Labour's lost tribe: winning back the working class

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Labour's working-class support rose at the 2017 election, but by far less than working-class support for the Conservatives increased. Amid some stunning victories in affluent areas like Canterbury, Reading, Leamington Spa and Sheffield Hallam, there were disheartening losses in predominantly working-class seats in Mansfield, Middleborough, Cleveland and North-East Derbyshire.

This is a rapid acceleration of a longer-run trend which Labour ignores at its peril. This article will focus on the deepening problem of working-class political disengagement, and what Labour can do to reverse the trend. The emerging Corbynite policy agenda has many worthwhile elements, but in terms of addressing class inequalities, and offering a route to working-class empowerment, it leaves much to be desired.

Labour must not forget working-class disengagement

IpsosMori voting data shows support from social grade C2 steadily declining from around 50 per cent in 1997 to 30 per cent in 2010, with support from DE voters declining from around 60 per cent to around 40 per cent over the same period (social grades C2 and DE are usually treated as synonymous with the working class).[1] After briefly appearing to further alienate working-class voters, working-class support for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour recovered just enough by the 2017 election to allow many other Labour 'heartland' seats to be spared.[2]

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.

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

We must not forget, moreover, that electoral turnout among working-class voters remains very low. While rising slightly in 2017, as it did across the electorate in general, C2 turnout was only 60 per cent, 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.

While the verdict on Labour's performance among working-class voters was inconclusive, the party's 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).

However, low turnout is relevant here too. Turnout among voters aged 18-34 in social grade C2 was only 49 per cent, and for DE this figure is only 35 per cent. In contrast, young C1 turnout was above the overall turnout rate *for all ages*. It is debateable whether Labour can win the dozens of seats required to secure a majority at the next election with only one in four of those in the poorest groups aged under 35 voting for the party. Of course, while aggregate turnout figures tell us an important story, Labour knows better than any party that many seats can be won on very low local turnouts under first-past-the-post. However, it must also be aware that C2 voters are over-represented in the marginal seats Labour must target to secure a majority.[3]

When confronted with unwelcome statistics on the class composition of Labour's electoral support, the Labour leadership, and its supporters in the elite media, have tended to respond in one of two ways. Firstly, that there are limitations to the Market Research Society's occupation-based ABCDE social grade classification, particularly at the C1/C2 boundary. There is clearly a significant divide (racialised, in part) between people in working-class occupations in large cities, and those in the smaller cities and towns where Labour's support is more vulnerable. Secondly, deindustrialisation and the spread of labour market precariousness means that erstwhile middle-class groups are experiencing a degree of 'proletarianisation'.[4]

Both of these responses are inadequate. The ABCDE framework is obviously imperfect from a social scientist's perspective. But it is the best data available on actual voting: we should always beware political leaders exploiting niche epistemological debates to unpick the validity of evidence they do not like. Moreover, even if we acknowledge, as we must, the blurred lines between working-class and middle-class occupations, the C2 and DE categories actually map rather well onto area-based deprivation.[5]

Deindustrialisation might have changed what it means to be working class, but it has not made the working class richer. Precariousness is primarily a working-class affliction, and arguably a defining condition. Instead of excusing its strained relationship with the working class with reference to changes in the industries in which precariousness is manifest, Labour should instead be considering how it can keep pace with industrial change to renew its working class base.

Corbynism is a strangely conservative creed

This is not intended as a clarion call for preference-accommodation. The Corbyn leadership is already too keen to crudely accommodate what it perceives to be working-class political preferences – primarily Brexit, albeit to little avail. There is a curious absence within Corbynism of a radical economic policy programme focused on supporting and empowering the working class, through which the latter's preferences might be shaped.

What there is instead is a modest industrial strategy rather similar to the May government's policy, focused on investing in high-tech R&D and improving the country's physical, energy and digital infrastructures.[6] The Labour approach would involve higher levels of investment than May's, especially in disadvantaged regions, achieved via the establishment of new bodies such as a national investment bank (NIB). This is a good idea, worth pursuing. But we should be clear on the limitations of this strategy. Making more capital available to invest in high-tech industries – essentially, the Germanic variant of capitalism – might lead eventually

to an uptick in UK productivity. Yet the benefits to the working class are not immediately obvious, beyond the tiny numbers who might secure good jobs in advanced manufacturing (as the sector automates its production processes).

