

York Student Think Tank (YSTT) Presents:



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CIVITAS POLICY JOURNAL
VOLUME I

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Foreword

Louis Kent
Director of Journals

For nearly a year and a half, I had the pleasure of acting as the Director of Journals for York Student Think Tank. Having participated in the society since my first year at university, I was always enchanted by the society's purpose in providing an inviting, non-partisan introduction to politics, and in its dedication to teaching policymaking as an art and a skill. More so than anything, my participation has been a learning experience - how to translate an idea or a vision into political reality. Although I have now departed from this position, I certainly hope that I played even a small role in imparting these experiences to others who have joined the society since.

While running the Cortado Journal and, now, the Civitas News Journal, it always occurred to me that this society was in a unique position to offer something special in the realm of student journalism. It felt natural that the highly developed literary skills of our writers should be combined with our technical knowledge of policy. Thus, the Civitas Policy Journal was born as a key mission of the previous committee. This journal aims not to be politically neutral but politically pluralist, offering views from across the political spectrum insofar as they are well justified according to the parameters of policymaking. Far from being opinion pieces, these articles intend to provide practical solutions to practical problems.

The ideas expressed in this journal, therefore, do not reflect the political leanings of York Student Think Tank itself. Indeed, we maintain our position as a politically non-partisan society. However, the quality of these articles have been rigorously assured by our editors and in collaboration with the new Director of Journals, Roma, without whom this journal would not be possible. I'd like to offer special thanks as well to all our writers, mostly full time students who have taken the time to express their expertise through the medium of policy and allow their articles to be published in this journal. Finally, I'd like to offer another special thanks to Benjamin Abtan, an experienced and educated policy specialist who has kindly decided to contribute a special edition to our new journal, boosting its credibility and status and hopefully enticing new students to write for this society.

It has been a great honour to bring the completed Civitas Policy Journal, and I thank you warmly for taking the time to read it.

Louis Kent

May 2025

SPECIAL EDITION - How to Educate about Race and Identity?

Benjamin Abtan

Abstract

This article explores innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching about race and identity in a global classroom, informed by experiences from the US, France, Rwanda, Ukraine, Armenia and Italy with over 1,000 students from over 70 countries. Embracing an emotionally engaged methodology, the course highlights the importance of personal narratives and emotions in understanding racial and cultural identities. The facilitator's role, focused on process over content, enhances students' engagement and helps them find their own voice. Adopting a global approach, the course helps understand the global nature of race and identity. Taking into account the centrality of the ecological catastrophe, it proposes solutions to do better thanks to experiences of resilient local communities worldwide and the learnings of Transitional Justice.

Introduction

I have been teaching about race and identity to over 1,000 students from over 70 countries in the US, France, Rwanda, Ukraine and Italy. Here are my main observations, learnings, and recommendations.

Emotions First

Identities are personal, intimate. This explains the strong emotional load related to identity topics beyond their social, political and geopolitical stakes. How to speak about intimacy in public? This is a challenge for all, especially when the public debate is full of symbolic violence as is the case when it comes to identity.

My students start the course with little capacity to manage the intense emotions they feel during conversations about race and identity. Their first instinct is to use the language of Black Lives Matter. For example, “White” students usually start by “acknowledging their privileges and leaving space for underrepresented voices” or by shutting down; when “Colored” students take the floor, they are always followed by several supporting statements; everybody rushes to point out that racism is systemic and institutional, present in the very institutions in which we learn together. They probably expect to get symbolic and self-image benefits. As a result, they get protected from the intrusion of violence into their intimacy but they also prevent themselves from having a real discussion.

I do not shy away from addressing the emotional dimension of race and identity. I keep in mind that “emotions and feelings constitute the driving force for the group life,” as Lawrence and Maryann Phillips observe. The first exercise I propose is to write the memory of the first time in their life when they realized they have a racial / cultural identity, and how they felt about it. Then, I ask them to discuss with another student before having a collective debriefing. As a result, students not only intellectually understand the intimate and emotional aspects of identity, but they also experience them. They find their own way of speaking about it publicly, starting in the smallest public setting.

To do so, there is a challenge to overcome: to ensure that the energy released by the expression of these emotions does not destroy the group or its ability to learn. Therefore, I constantly pay attention to the “heat” within the group, as it is recommended in the Adaptive Leadership theory developed at Harvard by Professor Ronald Heifetz. This is a metaphorical reference to the amount of stress in the group: too low a level results in complacency, while too high a level overwhelms individuals and provokes strong resistance, both configurations impeding progress. If I feel that the “heat” is too high, I pace the work, steer toward less controversial issues, make sure more consensual voices are heard, and I use mine to that end. To evaluate the level of “heat” in the group, I observe several verbal and non-verbal indicators. Those corresponding to a high level include body language such as fixed facial expressions, downcast eyes, hands tied and legs crossed; participants frequently interrupting each other; only confrontational issues being raised; a small number of people speaking up while others maintain a tense silence or on the contrary many people speaking erratically; the use of a peremptory or tense tone,...

As I am part of the system, I also observe, interpret and use my own emotions. For example, I remember having a sleepless night the day before the third session of my course in the spring of 2023. Walking on my way to the classroom, I realized that what I was feeling was a deep fear – of not being able to make the group learn, of being put aside, of the quality of the exercises I had prepared for this session. Once in the classroom, as students entered and sat down in silence before the start time, I felt this even more strongly. I thus assumed that this fear was present in the room, for the students too, regarding their own challenges. So, I focused my attention on listening to their fears. I then modified the exercises I had prepared, which led to a breakthrough in the group dynamic. As my blind spots, sensitivity and subjectivity influence my interpretations, I remain mindful of alternative perspectives I could have considered.

In terms of pedagogy, my courses are screen-free: no smartphone, no computer, no tablet. This makes all of us feel our emotions more intensively, thus be more able to work on and with them. I leave space for each individual to find his or her own voice. Concretely, I start each session by not speaking but by letting my students speak. They have only one constraint: to begin with something coming from the readings – be it a question, an idea, a quote,... During these student-led discussions, I pay special attention to not “correct” them. I favor their appropriation and the expression of their subjectivity, rather than an intellectual or

conceptual approach that would make it more difficult for them to take ownership of their emotions and find their own voice. If a debate arises, I make sure not to pick a side as I want them as a group to build together their capacity to have these public conversations. In that sense, I follow the recommendations of Norman Maier regarding group facilitation while having in mind the “paradox in facilitation” pointed by Terri Griffith, Mark Fuller and Gregory Northcraft: “the influence required to facilitate a group changes the group’s outcomes.” I address this paradox by striving for neutral facilitation and by practicing this effort. Lastly, I invite and protect underrepresented voices, which are hardly ever heard in the public debate, if at all.

As a result, after some sessions, students learn to move from a confrontation of stereotyped statements as is usual on social media to a mature discussion in which all of them take an active part. Surprising moments happen. For example, Camille, a 1st year BA student from France, shared in a collective debriefing: *“I feel I don’t have origins, because I come from the same village as my parents.”* Abdel, who has Algerian background, responded: *“Until you said this, I had always dreamt of coming from the same place as my parents. I thought it would be much easier in life not to feel the constant tension that I feel about my identity.”* Camille: *“I have felt strong tension regarding my identity too, for the exact opposite reasons.”* Students enhance their skills autonomously. I regularly encourage them to acknowledge this achievement and to continue practicing. Indeed, this capacity is not something that some people have and others do not have, but something that we have more the more we practice.

As a Teaching Position, Be with the Students, at Their Level

In order to give students the best opportunity to conduct this necessary emotional work, I have adopted the position of a facilitator as defined by Lawrence and Maryann Phillips: focused primarily on process and structure, rather than content. I am with my students, at their level.

Indeed, we are not talking about theoretical knowledge that someone possesses and would pass on to students, but of capacity that we all need to constantly develop. Of course, students need to acquire theoretical knowledge, and I ensure they do so through the course. Of course,

not everyone has the same ability to address race and identity. However, people are not divided into those who are totally racist or antisemitic and those who are not at all. Such thinking would be a rigid categorization that would mirror the logic of racism itself. We all belong to the same societies, so we are all exposed to racism. Our reactions may differ but we are all involved in the same collective movement, making similar efforts.

In terms of pedagogy, I share with my students my personal stories, my challenges. For example, I start the first class by stating *“I come from a family of Jews from southern Morocco who had to leave their country because of rising antisemitism. As a teenager, I got involved in civil society to bring about change and protect the most vulnerable ones from violence. Today, I mobilize my intercultural background and international experience to dismantle racism and resolve identity-based conflicts. I feel these are burning issues, for countries, societies and individuals.”* Instead of coming to the class only with answers, I also come with my unfinished business, my contradictions, my questions. I feel this approach embodies the attitude of constant efforts that I encourage them to adopt, lifts the paralyzing bad consciousness of not having all the “good” answers, and facilitates the transfer between them and me, which I use as precious fuel for pedagogy.

A Global Approach Is a Must to Address a Global Phenomenon

Unresolved academic debates continue about the origins of racism. Does it stem from a certain sense of superiority in Ancient Greece? From la “Limpieza de sangre” in Spain in the 17th century? From an instrumentalization of science in the 19th century? However, what is not debatable is that racism is a global phenomenon, with global roots and global effects.

In 2021, I had long discussions with my friend Denzel, an African-American very active for racial equity: *“the US are at the origin of racism. We invented racism in this country! This is scandalous.”* I strongly disagree with him. Behind the apparently very self-critical *“We are the worst in the world”*, I can hear an imperialistic *“We are the center of the world, for good or for bad.”* To dismantle racism and antisemitism, we need to understand their global natures and take into account the evolutions of their expressions around the globe.

In terms of pedagogy, I use examples and readings from different parts of the world. There is a challenge to it, as Western and English-speaking countries are way more covered by research. To overcome it, I mobilize researchers, academics, activists, political and community leaders in various countries. I know some of them thanks to my 25-year life commitment and my continuously renewed efforts to reach out to new ones. I invite them to share orally their experiences, observations and knowledge. This makes it possible to access the relevant content brought by those who do not write, or who write in a language that the students and I do not speak, or who write but are not published. I also make use of the cultural, national, and social diversity present in the classroom through the students, in encouraging them to share their knowledge while making sure that they do not act as institutional ambassadors of countries or cultures. This diversity can also be found in seemingly homogenous classes. For example, when I taught at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy, all students were Ukrainians, with similar skin colors and religious beliefs. We explored their territorial, linguistic, political, family and social differences, and used them as opportunities to be sensitive to international examples linked to these characteristics.

In my pedagogy, I also use global sources in the sense that I assign not only book chapters and scientific articles, but also songs, poems, novels, documentaries, fiction movies and speeches. Indeed, as racism has been present in our societies for centuries, its traces can be found in a variety of productions. Using non “classical” sources exemplifies the approach that I encourage my students to pursue. Indeed, only through innovative approaches can they drive meaningful change on identity-related issues.

The Ecological Catastrophe Is the Frame of All Issues

Listening to my students, I realized that the ecological catastrophe is for them a frame in which everything else takes place. This observation is in line with Bruno Latour’s work on the centrality of the ecological catastrophe, which forces us to reconsider all aspects of life. This frame is constantly tightening, which means for my students very practical questions that previous generations did not have to face: should they live near the water? Have children? Build a career around fighting the ecological catastrophe?

The ever-tightening frame causes ever greater tension in the system that we constitute as humans, alongside the other animals and living beings. In particular, this tension puts pressure on the categories of thought passed down by previous generations. Students respond to this pressure in two opposite ways. Most give in to it and get rid of these traditional categories, while others resist it and seek to reinforce them. The former ones circulate fluidly between genders, races and sexual orientations, while the latter ones oppose such fluidity. Politically, these groups are usually labelled “liberals” and “conservatives”, and they address race and identity in very different ways. Thus, how students respond to the pressure of the ecological catastrophe is strongly related to how they approach race and identity.

The growing pressure on the system has at least two additional consequences.

First, students feel a sense of urgency to address race and identity. They actively participate in class. This shared sentiment may also mean potential danger at a global scale: indeed, a social crisis like the ecological catastrophe is one of the three conditions to create scapegoats, as identified by René Girard - the two other ones being accusations of universal crimes and the identification of a target group, which is often defined by race.

Moreover, the pressure exerted on the system leads some students to forcefully deconstruct the phenomena that have led us to the bad ecological situation we find ourselves in today, like the development model inherited from the Industrial Revolution, capitalism and slavery, together with the imperialisms, colonialisms, and racism that lie at their core. This deconstruction might sometimes take the form of what I would call “a trial of the past” which objective would be to take us back to “before”. As if it were possible to erase the negative aspects of the past we inherit and create a purer, better present in doing so.

I perceive here the potential for a dangerous quest for purity. Dangerous, first of all, because it is not possible to erase the past. It is a fantasy, as is the representation of the past at play. Instead of being trapped into this fantasy, we should face today’s challenge: “taking into account the past that we inherit from, what can we do today to make a better future?” If we stray onto other challenges, we waste precious time and energy. The quest for purity is also dangerous because it sometimes directs resentment for centuries of wrongdoings committed by many actors against certain people and organizations today. That can lead to the justification of hatred and oppression.

In terms of pedagogy, I need to do a better job of integrating the ecological catastrophe into my teaching, although I feel that most of the tools I introduce are relevant to tackling it. For example, when we explore policy change, we study the attribution of personhood status to the Te Urewera Park in New Zealand. This groundbreaking legal and political innovation has provided protection to the park, to the indigenous Tūhoe people whose homeland it is, and to its other non-human inhabitants, and has been an inspiration worldwide.

How to do better? Let's get Inspired by Local communities and Transitional Justice

Students want solutions. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix nor ready-to-be-used toolbox that would have been acquired by previously-trained practitioners to provide short-term results. Rather, I propose to them an unsatisfactory objective: to do better, “imbere heza” (“for a better future” in Kinyarwanda) as the motto of the Association of Former Students Survivors of Genocide in Rwanda (GAERG) says.

Around the world, various resilient post-conflict local communities have made progress but have often been overlooked because of despise and lack of documentation. Since the 1990s, the actions that allow societies to transition from conflict, dictatorship or genocide to peaceful coexistence or democracy have been studied and conceptualized as Transitional Justice. My teaching builds on the experiences of these communities and on the theories and practices of Transitional Justice. It introduces impactful tools and frameworks, and explores how they can be adapted to develop methodologies rooted in local cultures to help companies, institutions, communities and societies dismantle racism and identity-based conflicts.

In terms of pedagogy, I use examples from periods ranging from prehistory to the present day, and of local communities from various countries and regions.

We have to keep in mind that none of these sources of inspiration brings a “perfect solution”, and that constant adaptation is necessary. Additionally, it is only through dialogue between the local and global levels that progress can be made. There is room for improvement that goes far beyond the limits of my courses, as this dialogue needs to be more structured, with more research than today.

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Beyond Health: The Renewed Debate Around Smoking In The UK

Henry Anderson

Abstract

Smoking, including the cigarette smoking of past legislation and the new dilemmas posed by vaping, has been a constant feature of UK policy and debate since the turn of the 21st century. The purpose of this essay is to explore this debate and the renewed policy discussion that has arisen since 2023, listing the wide range of legislation and government action that has been raised to tackle smoking. Once some idea of the current UK government's policy agenda has been ascertained, both sides of the policy debate surrounding smoking will be detailed and their supporting arguments debated and analysed. Following this an overall discussion will evaluate either side of the debate, and a conclusion will summarise the findings and make some final conclusions. With State responses to smoking in the UK being a divisive topic that goes beyond public health concerns, this essay will aim to capture that sentiment.

In October 2023, former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak made his headline speech at the Conservative Party Conference, outlining a plan to incrementally increase the legal age of smoking each year, with the aim of preventing anybody born after a certain point from buying cigarettes (BBC News, 2023). The following year in March, the Tobacco and Vapes government bill had its first reading in the House of Commons, proposing that no tobacco products could be sold to anyone born after January 2009, as well as shoring up existing legislation surrounding vape products (UK Parliament, 2024). However, following the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024 for the general election, this bill was aborted and made no further progress (UK Parliament, 2024).

