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Building a Better Birkenhead



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Newsletter

Energy Crisis Mark Two



The Chancellor Jeremy Hunt has made it clear that he puts the ability of the energy giants to make huge profits far ahead of protecting millions of British households from the continuing surge in the prices of gas electricity.

The Chancellor has refused to listen to calls from Labour, Charities and fuel poverty campaigners to halt his planned rise in the energy price guarantee (EPG) from £2,500 to £3,000 a year for the average household. Experts have pointed out that because of the falling price of gas the current level of support would not cost the government a significant amount. But Hunt is determined to pull away even the limited lifeline that ordinary families have in coping with their bills.

The additional £400 of extra government help with energy costs for all households, made in monthly payments since October, also ends in March. This means that for all except those on the very lowest incomes the price hike coming on April Fool's Day will be about 40%.

The impact will be devastating for the people of Birkenhead – many of whom have already contacted my office with desperate calls for help as the bills they cannot

afford come flying through their letterboxes. And recent reports revealed that 95% of families who are already finding it impossible to heat their homes and cook their food will still be wallowing in fuel poverty by 2030.

And the impact is not confined to the homes of the vulnerable. At a recent meeting with Wirral Primary school Heads, I learnt that every school in the Wirral is heading into a budgeting crisis due to the huge escalation of fuel costs. And businesses are closing because they simply cannot keep up with the price rises alongside the cost-of-living crisis across all areas of expenditure. And with inflation at 10.1% more bankruptcies are expected.

Alongside this the water giants are upping their bills by 7.5% for the year ahead. This will contribute to even more hardship amongst those already hard hit by the energy crisis.

And what was the response to the crisis by one of the biggest energy suppliers in the country? To give debt collectors warrants so they could break into the homes of poor people and install pre-pay meters. Not only was this a grotesque violation of the human right to live safely in your own home. It was also a wilful way of ensuring that the poorest would be unable to get any energy supplies because they did not have the money to put into these one-armed bandits installed under their stairs against their will.

This scandal even shocked the Tories, and the practice has been banned – but the mark of Cain will rightly be a permanent reminder that British Gas became a licensed thug during the first phase of the energy crisis.

Let us be clear – it is not the war in Ukraine, the disruption to gas supplies or the weather that lies behind this crisis. It is the greed of the energy giants who have pushed up the wholesale price of gas and electricity to drive up their profits and the handouts they can give to their already mega rich shareholders.

As we move towards the end of March, as we move towards even steeper energy price rises, the big guns in the energy sector, the likes of Shell and BP, are making vast profits. For 2022 Shell announced profits of £68.1 billion. BP chalked up a £23 billion surge in its takings.

These figures are obscene. Yet, instead of hitting these companies with a genuinely effective windfall tax the Tories are holding back from even their original timid tax on the grounds that it did not bring in very much. It didn't bring in very much because it was designed to protect the profits of big oil not ensure that those profits went to help those most in need.

And while the profits of the energy supply firms are not in the same league as the oil companies the big six suppliers have enjoyed handsome returns as a result of the energy crisis. One of the biggest suppliers, SSE, recorded profits in 2022 of £559 million – paid for by the increased prices that ordinary people have been forced to accept.

This entire situation is a scandal. Yet there is a solution that could address the crisis head on, that could lighten the burden on the poorest and that could make life more bearable for everyone. It is the root and branch transformation of the energy sector by:

- Imposing a punitive windfall tax on the oil giants to fund support for those who cannot afford the current price of energy.
- Investing in the transformation of fossil fuel generated energy to the cheaper renewable alternatives – such as wind power – which have proved they work.

- Taking the energy generating and supply sector into public ownership so that all profit created goes towards helping us achieve net zero in our carbon emissions and supporting those most in need in our society so that they can afford to light, heat and cook without fear of being plunged into debt and fuel poverty.

Teaching the Tories a Lesson

When the teachers went on strike for a day the Tories unleashed their attack dogs on the press and media. Listening to them snarling and barking their rage at teachers who were “damaging the education” of the nation’s children and “disrupting the lives” of hard-pressed parents you could be forgiven for thinking that these Conservative MPs and Ministers actually cared about our kids’ education.



Newsflash – they don’t. They are very good at two things – foaming at the mouth in rage against striking workers and doing everything they can, during their 13 years in office, to break the back of state education.

Teachers, on the other hand, took the action they did because they care about our children, they care about our schools, and they want to save and rebuild our education system.

