

## The last of the summer whine

‘The refrain we hear again and again is “*We have to be electable.*” *No one disagrees. But is that actually what’s happening?*’<sup>1</sup> asked Jamie Driscoll, when barred from running as the Labour candidate to become the North East (of England) mayor in May 2024. The result would normally be a shoo-in for Labour, but Driscoll may now stand as an independent. Fewer than half of the local Labour members eligible to vote bothered to vote for any of the candidates they were allowed to select from. They had been presented with a shortlist of two, which excluded Driscoll, the Mayor of North Tyne.

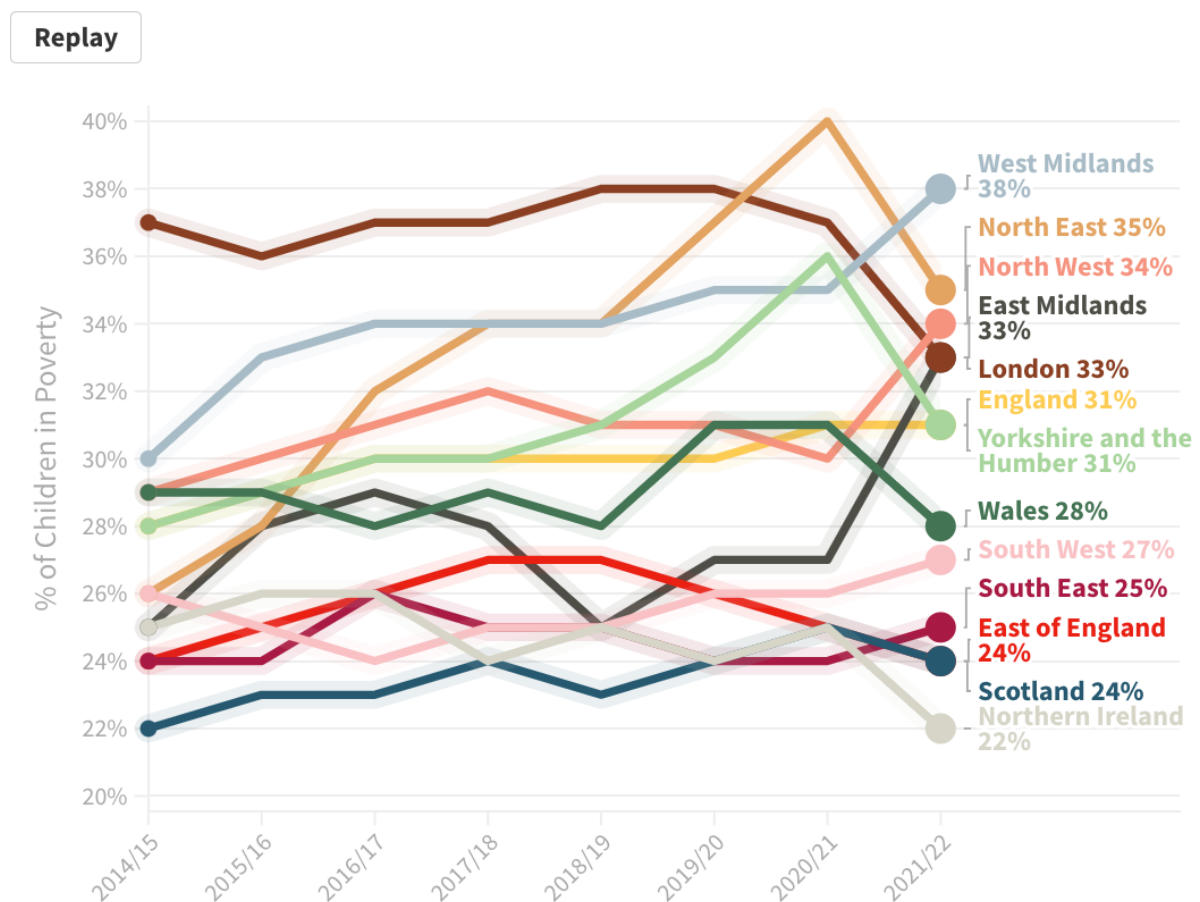
If he does stand, Driscoll will be up against McGuinness whose campaign pledge was: ‘*As your Labour mayor, my number one priority will be ending child poverty. It’s an absolute tragedy that the North East has the highest rate of child poverty in the country and I’ll do everything in my power to change that. For starters, every request for mayoral funding will have to outline exactly what that money will do to help end child poverty in the region.*’<sup>2</sup> Ending child poverty was a pledge made long ago by Tony Blair, another politician who represented a nearby part of the North East of England. Voters may remember what little that policy achieved. The aim had been to somehow achieve it without reducing economic inequalities . A million children moved ever so slightly over a statistical line that few could feel. But that mattered not while the upper middle class left loved Sure Start Centres, which New Labour kept alive as communities collapsed around them. Sure Start was imposed from above rather than grown from below.

