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Answering the Mansfield question

Labour's proletariat problem

Craig Berry

Does Labour have a 'Mansfield problem'? What, if anything, can the party do to reverse the deepening problem of working-class political disengagement?

[Correction added on 25 September 2017, after Online and Print publication: Corrections have been made to the graph on p.129]

The 2017 general election was peculiar for many reasons. One of those reasons, relatively overlooked to date, is that – amid some stunning victories in affluent areas like Canterbury, Reading East, Warwick and Leamington, and Sheffield Hallam – the Labour Party lost the constituency of Mansfield, a predominantly working-class town in Nottinghamshire.

This article will focus on the deepening problem of working-class political disengagement, and what, if anything, Labour can do to reverse the trend. As someone from a traditional working-class background, the general election has brought to national prominence a set of issues that – although I have rarely written about them – are central to my lived experience of British politics. Alongside Mansfield, Labour’s losses in North East Derbyshire, Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland tell a similar story.

“...although Labour’s working-class support did rise in the 2017 election, it rose by far less than working-class support for the Conservatives”

Although I have never been anything other than acutely conscious of my class background, the topic of class-based inequalities has played a remarkably small part in my professional life, despite a career that has taken in stints as a government and trade union official, as well as time spent in academia. Ironically, it has taken an apparent ‘surge’ of electoral support for the most left-wing Labour leader of my lifetime to force me to seriously question my view that Labour enjoyed the support of most working-class voters (albeit perhaps begrudging support) and that working-class conservatism, although ever-present, would only ever be a minority pursuit.

It has of course been obvious for a long time that this political imaginary is anachronistic; indeed, my own research interests in intergenerational and geographical inequalities reflect other faultlines in the politics of inequality which are now severely fractured. I also think gender inequalities are as important as class inequalities, although they feature even less in my research.

However, until the 2017 election, there appeared to be no compelling reason to confront my class-centred view of *party politics*. But although Labour's working-class support did rise in the 2017 election, it rose by far less than working-class support for the Conservatives – a rapid acceleration of a longer-run trend which Labour ignores at its peril, not least because it kept Theresa May in Number 10.

WORKING-CLASS POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT

Before the 2017 election, Labour had held Mansfield for 95 years (and it was actually first won by the party in 1918 – one of a clutch of new seats as the party won more than 50 constituencies for the first time). This is not to suggest that Jeremy Corbyn's leadership is solely or even principally to blame for this particular loss. But there is no doubt that the Corbyn surge has changed the complexion of Labour's electoral base.

“...the Corbyn surge has changed the complexion of Labour's electoral base”

Brexit is a crucial part of this story. Mansfield's support for leaving the EU in June 2016 was 70 per cent. But this archetypal 'left behind' town has been moving away from Labour for a very long time. Its directly-elected mayoralty has been held by 'independent' candidates since the post's creation in 2002. The Mansfield Independent Forum – a centre-right grouping in all but name – is now the council's largest party too, forming a cabinet with the support of UKIP councillors. The Conservatives have also, generally speaking, been catching up to Labour at general elections since 1997.

The reasons for Mansfield's abandonment of Labour are obviously complex. But they are wrapped up in the fact that the constituency has one of the highest concentrations of working-class voters in England. 60 per cent of the residents of the local authority area (coterminous to the constituency) are categorised as social grades C2 (skilled manual workers) or DE (semi-skilled, unskilled and unemployed), compared to an English average of 46 per cent.

We can therefore see Labour's loss of Mansfield as part of a long run national trend of working class voters deserting the Labour Party. IpsosMori voting data shows C2 support steadily declining from around 50 per cent in 1997 to 30 per cent in 2010, and DE support declining from around 60 per cent to around 40 per cent over the same period.⁷ After briefly appearing to further alienate working-class voters, Corbyn's Labour recovered just enough working-class support by the 2017 election to allow many other Labour 'heartland' seats to be spared.