Following a Labour victory in June 2024, the King's Speech outlined Labour plans to introduce a new Tobacco and Vapes Bill, with a progressive age increase on tobacco purchases and on vape marketing (HM Government, 2024). In the October budget, tobacco taxes were increased by 2% and a new flat rate tax on vaping liquid was set out to be introduced in October 2026 (BBC News, 2024). Finally in November 2024, a new Tobacco and Vapes Bill was introduced to the Commons, banning sale of cigarettes to anyone under 15 when passed and potentially extending the indoor smoking ban to outdoor areas (HM Government, 2024). Moreover, disposable vapes are set to be banned by June 2025 under separate legislation (HM Government, 2024). Over the course of a year, there has been renewed debate surrounding smoking in the UK, with a variety of proposed changes to its presence in people's everyday lives.

With regards to smoking, defined as incorporating both the smoked and vaporised forms of nicotine inhalation, the discussion on policy reaches beyond public health. While any policy in favour of reducing smoking will undoubtedly view improving public health as the most immediate goal, it cannot ignore the other aspects of public life that such a policy would concern. Understanding this then, the scope of the debate surrounding smoking is an extensive one, and the set of proposed policies, as already detailed, reflect this extent of debate. While looking to any future smoking legislation, for the purposes of evaluation, as well as understanding what the UK could look like with said legislation, it may be helpful to group these loose ideas of change into one broad policy.

This policy will have a relative emphasis on more recent policy proposals and bills of the Labour government, that is set to enjoy power until 2029 at the most. With this being established, we can observe that the UK government's smoking legislation is immediately based on phasing out tobacco smoking in the UK, and secondarily based on reducing the proportion of vape users. So presuming legislation is passed by Parliament, we could indeed see a 'smokefree' England by 2030 (BBC News, 2023), along with a reduction in vape consumption.

This of course depends not only on whether or not such an overarching policy agenda will feasibly achieve its aims, but also whether such an agenda is desirable in the first place. Both feasibility and desirability have been taken into account by this article's assessment, with the conclusion that while such a policy is indeed likely achievable, it has dubious desirability as an approach for dealing with the problems posed by smoking. In coming to this conclusion, the article will proceed by analysing the strongest arguments in favour of such a policy, along with those set against it. Alongside these analysed factors, the article will establish criteria for evaluation primarily based on the role of the state itself, to help critically evaluate the policy. Finally, a conclusion will surmise the stance that has been taken. With this in mind, arguably the greatest factor behind this policy's proposal, public health, will now be examined.

Smoking is correctly, and widely, understood to be detrimental to the health of smokers – definitely in the case of tobacco smoking, and increasingly seen to be the case for vaping too. Yet despite this, 6.4 million people still smoked cigarettes in 2022 (BBC News, 2024), which has placed a major burden on the NHS due to smoking-related illnesses and treatment. This is perhaps the strongest argument for proponents of smoking-limiting legislation; that in the UK, smoking is one of the biggest preventable causes of death (British Medical Journal, 2009). Preventing death and illness is the task of a state healthcare system, so an anti-smoking policy agenda would be in the best interests of this healthcare system. In 2005, 19% of all UK deaths were attributable to smoking, out of a smoking population of around 14 million people (British Medical Journal, 2009). Through extrapolating this data for smoking population decrease, we can estimate that anywhere between 8-10% of UK deaths in the present day are still attributable to smoking. Indeed in 2015, smoking was the single greatest cause of cancer in the UK, and in the present day is still one of the highest (Cancer Research UK).

Tobacco smoking undoubtedly causes serious illness, and most researchers additionally conclude that vaping is not risk-free (Cancer Research UK). Additionally, especially with regards to preventing illness among younger tobacco smokers, if smoking is stopped before the age of 35, the risk of survival from smoking-related diseases among former smokers is about the same as non-smokers (British Medical Journal, 2004). Therefore, precluding the ability to smoke from an early age, as would be achieved through a progressive age increase on purchasing tobacco products, would reduce the risk in long-term smoking illnesses developing. Overall then, this is the strongest factor behind smoking-limiting legislation, because it offers conclusive evidence for the health risks of smoking and that stopping smoking and vaping from ever being adopted prevents health problems developing. A lesser, but still significant factor, likewise stems from risks posed by the smoking products themselves.

In bolstering the case for the anti-smoking policy agenda, the environmental factor makes an important contribution. In 2018, tobacco cultivation accounted for 0.2% of the world's CO₂ emissions, making it a major investor in climate change (Imperial College London, 2018). Additionally, tobacco production uses more than 22 billion tonnes of water in a world where water is increasingly becoming a scarce resource, a fact that is heightened by the almost 90% of tobacco production concentrated in the developing world (Imperial College London, 2018). Moreover, in 2011, cigarette waste constituted around 30% of the world's litter, posing a serious risk to marine life due to the toxicity of chemicals found in cigarettes (British Medical Journal, 2011). In this case, policies designed to prevent the consumption of tobacco products in the UK will aid global action on both climate change and environmental damage. Given the risk these two problems pose to humanity, this strengthens the case for legislation to prevent smoking.

Furthermore, the recent rise in vape products as a tobacco alternative equally poses environmental challenges, especially in the case of disposable vapes. Vapes in general, when thrown out into the environment, pose three environmental risks: plastic waste, especially in the case of disposable, single-use vapes; electronic waste; and hazardous chemical waste (The Lancet, 2022). Thus, even with legislation preventing the distribution of tobacco products, smoking in the form of vaporised products continues to pose a risk, hence the proposed legislation to tackle the sale of disposable vapes in the UK. While a global issue,

climate change and environmental damage can be tackled at the national level, and a policy agenda preventing the sale of cigarettes and vapes would help the UK contribute to preventing this damage. Where public health and the environment are concerned, the current UK government's policy agenda with regard to smoking has strong empirical support.

On the other hand, the opposing camp, i.e. those who would prefer an end to the anti-smoking agenda that has emerged over the last couple of years, have equally strong arguments to support this stance. One such argument is that such an anti-smoking policy agenda raises questions about individual freedoms. In 2019, the smokers rights' group Forest declared that 'smokers are the canaries for civil liberties' (The Week, 2023). In 2022, the head of public policy for the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) argued that legislation that would implement smoking bans in public places, as well as restrictions on the ability to purchase smoking products, is evidence of an overstep by 'nanny statist' (IEA, 2022). It effectively gives the state the ability to influence how we live our own lives and treat our own bodies (IEA, 2022). Increasingly, as seen in the US with the nationwide debate on abortion, the idea of 'my body my choice' has been a battle cry for those seeking to establish individual liberties for certain groups, be that women in the case of abortion or smokers in the case of the new drive to stop smoking in the UK. This is seen by many supporters of smokers' rights to be about our individual liberty, and whether those liberties will be impinged upon or left alone (IEA, 2022).

The obvious rebuttal to these claims of shrinking liberties is reconfiguring the idea of freedom, and what the state's role is in maintaining it. While those against the proposed smoking policy agenda view it as limiting our rights to choose how we live our lives and a negative idea of freedom, effectively freedom from the interference of the state; those who support the agenda may argue that is the state's modern role to pursue a positive idea of freedom. Rather than being free from rules and restrictions, through these measures the state is giving you freedom to live a long and fulfilling life where smoking can no longer prevent this (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2021). Where the state has a growing presence in our lives this seems a more logical definition of freedom, as the enlarged state should take a lead in protecting our freedoms and enhancing them, rather than disregarding its responsibilities and leaving its citizens to suffer from potentially life-long health complications. Nevertheless, protecting the rights of smokers is still a strong argument to

prevent any policy agenda that would wish to change current legislation surrounding smoking, predicated upon the risk that this would pose to civil liberties. However, this is based upon one's own opinion of the relationship between public freedoms and the state rather than empirical data, unlike the financial arguments surrounding smoking in the UK.

Smoking is a popular activity, and as such, generates a substantial amount of tax revenue for the government as well as a steady income source for businesses that sell tobacco or vaporised products. Between 2024 and 2025, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that duties on tobacco products will raise £8.8 billion for the UK government, which comes to 0.3% of national income (OBR, 2024). In addition, in 2021 the vaping industry had a gross contribution to the UK economy of £939 million (Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2022). This amounts to a £310 million contribution to the government through tax revenues, alongside supporting 17,710 jobs across the UK (Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2022). These smoking products help boost the UK economy as well as contributing to national income, so any smoking policy agenda that would seek to limit the sale of these products would create a black hole in government finances, as well as impact the economy in general.

Nonetheless, it should also be noted that some research has highlighted the negative effect that tobacco products have had on the UK economy. In 2023, the pressure group Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) found that within the economy as a whole, £6.6 billion has been lost due to smoking-related unemployment and £1.3 billion in smoking-related early deaths (ASH, 2023), and that overall smoking across England costs £17.3 billion each year. While these figures are somewhat based on estimates and dependent variables, which is more than can be said for the concrete figures of tax revenue, they still highlight that smoking has just as much of a detrimental impact as a positive one on the UK economy. Therefore, regarding the relationship between smoking and the economy, there are apparent benefits as well as costs.

In evaluating the current government's policy agenda concerning smoking, and taking these aforementioned arguments for and against it into account, we must make decisions about the state's role within society and what it should prioritise. But firstly, we should consider the status quo as policy compared to the current policy agenda and the changes it entails. Tobacco smoking rates in the UK have been falling since the 1970s (BBC News, 2023) and

continue to do so, demonstrating that current legislation surrounding smoking is working towards making the UK smokefree. This is helped by the availability of vaping, which the current policy agenda seeks to equally reduce. There is no guarantee that any new changes will increase the rate at which smoking is decreasing, so it seems illogical to end the evidentially successful current policy on smoking in favour of something that has no guarantee of success. This is the first case against adopting any changes to the policy agenda to further legislate against smoking.

Moreover, when considering this policy agenda, we automatically must judge whether we believe it is the state's role to pursue the majority interest at the expense of a large minority. For instance in the environmental case, acting further to reduce smoking is in the interest of the majority, while it also entails the state trampling over smokers and their interests. Considering the precedent this would set for the state interfering in the lives of those it deems surplus to the 'majority interest', it is no wonder that the smokers' rights lobby have described their position as crucial to the struggle for individual freedoms. However, it should also be noted that smokers' rights groups (SRGs) receive huge funding from the tobacco industry rather than from amongst the smokers themselves, for example the £265,862 of funding received by SRG Forest from British American Tobacco in 1995 (European Journal of Public Health, 2007). With the obvious priority of the tobacco industry to make money, it casts aspersions over the smoking lobby's true intentions, suggesting they would rather serve the interests of their financially motivated backers than serve as a force for individual liberty. State priorities also come into question. Even while there are noteworthy arguments for smoking contributing to the overstretched NHS, and its detrimental impact on the economy, it is just as arguable that the state should endeavour to meet society's needs. The state should adapt to society, rather than forcing society to adapt for the priorities of the state, especially if that means an attack on our civil liberties. With all this taken into account, it is this article's view that rather than trying to build on a proven policy with enduring success, the government is meddling with a societal issue that has no need for it.

To conclude then, it is this article's belief that the smoking policy agenda adopted by two successive UK governments is ill-judged, when itself evaluated as well as compared to the status quo. Current legislation surrounding smoking is a perfect balance between limiting the marketing of cigarettes and preventing their easy access, while still allowing people to use

tobacco products should they choose to. With continually reducing smoking in the UK, it is best for the government to let the science and prevailing trends put off people from consuming cigarettes, rather than imposing new laws that may prove repressive and excessive. Nevertheless, the government should make efforts to monitor the growing vaping industry in the UK and form policies in response to emerging science, increased uptake and those buying, and attempts to buy (i.e. children) vaping products. However, it should not rush into rash and peremptory legislation. As shown by recent debate, smoking is a delicate topic for many in the UK and one that has sparked divisive debate, and this delicacy should be acknowledged by any policy agenda concerned with smoking.

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The Persistent Absence Crisis: Is Labour Stepping Up to the Mark?

George Hall

Abstract

This article reviews the policy decisions of the Labour government in the increasingly salient crisis of persistent absence in schools. It will contextualise the issue prior to the government taking office in July 2024 and aim to evaluate if the government's actions in the current national and international context are effective in addressing the crisis.

As a nation, and indeed internationally, we are only beginning to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our society. One of the areas with a seemingly visible impact is our education system, particularly attendance rates in secondary education. In the United Kingdom, and particularly England, this impact is being increasingly felt, with rising absence in state schools and rising numbers of persistently absent pupils. This article will contextualise the issue before the Parliament was dissolved, preceding the 2024 General Election, in order to then fairly consider what steps the Labour government has already taken and plans to take to address the crisis and what steps it should take going forward. It will also consider the feasibility of these measures in our current national context.

The post-pandemic years have shown a significant measurable impact on student attendance, with the reporting of the highest level of overall absence in English state schools since 2006 (House of Commons Library, 2024). This means, in practice, that the overall absence rate has jumped by around 3% since before the COVID-19 pandemic to a peak of 7.6% in the 2021/22 academic year (House of Commons Library, 2024). This general absence rate underestimates the more significant issue, which is an increasing persistent and severe absence rate, meaning missing over 10% or 50% of school time (House of Commons Library, 2024). This is particularly so in the most disadvantaged households and households with children with special educational needs (SEN) (House of Commons Library, 2024). For example, in 2022/23, 36.5% of free school meal-eligible pupils in England were persistently absent compared with 15.6% of pupils who were not eligible, and pupils with the most complex SEN were two times more likely to be persistently absent than those with no SEN in the same academic year (House of Commons Library, 2024).

This increasing rate of absence matters for a variety of reasons. Attendance is a well-known indicator of academic success. Higher attendance is linked to higher chances of post-16 progression, and, in terms of GCSE results, 35.6% of persistently absent pupils and just 11.3% of severely absent pupils achieved grades 9-4 in English and maths, compared to 67.6% of all pupils (House of Commons Library, 2024). As we live in an increasingly economically competitive and skilled world, this not only becomes a moral issue of ensuring pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to the job market but also threatens British economic growth and competitiveness if we have a generation that lacks the skills to thrive in the global economy. This becomes even more pressing when school attendance has

wide regional divides, with the more affluent an area linking to more frequent rates of attendance. This can help to further cement deprivation with deprived regions, such as the North East, reaching record lows of attendance, limiting the social mobility and economic advantages frequent attendance brings (EPI, 2023).

However, school attendance is not just about academic performance or skill development. Attending school brings many social and emotional benefits to young people. According to the mental health charity YoungMinds, data from NHS Digital shows a change from 1 in 9 young people reporting mental health issues in 2019 to 1 in 4 in 2022, (Young Minds, 2023) and schools can go a long way in providing essential pastoral support that can be ongoing but also help a referral into more formalised support.

We must now address exactly why this drop in attendance has occurred. Although noticeable after the COVID-19 pandemic, it has only perhaps been enabled by it, as it arguably stems from other underlying causes. The Education Policy Institute concluded that the increasing absence rate is due to a "backdrop of wider crises facing education" (EPI, 2023). Many issues could be included, but it is easier to define these crises into three main areas. Firstly, issues in schools themselves, such as increasing staffing issues. Secondly, underfunded and failing public services for young people, such as mental health and SEND services in particular. Finally, we must consider the dramatic shift in the public conscience surrounding the necessity of attendance and the growing lack of trust in the education system by parents.

It is simple to state that "better-funded schools will have better attendance" (Public First, 2023), but the reality reflects this. To address the first two causes, we must consider the legacy of the outgoing Conservative government. It was unwilling to invest in the education sector, with heavy funding cuts, particularly during its austerity programmes, which has led to a lack of resources in schools and increasing staff shortages, particularly in schools in the most deprived areas (The Sutton Trust, 2024). Students may be less inspired and motivated to attend or care for an institution seemingly unable to provide them with the education they deserve. Moreover, a lack of investment in and political direction in developing strong pastoral care systems has created a schooling system that fails its most vulnerable students (The Sutton Trust, 2024). This is followed by an increasing number of students who need to

access SEND and mental health services for young people, who have also seen long-term budget reductions (The Sutton Trust, 2024).

