2015

The challenges for politics as the general election looms

Sara Hyde on the voice of women in prison
Felicity Slater interviews Alison McGovern MP
Sadiq Khan MP on London’s future
Christine Megson on cracks in the glass ceiling
130 years of the Fabian Society
Seema Malhotra MP on the challenges still to come
And: Eleanor Southwood on social security; Esther Akinnuwa on a new wave of feminism; Reema Patel on local housing policy; Clare Devaney on class; and many others
The next year is set to be one of the most important and most exciting years in politics for some time.

2014 is the last full year before the next general election and with local elections on the horizon in May, the battlelines are being chalked up, thick and fast.

The Labour party are in the middle of a battle of their own - redefining key and historic elements of structure. And, as Labour MPs well know, 2014 is also a year of battling with big ideas. As manifestos turn from pencil to pen, it is time for our best and our brightest to stand up and fight for what they want the party to be going into the next election.

As Alison McGovern says in her conversation with Felicity Slater on p14, there is an important balance to be struck between politicians standing up for their values and listening to what is important to people and they way they live: “I think commissioners, as public bodies, have got to say what their values are...it also is just...politicians saying ‘This really matters to us’. I think you can do a lot by really listening to people and trying to make sure they understand the value of what they do.”

There are some big beasts to slay and issues to face up to in the next year too, not least social security and housing, as discussed by Eleanor Southwood and Reema Patel in this issue. But Labour must also look to the detail and the tough realities of our society now. On these pages Sara Hyde discusses the voice of women in prison, Cllr Paulette Hamilton talks about becoming a local mental health champion and Ann McKechin argues for digital equality.

This year is a big year for the Fabian Society too, as we celebrate 130 years! Fabian women have always been key to the Society’s success and intellectual output and we hope that through FWN’s events, publications and through Fabiana we are able to present a small selection of how our Fabian women are still making waves today. The success of our Revisiting Round About A Pound A Week event late last year really showed how important Fabian women were in the past and how relevant the issues are today - and we are ready, willing and able to tackle them still.

As Seema Malhotra MP, our president, and Ivana Bartoletti, our chair, talk about in this issue, Fabian Women’s Network achieved a lot in the last year, not least with the FWN mentoring programme, which been such a great success, with so many candidates emerging - find out more on p22, where amazing programme coordinator Christine Megson looks back over the last three years. But there are many things still to do and many areas still to improve on and develop and we hope that you will do this with us.

For the Fabian Society, the Labour party and for all of us, this year will likely shape a lot of what happens in our future. Now is the time to stand up and shout, now is the time to work with each other to argue for our good society and now is the time to reach out - to talk, to argue, to evolve and to never stand still.

As George Bernard Shaw said of the Fabian mission, we must never fail to “educate, agitate, organise”. And so we go into 2014 full of ideas and ready to do so.
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A FAIRER SOCIETY FOR ALL

by Ivana Bartoletti

The Tory and Lib Dem coalition drumroll promises that an economic recovery is on its way. But reality is more downbeat for millions of women. The families I see at the school gate or on the doorstep are still shivering while the economic ‘recovery’ is warming only the few at the top.

Any teacher would confirm that more children are going to school hungry while many single mums are worse off with the cuts to child benefit. The brutal bedroom tax is a blight not only on those directly impacted but on our communities as a whole, and the recent cut to housing benefit for under-25s will continue to lock our youth out of opportunity. When it comes to jobs, the coalition government talks about employment rising, but women know that too many of those jobs are on zero-hours contracts or pay too little to meet the soaring costs of childcare.

All the while the Tories are trying to out-Ukip Ukip by blaming Europe for their own failures. Divided internally, the Conservatives want Britain to renegotiate powers with Brussels – stripping away workers’ rights and women’s rights, which Europe has championed for decades.

Once again, it is us – women – who are being used as a battleground. This is why FWN has set up a working group on women, led by Mary Honeyball MEP and coordinated by Liane Cresswell, to look into what Europe has done for women so far and to explore how reforms and strategies for growth could be rooted in women’s jobs and women’s lives. And that is why FWN has set up a similar local government steering group, including cabinet members and voices on local government, to similarly explore how localism can better empower women and give them a voice for real change in their communities.

In the next few months we will be focusing on how Britain can get over the cost of living crisis. We are pleased that the idea of universal childcare we pioneered has recently become Labour party policy and we look forward to working with Lucy Powell MP on how a Labour government would deliver it.

This year we will step up our work on improving women’s working and living conditions, in partnership with the trade unions, on local government and we will look into what the ‘whole person care’ approach means – starting with a fringe event at the Fabian New Year conference.

We will also explore the issue of restorative justice and how we balance rights and responsibilities – my thanks go to Charlotte Proudman for setting up our first event on this with Dan Jarvis MP and many organisations that operate in the sector.

We are also proud to have published the report of our FWN mentoring programme, produced by Birkbeck College, which has evaluated the progress of our mentees. As readers might know, Seema Malhotra MP – founder and president of FWN has set up the programme, now in its third year and run by Christine Megson and Caroline Adams. My thanks in particular go out to Christine and to Caroline for their hard work in organising the scheme and their commitment to changing public life for women. In just three years our mentees have made huge strides in public life, and we are proud of them all. The report is a great step forward for us, as it really shows how crucial mentoring is for women – and how we need more of it.

Lastly, we will continue our work on how to increase women’s participation in science, innovation and technology as well as on company boards. We are delighted to have sponsored Made in Norway, edited by Eva Tutchell and John Edmonds, which explores the situation in Norway after the introduction of the 40 per cent quota ensuring women’s representation in corporate boards. It’s well worth a read. We will also continue to support the fantastic work undertaken by Seema Malhotra MP, calling for the government to create a new national strategy to better support women business owners.

2014 is going to be an exciting year for the Fabian Women’s Network. We are delighted to have formed our first elected committee with a new and flexible structure. We are now ready to step up our policy development work with the aim to improve women’s lives across Britain and to create a fairer society for all.

My heartfelt thanks go to Sofie Jenkinson and all the team for putting together this issue of Fabiana. We started the magazine two years ago as a space for policy debate to bring feminism into mainstream politics. I am delighted the project has grown and Fabiana is thriving.

There is so much to do over the next few months.

Our key challenge is financial. If you can help us realise all our ambitions with a donation, please get in touch with our Treasurer, Claire Leigh.

Reema Patel, Sarah Hutchinson and I look forward to the hard work of making FWN grow in the months ahead. As ever, if you’d like to pitch ideas for Fabiana, please let Sofie know and do get in touch if you’re keen to work with us in the months ahead.

Ivana Bartoletti is chair of FWN and a London Labour candidate for the 2014 European elections

Contact us on fabianwomen@fabians.org.uk
Gender equality has been at the heart of the European Union since before its foundation; the Treaty of Rome enshrined the principle of equal pay for equal work as a founding principle of the European Community, and the modern union has been at the forefront of battles for women.

Our revolution requires a European – and a global – perspective. The workers who died at Rana Plaza were overwhelmingly women. The victims of unequal pay and unfair hiring practice – both within and without the European Union’s borders – are overwhelmingly women. It is through alleviating women’s poverty that developing countries will find their way to prosperity and success. Human trafficking, whether that be for the agricultural industry or the sex trade, creates a disproportionate number of women victims. These are battles that can only be fought and won at an international level, but far too often, the European Union’s pledges have betrayed its promise.

While the principle of equal pay may have been present at the creation, it took until the mid-70s for the Community to issue any directives to match. That the common agricultural policy (CAP) hurts farmers in developing countries is a truism of British politics; we forget that the majority of the poorest farmers are women. Accession countries are asked to account for themselves in justice, in finance and in transport: but gender issues are still relegated to the margins when the Union expands.

