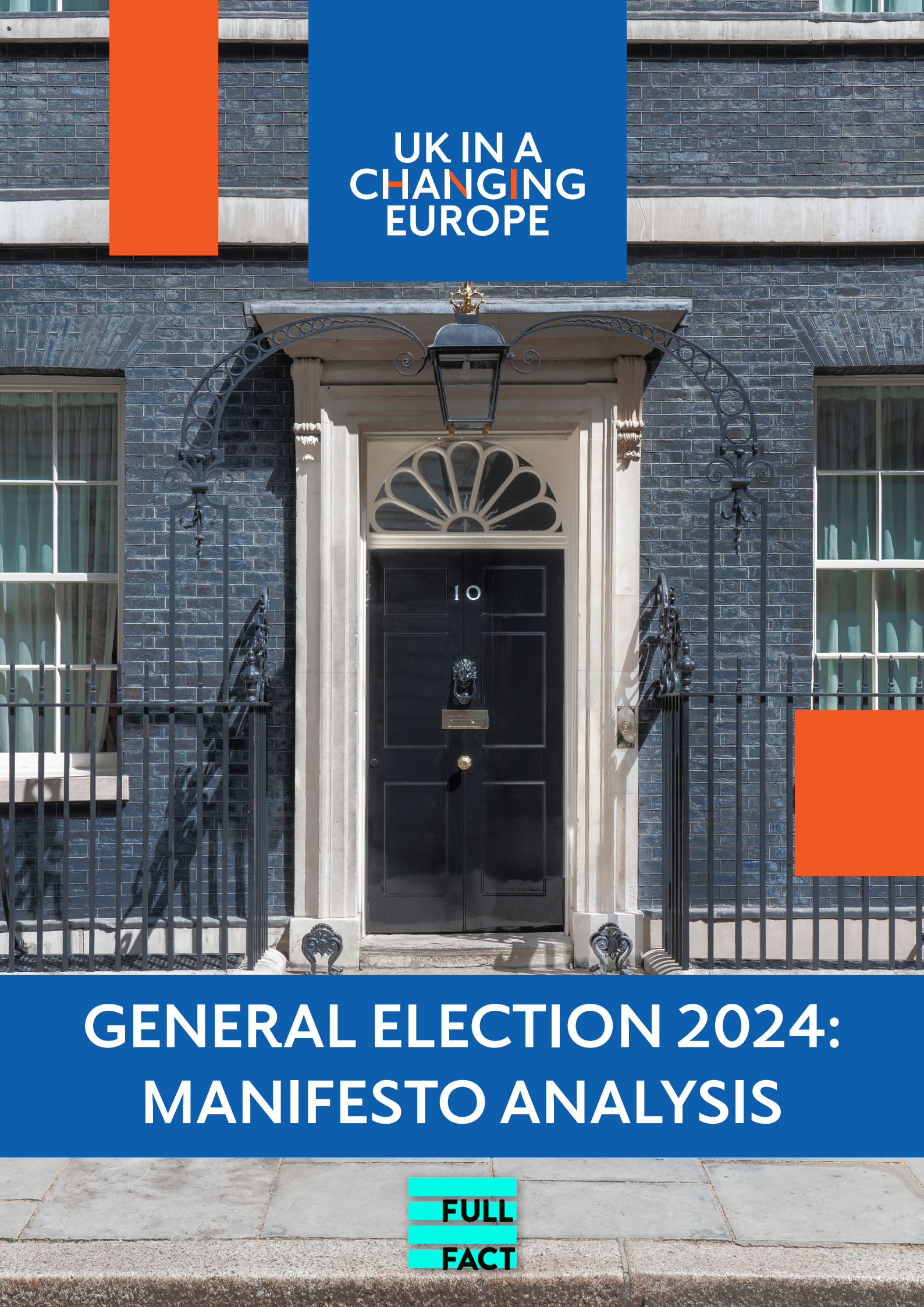




UK IN A
CHANGING
EUROPE

GENERAL ELECTION 2024: MANIFESTO ANALYSIS

**FULL
FACT**

FOREWORD

Manifestos provide an opportunity for political parties to lay out their plans for government. While not binding in any legal sense, a government is often judged, at least in part, by its success or otherwise in implementing the policies promised in the manifesto. At a time of increasing distrust of politicians, of falling faith in politics, and of concern about the proliferation of false or misleading information, it is more important than ever to ensure that manifestos are subject to scrutiny.

This is what we attempt to do in the report that follows. In it, Full Fact and UK in a Changing Europe have joined forces to produce a series of evidence-led, research-based assessments of the policies the Conservative and Labour parties say they will implement if they are to win the next election.

As ever, we have been able to draw upon the expertise of a large number of leading experts. Our thanks to all the contributors for not only providing their sections so quickly, but for dealing efficiently with the numerous questions and queries with which we subsequently bombarded them.

We hope that you will find what follows enlightening and informative. Election campaigns produce endless amounts of heat. We have attempted, in what follows, to shed at least a little light.

20 June 2024

Professor Anand Menon
Director, UK in a Changing Europe

Chris Morris
Chief Executive, Full Fact

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CONTRIBUTORS

Bee Boileau, Research Economist, Institute for Fiscal Studies

Mike Brewer, Interim Chief Executive, Resolution Foundation

Ben Brindle, Researcher, Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford

Charlotte Burns, Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield

Malcolm Chalmers, Deputy Director-General, Royal United Services Institute

Anita Charlesworth, Director of Research and the REAL Centre (Research and Economic Analysis for the Long term), Health Foundation

Paul Cheshire, Emeritus Professor of Economic Geography and Associate at the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science

Viviane Gravey, Senior Lecturer in European Politics, Queen's University Belfast

Nick Hillman, Director, Higher Education Policy Institute

Nicola McEwen, Director of the Centre for Public Policy and Professor of Public Policy, University of Glasgow

Francis McGowan, Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Sussex

Anand Menon, Professor of European Politics, King's College London and Director, UK in a Changing Europe

Dan Neidle, Founder, Tax Policy Associates

Jonathan Portes, Professor of Economics and Public Policy, King's College London and Senior Fellow, UK in a Changing Europe

Dr Isabel Stockton, Senior Research Economist, Institute for Fiscal Studies

Peter William Walsh, Senior Researcher at the Migration Observatory and Departmental Lecturer in Migration Studies, University of Oxford

Carole Willis, Chief Executive of the National Foundation for Educational Research

INTRODUCTION

Manifestos allow parties to set out their visions for the future of the country and specify what they intend to do should they end up in government. The promises made are not legally binding. They are, however, significant, if only because convention dictates that the House of Lords should not reject proposed legislation if it was foreshadowed in the government's election manifesto.

UK in a Changing Europe, in collaboration with Full Fact, have brought together a group of leading experts to assess the claims made in the manifestos. We asked them to focus on the Conservatives and Labour, the parties that – at least when the campaign began – we expected to fight it out to be the largest in Parliament and form the next government.

The economic backdrop is one of high public spending, a record tax burden but public services under pressure. Growth remains elusive. Lack of access to housing – either home ownership or secure tenure in decent homes – is an issue particularly for younger households.

Perhaps understandably, therefore, the debate so far has focused on tax and spending. The Conservatives are proposing small tax cuts, while Labour pledges some modest tax increases earmarked for specific spending. But both have ruled out changes to the rates of the big revenue raisers, and neither promises any attempt at more systematic reform to address the underlying anomalies and inefficiencies in the tax system.

A failure to grapple with difficult trade-offs characterises the approach of both parties to public spending and public services. Neither addresses the erosion of current plans by inflation. Consequently, a raft of problems – from the courts, to local government, to schools – go unaddressed with big cuts still baked into the plans for these ‘unprotected’ areas.

The Conservatives look to the welfare budget to finance their tax cuts, with plans to cut £12bn out of the growing bill for disability benefits. The eye-watering scale of what is proposed – getting around one million people off disability benefit or cutting the amount by over £2,000 per claimant per year – leaves room for reasonable doubt as to whether this is feasible. Labour does not propose any significant welfare reforms, and neither party addresses the problems in the financing of higher education.

Health is an exception. Both parties pledge to increase spending for the NHS, albeit at much lower rates than historic standards. Their plans look quite similar, though with more immediate ‘retail’ offers from Labour in terms of the number

of appointments and action to reduce waiting lists. But neither offers any prospective solution to the long-running sore of the inadequacy of social care – and neither offers a bold prospectus on prevention or tackling the drivers of ill-health.

Growth is central to Labour's ambitions to improve public services, end the stagnation of living standards and achieve rapid power sector decarbonisation. Partly, this is to be delivered via infrastructure and planning reform. Partly, too, growth is promised as a result of competence, stability and fiscal responsibility, though these are necessary rather than sufficient conditions.

The Conservatives commit to building a lot more housing than the UK has achieved in recent decades – but without any concrete proposals on housing supply, beyond returning to Parliament with legislation to remove inherited EU regulations around nutrient neutrality. Labour offers more concrete proposals to boost supply, but these are modest in relation to the scale of the challenge.

Both parties favour reductions in inward migration but offer different proposals. The Conservatives pledge an annual and reducing legislated cap on visas, while Labour wants to reduce demand for overseas workers with an emphasis on boosting training and better labour market enforcement.

Both also accept the need for action on unauthorised migration, while seeking wider international cooperation: for the Conservatives, to rewrite global asylum rules; for Labour, to improve enforcement. The big difference is the Conservative commitment to removals to Rwanda and full implementation of the Illegal Migration Act, while Labour's emphasis is on rapid processing and beefed-up enforcement.

As for the commitment to net zero, Labour presents this as an opportunity while the Conservatives portray it as something to be managed without inflicting unacceptable burdens on households. Labour has ambitious plans around boosting clean energy and home energy efficiency. The Conservatives stress more oil and gas licensing as their top energy security measure. The party positions itself on the side of motorists more generally, with plans to curtail local authority and devolved discretion on anti-car measures – as well as a commitment to rule out road pricing which leaves big questions (unanswered by Labour as well) on how to fill the gap in the public finances left by the dwindling of fuel duty revenues.

