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Citation: Davies, D. (2024). More broken promises: the politics of infrastructure. Soundings, 88(88), pp. 41-58. doi: 10.3898/soun:88.03.2024

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Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/36748/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.3898/soun:88.03.2024>

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More broken promises: the politics of infrastructure

Dominic Davies

Infrastructure is a promise to support future life: its neglect or destruction breaks that promise and takes life away

On 13 July 2006, the Israeli Air Force launched ‘Operation Density’, pummelling the Dahiya suburbs in southern Beirut with a barrage of missiles and obliterating civilian infrastructures across the city. Before-and-after satellite images showed Dahiya’s dense urban fabric - schools, hospitals, homes - flattened into stretches of rubble. Such scenes have since become commonplace in Gaza, where the IDF (Israel Defence Forces) used this ‘Dahiya doctrine’ to repeatedly destroy the infrastructure necessary to sustain Palestinian life there.¹ After the Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, this ‘de-urbanisation’ was so intensified that it became a mechanism of genocide.² As *Forensic Architecture* reports, Israeli airstrikes have since targeted ‘all elements of civilian life’ and damaged 74 per cent of Gaza’s infrastructures.³ One year on, in October 2024, the IDF returned this doctrine to Dahiya, levelling southern Beirut and displacing one quarter of the Lebanese population. The lies of ‘targeted strikes’ and ‘collateral damage’ are everywhere before us: setting terrifying precedents with their disregard for international law, the IDF has cemented the annihilation of civilian infrastructure as a core pillar of modern military strategy.

I submitted the final manuscript for my book, *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure*, in late September 2023, just days before 7 October.⁴ Though the book was concerned with the dire state of infrastructure in Britain, not Palestine, the genocidal extremity of the situation in Gaza reveals some key truths about the politics of infrastructure today, both for the UK and globally. In this essay, I will draw some arguments of *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure* forwards, moving from discussion on rentier capitalism and the racist riots that shook England and Northern Ireland in August 2024 to the policies of the new Labour government. In conclusion, I offer reflections on how the left might respond and mobilise around infrastructure in this reconfigured political landscape.

Yet I begin with the situation in Gaza because it is impossible to understand infrastructure in the UK without acknowledging its violent origins - imaginative as well as economic - in the colonial periphery. Britain’s functioning infrastructure has always been materially contingent on such spaces: wealth extracted at the edges of the Empire built sewers and railways for the Victorians, just as our modern economy benefits from the bombing of Palestinians through arms industry profits. This also holds for the cultural politics of infrastructure, by which I mean the idiosyncratic ways in which we see, imagine and talk about it. Whether the ‘waste lands’ of settler colonies in the eighteenth century, the Empire’s ‘uncivilised’ territories in the nineteenth century, the ‘developing’ economies of postcolonial countries in the twentieth century or the numerous war zones and refugee camps of the twenty-first century, the way we understand infrastructure in Britain is inseparable from these enduring imperial and postimperial imaginaries. Infrastructure may seem boring and technical, but in fact it manufactures common-sense understandings of society that reproduce the violence of racial capitalism globally. To paraphrase Frantz Fanon’s well-known tautology: if you enjoy good infrastructure, you are ‘white’; you are ‘white’ because you enjoy good infrastructure.⁵

This is not an academic point, but a lived one. A post-imperial malaise is *felt* every time local infrastructure fails, when the train is delayed, the bus doesn’t show or more shit is leaked into our rivers. It is one reason why Britain has been through so many existential crises recently,

as failing infrastructure threatens the ethnonationalist exceptionalism that remains central to British - and particularly English - identity. In the book, I adapted Raymond Williams and used the phrase ‘infrastructures of feeling’ to show how these different narratives and affects are attached to physical infrastructures. The genocide in Gaza has produced a terrible example of the connections I was dissecting: a stream of horrific footage has bound racialised bodies to obliterated infrastructures, working through that association to determine some lives as worth more than others and using that to justify their continued extermination.

