

REBUILDING LABOUR AND THE NATION

A report for Progressive Britain
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PROGRESSIVE
BRITAIN

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Progressive Britain is the new platform for policymaking, political education, and imaginative thinking to rebuild Labour and the nation.

Firmly rooted in the Labour Party, we are dedicated to national renewal and the intellectual revitalisation of the UK centre-left. The organisation was launched in May 2021 following the merger of Progress, the movement for Labour's progressives, and Policy Network, the international ideas exchange and think tank.

This paper was commissioned to provide a snapshot of the challenges and opportunities facing the Labour Party in the late summer/autumn of 2021 – and as a first point of reference for Progressive Britain activity looking ahead to 2022. It builds on data from a range of sources, including the results of the 2019 general election, and publicly available polling from a range of organisations – including the British Election Study, Ipsos Mori, YouGov and Opinium Research. It also quotes, with permission, from private research undertaken for the LGA Labour Group by the Campaign Company.

To fill in the gaps, Opinium ran two focus groups in August 2021, convening 15 people who voted Conservative in 2019 but are now open to voting Labour. Opinium also conducted a poll of 2500 adults from across the UK between 19 and 23 August. The data was weighted to be representative by age, gender, region, occupation group, car ownership, education, and past voting behaviour (i.e., the 2019 general election and the 2016 EU referendum).

KEY FINDINGS

1. Labour has everything to play for at the next election. There is a mountain to climb, but voters are currently historically volatile – which makes turning things around in one cycle a lot easier.
2. To accomplish this Labour must change and demonstrate a decisive break from the past decade, a period in which Labour failed to win back trust on the economy – and came to be seen as increasingly estranged from the lives of ordinary voters. The party must reconnect with the electorate and prove that it can be trusted to shape the UK's future as a modern, dynamic country.
3. While polling generally shows Labour has closed the gap since 2019, a sustainable, winning electoral coalition must include more 'soft' voters won over directly from the Tories than from anywhere else.
4. The public became unreceptive to attacks on the government when the covid vaccine was creating 'good news', and Keir Starmer's personal rating has taken a hit because of this. With politics getting back to normal, the public now wants to hear a more coherent critique about the state of the country.
5. The government is becoming increasingly vulnerable to the charges of incompetence and of wasting taxpayers' money. Voters are looking for a competent alternative to run public services, supported by a programme of reform with proper investment and value for money – but Labour is not yet seen as a fully credible alternative.
6. Labour is still generally seen as the 'party of the people', but this isn't enough if it is seen as out of touch with public concerns. However, recent 'culture war' issues are not the cause of this, with most voters saying they are not a top priority.
7. Instead, Labour should demonstrate it is 'in touch' with those voters who have moved away from the party by proving it is best placed to tackle enduring bread-and-butter issues such as neighbourhood crime, and by proving it is the party for those in work, not just for those on welfare. The politics of place – where people live, the widespread sense of neglect and decline across large parts of the UK, the quality of local services – has also assumed a new importance. Labour has to remake itself as the party of local community empowerment and an effective political agent of change on the ground.

8. However, proving it is in touch with voter's concerns will not be sufficient unless Labour can also prove it is competent enough to run the economy well. While voters have become more economically interventionist, they still say the biggest barrier to voting Labour is that it can't be trusted with the economy and public finances. The party needs to develop a plan that is committed to growth, but which also makes clear that borrowing will be disciplined – and that it will not lose control of the public finances.
9. A compelling – and realistic – offer on the environment can help bind Labour's existing coalition together, without alienating soft Conservative voters in the seats in needs to win. This would need to reconcile the urgency of the climate crisis with a fair transition to greener jobs and industries, helping affected communities through the process.

1. LABOUR HAS EVERYTHING TO PLAY FOR AT THE NEXT ELECTION

Here are three psephological facts:

1. In spring 2019,¹ support for the Conservatives fell as low as 16% in one poll (their lowest ever showing), before bouncing back to an historic election victory with over 43% of the vote at the December general election (the highest winning percentage for any party since 1979). While Labour's see-sawing support across the year wasn't quite as dramatic, it still fell as low as 18%, before finishing the general election campaign with 32%.

2. After the 1997 general election, it took 1233 days before the first poll showing the Conservatives ahead of Labour. After the 2019 election, which the Tories won by a similar margin, it took only 261 days before a poll showed Labour ahead.²

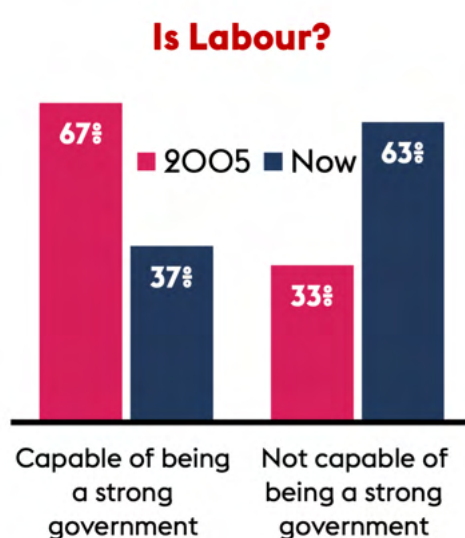
3. Recent years have taught that voters are much more volatile than they have been historically. Data from the British Election Study³ shows that after 1997 67% of the population said they very or fairly strongly identified with a party. At the last general election that fell to 52%.

Britain now has fewer party loyalists and a lot more 'compare the market' voters who are comfortable switching between parties depending on the offer presented to them at successive elections. This poses a clear threat to the Labour Party, as it no longer has a large group of predominantly working-class voters on which it can rely.

This also presents an opportunity. In a world where voters are so fickle, it should be possible to come back from a defeat as devastating as the 2019 election, even in a single cycle.

But while there may still be a path to another Labour government in the first quarter of this century, the party should not underestimate how just how challenging it will be to reach that point. The Labour brand has been severely damaged since the mid-noughties, and this will take a lot of work to repair.

In 2005, the last time Labour won a parliamentary majority, 67% of those with an opinion thought the party was capable of strong government, 33% did not. In our latest poll just 33% of those with an opinion think Labour are now capable of being a strong government, compared to 63% who disagree.



1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2019_United_Kingdom_general_election
 2. <https://twitter.com/chriscurtis94/status/1299789353401692160?lang=en>
 3. <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data>

The Conservatives still hold a 14-point lead on which party would be best placed to manage the economy, with Labour trailing on just 27% to the Tories' 41%.