However, not even considering these underlying issues, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and a lack of attendance became normalised, there was a "seismic shift" in parental attitudes towards attendance (Public First, 2023). Research by Public First, tested amongst all social classes and in various regions, found that parents have begun to find the attendance system harsh and do not see themselves as partners in it. This is hugely problematic as the system depends upon parents valuing regular attendance and enforcing this themselves (Public First, 2023). This becomes even more problematic when one considers that the most vulnerable in society may already lack trust, and this may have developed further if the pandemic has exacerbated this issue across all social classes. This distrust of the fundamental structures that bind the educational system together and will make it much harder to get students into school.

This crisis must be addressed if the Labour government wants to succeed in its core five missions, particularly those that increase economic growth and reduce barriers to opportunity. However, it also has inherited a terrible fiscal outlook and has many areas that need to be focused on alongside an increasingly volatile world. Therefore, although it is perhaps the ideal solution, it will not be easy to increase the funding to schools and young people's public services needed to make up for over a decade of underinvestment, particularly when considering the manifesto commitments and fiscal rules the government has to follow.

However, when considering the three areas that arguably have created this crisis, the government has already taken some important steps. For example, they have announced and implemented changes such as reducing the cost of branded school uniforms, but more importantly, implementing free breakfast clubs in primary schools (National Governance Association, 2024). These cost-of-living-based measures aim to encourage student attendance while tackling rising child poverty levels. They also send clear messages to parents that schools are on their side, which is welcome in beginning to reestablish the relationship between parents and schools. Looking forward, the plans the government has to include recruiting and training 6,500 new teachers, focusing on shortage subjects, investing in skills and opportunity, and introducing a new SEND framework, which will include specialist mental health services in every school (National Governance Association, 2024). We must

comment that these ideas need changes to address the crisis, but they have yet to be implemented fully. This is understandable because we are not even a year into the government's term, but they would still provide a building block towards addressing the crisis by increasing the quality of education and addressing barriers SEND students may face attending schools.

There are areas that the government needs to address further, particularly when considering the changing relationship between the education system and parents. There needs to be a wide-scale review, followed by creating and adopting a new national approach to attendance. It needs to be more positive in nature and refrain from punitive measures when possible, particularly when dealing with students with SEND and those from more vulnerable households (Public First, 2023). Taking time off to go on holiday during term time is a much different issue than needing to stay at home due to SEND or inability to afford to travel to school. The government could update statutory guidance for local authorities and allow more flexibility in granting time off whilst ensuring that this flexibility allows for remote or other kinds of learning at home whilst working towards more regular attendance (House of Commons Library, 2024). A review of the current system of fines is also overdue, as there is little evidence to suggest that they are working toward increasing attendance (Public First, 2023). The government must focus on ensuring that these fines do work or consider what can replace them.

When introducing its new approach to SEND, the government should consider the trial of a scheme of targeted attendance monitoring proposed by the previous Conservative government. These individuals offer personalised advice and support for students persistently absent from school and aim to return them to school for the long term. The advice and support given will vary depending on who the target is, but the beauty of the scheme is its flexibility. Whether it be long-term SEND issues or simply a breakdown in trust between parents and schooling, it can be targeted towards fixing the issue. In pilot schemes, 70% engaged with attendance monitors, and from those that did, almost all students returned to school in part (York Consulting LLP, 2024). When parents found out the monitor was independent and was not there for punitive purposes, they were much more likely to be accepted (York Consulting LLP, 2024). Costs are around £40 thousand for one monitor who can aid 32 children a year, accounting for just £1250 per child per year (CSJ, 2022). The

Centre for Social Justice argued that hiring two thousand more monitors, which could be targeted in the areas with the highest rate of persistent and serve absence, would account for around £80 million (CSJ, 2022), which is a more absorbable cost for the government over the next few years, rather than the billions needed to catch up investment into public services. These monitors could provide an interesting middle approach that could help repair relations with parents who do not trust the education system.

To conclude, the Labour government is overcoming the challenge of the persistent and severe absence in schools. Actions already taken, such as the establishment of free breakfast clubs and the reduction of uniform costs, will help reduce barriers to education and rebuild trust between parents and schools. Its further plans to invest in schools and train teachers are necessary alongside its planned investments in skills and SEND services. However, due to the challenging financial situation it faces, alongside the volatility of the world, it cannot make the capital investment required to truly overcompensate over decades of underfunding of the education system by the previous Conservative government. It must, therefore, consider alternative ways to address the crisis in this context. By reviewing its approach to absence itself and encouraging the rebuilding of public trust in the education system, it can help to naturally return students to school whilst also targeting the most vulnerable areas with attendance monitors to help bring students back into the classroom. The crisis persists, however, and indeed may evolve as generations who were born as COVID-19 hit and lacked elements of socialisation enter the education system, and the government's strategy and focus may indeed have to alter again. Either way, it needs to remain as committed as it is to the issue and respond proactively to the needs of the country's students to succeed in its core missions for the country.

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Removal of Fuel Subsidies in Nigeria

Krishi Mehta

Abstract

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria in May 2023 marked a pivotal economic shift, tripling petrol prices overnight and sparking widespread hardship and protests. While the government justified the move as necessary to curb unsustainable fiscal costs, corruption, and reliance on fuel imports, the abrupt policy change led to soaring transportation costs, inflation (reaching 27% by 2024), and diminished purchasing power for households. This article examines the flawed subsidy system, which disproportionately benefited the wealthy and smugglers, and analyzes the immediate economic shocks post-removal. It proposes alternative approaches, such as a phased subsidy removal and strengthened social safety nets, drawing on successful examples from Indonesia and Ghana. Additionally, the article outlines long-term solutions, including investments in public transportation (e.g., expanding BRT systems and rail networks) and renewable energy (e.g., solar and natural gas), alongside revitalizing domestic refining capacity through projects like the Dangote Refinery. By balancing fiscal reform with social protection and sustainable infrastructure, Nigeria can mitigate short-term pain while securing long-term economic stability and energy independence. Effective policy implementation and transparency will be critical to ensuring equitable outcomes for all citizens.

A Nation at a Crossroads

For decades, Nigerians relied on cheap fuel as a constant in an otherwise volatile economic landscape. Despite persistent economic challenges, subsidised petrol prices ensured affordable transportation, enabled businesses to operate, and kept the cost of goods relatively stable. However, in May 2023, the Nigerian government announced the removal of fuel subsidies, leading to an overnight tripling of petrol prices. This decision marked a pivotal moment in Nigeria's economic history, sparking nationwide outrage and protests.

The government defended its decision, arguing that fuel subsidies had become unsustainable, drained national revenue, fostered corruption, and discouraged investment in domestic refining. For the average Nigerian, however, the policy shift was not merely an economic adjustment but a matter of survival. This article evaluates the economic impact of subsidy removal, explores alternative approaches that could have softened the blow, and outlines a path forward for Nigeria's post-subsidy economy.

The Flawed Fuel Subsidies System

Fuel subsidies in Nigeria kept petrol prices artificially low (e.g., ~~₦65–₦97~~ per litre vs. the actual ~~₦150–₦200~~ cost in the 2010s), ensuring affordability for households, transport operators, and businesses. This stabilized transport and energy costs, indirectly supporting low-income Nigerians and curbing inflation in essential goods. Evidence from the World Bank (2011) and IMF (2012) confirmed that subsidies made Nigeria's fuel among the cheapest in West Africa, but corruption, smuggling, and unsustainable fiscal costs (~~₦4~~ trillion yearly by 2022) ultimately undermined the system, leading to its 2023 removal.

By 2022, Nigeria was spending approximately 10 billion annually on fuel subsidies—more than its combined budgets for health care (5 billion) and education (\$4.5 billion). This unsustainable burden diverted critical resources from essential social services, exacerbating poverty and inequality.

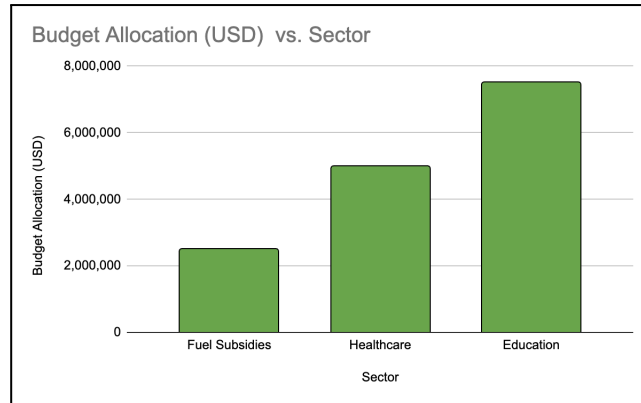


Figure 1: Nigeria's Fuel Subsidy Costs vs. Social Sector Spending
Source: (Nigeria Federal Budget, 2022)

The subsidy system disproportionately benefited the wealthy, who consumed the most fuel through multiple vehicles and businesses. Meanwhile, poor and rural Nigerians, many of whom lacked access to private transportation, derived minimal benefits. Additionally, a significant portion of subsidized fuel was smuggled into neighboring countries, where prices were higher, further undermining the system's effectiveness.

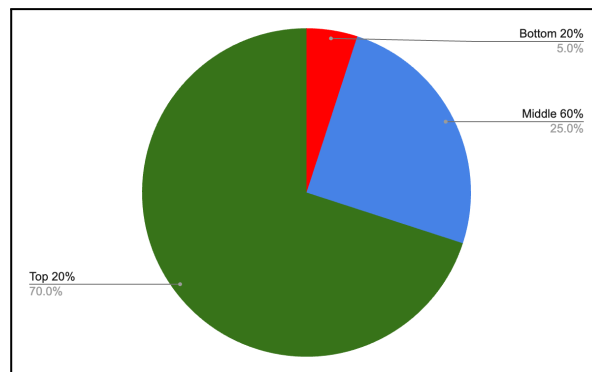


Figure 2: Distribution of Subsidy Benefits by Income Group
Source: (World Bank, 2023)

Despite being Africa's top oil producer, Nigeria relies on fuel imports due to its dilapidated refineries, like Port Harcourt, Warri, and Kaduna, which was operating below 10% capacity for decades because of corruption, underinvestment, and sabotage. This forced the country to buy refined fuel from foreign refineries like Rotterdam's BP (Netherlands), Reliance Jamnagar (India), and ADNOC (UAE), effectively subsidizing foreign economies instead of its own. Meanwhile, smuggling to neighboring nations further drained resources. The

Dangote Refinery, set to reduce imports, has faced delays, prolonging Nigeria's dependency. This cycle of dysfunction highlights how fuel subsidies, meant to aid Nigerians, instead enriched foreign refiners and smugglers while stifling local industry.

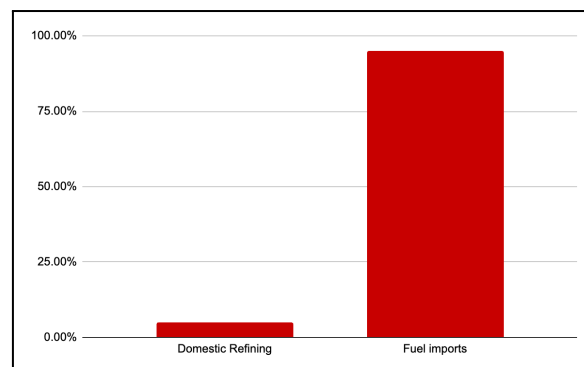


Figure 3: Nigeria's Fuel Import Dependency (2022)

Source: (Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, 2022)

The 2023 fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria was met with sharp divisions within the government and society. While President Tinubu's administration, backed by economic advisors and international institutions like the IMF, argued it was necessary to avert fiscal crisis, the move faced strong opposition from labor unions (NLC, TUC), opposition parties (PDP, LP), and some lawmakers who warned of severe public hardship. Mass protests and strikes erupted, criticizing the abrupt policy shift and lack of immediate social safety nets. Despite the dissent, the government proceeded, which led to a dramatic fuel price surge (from ₦197 to over ₦500 per liter) and worsened inflation, highlighting the contentious trade-off between economic reform and public welfare.

Economic Shocks and Hardships

The removal of fuel subsidies had immediate and severe consequences for Nigeria's economy and its citizens.

Petrol prices surged from ₦190 per liter to over ₦700 in some states, leading to a sharp increase in transportation costs. This, in turn, raised the prices of goods and services, placing additional strain on households and businesses.

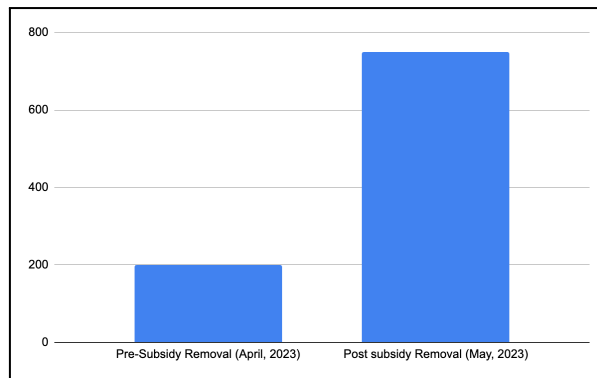


Figure 4: Fuel Price Increase After Subsidy Removal (May 2023)

Source: (Nigerian Midstream and Downstream Petroleum Regulatory Authority, 2023)

Inflation climbed to 27% by January 2024, driven by higher food and transportation costs. Businesses, already grappling with rising production expenses, passed these costs onto consumers, further eroding purchasing power.

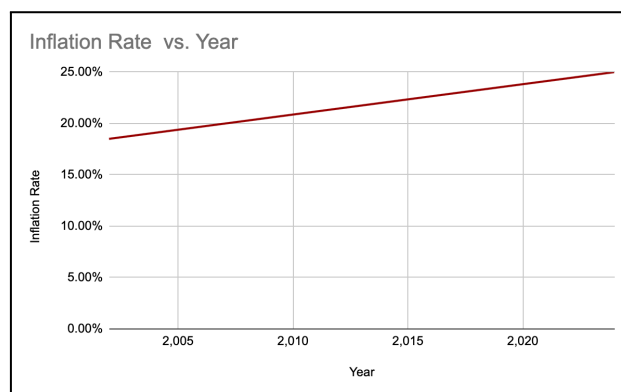


Figure 5: Nigeria's Inflation Rate (2022–2024)

Source: (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2024)

What Could Have Been Done Differently?

The abrupt removal of fuel subsidies exacerbated economic hardships, but alternative approaches could have facilitated a smoother transition. Below, we explore two alternative approaches that could have been adopted, supported by facts and Nigerian contexts.

1. Phased Removal of Subsidies

A gradual 2-3 year phase-out of Nigeria's fuel subsidies, with incremental 10-15% price

increases every six months, would have allowed for smoother economic adjustment than the sudden 170% price shock in 2023. Research from the IMF and World Bank supports this approach, citing successful examples like Indonesia and Ghana where staged removals prevented social unrest while controlling inflation. This measured timeline would have given households and businesses space to adapt, enabled investment in alternative energy and transport infrastructure, and allowed domestic refineries like Dangote to come online—reducing import dependence. Instead, the abrupt removal triggered severe inflation (28.9%) and public backlash, highlighting how a phased strategy could have balanced fiscal reform with social stability.

Countries like Indonesia and Egypt have successfully implemented phased subsidy removals. For example, Indonesia phased out fuel subsidies between 2015 and 2018, while simultaneously investing in social protection programmes and public transportation. This approach helped cushion the impact on low-income households and minimized public resistance. In Nigeria, a similar strategy could include targeted subsidies for vulnerable groups, like low-income workers, during the transition period, ensuring that the most affected populations were not left behind.

