UCL

Citizen Portraits: Exploring Everyday Connection

UCL
Policy Lab

Our cover celebrates our upcoming exhibition **Citizen Portraits: Exploring Everyday Connection**, including a special series of portraits of members of Citizen UK's new Liverpool chapter.

Foreword

It is sometimes suggested that the country's new Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, was elected as an antidote to the overly "performative" nature of modern politics.

What that analysis means is that Starmer offers an alternative to politics as essentially just noise. For these commentators, a politics that is "performative" is one full of big speeches with emotional resonance, but little real content; policy commitments made, but policy change not delivered; appetites provoked, but nothing ever satiated.

Having lived through British politics over the last decade, many will be hugely sympathetic to the idea that we want less of that. Absurd Brexit rows have been followed by empty boosterism and hollow promises, and the country has drifted as a result, with millions feeling that nothing really works anymore and that the future is beyond their grasp.

Nonetheless, something is not quite right in the diagnosis of what the new Prime Minister has to offer.

And that's because the word "performative" originally meant almost exactly the opposite of what such commentators appear to think it means. When the philosopher J. L. Austin coined the term in his classic *How to Do Things With Words*, it was intended to refer to using words to change the world – not just to describe or evaluate it. A "performative" is an utterance which performs an action, which actually does something. Performatives bring things about.

This might, of course, seem just the kind of technical, definitional distinction that academics care about, but of no real concern to politicians. But as the political philosopher Bonnie Honig has recently pointed out, this time the difference really matters. At a moment when so many have lost faith in politics, using words to change the world has rarely been more important. Working out how to bring the new into being is, after all, the task confronting all of us. And knowing how to speak and what to say in order to aid that process is just as crucial now as it has ever been.

For all of its differences with what has come before, we know that the new government takes that seriously, as will the newly elected leader of the Conservative Party too. And here at the UCL Policy Lab as well, we have spent the summer thinking hard about how change is to come to public policy, both in the UK and across the world.

This latest edition of our magazine is a short collection of the most exciting ideas that have been shared with us. From the stories told by economists who grew up with the end of communism to thoughts shared by someone whose words entertained millions on television for decades, we hope that they will move you, even inspire you, and, most importantly, enable you to find your own way for the future.

Marc Stears
Director
UCL Policy Lab

To find out more about our work and events programme, sign up for our newsletter. We are also very keen to hear from you, about ideas and collaborations.

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Economics

Political Science

News: 2024 Election was a 'final warning' as voters demand change to the status quo

Throughout the general election of 2024, UCL Policy Lab worked in partnership with More in Common to work out what was going on.

All of that work came to a culmination in the immediate aftermath of the election with a major post-election report on what had driven the result.

It found 67 per cent of the public believe that the primary mandate of the new government is captured in Labour's one-word election slogan: change.

Change Pending: The Path to the 2024 General Election and Beyond found that voters used the 2024 General Election to deliver a final warning to Britain's political mainstream that the way Britain works needs to change and that politicians need to show more respect for ordinary people.

The report - which was the first comprehensive investigation into the election, based on polling of more than 10,000 people and over 60 focus groups before, during, and after the campaign – found that two thirds of the public think the new Labour government has a strong mandate to bring about that change - including more than six in ten of those who backed parties other than Labour.

However, the research also identified that the unprecedented levels of political fragmentation and high abstentionism of July's election were driven by growing cynicism towards politics and a sense of futility that the political mainstream simply cannot deliver for ordinary people. The report suggests that 74 per cent of the public now believe that Britain is rigged to serve the rich and influential. With the public frustrated that their demands for change in the 2016 Brexit Referendum and 2019 "Get Brexit Done" election were not fully heeded, the report warns that the core mission of the next government must be to deliver voters expectations of change or risk more voters turning to populism.

The report also found that dissatisfaction with the NHS was a key driver of voter behaviour, with 54 per cent of the public saying that mismanagement of the NHS was the Conservative's biggest mistake since 2019, while 46 per cent supported the Labour Party because of its policies on the NHS - the highest of any reason for voting Labour. Meanwhile, with voters impatient for change and Labour voters expecting to see it within one year of government, it is the NHS against which people will benchmark Labour's delivery of change - nearly two thirds of the public (63 per cent) and 70 per cent of Labour voters say that reducing waiting lists will be their metric for assessing the Labour government's performance.

However, on the NHS and other issues, voters' expectations for change go beyond delivery. Some 96 per cent of the public say that respect for ordinary people is an important quality for a politician - the highest of any attribute tested. While focus group conversations informed the research, it was found that voters clearly want politicians to listen to them and their concerns, building on earlier research from the UCL Policy Lab and More in Common, including *The Respect Agenda*.

All in all, the new government has an immense challenge to prove that it can deliver meaningful change and reconnect politics and people.

Read in full,
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A new era for healthcare

Why participation is key to transforming lives with **Dr Fran Zanatta** in conversation with **James Baggaley**

In his 2020 book, *Together*, Vivek H. Murthy, President Obama's Surgeon General, spoke of his growing realisation that for all the complex medical challenges facing the United States, it was social connection and loneliness that came to define his time as the US's most senior health leader.

Murthy witnessed how the challenges of loneliness and disconnection came to define the health, well-being, and even the politics of a nation.

"So many of the problems we face as a society — from addiction and violence to disengagement among workers and students to political polarization — are worsened by loneliness and disconnection. Building a more connected world holds the key to solving these and many more of the personal and societal problems confronting us today."

Here at the UCL Policy Lab, we have been working with partners from across UCL such as Dr Fran Zanatta and with colleagues overseas to ask how social connection might enhance the health of the nation.

"Relationships, and fostering those relationships creates space for agency, for intentionality, for dialogue. And that is provides the space for healing."

As a new government in the UK looks to build an NHS fit for the future, I sat down with UCL's Dr Fran Zanatta, who has led work across psychology, mental health and citizen action, to explore why social connection and relational, participatory approaches to healthcare can provide us with a real opportunity to transform lives.
James Baggaley

JB: Your work explores how patients and clinical practitioners can be empowered to act, building relationships that can sustain healthy lives. Can you tell us about how this work came about?

FZ: I was working on a major research programme with young people in east London towards the end of the pandemic. They were interested in mental health, which, by accident, was the discipline that I was moving towards at the time, having previously worked in education.

