

REVIEWS

Labour and the politics of community

Jon Lawrence

Lisa Nandy offers a compelling vision of a Labour politics of ‘community’ – one that could provide much-needed inspiration for a future Labour government. However, key dilemmas of communitarian politics go unaddressed.

Lisa Nandy, *All In: How We Build a Country that Works*, HarperNorth, Manchester 2022

It is no mean feat to write and publish a serious book about the mess we are in and how to tackle it while holding down a high-profile Shadow Cabinet brief, but that is what Lisa Nandy has done. Knitting together insights from her broad experience in politics and the voluntary sector, Nandy’s central argument in *All In* is that the left needs to think and act at multiple levels if it is to meet the challenges of today. It is here that her twin roles under Keir Starmer, first as Shadow Foreign Secretary, and more recently as Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities and Local Government, come into their own. Perhaps inevitably, *All In* does register the pressures of office in various ways. Most obviously, pithy phrases and political soundbites often take the place of fully elaborated policy proposals, but nonetheless we are still left with a fairly clear picture of the direction Nandy would like to see a future Labour government take in Britain.

Throughout the book Nandy places great emphasis on decentralising power and working with local communities to ensure that they can shape, and as much as possible *make*, the decisions influencing their lives. But she is also clear that this can never be enough. There cannot be a purely local route to a better life for her constituents in Wigan, or for the rest of us, because so many of the challenges we face are global and can only be tackled through international cooperation between nation states. The existential crises of climate change and global conflict loom large, naturally, but Nandy demonstrates how many of the things woven deep into the fabric of everyday life, such as the fate of her local football team Wigan Athletic, can become embroiled in complicated entanglements of global capital and international law that require state-level diplomacy to navigate. Community empowerment alone, she rightly insists, will not solve the problems of modern politics. As Nandy says:

If we want a better country and a better world then we have to defeat those who say that if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. We have to show that we will use every local, national and global tool at our disposal to improve the lives of working-class people here *and* across the world (pp69-70).

But have no doubt – community is central to Nandy’s vision, and so too is her proclaimed faith in the creative ability of people to build their communities anew if they are given the opportunity. Speaking of the awe she felt, shortly after becoming MP, when she attended a Wigan game and realised that many in the cheering crowd had just put their trust in her at the ballot box, she declares: ‘They are the people who have built and sustained everything of value in our community: the grassroots football, rugby league and labour clubs, and the credit unions and community centres that have seen us through good times and bad (p5).’ Nandy’s argument is that these creative talents have been spurned by a highly centralised, top-down political system which seeks to micro-manage people’s lives from Whitehall. Like Maurice Glasman and Jon Cruddas, she is particularly critical of New Labour’s strong statist instincts. And, like historians such as Marc Stears and Jeremy Nuttall, she celebrates an alternative, lost Labour tradition which placed ethical arguments about the common good on an equal footing with questions about redistribution and control of the economy. Tellingly, she argues that much of New Labour’s best work was swiftly unpicked by the Coalition government’s scorched earth austerity programme precisely because it wasn’t properly embedded in local communities. As she puts it:

One of the lessons of thirteen years of Labour government is that the energy cooperative owned and run by hundreds of local people survives a change of government while the Sure Start services designed and funded from Whitehall do not (p134).

Despite all the talk of stakeholders, most of New Labour's social interventions came across as a benevolent state doing things for people's own good, largely on its terms. The fact that this was also how they were sold to the public – as interventions to help 'them', rather than as services for all – clearly compounded the problem.

Nandy is also spot on in her critique of the growing scourge of pseudo-public space, and its erosion both of civil liberties and of the fundamental idea of the common good (p167). *All In* presents this as part of a much broader colonisation of public life by the market over the past forty years, and is unequivocal about the need to reverse marketisation. New Labour's relaxed attitude to the attenuation of public life sprang in large part from a misplaced ideological faith in the neutrality, and social utility, of markets, but I would argue that it was also rooted in Labour's fundamental neglect of the politics of place. New Labour embraced the modish language of 'community' with gusto, but in its telling 'community' became little more than a synonym for 'the public', stripped of its essential 'placeness'. In New Labour speak, community became an empty, warm rhetoric, rather than something about lives as they are lived by people embedded (happily or not) in physical spaces and reciprocal personal networks.

