

Queer and the Cost of Living Crisis (Royal Society of Edinburgh Seminar Series)

With Emma Roddick, MSP Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees and MSP for Highlands and Islands and Yvette Taylor, University of Strathclyde.

Welcomes from Associate Principal Prof. Douglas Brodie and Dr Elaine Webster, Associate Dean, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (HaSS) Director of the Centre for the Study of Human Rights Law, University of Strathclyde. The below conversation took place as part of the Royal Society of Edinburgh funded Queer and the Cost of Living Crisis Seminar Series. This Series is part of Yvette Taylor's RSE Personal Fellowship on Queer Social Justice.¹

Yvette Taylor (YT): Welcome everyone to the 4th event in the Series of [Queer and the Cost of Living Crisis](#), it's nice to see new – and familiar – faces I'm going to say a few words myself about the series and our speakers, before coming to today's conversation, which in many ways represents a continuation of these issues and conversations. The seminar series is funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh [RSE], part of my Queer Social Justice Personal Research Fellowship – and I'm still recruiting for this project, and I've put information on your chairs, so please share and participate if of interest. Questions of cost, or crisis, and living, are always going to be questions of social justice. The Series runs as a continued conversation and forthcoming dates on the Eventbrite page have been posted: importantly, we previously heard from LGBTQ+ students and representatives across Scotland, exploring student voices and experiences in cost of living crisis.

There are also open access transcripts of previous events – via my Strathclyde webpage and I want to pull out just a couple key quote from the student panel, which includes students who were parents, international students, and mature students, for example, all with different reminders of who traditional – or even ideal – students are often imagined to be:

... when it came down to crisis it's not very helpful. Pantry's a good idea but I'm a uni student, but not confined to the uni campus itself. And I think my issue is when there is a crisis they're not helpful. And they forget that some people have lives outside of uni, you have responsibilities, and for me my crisis is their idea of an ideal student. They say they want all walks of life, but when it comes down to it when you're working-class, you're a single parent, you don't, you're not in a space where you can live five minutes round the corner from campus. You can show up, you live with parents, not everything's like that. And I think when they think of identity for students they think of an eighteen-year-old, living with parents, they don't need to pay rent, they don't need to work. Whereas realistically that's a very small percentage of uni students..

¹ Other series' transcripts available here:

<https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/183555017/Guyan-Taylor-RSE-2023-Queer-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis-data-in-as-crisis.pdf> ; <https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/publications/queer-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis-political-crisis> ; <https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/publications/queer-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis-queers-through-crisis>

I often joke about being like the minority of minorities ... I'm Muslim, genderfluid, bisexual, potentially have autism, ADHD, disabled. I will get hate crimed'. But like living within all these like minorities it feels like I'm just like on the edge of everything...

I'd encourage people to engage with the now published content, which also includes a conversation on [Queer Data In/As Crisis](#), with Dr Kevin Guyan and a transcript of my conversation with Canadian author of the *This Has Always Been A War. The Radicalisation of a Working-Class Queer*, L.E. Fox. In the spirit of open access, we are going to record this discussion – and I'll stop when we come into audience participation and Q+A. And in the spirit of collectively working together to create safer spaces, I'll know we'll commit to the principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion, environment in which all students, staff and visitors feel welcome, respected, and able to fully participate in events and activities.

For those of you who don't know me I'm Yvette Taylor, I'm a Professor in the Strathclyde Institute of Education, and I describe myself as queer-feminist sociologist. I've worked with the Scottish Government researching LGBTQ+ lives in the pandemic, as a Parliamentary Fellow and with Scottish Ballet on Safe to be Me, exploring inclusive curriculum in schools. I've researched and written books on queer life and class inequality, recently including [Working-Class Queers. Time, Place and Politics](#), which has also inspired this series.