If Labour is to stand any chance of victory at the next general election, it needs to spend the next few years turning round these critical metrics – and demonstrating that it has moved on from the past.

2. LABOUR MUST SHOW IT HAS CHANGED

Despite his better-than-expected performance at the 2017 general election, by the end of his leadership Jeremy Corbyn's unpopularity plumbed new depths. By March 2019, just 20% of the public had a favourable view of him, compared to 65% who held an unfavourable view.

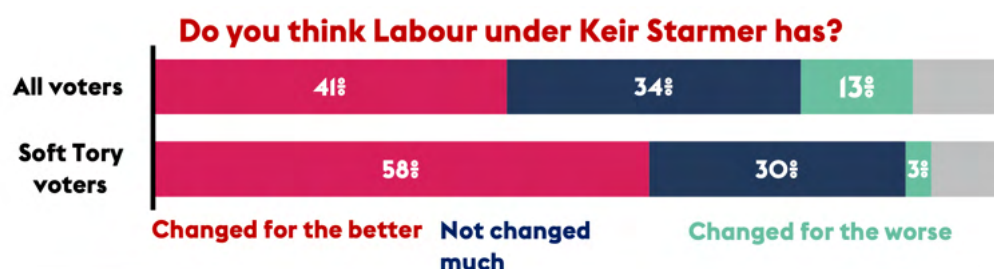
In April 2020, when Corbyn relinquished the leadership of the Labour Party, of the nine 'brand metrics' that YouGov asks about the two main political parties, Labour lagged behind the Conservatives on eight of them.⁴ These included ever-present Labour problems, such as the idea that they aren't 'strong', 'moderate', or 'competent'. But they also lagged in areas that would normally be core brand strengths – such as 'tolerance', 'being in touch', and 'trying to do 'the right thing'.

"I couldn't bear Jeremy Corbyn... could you imagine him running this country. The last election really was the best of a bad bunch"

Although there is no doubt that he exacerbated them, not all these problems can be solely put down to Corbyn's leadership. Our focus groups repeatedly mentioned how Labour couldn't be trusted with the economy, 'spent too much money when they were in government', and 'let in too many migrants'.

But regardless of the cause, it is clear that Labour needs to demonstrate it has changed and moved on from its recent past and instead focus on the challenges of the future.

Keir Starmer has already had some success in this. Our polling shows that 41% of voters think Labour has changed for the better under his leadership, compared to 13% who think it has changed for the worse. Around a third (34%) think it has not changed at all, while 11% don't know.



Among soft Conservative voters, i.e., Labour's key target voters at the next election, 58% think Labour has changed for the better, compared to just 4% who think they have changed for the worse.

4. <https://twitter.com/chriscurtis94/status/1250010933902151683?s=20>

One of the ways Labour needs to show it's moved on is on the issue of antisemitism. Aside from Brexit, the biggest political issue voters referenced for why they cooled to Jeremy Corbyn between 2017 and 2019 was antisemitism.⁵

Our polling shows that voters responded positively to removing the whip from Jeremy Corbyn. Nearly half (45%) said they were either delighted or happy with the decision, compared to 32% who were indifferent, and 14% who were either upset and angry.

How would / did you feel about?

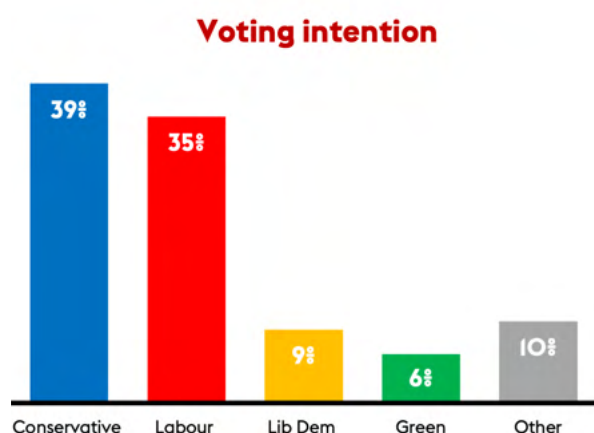
	Jeremy Corbyn being suspended	The whip being returned to Jeremy Corbyn
Delighted	25%	6%
Happy	20%	12%
Indifferent	32%	36%
Upset	6%	12%
Angry	8%	24%

Going forward, 35% said they would be angry or upset if the whip was returned to Jeremy Corbyn, compared to 36% who were indifferent. Around one in five (18%) said they would be happy or delighted.

5. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/01/30/brexit-indecisiveness-seriously-damaging-corbyn>

3. LABOUR HAS STARTED TO CLOSE THE GAP SINCE 2019

But while many voters agree that Labour has changed for the better under Starmer, this has not yet been enough to convince a substantial number of voters to change their minds.



Our poll shows the Tories holding a 4-point lead, on 39% to Labour's 35%. The Lib Dems are on 8% with the Greens on 7%.

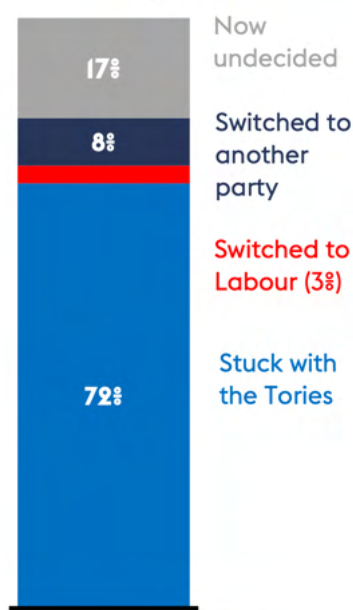
Simplistically applying uniform national swing to these numbers would point towards a hung parliament, with the Conservatives the largest party on 316 seats (down 49), and Labour on 244 seats (up 42).

However, the dent that Labour has so far made into the Tory lead is not necessarily as impressive as it looks. Most of Labour's extra support has come from winning over ex Lib Dem voters, who are disproportionately found in safer seats.

Meanwhile, most of the fall in support for the Conservatives has come from their voters moving to 'undecided' rather than shifting directly over to Labour.

In total, 72% of the Conservatives' 2019 vote is still sticking with the party, with just 17% saying they are now undecided. Only 3% have moved over to Labour. When we look at the 'soft Tory vote', which Labour needs to target, 47% has stuck with the Tories, while 41% are now undecided. Just 8% have moved over to Labour.

