

Funding the Future

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Labour has come up with a new soundbite slogan. It's that everyone should have the chance to 'earn or learn'. What about pensioners, carers, those too sick to work, those for whom there is no work and those with disabilities that prevent them from working? It seems that Labour just does not care about them.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6G0swSdKCE?si=e_8mOTKW_Y1m09M3

This is the audio file:

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This is the transcript:

Why should everyone either earn or learn?

Labour has come up with a new soundbite slogan which says that everyone should have the opportunity to either earn or learn. And this, they think, is their answer to the problems within our economy. It isn't. It just shows how out of touch Labour is with society as a whole.

We don't necessarily all need to be either earning or learning.

There are people in this country who are caring.

There are people in this country who are retired.

There are people in this country who are too sick to work.

There are people with disabilities that prevent them from working.

There are people who cannot earn or learn because there are no opportunities for them to do so in the area where they live - and the increase in bus fares to £3 each way is going to prevent them reaching those places where the opportunity does exist.

It is absolutely clear that there are good reasons why many people are not earning and are not learning. And yet, Labour is ignoring those people. And this is something that has worried me for ages.

Before the election, they kept on talking about 'working people'. Now they talk about people who are 'earning or learning' because they've noticed that there are students. But, when it comes down to it, Labour is still talking about a group of people who appear to be of sole concern to them. And that is those who are what I might call economically manageable units.

These are the people who Labour think will contribute to the economy. They can generate income, or they are learning to generate income. And everybody else, as far as Labour is concerned, appears not to matter.

This is quite an extraordinary situation, not least for Labour, because Labour was always the party of the underdog - the person who needed support and help in society - the Party to whom the person who required assistance would turn. And now Labour is turning its back on those people, it would seem. Its rhetoric is powerful and clear and sends out an obvious message to everyone who is retired, or who is sick, or who is unable for any reason to work, that they don't matter.

Is that because Labour thinks that these people don't vote? If they do, they're wrong. Pensioners have an extraordinarily high rate of voting, for example. So why Labour is choosing to ignore pensioners - which it very clearly is, because, for example, its policy on the winter fuel allowance also sent out that message - is very hard to work out.

Are they taking those people for granted? I think that's unlikely because, let's be honest, many pensioners vote Tory and Labour will need to keep them if it is to get back into office in 2029 or earlier if the election comes around sooner than Labour might plan at present, which I suspect will happen.

So, why is Labour so indifferent to the people who cannot earn inside the UK economy or who have reached the point where learning is not what they wish to do with their time because they have other responsibilities instead?

I haven't got a real answer to that, except for the fact that Rachel Reeves and Keir

Starmer are obsessed with one thing, and that is growth.

Growth opportunities in the UK economy are limited. Growth opportunities in the whole world economy are limited, but they're particularly limited in the UK because we are fundamentally a services-based economy, and that means that the amount of extra growth that we can generate by whatever form of innovation we undertake now is relatively constrained simply because services are reaching their point of maximum efficiency.

And we don't want more stuff. And if we don't want more stuff, because, as a proportion of our total expenditure, the significance of material items, whether they be phones, whether they be food, whether they be furniture, whatever it might be, is falling, because that is what is happening in every rich nation around the world, then our opportunities for growth are low.

And that means that if Rachel Reeves is obsessed with growth, the only way she can deliver it is by forcing more people into work as a proportion of the whole. This is actually what has happened over decades. When I was a child, it was pretty unusual for many mothers to go to work. Most mothers of most children in my class at a state primary school were at home looking after the family or turning up outside the school gate every afternoon to pick us up.

Actually, they didn't pick us up in those days. By and large, from the age of five onwards, they let us walk home because it was safe to do so. But mothers were at home to greet us. That was the way the world worked. And that is no longer the way the world works, as we know. The reason why we've had so much economic growth since the 1950s and 60s is because women have gone to work. That is the biggest single cause of the growth per capita in GDP in this country, because more people have been working.

And now, again, we're reaching the limit of that. We're into the 70 per cent of the total potential workforce working. The rest are, for all the reasons I've explained, not working because they're unable to, or they don't want to, or they are caring, or whatever it might be.

And as a consequence, Rachel Reeves is putting enormous pressure on people to return to work through the benefits system, in particular, because that is the only way in which she believes that growth can happen. Given that growth per capita isn't, she has to increase the number of people who work as a consequence.

It's a desperate move that is contrary to the interests of the people of the UK because we do need some people not to work, because they are unable to, because they need to be cared for, because they are doing the caring, because they have a disability which means that we shouldn't be forcing them to work although it would appear that they're sanctioned if they try to refuse to do so.

For all these reasons, a caring, compassionate society would mean that people were not forced into the workforce. But Rachel Reeves doesn't care about caring and compassion. She's only interested in numbers. And numbers require that people be forced to earn or learn.

I resent this phrase.

I resent this policy.

I think it is small-minded.

I think it is undesirable.

I think it reflects a total obsession with economic growth, which is unhealthy.

It is time that Labour remembered what it was for. It was for everybody. And everybody included those who could not partake in a normal sense in what Rachel Reeves now thinks to be economic activity because they were supplying some other form of service within the economy. And that, to me, is vital. It isn't to Rachel Reeves, and I think she's got it wrong.