

A BLUE HOPE

BY MARIO CREATURA
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FOREWORD BY MICHAEL GOVE
EPILOGUE BY KATIE LAM



About the Centre for Policy Studies

The Centre for Policy Studies is one of the oldest and most influential think tanks in Westminster. With a focus on taxation, business and economic growth, as well as housing, energy and innovation, its mission is to develop policies that widen enterprise, ownership and opportunity.

Founded in 1974 by Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher, the CPS has a proud record of turning ideas into practical policy. As well as developing much of the Thatcher reform agenda, its research has inspired many more recent policy innovations, such as raising the personal allowance and National Insurance threshold, reintroducing free ports and adopting 'full expensing' for capital investment.

About the Authors

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Oliver Middleton grew up in a single-parent family, reliant on welfare and free school meals. He initially joined the Labour Party as a 17-year-old, becoming the youngest PPC in history when he stood for Labour in the 2015 General Election. Oliver is now, however, a member of the Conservative Party, believing that personal responsibility is a prerequisite for social progress and rejecting the leftist idea that only government can and should solve the problems society faces. Away from politics, Oliver has spent ten years working in financial and professional services. He has also worked for two senior MPs, including the former Leader of the Opposition, and has written on policy and politics for the Times, the Guardian, the Telegraph, Conservative Home and CapX.

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A BLUE HOPE

WHY ASPIRATION SHOULD BE AT THE
HEART OF CONSERVATIVE RENEWAL

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Foreword

Conservatism has never been about managing decline. It is about believing that this country – its people, its families, its communities – can rise. That belief inspired Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher to found the Centre for Policy Studies in 1974, and gave Britain the boldest programme of renewal in modern times. Thatcher later said the CPS was ‘where our conservative revolution began’ and that by implementing its ideas ‘we gradually restored the confidence and reputation of our country’.

This paper sits squarely in that tradition. At a moment when confidence has drained from the public realm – when too many believe Britain is stuck, static, or slipping backwards – it sets out how the country can once again rebuild hope, ambition and pride. It rejects the fatalism now fashionable on parts of the populist right and the levelling-down egalitarianism that the left mistakes for fairness. Instead, it insists on something far more radical: aspiration as a governing philosophy.

**‘Aspiration is not a slogan or a sentiment.
It is the animating principle of every
successful Conservative renewal’**

Aspiration is not a slogan or a sentiment. It is the animating principle of every successful Conservative renewal. It says that where you start should never dictate where you finish; that work, ingenuity and family support should be rewarded; and that government’s job is to clear obstacles, not create new ones. It demands honesty about the barriers now holding Britain back – 15 years of flat earnings, a housing system rigged against the young, a welfare state that too often penalises work, and a tax code that punishes ambition. And it demands the confidence to change them.

This paper is upbeat because it believes Britain is not broken. We remain a scientific, creative and democratic superpower. We educate more first-generation university students than almost any country in Europe. We are home to the continent’s most dynamic tech sector and to world-leading advances in life sciences, defence, energy and green innovation. Our challenge is not a shortage of talent or potential but a shortage of political will.

This paper is combative because the alternative on offer – Labour’s managerialism dressed up as moral purpose – cannot meet this moment. Their instinct is always the same: more regulation, more tax, more state, less ambition. It is a politics of managed drift, not national renewal. Aspiration requires the opposite: a state that is active where it must be, limited where it should be, and always focused on empowering people to advance.

‘ We must speak to the ambitions of working people who want progress for themselves and opportunity for their children ’

And it is concise because the task ahead is clear.

- We must build a tax system that rewards work at every rung, not just at the top
- We must make home ownership a realistic goal for young families once again
- We must keep advocating for rigour, excellence and high expectations in every classroom
- We must champion entrepreneurship, innovation and investment over bureaucratic inertia
- We must strengthen the institutions – family, school, neighbourhood, nation – that give people the confidence to strive

Above all, we must speak to the ambitions of working people who want progress for themselves and opportunity for their children. They are not asking for the impossible, only that hard work opens doors; that playing by the rules is rewarded; that Britain remains a place where anyone can rise.

This paper offers a framework for that renewal. It is not timid. It is not content with incrementalism. It understands that political movements recover not by trimming and hedging, but by knowing what they stand for – and saying so clearly. Aspiration is that anchor. It aligns our economic policy, our social policy, and our national mission around one idea: restoring the confidence of our country.

The CPS was created to challenge orthodoxy and to give Conservatism the intellectual courage to lead. This work continues that mission. At a moment of national self-doubt, it reminds us that the future is not something that happens to Britain, it is something Britain can shape – if we once again choose ambition over managed decline.

A confident country is a rising country. And a confident Conservative Party – rooted in aspiration – can lead it there.

The Rt Hon the Lord Gove

Introduction

'Our vision is about much more than ownership and material things. We seek a world in which individuals can aspire to their own particular greatness. Where the quality of life is improved by the changed attitudes that prosperity and ownership can bring.'

Margaret Thatcher, Scottish Conservative Conference, 10 May 1985

In July 2024, the Conservative Party suffered the worst General Election result in its nearly 200-year history. There were, by general consensus, several core drivers of voter dissatisfaction with the Conservatives:

- 1) The Conservatives made **promises to voters** – most notably on immigration, the cost of living and the proper management of public services – **and then didn't deliver**.
- 2) Partly this was because of **a failure of execution** – most notably in the disastrous Liz Truss interlude.
- 3) There was a **breach of trust**, signalling a lack of respect for institutions, law and order – like the scandal of parties in Downing Street during the pandemic.
- 4) But perhaps most importantly, there was in the end a breakdown of philosophy, ideology and guiding principles – **of conviction**.

‘Over 14 years in government, buffeted by events inside and outside of our control, and distracted by internal debates, we slowly became unmoored from our values’

Over 14 years in government, buffeted by events inside and outside of our control, and distracted by internal debates, we slowly became unmoored from our values. All too often we seemed to say one thing and then do the opposite. In the words of Kemi Badenoch, Conservatives ‘talked right but

governed left'.! As a result, the Conservatives were roundly punished by the public at the ballot box, with Labour happening to be the most viable alternative.

We know that Sir Keir Starmer didn't enthrone voters – he was the least popular Leader of the Opposition to win an election in recorded history.² Fewer people voted for Labour in 2024 than voted for Jeremy Corbyn in 2019. The result was Starmer's 'monumental sandcastle' – his seat total was large, but his support was spread very thin, easily washed away.³

‘Earning back the permission to be heard in the minds of the electorate will be a slow and painful process’

This Labour government also serves as a warning about the dangers of attempting to bring about “change” and implement a policy agenda with little or no ideological grounding. The unusually high turnover of Downing Street staff and 24 chaotic U-turns in Labour's first Parliamentary session point to a government without a clear philosophical anchor. Labour's growing unpopularity and the ideological vacuum at the heart of its government are inextricably linked. At the time of publication, Sir Keir remains Prime Minister, but nearly two years in office have only reinforced his unpopularity – he is the most unpopular Prime Minister in recorded history. Increasingly, members of his own Parliamentary Party are publicly stating that many of their problems stem from his unsuitability for high office. It is unlikely that he'll remain Prime Minister for very long.

But as we can all see, the lack of love for Labour hasn't translated into support for the Conservative Party, partly because of the rise of Reform UK. As recent local election and by-election results show, voters on both

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- 1 B. Morton, 'Tories need to stop acting like Labour – Badenoch', *BBC News* (2 September 2024). [Link](#)
 - 2 H. Cole, 'Keir Starmer Is Least Popular PM to Win Election in History, Poll Shows', *The Sun* (27 June 2024). [Link](#)
 - 3 J. Rentoul, 'Keir Starmer's 'monumental sandcastle' could soon be swept away', *The Independent* (15 June 2024). [Link](#)

left and right remain disillusioned with the two main parties; they demand change, and expect it immediately.

It isn't all about Reform, however. Conservatives should be under no illusion that their brand is anything other than deeply tarnished. And earning back the permission to be heard in the minds of the electorate will be a slow and painful process.

Yet the problem for Conservatives – with both a large and a small 'c' – is not just about winning elections. Indeed, to focus purely on the state of the polls is to completely miss the point.

Britain today is stuck in what feels like a declinist doom loop – a pervasive pessimism that saps confidence and fuels cynicism. Objectively, the country is not doing well: growth is sluggish, wages stagnant, public services struggling.

‘ This paper seeks to contribute to and inform the goal of accelerating the renewal of conservatism and the centre-right ’

Leadership requires acknowledging those challenges while pointing towards a brighter future – showing how we can turn things around. That is what Thatcher offered in 1979 and Cameron again in 2010: a hopeful vision that went beyond fixing what was broken to inspiring people to believe their best days lay ahead.⁴

Instead of angry, unconstructive pessimism, we must chart a course of rational optimism, arguing that things can and will improve, grounded in realistic expectations and practical action. We must persuade the country that however great our difficulties, Britain can be greater still. That means offering not just critique, but hope: a programme that rebuilds confidence

4 See for example the 'Rose Garden' speech announcing the formation of the Coalition: D. Cameron, 'David Cameron's speech outside 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister', Cabinet Office (12 May 2010). [Link](#). While not downplaying Britain's 'big challenges' in the wake of the financial crisis, Cameron believed the country's 'best days still lie ahead'.

in our institutions, rekindles pride in our nation, and gives every citizen a stake in a better tomorrow.

This paper seeks to contribute to and inform the goal of accelerating the renewal of conservatism and the centre-right.

Our proposition is that to build a voter coalition that leads to a conservative resurgence, a compelling and easy-to-understand vision needs to be presented to the country. One that establishes a structure for all policy announcements and provides a lens through which a political and communications strategy develops over the next three years – a policy compass to ensure that the movement is always heading in the right direction.

‘ Our proposition is that to build a voter coalition that leads to a conservative resurgence, a compelling and easy-to-understand vision needs to be presented to the country ’

Ultimately, one can author the greatest set of policy solutions, crafted by the ablest minds in their fields, but without a clear, cohesive and compelling story to underpin and tie these together, there is little hope that they will cut through to the electorate.

We believe that vision should be built around **reclaiming, reasserting, and renewing aspiration as a core national value** – one that we feel our country has lost sight of in recent years, but that should be rekindled to inspire hope, as well as practical policy solutions to the deep challenges facing our country.

Over the coming pages, we will set out the case for building our renewal efforts atop a foundation of aspiration.

Why Aspiration Should Matter

'Line one, rule one of being a Conservative is that it's not where you've come from that counts, it's where you're going. We've been led by the daughter of a grocer, the son of a music hall performer – by a Jew when Jews were marginalised, by a woman when women were sidelined. We don't look at the label on the tin – we look at what's in it.'

David Cameron, Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 10 October 2012

'Observe the worlds of 'real capitalism' and 'real socialism' and ask yourself: which is most responsive to the needs and aspirations of the powerless? You will see then what a monstrous fraud has been perpetrated on the workers by the Marxist theory of class. Not only has the vanguard party, in its vigilant effort to exclude all but the faithful and the craven from its ranks, closed the avenues of social improvement: the powerless have become increasingly helpless, increasingly separated from any reward save that which is offered to them from above.'

Sir Roger Scruton, 'Thinkers of the New Left', 1985

More government cannot haul Britain out of its economic malaise – only individuals can.

In this sense, individual aspiration is about more than private ambition: it is a means to empower wealth creation that broadens opportunity, restores wage growth, and secures the revenues on which first-class public services depend. Only by identifying the key ingredients of aspiration, and why it works in a political context, can we start the journey to prosperity. That is the objective of this chapter.

At its heart, conservatism must be a belief in the limitless potential of individuals, unleashed through freedom and aspiration. Aspiration is the ultimate expression of individual freedom. Freedom to hope, to dream, to

use our talents to pursue whatever one feels is necessary for us and our families to thrive. To put it simply, the pursuit of happiness, which is core to being human.