The situation in Gaza has also thrown into relief the definition of ‘infrastructure’ I developed in the book, and which I continue to use here in this essay. Drawing on the work of geographers such as Doreen Massey and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, I understand infrastructures as the systems and materials that give the gift of time to their users: if buses run frequently and efficiently, we don’t need to walk many miles to earn a livelihood; if we turn on the taps in our homes and potable water comes out, we don’t need to spend hours collecting it from other sources; if hospitals are local, well-staffed and well-equipped, they give us more time by treating illnesses that might otherwise have taken it from us.⁶ It is in this sense that infrastructure materialises modernity’s promise: it pledges us more time - which is to say, *more life* - than we would have had without it.⁷ The problem is that when infrastructure collapses, whether it erodes slowly through years of neglect or is bombed to pieces by an IDF jet, the promise it made also gets broken, and the time and the life it once gifted is confiscated. This is why the destruction of power stations, sanitation plants, arterial roads and hospitals is a vicious accomplice in the implementation of genocide: each piece of decimated infrastructure is a broken promise, a bit of future life that has been deliberately eradicated.

Seeing infrastructure in this way affords a view on to the continuities of racialised class warfare globally. This is not to suggest that aerial bombardment and austerity are immediately comparable forms of violence, as though one might simply be read against the other. But it is to understand that infrastructure distributes nothing less than life itself, and to see that our current world is wired up to concentrate that life in an increasingly narrow elite at the expense of those who have the least of it: as US billionaires experiment with intergalactic air travel, Palestinian children are murdered by bombs dropped from the sky. Recognising infrastructure as a key means of this global class war can give us something solid to build a movement around - and, as the last months have shown, if the left doesn’t lead on this fight, an increasingly empowered far right will be quick to emerge from the debris.⁸

Breaking promises: infrastructure and unbelonging

Six months ago, my partner and I moved from London to be closer to her work in Bristol, freeing her from the delays and overpriced train tickets that come with commuting in modern Britain. Soon after we arrived, we had the misfortune of using Bristol Airport. Privately owned by a Canadian pension fund, the airport sits a short drive from the city and is serviced by an expensive shuttle bus. Passengers come from across the South West, and with no connections to local rail infrastructure, the only choice for many is to drive. While environmental campaigners have successfully stalled plans for a second runway, the surrounding fields are now being developed into massive car parks, where the rate to leave a vehicle starts at £50 per day. Sucked in by flights that are - shamefully - one of the most affordable forms of transport in the UK, passengers are then trapped by extortionate fees as they move through the airport: those who don’t drive must pay to be dropped off and picked up, while tolls everywhere push people into parting with their money, from queue jumps at security, to a duty-free gauntlet, to £3 for a bottle of drinking water.

I concede that I am here partaking in an age-old English pastime of complaining about poor travel infrastructure (an early inspiration for *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure*), and we were of course lucky to have the opportunity to holiday at all. Yet Bristol Airport's assault course of privatised spaces can be read as a microcosm for Britain as a whole. To live in the UK today is to be repeatedly asked to pay rent on something, whether you are using, moving or even staying still - and, not incidentally, Bristol is now the most expensive place for rental housing outside of London.⁹ While an invisible rentier class drives down Britain's productivity, the hyper-commercial spaces of airport and shopping mall bleed out across the country to create everyday experiences that produce profound feelings of alienation. As Brett Christophers has argued, if our lives are contingent on essential infrastructures that are owned by asset managers, then our lives are in their portfolios, not under our collective control.¹⁰ This is not a recipe for social coherence, community empowerment or wider cultures of openness and belonging.

This situation is the result of decades of neoliberal policy and infrastructure privatisation that have been thoroughly documented. Yet the extent of asset ownership, disinvestment, corruption and outright theft by private actors has recently broken through to a new public consciousness, exemplified in the country's ongoing water scandal. Rather than repairing or updating Britain's aching old water infrastructure, so-called 'investment' groups have ransacked its water companies, with the asset manager Macquarie Bank - for a long time a majority shareholder in Bristol Airport - extracting more dividends from Thames Water than it made in profits between 2007 and 2017.¹¹ This was not a failure of reinvestment but a deliberate programme of extraction, as Macquarie siphoned off additional dividends and piled the debt back on to a company that it knew wouldn't be allowed to fail because everyone needs water. With climate change increasing rainfall and flooding and placing pressure on the UK's crumbling water infrastructure, these companies chose to pour overflow sewerage into rivers and along coastlines, rightly inciting public outrage. Nationalisation should have been an easy win for the new Labour government, with one poll showing that 69 per cent of all British adults surveyed thought the water industry should be run in the public sector.¹² Yet Labour has ruled out nationalisation and Keir Starmer's environment secretary, Steve Reed, was barely able to summon a 'review' of the regulator, refusing to take any action before April 2025. Met with outrage among environmental groups, Reed's hollow promise to 'clean up' Britain's rivers was even more widely ridiculed when it emerged he'd accepted thousands of pounds worth of hospitality from a firm with links to the water industry.¹³

These are more broken promises, and broken promises have consequences. They damage faith in democracy and confirm well-grounded suspicions that the government in Westminster serves its own interests, and those of private actors, over those of the public. If this disaffection is congruent with the interests of neoliberal capitalism, which thrives on political disengagement and social fragmentation, it also makes fertile ground for the far right, which deliberately channels the widespread alienation increased by failing infrastructure into a politics of hatred.