We designed the project so that every Friday, we invited different artists to engage young people in a variety of methods to think about how they can take action within their community. We invited Citizens UK, an organisation focused on community organising, to run one of the sessions, which blew everything up by moving the discussion from just thinking and feeling, to planning and action. What was meant to be a single session ended up being a whole action that the young people planned themselves. From this one session came action and empowerment for the young people. Witnessing that was incredibly powerful.

JB: How has this kind of approach developed more broadly in the NHS? Can you give some examples?

FZ: My team's first project at UCL was with mental health peer support workers. These are individuals with lived experience who have gone through a process of recovery, or management of their challenges, to support others through volunteering or as paid staff members in the NHS.

They were still going through the recovery process, and we organised a series of sessions to enable them to become engaged actively in research. One of their training sessions was with Citizens UK. It was incredible to see them talking about power and how to transform anger from something destructive to something productive. It clicks something into people, and it shifts the capacity for action.

Suddenly people become aware of their own agency. I guess it is an element of awareness, empowerment or "yes, I can do this". We're going to be doing some more work this autumn, on peer support workers and power and research.

JB: Agency, or respect, often feels like it gets lost, even within well-meaning institutions like the NHS. Could approaches like yours offer people the tools to grasp back some of that agency? A sense of freedom when we need it the most?

FZ: It's about self-advocacy and awareness. A young person I was working with described agency as about having the awareness and knowledge that you have options, the capacity to make choices around your actions, and feeling like if you ask questions or make a suggestion, that it won't backfire on you.

There are issues with the processes and systems, but I think what matters the most is the relationship and the need for all of us to be more person-focused. Because of limited resources, staff have a bigger caseload, and there's less time for thinking, for feeling and processing those feelings. because there is a lot of holding that people working in mental health services have to do.

Relationships, and fostering those relationships create space for agency, for intentionality, for dialogue. And that provides the space for healing.

JB: How much of this approach is about listening and valuing peoples experience?

FZ: In some primary schools there is a designated mental health service, which is something being advocated for quite loudly by Young Minds and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, and organisations like the Young People and Children Mental Health Coalition. Having someone who you can go to, even just for a chat, creates the knowledge that you can talk about things even when they're hard, that there's someone listening and that it's okay to not feel great.

One of the primary schools I worked in had a chat bench, which we would sit on and young people could just come up and have a little chat if there was something that was bothering them. It's nothing complex, but it shifts the internal way of working and the way in which you relate with yourself, with your difficult experiences and with others. Once you've experienced it yourself, you're more likely to replicate it in your relationships and connections with other people. Those little changes are quite crucial.

JB: It feels like so much of your work is about building community – which again is often lost when all we think about is the immediate crisis – and yet it feels that without this community how can we expect long-term change for patients.

FZ: Working with peer support workers has been quite enlightening because it's centred around creating relationships. One of these colleagues leads a community cafe where people can drop in and have a chat or take part in activities. It helps to tackle very complex issues such as isolation, loneliness, and not having a warm space or a cup of coffee or tea. These seemingly small acts of community can be incredibly transformative.

Another programme was an evaluation for a community garden in Essex with a community organisation called Trust Links. They do amazing work. I've met a lot of volunteers and so-called service users, the local community members, and it's just incredible to see how transformative it is because it creates space where people can gather and cultivate, but it also creates somewhere where you can go to shift the thinking, or address something that you're struggling with. It becomes a space where you feel safe to share and get support for the challenges that you're experiencing.

When talking with young people, what comes up a lot is how sterile and terrifying some of the mental health spaces meant for healing are. When you have a space full of plants produced by people in the community, and there are smiling faces and people who look like you, talk like you, and struggle like you, that shifts their experience.

JB: Researchers and mental health policy experts often talk about the importance of 'social connection'. Do you see part of your role as helping build connection?

FZ: Yes, but connecting itself is not enough. The way I talk about it is more in terms of social action - having something to work towards together. Social connection is the beginning because it brings people together. It's the work of thinking about why we're so polarised.

How do we start? By being able to listen and to hear and to make space for different views and opinions. And that's probably one of the hardest activities that I had to engage with when working with Citizens UK, having to be more able to welcome different perspectives.

The work I do is around social connection. But also having a social connection to foster that hope for social action. It's a multi-step approach, about making sure that people feel like they can be actors and participants in their own lives, as opposed to passive observers or recipients of care.

JB: A lot of people would love to have the advocates that you've managed to secure, how did you get the leadership of your project on board, especially someone like UCL's Professor Peter Fonagy?

FZ: Both Peter and Jenny Shand were super enthusiastic about the idea of exploring different ways of working with the community. The whole point of Peter's work in psychotherapy (mentalisation) is listening to and understanding your own perspective as well as others', so that's something that I think is already within their training and the profession.

There's often a fear amongst leaders – and Peter in my mind is a leader - that if they build a community and hand away power, that their power will be lost. But with Peter and Jen, it has been absolutely the opposite. He recognises the greatest act he can perform as a leader is to redistribute, share power, to ask 'what can I do to make things easier for *you*? How can I be of support'?

I honestly think politics can take a lesson from this kind of approach. Instead of asking how can I use my power, ask how can I empower others?

"I honestly think politics can take a lesson from this kind of approach. Instead of asking how can I use my power, ask how can I empower others?"

A long *walk* home: how we rebuild Britain together

"We did this – the community fingerprints are all over it. The thing is, it's good because we built it. We came together to build initially – but also because the people who use it have shaped what it does from day to day"

This summer, the American rock star, Bruce Springsteen, rolled back into town for his latest UK tour. A favourite of MPs and Westminster insiders, including the leading Cabinet minister Pat MacFadden, the songsmith of hard times and social movements has spent decades telling the story of men and women who have thought back from difficult odds. "The diner was shuttered and boarded. With a sign that just said 'gone'," he sang. It could be the Rust Belt – it could be a marginal constituency in the Midlands.

James Baggaley

Walk around large swathes of our small towns, suburban high roads, and city centres and you will see boarded-up shops, cracked pavements, and the sense of a public realm in decay. For all the lofty political and economic debates, it's in large part this visible scarring of a country that has propelled Keir Starmer into Number 10. Ask any MP or councillor, and they'll tell you what comes up on the doorstep; high streets and potholes won't be far from the top. These everyday markers of decay blur into voters' experience of public services, leaving them with a general sense that the country isn't working.

