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# Labour's lost past endangers its future

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# The Labour Party in crisis

Britain's Labour Party is on a precipice. First Past the Post can be a very cruel taskmaster, rewarding parties that are strong in some regions rather than moderately popular across the country – and Labour is losing its grip on parts of the country where it used to enjoy unquestioned dominance. What it once thought of as its fortresses have crumbled or are crumbling. Labour has one Member of Parliament in Scotland, where as recently as 2010 it won 41. The Conservatives have just taken 33 Labour seats across the English North East and North West, Yorkshire and the Humber and North Wales: they now hold 45 per cent of the Parliamentary seats in those regions.<sup>i</sup>

If we just turn to Wales as a case study, since it seemed until recently to be relatively immune from Labour's medium-term decline, in 2019 Prime Minister Boris Johnson was able to gain six seats from Labour on a swing over five per cent. Four more seats – Alyn and Deeside, Newport West and Newport East, as well as Gower – ended up within two thousand votes of Johnson's grasp. That would have meant that Labour and the Conservatives had ended up equal in Welsh Parliamentary representation: Labour would have failed to win a majority of Welsh seats for the first time since its catastrophic defeat by the National Government in 1931. There are now signs that Labour's grasp even here might be rapidly weakening. The most recent polling shows the Tories hitting their highest ever score in constituency voting for the Welsh Assembly (35 per cent, as against 33 per cent for Labour).<sup>ii</sup>

The pool in which Labour has usually fished for votes has been shrinking very quickly since the early 1970s, as the numbers of traditional working class voters has declined and the number of white-collar middle class professionals surged. The share of the population in each group crossed around the turn of the Millennium, and those trends have slowed but not been reversed.<sup>iii</sup> At the same time, Labour's share of the vote among social classes C2, D and E has been fairly static across the last four elections, even as the Liberal Democrats and then UKIP have withered, while the Tories have surged with those same groups. A long-term perspective may be helpful to illustrate this. In the mid-1960s, Labour was able to win 54% and 59% respectively among C2 and DE voters. By 2019 those numbers had fallen to between 32% (C2) and 39% (DE).<sup>iv</sup> In recent years, Labour has spied an escape route from this shrinking political ecosystem, winning over young people, graduates and the most highly educated workers. But that move from one type of electorate to another is giving off all the signs of an incomplete realignment, as many higher-income voters stay with the Conservatives for fear of some of Labour's left-wing policies: the Tories easily won the AB and C1 social grades at the 2019 General Election.<sup>v</sup>

This is at the heart of a crisis of confidence, even of identity, inside Labour as a party of national governance. The Conservative Party, so long a party of Southern and South-West England, has broken out of its strongholds and is now fighting a war of manoeuvre, leaving Labour shell-shocked in the middle of its static and outdated defences. That development poses an existential risk to Labour's ability ever to govern again on its own, trapped very crudely between more working class seats when its majorities are heading downhill fast and more upscale areas which it is still to win.

Labour at the moment can only say things: it cannot do things. The sum total of the nurses it can employ, the teachers it can recruit, the hospitals it can re-equip and the council houses it can build is precisely zero. By far the most important reason for this is the face it presents to the voters. The formal structures of the Party seem obsessed with narrowcasting to a very small number of diverse urban seats, into which its voters are tightly packed (and who will be corralled even more tightly by the forthcoming Boundary Review). Reception and broadcast seem beyond it. How has this disaster developed, and how can Labour begin to dig its way out?

## LABOUR'S MANY VOICES

One approach – though only one – must be to look to Labour's governing philosophies for solutions, attempting to recover what types of politics have pushed the Party forward, what ideas have animated its intellectual and polling breakthroughs, and what type of language has allowed it to escape electoral straitjackets in the past. These questions are not of simple academic interest. One reason for the present impasse is the fact that Labour has forgotten much of its history as a pluralistic coalition. In attempting to remodel the Party as a 'social movement', on the lines perhaps of Left parties such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, the Labour Party's leadership has effaced much of its own past.