The Conservatives have positioned themselves more firmly on the side of farmers, with commitments to increase farm support payments and to legislate a new food security target. That is much less prominent in the Labour manifesto, but neither offers much in the way of big environmental ambition beyond net zero.

One issue both agree on is the need to continue with devolution in England. But on relations with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Conservatives offer more of the same in terms of asserting the role of the government in Westminster, whereas Labour holds out the prospect of a less confrontational approach. But neither has a big new offer on the governance of the UK.

Caution marks both manifestos on relations with the EU. The Conservatives do promise a few areas in which they will make more of 'Brexit opportunities' for regulatory reform. Labour commits to improving the trade deal with the EU, but reasserts its red lines on free movement and membership of the Single Market or Customs Union, which limits its ability to make a significant difference to most UK businesses.

Positions on both Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza are virtually identical. Equally, while neither party explicitly considers what might be the defining foreign policy issue of the next decades - the risks and benefits of dependence on China - their commitments on increasing defence spending are implausible, in the case of the Conservatives, and vague, for Labour.

Neither party is willing to expose the tough trade-offs that will confront the incoming government. This means they can avoid having difficult choices scrutinised now. But those are decisions deferred, not avoided - and by ducking them now, they may have reduced their ability to confront them in government. Choices will have to be made pretty quickly after an election, with the next spending round looming and an in-tray filling with problems which have not gone away during the election.

GROWTH

Jonathan Portes

CHALLENGES

UK growth over the past fifteen years has been poor by historical standards. GDP per capita is less than 4% above the level of 2008, compared to an increase of 40% in the previous fifteen years, although most other large Western European economies have also seen sharp slowdowns over this period. Slow growth reflects extremely poor productivity growth rather than a fall in employment, since the working age population has grown and employment rates have risen. It results in stagnating living standards and lower tax revenues and hence exacerbates the problem of underfunded public services. Short-term prospects have improved as energy prices and inflation have fallen, with growth of about 1% this year now likely. But the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimate – which has historically proved optimistic – is that the UK's trend level of productivity growth will remain below 1%.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Growth is front and centre of the Labour manifesto: Labour's first 'mission' is to 'kickstart growth', so as to deliver the 'highest sustained growth in the G7'. By contrast, a 'secure, dynamic and growing economy' is just one of the Conservatives' 17 'plans'. On the key economic policies that influence growth, the differences between the two main parties are often nuanced – but there are some potentially important differences in emphasis.

On macroeconomic and fiscal policy, both parties are committed to reducing debt as a proportion of GDP by the end of the parliament, and to do so without raising the main rates of income tax, VAT or national insurance; but the Conservatives are committed to further reduction in national insurance, while Labour plans some modest tax increases, and has not ruled out others. Labour would also modify the current 'fiscal rule' to make it somewhat easier to borrow to invest.

Neither will reverse Brexit, or rejoin the single market or customs union, and both are committed to new trade deals with countries beyond the EU, including India. But Labour will try to negotiate various deals with the EU to 'make Brexit work'.

Both want to speed up the process for approving large infrastructure projects and to increase housebuilding. The Conservatives' target of 1.6 million new homes is actually 100,000 more ambitious than Labour's – but Labour promises to

reform planning, reinstate local targets, and its plans imply a more aggressive and proactive role for central government.

Both want to maintain progress towards net zero by 2050; but the Conservatives promise to do this in an ‘affordable and pragmatic’ way, with ‘green levies’ reduced, and greater priority to security of supply, while Labour promises to decarbonise electricity by 2030 and plans a much more aggressive programme to increase domestic energy efficiency.

Both parties want to cut immigration; but Labour wants to do so by requiring sectors to develop workforce strategies that will reduce the ‘need’ for migration, while the Conservatives propose binding sector-level quotas, which would reduce migration overall every year.

Both want to move more people from benefits – especially incapacity-related benefits – to work, but the Conservatives’ approach is noticeably more punitive, promising £12bn of savings by tightening assessment criteria so that benefits are not a ‘lifestyle choice’. Labour promises more and better help and support, but with no commitments in terms of additional resources.

Perhaps the biggest difference, at least rhetorically, is Labour’s commitment to state intervention – albeit backed with relatively small amounts of public money – to drive investment, both public and private, with a ‘National Wealth Fund’ to support ‘green jobs’, decarbonisation and industrial policy more generally, and ‘Great British Energy’ to invest in clear energy generation. The Conservatives’ approach remains more sectoral, with a particular focus on tech and AI.

ASSESSMENT

Neither party claims there is a magic bullet for growth, whether from Brexit, massive tax cuts and deregulation, or large increases in public spending. That’s a welcome reflection of reality; but it means that a credible strategy to boost growth needs several significant new initiatives, brought together as part of a wider strategy. The Conservatives’ plans add little to existing plans and, where they do, seem highly unlikely to make much difference. Further cuts to national insurance will have only a marginal impact on labour supply, while attempts to tighten up benefit assessments were tried in the early 2010s and proved an expensive failure. The one policy that seems guaranteed to have a measurable impact on growth is the imposition of steadily reducing quotas on skilled migration – unfortunately, it will be growth-reducing not growth-enhancing.

Labour’s policies are both more ambitious and would, if successful, be more likely to make a meaningful difference. And success is essential if Labour is to have any chance at all of delivering promised improvements to public services. But they are

correspondingly more challenging to deliver. Given the fiscal constraints, the very large boost to overall investment that is implicit in its plans will have to rely on relatively small amounts of public funds to lever in much larger sums of private investment. Labour promises competence, stability and fiscal responsibility – but these are necessary rather than sufficient conditions to deliver that.

In addition, infrastructure and planning reform will need to move forward quickly and credibly, in the face of inevitable political obstacles and potential tensions with Labour mayors and councils. Joining up immigration and skills policy will need to be done in a way that helps businesses get the workers they need rather than adding new costs and bureaucratic barriers. Inevitable tax increases will need to be part of a strategy to make the system simpler and more pro-growth, rather than going for the least politically painful options in the short term.

There will also need to be genuine cross-government working. ‘Mission-led government’ must mean more than just new quangos, structures and working groups; it requires a step change in the quality of implementation and delivery across Whitehall. Most of all, reorienting the Treasury to focus on growth, especially at a time when there are real and genuine fiscal constraints, will require a major culture change.

PUBLIC SPENDING

Bee Boileau and Isabel Stockton

CHALLENGES

The next government will face difficult choices. Public spending, as a proportion of national income, is [higher now than its pre-pandemic level](#) – or than it was in 2007–08, after a decade of New Labour governments. But public services are in many cases [visibly under strain](#).

Meanwhile, growth forecasts remain disappointingly low. Debt is forecast only just to stabilise in three years' time, meaning there is little room for manoeuvre for a Chancellor who wants to avoid it rising further. Absent a sudden, persistent and surprising improvement in the [growth outlook](#), or an abandonment of the fiscal rule to which both main parties have committed, significant tax cuts require cuts to spending, and spending increases require tax rises.

Existing spending totals for the next few years [imply real terms cuts](#) for many public services. If we assume that the NHS budget will rise by 3.6% each year, [consistent with](#) the NHS workforce plan (as committed to by the two main parties), that schools spending will be held flat in real terms, that defence and aid spending will grow with GDP in line with our international obligations, and that childcare commitments made in the 2023 Spring Budget will be funded, then all other areas – for example, courts, prisons, and further education – face real terms cuts of around 1.9% to 3.5% each year. Avoiding such cuts to 'unprotected' areas would require a cash top-up of £10–£20bn in 2028–29.

Cuts of this size would be impossible to deliver while maintaining the current range and quality of public services.

Looking beyond departmental budgets, spending on social security benefits and on debt interest payments was [forecast at the Spring Budget](#) to remain consistently above pre-pandemic levels as a share of national income (largely as a result of rising caseloads for health-related benefits and higher interest rates, respectively).

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Neither party plans significant changes to public services spending. In both cases, ambitions for improvements in performance were set out, and deep-seated problems identified. But we have almost no detail on spending plans by department, and with very few commitments to overall spending increases, sharp real terms cuts to some areas are still implied.

The Conservative promises for ‘additional’ spending were primarily reallocations, with little change to the overall planned path of public spending. By 2029-30, overall departmental spending was topped up by £500m, less than one-tenth of 1% of total departmental spending this year. The most notable commitment was a restatement that defence spending would rise to 2.5% of GDP in 2030. This, nominally funded by cuts to civil service numbers and a reallocation of R&D spending, would likely further increase pressure on other areas of spending given no overall top up.

The Labour manifesto also promises some spending reallocation. But it also proposed topping up day-to-day departmental spending totals by around £5bn 2028-29, and increasing investment by an average of £4.7bn a year as part of the ‘Green Prosperity Plan’. Additional day-to-day spending was still relatively modest compared to what would be required to avoid cuts, and was largely targeted at the NHS and schools, both ‘protected’ services: while it would ease pressures on other areas to an extent, real terms cuts are still implied.

On welfare spending, there are some significant differences. The Conservatives promised to cut £12bn each year from the welfare budget, which is forecast to rise. Labour, in comparison, offered few details on benefit spending, whether in terms of additional spending – not promising to reverse benefit cuts they had [previously opposed](#), including the two-child limit – or in terms of spending cuts.

ASSESSMENT

Neither manifesto offers a realistic vision of the path of public spending over the next parliament. Spending totals involve cuts to public services – and, in the Conservatives’ case, to benefit spending. But manifestos did not spell out how these cuts should be delivered. To avoid them, increases to tax or borrowing would be needed, and were for the most part rejected. The opportunity to tackle head-on the difficult trade-offs that will come after the election was missed – as well as, in the process, the opportunity to get a public mandate for the decisions either party would take when in power.

The Conservative promise to cut £12bn from the welfare budget did not come with concrete plans as to how this would be achieved. Some of the policies included in the manifesto had previously been announced and already incorporated into forecasts. Therefore, by definition, they could not contribute to further savings. The largest new proposal was ‘reforming disability benefits’. To make savings here, the government would need either to reduce sharply the number of people on health-related benefits – getting one million people off the benefits, a reduction of one fifth – or apply big cuts to the level of benefits received – involving a cut of around £2,200 per claimant per year – or some

combination of the two. The manifesto does not provide much detail on which, if either, of these options would be pursued.