Several countries have successfully adopted compressed natural gas (CNG) for public transport, including India, Iran, and Pakistan, where CNG is 40-50% cheaper than petrol and widely used. Nigeria—with 200 trillion cubic feet of gas reserves—has lagged behind, with only about 10,000 CNG vehicles, due to high conversion costs (₦500,000–₦1 million per vehicle), limited refueling stations (under 20 nationwide), and resistance from fuel importers protecting their profits. While the government has proposed CNG initiatives, such as NNPC's 2023 programme, progress remains slow without subsidies for infrastructure or vehicle retrofitting. A well-planned transition could replicate global successes by investing in refueling networks, offering conversion incentives, and ensuring affordability—but critics argue it requires upfront funding and may face pushback from petrol-dependent businesses. A gradual shift, paired with subsidy reform, could position CNG as a viable, cleaner alternative to ease fuel price pressures.

2. Strengthening Social Safety Nets

The government's promise of ₦8,000 monthly cash transfers to vulnerable households was

poorly executed, with many Nigerians never receiving the aid. A more robust social protection system could have significantly softened the blow of subsidy removal and built public trust in the policy.

The government could have expanded existing social protection programmes, such as the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), to include more beneficiaries and increase the amount of financial assistance. For example, the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme, which currently provides ₦5,000 monthly to about 1 million households, could have been scaled up to cover 5 million households and increased to ₦10,000 monthly during the transition period. This would have provided much-needed relief to low-income families affected by rising fuel prices.

To effectively cushion the impact of fuel subsidy removal on vulnerable groups, Nigeria should adopt a phased public transport expansion strategy. The immediate priority should be scaling up Lagos' existing BRT system, which could double its capacity to serve 400,000 daily commuters within 12-18 months at an estimated cost of ₦150 million. Abuja's new BRT should follow closely, targeting ₦500 thousand riders within two years for ₦200 million, leveraging existing planning frameworks for rapid implementation. Secondary expansions in Port Harcourt and Kano would come next, while simultaneously completing Lagos' Red Line rail project to create a comprehensive transport network serving over 1 million commuters by 2025. This tiered approach strategically addresses cities with the most acute transport poverty first, delivering quick wins through affordable BRT fares (₦200 compared to current ₦500 trips) while building long-term rail solutions. The plan optimizes both speed (BRT systems operational in 1-3 years versus 3-5 years for rail) and cost-effectiveness, with complementary last-mile solutions like dedicated and bicycle lanes ensuring accessibility for the most disadvantaged commuters.

Effective communication and transparency in the distribution of aid would have built public trust and minimised resistance to the policy change. The government could have leveraged technology, such as mobile money platforms, to ensure that cash transfers reached the intended beneficiaries. For example, the World Bank's Rapid Response Register (RRR), which uses biometric data to identify vulnerable households, could have been scaled up to ensure that aid was distributed efficiently and equitably.

The Path Forward

While the removal of fuel subsidies has created short-term challenges, it also presents an opportunity for Nigeria to implement long-term reforms that can transform its economy and improve the quality of life for its citizens. Below, we explore two critical policy recommendations that can help Nigeria achieve these goals.

1. Investing in Public Transportation

Expanding and modernizing public transportation systems is essential to reducing Nigeria's dependency on petrol and addressing the challenges posed by subsidy removal. Cities like Lagos and Abuja urgently need improved urban transport planning, including the expansion of BRT systems, rail networks, and non-motorized transport options like cycling lanes.

The Lagos BRT system, which charges between ₦100 and ₦500 per trip, provides an affordable alternative to private vehicles. However, it currently serves only 200,000 passengers daily, while demand far exceeds supply. Expanding BRT systems to other cities like Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt would provide affordable transportation options for millions of Nigerians. For example, the Abuja Light Rail project, which was launched in 2018 but has faced operational challenges, could be revitalized and expanded to serve more commuters.

Nigeria's rail network remains underdeveloped, with only about 3,500 km of track for a population of over 200 million people. Accelerating projects like the Lagos Blue Line, which is expected to carry 500,000 passengers daily, is critical to improving mobility. Additionally, intercity rail networks connecting major economic hubs like Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt would facilitate the movement of goods and people, boosting economic activity and reducing the strain on roads.

Building cycling lanes and pedestrian pathways can provide low-cost transportation options while promoting healthier lifestyles. For example, the Lagos State Government has begun constructing cycling lanes in some parts of the city, but this initiative needs to be expanded and replicated in other urban centers. Cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen have shown that cycling can account for up to 50% of urban trips, compared to less than 1% in Nigeria.

Investing in public transportation can yield significant economic, social, and environmental benefits. For example, a study by the International Transport Forum (ITF) found that efficient public transportation systems can reduce petrol consumption by 20-30%. Additionally, reducing traffic congestion in Lagos alone could save the economy an estimated ₦4 trillion annually (about \$10 billion), according to the Danne Institute for Research.

2. Promoting Renewable Energy and Local Refining

Nigeria must prioritise renewable energy sources, such as solar, wind, and natural gas, to diversify its energy sector and reduce reliance on petrol. Additionally, boosting local refining capacity is critical to reducing fuel import dependency and stabilising fuel prices.

Nigeria has immense renewable energy potential, including solar, wind, and hydropower. For example, the country receives an average of 5.5 kWh/m²/day of solar radiation, enough to generate over 200,000 MW of electricity, compared to the current installed capacity of about 13,000 MW. The government should incentivise private sector investment in renewable energy projects through tax breaks, subsidies, and favourable regulatory policies. For instance, the Nigeria Electrification Project (NEP), funded by the World Bank, aims to provide solar energy to 5 million households by 2025. Expanding such initiatives can accelerate the adoption of renewable energy.

The Dangote Refinery's massive 650,000 barrel-per-day capacity could finally eliminate Nigeria's dependence on fuel imports. However, to fully unlock its economic potential, the nation must simultaneously:

- Revitalize neglected state refineries currently operating at less than 20% capacity
- Support modular refinery development to boost local production
- Develop complementary downstream industries to maximize value

This comprehensive approach offers compelling benefits:

- \$7-10 billion in annual import savings (African Refiners Association)
- 300,000+ new jobs across the energy sector
- \$12-18 billion economic boost from stabilized fuel prices and industrial growth (World Bank)

Nigeria has over 200 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves, the largest in Africa. Expanding gas infrastructure, such as the Ajaokuta-Kaduna-Kano (AKK) gas pipeline, can provide cleaner and more affordable energy for power generation and industrial use. For example, natural gas can be used to power public transportation systems, such as buses and trains, reducing dependency on petrol.

The renewable energy sector has the potential to create 500,000 jobs by 2030, according to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). Additionally, transitioning to renewable energy sources could reduce Nigeria's greenhouse gas emissions by up to 30% by 2030, contributing to global climate goals and improving public health.

Measuring Success

To ensure Nigeria's post-subsidy policies achieve their intended outcomes, a structured monitoring framework is essential. For the phased subsidy removal, success would be measured by stabilising inflation volatility (targeting under 5% quarterly fluctuations in transport and food prices), expanding social safety nets to cover 80% of registered vulnerable households, and maintaining public trust through transparent communication. If inflation spikes beyond projections, the government could amend the plan by reducing price increments to 5% every six months and leveraging mobile money platforms for more efficient cash transfers. This approach would require ₦600 billion annually (15% of saved subsidy funds), drawn from reallocated subsidy budgets and international loans, with implementation spanning 0–36 months. A more cost-effective alternative might involve targeted transport subsidies, such as discounted BRT fares, instead of universal cash transfers.

The public transport expansion (BRT and rail) would prioritize quick wins, aiming for 1 million daily BRT users in Lagos and Abuja by 2025, a 20% reduction in household transport costs, and 50,000 new jobs. If ridership falls short, integrating minibuses as feeder routes could improve accessibility. Costs would total ₦1.55 billion, funded through public, private partnerships and bonds, with Lagos BRT completed in 12-18 months (₦150 million) and Abuja's system within two years (₦200 million). Rail projects, like the Lagos RedLine, would follow within three (₦1.2 billion). To optimize resources, dedicated bus lanes (₦50 million/km) could precede full BRT systems.

For renewable energy and refinery rehabilitation, targets include achieving 60% operational capacity at state refineries by 2027, 15% renewable energy grid share by 2030, and a 50% cut in fuel imports by 2026. Delays at Dangote could be offset by fast-tracking modular refineries, while stalled renewables adoption might require mandates for solar in public buildings. Funding would combine NNPC joint ventures and climate finance, with state refinery rehab taking 2–4 years (₦1.5 billion) and CNG infrastructure three years (₦500 million). Gas-to-powers projects should be prioritised over costlier wind or hydropower initiatives.

Key trade-offs and Recommendations

Policy	Pros	Cons	Risk mitigation
<i>Phased Removal</i>	Lower inflation shock	High upfront fiscal cost	Stagger implementation
<i>BRT expansion</i>	Quick wins (1-3 years)	Limited long-term capacity	Pair with rail planning
<i>Refinery rehab</i>	Reduces import dependency	Corruption risks	Independent oversight bodies.

A hybrid strategy is advised: launch BRT and cash transfers immediately (0–24 months) while advancing refinery and CNG projects concurrently. Allocate 30% of subsidy savings to social protection, 50% to infrastructure, and 20% to contingencies. This balances short-term relief with sustainable growth, using data-driven adjustments to mitigate risks.

Conclusion

The removal of fuel subsidies was a bold and necessary step to address Nigeria’s economic challenges. However, its abrupt implementation exacerbated short-term hardships for millions of Nigerians. Moving forward, the government must prioritise policies that promote economic stability, reduce inequality, and build a sustainable energy future. If managed effectively, the long-term benefits of subsidy removal—such as reduced corruption, increased investment, and economic diversification—could outweigh the initial pain. However, failure to address the immediate fallout risks plunging millions deeper into poverty, undermining the very goals the policy sought to achieve.

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Why Britain should revitalise its Scandinavian foreign policy

Edgar Bloomfield

Abstract

Scandinavia has historically been a central region to British foreign and military policy, yet it has gone through a period of neglect. This article will highlight the long period of decline, from the 20th century through to today, demonstrating why the British government should revitalise its Scandinavian foreign policy. Highlighting the military and political decline that has occurred since the 1940s, allows for a clear analysis of improvements, which are established as ambitions for current governments to achieve.

This article will outline four necessary policy proposals designed to enhance, vital, future Anglo-Scandi relations. Firstly, is the ambition for further military integration and an expansion of NATO's vanguard Joint Expeditionary Force. Secondly, Britain needs to look closer at Scandinavia, and build strong European economic integration based of a Norwegian model. Furthermore, there should be an integration of Overseas Development Assistance, to create an international development superpower. Lastly, a focus on cultural exchange should be created to more closely link education and tourism in these countries, to boost powerful soft power ties.

If implemented these recommendations would enhance important Anglo-Scandi relationships and develop the region into a stronger power base. It is essential for Britain's future not to forget Scandinavia again.

Scandinavia, in north-west continental Europe, is made up of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Each country is unique, but they have shared a similar history which shapes their foreign policy outlook today. These interests are very similar to British European interests which is a key reason why the Anglo-Scandi relationship needs strengthening.

This is vital in a period of global instability. The largest threats facing this region is Russian advances into a Europe less protected by America at the same time America is driving increasing economic turmoil. Britain needs to weather this storm and should become more involved in Europe. This essay will demonstrate that Scandinavia is the best place to build this relationship and highlight how it should look to the region for greater guidance.

The United Kingdom's foreign policy in Scandinavia has been influenced by post war relations, initially dominated by the need for security from the Soviets, it declined with the end of the Cold War and general British military decline. Other factors contributed, such as increased European integration, reducing bi-lateral relations and a shift in British foreign policy thinking to other priorities. This detrimental decline has alienated us from some of our closest and most strategic allies.

This staggering decline is why this article is calling for a dramatic reset in our Scandinavian relations. After highlighting a brief history of relations, the article will call for revitalisation in four key policy areas. Beginning with greater British military participation in NATO's vanguard Joint Expeditionary Force. It will then focus on how post-Brexit Britain should repair its damaged economic relations with Scandinavia, and Europe as a whole, by adopting a Norwegian style model for European economic integration. The third recommendation calls for a reversal in Britain's ODA spending cuts and a combined spending bloc to boost efficiencies and modernisation to generate a development superpower. Lastly it will call for enhanced cultural exchange of tourists and students.

This article is under no illusion that one improved relationship will solve all British foreign policy questions. However, the implementation of the following recommendations mends a widening hole in British military planning and European relations in a period of significant instability. This instability is global, Britain should be building global relationships, but enhancing Anglo-Scandi relations would be a significant step forward. This article is a reminder to not forget Scandinavia again.

Conflicting Interests

Anglo-Scandi relations have had a long history, reaching their peak during, and straight after, the Second World War. Norway and Denmark had been occupied by the Germans and Norway even organised its exiled government in London. Britain therefore had very close relationships in Scandinavia, but it had a complicated set of aims. By 1947 it was realised that the Soviet Union was the greatest security threat to Europe and Britain, as such Britain began to strategize about what a conflict with the USSR would look like. The defence review believed Britain could only be defended if its forces were not degraded in Europe beforehand. This reversed Britain's previous policy of strategic defence with forward bases in Europe due to financial and military non-viability.

Britain proceeded to attempt to reshape Scandinavian and American foreign policy to enhance their own protections and have a wider security guarantee. Initially, from 1947, Britain attempted to create a Scandinavian bloc believing that if it could tie Norway and Denmark to Sweden then the bloc would be enough of a deterrent against invasion from the USSR. This was because Sweden retained its policy of neutrality and to support this it had one of the largest defence industries in Europe which could have been utilised to defend Norway and Denmark. However, this policy never gained a consensus, many in the British sphere disliked the idea of pushing more countries into neutrality away from the western sphere. There was also fear in Norway and Denmark, with the belief that a Scandinavian bloc would not protect them enough and Sweden believed that this would threaten their neutrality in the eyes of the Soviet Union and risk retaliation.

The risk of the USSR increased by 1948 because the Czechoslovakia coup demonstrated Soviet aims of political instability abroad. This increased the drive for a more permanent western security organisation. Britain in particular needed help as it could no longer sustain its military obligations, so it increasingly promoted an American led organisation that could fulfil most of these obligations. While the Scandinavian bloc still had merit and promoters, it was becoming clear that Norway and Denmark should move into any Atlantic treaty to gain protection, but most significantly this would be the best outcome for British military organisers. As such, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed on April 4th, 1949. Norway and Denmark were founding members.

After Norway and Denmark were tied into the western alliance their bi-lateral relations with Britain became less important and the focus turned to Sweden. While their position of neutrality was effective in the Second World War it was believed by western military planners that the USSR would not respect it in a wide scale conflict. As such, neutrality was viewed as a threat, by Britain and America in particular, because their defence sector could be absorbed by the USSR. This led to efforts by both countries to tie Sweden closer into the western military structure. Britain was more successful at developing subtle relationships with the Swedish security services and Swedish politicians began to recognise that the East was their biggest threat so allowed a small amount of secret contact, but they wanted neutrality to be maintained. These British Swedish relations grew, particularly in the early 1950s, and by 1954 Sweden had tied itself closer into the west, particularly through Norway and Denmark. Britain then used its position as a bridge to America who had failed to develop these relations.

This significant post-war period can be characterised as one of independence. Scandinavian countries attempted to maintain their defence and political independence while Britain aimed to maintain military independence to fight the Soviet threat. The mid-1950s can also be viewed as the beginning of the decline in Anglo-Scandi relations.

The Eternal Fall

Late 20th century British decline has long been a topic of academia, and it does not need another analysis here but there are certain factors that contributed to the decline in Anglo-Scandi relations.

British military decline was the biggest factor. As previously demonstrated, security made up a significant proportion of Scandinavian relations and armed forces declined and directly reduced British interactions in the region. This also coincided with renewed British foreign policy aims, the 1940s and 50s was dominated by rebuilding and securing Europe, whereas 1960s Britain shifted towards rapid decolonisation and by the 1980s the British military shifted toward more rapid, smaller scale intervention that has continued to dominate capabilities to the modern day.

