



The Sound of the Future Arriving

A Strategy
for Starmerism
in the UK

By Marcus Roberts

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About the author

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Introduction

Sir Keir Starmer faces a multiplicity of challenges as he seeks to rebuild the United Kingdom's Labour Party in the wake of its shattering defeat in the December 2019 general election and prepares to offer a new approach to politics in a post-COVID-19 world. The task is massive, as it involves detoxifying the Labour brand, ending divisions over Brexit, and reversing the long-term decline of working-class support for the party. There are strong indications that these problems will be addressed head-on, as Sir Keir has already demonstrated with a tough, no-nonsense approach to one of the most poisonous legacies of the Corbyn era: anti-Semitism within the party.

Labour's 2019 defeat—its worst general election result since 1935—stemmed from a combination of long-term structural problems and bad short-term politics. As a major study from Labour Together concluded,ⁱ key elements included the long-term decline in support for Labour among crucial working-class voters; Jeremy Corbyn's deep unpopularity; and Labour's confusion over Brexit. These problems were exacerbated by the ever-growing gap between the two core constituencies to which Labour has traditionally looked to secure electoral success: more-liberal, progressive, higher-education, higher-income voters and more immigration-sceptic, lower-education, lower-income voters who have suffered from the worst successes of globalisation and unregulated capitalism. At the 2019 general election, these issues combined to leave Labour out of touch with its working-class voters and out of trust with the electorate at large.

On becoming leader, Sir Keir was faced with two immediate challenges: the internal crisis of anti-Semitism within Labour and the external crisis of the coronavirus pandemic. So far, it is Sir Keir's response to these challenges that have defined his introduction to the public.

The presidentialisation of UK general elections has made leader ratings a deciding factor for success at the ballot box. Early signs that Labour is once again a strong challenger to the Conservatives and that the personal poll ratings of Labour's leader are much higher than those of Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson gives us an initial indication that Labour, as a party, is once again a strong challenger to the Conservatives.ⁱⁱ

Between now and the anticipated general election of 2024, Sir Keir faces the following three strategic challenges: to once again bring together the two wings of Labour's traditional electoral coalition, middle-and working-class voters; to detoxify the party's brand; and to offer a new politics focusing on work, family, and place for Britain's post-pandemic future. These objectives can be summarised succinctly: It is time to replace the essentially right-wing economic settlement of the Thatcher/Reagan years with a new left-wing settlement that can endure for the decades to come. The model to be followed is former Prime Minister Clement Attlee's reforms of economic and political power, which long outlived his electoral defeat in 1951, rather than the New Labour settlement, much of which did not survive the loss of power in 2010. This is not to minimise or condemn the successes of New Labour but rather to note that its most enduring legacy is to be found in the social and constitutional change it achieved rather than its public spending settlements.ⁱⁱⁱ

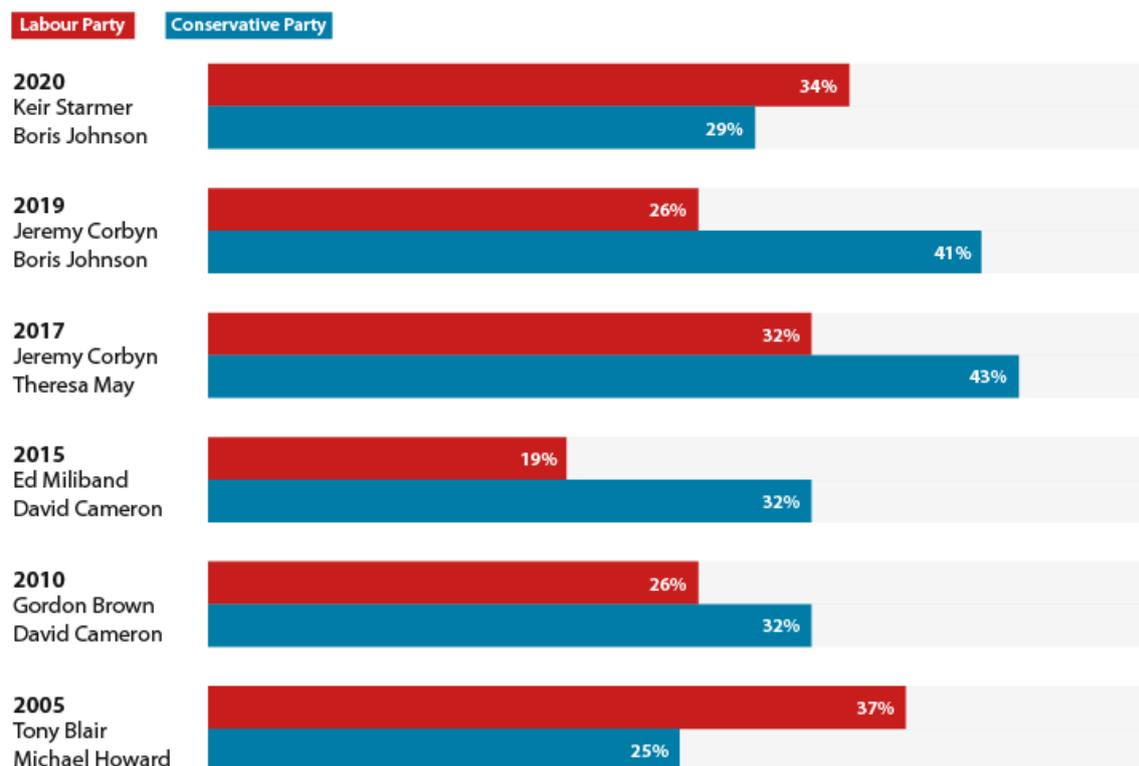
This paper will consider how Sir Keir has already embarked on a project of Labour renewal, what he has achieved so far, and what Labour should do next in order to forge a strategy to win back power.