That has to be set, though, against the Union’s real record of success for women. New laws on human trafficking have been drawn up and legislated for in Strasbourg, not national parliaments. EU-wide protection orders mean that restraining orders no longer lapse at the white cliffs of Dover. Women make up more than half of all British agency workers, and nearly half of the female workplace is part-time; European directives on agency work and rights for part-timers are real victories for women. So what can Britain and the European Union to assure that the best of Europe is seen, and not the worst?

Ruling out a costly – and superfluous – hokey-cokey as far as the European Union is concerned is absolutely the right thing to do for women. Britain cannot advocate for the real changes that women need in Europe if Britain has its eyes on the exit. Arguing for a Europe that looks outside Europe, towards developing countries, is vital; Europe has to be a strong voice for development and developing countries and for reform of the CAP. Within Europe, Labour needs to be an advocate – both in the European Parliament and the council of ministers – for structural changes that give women an institutional voice and not just a personal one. A European commissioner for women, and a ministerial council, like ECOFIN, for Europe’s women’s ministers, would both be good first steps. Otherwise, for women in Europe, it is a case of a little done, a lot more left to do.

The Fabian Women’s Network working group on women and the EU will be exploring these issues over the coming months. If you would like to get involved, please contact us by email on: fabianwomen@fabians.org.uk

Felicity Slater is outreach officer at Progress, research officer for the Young Fabians and a member of the FWN Executive.
Local champions for mental health

by Cllr Paulette Hamilton

We all have a part to play in breaking down barriers and promoting a wider understanding of mental health. With public health transferring to local authorities the role of councils in addressing the mental health needs of local people is ever more important.

Birmingham is a very diverse city: the health inequalities of its residents can be seen in the data relating to life expectancy across the city. Health is not just physical so we are also a city with mental health inequalities and I want to help put that right.

I was recently appointed to the role of mental health champion for Birmingham City council, as part of the local authority mental health challenge (mentalhealthchallenge.org.uk). As a former district nurse and Labour councillor in the Handsworth Wood ward of Birmingham for the last 10 years, I was honored when asked to take on this challenging, but exciting new role. It is a role that has an important part to play in linking the city council with communities, third sector organisations, the NHS, police and crime commissioners, the local police and other agencies such as NHS England.

The estimated cost of mental health is over £105bn per year: this is a massive issue. One in four adults and one in 10 children experience a diagnosable mental health condition at any one time. The role of a mental health champion on a local council can be used to target help and support where it is needed most, especially through partnerships and information sharing, to ensure that we have a joined-up service. The role can also be used to network with other authorities and bring valuable insights back to Birmingham.

Mental health champions can also be instrumental in breaking down taboos, old and new, about mental health, to ensure that people don’t become isolated and stigmatised. Education, and community development is incredibly important. If someone has a physical illness we rally round them – we must do the same for people with mental health issues. Not only will this help to break down the stigma around mental health, but will play an important part in how those with a mental health problem experience the criminal justice system.

The experience of African-Caribbean men is an area of great interest to me. As the Centre for Mental Health’s Bradley Commission found recently, BME communities are not only disproportionately represented in the mental health system, but in the criminal justice system too. And so, as a champion, one of the first things I have done is to fully support the Time to Change pilot project being launched in Birmingham in January 2014, which will look at the experiences of African and Caribbean men within the mental health system between the ages of 18 and 25.

Birmingham recognises that, in this time of austerity, change is needed in this area. We must do all we can, after several high profile cases involving African-Caribbean men who have died in police custody, to ensure that organisations and institutions work together to ensure that mental health becomes everybody’s business.

Paulette Hamilton is councillor in Handsworth Wood ward of Birmingham

The bread & butter issue

by Reema Patel

Housing is perhaps the most live political issue underpinning the debate about a cost of living crisis in London today.

Factors such as cost of housing (significantly higher than most other cost of living issues), its quality, its location, how we live in housing (rent or buy?), its nature as an economic market, and even the absence of it – homelessness, together ensure that most people living in London are barely making the breadline – if they are making the breadline at all.

Aside from cost, there are also significant issues relating to the quality of housing – particularly when individuals let from the private rental sector which means councils have much work to do alongside landlords in order to introduce and enforce a charter for tenants. The escalating price of housing in London threatens to create a two-tier national economy; one for those who can afford to buy and rent in London, and another for those who cannot. The present government’s ‘Help to Buy’ scheme risks overheating the housing market, over committing individuals on high loan-to-value ratios and, in the long term, placing families at high risk of negative equity whilst failing to address the real problem – a scarcity of homes in London.

As house prices are pushed further and further up, the incentives for treating housing as a market for speculation not as of inherent social value simply increases. There are also social consequences that follow: top jobs only for those who can afford it and internships only for those who can afford it. Our current policy on housing doesn’t just put a price on housing – it
London is a city facing big challenges. The cost of housing, transport and energy are skyrocketing, causing a desperate cost of living crisis.

Population boom – a sign of our city’s success – is putting massive strain on our housing, transport and infrastructure. Inequality and poverty are growing, with a dramatic rise in food banks and homelessness growing. And yet, when was the last time you had a real conversation about London’s future?

Our mayoral system means that London politics is too often dominated by personality rather than a debate about the big issues. We can’t possibly hope to tackle the challenges London faces unless we truly engage with them. That is why I have launched a new book published by the Fabian Society, and funded by London trade unions and the City of London Corporation about London’s Future: Our London: The capital after 2015, to kick-start a conversation about the future of our city.

The different chapters in Our London are written by experts on all areas of London life. It’s deliberately not a tribal book. While some authors are Labour politicians like my friends Andrew Adonis and Doreen Lawrence, others are politicians from different parties like the Green party peer Jenny Jones and some are experts or academics with no political affiliation like Tony Travers from the LSE and Matthew Bolton from the living wage campaign. It’s important that Labour recognises that we do not have a monopoly on good ideas. Particularly in a progressive city like London, we need to be receptive to new ideas and willing to open up debate, rather than close it down.

The biggest challenge for my generation of politicians in the capital is London’s housing crisis. And it’s on this issue I focus my chapter. We have failed to build enough houses in London over decades, but the crisis has got far worse under the coalition with house building falling to the lowest level since the 1920s and the mayor of London missing his own targets for building new affordable homes.

The result is home ownership falling, rents rising at 10 per cent a year, conditions falling in the private rented sector and an entire generation of Londoners giving up on the dream of ever owning their own home. Across London, I frequently meet people in their 30s still living at home with their parents and families living in horrifically overcrowded accommodation because it is all they can afford.

We need radical action if we are to tackle the problem. We need to build the next generation of new towns and garden cities. Labour will give ‘new town development corporations’ the powers they need to get building. We need local authorities to begin building council homes again. We are looking carefully at reforming the rules that London council leaders say limit their ability to build. We need ‘affordable housing’ to be genuinely affordable – there is just no point in building homes which are out of reach for most Londoners. And we need to make renting in the private sector more stable and affordable.

Housing is a good example of the weakness of debate about London. It is only thanks to our campaigning on the issue over recent months that it has begun being covered in the London media and discussed by Londoners. We will keep this campaigning up, highlighting housing as a key issue in the upcoming London local and European elections.

There are a lot of big ideas in Our London. Former Treasury minister Kitty Ussher explores the possibility of a new, higher minimum wage for London. Andrew Adonis calls for the government to get on with building Crossrail 2 and new bridges and river crossings in east London. Education campaigner Fiona Millar calls for a new London-wide structure for planning school places. Doreen Lawrence calls for the government to focus on the shockingly high unemployment rate in London’s black community and to keep up the pace of reform of the Metropolitan police. Linda Perks calls for pan-London planning in the health service. Dal Babu and Leroy Logan call for the Metropolitan police to do more to recruit and retain black and minority ethnic police officers.