We should also take seriously the argument that it is already too late for the UK to join the 'fourth industrial revolution', especially if the UK ends up outside the European single market, which is of course Labour's current policy. Industrial strategies are all well and good, but they need to be underpinned by an analysis of who might actually want to buy the stuff we produce – an issue the UK policy elite has long neglected.[7]

Support appears also to be growing for a 'citizens' wealth fund' (CWF), essentially performing the same role as the NIB, albeit via a different financial model – in fact the fund could also be used to capitalise public banks. The fund would utilise public assets or tax revenue streams to invest over the very long-term, supporting industrial development but also generating returns which can be invested in public goods, including dividend payments to citizens. A slightly more radical version of a CWF would see it capitalised by the socialisation of common resources, such as personal data (so the private enterprises using these resources would have to contribute to the fund).[8] Yet even this model has been advanced with little explanation of specifically why a CWF would be required to achieve these aims, rather than utilising the normal fiscal powers of the (democratic) state.

The central premise of a CWF, that wealth ultimately produced or owned by citizens should be used for the benefit of all, is an appealing one. But it is not without flaws. In addition to the limitations, noted above, inherent in any capital investment programme in the UK's present economic predicament, there are valid concerns about how such a fund (and indeed an NIB[9]) might be governed. In theory, one of the key benefits of a CWF is that its activities might seem less remote to ordinary citizens, in comparison with the state in general, even though the latter is ultimately managed by a democratically elected executive. Yet most proposals actually fail to substantiate the notion that CWFs serve to democratise economic power. Invariably they rest explicitly or implicitly on a model in which technocrats are appointed to manage the fund on behalf of citizens. The complex nature of the fund probably makes this a necessity – but nevertheless the risk of replacing one governing elite with another is a significant one.

The NIB and CWF ideas form part of the vogue-ish 'institutional turn' narrative now being championed by some on the Corbynite left, most notably Martin O'Neill and Joe Guinan.[10] While the key contention – that the UK's inequitable model of capitalism in underpinned by institutional arrangements which are contingent rather than fixed, and should therefore be remodelled – is inarguable, the institutional turn's ambitions appear to be somewhat limited. Its adherents advocate, above all, support for alternative models of company ownership (including public ownership, albeit not exclusively). This would be a more substantive form of empowerment for some workers (and of course private companies in a capitalist economy will always command far move investible capital than public bodies).

But it is difficult to see this prospect as anything other than a minority pursuit. Labour's discourse can therefore seem rather anachronistic at times. For most workers employed by large firms in low-value service industries, the notion that they may take partial ownership of their employer will be unappealing, and indeed rather fanciful. Shadow chancellor John McDonnell's recent speech to the Trades Union Congress announced plans to create

'ownership funds' for workers in firms with more than 250 employees, essentially giving them a share of the firm's profits – McDonnell argues dividends will supplement wages – as well as a degree of influence at boardroom level. Many working-class people could benefit from such a scheme, but the fact that workers would be unable to sell their shares (and presumably would be forced to relinquish them when they change employer) would make it a dubious form of empowerment. Lacking real control over their assets, most would simply see the scheme as an alternative (and perhaps volatile) source of pay (as in existing co-operative models). And even this benefit depends of course on the continuing profitability of the capitalist enterprise. In practice, some workers would benefit far more than others, irrespective of their performance.

Employee ownership models should be pursued where possible. But it is not a direct or robust response to the main sources of corporate power in contemporary capitalism, that is, the ownership of intangible intellectual property. Giving workers a share of their employer's profits will mean little if the company's most lucrative assets are held offshore.