A new leadership

Central to a winning strategy for 2024 is Sir Keir himself. When Labour has won, it has historically enjoyed a leading position in polls comparing and contrasting best prime minister choices. When Labour has lost, it has been because it was woefully behind on this key metric. To take the most recent examples, Tony Blair was well ahead of John Major, William Hague, and Michael Howard as the preferred choice of prime minister when Labour won the 1997, 2001, and 2005 elections. By contrast, Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband were well behind David Cameron in 2010 and 2015. Jeremy Corbyn's two general elections are also highly instructive. In 2017, voting intention for Labour rose in line with Corbyn's personal favourability ratings, so that by the time the election was held Corbyn was almost level pegging with Theresa May as to who would make the best prime minister. In contrast, in 2019, Boris Johnson was the country's clear choice over Corbyn, not only because of Johnson's own personal and brand strengths in that election but also because of the collapse in Corbyn's own numbers over the preceding two years.

FIGURE 1
Popularity of the prime minister candidate matters in the United Kingdom

Respondents in the United Kingdom on their preferred candidate for prime minister



Permission granted by YouGov.

Source: YouGov, "Best Prime Minister (GB)," available at https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/qr00ffuy0/YG%20trackers%20-%20Best%20Prime%20Minister_W.pdf (last accessed December 2020).

To deliver this advantage, Labour must ensure that voters have clear reasons—both rational and emotional—to fire the sitting Conservative prime minister and to hire Sir Keir for the job.

To that end, Labour must work tirelessly on developing Sir Keir's brand and designing the shape, style, and substance of his relationship with the British people in general and with Labour target voters in particular. The goal is to ensure that both the general public and target voters understand and appreciate that Sir Keir will deliver what they want in terms of competence for government, responsibility with the nation's finances, patriotism and love for country, and respect for the voters themselves. A down-to-earth approach will be necessary to achieve this, as Sir Keir's personality and style would likely preclude a Bill Clinton-style attainment of an overt emotional bond with voters. Instead, the Barack Obama-style respect for middle America, developed and demonstrated over years of town halls in Illinois and Iowa prior to his presidency, constitutes an effective and achievable template.

Finally, Labour should learn from the successes of Prime Ministers Attlee, Wilson, and Blair, who all won general elections after they demonstrated they were capable of changing both the style and substance of the Labour parties they inherited to make them fit for government. Historically, Labour leaders have only won power after they have forced their parties to confront the truths that are so obvious to voters yet ignored by Labour's unsuccessful leaders. As we shall see, Sir Keir has already begun this effort in earnest.

Detoxifying Labour

Labour's brand was exposed as self-evidently toxic in 2019, with Brexit and the party's long-term structural decline playing equal roles. On Brexit, Labour found itself facing both ways to middle-class Remainers and working-class Leavers, unable to defend one without offending the other. Brexit itself was the manifestation of a long-term disconnect between Labour and working-class voters, a pattern familiar to centre-left parties the Western world over.

