

RURAL POLICY AND POLITICS

How does Labour become the party of the countryside?

Luke Pollard MP

A new divide is opening up between Conservatives and the countryside. Labour is well placed to seize this terrain.

Labour has a mountain to climb to win the next general election. It is a task that we cannot escape or run from. We need new ways of working and new thinking.

To win a majority of just one, Labour will need to gain 126 seats, and to do that we will need to construct the broadest electoral coalition of any winning party in my adult life. It means winning back trust in communities in Scotland, across the North and the Midlands, beating newly elected Tories in red wall seats, taking back North Wales and winning those elusive marginal contests the nation over. And yes, it also means winning seats in rural communities the party has not won in years. We each have a role to play in building that broad electoral coalition, and winning more Labour votes in rural communities is mine.

Keir Starmer and I began this work at NFU president Minette Batters' farm in Wiltshire during a brief respite from lockdown in October 2020. Meeting in her muddy farmyard we both turned up in well-worn wellies, Keir in a bomber jacket. The NFU head looked surprised: the last politician on her farm had stepped out of the ministerial car on a wet day with no coat or wellies.

The inescapable truth is that while the Conservatives take rural voters for granted, Labour hasn't always turned up at all. Too many electoral contests with no Labour candidate to vote for – but, as well as turning up on the ballot paper, Labour needs to be heard and seen in local media, on the doorstep, in council chambers, on the letters page, in the pub and at church fetes.

Act on what is heard

We cannot simply turn up and listen. Crucially, we need to act on what we hear, and turn up in terms of policy and presence as well. Labour is never short on policy, but we need to examine more whether it is always the right policy for all the communities we need to win. Whitehall and Westminster are often accused of making policy for urban areas and then testing it against the needs of rural communities. However, even then, rural communities don't get that much of a look in. That needs to change.

Signalling this long overdue change, Keir's speech to the National Farmers Union annual conference last February launched Labour's Rural England Policy Review. He was our first leader to address the NFU since Gordon Brown thirteen years ago. The instruction from Keir is clear, Labour's next manifesto must offer as much hope and opportunity to people in rural communities as to those who live in towns and cities.

To do that, we must go beyond Labour's comfort zones (such as rural buses), and make an offer to countryside communities that spans the full breadth of policy. The top issues for countryside communities are similar to urban areas but with added complexity: distance, smaller communities, high house prices and low wages. Rural areas are poorly served by a picture postcard view held in Westminster and Whitehall of thatched cottages, rolling countryside and picturesque moorland. You can't eat a view – and Labour's policy offer must reflect the realities of everyday life in rural areas.

Farming is now political

Rural life is more than just farming, but for the very first time since the landmark Agriculture Act of 1948, farming is political again. The 1945 Labour government viewed food production as a national security issue just as much as a driver of employment and landscape management. Since then, the Conservatives and Labour have, by and large, agreed on farming policy at the strategic level. There have been disagreements on detail, farming methods, chemical use and animal welfare, but support for the structure of farming was solid on both sides. That has now changed.

The Tories now have an unwritten manifesto of change for farming. If they came clean, their plans would crash under the profound weight of anger and opposition. These stealth changes represent the biggest assault on farming in generations.

The new divide looks like this: the Conservatives want to import more food from abroad encouraged by post-Brexit trade deals. To achieve lower prices they're prepared to overlook production methods with lower animal welfare and environmental standards. They want to cut the absolute number of UK farmers, regarding them as inefficient after decades of EU cushioning. Their farm support payment changes are designed to put many small family and mixed farms out of business, favouring further intensification, automation and aggregation into bigger estates.

The offer we will develop through the Rural Review is fundamentally different. We favour growing more of our own food here in Britain, buying British, and investing to create countryside jobs, cut carbon and restore nature. We want Britain's high food and farming standards put into law, backing British farmers, small or large, to grow sustainably here. Instead of importing food produced to lower standards from the other side of the planet, we want to see trade policy driving global environmental gains.

Many farmers when confronted with this choice are already reaching the conclusion – sometimes to their surprise – that Labour is the party of the countryside rather than the Tories.