It is therefore imperative that we understand these broken promises in connection with fascist violence of the kind that erupted on the streets of Britain in summer 2024. On 3 August, hundreds of far-right protestors gathered in the centre of Bristol. After confrontations with the police, they made their way through the city to the Mercure Hotel, where asylum seekers were being accommodated. They were met there by dozens of antifascist activists who blocked the entrance to the hotel with their bodies and chanted: 'We are Bristol! Who are

you!?’). Yet these inspiring scenes of resistance could not be replicated everywhere across the country: in places such as Rotherham and my own hometown of Stoke-on-Trent, far-right aggressors tore through city centres and intimidated communities. This is not to overlook the brave actions of regional groups such as the North Staffs Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (NorSCARF), but to acknowledge that Britain’s uneven political geographies have left racialised minorities and their comrades in the country’s most deprived areas particularly vulnerable to violence from the far right.

I argued in my book that the hosting of migrants in Britain’s hotels had become a target not simply because it appeared to affirm old far-right narratives about a ‘soft’-touch welfare state catering to ‘lazy’ migrants (who nevertheless are somehow also here to ‘take our jobs’), but because it also breached a larger cultural division between deserving and undeserving constituencies that national borders are presumed to regulate. Rather than projecting the ‘deserving’ movement of citizens outwards on their holidays, these hotels epitomised an image of the UK as a resort for ‘undeserving’ non-citizens arriving from outside.¹⁴ The increasing ubiquity of privatised, bordered and costly spaces such as Bristol Airport - which evoke powerful affects of departure and arrival, work and leisure, access and entitlement - feeds into this infrastructure of feeling. These infrastructural landscapes alienate users, who feel they are being exploited by elusive actors that are often offshored and difficult to identify, abetted by a state that both actively sides with rentiers and visibly spends taxpayers’ money on housing migrants in hotels. Meanwhile, the global imaginary I described at the start of this essay cements this racial matrix together, as social media feeds are flooded with images of racialised and often Muslim populations fleeing cities that have had their infrastructures demolished by settler colonial power.

Of course, we know the asylum backlog was deliberately manufactured by the previous government to incite precisely this kind of spectacle and deflect from its organised abandonment of Britain’s most impoverished regions. It is also vital to emphasise that members of the far right both online and on the streets are operating on vile misinformation and openly racist ideology: these are people to be resisted, not negotiated with, and we should be cautious of slipping into any sense of ‘justification’ in our analyses. At the same time, we lose interpretive ground if we fail to understand that racism in Britain operates in the context of material infrastructures that incite feelings of paranoia and disenfranchisement. While the riots were widely condemned by the British public, six in ten Britons claimed to have ‘sympathies’ with the ‘protests’ before they turned violent.¹⁵ This shows that an understanding the ways in which racism contaminates common sense in places where public infrastructure has been eroded by privatisation must be part of any antifascist programme. Most people don’t buy into misinformation unless it *feels* real, matching up with some aspect of their experience; or, to invert that formulation, people are more susceptible to misinformation when it corresponds to something immediately in front of them.

Capitalism has always maintained its power by blurring lines between the world as we experience it and the material conditions of its production. In the UK today, this blurring takes place through nostalgia for a lost imperial ‘greatness’ or ethnonationalist ‘purity’ that gains traction from the material reality of the diminishing ‘wages of whiteness’ across Britain’s regions.¹⁶ To counter this, any campaign for public ownership of companies that deliver infrastructure must include a wider reckoning with the imperial and global history of this country - just as any substantive attempt to build an enduringly antiracist culture must include a critical engagement with the infrastructures that are failing vulnerable communities. Organising alternatives to the routine experiences of rentier capitalism presents one powerful

way to join antiracist politics to people's immediate experience and strengthen different narratives of belonging. But infrastructure also operates at scales that require national governance, and for that reason we must first pay some attention to ongoing events in Westminster.

Making promises: fixing the foundations?