A year into Tony Blair's premiership, I published a book about early Labour politics (*Speaking for the People*) in which the importance of the 'politics of place' was a central organising idea.¹ For sure, I was pushing back against claims that the birth of Labour politics had been at heart a localist revolt rooted organically in the resistance of working-class communities to national and international capitalism, but Labour's historic need to navigate strong place-based loyalties was nonetheless a central theme. Even in the early twentieth century, many Labour candidates, sponsored by national trade unions, were fighting parliamentary constituencies where their local connections were tenuous at best. Often, they found themselves on the back foot against populist Tory candidates and their wealthy local supporters, who routinely painted every Labour attack on the scourge of poverty or slum housing as an insult to local pride and working-class respectability made by an ignorant outsider. Over decades, Labour developed practical and rhetorical strategies to neutralise this small 'c' conservative 'politics of place', either by promoting candidates with their own local credentials or by learning to navigate the sensitivities of local patriotism. Sadly, these lessons were largely forgotten in the post-war years. Parachuting party high-flyers into supposedly safe working-class seats became the norm rather than the exception long before New Labour took control of the party machine. But New Labour did, nonetheless, raise the practice to a new level. By 2010, many of the key figures who had surrounded Blair and Brown since the mid-1990s found themselves sitting as MPs for places they had probably barely heard of when they first came into politics, and had

certainly never visited. It wasn't their fault, but the unwinding of Labour's heartlands in the 2010s was undoubtedly made easier by the party's complacent failure to cultivate the politics of place. Conservative Brexiteers seized their opportunity, promoting candidates who claimed deeper roots in, and understanding of, communities hit hard by economic policies that, with bitter irony, they and their party had been championing since the 1980s.

Nandy certainly recognises the dangers posed by the right's determination to stoke culture wars in Labour's historic heartlands. Like the early twentieth-century elites who once told people that Labour despised them and their community because it talked about the degradation of slums and poverty, today's right-wing populists lose no opportunity to tell working-class people, especially in the former industrial heartlands, that Labour despises them as backward, illiberal and racist. The credibility of the charge is reinforced by that fact that social media provide ample evidence of left-wing radicals who *do* parrot lazy stereotypes about the people and places of their imagined 'Brexitland' (usually without much personal knowledge of either). This toxic soup of ignorance and hate will do immeasurable harm to Labour unless it can find a way to underscore its absolute rejection of such lazy social prejudices. Like Orwell in the Second World War, Nandy's answer to this challenge is to celebrate the 'quiet patriotism' of ordinary people in contradistinction to the tub-thumping, hollow patriotism of the radical right. 'Quiet patriotism', Nandy argues, is measured 'not in the number of our flags but in the health of our children, the strength of our communities, the dignity of our workforce and the security of our nation' (p61). For her, the left's tendency to 'dismiss or belittle the patriotism on display in towns across Britain' is nothing less than a 'disaster'. As with her emphasis on 'dignity' at work, the influence of her colleague Jon Cruddas's book *Dignity of Labour* is clear in Nandy's analysis.² Labour, she argues, must recognise that at the heart of people's quiet patriotism is belief in (and love of) 'family, community, country' – a belief system which, she argues, 'gives us more than an anchor – it gives us a stake' (p66). All this is part of Nandy's central argument that the anger so often exploited by radical right populists is both real and justified, even if the divisive policies peddled by the right are nothing but a distracting smokescreen.