Where is the Conservative vote going?

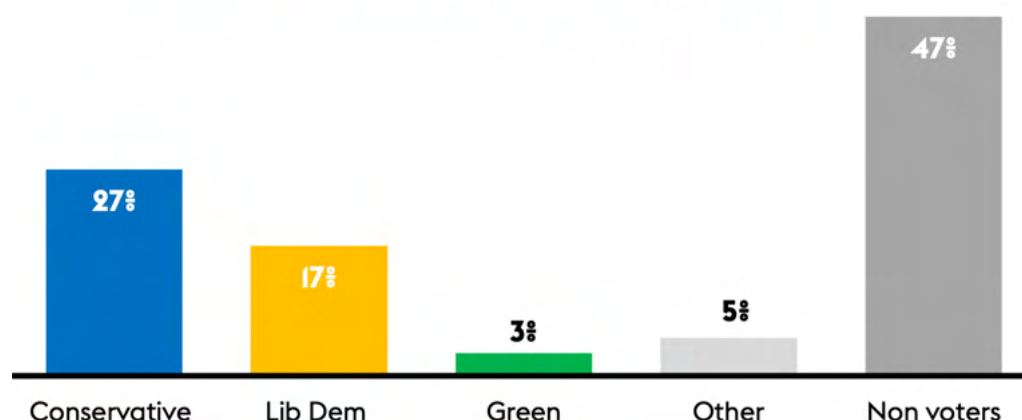


4. LABOUR NEEDS TO WIN SOFT TORY VOTERS

To win the next general election, Labour needs to take the people who voted for it in 2019 and bolt on enough voters (in the right places) to win to a majority of Westminster seats.

Our poll asked the entire population how open they would be to voting for Labour in the future. In total, 40% of voters didn't vote Labour but are open to doing so in the future, and they come from a wide range of political backgrounds.

Who are the potential Labour voters?



Around a quarter (27%) of these voters supported the Conservatives at the last election, with 17% backing the Lib Dems. Just 5% voted for the Greens, while nearly half (47%) didn't vote.

It might therefore seem appealing to concentrate on consolidating supposedly progressive voters under the Labour banner, targeting Lib Dems, Greens, and non-voters. This would avoid having to reach out to Conservative voters in the centre ground of public opinion. However, such an approach has severe limitations.

The next chart runs through multiple calculations to try to measure how valuable a gain a vote from each of the other parties would be.

How would / did you feel about?

	Conservative	Lib Dem	Green	Other	Non voter
All potential voters	27%	17%	3%	5%	47%
Potential voters who are likely to vote	43%	28%	5%	8%	15%
+live in target seats	53%	21%	4%	6%	15%
+ 'double counting' bonus	63%	17%	3%	5%	12%

Firstly, we calculate how likely they are to vote, based on their past voting history and how likely they say they would be to vote in another general election. This brings down the proportion who didn't vote in 2019 substantially – and boosts up the relative importance of Conservative voters.

While a lot of fundamental rules of politics have been broken in recent years, one that has consistently held true is that non-voters rarely vote – with only around one in ten voters who turnout in any given election being people who were eligible to vote in the previous election but chose not to do so. It would be naive for Labour to build an election strategy that relies on trying to change this.

Secondly, we can use data from the British Election study to look more specifically at where voters live, prioritising those who live in target seats (defined as the 150 seats Labour doesn't currently hold, but would need the smallest swings in order to gain at the next election). This further boosts the importance of Conservative voters.

Finally, we can add in a double counting bonus. If you win a vote from the party that currently holds the seat, that vote counts twice (because it is one more for you, and one fewer for them). Given that almost all target seats are currently Conservative held, this bumps up importance of Conservative voters even further. The numbers in the chart above assume 80% of any voters gained from the Tories would otherwise vote Conservative, as opposed to 20% of the voters gained from other parties.

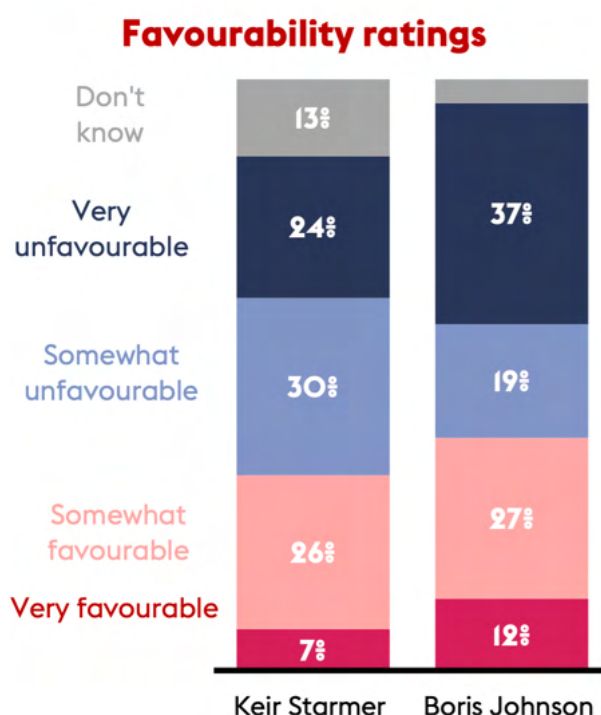
Given this, we end up at the unavoidable conclusion that Labour needs to focus its efforts on trying to directly win over these soft Tory voters (with the added, and very real, challenge of doing so without losing progressive voters in the process).

5. COVID MAY HAVE HIT STARMER'S POPULARITY – BUT VOTERS' VIEWS ON HIM ARE STILL SOFT

Starmer initially landed very well with the public, with a trajectory not dissimilar to polling during Tony Blair's time as opposition leader.⁶ He peaked in June 2020 when YouGov showed that 44% of the public had a favourable view of him, compared to 30% who had an unfavourable view.

However, since last summer his personal poll ratings have dropped. Our latest poll shows the majority (54%) have an unfavourable view of the Labour leader, compared to 33% who have a favourable view. This gives him a net score of -21. Among soft Conservative voters, 36% have a favourable view, compared to 49% who have an unfavourable view – a net score of -14.

While this drop is undeniable, views of Starmer are still fairly soft – which leave him with room for manoeuvre going into the autumn. Just 24% have a very unfavourable view of him, with 30% having a somewhat unfavourable view.



