

## **Labour and Life Beyond Cities: Towards a Social Democratic Manifesto for Non-Metropolitan Britain**

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***Despite an enduring legacy of three reforming periods of government since 1945, Labour struggles electorally beyond the big cities. In the context of this legacy and recent crises, there are some key dilemmas facing Labour as it looks to the period 2025-30. Some pointers are needed for a progressive social democratic manifesto for non-metropolitan Britain.***

The 2019 UK General Election left the Labour Party with an electoral mountain to climb. The party lost support across every region and its vote share declined in most small, medium and large towns, while consolidating in cities. Some 60 per cent of the UK population live outside the largest cities (of greater than 250,000 people), and any prospect of future electoral success will require Labour to appeal to those voters beyond the large metropolitan centres, who live in smaller towns and cities and in more rural areas.

Labour is generally understood to be urban and industrial in its origins and interests, emerging out of the trade union movement of the industrial working classes. Nevertheless, in the 1920s and 1930s a widespread view developed within the party that Labour could only ever form a majority government with the help of rural seats and so great efforts were made to build capacity and legitimacy in rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

By the late 1930s, Labour had established some basic party organisation in almost all constituencies. By then, the party had a detailed rural policy, advocating land use planning to manage land development and settlement structure, economic planning to support agricultural production, and public access to cherished landscapes and the creation of national parks. The threat to Britain's food security prompted the war-time government to intervene heavily to guarantee agricultural prices and markets and boost production. The war experience inspired a public urge for national renewal to address social inequalities. In 1945, Labour swept to power with 49.7 per cent of the popular vote and a working majority of 146. Of the 203 most rural constituencies, Labour won 69, underpinning Labour's claim to be a national party representing a range of interests and types of localities.

### **The Attlee and Wilson Governments and Non-Metropolitan Britain, 1940s-60s**

Under the Attlee Governments, the populations of small towns and rural areas benefited from the new NHS and welfare state. Over a million new homes were built and increased investment was made in improving utilities. The 1946 New Towns Act paved the way for the construction of almost thirty new towns, markedly changing Britain's settlement structure.

The framework for agriculture, land development and countryside protection rested on three legislative pillars. *First*, the 1947 Agriculture Act provided farmers with guaranteed markets and prices for their products and brought nothing short of a revolution in agricultural productivity. Built around the twin objectives of stability and efficiency, it gave farmers clarity of purpose, the security to invest and stimulated the modernisation of farming methods and radical improvements in productivity. *Second*, was the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act which provided the foundation for modern town and country planning. The Act introduced a system of public control of land development and was able to protect agricultural land for production and for amenity purposes. *Third*, the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act established a new system of countryside protection which enabled the creation of ten National Parks and over forty Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty which are cherished to this day.

While it is commonplace to observe that the 1945-51 Governments left a lasting impression on British society, it is less frequently noted that the legacy of policies for agriculture, the countryside and the physical planning of towns and villages endured even longer than the nationalisation of key industries. They supported expansion of food production, protected agricultural land, restrained the urban sprawl that became common in other advanced nations, and established strong landscape protection.

The 1964-70 Labour Governments are best remembered for Prime Minister Harold Wilson's emphasis on embracing science and technology as an agent of change, as well as for their liberalising social reforms, including repealing the death penalty, decriminalising homosexuality, outlawing racial discrimination, and establishing the Open University. The proportion of young people going to university more than doubled and the Equal Pay Act of 1970 brought about economic benefits for women.

Yet Wilson's modernism had a rural dimension as well. Outside the cities, New Towns continued to be built, and the 1947 frameworks for agricultural support and land use planning continued broadly intact. The 1960s were a decade of relative prosperity for farmers, with markets guaranteed and prices set through an Annual Price Review that provided continued stability and the direct involvement of farming unions. After the first unsuccessful application to join the then Common Market in the early 1960s, Wilson spent much time preparing the ground for further negotiations, including around farm support and food imports, which eventually led to the UK's accession in 1973.

During Wilson's era, rural areas were increasingly appreciated for their attractiveness and the conservation movement grew. The 1968 Countryside Act established the Countryside Commission as a new national quango to oversee strengthened landscape protection and better promote public access to the countryside, including to National Parks. At the same time, depopulation became a concern in the more remote and sparsely populated rural areas and the Government developed a more strategic approach to supporting rural industries to create jobs and maintain populations in those parts of the country.