Nandy is less clear about the policies needed to address the real causes of anger in places that she carefully (and rightly) avoids labelling as 'left behind'. Partly this must reflect the constraints of office, but it is also because Nandy insists that ordinary people, rather than politicians and experts, know best what needs doing (and undoing) in their communities. She explicitly rejects the challenge to set out her own 'blueprint for Britain', insisting instead that: 'The answers lie in people and communities and they must write the story of our future' (p121). Nandy is clear that this requires a radical redistribution of power from central government to local

people. Her rationale for this is also clear. Both the market and the state have failed to meet people's core needs in the era of globalisation and de-industrialisation. What people want, Nandy declares, is 'security, choices and respect', and she insists that these 'will never be delivered by people with no stake in the outcome. Power has to return to the people' (p120). This is a call echoed by Gordon Brown's constitutional commission report, which emphasises the need for what they call "double devolution" that pushes power closer to people'.³ Nandy presents this as Labour rediscovering its communitarian, anti-centralising traditions, and backs up her arguments with citations of past Labour giants such as Clement Attlee. This is politically effective but tends to obscure the reality that even though Attlee and many of his closest allies retained a genuine admiration for voluntarism and sought to foster Britain's strong associational culture, their policies were just as top-down and technocratic as those pursued by New Labour half a century later. Indeed, this was the main grievance that drove Michael Young, also heavily cited by Nandy, to break with Labour and set up his own Institute of Community Studies in the early 1950s.⁴ Historically, relinquishing power, and indeed trusting the people, have not come as naturally to Labour politicians as Nandy would like us to believe.

Nandy herself is no doctrinaire anti-statist. Not only does she insist that the complexities of globalisation and international law demand action at national and international level, but she also envisages the nation state continuing to define the broad parameters of economic and social policy. Nandy advocates the return to corporatist planning, although she prefers the term 'social partnership', noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic even the Conservatives realised they needed to work directly with the CBI and TUC to plan how best to steer society and economy through the crisis. Nandy argues that in other countries it remains a core task of central government to help broker partnerships between workers, business owners and local politicians 'united in the common goal of reviving their towns, cities, villages and regions' (p132). She also calls for the state to legislate for a Universal Basic Infrastructure (albeit a call yet to become party policy) to ensure that local communities cannot be hollowed out by losing the basic services that make it possible to live in them with security, dignity and choice. She calls this 'taking a different, place-based approach to the economy' and champions it as an alternative to the hallowed wisdom of the last forty years that markets always know best (p146). Universal Basic Infrastructure would use a per capita formula to determine a minimum level of *local* service provision (in the process, shifting the focus of policy from abstract individual rights to the shared, collective rights of physical communities). This would not only put the 'politics of place' centre stage: it would also represent a radical recalibration of social policy away from market liberalism towards a more overtly social-democratic framing. It also has the added appeal of puncturing the Conservatives' current narrow, anti-worker agenda of imposing

‘minimum service level’ agreements by envisaging a much more fundamental public right to decent services.

Although she doesn’t spell this out, creating minimum standards for services (both public and private) also provides an important check on the freedom of localities to wield their increased powers divisively by prioritising some needs over others, or even some groups over others. This is part of a larger silence. At no point does *All In* grapple with the twin challenges to any communitarian political strategy: that communities are never homogeneous, and that not everyone wants to take an active part in local decision-making. By its nature, democracy brings with it the danger that the majority might organise things to the detriment of marginalised minorities. Community activism adds the additional danger that a vocal minority might come to dominate the political process and govern against the interests of people more marginal to local social networks or simply less able to participate. Indeed, one of the fundamental problems for any politics rooted in ‘community’ is that neither people’s ‘lived community’ – how they experience living in a place – nor their ‘imagined community’ – how they envisage that place and its people – is ever a direct representation of the place itself, in all its rich diversity. In *The Uses of Literacy*, his influential study of working-class community published in 1957, Richard Hoggart famously refuses to use the word ‘community’, arguing that its favourable overtones would too easily obscure the tensions and sanctions running through working-class neighbourhoods. The greatest of these, he suggests, is the pressure to fit in – to conform.⁵ The warm language of ‘community’ retains this power to obscure.

As I argue in *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-war England*, the popular appeal of ‘community’ remains undimmed despite a radical social revolution since the 1960s which has elevated personal autonomy to be the highest social good.⁶ People want the social connection that community brings – the feeling of being ‘all in’ if you will – without the coercive, controlling aspects of face-to-face community that, as Hoggart reminds us, once placed severe limits on people’s right to live as they pleased. Whether a radical decentralisation of power to local people in their communities will be able to reconcile this urge for both social connection *and* personal autonomy is the great unanswered question. Here, it also goes unposed.

