

REBUILDING LABOUR AND THE NATION

A poll tracker for Progressive Britain
by Chris Curtis, Opinium Research

MAY 2022



PROGRESSIVE
BRITAIN

ABOUT THIS PAPER

Progressive Britain is the platform for policymaking, political education and imaginative thinking to rebuild Labour and the nation.

Firmly rooted in the Labour Party, we are dedicated to national renewal and the intellectual revitalisation of the UK centre-left. The organisation was launched in May 2021 following the merger of Progress, the movement for Labour's progressives, and Policy Network, the international ideas exchange and think tank.

This research was commissioned as an update to the first Rebuilding Labour and the nation report published in September 2021. The aim of this series is to monitor and help improve Labour's ongoing political performance, and to look at ways the party can advance further.

Opinium conducted a poll of 4000 adults from across the UK between 14 and 26 April 2022. The data was weighted to be representative by age, gender, region, education level, working status, political attention, ethnicity, and past voting behaviour (i.e., the 2019 general election and the 2016 EU referendum).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CHRIS CURTIS, HEAD OF POLITICAL POLLING, OPINIUM

Chris has worked at Opinium since November 2020 and has been Head of Political Polling since in December 2021. He worked at YouGov 2016-2020.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS

1. Labour has made significant progress since last summer and is now two points ahead of the Conservatives in our large sample poll. One in ten voters who supported the Conservatives at the last election are now switching straight to Labour.
2. However, the main driver behind this has been voter disappointment with the Conservatives rather than renewed enthusiasm for the Labour Party.
3. Despite polling well as the party of working people, voters still have doubts that Labour can run the economy competently without spending too much money. While Labour has made some progress on the economy, it is still the biggest hesitation target voters have about backing the party.
4. Labour needs to use its achievable and affordable plans on the cost of living to demonstrate to target voters that the party will improve their lives while being fiscally responsible.
5. Voters will only hear about Labour's plans, and be reassured on spending, through repetition. The party needs to maintain discipline in focusing on the cost of living crisis and avoid the attempts to by its opponents to knock it off message with culture war debates.

LABOUR HAS A REAL SHOT AT THE NEXT ELECTION

In the first report in this series, we argued that, while the task is difficult, people should not dismiss Labour's chances of winning the next election.

If people were wary of that argument before Christmas, then recent opinion polls and the May 2022 local election results should convince them otherwise. Both demonstrate that there are more than enough winnable voters for Labour to be in government after the next general election – as long as the party can mitigate current weaknesses.

Our polling also shows that Labour cannot rest on its laurels. While the party's position has certainly improved, the biggest driver of recent polling success has been the public's loss of faith in the Conservatives, not renewed devotion to Labour.

The public still don't believe the party is ready for government and, unless it convinces them otherwise, overcoming such a large Conservative majority won't be possible.

Nowhere is this truer than on the economy. Labour still lags behind the Tories when it comes to

the best party to manage the economy, and economic factors are the biggest reason people give for not switching to Labour. Most importantly, there is still a belief that Labour would spend too much money and not be financially disciplined.

The Cost of Living crisis is a moment where Labour can demonstrate it has a plan and regain economic credibility. It must show how and why the government can't be trusted on the economy – that the Tories are wasteful and not prioritising spending money on voter's priorities. By contrast, that Labour has affordable and achievable policy solutions that will improve their lives. A strong example of this is the popular windfall tax energy policy, that itself demonstrates a focus on priorities, paired with solid thinking about where the money comes from.

Labour must be ruthlessly focused on talking about this policy and its other solutions to the crisis. The message must be that the party has solutions that are fair, realistic, and affordable.

LABOUR'S PROGRESS SO FAR

Labour needed to be focused on winning voters straight from the Conservatives, as that is the only way it can gain enough seats for a parliamentary majority (see the first report in this series). To do so, Labour needs to:

- Demonstrate a decisive break from the past.
- Convince people it can run the economy competently, with a commitment to economic growth and fiscal discipline.
- Show it is in touch with those more socially conservative voters who have left the party over the past decade or more by arguing it has renewed itself as the party of work and working people – and that it is the party best placed to tackle neighbourhood crime.
- Build up a tightly-defined and coherent critique about the current government, rather than jumping from one attack to another.