It is undoubtedly important – indeed, morally pressing – to be rooted in local communities, trade unions, the third sector and campaigns for social justice: but Labour's Parliamentary Party has always been the focus of all of those efforts, because only in that way can the country be changed through government action and legislation. Clause One of the Party's Constitution makes clear that 'its purpose is to organise and maintain in Parliament and in the country a political Labour Party' both to 'bring together members and supporters who share its values' and to 'promote the election of Labour Party representatives at all levels of the democratic process'.<sup>vi</sup>

Many voices have contributed to the Labour chorus since the Party's effective foundation in 1900. It is a cliché to say that the Party 'owes more to Methodism than to Marx', but one with a great deal of truth to it. Historically speaking, Labour has never been a party of the narrow left. It has been a party that always contained that left, and which benefited enormously from many of its ideas: but it has actually rested on the support of many stripes of socialists, social democrats, liberals and radical centrists. It owes enormous debts to Christian Socialist revivalists in the nineteenth century; the Edwardian New Liberal thinkers who animated David Lloyd George's progressive Liberal Budgets; and the technocratic efforts of Liberal thinker-bureaucrats such as William Beveridge. It has always proved very unlikely to succeed for long without all of them.

Consider, as a case study, the social liberalism of Labour's period in office between 1964 and 1970. Harold Wilson's first two Ministries are often seen as softening and humanising British national life, both accepting and fostering the gathering mood of tolerance and understanding that was changing the country faster than most governments could. It was Roy Jenkins' tenure at the Home Office between 1965 and 1967 that gave full rein to those developments. The list of achievements in Jenkins' short time there was long, from support for the decriminalisation of homosexuality to abortion law reform. The last was secured via Jenkins' support for a Private Members' Bill introduced by the future Liberal leader, David Steel – an excellent example of how Labour has always relied to some extent on working not just across its own coalition, but with other political parties as well.

## DIVISION AS DEFEAT

For some years now, and certainly since 2015, Labour has chosen instead to give the impression that only it has all the answers: that other parties and their supporters are necessarily and morally inferior, and that even Labour's more moderate members are some way short of the ethical standards required. One way it can fix that impression is to reach out to people who are at present backing other parties – to the Liberal Democrats most of all, since in terms of votes across the whole of Britain they are its biggest single competitor among progressives, but also to voters currently backing the Scottish Nationalists or supporters of Plaid Cymru, Greens and liberal Conservatives. This certainly does not mean any formal alliance, pact or electoral deal. Such an approach would mean Labour could be tempted to 'sub-contract' out its relationship with those voters to other parties, allowing it to persist with a narrow appeal to its own political tribe. In addition, it would run the risk of appearing to carve up any election with other politicians – a lethal impression to give to voters at a time of very widespread dislike of politicians. Still less should it mean accommodation with parties who want to break up the UK altogether, which risks dooming the whole point of Labour's existence – redistribution and the pursuit of greater equality – as well as alienating those non-nationalist parts of the liberal centre and centre left which it needs to govern at Westminster. Labour needs a new feeling for pluralism – a sense of openness, lightness, and a willingness to appeal across party lines and labels on causes and campaigns in pursuit of Labour's values.

One way it could do this would be to accept that Labour is only one repository of wisdom on the left. This is especially obvious because it has just lost an election particularly badly, in part because Britain's progressive forces – and in particular its support for remaining in the European Union – were divided. A number of Parliamentary seats were lost to the Conservatives, in particular, because of the fatally deep division between Labour and the Liberal Democrats – between which two parties relations have rarely been worse in the modern era. During that election the Liberal Democrat leader, Jo Swinson, even declared that there were no circumstances at all under which she would put Corbyn into office – a visceral dislike that was more than matched from the Labour side.<sup>vii</sup>

The number of seats lost to Labour and the Liberal Democrats via these divisions is hard to quantify, but it certainly runs into double digits and more. Labour lost Kensington, which it had gained only in 2017, by just 150 votes after a strong Liberal Democrat intervention which saw their vote nearly double to over 9,000.<sup>viii</sup> In Gedling, Labour lost by just 679 in a seat where the Liberal Democrats again more than doubled their vote (albeit from a low base) to 2,279.<sup>ix</sup> In Stroud, the Liberal Democrats pulled out in favour of the pro-European campaign of Green Party MEP Molly Scott Cato: she gained just under 5,000 votes in a seat which the Tories gained by 3,840.<sup>x</sup> Labour lost Bury North<sup>xi</sup> and Bury South<sup>xii</sup> to the Conservatives by the thinnest of margins – 105 and 402 – in seats where the Liberal Democrats were able to attract 1,584 and 2,315 votes. And so on.