At the same time, working-class support for the Conservative Party has risen steadily across recent elections, now almost matching its early 1980s peak. As such, the Conservative Party now leads Labour among C2 voters by 4 percentage points, rising from an even share with Labour in 2015. And the Conservative Party has closed the gap among DE voters to 9 percentage points, having been 15 points behind in 2015.⁸

Labour picked up the working-class vote share too (benefiting from a collapse of working-class support for the SNP and the Green Party⁹), but its surge was based mainly on a remarkable uptick in support among AB and C1 voters (managerial and professional workers). Incredibly, the spread of support by class is now fairly even for both main parties.

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The apparent silver lining for Labour in terms of the party's working-class base is that its vote share among *young* C2 and DE voters appears to have been particularly strong. Labour won 62 per cent of the vote share among C2 voters aged 18–34 (compared to 27 per cent for the Conservatives), and 70 per cent for of the DE vote in the same age group (compared to 18 per cent for the Conservatives).

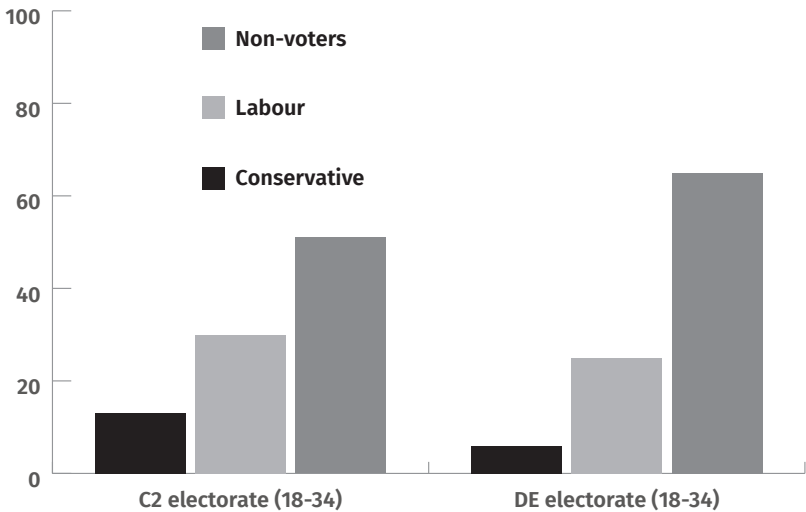
7 Bertram T (2016) 'The Copeland test: Labour's core vote'. <https://medium.com/@theobertram/the-copeland-test-labours-core-vote-ddac4fb8ee>

8 Ipsos MORI (2017) 'How Britain voted in the 2017 election'. https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2017-election?language_content_entity=en-uk

9 See YouGov voting data: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/owc2a5orpr/Establishment_Extra_Variables_Website.pdf (2015) and https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/smo1w49ph1/Internal_Results_170613_2017Election_Demographics_W.pdf (2017).

There is, however, a rather inconvenient truth which overrides this positive (or not-quite-as-bad-as-it-seems) story about Labour's working-class vote in 2017: turnout among working-class voters remains very low. While rising slightly, as it did across the electorate in general, C2 turnout was only 60 per cent in 2017, and DE turnout was only 53 per cent (the overall figure was 63 per cent, while AB and C1 voters both have a turnout rate close to 70 per cent).

Furthermore, turnout among working-class young people is depressingly low. C2 turnout in 2017 among voters aged 18–34 was only 49 per cent, and DE turnout was only 35 per cent (young C1 turnout, in contrast, was above the overall turnout rate *for all ages*). Here is the IpsosMori voting data by class and age with non-voters included:



There are limitations to the Market Research Society's ABCDE social grade classification, especially given that deindustrialisation has blurred the lines between white-collar and blue-collar occupations (particularly at the C1/C2 boundary). There is also clearly a significant divide (racialised, in part) between people in working-class occupations in large cities, and those in smaller cities and towns like Mansfield.