It's my pleasure to introduce Emma Roddick, MSP, also Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees, appointed in March 2023. Emma is passionate about social justice, disability rights, equality, and the LGBTQ+ community. She formerly sat on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee in the Scottish Parliament and was a member of the Cross-Party Group on Disability, as well as Cross-Party Groups covering women's health, and LGBT+ issues. Emma's specific responsibilities include areas of mainstreaming of equality and human rights; diversity, inclusion and equalities, including disability, older people, women, gender, LGBTI and race, including Gypsy/Traveller community; social isolation and loneliness strategy; faith and belief; and population and migration; refugees, asylum seekers and displaced peoples. So certainly relevant to today's topic! Like myself, you also identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, and have spoken against conversion therapies, supported a ban, and been active in your trans inclusive views.

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YT: I guess just to kick us off then Emma, people are probably familiar with this idea of the cost-of-living crisis. From your perspective why is it happening and how can we lessen or reverse its harms?

Emma Roddick (ER): Big question, because there are so many reasons that the cost-of-living crisis is happening. To me it comes down to the politics and the priorities over the last kind of fifteen years in UK politics, where it was not, opportunities were not taken to ensure that events like the pandemic, like inflation, like the economic crash that we saw during Liz Truss's reign were not going to impact some groups worse than others. So what that's turned into is this panic to protect the bank accounts of those who already have lots of money, and protect the interests there, the very large ones, while people who were already struggling to get by, or maybe just managing, are now really, really struggling and not being able to afford food and heating, just absolute basics.

YT: Mmm. Yeah, certainly some of the panels so far have talked about that quandary between heating or eating. Are these new issues? So when I think about the title of the seminar series, Queer

and the Cost-of-Living Crisis, I wonder sometimes if crisis is the right term to capture what seem to be like ongoing and repeated issues rather than just one-off interruptions.

ER: Yeah. I think, I struggle as well with things being classed as sudden or an emergency or emergent when it's something that many of us had long had this familiarity with. But I think that for people who grow up without money - like I did, I was in a single parent household and couldn't afford to go to university - you get used to it and you start accepting things that maybe we shouldn't be accepting, and that the middle-class is currently not accepting when it's happening to them. And we just learn to deal with it, and even if we're angry about it, or bitter about it, it's part of life and you start to accept it as normal.

YT: Mmm, mmm. And within that, as you've said, there are some groups that are clearly advantaged and are getting by more than others.

ER: Yeah. I mean after Liz Truss, when mortgages started skyrocketing and energy bills went through the roof, I had people getting in touch with me who live in large houses who were suddenly struggling because their incomes weren't enough, or much more of their income was being spent on essentials, whereas before they were very comfortable and could afford to do lots of leisure activities. And it kept striking me that the language that was being used in these emails - and they're reaching out for help, and I was going to help them any way I could, it wasn't a fair situation - but they said things like 'this shouldn't be happening to me', or 'this isn't supposed to be what happens, because I work and I'm married and I've done all this. I pay my taxes'. And I think, well, you know, when I was homeless I was paying taxes. It's just that we were in very different situations.

YT: Yeah, yeah. And I think we hear that in academic talk about precarity, and precarity increasingly affecting the wider group. But some people again have always been in those precarious situations. So when do we sit up and take notice I suppose?

ER: Yeah. And I think it is that, it's people were outraged because 'this shouldn't be happening to me', and we had people getting in touch with politicians and going 'I'm struggling to pay my energy bill. How can I be put in this situation?' Whereas I never hear really from the people who have their whole lives struggled to pay their energy bills, and rationed and just, you know, really gone without eating on certain days, and that's just a part of their lives, because they don't go 'right, I'm going to contact a politician about this because I shouldn't be in this situation'.

YT: Yeah, yeah. And I talk a little bit in the research that I've done, which has involved interviewing about two hundred and fifty people over a twenty year period, so from New Labour hopes and sentiments that things were going to get better, right? Through a different economic crisis to a period of austerity to the pandemic, post-Brexit times. So there's been waves of kind of hope and failure. But I think often there's a group of people that are blamed for that failure, and you see this in these new maybe moral distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor as a longstanding categorisation, right?

ER: Yeah, absolutely. I mean I have people say to me quite regularly, when I'm talking about minimum income guarantees or increases to disability benefits, all things that I strongly believe in, you'll get people who say 'right, but I know someone who doesn't work and they still have a TV'. 'Okay, sure. Of course'.

YT: Right, yeah.