On the other side of the ledger, there is little doubt that the Liberal Democrats missed out on a number of target seats because of Labour's toxicity. A cluster of seats to London's South-West, and among Southern English towns, might have fallen to Swinson's party without the threat of Labour's radical economic plans hanging over voters there. Wimbledon<sup>xiii</sup>, Esher and Walton<sup>xiv</sup> and Guildford<sup>xv</sup> are examples of that first group: Cheltenham<sup>xvi</sup> and Winchester<sup>xvii</sup> are among the second. In other seats, particularly where defecting Labour MPs were standing for the Liberal

Democrats, Labour appears to have deliberately mobilised activists to prevent Conservative losses: Cities of London and Westminster<sup>xviii</sup> and Finchley and Golders Green<sup>xix</sup> fall into this category.

There is no sense in which voters choosing Labour or the Liberal Democrats are interchangeable, or will switch mechanically from one to the other: but the parties' decision to wage all-out war against each at national level clearly cost both parties seats.

These Tory gains and holds may not have made a difference to the election of a majority Conservative government; but changing the outcome in between ten and twenty constituencies would have made the difference between a majority of eighty and one between forty and sixty. Given that Boris Johnson will still have to get any Brexit deal through Parliament, that might not be an insignificant difference. In any case, this seat count adds up only those results which look likely to have had different outcomes even with a little co-operation and engagement, or in Labour's case a rather more certain Brexit policy: the difference may have been far greater with a really strong Labour leadership in the field, armed with a resonant, confident message – including a greater openness to other political traditions.

## **THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE SPLIT ON THE LEFT**

Labour and the Liberals have not always been so divided. In the late nineteenth century, MPs and intellectuals in the 'Labour' interest were but one wing of a Liberal Party which was in some ways an even broader coalition than the later Labour Party's was one day to become. Many prominent members of the new Fabian Society were in the 1880s and 1890s enthusiastic Liberals: other ginger groups such as the Rainbow Group brought together Liberal MPs with collectivist thinkers and early Labour leaders such as Ramsay MacDonald. Although these alliances often broke down on individual questions (in the Rainbow Group's case the South African War of 1899 to 1902), there was no sense that these different views should or could be completely separated from each other.

'Liberal' and 'Labour' organisations took a long time to diverge. The two interests rarely fought each other electorally, except in a few big cities such as Liverpool: elsewhere, two-member constituencies allowed them to reach local deals with each other. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Liberals also deliberately helped Labour, helping to ensure that the two parties would not get in each other's way. Labour's Parliamentary beginnings owed a great deal to a behind-the-scenes deal in 1903: the so-called 'Gladstone-MacDonald' pact that saw the Liberal Party withdraw from a number of seats to allow Labour a free run (though both sides denied the agreement's existence in public). In the two General Elections of 1910, Labour accepted Liberal acquiescence in many of its electoral targets in return for a strict limit on the number of Labour candidates: sixty-eight in January 2010, and only fifty-six in December of the same year. By so doing, it managed to return 40 and then 42 MPs, expanding on its bridgehead of 29 elected in 1906.

It was once the fashion to decry the subsequent rise of 'class-based' politics, especially among political centrists. Jenkins' own Dimpleby lecture of 1979, which foreshadowed his role in the creation of the Social Democratic Party, pinpointed the rise of Labour as a 'working class party' as the factor which 'unbalanced' inter-war politics – gifting its dominance to the Conservatives. In fact, the story was much more complex, and much less pre-determined and inevitable, than the emphasis on social class implies. It was the First World War that did most to tear the old Liberal Party apart, not any near-inevitable 'rise of the working classes', because it made evident the

tensions within the Party's ideology – of free trade, peace and social reform in the interests of the 'nation', rather than sectional interests.

Questions of 'more' or 'less' social reform could be finessed or fudged: the hard questions involved in a new and modern total war proved more intractable, especially after the entry of Conservatives into the wartime Coalitions of 1915 and 1916.

The Liberal Party fatally split in reaction to Lloyd George's formation of a new government in December 1916: the division between the new Prime Minister and the old, in the shape of Herbert Asquith, was effectively to hobble the Liberals for years to come. But the splits in Liberal ranks were in truth much wider and deeper than this. Much of the Liberal press, and many activists, questioned the need for conscription; found widespread nationalisation and the control of prices and supply objectionable; and perhaps most of all began to question the central role of the state in economic life, where Lloyd George had done so much before the War to remake the Liberals as the Party of social progress. This gave Labour its opportunity to break away, and then to break through.

