Beyond incrementalism: can the politics of abundance work for the UK?

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Abstract

The abundance agenda offers an important provocation to progressives, asking them to think big about the possibilities for growth and economic renewal. Developed in the context of the United States, abundance economics is also attracting some attention in UK policy circles, given the government's top-line commitment to growth, and the threat posed by the scarcity politics of the populist right. But while the abundance critique of the status quo is a powerful one, its policy prescriptions may not translate straightforwardly to the UK. Enacting economic reforms in the name of abundance may also rely on a mode of emergency politics that trades off democratic accountability for efficiency. The question for Labour is not only whether they believe that abundance is the right economic strategy, but how they can turn it into a viable political programme that takes public consent seriously, based on a narrative that invites the public to support the trade-offs it involves.

President Obama famously had a desktop plaque in the Oval Office, inscribed with the aphorism "hard things are hard". Gifted to him during the negotiations on healthcare reform[1], the plaque was supposed to be a reminder that governing a mature democracy means dealing with endless frustration. The business of government is struggling through institutional brambles, engaging with vast complexity and, very often, coming to the end of your term of office having made a fraction of the progress you hoped for. It is then for successive political generations to build on what you managed to squeeze out of the system when it was your turn.

But can progressives afford to continue pursuing this kind of incrementalism, when the challenges they confront today are so large? Faced with climate change, economic stagnation and geopolitical upheaval, should they still be content with hard-won but gradual change? A recent book by journalists Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson[2] puts the counterargument in vigorous terms. Writing in the context of the United States, Klein

[1] P. Souza, "Instagram," 2017, https:// www. insta gram. com/p/ BRCdveTlWQ 3/? hl= en.
[2] E. Klein and D. Thompson, "Abundance," Profile Books, 2025.

and Thompson make the case for a radical politics of economic abundance. Speaking mostly to Democrats, they urge policymakers to think big about the possibilities for growth and economic renewal: to sweep away the bureaucratic and legal obstacles that stand in the way of those possibilities, and to drive forward a new era of prosperity and progress. In their view, “one generation’s solutions can become the next generation’s problems”[3], and the regulatory safeguards that were supposed to ensure progressive outcomes are now frustrating them, making it too hard to build new homes, improve infrastructure and take risks on innovative scientific research. They want to replace the regulatory state with “a liberalism that builds”, asking the left to move away from their historic role as moderators of markets, and towards a more muscular economic strategy that pursues a step change in output growth, even if it means undoing policies that progressives have traditionally owned. Key policy priorities, for a progressive government pursuing abundance, would include accelerating the transition to green energy, building more affordable housing, and promoting the scientific breakthroughs that will underpin tomorrow’s productivity gains.

Abundance in the UK: is it the right economic prescription?

In certain sections of the British left, this abundance agenda is also attracting attention. Pursuing growth is a top-line priority of the Labour government, at least at the level of rhetoric, but it has been unclear what constitutes good growth for this government, and how it plans to achieve it. A newly-formed Labour Growth Group is stepping into this ideational space, pledging to throw backbench support behind the Chancellor if she pursues a radical growth strategy along the lines the abundance agenda suggests. Writing in the New Statesmen in July, its founders argued that the UK faces a “revolutionary moment” that calls for a “politics of strategic disruption” that is honest about the difficult trade-offs to come.[4] In key areas, abundance thinking now appears to

[3] “Klein and Thompson,” p. 5.
[4] M. McVitie, C. Curtis, and L. McEvoy, “Britain Faces a Revolutionary Moment: Labour Must Respond,” New Statesman, 2025, https:// www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2025/07/britain-faces-a-revolutionary-moment-labour-must-respond.

be shaping government policy: for example, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill would remove strict environmental protections for wildlife, letting developers pay into an offsetting 'nature restoration fund' while getting their applications consented faster. Airport expansion in South East England is being enthusiastically embraced in the name of growth. The merits of those policies can be debated, but the direction of travel is increasingly clear.