ER: Should people not enjoy life? Should you not be happy because you've been born into a different situation to someone who's had it quite easy financially? It's very frustrating.

YT: Yes. Now I think my colleagues – in their welcomes – were alluding to this idea of intersectionality, that there's groups, based on protected characteristics, that we increasingly need to attend to and give attention to in the university. How is that word mobilised politically? Is it appearing increasingly in policy? Does it mean separate things, do you think, from maybe our academic purchase on the word?

ER: Yes. And that's something I have to keep adapting to in politics, because words do get co-opted, whether it's because of a particular manifesto commitment or a new government paper. You know, we see things like at the moment social contract being used a lot in the chamber, which happened very suddenly, and you have to adapt to not just what that means to your colleagues in the chamber, but what the public actually is picking up on your intention behind the words. And things like mobilisation and, yeah, opportunity and equality of opportunity and equity, I think you have to keep adjusting your language as a politician because people do try to change what these words mean. And that does mean that when you're speaking, constituents think you mean something different to what you do.

YT: Right. And is intersectionality one of those hot words that you mean or want different things from, and that doesn't fly, or does it?

ER: Yeah. And I think it's, when I use it I'm talking about, you know, not oversimplifying and making sure that we're considering the impact on women of colour and the different considerations that we have to give for queer women, for trans women, disabled women. Whereas others will view it as just a particular relationship between two groups, usually people of colour and women, and maybe think that it's more about them changing rather than systemic change, which is what I'm generally talking about.

YT: Yes, absolutely. It makes me think about someone I talk about in the [book](#), who I named Will, and, because I think there's a lot of good intent in invoking that word intersectionality. Like you can just be, somebody who's gesturing towards an inclusive possibility or wanting to include other people. So it can be generous in its intention. But I do, like yourself, wonder about the structural exclusion that it maybe invisibilises in that as a gesture. And there was one interviewee who talks, in the book, Will is thirty-five, middle-class, cis man, gay, who says 'I'm intersectional. I am, you could tell that from my Twitter account, you know, I'm into all these things and I'm ...', sort of signalling his diversity. And, you know, I don't want to just pull down Will, as my interviewee, but I think lots of people are using it in that gestural way rather than thinking about it as inequality in structures and exclusions.

ER: Yeah absolutely. And I think it's about having a shared understanding of what it is we're talking about, because I don't think we're there yet, even amongst politicians who are actively engaged in these conversations. People do take things to mean different things. So when we're talking about diversity I often hear people talk about an individual as diverse, and that doesn't make sense. And I think the same kind of thing happens with intersectionality, where it's seen as an ideology in itself that spans more than what it actually means.

YT: Right, absolutely. Do you want to talk about some of the areas of your ministerial brief in terms of refugees and migration, as also potentially likely queer issues. And again in the book I've interviewed people who are from a migrant or refugee background.

ER: Yeah, I've had some really interesting conversations lately in the context of conversion practices and work that we're doing in the LGBTQI+ space, and the impact of current policies and ways of working on people who are LGBTQI and coming to Scotland to seek safety and flee war and

persecution. Because I think people forget how common that experience will be, given the persecution that LGBTQI people face across the globe. So we will be welcoming people who are queer, and who maybe don't feel safe to volunteer that information when accessing services, because their experience so far has been that that's a dangerous thing to do. But the assumption that the person that you're dealing with is a straight cisgender person can be harmful in not just preventing them from feeling safe, because they're, you know, coming up against similar assumptions that previously they know to be dangerous, but also you're not giving them that person-centred support and that ability to integrate. Because it's not just about integrating into Scotland, but perhaps the Scottish queer community or others who can support them and know their experience.

YT: Yeah. I was thinking about a particular interviewee who was going through the asylum-seeking process and wasn't out about their sexuality and gender status. But in the course of the research had come out and had sought support, and did talk about Scotland as the best place in the world. And while I want to sort of celebrate that.....I'm not sure that that even sort of reflected their own experience through that bureaucratic system.

ER: Yeah. I find it interesting because, and that chapter in your book where everybody's going, you know, 'Scotland's really great, and it's different to England', and it was further ahead, and I was thinking, because you'd just previously talked about Section 28...