Infrastructures of feeling are wielded by politicians - somewhat paradoxically - to distract from their refusals to invest in infrastructure; indeed, the more our infrastructure is outsourced to foreign capital, the harder these nationalist infrastructures of feeling must be pedalled. The Johnson government exemplified this and drove me to write my book. Yet words like 'distract' or 'deflect' don't quite capture the larger ecologies of infrastructure, culture, affect and experience that I have been trying to describe. The stories wielded by politicians to build electoral majorities are never plucked out of thin air; on the contrary, infrastructures of feeling are powerful because they mobilise 'common sense' narratives that are themselves derived from the infrastructure we already live with.

For example, Thatcher's personal commitment to road building and car ownership, along with her derogatory comments about bus travel, were fed by her political obsession with the individual. She understood that the more people drove around in isolated units, viewing all other traffic as a potential delay to their journey, the more they would buy into her neoliberal philosophy. By contrast, the daily use of buses enacts key tenets of a more socialist society: it trains people to recognise that waiting a short while for others - including the most mobility impaired - is not only fairer, but that if we're all collectively on board with the idea we'll *all* get there much quicker. It is not that the political right waves around ephemeral infrastructures of feeling while the left builds material infrastructure; rather, the infrastructures of feeling I mapped in the book have played a consequential role in the kinds of infrastructure that has actually been invested in.

After a decade and a half of austerity, it is easy to slip into the assumption that the UK needs to build infrastructure indiscriminately. There has been little discussion about strategic priorities and even less effort to think carefully about what kinds of infrastructure might actually build a fairer society. Such blanket approval has led to the recent resurgence of arguments about NIMBYs (not in my backyard) and YIMBYs (yes in my backyard), dichotomous phrases that we would do well to avoid because they obscure more than they reveal about the politics of infrastructure in Britain. Local resistance to new infrastructure projects - whether on the grounds that they are breaking apart urban communities or destroying natural landscapes - has historically fuelled both radical and conservative political agendas, often producing unlikely alliances. Similarly, movements to modernise Britain through infrastructure investment may have realised some of the most egalitarian moments in the country's history, but they have also been conjoined to post-imperial ideas of British supremacy and projected racialised visions of white modernity. Turning NIMBYism and YIMBYism into coherent ideologies that float free of the classed, racialised and environmental dynamics driving specific infrastructure policies leads to ill-informed and irrelevant punditry. When we're talking about NIMBYs and YIMBYs, we're not talking about whether the energy is green, the housing social or the transport public, and we're not paying attention to where returns on the money that *is* invested is ending up: will it circle back into communities through progressive procurement practices and re-empowered local governments, or will the profits leak out through layers of unregulated outsourcing into the profits of asset managers and multinational conglomerates?

The dangers of the oversimplified division between NIMBYs and YIMBYs are epitomised in the recent 'Foundations' report, a manifesto for infrastructure building in Britain written by a group of centre-right think tankers and endorsed by Robert Jenrick during his campaign for the Tory leadership.¹⁷ The report begins with bold headlines about Britain's failing growth and blames this on a lack of infrastructure investment, an alluring tagline that sucked in YIMBYs on the left as well as the right. But while it is presented as a departure from austerity, the solution it identifies is more deregulation and privatisation of the sort that has siphoned wealth away from disadvantaged communities and catalysed disasters such as Grenfell. Bombarding readers with graphs of one-dimensional statistics, the authors celebrate the century before 1945 as a period of free-flying growth, though without ever mentioning that Britain had a markedly *unfree* Empire to buoy its economy throughout this long period. The same failure to look beyond national GDP leads them to read Clement Attlee's 'reforms' as holding back Britain's growth, when in fact it was during this period of decolonisation that most of the country's modern infrastructure was built. And, in a final misreading, they suggest that it was the massive privatisations pursued by Thatcher and Blair that restored growth in the 1990s, not the boom that briefly inflated the world-economy and then collapsed in 2008.

In short, as David Edgerton has also argued, the Foundations report grounds its libertarian case on a historical narrative that is based in ethnonationalist fictions, not material facts.¹⁸ We can see how infrastructures of feeling are at work in the world, as nostalgia for a lost era of industry and empire - a politics of 'Make Britain Great Again' - is mobilised to revive long-hegemonic but historically disproven arguments about deregulated infrastructure development as a quick fix to the UK's growth crisis. They may be wrapped in the shiny paper of right-wing think tanks that appeal to politicians in need of media talking points, but they have little material connection to the communities living with failing infrastructure, or indeed to the local governments who are trying to maintain those services with shrinking budgets.