Boris Johnson's character flaws cannot be ignored, but we believe the best critique for Labour to use is how the government is both wasteful and incompetent (indeed, Rachel Reeves has been using this line for some time).

While doing so, Labour also needs to ensure it covers its left flank by building a compelling but realistic offer on the environment.

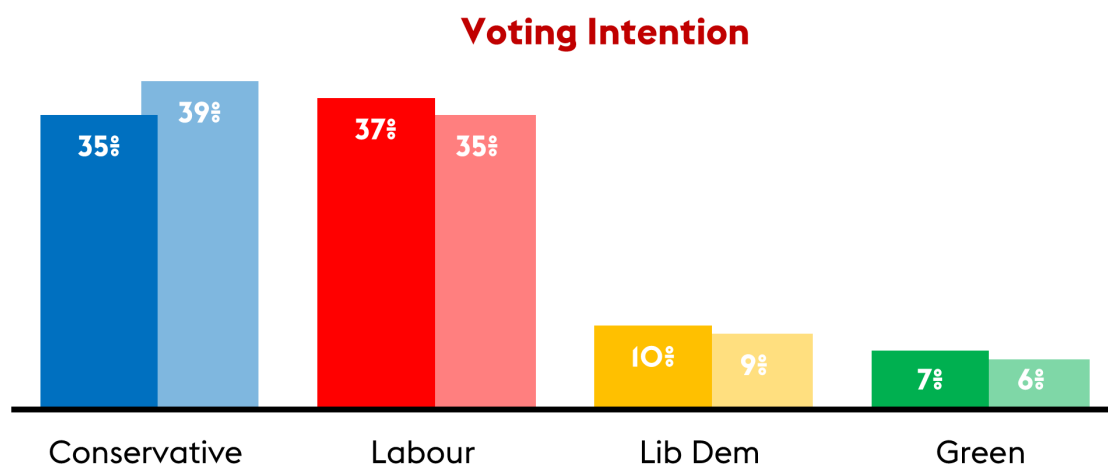
To analyse progress on these objectives we have created a series of tests and will track how Labour is doing against each as we head towards the next general election.

Test	Score	Polling Summary
Win over Conservative voters		10% of the Conservative 2019 vote now say they would vote Labour, while only 3% are moving in the other direction. However, Labour needs to increase this to around 15% in order to get to majority territory.
Demonstrate a decisive break from the past		43% of voters think Labour has changed for the better under Starmer, compared to just 12% who think the party has changed for the worse. Among soft Conservative voters 63% think Labour has changed for the better.
Regain economic credibility		By 31% to 25%, people still prefer the Conservatives to Labour to run the economy. While this is a significant drop in the number who trusted the Tories last year, polling has only shown a moderate increase in the number who think Labour would be able to manage the economy well.
Demonstrate the party is best placed to handle crime		23% now think Labour is best placed to bring down crime, ahead of the Tories on 21%. However, they both lag behind "neither".
Reclaim the mantle as the party of work and working people		57% now say that they think Labour is the party of ordinary workers, compared to just 18% who say the Tories are. More positively, 44% of voters say that Labour is the party of "people like them" compared to just 25% who think the Tories are. By 40% to 29%, target Tory voters think Labour is most on the side of people like them.
Build a coherent critique of the current government's incompetence and money wasting.		Overall, voters think Labour (26%) would be better than the Tories (22%) at spending government money efficiently. However, 26% of swing voters still think the Conservatives would be best compared to 20% who think Labour would.
Compelling and realistic offer on the environment		While voters are more likely to think that Labour (26%) than the Tories (17%) will be better at combatting climate change, there is still a significant minority (22%) of Labour 2019 voters who say they think neither would be good. These voters are far more likely to be defecting to other parties.

While Labour has made progress in all of the areas we outlined in our report, it is clear there is still lots more work to do. The most important area for Labour to now focus on is continue its work in trying to regain economic credibility.

LABOUR HAS TAKEN A TWO-POINT LEAD IN OUR POLLS

Partly down to this progress, Labour is now two points ahead in our poll. The party is on 37%, which is up 2ppts from August. Meanwhile, the Conservatives have fallen by 4ppts to 35%. One in ten (10%) Conservative 2019 voters are now backing Labour, compared to just 3% who had made the move when we polled last summer.



However, this shift is more down to people losing faith in the Conservative Party, rather than being enthusiastic about Labour.