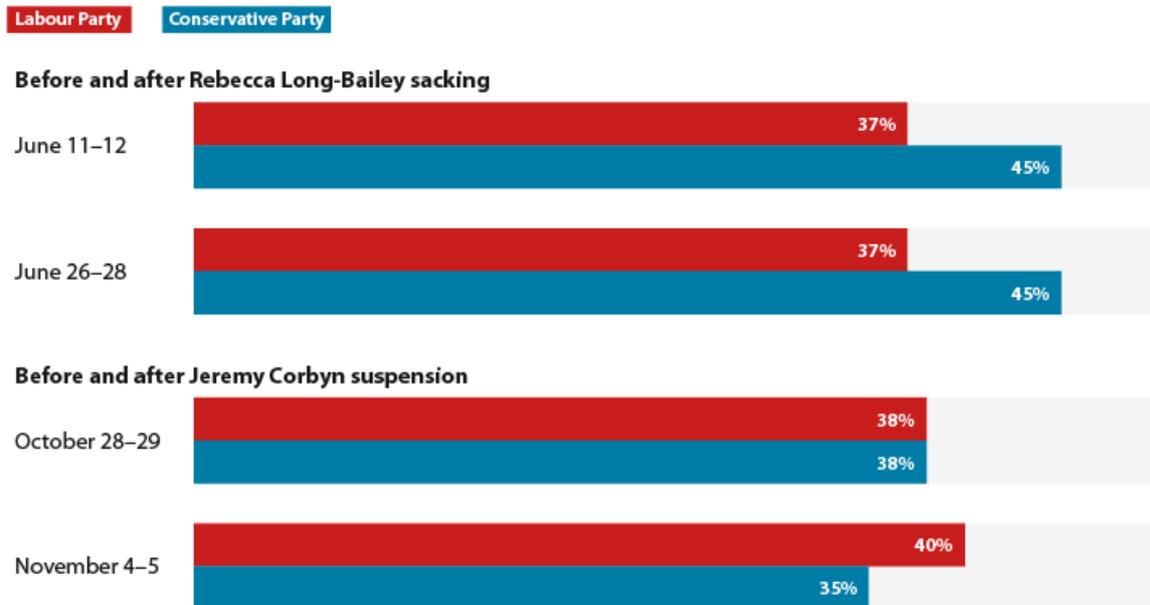
While the left's middle-class voters have overwhelmingly been the beneficiaries of globalisation, the left's traditional working-class voters have often been left behind by deindustrialisation, deregulation, feelings of unfair wage competition with immigrants and the general pace of cultural change at a time of economic insecurity. This has resulted in a logical desire to seek a radical alternative to their status quo, and both Brexit and their 2019 Conservative party vote was the expression of this. And so, Labour has come to face a problem between the two essential halves of its electoral coalition, with middle-class voters increasingly stressing the importance of liberal, cultural politics, and working-class voters feeling distanced from a Labour Party that at times has seemed more comfortable with cities, corporate boardrooms, and international organizations than towns, trade unions, and the nation.

Labour is already making strong progress in party detoxification through Sir Keir's initial "under new management" soundbite and "A New Leadership" party slogan.^{iv} This explicit tying of Sir Keir to the party identity will allow for a far faster detoxification of the brand than would otherwise be possible. By linking Sir Keir's new leadership with a post-Corbyn Labour Party in such a direct manner, Labour can emotionally make the break with the Corbyn years in the hearts and minds of voters. Parallel to this will be the long, hard, and painstaking work of removing what Sir Keir has called the "stain" of anti-Semitism from the party and rebuilding trust with the Jewish community.^v Evidence of this approach in action can be seen first in Sir Keir's firing of his former leadership contest rival, Rebecca Long-Bailey, as part of his "zero tolerance for anti-Semitism" policy in the wake of a tweet scandal. Then came the Labour Party's decision to suspend Corbyn for his failure to accept the scale and severity of the anti-Semitism problem in Labour.

In both instances, the electorate was given clear demonstrations of Labour’s changed nature, thus speeding up the detoxification process. It is telling that despite threats of splits and newspaper headlines about civil war, both Labour and Sir Keir’s poll ratings remained steady throughout these tumultuous events.^{vi}

FIGURE 2
U.K. voter intentions were swayed after Sir Keir Starmer's actions cleaned up the party