This raises two points that the left should take note of. First, dishonesty about the historical sources of Britain's wealth continues to distort understandings of how the country can be rebuilt in the twenty-first century. This is the case not only nationally, but also at the regional level, where the immediate experience of rentier capitalism appears to affirm the ethnonationalist narratives that are weaponised to justify the continuation of privatised infrastructure delivery. We must intervene into this feedback loop. Robert Jenrick may not have won the Tory leadership, but he is in Kemi Badenoch's shadow cabinet. The Foundations report's focus on infrastructure - which makes a show of departing from austerity, dovetails with Badenoch's culture war politics and promises only more privatisation - makes it a tantalising proposal for a Tory Party looking to reinvent itself.

The second point leads directly on from the first. Tracking infrastructures of feeling through the Foundations report reveals how culture-war narratives are actively used to prevent meaningful wealth distribution. Britain is now more unequal than it has been in almost a century.¹⁹ Progressive investment in public infrastructure is the means through which its extraordinarily uneven distribution of life chances can be rebalanced. The coupling of stories about Britain's 'great' national history to more of the same proposals for privatisation and deregulation is simply a way to cling on to right-wing fantasies that the UK's infrastructure can be improved without a meaningful redistribution of resources. Against such delusions, a more honest appraisal of Britain's history reveals that better infrastructure can only be

achieved through a dynamic and interventionist state that is committed to public ownership, progressive taxation and the devolution of power (economic as well as political) to local authorities in the country's most deprived regions.

This all brings us to the new Labour government, which, as Edgerton points out, has pursued something quite similar to the policy outlined by the Foundations report's authors - Starmer and Rachel Reeves even used the phrase 'fixing the foundations' in their post-election sloganeering. They may have shorn away some of the culture-war rhetoric, and the term 'levelling up' has taken a back seat, but Labour's plan to achieve undifferentiated growth by deregulating construction laws pegs its hopes to the same uncritical YIMBYism. The idea that all infrastructure is 'good' infrastructure is as ludicrous as the idea that all growth is 'good' growth: exemplary here is Labour's bulldozing through community opposition to the construction of data centres, which are not only eyesores but require vast quantities of energy, suck up water reserves and generate few local jobs, prioritising the interests of Silicon Valley over those of the British electorate. Yet Labour has nailed its colours to this mast because it is unwilling to make the political case for progressive taxation and public ownership - and in this respect, its electoral victory in July 2024 against a historically weak Tory Party may prove to be a serious missed opportunity.

This came to a head in Reeves's first budget, which took the step of raising taxes, but repeatedly justified that decision on the basis of correcting *past* deficits rather than delivering *future* prosperity, creating a disastrous political mood of restraint and despondency. She rightly freed up borrowing for major infrastructure projects by altering debt rules to exempt spending on assets such as roads, railways and hospitals, but this was lost in the outrage around Labour's 'broken promises' on taxation, not all of which was unwarranted. In her dogged attempt to attract investment from big business, Reeves sacrificed small businesses (and, indirectly, their employees) through increases in National Insurance contributions, while failing to alleviate - and in some cases adding to - the financial pressures that impact Britain's most vulnerable.

Indeed, for all the hype that spiralled around Labour's first budget, it pursued a plan that Reeves has been selling to big business since at least February 2024: to create a de-risked economy for major international corporations, who will then invest the large sums of capital needed to fix Britain's broken infrastructure - or as Richard Seymour described it, 'the "public-private partnership" boondoggle on a massive scale'.²⁰ The irony of this 'vision' is that Reeves has already cancelled billions of pounds worth of infrastructure projects in order to create the de-risked economy she believes will allow Labour to leverage this investment in infrastructure.²¹ We may not be back to austerity exactly, but Reeves has hemmed herself into the same capitalist-realist tautology that marked George Osborne's first budget, which I described in *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure*: 'unless we postpone the building of a fairer society, the building of a fairer society will be postponed'.²² This contradiction is most glaring in the raising of the bus price cap, which prevents the most disadvantaged from using transportation infrastructure in the name of investing in more infrastructure at some point in the future!