In many ways the strongest part of the abundance agenda is its insistence that the status quo simply will not do. Its proponents argue that energy security and the green transition are inescapable priorities, while affordable housing and the promise of rising living standards are crucial to renewing the social contract between generations. Crucially, they make clear that the alternative to growth is long term economic stagnation that leads inexorably to the rise of the far right. The evidence of the last two decades certainly suggests they are right: it is no coincidence that Europe's right populists have made electoral gains since the 2008 crash that they could only dream of before it. The abundance agenda offers hope that this outcome is not inevitable, promising that by harnessing a new wave of innovation on energy, infrastructure and tech , growing economies can turn away from the politics of scarcity. When Keir Starmer described growth as "the antidote to division" in his recent conference speech, he was making an abundance argument to his party.[5] Abundance thinking appeals most obviously to what Colm Murphy and David Klemperer[6] have called the "neo-Blairite" wing of the Labour party, which places its faith in technological progress (particularly AI) to rejuvenate the UK economy. But there may also be good reasons for other parts of the left to support abundance, since an economy that no longer generates rising living standards will also fail to generate the revenues that allow governments to mitigate the bad times in traditionally social-democratic ways. If abundance policies were successful in returning the UK to growth, it would not only bring jobs and rising incomes, but revenues, freeing Labour from the dismal fiscal arithmetic that means cutting

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[5] K. Starmer, "Leaders' Speech, Labour Party Conference," 2025, https:// labour. org. uk/pm-keir-starmer-at-labour-party-conference -2025/.

[6] D. Klemperer and C. Murphy, "Bevin, Crosland or Blair?: Labour's Rival Political Economies," Renewal blog, 2024, https://renewal.org.uk/blog/bevin-crosland-or-blair-labours-rival-political-economies-2/.

benefits when the poorest households have already experienced a twenty year freeze in real incomes.[7]

However, abundance economics also sits in tension with some other elements of Labour's thinking, particularly the 'securonomics' that was supposed to be the hallmark of Rachel Reeves' economic programme. Whereas securonomics insisted that economic precarity was bad not just for individuals, but for the economy as a whole, abundance says that some upheaval, and presumably some insecurity and risk, is the price we must pay for economic renewal. This is perhaps an easier argument to make in the United States, which allowed businesses to lay off millions of workers in the pandemic and re-hire them later; the UK protected jobs through the furlough scheme, and then elected a Labour government promising to help people navigate the "age of insecurity".

There are also important institutional differences between the US and the UK, which mean that while the diagnosis of our ills may look similar, the policy prescription might have to be adapted. Compared with the US, Britain already has a very centralised model of government, and the pursuit of abundance through planning reforms will reduce what little discretion still exists at local level. This may be a price the government is willing to pay for expediting new housing and infrastructure, but the political consequences will only be felt later, when controversial applications begin to go through. The UK also has reason to be cautious about the notion that "procedural kludge" (or red tape, in the local dialect) is a single problem that can be beneficially reduced across the board. Since the 1980s, successive UK governments have called for generalised deregulation in the interests of economic dynamism, but there are clear risks to pushing further down that road, as the public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire vividly showed. The Inquiry's final report made clear that the Cameron government's 'one in one out' policy for regulation had led to a crude focus on the quantum, rather than the quality and

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[7] A. Sterling, "Before the Boil: Addressing the UK's Living Standards Crisis," Political Quarterly 96, no. 4 (2025): 722–728, https://doi.org/ 10.1111/1467-923X.13577?af= R.

purpose, of regulatory measures, warping incentives for public and private actors alike.[8] Klein and Thompson may be right that excessive bureaucracy can frustrate public servants as much as market actors. But another crude deregulatory push would do little to change that picture and could be actively harmful. Converting their critique into policy solutions in the UK context must be done carefully, paying granular, sector-by-sector attention to the substance of what government rules are for, where they can safely be removed, and where they should remain or be strengthened.

The politics of abundance: how to be an economic radical in a democracy

Besides the economics, a crucial political question remains: is this a political project that can take on Faragist populism? The first challenge is whether abundance has any resonance for the public. Current polling[9] shows that over 80 per cent of British voters think the country is "in a bad state", and 60 per cent expect it to get worse in the coming year. The number of voters who expect things to get better has fallen, from a half to a third, since Labour took office. Utopian visions of a prosperous future built on green energy and self-driving cars may inspire big thinking among policy elites, but they will seem fanciful to the average voter. Nor is it viable to simply do abundance and let the ends justify the means: waiting for abundance policies to deliver growth, and growth to deliver happy voters, is not a model that will work on any normal democratic timetable. So the question for Labour is not only whether they believe that abundance is the right economic strategy, but how they can turn it into a viable political programme.

In many ways, the abundance agenda is the mirror image of what Reform are offering. Reform, in common with many right-populists, lack a coherent political economy; their economic policies are a grab-bag of unfunded tax cuts and spending pledges, hostility

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[8] Grenfell Tower Inquiry, "Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase Two Report," 2024, 156–60, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66d817aa701781e1b341dbd3/CCS0923434692-004_GTI_Phase_2_ Volume_1_ BOOKMARKED.pdf.