By comparison, views on the prime minister are a lot harder, with 37% of people have a very unfavourable view of Boris Johnson, compared to 19% who have a somewhat unfavourable view. Starmer's drop in popularity has come disproportionately from Labour voters, rather than the Conservative voters the party needs to focus on winning over.

“Today Boris announced change to the amber list and then the guy from the head of the travel union said ‘brilliant’ then Keir said ‘rubbish, it’s no good, too little too late’, just made himself look like an idiot”

This drop is worth investigating further. We polled 250 people who had cooled to Starmer since last Summer and asked them to tell us, in their own words, why they had changed their mind.

6. <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/starmer-achieves-best-satisfaction-ratings-leader-opposition-blair>

The top reasons were that he was being indecisive /changing his mind (19%), that he was not putting forward a vision for the country (15%), that he was not providing strong opposition to the government (10%), and that he was

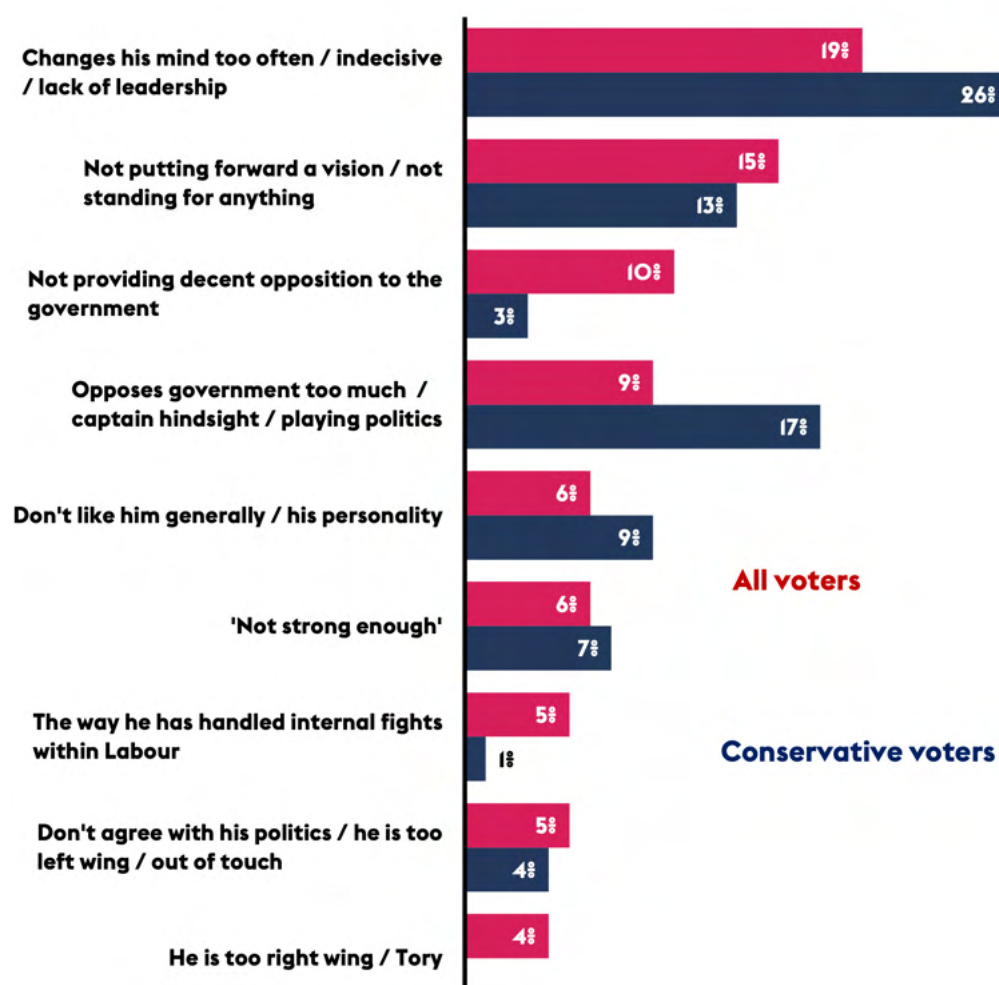
“He said he would work with the government re Covid but all he did was moan and criticise”

“He said he would forget politics and help and assist Boris in the fight against covid. He soon changed his mind and argued against everything”

opposing the government too much and playing party politics (9%). The Conservative voters Labour needs to win over are particularly upset about the way he has opposed the government in recent months, and a perception he has been playing party politics

during a pandemic. In total, 17% said that was the main reason they had gone off the Labour leader, as opposed to 3% who said it was because he is not providing strong enough opposition to the government.

Why have voters gone off Keir Starmer?



6. LABOUR SHOULD ATTACK THE TORY GOVERNMENT FOR WASTING TAXPAYERS' MONEY

If attacking the Conservative government too much is one of the main reasons for Starmer's drop in popularity, this begs the question 'what should the alternative be?'

In the post-expenses era, voters have become cynical about their politicians, with ever lower expectations re: the ethics and efficacy of British politics as a result. This means that attacks on the characters of those in public office are not as effective as they would have been in the past. But the public also gives short shrift to attacks on the government that aren't attached to a realistic alternative, something that presents difficulties early on in an electoral cycle.

"It would be interesting to see what they would have done, because it's easy to say something – but would they have carried it out?"

Despite this, the leader of the opposition can't stand up every Wednesday and ask six questions of the prime minister without giving his view on the shortcomings of the current administration. As shown, there are also a sizable number of voters whose problem with Starmer is that he isn't opposing the government strongly enough.

The best way to square this circle is for the prevailing critique of government to have a laser-like focus. Labour has a range of options open to it and should use these to build up a consistent narrative about the government. This critique should be something voters see as relevant to their lives, and not just an exercise in scoring points. While the prime minister redecorating his flat with upmarket wallpaper may make for a good newspaper headline, ultimately it isn't going to change anybody's mind about the effect a Conservative government has on their day-to-day lives.

The best critiques are also ones that can reframe a debate and turn something that is a current brand weakness for Labour into a brand weakness for the Conservatives.

The most effective critique of the current government would be that it is 'wasting taxpayers' money'. This has been a clear weakness for Labour with a recent poll showing 34% of voters still think the Tories are better at spending government money efficiently, compared to 28% who think Labour would spend more efficiently.⁷

7. <https://www.opinium.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Opinium-Political-Report-11th-February-2021-Final.pdf>

Who are better at spending taxpayers money more efficiently?



The current political dynamics offer ample opportunities for Labour to use the 'wasting money' line against the Conservatives.