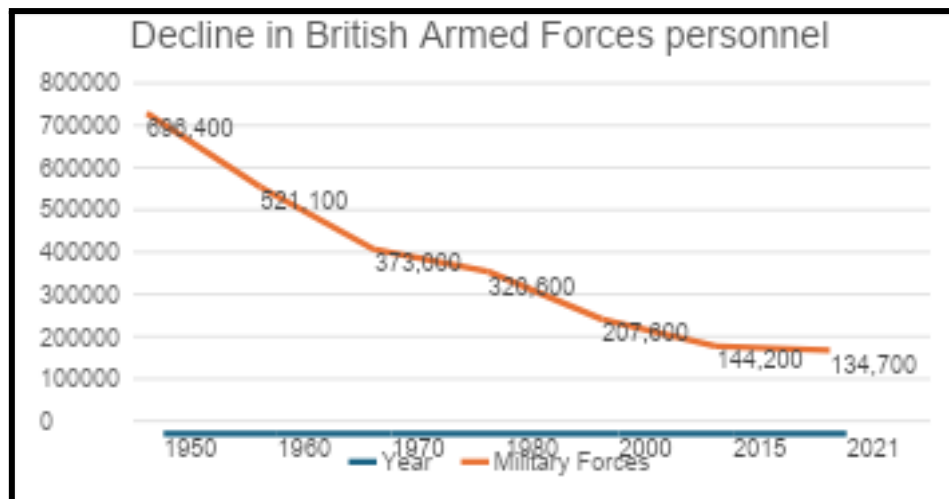


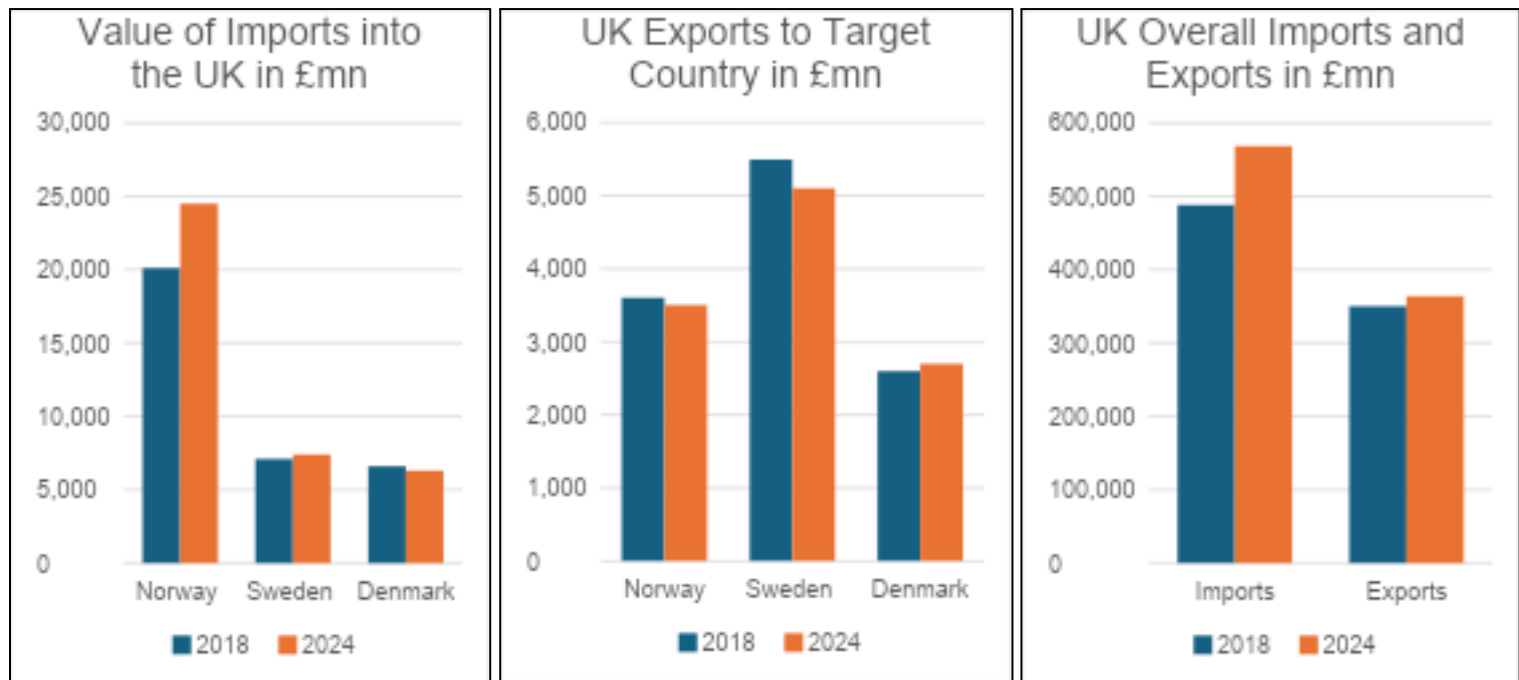
Figure 1: Decline in British Armed Forces personnel

Source: (Clark, 2024) and (Kirk-Wade, 2024)

The rise of the multi-national world also damaged relations. The process began with NATO which removed the need for bi-lateral security. This was further demonstrated by greater political and economic integration through the European Economic Community and later the European Union.

Britain and Denmark joined the EEC together in 1973, this was meant to be coordinated with Norway but a referendum in 1972 prevented this. European integration led to economic policy being centred in Brussels and other policies were increasingly decided there as well. Most significantly European integration did restrict states abilities, to a certain degree, to have relations with external countries. That is why it could be argued that British bi-lateral relations declined with Norway and Sweden after 1973 even though they themselves did not join an economic agreement until 1994 or in Sweden's case the EU until 1995.

While the European Union may have limited the extent of political and bi-lateral relations, its biggest success was economic integration that created strong bonds between countries within the EU. As such Britain's relationship with Scandinavia was further damaged when it left the EU in 2020 after voting to leave in the 2016 referendum. This rupture in the relationship can be seen clearly in the data presented below that demonstrates a decline in most cases of exports to the region which demonstrates how Britain is increasingly losing influence while Scandinavian countries are increasing their exports to us.



Figures 2, 3, & 4 below: Value of Imports into the UK in £mn; UK Exports to Target Country in £mn; UK Overall Imports and Exports in £mn

Source: (Office of National Statistics, 2019) and (Office of National Statistics, 2025)

Evidence of this declining relationship and a British perception of reduced significance can be seen with the decline in British political interest through high level political bi-laterals. For example, the British Prime Minister since 2010 has only visited Norway three times, Denmark three times and Sweden six. This declining priority can be viewed on a wider scale through visits made by Queen Elizabeth II. She continually travelled the globe throughout her reign but only visited Norway three times, in 1955, 1981 and 2001, Denmark only twice in 1957 and 1979 and Sweden twice in 1956 and 1983. This demonstrates that while this region might appear an important set of allies, they have not been a priority for the British political establishment since the 1980s.

The Resurrection

This article has so far set the context for modern Anglo-Scandi relations, it has demonstrated how they focused on military alliances and security needs. It has then tracked the decline through the wider trends in late 20th century demilitarisation, especially of the British armed forces but also the damage that European integration caused to bilateral relationships. These

relationships were further damaged when Britain left the European Union, causing a decline in economic ties with Scandinavia.

While all this damage has occurred, the Anglo-Scandi relationship has a strong base. It is a close region to the UK both geographically but also in political aims, meaning there is a groundwork to build from. The rest of this article will highlight the need for a rapid reset in Anglo-Scandi relations for the benefit of both parties as well as wider regional security and prosperity.

As this article has had a central focus on British military and security relationships in Scandinavia, particularly at the height of co-operation post-World War Two, it will come as no surprise that the military relationship will still be placed central to the relationship's future. There are dramatic new threats facing Europe, the Ukraine war is increasingly looking like it could collapse into an unstable, fragile peace that would embolden Putin to conduct greater offences across Europe and even in NATO countries. Scandinavia is still a vital region for European security from Russia, all three are significant Baltic Sea players, which is a vital Russian naval and communication route. This NATO region has been further strengthened by Sweden's accession into NATO in 2024.

NATO is the key tie in this essential military relationship, but this is further enhanced by NATO's vanguard group, the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). JEF is a group of ten nations that includes all Nordic and Baltic countries as well as the Netherlands and UK. It is seen as the rapid response group for NATO and specialises in Northern and Arctic warfare. This group was created in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea, which makes the renewed threat from Russia the most advantageous moment to further enhance JEF.

There are many recommendations for how JEF could enhance its capabilities, which were recently set out in a research paper by RUSI. The most significant recommendations were for Britain's role to aid the integration of new NATO and JEF members, Sweden and Finland, into the NATO military infrastructure and command. There should also be greater intelligence sharing in the JEF group with a proposal of 'ten eyes' that focuses on Northern and Arctic security. Lastly there should be greater clarity around the JEF mission, and it should seek an explicit directive from wider NATO about its overall role and abilities.

Overall, the UK should more greatly combine its abilities and enhance its actions in the Scandinavian sphere.

Britain also needs to repair its Scandinavian economic relations which have significantly declined post-Brexit. In a period where the UK economic policy is increasingly afloat with little leadership, and American leadership increasing tariffs, a turn towards the EU could be very beneficial as Europe remains our largest free market trading partner. However, EU integration will remain a complicated and divisive political issue which is why a middle ground should be sought. For this, the UK should turn to Norway for guidance. Norway integrated itself partially into the EU in 1994 but never joined the wider political union. This was politically very beneficial for Norway as it solved the divisive political deadlock on membership and increased their access to a multitude of economic benefits.

Ultimately, the future of Anglo-Scandi relations lies in economic cooperation, which in turn lies in a closer UK-EU relationship. This would have massive wide-ranging benefits for the UK as it could help boost UK economic prosperity, help mitigate the impact of Trump's tariffs - that are beginning to be imposed on the UK, and there are further opportunities for a greater role of the UK in European security.

Another significant area where there should be a massive revolution in Anglo-Scandi foreign policy is with Official Development Assistance. Each Scandinavian country spends considerable amounts on ODA as did the UK until recent cuts in future spending. As a proportion of GDP Norway is the largest contributor to ODA in the world at 1.09% of GDP, Sweden is not far behind at 0.91% and Denmark at 0.74%. This is compared to the UK spending 0.58% in 2023, falling to 0.3% in 2027.

Combined spending in 2023 would have amounted to \$33.3bn, which would have placed the group as the third largest in the Development Assistance Committee behind Germany and America. If this group organised into a regional power bloc, then it could dramatically increase the efficiency of aid distribution. There would only need to be one central bureaucracy that would organise projects and priorities, this would streamline distribution, cutting costs. The strength of a syndicate would give greater space for experiments in modernising ODA, with one example being large scale trials of direct cash injections, currently promoted by the NGO Give Directly.

The UK should maintain its current ODA funding and organise into a Scandinavia bloc to develop an international development superpower. This would be particularly valuable at a time when the US halted all overseas aid. This would give the bloc great global influence and the space to modernise ODA and usher in a period of more efficient development.

The Anglo-Scandi region should also boost cultural exchange. Soft power is essential to any effective foreign relationship, and the UK and Scandinavia are close geographical neighbours. The two have a long-shared history, and there are many aspects of music, food and art that are popularised across both regions that should be more effectively shared and spread to a wider audience.

Tourism is the most effective method that increases cultural experience for many people. The capitals of Scandinavia are teeming with museums that celebrate history, art, innovation and music, which can all be enjoyed in vibrant, modern and friendly cities. In 2023 Brits visited Norway with a combined number of overnight stays at 677,200, Sweden in 2024 at 675,000 and Denmark in 2023 at 999,700. These are considerable numbers and likely amount to about 100,000 – 150,000 tourists. Substantial numbers also visit the UK yearly, in 2023 600,000 Norwegians, 674,000 Swedes and 629,000 Danes visited.

This is a very strong base for popular cultural exchange that can be developed. A promotion increase in British markets could significantly boost demand and there can also be greater promotion of the cultural links and value that tourists would gain.

A smaller but significant aspect of cultural exchange is education. The UK is the top destination for Norwegian foreign students at 3,000, second for Swedes at 1,955 and 890 Danes also study in British Higher Education. This form of exchange needs even greater attention, UK students only make up 1.65% of foreign students in Sweden, at 659, and the numbers for Norway and Denmark are negligible. This asymmetry in exchange needs to be mended, HE providers should work better across the two regions to open greater possibilities for British students.

The Future Across the Sea

The Anglo-Scandi relationship has had a long and varied history with its zenith in the Second World War. The period after was characterised with competing security interests with the need to deter the Soviets and ultimately choosing NATO multilateralism with Sweden maintaining neutrality but within western security architecture.

The rise of NATO, the EEC and the EU as multi-national organisations reduced bilateralism leading to declining relations. These were exacerbated by British military decline, shifting foreign policy aims and the harm of Brexit. This all demonstrates a need to reset the Anglo-Scandi relationship. This should occur through the four recommendations set out. Britain should enhance its military presence in Northern Europe through the JEF. The UK should build stronger economic ties with Europe based on a Norwegian model as well as closer collaboration on ODA, creating a development superpower. Lastly, there should be a focus on cultural exchange to enhance soft power and maintain a revitalised relationship.

Measuring the success of this revitalisation is complex as relationships are built off many unquantifiable features. However, taken in turn each recommendation has identifiable measures for success. Whether it is more British troops in the region, increasing European trade, more collective ODA spending, or more student exchange. Each measure strengthens the Anglo-Scandi relationship, building stronger British economic ties to Europe and increasing its presence in a strategic military region. These improvements combined can determine success which can be maintained through more hidden measures demonstrated through political discourse, improved education about the relationship and a greater number of political visits.

Ultimately 2025 is being marked as the likely beginning of a long period of global instability and a revaluation of allies, security, and economic relationships. Britain must ensure that it protects itself in this climate and place itself on the right side of history by building a new, strong and versatile relationship with Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

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“Growth” and “Tax and Spend”: An Artificial Binary in UK Policy-making

Louis Kent

Abstract

The discourse surrounding the 2024 United Kingdom general election was dominated by three major political forces regarding fiscal policy. The Conservative Party and Reform UK campaigned heavily on tax cuts. On the opposite side, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party have adopted a much more ambitious approach in terms of investment, sharing key ideas such as a reconciliation with the European Union and public spending in the UK’s dilapidated public services, funded explicitly through tax rises. Finally, the Labour Party walked a precarious middle ground, advocating for very modest spending increases that are dwarfed by all the other parties, instead supporting piecemeal structural change through the adoption of mission-driven government and investment institutions. This article will use the landmark report “The State of the UK Economy in 2024” (Advani, 2024) to demonstrate how the UK’s continuing economic crisis is due precisely to a long-term lack of public and private investment, alongside a workforce of declining wealth and educational outcomes. Therefore, the approach of the Liberal Democrats and Greens is vindicated, with increased public spending being the best option to facilitate growth in the long-term.

Introduction

A divide which arose throughout the 2024 UK General Election is between the election manifestos which proposed “tax and spend” policies, and those which believed those policies were antithetical to economic “growth”. Indeed, a lack of economic growth is cited as the reason why political parties are unable to “tax and spend” on public services and investment. This article will analyse this view critically, arguing instead that conventional economic wisdom views “tax and spend” policies as conducive to growth in the long-term, and more effectively addresses the UK’s economic crisis that has arisen in recent years. First, this essay will establish the economic crisis that has taken hold of British politics, identifying the major issues using the seminal report, “The State of the UK Economy 2024”. Second, party policy will be broadly grouped into “tax and spend” and “growth” categories based on their plans for increases or cuts to spending and tax. Finally, these policies will be critically evaluated using recommendations from respected think tanks, coming to the conclusion given above.