The institutional turn also encompasses a celebration of 'the Preston model' of community wealth-building (as we might expect, given that the model is based on initiatives in the United States promoted by the University of Maryland, where Guinan is based, as well as the Centre for Local Economic Strategies in the UK). Through this approach, local authorities focus their procurement activity on local firms, and indeed support the creation of co-operative firms and the development of the third sector, in order to deliver local services. The Preston model has many virtues, but limited application. Many local authorities in the UK have of course already adopted such procurement practices to some extent. Affluent Preston, with strength in the aerospace industry, is a rather favourable test-case, especially given that it is not a unitary authority, and so has no responsibility for acute services such as social care. Will the same approach have a transformative impact in neighbouring Blackpool, for instance, a unitary authority with significant levels of deprivation, strained services, poor infrastructure and declining industries?[11]

The institutional turn is not necessarily rendered redundant by its lack of ambition: radical policies usually only emerge after more moderate adjustments to dominant paradigms have been tried and tested.[12] A more significant concern is that it is cast implicitly *against* redistributive politics and fiscal activism. O'Neill and Guinan's resurrection of Ed Miliband's 'predistribution' (the notion that we should prevent inequalities occurring so that fiscal policy does not have to work as hard to ameliorate them) is a case in point; as Ed Miliband found to his cost, the concept of predistribution offers an over-elaborate way of describing the rather mundane. It was used primarily by Miliband to fashion a radical-sounding agenda palatable alongside a perceived austerity imperative.

Like it or not, the next Labour government is going to have to tax and redistribute wealth in the UK on a quite significant scale, and far more so than was admitted in the 2017 manifesto. The task should not be seen as anything other than urgent, and the time to start making the case for this agenda has come. Yet macroeconomic policy in general, which had been central to the early Corbynite agenda – remember 'people's QE'? – now appears to have been thoroughly marginalised, at least in Labour's public discourse.

Labour's vanguardism is the opposite of progressive politics

Faced with the inconvenient truth of working-class disengagement, prominent Corbyn supporters in the media and academia have used a series of overlapping (and self-serving) arguments to justify Labour's claim to represent the interests of the worst off. The most noxious include a crude 'false consciousness' thesis, the notion that the UK has arrived at a momentary historical 'juncture' requiring swift mobilisation irrespective of mass support, and the assertion that those from privileged backgrounds are better able to understand class-based inequalities.[13]

This does not mean the Corbynite left deserves no credit for its attempt to engage working-class groups. Perhaps the greatest irony of the Corbynite left's blindness to – and, if we are honest, harbouring of – anti-Semitism is that the leadership has successfully managed to marginalise the crude 'Blue Labour' perspective on Labour's class politics. Blue Labour's narrow and fantastical version of the 'white working class', reimagined more recently as the 'left behind', is an implicitly racialised narrative which place the experiences of ethnic minority groups outside its depiction of traditional working-class communities. Corbynites rightly recognise that class is an economic status, not a fixed identity.[14]

Too often, however, populist politics passes for working-class engagement among Labour's leadership cadre. The challenge for the advocates of the institutional turn is to demonstrate its potential to genuinely disseminate power away from elites – rather than simply providing a veneer for vanguardism. Tellingly, McDonnell's recent account of 'industrial democracy' implicitly rebuked a key element of the institutional turn, by denying that Labour requires the kind of post-neoliberal 'intellectual infrastructure' outlined in elegant terms by key figures such as Christine Berry, and Laurie Laybourn-Langton and Michael Jacobs.[15] He cites approvingly Berry's account of the intellectual infrastructure which supported the Thatcher revolution, but says Labour will do things 'by very different means'.

Instead, Labour's programme will be driven by 'the real experts on the shop floor'. Such statements are reminiscent of Michael Gove's depressingly effective diatribe against 'experts' during the 2016 EU referendum campaign. The implicit depiction of the working class is actually rather dehumanising; in McDonnell's rendering, the working class is abstracted and economised; considered useful only insofar as they have knowledge of production. Moreover, this 'real' expertise is 'tacit' – requiring translation into concrete policy prescriptions by a governing elite.

Such an understanding is implicit in McDonnell's advocacy of ownership funds, discussed above. While giving workers real control over the company shares they accrue, by allowing them the option of selling, would have the whiff of Thatcherism and 'asset-based welfare', Labour's new approach seeks to reward only workers who conform to a rather narrow, top-down vision of industrial relations.