Firstly, the growing perception that there are costs associated with 11 years of underinvestment in public services, e.g., the additional costs associated with the pandemic by cutting preparedness planning, a rise in crime due to cuts in policing, or the increase in homelessness. Our polling suggests that most of the public (54%) think this is a fair criticism of the Conservatives compared to 29% who think it is unfair.

Secondly, the Tories are viewed as being too close to big business. Labour can build a narrative around taxpayers' money being wasted on contracts being outsourced to companies with close ties with the Conservative Party (especially re: the lack of transparent competitive tendering or sufficient due diligence). Our polling showed that 60% of voters think this is a fair criticism of the Conservatives compared to just 18% who think it isn't.

There are many recent examples of how effective a 'wasting money' narrative can be effective.

It was a key plank of David Cameron's charge against the last Labour government, enabling him to sell austerity as a credible policy platform as prime minister. In August 2010, 40% of voters agreed that increased spending under Labour 'did not improve services much and was mostly wasted'. This was compared to just 10% who thought that 'increased public spending improved services without much waste' under Blair and Brown.⁸

This line of attack was revived and levelled against the EU by Brexiteers during the 2016 referendum campaign, most notably on the side of the 'let's fund our NHS instead' bus. On the occasions where Labour does make this argument, it must link back to the overall critique that voters see as relevant – that their money is being wasted – rather than a more general attack about how the Conservatives are 'sleazy' or 'corrupt'.

8. https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/fg7lifzqbv/TimesRadioResults_Spending_200616.pdf

Pressing home the ‘wasting money’ line of attack might mean that Labour refrains from making criticisms outside of this narrative arc (including areas that are of particular interest to political journalists!). But it would be a key step towards overcoming the biggest problem any opposition party has, i.e., trying to be seen as a constructive opposition, while also rightly critiquing the government.

7. LABOUR IS STILL THE ‘PARTY OF THE PEOPLE’, BUT THAT ALONE ISN’T ENOUGH

Despite the damage done to the party’s brand in recent years, Labour is still seen as the ‘party of the people’. The majority (57%) think Labour is the party most on the side of ordinary workers, compared to just 23% who think the Tories best meet that description.

However, that 34-point lead shrinks substantially when we ask people to think of ‘people like them’. Just 43% think Labour is more their side, compared to 32% who say the same of the Conservatives. This is still a lead, but a notably smaller one. When we focus in on soft Conservative voters, just 19% think that Labour is best placed to stick up for them, compared to 43% who think the Tories are.

“I like that they still represent working class people. Maybe not as much as they might have done historically, but there does seem to be an element of being closer to the ground, where working class are concerned”

Clearly, part of that difference is because some people wouldn’t self-identify as an ‘ordinary worker’. But some people in our focus groups also thought that, while Labour stood up for people generally, they weren’t on the side of them specifically. One participant said, ‘The Conservatives make the rich richer, and Labour help the least fortunate, but Labour needs to come more into the middle and reach everybody’.

“They support the people, whereas the Conservatives are all about money”

help certain groups, but a higher proportion of its offer (and the things it talks about) need to be solutions that will help the majority of the population.

But it doesn’t matter if you care about ordinary people’s concerns if you aren’t in touch with those concerns. Polling from YouGov shows that just 15% think Labour is now ‘in touch’ compared to 56% who think they are ‘out of touch’.⁹

“The Conservatives make the rich richer, and Labour help the least fortunate, but Labour needs to come more into the middle and reach everybody”

So, although Labour still holds the mantle of the ‘party of the people’, this is not enough. Labour must also convince people that they understand what people actually want.

9. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/is-the-labour-party-in-touch-or-out-of-touch>

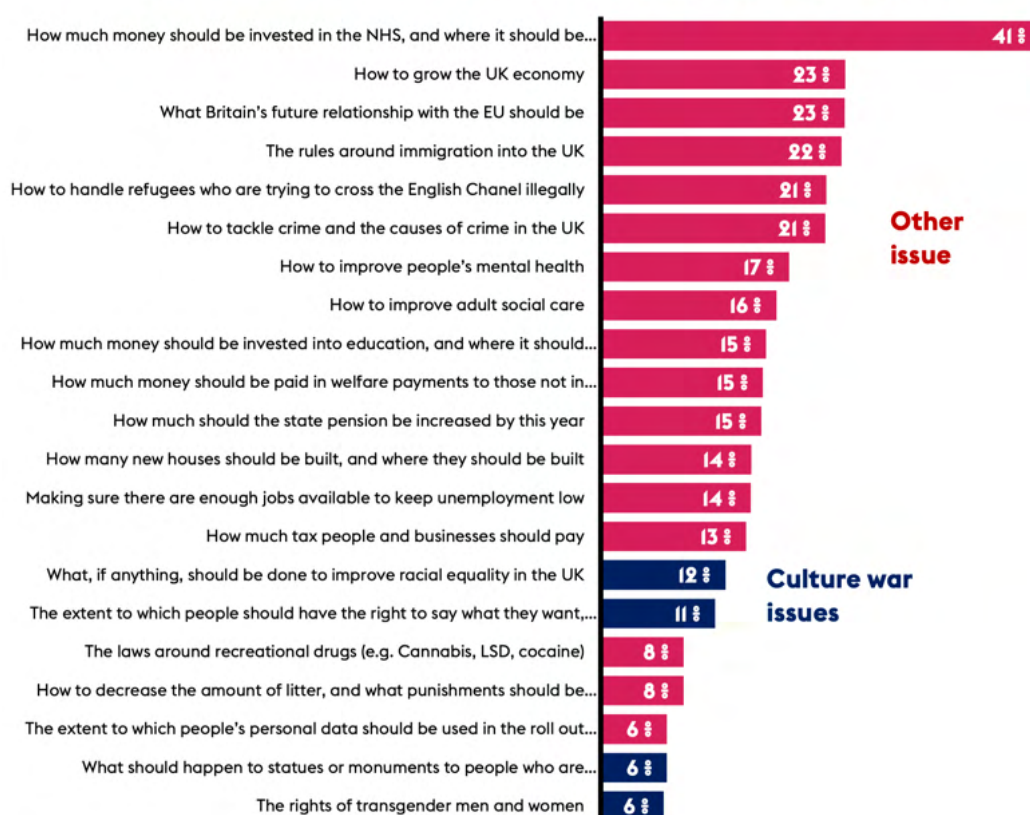
8. IT ISN'T THE CULTURE WARS THAT ARE MAKING LABOUR LOOK OUT OF TOUCH

The biggest voter block that has moved away from Labour in recent years are left-wing voters with so called 'traditional' values. Finding ways to prove Labour are in-touch with their values will be critical to winning back their support in 2023 /24.