Even if realised, the £12bn of cuts from the welfare budget was matched by tax cuts, so would not be available to top up squeezed departmental spending totals. Significant real terms cuts to day-to-day spending for a range of ‘unprotected’ departments are still implied by both parties’ manifestos. Real terms cuts to investment spending, too, were kept in place by both parties, although these were made less sharp by Labour’s investment top-ups.

These cuts to many areas of public service spending implied by both parties’ plans have not been laid out in detail – it remains unclear exactly where or how they will be delivered. Delivering them will almost certainly imply a (further) worsening of service quality in some areas, a reduction in the range of things the state does, or both, particularly given the parlous state of many public services. They could be avoided if parties were willing to raise taxes, or to allow debt to rise for longer. Both main parties should have, and have not, made clear which of these options – sharply cutting many public services, raising taxes, or fudging their fiscal rule – they intend to take.

TAX POLICY

Dan Neidle

CHALLENGES

Writing 1,000 words on the tax content in the Labour and Conservative manifestos is hard. I think I can do it in twenty: a [handful of small tax rises on unpopular people](#) (Labour); a [handful of small tax cuts for popular people](#) (Conservatives).

That is a shame when the tax challenges we face are so significant.

The first challenge is that, as things stand, [either](#) taxes will have to rise or there will have to be dramatic spending cuts within the next few years. That's absent a dramatic improvement in UK growth and productivity.

The second is that, whilst everybody talks about growth, there are many aspects of the current tax system which are anti-growth: the breadth of our VAT exemptions (and the [complexity](#) they create), the high £90,000 VAT threshold (which [prevents small companies from growing](#)), the [complexity](#) of corporation tax and the way it subsidises [unprofitable investments](#), the [gimmicks and bodes](#) in income tax that create high marginal rates, the [barrier to labour mobility](#) created by stamp duty land tax, the [artificial devaluation](#) of our listed companies created by stamp duty, the [inefficiency](#) of council tax and business rates, the [duplicated complexity](#) of bank taxation, the flaws in [inheritance tax](#) and [capital gains tax](#) which create [bad incentives](#), and even the [underfunding](#) of HMRC itself.

These are all well-understood, and in most cases the subject of consensus amongst economists and policy wonks across the political spectrum. The challenge of tax reform is how to sell it politically given that tax reform almost always has winners and losers. The losers tend to shout louder than the winners and, in this cynical political age, the winners will often worry that they are actually losers.

So our two tax challenges are really both political challenges: how to raise tax and how to reform tax. Neither party has much to say about either.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Certainly nobody wants to talk about raising tax. There has been a race between Labour and Conservative politicians to rule out tax rises in income tax, national insurance, VAT, and corporation tax. But these four taxes make up more than three-quarters of all UK tax receipts; once you've promised not to increase them, what do you do if you find you need to fund additional expenditure?

The answer will likely be the same answer we've seen in the last decade: 'fiscal drag'. Do nothing, freeze tax thresholds and allowances, and let income growth/inflation push people into higher tax brackets. This is taxation by stealth, and it can raise very large sums – the current government's freeze of the personal allowance and higher rate threshold is forecast to raise £34bn of tax in 2028/29.

It's not a very efficient or a very honest way to run a tax system. And, instead of tax reform, we see a series of micro-proposals, dealing in figures that are irrelevant in the context of a £2.5 trillion economy.

Labour will impose VAT and business rates on private schools; it says that will raise £1.5bn and is [probably correct](#). It will end the practice of private equity fund executives receiving bonuses in the form of 'carried interest', taxed at 28% rather than 47%. It says that will raise £565m – nobody really knows but the number is [not obviously wrong](#).

Labour says it will tighten up the government's 'windfall tax' on oil and gas extraction and raise £1.2bn. That seems modest – we [estimated](#) that around £5bn could be raised by making the tax properly retrospective (as windfall taxes should be) and removing the deadweight cost elements of the windfall tax investment allowance. The party will also add another 1% stamp duty on non-residents buying UK real estate, which it says will raise £40m (which it [likely will](#)).

The Conservatives will cut national insurance by 2p. That's very expensive – £13bn in 2029/30 – but if you are going to cut tax, this is a good way to do it, given it has the greatest effect on working people earning median incomes. Others can talk about how affordable it is.

The party will give pensioners an increased tax-free personal allowance, at an eventual cost of £2.4bn. This is effectively a reversal of the [abolition of the age-related personal allowance](#) by George Osborne in 2012, and protects pensioners (but nobody else) from the freeze on personal allowances [since 2021](#). It's hard to see how this is justified, given that pensioners' incomes are [on average higher](#) than those of working people (and pensioners' [poverty rate is lower](#)).

The Conservatives will abolish stamp duty for first time buyers – which is an odd thing to do, when the evidence is that these policies just [increase prices](#) and [don't help first time buyers](#). They will also create a new capital gains tax exemption for landlords selling to their tenants, which at £20m is almost entirely irrelevant.

Both Labour and the Conservatives think they can raise significant sums from cracking down on tax avoidance and tax evasion. Labour £5bn (with a [detailed plan](#)), the Conservatives £6bn (with a [less detailed plan](#)). This is [ambitious but not impossible](#), particularly compared with the Lib Dems (whose plan consists of

[one sentence](#) in their manifesto but which they think can raise over £7bn).

ASSESSMENT

Another measure in the Conservative manifesto best illustrates the tax hole that we are in. The clawback of child benefit introduced by George Osborne (the '[high income child benefit charge](#)' or HICBC) creates high marginal rates for people earning £60,000. The manifesto makes a (laudable) attempt to fix this, but accidentally means that parents with three children under 18 earning between £120,000 and £125,000 face a marginal rate of 70%.

The tax system is now such a car-crash that well-intentioned attempts to fix one part of it just create worse problems elsewhere. So we don't really see any answers at all to our two challenges.

Pretty much everybody agrees that we as a country are paying too much tax for the quality of public services we receive. The only way out of that is growth. When there are parts of the tax system that stand in the way of growth, answer seems obvious. But it's not in any of these manifestos.

LIVING STANDARDS

Mike Brewer

CHALLENGES

How do we get household living standards to grow again? This is a question all political parties should be asking, given this has been an awful parliament for living standards, capping off an awful period since the great financial crisis. [Typical incomes in 2022-23](#) were £380 (or 1.3%) lower than they were in 2019-20, and only £2,400 higher than in 2010-11, an average annual growth rate of 0.8%. Incomes at the 20th percentile have grown by just £31 since 2019-20, and by 8.7% since 2010-11. Weak growth in household income over the last couple of decades, plus persistently high levels of inequality mean [typical households in Britain are 9% poorer than their French counterparts](#), and our low-income families are 27% poorer.

The cost of living crisis starkly illustrated the lack of economic or financial resilience among low-income households. Last year saw [record homelessness numbers](#) - the number of families living in temporary accommodation has doubled since 2010 - and the number of emergency food parcels distributed by Trussell Trust affiliated food banks surpassed three million for the first time. In 2022-23, 23% of people in the bottom fifth of the income distribution lived in households that could not afford to keep their homes warm enough, up from 10% in 2020-21. Seven million people lived in households experiencing food insecurity in 2022-23, up from five million in 2019-20, including 41% of households on Universal Credit.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

The Conservative Party's pitch to voters concerned about the aftermath of the cost of living crisis is that they are going to cut taxes in the next parliament, and that Labour aren't. Central to this is a trebling down of 2p cuts to employee National Insurance - taking the main rate down from 13.25% in September 2022 - before the Health and Social Levy was cancelled by Liz Truss - to just 6% by the middle of the next parliament. This delivers a [tax cut of up to £750 for someone earning £50,000](#), and means a typical employee would have the lowest effective personal tax rate since at least 1975. On top of this was the unexpected pledge to completely abolish NI for the self-employed, and to increase the Income Tax personal allowance for pensioners in line with the triple lock.

We have a different sort of offering from the Labour Party, which is proposing the biggest shake-up of the workplace in a generation. The most innovative approach

is a proposed Fair Pay Agreement to set sector-wide standards in social care. Care workers are among the lowest-paid workers in Britain, and often at risk of being paid less than the legal minimum wage when travel time is included, and this is a sector that is dogged by chronic staff shortages. If this agreement were to ensure that all care workers are paid at least the real Living Wage, [over two-in-five care workers would benefit directly](#). Labour's package for workers also includes new employment rights for all – the right to a contract reflecting regular hours, 'day one' rights to improve job security – and, crucially, tougher labour market enforcement. The aim is to tackle levels of work insecurity and volatility, and the lack of autonomy in jobs, that discourage people from doing jobs, or taking on more hours.

On welfare, the Conservative manifesto suggests that a future government could find £12bn of cuts, and pointed in particular to the rising cost of disability benefits, due to rise by almost £10bn a year (in today's price) by 2028-29, almost half of the total forecast rise in social security expenditure. But there was little detail on how such large cuts can be delivered.

For its part, the Labour Party has made few concrete pledges on welfare. It says it wants to reform the Work Capability Assessment, a key part of determining whether someone can claim incapacity benefits, but nothing about the challenge of rising spending on disability benefits more broadly. It has promised a child poverty strategy, and to review aspects of Universal Credit, but no money is earmarked for any policies that might follow.

ASSESSMENT

The Conservatives' focus on employee NI is certainly better than some of the alternative tax cuts traditionally mooted – Britain does indeed need to shift the tax burden away from earnings. But there are serious doubts about the claimed savings possible from welfare spending. The last major disability benefit reform – the introduction of Personal Independence Payment under the coalition government – [saved just 7% of what was originally expected](#) by the end of the parliament in which it was announced. The Conservative government also announced £12bn of general welfare cuts in its 2015 manifesto; ultimately, only £9bn of these cuts were delivered by 2020-21, and before some of those 'savings' were subsequently reversed by the most recent Conservative government.

