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Why Wealth Inequality Matters, Part 2: Reflections on the deselection of Faiza Shaheen

*Wealth inequality has a corrosive impact on politics, with those who hold no real wealth to speak of feeling increasingly alienated from the political establishment, writes **Mike Savage**. In this context, what should we make of the Labour party's decision to deselect Faiza Shaheen – an outspoken campaigner against inequality in the UK – as a parliamentary candidate for the UK's upcoming general election?*

In February I wrote a short post, "[Why Wealth Inequality Matters](#)", laying out how the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few is not simply one social problem amongst many, but rather generates multiple social, cultural and political ills. I drew from my recent book, *The Return of Inequality*, where I argued that the massive build-up of wealth assets in recent decades returns us to older historical periods in which rich, entitled and arrogant elites hog the political stage.

But although this long-term historical framing might lend itself to feelings of hopelessness, I actually wrote that post – only three months ago – sensing a sea change in public opinion. Increasing numbers of people recognise the sheer injustice of the huge inequalities that mark contemporary British life. The recognition of colossal disparities in wealth, pitting many millions of people juggling debt against those with more wealth than they know what do with, is now a lightning conductor for this sense of malaise. Having participated in many public events at the LSE over the years, I was really struck by the mood at three recent book launch events hosted by the International Inequalities Institute – all of which tackled wealth inequality head on. [Faiza Shaheen](#) (last June), [Liam Byrne](#) and [Gary Stevenson](#) (both March this year) all spoke to packed-out audiences that seemed to chime with the recurring message that fundamental injustices are produced by booming wealth assets which empower the few at the expense of the many.

This sense of urgency was further reinforced by the expert roundtable on "[Why Wealth Inequality Matters](#)" that we held, in association with Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Fairness

Foundation, on 13 May 2024. At that event, we emphasised that simply pitching against the distributional unfairness of wealth inequality – the vastly disproportionate share of wealth taken by a tiny proportion of the population – undersells the corrosive effects of wealth inequality across the entire social fabric. In our [briefing paper](#), we argued for opening a “second front”, making the case that the accumulation of wealth accentuates systemic social injustices, notably through exacerbating huge wealth divides with respect to gender, race and class. If anything, these divides are getting bigger as those who historically have possessed greater wealth assets are better placed to reap even more. Wealth begets wealth.



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This second front also recognises the corrosive impact of wealth inequality on politics. The contemporary hollowing out of liberal democratic institutions is driven by “elite capture”, as wealthy elites have ever-greater resources to steer political agendas by incessant lobbying, cronyism and patronage.

But this is only part of the story. The 50% or so of the population with no (or negligible) wealth resources feel increasingly alienated from, and bitter towards, the political establishment, whatever its party-political stripe might be. [Prize-winning research](#) by Insa Koch, Mark Fransham, Sarah Cant, Jill Ebrey, Luna Glucksberg and myself has shown how poor and deprived communities across the UK feel they are left to fend for themselves in the context of austerity and the diminishing role of the state and civil society in poor neighbourhoods. Recent LSE Sociology PhD student Sacha Hilhorst draws on her ethnographic research to [argue](#) that “across rich democracies, working-class citizens are more likely to perceive widespread corruption.... The view that politics is corrupt, which appears to be widespread among disempowered citizens, serves to delegitimize the political system, with potentially severe consequences”. Wealth inequality erodes political engagement from above and below.

It is clear, therefore, that how to deal with wealth inequality needs to be discussed in the forthcoming General Election. On the face of it, the Labour Party is more sympathetic to this

current, for instance as clearly laid out by the Labour MP Liam Byrne in his recent book, and the – admittedly cautious – proposals to impose VAT on private schooling. However, on the other hand, Keir Starmer’s naïve endorsement of “wealth creation” in a recent interview displays a shocking lack of the basic social scientific awareness that any credible Prime Minister will need if they are to tackle the fundamental problems that the nation faces.

This leads to reflections on the recent deselection of Faiza Shaheen as Labour Party candidate for Chingford and Woodford Green. Over the past decade and more, Faiza has been one of the foremost political campaigners in the UK to insist that tackling socio-economic inequality is central to any meaningful political agenda. In her recent book, *Know Your Place*, she discusses how wealth inequality undermines prospects for social mobility as those who cannot draw on parental resources lose ground to those who can. She combines a sharp analytical mind with a commitment to collaboration and delivering tangible results. We have benefitted hugely from her ideas, insights and support as Visiting Professor in Practice at the LSE’s International Inequalities Institute. Her qualities include incredible bravery in refusing to be cowed by the Islamophobic racism, misogyny, and condescending classism to which she is routinely subjected.



Rally for Faiza Shaheen at Highams Park, London, on 31 May 2024. Photo by Tom Spender (@Shutterstock).

Faiza’s campaigning work in East London has exhibited a strong personal commitment to building the kind of collective efforts and ethos needed to remedy the hollowing out of local communities which wealth inequality has produced elsewhere. Rather than maintain a safe distance and operate as a “machine politician” – part and parcel of the political apparatus that vast numbers of voters despise – Faiza has tramped the streets to talk to people about local issues, earning a great deal of respect as a result. The fact that the Labour Party has so easily brushed aside this work by deselecting Faiza suggests a basic lack of awareness of the very problems that they are claiming to have the remedies for.



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Again and again, our research returns to the key insight that rebuilding trust in our political systems is a precondition for wider policy making. A high level of cynicism is disabling for governments of all political stripes, especially those wanting to create change. It is therefore regrettable that in pursuing an ugly and manifestly factional manoeuvre in their deselection of Faiza Shaheen, UK Labour may be doing more harm than they realise when it comes to promoting their stated goal of “a decade of national renewal”.

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About the author



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