### **The 1997-2010 Blair and Brown Governments**

Labour's 1997 manifesto said little about rural issues, except for a commitment to a vote on hunting with hounds. However, rural policy was soon drawn more centrally into New Labour's reformist programme. This was for several reasons. First, falling farm incomes brought repeated pleas from farming unions for extra funds. An impending reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) therefore offered a chance for a more fundamental rethink of farm support. Second, the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to co-ordinate regional economic development in England merged existing agencies in the regions, including the Rural Development Commission (RDC). A knock-on consequence of creating RDAs was to combine the RDC's central functions with the Countryside Commission to establish a new Countryside Agency to represent rural interests. Third, the election result had unexpectedly produced a relatively large cohort of Labour MPs in rural and semi-rural constituencies. These MPs were keen to forge a New Labour vision for the countryside in response to the emergence of the Countryside Alliance, which mobilised a wider rural constituency to defend hunting and portray a general rural malaise. Finally, the then Ministry of Agriculture was seen as a dysfunctional Whitehall basket-case after a string of food and farming crises.

Thus, rural issues came to assume far greater prominence during the first Blair Government than had been envisaged. Blair commissioned a review of rural economies as part of the first tranche of work by his new Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit and a bold new Rural White Paper followed in November 2000. A radical step was taken to use new discretionary measures in the CAP to accelerate the shift in spending from direct payments towards agri-environment and rural economic development schemes. This effectively doubled

the resources going into agri-environment schemes over the period 2000-2006, and subsequently inspired an EU-wide approach to significantly green the CAP.

Three months later, Foot and Mouth Disease struck, and the Rural White Paper was quickly overtaken by events. Almost 6.5 million animals had to be slaughtered amidst an £8 billion rural economy crisis. After the 2001 election, what had been trailed in the manifesto as a new Department for Rural Affairs emerged as the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The addition of responsibility for environmental protection and climate change in Defra's hastily thrown together portfolio meant that environmental sustainability became Defra's central focus. The initial intention had been to raise the profile of rural issues across government, with rural development envisaged in a central and integrating role, but Defra had the opposite effect of marginalising rural affairs. Wider (non-farm) rural economic development lost ground to the renewed emphasis on sustainable food chains and farming's viability. Lord Haskins was asked to review Defra's quangos and his farm-centric view of the rural world led to the axing of the Countryside Agency. Its research, advice and advocacy role passed to the new, and tiny, Commission for Rural Communities (CRC). Rural socio-economic programmes were given to the RDAs and Defra quietly pared back its rural affairs work.

An unravelling of the institutions of rural affairs policy for England followed the Haskins Review. The Rural White Paper's commitment to market towns survived, but sub-national economic development soon became dominated by a new focus on 'city-regions'. These would embrace the major conurbations and their surrounding commuter hinterlands as the main economic development priority areas but leave the local and rural economies beyond as neglected back-waters.

### **After New Labour: Austerity, Covid-19, Brexit and Life Beyond Cities**

The Coalition Government's 2010 emergency budget tightened public finances by £113 billion by 2014/15. It also continued the retreat from rural policy that began under New Labour. It abolished the CRC and so for the first time in over a century there was no national body to promote socio-economic development from the rural perspective. Its functions were absorbed within Defra's Rural Communities Policy Unit, but this too was disbanded in 2015. RDAs were replaced with Local Enterprise Partnerships, which were 'business-led,' based on smaller geographical areas and generally less strategic. By the time of the Brexit vote, public policy to support rural development in England had been largely dismantled, and by the time Covid-19 struck, there was next to no rural policy left at all.

The non-metropolitan and rural dimensions of the economic downturn and reductions in public expenditure have remained relatively under-researched. National policymakers have failed to grasp the contribution non-metropolitan areas make to national economic well-being, and the Coalition continued to pursue the city-regions approach, only serving to reinforce metropolitanism and marginalise the hinterlands beyond. Despite four decades of optimistic rhetoric from both main parties, Governments had not shown sufficient concern about the growing inequalities between places and neglected the distributional consequences of recession and, for that matter, of growth. This failure to notice 'left-behind' people and 'left-behind' places fuelled popular resentment that culminated in the political convulsion of the 2016 Brexit vote. There was a distinct geography to the 'Leave' vote, with non-metropolitan Britain effectively 'biting back'. People in rural areas were more likely to vote leave than the national vote, and the highest leave-voting areas were often rural and coastal.

### **The Realities Revealed by Covid-19 and Brexit**

Brexit and Covid-19 have been major disruptors of British economic and political life. Covid-19 overshadowed the negotiation of the post-Brexit Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA) and triggered an unprecedented economic recession. The TCA is a 'thin' deal which has

brought significant new barriers to the movement of people, goods and services, and Covid-19 has camouflaged some of the difficulties that Brexit has wrought (food and drink exports in January 2021 were 75 per cent lower than in 2020, for example). The quest for new trade deals is also raising concerns about the potential competitive threat to large parts of British agriculture.