Voting intention rates before and after certain political events, by party



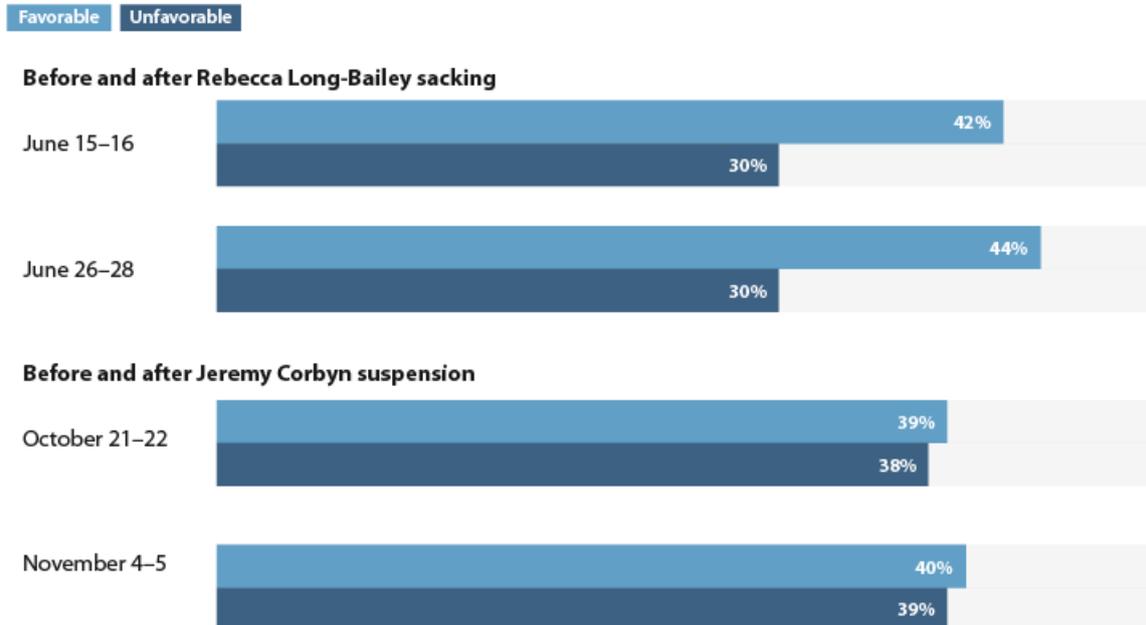
Permission granted by YouGov.
Source: YouGov, "Voting Intention," available at https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/explore/issue/Voting_Intention (last accessed December 2020).

“It is clear that detoxification requires reconnection.”

FIGURE 3

Sir Keir Starmer's poll ratings remained relatively steady despite tumultuous party events

Starmer's favorability ratings before and after certain political events



Permission granted by YouGov.

Source: YouGov, "Keir Starmer," available at https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/explore/public_figure/Keir_Starmer (last accessed December 2020).

On Brexit, Labour should begin the work of rebuilding trust with clarity on its position. Sir Keir's Labour Party can argue for a closer relationship with the European Union as long as it accepts that Brexit itself is the settled will of the British people for the foreseeable future and that people are exhausted by the idea of opening up the discussion again—even as the majority now think it was wrong^{vii}. Critical to this is an acceptance that there can be no rapid return to the free movement of people, for it makes no political sense for Labour to respond to both Brexit and the loss of its heartland seats with an argument for open borders.

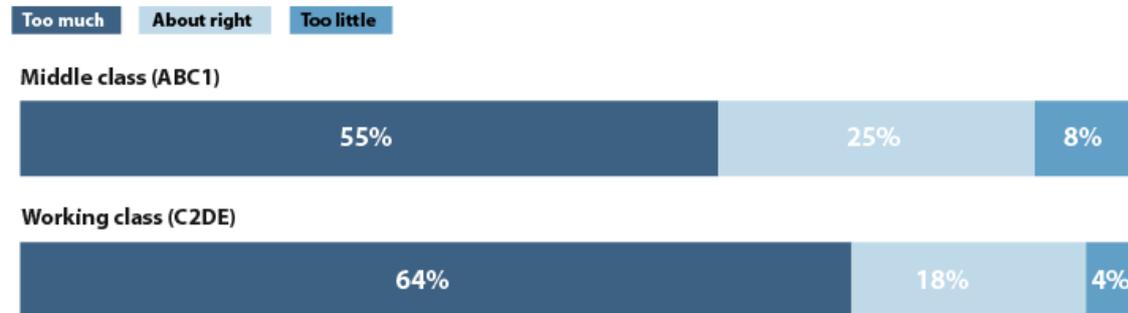
Concern over immigration and support for the principle of control receives majority support among both working-class and middle-class voters.^{viii} Should Labour reject these starting principles and adopt the pro-open borders politics that much of its liberal, middle-class minority desires, then the party might well expect to see vote shares fall in line with many of its struggling European counterparts—that is, stuck in the 10s and 20s in the polls from Germany to Holland.

“Labour should accept an end to free movement whilst also arguing for a liberal position on refugees and a generous, but controlled, programme for economic migrants.”

FIGURE 4

Working- and middle-class British society thinks immigration levels are too high

Immigration perceptions among the working and middle class in the United Kingdom



Permission granted by YouGov.

Source: YouGov, "Do Brits think that immigration has been too high or low in the last 10 years?", available at <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/do-brits-think-that-immigration-has-been-too-high-or-low-in-the-last-10-years?crossBreak=abc1> (last accessed December 2020).