Some have argued the increased salience of 'culture war' issues will be a barrier to this, creating new wedge issues between the voters Labour needs to win back and their core voter base. Yet, despite the prominence of these debates on Twitter and in certain sections of the press, the general public still seem relatively unmoved by these topics.

We showed our focus group participants a series of 'political debates' that are 'happening in Britain at the moment' and asked them to tell us the issues about which they felt most passionate.

Which political debates are people passionate about?



Only one participant picked out a culture war issue – what should happen to statues and monuments – and on this occasion the issue was only selected at the end of discussion about a range of other topics which included the NHS and crime.

We repeated similar exercises in the polling and got the same results. We showed four culture war issues, alongside seventeen others. The culture war issues were picked out less than almost any of the others. The full results are in the previous table.

Culture war debates still have the potential to trip Labour up. While voters may not care about these issues in principle, the constant media focus on them provides ample opportunities for Labour (or people associated with the party) to say things that still make them look out of touch.

Despite this, the best strategy for Labour remains the same - try to avoid these issues where possible, and instead focus on the issues that actually matter to voters. When these issues do need a response, it's important to remember that most voters don't apply the same ideological lens as party members or political commentators. They are instead driven by what sounds reasonable and practical, so Labour's needs to make sure its response fits that framework, whatever position they decide to take.

The immediate challenge for Labour is to reconcile differences among its existing members and supporters if it has any hope of constructing a winning national programme.

As an example, if we take the Conservative's plan to bring in voter ID laws, it might be tempting to attack this from a more ideological position about how it should be as easy as possible for people to vote, and this could potentially disenfranchise voters.

Instead, it would be a lot more successful to criticise the policy based on the practicalities, or even the £120 million price tag.

9. INSTEAD, LABOUR CAN PROVE IT IS IN TOUCH BY BEING THE PARTY OF SAFER COMMUNITIES, AND HARD WORK, NOT JUST WELFARE

Our focus groups couldn't stop criticising Labour for being the party of welfare. When asked for an ideal Labour policy that might make them consider voting for Labour again, one participant even suggested bringing in 'a tax on benefits'.

To appeal to these voters, Labour needs to change their perceptions about its reputation. One way of doing this would be to make it clear that Labour is the party

“All they will do is pay people on benefits on universal credit more money and taxing people who are working. Paying people benefits isn't the answer, we need to think about how we get them into work”

for people in work, not just the party of those on welfare. Labour needs to develop a clear strategy to get people from welfare into work and promote a credible policy platform in this space.

Labour can also get around this by talking more about the problems voters, particularly economically insecure voters, face in their workplace. In the same way that many social issues serve as wedge issues for the Labour party, splitting their

voter base, issues around fairness at work do the complete opposite – dividing the Conservative's voter base while uniting Labour's.

Polling for the TUC showed that all the voters within Labour's winning coalition strongly support pro-worker policies such as banning zero hours contracts; giving all workers the same basic set of rights; or requiring staff to have 28 days' notice of shifts so they can plan their lives and childcare.¹⁰

Talking about these issues also highlights a key brand weakness for the Conservatives: a perception that they are too close to businesses, particularly large global businesses who are taking advantage of their workers.

These are all important areas for Labour to consider in its upcoming policy review – it has found solutions to these issues before. In the mid 1990s the policy of 'welfare to work' was successful in opposition and made for effective policy through the New Deal. After the financial crisis, the Job Guarantee Scheme guaranteed work for those who couldn't find it, but also made it much harder for people to claim benefits illegally while working.

Another set of bread-and-butter issues that will connect with voters relate to crime and community safety. These risen back up the policy agenda substantially in recent years, with our poll showing it coming 6th in the list of political discussions people get most passionate about.

¹⁰O. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/huge-demand-government-take-action-workers-rights-tuc-poll-reveals>

Labour can look to link together tackling crime with building stronger communities. While Labour lags behind the Conservative's by 34% to 25% as the party best placed to handle Crime generally,¹¹ they beat the Conservative's by 42% to 39% on the party best placed to "keep communities safe".¹²

Labour is still perceived of as a communitarian party, so finding ways to combine a message which links 'stronger communities' with "safer communities" would appeal strongly to those voters who have moved away from Labour in recent years.

'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' reframed this issue in the 1990s – the party needs to find a similar mantra which encapsulates its commitment to local communities in the 2020s.

In a similar vein, one area for Labour to investigate as it grapples with these questions is the extent to which it becomes an unabashed champion of more localist policy solutions. The politics of place – where people live, the widespread sense of neglect and decline across large parts of the UK, the quality of local services – has assumed a new importance for people, and Johnson is committed to making 'levelling up' a touchstone of his premiership. Labour has to remake itself as the party of local community empowerment and an effective political agent of change on the ground.

The LGA Labour Group polling suggests that Labour is already well-placed across a series of key local dividing lines, being seen as the party most likely to 'protect public services that the most vulnerable rely on' (54% of respondents), 'stand up to powerful interests' (46%) and 'keep communities safe' (43%).¹³

"When I was younger there used to be youth clubs and things, there isn't anything anymore, and they wonder why people end up committing crimes"

11. <https://www.opinium.com/resource-center/uk-voting-intention-8th-july-2021/>

12. LGA Labour Group private polling conducted by the Campaign Company, September 2021

13. Ibid

10. LABOUR NEEDS TO BE SEEN AS ECONOMICALLY COMPETENT

But even if Labour can convince the public that they are in touch with their concerns it doesn't count for much if people don't see the party as being competent enough to run an effective government.

“I think Labour are for the people, because a recession usually follows them being in government, doesn't it”

Our polls shows that just 28% think Labour is capable of being a strong government, compared to 48% who think it isn't. While the Conservatives may have taken a substantial hit on competency over the past few months, this won't have an impact until Labour builds up its own reputation for being able to govern effectively.

Our research shows the most important area for Labour to demonstrate this is on the economy. Nearly 13 years on from the financial crash, Labour has failed to make up lost ground on economic competence. Our poll shows only 27% of voters think that Labour would

be the most trustworthy party to handle the economy, compared to 41% who would trust the Conservatives.