And for all the promises of grandiose technological fixes, it is our day-to-day relationships with public services, be that at the GP surgery, the school gate or the bus home from work that often matters most of all. To understand how we rebuild trust, we must look to nurture and improve these daily experiences, which are often centred around deep relationships, not futuristic abstraction. As the great geographer, Deborah Massey, once wrote "amid the Ridley Scott images of world cities, the writing about skyscraper fortresses, the Baudrillard visions of hyperspace… most people actually still live in places like Harlesden or West Brom. Much of life for many people, even in the heart of the First World, still consists of waiting in a bus shelter with your shopping for a bus that never comes."

It is a theme we picked up time and time again in our recent UCL Policy Lab and More in Common research, alongside a sense from voters demanding real change – not just short-term improvement but a sense politics would 'do things differently'. This was best expressed as a demand that politics better respect ordinary people.

Keir Starmer reflected on just this issue in his recent Rose Garden speech in Downing Street. Amongst the foreboding about the difficult choices to come, there was a reflection on ordinary people's response to this summer's riots and how this response could inspire how we rebuild Britain.

"Imagine the pride we will feel as a nation. When, after the hard work of clearing up the mess is done. We have a country that we have built together."

With these words, Starmer recognised a truth that should be self-evident – collective change has to be done together. And not just by Whitehall, anyone who has had minimal contact with the British state will know that relying on targets and bureaucratic changes alone won't come close to meeting the complexity of the challenges we face.

This is an argument that UCL Policy Lab's Ordinary Hope project has returned to time and time again: as writer Jonathan Rutherford often phrases it, it is about the country that sits just beneath the surface. Not some rare breed of community organiser or activist, but those who comprise the majority—the people who work hard to build a place and support one another when times are tough.

It is a spirit you will find alive and well at One Stonegrove, a community centre located not 15 minutes from Edgware station. When I visit, it is just three weeks since the riots that brought racist street violence to communities across Britain. Yet here, amongst the sound of kids playing basketball in the hall and folks wandering in and out, we are in another country, another place.

"We did this – the community fingerprints are all over it. The thing is, it's good because we built it. We came together to build initially – but also because the people who use it have shaped what it does from day to day".

Gus Alston is the CEO of One Stonegrove and has worked in and around local projects all his life. He's worked for and with councils, the charity sector, and civic society—he's a walking talking testimony of government initiatives and attempts to support 'connection' or 'cohesion'.

Gus's work is inspiring. But it is also echoed across the country. The practitioners and social change leaders we work with tell us that there are a thousand Guses in the UK. Charities and governments like to turn them into very special heroes—and in a sense, they are—but they are also there in every community and neighbourhood. This sense of place and community exists in spades in Britain; we see it in our polling and our views on how public services should be run.

It is a fact that researchers including UCL's Professor Mark Tewdwr-Jones say is happening across Britain "In many places, there is not only a desire for change but also a determination to get on with things. People are no longer prepared to wait for the central state to act. Or else they are more cynical now about the state's ability to recognise the uniqueness of their problems and find the means to eradicate them". It's this work that he and colleagues at UCL have continued to explore and study – helping recognise the immense social and economic value of people like Gus. For all the grand projects call it 'inclusive growth' or 'levelling up' Tewdwr-Jones believes it comes down to governments willingness to trust and respect those doing the work locally.

"A quiet revolution is happening". Tewdwr-Jones says. "This is a place-based, people-centred approach to managing change, bringing citizens, communities, businesses and agencies together, finding little local victories, offering hope. Central government doesn't need to intervene in a hands-on way in these instances or offer money for some glitzy 'grand projet'. All that central government needs to do is give legitimacy to the activities and learn not to get in the way".

When you've visited dozens of community schemes, you sometimes expect them to feel rundown or falling short. But not here. The One Stonegrove community centre is beautiful. It is not showy or expensive, but it is a place you want to be. It is a place you want to meet and a place you'd be proud to call home.

And this stuff matters; you don't have to be a fully signed-up member of the broken windows theory of policing to think social rot starts with actual rot – be it damp flats or creaking sports facilities (or no facilities at all). It matters when it comes to social cohesion, it matters when you want to create a sense of national mission and it matters when you want to be a healthy growing economy.

When you speak to people like Gus, they often try to avoid national political debates. They are, after all, dealing with the critical stuff, ensuring people are fed or housed, but he offers some ideas as to what type of politics can properly fix and rebuild Britain.

"There seems to be a tendency to bring in experts and consultants into central government. But what about those working in health, education, or youth services in communities? Perhaps if they asked and listened, they might be able to design smarter solutions." It's about understanding that grand schemes and centralised systems are well-meaning but too often fail to adapt and use genuine talent and ideas.

"If I'm honest, council-owned community centres are generally a disaster", says Gus. He is quick to stress that they are well-meaning but fundamentally set up to limit risk and deliver to statutory objectives – as opposed to fostering connection and innovation. Gus provides a small but powerful example.

"We have a group of young people that volunteer every week, and they're great, and there really is no reason why you can't do it. But if we were council-run, there's no way it would be happening." And it's not just around young people and skills where councils and public services seem unable to adapt to human needs and capacity.

"Here, a community member can come to a staff member or grab ten minutes with me because I'm not hiding away in some office." Gus talks of how ideas that come to him in the morning could be implemented by the afternoon. "We can test and adapt and give people a sense of control over their place and community".

Gus recalls when a big housing association contacted the trust to offer £500 grants to local residents. “They were asking residents to do seven-page risk assessments. Of course, most people don’t know how to write a risk assessment. Luckily, we persuaded them to give us the grants in batches, and essentially, what we’re doing in the end is indemnifying them, and we’re prepared to take the risks”.

The capacity to take on social and economic risks is something that UCL economists such as Wendy Carlin have highlighted as an integral element to restoring the British economy. If we’re to rebuild, a willingness to embrace and trust one another will be key – researchers saw that during the pandemic when local public health teams were trusted they were able to deliver effective local schemes with little funding.

Fundamentally, this approach is about being able to respond and be there for one another. As Gus rushes off to speak to the workmen installing the brand-new solar panels (the panels will make up the largest charity solar power system in London) I start chatting with Akram. She mentions that she’s lived in several areas and has never quite felt like she’s been at home. When she moved into the new estate across the road, she saw the life coming from the centre; a keen baker, she wandered in with some cakes and offered them to the staff.

“In truth, after that, I never left. I’d bring cakes in for the locals and groups, and then they asked me if I wanted to help out”. Akram smiles as she talks about the place that she now calls her community. I ask her if it is genuinely this friendly, is it as perfect a community as it looks – it must have problems.