It is highly likely that some form of more organised 'Labour' group would have emerged after the war, as socialist parties variously claiming to speak for working people gained in strength across Europe: but the actual story of Labour's emergence is a good example of the mix of the accidental, personal and political in driving a wedge between the Liberals and Labour. In 1917 Labour's leader and its first Cabinet Minister, Arthur Henderson, was refused permission to go to a conference of socialist groups in Stockholm: he resigned, and turned his attention instead to how Labour might emerge from the war in the strongest possible position. A programme for a 'just peace', including a League of Nations, was less important in some ways than Henderson's decision to build a Labour Party with a constitution, constituency parties and an individual membership, replacing the federation of trade unions and socialist societies that then existed and offering an alternative to the Soviet revolution in Russia, then threatening to spread across Europe. In this way he would also take advantage of Liberal disarray and become the main opposition party to the Conservatives.

The 1918 constitution that eventually emerged was a curious mix, unmatched on the continent: theoretically socialist in its commitment to public ownership via the 'old' Clause IV, but in reality gradualist, 'labourist' and in huge debt to the more conservative trade union movement. Its main opponents were often the 'Lib-Lab' unions, who feared an influx of middle-class radicals into the new membership structure envisaged in each constituency: they had to be placated with a clear majority of seats on Labour's ruling National Executive Committee. The Party's 1918 policy programme was in fact a moderate one, given those unions' influence over Labour's direction: it imagined only 'the gradual building up of a new social order, based not on internecine conflict... but... deliberate planned co-operation'. Even so, the Lloyd George coalition's harsh attitude towards post-war strikes (and public spending) embittered the unions and the wider labour movement. A divided Liberal Party, Lloyd George's choice to join up with the Tories and Henderson's codification of a 'Labour' plan had set the two parties irretrievably against one another.

## **LABOUR'S LOST 'LIBERAL' PAST**

Even then, there was actually a wide range of potential agreement between the parties about individual policies, even if their basic ideologies were diverging sharply. It was always crude, and at its worst downright misleading, to characterise the Liberals and Labour as necessarily enemies. Many key Liberal theorists, such as Leonard Hobhouse, thought that they could well enjoy

some unity in practice – an insight borne out in actual policy proposals, for in manifestos such as *Britain's Industrial Future* (1928) and *We Can Conquer Unemployment* (1929) Lloyd George ended up advocating more extensive, and more detailed, state intervention on public works than Labour did. As Hobhouse argued in the early 1920s, there was no necessary contradiction between the Liberal stress on the individual and Labour's argument that a greater measure of quality was required for each person's development. J.A. Hobson, who actually joined Labour after the First World War, did so because he thought a new generation of members and leaders were replacing doctrinaire statism with an emphasis on economic co-operation and rationalisation.

Many other Liberal figures joined up with Labour between the wars, playing key roles in bringing Labour into the heart of the British state. Charles Trevelyan, who had been a Liberal MP before the First World War and a member of the Rainbow Group, became MacDonald's President of the Board of Education in 1924. Josiah Wedgwood, Noel Buxton and Arthur Ponsonby all left their former home in the Liberal Party to serve under MacDonald. Many of them were appalled at Lloyd George's unreliable behaviour; some had become pacifists or radical internationalists during the First World War; others had simply come round to the idea of faster social reform. Labour's development between the wars owed a huge debt to those Liberals who came over to join it, and their influence spread throughout the Labour movement: William Wedgwood Benn, Viscount Stansgate, became Secretary of State for India in MacDonald's second government between 1929 and 1931. Another Liberal defector, James Chuter Ede, became Attlee's Home Secretary after 1945.

Many of these Liberals changed little, however, in their outlook, but shifted to Labour out of the pure fact that under First Past the Post, Labour was now the reformist Party most likely to win elections and actually implement its programme. Labour, too, colonised so much of the Liberals' ideological space that they starved it of support: the newer party offered support for Free Trade, Imperial reform and peace abroad, with the added impetus of quicker social reform at home: Liberalism's appeal would dim once it fell below a certain level of support within the country. Practical politics exerted its usual gravity. Trevelyan joined Labour because it was 'now such an enormously better instrument for fighting economic wrongs and profiteering and monopoly than Liberalism ever was or could be, that it has become a waste of time for earnest social reformers to bend the Liberal Party to their ends'.

Labour and the Liberals were, of course, still very different parties. Their attitudes to economic organisation, individual liberty and even history itself were and are poles apart in some respects. No less a figure than Clement Attlee was very clear about it in an essay he published in the *New Leader*, where he wrote of Hobhouse: 'his conception of society and its ends is different from ours. Our gods are not his gods'. Liberals, Attlee argued, thought of recent British history as the triumph of the industrial revolution and then of individual and civil rights in its wake: socialists believed that the period had in fact witnessed a disastrous immiseration that had broken up an ordered society only now being seen for the unequal tragedy it really was. Be that as it may, this was to adhere to different outlooks at the cost of similar prescriptions in the here and now – as, after a brief period of two-party dominance, the post-war era was to prove.