Londoners deserve a focus on the issues that matter to them across all policy areas, whether housing, transport, the cost of living crisis or local services. Our London has helped to start this debate, but it is up to Londoners to push it forward and ensure that London’s future is actually based upon Londoners’ vision of the kind of city we want to live in.
We’ve just entered the year 2014, but before we discuss the future we should reflect on 2013: a year where feminism really took to the limelight. We can and should look at ways to keep this new wave going.

Especially notable was the dialogue between pop culture and feminism, which seemed to result in encouraging more young people to join in the discourse.

This interaction and dialogue between pop culture and feminism led to many debates and mixed feelings and, although I had some disagreements with certain views expressed throughout the many facets of feminism, it made feminism relevant again. In the past the movement has suffered from various negative labels and associations, especially for some younger women, but conversation and debate allows the views of people from all backgrounds not only be heard but understood.

There have been a number of instances where feminism kept on resurging more than ever. One example was when Robin Thicke’s single ‘Blurred Lines’ came out. It was branded as the most controversial song of the decade due to the lyrics disregarding the process of sexual consent and therefore strengthening ‘rape culture’. After this song came out there was an awakening: people who previous wouldn’t even mention feminism in their day-to-day lives became front-line soldiers against the song and for feminism. It even got to the point that the video was banned in student unions.

Last year young women were among the majority of new recruits for feminism, so this year it’s time we got some more allies of all genders. Not only is the dialogue between different genders important, sharing experiences across a wider demographic – male, female, transgender, black, white, asian, religious and non-religious, young and old. Just as the civil rights movements in the 60s received support and strength from people of different racial backgrounds, particularly the white allies such as Kennedy and DuBois, so too will feminism find strength in diverse allies.

W.E.B. Du Bois, civil rights activist and feminist in his own right, believed in joint effort so he brought together both black and white people in the NAACP to work together for the progression of racial equality. This year we would see feminism elevate to a higher level if we make a conscious effort to involve and engage with more people from all walks of life – from young women discovering feminism through the pop charts and beyond.

Esther Akinnuwa has a Sociology MA from University of Warwick and is a mentor in training at the Girl’s Network.
The Labour party likes to think of itself as an inclusive party. And most of the time it does a pretty good job. Over my 10 years as an activist who is female and blind, I’ve seen efforts to make our policy-making and selection processes more accessible. There’s still plenty of room for improvement but while we’re focusing on getting our own house in order, we must also take care to apply the same principles to how inclusive our policies feel to 2015’s general electorate.

Nowhere is this more important than in social security. Responsibility, decency and fairness are, without doubt, the right guiding principles for a ‘one nation’ approach to welfare, as Rachel Reeves set out recently.

Within the party there seems to be a genuine desire to reach out: to include rather than exclude. For example, we include people who are in work but reliant on benefits because of poorly paid jobs, zero-hours contracts and a fragile economic recovery that benefits the few not the many.

And for a truly inclusive approach we must go wider. One nation Labour is also about people for whom traditional, paid work is not a viable option. On the doorstep and through my role with a national charity I meet Labour supporters who are unclear where they stand because they either can’t work, can only work for short periods of time or have chosen (or been compelled to) do work that doesn’t happen to command a market value.

I know we’re the party for people in these situations. And it’s our responsibility to offer an alternative to Tory policies that undermine the values our party holds dear. Crucially, this is about communicating what our fundamental principles of responsibility, decency and fairness would mean for one nation Britain, to the people who really matter: the electorate.

The first - and bravest - thing we must do is to make it harder for the Tories to set and lead the agenda on welfare by mimicking their language and priorities. Others have said it before (notably Emma Burnell and Sunny Hundal in blog posts last year). While tough rhetoric on welfare might feel like a vote winner, it’s something of a policy cul de sac and, really, the electorate are unlikely to take it very seriously.

Not only does it feel a tad disingenuous. It does a huge disservice to our movement. I’m proud to have joined a party that believes in mutuality, in communities being stronger when people support one another and where responsibility is shared. And yet, just occasionally, I hear myself assuring someone that we too will cut the benefits bill and feeling rather ashamed. Can it be that we still feel insecure about our financial capability: eager to show that Labour really can be an efficient and trustworthy guardian of the public purse?

So naturally the second thing we must do is to give life to a credible alternative. Too often it feels that promising discussions on social security quickly get bogged down in tactical questions of ‘how’ before we’ve really got to grips with the ‘what’. Tactics are important, of course. It’d make a huge difference if we remove structural barriers between HMRC and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) that make it hard for people with fluctuating or newly-acquired disabilities or health conditions to work as and when they are able.

“We need to decide what sort of work we value and to what extent this meets our fairness principle.”

And perhaps we also need to engage with some more fundamental questions, if activists are to feel confident about describing who and what a social security system under Labour is for. What exactly do we mean by ‘contribution’, for example. One of the most interesting issues raised by Liam Byrne’s recasting of the contributory principle back in 2012 was the extent to which desert should be based on individual contribution - a sort of personal insurance scheme - compared to desert based on need and drawing on resources collectively given.

We also need to decide what sort of work we value and to what extent this meets our fairness principle. Whilst the economic value of some work is easily measured, other types of work – childcare, caring, teaching etc - pose challenges: either because they don’t traditionally command value in the language of market competitiveness or because we haven’t yet found a way to talk about them as work at all.

We know how crucial this particular battleground is for 2015. I believe that we’re the only party with the policies that could ensure our social security system isn’t simply picking up the pieces from failure elsewhere in our economy. I’m proud that we’re a party that aspires to respect people who can’t work as much as people who are ‘hard working’. We have 16 months to demonstrate that we have the courage of our convictions.

Eleanor Southwood is a council candidate in next May’s local elections in Brent and vice chair (external affairs) for RNIB.
The Voice of Women in Prison

Women prisoners account for 6 per cent of the total prison population but about half of all incidents of self-harm. By listening to their experiences we can create better policy and create a criminal justice system where good mental health for those inside is achievable, says Sara Hyde

In December the Lancet published a report on self-harm in prisons based on data from all records of self-harm incidents in all prisons in England and Wales between January 2004 and December 2009. The following statistics come from its core findings: 139,195 self-harm incidents were recorded in 26,510 people in prison in five years; 20—24 per cent of women in prison self-harmed every year; repetition of self-harm was common, particularly in women and teenage girls, in whom a subgroup of 102 prisoners accounted for 17,307 episodes.

I have worked in a variety of prisons and have worked in the women’s estate as a counsellor; due to the nature of my client group, I see a far higher incidence than this in my work. In wider society too, self-harm is poorly understood and has increased over the last 20 years.

What do we mean exactly by ‘self-harm’? The Lancet study defines self-harm as “intentional self-poisoning or self-injury”. The Basement Project, working with self-harm, provides a more detailed definition: “Some cut their arms or legs, others bang or bruise their bodies. Self-harm also includes burning, scratching, hair-pulling, scrubbing or anything that causes injury to the body. Some people take tablets.” A broader consideration of self-harm might also include starving yourself, over-eating, drinking too much, drug-taking, risk-taking, smoking and more socially accepted methods, such as constantly working.

What does the Lancet report tell us about our prisons and the women in them as they stand at the start of 2014?

Prisons are environments that can perpetuate self-harm. One women commented: “I entered prison as a person of sound mental health. During my incarceration, I experienced many mental health problems such as medical dependency, self-harm and suicidal thoughts and severe weight loss, due to the unbearable pain of separation from my daughter and being in prison.”

The pain of the deprivation of liberty, the lack of control over the minutiae of daily life, the absence of former coping strategies (e.g. taking drugs) and the inability to communicate all this non-violently, can easily lead to self-harm with whatever comes to hand.