Restoring an aspiration-centred approach to our politics, unlike the zero-sum frameworks often favoured by the left, doesn't seek to pit groups against each other. Like a rising tide, its noble ambition is to lift everyone together.

But why does any of this matter – and more to the point, why should aspiration be a cornerstone of any offer to the British people in the years to come, versus just a nice-to-have?

‘ Restoring economic growth will only be possible when paired with an aspirational policy agenda ’

First, there is an overriding moral imperative to champion aspiration – a basic embodiment of the fundamental right of every individual to pursue a better life.

We also know that prosperity is an essential enabler of social cohesion, leading to lower crime rates, higher levels of educational attainment, reduced antisocial behaviour, more stable families, and thriving communities, to name just a few of the many benefits. And if prosperity is a prerequisite for social cohesion, aspiration is a prerequisite for prosperity.

This relationship is explored and evidenced by Jon Moynihan in his recent book, ‘Return to Growth: How to Fix the Economy’. He argues that economic growth is only possible when Britons feel able to express their basic aspirational instincts. Quite simply, restoring economic growth will only be possible when paired with an aspirational policy agenda.⁵

5 J. Moynihan, *Return to Growth: How to Fix the Economy Volume One* (2024), pp.5-10.

And has an aspiration-led growth agenda ever been more of a political and economic necessity than at present? Since 2008, real average weekly earnings have declined by 0.3% per annum, resulting in an overall reduction of nearly 5% by 2023. In the 18 years since the financial crisis, UK GDP per head has grown at just 0.7%. If we had matched the trend growth rate of the 18 years prior to the financial crisis, our GDP per head would now be 33% higher.⁶

The UK also has lost much of its entrepreneurial zeal. Britain is creating new businesses at the slowest rate since 2010, with overall firm turnover still below pre-2008 levels.⁷ This isn't surprising, considering that more than 50% of working-age adults say they'd be too worried about starting their own businesses, up from 35% in 2016.⁸ Risk is not rewarded, so aspirational SMEs are floundering.

‘ If we had matched the trend growth rate of the 18 years prior to the financial crisis, our GDP per head would now be 33% higher ’

In parallel, UK government debt has ballooned to over 100% of GDP, with public spending – driven by significant increases in the NHS and welfare budgets – now accounting for almost 45% of GDP. Thanks to a combination of demographics and stagnant growth, spending has vastly outstripped our national income. On this trajectory, Britain's debt will grow to over 150% of GDP by the middle of this century, leaving the UK one financial crisis away from bankruptcy – or, in the 'best case' scenario, imposing such a crisis on future generations.⁹

6 M. Wolf, 'The roots of the British malaise lie in a sick economy', *The Financial Times* (7 July 2025). [Link](#)

7 Reuters, 'UK Creates New Businesses at Slowest Rate Since 2010' (18 November 2024). [Link](#)

8 C. Smyth, 'Britons Are Scared to Start a Business – Help Them, Reeves Urged', *The Times* (21 October 2024). [Link](#)

9 For long-term debt projections, see: OBR, 'Fiscal risks and sustainability – July 2025' (8 July 2025). [Link](#)

Home ownership, once a cornerstone of aspiration, is also slipping away. As recently as the 1990s, a first-time buyer couple on a low to middle income, saving 5% of their wages, would have enough for an average deposit after three years. Today it would take them 24 years.¹⁰

This is why, like aspiration itself, there is a moral imperative for Britain to ruthlessly focus on the proven drivers of growth. By embracing a small state, low taxes, and minimal regulation, we empower individuals to innovate, create wealth, and build a brighter future for themselves and their communities – as outlined by Robert Colville in his Centre for Policy Studies essay ‘The Morality of Growth’.¹¹ At the same time, we need to drive down unnecessary spending in areas like welfare, the antipode to aspiration.

‘ Britain’s debt will grow to over 150% of GDP by the middle of this century, leaving the UK one financial crisis away from bankruptcy ’

In practical terms, this means focusing on five key pillars of aspiration:

1. **Fairness**
2. **Dynamism**
3. **Personal responsibility**
4. **A stake in the future**
5. **Family and community**

Let’s explore each of these in turn.

10 N. Boys Smith, ‘A Generation Has Been Cut Adrift by Unaffordable Housing’, *The Telegraph* (16 March 2022). [Link](#)

11 R. Colville, ‘The Morality of Growth’, CPS (13 January 2023). [Link](#)

1. Fairness: hard work is always rewarded

Our view is that hard work and ambition should be consistently rewarded. The state should incentivise effort, foster aspiration, and ensure no one is penalised for success – but otherwise get out of the way.

The concept of ‘a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work’ is as old as time and one that the vast majority of Britons would instinctively agree with. Yet in the UK today, many feel this concept no longer applies.

‘A thriving economy should reward effort, yet Britain’s current tax and economic system often severs this connection’

A thriving economy should reward effort, yet Britain’s current tax and economic system often severs this connection. In the words of Paul Johnson, until recently Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies: ‘I challenge any reasonable person to defend the system as it stands today and to claim that what we have is anything other than arbitrary, complex, inequitable and damaging to the economy. We are desperately in need of another Chancellor of [Nigel] Lawson’s stature to clear up this mess and start again.’¹²

He is right. As it stands, due to the crippling cost of childcare, and the sudden withdrawal of subsidies above a particular income level, a UK parent with two young children would be better off earning £99,000 compared to £130,000.¹³ Similarly, the personal allowance of £12,570 is gradually withdrawn at a rate of £1 lost for every £2 earned above £100,000, creating an effective 60% marginal rate – more, with National Insurance.¹⁴

12 P. Johnson, ‘Britain’s Economically Damaging Tax System Is Now Indefensible’, *The Telegraph* (5 April 2023). [Link](#)

13 S. Ping Chan, ‘Childcare Tax Trap Completely Insane, Warns IFS’, *The Telegraph* (19 March 2024). [Link](#)

14 A. Hussein & J. Sharkey, ‘Will You Be Caught in the 60% Income Tax Trap?’, *The Times* (14 December 2024). [Link](#)

The overall picture is even more concerning. In the UK, the top 1% of earners pay 30% of all income tax: a higher share than at any time in the past 20 years. In other words, three in every ten pounds that the government receives in income tax is paid by just over 300,000 individuals.¹⁵

Inevitably, as we've seen recently, the UK's wealthiest are leaving, and taking their tax contributions with them. Surveys show one in eight SME owners planning to move themselves or their businesses overseas, equivalent to around 680,000 firms.¹⁶ Unserious Labour politicians may snark at their predicament, but many of those leaving will be Britons who have started, owned, run and grown businesses, paid tax, and raised their families here.¹⁷ Labour may not like millionaires, but these wealth creators are the ultimate enablers of its tax-and-spend modus operandi.

‘ The top 1% of earners pay 30% of all income tax, a higher share than at any time in the past 20 years ’

At the other end of the scale, if you're born into a low-income household or one where opportunities to improve your circumstances are limited, the odds are stacked against you even further. Whether it's the depressingly poor levels of educational outcomes (particularly for working-class boys), the insurmountable cost of housing and childcare, or the lack of good-quality jobs beyond much of the South East, the barriers to true social mobility are arguably greater now than they have been at any time since the 1940s.

Even if you rise from a low-income household through sheer determination, Britain's broken system erects repeated barriers to social mobility. Working-class families, striving for better lives, face unaffordable housing, limited access to quality training, and scarce well-paid jobs, stifling their dreams.

15 A. Summers & A. Advani, 'How Much Tax Do the Rich Really Pay?', *LSE Research for the World* (15 March 2022). [Link](#)

16 M. Shoffman, 'Are the rich leaving the UK due to high taxes? Where the wealthy are going', *MoneyWeek* (11 November 2025). [Link](#)

17 M. Ward-Brennan, 'Not Just Non-Doms: Wealthy Workers Considering Leaving the UK to Beat Tax Hikes', *CityAM* (8 May 2025). [Link](#)

As James Frayne has argued in the CPS paper ‘The New Majority’, this sense of unfairness is especially sharp among working-class voters.¹⁸ Their frustration is not born of envy towards those who succeed, but from the belief that the system fails to reward effort while too often appearing to reward those who do not contribute.

For policymakers, this insight matters: fairness must therefore run through all policy design, ensuring work always pays and that strivers feel the system is on their side.

The Conservatives, in particular, lost the trust of the British people not only because of policy failure, but because they came to be viewed as a party for the rich.¹⁹ For the Conservatives to regain the faith of the British people, they must once again become the party of the working-class strivers – the party of fairness.

‘The Conservatives, in particular, lost the trust of the British people not only because of policy failure, but because they came to be viewed as a party for the rich’

2. Dynamism: reviving the spirit of enterprise

Aspiration, at its core, is the belief that you can do anything or be anything – a right to dream embodied in an entrepreneurial, high-achievement mindset. Dynamic economies thrive on such dreamers, and instilling this mentality early enhances life chances and national prosperity.

Yet the Sutton Trust reveals that state school pupils, unlike their independent school peers, are rarely encouraged to aim high, with children from more advantaged backgrounds having significantly higher levels of extroversion and very substantially higher economic aspirations.²⁰

18 J. Frayne, ‘The New Majority’, CPS (September 2022). [Link](#)

19 J. Frayne, ‘Common Ground Conservatism’, CPS (November 2024). [Link](#)

20 J. Rentfrow & R. De Vries, ‘A Winning Personality: Confidence, Aspirations and Social Mobility’, The Sutton Trust (14 January 2016). [Link](#)

Labour's approach – focusing on redistribution over aspiration – drags the successful down rather than building the vulnerable up, deepening the confidence gap and callously stifling social mobility for the less advantaged.²¹ The Government's recent imposition of VAT on private school fees is a vindictive measure that burdens those hardworking parents already sacrificing to send their children to the school of their choice.

Some 25,000 pupils are reported to have already left private schools in England, far surpassing the government's estimate of 3,000 transferring to state schools – with experts predicting even higher numbers as the reality of the measure takes effect. More than 100 independent schools have announced their closure or potential closure, sparking concern among state and private school leaders alike.²² And far from raising the anticipated £1.6 billion, Treasury analysis reveals this policy may cost the government an additional £650 million annually.²³

‘ More than 100 independent schools have announced their closure or potential closure, sparking concern among state and private school leaders alike ’

Grammar schools, which democratise aspiration, are one of the few tried and tested paths to greater social mobility. Labour's vendetta against them, epitomised by Anthony Crosland's 1965 vow to destroy them,²⁴ has stifled opportunities for talented children from less affluent backgrounds for decades.

21 Today's Problems of Intergenerational Inequality Risk Becoming Tomorrow's Big Social Mobility Divide', Resolution Foundation (12 March 2018). [Link](#)

22 E. Ivens, 'More than 100 private schools forced to close after Labour's controversial tax raid on fees,' *Daily Mail* (3 January 2026). [Link](#)

23 G. Holl-Allen, T. Wallace, N. Gutteridge, 'Labour's schools VAT raid 'will cost public up to £650m', *The Telegraph* (17 May 2024). [Link](#)

24 K. Meagher, '34 Years Today Since His Death: Tony Crosland's Challenge to Ed Miliband', *Labour Uncut* (19 February 2011). [Link](#)

By contrast, Michael Gove's education reforms, particularly the expansion of academies and creation of free schools, helped reverse decades of educational decline by fostering competition and raising expectations. By granting schools greater autonomy over budgets, curriculum and staffing, these reforms empowered educators to innovate and tailor education to local needs, instilling a can-do culture in schools.