### **LABOUR'S NEGLECTED VICTORIES: 1945, 1964, 1997**

Labour's most famous election victories have come at times when it was plausibly able to represent 'the national interest', embody the future – and appeal to at least some Liberal voters. The classic result in that respect is the 1945 General Election, when Attlee was able to portray himself as a

sensible, moderate reformer against Churchill – a great war leader turned rejuvenated peacetime extremist who now warned of a seemingly unlikely ‘new Gestapo’ if Labour won. Labour’s 1945 Manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, promised full use of the techniques that had helped win the War: the total employment of all resources, both human and capital; full employment; nationalisation; investment, efficiency and economic planning. They were ideas that had helped Britain escape disaster, and they captured the optimistic tone of the moment.

Periodicals and newspapers one would have thought of as backing the Liberals – *The Economist* and *The Manchester Guardian* – took Attlee’s side in the war of words, both because Labour had a detailed and it appeared realistic programme, and because of the Tories’ backward-looking jibes about men and women who had been their colleagues until just a few weeks before the election. Attlee and his lieutenants had been serving in a wartime Coalition for five years when they were elected in their own right. They had little difficulty in presenting themselves as gradual, progressive reformers who the public had already come to know well. The much-heralded Liberal revival failed to materialise (as it would on several further occasions in the years to come): equipped with many of the ideas Beveridge and that other vital Liberal thinker John Maynard Keynes had taught it to deploy during the war, the Labour tide swept all before it.

Labour’s victory in 1964 was very different, since the Party had been out of power for thirteen years by that point: this is the only time, excepting the 1997 landslide, that Labour has been out of office before the poll but still able to turn a Conservative majority into one of its own in a single election. Harold Wilson, Labour’s leader in 1964, was a skilful and subtle political operator, accepting that nationalisation had become unpopular and therefore evoking new industries and scientific breakthroughs for the central thrust of the new, more vigorous government he imagined.

Wilson was able to take advantage of a renewed tide of discontent with the apparently tired and amateurish Conservative administration that seemed to be holding the country back. He gained a majority of just four, but that still meant he did not have to turn to the Liberals for assistance. Despite the hopes raised by famous Liberal by-election victories such as Orpington in 1962, only a handful of seats appear to have been affected by the Liberal intervention in 1964, as the Party took its votes fairly equally overall from both of the two main parties.

Even so, Wilson’s right flank was covered by this rejuvenated Liberal Party, which had been slowly recovering from its nadir in 1951. The Liberals’ small electoral effect was less important here than the general mood of optimism that both Labour and the Liberals shared. The Liberals were enthusiasts for the policies of planned, concerted growth and scientific forward-thinking Wilson espoused so successfully in the mid-sixties: indeed, in some respects they were even more excited about planning and economic progress than Labour were.

Jo Grimond, the Liberals’ popular leader at the time, spoke of establishing a Ministry of Expansion and setting an economic growth target of five per cent, the same aim President Kennedy had set himself in the United States. For his part, Wilson himself appeared the very apogee of exactly that ‘New Man’ the Liberals under Jo Grimond spoke of: middle class, middle aged, provincial, highly trained, with as Wilson said himself little patience for ‘outdated practices on either side of industry’. This broad front may have seen Labour and the Liberals jostle with each other for votes, but it made the Conservatives seem like a force from the past.

If Grimond and Wilson caught the Conservatives in something of a pincer movement, Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown deliberately set out to bring down the Tory government that by 1997 had governed for eighteen years. Labour again took advantage of a general mood, a sense of possibility, and embodied a future that summed up but was not trapped by current thinking on the left.

This time, Labour's dominant themes reflected the needs of a country that had tired of an ever-more dilapidated public sector and the one-size-fits-all policies that emanated from Westminster and Whitehall without regard for the UK's different nations and regions. At this time, Labour and the Liberal Democrats shared a strong commitment to spending more on schools and hospitals, and on spreading power to individuals via constitutional innovations such as the Human Rights Act.

The two parties also shared very strong commitments to devolution, working together and with wider civic society in the Scottish Constitutional Convention that eventually led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. They worked together on constitutional reform, and their shared pro-Europeanism was obvious. Ashdown abandoned the new Liberal Democrats' previous policy of 'equidistance' between the two main parties. Blair in his turn made clear in a 1995 Fabian pamphlet that he sought 'a new political consensus of the left-of-centre', and that to get there Labour 'must value the contribution of Lloyd George, Beveridge and Keynes and not just Attlee, Bevan or Crosland'.