Better connection to the land

Because there is now a great farming divide between Labour and the Conservatives, it is even more important that our policies are informed by the real world experiences of farmers and rural communities, the wider supply chain, and consumers too. Even people with rural backgrounds can find themselves becoming detached from rural life and the challenges of food production. James Rebanks wrote about his own journey away from his rural Cumbrian roots and back again in *English Pastoral*, a twenty-first century farmer's account of three generations of his own family: 'When we left, we were farmers. When we returned, other people, tougher people, were the farmers, and we just loved "nature". We had become free of the harsh realities and were then several steps removed from what others now did in our name to feed us.' His conclusion is telling: we need 'a politics that sees the land and what happens on it as being at the heart of building a more just and decent country'.¹

Polling on rural voters' attitudes to Labour is limited and dated – that is one issue I hope we can redress. What data we do have shows that rural voters do not believe Labour understands rural areas, or shares their values. In her 2015 report *Labour's Rural Problem*, Maria Eagle MP writes about Labour members: 'For too many, rurality is synonymous with Conservatism, and engaging with these communities is at best an afterthought, and at worst a complete waste of time'.²

We need to acknowledge that perception before we can challenge it.

When Keir asked me to lead the Rural Review, I made it clear that the review must be authentic and comprehensive. It must stretch across the frontbench teams and be owned by Team Labour, not just me. It must be no quick fix, but instead a careful and thoughtful examination of how the party has got to this point. We must be humble. The review must not fall into the trap of assuming rural people to be the same the country over, or that countryside dwellers are different to urban people; instead, it must reflect the diversity of rural communities and understand the core values which exist everywhere. It is because Keir was in the exact same place as me on this that we agreed to start this work.

Rural proofing has failed because it was never done properly

Defra's job as the lead on rural affairs includes 'rural proofing' policies across government. The government claims this is meant to ensure 'rural areas are taken into account in designing and delivering policies'. However, in practice, that exercise has merely served to highlight this government's utter complacency, the inadequacy of their understanding, and their siloed response to the real issues faced by rural communities. Rural proofing has failed because it was never done properly.

There is damning evidence of this recorded in Defra's latest rural proofing report. Among its findings are: houses are less affordable in rural areas than in urban; around half of all houses in the most rural areas are 'energy inefficient', just 7 per cent in urban areas; average public transport travel time to hospital is twice as long in rural areas as in urban; broadband speeds and 4G coverage are poorer. Not surprisingly with these disadvantages, the report found productivity is lower in rural areas and actually fell from 10 per cent to 18 per cent below the England average between 2001 and 2018.³

The stark reality is that, after eleven years in power, the blame lies solely with the Conservatives.

Labour's Rural Review is shining more light on the Tories' rural failures.⁴ This has found that young people in rural areas are struggling now more than at any time over the last ten years to get onto the property ladder, with house prices nearly nine times higher than annual earnings and an estimated 132,000 fewer young homeowners in rural areas now than in 2010; rural communities have been hit hard by cuts to police services with crime rates soaring over three times faster than in the country as a whole since 2011; rural areas have twice the proportion of officially 'non-decent' homes as suburban residential areas; local authority supported rural bus provision has declined by 54 per cent since 2011, filling country roads with more cars.

Rural proofing has failed because Defra has been taken over by a dreary managerialism, a failure of leadership driving a second-order department towards marginality, at a time when it should be growing its role and influence. Future Conservative rural proofing reports could well end up simply documenting how rural communities have failed to attract as much of the much hyped levelling-up funding; how rural businesses have been disproportionately devastated by EU trade deal red tape imposed by the government asymmetrically on this side of the channel; and how rural villages have continued to lose their banks, pubs, post offices and their last shops.

I don't like the concept of rural proofing because it starts from the assumption that countryside issues come after urban thinking. It's also paper-thin. Where is the hard and fast assessment of rural effectiveness? Where is the cross-government champion driving awareness of rural communities? Where are the consequences for ministers who so consistently and so obviously fail rural communities?

In contrast to the Conservatives' rural proofing, I want Labour policy to be rural positive, to make sure we can build joined-up policies – across transport, access to health services, housing, business, crime and policing, support for young people and skills training. So I am getting out and about with my shadow cabinet colleagues to turn up, listen and act on what we have heard.

