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Make Stuff Cost Less

The politics of making life affordable

Quietly, as the drought of the long cost-of-living crisis continued throughout all of 2026, a four word campaign slogan from North Carolina spread around the world, almost imperceptibly outwards, from the south eastern coast of the USA. Very different from Trump's 'Make America Great Again' or Starmer's the UK needs "Growth Growth Growth", "Make Stuff Cost Less" was simple, meaningful, and may possibly be more effective.

"Make Stuff Cost Less" was the four word campaign slogan of the Democratic Party candidate for North Carolina, Roy Cooper. By August 2026 Cooper was nine points ahead in the polls. This is despite being attacked by the US media which has tried, and so far failed, to ridicule his aim: 'He wants to "Make Stuff Cost Less." He promises to take on insurance companies and stand up for working families. Both say little and mean even less' claimed one journalist writing in his local *Charlotte Observer*.[1]

The cost-of-living-crisis is a never ending drought, which we have been in for many years. It stretches forwards as far as the eye can see, and we increasingly find it hard to remember what life was life like before it began, before the pandemic. This is not just true in the USA, but also in the UK. Cooper's campaign, which began with that slogan in January 2026, has been noticed and used in the UK too. It is, in effect, the basis for much of Andy Burnham's messaging and his, and his colleagues, actions since he became UK Prime Minister.

As the BBC reported on August 10th: 'Burnham, who is embarking on a tour of the UK while Parliament is in recess, has promised a series of "everyday fixes" to help people with the cost of living. He said: "I'm determined to pull every single lever we can to provide people with some room to breathe on the cost of living."'.[2] Each individual intervention is small. The one that accompanied that announcement was to bring forward an already existing promise to make it easier to exit a subscription agreement, for instance with you Internet provider. It followed his announcements of a £2 bus fare cap in England, and a VAT cut on household electricity bills (for all of the UK), as well as many smaller measures.

Just before Burnham became Prime Minister, the UK steel industry was renationalised without compensation being paid to the former owners. Now we await what will happen to Thames Water and dozens of other failed privatisations where the owners of the assets try to hold the government to ransom by claiming that if the industry is nationalised, then the UK government will have to take on their debt too. So far that has not been the case with British Steel.

In North Carolina the issues are different, starting with 'Support Our Farmers and Stop Chaotic Tariffs'.[3] The tariffs that Trump has introduced are, in effect, a huge consumer tax on US citizens, making them pay far more for basic goods and some services than they used to. The revenue he raises from his new taxes allows Trump to invest in his various wars abroad, but those interventions also make stuff cost more and more, not just for folk in the USA, but worldwide.

The pledges in the USA include introducing things which are already law in the UK such as: 'Ban algorithms on grocery pricing to make it illegal for companies to raise the price of groceries based on a specific customer.' There is also a great deal about health costs in Roy Cooper's promises which thankfully are not needed in the UK as we have only partially privatized the NHS. However, Burnham is likely to turn his attention to how private providers cost the NHS so much. He needs promise after promise, and action after action, if he is to sustain his equivalent of "Make Stuff Cost Less" in the UK. He needs to out-run the press and be relentless.

At the core of this new message is an argument for more state intervention in peoples' lives, and especially in controlling markets so that they are not used to make most people poorer to the benefit of a tiny few who become richer when bus fares are not controlled, when your subscriptions for utilities can be auto-renewed at higher prices, when private companies can buy national assets and load them with debt. Politically it is an appeal to suggest that the large majority of people would fare better putting their faith in a more interventionist state, even though the interventions are largely about the minutiae of life and against “rip off Britain”.

All this will require a rebalancing of costs, of who has what to spend. You cannot cut VAT costs on fuels and do other things that reduce the money government has coming in and assume that everything else will operate well. If government were to do that, then national debt would have to rise and/or the pound reduce in value. If national debt rises we end up paying more to the wealthy people (and their pension funds) who have enough money to buy bonds. If the pound falls in value then the cost of all the food and medicines that we have to import, and much more, rises.