Labour's new 'Build it in Britain' campaign strikes a similar tone.[16] In practical terms, the campaign advocates little more than an agenda to focus public procurement on UK rather than overseas companies; as such, it would be a useful part, but only a small part, of a new industrial policy framework focused on increasing industrial capacity in the UK economy. But the campaign – launched alongside grainy, monochrome images of smoking factory chimneys and workers in flat caps, heralding the country's 'proud industrial history'[17] –

carries the message that mass manufacturing could return to 'Britain's towns and cities'. It is, in essence, a promise to 'reshore' manufacturing jobs.

Yet reshoring depends on low labour costs, which is undesirable, and on lower energy costs, which is undeliverable in the short term. As John Bryson, Vida Vanchan and Rachel Mulhall argue, 'Build it in Britain' is reminiscent of Donald Trump's nativist 'Make America Great Again' agenda. It takes no account of the fact that reshored manufacturing jobs are the likeliest to be automated – all the more so if Labour were to seek to reshore while simultaneously driving up wages in manufacturing industries.[18] Mass manufacturing, and related industries, cannot be central to improving the livelihoods and life chances of the working class. Lest we forget that it is a mere three years since Corbyn called for coal mines to be reopened, perhaps the most staggeringly patronising offer ever made by a Labour politician to the party's working class base. Trump likes coal too.

Winning back the working class

It's hard out here for a prole. While the centrist critics of Corbynism have failed to produce anything close to a substantive, progressive programme for government (beyond the imperative of resisting hard Brexit), the non-Corbynite left has been a rather lonely place for the last couple of years. But there are several strands of thinking on the left – including the institutional turn, to some extent – which offer hope for a genuine reimagining of the left, whether under Corbyn as Labour leader, or beyond.

Much of this thinking has been codified in Andrew Gamble's recent book *Open Left*.[19] At its crudest, Corbynism is a programme essentially pitched at what Gamble calls 'the globalised market economy, where goods and services are internationally traded and activity is driven by profit maximisation, competition and shareholder value'. Clearly, Corbynism has a much more expansive view of the role of the state in supporting British industries to succeed in this context, and indeed seeks to broaden the ownership base in various ways so that greater numbers can benefit from this success – but this agenda is constructed via the imaginary of the market economy. Gamble, in contrast, draws upon feminist and green thought, as well as recent work by Julie Froud, Sukhdev Johal, Karel Williams[20] and others to outline three 'other economies', that is, the foundational economy, the household economy, and the green economy.

As Gamble explains:

> [T]here is the local or foundational economy… employing about one-third of the workforce, and comprising the production and distribution of food, the organisation of vital services like education and health, and public utilities such as transport, heat, water and light; there is the reproductive or household economy, which comprises the unpaid care activities necessary to secure the biological and everyday reproduction of human beings; and there is the green economy, which measures the impacts of human activities in all three of the other economies on the biosphere, such as our carbon footprint, use of natural resources and impact on biodiversity.

Importantly, O'Neill and Guinan touch upon this agenda in recommending Rachel Reeves' essay on 'the everyday economy'.[21] But Corbynite thought is not nearly radical enough, or not as radical as it thinks it is. The green economy, for instance, might benefit tangentially if Labour's industrial strategy focuses on technologies to support decarbonisation. But there has

been a noticeable lack of attention to the household and foundational economies, or their distinctive composition and needs, despite the fact that the livelihoods and sustenance of millions of working-class people, far more so than more affluent groups, are dependent on the successful functioning of these economies.

The foundational economy framing should be seen as an opportunity for the advocates of the institutional turn. According to Julie Froud *et al.*, a progressive approach to the foundational economy would involve 'franchising'. Foundational economy business models can be understood as franchises insofar as the permissibility of specific routes to profitability are determined by public sector procurement and a complex regulatory architecture.

So, our task is to *socialise* the franchise by treating communities – the workers, consumers and ultimately financiers of the foundational economy – as the key stakeholders.

The Corbynite left deserves credit for creating space for radical policy thinking, even if its actual agenda still resembles that of the Miliband interregnum, albeit a souped-up version. But Labour needs more than technocratic fads, and must recognise that other traditions within the labour movement, and wider civil society, might be more capable of engaging the working class, and indeed of representing working-class interests in relation to the household and foundational economies. Specifically, any form of industrial democracy which relies upon workers staying with a single firm or even single industry, or any form of democratising finance which privileges the role of financial intermediaries – although these policies may be worthwhile in some ways – is a flawed path to working-class liberation and empowerment.