The most important response to these concerns from a social scientist's perspective is that this is the best available data. Indeed, research by polling companies using the ABCDE framework produces the *only* form of data which explicitly connects voting behaviour to a classification of social class.

It is imperative that the baby is not thrown out the bathwater. We should not mistake a lack of exactitude with a lack of usefulness – and we should be wary of political leaders exploiting niche epistemological debates to unpick the validity of evidence they do not like. The ABCDE categories remain useful; for instance, areas with a high proportion of C2DE residents correlate closely with areas of high deprivation.¹⁰

It is possible to conclude that the Conservatives are now a party with strong working-class support *and* that Labour is recovering lost ground among its working-class base. Elements of both stories are apparent from the evidence – but more evidence is needed. The most important (and least refutable) story emerging from the 2017 general election in this regard, however, is that the working class remains disproportionately disengaged from formal politics. This disengagement is particularly acute among young people. Precisely because the ABCDE framework is imperfect, very little can be inferred from Labour’s DE vote share among the proportion of the 18–34 age group that voted. The only fact that really matters is that two-thirds of this group did not vote.

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THE MANSFIELD TEST

There is nothing wrong with Labour attracting more middle-class votes. The party needs to forge alliances across socio-economic groups to win a majority in parliament. Yet a celebration of the unexpected but commendable feat of gaining 30 seats must at some point give way to consideration of how a further 64 seats will be gained to secure a parliamentary majority.

The Conservative Party’s own surge among working-class voters contributed to its enormous 42.4 per cent overall vote share. This was, incredibly, almost matched by Labour, but the Conservative vote is more evenly

¹⁰ See social grade and deprivation data available, respectively: https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/2011censusquickstatisticsforenglandandwalesonnationalidentitypassportsheldandcountryofbirth/r24ewrtableqs611ewladv1_tcm77-304378%282%29.xls and <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015>.

spread, enabling the party to emerge as the largest party by a considerable margin. Of course, there are relatively few constituencies like Mansfield, so it would be wrong to assume that reinforcing the party's appeal to working-class voters in 'left behind' towns would produce a stable majority for the Conservatives at the next election.

However, this argument is a bit of a red herring. The first-past-the-post system means that the Conservative Party does not need to win all of the predominantly working-class constituencies competed over by Labour and UKIP at the 2015 election, for instance, to win a majority. A handful of Mansfields would help, but the more important goal for the Conservative Party is winning back its own supporters in suburban areas. This is far more achievable as long as the working-class vote in these areas remains depressed.

If a new Conservative leader can combine some of the more appealing elements of Mayism with a dash of Osbornomics, the class alliance underpinning the approach to statecraft emerging under Theresa May might start to look a little more robust. A housing market stimulus which benefits younger as well as older people – both requiring and signifying a softening of austerity – in combination with a new system of higher education funding would probably do the trick.

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Labour's support in large cities – much prized by Cameron and Osborne – seems to have been strengthened by Corbynism (Sheffield was in fact the only city in England and Wales which delivered a swing to the Conservatives at the election¹¹). But May's alternative emphasis on smaller cities and towns has started to bear fruit. Ironically, the metro-mayoral offices – the creation of which was central to Osborne's metropolitan strategy – in the West Midlands and West of England were only won by the Conservatives because of support attracted by the party *outside* the regions' core cities.

Labour performed well at the 2017 election largely because of middle-

11 Breach A (2017) 'The swinging cities', *Centre for Cities*, 15 June. <http://www.centreforcities.org/blog/the-swinging-cities/>

class urban-dwellers. But the next election will probably be fought on very different territory. Unless the working-class vote can be decisively won (including mobilising the politically disengaged), the fragility of the electoral coalition cobbled together by Corbyn could be exposed. Indeed, given the likelihood that Labour's success in retaining the vast majority of its predominantly working-class seats in 2017 can be at least partially explained by a habitual Labour-despite-Corbyn vote, which will be impossible to retain now the leader's position is unassailable, a re-examination of the party's relationship with its base is critical.