In 1984, very near to where I first went to school, a centre was opened in Donnington in Oxford. That was the year in which the miners’ strike began and when the state was most rapidly withdrawing from public life. It was started by a group of mums,

including my mum.<sup>3</sup> It is still there. Donnington Doorstep will be forty years old next year. Long after the politicians stop bragging about what they have achieved and what their opponents haven't, long after we have forgotten countless different narrations 'we have to be electable', what will remain is what we fight for with the greatest hope. What has died is what we didn't realise to be under threat.

Consider where highest proportion of children are now growing up in poverty:

### Child poverty across nations and regions 2014/15 to 2021/22



Source: [End Child Poverty Coalition](#)

See: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/blog/where-is-child-poverty-increasing-in-the-uk/>

Child poverty may be highest in the North East of England and the West Midlands, but it is also now higher in affluent South East England (in the region that contains Oxford), than in all of Scotland and Northern Ireland. No one in 1984 would have believed you had you suggested such an outcome were possible four decades after Thatcher's men trod on the necks of the miners. The South East lost too, as did all of England. Child poverty is now so much lower in Scotland than its two English geographical neighbours. One child fewer in every ten is now growing up in poverty in Scotland today as compared to both the North East and North West of England.<sup>4</sup> As I type, child poverty in Scotland is plummeting because the £25 a week Scottish Child Payment for all children who are poor and under 16 kicks in there throughout 2023 – that enhanced payment began to be made in November of 2022.

Scotland fought back. England didn't. Scotland is still fighting. In June 2023 its ministers pledged to reduce the need to use food banks within three years by introducing a human rights approach to providing cash and hence dignity.<sup>5</sup> There is now a huge difference between pledges made in Scotland and those made in England. At its core that difference is intent. The Scots really do mean to do it. Tony Blair did not. Had he meant to, he would have done so. It is easier to reduce inequality and poverty than it is to go to war. Unlike most European leaders he joined America's war. Unlike almost all of them, he did not reduce inequality and poverty.

New Labour still has its cheerleaders: *'Labour's leader had a strategy mapped out from day one, and nothing has distracted him from it: two years to fix the party, ruthlessly expunging any who damage it; a set of five cast-iron missions; and fiscal discipline, avoiding all spending traps ahead of the manifesto.'*<sup>6</sup> This *'...is the time to remember May 1997'* the cheerleaders say. But some of us remember 1997 differently to others – the promises, the hope, the exhilaration of the Conservatives being shown the door after 18 years, and then Mrs Thatcher in Hampshire five years later being able to list as her greatest achievement: 'Tony Blair and New Labour'.<sup>7</sup>

What are the ‘five cast iron missions’ of New Labour in 2023? Here is a summary:

- 1: Highest sustain growth in the G7 (a watered down version of George Osborne’s 2015 pledge).
2. Make Britain a clean energy superpower (very similar to Theresa May’s climate pledge of 2019).
3. Build an NHS fit for the future (Boris Johnson’s 40 new hospitals 2020 promise, but even vaguer).
4. Make Britain’s street safe (Tony Blair’s ‘tough on crime’ 1993 promise repeated often and in 2021).
5. Break barriers to opportunity (copyright Rishi Sunak, and his ‘spreading opportunity’ 2022 mission).

Labour do promise a few things that are a little different to what the Conservatives offer, such as removing some tax exemptions from private schools, including exemptions from VAT and relief on business rates. But the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimate that this would only raise tax revenues by about £1.6 billion, would hardly reduce the state-private divide at all, and result in just an extra £100–300 million a year cost from extra state school usage.<sup>8</sup> These numbers are economic policy chicken-feed and do not address the core reasons why the UK has the most divided education system of all affluent countries – its high levels of economic inequality maintaining a small group who can afford the fees and the disregard for state provision from those who do not use it for their own children, or have children.

Labour in 2023 just don’t plan to be that different. They did not in 1997. They say nothing about repealing the Refugee Ban Bill which means that survivors of torture are terrified of what the future holds. When they attack the Conservatives for their proposals in The House of Commons, the Home Secretary can reply: *‘As ever from Labour, there is no alternative plan, and moreover, it does not care that it has no alternative plan.’*<sup>9</sup> When the Financial Fairness tracker in July 2023 found that *‘in the last month, one-in-eight social tenants (13%) and one-in-twelve private tenants (8%) had not eaten for a whole day for three or more occasions, because they did not have not enough money for food,’* Labour can offer only *‘economic growth’*. The normally, reserved Equality Trust lead its July 2023 bulletin with the headline: *‘When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich’*<sup>10</sup>

This promised growth, Labour's 2023 internet, is a kind of Woke Capitalism, and Woke is profitable. Policies of inclusion, tolerance, and diversity are beneficial to business. They widen the customer base as all are welcome; reduce risk in terms of bad publicity, reputational damage and/or costly legal settlements; and do not cost much. Larger brand-conscious companies become especially more progressive, and New Labour – so that blue skies thinking goes – can be too. It is led by younger people as time goes on, people who are relatively comfortable with the social progress of recent decades.