The Tories have just refused to publish the “Buildings Conditions Survey” that they commissioned for the nation’s schools. They have good reason to want to cover this up. The report found that many schools were dilapidated and that a good number posed “a risk to life”. And despite not publishing the report the Department for Education admitted, “there is a risk of collapse of one or more blocks in some schools, which are, or are approaching, the end of their life expectancy, and structural integrity is impaired”.

The reason for this state of disrepair was explained by a House of Commons Briefing paper in startlingly simple terms, ““Spending generally followed a downward trend between 2009-10 and 2013-14 and in the years since spending has fluctuated ... Overall, between 2009-10 and 2021-22, capital spending declined by 25% in cash terms and 29% after adjusting for inflation (2021-22 prices).”

Kevin Courtney of the National Education Union (NEU) translated these percentages in money terms, “If the government had not cut Labour’s school rebuilding programme, £27bn more would have been spent on school and college buildings.”

What is more damaging to our children’s education – a one day strike by teachers or buildings which could fall down and kill the students in them?

It is the same story with teachers leaving the profession because they are overworked, underpaid and under stress. Last year 25% of all head teachers in state education left their jobs within five years of starting and of that number 64% left education altogether. Amongst newly qualified teachers 31% leave within five years and 40% within ten years.

What is more damaging to our children’s education – a one day strike by teachers or there not being

enough teachers to educate them because of low pay and overwork?

The lockdowns caused by the Covid pandemic were accompanied by chaos and countless students having their lives upended as a result of the chops, changes and downright stupidities of the then Education Secretary Gavin Williamson. The Tory promise was that the lost learning would be addressed through the tutoring subsidy, supporting children to be able to catch up with their education.

The National Audit Office reported that there is a significant problem with the catching up, ““Learning loss for disadvantaged pupils has been consistently greater than for pupils overall and, as a result, the gap in attainment has grown since 2019. Left unaddressed, lost learning may lead to increased disadvantage and significant missing future earnings for those affected.” So, the Tories have responded by threatening to cut the tutoring subsidy threatening the most disadvantaged pupils with the prospect of never catching up.

What is more damaging to our children’s education – a one day strike by teachers or cutting the tutoring subsidy and leaving the disadvantaged to rot?

To pose these questions is to answer them. The crisis in education is a direct product of Tory policy while in government. And the strikes by the NEU are actions designed to save our crumbling education system. And the union is right not give in to the government’s offer of talks on condition that the next strikes are suspended. The union brought over 200,000 teachers out last time. It recruited 40,000 new members as a result of its firm stance. The NEU have agreed that they will only consider pausing the strikes in exchange for talks that involve an improved pay offer. If the government want to negotiate with the union good – but it must be on the union’s terms and from a position of strength.

Take the message out to parents and pupils – solidarity with the NEU; their fight is our fight; it is a fight for the future of education.

Divide and Fool!

As I explained last month the Tories are driving the NHS into the ground. There are 133,000 vacancies. Over the past five years 43,000 nurses have left the profession citing stress, pay and burn out as the reason for leaving.

The Medical Defence Union’s latest survey revealed that 40% of NHS doctors and dentists are leaving the profession or taking early retirement because of over work. The Royal College of General Practitioners have estimated that the current crisis in the sector – with increasing numbers of patients unable to get appointments at their surgeries – is set to get worse.



And to top it all the promises the Tories made of building 40 new hospitals are as empty as the heads of the Cabinet Ministers running the country. Three years on only 10 hospitals have received planning permission.

This is the context for the current wave of strikes across the health sector involving the Royal

College of Nursing, Unison, the GMB, Unite, the Physiotherapists union and now the Junior Doctors from the British Medical Association.

Every strike centres on the fact that the workers in the hospitals, the ambulance stations, the clinics have been driven to desperation by a government that has vandalised their service, that has driven down their pay year on year and that is attempting to make fewer people work hared for even less money.

The waiting lists, the ambulance waiting times, the staff shortages and the crisis in the GP surgeries is the direct result of this government's policy and its underlying strategy of marginalising the NHS and promoting the private health sector. That is why there is huge public support for the strikes and a record low support for government policies towards the NHS, with only 10% of those polled believing the government is doing a good job.

The strength of the strikes has been the effective unity across the different unions. The government's offer to talk to the RCN – and treat nurses as a special case – is a cynical attempt to undermine this unity. As the new leader of the TUC, Paul Nowak said, the TUC would not accept the government "taking a pick'n'mix approach to pay or playing divide and rule with public sector workers", adding: "They must confirm they will seriously negotiate with every union in dispute, without preconditions."