Context: The UK’s Economic Crisis

The UK’s economy, since the Covid-19 pandemic, is increasingly slipping into crisis. Since the 2008 Financial Crisis, the growth of the UK economy has been extremely poor, but not excessively out of line with other European economies. As such, there is a broad mixture of factors that have led to this state of affairs. “The State of the UK Economy 2024” policy report issued by “The UK in a Changing Europe” offers plenty of insight into the condition of the UK economy and touches on a few of the reasons why it is in its current state. First and foremost, the consensus among economists and academics is that the UK’s economy has suffered most from both a lack of private and public investment. While low business investment pre-dated Brexit, it’s highly likely that Brexit accounts for it being around 10% lower than it could have been according to the landmark report. Further, austerity policies instituted by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has accounted for lower investment in education, the decimation of social care and local government, and lack of sufficient growth in NHS spending. These major factors have accounted for the structural decline in the UK’s economic structure, subject to shocks like Covid-19.

The second most prominent problem with the UK economy is the issues pertaining to the fitness of the workforce. Being an incredibly centralised state, educational outcomes are unevenly spread throughout the UK's regions, and sickness and disability are increasingly rife. Major causes of this are the austerity measures of the early 2010s, which cut funding to education, social care, and local government substantially, alongside the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, inflation has increased as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine causing energy prices to skyrocket, alongside the continuing effects of Covid disruptions. The UK has dipped into recession twice as a result of these short-term factors in 2020 and 2023. However, structural limitations also continue to hold the UK back, including the centralised political and economic institutions, the inefficient planning system, and the chronic short-termism borne out of centralisation and political polarisation. As such, it's clear that the UK's dire economic situation is multifactorial. However, in terms of priorities, the main issue with the UK economy is a lack of investment borne out of spending, closely followed by problems with the workforce, and finally by structural difficulties.

Party Policy in 2024

Labour's emphasis on "growth" has perhaps been the most obvious of the major parties and acts as the centrepiece of their manifesto. Underpinned by a dedication to "mission-driven government", that being the better implementation of measurable, long-term policy objectives, indeed, the number one mission is to stimulate the highest sustained growth in the G7. They are primarily interested in achieving this through the establishment of a "national wealth fund" to invest strategically in areas like steel, automotive manufacturing, and supply chains. Furthermore, they have emphasised the importance of building, promising 1.5 million homes over the next Parliament alongside the reintroduction of targets and reform of the relatively strict planning process. Despite slightly more radical promises pertaining to the nationalisation of rail, increased bus franchising, and the introduction of Great British Energy, Labour has been remarkably conservative in its spending increases. They intend only to raise an extra £9 billion over the next Parliament and have pledged to cap taxes like corporation tax. Harkening back to the days of Blairism and the Third Way focus on "wealth creation", Labour's enthusiasm to adopt "growth" rhetoric has been obvious.

However, Labour is not the only party keen to evoke this rhetoric. The Conservative Party who, despite their dismal chances of winning in 2024, continued to exist as the only other serious contender for government, had also focused heavily on “growth”. However, their approach had been broadly similar to that of Reform UK, in which tax cuts were the way both parties intended to stimulate growth. The Conservatives pledged an extra 2p off of National Insurance to introduce the triple lock plus to protect pensions from taxation, and to tighten the welfare system with regard to disability payments and those they deem able to work. Interestingly, the Conservatives intended to spend an extra £15 billion; £6 billion more than Labour, but these came mostly on tax cuts. Reform was even more radical on tax cuts, lifting the income tax start point to £20,000, cutting energy taxes and stamp duty, and abolishing inheritance tax under £1 million, along with a similar tightening of benefits access to the Conservatives. While emphasising tax cuts more so than Labour, both of these parties similarly renounce the idea of “tax and spend”, instead focusing on “small government” economic policies.

While the politics of the 2020s now features an increasingly divided and marginalised right, it also features the Liberal Democrats shifting to the left of Labour on “tax and spend” policies. The Liberal Democrats were far more willing to announce increases in taxes, by reversing Conservative tax breaks for the banks, introducing a Digital Services Tax, and closing loopholes for Capital Gains Tax. Further, they have also been unafraid with regard to increased spending, proposing an extra £9 billion for health and care alone, a removal of the two-child limit for child benefits, culminating in a £27 billion increase in spending overall. Further, the Greens follow in this approach, proposing a Wealth Tax, similar Capital Gains Tax reforms, alongside a Carbon Tax, all with the aim of bringing essential utilities under public ownership and instituting £40 billion in Green investment. Both the Liberal Democrats and the Greens carry the torch of “tax and spend” policy making into the new Parliament, both announcing publicly their intentions to push Labour on issues like health and green investment.

Policy Evaluation

The recommendations from the Institute for Public Policy Research regarding “mission-driven government” have been fully heeded by the incoming Labour government

who intend to integrate them into their operation of government. Labour's focus on "missions" has been notable and does well to address the endemic "short-termism" in British politics. Further, their plans to build 1.5 million homes throughout this Parliament also addresses the issues with the planning system, and the implementation of a "national wealth fund" somewhat addresses issues regarding investment. However, as in the IPPR report as well, their fiscal timidity holds them back from fundamentally addressing the major problems with investment and, by extension, the British workforce. For example, their refusal to lift the two-child benefit cap, their removal of the Winter Fuel Allowance, and their offensive against welfare will impact the workforce in the long-term, by exacerbating the uneven outcomes in education and disability throughout the country. Further, their ruling out of tax increases in income tax, VAT, and national insurance, despite a £22 billion shortfall, will inherently limit their scope for both private and public investment. As such, they only partially address the fundamental economic issues with the UK.

The Liberal Democrats and the Greens better exemplify the "tax and spend" policies that are needed to stimulate the economy, although the former does more so. The Liberal Democrats proposals regarding health, social care, and education address to a great extent the issues with Britain's workforce, while both parties propose increases in Green investment. Further, the Liberal Democrats also follow Labour in pursuing a new "industrial strategy", and both parties support a closer relationship with Europe which they hope will stimulate foreign investment. Finally, both parties are less timid than Labour about promising tax rises. The significance of this is emphasised by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, who argues strongly in favour of the idea that tax cuts or failure to increase taxes in the short-term will lead to greater tax increases in the long-term. This idea disrupts Labour's focus on long-termism but bolsters the credentials of the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. As such, on "tax and spend" policies, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens do more to holistically remedy the issues with the UK economy and promote economic growth.

The Conservative Party and Reform UK take an approach that is radically at odds with "tax and spend", instead proposing large tax cuts and reductions in welfare spending. There are two main issues with this at a time of economic downturn. First, by reducing welfare spending, issues with Britain's workforce will continue to be exacerbated as essential support

for the disabled alongside vast inequalities in educational outcomes will be exacerbated. Further, Liz Truss' premiership showed how this is economically problematic and will impact investment. Tax cuts are large spending priorities that do not result in strategic investment, meaning the UK's dire financial situation will continue into the future. Further, radical plans to cut taxes can result in an intense destabilisation of the UK economy, as shown by Liz Truss' premiership. Far from promoting economic growth, the shocks to the UK economy reduced incentives to invest. It is essentially using public resources without the long-term benefits of economic growth. "Tax and spend" policies cannot realistically be separated from economic growth in such a time of economic crisis, particularly when the UK's specific problems call for it.

Conclusion

Experience from the past and the opinions of many esteemed policymakers suggests heavily that "tax and spend" policies and economic "growth" rhetoric should not be viewed as diametrically opposed concepts. It's clearly established that the main issue with the UK economy is a lack of investment, both public and private, with an increasingly disabled and less educated workforce worsening the problem. As such, Labour's focus on "growth" with extreme timidity on "tax and spend" policies is misguided and unrealistic in this situation, even if certain policies successfully address issues of investment and inefficiency. Further, the focus of the British right on maintaining implementing tax cuts and cutting welfare spending also exacerbates the secondary problem with the UK's economy, being the prevalence of educational inequality and disability in the British workforce. The Liberal Democrats and the Green Party are certainly the most ambitious on "tax and spend" policies, but it remains important that they implement these policies with the long-term view of achieving the growth and investment that is desperately needed. Working together in tandem, these two concepts have the potential to alleviate the dire economic situation.

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Industrial policy: How can the UK use fiscal policy to support UK industry?

Thomas Crothers

Abstract

The UK's industrial base stands at a critical inflection point. Years of underinvestment, coupled with an over-reliance on financial services, has eroded the nation's manufacturing capabilities, and exacerbated regional inequalities. This report presents a fiscally sustainable yet ambitious strategy to reinvigorate British industry through targeted interventions.

This analysis identifies three systemic challenges: manufacturing capabilities have collapsed, public investment trails G7 counterparts, and Northern and Midlands regions have suffered decline in manufacturing employment since 2000. To address these issues, I propose a three-pillar approach:

1. Strategic investment in high-potential sectors including defence and clean energy.
2. A fund for emerging technologies like SMRs and fintech.
3. Regional development targeting infrastructure and skills.

The plan is funded through minimal borrowing and revenue-neutral reforms, including inheritance tax modernisation and a targeted 1.5% share buyback levy. The policies success will be monitored and metrics such as regional job creation and productivity gains will be assessed, to ensure value is being delivered. Projected outcomes include GDP growth uplift, reduction in regional inequality, and improved global standing.

This balanced approach offers a credible pathway to rebuild Britain's industrial capacity while maintaining fiscal sustainability.

The UK economy is at a crossroads. Despite being a global financial hub, the country faces significant challenges in industrial competitiveness, regional inequality, and infrastructure failures. This document proposes a bold industrial strategy, leveraging targeted fiscal policy to revitalise key sectors, bridge regional disparities, and secure long-term economic growth.

The UK has become an economy that fails to provide for industry and its citizens. Currently, the UK lacks sufficient fiscal spending to support economic development nationally, as highlighted by the OECD Economic Surveys (2024), which emphasise the need for targeted fiscal policies. Admittedly, the UK has been constrained by its limited ability to spend, but this is a challenge that must be addressed. Across the globe, multiple nations are using high levels of fiscal spending to support their industries. For example, initiatives such as the Inflation Reduction Act in the US and Made in China 2025 both focus on specific sectors to drive economic gains. Most significantly, Germany recently announced the removal of its debt barrier, which had restricted the level of debt-to-GDP to 40%. This change is particularly notable because it is not merely a policy shift but a constitutional amendment that had been in place since 2010.

The UK must now develop an effective fiscal spending policy that supports industry and citizens across the nation, especially in a world that is becoming increasingly fractured (IPPR, 2023; Lords Library, 2023). By adopting a targeted approach to fiscal policy, the UK can address its structural challenges. The UK economy can adopt a three-pillar approach by targeting strategic industries such as defence, emerging industries like Small Modular Reactors, and bridging infrastructure and education gaps. This will lead to innovation, and create a more resilient and competitive economy.

The UK's industrial failure

The UK's industrial strategy has struggled to deliver long-term results. The 2017 Industrial Strategy aimed to boost productivity and innovation but failed due to inconsistent funding and a lack of focus on emerging technologies. In contrast, Germany's Mittelstand model supports Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) through targeted subsidies and vocational training, and has successfully fostered innovation and growth.

The UK's economy is heavily reliant on the financial sector, which accounts for 8.8% of GDP but has failed to deliver growth outside London and the Southeast. Meanwhile, manufacturing, which once contributed 30% of GDP, now accounts for less than 8.23%. This imbalance highlights the need for a more diversified economic strategy.

Historically, the UK's industrial policy has been inconsistent, often shifting with changes in government. The 2017 report 'Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future' highlighted the government's failure to deliver long-term stability and the necessity of an industrial strategy (HM Government, 2017). While countries like China and the US have driven growth through heavy subsidies and investment (e.g., the US CHIPS and Science Act, which invested \$8.65 billion in Intel), the UK lacks comparable initiatives. Small programs like Invest 2035 focus on green strategy but fall short of the scale seen in the US, China, and the EU (LSE Grantham Institute, 2024).

Key challenges for the UK

- Competitiveness - The UK lags behind in traditional and high-tech sectors, with many success stories moving abroad such as ARM. For example, the US has the CHIPS act (2022) and the EU has the European Chips Act (2023).
- Financial sector domination - The UK economy is heavily reliant on the financial sector for high-paying jobs. The North and the Midlands have seen a 15% decline in manufacturing jobs, whereas London and the Southeast have high paying service jobs.
- Infrastructure failures - Consistent failures and overspending on infrastructure such as HS2, with an initial budget of £37.5bn and now estimated costs exceeding £100bn.

Investment Levels

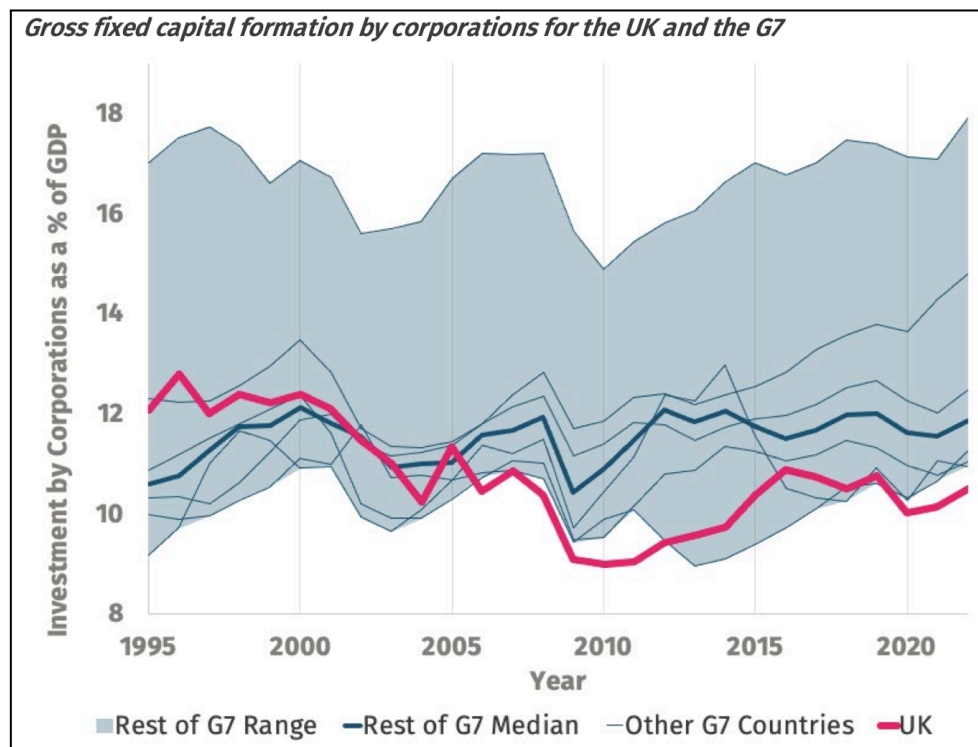


Figure 1: Office for National Statistics “Gross fixed capital by corporations for the UK and the G7”

Source: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), 2024

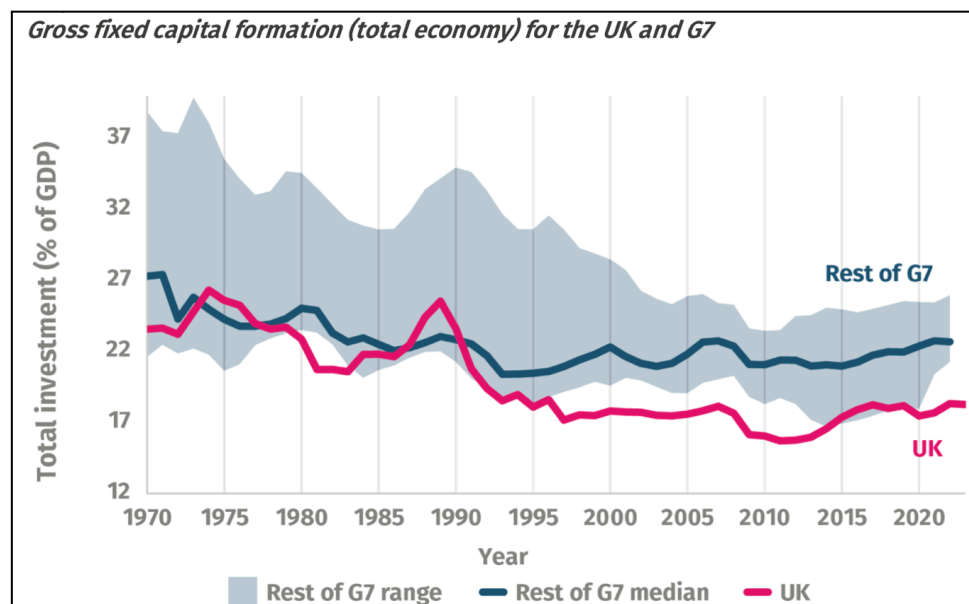


Figure 2: Office for National Statistics “Gross fixed capital formation (total economy) for the UK & G7”

