

ECONOMICS, DEMOCRATISATION AND LOCALISM

The Lost World of Peter Lee

John Tomaney

There is a growing recognition that decentralisation and localism should play a key role in a future Labour manifesto. Where should Labour look for lessons about effective localism? The party's own past provides valuable lessons about how to forge a progressive localism.

County Durham emerged as a Labour heartland in the period between the First and Second World Wars, but the origins of this hegemony are poorly understood today. Labour's rise was hard-fought and by no means inevitable. Peter Lee (1864–1935) was a political colossus who, during the 1920s and 1930s, held the leading positions in both the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) and Durham County Council. He presided over Labour's rise, exercising extraordinary local political power. Today, his life and work is largely forgotten in the region he did so much to transform, albeit he is commemorated in the New Town which bears his name. But his life bears scrutiny for the light it sheds on how Labour won and used power in Durham, the strengths and limits of this politics, and its contemporary relevance.

The foundation of Labour's power was the DMA, but local politics was not simply a product of the dominance of coal. The Durham miners came relatively late to Labour. In the early twentieth century, the DMA was aligned with the Liberals. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain affiliated to Labour in 1910, the DMA not until 1919. During the 1920s and 1930s, though, Labour captured control of local government in the county and began to use it to address the neglected basic needs of working people. In his 1946 novel, *Charity Main*, a lightly fictionalised account of his time in the Durham coalfield, Mark Benney attributes Labour's ascendancy to the need to tackle the legacy of the 'coalowners' complete severance of industrial from social responsibilities'.¹ Peter Lee was the central figure in this story.

Peter Lee went down Littletown Colliery, near Durham, aged 10. In his youth, he was an itinerant drinker and fighter. He was saved by a love of books, a belated commitment to self-improvement and, above all, marriage to his childhood sweetheart, Alice Thompson. Under her influence, he gave up drink and became a Methodist preacher. The couple settled in Wheatley Hill where he took the role of checkweighman at the colliery, the trusted representative of the workforce in the determination of piece earnings.

Peter Lee began his long march through the institutions of local government in 1903, when he was elected to Wheatley Hill Parish Council. In 1907, he was elected to Easington Rural District Council, developing 'a consuming interest in the provision of water and improving sanitation'.² He argued for these improvements in the face of ratepayer opposition, which called his plans reckless and un-costed. His enemy was the dangerous level of diphtheria in Wheatley Hill, which were attributed to poor sanitation. He was prodigiously hard working and noted for his attention to detail. In 1909, he was elected to Durham County Council. When Labour won control of the County Council in 1919, Peter Lee was offered the role of Chairman. After returning to Wheatley Hill to discuss the offer with Alice and the DMA Lodge, he agreed to accept it: he was 55 years old. After briefly losing control of the council in 1922, Labour regained it in 1925 and has held it since. Now, according to his biographer Jack Lawson, Peter Lee assumed the role of 'chief of the civic life of Durham and leader of its people'.³ A household name locally, he could fill any hall. He was physically imposing, over six feet tall; but quiet, lacking in personal

ambition and ‘almost medieval in his monk-like passion for withdrawing from the world’.⁴

Peter Lee personified Morgan Phillips’ proposition that the Labour Party owed more to Methodism than Marx. Politics was his sacred duty. He believed in the moral superiority of Labour, confronted with the corruption and inequity of capitalism. But he sought accommodation with capitalism rather than its overthrow. In his role as a union leader he always wanted to settle rather than prolong strikes. He was driven by an intense sense of social injustice rather than an ideology. He practised a demotic socialism focused on practical solutions to everyday problems. One of his greatest legacies arose from his obsession with the provision of clean and reliable water supplies and improved sanitation. A crisis occurred in 1914 when privately-controlled water supplies to Consett were disrupted for several weeks, representing a massive failure of ‘free enterprise’ to meet basic human needs. Under Peter Lee’s leadership, in 1919, the existing private companies were wound up and replaced by a new publicly-owned Durham County Water Board. An early task was the building of Burnhope Reservoir in Upper Weardale. Lee proselytised for the project, sought central government funding and used the rates to pay for its construction. The building of the reservoir was a massive engineering challenge, completed in 1937, two years after the death of its originator. The provision of clean water contributed to the decline of infant mortality rates – hitherto the highest in the country – at a faster rate than anywhere else during this time. The new reservoir symbolised a far-reaching transformation of social conditions in fields such as housing, health and education.