Neither party is offering a significant boost to household incomes for those on lower incomes (although continuing the triple lock for the state pension will help all pensioners). Most of the benefits of the Conservatives' tax cuts would accrue to middle- and upper-income households, including better-off pensioners, and most of the losses of the cuts to welfare would, if they are delivered, fall

on lower-income households. And, by signing up to the current government's spending plans, both parties are implicitly committing themselves to continuing the two-child limit to benefits and the benefit cap, and to freezing support for renters in cash terms, all of which would bear down on low-income working-age households.

If asked, Labour would say that its manifesto is aimed primarily at securing economic growth, and not making promises that it might not be able to keep. And it's absolutely the case that growth would not just help solve a future Chancellor's unpleasant fiscal arithmetic; it's a prerequisite for a sustained rise in living standards across the income distribution. Tackling this, and bringing about shared prosperity for UK households, should be the first, second and third priority for whoever finds themselves in government in three weeks.

HOUSING

Paul Cheshire

CHALLENGES

Britain's housing crisis is essentially a crisis of supply – a multigenerational paralysis in building new homes. If we had built as many houses a year in the 30 years to 2020 as we did in the previous 30 years there would have been over three million more homes.

Lack of building has been getting worse over the last 15 years. Detailed Planning permissions in Q1 2024 were [at their lowest level](#) since 2016 and half the level of Q1 2019. House completions in 2023 were 158,200 – again the [lowest in recent history](#). The damage this lack of supply causes is concentrated in London and the wider south east of England; it is disproportionately borne by the young and causes damage and lost output to the UK economy as a whole as people cannot afford to move to more productive local economies. Unaffordable housing in highly productive economies like Cambridge or London does not favour people in either the north or the south, but makes all poorer.

Party manifestos on housing, therefore, need to be judged in the light of how effectively their proposals will alleviate this supply crisis.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Against this measure the Conservatives offer little of any substance. For fifteen years, there has been a target of building 300,000 new homes a year – it has never been met. The latest data shows house building falling even further back, yet the Conservatives propose no concrete measures to address this. The manifesto merely reiterates the aspiration of building 300,000 homes a year, but a target without mechanisms to achieve it is meaningless.

The only concrete proposal is to abolish the 'legacy EU 'nutrient neutrality' rules' and relieve developers or water companies of the requirement to ensure sewage treatment is available. They claim they could deliver record numbers of new homes on brownfield land – a panacea of successive parties since 1996 – but this solution has been dismissed by objective observers such as the [House of Lords](#).

Echoing the 1999 Rogers [Urban Renaissance](#) report, the party also claims it will 'raise densities in Inner London to those of Paris or Barcelona' – again with no credible mechanisms to achieve it. Finally, it claims it will unlock 'urban regeneration', citing the aspirations for Cambridge [announced in 2023](#). Even if –

against current expectations – it were to work, this is hardly a recipe for helping the housing crisis any time soon, since it is not due to come online until 2050.

The Conservatives do have proposals to subsidise first time buyers but, as has been definitively demonstrated, Help to Buy (HtB) only helped to enrich those controlling the companies specialising in starter homes. Where housing was less affordable and in less elastic supply, all the value of the taxpayers' 'help' [went to](#) inflate prices.

The Labour Party's proposals are at least concrete and attempt to increase supply. As a political response to the Chesham and Amersham by-election in 2022 (in which the Liberal Democrats courted the 'NIMBY' vote) the government, in effect, made building targets voluntary and eliminated any incentive to have legal local plans for Local Authorities (LAs) where it was politically awkward to build houses. A 2022 [House of Lords report](#) showed only 45% of LAs had valid current plans; by 2023 this [had fallen](#) to 33% and was projected to fall to 22% by 2025.

Labour does have some quite cunning proposals for incentivising even the most NIMBY-inclined LAs to produce plans and enforceable housing targets. Suggestions include forcing LAs to accept development proposals automatically where they are not meeting local housing targets, and having the Planning Inspectorate impose plans on LAs where they 'egregiously delay' drawing up their own plans

It also proposes a strategic review of the extent and purpose of [green belts](#) (designed to prevent urban sprawl), with the aim of releasing at least some of the greyest areas in green belts. In fact, releasing just 1.5% of the area within 800 metres of commuter stations [could provide](#) enough land in the wider London region for one million homes.

Another proposal is a new generation of New Towns. Whether these could even be planned and their construction set in motion within the lifetime of a parliament is questionable. It is also unlikely that New Towns would be superior to large town extensions, or building round existing commuter stations, both of which can piggy-back on existing infrastructure. Making more efficient use of rail, our greenest transport infrastructure, is both much cheaper and also greener than building new.

Labour has also come up with its own version of HtB: it proposes mortgage guarantees to first time buyers. This will have the same effect as HtB on the prices first time buyers pay – because it boosts demand not supply – but transfers the risk to the taxpayer.

ASSESSMENT

Overall, Labour's proposals for increasing supply seem more viable, given that Britain's housing crisis is primarily a result of having built far too few houses for far too long and then, when houses have been built, locating them too far from more productive jobs. Yet even Labour's proposals are, beside the scale of the problem – a shortfall of at least three million houses over the past 30 years – very modest. They are certainly not radical enough to get 300,000 houses built in any year much before 2028.

EDUCATION/SCHOOLS

Carole Willis

CHALLENGES

Sufficient funding underpins every aspect of a well-functioning education system, presenting the next government with [difficult choices](#). Whilst welcome, recent boosts to school funding only equate to a return to 2010 levels in real terms per pupil (and a fall of 4% compared to 2010 when taking account of actual school costs).

Schools face increasing costs and unprecedented demands to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); behaviour, attendance and mental health challenges; an entrenched [attainment gap](#), exacerbated by partial school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic; and deteriorating [school buildings](#).

The profound impact of the ongoing [cost-of-living crisis](#) on pupils and families is hitting schools hard. Falling pupil numbers, which typically reduce income but not fixed costs, are likely to exacerbate pressures on [school budgets](#). Meanwhile, teacher supply remains in a [critical state](#).

The early years and FE sectors also face serious issues. The extended entitlement to free childcare is [at risk from a lack of staff](#) and many existing staff [lack appropriate qualifications](#). Ensuring appropriate progression and pathways to employment are crucial for all young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Labour has said it would recruit 6,500 new teachers, paid for by ending tax breaks on private schools. It would introduce a modern childcare system with breakfast clubs in every primary school, while opening an additional 3,000 nurseries through upgrading space in primary schools.

Labour would also expand apprenticeships and skills training, not least through the creation of Skills England. On Ofsted, Labour says ‘accountability is non-negotiable, which is why Labour supports school inspection’, and has included a £45m pledge for Ofsted reform, including replacing a single headline grade with a new report card system. The party also pledges to broaden the curriculum, developing creativity, digital and speaking skills for work and life.

As for the Conservatives, they promise in their manifesto to introduce an advanced British Standard along with post-16 qualification reforms including

compulsory maths and English to the age of 18. They also pledge to create 100,000 new apprenticeships per year funded by closing poor performing degree courses. They believe the existing school curriculum is achieving world-leading results and are more focused on the post-16 phase.

The manifesto sets out their plans for childcare reforms, including increased access to free childcare and delivery of new Family Hubs, while banning mobile phones in the school day and consulting on social media access. The party has little to say on accountability in the manifesto, other than that it will ‘back Ofsted’.

ASSESSMENT

Employing sufficient high-quality teachers is fundamental to the parties’ education pledges. For example, the current shortage of maths teachers needs to be tackled to make the Conservative ambition of extending maths teaching to 18 deliverable. Labour’s commitment to recruiting 6,500 additional teachers must be backed-up with incentives that can deliver this.

Adequate funding is imperative to give schools the resources, stability and security needed to offer children the education they deserve. Research suggests school leaders are having to make cuts – which could affect the quality of learning. More are reporting in-year deficits and expect to be forced into further cuts. Pupil numbers will be falling over the coming years – by 5-10% between now and 2030. If the total schools’ budget is maintained in real terms, this would provide some flexibility to address some challenges, increasing per pupil funding in real terms.

Levels of funding will also need to be carefully considered to ensure that the Labour ambition for teacher recruitment and retention can be met, with above-inflation pay increases likely needed to attract and retain sufficient teacher numbers. Non-pay related incentives, such as a reduction in workload and flexible working, are also important to addressing this issue.

The Conservatives want to fund 100,000 high-quality apprenticeships for young people, in a reversal of declining trends over the last few years. Labour has pledged to create higher-quality training and employment paths by empowering local communities to develop the skills people need, and putting employers at the heart of the skills system. All of these pledges need to be considered in light of the changing nature of employment, with new technologies and major demographic and environmental changes transforming the workplace.

The pandemic caused the disadvantage attainment gap to widen. We know this is well entrenched by the time children start school, so getting things right early

really matters. In the early years, both parties have a focus on childcare, which is welcome, but needs to be balanced with [early education](#). Labour's focus on nursery school places may help address the disadvantage gap by improving quality of provision.

The pressures on SEND provision are considerable, and action in the next parliament is vital. The Conservatives want to create 60,000 more school places, while the Liberal Democrats want to provide local authorities with extra funding and establish a new National Body for SEND. Labour's manifesto lacks specifics, but states that it will take 'a community-wide approach'.

Ofsted reform is needed but alternate approaches, such as a report card, need to be fully thought out. Ofsted's 'The Big Listen' consultation is underway, and the next government will have to carefully consider its recommendations.

To conclude, the next government will face a backdrop of unenviable challenges.

FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Nick Hillman

CHALLENGES

The biggest issue facing both higher education institutions and students in England is a gap between costs and income. The higher tuition fees introduced in 2012 (more than) covered the costs of educating home undergraduates but, having increased only once in the last dozen years, they no longer do so. The maximum £9,250 fee is now worth only around £6,000 in real terms due to high inflation, with the gap in funding being increasingly made up by international students' fees.

Meanwhile, the maximum maintenance loan of around £10,000 has been going up much slower than inflation. A full-time student living away from home needs over [£18,000](#) to have a rewarding student experience, with enough money to feel safe, eat healthily and to become involved in a society or two.

Those who criticise traditional higher education usually want to see people pushed towards higher-level apprenticeships instead. But despite past promises, these remain incredibly rare. The proportion of young people taking a degree apprenticeship is more like 0.5% than the 50% plus who enrol in other forms of higher education. In 2022/23, under 4,000 18-year-olds began a degree-level apprenticeship.