YT: Right.

ER: ...I was thinking, well we weren't ahead. And I think it's something that people who do know differently, from experience, keep saying. And I don't know where that comes from, that we believe that Scotland doesn't face these challenges, or not to the same extent as other places, because that's not the lived experience that I'm told.

YT: Right.

ER: And, you know, as the minister responsible for trying to bring through a ban on conversion practices this session, it's not an easy job. It's not the same as presenting other government bills to the chamber. There's work to be done on bringing people on-side for something that is just about protecting a marginalised group from actual harm. So.

YT: Yeah, these are serious continued issues. And I think sometimes when I hear it, again people are almost like willing it into place, but without that sort of discussion about what is still difficult and troubling, yeah.

ER: Yeah.

YT: So you've also talked about – and I think you were alluding to it there – the difficulties of mainstreaming some of these equalities issues. So for a lot of my sort of feminist activism, or even disciplinary space in academia, I've sort of invested in maybe queer otherness, or another way to be in the world. But that's hard when you're in formal political structures then?

ER: Yeah it is. And I think because the landscape is so complex at the moment and so heated, I suppose, it's again about being able to unpick that and go to people at the point where they can understand. Because I know that, you know, I've got colleagues who will broadly agree with me on most issues, but don't have the experience of being queer, and don't understand why that's still a problem in Scotland, and possibly think that, you know, equality has been reached and now any demand that we as a community make is unreasonable or, you know, not deserved, or unnecessary.

And it's very difficult, and I had a bit of a crash back to earth moment recently. I had a former teacher of mine come to the parliament for a visit, and she had kind of introduced me to politics, but she lives in the Highlands and she's not in the Central Belt political bubble in the way that, you know, I realised I am. Because we were chatting and a Conservative came over and was chatting about rural politics, and after her left she said 'I'm really surprised to see a Tory man wearing the suffragette colours'. And I explained to her that in parliament that is a signal of transphobia not of feminism. And she was shocked, and she had never heard that this had been appropriated in this way. And I kind of realised, right, there's work to be done on maintaining that relationship and, you know, with feminists, and getting the message across about inclusivity and intersectionality.

YT: Yeah. Absolutely. And I remember being at the parliament for, I think it was, was it twenty years since the repeal? Or, yeah, because it was, just before pandemic it might've been...And there was lots of school attending and they had got their LGBT Charter Marks. They've got all these formal processes that we go through to say that we're stamped and official and are doing a good job at this. And it did make me think about my own schooling in Scotland, in Glasgow, as a young person, and the, you know, the dissonances. Because in many ways things had progressed, but actually it didn't feel like we we'd arrived as fully equal. Or that there were different and competing agendas in that celebratory moment. Because of course we're still having a lot of controversy about ensuring trans lives are more liveable. There are moments still of what equalities count and when? Maybe I can, in terms of thinking about that event and who else was there, there was a big presence from the third sector, and I know the third sector have been important in doing a lot of equalities work. And The Equality Network were part of the last, the second rather, seminar. We had Patrick Harvie along as well. The Equality Network were saying, like lots of third sector groups, they feel themselves quite underfunded or challenged in terms of resources. And we could all do with more resources right? But where these groups are often doing the work of equalities how do we protect them?

ER: Yeah. It's a question we've not got a strong answer to yet, because it is about using that experience, and using that access. Because, with the best will in the world, I don't hear from [LGBTQ+] people directly to the same extent that The Equality Network or LGBT Youth Scotland will, because this is a disenfranchised group right? They're not going to reach out to their MSP or get involved in government consultations the way that the organisation representing them can. But it's about supporting them and, yeah, accepting that they can do work without removing that work from government as well, because that work also needs to be done by my colleagues across government. Equality needs to be embedded throughout all of our processes. And that's the balance that I try to get, is to not allow people to put that responsibility on a group that's separate to us, without doing the work as well.

YT: Yes, that makes sense. And I think, I was reading an exchange – because you can access what ministers are saying in parliament and it's really transparent. And I think I was witnessing an exchange where you were also encouraging people who didn't maybe have the equalities brief to also do equalities work. Right?