Yet there is a need for immigrants, as the desperate shortages of staff^x at all levels in our hospitals and care homes across the country have shown during the COVID-19 crisis. There is a balance that can successfully be struck. Labour should accept an end to free movement whilst also arguing for a liberal position on refugees and a generous, but controlled, programme for economic migrants.

Thus, it is clear that detoxification requires reconnection. To do this, Sir Keir must demonstrate through his words and deeds where his priorities lie. There is an overriding need to find the common causes that middle- and working-class voters share, the common problems that they face, and the common values that they hold—and then to demonstrate that these are the causes that Labour embraces, the problems that it will tackle, and the values that it holds. It is a mistake to believe that policy can solve these brand problems when they are problems of connection, respect, and understanding that must be addressed first, before any policy can even get a hearing. By spending his time in communities where Labour is seen as out of touch, Sir Keir can win back trust. Labour can then go on to put flesh on the specific policies that address these issues and then, in government, deliver a full policy agenda that not only ameliorates the problems such voters face but also addresses their long-term causes as well.

This is all part of a wider, new politics that is now within Labour's grasp and to which our attention turns next.

Work

The politics that Britain and so many other Western industrialized democracies face in the 2020s is a politics driven by voter anger and discontent stemming, in part, from the effects of globalisation, which produces losers as well as winners. At the same time, the left has gradually chosen to lean toward its social liberal side over its economically radical politics, whilst failing to curb the devastating effects of unbridled or insufficiently regulated capitalism caused through the often reductionist approach of mere tax and spend.

What is needed is a politics for the left that creates a genuine left-based political economy that would enjoy enough popular support that it would successfully outlast the government that created it.

This politics has its roots in the Fabian thinking of Anthony Crosland, who argued in the 1950s that the future of socialism lay in taxing the worst excesses of capitalism and using that money for the purposes of redistribution of wealth through welfare and public service spending to aid those on lower incomes.^x In the 1990s, Clinton in the United States, Blair in the UK, and particularly Schroder in Germany effectively took Croslandism to the limits when they chose to accept the free market economics of the Thatcher/Reagan era, hoping to couple this with increased amelioration of its adverse effects. Thus, the Blair and Clinton administrations decided to emphasize generous public spending settlements and working families' tax credits to bolster low-paying jobs through the welfare state. The problem with this approach was that as soon as a change of government occurred, these public spending settlements could be undone and welfare payments cut. In the UK, this was particularly true in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, when the Cameron government, coming to office in 2010, introduced its policy of austerity that undid so much of New Labour's good work in this area for lower-income people.

A future progressive politics would put work and family at the heart of the left's politics again and create a new political economy of the left to promote opportunity and combat economic inequality. We must learn from the lasting success of the Thatcher/Reagan axis in embedding a political economy so well that their successors, regardless of party, continued to uphold it. This new political economy should be based on core principles of responsibility as well as fairness and would emphasise empowerment and agency—not just equality. This is a politics which seeks a radical redistribution of power, not just wealth—with forms of workplace democracy ranging from worker representation on boards, worker influence over remuneration, pay transparency, salary ratios, an embrace of partnership and mutual models of employee ownership, and a dramatic expansion of shareholder democracy.

On the macro level, such a settlement bolsters the mixed economy. It encourages individuals, groups, companies, and corporations to establish or expand their own enterprises and compete with each other on a level playing field. At the same time, Labour would ensure that key regulatory elements were in place to underpin this settlement. These would include powers to ensure that the playing field is indeed level. This should be done through financial arrangements such as taxation, to ensure both the quantity and quality of public services required to enable people to work and the private sector to thrive. It also means supporting prevention of adverse developments such as the emergence of monopolies and the prevalence of massive companies who pay little or no taxes by comparison with their UK turnover; and it also includes effective instruments to deny control of key economic assets such as telecoms or power stations by foreign interests that are inimical to the UK's interests.

There is also a need to prioritise the needs of entire regions over cities; in the current model, megacities effectively dominate subservient and subsidy-dependent towns and districts. This requires a radical devolution of both power and money. The left should never advocate surrendering the possibility of economic opportunity in the towns and country beyond our cities. Rather, Labour must ensure a regional renaissance of power and prosperity beyond the megacities.

Such an agenda would include a proper system of regional banks—with attendant large-scale capitalization—and lending tied to small and medium enterprise.

