

# WHERE NEXT FOR LABOUR?

## Getting the basics right

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Labour needs to win big in 2024. It's time for the party to re-learn the art of professional leadership and communication, and to accept the limits of its existing electoral coalition.

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One of the most revealing things to happen in the immediate aftermath of our fourth and worst electoral defeat in a decade wasn't simply the varying reactions from different traditions within the Labour Party, but also the varying ways through which they explained it and sought to move on. Some of my parliamentary colleagues have blamed the context and timing, convincing themselves that had we been less associated with the pro-Remain position almost universally held within the party we might have done better. This was reminiscent of the earlier notion, advanced after 2015 and 2016, that we should be making arguments about the impact of immigration which we did not believe to be true and which were inconsistent with our values.

Others have looked backward to the demographics and constituencies whose support installed and sustained the last Labour government. They have suggested that rebuilding or reconnecting with those voters and places on the same terms we did in the past provides the natural way forward: that the path to tomorrow must run through yesterday. And yet others look at the campaign as a purely technical failure, distinct from wider questions about our future direction, or any

consideration of a clear political vision of what our society and economy might look like in four years' time, and what Labour's plan should be if we are to enter government in 2024.

Immediate post-election discourse is seldom very informative. Everyone can make a case in isolation for the apparent significance of their pet variable. The analyses that are most valuable come from large-sample polling. But there are already a few observations that it seems safe to make: that for once Labour has less of a 'women problem' and more of a 'men problem'; that, as in 2017, Labour support was significantly correlated with age, with younger people more likely to vote for us than older people; that the places we lost are places which have fewer working age people and more retired people than they did thirty years ago; and that the principal reason people who might previously have voted Labour were not prepared to do so this time was Jeremy Corbyn, who was less popular and less convincing than even Boris Johnson.

## **Leadership and framing**

Corbyn's failings were a central problem. It is no good people saying the media were biased against him: the papers have been biased against every newly elected Labour leader since forever. They switched sides on Blair only when they saw the writing on the wall. The Opinion on-the-day poll, published on the Friday of election week, was brutally clear that for each and every group of people who considered voting Labour but eventually didn't, the top reason for not backing Labour was not our position on Brexit but our leadership.<sup>1</sup> Corbyn was simply not credible as prime minister. It is no good claiming a mandate from the members if neither your parliamentary colleagues nor the electorate think you are up to the task. The role of an opposition leader is to look outwards to victory, not inwards to legitimacy. We perhaps need to think again about how we ensure that focus for our leaders.

One of the oft-remarked upon but seldom analysed aspects of our politics these days is the extent to which the Tories have learned not simply from America, but from Australia. Obama's triumph in 2008 was the iconic victory against the right for my generation, but in many ways Australia's recent history is a more informative comparison: a parliamentary democracy with a party system more like our own, where Labor has a nasty habit of losing elections. Lynton Crosby and his acolytes have developed, repeatedly deployed, and successfully exported a model from Australia which has worked again and again in the last twenty years. They make the election, so far as they can, about a single issue which they can frame as one where the right has an inbuilt advantage, and then absolutely go for it, without shame or self-restraint. Often this is 'security': making the election about things, and people, that might be painted as threatening our way of life, be it immigrants who are

scapegoated for the consequences of fiscal decisions, foreign powers or terrorists on whom we are supposedly soft, or - on occasion - the threat to the economy posed by ambitious spending commitments.

Once the election is thus framed, Labour is doomed: both in Australia and in Britain, efforts to position ourselves as the party of immigration controls have been stuck between a rock and a hard place. Members and existing supporters regard them as morally questionable, and we leak votes to other 'progressive' parties; while electors know we will always be outbid by the right. Those who point to the apparent success of the 'tough on immigrants, good on workers' rights' model of contemporary social democracy in countries like Sweden tend to pass over in telling silence the very different age structure of support for the Social Democrats, which is almost precisely the reverse of the pattern in the UK.<sup>2</sup> For now in Britain young people disproportionately support Labour: at a very simple level, one of our many challenges is to seek to ensure that becomes a cohort effect and not simply an age effect.

## **The power of social-democratic arguments**

Our framing problem is not inevitable. The central problems of our world today are all ones for which there is potential success for clear and convincing messages from social democrats who believe in the power of collective action and the state to achieve socioeconomic security for its citizens. For example, we can recognise that we are a trading country, soon to be alone in a large and hostile world, and that we will need a strong relationship with Europe to protect that status - not because Britain ought to 'punch above its weight', but because we achieve more together than we do alone. The uncertainty that hangs over tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs in the North East is the result of decisions taken by the government, and Labour will need to develop an alternative that creates jobs and offers hope.