Crises can reveal previously hidden truths and lead to norms and expectations changing very quickly. Covid-19 and Brexit have revealed new realities which must inform thinking about any new approach to non-metropolitan Britain.

*First* is the scope for state action. Neoliberal market ideology sees markets as preferable to governments in allocating resources and the role of the state as needing to be constrained to enable markets to flourish. This has been an orthodoxy for forty years. Yet Covid-19 vividly illustrated the need for strong state action, and the response to the pandemic has opened up questions about whether a broader scope for government might be desirable. To deliver the UK's commitments under the Paris Agreement on climate change emissions will require a state-led transformation of land use and food production of similar scale to the 1940s.

*Second* concerns where we live and work. Commuting distances had been lengthening for years and we had been spending an increasing proportion of our time travelling to and from work. Lockdown threw this into sharp relief. For some, working from home has been a challenge but for others, it has proved a welcome new way of life. Employers previously concerned about productivity have been reassured, and the potential for more home-working opens profound new possibilities for economic geography and the relationship between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Britain. Rents have been falling in big cities and demand for housing has been growing in non-metropolitan areas as workers and families seek to move out.

*Third* concerns the infatuation with agglomeration. It has long been commonly assumed that economic development efforts are best concentrated in large cities. This is not just because large cities are home to more people, but also because larger urban economies are argued to function in an inherently more innovative and productive way. The rise of urban economies is often thought inexorable and Brexit is, in part, a backlash against this spatial fetish, which has marginalised huge swathes of the UK as less of an economic development priority. A global respiratory-borne viral pandemic problematises this view and there is some evidence, uncomfortable for metrophile exponents of urban boosterism, that cities are not always best at growth and innovation. There have been periods when economic growth in England has been higher in smaller towns and rural areas than in larger cities, and firms in non-metropolitan and rural areas often have to be *more* innovative to overcome the frictions and challenges of surviving in more sparsely populated areas than their big-city counterparts.

### **Priorities for National Renewal and Non-Metropolitan Places**

Covid-19 has brought new perspectives into play in British politics, which may have lasting purchase. There have been calls for an explicitly Keynesian macroeconomic response, with wage subsidies to encourage hiring young people and support for distressed companies including tax breaks. And some see Covid as a potential turning point in the UK's efforts to address climate change through building a 'green economy'. IPPR, for example, calculate that clean recovery investments could together create 1.6 million jobs over the next decade, equivalent to about three quarters of the jobs expected to be lost as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. There is also increasing criticism of the centralised nature of the British state and calls for a more radical approach to devolution and decentralisation, especially in England.<sup>2</sup>

As the social and economic implications of Covid-19 come into sharper focus, we can point to some key questions for national renewal and for the role of non-metropolitan places.

*Levelling up:* The UK is one of the most unbalanced economies in the developed world and the prospects of advantaged and disadvantaged places in the UK are becoming more divergent rather than less. The current Government's approach to levelling up is poorly developed and opaque. Because the impacts of Covid-19 and Brexit play out differently between places, age groups and ethnicities, central to any national renewal need to be questions of intergenerational fairness and geographical inequalities. A form of 'place-proofing' needs to be introduced to assess the variable geographical implications of central government's national policies. Economic development needs to be reconceptualised in much broader and more inclusive terms. And it is important to recognise that economic dynamism, innovation and growth-potential exist in local economies beyond big cities.<sup>3</sup>

*Digital connectivity:* The digital revolution has been the single most important technological change affecting British businesses in the last 30 years and Covid-19 has revealed the social and economic potential of greater digital interconnectedness. Following Labour's 2019 election commitment on broadband, there continues to be a need to improve digital connectivity in non-metropolitan and rural areas and to stimulate private investment to develop the best digital infrastructure network in Europe.

*Skills and tertiary education:* New Labour's commitment to 50 per cent participation in higher education was a laudable goal, and recent Conservative 'sniffiness' about it is elitist and regressive. However, a significant socio-cultural and political cleavage has developed between those with a degree-level qualification and those without. This further exacerbates geographical inequality, as remote rural regions continue to suffer from low progression to higher education, especially in areas like East Anglia and Lincolnshire. There continues to be value in expanding participation in higher education, but this needs to be coupled with the stronger promotion of higher-level vocational skills within higher education and a deepening of the collaboration between higher education and further education. Finally, there is a need to raise esteem and financial support for young people, and those reskilling, to pursue vocational training beyond the higher education sector, in further education and elsewhere.

