically. Each of these building blocks is set out in more detail below – along with a fourth, taking on oligarchic power that undermines democratic citizenship. **These building blocks will be developed through our programme.**

Citizenship must be more embedded in our lives: democratic citizenship is the precondition for developing a new politics and a programme of radical, structural change. This deeper, more mutual understanding of citizenship can help us develop a stronger account of national

2 Powell R and Jung C (2026) *Acceleration is not a strategy: A framework for directing AI towards public value before it's too late*, IPPR. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/acceleration-is-not-a-strategy>

belonging, capable of challenging the far right's exclusionary, racist vision of the UK.

Over the years to come, governments will face difficult choices. Avoiding them isn't an option, if progressives want to protect and deepen our rights and achievements, and offer people good lives. It will mean making bold choices on tax, and rebalancing away from consumption-led growth towards investment in the industries of the future. All of this will require that we ask more of each other and the state – and that will require a deeper sense of the obligations we owe each other – a new politics of reciprocity. Democratic citizenship is crucial to that.

1. **Power:** expand the political power, rights and responsibilities of citizens in our public life and decision making.

Citizenship at its most basic level is about belonging to a political community. Under a progressive project, citizenship can be obtained by birth or earned by naturalisation. As it stands, citizenship involves rights and responsibilities. We need to deepen both the rights we offer people, and the responsibilities we expect of them, and build institutions to support this new form of democratic citizenship.

Democratic citizenship means promising people more concrete rights, entitlements and services, which provide them with hope and security, making votes meaningful through electoral reform, and prioritising pathways to citizenship over temporary residence in our migration system. And from a foundation of security and trust, asking more of people, including requiring them to vote, or to take an active part in community life, or policymaking.

Democratic citizenship means asking us to embody a shared set of values, to contribute to the success of the UK, and to participate in its public life. This must mean making participation an expectation but also making it easier and more rewarding. We can build a new relationship between the state and the citizen, which is deeper, more mutual, and less bureaucratic.

2. **Place:** build the social spaces and institutions that can bring people together around a common endeavour.

The creation of *democratic citizenship* requires that people have a shared set of values, that they (broadly and within

reason) have shared information, come across new people and ideas, and have shared institutions that they contribute to and benefit from. The left must put much greater value on the spaces and institutions – both virtual and physical – that achieve these things.

It must be more robust in defending and renewing existing institutions, such as the BBC and the NHS, and local government, and more radical in imagining and building new institutions – locally, nationally, and with our international allies. We need to work with countries committed to public broadcasting to build online platforms that serve the public rather than American oligarchs.³ We need a 21st century welfare fund⁴ to equal the Miners' Welfare Fund, which built new social infrastructure at scale 100 years ago. And we need to reprioritise arts and culture in our educational systems and refund its local and national provision – because it brings people together and allows them to imagine different futures.

Our new social infrastructure must be built in and serve people across the UK, rather than entrenching power in London and the South East.

3. Participation: give people more hope and agency in their economic life.

It is a mistake to think citizenship is just a social or political concept. The idea of shared *democratic citizenship* is fatally undermined if people do not feel that everyone is in it together economically. Too many people in the UK feel like they can't shape or share in our economy.⁵ The left needs to rediscover and revitalise economic agency. This is not a technical concept, but a simple and radical idea: every person who depends on our economy and contributes to it should have a stake in how it's governed. Because it's the right thing to do, because it develops our sense of belonging, because it reorients politics around providing the essentials of life, and because it economically commits us to a collectivism that market individualism erodes.

3 Ropke-Hewson S and Jinadu J (2026) *Stuck on you: How to make social media good again*, IPPR. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/stuck-on-you-social-media>

4 Hillhorst S (2025) *Places to come together: Rebuilding local solidarities against the far right*, IPPR. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/places-to-come-together>

5 Clark T (2024) *Earning vs owning: Rescuing opportunity in the asset economy*, IPPR. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/earning-vs-owning>

This could mean collective economic institutions – community energy cooperatives, mutual care providers or a citizen wealth fund – where people are not served, protected or managed, but members with real power. Collective economic institutions should also mean deeper workplace democracy that takes into account the unstable nature of contemporary work, and gives us more control. And it might mean new modes of governing the institutions at the centre of our economy, like the Bank of England and the Treasury. In a democratic economy, growth should mean materially better lives and giving people a stake in the new institutions and industries that the UK needs.

Widespread economic solidarity will be required to embed the long-term structural reform the UK needs, whether increases in investment (requiring lower consumption), tax reform to make the state sustainable, or industrial policies that impact places or existing industries.

4. Protection: confront oligarchic power that seeks to divide us and undermine democratic citizenship.

Democratic citizenship must be positive, generative and forward looking. But it cannot be blind to the risk that it will be fatally undermined by the forces lined up against it. This is what the new right, alongside the oligarchic interests that benefit from concentrations of wealth and power, intends to do. Progressives must therefore seek to take these forces head on; to ensure that *democratic citizenship* can succeed by breaking up concentrated power and putting the interests of people first. This could mean replacing private financing of parties with state funding, competition policy which backs insurgents and breaks up monopolies, strong AI sovereignty policies, and reforms to taxation which tackle concentrations of wealth which are a threat to democracy.

Together, these foundations point the way towards a new, hopeful vision for the left.

Some will argue that the left just needs to deliver the basics: better public services, fiscal sustainability, and action on the cost of living. But delivery alone fails to deliver. Without an animating purpose, governments can't build the coalitions, public support or patience that real delivery over a decade demands. Skilled administration becomes directionless; election victories become transient and

shallow. And people hunger for something more: for a cause, for morality, for belonging. It's time to stop dismissing long-term vision as ornamental: it's precisely the pairing of concrete short-term demands with long-term purpose that will transform our country and our politics.

Many people today feel that decline is inevitable. For the left, this fatalism is toxic. We rely on the claim that society is susceptible to influence by collective action. When the future looks set, people may retreat from democratic politics and look for a fascist break from the present. But we have much more say over our collective destiny than the far right wants us to think. The core of what it means to be a progressive is to insist on this agency; to insist that the future can look better than the past; to insist that if we come together rather than fall apart, we can make 'hope practical, not despair convincing.'⁶

Put simply: progress is possible if we work together. We need a new politics, and we want to build it with you.

6 See: Williams R (1980) 'The politics of nuclear disarmament', *New Left Review*, 124 Nov/Dec 1980. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i124/articles/raymond-williams-the-politics-of-nuclear-disarmament>

About IPPR

IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is an independent charity working towards a fairer, greener, and more prosperous society. We are researchers, communicators, and policy experts creating tangible progressive change, and turning bold ideas into common sense realities. Working across the UK, IPPR, IPPR North, and IPPR Scotland are deeply connected to the people of our nations and regions, and the issues our communities face.

We have helped shape national conversations and progressive policy change for more than 30 years. From making the early case for the minimum wage and tackling regional inequality, to proposing a windfall tax on energy companies, IPPR's research and policy work has put forward practical solutions for the crises facing society.

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