Self-harm is a manifestation of emotional distress; it is a symptom, not a cause in and of itself. The root causes commonly include “past trauma (including abuse, neglect or loss), or social or economic deprivation together with some level of mental disorder… the misuse of drugs or alcohol.” It is unsurprising in a population with high levels of the above, further magnified by the restraints and frustrations of prison life, that self-harm rates are high. How does a responsible society and government respond to these deep-seated problems and ensure that the criminal justice system does not exacerbate further the prevalence of self-harm?

Well-trained, experienced staff

A prison officer, with the time to engage in a careful conversation with a woman, can prevent an incident of self-harm. The number of staff on wings has been significantly reduced to cut costs and hit the Ministry of Justice cuts target.

For the same reasons, many experienced staff are choosing to take redundancy, rather than face increasingly difficult working conditions for less money. This means there are many new, inexperienced officers on the wings, who can no longer take time for in depth discussions with individuals, which may relieve the pressure and the immediate desire to self-harm. One officer working in a male prison commented: “It’s tough. We are working with civilians now, not officers. They don’t have the wisdom, the experience. It’s more dangerous but what can you do?”.

The following article discusses self-harm and may therefore be triggering to some readers.

Women prisoners account for 6 per cent of the total prison population but about half of all incidents of self-harm.
The elimination of poverty and inequality

The nature of women’s offending is often inextricably linked to poverty. For example, street drug addiction can rapidly criminalise you, whereas if you can afford quality cocaine and have the social capital to navigate the highs and lows of class A drug use, it doesn’t.

Another example, I might be able to afford to see a psychotherapist before my self-harm spirals out of control and becomes a compulsive disorder. I have the kind of social networks that endorse and support me doing so because I didn’t grow up in care where I felt like people only took me seriously when I self-harmed. These are two small examples of how our criminal justice system is stacked against those from particular backgrounds and why reducing inequality is crucial to a just system.

To reduce self-harm in prison we must of course focus in and care for the individual presented but we must also zoom out, looking to create a system where good mental health for those inside is achievable and not a pipe dream.

Ensure gender-specific provision

Women account for about half of all self-harm incidents in prison, even though they comprise only 6 per cent of the total prison population. Many of Baroness Corston’s key recommendations in the Corston report still go unaddressed and despite incremental changes, fundamental change seems increasingly unlikely in the face of Chris Grayling’s austerity-driven reforms.

Listening to the stories of those in the criminal justice system and involving them in policy making.

Self-harming behaviours can be a response to feeling judged by society, of feeling rejected and unheard. It can be a coping strategy and a way of communicating intense pain or frustration where words seem inadequate. “The absence of articulation is what creates violence.

If you can’t express something, or if your voice is unheard, you of course resort to violence.” And in the case of women, this violence is largely turned inwards and visited on themselves. To enable women to be (re) habilitated we must extend the dominant narratives to embrace their voices, to prevent further marginalisation and risk more criminal acts. People in prison may bring tales of violence, abuse, distress and chaos, but we must listen, learn from and take action on these, if we are to reshape prisons into more than profit-making warehouses for the poor.

Let’s celebrate for a moment, but there’s a lot to do in 2014, says Seema Malhotra MP

The Fabians have always had a strong internationalist tradition – a focus on national issues but with an international perspective and connection.

British Fabians such Leonard Woolf and Rita Hinden brought their analysis to bear on the questions of world governance and post-colonialism. Woolf’s work on international institutions had a major impact on the formation of the United Nations. Many leaders of post-colonial countries were members of the Fabian Society, from Julius Nyerere in Tanzania to Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. Even Mahatma Gandhi was a Fabian when he lived in England. Internationalism is essential to Fabianism.

This year we have a key opportunity to get involved with policy and campaigns and see progress with the lives of women at home as well as abroad.

In a global economy, as an outward looking nation, new development goals and ideas of how Britain can play a part on the global stage through support, partnership and charitable work is vital space for debate.

Looking back on last year, a literally world-changing date was 12 July 2013: Malala Day. This day, chosen by former prime minister Gordon Brown, marked the sixteenth birthday of the young Pakistani activist Malala who has inspired the world and campaigns for global rights to education for girls. Last July, hundreds of young leaders from around the world representing nearly 100 different countries were united in support of reaching the achievable goal of seeing all children, especially girls, in school and learning by 2015.

As well as supporting the Malala campaign from a fundamental human rights perspective, global education for girls is vital to see progress with women in the global economy. A recent TED talk by Yann Borgstedt quoted some stark statistics from the World Bank: each year of primary school education increases a girl’s income by 10 per cent or more, and that additional years of secondary school have an even greater impact of up to 30 per cent. Girls who have received an education typically marry five years later than non-educated girls, and have fewer, healthier and better educated children. As the World Bank has said: “There is no investment more effective for achieving development goals than educating girls.”

But while we strive for global education for women, we must also keep the pressure on at home on women’s progress and rights, as this Tory-led government is failing millions of women with the cost of living crisis hitting the purse four times as much as the wallet. This year we must ensure that women’s voices are heard and represented at every level in society, and see more progress with women in business, in politics, and public life.

Women on boards is an issue I have been campaigning on for five years now. While the number of women on FTSE 100 boards is creeping up, the rate of new appointments of women has fallen from 44 per cent to 24 per cent in the last year. For Lord Davies to reach his target of 25 per cent female representation in FTSE 100 boardrooms by next year, we still need to see 66 more board seats going to women over the next 12 months.

In UK politics there is also some way to go. Women currently make up just 23 per cent of MPs, with Britain ranking around 60th in the world for female representation in parliament. The Labour party has the highest proportion of female MPs, with 86 or a third of Labour MPs being women. The Conservatives have 48 women MPs and the Lib Dems have seven. What is even more promising for Labour is the amount of amazing, female candidates we have going into the general election next year – something which has recently embarrassed David Cameron and the Tories. At the start of the month we found out that less than one third of Conservative candidates selected in constituencies so far are women. David Cameron is said to be frustrated with the slow progress of modernising his party – but he could start by setting an example himself and modernising his cabinet, which has just four women out of 25.

But it’s not just in parliament where representation matters. On local councils where key decisions are made about local services, women make up around 31 per cent of councillors in the UK. We must improve that this year with local elections across the country. Women also make up just 27 per cent of the police force, and less than 20 per cent of judicial positions – even though two-thirds of law students in 2010/11 were women.

The Fabian Women’s Network was founded nine years ago, in January 2005, and has continued to aspire to see the progress of women in all areas of public and political life - in the UK and abroad. The mentoring programme, which began three years ago and has recently launched its assessment report, is a great example of that – with political parties and parliaments abroad having expressed an interest in it. We should be proud of the FWN’s achievements in the UK.

As we look to its second decade beginning next year, we have a moment to reflect on where we want the FWN to be in the next 10 years in the UK and in its growing international contribution, and start working to that now.

Seema Malhotra is MP for Feltham and Heston, opposition whip and president and founder of FWN
Felicity Slater interviews shadow minister for international development and Wirral MP, Alison McGovern, who explains why it is important for politicians to talk about what they value, her theory of the dignitarian state and why we must treat people like human beings

Like so many people who work for the NHS, my mum loves the definitive part of her job. A community occupational therapist, she goes door-to-door to her patients, and out of her way to make sure living at home with a long-term illness or a disability is as simple and comfortable as possible. Less enjoyable is the top-down reorganisation that brings a new manager or a tripling of her admin work, and the dip in morale that ensues – never mind the tightening budgets of the last three years.

“What would it be like if services like that were well-run in a way that meant your mum went to work and felt well supported, she had the tools to do her job, she felt that the people running the service understood what she needed to give a good service to the people that she worked with every day?” Alison McGovern and I are discussing *The Real Life State*, her pamphlet published by the Fabian Society in November.

“how we take care of people with whom we have the most profound relationships is one of the ways we’re going to live well – or not.”
“...let’s try and give people a better view of themselves, not a worse view of themselves. I think there’s a whole way of looking at changing public services by thinking about people’s experiences of our public services.”