Meanwhile, colleges have been suffering as a result of cuts in funding, staff shortages and ill-thought through policies like the attempted replacement of tried-and-tested BTECs with the government's preferred T-Levels.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Neither the Conservatives nor Labour is offering to reduce the financial shortfall in the costs of teaching home undergraduates by raising tuition fees or increasing grants to universities, and neither is committed to improving the woefully inadequate student maintenance support. Moreover, both parties want to reduce net migration, which - at best - implies it will be very difficult to expand international student numbers further. This is in stark contrast to the last two watershed elections, in 1997 and 2010, when both main parties backed a review of higher education funding. In 2024, it is left to the Liberal Democrats to promise 'a review of higher education finance'.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the Conservative manifesto when it comes to higher education is the stark change in direction. After 14 years of expanding school leavers' access to full-time honours degrees, the Conservatives claim too many young people make it to university and that courses and places should be cut. Yet the number of school leavers is set to go on rising throughout this decade, increasing demand.

In an inversion of their main election slogan, 'Change', Labour seems to be offering more stability. They promise to 'continue to support the aspiration of every person who meets the requirements and wants to go to university.' Even if this leaves the funding questions unanswered, it is a welcome shift: when they were last in office, Labour fined universities if they surpassed their given number of undergraduate places.

On skills and further education, Labour are promising more change by forcing more cooperation. They plan to establish Skills England to improve coordination between Westminster / local authorities with business, training providers and unions while devolving adult skills to the combined authorities. They also commit to converting Further Education colleges into specialist Technical Excellence Colleges and to changing the Apprenticeship Levy into 'a flexible Growth and Skills Levy' - prompting accusations this will lead to (another) drop in the number of apprenticeships. Integration is the name of the game, though on a notably less ambitious scale than the Welsh Labour government's new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (Medr).

For their part, the Conservative manifesto claims, 'We will always support and celebrate our further education colleges.' Yet aside from references to previously announced policies on 16-to-19 education, such as a new Advanced British Standard that would affect schools and colleges alike, there is a lack of detail. After decades of ministers promising but not achieving 'parity of esteem' between different educational routes, colleges know better than anyone that such fine words butter no parsnips.

ASSESSMENT

The absence of bold new policies, combined with the dire fiscal position, make it likely that the university and college sectors will have to continue muddling through after the election - perhaps until a major upset, like a university bankruptcy, upsets the apple cart.

The biggest policy gap, however, comes with the commitments on research and development (R&D), much of which occurs in universities. Back in 2019, the Conservatives promised 'the fastest ever increase in domestic public R&D

spending' while Labour committed to 'a target for 3% of GDP to be spent on research and development (R&D) by 2030.'

This time, the Conservatives promise to increase public spending on R&D by 10% a year to £22bn in the next parliament. This is actually a major watering down of an old commitment: at the 2020 Budget, the UK was forecast to have £22bn of public spending on R&D by 2024/25. Meanwhile, instead of focusing on specific sums, Labour are promising 'ten-year budgets that allow meaningful partnerships with industry'.

Politicians have been able to take their eye off the ball on research because the Office for National Statistics' new methodology for counting R&D expenditure boosts the annual recorded (public and private) total by £20bn. With the stroke of a pen, the UK moved from being below the average among developed nations for spending on R&D as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product to somehow above it.

The research community is now being offered (a little) more money or a ten-year plan. Yet both are needed simultaneously if the grand challenges facing the UK - like sluggish growth, climate change and stalled life expectancy - are to start being fully addressed.

ENERGY AND NET ZERO

Francis McGowan

CHALLENGES

Both main parties have been committed to achieving net zero, improving energy security and controlling energy prices, arguing that the goals were complementary and offered opportunities for UK industry to take a lead in developing the clean technologies needed for the transition. Sustaining these ambitions became harder, however, as energy prices, inflation and interest rates increased, prompting both parties to revise their positions. The Conservative Party under Rishi Sunak has repositioned itself to stress energy security, affordability and personal choice at the expense of some climate [policies](#). While they have retained the commitment to achieving net zero by 2050, they have stressed the imperative of a ‘pragmatic and proportionate’ [approach](#). The Labour Party scaled back its spending [ambitions](#) while retaining its positive take on the economic opportunities which decarbonisation [presents](#).

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

On energy and net zero, the Conservative message has been broadly the same since last autumn. It maintains the shift towards energy security, affordability and lifestyle issues in what is widely seen as a move to create clear green water between the Party and its rivals. While retaining the ambition of net zero, the manifesto claims it will cut the cost of achieving the goal through a more ‘pragmatic approach’, guaranteeing not to introduce new - and to lower existing - green levies and charges on energy bills. The manifesto also pledges that any new emission reduction targets will be fully debated in Parliament and the independent Climate Change Committee will consider the costs for households and energy security in future advice.

The manifesto celebrates recent expansions of renewable energy, seeing the technologies as central to its net zero plans, but the onus is placed on offshore wind while support for other options is qualified. It envisages considerable expansion of solar but reinforces the party’s commitment to restrict large scale deployment in the countryside, and in the case of onshore wind, the manifesto seeks to maintain a balance between energy security and community consent, a stance which has served as a de facto ban on the deployment of new wind farms in England.

The manifesto makes a clear commitment to nuclear power, approving two ‘fleets’ of small modular reactors early in the Parliament, backing construction of a new

large-scale reactor over the next five years and halving the time taken to secure project and planning approval for new nuclear capacity.

While committed to zero carbon technologies, the manifesto stresses the energy security case for continued development of the country's fossil fuel reserves, confirming that it will hold annual licensing rounds for North Sea oil and gas fields and commission the construction of new gas-fired power stations. These commitments are arguably balanced by its confirmation of support for substantial carbon capture and storage facilities in the north of England, Wales and Scotland. In terms of financial support for industries delivering clean energy technologies, the manifesto reiterates existing plans to promote UK manufacturing.

Central to the energy and net zero elements of the Labour manifesto is the 'Green Prosperity Plan', the financial package underpinning its plans to make the UK a 'Clean Energy Superpower'. Funding has been reduced from the original ambition of an additional £20bn a year in public funds to £4.7bn a year (both figures are on top of roughly £8bn a year in Conservative plans). The Plan has three main components:

- Great British Energy, a publicly owned company, would receive £8.3bn to invest in new and mature clean energy technologies and finance local and community energy projects with the aim of lowering energy bills, creating jobs and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- The National Wealth Fund would invest in decarbonising existing industries and infrastructure (principally steel and ports) and developing new clean technologies, such as carbon capture facilities, gigafactories for electric vehicle batteries and green hydrogen, which would be used as a substitute for fossil fuel-based heat in energy intensive sectors. With envisaged government funds of £7.3bn, Labour hopes this would unlock three times as much in private finance to support green industries.
- The Warm Homes Plan will see an additional £6.6bn invested in home insulation, roof-top solar and other improvements to reduce energy bills and boost energy efficiency in five million homes through a mix of grants and low interest loans.

Taken together, these initiatives would contribute to a doubling of onshore wind capacity, a tripling of solar power and a quadrupling of offshore wind by 2030, achieving the Party's goal of a decarbonised electricity system by that year (the manifesto also commits to developing new nuclear power stations, particularly small modular reactors, but no specific target is set). A reserve of gas fired power stations - presumably linked to carbon capture facilities - would be retained to guarantee security of supply.

On North Sea oil and gas, the manifesto outlines a policy of no new licenses but no revoking of existing ones, reflecting both the difficulties of accelerating the shutdown of what remains of that sector and the dependence on continuing revenues from the North Sea including an enhanced and extended windfall levy on energy producers.

ASSESSMENT

The Conservative manifesto retains the goal of net zero but the shift in rhetoric casts doubt on the party's commitment, while the mix of proposals appears to make it harder to achieve. For Labour, the scaling back of financial support has not been accompanied by any reduction in the party's overwhelmingly positive stance; on the contrary, it continues to make a virtue of its green ambitions for UK industry and households. The question is whether its reduced financial commitment will be sufficient to mobilise the private investment required to meet both its 2030 and 2050 targets, leaving open the possibility that other measures not directly addressed in the manifesto (such as new green levies or regulatory changes) will be needed to realise its plans.

ENVIRONMENT AND FARMING

Charlotte Burns and Viviane Gravey

CHALLENGES

The next government will face multiple environmental challenges. Addressing some of the big policy issues such as housing shortages, growing the economy and the cost-of-living crisis requires choices with environmental consequences. The new government will have to deal with the ongoing issue of water pollution, which has generated multiple headlines over the past year and was ranked as the most important environmental issue for the public in a [YouGov poll of February 2024](#). In addition, it will have to try to reverse the continued degradation of our natural environment while supporting farmers who are concerned about the loss of income support and the impact of trade deals.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Both Labour and the Conservatives commit to protecting the environment but their manifestos are relatively light on detail. The Conservatives repeat their objective of leaving the environment in a better state for future generations. Labour claims it will tackle the climate and nature emergencies and make Britain a clean energy superpower. It also links the climate emergency to wider questions of resilience and flooding.

Both focus on water pollution and commit to imposing fines and banning bonuses for executives in failing water companies. Labour states that it will ensure ‘independent monitoring of every outlet’. The Conservatives commit to reforming the regulatory process for water companies and to using funds from fines to invest in river restoration projects to develop a river recovery network. On air quality, the Conservatives position themselves clearly on the side of drivers, seeking to curb local authorities’ and devolved governments’ ability to impose restrictions such as low emission zones, low traffic neighbourhoods and blanket 20 mph speed limits. Labour is quiet on the issue, with the expected Clean Air Act [notably absent](#).

Both parties also have commitments on nature recovery. Labour notes that the UK is one of the ‘most nature depleted countries in the world’ and commits to implementing the targets in the Environment Act, to developing nine new national river walks, three new national forests and to planting millions ‘(no details on exactly how many) trees. The Conservatives commit to one new national park, and to tree planting and peatland restoration, but again no details

are provided. Drawing on a common theme in their manifesto, the Conservatives also commit to cutting red tape ‘that holds back the planting of trees’ as part of a wider simplification of the planning system.