The impact is evident in the overall rise in school standards: by the end of the 2022/23 academic year, 89% of all schools in England were rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted, up from 68% in 2010.²⁵ Free schools, in particular, have set a high bar for innovation, with some achieving outstanding results in traditionally disadvantaged communities. Perhaps most tellingly, the international PISA rankings show that pupils in England performed better than SNP-run Scotland and Labour-run Wales across all subjects. In maths, England is now one of the top-performing countries in the Western world.²⁶

‘ The international PISA rankings show that pupils in England performed better than SNP-run Scotland and Labour-run Wales across all subjects ’

Tragically, Labour is now dismantling the reforms which yielded these massive improvements. So, as a first step, any future government with a commitment to aspiration will have to undo the damage done under Bridget Phillipson. But it will also need to go further and set about building a reimagined education system to unlock talent and incubate the entrepreneurs and high achievers of the future, regardless of who they are or where they are born. After all, these are the people who will support and create the jobs and growth which will help create opportunities for future generations, including those from less affluent backgrounds.

25 EPI, 'Ofsted Ratings: Have Standards Been Improving?' (13 May 2024). [Link](#)

26 Department for Education, 'England among highest performing western countries in education' (5 December 2023). [Link](#)

3. Personal responsibility: creating a culture of contribution

Personal responsibility is the bedrock of aspiration, transforming ambition into tangible outcomes. It empowers individuals to take control of their lives, turning dreams of a better future into a reality through hard work and accountability.

For conservatives, championing personal responsibility is both a moral imperative and a compassionate act: it fosters self-worth, purpose, and dignity.

‘ The OBR expects the working-age welfare bill to reach almost £100 billion by the end of the decade ’

Tragically, the balance between rights and responsibilities has eroded over too many decades. Since the 1950s, welfare expansion has ballooned, fostering dependency and undermining autonomy – but the pandemic clearly represented a critical acceleration of this trend. More than half of households now receive more in benefits than they pay in taxes (including 45% of working-age households),²⁷ and more than one in five people between the ages of 16 and 64 now claim some form of working-age benefit.²⁸ Universal benefits like free school meals have been extended to affluent families, diluting incentives for self-reliance. The OBR expects the working-age welfare bill to reach almost £100 billion by the end of the decade.²⁹

Historically, the Conservatives have sought to restore this balance. By 1997, Margaret Thatcher’s Right to Buy scheme, launched in 1980, had enabled 1.7 million council tenants to own their homes, fostering pride and a stake

27 E. Pasternack, ‘Half of Britons Are Net Welfare Recipients and That Must Change’, *The Telegraph* (12 February 2025). [Link](#)

28 A. Hagopian & D. Maddox, ‘Reeves to Crack Down on Benefits as Welfare Bill Soars’, *The Independent* (2 July 2025). [Link](#)

29 D. Herring, ‘Welfare Reform: Why Labour Must Go Further’, CPS (4 April 2025). [Link](#)

in society.³⁰ The two-child benefit cap, introduced by George Osborne in 2017, ensured that young families who made tough but responsible choices about the number of children they could afford were not penalised relative to those who didn't take responsibility. John Major's Citizens' Charter, introduced in 1991, emphasised accountability, setting standards for public services and empowering citizens to demand better service. These policies reflect the conservative belief that aspiration thrives when individuals are trusted to take responsibility, with the state's focus limited to establishing the necessary enabling conditions.

‘ By 1997, Margaret Thatcher’s Right to Buy scheme, launched in 1980, had enabled 1.7 million council tenants to own their homes, fostering pride and a stake in society ’

Indeed, for centuries, successful societies have advanced precisely because they balance rights with responsibilities: individuals contribute to society in return for its protections and benefits. Yet today, this balance is eroding, with some demanding rights, such as state housing or welfare, without delivering on their side of the bargain, like respecting their communities, embracing local and national values or avoiding antisocial behaviour.³¹

A belief in aspiration means a system where individuals take responsibility for themselves and their families, and are encouraged and supported to do so by policy. This should be matched by their taking on appropriate duties and obligations in return, including to future generations.

The antithesis – welfare dependency and overregulation – stifles aspiration and fuels voter discontent. By championing personal responsibility, politicians can also rebuild trust with voters who feel fairness has been eroded.

Personal responsibility is not just about individual success – it's about collective prosperity, ensuring every Briton has the tools to aspire, from education to entrepreneurship, and building a stronger, fairer and genuinely inclusive nation.

30 'Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy Legacy', *The Week* (5 May 2024). [Link](#)

31 H. Phibbs, 'Councils Failing to Evict Tenants Involved in Anti-Social Behaviour', *Conservative Home* (26 October 2023). [Link](#)

4. A stake in the future: making ownership achievable again

Aspiration thrives when individuals have a tangible stake in their future, most powerfully through owning a home or starting a business.

This principle lies at the heart of the traditional Tory vision of a property-owning democracy, a concept championed by Anthony Eden in the 1950s and brought to life by Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme. Ownership is not merely a financial asset; it is a prerequisite for aspiration, providing security, pride, and a sense of agency – a literal interest in the maintenance and development of the asset and the community around it.

‘When people own their homes or businesses, they are more likely to invest in their communities, maintain their properties, and engage in civic life’

Recent polling analysis has highlighted how important this sense of control is to public attitudes. Research by James Kanagasooriam at Focaldata suggests that political dissatisfaction increasingly correlates with whether people feel they have real control over the direction of their lives – what he terms ‘agency’.³²

When people own their homes or businesses, they are more likely to invest in their communities, maintain their properties, and engage in civic life.³³ As Ben Ansell, a professor of politics at Oxford University, has noted, in the 1970s and 1980s homeowners were only five percentage points more likely to vote in general elections than non-homeowners, but since 2005 they have been about 25 percentage points more likely.³⁴ This widening gap reflects not a decline in the absolute number of homeowners, but the fact that fewer young people now own homes and

32 J. Kanagasooriam, ‘Agency could be the next big idea’, *The Political Whiteboard* (8 March 2026). [Link](#)

33 J. Vitali, ‘The Property-Owning Democracy’, Policy Exchange (4 December 2023). [Link](#)

34 B. Ansell & J. Gingrich, ‘Political Inequality’, *Oxford Open Economics* 3, no. Supplement_1 (2024), pp.i233–i261. [Link](#)

non-owners – disproportionately younger renters – have become much less likely to turn out to vote.

Similarly, the Electoral Commission reports that 94% of owner-occupiers are registered to vote, compared to just 63% of private renters.³⁵ You may argue that this is because homeowners are relatively elderly, and the elderly are more likely to vote. But regardless of the length of time they have owned a home, homeowners are also 1.3 times more likely to become involved in a neighbourhood group and to join a civic association than renters. This increased community participation holds true in low-income neighbourhoods as well,³⁶ reflecting a deeper commitment to their surroundings.

‘ Homeowners are 1.3 times more likely to become involved in a neighbourhood group and to join a civic association than renters ’

Sadly, Britain’s housing crisis and regulatory burdens have made the dream of home ownership increasingly unattainable, eroding the aspirational spirit of a generation. In 1991, 67% of those aged 25-34 were homeowners.³⁷ That had dropped to 59% by 2003-04,³⁸ and 39% by 2022-23.³⁹ The average age of first-time buyers in 2022-23 was 34 years old.⁴⁰ A generation earlier, the average age of first-time buyers was 27.⁴¹

Similarly, starting and growing a business – a hallmark of entrepreneurial ambition – is stifled by high taxes, complex regulations, and excessive

35 Electoral Commission, ‘Accuracy and Completeness of Electoral Registers: February and March 2014 Electoral Registers’ (1 August 2019), pp.37-38.

36 Habitat for Humanity, ‘Outcomes Associated with Homeownership’ [accessed 8 July 2025]. [Link](#)

37 ONS, ‘Housing and Home Ownership in the UK’ (22 January 2015). [Link](#)

38 W. Wilson et al, ‘Extending Home Ownership: Government Initiatives’, HoC Library (30 March 2021). [Link](#)

39 J. Cribb, ‘Homeownership among Young Adults Has Recovered to Its 2010 Level’, IFS (14 March 2024). [Link](#)

40 DLUHC, ‘English Housing Survey 2022 to 2023: Headline Report, Chapter 3: Housing History and Future Housing’ (14 February 2024). [Link](#)

41 L. Boyce, ‘Average Second-Time House Buyer Is 42’, *This Is Money* (5 August 2013). [Link](#)

compliance costs. The total combined cost of tax compliance to small businesses amounts to nearly £25 billion per year, with SME owners spending an average of 44 hours per year on tax admin, according to the Federation of Small Businesses.⁴² In 2024, for the first time, the proportion of small firms expecting to contract, sell or close outnumbered the percentage hoping to grow.⁴³

These barriers not only undermine individual aspiration but also sap Britain's economic dynamism, since homeownership and entrepreneurship are inextricably linked to wealth creation.⁴⁴

‘ In 2024, for the first time, the proportion of small firms expecting to contract, sell or close outnumbered the percentage hoping to grow ’

Ownership also reinforces social responsibility. Homeowners and business owners are more likely to care for their neighbourhoods, from maintaining gardens to supporting local shops, than transient renters or those dependent on state support. Less than half of renters feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood, compared with almost two-thirds of homeowners, highlighting ownership's role in fostering social cohesion.⁴⁵

By contrast, Labour's policies risk creating a nation of transients, disconnected from their communities and reliant on the state, undermining the very fabric of British society.

Historically, Conservatives have understood this link. From Disraeli's One Nation vision to Thatcher's empowerment of council tenants, the party has championed ownership as a pathway to aspiration. Today, this mission is more urgent than ever.

42 FSB, 'Tax red tape's huge cost to small firms revealed in new report' (22 April 2025). [Link](#)

43 FSB, 'For First Time More Small Firms Expect to Shrink Than Grow, FSB Report' (14 July 2025). [Link](#)

44 Y. Zhao, 'The Importance of Small Business Development to the National Economy and the Factors Affecting Its Development', *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences* 126 (19 December 2024). [Link](#)

45 'Renters Are Less Likely Than Homeowners to Feel a Sense of Belonging in Their Neighborhood', *BusinessWire* (13 December 2024). [Link](#)

5. Family and community: protecting what matters

Aspiration begins at home, with stable families and vibrant communities nurturing the confidence and ambition that drive individual and national success.

Conservatives have long recognised that families are the cornerstone of society, instilling values of responsibility, discipline, and aspiration through engaged parenting. As Children’s Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza beautifully says: ‘There is little that correlates more with a child’s happiness than how happy they are with their family. Little that better predicts their outcomes and chances of success. For children to grow up to be adults that are happy, healthy and contribute to society, there is nothing more important to focus on than family.’⁴⁶

‘ For children to grow up to be adults that are happy, healthy and contribute to society, there is nothing more important to focus on than family ’

James Frayne, in his work for the CPS, reinforces this point: family is consistently cited by working-class voters as their highest priority in life, ahead of work, money or politics.⁴⁷ For them, family is where values are learned, security is built, and aspiration is passed on. They want government to respect and strengthen family life, not undermine it. This means recognising the family as the essential unit of fairness and stability in society – supporting parents to raise children well, rewarding responsibility, and ensuring that those who strive to provide for their families are not penalised.

Communities amplify this effect, with local charities, faith groups, and extended families fostering a ‘can-do’ mindset. As Disraeli’s One Nation vision and Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ underscored, aspiration thrives when individuals are connected by a shared social mission, rooted in mutual responsibility.