Labour's rural drive as a political objective

Turning up in rural areas must be a conscious manifestation of Labour as a political force. As Keir stated in his NFU speech 'no party can claim to represent the country, if we do not represent the countryside'.⁵ No longer can rural voters be an 'afterthought' for Labour, or perceived as such: or else, how can we be surprised when we are an afterthought for them? Daniel Zeichner MP, Labour's Shadow Farming Minister, told me about asking a countryside plumber what made him vote the way he does, 'I guess I vote Tory because that's what people in South Norfolk do'. Polling shows that people who are very similar demographically vote Labour in Labour areas and Tory in Tory areas.

This government has not only taken rural votes for granted, but it has also treated our nation's food production with disdain. The Conservatives have surrendered their authority in the countryside and created a toxic relationship with farmers and fishers. Labour and the NFU may not seem natural bed fellows, but they are standing shoulder to shoulder against the Conservatives on food standards.

Labour's 'buy British, buy local' campaign means buying more locally-produced meat, vegetables and fruit, but it also means making inroads into diets and behaviours going back decades: it means eating more British fish, instead of importing the fish we eat and exporting the fish we catch. Food miles need to be spoken about

again, and we need to get serious about carbon and water use in supply chains, because when we do our local produce becomes more attractive than cheaply produced food from down-under or across the pond.

Labour has popular policies on green space and clean air, and our rural crime policy was praised by the Countryside Alliance. Labour can strengthen the rural economy, offering high-quality green jobs, access to training and education, and better digital connections for home working. Rural areas desperately need the properly-funded, better-quality public services which Labour can deliver. Labour is better placed to offer a more hopeful vision, a more thoughtful approach, and an economic plan which closes the gaps between communities that austerity has opened up.

This May, in an otherwise tough set of elections for Labour, Dr Nik Johnson was elected as Cambridgeshire and Peterborough mayor, and Dan Norris as mayor of the West of England. Labour also took council seats from the Conservatives in Chipping Norton and Witney, in Tunbridge Wells and Worthing, and reduced Tory majorities in many more rural wards across England. It was a glimpse of what we can achieve nationally.

As we have seen in our own traditional areas of support, the speed at which old, universally-accepted truisms of political faith can collapse is surprising. Every swing towards Labour in blue territory, big and small, further erodes the notion that the countryside dutifully votes Conservative as a matter of course. The role of the Rural England Policy Review is to ensure that when this happens, Labour is ready, armed with policy, equipped with a positive message and an abundance of trusted messengers.

Alongside the 'red wall' is a rural wall, if you will excuse me butchering this over-used simplification of complex causes. The Tories' 'rural wall' borders nearly every Labour constituency. Fast-changing demographics could enhance the opportunity for political change, with urban workers relocating to the countryside in response to the pandemic. But this is not a question of binary oppositions. We do not live in *either* urban or rural communities: a myriad of villages, small towns, suburban communities and commuter towns are nestled in the countryside. Labour must maintain our strong support in cities but also address a sense of alienation that is setting in across the suburbs.

Rural voters alone will not win Labour power, but without them we will not stand a chance. That is the blunt political reality we must face and why Labour's Rural Review is an exercise in ambition not just practicality.

In Tony Blair's landslide 1997 victory, Labour won 179 seats classed as rural or semi-rural: currently we hold just 17. This shows that Labour has won trust here before, but also that there is no such thing as a successful Labour campaign that does not have something substantial to offer people in rural seats, no path to Downing Street that does not go through acre after acre of English countryside. If

Labour are to climb the mountain in front of us, we will need to turn up – and not forget a coat and a pair of wellies.

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Notes

1. James Rebanks, *English Pastoral: an inheritance*, Penguin, London 2020, p200.
2. Maria Eagle, 'Labour's Rural Problem – Winning Again in Coast and Country', internal report, Labour Party, 2015.
3. Defra, 'Rural Proofing in England 2020: delivering policy in a rural context', Defra, London 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-proofing-in-england-2020>.
4. The Labour Party, 'Labour's Rural England Policy Review', 2021: <https://labour.org.uk/page/rural-england-policy-review/>.
5. Keir Starmer, 'Speech to the National Farmers' Union', 23 February 2021: <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-speech-to-the-national-farmers-union/>.