On housing, both parties are committed to more house building and emphasise the need to use brownfield sites rather than disrupting the green belt, but they deal differently with nutrient neutrality. Excessive nutrients in water can lead to damaging plant growth and algae blooms with negative impacts upon aquatic and marine health. Post-Brexit, the UK carried over rules from the EU on limiting house building in sensitive areas due to the risk of nutrient overload. The current Conservative government has already [tried unsuccessfully](#) to set these rules aside but commits to doing so in its manifesto. By contrast, Labour seeks to allow for housing in nutrient sensitive areas but without weakening environmental protections. It does not specify how it will achieve this.

The Labour manifesto makes limited mention of farming or rural development, confining itself to setting a ‘target for half of all foods purchased across the public sector to be locally produced or certified to higher environmental standards’. An almost identical commitment is made in the Conservative manifesto. Labour claims it will make [environmental land management schemes](#) work for farmers but without saying how. It also suggests it will seek to end the badger cull, ban trail hunting and the use of snare traps. The Conservatives are clear that there will be no change to the hunting rules.

Overall, the Conservative manifesto has much more extensive and detailed coverage of farming, particularly of funding across England, as well as sharp criticism of farming policy in Wales, reflecting its stronger rural base. In both manifestos there is an emphasis upon food security (‘national security’ for Labour), which the Conservatives claim is at risk from solar farm development. The Conservatives commit to a legislated target for food security, without being clear what this means. Labour commits to promoting the ‘highest standards when it comes to food production’ and to simplifying trade with the EU through a veterinary deal. The Conservatives pledge to ‘always look for the right deal for farmers’ when negotiating trade deals, and to help the agri-food industry benefit from existing deals.

On fishing Labour has nothing to say and the Conservatives only a limited amount on future quotas and marine planning. Despite the [continuing political salience](#) of plastic pollution as a top five environmental issue for the public, neither party mentions it. The Conservatives commit to cracking down on organised waste crime and preventing new waste incinerators. Labour is committed to reducing waste by moving to a circular economy, but with few details.

Finally, both manifestos mention the recently adopted Environment Act, but make markedly different commitments to changing how the environment is regulated in England. The Conservatives emphasise cutting red tape and tightening control on Natural England and the Environment Agency, making sure they ‘take balanced decisions and factor in the impact on the rural economy’. Labour offers a ‘reset’ with the devolved administrations, aiming for the four nations to ‘work together for the common good’.

ASSESSMENT

Overall, it is clear that both parties recognise that there are a range of huge challenges that need to be tackled. Labour has put more emphasis on achieving net zero and the clean transition than wider environmental challenges. The lack of specific detail on many policies makes it unclear whether the issues the public care about will be addressed by either Labour or the Conservatives. Those looking for greater environmental ambition might be better turning to the Liberal Democrat manifesto, which offers more concrete policy detail on how to address the water and nature crises.

HEALTH

Anita Charlesworth

CHALLENGES

Three key issues will shape the future of the health service during the next parliament: improving access to NHS care, modernising the health service and funding. The incoming government will also need to address the unresolved challenges of social care and the rising burden of ill-health from obesity and poor mental health.

Long waits and problems accessing NHS services are key issues of concern for the [public](#) and [patients](#). Satisfaction with the NHS has fallen to a historic low. The waiting times standards for planned hospital care, ambulance response, A&E and cancer have not been met for almost a [decade](#). Covid-19 exacerbated these pre-existing problems. The waiting list for planned care stands at 7.6 million, up from 4.4 million in 2019. Access to GP services, mental health and dentistry are all areas of public concern.

Health needs are increasing and changing, as people live longer with multiple health [conditions](#). To meet rising need, the NHS is seeking to move to a more sustainable model of staffing, training more and improving retention. The NHS published a long-term workforce plan in 2023. Delivering on the big commitments it contains will take more than a single parliament.

The NHS does not however have a capital infrastructure plan. Compared to other comparable countries' capacity – beds and diagnostic scanners – is [low](#). 40 new hospital upgrades are planned but are [behind](#). Infrastructure is a growing problem, with a maintenance backlog of over £11bn.

Many health conditions that are projected to increase most over the next decade are managed in primary [care](#). But over the last decade the share of NHS resources devoted to this has [fallen](#). Providing more proactive care to support people to live independently has been a long-standing policy ambition but progress has been [slow](#).

The potential of new technologies – AI, genomics, precision medicine are advancing rapidly – to transform care is a huge opportunity and [challenge](#).

NHS funding has historically increased at a faster rate than inflation. Keeping pace with the long-term average rate of funding growth would require spending on the English NHS to increase by an average of 3.8% in real terms, almost 50% more than the rate of growth in the decade before the [pandemic](#). This is a

much higher rate of growth than assumed in the OBR's last economic and fiscal [projections](#).

Funding requirements are closely linked to productivity improvement. Health service productivity has been badly hit by the [pandemic](#). How quickly it can recover will be a key factor determining the funding required over the long-term.

There are also major, unresolved, issues about the funding and organisation of social care. Hospitals are struggling to discharge elderly patients who no longer need medical care and problems accessing social care is a contributory factor. Need is increasing; pay, terms and conditions for staff are often poor; and the balance of responsibility between the individual and state is widely seen as unfair. A cap on individual contributions was included in the 2014 Care Act but implementation has been repeatedly [delayed](#).

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

In terms of access to health services, both the Conservative and Labour manifestos promise a return to the NHS performance standards for waiting times for planned hospital care, A&E and cancer. Both want to expand access to mental health services, particularly for young people, and improve access to dentistry – the Conservatives through their dental recovery plan while Labour promise 700,000 more urgent appointments. Labour also proposes to guarantee a face to face GP appointment for anyone who wants it.

The modernisation plans also have a lot in common: commitment to the hospital building programme and the NHS workforce plan, a bigger role for digital and for pharmacies, and reform of the dental contract. Both promise a shift away from hospital care: the Conservatives propose to build or modernise 250 GP surgeries and 50 Community Diagnostic Centres; while Labour proposes a move to a 'Neighbourhood Health Service', shifting resources to primary care and community services over time.

The Conservatives pledge to increase NHS spending above inflation in each year of the next parliament and to invest £3.4bn in new technology. Labour plans to spend £1bn for 40,000 more operations, scans and appointments a week and £250m to double the number of CT and MRI scanners.

On social care, the Conservative manifesto includes a pledge to introduce the cap on care costs delayed from 2023. Labour is promising to introduce a national care service which will set national standards, to deliver consistency of care across the country, although services will be locally delivered, with a principle of 'home first'. Labour is also promising a 'Fair Pay Agreement' for social care staff – a collective agreement on pay, terms, conditions and training standards.

Both parties are also promising the state will intervene to improve health; with the commitment to phase out smoking, and for action on mobile phones, unhealthy food and energy drinks for children.

ASSESSMENT

The degree of consensus over the NHS reform and delivery priorities is striking. Both manifestos focus on increased capacity, using that to improve access, shifting care towards the community and expanding mental health services. The detail varies but the direction of travel is very similar. Even previously contentious issues, such as patient choice and use of the independent sector, seem part of the consensus.

The choice for voters therefore centres on questions of competence and credibility. On credibility, there is a huge question mark hanging over both manifestos: how to provide the funding the health service needs. Both parties' commitments on tax, spending and borrowing mean it will be very hard to increase NHS funding by much more than a third the historic rate of [growth](#). Given the huge performance challenges that is not credible, [new projections](#) suggest improvements on the scale promised by the parties would require funding increases in line with the historic average and does not match the scale of their ambition for recovery and improvement.

It also means that the promised social care reform is likely to be delayed again – it's now more than 10 years since the cap on care costs was passed into law. Whatever happens to it, much of the cost of meeting improved terms and conditions for workers and rising need will fall to local authorities.

One response might be to try to protect NHS funding by further squeezes on other public services. But that risks further harming the social and economic determinants of health – housing, education, welfare. There are no easy routes to NHS recovery.

MANAGED MIGRATION

Ben Brindle

CHALLENGES

The Conservative and Labour parties both say they want to reduce legal migration from its historically high levels. Net migration – a measure of the number of people arriving minus the number leaving – increased sharply post-Brexit, peaking at 764,000 in 2022. Despite a 10% fall in 2023, to an estimated 685,000, net migration remained significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels of roughly 250,000.

That being said, regardless of who forms the next government, net migration levels are expected to fall sharply from 2024 onwards, for two main reasons. First, emigration of former international students is [increasing](#), following the boom in student arrivals between 2021 and 2023. Second, the Conservative government introduced [various measures](#) restricting migration between January and April 2024 which we might reasonably expect to bring numbers down. Work visa numbers are already falling very sharply. However, it is unclear how large the decline will be.

Research evidence cannot tell us what the ‘right’ level of net migration is, for a number of reasons. Migration impacts across a wide range of policy areas, from tax and spending to labour markets to housing, so there are inevitably trade-offs between different policy objectives. Moreover, these trade-offs will vary over time, with the state of the economy as well as other factors. And the impacts of migration differ depending on *who* is coming to the UK, not just how many people are. The impacts of policies to reduce net migration will thus depend significantly on which groups are targeted for more restrictive policies.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

Both major parties say they want to go further to reduce migration than the policies the current government has already introduced (most of which Labour do not oppose). To do this, they would take different approaches, however. As one [analysis puts it](#), the Conservatives want to restrict the supply of migration while Labour want to reduce demand. Labour also puts more emphasis on addressing exploitation of migrants on work visas.

The Conservatives want to introduce an annual cap on work and family visa grants, with the specific level of the cap based on recommendations from the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) and then voted on by Parliament, with the overall number reducing every year. By contrast, the Labour Party would look to

address skills gaps in the UK economy. Under their proposals, sectors requesting high numbers of work visas would be required to create training plans, while the MAC would be linked to bodies setting out industrial strategy. The manifesto references ‘appropriate restrictions on visas’ but without further detail.

The smaller parties flank Labour and the Tories on both sides. The Greens propose more liberal policies. For example, they would reverse recent restrictions on the family members of students and care workers – a policy that the major parties say they would retain. At the other end, Reform UK has said that net migration should be zero.