More narrowly, Labour and the Liberal Democrats both concentrated on their Conservative targets, rather than fighting each other. That co-operative approach reaped enormous electoral dividends. It may be that Labour won 21 more seats than they would have done without their tacit deal with the Liberal Democrats, and that Ashdown's party itself returned 14 more MPs than they otherwise would have done – 35 Tory losses that turned a terrible defeat into a rout.

On the other hand, it has often been when Labour and the Liberals have been most divided – or when they have allowed the Conservatives to split them one from the other – that they have suffered their most significant defeats. When the Liberals took advantage of a series of British treaties with the Soviet Union to bring down the first minority Labour government of 1924, they managed to polarise the country between those extremes of left and right who could either live with, or were horrified by, the spectre of Soviet Communism. The Liberals lost 105 seats to the Conservatives, sweeping away much of the progress they had painfully built up to via a show of unity and effort in the 1923 election. They were reduced to a rump of 40 seats, and never looked likely to form a government themselves again.

Labour's effective loss of its huge 1945 majority across the 1950 and 1951 elections had at its root the defection of large numbers of Liberal voters to the Tories. The old National Liberals, who had supported the National Government in the 1930s, effectively merged with the Conservatives in 1947: this new 'National Liberal' part of the Conservatives' electoral alliance won 17 seats in 1950. The Liberals were gutted electorally, as well as having key parts of their coalition absorbed by the Conservatives. Even as Labour registered its highest ever share of the vote, in 1951, the Liberals could elect only six MPs – five of them unopposed by Tory candidates.

All across Southern England and in a host of suburban seats, a large-scale revolt against the austerity and rationing Labour had been forced to impose given Britain's parlous economic situation cost Attlee seats, not just because Labour's vote fell, but because Liberals moved over

into the Conservative column. Labour's internal analysis concluded that seventeen of the Party's losses in 1951 were due to the Liberal candidate withdrawing entirely in favour of a Conservative.

The Tories themselves won only 61 per cent of the middle-class vote in 1945, in a contest when one in eight of them voted Liberal: but the Tories managed 77 per cent among that same group by 1955. Labour and the Liberals did not necessarily fall or rise together, but the success of one usually made it more likely that the other would prosper. Labour succeeds when it embraces a mood of change, including the ideas of others, and when it clearly both seeks and secures allies – not when it stands on its honour.

### **BIG POLITICS MUST REPLACE SMALL TALK**

No doubt this argument will be characterised as 'centrist', a recently-fashionable supposed insult that illustrates all too starkly the manner in which ideologues understand politics only along one axis – the crude and outdated left-right spectrum that actually very few voters site themselves on. Labour's new establishment, who have just managed to secure Labour's worst defeat in seats terms since the 1930s, will likely argue in response that moving towards 'the centre' means becoming more pro-European, more liberal, more cosmopolitan – in direct defiance of just that Labour bedrock vote which looks to be disintegrating beneath the Party's feet.

This simplistic argument, pressed into use during the General Election by Labour Party Chairman Ian Lavery and prayed in aid of the leadership's performance afterwards by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, is as deeply misleading as it can be beguiling. It is, first and foremost, crude and condescending about 'traditional' and 'Northern' voters, as if they are all keen Brexiteers and social conservatives (in fact, by far the greater number of Labour voters in constituencies that voted Leave were probably Remainers). In this reductive scheme, voters are constructed in stark and de-personalised terms: as, for instance, 'Leavers' and 'Remainers'. Voters are, second, thought to be obsessed by sectional interests and obsessions rather than interested in a broader, more universal case that appeals to them as people – citizens, parents, patients, students and, yes – if this is not a dirty word among today's left – consumers.

There is no particular reason why Labour need go in only one particular, and stereotypical, direction. Boris Johnson has no problem winning Runnymede and Weybridge<sup>xx</sup> as well as Mansfield<sup>xxi</sup> with similar majorities (despite Runnymede and Weybridge voting Remain in 2016). The Conservatives enjoy strong majorities in Blackpool North<sup>xxii</sup> and Wokingham<sup>xxiii</sup>, even though Wokingham was a Remain constituency: and they similarly hold both Walsall North (74% Leave) and Woking<sup>xxiv</sup> (56% Remain) with big majorities. Johnson's optimistic talk of a better future, buttressed by much more government spending – particularly on infrastructure – proved more telling than his opponents thought. And, as ever, he was able to divide them and pick them off one by one.