“Of course, but you know what? I know everyone’s name in the block opposite. We’re from all different backgrounds – some social tenants or some own their flats – but we look after one another. It’s a real place – a home.” I look back across towards the school; another group is arriving for classes and Akram heads off to greet a group of elderly residents dropping by to say hello.

There is a growing body of evidence showing the importance of social infrastructure built by folks like Gus and Akram. These are spaces that bring people together and contribute to community cohesion and wellbeing. Recent work at UCL by Professor John Tomaney and colleagues has demonstrated its contribution in former coal mining communities in County Durham. Their work reads like a story from a Bruce Springsteen song; concluding that social infrastructure takes time, commitment, and care to build but can be quickly lost if it is not well maintained, with harmful consequences for communities.

In his hit *A Long Way Home*, Bruce Springsteen speaks of a place that’s seen better days, and yet recognises its strength remains, the people who make it so, they have always looked out for one another. Springsteen sings about a brighter future, a belief in the hope that comes from shared endeavour.

It may be a long walk home, but if our politics can allow it, Britain has the chance at genuine renewal.

Citizens Portraits: A yearning for change

The 2024 election was undoubtedly a “change election,” with over seven in ten voters saying Britain needed change rather than sticking with the plan. This was the message we found when we headed out across the country in our latest series of Citizen Portraits.

Photographer Jørn Tomter captured the yearning for renewal that comes with the changing of the political seasons. We caught the struggles that people too often face and the determination that they muster to respond.

These images should be at the forefront of the minds of the country’s new government, and all of those who devise programmes and plans for national prosperity.

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How will Britain fund investment?

A lesson in accountability and partnership with **Dr Eleanor Woodhouse**

When the new Chancellor Rachel Reeves gets to her feet on 30 October, we know that there will be the much-touted tough measures around spending and tax.

These are fiscally difficult times for the UK government and the new administration is led by those who are determined not to be portrayed as fiscally irresponsible. At the same time, we live at a moment when public services are clearly in need of significant new investment. So how can that circle be squared?

How might Rachel Reeves 'unlock' the public service investment needed to turn the UK around, without betraying her own fiscal rules?

One person who knows the answer better than most is Ellie Woodhouse from the Department for Political Science at UCL. Woodhouse specialises in understanding public and private investment, and the resulting challenges in terms of democratic oversight and responsiveness to citizens. And she has a clear view of the mixed history of recent efforts.

"A central pillar of how governments have sought to get investment into public services has been through public-private partnerships (PPP). However, we saw with the now much maligned Public Finance Initiative (PFI) how, when done poorly, these initiatives can leave voters and governments picking up the bill for botched contracts or failed projects."

For Woodhouse these are not simply scholarly questions. Before academia, she spent several busy years as a policy advisor at the European Commission, which gave her an urgent understanding of the twin pressures of policy and politics. And it was because she understood the possibility of policy to change lives, that she decided to bolster her capacity for research. "I quickly realised that in order to improve the effectiveness of my policy skills, I would need to get better at evaluating policies".

"It wasn't meant to be this way. I'd originally planned to go back to work in the European Commission, or some other political setting, but I found academia inspiring. I found myself more and more interested in developing my own research agenda, with a focus on exploring the relationship between policy choices and accountability". The question of accountability comes up time and time again in our conversation. Woodhouse is steeped in the technicalities of delivery, but her work is grounded most of all in the belief that policymaking must first and foremost engage with the concerns and demands of citizens – and be understandable to them. If good policy is to be sustained, then understanding how citizens can measure and comprehend it is vital.

These are also central questions for Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves. In recent weeks, luminaries like former Cabinet Secretary Gus O'Donnell, have warned about the democratic risks inherent in PFI-like schemes that can be opaque and hard to hold to account. Woodhouse echoes O'Donnell's caution while also looking to see how we can reform existing forms of investment and public service delivery.

"In previous decades, under the new public management paradigm, significant emphasis was placed on value for money and efficiency. And of course this matters hugely. But we also need to understand how government policies are accountable". Woodhouse points out that during COVID-19, we saw times when policy failed to meet those other needs, which in turn meant they were ineffective in the task of government or citizens.

This means that for investment schemes such as PPPs, the government needs to be frank and open about where schemes do and don't work. "There's a set of conditions under which research would suggest that public-private partnerships can be successful."

"I quickly realised that in order to improve the effectiveness of my policy skills, I would need to get better at evaluating policies"

"They work best when there is a very clear project with set objectives – for example, infrastructure like a bridge, tunnel or road." Woodhouse explains that it gets complex when there are multiple objectives and layers to a contract. A classic example from the 1990s is a hospital or school, where private companies bound the government in – not only to the building itself but to a myriad of services, from cleaning to maintenance, the effectiveness of which was hard to evaluate from the outside.

Another area that causes challenges for PPPs is the capacity of the government to keep up with the complexity and expertise of the private sector when it comes to contracting and negotiation. Procurement, long seen as a weakness of British governments, poses real challenges when it comes to more complex forms of PPP.

"Poor governance and design of contracts of this nature can be especially problematic as they can lead to the sometimes-frequent renegotiation of PPPs". Woodhouse explains. If government is to overcome these challenges it will need to invest in skills and likely bring in external talent at least in the initial stages – costs which although rational in terms of long-term cost may prove challenging for the public and media to swallow (the eye-watering salaries of knowledgeable private contractors – with some private sector procurement specialists earning far more than the PM – may prove difficult to justify).

Yet along with challenges, there are also opportunities to learn from other countries where a collaborative partnership-led approach is being fostered. One such case is Australia, where state governments have used PPPs as opportunities to develop consortia of companies that can deliver on major infrastructure projects. This has the advantage of using state-led projects to support and foster a healthy and sustainable business environment, strengthening the economy for the long term.

Despite the difficulties and the intricacies of public financing right now, I am struck by how Woodhouse never gave up her idealism and belief in the possibility of policy. No matter how rigorous and, yes, abstract the theory, she has held fast to the idea of democratic accountability and human betterment. If Rachel Reeves is to deliver on her mission of a growing economy and improved public services, she's going to need the brain power, compassion, and democratic zeal of thinkers like Dr Eleanor Woodhouse.

How might politics build a lasting environmental movement

James Baggaley sits down with best-selling author Guy Shrubsole to explore how new coalitions might be built with a focus on the ordinary and everyday.