ASSESSMENT

All policy choices on migration have trade-offs. If the next government wants to reduce net migration, the key challenge will be to do so in a way that mitigates any unintended economic or social impacts, from impacts on growth and tax revenues or university financing to social care provision and families.

The Conservatives’ proposal to cap visa grants would require the MAC to determine a single optimal level of migration. But migration has a range of costs and benefits, some of which are social rather than economic, and these are highly dependent on policy in other areas, such as health and social care or education. Moreover, it is unclear how the MAC’s view on an ‘optimal’ level would be reconciled with the commitment to year-on-year reductions, if the MAC took the view that an increase was appropriate.

Under the cap proposal, the government would need to decide what would happen if the cap is reached (e.g., a waiting list, lottery, or criteria to prioritise certain applications over others). While it is likely that a cap policy would reduce migration, caps can create [uncertainty](#) not only for applicants, but also for employers, because they cannot run recruitment processes knowing what the rules are and which jobs are eligible. If the cap was set on a sector basis, as the Conservatives propose, this system would require the MAC to make detailed forecasts of labour demand, an extremely demanding task in a relatively flexible and dynamic labour market like that of the UK.

The potential impacts of Labour’s plan to train UK-based workers are uncertain. While training has merits in its own right, it will not necessarily reduce work migration. This is because the level of jobs in the labour market is not fixed. If the number of engineers increases through training, for example, UK employers may simply decide to employ more engineers. Nor would training address high vacancy rates in the care sector. Here, the underlying driver of shortages is low pay and poor working conditions – caused in turn by limited government funding – which make it difficult for care providers to retain workers. However, more

effective training might potentially help mitigate the impacts of more restrictive work migration policies. Again, however, the proposals would require a degree of labour market planning that is likely to be difficult to deliver in the UK context.

Moreover, the desire of both parties to reduce migration substantially from current levels would have wider macroeconomic and fiscal impacts. The OBR estimates that lower net migration would have a fiscal cost, particularly in the short run (i.e. 5 years), although its magnitude would depend on which types of migration bore the brunt of any declines.

SMALL BOATS AND ASYLUM

Peter William Walsh

CHALLENGES

While Labour and the Conservatives are not miles apart on the core migration system, the picture is quite different when it comes to small boat arrivals and the asylum system. This is where the most difficult immigration challenges for the incoming government lie. All parties want to tackle small boat arrivals, which stood at 29,000 last year. Almost all people arriving by small boat claim asylum (although many asylum applicants arrive through other routes, legal or illegal). Despite some significant progress in reducing the number of outstanding asylum claims in 2023, the total asylum backlog remained at around 86,000 at the end of March 2024 (more than 118,000 people when family members are included).

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

On small boat arrivals and asylum, three pledges are shared across the manifestos: reducing small boat arrivals, clearing the asylum backlog, and signing new agreements to help remove people without immigration status. On this last point, Labour goes further, committing to the creation of a new ‘returns and enforcement unit’, with a thousand extra staff.

Between the lines of the manifestos, however, Labour and the Conservatives are offering very different visions of how the asylum system will work. The main dividing lines are Rwanda and the Illegal Migration Act (IMA). The Conservatives say they will bring the Illegal Migration Act fully into force, which means that the government would no longer be able to process most asylum claims and instead would be committed to removing most people who apply for asylum to another country. In practice, this means Rwanda.

Labour would axe the Rwanda scheme, redirecting the money to a new Border Security Command, staffed by specialist investigators with counter-terror powers. While the manifesto does not explicitly say that it would repeal the Illegal Migration Act, Labour’s pledge to process claims and clear the backlog implies [abandoning or substantially changing](#) the process the IMA envisages. Labour plans to recruit additional caseworkers to process asylum claims (there are already over 2,000).

Both parties promise forms of international cooperation: the Conservatives want to work with other countries to reform global asylum rules, while Labour seeks a new security agreement with the EU. Both parties commit to new returns agreements.

ASSESSMENT

The Conservatives promise to have ‘all claims processed within six months’. This appears to be in tension with their plan to bring the IMA fully into force, as this would prevent the government from processing the claims of most asylum seekers. Labour’s plan to address the backlog is slightly clearer, as it does not commit to retaining the IMA.

For the Conservatives, the main unanswered question is what will happen to asylum seekers who are not removed to Rwanda. This group of people is already in the tens of thousands, and could remain indefinitely in the UK in receipt of asylum accommodation and support – what the Labour manifesto refers to as the ‘perma-backlog’.

While both parties want small boat arrivals to fall, there are no simple solutions to make this happen. The Conservatives’ approach relies on the idea that the Rwanda policy and Illegal Migration Act will be a deterrent. In practice, the size of any deterrent effect is highly uncertain. Past research has suggested that deterrence policies often have relatively small impacts. However, if very large numbers of people are sent to Rwanda, the scheme might have a significant deterrent impact – though it is unclear whether this scenario is plausible.

Similarly, Labour’s plan focuses primarily on enforcement. It is not clear how much impact additional enforcement would have, given the level of enforcement activity that already takes place.

Under either plan, reducing small boat arrivals to zero in the next term of government is extremely unlikely. The Conservatives’ totalising promise to ‘stop the boats’ is thus less attainable than Labour’s vaguer pledge to ‘stop the chaos’. And while both sides are interested in returns agreements, their success would depend on how they are implemented. Past research suggests such agreements [do not necessarily lead to more removals](#).

SECURITY, DEFENCE AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Malcolm Chalmers

CHALLENGES

Security and foreign affairs are increasingly important to the economic and physical security of the British people. This is the first election since the invasion of Ukraine and takes place while the outcome of the war remains uncertain, on the eve of one of the most consequential US elections, and at a time when prospects for a second Cold War – between the US and China – loom ever larger.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

There is a broad consensus that the world is ‘an increasingly dangerous place’ (Conservative), with a ‘darkening global landscape’ (Labour). The Conservatives emphasise the opportunities provided by Brexit, for example on trade and sanctions. Labour argues that ‘chaotic foreign policy’ has weakened the UK’s influence and says that it will ‘reconnect’ with allies and new partners.

Two areas of clear divergence – climate policy and relations with the EU – are tackled in other chapters. However, the main parties agree on a wide range of other key issues – demonstrating a stronger cross-party consensus on security policy than most of our allies, including the US, Germany or France. There is no substantive difference in relation to Ukraine, where both parties are committed to a sustained effort to provide military assistance.

Labour now appears to have accepted the Foreign Office / Department for International Development merger, committing the party to ‘strengthen international development work through the FCDO’. The wording on aid spending is almost identical, with Labour promising to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income ‘as soon as fiscal circumstances allow’ and the Conservatives ‘when fiscal circumstances allow’. Neither has earmarked more money for the FCDO in their manifesto costings. This is a long way from the cross-party consensus in 2010, when all three major parties committed themselves to steep rises in Official Development Assistance spending, which the Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition went on to deliver.

On the Israel / Gaza conflict, today’s most controversial foreign policy issue, the positions of the two parties are remarkably similar. Labour emphasises that Palestinian statehood ‘is not in the gift of any neighbour’ and is the ‘inalienable

right of the Palestinian people'. But it will only commit to recognition 'as a contribution to a renewed peace process', which is not substantially different from the Conservative commitment to do so 'at a time that is most conducive to the peace process'.

In relation to the rest of the world, there are nuanced differences. The Conservatives make a favourable mention of the Gulf, but Labour does not. Labour talks of the importance of partnership with Africa, while the Conservatives do not. Neither mentions Latin America.

Both parties emphasise their commitment to the Trident nuclear deterrent, and to the AUKUS defence industrial partnership with Australia and the US. These two programmes, taken together, are set to cost the UK some £110bn over the next ten years, and much more over subsequent decades. The maintenance of cross-party support, in all three partner countries, is vital to their success. It appears solid in the UK.

Both are also committed to increasing defence spending from 2.3% of GDP to 2.5%. The Conservatives have committed to meeting the target by 2030, which will involve an extra £5.7bn in spending in the last year of the new parliament. They plan to finance this through cutting the civil service pay bill by a quarter, and through cuts in civilian research and development. Labour argues that such a sharp cut in civil service numbers is impractical. But it does not offer a plan for paying for its own 2.5% commitment. Rather, it promises a Strategic Defence Review, along with a fundamental reform of how the Ministry of Defence works.

Labour has been highly critical of the Conservative plan to spend £2.5bn per annum, by the end of the parliament, on its National Service plan. The plan includes an option for a one-year full-time placement with the armed forces or cyber defence. If up to 30,000 new 18-year olds are recruited each year, as the Prime Minister has [suggested](#), this will involve substantial investments in service housing, training, equipment and salaries. The costings in the Conservative manifesto suggest that £1.5bn of the annual costs would be borne by the defence budget. If the total defence budget is capped at 2.5% of GDP, which is the emerging consensus, it is far from clear that this scheme merits such a high priority.

The comparison of UK performance with that of other European countries is a recurring feature of its political discourse – as seen, for example, in Labour's ambitious commitment to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7. In relation to defence, by contrast, it is the Conservatives that have emphasised inter-European comparisons – setting targets to 'become the largest defence exporter by 2030' (overtaking France) and 'remain the largest defence power

in Europe' (pushing past Germany, which is due to overtake the UK this year). Labour has made no such commitments.

ASSESSMENT

One striking feature of both manifestos is their underestimation of the economic consequences of recent foreign policy decisions, first in the case of Brexit and then following the imposition of sanctions on Russia in response to the Ukraine invasion. But these costs would pale in significance if there is a radical rupture in trade relations between the major powers. Despite the growing possibility of such a rupture, especially under a Trump administration, it is striking how little discussion there is of how the UK should balance the risks and benefits of dependence on China.

This reflects a broader phenomenon. Whoever wins the election on 4 July will have to respond to a blizzard of external events, as the last government had to do in relation to Covid-19 and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The biggest uncertainty in foreign policy is therefore whether the leaders of the next government will have the character, judgement and time to respond with wisdom and determination to new external challenges as they arise. Only time will tell.