*Social change and geographical mobility:* Demographic change will be important in reshaping England's non-metropolitan areas in the years ahead. Debates about local change over the past 30 years have been prone to romanticised ideals about stability, changelessness and local rural communities that cast in-migration as a disruptive and threatening force. It is clear that in-migration can be a positive process, not least from the perspective of new business formation and improved employment opportunities. At the same time, the loss of young people from smaller settlements is frequently seen in negative terms, even when out-migration is driven by enhanced employment and training opportunities. Yet, it is demographic ageing that probably represents the most impactful trend over the next 20 years, and this will play out first and most markedly in non-metropolitan rather than metropolitan Britain. A positive vision for non-metropolitan Britain will have to work with the grain of demographic ageing with rural service centres, for example, having to develop their businesses and services to cater for older populations.

*Local and rural economies in the post-carbon world:* The UK is well-placed to play a leading role internationally in decarbonisation. Beyond our large cities, attention to date has focused on the potential role of land-based businesses in the supply of renewable energy and the role of farming practices in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, building on Labour's Green New Deal proposal<sup>4</sup>, there is a much broader range of opportunities to strengthen the low-carbon economy including small-scale household and community renewable energy schemes, environmental services, and new modes of transport provision. Community resilience needs to include strengthened support for, and co-ordination of, voluntary groups, ideally through local authorities. And the heating and insulation of the existing housing stock

is the next frontier in the UK's battle to mitigate climate change through reducing carbon emissions.

### **The Left and the Left Behind - Towards a Manifesto for Non-Metropolitan Britain**

Although the countryside has not formed a major part of Labour's political imaginary, Labour Governments have left their mark on Britain's non-metropolitan areas. There are useful lessons to be learned from the three main reforming periods since 1945. Looking to 2025-30, I would highlight eight key pointers for a progressive social democratic manifesto for non-metropolitan Britain.

- Labour's vision for non-metropolitan Britain needs to chime with its vision for national renewal and avoid the risk of pitting town against country or a metropolitan elite against everyone else.
- Addressing the UK's unbalanced national economic geography is a necessary first step in addressing inequalities in life chances more generally.
- In step with President Biden's approach in the US, a more expansive view of the legitimate remit of state action will be required than that which has prevailed over the past four decades, including the New Labour years. Stronger action will be required to support the transition to net zero, for example.
- Any national approach to decarbonisation and climate action needs to be geographically sensitive to the opportunities and challenges that non-metropolitan places face. Rural communities are more car-dependent but can also be innovative in community-based climate initiatives.
- A new relationship between work and home could boost the prospects of some non-metropolitan places but generating benefits to local economies may require a more flexible and permissive approach to development that supports local social and economic wellbeing.
- Skills and tertiary education need to be prioritised, but national tertiary education policy should be developed in a more geographically discerning way that helps address regional economic imbalances. Higher and further education institutions should be encouraged to work together to address the cold-spot areas of low participation in higher education and skills found in more rural regions.
- Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should now be complemented by more comprehensive devolution of powers and resources within England, ideally to regional groupings of local authorities. Powers and resources for these regional bodies should be drawn down from central government and not up from local government.
- Post-Brexit, British agricultural policy should be driven by the need to support the provision of public goods such as environmentally enhanced landscapes and ecosystem services. Policy for the food system more generally should be driven by the need for decarbonisation and sustainable development alongside public health. Meeting the Paris Agreement commitments will require an active and energetic state to promote significant change in land use, farming practice and dietary choices.

In 2021, the Labour Party has begun a rural policy review signalling the Party's appetite for a systematic rethink of its approach to rural areas. This is a welcome step. The challenge will be the extent to which the Party can break away from conventional thinking around rural affairs

policy and develop a bold new vision for national review without falling into the trap of elite metropolitanism.

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<sup>1</sup> Clare Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain, 1918-1939*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p8.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Raikes, 'The power to rebuild', in Vanesha Singh (ed.) *Better Off: Recovery and Reform in the Post-Coronavirus Economy*, Fabian Society, London 2020, pp14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Ward, '*Levelling Up and Rural Areas –A Review of Lessons from Rural and Regional Development*'. National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise State of the Art Review, Newcastle University <https://ncl.ac.uk/nicre/blog/blog-items/build-back-better/> 2021

<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Buller, Where next for the Green New Deal, *Renewal* 28, pp26-36, 2020 <https://renewal.org.uk/archive/vol-28-2020/where-next-for-the-green-new-deal/>