46 Children’s Commissioner, ‘Family and its Protective Effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review’, (September 2022). [Link](#)

47 J. Frayne, ‘Common Ground Conservatism’, CPS (November 2024). [Link](#)

Yet this foundation is being undermined, not least by family breakdown. Kemi Badenoch warned in 2024 that absent fathers and fractured families leave children without role models, increasing the risk of disengagement.⁴⁸ The Centre for Social Justice reports that family breakdown doubles a child's likelihood of failure at school or getting into trouble with the police, and more than doubles their chances of becoming homeless. In the case of homelessness, the experience of family breakdown is a greater risk factor than mental health problems or even drug addiction.⁴⁹

In 2018, the cost to taxpayers generated by family breakdown, which takes into account increasing costs in terms of welfare benefits, health, housing, social care, and the education and justice systems, was estimated to be £51 billion, up from £37 billion a decade ago.⁵⁰

‘British families on low and middle incomes are often taxed at greater rates than people without children’

The tax system has also exacerbated these challenges, failing to recognise parenting as a societal good. As the CPS has noted, British families on low and middle incomes are often taxed at greater rates than people without children and face a much higher tax burden than families in other comparable countries.⁵¹

The former MP Miriam Cates has made a similar observation, pointing out that while a German family with a median income pays no tax at all, the same family in Britain will pay £5,936. The problem is exacerbated when only one parent works or when there is a big difference between parents' wages.⁵²

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- 48 K. Badenoch, 'Kemi Badenoch: 'Parenting Is a Two-Person Job. Where Are the Dads?', *Kemi Badenoch MP* (19 October 2024). [Link](#)
- 49 CSJ, 'Why Family Matters: Comprehensive Analysis of the Consequences of Family Breakdown' (March 2019). [Link](#)
- 50 S. Doughty, 'Marriage Break-Ups Cost Taxpayers £51bn a Year', *Daily Mail* (30 January 2018). [Link](#)
- 51 R. Jayawardena & T. Clougherty, 'Family-Friendly Taxation: How to restore fairness to the tax system', CPS (10 July 2023). [Link](#)
- 52 M. Cates, 'Our Tax System Must Recognise Parenting as a Service to the Nation', *ConservativeHome* (13 April 2022). [Link](#)

Those of us on the centre-right must reclaim family and community as the heart of our aspirational mission. Strong families provide the stability for children to dream big, while vibrant communities, rooted in local pride and mutual support, create environments where aspirations can flourish.

When people feel rooted in strong families and communities, they are far more likely to believe that their efforts can shape their future. In this sense, aspiration is sustained by a wider sense of personal agency – the belief that one’s choices, relationships and contributions genuinely matter.

This vision is not just about personal success but about collective prosperity. By championing the role of parents and local networks, we can restore trust with young families and working-class voters. Neglecting this risks failing a generation, leaving children without the confidence to aspire and communities without cohesion. Reclaiming this mission is essential to rebuilding a Britain where every individual, regardless of background, has the opportunity to thrive.

‘ Our country must rediscover its insatiable appetite for progress, ambition and greatness ’

The pillars of aspiration

These five ingredients – fairness, dynamism, personal responsibility, a stake in the future, and family and community – are the mutually supporting pillars of aspiration.

Personal responsibility turns ambition into action. Fairness rewards and incentivises hard work. Dynamism instils a can-do mindset. Ownership provides a tangible stake in personal and communal outcomes. Strong families and communities provide the support to allow us all to dream big.

What is the alternative? Victimhood induced, equality of outcomes forced, passivity rewarded, state dependence encouraged and selfishness celebrated – a damaging approach that settles for mediocrity, breeds complacency and stifles Britain’s potential.

Aspiration is the antidote to that complacency. Our country must rediscover its insatiable appetite for progress, ambition and greatness – an agenda that must be championed up and down the country.

Aspiration and the Public

'Everyone knows that talent and energy and enthusiasm and flair are evenly spread across the UK. It is opportunity that is not and it is the mission of this government to unite and level up across the whole UK not just because that is morally right but because if we fail then we are simply squandering vast reserves of human capital, we are failing to allow people to fulfil their potential and we are holding our country back.'

Boris Johnson, Levelling Up Speech, 15 July 2021

'Society is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead and those who are to be born.'

Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 1790

The challenge – a nation losing hope

Thanks to technological, social and medical advances, we reasonably expect that our children should experience a greater standard of living compared to their parents. We believe that the pursuit of financial stability, owning your own property, and one day being able to pass it on, will ultimately contribute to happiness and fulfilment. That if you work hard you should achieve success in life – broad tenets that have formed the basis of our intergenerational social compact.

Unsurprisingly, the polling evidence is that these expectations have not survived contact with contemporary reality. A recent YouGov survey revealed that 43% of Gen Z respondents (aged 18-27) felt they were less financially secure than their parents at the same age; 51% believe they are less happy than their parents' generation; and a striking 61% say they feel they need to work harder than their parents to achieve similar outcomes.⁵³

⁵³ YouGov, 'How Do Gen Z Britons Think Their Own Lives Compare to Their Parents?' (21 February 2025). [Link](#)

They aren't the only ones: Ipsos data from December 2025 showed a persistent pessimism about the economy, with 73% of Britons expecting it to worsen over the next 12 months, and only 7% expecting any improvement – that's lower than the levels seen during some of the most challenging economic periods in recent history, including the global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁴

Voters across generations feel as if the implicit deal – work hard to get ahead – is broken. Young people face unattainable homeownership and stagnant wages. Older voters worry about economic decline and cultural change. All share a sense that effort no longer yields reward.

‘ Voters across generations feel as if the implicit deal – work hard to get ahead – is broken ’

The opportunity – aspiration as the antidote

Despite this gloom, there are still people out there who respond to an aspirational message.

Analysis of the British Election Study⁵⁵ suggests the following were key features of the voting coalition assembled by the Conservatives in 2019:

- 1. Economic values:** They favoured free markets, lower taxes, and less government interference but expected targeted support from the state.
- 2. Social values:** They leant slightly authoritarian, valuing traditional norms, fairness and justice, law and order, and national identity. They were more socially conservative than 2019 Conservative MPs.
- 3. Cultural concerns:** They worried about rapid cultural change and immigration, prioritising the preservation of a national cultural identity.

54 Ipsos, 'Economic Optimism Remains Near Historic Lows, Capping a Year of Rock-Bottom Public Sentiment' (23 December 2025). [Link](#)

55 T. Bale, A. Wagner & A. Menon, 'The Death of May's Law: Intra- and Inter-Party Value Differences in Britain's Labour and Conservative Parties', *Political Studies* 70 (26 March 2021), pp.939-961. [Link](#)

4. Post-Brexit priorities: They took issues of national control and sovereignty seriously, reflecting a broader cultural and political alignment with the Leave vote in the 2016 referendum.

For younger voters, forward-looking policies like affordable housing, support for tech-driven jobs, and skills training could help to tackle Gen Z's financial insecurity and desire for progress. For most older voters, the winning approach is a combination of economic stability, cultural cohesion and robust law-and-order policies. In other words, a blend of Brexit's 'take back control' ethos with a forward-looking agenda championing British entrepreneurship, global trade leadership, and cultural confidence.

We believe that the British people are resilient, ambitious and ready for a brighter future. Yet they face real challenges. In January 2025, Ipsos published research on the most important issues facing the country.⁵⁶ The economy was top of the list (37%), followed by healthcare and immigration (both at 33%), then the cost of living (17%). Housing was next (16%) followed by crime/law and order (13%), with education and schools joint with poverty and inequality (12%). Climate change and the environment completed the list at 11%.

More recent YouGov polling shows that since then the top three issues have moved around a bit, and defence and security has edged out health, likely because of events in Iran. But broadly speaking these remain the key priorities. As of late April 2026, voters thought the most important issues facing the country were the economy (54%), immigration and asylum (49%), defence and security (30%), health (29%), welfare benefits (20%), crime (19%), tax (15%), housing (16%) and the environment (14%).⁵⁷

And it is easy to see how an aspiration agenda could be built that addresses these concerns, and the narratives that could be employed:

56 Ipsos, 'The Economy, NHS and Immigration Remain the Big Three Issues Facing Britain' (31 January 2025). [Link](#)

57 YouGov, 'Tracker: The Most Important Issues Facing the Country' [accessed 29 April 2026]. [Link](#)

Cost of living and the economy

We want to see an end to complacency. A Britain where hard work builds thriving lives. Families saving for holidays, local high streets bustling with small businesses, young innovators launching tech start-ups.

We'll unleash ambition by simplifying taxes, cutting red tape and fostering high-skill jobs, ensuring every Briton prospers. We'll turn our country into Entrepreneur Island, the Singapore of Europe, empowering wealth creators and attracting dynamic risk-takers.

This vision unites communities dreaming of a brighter future, where aspiration drives growth and families stand tall with pride in their achievements.

- **Fairness:** Remove barriers so every Briton rises through hard work, restoring a merit-based economy.
- **Dynamism:** Ignite entrepreneurship with support for innovators, building a vibrant, forward-looking Britain.
- **Personal responsibility:** Take charge of your financial future with taxes that reward effort, not stifle ambition.
- **A stake in the future:** Build wealth for your children, free from state overreach, securing lasting prosperity.
- **Family and community:** Empower families to thrive, strengthening local economies where everyone shares in success.

Health and the NHS

Imagine nurses using cutting-edge AI tools, families accessing swift care in local clinics, and communities trusting a revitalised, productive NHS. We'll streamline unnecessary bureaucracy and champion prevention, empowering Britons to live longer, healthier lives.

This vision unites urban professionals and rural families, ensuring every citizen can pursue their dreams, confident in a health service that's always there whenever we need it.

- **Fairness:** Guarantee swift, equal access to NHS care for all, ensuring hard-working families pursuing ambition are never held back by health barriers.

- **Dynamism:** Harness innovation to deliver efficient, patient-focused NHS care.
- **Personal responsibility:** Individuals should take ownership of their health, supported by systems that encourage choices to enhance well-being.
- **A stake in the future:** Secure an NHS that endures, a legacy of health for all generations.
- **Family and community:** Support families with accessible care, fostering resilient communities that thrive.

Immigration

A strong, sovereign Britain unlocks opportunity for all its people. Our vision is of a nation that takes back control with confidence and clarity – where illegal migrants are deported swiftly, ensuring our borders are a gateway to opportunity, not exploitation.

We'll build a system that prioritises British workers, strengthens communities, and restores pride in our shared national identity. We'll embrace international talent, aligned to the skills our country needs to thrive. By standing firm, we'll create a fairer, more cohesive Britain, where every citizen can aspire to a brighter future, secure in the knowledge that our country works for them first.

This vision unites us all, creating a Britain where ambition flourishes in a secure, proud society that celebrates its shared heritage.

- **Fairness:** Immigration should prioritise British workers and communities, ensuring opportunity is enhanced, not undermined, for all citizens.
- **Dynamism:** A merit-based system welcomes talent that fuels ambition, driving a vibrant and competitive Britain.
- **Personal responsibility:** Expect newcomers to contribute and uphold British values, strengthening our society.
- **A stake in the future:** Foster a sovereign nation where citizens take pride in a shared future.
- **Family and community:** Build cohesive communities rooted in shared values, where families thrive.

Housing

Picture young families moving into new garden towns, proudly owning their homes, and communities buzzing with local pride. We'll make housing affordable by streamlining planning and boosting supply, ensuring every Briton can build a secure future.

This vision unites generations, from city dwellers to village residents, creating a Britain where aspiration thrives in vibrant, family-friendly communities that every citizen calls home.

- **Fairness:** Homeownership must be accessible to all, ensuring ambition opens doors to security and stability, not just for the wealthy.
- **Dynamism:** Spark a housing boom by removing barriers, inspiring dreams of ownership.
- **Personal responsibility:** Hard work should lead to homeownership, empowering individuals to take charge of their futures through effort and ambition – rewarded with lasting security.
- **A Stake in the future:** Every citizen should feel invested in their community, with homeownership symbolising a shared stake in Britain's prosperity.
- **Family and community:** Deliberately design family-friendly towns, uniting communities with pride and opportunity.

Crime

Imagine families walking vibrant streets, police patrolling with smart tech, and trust in justice restored. We'll boost law enforcement and tackle crime's roots, creating cohesive neighbourhoods where ambition thrives.

This vision unites Britain, ensuring every citizen can pursue their dreams without fear, in a nation where safety and pride strengthen our shared future.