This is despite the fact that the public have clearly become more economically interventionist. In 2009, 52% would have preferred spending cuts as a method of deficit reduction, compared to 30% preferring a rise in taxation to plug the gap. Fast forward a decade and just 27% would prefer to see the deficit reduced via spending cuts compared to 47% favouring tax rises.

Our polling shows the main reason for this juxtaposition is the lingering strong belief that Labour 'would increase the debt and deficit by spending too much money'. Nearly half (46%) said this was the main reason they still didn't trust Labour to run the economy. Even at a local level, polling from the LGA Labour Group showed that 48% of voters thought Labour was seen as the party more likely to 'bankrupt the council' compared to 39% who thought it was the Conservatives.¹⁴

While people now reject the idea of austerity and better appreciate the importance of a well-funded state, they are still strong advocates of 'balancing the books' – and don't believe Labour is capable of doing it.

Polling by YouGov has also shown the Conservatives hold a substantial lead on the question of which party can best deal with the deficit. Their most recent poll shows that 34% trust the Conservatives compared to 13% who picked Labour.¹⁵

“They need a budget plan, basically. I'm going to do this, ok, well where are you going to find the money from?”

¹⁴. LGA Labour Group private polling conducted by the Campaign Company, September 2021
¹⁵. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/which-government-would-be-better-at-tackling-the-deficit>

Our focus groups also spent a lot of time discussing how much of a barrier this was to people supporting Labour. One participant told us ‘They do like to spend, the Labour Party, when Gordon Brown was in he got us into loads of issues with money, from what I remember’. Another added that ‘They want to spend too much without getting that money there in the first place’ while a third thought that ‘Labour will just look at spending, rather than generating’.

But given the challenges facing Britain in the coming decades, as well as the desire from the public for better public services, Labour can’t go into the next election without a bold offer that includes increasing the size of the state.

So how does it get around this problem?

Firstly, as discussed above, criticising the Conservatives for wasting taxpayer’s money can help narrow their advantage in this area.

“It’s ok me saying I am going to spend x amount on this, it’s like me saying I’m going to buy a Prada handbag when I’ve got 20p in my bank account, the two don’t tally”

Secondly, where Labour does put forward public spending proposals, the offer needs to be seen as affordable, achievable, and in-line with the public’s priorities. We tested a range of policy options in our poll to see what might meet those criteria.

The options that performed best were ‘Hiring 20,000 more nurses and 8,000 more GPs’, ‘Hiring 20,000 more

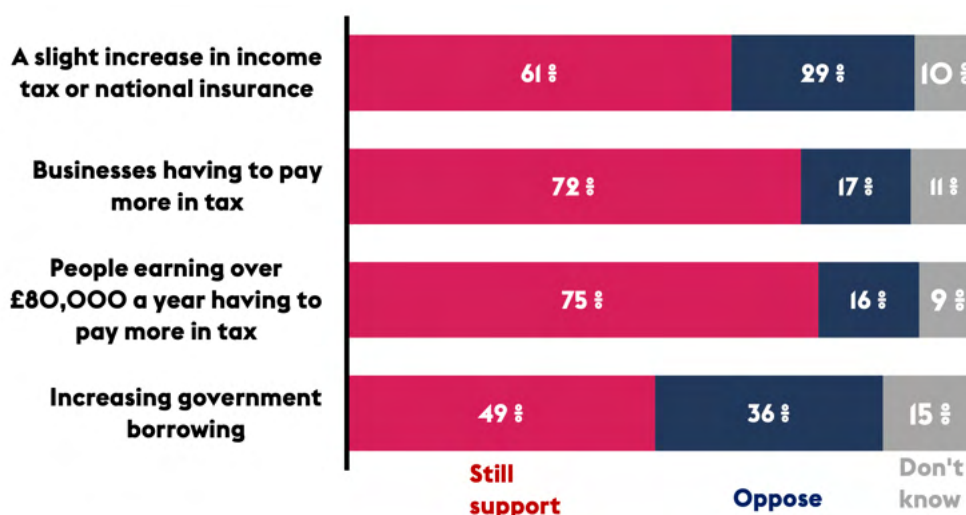
police officers’, and ‘Cutting class sizes for primary school children so there are never more than 30 people in a class’. At the other end of the spectrum, soft Conservative voters are more likely to think that ‘Introducing free broadband’ is unaffordable and unachievable, than affordable and achievable.

Finally, Labour needs to make it clear how it is going to raise extra money without increasing borrowing or relying on a ‘magic money tree’. The public still respond negatively to the latter, perhaps even more so now that people are worried about how the costs from the pandemic are going to be paid.

This could be done through extra tax rises, with our poll showing that this would be preferable to increased borrowing. For example, the public would still support more money being spent on public services, even if it meant ‘A slight increase in income tax or national insurance’ 61% to 29%.

“That’s what makes people not believe them when they say they are going to put x into that or whatever. Tell us where you are going to get the money from, then we might believe them without going into another recession in 10 years”

Would you still support more money on public services with?



Even more significantly, the public supports an increase in spending on public services even if it means 'Businesses having to pay more in tax' (72% to 17%) or 'People earning over £80,000 a year having to pay more in tax' (75% to 16%).

There is much less support if it means 'Increasing government borrowing', with just 49% in support compared to 36% opposed. If you were to mix this in with Labour's poor reputation on extra borrowing, these numbers would likely be even worse.

However, as recent events have shown, tax rises that poll well in the abstract can face a harsher reaction when they collide with reality. Raising national insurance for social care and the NHS polled very well in our poll, with 54% saying they would be 'delighted' or 'happy' if it happened, compared to just 14% who said they would be 'upset' or 'angry'. Polling taken after the Conservatives announced a similar policy showed a collapse in support, with a poll from Opinium showing just 33% in support compared to 45% opposed.¹⁶

The likely reason for this is that the public are always going to look for a reason to oppose a tax rise once it's announced, particularly if it affects them personally. In this case, the reason voters turned against it was related to fairness, with one poll showing that 50% thought the policy was unfair, compared to just 34% who thought it was fair.

There are two clear lessons to learn from this. Firstly, any tax rises Labour puts forward need to be viewed as fair and progressive, with those who are most able to pay facing the largest burden. Secondly, voters can turn against tax rises very quickly, so any proposals need to be bullet proof.