"Of course, we need to sort out the cost of living crisis, making sure that we're bringing down energy prices, and ensuring that people have a fair wage. But there are daily moments that really matter for people in terms of being able to see a sunset or enjoying time out in nature and experiencing the rest of the living world."

As we glide through the English countryside - on that most endangered of species, an on-time mainline train - I flick through a whole stack of notes ahead of my meeting with Guy Shrubsole. His book *Who Owns England?* was an instant bestseller, and *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*, was another hit – winning huge acclaim from across the political spectrum.

With these works and many others, he has become a key thinker in today's environmental movement. Shrubsole's ability to marry campaigning fire with a captivating love of the natural world has inspired millions. He allows us to rethink what a modern environmental movement might look like.

In preparing to chat with Shrubsole, I also found myself reading Margaret Thatcher's last speech to the UN as Prime Minister. Speaking to the assembled leaders and diplomats, she spoke not of the majesty of markets or the evils of communism – the international battles which had come to define her. Instead, on that mild autumn evening in New York, that doyen of free market capitalism spoke of the delicate beauty of our natural world.

As she did so often, Thatcher invoked the Old Testament to express her profound conservatism.

"…we are the Lord's creatures, the trustees of this planet, charged today with preserving life itself—preserving life with all its mystery and all its wonder".

The speech sought to alert fellow leaders to the looming threat of climate change and the need for us all to respond. Environmentalism was to be seen as a duty, not just to oneself, but to something bigger—to the nation and, for Thatcher, God's green earth.

I finish the speech just as we pull into the small town in Devon where Shrubsole lives today. Mrs Thatcher would know this place as well as any other part of Tory England. Yet today, as Shrubsole points out, she might be surprised by its political shift, rural England is changing, in part driven by the emergence of a new environmentalism.

In the general election this year, a whole host of deep blue seats have switched to Labour and Liberal Democrat, with Greens making headway in a nearby rural seat. To Shrubsole, so much of this is down to a connection to place and the natural world – a connection that runs deep.

"Environmentalism is the sleeping giant of British politics." Echoing the words of the late Robin Cook, Shrubsole makes a case for an environmentalism that respects and values those who have been ignored for too long—something I doubt I would find in early drafts of Thatcher's speech.

For Shrubsole, this is a progressive moment, and it must be seized if we're to make change with genuine, lasting support.

"There is a long history of environmentalism within the Labour movement and the left, in being interested in access to nature, and the quality of that environment. Often this is forgotten". He believes there is an importance in understanding how environmentalism is understood by the many, not the few, if we are to have long-term change, not just on issues such as net-zero but also on how we think about access to land.

"Nature isn't just a 'nice to have' for rich folk or the middle classes. It goes back to that expression 'bread and roses'. Of course, we need to sort out the cost-of-living crisis, making sure that we're bringing down energy prices, and ensuring that people have a fair wage. But there are daily moments that really matter for people in terms of being able to see a sunset or enjoying time out in nature and experiencing the rest of the living world. Those things are fundamental to us all."

"He believes there is an importance in understanding how environmentalism is understood by the many, not the few, if we are to have long-term change, not just on issues such as net-zero but also on how we think about access to."

While reading Tom Baldwin's recent biography of Sir Keir Starmer, Shrubsole was struck by how the new Prime Minister appeared to share this value. As Baldwin recounts, his dad would take the young Keir and his siblings to the Lake District on holiday every summer, something he recently relived in a poignant election campaign video with former footballer Gary Neville.

"His family met Alfred Wainwright, and made friends with him," adds Shrubsole. "Wainwright is the champion of fellwalking and access to the Lake District and has written all these amazing, illustrated guides. I hope that it has stayed with Starmer and means that he's interested in things like nature and access to the outdoors."

The importance of natural space and place has been shown not only in Shrubsole's writing but also in recent UCL and More in Common research, where support for environmental policies remains strong.

Despite what social media arguments might suggest, Britain is not divided when it comes to climate change. People's belief in, and relative support for, what might be called the net-zero agenda cuts across ages, voting patterns and social groups. And yet, the politics of climate and ecology feels just as scratchy as the rest of British politics – it is at least presented to us as a culture war ready to blow, a tinder box of misrepresentation and misunderstanding. And hallenges remain for politicians about maintaining support for net-zero in the age of populism.

It's a theme we see in a new generation of environmental thinkers. There is now an increasing recognition that a contemporary agenda of change involves building environmental politics and policy that has a connection to place, people, and community, not just to scientific abstractions.

Shrubsole points out ideas in his own neighbourhood which could go some way to seeding and nurturing support for ongoing change: the community hydro dam helping deliver renewables, or the push for a community-led redevelopment of a now unused dairy by the station. These small yet significant local icons have the potential to become beacons of a shared vision and story – one that is grounded and has respect for the local, while seeking ultimately to tackle the most global of challenges.

In the recent uprising of anger on sewage, Shrubsole witnessed how local community engagement has allowed for improved outcomes.

"The River Wye, for example, is one of the few rivers where there is a clear right of access. And I think it's no coincidence that the Wye has become one of the flashpoints over river pollution. Although they don't own the river and don't have any legal title to it, people feel a sense of belonging to it". A shared valuing has resulted in a better stewardship of something that can serve the community and the nation.

Shrubsole is also quick to return to the need to see these assets as not simply 'nice-to-haves', but 'ncreasingly necessary' as we get hotter and hotter summers. "Not everyone is going to travel all the way to the coast," he explains. "But as a way to cool off in a hot climate-changed summer, being able to have a dip in the river is a good thing."

The chance to cool off on a barmy summer evening is a right we can all get behind.

Which brings us to access and ownership, the key themes of Shrubsole's new book.

"We have a right to roam over just eight per cent of England, and the countryside here is still littered with Keep Out signs," Shrubsole tells me. "Yet go to Scotland, and you have a right of responsible access to the vast majority of the Scottish countryside. That's thanks to some far-sighted legislation brought in the last time Labour was in power in Scotland, the Land Reform Act 2003. It's an amazing feeling crossing the border into Scotland because you instantly get that sense of belonging, even as a visitor – of being welcome in the countryside. No aggressive Keep Out signs, for one thing! And the more that people feel a sense of belonging, the more that encourages care for nature and your local area.

Shrubsole pauses. "That same Land Reform Act did something else too" – it gave the public in Scotland a Community Right to Buy. Meaning hundreds of communities have been able to take back control of land in their locality; sometimes for affordable housing, sometimes to create local nature reserves. It's had an amazing impact – over half a million acres of land in Scotland are now owned by communities. And again, it's boosted people's sense of belonging and concern for nature. The town of Langholm, for example, recently bought up a Duke's grouse moor and they're turning it into a nature reserve.

