

Abstract

Any attempt to understand and reverse the major defeat suffered by Labour in December 2019 needs first to appreciate why comparisons with the defeats of the 1980s are so unhelpful. Whereas in 1983 Labour was all but wiped out across southern England, it held on comfortably across the ‘red wall’. In 2019 Labour did well in cities and university towns across the south, and appears to have solved its historic problem with the southern, educated middle class. However this has been at the expense of alienating working-class voters across the country, not just in its former industrial heartlands. But this is not inevitable. A reanalysis of testimony from hundreds of interviews with working people across England from the 1940s onwards allows insights into attitudes and values that are often obscured by survey techniques. Crucially, it points to a broad-based vernacular liberalism at odds with the culture wars model of a terminal crisis for social democracy.

Keywords: culture wars, popular liberalism, working class, myth, common ground

Since publishing *Me, Me Me? The Search for Community in Post-war England* last summer I have mainly found myself embroiled in debates about the recurring tension between self and society in recent decades, and its implication for the future of ‘community’.¹ The book re-analyses the original testimony

collected by social-science studies conducted between the 1940s and the late 2000s and challenges simplistic accounts of the triumph of individualism, and the decline of the community. It argues that people have consistently sought ways to reconcile social connection and personal autonomy in their lives, and that in many ways people are better able to sustain meaningful social relationships in the twenty-first century than they were during the supposed golden age of urban ‘community’. We should therefore be wary, not just of exaggerated accounts of the social anomie of post-industrial society, but also of accounts which insist on the emergence of a new cleavage between the connected and the rootless – or in David Goodhart’s evocative phrase: between the ‘somewheres’ and the ‘anywheres’.²

The relevance of these issues for the Labour party is evident, but I was nonetheless brought up short during the recent election when an eminent historian insisted that I had really written a book about the crisis currently facing the Labour Party. I was adamant that this was the book I had chosen *not* to write, but nonetheless I knew he had a point. Although the book is primarily focused on reconstructing popular conceptions of social change, in the process it necessarily challenges models of working-class life and politics, both idealised and demonised, that still have significant influence on the left.

The size and nature of Labour’s latest electoral disaster has unsurprisingly encouraged me to think harder about how the evidence documented in *Me, Me,*

Me? could be used to reflect on the challenges now facing Labour politics. But before exploring what lessons might be learned from thousands of pages of contemporary personal testimony that informs *Me, Me, Me?*, it is helpful to explore some of the ways in which the 2019 election is different from Michael Foot's historic drubbing in 1983 (the election most often summoned up when media pundits sought to find an instant parallel for Corbyn's dramatic defeat). The most obvious difference is that in 1983 Labour was all but wiped out across southern England; holding on only in its working-class London heartlands and in three scattered working-class enclaves: Thurrock, Ipswich and Bristol South. In 2019 it swept the board in Bristol, holding all four seats easily, and did well in cities and university towns across the south, even holding Canterbury, which before the surprise result in 2017 had *never* been Labour. But in a sense this is the party's problem – it has solved its historic problem with the southern, educated middle class at the expense of alienating its former industrial heartlands of the Midlands, the north and, let's not forget, central Scotland. In the 1980s, when the appeal of the SDP/Liberal Alliance was sapping Labour's strength across southern England, it would have been literally unimaginable that mining seats like Dennis Skinner's Bolsover or Tony Blair's Sedgefield might fall to the Tories. In 1983 the party had majorities of 13,848 and 8,281 respectively in these two seats. It would have been equally absurd to suggest that Stoke-on-Trent might return three Conservative MPs with large majorities. Labour's world has literally been turned upside down since the early 1990s

when North Durham MP Giles Radice penned his famous series of pamphlets outlining how Labour might go about solving its ‘Southern Discomfort’.³

The question is, was this inevitable? The Brexit issue certainly made Labour’s task exceptionally difficult, especially given the leadership’s serial dithering on the issue, which undoubtedly weakened its credibility with unaligned voters.

But Labour’s problems with its traditional, working-class heartlands in the north, the Midlands and central Scotland predate Brexit. Nor can Labour afford to focus only on the post-industrial regions – it did equally poorly in many of the southern, socially mixed urban seats that polled heavily for Labour in the Blair years and which it will need to regain to form a majority government (especially as a radical redrawing of constituency boundaries is overdue and will further harm Labour). It is striking that Labour held Canterbury whilst losing badly in the band of industrial seats that run along the north Kent coast, just as it won leafy Bristol West but remained a distant second in the city’s more working-class, suburban hinterland of Kingswood, where I grew up, or nearby Filton & Bradley Stoke. Seats such as Swindon, Milton Keynes, Stevenage, Watford, and Basildon all tell the same story, as do Thurrock and Ipswich, despite having weathered the Thatcherite storm in 1983. In short, Labour needs to rediscover how to connect with working-class voters *across* Britain, not just in the north and Midlands.