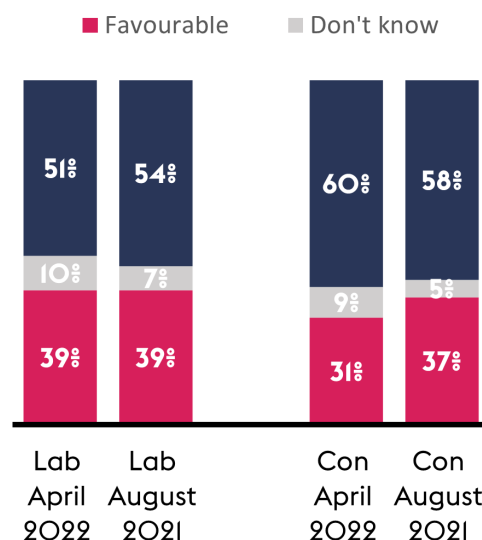
The proportion of people who have a favourable view of the Conservatives has dropped by 6ppts, from 37% to 31% and the proportion who have an unfavourable view has increased from 58% to 60%.

Meanwhile, the proportion of people who have a favourable view of Labour is unchanged on 39%. The proportion of people who have an unfavourable view has decreased from 54% to 51%. Similarly, the proportion of people who say they think the Conservative Party would be best at managing the economy has decreased from 41% to 31%, but the number who say they trust Labour is still just 25%.

A recent YouGov poll showed that just 23% of voters think Labour is ready for government, under half the 55% disagree.

It's clear that Labour still has a lot of work to do to turn these figures around and remove the fears that voters still have about a Labour government.

It is clear that mid-term poll leads gained against a floundering Conservative Party can't be relied upon until the next election.



THE MOST IMPORTANT TASK FOR LABOUR IS TO REGAIN ECONOMIC CREDIBILITY

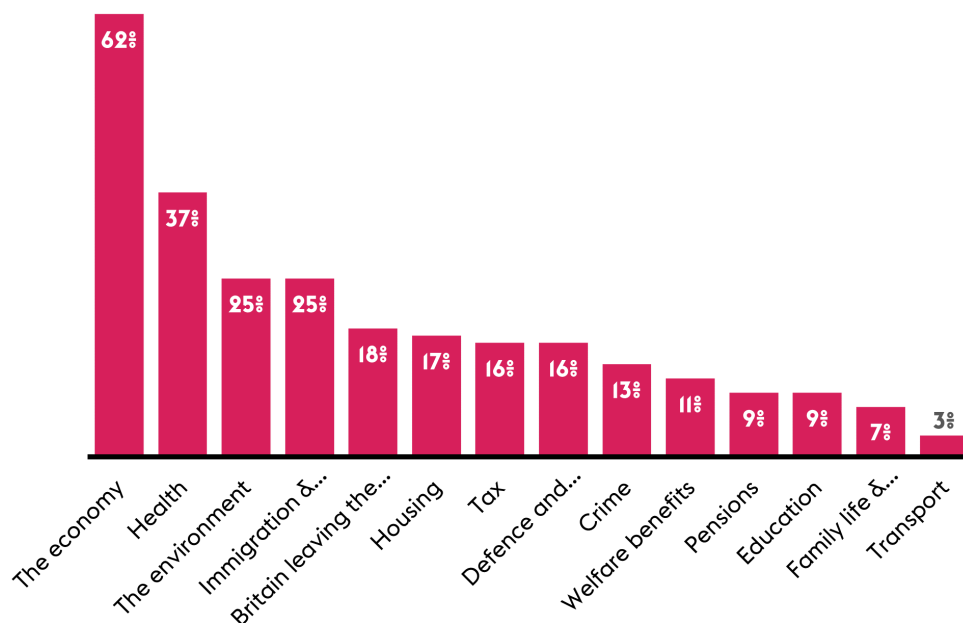
Labour is making ground in all of the key areas we identified. However, the biggest challenge is to regain economic credibility. Labour has been behind on the economy ever since the financial crisis in 2008, and this weakness has been a major factor in all four election losses since.

This is not a “red wall” or “blue wall” issue, with voters right across the political spectrum cynical about Labour’s commitment to grow the economy and not overspend.

It will be even more important for Labour to fix this given the economy is likely to be top of voters’ minds in the coming years. A recent YouGov poll showed that 62% said it was the top issue facing the UK, now well ahead of the NHS on 37% and the environment on 25%.