[9] M. Smith, "Eight in Ten Britons Say the UK is in a Bad State," YouGov, 2024, https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/52842-eight-in-ten-britons-say-the-uk-is-in-a-bad-state.

to anything under the umbrella 'net zero' and some racially coded welfare chauvinism. None of this is a serious attempt to cure the UK's economic ills, and indeed it is hard to see why Reform would want to do so. If your political business model is based on channelling public anger into a mandate, then actually solving the country's problems is self-defeating; you need to keep people angry, while ensuring you win the blame-game over who they should be angry with. Reform have neither the incentive nor the ideas to make the economy better, but they do have a viable political model based on harnessing voters' deep dissatisfaction with the status quo.

The abundance agenda, on the other hand, is a serious attempt to think through the big political economy problems of the day. But it lacks a political business model, giving little sense of the coalition that could keep it in office and make implementing any of this possible. Politics and government, in the Klein and Thompson book, appear mostly as a set of obstacles; they look wistfully eastwards at China's ability to build on a gigantic scale, and point to the Covid pandemic as a period in which Western governments got big things done by suspending some of their usual processes. Economic renewal, they suggest, could be attacked in a similar way, because "it is always up to us to decide what counts as a crisis" (p.200) The implications of that position deserve some closer scrutiny.

It is true that crises are not just self-evident emergencies that require common-sense responses from the authorities. To some extent every crisis is politically constructed, because calling something a crisis (as opposed to an ordinary problem) legitimates urgent action. Even when the existence of a crisis seems completely unarguable (the Covid-19 pandemic, for example), political contestation may still occur around the specific nature of the crisis, the responsibility of different actors for causing it, and the appropriate policy response[10]. To this extent, even universally-acknowledged crises must be politically constructed as a particular kind of problem, in order to provide a basis for a particular kind of policy response. Injecting the urgency of crisis politics can

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[10] K. Alexander-Shaw, J. Ganderson, and A. Kyriazi, "What's in a Crisis? Taking Contestation Seriously in the Study of Europe's Crisis Politics," Comparative European Politics, forthcoming.

be an important first step towards overcoming collective action problems (see, for example, how climate change was rebranded as climate crisis and now, perhaps, climate emergency).

Suspending normal bureaucratic processes can be effective in a fast-moving crisis, as in the case of vaccine development in 2020. Even then, there are clear downsides to be weighed in the balance; the scandal of fast-track PPE procurement in the pandemic is a lurid example. But when the nature of the crisis is not a fast-onset event, like a financial crash or a pandemic, but a slow-burning crisis of economic erosion, then the argument for using extraordinary powers becomes open-ended. Progressives interested in radical thinking on the economy must be cautious of this slippery slope. The idea that crises may be politically constructed is a lesson that authoritarians of the world learned a long time ago (witness Hungary's near-constant state of official emergency since 2015). It is easy to condemn authoritarians who invoke a crisis to shore up their power, but this kind of 'emergency politics' still has institutional consequences even when it is enacted by the political centre. As Jonathan White eloquently puts it when discussing the European Union, "in the practices of emergency rule one sees… a broader shift towards more coercive forms of rule under conditions of weakening democratic authority".[11] When crisis politics is brought to bear on a slow-burning crisis rather than a time-limited emergency, these institutional legacies can be particularly serious.

Conclusion: the role of narrative

Economic change is rarely popular, and governments are entitled to be leaders as well as representatives; they often move ahead of public opinion in order to make changes for the long term. But at some point, they must recommit to bringing the public with them, or their economic programme will continue to rely on trading off democratic accountability for efficiency. The pre-2008 period holds plenty of lessons for the left on how that can turn out. The answer, as ever, is that governments must find a narrative

[11] White. J. Politics of Last Resort: Governing by Emergency in the European Union. Oxford, OUP p.4

that invites the public to understand its economic agenda and to support the trade-offs it involves.

Proponents of abundance offer a powerful critique of where stagnation is taking us, both economically and politically, and they are right about the scale of the political ambition that will be necessary to turn things around. Finding a way back to rising living standards, and making growth a leftwing project that harnesses the possibilities of technological progress for the many, not just the few, is a worthy ambition. If the social democratic parties that thrived in the postwar era are to shape the economies of the mid-21st century, these are indeed the challenges they should be thinking about. But as Obama knew, making change in a democracy is not supposed to be easy. The abundance agenda will not be implemented quickly, and Labour will soon need its mandate renewed. In that case, the path to a new age of abundance does not go around voters, but through them. Securing a mandate for economic change is never easy, but the first step is to take public consent seriously, and to ask for it.