- **Fairness:** Law-abiding citizens deserve protection, with justice that is swift and certain, re-establishing trust in communities that doing the right thing will be rewarded.
- **Dynamism:** Innovative, tech-driven approaches to crime prevention can build stronger, resilient communities, inspiring confidence – but we also need to get the basics right again to guarantee compliance.

- **Personal responsibility:** Individuals must be accountable for their actions, fostering a society where respect for the law underpins opportunity. Low-level crimes must be swiftly nipped in the bud to restore faith in the system.
- **A stake in the future:** Safe communities empower citizens to aspire without fear, ensuring a legacy of security. Accepting that you are part of a well-run, functioning society breeds a desire to support the vibrancy of your neighbourhood.
- **Family and community:** Strong families, supported by cohesive communities, guide children toward ambition, reducing crime's root causes.

Education

Envision every child having the opportunity to maximise their talents – whether through a technical apprenticeship or a career-oriented university degree. We'll align learning with opportunity, empowering young people to succeed regardless of background.

This vision unites communities, building a Britain where education drives ambition and social mobility, ensuring every citizen dreams big in a confident, prosperous nation.

- **Fairness:** Ensure equal access to quality education, letting ambition define achievement.
- **Dynamism:** Innovate with vocational tech courses, igniting a can-do mindset in every child.
- **Personal responsibility:** Empower students to seize learning opportunities, owning their path to success.
- **A Stake in the future:** Equip youth with skills for a thriving Britain, securing their stake in tomorrow.
- **Family and community:** Support families to champion education, building communities where aspiration flourishes.

Aspiration – a message that stretches across the electorate

Above, we looked at the values shared by the 2019 Conservative voter cohort. But the truth is that aspiration is a message that appeals across the electorate, in various different ways.

'More in Common' recently unveiled a new segmentation of the British public, which they say moves 'beyond the traditional left-right divide to explore deeper values, beliefs, and behaviours shaping 2020s Britain'.⁵⁸ Based on extensive research, including polling over 20,000 people and numerous focus groups, they identified seven distinct voter segments: Traditional Conservatives; Rooted Patriots; Dissenting Disruptors; Established Liberals; Sceptical Scrollers, Incrementalist Left; and Progressive Activists.

Based on their summary of what drives each group, we believe they could (almost) all respond positively to a narrative of national aspiration, albeit in different ways:

Traditional Conservatives – 8% of the population

More in Common definition: 'Respectful of authority and tradition, Traditional Conservatives believe in individual responsibility and established norms that have served them well. Nostalgic for the past but optimistic about the future, they are deeply sceptical of many forces of change such as immigration or the path to Net Zero.'

This segment of voters welcomes ambition rooted in established values, merit and tradition, effort and security – honest work rewarded. For Traditional Conservatives, aspiration resonates strongly as a means of rewarding individual responsibility and preserving traditional norms, especially when applied to the economy or crime.

58 More in Common, 'Britain's Seven Political Segments' [accessed 17 July 2025]. [Link](#)

Rooted Patriots – 20% of the population

More in Common definition: 'A patriotic but politically untethered group which feels abandoned and overlooked by political elites and yearns for leaders with common sense, but does not want to overthrow the system as a whole. They are particularly concerned about community decline and the pressures of migration. Interventionist on economics but conservative on social issues, they have shaped much of Britain's politics over the past decade.'

For Rooted Patriots, aspiration appeals when tied to the language of community strength and national pride, particularly in the areas of immigration and crime policy. They would support policies that protect local identity and opportunities, so linking aspiration to patriotic, community-focused values would likely resonate powerfully with this segment.

Dissenting Disruptors – 20% of the population

More in Common definition: 'Frustrated with their circumstances with an appetite for radical solutions, Dissenting Disruptors crave dramatic change and strong leadership. Highly distrustful of institutions, opposed to multiculturalism and feeling disconnected from society, they are drawn to political movements that promise to overhaul the status quo and put people like them first.'

Aspiration connects with Disruptors if framed as a way to deliver radical change and restore opportunities for 'people like them,' particularly in housing and immigration policy. But they're wary of airy promises – they need concrete plans, and swift delivery. To win this group over, aspiration should be presented as a dramatic policy shift that prioritises ordinary Britons.

Established Liberals – 9% of the population

More in Common definition: 'A prosperous, confident segment who believe the system broadly works as it is and who trust experts to deliver continued progress. They have a strong belief in individual agency which can make them less empathetic to those who are struggling. Institutionally trusting, they maintain faith in democratic processes and have a strong information-centric way of engaging with issues.'

For this group, aspiration aligns with their belief in individual agency and progress, and they strongly resonate with economic and environment policies driven by innovation. They see aspiration as a path to continued prosperity – for them, the key to selling an aspiration agenda is emphasising dynamism and future prosperity.

Sceptical Scrollers – 10% of the population

More in Common definition: 'A digitally native group whose unhappiness with the social contract means they have lost faith in traditional institutions and seek alternative sources of truth online. Often shaped by their experience of the Covid pandemic, they prefer individual influencers over mainstream media and are increasingly drawn to conspiratorial thinking.'

Aspiration may feel particularly distant for this group due to their distrust of institutions, but tangible benefits like jobs and housing could resonate if framed as the result of empowering individuals against entrenched elites. They would also connect with aspirational messages on the economy and poverty, if couched in terms of personal empowerment and radically reforming broken systems.

Incrementalist Left – 21% of the population

More in Common definition: 'A civic-minded, community-oriented group holding views which are generally left of centre but with an aversion to the extreme; they prefer gradual reform over revolutionary change. They trust experts and institutions yet are largely tuned out of day-to-day politics and can be conflict-averse, stepping away from issues they see as particularly fraught or complex.'

This segment are the polar opposite of the Disruptors above. But there is still space to talk to them about aspiration when it is framed as a way to foster collective opportunity – a pragmatic philosophy, designed to create resilient and thriving communities.

Progressive Activists – 12% of the population

More in Common definition: 'A highly engaged and globally-minded group driven by concerns about social justice. Politically active but feeling increasingly alienated from mainstream party politics, they prioritise issues such as climate change and international affairs. Occasionally outliers on social issues, they maintain a strongly held and sometimes uncompromising approach to their beliefs.'

For Progressives, with their focus on outcomes over opportunity, and the collective over the individual, aspiration may seem like a hard sell. Yet elements of an aspiration message could still strike a chord: the focus on delivering people from poverty and fixing the housing crisis, for example, as a way to combat systemic inequality.

Summary

By championing aspiration through promoting economic growth, cultural confidence and tangible opportunity, politicians can chart a path that unites generations and social groups. Current UK voter attitudes reveal a nation that is weary but not hopeless, craving not just stability but opportunity – fertile ground for an aspiration-focused party.

And with 70% of voters believing the UK is on the wrong track,⁵⁹ the moment demands boldness, not caution. Playing it safe is no longer an option.

59 Ipsos, 'Right Direction or Wrong Track?' (24 April 2025). [Link](#)

The Tradition of Aspiration

'I want to see us build a country that is at ease with itself, a country that is confident, and a country that offers opportunity to all... I want to see us living in a country where enterprise is free to flourish, where aspiration and effort can lift you as far as you want to go.'

John Major, first speech as Prime Minister, 22 November 1990

'I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it's your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are or what your accent sounds like. Let us not underestimate what it will take to create that great meritocracy.'

Theresa May, 'Britain: the Great Meritocracy' Speech, 9 September 2016

‘For more than 150 years, aspiration has been at the heart of Conservative philosophy’

For more than 150 years, aspiration has been at the heart of Conservative philosophy. From Peel's promise to 'correct proved abuses and redress real grievances', to Disraeli's 'One Nation' vision, through Macmillan's housing drive, Thatcher's Right to Buy, and Cameron's Big Society, the Conservative Party has always been at its strongest when it has championed the strivers and given people the means to build a better life.

Aspiration has never been a passing slogan – it has been one of the defining threads of the Conservative, and conservative, tradition, the reason millions of working- and middle-class families have repeatedly turned to the party for hope, opportunity, and progress.

As detailed earlier, the Conservatives' electoral defeat in 2024 was not simply the result of political misfortune but of a deeper failure – a failure both of language and of policy.

For much of its modern history, the Conservative Party has succeeded when it has not just spoken about aspiration, but backed that rhetoric up with meaningful reform. But over the last 14 years, it too often did neither. Voters noticed. And they turned away.

By the time of the 2024 election, the perception that the Conservatives governed in the interests of the wealthy had become deeply entrenched. Among 2019 Tory voters who chose a different party in 2024, the third most cited reason was that the Conservatives ‘have mainly looked after the rich’.⁶⁰ For those who said they would never vote Conservative again, it was the most common explanation.

This was not simply a communications failure. Too often in Government, we failed to deliver on the issues that matter most for aspiration. The tax burden ultimately reached record highs, as income tax increasingly hit not just the wealthiest, but middle and higher earners alike – without the necessary improvements in public services to show for it. The ability to secure a decent, affordable home – perhaps the most fundamental enabler of aspiration – remains out of reach for too many, held back by years of political paralysis and policy drift.

‘Conservatives must recover a deep ideological purpose – but one that is tied to aspiration and rooted in the lives of ordinary voters’

To neglect aspiration today is not only to fail voters in the present; it is to betray the heritage that made the Conservative Party the natural home of Britain’s aspirational majority. This conclusion is increasingly shared across the conservative movement. Recent work by the Next Gen Tories campaign has similarly argued that any credible Conservative revival must rest on three pillars: wealth creation, aspiration and community.⁶¹

As we have covered earlier in this paper, the lesson of the last 14 years is twofold. First, Conservatives must recover a deep ideological purpose – but one that is tied to aspiration and rooted in the lives of ordinary voters. Without that, the party again risks becoming unanchored, drifting in response to events.

60 J. Frayne, ‘Common Ground Conservatism’, CPS (November 2024). [Link](#)

61 J. Cowling & J. Smith, ‘Conservative Revival: a New Radicalism’, Next Gen Tories (18 March 2026). [Link](#)

Second, ideology without serious policy development is empty. The Conservatives must now rebuild an aspirational agenda that is serious, believable, and rooted in the real concerns of the country. Only by doing both can they hope to recover.

It is therefore worth going back through history, to see how some of Britain's most successful politicians have matched a message of aspiration with real delivery.

Benjamin Disraeli (1804 – 1881)

In his Crystal Palace speech of 1872, Disraeli articulated a vision of what became known as One Nation conservatism. He emphasised the need to unite the 'two nations' – the rich and the poor – through social reform and opportunity.

Disraeli's rhetoric framed the Conservatives as a party that wanted to uplift the working classes, delivering reforms like the 1875 Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, which gave local authorities the power to clear slums and redevelop urban housing, thereby improving public health and reducing mortality rates in cities like Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow. It marked a significant shift toward local government responsibility for housing standards and laid early foundations for future social reform aimed at improving living conditions and strengthening civic responsibility.

Robert Peel (1788-1850)

In his 1834 Tamworth Manifesto, Sir Robert Peel laid out a practical vision that championed cautious reform to rectify inequities and unlock opportunity for the rising middle class – 'the correction of proved abuses and the redress of real grievances'. In essence, it was a promise to make Britain a place where effort could pay off.

His repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, despite splitting his party, prioritised free trade and the national interest.⁶² Many, including Milton Friedman, regard the repeal of the Corn Laws as the true start of global free trade and globalisation, which, since 1850, has lifted 3.3 billion people out of extreme poverty.⁶³

‘ Many regard the repeal of the Corn Laws as the true start of global free trade and globalisation, which, since 1850, has lifted 3.3 billion people out of extreme poverty ’

Taken together, this is why the late Conservative historian, Lord Robert Blake, credited Peel with having created a ‘libertarian fiscal policy which would in the end bring increased affluence to every class in society and thus relax the tensions which in the hungry 1830s and 40s threatened revolution in Britain’.⁶⁴

Noel Skelton (1880-1935)

One of the most famous and successful examples of conservative aspiration is the idea of the ‘property-owning democracy’. Although this compelling vision is commonly associated with Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, it was, in fact, the brainchild of Noel Skelton, a Conservative Scottish Unionist MP between 1922 and 1935.