ER: Yes. I mean that's a lot of my portfolio. Having responsibility for mainstreaming and for the whole population, and for human rights is about getting all other ministers to do that work, because it shouldn't just be something that happens in Equalities. I need somebody who is making a decision about transport to think, right what are the impacts on disadvantaged groups? Who's going to struggle more due to this decision? And can I make this decision in a way that is fair and does allow equal access to, yeah, new Scots, to asylum seekers, to disabled people, to folk who live in rural areas? Because I can't, you know, go and check every decision that's made, and why would another minister want to know what my opinion is on their decision? But if they can learn equalities and

human rights budgeting, if they can keep equalities considerations in mind throughout their work, then I don't need to.

YT: Yes. And I was reading about your own university journey, and that might resonate, people might want to hear more about that. But in terms of, what can universities, or workplaces more generally – you obviously work in the parliament – what can they do to support these issues, these cost-of-living crisis issues?

ER: So my experience of university is so limited because, for those who don't know, I got into my dream uni, which was Edinburgh Uni. I could only be there for about three months, because I ran out of money. The SAS support that I got was just enough that with a part-time job I thought I could manage that budget, but my student accommodation would add on random charges for bins, for cleaning, for, you know, 'somebody left oil on the floor, youse are all going to pay for a cleaner to come in', and I couldn't do it, so I had to leave. And I continued my studies through the Open University. So I don't have a lot of experience of what it's like to be a queer disabled woman at university, because I didn't manage to do it. So for me the barriers that I'd be looking at are more national and ones of access. But in the book you talk about, you know, the yabs, and the exclusionary conversation, and that labelling of people. And I can imagine that if I'd stayed I would've faced similar assumptions that I face in politics, where people look at you as a disabled woman, they look at you as a young woman who's in politics, and, you know, too loud, and as somebody with mental health issues, and who identifies as queer. People see this as like a, a mark of danger I suppose. There's that assumption that you're very angry, difficult to deal with, and people will treat you that way.

YT: Yeah.

ER: And I think, and I would imagine, that that is a similar experience that people will have in all institutions. So it's about universities, and about governments and parliaments, taking steps to recognise that experience. And not engage in it in the, you know, 'okay, well she's just a radge so let's treat her differently'. Let's ask ourselves, what are the systems that are preventing this person from accessing education in the same way, from participating in, you know, the lecture theatre? Why are these groups not putting their hands up as much? Or why do these groups feel that they need to speak more than that group?

YT: Yeah. Absolutely. And I think that idea of the ideal student and the ideal worker is still very pervasive. Even as we know that those people are very limited. Yeah, so thanks for being part of that, you know, embodied changed in the parliament as well.

ER: It's hard. And it's slow. It's, we always talk about the Scottish parliament being further ahead, in the same way that we were talking about Scotland, and it's true when you look at Westminster and you look at, even our offices are, you know, glass. You can see from outside who a minister is meeting with. We're not, you know, taking lobby groups into the dungeon to chat about goodness knows what. But it's not as accessible as we make out. And I think the work that's going on at the moment, led by the presiding officer, on gender sensitive auditing of the parliament, which is also looking at disability accessibility, is really important because we need to make sure that people know, you know, okay, yes there are disabled toilets in the parliament, but they're not in the ministerial tower. There's a slope to get into the chamber, there aren't steps, but that's fine if you're in an electric wheelchair. It is so hard to get up into the chamber in a manual chair without any assistance.

YT: Yeah. Lots of work to do to make spaces even more accessible... even in our 'accessible' space today, soon as you start to unpack that, it's named as accessible because a wheelchair user could get in, but actually no-one is anticipating a wheelchair user speaking on the stage, but rather sitting at

the back. And I think there are so many rooms that are that are like that. And I think we get too stuck in that then.

ER: And I got, my first year as an MSP was really difficult, trying to get adjustments made, but I was getting there. And then I was put into government and things that had been put in place for me, like a seat at the back of the chamber with a slight rise to it and a footrest, 'well no, you have to go down to the front now because you're answering questions as a minister'. It's not been moved down. And because the front bench changes it can't be there for me. And then you've got, you know, online hybrid options, speaking online, and when we were looking at whether to keep that as a parliament people were saying 'okay we'll keep it, but not for ministers'. And I said 'right, but do you realise that you're saying we can have disabled people in the parliament but they shouldn't be ministers?' And I think people get uncomfortable with it, but that is the only real logical conclusion of what it is that they're saying.