This vision of the state is deeply rooted in McGovern’s own experiences as a politician. “The whole thing started when I was a councillor. I used to think ‘what is the purpose of my surgery?’ But I knew that there was something important about it. Not just because... people used to come and see you about damp in their social housing or the inability of the council’s finance department to process their council tax properly. Actually, the reason they came to see their councillor or MP was not because they couldn’t have achieved the same aim in the end themselves; they felt like they had been treated with disrespect. And almost just the act of my listening and saying ‘Yes, that is not good enough, and you have a right to be cross’ restored something to them, whether or not I was saying ‘Yes, that is not good enough, and you have a right to be cross’ restored something to them, whether or not I was saying ‘Yes, that is not good enough, and you have a right to be cross’ restored something to them, whether or not I was saying ‘Yes, that is not good enough, and you have a right to be cross’ restored something to them, whether or not I was saying ‘Yes, that is not good enough, and you have a right to be cross’ restored something to them, whether or not I was saying ‘Yes, that is not good enough, and you have a right to be cross’ restored something to them. And it also matters to people’s sense of self, so let’s try and operationalise that and let’s try and give people a better view of themselves, not a worse view of themselves. And that runs right through the operation of local authorities, and DWP as a whole. I think there’s a whole way of looking at changing public services by thinking about people’s experiences of our public services. [...] We’ve got to have proper procedures in place so we know that public money is being spent correctly. As well as that, we’ve got to have a way of treating people like human beings.”

She illustrates the point with Job Centre Plus: “It’s not enough to have a well-accounted for process, if people leave the job centre feeling worse than when they came in. Because being unemployed – being useless to our economy, which is what being unemployed actually is – is one of the worst things that can happen to you, to offend your sense of self esteem. So, what the government does with those people who are in that matters crucially to the health of our economy and whatever else, but it also matters to people’s sense of self, so let’s try and operationalise that and let’s try and give people a better view of themselves, not a worse view of themselves. And that runs right through the operation of local authorities, and DWP as a whole. I think there’s a whole way of looking at changing public services by thinking about people’s experiences of our public services. [...] We’ve got to have proper procedures in place so we know that public money is being spent correctly. As well as that, we’ve got to have a way of treating people like human beings.”

Our discussion moves on to dignity in care, an issue on which McGovern is leading a constituency campaign. “[It’s] really heart-breaking, partly because it’s people’s mums, dads, aunties, uncles, grannies; people that are really important to them. And it’s got to be really important to politics, because these are our most profound relationships, how we take care of people with whom we have the most profound relationships is one of the ways we’re going to live well – or not.”

Care is doubly pertinent because the lack dignity and security of carers, not just those receiving care, experience: how might we seek to address this. I ask McGovern. She highlights UNISON’s Ethical Care Charter: “[It’s one] way that local authorities can [set out their standards and values], so they can say not just about paying a living wage, but also being an ethical employer, which Wirral is moving towards adopting now. And there’s a whole list of things: about moving away from zero-hours, 15-minute appointments, treating every person with respect, using their full title – Mr or Mrs, if that’s what they want [...] What that enables councils to do is state what their values are. And I think if you do that, you also say to people who work in that field, ‘We’re paying attention here, we’re...
not just going to dole a contract out and, frankly, what happens to you in your workplace is not of a concern to us, as a commissioner. ‘I think commissioners, as public bodies, have got to say what their values are, and that also gives people a sense of esteem about the importance of what they do. Part of it also is just political attention and politicians saying ‘This really matters to us’. It helps, saying to people in that field, ‘You do an amazing job. If there are issues that mean that you’re doing less of an amazing job, we need to hear about it.’ I think you can do a lot by really listening to people and trying to make sure they understand the value of what they do.’”

“I think commissioners, as public bodies, have got to say what their values are… it also is just political attention and politicians saying ‘This really matters to us’. I think you can do a lot by really listening to people and trying to make sure they understand the value of what they do.”

As we discuss the relationships between people at any level of public service, our discussion moves on to where power lies in relation to them, and how this affects their ability to operate effectively. We return to the issue of unemployment: “Where does the best intelligence lie as to how to tackle unemployment? I’m not sure that the best is in DWP, I think it lies probably more likely within local authorities and city region operations, because that is how the economy works. Who made the best of the Olympics coming to London? Well, thankfully the Labour administrations of the London boroughs like Newham worked out what their local unemployment was like and how to best interact as government to tackle that unemployment, using the opportunity of the Olympics. […] In the end, it comes back to understanding the people that you’re working with and understanding the people that you’re there to serve. As it happens, I think that probably local authorities are better-placed to be in the lead.”

So, is she in favour of elected mayors, I ask. “Yes, but I don’t get hung up on structures. […] What I heard from the business community in Merseyside for quite some time was [they wanted] a leadership that would go and fight for our city and maintain that economic momentum of Liverpool as a city region, and they felt that having clear lines of political leadership was a way to do that, and I probably agree. I don’t think they need to have the job title of mayor. There are other people who are leaders of councils who do it perfectly competently who have a view that their responsibilities don’t just stop at the boundaries of their particular administration, they have a view over the whole economy, they care about the kind of places the people they represent work, not just where they live, so you don’t just need to be a mayor to do it.”

Those of us who sign up to the Labour party do so because of a profound belief that our values are timeless. Those in the wider public who vote Labour – and decide elections – do so when those values are apparent to them; the bedrock of everything that we do. McGovern’s vision of the dignitarian state does exactly that.
The Tories have form when it comes to casting charities as the villains and big business as the heroes in the lobbying story.

While the government’s latest climb-down on the so-called ‘gagging bill’ is welcome, it can’t undo one of the most damaging effects of the whole sorry saga: the almost complete diversion of campaigners’ attention away from the issues of lobbying and regulatory capture, which is what the bill was supposed to be about.

In a speech to the Institute of Directors, in 2011 George Osborne set out his commitment to stripping away the taxes and regulations affecting business, before characterising the politics of this endeavour:

“The forces of stagnation will try to stand in the way of the forces of enterprise. For every line item of public spending, there will be a union defending it. For every regulation on business, a pressure group to defend it. Your voice, the voice of business, needs to go on being heard in the battle.”

I’m confused, George! Yesterday the third sector was the ‘big society’. Today they’re the “forces of stagnation”. I just don’t know what to think any more! Meanwhile the Institute of Directors is considered a “tireless advocate” for lower corporation tax, not a pressure group. A selfless and noble struggle if ever there was one.

But that’s the point: in this Thatcherite worldview, obsessed with the idea that lowering taxes and cutting regulation will make the economy more competitive, business lobbying is not a cause for concern but something to be actively encouraged. Charities and NGOs are “pressure groups” with suspicious ‘leftie’ agendas, but businesses and trade bodies defending their own interests are “tireless advocates” for what’s best for Britain.

This mindset has been woven into the entire fabric of government; its tentacles seem to be everywhere. Even if we had been debating the government’s weedy proposals for a ‘lobbying register’ instead of the proposed new restrictions on charity campaigning, we’d have been tinkering at the edges of the problem. The biggest and most powerful corporate interests don’t need to rely on lobbying agencies to make their voices heard in the corridors of power: increasingly, they are being deliberately embedded into the policymaking process.

One manifestation of this has been the government’s policy of ‘one-in, one-out regulation’ – last year amended to ‘one-in, two-out regulation’. This policy is quietly reshaping the way government works, and yet few people seem to know about it. The announcement states that: “…every new regulation that imposes a new financial burden on firms must be offset by reductions in red tape that will save double those costs.” This applies to business and voluntary organisations.

“...The biggest and most powerful corporate interests don’t need to rely on lobbying agencies to make their voices heard in the corridors of power: increasingly, they are being deliberately embedded into the policymaking process.”