The obvious way of curtailing the costs of a little redistribution towards the large majority is to tax the rich a little more. This is not about treating the national accounts as if they were a household budget. It is about realising that there is short-term fixed supply of resources. If, for example, you would like more of your country’s electricians fixing the dangerous wiring in older buildings owned by people with little money, then you need fewer of them installing pumps and under-water lighting in the swimming pools of multi-millionaires. In a market economy (like the UK’s) you achieve that with greater taxation of multi-millionaires.

As the campaign group ‘Tax Justice’ explain: ‘a 2% levy on individuals who own assets worth more than £10 million – it would affect 0.04% of the UK population and would raise £24 billion a year.’[4] For the 99.96% of us who do not hold assets worth this much there is still plenty of scope for a small redistribution of wealth that would increase the spending power of the large majority of people and help take huge numbers of children out of poverty. A proportional property tax has been mooted, similar to the one already in place in Ireland (and in much of the USA). Most people would be better-off under one that raised more taxes than council tax. Under the new rules applied to private landlords in May 2026 they would not be allowed to pass the tax on to their tenants.

The various objections to all these actions have been heard repeatedly and can all quite easily be argued against. However, the media is mostly owned by the very well off which is why we hear, again and again, that there is no alternative. That argument, that we must just live with this until a rising tide lifts all boats, is now synonymous with the 'Make American Great Again' slogan which has out-lived its more than a dozen years of use. Trump came up with his slogan in 2012.[5] It is the old unpopular rhetoric of Starmer and his "Growth Growth Growth" talk, first introduced on the 25 July 2022,[6] after which his popularity plummeted and plummeted. The alternative now to "Make Stuff Cost Less" working is a Reform government of one kind or another.

These arguments are being made more and more widely across Europe now, not just in the USA and UK. In Germany, Isabella Weber's 'Anti-Fascist Economics' is receiving growing attention. Her book with that title will be published in October. Her message is clear, if Germany does not control its costs-of-living, then a far-right party will gain power in Germany. She has served as a member of the German government's gas price commission, and in 2025 was appointed by the Conservative Chancellor to be a member of the expert commission to advising the Finance minister on tax, spending and debt policy. Across the western world there is now a battle between a combination of the far-right and the old Thatcherite economics of privatization – verses hope. German Conservatives and the British Labour party have a more and more similar outlook.

Often the policies being presented appear technocratic in the UK, such as: 'Revisit the intuitional arrangements of the Bank of England and Treasury to allow greater coordination of monetary and fiscal policy, including dropping or redesigning the debt stock fiscal rule'; or 'restructure the UK's tax system to raise revenue, reduce complexity and shift the weight of tax revenue away from earnings'. Others sound sensible but boring: 'Recognise formally the investment and stimulus potential of public services – to make, among other things, the real costs of inaction on social care clear (at the moment only the costs not the benefits of spending on social services are accounted for).' However, these are unlikely to be how these policies are presented – which will be more pithy and pragmatic.

There will be another debate on social care and how the elderly are, or are not, cared for. But it will be in terms of who will lift you from the floor when you fall out of bed in your old age. What may also be different this time is that there needs to be as much action as talk. The mood is different now because something has changed: things cost too much and are stuck costing too much. If we don’t use the public sector and public intervention to make them cost less, the only alternative on the table for most people is to vote for the false promises of those backed by billioniares, on the grounds that anything is better than this.

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Prof. Danny Dorling

*As the cost-of-living crisis shows no sign of easing, **Danny Dorling** argues that the political message of "Make Stuff Cost Less" could offer a powerful alternative to the failed promises of endless growth. Danny Dorling, the 1971 Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford, examines how state intervention could reduce everyday costs and reshape the political landscape.*

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TAX JUSTICE

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■ www.dannydorling.org
@dannydorling

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