We can also develop some of the policies in the manifesto to give a focus to ensuring proper rights and job security for younger workers, so that we can frame security in terms of the challenges of people's lives, rather than allowing it to be mobilised to create a visceral fear of the other. We can use our time out of office to think afresh about what the welfare state should look like: not simply winding back Universal Credit and returning to the different inadequacies of the past, or reaching for the appealing-sounding but probably undeliverable answer of universal basic income, but working with projects such as the Child Poverty Action Group's Secure Futures initiative to inform our thinking properly.<sup>3</sup> We need both to repeat the progress of 1997-2010 towards eradicating child poverty, and to make our social security system fit for the challenges of tomorrow. The Five Giants on the Road to Recovery, which Beveridge sought to slay almost eighty years ago, have been

replaced by different giants today. At the same time, we need to be working with trades unions to support and encourage effective models of union growth and organisation in new workplaces and industries, and to prevent the return of the old evils of piecework and sweatshops that are presaged by the gig economy and venture-capital-fuelled 'disruption'. We want people to have good and fulfilling jobs, not just jobs.

And we must look at how an incoming Labour government deals with a world sharply warmer even than in 2010, and set to grow warmer and less predictable still. Solutions and mitigation of the problems climate change will bring cannot be left either to a complacent Conservative government or to campaigners with good intentions but without electoral legitimacy. The Extinction Rebellion strategy – which seems to involve citizens' assemblies whose outcomes should bind governments and electors – is simply not a workable approach in a democracy like ours. We need to do better: we can be confident the Tories won't.

In all of these areas, our problems are partly about framing, partly about policy, but they are also about how we communicate. Knowing how to grab headlines is less useful in an era of social media, and no substitute for winning hearts and minds. We have a tendency, at a strategic level as well as a tactical one, to engage on the terms set by others: responding to questions, not defining the terms ourselves. Most of us as individual elected politicians are behind where we need to be in using social media, whether to spread Labour's messages or to pick up on community concerns. And in the last five years, much of the PLP has given up taking a steer from the leadership on suggestions such as asking helpful questions, echoing attack lines, following a script, or using good briefings from HQ to tear strips off ministers. Rebuilding the party machine and restoring the legendary message discipline of the late 1990s, in an era where self-expression is so much easier for MPs, and so many of us have got used to it, will be a major challenge for the next leader.

## **The temptations of nostalgia**

We also need to look at the distribution of our support and our vote. Our slow transformation over many elections towards a party of cities and graduates is one we need to consider in detail: we need to think about three questions - who we are for; who we might win among; and where we might do so. On the first question, my view is that the Labour Party was founded to represent the working people of this country, and that we are at our best when we look afresh in every generation at who is most disadvantaged by society as it stands, and what we need to do to improve their lives. We need to beware the temptation of nostalgia, and focus on the challenges of the present rather than of the people and places we represented in the past: MPs are not sent to Westminster to build a better yesterday. On the second

question, we do best when we are seen as competent and when the battleground at election time is on the issues central to working people's lives: their standard of living, their housing, their services, their job security, their hopes for their children. The fate of Labour in Scotland in recent years is testimony to how hard it is to return political discourse to those issues after a divisive referendum on an issue which cuts across socioeconomic divides. We need to do a lot better, fast, to avoid that fate south of the border.

On the third question, however much some of my colleagues might support electoral reform, it isn't coming before the next election, and the blunt truth is that we need to win more seats outside the big conurbations. The distribution of our vote has become steadily less efficient at returning Labour MPs. But the politics of place can be unhelpful: we need to avoid giving the impression that the problems faced by some towns are the same in every town; that the problems of people in the north are the result of where the government is rather than what the government does; and that big cities cause problems for everyone else – a divisive narrative that plays straight into the hands of Conservative electoral strategy. There is no escaping the reality that for Labour to win an election in Britain now is likely to mean winning big – a sweeping victory in the popular vote, with a competent leadership, a clear narrative, and an outstanding campaign.

But none of this is impossible. Each time we have lost several general elections in succession, there has been much agonised hand-wringing over whether this is the end for social democracy in Britain. It never has been: not after 1935, not after 1959, not after 1979, and it need not be now. For as long as there is avoidable suffering, insecurity, inequality of opportunity as well as of outcome, for as long as compassion and justice speak to core values of the British people, for as long as we can see a future in terms of hope as well as of fear, then there is a role for a Labour government and a future for our party, though perhaps not always an easy one.

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## Notes

1. 'Preview of our Day of Poll survey': [www.opinium.co.uk](http://www.opinium.co.uk), 17 December 2019.
2. Statistics Sweden, 'Political party preferences in May 2018': [www.scb.se/en](http://www.scb.se/en), 06 November 2018.
3. Child Poverty Action Group, *Secure Futures for Children and Families*, Child Poverty Action Group 2019.