"It's great to see the new Westminster government bringing forward plans for a Community Right to Buy in England now, too. Given that one per cent of the population owns half the land in England, there's a real sense in many communities – rural and urban – of having no control over your area and the land you depend upon."

Suddenly, breaking off, Shrubsole points over towards a shallow bend, a small hollow in the riverbank where the sun reflects up, allowing us to see the small bird hovering above. It is a kingfisher, electric blue, skimming over the River Dart.

Shrubsole turns to me. "You're so lucky. We don't always get to see them." I lean forward, captured by the moment – frozen by just how beautiful the unremarkable riverbend is – the bird – almost painted against the summer's day.

It's a reminder of just how much natural beauty we have on our doorstep. A beauty that rests on our actions and sense of service to the natural world.

Enough beauty to melt the heart of an Iron Lady and a toolmaker's son – perhaps even enough to sustain a political movement.

UCL Professor of Economics **Łukasz Rachel** reflects on how his childhood in post-soviet Poland and an early job at the Bank of England came to shape his work, with Maddy Breen.

There aren't many economists who can truthfully report that their first week at the Bank of England in 2008 was also the week that Lehman Brothers collapsed and the Great Financial Crisis truly began.

But Łukasz Rachel can.

"It wasn't causal, I hope" he grins.

But even if it wasn't the reason behind the crash, it is clear that this experience, along with his childhood growing up in Poland as communism collapsed, has hugely shaped his career since.

"The job of a macroeconomist is very counter-cyclical - when bad things happen, unfortunately, it tends to make our work more interesting," Rachel summarises.

"Certainly, it was all hands on deck at the Bank of England at the time; the problems that we were grappling with were just huge in magnitude, and huge in consequence. This was an unprecedented crisis, and it was uncharted waters."

Growing up in 1990s Poland was also uncharted waters. Following the revolutions of 1989 and the success of the trade union Solidarity in the summer elections, Poland broke free of the Warsaw Pact and gained independence that New Year's Eve. The change between the decades is vast. My own family's memories of Poland under Soviet influence are of a world with hardly anything in shops, unless you had hard currency, which you could spend in specific shops on such luxuries as tinned ham. Although Rachel doesn't recall much of his early years under Communism, the changes that followed left a lasting impression.

"I remember finding it fascinating how the situation just changed so much and how people became very entrepreneurial. Suddenly, the environment became very different; from a stagnant, grey, backward-looking place to a place full of enthusiasm, and interesting, different things."

It is no surprise, then, that change—its role and implications—is at the heart of Rachel's work today. His research focuses on understanding the nature of technological change and its impact on economic performance, growth, standards of living, and the distributional effects that such changes bring.

That other watershed moment, at the Bank of England, had a similarly important influence.

"As junior economists, we were given a lot of freedom and trust to try to put some framing into what had happened and to come up with some answers. But as we moved out of the crash, there were more and more longer-term questions that needed answers. With that shift, I grew more and more interested in looking at these questions more deeply – not just doing policy work but researching these questions."

This takes him to technology today.

"A long-standing project of mine is trying to understand exactly what the consequences of that technological change, which shows up as the increasingly intense fight for consumer attention, and what that means for the economy. What the answer is, at least according to my research, is that this fight for consumer attention becomes naturally more and more prevalent, and more and more fierce as the economy develops."

"When that happens, more and more resources are devoted to developing new technologies that try to attract consumers' attention, which can shift the engine of growth away from the traditional technologies that show up well in our GDP and productivity measurements, towards the products and services that don't."

"One issue is mismeasurement; we mismeasure real progress because we're not capturing the value of everything on your smartphone that's basically given to you for free. At the same time, this translation of the traditional economic progress towards this leisure-enhancing technological change, as I call it, might happen at a very inefficient rate. On the one hand, we might not measure all the progress, but on the other hand, we could be sacrificing traditional technological progress for some of these attention-grabbing technologies. We might be sending too much talent basically to work on the next YouTube feed that's going to capture your attention, compared to sending talent to work on the next drug that will save lives."

Throughout our conversation, I'm aware of the challenges Rachel's ideas might pose for traditional ways of looking at problems. His effort is always to find the new.

"Some of the most beautiful moments in economics, for me as an economist, is when the most natural or obvious intuitions just fail. They fail for good reason, and you see those intuitions repeated over and over again, and yet there's a simple explanation for why they don't work."

And does this apply to the major economic challenges facing government too? Like how to generate greater growth?

"It is a big question", he replies. "The source of growth has got to come from the government setting the right environment for the private sector to thrive. But that's escaping the question really, because that's very general."

"I don't think there's any particular single policy that is going to change the situation dramatically. We need to think about a coherent program of policies that complement each other. The important thing, especially in the context of the UK would be to implement a set of policies that include wider parts of the population in the growth-generating economic process."

"That's got to start from childhood and from investments in education. I think this is a no-brainer. There's going to be a long-term gain in this, it's not a short-term win, but it's absolutely crucial that we realise that the societal rate of return from investment in early education and in schooling is going to be orders of magnitude larger than the cost."

"Encouraging more risk-taking, unlocking more capital for riskier projects, is another thing that I would stress," he emphasises.

And with this stress on the potential power of youth and novelty, I can't help but think of his recollections of being a junior economist, encouraged to bring new thinking and given the freedom to look for answers during the crash.

We all live through watershed moments which shape us and the decisions we make. Change, whether written in the chapters of history books or taking place quietly in our homes, demands that we step out of our comfort zones. It's in these moments of uncertainty that we find the courage to redefine what's possible, and the confidence to deliver it.

Lessons in leadership

At last year's Labour party conference, the UCL Policy Lab was joined by a distinguished guest from a world not usually represented either in academia or policy-making: the legendary television football commentator, Clive Tyldesley.

At that event, Tyldesley kept the audience rapt with his stories of how football clubs in communities across the country act as a power for good and how the loyalty and passion of football fans across Britain can also be channelled into deserving social causes.

As Britain elects as its new Prime Minister, someone with a long-held dedication to football, Keir Starmer, we returned to Tyldesley to ask him what lessons Britain's national pastime might have for its incoming government.

Pressure, it is the most overused and under-defined word in sport, in politics, in life itself.

