

# Securonomics beyond the ‘first political question’: Power, people and place

**Andrew Pakes and Frederick Harry Pitts**

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Rachel Reeves’s recent **Mais Lecture** set out a powerful framing for Labour’s planned decade of national renewal, adding further detail to what is already being called ‘securonomics’.

As Tom Collinge has **written** for Progressive Britain already, it is rare for front-line politicians to offer such a coherent argument and analysis linking the past with the present with the future.

Security has become a totemic issue for progressives in rethinking the role of a modern state an increasingly insecure world, and the Mais Lecture summed up what will be the purpose of government for Labour.

It described security as a fundamental organising principle that articulates across domestic and foreign policy, and provides a basis for Labour to achieve other, higher goals and values.

## **Security: the first political question?**

As in our own work on this topic for the **Foundation for European Progressive Studies** and **Progressive Britain**, Reeves’ starting point was security’s role as what the philosopher Bernard Williams called the ‘first political question’ – ‘the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation’.

Security is the ‘first political question’ because security alone is not in itself sufficient – as it might be seen in an authoritarian regime. Rather, it provides the platform for the realisation of other moral and ethical imperatives like freedom, justice and equality.

A sense of security is also synonymous with a feeling of control over our lives and the environment in which we live them.

In our work, we have been particularly focused on industrial change and how people, communities and places are shaped by (in)security.

Too many areas of the country are still living with the legacy of de-industrialisation and underinvestment. Whilst governments cannot stop industrial change, they can help manage its impact and create new opportunities for workers and communities through industrial strategy, investment in skills and levelling-up.

Addressing how insecurity shapes identity should be at the heart of industrial strategy, helping workers and communities to redefine themselves as circumstances change. This is the meaning of the ‘just transition’ that is at the core of our thinking and much of the trade union movement.

Reeves’s vision of securonomics sets out, in broad brushstrokes, how government will steer and support this process of adjustment. But there is still a need to flesh this out for stories about how this will make a difference to particular individuals and geographies, going beyond security as the first political question to suggest what else it enables us to achieve.

## **Power, people and place**

We suggest that this can be done around three ‘p’s: Power, People, and Place.

‘Power’ is about having the institutions and infrastructure to get things done and enable say in how decisions are made – whether in terms of access to sustainable sources of energy or the devolution of greater control to local government. It is about the sense of agency we feel amidst processes of change.

‘People’ is about putting individuals and communities at the centre of economic and industrial strategies that often fail to consider the human-level conditions and consequences of the transitions afoot – whether in terms of job quality or skills needs.

‘Place’ is about recognising that economic and industrial renewal will happen in particular localities, and will need to be matched to their strengths and specificities – whether in towns, cities, regions or at other scales, change will mean different things to different places.

When we talk to businesses and workers alike, they demand some variation on these three ‘p’s. They may, in some cases, speak of slightly different things for each. But the ‘securonomics’ agenda set out in the Mais Lecture provides the best basis for articulating across these different meanings in a way that is, as Reeves puts it, both ‘pro-business’ and ‘pro-worker’.

## **Securonomics in specific sectors**

Elsewhere, we have argued that such a ‘securonomic’ approach to power, people and place can shape strategically important sectors like **critical metals** and **critical minerals**.

Dealing with the deprivation that followed deindustrialisation, Cornwall in particular is crying out for the infrastructure, investment and institutions needed to support local skills pipelines and value chains.

Here, however, we want to focus on the digital sector, where tendencies towards artificial intelligence and greater cybersecurity meet.

As evidenced in a new **IPPR** report, AI holds the potential to fundamentally transform economy and society. Working life is a particular area where the rapid acceleration of digital technologies is being experienced, leading to new forms of insecurity.

Beyond headline-grabbing figures about job displacement, however, the report highlights a central weakness in the current government's approach to tech. AI is seen simply as an issue for the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, dominated by a focus on the industrial superheroes that already possess knowledge and power.

But this obscures the realities of what a progressive tech policy should be about.

An AI strategy that does not deal with skills, industrial strategy or communities will fail to provide the basis for safe, sustainable innovation to match the UK's wealth of ideas.

Labour's **Peter Kyle** has been talking about the party's ambition to work with business and unions to build a consensus about how we create jobs and prosperity in the digital age. A sense of AI as something controllable and everyday is underpinned by a strong focus on skills and the future workforce.

With around 2/3rds of our 2034 workforce already in work, on the UK's AI strategy will be a failure without a plan that confronts of the new risks and insecurities these technologies pose to how we live and work.

It is not good enough just to have a focus on the 'superhero' end of AI. There needs to be a plan for everyone else, and this involves power, people and place.

## **Cybersecuromics**

Cyber is one part of the digital sector where Labour's agenda in this area could be felt. Businesses, institutions and individuals are all susceptible to the risks generated by the acceleration of AI and other technologies.

As such, cybersecurity is central to the security of the country at a time where the same economic and technological forces that create a more interconnected world are also capable of being wielded as weapons in what Mark Leonard terms a new 'age of unpeace'.

As demonstrated in our **report** last year for Progressive Britain and the Labour Foreign Policy Group, followed up by more recent work on digital by Hamish Falconer for **Labour Together**, cyber is both an area that would benefit from specific institutional and infrastructural support in line with its status as a sovereign capability, as well as being central to the security of our national institutions and infrastructure more broadly.

As regards people, one of the barriers to expanding capacity in this area is a shortage of skilled personnel, and this could be partly resolved by creating a greater array of routes into cyber that enable a broader and more diverse labour market.

In terms of place, this would also help break the concentration of cyber expertise in specific regional and urban hotspots, distributing protection and support to the parts of the country home to the companies and critical national infrastructure operators that most require it.

## **Securing the connections**

Across such sectors, there is a strong connection between the needs of national security, the security of our domestic economy and industries, and greater security in the sphere of local employment and everyday life.

In turn, these provide the foundation for a politics of power, people and place that goes beyond security alone to bring greater control, prosperity and equality to individuals and communities.

Securonomics, as Reeves explains it, provides the party a frame for this politics. But Labour's job is now to bring local colour to the big-picture landscape impressively surveyed in the Mais Lecture.