How a red tide swept Cornwall – and securonomics could sustain it

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Far west of Westminster, beyond the north-south divide, a distinctively local story of Labour's landslide success can be found. It's not quite the 'Red Wall'; not quite the 'Blue Wall'; but another 'wall' entirely: Cornwall.

Labour has almost never had more than a single MP at a time in Cornwall, and for much of its history had none. Today, it has four – in Truro and Falmouth (where I campaigned), Camborne and Redruth, St Austell and Newquay, and South East Cornwall. On the current boundaries, none of these constituencies has previously had a Labour MP.

The Lib Dems having bagged the other two Cornish seats, Cornwall's parliamentary contingent is now Tory-free. Newly-elected MPs swore their oaths of allegiance in our national language, and calls have issued for the new government to create a dedicated minister for Cornwall to represent the interests and identity of our national minority people.

To those accustomed to seeing contemporary Cornwall as a kind of convalescent home for burnt-out urbanites, this unprecedented situation may require some explanation. The full electoral story certainly requires further study; but its roots can be found in Cornwall's past – and, moreover, its future.

Deindustrialisation and deprivation

I live and work in the town where I grew up, which was formerly part of a constituency known as Falmouth and Camborne. This industrial seam was once Labour's only solid electoral prospect in Cornwall, linking the unionised docks and shipyards of Falmouth with the remaining mining districts around Camborne.

It last had a Labour MP from 1997 to 2005 – a period in which the party's mandate locally and nationally combined to attract investment and infrastructure to an area hit hard by the fallout from a long, drawn-out process of deindustrialisation that left Cornwall one of the most deprived parts of Europe.

Some of the poorest areas of Cornwall today were among the richest places in the world during the mining boom that saw the region industrialise before the rest of Britain had even got started.

But by the mid-1800s, overseas competition forced many mines to close and workers to seek employment abroad, with the last tin mine closing in 1998 – although today set to reopen.

This premature and prolonged industrial decline meant that working-class communities largely missed the subsequent emergence of the British labour movement, the gap plugged by Liberalism as the main vector of rural discontent.

The long-standing lack of a durable Labour tradition was compounded with the splitting of the Falmouth and Camborne seat across two new constituencies for the 2010 election, diluting Labour's strongholds with traditional Lib Dem-Tory toss-ups.

Dominance and decline

But Labour's recent gains in Cornwall are not an overnight success attributable to the scale of the Starmer landslide alone. They are the result of years of hard work, on town councils and the unitary authority, to keep local parties competitive against the grain of the party's declining fortunes over the tortuous 2010s.

Demographic shifts have introduced new voting habits to the area, weakening Cornwall's traditional electoral affinity with a Lib Dem brand tarnished by the coalition years. Whilst these shifts have seen Reform make gains, too, it is Labour who today represent the tactical alternative to the Tories in most Cornish constituencies.

This long effort has put Labour in an excellent position to channel increasing public anger about the intensifying socioeconomic contradictions that Cornwall faces. Cornwall has some of the worst pay and precariousness in the UK, with many dependent on seasonal work serving up leisure and pleasure to coastal playgrounds for the rich.

An ageing population, a lack of private investment and poor infrastructure leave Cornwall lagging behind the rest of the UK in productivity and economic dynamism. Cornwall's popularity as a refuge for wealthy dropouts, retirees and second-home owners exacerbates a demand-driven housing crisis to which greater supply represents little convincing response.

Over the past decade, Conservative dominance in Westminster has failed to combine with Conservative dominance in Cornwall to really address or resolve these fundamental issues. The collapse in the Conservative vote on July 4th showed that

Cornish voters are ready for change, with Labour having assumed the role of its standard bearer locally.

Devolution and delivery

As well as the contributions of grassroots candidates and activists, the party's fight for these votes was undoubtedly enabled by a more localised approach to campaigning – with lessons for Labour elsewhere.

Against the party's centralising instincts, the Labour machine has gradually ceded more space for local campaigns to embrace the powerful sense of Cornishness with which a sizeable proportion of the population identifies. This is expressed not only in the symbolism of the St Piran flag, but in demands for the devolution Cornwall needs to build up the institutions and infrastructure for broad-based economic growth.

In previous periods of geopolitical upheaval, Cornwall's unique concentration of natural resources and other geographical advantages made its industrial strengths strategically pivotal to the country's security – mines, ports and satellite stations that are newly relevant today.

As I have argued here and elsewhere, in these respects Cornwall provides a test case for many of the core elements of Labour's securonomics agenda.

For energy security, see offshore wind. For resource security, see critical minerals and metals. For food security, see agriculture. For cybersecurity, see space and satellite communications. And for national security, see defence ship repair.

The prospect of a Labour government putting the state on the side of such industries in order to generate jobs and share gains has helped local candidates craft place-specific policy messaging that resonates with Cornwall's past, present and future.

The winds of change will make themselves felt again in the upcoming local elections in spring 2025. Labour has a real chance of combining with other parties to overturn Tory overall control of Cornwall Council.

With the green transition promising a rapid reindustrialisation of Cornwall's economy in the near-future, Labour locally will be looking to the government to deliver on its stated aim of devolving power and control to those places with 'skin in the game'.

However, coming so soon in the parliament, the pitch for local government cannot depend on national delivery alone, but local messaging too. Thankfully, Cornwall is a place where the national policy agenda is coherent with the need for a local offer to voters. This offer must capture not only the cultural specificity buried deep in Cornwall's past, but the industrial possibility that defines its future.