YT: Yeah. And I think if we think about queer lives more broadly and beyond that straight and narrow version as what fits to buildings or institutions or expectations, we can imagine that sort of queer as a possibility to think otherwise. Do you think there could be learning from queer lives to mainstream society about how to get ourselves outside, outwith crisis?

ER: Yeah. It's about flexibility and it's about thinking, you know, not everybody has this universal experience. And actually what people think of as a typical experience is pretty rare, but everything's designed around it. So it would make as much sense to create a society which caters to only queer disabled people as it is to only cater for a specific age group of cisgender heterosexual male.

YT: Right, yeah. It seems quite obvious doesn't it?! Just in terms of, and I don't want to take away from questions in the room, and we'll shortly move to questions, but just in terms of this being an election year, are there things we can look to see in political manifestoes in terms of addressing the cost-of-living crisis?

ER: Yeah. We've made some pretty big requests as the SNP. Obviously from my perspective, being a Scottish Government Minister, I would love for us to be able to make more decisions. A lot of our time is spent trying to get an indication from the UK government, you know, if we do this are you going to try and stop us? If we do this are you going to cut money down south and force us to either give this up or only spend on this? Because we're in that really precarious position all the time of wanting to set up say a new benefit, but not knowing, okay next year are there going to be welfare cuts down south, and how are we going to fund this? Because the only other real levers we have are increasing council tax and other kind of local authority level taxes. So I just want to be able to look at the whole, because trying to play with little bits of the system can make a big difference to individual lives, but it's not strategic. It's not as strategic as we want to be. So we've asked for an incoming UK government to look at a social level of energy bills and broadband, a social tariff. So that disabled people in Scotland are, that it's recognised that they're spending more money on these things out of necessity. But these are things that can only be changed, at the moment, at a UK level, because that's where most of the financial levers sit. So yeah, for me, please call for more devolution of powers, but in the interim big change is needed on spending and taxes.

YT: Mmm, mmm. I'm going to come to one of the quotes that just jumped out to me as you were speaking. And it sort of touches on that sense of sort of scepticism. Because I want the change, right? I don't think this is as best as it can be, or best as it gets, but I think some people we're talking about, because they'd lived those crises over a long-term, that there was a deep scepticism about the possibility of changing political structures. And I think somebody says [in the book] 'it's just going

to, even if we have Scottish independence like it's just going to be another structure, it's just going to be another bureaucracy'. What would you say to those queer voices that have lost hope in institutions?

ER: I think because of where my politics sit like people assume I'm really optimistic and idealistic, and I'm actually really cynical. So I get that. And I spend a lot of time kind of feeling completely defeated and going 'right, well if I can't get this one tiny thing changed how are we going to also change the world?' But it is possible. We can look fundamentally at the structures that are in place and question, you know, should they be there? Should they be there in the way that they are now? And what can we do, in the short-term as well as the long-term, to change it? And I am excited by things that we are doing, albeit knowing that we could do more if situations were different. So the likes of the Human Rights Bill that we're bringing forward, that's really exciting to me. Recognising economic, social, and cultural rights as well as civic and political rights in Scotland, it's huge. It's a huge step forward. It's very frustrating that I'm sitting there going, 'right okay, and we can't do this, and we can't put this duty on people, and we can't apply it to, you know, acts that were passed by the UK parliament because we're devolved and they'll take us to court and we'll lose'. But it is great that we're doing it, and it's creating that human rights culture that will make it easier in future to go further.....and to take more steps, and to educate people in the process about what their rights are, and what they should be doing if they're not being realised.

YT: Mmm. I think this is a great point to pause, because I know people have got other things to get to. While we pause those who are remaining – and in fact you can clap on your way out – can we give Emma Roddick a round of applause. And thanks for engaging with the book, *Working-Class Queers. Time, Place and Politics*, Emma! Can I thank everyone again, and thanks to the RSE.