Running parallel to this is the ‘red tape challenge’, in which businesses are invited to tell government which regulations annoy them most. Everything from the Equality Act to environmental protection laws has been up for grabs, and with Vince Cable ominously stating that regulations would be “presumed guilty unless proven innocent”.

Frankly, there’s just too much wrong with this policy to discuss here. For one thing, the whole point of regulation is to make the regulated do something they wouldn’t otherwise do, or to force businesses to internalise costs that they are ‘externalising’ to society. Of course, regulation should be proportionate, but stifling any new
regulation which will cost business money unless the department responsible can successfully scramble around for something else to repeal is both mad and dangerous. (When ‘one-in, one-out’ was first announced, there was at least going to be an exception for regulation to tackle systemic financial risk, a tacit recognition that the banking sector at least was not over-regulated but under-regulated, but even this grain of sanity seems to have sunk without trace.) This is not proportionate regulation: this is government by hokey cokey.

"There is great irony that such an elaborate bureaucracy has been set up for the reduction of bureaucracy."

‘One-in, two-out’ dominates the thinking of ministers and officials, just as it is meant to do. I could give countless examples from my own experience of vital interventions that it has delayed, watered down or strangled at birth. But for now, I want to focus on the way it both illustrates and accelerates the corporate capture of government.

To understand this, we need to look a bit more closely at how the policy works in practice. First, civil servants have to produce a ‘regulatory impact assessment’, which quantifies the regulatory burden imposed by a new proposal. Of course, part of the policy’s power is the way it narrows the parameters of the possible: any idea which imposes a significant new burden is likely to be rejected as unworkable before it even gets to this stage. These documents then go to the regulatory policy committee, and from there onwards and upwards to the reducing regulation committee, and are sent back to the department concerned if they are deemed inadequate. No new regulation can be passed until it has successfully cleared this process.

There is great irony that such an elaborate bureaucracy has been set up for the reduction of bureaucracy. The reducing regulation committee is a cabinet subcommittee, and is made up entirely of ministers – so far, so unremarkable. But the regulatory policy committee is made up of “independent experts” – which happen to include the chief lobbyist at the Institute of Directors, a representative of the City of London Corporation, and a company director with extensive interests in the energy industry. The committee includes just one woman, and just one representative of labour - who happens to be the same person.

In other words, a body representing some of the most powerful corporate interests in the country has essentially been handed the power of veto over new regulations. The committee has no publicly available conflicts of interest policy. When I emailed them to ask for a copy of any such policy, I was told: “We operate an internal policy which ensures that any members who have a conflict of interest on policy areas are not involved in the committee reviews of impact assessments relating to those areas.” Well, colour me reassured.

Of course, there are deeper problems with this set-up than the specific conflicts faced by individual members. It is specifically designed to subject regulations to the scrutiny of a business-led body whose thinking will reflect business priorities. Let’s take just one example. Among the myriad problems with regulatory impact assessments is the fact that officials are often largely reliant on business themselves for estimates of how much a new regulation will cost to implement. It’s ludicrously easy for companies to game the system by making exaggerated claims about costs which will make it impossible for officials to balance the regulatory books – and, not surprisingly, lobbyists have become wise to this. But officials who feel hamstrung by this aren’t going to get much sympathy from the regulatory policy committee. The committee recently ‘red-lighted’ a Defra assessment on marine conservation zones, saying it was “not clear” why officials had accepted cost estimates provided by Natural England instead of those of the industry affected.

All of this is just the tip of an iceberg. Regulation is being systematically and deliberately put in the hands of the regulated. The battle over charities’ right to campaign appears to be largely won; the battle for the soul of government urgently needs to begin. 

Christine Berry is a researcher and writer working in the third sector. She blogs at No Wealth But Life nowealth.blogspot.com
Ed Miliband recently promised that, should he win the next election, he will “rebuild the middle class”. Writing in that most middle of middle-class missives the Daily Telegraph, the Labour leader said: “Our country cannot succeed and become collectively better off unless Britain has a strong and vibrant middle class…”, citing the need to tackle the impending crisis in middle-class living standards as “the greatest challenge for our generation”.

The cuts have by no means only been felt by the very poorest in society, and austerity has not discriminated in its impact (save for the 1 per cent who have largely escaped unscathed). It’s about time someone said it. This is not ‘strivers v shirkers’, as the Tories would have us believe in their classic divide and rule ideology. 99 per cent of us are – to borrow a phrase - all in this together – and not in a good way.

Tackling the impending crisis of the middle-class is a challenge, but an even greater one is tackling the very notion of the middle class itself. What we currently considering to be the middle class is undoubtedly growing, but it appears to be largely because there is simply no other convenient social grouping box to put people in. Essentially, if you don’t fit in to box A or B, there’s this convenient – and increasingly full - box in the middle.

Where I come from, we like our class like we like our baths, our paths, our grass and our glass – without the help of additional ‘r’s. I can’t help but find something particularly sanctimonious when that laboured long vowel makes its way into commentary on ‘class’ - as if the sheer physiology of twisting the face to accommodate that extra consonant might uncontrollably warp the facial features of the speaker into a haughty, nasal, Kenneth Williams-esque sneer - ‘but how do we engage with the working clarrrrrrrrses’ – and which I also fear, even on the radio, might cause the speaker to albeit involuntarily look down his or her nose.

While it’s pretty clear where the Tory demographic is, Labour apparently continues to wrangle with its target market. The party of the working classes that allegedly ‘sold out’ to the middle under New Labour – has since felt like it has been trying, in some way, to prove its class credentials. A posh kid in street trainers. “Last year”, the Telegraph goes on to observe, “Mr. Miliband called for a return to socialism.”

Who is setting this agenda? It’s time for a new paradigm.

In 2011, the BBC (teamed up with researchers from the LSE, the Universities of York and Manchester to bring us the Great British Class Survey – offering an online class calculator. “Traditional British social divisions of upper, middle and working class”, it told us, “seem out of date in the 21st Century, no longer reflecting modern occupations or lifestyles”, before determining which of the seven ‘new’ social classes the user might belong to through a series of searching questions including:

- What is your total household income after taxes?
- Which of these people do you know socially: chief executive/university lecturer/cleaner
- Which of these cultural pursuits do you engage in? Go to the opera/Do arts & crafts/Listen to hip-hop

These are the limited – and increasingly irrelevant - parameters in which social class distinctions continue to operate. And this is the real challenge for politics – becoming relevant again. So let’s actually forget the middle classes, the working classes, the ‘lower’ classes and the ‘upper classes’, and let’s get back to being a party of people. Labour should be a party which recognises and values both individuals, and the power of those individuals coming together as communities.

“Let’s forget the middle classes, the working classes, the ‘lower’ classes and the ‘upper classes’, and let’s get back to being a party of people.”

The very things that Ed Miliband says are creating the ‘middle class’ crisis - falling real wages, rising costs for items including food, childcare, energy and transport, are things that cut across most of our society. Ensuring access to further education and training, good quality jobs with reliable incomes, affordable housing, stable savings, secure pensions seem to be what we all want. This is what brings us all it in together and together we can fight.

Clare Devaney is a strategic consultant and project manager, specialising in urban development. She is an Associate of the RSA and a founder member of the Fabian Women’s Network NW.
The majority of children in custody are victims of abuse. The figures, cited in a 2011 Prison Reform Trust report, are staggering: 39 per cent have been subject to a child protection plan, and experienced abuse or neglect; 76 per cent have an absent father; and 47 per cent have run away or absconded. Considering the struggle many of these children have experienced so early in their short lives, it’s surely not surprising that so many find themselves on a path of criminality and destruction.