The other problem side-stepped by *All In* is that, historically, initiatives to empower local communities have often ended up favouring advantaged areas (where many are both time- and resource-rich), over areas with greater need, but where people are time- and resource-poor. From good neighbour schemes in the 1970s to Michael Gove’s Free Schools in the 2010s, the well-to-do have been quick to grab the lion’s share of any resources the central state has devolved to bottom-up, community

initiatives. Particularly when it comes to planning, one also must ask whether radical decentralisation will prove an insuperable barrier to delivering the affordable homes and the low carbon infrastructure that must surely be among the principal priorities of an incoming Labour government. Can we have localism without nimbyism? It is conceivable that an incoming Labour government will devise robust ways to overcome these problems, but the need to do so isn't registered. Nor should we imagine that the answers will be simple. As Nandy herself recognises, anything that smacks of special (rather than universal) measures – policies that can be read as targeted by 'them' at 'us' for 'our own good' – is likely to fail at the first hurdle. Historically, Whitehall funding formulas have been used to finesse distributional problems, but guaranteeing universal minimum infrastructure and service levels may reduce the scope for such covert targeting.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the community politics of *All In* are unrealisable, only that the practical steps necessary to deliver the book's vision are left to others to resolve. Nandy offers many inspiring examples of people rallying round to secure a common goal for the benefit of all, but she does not explore what happens when goals are not held in common – in short, when 'the people' being empowered are divided. At various points she is positive about experiments with deliberative citizens' assemblies to resolve divisive issues, and the implication may be that such mechanisms could be used to broker consensus around local priorities. But, again, great care would need to be taken to ensure that such deliberative assemblies did not systematically exclude those less able or willing to devote time and energy to the political process. An activist democracy can easily be as exclusionary and disempowering as any conventional representative democracy.

In *Me, Me, Me?* I approach this problem tangentially, through a history of popular perceptions of social change since the Second World War. I argue that the powerful yearning for 'community' that runs through popular discourse (which I call 'vernacular politics') is driven in large measure by the transformation of community-as-place that has taken place during this period; this has been driven by the reinforcing logics of, on the one hand, modern communications, which have radically shrunk spatial barriers, and, on the other, market liberalism, which has shrunk not just public space, but the broader vocabulary of public life (e.g. concepts of public service, the public good, etc). The message of *Me, Me, Me?* is that whilst most people undoubtedly *want* both community and personal autonomy, reconciling the two through politics will not be easy. As noted, one reason for this is that people often conflate *their* community, the people they know and interact with, and *the* community: all the people who live in a particular place. Another is that many people are suspicious of organised attempts to foster community, preferring informal, semi-spontaneous forms of social interaction over formal structures, especially when those structures appear to be dictated from above. Perhaps

Nandy's solution of community empowerment will break through this dilemma. One can envisage how a genuine 'enabling state' might facilitate groups forming, more or less spontaneously, around specific common goals, without presupposing any wider unity of identity or purpose. Arguably, this is exactly what the National Lottery Fund has been doing on a small, patchwork scale for three decades. People, rather than 'the people', would be empowered by this form of community politics. There would be an incentive to find common ground within a locality rather than accentuate differences and division. Who knows, perhaps such an incremental politics of local empowerment might even help us rebuild the language of the 'common good' from the bottom up. We must hope that Nandy has sufficiently captured the ear of her colleagues and her leader, and that any future Labour government will take this ambition as its template.

Jon Lawrence is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Exeter. His book *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-war England* came out in paperback in February 2023.

Notes

- 1 Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914*, Cambridge CUP 1998.
- 2 Jon Cruddas, *The Dignity of Labour*, Cambridge Polity Press 2021.
- 3 Labour Party, *A New Britain: Renewing Our Democracy and Rebuilding Our Economy, Report of the Commission on the UK's Future*, Newcastle 2022, pp97-9.
- 4 Lise Butler, Michael Young, *Social Science and the British Left, 1945-1970*, Oxford OUP 2020, pp68-76, 98-122.
- 5 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* ([1957], London, Penguin 1981, p80.
- 6 Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-war England*, Oxford OUP 2019.