As the social commentator #Max12to1 so astutely pointed out in the summer of 2023: *'if they aren't comfortable with social progress, then their kids probably will be, and they will pester their CEO Mum or Dad in that confident private-school manner. They will know who Greta Thunberg is and that their futures are bleak unless things change.'* Max did acknowledge that: *'these are all positive developments, that it is now impossible to see how "woke capitalism" can be walked back: "Walked back to what? A narrower customer base? A toxic workplace full of racism, sexism, and bullying? Endless scandal and massive legal costs?"* But went on to point out that *'And best of all for those who run big business, Woke is cheap. Woke doesn't concern itself with pay ratios. Woke doesn't have much to say on how a business is owned or run. The dividends keep flowing, the bosses get millions, and the cleaners get buttons. A bit more money may have to be spent on the Human Resources (HR) function and on the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme, but the business fundamentals are left in place. Rank unfairness remains, and social and class differences are preserved. Keep calm and carry on exploiting... Woke capitalism may be better than what went before, but it's not nearly enough. Until we radically change business ownership, and make companies more equitable and more democratic, then #inequality and #poverty will continue to blight our economy and society.'*

So, what will the Conservatives do when faced with a Woke onslaught? Expect much more talk of small boats, of putting the hard-working working-class car driver first, of Labour being the 'Party of Extinction Rebellion' and, as Jamie Driscoll pointed out, much more questioning over what is actually happening.

Three by-elections were held on a single day in July 2023. The Tories won one, because young people who might have voted Labour didn't bother to turn out. The young are very astute at sniffing out fake Wokery. The Liberals won another, as they can expect to do in the huge number of seats in which they are currently placed second, or even a close third. Labour won just one. It does not matter so much where you stand in the polls between general elections. If you are relying on the old folk of Selby in North Yorkshire, you are in trouble, because the message you peddle to them will not enthuse the young, and then the old may start to see through it too.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Jamie Driscoll (2023) Labour voters are disillusioned with the party. Their support since my resignation proves it, The London Guardian, 18 July, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/18/labour-voters-party-support-resignation-mayor-jamie-driscoll>

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Holland (2023) Kim McGuinness wins race to be Labour's candidate for North East mayor in historic 2024 election, The Newcastle Chronicle, 17 July, <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/kim-mcguinness-labour-mayor-election-27337379>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://vanderbilthustler.com/2020/09/14/eat-the-rich-how-an-18th-century-phrase-has-made-a-comeback/>

# THE LAST OF THE SUMMER WHINE

Danny Dorling is an English social geographer and academic. Since 2013, he has been Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography of the School of Geography and the Environment of the University of Oxford. He is the author of 'Shattered Nation' being published by Verso on September 19th.

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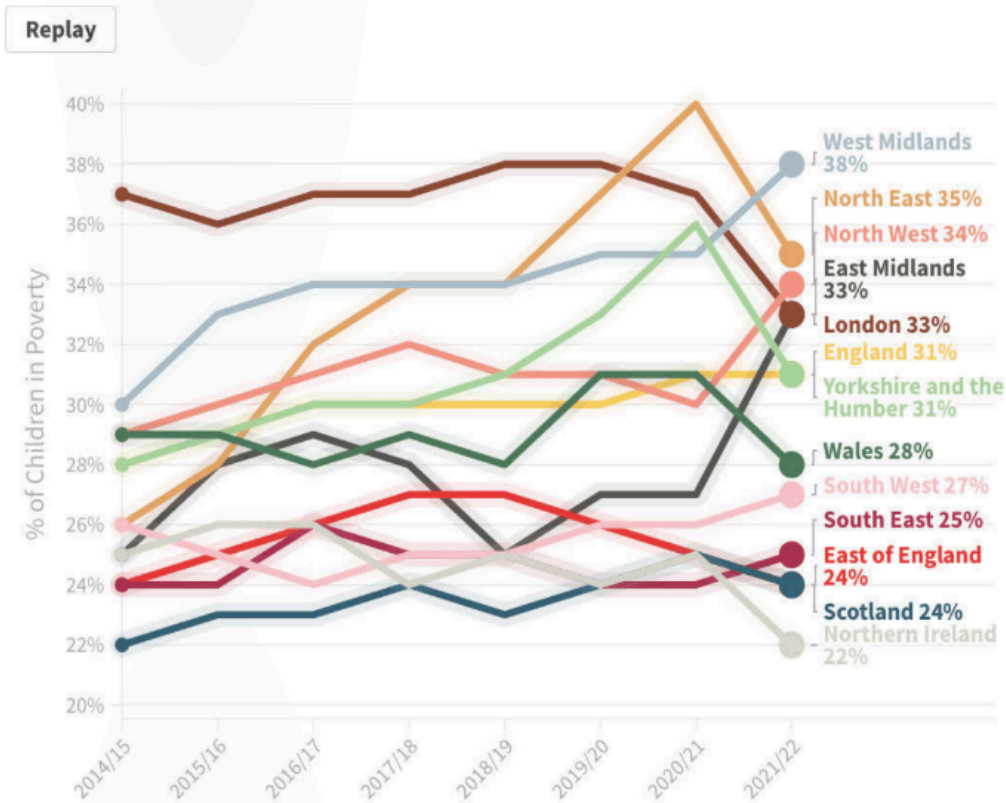
Prof Danny Dorling

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