The situation deteriorates further once children enter custody. Figures show that our nation’s youth justice system is failing children who enter it. A staggering 50 per cent of girls in custody have said they have been raped in prison while one in 20 boys in prison stated they have been sexually abused, according to a study by the Prison Reform Trust in 2012. Vulnerable children too often leave the system far more damaged than when they entered.

The high levels of abuse children experience in custody indicate that there is a dire need to examine the institutional environment of the three secure estates where children are imprisoned. At present children are either imprisoned in under-18 young offender institutions (YOIs), secure training centres (STCs), or secure children’s homes (SCHs). Currently most children are imprisoned in YOIs. At the end of August 2013 there were 842 children held in YOIs, 270 in STCs, and 127 in SCHs.

YOIs and training centres both have a poor record of delivering positive outcomes for children and have the highest assault rates of any prisons in England and Wales. They have been described as adult prisons with children in them, but they are the cheapest option. Historically both of these institutions have been the target of criticism from youth justice charities, with problems including suicides, bullying, and unsafe conditions for children.

The government recently launched a so-called radical plan to convert YOIs into training centres, where education would be put at the forefront of youth justice. The plan is far from radical. It is simply a rebranding exercise. It is an attempt to rebrand YOIs into educational institutions that offer 30 hours of education every week, double the education time currently provided by YOIs. Other than increasing education time, there are no major differences between YOIs and training centres.

As Frances Crook of the Howard League for Penal Reform said: “Confusion is at the heart of these plans, which risk repeating the mistakes of history such as the failing of secure training centres, where reoffending is sky high and two children have died.” While an emphasis on education is welcomed, particularly given that 47 per cent of children in youth custody are underachieving at school, it is important to remember that children in custody have complex problems, and therefore require a holistic support package. Before increasing the educational requirements, children’s deep-rooted problems need to be tackled in prisons. One potential way of providing the support children require is by increasing the numbers of SCHs, and closing down YOIs and STCs.”

Evidence shows that children’s needs would be better accommodated in secure children’s homes. SCHs, which are run by local authorities on therapeutic grounds with a high staff-child ratio, could be the preferred model for secure placements, both in terms of their size and operation. A recent inspection of the Young People’s Unit at HMP-YOI Parc, which holds around 50 young people, found a direct link between the size of the establishment and the fact that in small establishments fewer children felt unsafe and that they had better relationships with staff.

Staffed primarily by social workers and support staff who are equipped to work with the youngest, and most vulnerable, SCHs have links to local and statutory services, which are vital to the delivery of interventions that are best placed to address the complex needs of youth offenders. Children receive 30 hours of high quality, individualised learning per week, the same amount of education time, which will be provided by training centres.

Surely it is safer and more humane to detain children in small, local units with a high staff ratio and where they can maintain links with their families, and children’s services. Such links can also lead to better planned resettlement, and therefore reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

The recent reduction in the number of children in custody has not been used as an opportunity to invest in the best option in the most challenging circumstances for the very few children who do require a period in a secure environment. Instead SCHs have been cut to save money in the short term. In 2003 there were 28 SCHs in England, and since 2003, 12 have closed.

Evidence shows that locking up youth offenders does not stop them from offending, but actually supporting them in the right environment might.

Rob Flello is MP for Stoke-on-Trent South and former shadow justice minister.
Towards Digital Equality

There are still numerous obstacles to getting online, and removing them goes to the heart of the inclusive politics that a one nation Labour government would bring to the country, says Ann McKechin MP

Governments across the world are embracing digital technology. The prime minister even live-tweeted his latest ministerial reshuffle. But we would be wrong to assume that everyone in our society is enjoying the greater choice, better job prospects, and easier access to information that fast internet access brings. There are still numerous obstacles to getting online, and removing them goes to the heart of the inclusive politics that a one nation Labour government would bring to the country.

In his excellent analysis of the problem, Across the Divide: Tackling Digital Exclusion in Glasgow, Douglas White of the Carnegie Trust focussed his research on my home city and found that an astonishing 40 per cent of residents are still offline, nearly double the UK average of 24 per cent. Other parts of the UK, such as north-east England and Northern Ireland have similarly poor levels of internet usage. As the government shifts to a ‘digital by default’ position in its provision of public services, I am worried that those in this offline demographic are being forgotten by both the public and private sectors.

Low internet usage is not due to a lack of broadband access. Indeed, the Treasury announced plans earlier this year to make superfast broadband available to 95 per cent of the country by 2017, and has invested considerable sums in strengthening rural broadband infrastructure. The problem is one of take-up; the Carnegie Trust report found that there are a variety of reasons for people not using the internet: preferring to do things by phone or face-to-face; concern over online safety and viruses; the cost, and not wanting to sign a contract; the difficulty of learning how to use the internet; spending money on other things. These boil down to two basic concerns; fear of the online world, and the cost of getting online. The government have so far done little to tackle either of these problems.

The benefits to being online are clear. Internet access facilitates easier communication with friends and family, better shopping and utility deals, wider job searches, online training opportunities and access to local and national public services. But these are rarely communicated to the most excluded groups, especially pensioners and non-working adults living in social housing. There are various not-for-profit training organisations that focus on digital exclusion, and their work is to be applauded.

But given the huge public investment made by the government in rolling-out superfast broadband across the UK, why is not even a small portion of that funding being set aside for digital literacy training and support on a larger scale? It appears that the government has failed to learn the impressive lessons from the recent switch to digital TV, which included a centrally funded programme to ensure maximum take-up throughout the country.

Such a programme could fund community projects in the most digitally excluded parts of the UK, such as the example set by Liverpool, where a group led by the city’s local council increased digital literacy substantially in very little time. The Carnegie Trust report recommends the creation of local role models, or ‘digital champions’, who would take a leadership role in communities with low levels of online access. In the USA, the Net Literacy organisation operates a model in which student volunteers deliver training to those without internet skills, already reaching 250,000 individuals since it was founded in 2003. This is the kind of vision we need for improving digital skills in the UK: low cost, easy to replicate, and offering rewards for both trainee and trainer.

The question of how to fund access itself – from the broadband coming down the cable to the physical computer it is used on – is perhaps a trickier question. Thankfully, hardware costs have been coming down for years, and the advent of tablet computers means that laptops and basic desktop computers are affordable and within reach of those on low incomes. A year ago, Ian Duncan Smith said his department was looking at the possibility of ‘social housing tariffs’ for broadband, but this does not seem to have gone anywhere. Housing associations in Glasgow have recently piloted a scheme in which subsidised broadband is provided to residents along with tablet computers able to connect to Wi-Fi points in their properties. This is perhaps not a scalable solution, but such a bold intervention by those on the coalface of social housing policy shows that some problems need a radical response.

Combining top-notch training with low-cost hardware and internet access is the key to closing the UK’s digital divide. The government must commit to a strategy for reducing digital exclusion as well as improving infrastructure, or it risks leaving a large section of our society behind.

Ann McKechin is MP for Glasgow North, former shadow secretary of state for Scotland and is on the Scottish Fabians executive committee.

This article forms part of the Fabian Society’s Labour 2014 series, where Labour MPs discuss an idea for the party to embrace in the last full year before the next general election.

Read more at www.fabians.org.uk/fabian-review
130 YEARS OF FABIANs!

This year the Fabian Society celebrates its 130th birthday. And so we at FWN are celebrating 130 years of Fabian women too. Throughout this year there will be celebrations and events to mark this occasion - as well as dedicated articles and features. Here are just some of the incredible photos held at LSE library of the Fabian early years, including Fabian summer schools and Beatrice Webb.

You can visit the Fabian archive exhibition at 61, Petty France, London SW1H 9EU.
A timely but chance encounter led to the creation of the Fabian Women’s Network (FWN) Mentoring and Political Education Programme. When I met Felicity a student studying politics and French at an annual FWN reception, I asked the obvious What Next question. For women interested in politics without role models at home or local networks there is no easy way of knowing what answers you can give to this question. Even if you are clear on what you want to achieve, the route can be difficult to navigate and particularly so if you live outside London.