Skelton is a little-known figure today, yet he was the intellectual engine behind the 1920s parliamentary grouping of young, talented and ultimately highly influential Conservative MPs, of which Eden and Macmillan were part. Skelton, as the source of much of the group’s policy brainpower, developed ideas and advocated values which in today’s world could be considered intellectual forerunners of the ‘Big Society’ and ‘Red Toryism’.⁶⁵

62 N. Gash, *Peel and the Conservative Party 1830–1850* (1972).

63 M. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962).

64 D. Hurd, ‘Douglas Hurd’s Tamworth Manifesto’, *LRB* (17 March 1998). [Link](#)

65 D. Torrance, *Noel Skelton and the Property-Owning Democracy* (2010).

Anthony Eden (1897-1977) and Harold Macmillan (1894-1986)

Although Skelton may have been the brains behind the property-owning democracy, it was Eden who introduced the idea to the mainstream, placing it front and centre of his speech at the 1946 Conservative Party conference in Blackpool.⁶⁶

‘It wasn’t until the early 1950s that this vision was brought to life by Harold Macmillan who, as Minister for Housing, built a staggering 300,000 homes a year’

However, it wasn’t until the early 1950s that the vision of mass homeownership was brought to life by Harold Macmillan who built a staggering 300,000 homes a year – many of which continue to be occupied today, in what can be taken as both a credit to Eden and Macmillan and as a damning indictment of our collective failure to build enough houses in the decades that have followed.

As Prime Minister, Macmillan oversaw a transformation in living standards for millions of Britons, with annual economic growth rates of around 4%, significantly increasing prosperity and reducing inequality.⁶⁷

Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) and Nigel Lawson (1932-2023)

The Conservative campaign for mass home ownership reached its zenith in the 1980s, when occupiers of council properties, many of which had been built under 1950s Conservative governments, were allowed to purchase their properties as part of Margaret Thatcher’s ‘Right to Buy’.

From an aspiration perspective, the policy should be seen in the context of Thatcher’s and Nigel Lawson’s wider vision for Britain: namely, a return to a more distinctly British (and conservative) set of values, including personal responsibility, individual freedom, free and open trade and a smaller state.⁶⁸

66 P. Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945–1951* (2006).

67 A. Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (2007).

68 N. Lawson, *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical* (1992).

Since the introduction of the Right to Buy in 1980, more than 4.5 million social tenants have taken up the opportunity to buy their homes from the state. Voices on the left are often critical of the policy, arguing that it has depleted the social housing stock and so undermined the social contract. But in reality, Britain today still has a comparatively large social housing sector by international standards – around 17% of homes as of 2019, one of the highest shares in the OECD.⁶⁹

The real constraint on aspiration today is that we are not building enough homes of any tenure. To renew Thatcher's legacy, Conservatives should focus on unlocking far greater housebuilding so many more families can take their first step into ownership.

‘Thatcher and Lawson’s vision for Britain recognised that encouraging individuals to take responsibility means giving them the space to take risks and providing an environment that rewards success’

More broadly, Thatcher and Lawson's vision for Britain recognised that encouraging individuals to take responsibility means giving them the space to take risks and providing an environment that rewards success.

Starting a business is high-risk but can be high-reward. If there are too many state-crafted obstacles, you crush success and growth before it begins.

Thatcher understood this, and so did Lawson, which was why, when public finances allowed, they addressed perverse, anti-enterprise disincentives to entrepreneurship and aspiration by slashing both the top and bottom rates of tax, pursued financial deregulation and championed small businesses – ultimately leading to the 1986 ‘Big Bang’.

As Lawson himself reflected in a foreword to a collection of CPS essays 20 years on, ‘without that reform, it is doubtful if London would have retained its place as Europe’s pre-eminent financial centre, and certain that it would not have become the foremost truly international financial centre of the

69 A. Morton, ‘The Right to Own’, CPS (9 June 2022). [Link](#)

modern globalised economy that it is today, to the great benefit of the British economy as a whole'.⁷⁰

In 1993, Thatcher reflected that: 'Incentives do matter both to those in the higher brackets and those who aspire to get there. New inventions, new business, good top management, it is these things which create not only the wealth of individuals but the wealth of nations.'⁷¹

As we know, the Big Bang unleashed the individual and collective aspiration of millions of Britons who wanted better for themselves, their families and their country – the rewards of which we continue to reap today.

‘ Starting a business is high-risk but can be high-reward. If there are too many state-crafted obstacles, you crush success and growth before it begins ’

The Big Society and Levelling Up: grand visions, unfulfilled ambitions

In the years that followed Thatcher and Lawson, there has been no shortage of great ideas on the centre-right – but what has too often been missing is effective execution. This was typified nowhere more than with the Big Society and Levelling Up.

Cameron's 'Big Society' set out to fuse devolved, free-market empowerment with a renewed social contract. Johnson's 'Levelling Up' vision pledged to bring opportunity, achievement and civic pride to every region. These were both serious philosophies developed by deep thinkers, driven by a determination to reshape Britain. Both, if carried through, might have crafted a legacy akin to Disraeli, Macmillan or Thatcher. Yet both ultimately remained at best abstract concepts, never delivering the concrete, ground-level change they promised.

70 N. Lawson in 'Big Bang 20 Years On', CPS (2006). [Link](#)

71 M. Thatcher, 'Speech to Citibank in Singapore', Margaret Thatcher Foundation Website (1 September 1993). [Link](#)

David Cameron and the Big Society

The notion that we need to preserve and protect is in the philosophical DNA of Conservatives. At its core, that's what Cameron's Big Society sought: for communities up and down the country to take ownership of their local areas to improve them in any way they saw fit, free of overbearing government interference. Essentially, to get back to the good old days when families, neighbours and community groups took personal responsibility for their localities, when isolation and loneliness were rare and not endemic.

The Big Society was also a response to the fear that Britain and Britons had become too reliant on support from the state during the New Labour years. Weaning us off meant establishing a more responsible mindset – not just by reducing central government grants to local authorities.

**‘The notion that we need to preserve
and protect is in the philosophical
DNA of Conservatives’**

Looking at its roots, you can understand why Big Society was appealing as a philosophical concept: it combined classic free market economics and principles with a rejuvenated belief in the power of a functioning social contract – that the more you put into our country, the more you get out. Should both those approaches have taken root, they would have become a powerful antidote to the dependency and over-reliance on state services that we have become accustomed to.

At (one of) its launches, the aspirational priorities for the Big Society were announced as intending to:

1. Give communities more powers (localism and devolution)
2. Encourage people to take an active role in their communities (volunteerism)
3. Transfer power from central to local government
4. Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises
5. Publish government data (open/transparent government)

Each was designed to decentralise power and decision-making from the centre and put people power right at the heart of societal reform: in essence, giving them the tools to aspire for their communities.

The fact that the agenda was launched at the same time as George Osborne's attempted austerity programme was unfortunate – it gave ready ammunition to statist opponents, allowing them to criticise the Big Society as being nothing more than a slick bit of PR cover.

‘ The Big Society was appealing as a philosophical concept, but the agenda never cohered ’

This was an unfair attack: Cameron's speeches on the topic were always enthusiastic and energetic, and those around him at the time make crystal clear that this was a 'great passion' for him.⁷² His driving, conservative mission was to empower local people to roll up their sleeves and for the government to get out of their way as they sought to better their localities.

But the agenda never cohered, perhaps because its architect – Steve Hilton – left government relatively quickly, but more likely because it was never the core priority. Cameron stopped using the term himself after 2013. At the 2015 election, the Big Society did not feature in the Conservative manifesto. Some schemes implemented under its banner were, to varying degrees, successful. The National Citizen Service (ended by Sir Keir Starmer) and the free schools agenda have been undeniably transformative. But ultimately, it fell short.

Boris Johnson and Levelling Up

Next came 'Levelling Up'. One of the core Conservative beliefs has always been that opportunity should not be hoarded by the few, nor confined to any one part of our country. It was this deep instinct that geography should not determine destiny that Boris Johnson's government sought to bring to the forefront through its Levelling Up agenda after the 2019 General Election.

72 'David Cameron Launches Tories' 'Big Society' Plan', *BBC News* (19 July 2010). [Link](#)

At its heart, Levelling Up was a simple but profound idea: to give every person, in every corner of Britain, the chance to aspire, achieve, and take pride in the place they called home. As Robert Jenrick said, in a former incarnation, what drove the then government was ‘a belief that opportunities should be more equal and background no barrier to success. And a commitment to helping those who have been held back by accident, circumstance or misstep, to achieve the fulfilment and happiness of rewarding work, security at home and nourishing relationships’.⁷³

Levelling Up was about restoring dignity to communities that had for too long been overlooked by Westminster. As a philosophical concept, it was both a return to conservative ideals of opportunity and aspiration, and a bold reimagining of the state’s role in enabling local success.

‘ Levelling Up was about restoring dignity to communities that had for too long been overlooked by Westminster ’

A dedicated Department for Levelling Up was established, and in 2022, a comprehensive White Paper set out 12 missions to be achieved by 2030 – from narrowing education and health gaps to boosting pay, productivity, and local pride.⁷⁴ Each aim was rooted in the idea of aspiration that where you live should not dictate the opportunities you can seize. Crucially, these aspirations were cast not as charity or redistribution, but as a call to empower people and places to stand on their own feet.

But, as with the Big Society, the ambition of Levelling Up ran into harsh realities – derailed in part by the pandemic, but also constrained by institutional and fiscal limitations. The commitment to new infrastructure through Levelling Up was real: broadband expansion reached 85% of homes with gigabit-speed internet by 2024, up from virtually none in 2010.⁷⁵ But on physical connectivity, a cornerstone of regional growth, results were a lot patchier.

73 R. Jenrick, ‘Speech to the Centre for Social Justice - Close to Home Report Launch’ (25 February 2021). [Link](#)

74 DLUHC, ‘Levelling Up the United Kingdom Policy Paper’ (2 February 2022). [Link](#)

75 A. Clark & C. Baker, ‘Gigabit Broadband in the UK: Government Targets, Policy, and Funding’, HoC Library (21 November 2024). [Link](#)

HS2 stands out as the obvious example. Designed as a transformative rail strategy, its failure is emblematic of wider failures of to deliver on expectations. Similarly, new funding streams like the Towns Fund and Levelling Up Fund did target places in need. These grants supported local regeneration, from high street improvements to enterprise hubs. But their impact was limited by short-termism, opaque allocation and an over-centralised model.

At the heart of Levelling Up was a belief in local leadership, and this was an area where change genuinely was achieved. As of September 2024, there are 12 combined authorities with directly elected metro mayors in England with powers over transport, skills and planning.

‘ The scale of investment behind Levelling Up was modest, and there was no real attempt to galvanise the private sector into filling the gap ’

But in truth, the gap between rhetoric and reality was not just about the pandemic. The scale of investment behind Levelling Up was modest, and there was no real attempt to galvanise the private sector into filling the gap.⁷⁶

We would argue that the failings of Levelling Up were not in its ideals, but in the limitations of political will, fiscal constraints, and delivery mechanisms. Like Cameron’s Big Society, it offered a powerful vision of what a more aspirational Britain could look like – a vision yet to be fully realised, but one whose lessons must shape conservative thinking for the years ahead.

Schools and welfare: examples of aspirational policy success

We said above that aspiration was not a consistent or central narrative theme between 2010 and 2024 – that it was too often relegated as a priority due to the political realities of austerity, Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this, there were still pockets of policy where it played a meaningful role, most notably in education and welfare. Not by coincidence, these were also the areas where the Conservatives had the most success.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Schools reform

Education must be at the core of any aspirational policy programme. And Conservative school reforms were designed with a single, moral objective: to give every child, regardless of background, the chance to succeed.