It would also see a deprioritization of our dependency on financial services, particularly in terms of the disproportionate share of GDP that they take up—not reducing these sectors as an end in itself but rather pursuing growth in other areas of the economy in order to shift the balance of the economy overall. To assist this, an ambitious industrial policy strategy to rejuvenate the manufacturing sector must be pursued with the objective of bringing manufacturing as a share of GDP more akin to that of Germany—which, per the OECD manufacturing value added index, stands at 21 percent—than that of the Anglosphere (9 percent in the UK; 11 percent in the United States).^{xi}

Labour could further underpin this regional approach by committing to an investment ratio that disproportionately benefits less prosperous regions. The same principle could be applied to education, so that instead of prioritising new university places in richer areas of the UK, a far greater emphasis in access to and funding of vocational education throughout the UK occurs.

Value should be placed on work. This new political economy would see the transformation of minimum wages into living wages and precarious work into full-time, secure jobs. The left needs to accept that welfare is no substitute for wages—and can indeed be seen as insulting rather than empowering by many of the very voters the left most wants to empower. Agency over one’s own life includes knowing that hard work will pay off, without the need for what is sometimes felt to be charity from government in the form of tax credits or welfare payments. Guaranteeing good, full-time and well-respected jobs through well-funded, accessible training programmes in all sectors and across all regions is vital to this approach. This represents a shift from a traditional social democratic focus on the redistribution of wealth through taxation to the redistribution of the creation of wealth in the economy.

To this end, a genuine left-based political economy would seek predistribution more than redistribution as a means of ensuring that wealth did not flow from top to the bottom but rather was generated at all levels of society. Regional growth and workplace democracy are engines of this change. Regional growth can be achieved through an ambitious programme of regional bank development with high market capitalisation.

Paired with these initiatives, a radical programme of workplace democracy—involving the empowerment of workers in pay remuneration committees and worker representation on boards—offers a vision of the worker as a genuine partner of capital as opposed to a servant. By empowering workers with shared responsibility for wage decision-making, lower wages can rise rather than welfare being called on to alleviate in-work poverty. All of this amounts to a politics of control, in which workers themselves feel genuine agency over their time, money, and power.

The ultimate ambition for the left in this area should be to develop a political economy as rewarding in terms of agency and self-respect for blue-collar workers as for the middle class—underpinned by proper pay and decent jobs. What’s more, the left must ensure that these good, full-time, respectable jobs are to be found in the existing communities in which workers live. Ensuring good work exists beyond big cities is critical not only to the vital regeneration of high streets and communities, struck first by globalisation and now by the pandemic, but also to honouring a true respect for the places in which voters live, work, and love.

Family

The natural temptation of the left is to talk about the challenges people face and the actions government can take in terms of large-scale statistics and big central government programmes. In blatant contravention of what is known about voter psychology, the left prefers to argue its points through statistics—not stories—and at the level of the general rather than the personal. Sir Keir’s Labour Party instead should return politics to the personal level. It should talk about the challenges of COVID-19 and the economy and view this frighteningly fast-changing world through the prism of individual voters’ stories. Families worried about grandparents in care homes, parents on furlough, and children losing out from exam fiascos are a powerful means of forging a genuine emotional connection between the state of the nation as a whole and the need for genuine and meaningful change in a voter’s real-life experience.

A greater emphasis on the politics of family will also allow the left to avoid potentially divisive social politics and embrace powerful and positive themes of commonality and feeling instead. This was the case with the marriage equality advance over the past decade. Rather than dwelling on the legal sphere of the debate, marriage equality campaigners enjoyed marked success by making arguments based on a simple respect for love between partners. Arguing its politics through a language of family and love, and indeed love of family, makes the left more capable of winning even difficult arguments on immigration or refugees.

The left should be sure to connect its values concerning family and work and not treat these as separate matters. For most people, control over their life includes the freedom both to enjoy a decent, well-paying, fulfilling job and either to raise a family and spend meaningful time with it or to enjoy some other lifestyle outside of work. It also includes making sure that older generations are taken care of and families aren’t forced to make large financial sacrifices to look after grandparents. For too long, too many voters have had to choose between time with family and the demands of work, and Labour should be explicit in its efforts to free voters to enjoy both. By stressing the politics of family, Labour will also be able to couch important arguments on issues such as the gender pay gap in terms that are not just based on equality or statistics but in emotion as well. This family-led approach means creating a more equitable housing market, a fairer welfare system, and early interventions such as state-led early years education.

Finally, an emphasis on how politics affects families and on the importance of understanding what matters to their own family is far more important for most voters than what matters beyond their family. Sir Keir’s Labour Party can test the likely efficacy of positioning messaging policy or politics in terms of its likely impact on a voter’s family.

“Sir Keir’s Labour Party should return politics to the personal level.”