Pressure is expectation. Add the expectations that your public has of you to those you have of yourself, and the grand total is your pressure reading. It's a sliding scale depending on the individual under pressure.

Boris Johnson's needle slid to a pitifully low level by the seedy end of his era. He somehow succeeded in ridding himself of the pressure of any real scrutiny or judgment, because nothing he did surprised or appalled us beyond a shrug of the shoulders. It didn't even seem to be his fault because he was clearly as ill-fitted as his clothes to the pressures of political leadership.

In football, Gareth Southgate had no such excuse. He was the perfect fit for England manager. Experienced, intelligent, capable, decent and likeable, he made the beautiful mistake of raising our expectations above a level we had any right to entertain until nothing he could do ever quite satisfied us anymore. He cooked his own pressure.

I believe that there is an awful lot more Southgate than Johnson about Keir Starmer. And therein lie both the PM's strongest sources of appeal and doubts. He looks the part and has dared to give us some hope. And we all know what kills us. It even did for Boris in the end.

If there is a lesson to learn from the England football team, it is 'be careful what you wish for.' But will we? Starmer's trump card should be that he is from a different pack to all the knaves, queens and jokers that preceded him, but the nation's gamblers quickly forget their last hand, however bad it was.

And they seem to love a face card – a Jack of Hearts - more than an ace.

Southgate was dealt a busted flush in 2016. If a defeat to Iceland felt like the very bottom of the barrel, Sam Allardyce still had some scraping to do. It was England's Partygate period. All they were short of was a kit designed by Lulu Lytle and paid for by Lord Brownlow.

Southgate's sheer ordinariness was just the medicine we needed back then, but all the natural competence with which he cured our ills only gave us a taste for stronger drugs.

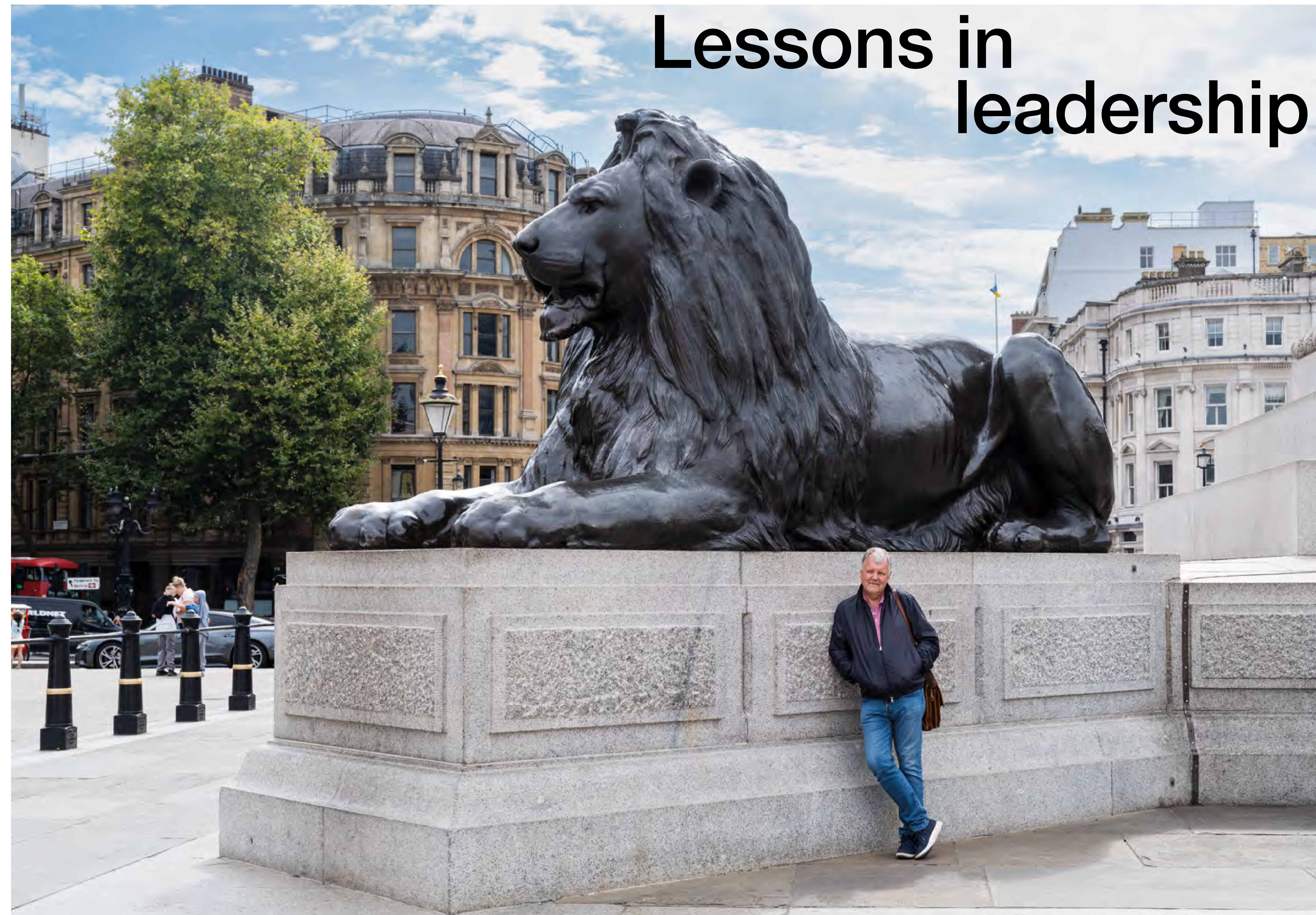
The very qualities that so suited him to the juggling act of getting results for the country while also setting standards and examples for us all were being held against him. His strengths were suddenly his faults. Too sensible, too measured, and too diplomatic to catch the fevered mood of madness that grips "Dear England" during a tournament.

But if the pressure got to anyone it was us, not him. The theatrical fiction became our virtual reality. Southgate was still trying to be the man the play is loosely based upon, but the audience wanted the fantasy of James Graham's considerable artistic licence.

Be careful what you wish for.

The initial feeling that has followed Starmer onto centre stage is one of relief that there is a grown-up in the room again. That sense of assurance only gives you breathing space, though. The clock ticks quickly. Southgate was about as adult as this country has got over the last eight years, but we actually began to grow weary of him for that. Like young children chorusing 'aw dad!' at bedtime, we started to cast him as a kill joy.