The focus between 2010 and 2014 was unapologetically on standards, choice and accountability. As Education Secretary from 2010-14, Michael Gove led a radical programme of change to raise expectations in the classroom and expand autonomy for schools. The Academies Act 2010 enabled state schools to convert to academy status, freeing them from local authority control.

‘ Education must be at the core
of any aspirational policy program ’

Simultaneously, new ‘free schools’ were invited to open. These were state-funded but independently run, often established by groups of teachers, parents, or charities with a vision for better local provision.

Free schools in particular were initially met with fierce resistance, dismissed by critics as gimmicks that would exacerbate inequality. But by 2015, more than 400 had opened or been approved – and they were eight times more likely to be located in the poorest areas than the richest.⁷⁷

Crucially, their presence had a ripple effect: in every year except 2010, the opening of a free school was associated with significant performance gains in the weakest nearby primary schools – over and above national improvements.⁷⁸ These were reforms that raised the floor for all, not just the ceiling for a few.

Schools policy more broadly was a massive success for Conservative governance between 2010 and 2024. England, the largest UK school system, climbed from 17th to 11th place globally in mathematics and now

⁷⁷ J. Simons, ‘Now We Have New Evidence About Free Schools. And It Shows That They’re Working’, Policy Exchange (9 March 2015). [Link](#)

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

ranks 13th in both reading and science, placing it among the highest-performing Western countries.⁷⁹ SNP-run Scotland, by comparison, has performed abysmally in recent years. As of late 2023, the catastrophic fall in educational standards is the equivalent of today's teenagers missing around 16 months of maths teaching compared with those in 2012, 18 months of science, and eight months of reading.⁸⁰

‘Schools policy more broadly was a massive success for Conservative governance between 2010 and 2024’

Welfare reform

Welfare reform under Iain Duncan Smith similarly embodied the Conservative vision of an aspirational society: one where every individual is supported to stand on their own two feet, rather than trapped in dependency.

This reform in the early 2010s was rooted in the principle of shared responsibility and a simple, moral conviction: that meaningful work offers not just income, but dignity, purpose and the best route out of poverty. It emphasised that a thriving society requires a thriving social contract, where the government supports individuals making the right choices, but responsibility for those choices ultimately lies with the individual. And with Universal Credit (UC) as its flagship reform, it sought to replace a system that too often disincentivised effort with one that empowered individuals to help themselves.

The Conservatives had inherited a benefits system where claimants could lose up to 80% of every additional pound earned due to overlapping benefit withdrawals.⁸¹ Universal Credit applied a consistent taper rate, allowing people to keep more of their earnings as they worked more

79 Department for Education, 'England Among Highest Performing Western Countries in Education' (5 December 2023). [Link](#)

80 S. Sodha, 'Scottish Schools Have Tumbled from Top of the Class. This Is What Went Wrong', *The Guardian* (10 December 2023). [Link](#)

81 CSJ, 'Unfinished Business: Next Steps for Welfare Reform in Post-COVID Britain' (October 2020). [Link](#)

hours.⁸² It was a radical simplification of the benefits system that merged six major working-age benefits (Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit, and Working & Child Tax Credits) into one monthly payment.

The foundations of Universal Credit were established during the party's time in opposition in the late 2000s – just as the groundwork for the policies of the 2030s will need to be laid today.

‘ The introduction of a benefit cap in 2013 enshrined a simple core principle: no family on welfare should receive more than the average working household ’

The Centre for Social Justice, co-founded by Duncan Smith, had long argued that the old welfare system contributed to ‘Breakdown Britain’: a landscape of entrenched disadvantage marked by worklessness, family breakdown, debt, and addiction.⁸³ The answer, they argued, was not just higher spending, but structural reform that restored individual agency and social responsibility. In office, this vision became reality through Universal Credit.

But welfare reform in the early 2010s went beyond benefits. The Conservatives introduced a range of ‘work-first’ policies to reinforce the link between support and responsibility, helping nearly half a million people into work.⁸⁴ Tougher conditionality meant that claimants were expected to actively seek work or training, with sanctions applied for non-compliance. The introduction of a benefit cap in 2013 enshrined a simple core principle: no family on welfare should receive more than the average working household. Each of these reforms was underpinned by the belief that welfare should be a springboard, not a crutch.

82 DWP, ‘Universal Credit: Welfare That Works’ (11 November 2010). [Link](#)

83 CSJ, ‘Breakthrough Britain: Ending the Costs of Social Breakdown’ (July 2007). [Link](#)

84 DWP, ‘Work Programme – Competitive Market Delivering Constant Improvement’ (6 March 2014). [Link](#)

The social justice strategy, published in 2012, reflected a broader goal: to intervene early and tackle the complex causes of poverty, not just its symptoms.⁸⁵ The Troubled Families Programme, launched the same year, provided intensive support to families facing multiple disadvantages, combining education, employment, and parenting support into one joined-up effort. Alongside this, measures such as raising the personal income tax allowance helped more people to keep more of what they earned. These were practical steps to help make aspiration viable for every household.

‘By January 2025, Universal Credit claimants had surged to 7.5 million, with 23% of the UK population receiving some form of benefit’

By 2015, welfare reform was beginning to bear fruit. Employment reached record highs, unemployment fell to historic lows, and early evidence suggested Universal Credit was working as intended: claimants were more likely to move into work than those on legacy benefits. Department for Work and Pensions analysis found that early UC recipients were eight percentage points more likely to be in employment within 270 days of their claim.⁸⁶

Yet progress stalled in the years that followed, and the successes were outright reversed due to the pandemic, which triggered a sharp rise in welfare dependency and exposed key structural weaknesses in the system.

By January 2025, Universal Credit claimants had surged to 7.5 million, with 23% of the UK population receiving some form of benefit.⁸⁷ By the end of the year, the figure had increased to a shocking 8.4 million.⁸⁸ The dramatic and persistent rise in working-age and incapacity benefits has been equally well publicised. The case for a new phase of reform – rooted in the same principles of aspiration, agency, and early intervention – is clearer than ever.

85 DWP, ‘Social Justice: Transforming Lives’ (13 March 2012). [Link](#)

86 CSJ, ‘Unfinished Business: Next Steps for Welfare Reform in Post-COVID Britain’ (October 2020). [Link](#)

87 A. Hagopian & D. Maddox, ‘Welfare in Numbers: The Facts Behind Britain’s Soaring Benefits Bill’, *The Independent* (2 July 2025). [Link](#)

88 I. Jones & A. Fox, ‘UK Universal Credit Claimants Rise by More than a Million in 2025’, *AJBell* (20 January 2026). [Link](#)

Tax and housing: from pillars to blockers of aspiration

A supportive tax system and a steady supply of affordable housing should sit at the heart of an aspirational society: the promise that if you work hard, you can build wealth, put down roots, and own a home. But in modern Britain, that vision has drifted out of reach. Rising taxes and house prices have turned the key pillars of aspiration into barriers – leaving the vast majority of people unable to accumulate wealth, and homeownership a fading dream for millions.

Tax policy

Tax policy under George Osborne was rooted in a Conservative conviction that opportunity should be earned, not blighted by excessive bureaucracy or hidden taxes. It rested on the belief that a fair system rewards effort, allowing every individual, regardless of background, to aspire and advance.

‘ At the heart of Osborne’s agenda was a sweeping rise in the income tax personal allowance (advocated by the Centre for Policy Studies), which grew from £6,475 in 2010 to £10,000 by April 2014 ’

In the early 2010s, the Treasury duly set out to make work pay, simplify tangled tax codes, and introduce targeted reliefs that put more money into the pockets of those striving to get on.

Through targeted tweaks, the tax system was shaped to reflect a commitment to compensating hard work. While taxes did not fall, they did remain broadly stable as a share of GDP, in sharp contrast to the post-pandemic years.

At the heart of Osborne's agenda was a sweeping rise in the income tax personal allowance (advocated by the Centre for Policy Studies), which grew from £6,475 in 2010 to £10,000 by April 2014. This series of uplifts delivered average savings of around £700 per worker and lifted 3.4 million low earners completely out of the tax net by 2015. For many on basic-rate incomes, take-home pay rose by over £800 annually, tangibly reinforcing the promise that honest work would never go unrewarded.

Osborne and his team consistently framed these cuts as 'about making sure that we use every penny we can to back hard-working people who want to get on in life'.⁸⁹ Polling showed that over 85% of the public supported raising the allowance to £12,500, making it the most popular tax pledge in the 2015 election campaign.⁹⁰

‘ Polling showed that over 85% of the public supported raising the allowance to £12,500, making it the most popular tax pledge in the 2015 election campaign ’

Osborne also established the Office of Tax Simplification in 2010 and abolished more than 40 outdated reliefs and allowances that cluttered the tax code.⁹¹ From 2014, taxpayers received annual statements showing exactly where their contributions were spent, an innovation designed to foster trust in how the state uses its revenues. Age-related allowances were unified into a single personal allowance bracket, and discussions began on aligning National Insurance with income tax to reduce hidden marginal rates, steps that ensured that climbing the career ladder wasn't penalised by sudden cliffs in taxation.

In 2015 the Marriage Allowance was introduced, letting a lower-earning spouse transfer £1,000 of their tax-free income to their partner. Roughly four million couples benefited, saving up to £250 each per year, an emblem

89 P. Wintour, 'Welfare Reforms: We Will Make Work Pay, Says George Osborne', *The Guardian* (2 April 2013). [Link](#)

90 Ipsos, 'Personal Allowances Rise the Most Popular of Conference Season Tax Pledges' (16 October 2014). [Link](#)

91 Chartered Institute of Taxation, 'Abolition of the Office for Tax Simplification' (14 May 2023). [Link](#)

of the state backing family responsibility.⁹² At the same time, stamp duty was overhauled into a smooth, banded system: by scrapping punitive cliff edges, the reform cut bills for 98% of homebuyers and saved average purchasers over £4,000, helping families onto the housing ladder without penal tax jumps.⁹³

By 2015, millions felt the difference: disposable incomes for lower and middle-earners were markedly higher, and work incentives strengthened as marginal rates fell. Politically, these measures reshaped the Conservative narrative, from one of spending cuts alone to a platform of tax relief for the many, cementing the idea that those who work hard deserve the chance to keep more of what they earn.

‘Tax policy became much more complicated, and various tweaks and cliff-edges were introduced that produced sharp disincentives to aspiration’

These reforms complemented education and welfare changes, offering a coherent framework in which effort was rewarded, ambition supported, and every individual could see a tangible reward for endeavour. Crucially, this suite of micro-changes took place against the backdrop of a broadly stable tax burden and restrained public spending, conditions that amplified their impact and reinforced the message that growth and fairness could go hand in hand.

In the years that followed, however, the early coherence of Osborne’s tax agenda began to fray as Brexit and the pandemic dominated British politics. It was also true that it never quite achieved many of its stated objectives: overall, tax policy became much more complicated, and various tweaks and cliff-edges were introduced that produced sharp disincentives to aspiration at particular income points, especially those where benefits were withdrawn. The relatively meagre marriage allowance, similarly, still left us with the least family-friendly tax system in the Western world.⁹⁴

92 HMT, ‘Marriage Transferable Tax Allowance Announced by Government’ (30 September 2013). [Link](#)

93 R. Mason & K. Allen, ‘George Osborne Unveils Stamp Duty Overhaul in Autumn Statement’, *The Guardian* (3 December 2014). [Link](#)

94 R. Jayawardena & T. Clougherty, ‘Family-Friendly Taxation’, CPS (10 July 2023). [Link](#)

But still, things post-Osborne got markedly worse. Under Theresa May, Philip Hammond did raise the personal allowance further and backed away from further cuts to corporation tax in favour of fiscal caution. But the government also started to reopen the spending taps, inevitably leading to pressure for tax rises down the line.