This is the innermost logic of the broken promise of infrastructure, which extracts the hope of a better future that is projected by infrastructure and uses it to deflect from meaningful investment in the present. It is a situation that demands extended reflection not only on 'infrastructure' but on 'the broken promise', a cultural phenomenon that increasingly acts as a distorting force in British politics. As legacy media becomes transfixed by the spectacle of

general elections and presenter-journalists build careers by catching out politicians, the UK's political discourse descends into meaningless debates about the wording of lines in election manifestos. In scenes worthy of *The Thick of It*, any substantive political vision for infrastructure or the economy is subsumed into nitpicking about the specifics of what was and was not actually promised. This is not to say that we shouldn't criticise Starmer's Labour Party for its lack of political will, but to recognise that the pressure on politicians not to break their promises is now significantly warping the kinds of actions they are willing to commit to.

This is materially evident in the persistent refusal to nationalise key segments of Britain's infrastructure, which is perceived - incorrectly - to require large initial outlays of both fixed and political capital without reaping significant rewards inside a single term.²³ Labour may dodge calls for public ownership on the grounds that it is 'not ideological' (a contradiction in terms), but the real concern is that it would bring major costs on to the government's books and upset the deficit record ahead of the next election. Having boiled down a substantive political programme to a few pledges that can be read off a business card, Reeves leaves herself no option but to outsource infrastructure to asset managers and PFIs. There is, in other words, a longstanding structural congruence between privatisation and electoral politics in neoliberal democracies like Britain, where the cumulative pressures of 'the broken promise' are now directly contributing to the deterioration and high costs of the actual infrastructure we all have to live with. As Mark Fisher anticipated in his pithy summation of the New Labour years: 'all that is solid melts into PR'.²⁴

Clearly, we don't want politicians who *do* break their promises; rather, we want politicians who don't need to worry about decontextualised commitments clipped from interviews precisely because they are backed by bolder political visions. A serious obstacle to this more expansive politics has been the UK's first-past-the-post system, which disincentivises longer-term planning and consensus across parliaments by continually swinging disproportionate power backwards and forwards between the two major parties. One of the most notable outcomes of the 2024 general election was that it produced the largest ever gap between the number of votes and MPs, this time working in Labour's favour by securing it 64 per cent of commons seats with just 34 per cent of the popular vote, while seriously disadvantaging both Reform and the Greens.²⁵ These results have resurrected discussions about proportional representation, and while electoral reform should be a central plank of any left agenda, it is particularly important when it comes to organising around infrastructure.

Proportional representation would not only be more democratic, incorporating a dose of populism into parliament and restoring some public faith in the electoral process. It would also move us from single-party *promises* to cross-party *compromises* that would pressure politicians to take positions and make arguments for them. More particularly, it would make space for policies that could endure across the election cycle and help shift common sense on policies beyond the single term, including, not least, on public ownership of key infrastructures and services. Some worry that PR risks giving more voice to right-wing parties such as Reform, but a shift to proportional representation could just as easily dampen the energy of Farage's cringingly English anti-establishmentarian framing. Meanwhile, it would help broaden the path that has been opened by the Greens and others for grassroots organising to find a way into parliamentary politics without going through Labour.

The real story of the general election of 2024 was the splintering of the popular vote away from both the Conservatives *and* Labour, and this is sure to continue, strengthening the case for electoral reform. If we want to restore Britain's democracy through collective ownership

of its infrastructures and assets, then we must also push for a different politics of promise that is contingent on more proportionate representation.

Conclusion: keeping promises

What, then, is to be done? Reeves's plan to unlock private investment in infrastructure as the sole way to grow the economy is a gamble that seems unlikely to substantially raise living standards - and this is what the next election will almost certainly be fought over. On the other hand, a Tory party led by Kemi Badenoch will struggle to carve out enough space between Reform and a right-wing Labour Party to win an election outright. It is therefore possible that the next UK general election will produce a hung parliament and put the smaller parties into a stronger bargaining position. Turnout in the 2024 general election was 59.7 per cent, the lowest since 2001; significantly more people didn't vote at all than voted for Labour, and these are mostly younger people, people of global majority heritage and the socioeconomically disadvantaged.²⁶ Much of this constituency could be mobilised for the left, especially if it focuses its energies on constituencies where smaller progressive parties such as the Greens, or independents organising around local or international issues, have a chance of winning.

The left can build momentum for such candidates by connecting their representatives in national politics to community experiences of alienating infrastructures. This will require social movements that mobilise around actual infrastructures as they are lived day-to-day. Rather than falling back into an unhelpful NIMBY or YIMBY politics, the left must demonstrate to communities across the country that there are meaningful alternatives that sit to the left of Labour's raised bus prices and its 'review' of water companies. The importance of infrastructure is crucial in this context: its multi-scalar operations mean that it joins immediate community experiences to decisions in local and regional government as well as agendas at the national level, that way creating powerful pathways for a motivated politics that feels like it can actually make a difference.