In 1934, J.B. Priestley painted a memorably grim portrait of village life in Shotton, near to Peter Lee’s Wheatley Hill.⁵ But his account overlooked the forms of self-organisation that shaped these communities. Mark Benney noted in 1946 that, ‘wherever, by chance, the eye rests upon some building more attractive than its neighbours, one almost invariably finds that it owes its existence to the organised efforts of the miners themselves. Their clubs, welfare institutes, and co-op stores are outstanding institutional buildings’.⁶ Each village, according to the novelist Sid Chaplin, was ‘a sort of self-constructed, do-it-yourself counter-environment’, which the people had built themselves. Chaplin acknowledged their imperfections, such as the gendered nature of the

opportunities they offered, and admitted that his greatest ambition as a youth had been to escape. But he insisted, 'their achievements cry out for celebration'.⁷ Peter Lee and other Labour leaders drew on these traditions, but added to them the power of the nascent local state.

Peter Lee was deeply localist: 'Many times he was invited to stand for Parliament. But instinctively he knew his own unique value in the North, so he stayed there'.⁸ An inveterate walker and cyclist, he had a deep knowledge of the northern landscape and culture: 'Local history and legend were probed for his purpose. An ancient lead mine, a farm, or church built of stones from old Roman ramparts told a story'.⁹ He loved Durham Cathedral deeply and its associations with St Cuthbert and St Bede, despite his Methodist faith. He belonged profoundly to Durham. The miners' Lodge remained the key political institution, but a politics of community and belonging was being forged alongside workplace struggles, best expressed in the annual Miners' Gala, 'the spontaneous expression of communal life'.¹⁰

Of course, we cannot recreate the world of Peter Lee, but County Durham remains a Labour heartland, in part, because it still draws on the diminishing moral and physical capital accumulated during the era of Peter Lee, when local state power was used relentlessly to address the basic needs of local communities in the face of neglect and opposition from the privileged. Today, the region abounds in unmet human needs. There is a yearning for community and belonging, and a space for a politics that recognises this. The extraordinary contemporary revival of the Miners' Gala, with its modern pageant of bands and banners, is one powerful testament to this. The lost world of Peter Lee was more divided internally, along religious, cultural and material lines, and more susceptible to media narratives than we realise today. Workplace solidarity and community cohesion were not bequeathed to Labour but were hard won. Labour's local task was achieving compromise about policy priorities focused on the foundational requirements of civilised life, in the process balancing different interests and identities. Labour's own history provides plenty of food for thought to inform a modern, progressive localism.

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Notes

- 1 M. Benney, *Charity Main: A Coalfield Chronicle*, George Allen and Unwin, 1946.
- 2 W. A. Moyes, *Mostly Mining: A Study of the Development of Easington Rural District from the Earliest Times*, Frank Graham, 1969.
- 3 J. Lawson, *Peter Lee*, The Epworth Press, 1946, p130.
- 4 Lawson, *Peter Lee*, p105.
- 5 J. B. Priestley, *An English Journey*, William Heinemann/Victor Gollancz, 1934.
- 6 Benney, *Charity Main*, p51.
- 7 S. Chaplin, 'Durham mining villages', in M. Bulmer, ed., *Mining and Social Change. Durham County in the Twentieth Century*, Croom Helm, 1978, pp81, 71.
- 8 Lawson, *Peter Lee*, p157.
- 9 Lawson, *Peter Lee*, p111.
- 10 Lawson, *Peter Lee*, p168.

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