All those on strike have a common cause. All of them want to tackle the crisis facing the NHS, win decent pay and recruit and retain new staff to begin to repair the damage the Tories have inflicted. If the government try to divide us, we should be clear – Sunak is fooling no one. His plan for the NHS is a plan to run it down. That is why the unions must continue to stand together and end the dispute with a clear victory for the NHS and all its staff.

Refugees Are Welcome Here

Like many people, I have been reflecting on the terrible scenes that took place outside the Suites Hotel in Knowsley on Friday 10 February. I echo my friend and colleague George Howarth, the Member of Parliament for Knowsley, in saying that the actions of the rioters who sought to terrorise refugees do not represent our communities' values.



Merseyside has a long history of providing sanctuary to those in need and we are right to pride ourselves on our generosity and hospitality. But the events of Friday night must also serve as a reminder of the potency of the far-right's tactics of sowing hatred and division.

The scapegoating of refugees can prove to be dangerously alluring in many of our poorest communities, ravaged by years of austerity and government neglect.

We must be more resolute than ever in seeking to confront the organised far-right. But at the same time, we need to reach out to our friends and neighbours, engage meaningfully with all those who feel alienated and disempowered, and build unity within and across our communities. Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants are not responsible for the austerity that has ravaged our communities. They are not the cause of poverty and deprivation. We must not let the far-right direct

blame at them and deflect blame from the real culprits – the Tory government.

The government is not prepared to accept responsibility for the role that its dangerous rhetoric has played in stoking division. In an increasingly hostile environment for both refugees and migrants, it is not nearly enough for the Labour Party to meekly follow public opinion. In Westminster and across the country, our party must instead take a lead in the national conversation and proudly champion the rights of all those who come to our country seeking safety and the hope of a better life.

Refugees are welcome here.

Out and About in Birkenhead

February proved to be a busy time in the constituency because the parliamentary recess gave me time to catch up with a number of organisations and events here in Birkenhead. The month kicked off with me appearing as the guest MP on Claire Hamilton's Westminster slot. And as ever it was a pleasure to talk things through with Claire.



In case people missed it I used the interview as an opportunity to highlight my concerns at Magenta changing working practices with regard to dealing with asbestos. The workers at Magenta felt that the changes were a direct threat to their health and safety and have taken action to oppose them. Unite the Union are backing this strike and I believe that the company need to listen to the concerns of their

workforce. They should withdraw the changes, return to the established practice regarding dealing with asbestos and open negotiations with the union to resolve the dispute in a manner that addresses the workers' concerns.

I was delighted to work with Sue Higginson at Wirral Met to make Apprentice Week, 6th to 10th February, a success. The college showcased the work it does in conjunction with companies to promote and extend meaningful apprenticeships that offer the chance of well - paid employment for the youth in our town.

I am also working with Sue's staff to design a container facility for Wirral Change that can serve as a store and shop to help asylum seekers and refugees with clothes and other essentials. Peel have kindly agreed to supply the container and work will soon be underway to install it and fit it out with Wirral Met students getting valuable experience as part of the project.



On the sporting front I have visited Birkenhead Hockey Club to help promote their activities. Birkenhead hockey club was established in 2016 and currently runs two men's teams in the North-West hockey league. The club is looking to establish itself as a leading hockey club in the north of England, and a club where the local community can be an integral part of it. The biggest challenge they face is establishing a permanent home, giving them a playing facility and 'clubhouse'/match



day indoor venue.

Sorting out a permanent home – or rather re-equipping their old home – is the problem faced by the Mersey Thai Boxing Club who I also met this month. Following the Covid lockdowns the club has suffered from the loss of equipment and their premises are in a state of disrepair. I believe the former landlord has now disappeared along with the club's equipment.

The Directors of the Mersey Thai Boxing Club for taking the brave step of establishing a CIC with a view to reviving the club, restoring its facilities and returning it to its previous status as a beacon of sport in our town.

This objective is one I wholly support. The club has been a vital part of the community providing many local young people with a means of getting fit, learning skills and seeing the value of being part of a collective effort. As a result, the club has helped young people through difficulties they have encountered as individuals, helped reduce anti-social behaviour in the community, helped reduce crime by offering positive activity and outcomes to people, improved health, fitness and mental health for people, especially young people and given them a chance of sporting glory.

Tranmere is a deprived ward in Birkenhead. The people there cannot afford the more expensive gyms and clubs that some other wealthier areas have access to. The average household income in Tranmere is almost £10,000 less per annum than the overall average in Wirral. Poverty breeds crime and Tranmere has suffered more than most other areas.

The Mersey Thai CIC Boxing Club offers hope amidst these gloomy statistics. It is an antidote to crime, a route to a healthier and happier life for young people and a community asset that deserves every ounce of support it can get.