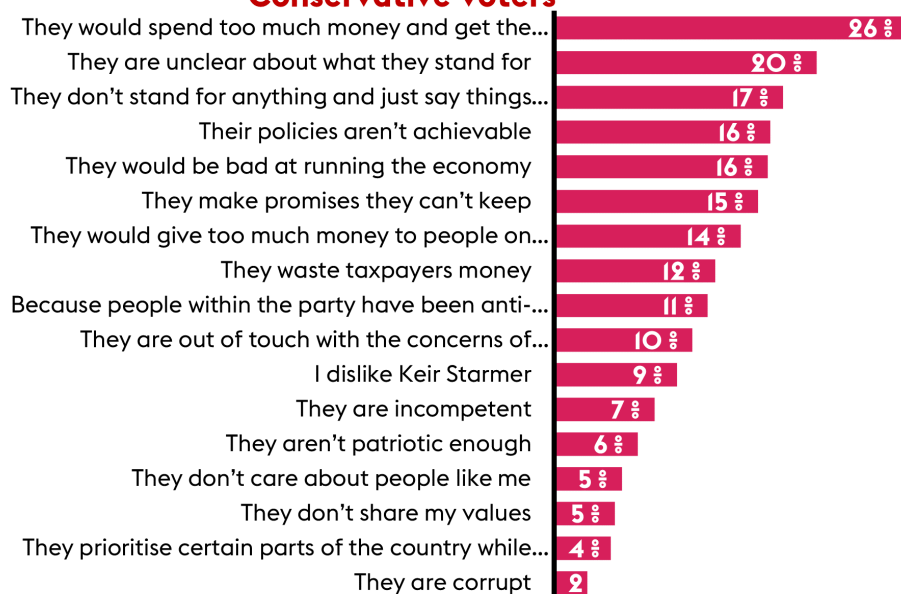
When asked why people trusted the Tories over Labour on the economy, the top answer was “Because Labour would increase the debt and deficit by spending too much money” on 52%, showing how that argument still sticks in the mind of voters.

Most important issues facing the country



More generally, the biggest reason soft Conservative voters give for not supporting Labour is that they “would spend too much money and get the country into more debt”. Overall, nearly a third (31%) mention something to do with the running of the economy.

Biggest reason for not supporting Labour - Soft Conservative voters



It is clear that an attack on Labour for not being fiscally disciplined would be just as powerful now as it was under Cameron and Osbourne in the run up to the 2015 election. It has also been noticeable how respondents in focus groups mention, without prompting, the need for fiscal discipline coming out of the pandemic.

However, there are still lots of voters who think Labour is unclear about what it stands for and is just criticising the government without putting forward ideas of its own. Labour needs to start setting out a vision for how it would run Britain differently, and that is likely going to involve extra government spending in certain areas.

Labour can square that circle by considering four areas when developing policy:

- **Modesty** – any offer can't sound like "too much". It needs to come across as affordable and achievable.
- **Priority** – any extra spending that Labour puts forward should match the priorities of voters.
- **Efficiency** – Labour needs to make the case that any extra spending will be done efficiently and without waste. It needs to juxtapose this with the wasteful practices of the current government.
- **Saying "where the money will come from"** – when Labour does promise extra spending, it needs to continue the shadow treasury team's commitment to saying where the money is going to come from and that it will be fully costed.

Labour should be willing to accept tax rises if they are necessary for extra public spending. Polling still shows that doing so can be popular and that people are more likely to think a party is economically competent if they say where the money is going to come from.

However, it needs to make sure that any tax increases it proposes are considered fair and reasonable and don't put undue burden on struggling voters.