Of particular interest here is the rise of what I call 'community infrastructure projects', a term that refers to any coordinated, collective effort by a community to provide the foundational materials that make modern life possible: food banks, mutual aid groups, car and bus shares, green energy systems such as heat pumps and networks, and community takeovers of disused buildings as cultural centres or emergency housing. Over the past decade, these projects have proliferated as austerity has weakened state provision. Cynically, they could be seen as realisations of David Cameron's 'big society' vision, in which essential services once provided by local government are replaced by volunteers and charitable organisations. Yet while there's some truth in this assessment, it cannot contain the social energy, communal ownership practices and progressive alternatives that such projects are generating. Across the country, people are coming together to alleviate fuel costs by installing solar panels on rooftops; they are building a renewed sense of belonging by combining the provision of essentials such as food with practical skills for housing repairs and opportunities to make art and culture; and they are negotiating with local councils to arrange community leases of disused buildings, with a view to eventually taking them into collective ownership.

To give just two brief examples, consider the Portland Inn Project in Stoke-on-Trent and Bricks in Bristol.²⁷ Both projects are situated in relatively disadvantaged areas, bringing communities together through vital infrastructures and developing innovative ways of ensuring democratic involvement from a broad range of residents. A few years ago, Bricks

took a lease on St Anne's House, a disused building that is now home to a cooperative gym, sauna, canteen, theatre and art spaces, therapy and mental health services, an alternative art school and a mushroom farm. The Portland Inn Project, which has been operating out of an old shipping container in Stoke for several years, is currently in the process of renovating a disused pub building - attained from the council through a community asset transfer - and turning it into a hub containing a community kitchen, artists' workshop and residency spaces, a roof garden, and somewhere warm and joyful for people to come together. There can be no set formula for these community infrastructure projects because they are part of the place where they are happening, their actions deeply responsive to local contexts. But each of these projects provides far more than skeletal infrastructure. They are building new infrastructures of feeling, expanding what it means to belong and empowering members of their communities to keep promises to one another. As Bricks puts it, its aim is 'to reduce social isolation, build community resilience, and put in place structures that support people to effect change in their area'.²⁸

Community infrastructure projects may seem like a drop in the ocean of a dwindling national economy and stagnating world-system riven with climate crises and military conflicts. Yet by empowering communities, they restore a democratic deficit that has been eaten away by the massive privatisations of the past decades in Britain, while also reimagining new forms of public ownership that are up to the challenges of the twenty-first century. They link into local governance by turning their members and organisers into experts on the ground who can advise local councils on how to most effectively spend the little money that they do have. In light of the landscape mapped above, they can also feed into national politics by turning communities that have started single-issue campaigns around failing infrastructures into much larger movements that have meaningful sway over who is able to get elected in their constituencies. They can help people to see how things work and involve them in fixing it, dispelling in the process many forms of manufactured disenfranchisement, from voter disengagement to climate anxiety.

Perhaps most importantly of all, given the international context with which I started this essay, they are able to foster what Doreen Massey called 'a global sense of place' as a robust rejoinder to a far right newly emboldened by victories in the US and Europe.²⁹ There is a tendency on the left to see place-based politics as parochial, either representing a naive response to the grim face of global capital or risking a defensive nativism that excludes people constructed as outsiders. But we cannot allow pride of place to be monopolised by far-right narratives, and feelings of belonging are not incompatible with a committed internationalism. As Massey asked many years ago: 'Can't we rethink our sense of place? Is it not possible for a sense of place to be progressive; not self-enclosing and defensive, but outward-looking?'³⁰ Britain desperately needs this kind of vision, not as some hypothetical ideal, but as a politics that is lived through the daily feelings that we all attach to infrastructure, and which in that sense - in that truly common sense - might make a dent in neoliberal hegemony and inoculate against the lure of the authoritarian personality.

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Notes

¹ See Rashid I. Khalidi, 'The Dahiya Doctrine, Proportionality, and War Crimes', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol 44 No 1, 2014, pp5-13, 7.

² Mahsa Alami Fariman, 'On the ruins of Gaza: Clearing the way for an urban dystopia', 19 December 2023: <https://lwbooks.co.uk/on-the-ruins-of-gaza-clearing-the-way-for-an-urban-dystopia>.

³ 'A Cartography of Genocide: Gaza': <https://gaza.forensic-architecture.org/>.