Source: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), 2024

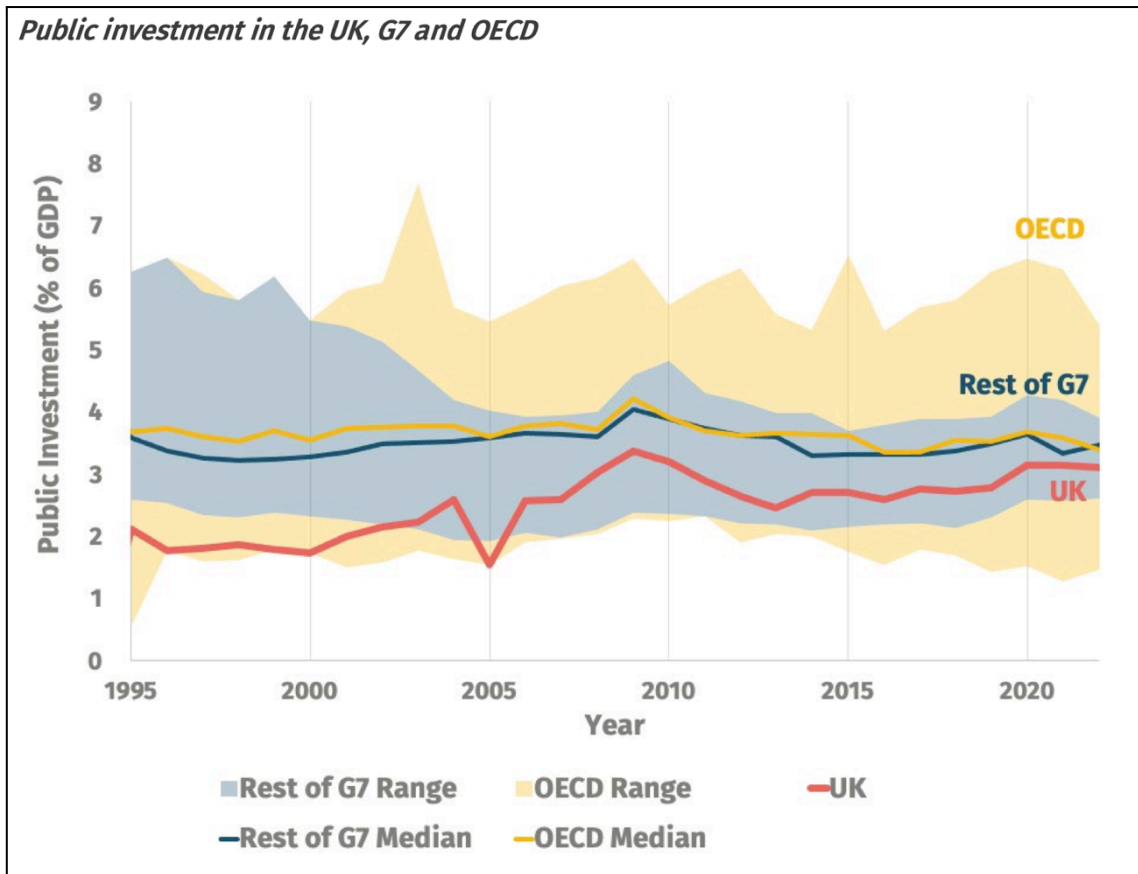


Figure 3: Office for National Statistics “Public investment in the UK, G7, and OECD”

Source: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), 2024

The UK faces a significant investment gap compared to other G7 nations. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows that both government and private investment in the UK are consistently lower than in other G7 countries (ONS, 2023). This underinvestment has led to declining infrastructure, public services, and regional inequalities.

Additionally, the UK public is reluctant to invest in domestic companies. Only 10.8% of UK adults hold UK shares, compared to 62% in the US (Finder, 2025; ONS 2023). This lack of domestic investment has made the UK less attractive for companies to list on the London Stock Exchange. For example, ARM, a Cambridge-based company, chose to list in the US rather than the UK.

Regional inequalities

The UK has significant regional inequalities, mainly due to the decline of the manufacturing sector in the UK. There are still many companies that operate within the manufacturing

industry that could improve growth and provide high paying jobs for multiple people.

However, there is limited support to boost and support these industries that provide many jobs to the Midlands and the North of England.

Fiscal constraints

There is a limited amount of room on the level of fiscal spending that the UK can make due to its tight fiscal position. This is a serious problem when the government considers spending. If the spending is perceived to be effective then the impact on the bond market will be minimal but when spending is poor, the bond market will react poorly, raising yields and increasing the interest cost for the UK government as seen during the ‘mini budget’.

Three pillar approach

This strategy focuses on three pillars: supporting strategic industries, investing in emerging sectors, and addressing infrastructure and education gaps. By doing so, the UK can position itself as a global leader in innovation and sustainability.

The First Pillar: Strategic Industries

The UK’s strategic industries, such as aerospace, defence, and renewable energy, are home to globally competitive companies like BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce. These industries have the potential to drive innovation, create high-skilled jobs, and strengthen the UK’s global position.

BAE Systems: Increased support for BAE Systems would strengthen the UK’s defence industry, enhance European partnerships, and create high-skilled jobs in regions like the North and Midlands. As Europe seeks to reduce its reliance on the US, BAE Systems is well-positioned to play a key role in defence policy.

Rolls-Royce: With its diversified portfolio in defence aerospace and small modular reactors (SMRs), Rolls-Royce is a key player in both aerospace and clean energy. By investing in Rolls-Royce, the UK can drive innovation in these sectors, creating high-skilled jobs in the Midlands and the North, where the company has a significant presence.

Renewable Energy: The UK's green policy, including initiatives like Invest 2035, provides a strong foundation for growth in renewable energy. Supporting this sector will not only help the UK meet its climate goals but also create jobs and attract investment in regions that have been historically underserved.

Policy Support for Strategic Industries

Allocate £5 billion to support strategic industries like aerospace and defence. While this may increase debt, the focus will be on ensuring investments yield high returns through monitoring and performance reviews.

Invest £500 million to enhance the UK's global competitiveness. This includes fostering partnerships with established allies and leveraging initiatives to attract investment and talent.

By focusing on strategic industries like aerospace, defence, and renewable energy, the UK can drive innovation, create high-skilled jobs, and strengthen its global position. Targeted fiscal policies, combined with transparent planning and public engagement, will ensure these industries thrive while addressing regional inequalities and fiscal constraints Zenghelis, D. (2025).

The Second Pillar: Emerging Sectors

The UK's future competitiveness depends on its ability to support emerging sectors with high growth potential, such as fintech, Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), and advanced manufacturing. These industries align with global trends toward clean energy, digital innovation, and technological leadership.

Small Modular Reactors (SMRs): Rolls-Royce's development of SMRs represents a significant opportunity for the UK to lead in next-generation nuclear technology. Investing in SMRs could position the UK as a global leader in clean energy, creating high-skilled jobs and reducing reliance on fossil fuels. The government should provide targeted subsidies and tax incentives to accelerate the development and deployment of SMRs.

Fintech: The UK's fintech sector, led by companies like Revolut, is a major success story. Revolut, valued at \$45 billion, is the UK's most valuable unicorn (a company valued at over £1 billion). To ensure such companies choose to list in the UK, the government must work to increase IPOs on the London Stock Exchange. This will not only support the financial industry but also attract entrepreneurs and investors to the UK.

Policy Support for Emerging Sectors

Allocate £2.5 billion to support high-growth industries like fintech, SMRs, and advanced manufacturing. This funding will help build domestic supply chains, reduce reliance on imports, and create jobs in deprived regions. However, the risk of R&D fraud must be mitigated through strengthened audit systems and clear guidelines.

Introduce targeted tax incentives to encourage private investment in emerging sectors. For example, a 1.5% stock buyback tax could generate £450 million in revenue while encouraging companies to reinvest in innovation rather than shareholder pay-outs.

The Third Pillar: Addressing Infrastructure and Education Gaps

The UK's infrastructure and education gaps are significant barriers to economic growth, particularly in the North of England and the Midlands. Addressing these gaps is essential to improving connectivity, fostering innovation, and equipping workers with the skills needed for strategic industries like advanced manufacturing and renewable energy.

Infrastructure Investment: The majority of the UK's infrastructure issues are concentrated in the North and Midlands. Investment will focus on public rail and logistic hubs, improving connectivity between cities and making it easier for businesses to trade. For example, projects like HS2 (despite its cost overruns) highlight the need for better transport links. Transparent planning and effective spending will be critical to ensuring these investments deliver value.

Education and Skills: The UK must foster partnerships between businesses and universities to drive innovation and address skills gaps. Expanding apprenticeship programs and vocational training opportunities will equip workers with the skills needed in strategic industries. For example, partnering with companies like Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems to

create 10,000 new apprenticeships by 2030 will help build a skilled workforce and attract investment to the UK.

Policy Support for Infrastructure and Education

- Allocate £5 billion to improve infrastructure in the North and Midlands, focusing on public rail and logistic hubs. Transparent plans and public engagement will be critical to gaining support for these initiatives.
- Invest £1.7 billion in expanding apprenticeship programs and vocational training opportunities. Aligning these programs with industry needs will ensure workers are equipped with the skills required for strategic industries.
- Increase fuel duty by 3%, generating £750 million to fund improvements in public transport. Effective spending on public transport will reduce congestion, improve connectivity, and support economic growth in underserved regions.

How will this be funded and where is the money allocated?

Below is an outline of the proposed policies and their costs:

Policy	Cost	Risks	Mitigation
Borrow to invest key industries	£5bn	Increased debt	Ensure investments yield high returns
Strengthening global position.	£500mn	Failure to achieve gains	Work with established partners such as the commonwealth
Regional development	£5bn	Public opposition	Transparent plans

Apprenticeship and Vocational training	£1.7bn	Skills mismatch	Align with industry needs
Support for emerging sectors	£2.5bn	R&D Fraud	Strengthen audit
Total	£14.7bn		

<i>Policy</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Risks</i>	<i>Mitigation</i>
Increase VAT by 1%	£8.55bn	Increase the cost of goods.	Policies provide a net benefit.
Stock buyback tax (1.5%)	£450mn	Variable levels of buybacks.	Monitor buybacks and adjust rate if needed.
Closing IHT loopholes	£4.5bn	Avoidance by high-net-worth individuals.	Strong enforcement and ensure all loopholes are closed.
Double tax on gambling	£900mn	Decrease the level of gambling so money raised is not as high.	Gradual increase and find the optimal level.

Increase fuel duty by 3%	£750mn	Impact consumer spending.	Effective spending on public transport.
Clamp down on R&D fraud	£1.1bn	Risk of misidentification affecting genuine businesses.	Improve audit systems and ensure clear guidelines.
Increase IPT tax by 2%	£1.2bn	Increased costs for businesses and consumers.	Gradual implementation.
0.5% tax on homes value >2mn	£800mn	May lead to tax avoidance or property market distortions.	Strengthen enforcement.
Total	£18.25bn		

Why This Policy?

The proposed industrial strategy, centred on targeted fiscal policy and government intervention, represents the most effective way for the UK to compete on the global stage. While alternative approaches, such as relying on market forces or implementing tax cuts, have been tried in the past, they have proven inadequate in addressing the UK's structural challenges. Over the past 15 years, the UK's reliance on market forces and minimal government intervention has led to stagnant economic growth, with productivity averaging just 0.3% growth, the lowest among the G7 nations. Private sector investment has also been poor, exacerbating existing issues such as skills gaps, poor infrastructure, and regional inequalities. For example, the UK's R&D spending stands at 1.7% of GDP, significantly

lower than Germany's 3.1% and the USA's 3.5%. This underinvestment has left the UK lagging behind.

In contrast, the proposed industrial strategy leverages targeted fiscal policy to address these challenges directly. By focusing on strategic industries, emerging sectors, and infrastructure and education gaps, the strategy aims to create an environment where both public and private investment can thrive. This approach is not only necessary but also proven effective, as demonstrated by the success of industrial policies in other nations. For instance, Germany's Mittelstand model, which supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through targeted subsidies and vocational training, has been highly successful in fostering innovation and growth. Similarly, the US's CHIPS and Science Act has led to significant public and private investment in semiconductor manufacturing, creating jobs and driving economic growth in historically deprived regions like Kentucky, which is set to receive \$13.9 billion in investment by 2030. The rapid development of South Korea and China also underscores the effectiveness of government-driven industrial policies, which have relied on direct support, R&D subsidies, and a highly skilled workforce to achieve economic transformation.

Critics of government intervention often argue that tax cuts could stimulate growth by increasing disposable income and encouraging private investment. However, as economist Joseph Stiglitz (2015) has noted, tax cuts often disproportionately benefit high-income individuals and corporations, with little trickle-down effect on the broader economy. Moreover, given the UK's tight fiscal position (IFS, 2024), tax cuts would likely lead to reductions in public services, which have been shown to be ineffective in addressing structural challenges such as skills gaps and regional disparities. The proposed industrial strategy, by contrast, offers a more balanced and sustainable approach, focusing on targeted investments that yield long-term benefits.

Addressing UK-Specific Challenges

The proposed strategy is designed to address challenges specific to the UK, including regional inequality, skills gaps, over-reliance on the financial sector, and infrastructure failures. By building on existing strengths in industries such as aerospace, defence, and finance, while also supporting emerging sectors like fintech, renewables, and biotech, the

strategy aims to create a more balanced and resilient economy. For example, the UK's aerospace and defence sector, led by companies like BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce, has the potential to drive innovation and create high-skilled jobs in regions like the North and Midlands. Similarly, the fintech sector, with companies like Revolut valued at \$45 billion, represents a major success story that can be further leveraged to attract investment and talent to the UK.

While the proposed strategy involves upfront costs, the long-term benefits far outweigh the risks. Targeted investment will increase GDP, create high-paying jobs, and generate higher tax revenues, ultimately improving the UK's fiscal position (IMF, 2024). Improved infrastructure will enhance the country's global competitiveness and attract foreign direct investment (FDI). However, to ensure public support, the government must prioritise transparency and effective spending. The failure of projects like HS2, which faced public backlash due to cost overruns and perceived inefficiency, serves as a lesson. By engaging the public and demonstrating the tangible benefits of the strategy such as job creation, regional growth, and improved infrastructure, the government can build cross-party and public support for its policies.

Measuring Success

To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed industrial strategy, success will be measured using a range of key performance indicators (KPIs). Economic growth will be tracked through GDP growth, with a focus on the contribution of specific industries such as aerospace, renewables, and fintech. Productivity will be measured by output per worker, ensuring that supported sectors are becoming more efficient and competitive. Given the strategy's emphasis on reducing regional disparities, growth will also be assessed on a regional basis, with a particular focus on areas like the North and Midlands.

Job creation will be another critical measure of success. Employment rates in supported industries and regions will be closely monitored, as will the uptake of apprenticeships and vocational training programs. Surveys and feedback from employers, facilitated by organisations like the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), will be used to ensure that workforce skills align with industry needs.

The strategy's ability to attract investment will be evaluated through increases in foreign direct investment (FDI) in targeted sectors, as well as domestic investment in R&D and infrastructure. The number of UK companies choosing to list on the London Stock Exchange will also be tracked, as this will serve as an indicator of the UK's attractiveness as a business hub.