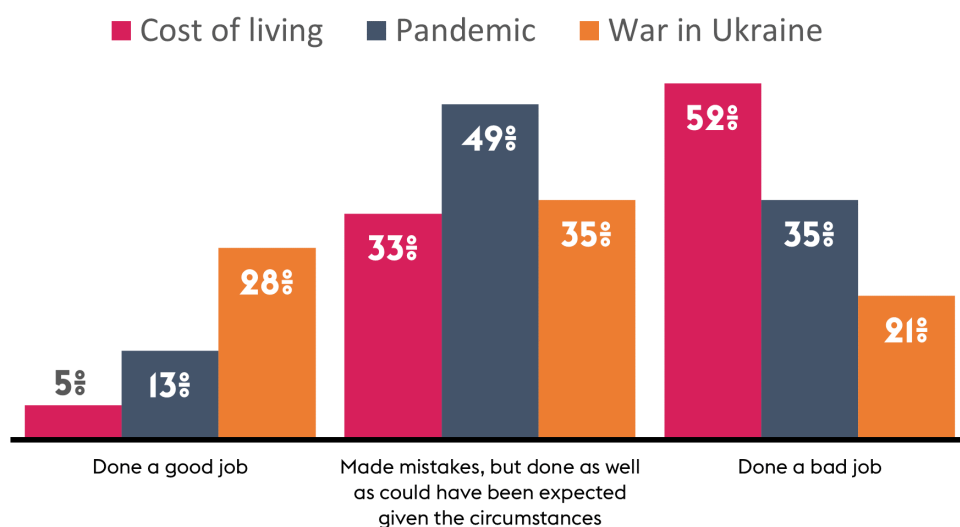
THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS GIVES LABOUR A CHANCE TO REBUILD TRUST

Labour has a chance to use this cost of living crisis to demonstrate to voters that it can be trusted on the economy and has affordable and achievable policy solutions to the problems they face.

Firstly, unlike other issues (most notably the pandemic) voters are not willing to give the government the benefit of the doubt on the cost of living crisis.

In both cases, only a minority think the government has done a “good job” (13% on the pandemic, 5% on cost of living) but when it came to the pandemic an additional 49% of voters said they thought the government “...have made mistakes but done as well as could have been expected given the circumstances”. When it comes to the cost of living crisis, just 33% picked that option, while a majority (52%) think they have outright done a bad job.

How has the government done responding to...?



A recent Opinium poll for the TUC showed that just 20% of those who voted in the May 2022 local elections thought the government had done enough to tackle the cost of living crisis, compared to 73% who thought they hadn't.

Secondly, it moves the economic debate onto a playing field that works better for Labour, particularly when it comes to stitching back together its voter coalition. While voters may have moved away from Labour because of cultural issues, many still instinctively trust Labour to better look after their financial interests.

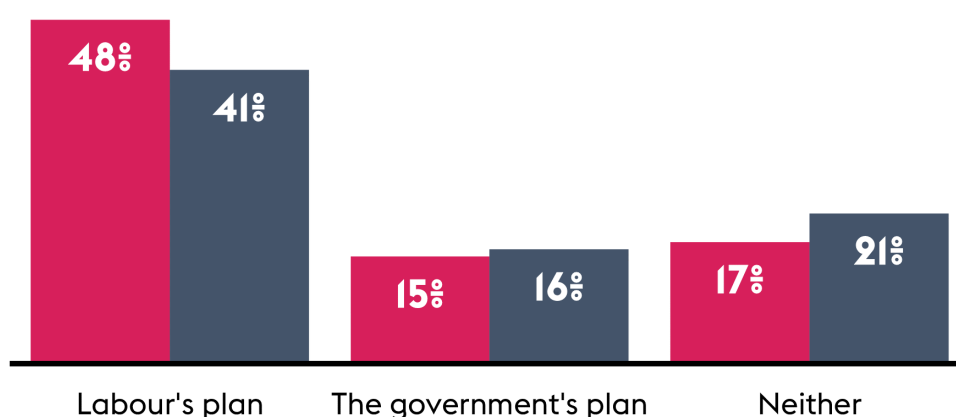
By 29% to 17% people say they think Labour is better than the Conservatives at “Improving [their] personal financial situation”. Soft Conservative voters prefer Labour by 30% to 19%. Conservative voters who are open to voting for Labour are also more likely to suffer severe consequences from price spikes than those voters who would never consider the party.

Thirdly, Labour has a policy solution that is popular with voters. When both plans were described

to voters, 48% said they preferred Labour's plan, while just 18% preferred the governments. Even among those who voted Conservative at the last election, 27% preferred Labour's plan, compared to 26% who preferred the government's.

Which cost of living plan...

■ ...do you prefer? ■ ...do you think would be better for you personally?



Additionally, four in ten (41%) said they thought Labour's plan would be better for them personally, compared to 16% who thought the government's would be.