⁴ Dominic Davies, *The Broken Promise of Infrastructure*, London, Lawrence Wishart, 2023.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington, New York, Grove Press, 2004, pp4-5.

⁶ See Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place', in David Featherstone and Diarmaid Kelliher (eds), *Doreen Massey: Selected Political Writings*, London, Lawrence Wishart, 2022, pp151-163; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence', in Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (eds), *Futures of Black Radicalism*, London, Verso, 2022, pp225-240.

⁷ See Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel (eds), *The Promise of Infrastructure*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2018.

⁸ As Andrew Cumbers warns in a recent issue of *Soundings*, the failure of privatisation may present an opportunity for the left to organise around forms of public ownership, but it is increasingly 'a territory for less progressive forces to occupy' as well. Cumbers, 'The return of public ownership amidst neoliberal mutation', *Soundings* 87, Summer 2024, pp117-133, p120.

⁹ Estel Farell Roig, 'Bristol's average rent revealed as city now most expensive place outside London', 21 March 2024: <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/bristols-average-rent-revealed-city-9179511>.

¹⁰ See Brett Christophers, *Our Lives in Their Portfolios: Why Asset Managers Own the World*, London, Verso, 2023.

¹¹ 'The water industry is in crisis. Can it be fixed?', 25 October 2024: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0qdev4vyl5o>.

¹² 'Do you think water companies should be nationalised and run in the public sector, or privatised and run by private companies?', 28 June 2023: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/consumer/survey-results/daily/2023/06/28/bd953/1>.

¹³ Alix Culbertson, 'Environment secretary Steve Reed "didn't know" company that gave him £1,700 football ticket was linked to water firm', 23 October 2024: <https://news.sky.com/story/environment-secretary-steve-reed-didnt-know-company-he-received-1-700-football-ticket-from-was-linked-to-water-firm-13239407>.

¹⁴ Davies, *The Broken Promise* ... , pp177-180.

¹⁵ Dylan Difford and Matthew Smith, 'The public reaction to the 2024 riots', 6 August 2024: <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50257-the-public-reaction-to-the-2024-riots>.

¹⁶ See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, New York, Verso. Paul Gilroy recently repurposed Roediger's phrase for the British context, where 'whiteness just ain't worth what it used to be': Paul Gilroy, 'Whiteness Just Ain't Worth What it Used to Be', *The Nation*, 28 October 2020: <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/paul-gilroy-interview/>.

¹⁷ Ben Southwood, Samuel Hughes, Sam Bowman, 'Foundations. Why Britain has stagnated'. <https://ukfoundations.co/>. See also Robert Jenrick on X: <https://x.com/RobertJenrick/status/1837136120531796185>.

¹⁸ David Edgerton, 'Don't be seduced by the myths of the economic right', *New Statesman*, 8 October 2024: <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2024/10/dont-be-seduced-myths-the-economic-right-free-market>.

¹⁹ Max Roser, ‘How has inequality in the United Kingdom changed over the long run?’, 2 December 2013: <https://ourworldindata.org/how-has-inequality-in-the-uk-changed-over-the-very-long-run>.

²⁰ Labour Party, ‘Rachel Reeves speech at Labour’s Business Conference’, 1 February 2024: https://labour.org.uk/updates/press-releases/rachel-reeves-speech-at-labours-business-conference/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email; <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/majority-without-a-mandate>.

²¹ Kiran Stacey, ‘Treasury asking ministers to draw up billions of pounds of infrastructure cuts’, *Guardian*, 1 October 2024: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/oct/01/treasury-asking-ministers-to-draw-up-billions-of-pounds-of-infrastructure-cuts>.

²² Davies, *The Broken Promise ...*, p39.

²³ As the brilliant campaigning group We Own It regularly highlight, public ownership can in fact be more cost effective in the short and medium as well as long term. See <https://weownit.org.uk/>.

²⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, London, Zero Books, p39.

²⁵ Ben Chu, ‘Biggest-ever gap between number of votes and MPs hits Reform and Greens’, 5 July 2024: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c886pl6ldy9o>.

²⁶ House of Commons Library, ‘2024 general election: Turnout’, 5 September 2024: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2024-turnout/>.

²⁷ You can learn more about these projects on their websites: <https://www.theportlandinnproject.com/>; <https://bricksbristol.org/>.

²⁸ <https://stanneshouse.org/about/>.

²⁹ Massey, ‘A Global Sense of Place’, pp151-163.

³⁰ Ibid, p152.