Place

In December 2019, Labour lost dozens of seats in its former heartlands as a result of losing touch with voters and failing to come up with a convincing response to Conservative promises to regenerate their communities. Since the election, the Johnson administration has promoted its vision of a “Levelling Up” agenda that would prioritise local and regional growth, especially for towns hard hit by the worst success of globalisation and economic decline.^{xiii} However, the coronavirus pandemic means that in practice little has been done to implement this agenda. Moreover, in the longer run, Conservative success in this area will, by definition, be limited by the Conservative worship of the free market and refusal to tackle the root causes of inequalities of power and wealth.

As a result, Sir Keir’s Labour Party has both a moral mission and a political opportunity to pursue in exposing the failures and broken promises of the Conservative “Levelling Up” agenda and the need for real and meaningful change that a Labour government can provide. Such an alternative is not about policy alone. Labour in the future must be as passionate about the politics of community as it is about the politics of the state and must look to protect communities from the worst ravages of globalisation and the aftermath of COVID-19. There is a clear and present danger that the long-term consequence of the COVID-19 crisis will be to make globalisation’s winners win even more and its losers lose even more. Sir Keir’s Labour Party must protect, preserve, and promote communities in all their varied forms with the full range of political and policy responses from recovery grants (not loans) to sustain small business, shop-local campaigns to counter online shopping’s dominance, and a recovery tax on the tech giants that have enjoyed war-profiteering throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Labour must embrace community through the politics of place, of pride in place, and through a commitment to the restoration of towns and communities—not just the acceleration of big cities. Labour must understand the importance of high streets as the cornerstones of what makes for decent societies in local communities, where services such as local post offices and the prosperity of local shops are essential to a community’s success and perhaps to its very survival.

Achieving this will require Labour to ground itself emotionally, culturally, geographically, and politically with the major urban centres and to reconnect with voters who are proud of the places they live in and who rightly feel disrespected when offered work elsewhere or welfare instead. Labour must prove through the candidates it selects, the local campaigns it runs, and the policies it develops that it understands, feels, and shares a deep and meaningful commitment to the community’s voters, to their lives, and to the places in which they live.

“Labour in the future must be as passionate about the politics of community as it is about the politics of the state.”

Power and democracy

As important as new leadership and the new politics of work, family, and place are to Labour's reemergence, they are insufficient if a different way of doing politics is not also embraced. Taking inspiration from the great Willy Brandt, Labour must "dare more democracy."^{xiii} Sir Keir must challenge the left to think about how to apply a radical expansion of democratic empowerment not just in its politics but particularly in its economics. Empowering workers and putting agency at the heart of the left's policy prescriptions are the keys to success in making this new politics work for Labour. Labour should consider establishing an agency test for its future manifestos and party platforms. Indeed, it should even set in place an agency test in policymaking—similar to the equality tests the last Labour government established—so that no piece of legislation or policy initiative is considered without asking the question: "Does this increase or decrease an individual citizen's or a local community's actual control over their lives and decisions?" It is no longer sufficient for Labour to simply act unilaterally for the good of others. Labour must act with others to serve the common good and indeed empower others to act in the common good for themselves and with their communities.

Whilst some on the left believe that the correct response to the result of the Brexit referendum or the consistent election and re-election of Conservative governments is to trust voters less and centralise power more, Labour must reject such thinking and indeed embrace the opposite. Brexit was as much a cry for political control as it was a wave of anger at the existing economic settlement. Democracy is Labour's way out of the entire problem. It is precisely when voters might be inclined to make what some may see as dangerous decisions that it becomes more important than ever to trust them. For why should voters trust politicians who do not trust them? Trust is the gift of voters, and trust is the prerequisite of politicians.

A radical politics of democratisation in society, the economy, and in power itself can help rebuild that trust and provide the mandate that Labour needs for the sweeping structural, political, and economic change that is needed to attack the root causes of the problems Britain faces. In practical terms, this means the devolution of decision-making and power on a true basis of subsidiarity. It means using such measures as participatory budgeting, total place experiments, and the establishment of cooperatives that share power within companies and organizations in order to push power beyond politicians. Ideas such as the thirds model—whereby those who use services, those who run services, and those who pay for services are all equally represented at the senior decision-making level—can offer new ways of practicing what we preach in terms of democracy and agency.

All of this amounts to a kind of communitarian democratization of political power. A communitarian approach is one that emphasizes the local place that a person comes from; their community, both geographic and professional, that contributes to their identity; as well as the importance of family in understanding their motivations. Democratisation is a means by which a greater sense of control can be felt by voters who are now more easily able to actively participate in a range of decision-making, from political power, to the workplace, to their own neighbourhoods. By tying the two together, communitarian values can be advanced and communitarian interests protected by democratization. What's more, an emphasis on the real experiences of voters in the realms of work, family, and place is a better expression of democracy than the left's traditional emphasis on big national programmes to further a politics removed from the real lives of citizens.