As I looked round the room of Fabian women and saw members of the Cabinet, MPs, the Prime Minister’s Wife, Peers, Chief Executives of charities and a campaigner against child poverty, I realised the answer was in the room. Within the FWN there exists massive social and intellectual capital just waiting to be tapped and Fabians tend to share the same values. I was a mentor at the time and realised how powerful the process could be. Felicity and I approached Seema Malhotra, FWN director, and the planning of the first mentoring programme began. 75 amazing women in three cohorts have benefitted to date.

The aims of the programme are to increase women’s political understanding and the impact and influence of women in politics and public life. There are many women who we see as having “made it” in that they have got to the “top” in their chosen field, but the common theme they relate to us is that it was a harder journey than it should have been and took a longer period of time. They recount the difficulties of navigating choices, often without empathy from work colleagues, not knowing who to ask for advice, and the challenges of work/life balance that women tend to face more than men at different stages of their lives.

We knew that in addition to mentoring we needed to organise a flexible skills training programme based on a robust political skills framework Seema devised from her own experience. We use the power of place so participants can feel what it is like to sit round the Shadow Cabinet Room table or gain confidence in talking about Europe from sitting in the European Parliament. The model needs consistent support with invaluable input from Caroline Adams from the Parliamentary Labour Party but draws on expertise from within the group.

The strength of the peer network is the backbone of the programme and is what will sustain it for years to come. At each induction there is immediate respect of the sheer wealth of experience and diversity in the room. As planned, we have attracted women from their 20s to their 60s, from different social class and ethnic backgrounds and all sectors of employment. This remains a strong objective so we widen the range and appeal of the scheme. A ‘buddying’ system from earlier cohorts allows new mentees to extend their networks.

Since the programme began nearly 30 women have put themselves up for selection at local, national and European level, often earlier than planned; a number have become trustees of charities and many have rapidly gained promotion at work. They have published articles and spoken at conferences and in the media. Each of these has acted as a role model and inspiration to the rest of the group. There are regular opportunities to manage or support each other’s campaigns.

On 14th January we are delighted to be launching the evaluation report produced by Professor Joni Lovenduski and Dr Rosie Campbell of Birkbeck, University of London. They have measured the progress made by the women in the first two cohorts, analysed the success of the programme through focus groups and interviews and their observations on the challenge of funding and the need for a wider geographic pool provide us with a clear steer for an even more successful future.

Additionally we have been capturing the views of mentees to illustrate their progress:

“The programme came at a really timely moment as I was considering standing for election as a local ward councillor. The elements of the programme were excellent for educating and empowering me to take a route into public life. My mentor taught me how to do it on my own terms. More than that, it facilitated a brilliant network of likeminded women who have continued to be a valuable sounding board and source for motivation to continue in public life”. ELEANOR

“Without a doubt I would not be the Labour candidate for Manchester city centre in next year’s local elections or the co-founder of Fabian Women North West without taking part in the FWN mentoring scheme. The scheme provided me not only with essential skills to run for public office, but most importantly the confidence and support to actually carry it out. From walking the halls of European Parliament to eating Pringles in the shadow cabinet office in Westminster, the mentoring scheme gave me an invaluable insight into the real world of politics and opened the seemingly closed doors that surround public life. Being part of the FWN mentoring scheme taught me that if you want to see progress and change you have to be part of that yourself. The scheme points to the glass ceiling and hands you the hammer to break it down.” BETH.

APPLICATIONS FOR THE NEXT COHORT OPEN IN MARCH

Christine Megson is FWN Mentoring programme coordinator
EVENTS

Risks and Rewards of Restorative Justice: Striking the Right Balance for Women
Tuesday 28th January, 6.45pm for 7pm.
Houses of Commons, Committee Room 6

With Dan Jarvis MP (shadow justice minister); Restorative Justice Council; Ellie Cumbo (FWN); Birgit Larsson, (restorative justice expert at the University of East Anglia); Charlotte Proudman, Barrister (Chair).

The event will examine how women victims and offenders currently find justice through engaging in restorative justice; whether restorative justice has application in domestic violence situations; and how victim-offender mediation can be implemented throughout the UK while ensuring victim’s safety.

RSVP via Eventbrite eventbrite.co.uk/e/risks-rewards-of-restorative-justice-striking-the-right-balance-for-women-tickets-9925495424

Women in Local Government
24th February, 5pm-8pm
Local Government Association offices

With Hilary Benn MP (shadow secretary of state for communities and local government).

FWN invites you to an event on women in local government at the LGA. Followed by a reception Labour women are driving change across our communities - from Council leaders reshaping the way services are delivered to those organising in our neighbourhoods.

To confirm your attendance RSVP to Farah Hussain at farah_hussain_88@hotmail.com

SAVEx THE DATE!
International Women’s Day Celebration with the Fabian Women’s Network
10th March, Venue to be confirmed

We’re combining a Fabian Women’s Network celebration with a small fundraiser.

NEWS

After the election of our first executive committee last autumn, we’re pleased to announce the co-opted members of the committee These are:
Shama Tatler
Jayne Almond
Christine Megson
Kate Talbot
Paulina Jakubec
Charlotte Proudman

We have been lucky to have so many talented women standing for the committee. However, we’re still keen to involve as many members as possible in running FWN If you’d like to find out how to help us with events, Fabiana, or you’ve an idea about what we could be working on, please get in touch.

FWN EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
Seema Malhotra MP (President)
Shamshia Ali
Ivana Bartoletti (Chair)
Ellie Cumbo
Louisa Douma
Susie Gilbert
Farah Hussain
Sarah Hutchinson
Sara Hyde
Paulina Jakubec
Sofie Jenkinson
Claire Leigh
Christine Megson
Abena Oppong-Asare
Reema Patel
Felicity Slater
Shama Tatler
Abigail Wood

For the latest news and updates:
www.fabianwomen.org.uk
@FabianWomen
facebook.com/FabianWomen
fabianwomen@fabians.org.uk

Labour Friends of Sure Start is here to champion the priceless services Sure Start provides for hundreds of thousands of families.

We celebrate this great work and campaign hard to preserve our Centres. We also act as a mini think tank, highlighting the clear research support for investing in the Early Years – and we generate new ideas about the future of Sure Start.

We want to give a voice to everyone who is passionate about Sure Start. Perhaps you’re a parent, an employee or volunteer at a Sure Start Centre, or maybe you’ve been involved in a campaign to protect a Children’s Centre. Or perhaps you’re just really passionate about supporting families and investing in the Early Years.

We’d love to hear from you, please get in touch: laboursurestart@gmail.com / @LabourSureStart
Interested in taking action on issues you care about? Eager to win change in your community but don’t really know where to start?

**INTENSIVE TRAINING WEEKEND IN COMMUNITY ORGANISING**

Whether you are a new activist or an experienced organiser, the Movement for Change Intensive Training Weekend in Community Organising will provide a great opportunity to develop your skills and learn from others.

The course covers the core skills of community organising, including:

- Building community relationships
- Campaign strategy and tactics
- Telling your story to motivate others
- Developing a leadership development plan

Trainees will leave with practical tools for organising community actions, as well as a strategic plan for their individual development. Participants will also be able to access ongoing support from the Movement for Change organiser team.

The cost will cover all meals and accommodation in your own room.

Movement for Change is a membership organisation and our members are entitled to a range of discounts, priority bookings and other benefits. We offer a special Movement for Change membership rate. You can become a member of Movement for Change on our website. A limited number of lower-priced tickets are available for students or for people who are out of work.

Find out more & book at movementforchange.org.uk

NEXT WEEKEND: BARNSLEY
MARCH 14