Finally, Labour's plan helps to solve the strategic objective set out above – putting forward affordable and achievable sounding policies that improve people's lives. In doing so, they can start to dispel the reputation they have for not having any solutions. The use of the windfall tax means they can also demonstrate that their solutions are not a return to Labour "spending and borrowing too much".

LABOUR NEEDS TO AVOID GETTING KNOCKED OFF MESSAGE

If Labour's cost of living plan is so popular, and the most important issue to voters, that begs the question, why isn't Labour doing better?

The most obvious answer is that Labour is failing to get its message through, and not enough target voters have been hearing about Labour's plan. The government's tactic is constant distraction, whether via Party/Beer Gate, or their Rwanda immigration plan, and clearly is making it a lot more difficult for Labour to shift the discussion back to the most important issue.

In response, the party should be more ruthless and focused on talking about its plan wherever possible. Given this is such a powerful issue for Labour, they should use any opportunity to pivot back when dragged off topic.

Just like in our previous poll, we asked people what political debates they are most passionate about at the moment. How to make the cost of living more affordable came top at 46%, with 48% of soft Conservative voters selecting it.

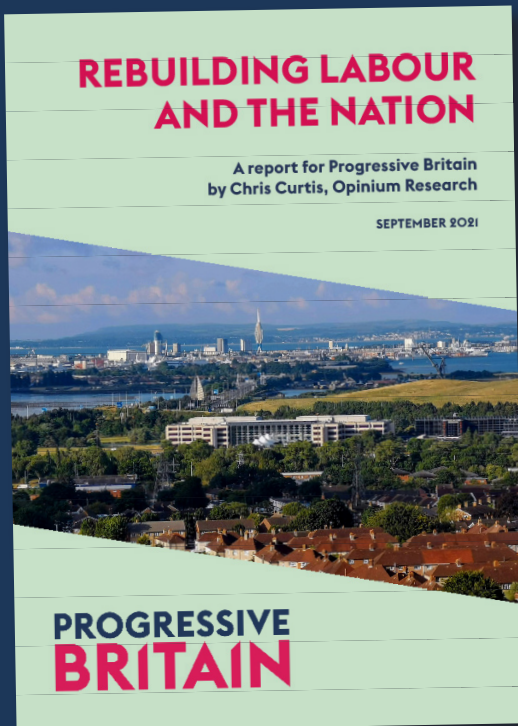
Political debates people are most passionate about



REBUILDING LABOUR AND THE NATION

Does Labour have a chance at the next general election? Where do voters like the party's offer and where does it need to strengthen its message?

In this report from September 2021, Opinium pollster **Chris Curtis** sets out the challenge and the potential for Labour. He finds that Labour has closed the gap on the Conservatives since 2019 but must do more to show it has changed and inspire confidence with voters – especially those who switched to the Conservatives for the first time that year.



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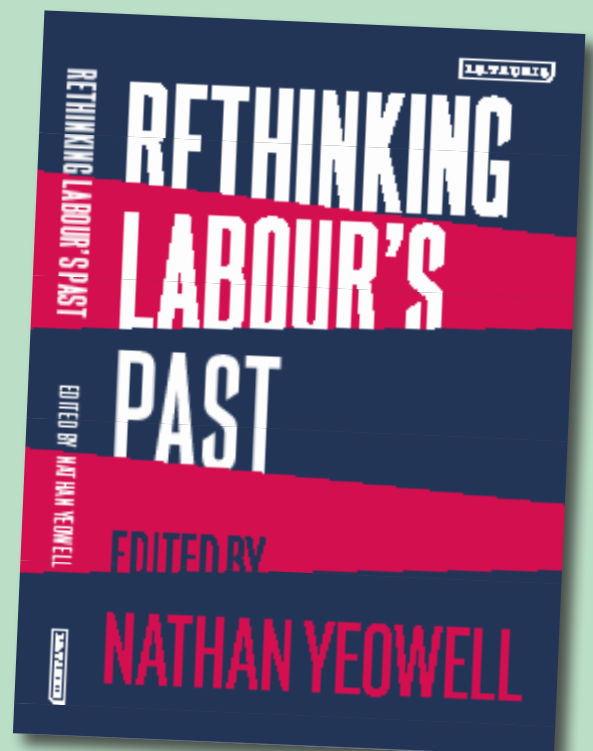
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