This is an attractive prospect in terms of making manifest the all-too-often ethereal politics of agency. But it is not without its own problems. A political weakness in this approach would be the extent to which its individual atomisation could be exploited by the right. However, contra-that, is the potential strength of the left as the only actor that can credibly challenge the power of the market. The left achieves this not by threatening, as it has in the past, to replace a bullying and overweening market with a bullying and overweening state. Rather it does so, once again, by creating a balance of interests between the market, the state, and the community. Similarly, there's a danger of middle-class capture in the politics of meeting-itis, by which the left feels better because there are participatory budgeting programs and more powerful tenants resident associations and parent teacher associations.

In order to mitigate these weaknesses, Labour needs to improve access to these forums whilst making it easier to take part at a variety of levels. Peer-to-peer recruitment, flexibility of scheduling, and greater online access would make such participation more attractive. Doing so will allow working-class access to the secret passageways of power that the middle classes have enjoyed and exploited for so long. Participation takes up valuable time, which someone working full time cannot afford. Levelling up the playing field by improving child care access and increasing flexible working hours would make life better for everyone—gig workers, single parents, as well as traditional families. This is where the state should harness its power to regulate in order to shape markets and society rather than to redistribute after the fact in order to deliver social justice, guaranteeing time off, holidays, and basic working rights for all citizens. As well as being right in and of itself, this would also allow more people time to get involved in their communities should they so wish. This all leads back to a politics that has the potential to win back the trust, faith, and votes of working-class people.

This is why, even though the approach outlined above risks a degree of individualisation, that individualisation is likely critical to the success of this politics; unless blue-collar voters themselves are practically able to wield greater power for higher pay and more flexible time off on their own terms, the politics will work on paper but not in practice. Collective action through renewed trade unions, guilds, and other structures can be a means of mitigating the risk of getting the balance between the individual and the collective wrong.

“Labour must develop a politics that unites the working- and middle-class wings of its electoral coalition through a policy emphasis on work and place.”

“Starmerism is a forward-looking, patriotic reimagining of what it is to be Labour.”

Conclusion

The strategy for Labour’s victory at the next general election requires Sir Keir’s success in forging a relationship of approval, trust, and respect with the electorate. Labour must develop a politics that unites the working- and middle-class wings of its electoral coalition through a policy emphasis on work and place and a messaging emphasis on family. Delivery should be local, community-led, and citizen-controlled. A radical embrace of a dramatic double devolution of power and money from central government to nations, regions, localities, communities, and citizens themselves will show Labour’s willingness to dare to embrace more democracy. No longer will Labour merely threaten to replace an overweening and bullying free market with an overly centralised state whose bureaucracies too often bully rather than empower citizens.

Instead, Labour’s new politics of work, family, and place will replace this, establishing a new balance of interests between the market, the state, and the community and placing each on a more equal footing. When combined with Sir Keir’s clear patriotism and demonstrated respect for the voters themselves, this will give Labour the means to prove—in both style and substance—the party’s changed nature in opposition and its changed approach to government. This combination of reassuring leadership and inspirational politics can win back the trust of voters, demonstrating in both word and deed that Labour is once again responsive to the needs and aspirations of society as a whole, from the most vulnerable and left-behind to those whose prime fear is that Labour would threaten the progress they have already achieved.

Starmerism is a forward-looking, patriotic reimagining of what it is to be Labour. It is as proud of the values and history of the nation as it is of the Labour movement. Starmerism speaks to the hopes and fears of working people, both middle- and working-class alike, who previously abandoned Labour but whose support is crucial to taking the party back into government.

As Sir Keir himself said: “What we say at the next general election isn’t written yet. But it will be rooted in Labour values. It won’t sound like anything you’ve heard before. It will sound like the future arriving.”

Endnotes

- ⁱ Labour Together, “A Historic Defeat, a Long-Time Coming, a Mountain to Climb,” 2019, available at <https://electionreview.labourtogether.uk/foreword/foreword>.
- ⁱⁱ YouGov, “Keir Starmer approval rating,” available at <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/keir-starmer-approval-rating> (last accessed December 2020); YouGov, “Boris Johnson approval rating,” available at <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/boris-johnson-approval-rating> (last accessed December 2020).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Derek Brown, “1945-51: Labour and the creation of the welfare state,” *The Guardian*, March 14, 2001, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/mar/14/past.education>.
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