THE UNION

Nicola McEwen

CHALLENGES

Over the last eight years, Brexit, Covid and more complex devolution settlements have led to tensions and mistrust in relationships between the UK and devolved governments. Whereas previous UK governments largely left devolved governments to manage their own affairs, Conservative governments since 2016 have been more willing to challenge them. This included: referrals to the Supreme Court to challenge devolved competencies; bypassing devolved governments to spend directly in devolved areas; passing the United Kingdom Internal Market (UKIM) Act, to ensure devolution did not result in ‘unnecessary’ barriers to trade in the wake of Brexit; and ignoring the Sewel convention, which committed the UK Parliament to not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters without the consent of the devolved legislatures.

From the perspective of the devolved governments, this approach undermined devolution and damaged/discredited the Union. These perceptions were augmented in Northern Ireland, where Brexit and the implementation of the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol has left a legacy of deep mistrust in the UK government, particularly among unionists.

The election of a new government offers the opportunity of a new approach to devolution and the Union, and a reset of relationships with the devolved governments.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

The more assertive approach to devolution adopted by the Conservatives in office was its way of strengthening and protecting the Union, and its manifesto promises more of the same. It pledges to ‘relentlessly protect the UK’s internal market’ and commits to continue funding programmes that bypass the established system of block grant funding to the devolved governments. This includes a three-year extension to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and funding in areas that are wholly or partly devolved, including investment zones, farming, road and rail infrastructure and connectivity between the UK’s constituent nations and communities.

More directly, the manifesto undermines Welsh devolution by pledging to overturn legislation already passed in the Senedd that reduced speed limits and disapplied restrictive UK trade union legislation to Welsh public bodies, as well as reversing the planned increase in Senedd members.

Does the Labour Party's 'change' manifesto promise a changed approach to devolution?

There are fewer direct challenges to the authority of the devolved institutions, but the change Labour offers seems modest.

The Labour [Commission on the UK's Future](#) (led by Gordon Brown) had called for a new, broader and legally-binding formulation of the Sewel convention in law, including removing the 'normally' caveat to make it binding in all circumstances. The Labour manifesto falls some way short of that, promising instead a new memorandum of understanding 'outlining how the nations will work together for the common good'.

With respect to Northern Ireland, Labour commits to uphold 'the letter and the spirit' of the Good Friday Agreement and implement the Windsor Framework, negotiated by Rishi Sunak, to ease Brexit-related barriers to trade between Britain and Northern Ireland. Labour also commits to repealing and replacing the 2023 Legacy Act, which gives a conditional amnesty to those accused of killings during 'the Troubles' and was opposed by victims groups and all major parties in Northern Ireland.

For Wales, commitments to 'explore' the devolution of probation services and 'consider' the devolution of youth justice fall some way short of the recommendations of both the [Thomas Commission](#) and the [Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales](#) to devolve justice and policing. No new devolved powers are offered to Scotland, but there is a pledge to increase Scottish representation in UK-wide bodies. Labour's opposition to Scottish independence or to another referendum are restated, in stark contrast to commitments made elsewhere in the manifesto to self-determination for the Overseas Territories, Crown Dependencies, Palestine, and Northern Ireland.

The manifesto commits to working with the devolved governments 'to drive growth across the country' and 'work collaboratively to deliver Labour's national missions'. It takes up the recommendation of the Brown Commission to establish a new Council of the Nations and Regions, including leaders from the devolved governments and mayors of combined authorities, but postpones its central commitment to replace the House of Lords with an Assembly of the Nations and Regions. Instead, it pledges to consult on 'an alternative second chamber' that is 'more representative of the regions and nations'.

ASSESSMENT

By default, much of Labour's manifesto is centred on England, as most of its 'missions' concern policy areas that are devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern

Ireland. Frequent references to resetting UK government-devolved government relationships lack detail.

A promise to restore ‘decision-making over the allocation of structural funds to the representatives of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland’ makes little sense. Structural funds were provided by the European Union and administered by devolved governments. If this pledge refers to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund that partially replaced them, where does it leave other contentious programmes where the UK government has bypassed the devolved governments to spend in devolved policy spheres?

Is the proposed Council of Nations and Regions in addition to, or a replacement for, existing intergovernmental machinery? Devolution within England remains very distinctive from the legislative devolution in the other UK nations. Putting leaders of the devolved nations alongside metro mayors risks further undermining their authority rather than restoring it.

The Brown Commission argued that redistribution of power across the UK’s nations and regions ‘also requires radical reform at the centre of government, in both Westminster and Whitehall’. The Labour manifesto does not inspire confidence that radical change is coming.

Constitutional safeguards for devolution and intergovernmental relations are notable for their absence. A new approach to governing the Union may yet transpire under a Labour government, but it will be one that rests on goodwill, a spirit of cooperation and investment in rebuilding trust.

RELATIONS WITH THE EU

Anand Menon

CHALLENGES

Five years is a long time in politics. The 2019 election was all about Brexit. Now, Brexit is the dog the large parties have effectively muzzled. Partly, this is because the UK-EU relationship has reached something approximating a stable equilibrium, not least because of the signing of the Windsor Framework. Moreover, the public are no longer interested. In 2019, Brexit was by far the most salient political issue. It has now slipped out of the top ten.

Brexit might be ‘done’ but it is not over. There is scope for future tensions over the Protocol and the unique position of Northern Ireland. Upcoming negotiations over energy and fish, plus a scheduled review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement hold out the prospect of further collaboration or renewed conflict. Meanwhile, public opinion has shifted quite dramatically, with poll after poll underlining decreasing support for Brexit. Finally, there is the elephant in the room. Brexit continues to impose costs on the British economy, and future governments will confront difficult choices as to how far they are willing to go to mitigate these.

WHAT THE MANIFESTOS SAY

The shifting salience of Brexit is most striking in the Conservative manifesto. This includes passing reference to having ‘got Brexit done’ and stands in sharp contrast to the 2019 document, which majored on the need to ‘do’ it.

Brexit opportunities are mentioned, although not elaborated in any great detail. We read of an intention to sign new trade deals, speed up infrastructure decisions, create ‘new fishing opportunities’ and cut red tape for business, for instance by lifting the employee threshold, thereby allowing more companies to be considered medium-sized. Meanwhile, there is a promise to have repealed or reformed over half of inherited stock of EU law by July 2026.

As for relations with the European Union itself, the Conservatives pledge to ‘build on the TCA’ without specifying what this means. The party is clear, though, that it would not agree on anything, including in the forthcoming TCA review, that would ‘infringe our legal sovereignty or involve submission to the CJEU or dynamic alignment’.

Labour insists that to ‘seize the opportunities ahead, we must make Brexit work.’ But its tone is very different. The manifesto stresses that Britain will be

a ‘reliable partner, a dependable ally, and a good neighbour’. It promises to ‘reset the relationship’ to make the UK ‘confident in our status outside of the EU, but a leading nation in Europe once again, with an improved and ambitious relationship with our European partners.’

There are obvious limits to this – a return to ‘the single market, the customs union, or freedom of movement’ are all ruled out. The desire to remain outside the customs union is reinforced by a pledge to seek targeted trade agreements aligned with Labour’s industrial strategy and economic strengths, while using the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership trading bloc (which the Conservative government joined) to promote deeper trade and cooperation.

However, the manifesto outlines an ambition to improve the relationship with the EU by ‘tearing down unnecessary barriers to trade.’ Specifically, this includes a veterinary agreement, help for touring artists, and a mutual recognition agreement for professional qualifications.

There is less detail when it comes to the other key plank of the Labour platform – ‘an ambitious new UK-EU security pact’, though this is intended, amongst other things, to ‘ensure access to real-time intelligence and enable our policing teams to lead joint investigations with their European counterparts’ and thereby bolster Labour’s plans to control irregular migration.

For both parties, improved relationships with European allies would be achieved via bilateral cooperation. While Labour promises increased defence and security cooperation with the likes of France and Germany, the Conservatives signal an intention to conclude defence treaties with Poland and Germany (albeit for them, bilateral cooperation is instead of deeper relations with the EU). Both parties also signal their intention to work more closely with the Joint Expeditionary Force.

ASSESSMENT

A change of tone is one thing a Labour government will find relatively easy to achieve should they be elected. And there is evidence to suggest that the European Union would be open to negotiations on a more formalised relationship when it comes to security.

There are, however, reasons to question the feasibility of a number of the proposals made by both parties. The Conservatives have long talked a good game about cutting EU regulations but have never quite managed to act on their rhetoric.

As for Labour, while the EU will be [willing to engage](#) on issues such as a veterinary agreement, there will be difficult negotiations around the extent of UK alignment with EU law and the oversight mechanisms involved. When it comes to mutual recognition of professional qualifications, talks are already underway on such a deal for architects, though they are proceeding slowly, with the EU having already [rejected](#) one set of proposals as ‘prejudicial to EU architects.’ Finally, while ‘helping touring artists’ sounds deceptively simple, the [issues involved](#) range from immigration and employment requirements in individual EU member states, to TCA restrictions on goods exports.

Second, there is the politics. One reason each of the large parties has largely refrained from talking about Brexit is the presence of a rival with a more extreme position on their flank. This promises to become more of an issue after the election. The Conservative Party might face calls from Reform to toughen its position (Reform are proposing, *inter alia*, the immediate scrapping of EU regulations and the abandonment of the Windsor Framework). Similarly, Labour might come under pressure from the Liberal Democrats, should the latter choose to be more vocal in support of its proposal to rejoin the single market. If elected with a significant majority, Labour will also potentially face pressure to go further and faster from its own members.

Finally there is the economics. Labour’s manifesto focuses on the need for growth, acknowledging, unlike the Conservatives, that Brexit has been economically damaging. The kinds of minor alteration to the TCA that it is proposing, however, will do little to address the impact of Brexit on the UK’s economy. Whether Labour is tempted to go further if it is in government will depend on how the UK economy develops post-election. Should growth prove elusive, a Labour government might have to revisit its plans. The equilibrium might prove less stable than it currently seems.

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020 7848 2630
info@UKandEU.ac.uk
@UKandEU

www.ukandeu.ac.uk

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