

Editorial article

Editorial: Post-election special issue

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If politics is the art of the possible, it might be said that governing is grappling with the impossible. Whatever agenda and programme a new administration arrives with, it rapidly becomes destabilised by events beyond ministers' control, the power-plays of individuals and factions, and – not least – the sheer enormity and complexity of the issues it is expected to deal with.

Keir Starmer's Labour government has scarcely passed the totemic milestone of one hundred days in office, and already much of the shine of July has worn off. This has partly been the consequence of some heavy-handed preparation for a painful Budget, partly a result of the predictable public relations stumbles of a novice leadership, and at least to some extent due to an awareness that world circumstances remain bleak. Whatever energy and commitment new ministers bring to their portfolios, the difference they can make to global factors is at best incremental.

Such a rapid deflation of expectations presents the opportunity to begin taking the slogan of 'fixing the foundations', the theme of the recent Labour Party conference, more seriously. Even in supposedly ordinary times it would be challenging enough, for example, to restore health services to a modicum of reliability and undo the devastation of a housing market which for decades has reduced the chances of decent, affordable housing.

It is worth pausing to ask what is really foundational within a complex urbanised society. It can be easy to confuse the foundations with the intricate houses of cards that have been constructed on them.

Abraham Maslow's famous theory of needs (1943) posits a hierarchical approach to human motivations for action, beginning with the physiological requirement for food to sustain the body and moving on to issues of 'safety' – the need to feel the world is dependable and unthreatening – and progressing to questions of self-esteem and self-actualisation. The Labour government's 'five missions' (Labour Party, 2024) predominantly relate to questions of security (freedom from crime, rebuilding the NHS, and kickstarting economic growth) with a nod towards a kind of national self-esteem ('make Britain a clean energy superpower') and a hint of self-actualisation ('break down barriers to opportunity'). Considering the five missions in the light of Maslow's hierarchy raises a question of how governments assess and respond to the most basic needs of the people they are elected to serve.

Maslow was writing in the 1940s, from a perspective rooted in anthropocentric modernism. That perspective, with its assumptions about the hegemonic rule of humans and its expectations of perpetual progress, has been profoundly disturbed by the human propensity for self-destruction, both in terms of still-rising greenhouse gas emissions and the accelerating decline of biodiversity.

Human life is interwoven with and dependent on a global mesh of species and actants (Morton, 2010), yet the new UK government, like most of its global counterparts, has paid scant attention. Central to this Special Issue is a call for an urgent and radical refocusing on planetary issues as a basis for addressing human needs at a governmental scale. Krashi and colleagues call for an ontological shift, informed by awareness that the human species is rapidly exceeding planetary boundaries for safe and sustainable living (Richardson et al., 2023). In practice, this means that government should acknowledge that the age of human exceptionalism is over, and that our species cannot face the future without thinking in concert with the others that sustain our lives – hence Krashi’s call for a deeper exploration of the ‘rights of nature’ as a step towards such a recalibration. Glentworth et al introduce a series of practical steps government can take towards ‘nature recovery’ as a direct response to the crisis of biodiversity loss, challenging the relative silence of the new administration.

The existential issues of climate change and species extinction are not disconnected from the more familiar foundational questions of economy and society that have been the bread and butter of this journal. Crisp’s article charts Chancellor Rachel Reeves’ retreat from concern with the ‘foundational economy’ (which can include the unpaid labour of care) into so-called ‘securonomics’ which aim to stabilise existing economic arrangements through moves towards greater energy security and improved workers’ rights. Crisp describes this as a ‘missed opportunity to experiment with a new economic model centred on a more inclusive political and moral economy’; in short, the government is reharnessing itself to a system that Krashi describes as ‘self-terminating’.

A similar process of ducking the deeper questions can be identified through Archer and Parr’s critique of Labour housing policy, which promises a significant increase in supply but relies on the same strategy of boosting private housebuilding that has failed to reverse an escalating crisis of insecurity, unaffordability and – for many – homelessness. Archer and Parr point out intersections between housing policy and the climate crisis, with a ‘significant gap’ between funding commitments and the actual cost of improving homes, and the failure of market-driven models to meet the needs of an aging population and the rising costs of emergency support for homeless people. If one of the primary roles of government is to provide security and stability, housing policy provides a key test of its achievement.

In the final article in this issue, Adeyemo takes a long view of governments’ relationship with the voluntary sector – the glue of civil society that can link the strategic action of government on foundational issues such as the environment, health and homelessness with the direct and embodied action of restoring lives and ecosystems in the places where we live. Adeyemo’s review of decades of policy initiatives leaves him asking ‘who cares’ about a flourishing civil society. Without care for the carers, it is hard to see how aspirations of fixing foundations will be translated into meaningful reality.

What does this mean in terms of the everyday practice, rather than the public rhetoric, of government? Taken together, the articles in this issue make the case for focusing spending on work that protects and restores the basics of life - ecology, food and shelter – and supports the people on whose labour such foundational factors rely. Extrapolating, we can point to the importance of fairness and equity in ensuring that all, and especially the most vulnerable, can build their lives on more secure foundations. This directly challenges continued assumptions of trickle-down wealth creation. Thirdly, the articles

emphasise the need for serious long-term thinking, based on evidence that is all too often set aside because it is considered too difficult or politically disadvantageous to action.

There are some indications that the new government is aware of both the scale of the challenges and the need for commensurate responses. But we also have ample evidence of how easily new governments may become derailed. The Labour administration has a unique opportunity to address some of the foundational issues of our time; the concern is that it may only get one shot at it.

Also in this issue

Book review - The Unsettling Outdoors: Environmental estrangement in everyday life

Julian Dobson offers an insightful review of Russell Hitchings' *The Unsettling Outdoors*; a must-read for those interested in the complexities of human interaction with the natural world.

Book review - Post Carbon Inclusion: Transition Built on Justice

In his review of *Post Carbon Inclusion* (Horne et al.), Jonathan Webb explores how the book tackles the challenge of a fair, post-carbon transition. It's a thoughtful and engaging critique for anyone interested in just and sustainable climate solutions.

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