Labour needs to develop the kind of political structures, inside and outside government, that enable both the means and ends of progressive action to be co-produced with disadvantaged groups. Here are ten ideas for starters, in no particular order:

1. Labour can address the pernicious role of unsecured personal debt in poorer communities by creating mechanisms for household debt restructuring, and supporting a massive expansion of credit unions.[22]

2. A more transformative impact on capital markets than that promised by a citizens' wealth fund can be achieved by turning attention instead to pensions saving (the latter could even be a source of capital for the former). Almost every worker will eventually be enrolled in a workplace pension scheme, with employer contributions, so if even only a tiny proportion of accumulated funds were managed more locally and democratically, it would transform everyday experiences of finance. New 'collective defined contribution' schemes could become an important mechanism for alternative, member-driven investment strategies.[23]

3. As well as employment rights for 'gig' workers, Labour needs to think much more creatively about the minimum wage. The minimum wage should of course be raised at a faster pace than the Corbyn leadership currently envisages. But the same principle of a wage floor needs to be rolled out across the new landscape of precarious work.[24]

4. Labour also need to think more creatively about welfare, instituting a comprehensive, productivity-enhancing settlement for parents, particularly women whose careers are impeded by caring responsibilities. We need new forms of social insurance that encourage individuals willing to work to take risks to progress their career. In

combination, a radical approach to the minimum wage alongside a radical approach to welfare would achieve the ambitions of a universal basic income without simply valorising a consumption-based economy or opening the door to new forms of benefit conditionality.

5. The UK requires a long-term industrial strategy, but the strategy must look beyond high-tech industries, adopting the principle of 'universal basic infrastructure' and making world-class health and care systems central to the UK's economic future.[25]

6. This approach clearly overlaps with the notion of the foundational economy. As noted above, Labour needs to consider how to ensure foundational economic activities in every place – including telecommunications, the energy supply, food production, etc. – are being managed appropriately, serving to develop social capabilities rather than being driven to innovate via cost-cutting. Nationalisation might make sense in some industries, but the foundational economy requires bolder thinking around how to empower individuals and communities to better cater for their own basic needs.

7. The empowerment of local government has to be central to the agenda of Labour's next central government. The coalition and Conservative governments' approach to devolution has largely failed to include economic powers, and any additional resources have tended to come with strings attached by the centre, including the imposition of the metro-mayoral model of governance. Centralised economy policy-making, even if well-intentioned, is invariably under-informed about, and insensitive to, local conditions. As far as possible, we must let local communities decide how national and international firms have to operate within the local economy.[26]

8. A more sophisticated approach to public procurement, focused on creating new markets and supporting industrial innovation rather than cost-saving, will be central to a comprehensive industrial strategy. In local government, Labour can start putting this agenda in place now, encouraging suppliers to create quality career progression opportunities for their workforces, provide support to the voluntary and community sector, and invest in local supply chain development.

9. Trade unions are in theory a vital link between the party and working-class groups. Unions should become *more* important to Labour, but only on the basis that they become more representative of the working class. Repealing the Thatcher restrictions on union activity will not be enough. We need to think radically about how to make trade unionism salient to young, precarious workers. If existing unions are reluctant to change, Labour must support and drive the creation of new forms of trade unionism.[27]

10. Labour, with the support of unions, should embark on a massive programme of political and economic education, building upon some of the non-partisan, charitable initiatives already established, but ideally reaching far beyond the already-engaged. Ironically, as noted above, Labour's increasing dislocation from the working class has led to a mass pandering exercise, especially in relation to Brexit, where the party accommodates what it perceives as working-class prejudices against immigration. Once the party becomes rooted again in the working class, it must have the confidence to preference-shape through informed dialogue.

This is not an exhaustive programme for government; if it were, it would include, as a matter of urgency, the formation of a new, radical macroeconomic policy framework, and a strategy for preventing or mitigating Brexit. Instead, it is a set of initial ideas through which Labour can both support *and* re-engage its working-class base, as it evolves in response to economic change – not least because this would make electoral victory more likely. There is much to applaud in recent developments in Labour policy thinking, but also a very long way to go.

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