Then came the pandemic, which saw Rishi Sunak shift policy dramatically from tax-cutting conservatism to expansive fiscal intervention. Emergency measures, including temporary VAT cuts, furlough schemes, and 'Eat Out to Help Out', were widely – though not universally – welcomed. Yet by 2021, record levels of borrowing and surging inflation had fuelled a new wave of tax pressures.

‘ The UK has diverged from peer economies by failing to return spending and taxation to pre-crisis levels ’

Income tax thresholds were frozen, triggering fiscal drag, and the Health and Social Care Levy was introduced to meet the mounting demands of the NHS and social care, which was accompanied by a collapse in productivity in the healthcare system. At the same time, debt servicing costs rose sharply as interest rates climbed – something Sunak had repeatedly warned about. Structural constraints, an ageing population, anaemic productivity growth, and a retreat from spending restraint pushed the tax burden above 37 per cent of GDP, the highest since the 1940s.

As Prime Minister, Sunak prioritised fiscal stability following Liz Truss's short-lived premiership, with Jeremy Hunt raising corporation tax to 25 per cent (albeit while introducing 'full expensing' for capital investment – another CPS proposal). Modest National Insurance cuts followed, but the broader trend was unmistakable: a shift from aspirational liberalism to a tax system shaped by crisis, constraint, and rising demands on the state.

Indeed, while the pandemic was an unprecedented global shock, the UK has diverged from peer economies by failing to return spending and taxation to pre-crisis levels. Any government serious about building an aspirational society must grapple with this new normal and address the structural pressures driving high public spending, so that the tax system can return to upholding the principle that hard work should pay.

Housing policy

The UK's housing crisis is clearly not a problem created by the Conservative Party. Britain's housing dysfunction stretches back to the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which effectively nationalised development rights and disincentivised local communities from supporting new buildings. But nowhere has the failure of the aspiration agenda been more visible.

The task before the Conservatives in 2010 was immense but clear: to fix a broken planning system, unlock more land for homes, and get Britain building again in the wake of the financial crisis. A growing population and an ageing housing stock demanded bold reform – pressures which sustained increases in immigration levels would only exacerbate.

Yet while improvements were made, the core failure of this period was an inability to sufficiently increase housing supply.

‘ The core failure of this period was an inability to sufficiently increase housing supply ’

The Help to Buy equity loan scheme enabled nearly 390,000 households, more than 80% of them first-time buyers, to purchase a home. Stamp duty changes, including first-time buyer relief and the removal of punitive tax thresholds, significantly lowered transaction costs. For renters, the Tenant Fees Act 2019 eliminated hundreds of millions in hidden charges.

But despite these achievements, the Conservatives still fell far short of solving the supply crisis. The National Planning Policy Framework, introduced in 2012, streamlined planning guidance and tilted the system in favour of sustainable development. But while housing completions rose from 2013 onward, they still consistently lagged behind what was needed – and far below the 300,000 homes per year target.

Today, the number of new homes in England has fallen to its lowest level for nearly a decade. Labour promised to build 1.5 million new homes in five years, but official figures show just 208,600 were created in England in 2024/25, down from 221,409 the previous year.⁹⁵

This inability to build at scale has had profound economic and social consequences. Over the last four decades, England has grown its housing stock by just 0.8% a year, compared to 1.1% in France. That seemingly small difference means that, had England matched French building rates since 1982, it would have 2.9 million more homes today.

‘As things stand, in the UK we now have a shortage of around 6.5 million houses’

Instead, young people are living with their parents for longer, renters face escalating costs, and even middle earners in thriving cities find themselves priced out of homeownership. As things stand, in the UK we now have a shortage of around 6.5 million houses.⁹⁶

Any future Conservative government committed to fairness and opportunity must reckon with this reality. For all the incremental reforms, the Conservative Party between 2010 and 2024 presided over a housing system that remained fundamentally unfixable. Without deep structural changes, Britain will continue to fail a generation – who have found that even if they do everything right, there’s nowhere to live.

95 K. Devlin, ‘Number of new homes in England plummets to near-decade low despite Labour pledge for housebuilding revolution’, *The Independent* (20 November 2025). [Link](#)

96 B. Hopkinson, ‘How Many Homes Does the UK Need?’, CPS (July 2025). [Link](#)

Conclusion

'For me, Conservatism is about giving people the chance to make something of themselves. It's the chance to build something: a career, a business, a family. To acquire capital and, through it, security: savings, a house, investments, a pension, so that even if today is tough, tomorrow is bright. That's what enterprise and opportunity mean to me. It's not about handouts – it's about helping people help themselves. Government should clear the way, not block the path.'

Kemi Badenoch, leadership launch speech, September 2024

The defeat of 2024 provides the Conservative Party with an all too rare opportunity for root and branch transformation and change. Or, as Kemi Badenoch has put it, a need to return to 'first principles'.⁹⁷

**‘ Right across the country, individuals
need to feel a sense of ambition ’**

In a letter to Conservative MPs in July 2025, Badenoch listed those principles as:

- Freedom (of speech, of markets, of association)
- Pro-enterprise
- Personal responsibility
- Living within our means
- National interest before international interest
- Lower taxes and a smaller state
- Secure borders

⁹⁷ S. Francis, 'Badenoch promises change after historic Tory leadership win', *BBC News* (3 November 2024). [Link](#)

For the reasons discussed in this paper, we firmly believe this list must be wrapped within a broader agenda of aspiration. Cultivating a culture of hopeful ambition by encouraging individuals to take responsibility for themselves, combined with effective economic incentives and rewards – a smaller state, controlled bureaucracy, supported with lower taxation.

For us, aspiration should be viewed in the widest possible context – social mobility and meritocracy, yes, but also a boundless hope that our country can be great again; that businesses can prosper with risk-taking entrepreneurs unencumbered; that education can be championed; that the family unit can be trusted as the healthy foundation of our society; and much more besides.

‘ We need to lift the country out of the corrosive cycle of defeatism that now hangs over our politics ’

Right across the country, individuals need to feel a sense of ambition. They need to know the government has their back, that it is willing them to get ahead in life. That if they work hard, they will be championed. That if they innovate, they’ll reap the rewards.

We need to replace weary cynicism with earnestness and sincerity. That’s where ‘aspiration’ as a unifying framework comes in.

However good a party’s policy solutions are, they will be lost in the digital ether without an effective narrative compass to drive the message home in the minds of the electorate.

As we have attempted to argue in this paper, we firmly believe that reclaiming, reasserting, and renewing ‘aspiration’ as a core national value is the answer to Britain’s problems – and that the vision we have set out here is our nation’s best hope of making it happen.

But aspiration must mean more than a slogan or a policy theme. We need to lift the country out of the corrosive cycle of defeatism that now hangs over our politics. At present, too much of the national conversation is dominated by decline – a sense that Britain's best days are behind it, that nothing works, and nothing ever will. That mindset risks becoming self-fulfilling if it is not challenged.

Conservatives cannot be content simply to echo this gloom. We must level with people about the scale of our difficulties – stagnant growth, broken services, a bloated and indebted state, a crippling tax burden, families struggling under pressure – but we must also chart a path beyond them. That is the task of leadership: to acknowledge what is wrong, while inspiring confidence that it can be put right. Thatcher in 1979 and Cameron in 2010 both won because they convinced people that tomorrow could be better than today.

‘Aspiration is the belief that Britain’s future can be brighter – that effort is rewarded, that talent is celebrated, and that hard work opens doors’

If we allow ourselves to be dragged into a politics of permanent complaint, we will become indistinguishable from those who rail against decline without ever offering a way forward. Aspiration is the belief that Britain's future can be brighter – that effort is rewarded, that talent is celebrated, and that hard work opens doors.

That is how we rebuild trust, restore pride in our nation, and assemble a coalition stretching across the electorate. The way out of the doom loop is not despair, but belief – belief in Britain, and belief in the power of its people to achieve more.

‘It’s true that there are some who publicly criticise those who aspire to a higher standard of living. But the truth is that human aspiration in all its fullness – the arts, the sciences, commerce, travel, intellectual pursuits – all these have never had greater scope than that opened up by the material benefits which western capitalism, uniquely, has brought into existence.’

Margaret Thatcher, Young Conservative Conference, 7 February 1987

Epilogue

Whether in the civil service of William Pitt, the industrial boom of the 18th and 19th centuries, or the Thatcher revolution of the late 20th century, our country has always succeeded when it has placed its faith in the talents and abilities of the British people. At its best, the Conservative Party has been the standard bearer for merit and ambition, which have allowed those capabilities to flourish, to grow, and to be rewarded.

Reading this paper and Lord Gove's foreword, one cannot help but be reminded of the fact that the Conservative Party cannot rebuild itself or the country unless it embraces that role once again. In order to do so, we must be honest about the challenges and choices that the country faces, and present a serious, detailed plan for how we can enable a culture of merit and aspiration to flourish once more.

**‘ The Conservative Party has been
the standard-bearer for merit and ambition,
which have allowed those capabilities to
flourish, to grow, and to be rewarded ’**

Stripped back to its barest basics, the idea of rewarding aspiration is a very simple one. When societies create conditions which reward those who can combine aspiration, talent and drive, they flourish, at the collective level as well as the individual one. As the authors of this paper rightly identify, there are three conditions which are found in almost all societies which genuinely reward ambition.

First, incentivising and rewarding hard work, risk-taking and success.

People aspire when they trust that their work will count for something – when the rules are fair, and when playing by them isn't a disadvantage.

The world's most successful and dynamic economies share some common characteristics: low taxes, light-touch regulation in areas like housing and energy, and a recognition that people are best placed to run their own

lives. Whenever we've abided by these simple rules-of-thumb, we have succeeded; whenever we've rejected them, we've stalled.

In Britain today, it is simply too hard to make the right choices and take risks, and too easy to do the opposite. That's true for the entrepreneur who leaves a stable job to start their own firm, or the person working two jobs yet earning less than their neighbour on welfare. When a working family needs to earn £71,000 to out-earn a family with three children on benefits, our incentives are clearly wrong.

Risks must be worth taking. That requires a reward – not guaranteed, but genuinely possible – for effort, ambition and hard work.

Second, aspiration and merit can only flourish when a country feels safe, stable, and sufficiently predictable that people can plan beyond their immediate needs.

‘When a working family needs to earn £71,000 to out-earn a family with three children on benefits, our incentives are clearly wrong’

As this paper makes clear, people cannot look forward if the ground beneath them feels unsteady. The loss of control at our border, the growing disorder in the public realm, and the constant layering on of new rules and regulations force people to focus on immediate threats. Instead of daring to dream, we are forced to spend much of our time grappling with the day-to-day instability which has become the background hum of life for far too many people in this country.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, a culture of aspiration can only grow when we have confidence, collectively, in the ability of individuals to change the world.

After all, aspiration requires a belief that it is possible to do, be, and achieve something more than we already have. To make the world better, we must first tell ourselves that it can be so.

Growing up, the confidence that my parents and teachers placed in me was one of the greatest gifts that I have ever received.

Working in global financial markets showed me another truth that mirrors the findings of this paper: when confidence collapses, so does ambition – for individuals, for businesses, and for nations. No one invests in an individual, a company or a country that does not believe in itself.

The message of this paper is that Britain is at its strongest when it focuses on restoring these fundamentals: clear incentives, genuine security, and a culture of confidence in individuals, in businesses and in our country as a whole. These are the essential conditions that allow aspiration to take root in the lives of ordinary people.

‘ It is a promise that those who work hard, play by the rules, and take control of their own lives will not face undue hurdles put up by the state ’

Aspirational politics is not about promising the earth or guaranteeing outcomes. In many ways, it is the total opposite. It is a promise that your destiny is your own, and a recognition that the role of government is to allow for the conditions, in ways possible only at the national level, for each individual to seize their particular destiny. It is a promise that those who work hard, play by the rules, and take control of their own lives will not face undue hurdles put up by the state.

It is a promise worth renewing.

Katie Lam MP



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