Innovation will be measured through increases in R&D spending, with a target of reaching at least 3% of GDP by 2030. The number of patents filed by UK companies in strategic sectors will also be monitored, as will the UK's share of global markets in key industries like aerospace, renewables, and fintech. Research by Hall & Lerner (2010) supports the idea that targeted support for small businesses can drive innovation, as these firms often face higher R&D costs.

Infrastructure projects will be assessed based on their timely and cost-effective delivery, with project completion rates and public satisfaction gauged through surveys. Fiscal sustainability will be monitored through bond market stability.

Adjustments and Contingencies

While the proposed strategy is designed to deliver significant benefits, it is not without risks. Broader economic conditions, such as the US reducing military support for Europe or imposing trade restrictions, could impact the policy's effectiveness. However, the strategy's focus on aerospace and defence will help mitigate these risks by strengthening the UK's position as a supplier to European allies and improving relationships with countries like Canada and Australia.

If certain industries fail to deliver expected returns, resources can be reallocated to more promising sectors. For example, if fintech becomes self-sustaining, funding could be redirected to emerging sectors like AI or advanced materials. This flexibility has been demonstrated in the past, such as when the failure of British Volt led to the repurposing of its facilities into a data centre (Manning, 2025), a key resource for the AI revolution.

If borrowing costs rise significantly, alternative revenue-raising measures, such as green bonds or public-private partnerships, could be explored. Adjustments to VAT or other taxes could also be made in response to changing economic conditions. To address public opposition, transparency in spending and decision-making will be critical. Campaigns highlighting the benefits of the policy, such as job creation and infrastructure improvements, can help maintain public support.

Finally, contingency plans for underperforming projects will also be established to mitigate risks and ensure the strategy's long-term success.

Conclusion

The proposed industrial strategy represents a bold and necessary shift in the UK's economic policy. By leveraging targeted fiscal policy, the UK can address its structural challenges, drive economic growth, and position itself as a global leader in innovation and sustainability. While alternatives like free market policies and tax cuts have proven ineffective, the use of industrial policy offers a strong path forward for a more competitive and equitable UK economy.

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A Policy Proposal for a Voter Qualification Examination

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Abstract

This policy paper proposes the introduction of a voter qualification examination as a prerequisite for electoral participation in general elections. The intent is to ensure that voters possess a fundamental understanding of governance, policy, and current affairs, thus enhancing the quality of democratic decision-making. By requiring citizens to demonstrate a basic level of political and policy knowledge, this policy seeks to mitigate the influence of misinformation, emotional decision-making, and uninformed voting. Though a lower voter turnout is to be expected, as some will lose their right, this policy paper will argue that this is a more desirable situation than an influence of these issues. The test will be designed to be fair, objective, and accessible, with accommodations for disabilities and literacy challenges. This proposal addresses key concerns, including democratic integrity, accessibility, and implementation strategies.

1. Introduction

The right to vote may be a cornerstone of democratic governance. However, the quality of democratic outcomes is directly linked to the knowledge and awareness of the electorate. In contemporary democracies, we are often exposed to misinformation, media bias, emotional rhetoric, and widespread ignorance. It is therefore unfair to those who follow and understand the political climate, that those who do not even know who their prime minister is, have the equal right to vote.

A policy of examining basic knowledge of government and party policies would serve as a filter to prevent unformed voters from influencing potentially millions of lives. This examination would be neutral, factual and widely accessible. It would be a multiple choice test, so as to avoid biased answers, available locally, with the option of retaking it indefinitely, and tailored conditions such as time extensions or monitors for the disabled. For instance, dyslexic people would get the proportional amount of additional time. Moreover, this test would not be difficult. It would not require studying several hours per day in order to pass it. On the contrary, if one watches the news for 30 minutes per day, or reads the newspaper, they should be able to pass. Requiring bare minimum knowledge of the basic structure of government and the candidates' policies ought to be seen as a civic duty, not as a restriction of a right. While this policy does not come without problems, which will be addressed, it greatly diminishes those that arise without it.

2. Rationale and Justification

While a voter qualification examination may at first appear to undermine fundamental democratic rights, this policy contends that it is not the existence of voting rights themselves, but the uninformed exercise of those rights, that threatens democratic integrity. The test is intended not to exclude, but to elevate the standard of participation. This measure is akin to competency requirements that already exist in multiple facets of civic responsibility. Examples include drivers licenses, where individuals must pass both theoretical and practical tests, and must be well versed in road safety and regulations. In Jury duty people are expected to comprehend legal proceedings and apply reasoning skills in rendering verdicts. Many places such as the UK, Canada and EU countries, also require tests and background checks to ensure responsible use of firearms (Home office, 2024) (Public Safety Canada, 2024).

However, such analogies risk oversimplifying the moral and political weight of voting. Voting is not merely a technical act but a civic responsibility with profound philosophical implications. While the proposal aims for political neutrality by focusing on factual knowledge, it must be acknowledged that “facts” in civic education are never value-neutral. The very structure of the test (what is included, what is excluded, and how it is framed) can subtly reinforce the dominance of existing political narratives. In this sense, a test based solely on reciting the established political order may risk validating the status quo, rather than encouraging voters to think critically about it.

Even though it may seem so, this policy does not suggest replacing democracy with a meritocratic elite. The focus is not on creating a technocratic filter that rewards memorization and rote knowledge, but on emphasising and promoting deep ethical reasoning and understanding. To that end, future iterations of the examination may include adjustments that foster not just awareness of governmental structures and party platforms, but also basic political literacy; understanding ideological distinctions, evaluating policy arguments, and recognizing the potential for systemic reform. Ultimately, the rationale for the test is not to prevent dissent or alternative visions of governance, but to ensure that participation in democracy comes with a minimum standard of engagement; one that must include, at the very least, awareness of the system’s structure and its present functions. That being said, the proposal remains open to ongoing revision to ensure it does not merely entrench institutional power, but instead equips citizens to question it meaningfully.

3. Structure of the Voter Qualification Examination

3.1 Accessibility and Fairness

- Accommodations will be provided for individuals with disabilities, including extra time and alternative testing formats.
- The test will be available in various local places, such as local government offices and schools.
- There will be no fee associated with taking the test to prevent economic discrimination.

3.2 Retake and Frequency

- The test will be valid for five years, requiring periodic renewal to ensure continued voter awareness.
- Individuals who fail may retake the test an unlimited number of times within a set period before elections.
- The test must be completed at least 72 hours before election day to allow for administrative processing.

3.3 Required personal details

For security, fairness, and administrative efficiency, test takers will be required to write down specific personal details before viewing the questionnaire in order to verify identity and ensure compliance with election regulations:

1. Full Legal Name – As it appears on government-issued identification, ensuring consistency with voter records.
2. Date of Birth – To verify eligibility based on the legal voting age.
3. National Insurance Number (NINo) or Passport Number – To prevent duplicate testing and confirm that the person is a registered UK resident.
4. Registered Residential Address – Must match the official voter registration database to confirm eligibility for elections within a specific constituency.
5. Email Address and/or Phone Number (optional) – Used for test confirmations, results notifications, and retake scheduling if necessary.
6. Special Accommodations (if applicable) – For individuals requiring disability-related adjustments, such as extra time or alternative formats.
7. Examination number – Provided by the supervising staff on site.

3.4 Content

The examination will be a multiple-choice test designed to assess fundamental political knowledge, current affairs, and an understanding of government operations. It will include:

- Government Structure: Understanding the branches of government, their functions, and electoral processes.
- Policy Knowledge: Basic knowledge of key policy areas, such as healthcare, education, and foreign policy.
- Party Platforms: Awareness of major political party positions (factual, not interpretative).

- Voting Procedures: Information on how elections work, including voter registration and ballot processes.

Each question will be accompanied by a brief paragraph providing context, ensuring that test-takers can answer based on factual understanding rather than preconceived bias.

3.5 Format

- The test will be 50 minutes in length.
- There will be 25 questions in total, allowing for an average of 2 minutes spent on each question.
- There will be up to two four optional answers, with the possibility of more than one, even all of them being correct.
- At no point will there be an option for the test takers to write anything themselves, further ensuring objectivity in assessing their knowledge and understanding.
- During this time, test takers will be allowed to leave only to use the toilet one at a time, and will be accompanied by a member of staff.

3.6 Example questions

1) As of the most recent general election, what is the Labour Party's stance on the privatization of the National Health Service (NHS)?

- A. The Labour Party supports full privatization of the NHS.
- B. The Labour Party opposes privatization and advocates for increased public funding.
- C. The Labour Party plans to introduce a mixed public-private healthcare model.
- D. The Labour Party has no official stance on NHS privatization.

Correct Answer: B)

2) The UK government consists of multiple branches and institutions, each with distinct roles and responsibilities. Which of the following statements accurately describe aspects of the UK government? (Select all that apply)

- A. The House of Commons is responsible for proposing and passing legislation, while the House of Lords reviews and revises proposed laws.

- B. The Prime Minister is directly elected by the public during general elections.
- C. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is responsible for managing the UK's economic and financial policy, including the national budget.
- D. Devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have powers over areas such as health and education, but certain matters, such as foreign policy and defense, remain controlled by the UK Parliament.

Correct answers: A), C), and D)

4. Implementation Strategy

1. Legislative Approval: Introduce the policy through parliamentary debate and public consultation.
2. Test Development: Form an independent commission to design the test.
3. Public Awareness Campaign: Inform citizens about the new requirement and provide study materials.
4. Trial Phase: Implement a voluntary pilot program before full enforcement.
5. Nationwide Rollout: Require passing the test for all general elections moving forward. If successful, considered for by-elections, local elections etc.

While some may argue, as no doubt many will, that proposing government help to educate the population should be prioritised over the act of voter right limitation, this policy proposes doing both. Along with introducing multiple choice examinations, schools would also implement mandatory education on civic duties and basic government structure. However, the objective of this policy is to filter out ignorance and misinformation, and no matter how educated the population is, this is inevitable on some level.

5. Estimated cost

Based on similar government programs (e.g., UK citizenship test, driving theory test, jury duty expenses), the following can be estimated (in £ million per year):

1. Test Development & Review: 10 - 20
2. Administration and Staffing: 50 - 100

3. Public Awareness & Education: 20 - 40
4. Accessibility Accommodations: 10 - 30
5. System Maintenance & Security: 20 - 50

Total Estimated Cost : £110 - £240 million per year.

Given that this would be financed by the government, it would unfortunately mean a serious reallocation of resources, changes in budgets and an increase in taxes.

6. Addressing Potential Criticisms

6.1 The Problem of Bias in Test Design

Bias is undoubtedly the most significant concern surrounding this policy. Even if the test avoids overt political alignment, the very selection of what counts as “essential knowledge” risks privileging the dominant perspective embedded in the existing UK political framework. By requiring voters to demonstrate familiarity with how the British political system operates; its institutions, procedures, and party platforms, the test may inadvertently legitimize those structures as unquestionable norms, thereby discouraging dissent or alternative political imagination. This policy recognizes that even factual multiple-choice questions are never entirely neutral. For instance, the difference between “What does Parliament do?” and “What are the criticisms of parliamentary sovereignty?” is not simply semantic. It reflects a deeper choice about what kind of citizen the state wants to cultivate: one who complies, or one who questions?

To mitigate this, the examination will be developed by an independent, ideologically diverse commission tasked with reflecting a spectrum of political thought. Beyond neutrality, the test content will eventually aim to include questions that assess the ability to understand competing political arguments, not just recall institutional details. While the initial version of the exam will focus on structural literacy, future revisions may integrate civic-critical thinking elements. For instance, understanding the pros and cons of first-past-the-post, or recognizing different ideological stances on issues like taxation, healthcare, and civil liberties. Importantly, transparency will be central. The test content, development process, and review methodology will all be made public, subject to periodic audit, and open to democratic feedback. Only by acknowledging and grappling with the problem of embedded

bias can this policy fulfill its stated aim: to cultivate an electorate not just more informed, but also more reflective, self-aware, and democratically competent.

6.2 Disenfranchisement Concerns

Requiring a test disproportionately affects low-income and minority groups. For instance, a single mother with four children would not find time to study regularly for the examination, and would end up being discriminated against.

The test will be free and accessible to all, eliminating financial barriers. It will be widely available both in local areas, such as schools and courthouses, as will the content and information. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee the right to vote for everyone, and there will of course be people who will end up losing it. However, this policy aims to minimize the festering of ignorance amongst the population, and by doing so, will cause less harm than good. Moreover, this policy may serve as an incentive for people not to make poor decisions, and perhaps for future governments to provide more assistance to those in difficult situations. As mentioned above, this test will not be difficult, in the sense that it will not require hours of study such as that in school or university examinations. Even those with limited time or ability, so long as they find a few minutes per day to follow the news or read the paper, should be able to pass. It is only basic knowledge of government structure and candidate policy that is being tested after all. Additionally, this policy would, for the time being, only be implemented for general elections, so even those with difficult circumstances and limited schedules, should be able to find some time every 5 years to take this test, particularly as they would have an indefinite number of chances up to 72 hours before the election.

6.3 Potential Left wing bias

Further on disenfranchisement, there is a clear correlation between higher education and left leaning views (Pew Research Center, 2016) (Apfeld et al., 2022). Since an educated person would have better chances of passing the examination, there is a risk of skewing the electorate towards left leaning parties and candidates. This is particularly true with the partnership of this policy with civic education in schools.

The statistics are indeed clear that those with a higher education tend to be more left wing, but once again, it must be stressed that this examination requires very basic knowledge as has been demonstrated by the examples above. It is the estimate of this policy that the gap in

education would not be enough for an entire branch of voters to fail outright. That being said, this may serve as an additional incentive for individuals to educate themselves and keep up with the political, social and economic climate of their respective areas and the country as a whole, thereby further encouraging and promoting a competent electorate.

6.4 Impact on Voter Turnout

While voter turnout may decrease initially, this policy prioritizes quality over quantity in democratic participation. A smaller, well-informed electorate is preferable to a larger, uninformed one. The same applies to the previous two points (6.2 and 6.3).

6.5 Possible alternatives

1) Easier access to unbiased political information, such as government-provided election guides that summarize party policies in neutral terms.

While this may improve things, many could and predictably would ignore them. More importantly however, this would actually bring more bias into the picture.

2) Stronger media literacy initiatives to help people distinguish between real information and propaganda.

In an increasingly technological as well as globalized world, this is becoming ever more difficult. While this is a legitimate problem, it could feasibly be included in a separate policy, since the media must be as neutral and objective as possible regardless of whether voting examinations are implemented or not. Yet this does nothing for those who do not follow the news media to begin with, which is what this policy promotes. Therefore, this is an objective that must be strived towards in partnership with this policy, not as an alternative.

7. Alterations, adaptations and amendments

For the purpose of adapting to unforeseen outcomes and side effects upon implementation, the policy is prepared to make alterations and amendments including but not limited to:

- Financial award or a tax deduction for completing the exam, creating an additional incentive.

- Should the test prove too difficult or too expensive to implement, it could be reduced to being mandatory once and valid for life (as is a driving test).
- Online availability for those with disabilities which make mobility difficult.
- Potential change in legal voting age, as a better mark for voting rights.

Note: These points are subject to revision should any unpredicted issues arise.

8. Conclusion

This policy aims to enhance democratic integrity by ensuring voters possess a fundamental understanding of governance and policy. The format and structure allow for neutrality, accessibility, and will be tailored for those with disabilities. Though the exact content will be determined by an independent commission, a general outline of the content has been provided by the sample questions. Moreover, the time and number of questions, as well as allowing for an indefinite retake frequency, create a balance of realistic time availability with efficiency in knowledge and understanding. While concerns exist about bias, taxpayer burden and most importantly, the alleged violation of the right to vote, the necessary safeguards will be implemented, and possible alterations have been taken into account. Overall, the introduction of a voter qualification examination will lead to a more informed electorate, better decision-making, and a more resilient democracy. This initiative does not seek to undermine democratic participation but to enhance it by ensuring that voters are equipped with the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions that shape the future of the nation.

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