LABOUR'S WORKING-CLASS WOBBLES

There appear to be four main treatments of the working class in the centre-Left imaginary. The first is that there are increasingly few differences between working- and middle-class interests. Labour figures are of course correct to point out that working- and middle-class interests may be in far stronger alignment during a period of labour market 'hollowing out' than is normally assumed, and we may indeed be witnessing a 'proletarianisation' of the economic experience of some middle-class groups, particularly among the young. Such conclusions contribute to concerns around the sanctity of the ABCDE social grade classification.

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But economic precariousness is, overwhelmingly, an affliction of the traditional working class. The broader charge of Labour's 'embourgeoisement', an accusation made most forcefully by John Gray,¹² is unfair and simplistic, but the over-amplification of middle-class precariousness among Corbynism's softer, left-liberal wing is undoubtedly related to the under-representation of working-class people among the party elite.

The reaction to Jeremy Corbyn's appearance on the main stage at Glastonbury – a music festival which attracts a predominantly middle-class audience – underlines this point. It is too crude to suggest that working-class people do not attend events like Glastonbury. But it is equally absurd

12 Gray J (2017) 'Labour's populism for the middle classes', *New Statesman*, 18 June.
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/06/labours-populism-middle-classes>

to suggest that Glastonbury is a cross-class gathering because working-class people can ‘save up’ to afford the expensive tickets,¹³ or that many attend as volunteer bar workers. I did both of these things, when I was poor, so that I could attend concerts and festivals. But the vast majority of working-class people have very limited access to cultural goods like Glastonbury. Some bemoan this fact, and some are entirely indifferent. There are as many working-class lifestyles as there are working-class people.

A second treatment of the working class evident among Corbyn supporters involves recognition of working-class opposition to Corbynism, explained via a pseudo-Marxist false consciousness thesis, in which the working class are deemed incapable of understanding their own socio-economic interests. One of the corollaries of this sentiment is a predilection to portray the present moment as a historical juncture; that is, an interregnum between distinct historical periods. This provides a comforting frame for Corbynism, since it compels an immediate mobilisation of socialist forces, irrespective of working-class support, in order to capitalise on a weakening of neoliberal normativity.¹⁴

“In practice, the experience of capitalism by working class groups has always been heavily politicised, but manifests as an interest in both liberation from and reproduction of their class status”

In practice, the experience of capitalism by working class groups has *always* been heavily politicised, but manifests as an interest in both liberation from and reproduction of their class status. For working-class people, this contradiction is not a theoretical problematique, but rather a crushing, everyday dilemma.

This is not to deny that history develops via junctures at which a multitude of futures are imaginable, and at which failed futures – such as those which

13 Jones O (2017) ‘Glastonbury is more evidence: Corbyn’s appeal crosses classes’, *The Guardian*, 26 June. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/26/labour-jeremy-corbyn-middle-working-class-glastonbury>

14 Both of these arguments are present in the work of cultural theorist Jeremy Gilbert. See: Gilbert, Jeremy (2015) ‘Captive creativity: breaking free from the long 90s’, paper presented at University of Leeds, September (<https://jeremygilbertwriting.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/the-end-of-the-long-90s1.pdf>) and Gilbert, Jeremy (2017) ‘A response to Paul Mason’s “Labour: the way ahead”’ (<https://jeremygilbertwriting.wordpress.com/2016/08/01/a-response-to-paul-masons-labour-the-way-ahead/>).

did not materialise after the crisis of the 1970s, before the ascendance of neoliberalism – can be romanticised and revived. But the notion that we can identify a juncture as we live through it, immediately understanding its historical implications and imperatives for praxis, is fallacious. The conjunctural nature of the present moment is obviously one of the reasons for Corbyn’s popularity on the Labour left, eventually transmitted to key sections of the electorate. But to move from this recognition to the argument that Corbynism itself represents a progressive future – irrespective of the content of Labour’s policy programme, or the nature of the class forces underpinning it – is too great a leap.