I also spent an enjoyable and informative morning with the Wirral Methodist Housing team where they explained what they do, how they are organised and their hopes for the new developments they have launched helping address the housing crisis in our town.

Last, but by no means least, I visited Café Create and met their fantastic team as well as some of the young people who use the services at the Pilgrim Street Arts Centre. The Response

Team really are a family. They work with Wirral young people, who are struggling with their emotional wellbeing or are having problems with drug/alcohol use. They are a surrogate family for our young people when they need support. And at Café Create they get counselling support, sporting activities, creative activities such as photography and much more beside.

This service benefits our whole community as well as the youth who access it. It is a service that must be maintained and supported so that its work may continue well into the future.

Birkenhead's Voice in Westminster



- A bout of Covid and a half-term recess meant that I've not been as active in Parliament this month as usual. I was particularly disappointed not to be able to make a debate on the Cammell Laird 37 that my friend and colleague Gareth Thomas led in Westminster Hall. You will all know of my longstanding commitment to seeing that justice is done by the 37 Cammell Laird workers who were wrongly imprisoned in 1984 for standing up for their jobs and community, and Gareth and I have been working together on this issue for a number of months. But I was very thankful to all of my Labour colleagues who were able to attend and speak in favour of the merits of a public inquiry into the events of 1984, and I know that their support was greatly appreciated by the three members of the 37 who travelled to Parliament to watch the debate. I was able to meet with representatives of the 37 after the debate here in Birkenhead to discuss taking the campaign forward. You can read the Westminster Hall debate in its entirety here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-02-07/debates/CA5DDD28-D60A-488B-99CC-4A882E885282/details>
- I've spoken in Parliament many times before about the water companies' appalling treatment of our precious rivers, seas, and beaches – with one million sewage discharges having been recorded since 2016, the equivalent of one every two and a half minutes. But during an urgent question in Parliament this week on the performance of the water companies, I raised an issue that could have far more dire consequences for us all. It may seem hard to believe in a country as wet and rainy as ours, but the mismanagement of our water network since privatisation in 1989, population growth, and rising temperatures have combined to leave vast swathes of our country facing significant water stress. In fact, in 2019, the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency warned that we could be staring into the “jaws of death” in twenty-five years – meaning that our demand for water outpaces supply. Years of underinvestment left the water companies struggling to cope with last summer's extreme temperatures. If we're to guarantee our water security in an age of climate crisis, we need to return our water network to public ownership and replace the water monopolies with an integrated, national water supplier that serves the public

need, not private greed. You can see my exchange with the Minister here: <https://twitter.com/MickWhitleyMP/status/1628110571760386051?s=20>

- The terrible scenes we witnessed outside the Suites Hotel in Knowsley this month highlighted the failures of the government's strategy of housing vulnerable refugees in hotel accommodation for extended periods of time. This week, I challenged the Minister to develop community-based alternatives to housing refugees in hotels: <https://twitter.com/MickWhitleyMP/status/1628149589730525186?s=20>
- I've heard a number of reports from service providers in Birkenhead that many of the energy vouchers that are being issued to customers with pre-payment meters aren't being redeemed. That's why I've written to the Energy and Net Zero Secretary, urging him to ensure that vulnerable households get more support in understanding the process of redeeming vouchers. I've also asked him to consider the possibility of energy suppliers directly crediting the bank accounts of people using pre-payment meters.
- The backlog in our legal system has hit record highs – in September 2022, more than 17,300 Crown court cases had been outstanding for a year or more. Victims of crime are being badly let down, with many choosing to let their cases lapse entirely because they simply can't cope with protracted delays. This month, I challenged the Solicitor General on what steps he and the Attorney General are taking to tackle this backlog. You can see that exchange here: <https://twitter.com/MickWhitleyMP/status/1621066667475222529?s=20>
- Under an initiative implemented by the Tories themselves, the government has to produce impact assessments for all new pieces of regulation which are then scrutinised by the Business Department's independent watchdog. The Regulatory Policy Committee has now delivered its verdict on the government's anti-strikes Minimum Service Bill – and it is damning. The RPC have found that the government failed to submit the impact assessment in good time, has relied on incomplete and out of date evidence, and have failed to consider all the impacts of the new requirements set out in the Bill. The impact assessment has been classified as "not fit for purpose" and slapped with a rare 'red notice'. Ministers rushed the Bill through the Commons because they knew it wouldn't survive robust scrutiny in committee and now it's before the Lords. It's time for them to pull the Bill.