Failing to understand the wider emotional landscape of actual voters, and the need to explore an overarching story rather than pick out individual reasons for failure, has left Labour crouched down amidst cramped and confining 'offers' – tested to destruction under both Ed Miliband and Corbyn's leadership. These are classic 'tells' that show off for everyone to see that you are uncertain – signals that you are weak, not confident. This is why the promise of 'free broadband', lower train fares or big payments to pensioners the date of whose pension has been put back (the 'WASPI women') were met with such instinctive derision.<sup>xxv</sup>

The same situation applies if we turn to that more generous, holistic political co-operation that might unlock pent-up sympathy for Labour's ideals. This could not possibly work if it was conducted mechanically. What such an open politics requires is confidence about the overarching stories of a truly honest, engaging and variegated appeal – to the greater equality which is more likely under conditions of economic dynamism, the more liberal society that can only be fostered in an open economy, the links between immigration and better public services.

The pollster Marcus Roberts, currently assisting one Labour inquiry into its electoral disaster, has recently labelled these large-scale national narratives a 'Duplo' practice – mobilising big ideas that click together one with the other, striking a chord with huge numbers of voters.<sup>xxvi</sup> This is the real difference with the politics Labour has been conducting for so long, a series of small-scale 'Lego' stories of patently obvious manoeuvres, little concessions and microtargeting.

### **'Building coalitions to win elections'**

This unambitious and minimalist approach to politics is precisely the wrong way to go about things. Instead of the single-shot explanations offered by Lavery and his ilk, Labour can offer narratives that merge many themes: a diverse politics that reflects a modern and therefore complicated country. The Democratic Party strategist James Carville has recently outlined exactly what this means in the context of the Democrats' battle against Donald Trump: 'the real argument here is that some people think there's a real yearning for a left-wing revolution in this country, and if we just appeal to the people who feel that, we'll grow and excite them and we'll win. But there's a word a lot of people hate that I love: politics. It means building coalitions to win elections. It means sometimes having to sit back and listen to what people think and framing your message accordingly'.<sup>xxvii</sup>

One way to show that Labour is listening will be to reunite all of those strands of opinion that it has been alienating for at least four and a half years, and perhaps longer: the progressive, liberal, tolerant, open and fair-minded Britain that Gordon Brown celebrated in his 2007 speech on 'Britishness' to the Commonwealth Club in London. That Britain has a 'rich, open and outward looking culture', upheld in its turn by 'countless strands of common, continuing endeavour in our villages, towns and cities - the efforts and popular achievements of ordinary men and women, with one sentiment in common - a strong sense of duty'.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Politicians stuck amongst their smaller Lego bricks can see only the apparent contradiction between 'Leave seats' and 'Remain seats'. And, indeed, Labour is leaking votes from both social conservatives worried about identity and social liberals put off by the Party's collectivism. For Barnsley Central MP Dan Jarvis, Labour's perceived lack of loyalty to an idea of 'the nation' was the key factor: 'I had countless conversations with people who expressed deep concern at a Labour Party that they thought no longer spoke for them. They felt we were out of step with the values of community, patriotism and respect for our armed forces that run deep throughout our town'.<sup>xxix</sup> David Hanson, who lost his Delyn seat in North Wales by less than a thousand votes, evoked a different language to typify Labour's deficiencies: Labour was 'seen as a party that was far too left-wing for the public... we have lost that ability to appeal to the centre ground and be centre left'.<sup>xxx</sup>

But the large-scale building blocks of a national appeal are visible. First and foremost, Labour must speak with an inclusive and incisive purpose. Better leadership, which is credible, authoritative and accessible to other parties – and which, crucially, does not cause them to avoid association with continued Labour toxicity – could also short-circuit these theoretically competing fears, and the

contradictory solutions which might grow from them. Most voters have identified Labour's angry and offputting leadership as the main factor why they could not bring themselves to vote for them. Among voters who defected from Labour between 2017 and 2019, 37 per cent told Opinium that Labour's leadership was the reason; 21 per cent cited the Party's Brexit stance.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The end of Brexit's first stage could help Labour here, because it might allow Labour and other parties to unite around a vastly closer relationship with the EU than an increasingly Eurosceptic Conservative Party would ever tolerate. Labour's 'Leave seats' contain many voters who Labour could have kept on their side had they had any definite and clear policy at all. There were always lots of Remainers there to be won, and more wavering Leavers and undecideds who might have respected a clear lead. One voter in fact spoke for many when he told YouGov that 'I couldn't believe Corbyn was the right man... he couldn't even decide if he was pro-Brexit or not'.<sup>xxxix</sup>