Among those opposed to Corbyn’s leadership, the only serious thinking about the proletariat problem within the Labour Party in the last few years has come from the Blue Labour perspective. Alas, ‘serious’ is by no means synonymous with ‘sensible’ in this context. What started out as an important critique of New Labour’s managerialist state, inspired by communitarian thought, has morphed into self-parody as the very essence of social democratic statecraft – collective action to pursue universal values – is deemed incompatible with community-building. Blue Labour replaces the class politics of inequality with the class politics of culture, and too eagerly apotheosises the image of the white, English manual worker as the key agent of the socialist imaginary, while depriving this agent of their experience of exploitative economic relations and instead fetishising their experience of place and ‘belonging’.¹⁵

“Corbyn and McDonnell have begun to adopt a populist and conspiratorial tone on the economy, offering a ‘personalised’ critique of global elites”

The fourth treatment is increasingly being employed by Corbyn himself, alongside shadow chancellor John McDonnell. Corbyn and McDonnell have begun to adopt a populist and conspiratorial tone on the economy, offering a ‘personalised’ critique of global elites for creating a ‘rigged’ economy, and committing to end freedom of movement as part of the Brexit process.¹⁶ We should, on the one hand, credit Corbyn et al for appearing to take seriously the need to appeal to the working class, and for

15 Berry C (2015) ‘Resurrected right, disorientated left: pre-crisis economics and post-crisis emotions’, *Juncture* 22(3), 235-242.

16 Bolton M (2017) ‘Reassessing Corbynism: success, contradictions and a difficult path ahead’, *SPERI Comment*, 13 June. <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2017/06/13/reassessing-corbynism-success-contradictions-and-a-difficult-path-ahead/>

seeking to politicise the distinctive nature of working-class experiences in some areas. In this regard, Jeremy Corbyn is no Corbynite.

On the other hand, however, there are as yet no meaningful examples in history of left-wing populism transforming, once power is attained, into a substantive, progressive and inclusive programme of social change. I have my doubts that Labour's accidental leader is about to set a trend in this regard. There is little evidence that populist rhetoric will 'cut through' to the working class, and certainly not without feeding a xenophobia from which only the Right will benefit. In practice, Corbyn's left-wing populism is more a performance for his own supporters than a genuine attempt to mobilise working-class groups.

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A NEW SETTLEMENT

We should be pleased, therefore, that Corbyn's populist turn remains at the embryonic stage. For the most part, Labour seems trapped between two equally absurd positions on its working-class base: either that the working class is a homogenous, apolitical lump for which Labour must craft a distinctive offer, or that there are increasingly few differences between middle- and working-class politics.

Clearly, the Conservative government has acute vulnerabilities of its own making, as its future failures in terms of the Brexit process create opportunities for Labour. But Labour will continue to struggle to develop a coherent perspective on Brexit until the party reacquaints itself with the working class.

Corbyn is not responsible for the acquaintance having been lost, but it is essential that action is taken now to resolve the problem. Labour needs a policy offer for the working class which extends beyond increasing the minimum wage by slightly more than the Conservative Party is planning. The party needs a radical approach to social security and employment rights. The leadership also needs to make a determined effort to elevate people from working-class backgrounds to the highest ranks of the party.

The party itself must reform. A decisive shift of internal culture is needed: away from members debating policies among themselves, and towards genuine deliberation with working-class communities. Structural change – such as the comprehensive federalisation of the party within England – would assist this agenda. There is also work to be done by the trade union movement. Trade unions should become *more* important to Labour, but only on the basis that they become more representative of the working class. If existing unions are reluctant to change, Labour must support and drive the creation of new forms of trade unionism.

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Labour stands at a critical juncture. The stubbornness (and exacerbation) of class-based inequalities shatters the illusion upon which much of Labour’s recent statecraft has been founded. But while the party’s shift leftwards clearly offers an opportunity to re-root Labour in the working class – while acknowledging its complexities – there are few signs at present that this opportunity is being realised.

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