Pundits tell us that Labour's problems are insuperable; that it's caught in the middle of a new culture war between a mobile, educated, predominantly young and liberal middle class, and a largely immobile, poorly educated, older and more socially conservative working and lower middle class.⁴ Under Jeremy Corbyn the party tried to triangulate this problem by combining social liberalism with a strongly radical, redistributive economic programme aimed at least in part at shoring up its post-industrial, working-class base. Even in 2017, when Labour enjoyed an unexpectedly large uplift in the popular vote from 30 to 40 per cent, it still lost a series of historic working-class seats scattered across the so-called 'red wall' including Mansfield, Walsall North, Stoke-on-Trent South, Derbyshire North-East and Copeland in Cumbria and saw its vote fall in many others. Even without the powers of hindsight it was obvious that the omens were profoundly shaky for this type of top-down triangulation of Labour's offer.⁵

But, as I argue in *Me, Me, Me?*, all is not lost for Labour. The 'culture wars' between its different social constituencies are not as deep-seated and insuperable as many suppose. Labour's working-class supporters (and former supporters) may, on average, offer less liberal responses to pollsters' trigger questions on crime, LGBT rights or immigration than the party's middle-class supporters, but it does not follow that they are instinctively illiberal in their world view. Such attitudinal differences spring largely from people's different life situations and experiences, and should not automatically be assumed to represent fixed badges

of identity, let alone the key determinants of political allegiance. Hence the rapid shifts in popular attitudes to sexuality and racial difference that have occurred over the past half century as people's experiences and social understanding have changed.⁶

By tracing popular attitudes over the long-term, *Me, Me, Me?* highlights the strong hold of a quiet, non-assertive liberalism over English popular culture; a liberalism rooted in long-established popular ideas about 'fair play', 'live and let live', and the right to privacy and personal autonomy. The problem is that this common sense popular liberalism can often jar with the sensibilities of metropolitan liberalism, immersed as it is in the carefully crafted 'correct' language for discussing issues such as transgender rights, unconscious racism, or post-colonialism. Arguably it is here that political attitudes as fixed badges of identity loom largest, and Labour needs to find a way to uphold these expanded conceptions of individual liberty without appearing to judge or dismiss voters who are unfamiliar or even uninterested in such issues. Here the strong purchase of ideas about personal autonomy and freedom in the vernacular is Labour's great ally – but it needs to display confidence in a liberal-minded, tolerant populace to make this version of triangulation work.

As *Me, Me, Me?* argues, the myths we live by matter, and for its own sake Labour therefore needs to believe in and champion a vision of the general public as decent, progressive, and reform-minded. It helps that there is plenty of evidence

to back up such a reading, but the point about myths is that they represent powerful tools for understanding and hence defining the social world.⁷ It is a real problem, therefore, that we so often find the left perpetuating derogatory, judgmental myths about small town and suburban Britain. Arguments about ‘left behind’ Britons or the ‘white working class’ perpetuate unhelpful myths which simultaneously flatten the complexity of lives lived and give succour to voices from the radical right.⁸

But in addition to developing a more subtle sociology of politics, Labour also needs to break with its current top-down, paternalistic political style, which seems to rely on attracting voters with extravagant, barely credible policy offers, rather than taking the time to engage directly with those voters’ pressing hopes and fears. As John Harris has recently argued, the party needs to connect with the tens of thousands of community activists working to build radical social change on the ground.⁹ It also needs to develop the direct, idiomatic political language that can help to unite the common sense liberalism to be found in its former post-industrial heartlands with the identity politics of its new metropolitan heartlands. This will not be an easy task, and can only be achieved through a significant injection of professionalism at the heart of the party machine. No one wants the return of the unalloyed politics of spin, but unless Labour again becomes capable of honing sharp, apposite political messages based on a sophisticated

understanding of popular attitudes it will have no chance of reconstructing a broad-based progressive coalition with genuinely nationwide appeal.

NOTES

Special thanks, as ever, to Jane Elliott.

¹ Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-war England* (Oxford, 2019).

² David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: the Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London, 2017).

³ Giles Radice, *Southern Discomfort* (Fabian Pamphlet 555, London, 1992), Giles Radice and Stephen Pollard, *More Southern Discomfort: a Year On - Taxing and Spending* (Fabian Pamphlet 560, London, 1993), and Giles Radice and Stephen Pollard, *Any Southern Discomfort?* (Fabian Pamphlet 568, London, 1994).

⁴ David Runciman, 'A win for proper people? Brexit as a rejection of the networked world', *IPPR Juncture*, 23, 1 (Summer 2016); Goodhart, *Road to Somewhere*.

⁵ Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, p. 17.

⁶ Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, *The New Politics of Class: the Political Exclusion of the British Working Class* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017), pp. 70-6; Jon Cruddas, Nick Pecorelli and Jonathan Rutherford, *Labour's Future: Why Labour Lost in 2015 and How it Can Win Again* (One Nation Register, London, 2016), p. 18.

⁷ Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York, 1990).

⁸ Michael Collins, *The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class* (Granta, London, 2004); Satnam Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Other* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014); Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath, 'The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the left behind: an aggregate-level analysis of the result', *The Political Quarterly*, 87, 3 (2016), pp. 323–32; Lorenza Antonucci, Laszlo Horvath, Yordan

Kutiyski and André Krouwel, 'The malaise of the squeezed middle: challenging the narrative of the 'left behind' Brexiter', *Competition & Change*, 21, 3 (2017), pp. 211-29;

⁹ John Harris, 'A Labour revival must tap into the energy for change on the ground,' *Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2019 at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/15/labour-revival-change-community-activists-plymouth> (last visited 21 Jan. 2020).