To go back to Labour's electoral debacle of 2019, the authoritative British Election Study has shown that 60% of Labour voters in seats where Leave won, but which returned Labour MPs in 2017, actually opted to Remain in 2016.<sup>xxxix</sup> Delyn was lost by a whisker, but more than 2,300 of its voters picked the Liberal Democrats at the last election<sup>xxxix</sup>: even in Barnsley Central, which theoretically developed into a straight fight between Labour and the Brexit Party, the Liberal Democrats won over 1,000 votes (and the Greens a further 900).<sup>xxxix</sup> Together, those two parties' vote amounted to 5.6 per cent of the vote in Jarvis' seat, and went up by nearly three per cent on 2017. Turning inwards, adopting a clichéd and autarkic appeal to a nationalist, and not a national, politics could make things worse.

## **COMPROMISING WITH THE ELECTORATE – AND WITH THE PAST**

Labour members have shown they are ready to compromise with the electorate. 41 per cent of them told YouGov in January that they were willing to accept? 'large' or 'moderate' compromises on Labour values if it meant a better chance of winning the next General Election: a further 42 per cent were willing to agree 'small' moves away from a 2019 Manifesto many accept was at best overloaded, and at worst unrealistic.<sup>xxxix</sup> Now it will be up to Labour's next leader to see what signals he or she can send the voters: hopefully these will be generous, open-minded, optimistic and focused on a future in which Britain will have to grapple with economic and social changes to which government will not have all the answers.

Some of the more interesting things said by the those leadership candidates who are at least attempting to understand some of Labour's problems – Keir Starmer and Lisa Nandy – show that they appreciate at least some of the history and meaning of Labour's past victories and the Lib-Lab tradition. Starmer's internationalism and pro-Europeanism is essential, even if it only for now means a close association with the European Union's Single Market. Nandy's emphasis on local efforts and municipal identity carries with it clear echoes of that nineteenth-century liberalism that built Britain's industrial cities. None of the candidates in the Labour leadership contest appear to have really grasped the scale and scope of Labour's defeat, but there are lines of interpretation out there that are more hopeful than others.

Many Labour writers have always recommended working beyond the boundaries of a mere political party's organisation, among them the revisionist social democratic thinker and Cabinet Minister Anthony Crosland. Although he was writing at a time when rising prosperity and the 'inevitable'

victories of the welfare state were widely thought to be dissolving party politics' sharpest divisions, these words from his 1956 masterpiece *The Future of Socialism* are still important today:

*There are... not one, but two good reasons for being a reformer, and on the Left. The first is a belief in the benefits of socialism. But there are many changes in society which an idealistic reformer might wish to make, but which are not to be subsumed under any defensible definition of socialism. And one is also on the Left, and a Labour supporter, because as a matter of experience most of those advocating such changes are to be found on the Left, and those opposing them on the Right.*

Any new Labour leader will emphasise their own blend of the Party's traditions. What they cannot do is escape from them, as the catastrophe of the last four years has demonstrated. The Party's 1903 Pact with the Liberals, its absorption of so much of the Liberal Party's Parliamentary and intellectual strength in the inter-war years, its debt to Keynes and Beveridge, its appeal to Liberal-minded voters in the 1960s, its cooperation with the Liberal Democrats in 1997 – all of this must be borne in mind when piecing Labour's very identity back together. So must its ownership of a general sense of 'the future' in 1945, 1964 and 1997. The party can get out of the hole it has dug itself: but it cannot do that without mobilising a broad coalition, or without any political friends. If Labour wants to win again, it cannot look to the past, it cannot pretend itself illiberal, and it cannot win by behaving as if it has all the answers.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-red-wall-how-blue-is-it-now/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2020/01/29/the-first-welsh-political-barometer-poll-of-2020/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/feb/26/uk-more-middle-class-than-working-class-2000-data>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2017-election>;  
<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election>

<sup>v</sup> <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/17/how-britain-voted-2019-general-election>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Rule-Book-2019.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/13/jo-swinson-corbyn-and-johnson-are-unfit-to-lead-country>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000768>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000710>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000980>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000611>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000612>

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14001040>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000697>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000719>

<sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000630>

<sup>xvii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14001041>

<sup>xviii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000639>

<sup>xix</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000703>

<sup>xx</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000907>

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