¹⁶. <https://order-order.com/2021/09/08/exclusive-poll-45-oppose-national-insurance-rise-versus-33-support-opiniumresearch/>

But this is clearly only half of the answer. The voters in our focus groups were sceptical of Labour as a party committed to 'growth'. One said that 'Labour just wanted to spend the money before they had even earned it', while another said that the biggest thing that would convince them Labour could be trusted was if they heard more from the party about 'how they would grow that pool of money'.

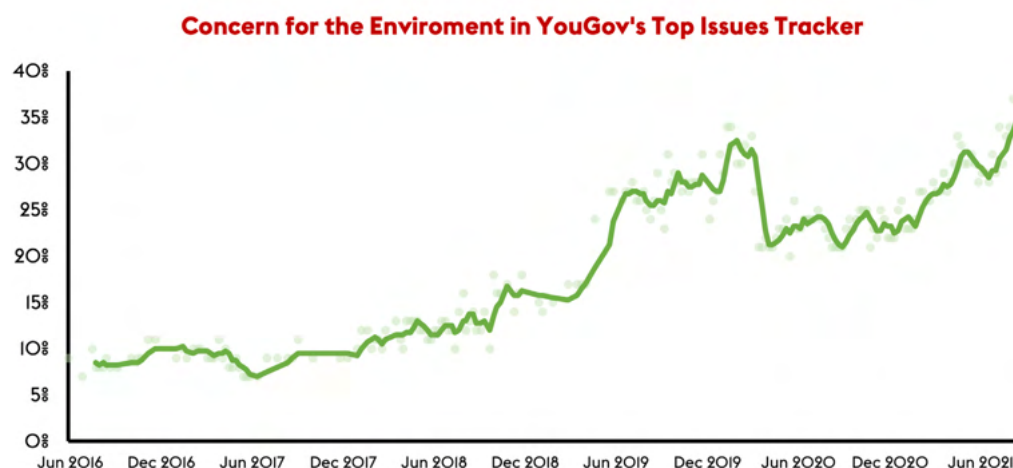
One way Labour might be able to do this is by talking more about the problems that will face the economy in the future. Many people we spoke to were nervous about the effects automation would have on the future of work. One participant (who had previously been responsible for managing cash at a supermarket) had been laid off that day because her job had been replaced 'by a machine'.

11. A COMPELLING – AND REALISTIC – ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY MIGHT HELP

While Labour needs to broaden its appeal to soft Conservative voters, they must also ensure that they keep left leaning liberal voters onside. While these voters are less likely to live in target seats, there are still enough in these areas to hold Labour back if they defect to the Greens in sufficient numbers. A recent poll showed as many as one in seven 2019 Labour voters said they would vote Green in an election tomorrow.¹⁷

The most obvious way to keep them onside is a traditional squeeze message, making it clear that Labour is the only party that can beat the Tories in those marginal seats. But for that to work Labour still needs to be seen as different enough from the Conservatives and exciting enough to motivate this segment to turnout.

An obvious answer is for Labour to have a bold offer on the environment. Climate change has surged up the issues index in recent years. Before the 2017 election, only around one in ten picked it out as a top issue facing Britain. In a recent YouGov poll, 34% picked it out as one of their top three issues.¹⁸ The voters on Labour's left, who have been flirting with the Green Party in recent polls, are also more likely to pick climate change out as a top issue.



Our polling showed that the two main reasons given for why people don't trust the Conservatives on climate change is because the party is too close to polluting industries, and because has been in power for over ten years without doing enough. Labour should frame its position on the environment to exploit this public mistrust and emphasise the difference between the two parties.

17. https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/l8pxgji8rh/TheTimes_VI_Results_210909_W.pdf
18. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country>

Labour needs to put forward a compelling policy offer, demonstrating how they would guarantee Britain meets its ambitious climate change targets.

While soft Tory voters care about the issue less than Labour voters, our polling shows that six in ten (59%) believe that “man-made climate change is a real issue, and it is as bad as often described” and would be willing to agree to bold policies in this area; by 58% to 24% they would support climate policies that ‘limited the amount of times you were allowed to fly abroad each year’. However, by 43% to 22%, they would oppose any policies that had a negative impact on their own personal finances.

This policy offer also needs to be realistic, reconciling the urgency of the climate crisis with a fair transition to greener jobs and industries, helping affected communities through the process.

CONCLUSIONS

Polling clearly shows how challenging it is for Labour to rebuild its brand after 11 years in opposition. However, given the volatility of voters there is no reason to think that this can't be achieved within a single term – as long as it ruthlessly tries to win the support of 'soft' Conservative voters.

In order to achieve this, our research shows that Labour needs to set out a clearer vision for the country – on that recognises and seeks to accommodate voter's concerns, particularly on issues around the workplace, welfare, and crime. It also needs to regain a reputation for economic competence by proving it can be prudent enough to be trusted with the nation's finances.

Over the coming years it needs to build a consistent critique that the government have wasted taxpayer's money through incompetence, a decade of austerity, and too close relationships with business.

And finally, while ruthlessly targeting these voters, Labour does still need to ensure it keeps its progressive voters on side and gives them a reason to vote at the next election. A compelling – but realistic – offer on the environment would be one of the best ways of doing this without alienating some of the voters Labour needs to win over. Such an offer also needs to be realistic, reconciling the urgency of the climate crisis with a fair transition to greener jobs and industries, helping affected communities through the process.

This doesn't provide all the answers, and many of these areas will require more research. However, we hope it provides a good starting point to help rebuild the Labour Party's relationship with the Nation, win the next general election and begin the process of rebuilding the country.

This paper was commissioned to provide a snapshot of the challenges and opportunities facing the Labour Party in the late summer/autumn of 2021 – and as a first point of reference for Progressive Britain activity looking ahead to 2022. It builds on data from a range of sources, including the results of the 2019 general election, and publicly available polling from a range of organisations – including the British Election Study, Ipsos Mori, YouGov and Opinium Research. It also quotes, with permission, from private research undertaken for the LGA Labour Group by the Campaign Company.

To fill in the gaps, Opinium ran two focus groups in August 2021, convening 15 people who voted Conservative in 2019 but are now open to voting Labour.

Opinium also conducted a poll of 2500 adults from across the UK between 19 and 23 August. The data was weighted to be representative by age, gender, region, occupation group, car ownership, education, and past voting behaviour (i.e., the 2019 general election and the 2016 EU referendum).

Progressive Britain is the new platform for policymaking, political education and imaginative thinking to rebuild Labour and the nation. Firmly rooted in the Labour Party, we are dedicated to national renewal and the intellectual revitalisation of the centre-left

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