

Campaign for Social Rights: Human Rights for the Many, Not the Few

The Labour Campaign for Human Rights urges the the next Labour government to deepen its commitment to social justice by introducing a Social Rights Bill that enshrines our rights to education, food, health, housing and work into law.

Since 2010, the Conservative government has launched a sustained attack on the homes, livelihoods and dignity of Britain's most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, through its brutal and ideological austerity agenda. Many of these policies have violated the human rights of millions of people, including their rights to food, health, housing, work and an adequate standard of living. Without legal safeguards protecting these rights from abuse, communities have been left defenceless.

While previous Labour governments acted to protect against discrimination and abuse of our civil and political rights through the Human Rights Act and the Equality Act, adequate legal safeguards do not exist for the rights needed to ensure people have enough to eat or a decent place to live.

The Labour Campaign for Human Rights believes the next Labour government should introduce a new generation of human rights protections, and commit to enshrining our economic, social and cultural human rights into domestic law. In doing so, it could leave a powerful and lasting legacy, giving the rights to food, health and housing just as much protection as the rights to free speech and a fair trial.

What are Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Economic, social and cultural rights are human rights.

While 'civil and political rights' include rights such as freedom from torture, freedom of expression and rights to a fair trial, 'economic, social and cultural rights' include human rights such as the rights to food, housing, health, education and work. Both sets of human rights are equally important, and the UK has signed legally binding international treaties committing to respect, protect and fulfill both.¹

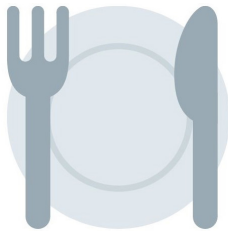
Economic, social and cultural rights seek to provide an adequate standard of living and have a direct and meaningful impact on the daily lives of people everywhere. By becoming law in Britain, they would work to ensure that government policy and resources were directed at promoting the health and well-being of all. They would also provide ways to prevent measures that violated these rights, and mechanisms to challenge unjust policies or practices. They would apply no matter who was in power.

Numerous UN bodies, a wide range of civil society organisations, and the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission, have all consistently called for UK governments to incorporate economic, social and cultural rights into domestic law.²

1 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), ratified by the UK in 1976.
2 Equality and Human Rights Commission, Progress on Socio-economic Rights in Great Britain, March 2018; CESCR, Concluding Observations: UK, July 2016, UN doc:E/C.12/GBR/CO/6; Just Fair, 'Submission to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, The Human Rights Act at 20 Inquiry', September 2018.

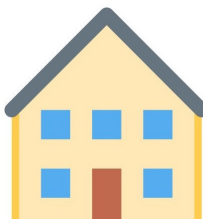
What difference would enshrining Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in law make?

Had these rights been enshrined in law before 2010, the cruelty of many benefits cuts and sanctions, and the underfunding of key public services, could have been challenged, mitigated or stopped entirely. Looking forward, legal recognition of these rights would provide obligations on public bodies to provide adequate, accessible and accountable services to all. **Some examples include:**



The Right to Food

Enshrining this in law could require the government to halt the dramatic cuts to social security that have resulted in families going hungry and being forced to rely on foodbanks. Future governments would be bound to make sure people could afford to buy food, or be compelled to provide it via a safety net if people are unable to feed themselves.



The Right to Housing

This would challenge practices such as ‘no-fault evictions’ that often force private renters from their homes, while ensuring minimum standards and accountability to residents could perhaps have prevented the tragedy of Grenfell Tower.



The Right to Health

This could require the government to adequately fund the health system and tackle the social determinants of health inequalities that have meant that life expectancy has stalled or declined in many parts of the UK. It would help protect our NHS.



The Right to Work

This would help bring the UK employment law into line with European and global standards relating to pay, conditions and the right to organise collectively.



The Right to Education

Strengthening this could defend our education from government cuts, and help protect schools being forced to close early just to save money. It would also act as an important building block towards Labour’s commitment to create a unified National Education Service (NES) that gives all children the best chance in life.

How can it be done?

The UK would not be the first country to incorporate economic, social and cultural rights into law – many countries from Finland to South Africa have already done so. Over 90% of the world’s constitutions recognise at least one such right, and in 25% at least ten are enforceable in courts.

Labour would of course need to incorporate these rights in a way that worked for the UK’s specific context. One option would be to introduce a Social Rights Bill that would work in a way similar to the Human Rights Act, providing legal obligations that all public bodies must respect, and ways for people to challenge policies or practices that violate their rights. A group of academics and human rights practitioners have already drafted such a Bill, and Labour could draw on these proposals.³

Conclusion and Recommendations

We therefore recommend that the Labour Party:

- Includes a commitment in its next manifesto to incorporate economic, social and cultural rights into domestic law as human rights, and consult widely on the best way to do so.
- Provides a clear commitment that economic, social and cultural rights should be seen as no less important, and no less binding, than civil and political rights.
- Establishes a policy commission, involving representation from a range of shadow teams as well as external expertise, to further develop options, and to recommend a detailed model for incorporating economic, social and cultural rights into domestic law as human rights.

What you can do to help

- Follow us on Twitter @LabourCHR and support us by sharing the campaign with the hashtag #SocialRightsAreHumanRights
- Download our [template letter](#) and write to your MP, asking them to write a statement of support for our campaign
- Download our motion to propose at your local Constituency Labour Party (CLP) meeting.
- Show your support for this campaign by becoming a member of Labour Campaign for Human Rights: <https://lchr.org.uk/membership/>

3 For more information on the draft Bill see <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/article22/consultation/>.