When a 'safe pair of hands' at the helm is seen as a shortcoming, we all need to eye the nearest lifeboat.



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If Starmer had a pound for every time he has been called 'boring', he could have filled all the black holes in the economy and every pothole in the roads already. His first cabinet is a collection of round pegs in round holes, the political equivalent of playing players in their club positions. It hasn't been picked to play to the crowd but rather to get results.

Most football fans convince themselves they want entertainment over results. Or they do until the results dry up. It's the difference between what is populist and what is popular, the difference between what we think we want and the means to practically create and achieve it.

Every fan and every voter loves the idea of a headline philosophy, but ideas never win a football match or an election. Of all the middle grounds in modern politics, the land of results is the most important for a leader to claim. And results are usually won by sound management and workable policies. Good defences win titles. Boring but true.

If Starmer fought a defensive campaign, it was partly because he knew it was an election Labour could only lose, but also to manage expectations in the wake of an increasingly inevitable victory. Every new boss asks for time and patience. Few get much of either in football or politics. The polling on 'a decade of change' begins the moment the referee's whistle blows.

I was present at a private Downing Street gathering of supporters and donors last month where Starmer said, 'we need to take decisions and we won't get them all right.' The acid test of the hope and expectation he has raised will be whether he's stockpiled sufficient trust to be so refreshingly open and honest in his approach going forward. Whether he dare.

Public opinion is a restless creature led by the fickle fads of trending agendas and nuanced news outlets. Mistakes and misadventures will happen. Neither sport nor government are scripted dramas. How you respond to setbacks and set-to's is a big part of turning L's into W's.

Trust is key to the kind of serious leadership that Starmer and Southgate try to provide. The more of it you ask for, the more expectations you raise. If you're just playing at politics, as the last regime appeared to be on the way out, it's only a game. If you look like you mean business, the pressure grows on you to deliver results.

The only certainty that comes with leading the country in parliament, or on the touchline is that one day your job will be someone else's. Gareth Southgate got to choose that day, Keir Starmer may never know that luxury.

Universities in service of national renewal

UCL President & Provost
Dr Michael Spence

As the new Government considers its programme and the Opposition refreshes its ideas, renewal is front of mind this autumn. Universities, like UCL, have a huge contribution to make to these endeavours. We have long been at the forefront of both the ideas behind and the delivery of renewal, socially and economically, for the UK. As we prepare to refresh our work in the service of meeting the challenges the country faces, it is worth reiterating the many areas in which we contribute to renewal, and in which we hope to do yet more.

Intellectual renewal

It is well understood that universities make a massive contribution to the intellectual, scientific and cultural discourse of our country. In addition to this, UCL for one, has held firm to the commitment to share our extensive expertise and ideas with policy makers at all levels. In London for example we work with local boroughs on issues ranging from environmental sustainability to town centre recovery, to public health. UCL Policy Lab, which brings together extraordinary ideas and everyday experience, is running a series of events at party conferences that I hope will provide much insight and spur much constructive debate.

Our role as a platform for debate further underlies our commitment to engage with political ideas. At a time of increasing polarisation, it has never been more important for the university, in a liberal democracy, to live up to its role in helping communities debate the contentious issues of the day while co-existing. At UCL we are proud of our Disagreeing Well programme that, focusing on our own community, aims to do just this.

Economic renewal

Much of the conversation at party conferences will focus on economic renewal. Here the contribution of universities can go under the radar. Politicians often (rightly) laud the tech sector as key to future economic growth. Its value to the UK is estimated at £150bn. The university sector is in the same league, our impact being £130bn each year. UCL alone contributes £9.9 billion annually to the UK economy and supports 18,000 jobs, 7,000 of them outside of London.

This is underpinned by our huge contribution in supporting and nurturing talent. Graduates from higher education each year have been shown to be one of the few consistent contributors to productivity growth in the UK. This is in part because our sector works hard to ensure graduates leave with useful knowledge. At UCL, for example, almost half of undergraduates study on programmes which are accredited or endorsed by professional bodies, helping to create the next generation in fields such as Medicine, Engineering, Pharmacy, Law, Psychology, and Architecture.

It is also underpinned by research and innovation excellence. Here we represent incredible value for the public investment we receive. Every £1 of public funds invested in R&D at research intensive UK universities adds more than £8.50 to the economy.

Our potential to contribute yet more is shown by the growing numbers of new companies we generate. UK universities have 19,000 active spin-outs, start-ups and social enterprises. Our research excellence brings in the private investment which creates these innovations. With the right support from government, we can do even more to spur growth across every part of the country in this way.

Social renewal

This brings me to the role universities play in social renewal. The contribution of companies started at UCL cannot only be measured in pounds and pennies. Take for example Freeline Therapeutics which creates therapies for patients with genetic disorders and has for the first time cured a patient of haemophilia B, or Carbon Re which uses AI to cut the emissions of heavy industry.

Prehaps more fundamentally, our role as higher education providers is a crucial one for society. Our contribution to public services stands out. Universities train over 100,000 public service workers every year – 42,000 nurses, 21,000 medical specialists, and 38,000 teachers. In shaping the future of these professions and through research into best practices and new technologies, we are at the forefront of reform of the public realm.

Our role in ensuring equality of opportunity is of utmost importance. At UCL we take great pride in our partnership with schools aimed at helping potential students from underrepresented backgrounds see that they belong at UCL. As we do in the financial aid that we provide, from supporting prospective students fleeing conflict to our UCL East London Scholarship for aspiring local students to study at our new campus on the Olympic Park.

This adds to the support universities give to local communities in countless ways, from volunteer programmes, to advising local charities and opening up sports facilities and museums to the public. It is estimated that members of the community interacted with universities on over 500 million occasions over the last year.

These social and economic impacts are tangible and felt in places up and down the UK. Whether it is in bringing in local investment, providing local jobs or opening our doors to support local communities, universities are vital anchor institutions.

Service, to one another and to the wider community is in all these ways fundamental to what it means to be a university. Our role is one of shared endeavour, where all no matter their background have the chance to shape the world around them. To learn and to serve. Our partnerships, be they with community groups, health providers, businesses or political leaders nationally and locally, are central to our purpose.

Working together with our partners, in the many ways set out above, universities such as UCL are central to the UK's national renewal intellectually, economically and socially.

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Our Themes

Challenging Inequalities
and Protecting Rights

Promoting Democracy and Peace

Ensuring Sustainable Development

Rethinking Economic Policy
and Decision-Making

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