

# Rethinking identity politics

## What is Labour's story about belonging and inclusion?

Sunder Katwala

---

Keir Starmer's ambition is to lead a decade of national renewal. Labour sought to lean out of the politics of polarisation which has so often dominated the last decade in British politics. It was successful in winning a landslide election victory – yet Labour's 2024 electoral coalition was both extraordinarily broad and unusually narrow at the same time.

---

This should have important implications in shaping how Labour thinks, talks and acts when it comes to identity and belonging. It makes the ability to bridge divides not just a positive ethos for the government of a country but a necessary self-interest for sustained political success.

The identity challenges which the Starmer government must navigate often uncannily echo those faced by the last Labour government. Asylum and immigration are again central and contested. Conflict in the Middle East is impacting on community relations electoral politics in Britain. Even after Brexit, whether or how to pursue a closer relationship with European neighbours may become a prominent theme again. There are important lessons from the recent past in how New Labour saw its approach to identity often dramatically reshaped by events at home and abroad. It is rational for social democrats to be anxious about the politics of identity today, given how disruptive identity arguments can be for the electoral coalitions of the

past and the present. The answer to the challenge does not lie in avoiding identity issues, but in developing a social democratic politics of identity, which recognises and respects differences, and seeks to strengthen the common ground.

## **The unusual landslide: the coalition of (nearly) everywhere**

The 2024 General Election saw Labour win with both the broadest and the narrowest voting coalition in British political history. It was both a crushing yet curious landslide, managing to somehow resemble each of the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections all on one night: 411 seats won and a majority of 170 gave Labour a dominance in the House of Commons closely resembling that of the 1997 landslide. The turnout of 60 per cent was the second lowest in post-war history, just above that of 2001, which may now come to be thought of as the first ‘loveless landslide’. The share of the vote of 34 per cent was the lowest for any winning post-war government, marginally behind that of 2005, in an election understood as primarily a rejection of the Conservatives, and a more cautious endorsement of the winning party.

There was an unprecedented geographic breadth to the constituencies won by Labour. This was the first time since 2001, that the same party led in both votes and seats in England, Scotland and Wales. An entirely unprecedented achievement was for Labour to win more seats than any rival party in every region across England and Great Britain.

Labour’s game-plan to secure a Commons majority – to win people and places that were not already onside – was executed to perfection when reaching out. But the message that Labour was prioritising people and places who do not habitually vote Labour, was heard and sometimes acted on by some of those who normally would.

Labour’s vote was more evenly spread across social groups than any previous electoral coalition for a major party. Labour won across each social class group – with a remarkably even vote of between 32 per cent and 36 per cent across the AB, C1, C2 and DE categories. This was in fact the first post-war election where one party led in each social class group: New Labour, contrary to political folk memory, had trailed John Major among AB professional voters, while Margaret Thatcher had been behind Michael Foot in 1983 among voters from social grade DE.

Labour’s 2024 electoral map could be called ‘the coalition of everywhere’ – or perhaps more accurately, ‘the coalition of almost everywhere’, given the exceptions and holdouts to the general rule. While the party gained over two hundred seats, the party lost half a dozen constituencies that it had won in 2019. Bristol Central ousted Labour to strengthen the Green voice – perhaps consciously deciding to

offer a cosmopolitan counterblast to Nigel Farage's insurgency in Clacton on the Essex coast, as the two English constituencies which would tend to rank furthest apart on issues of identity and cultural values. Five formerly Labour-held constituencies voted for independent candidates, including the party's former leader Jeremy Corbyn retaining his Islington North constituency as an Independent, and pro-Gaza independents.

Unusually, no party won more than 50 per cent of the vote in almost any voter demographic in 2024. This was a stark contrast to 2019, when Labour won 62 per cent of first-time voters, and the Conservatives 64 per cent of the over-65s. The sole exception in 2024 is that Labour is estimated to have won 53 per cent of the vote among Black British voters, albeit on a reduced turnout. This was the first modern General Election when a majority of British Asian voters did not vote Labour, with Focaldata estimating a 43 per cent average across British Asian groups, with more significant losses among British Muslim voters than after the Iraq war in 2005, often to Independent and Green candidates, while the Conservatives continue to increase their share of British Indian and Hindu voters in particular.

This was again a result of Labour's vote advancing most where the party had been weaker but fell back among those groups where it had a significant lead. Labour's national vote share fell significantly in seats with more voters under 40, in areas of higher social deprivation and, most of all, where most voters were not white, with Labour's vote dropping by an average of 20 per cent in minority-majority constituencies, and by a larger margin where there were more British Asian voters. Yet Labour also remained more popular than average among the groups where its vote fell, emphasising the phenomena of a levelling out of its vote, by both geography and demographics.

There are important consequences of this narrow and broad electoral coalition. Keir Starmer has achieved a temporary dealignment primarily by making the case that it is 'time for change.' Many people with very different views and priorities could agree about that. Once Labour faces the pressures of governing, such a coalition may fracture at many points. Many have been quick to note the potential fragility of Labour's 2024 electoral coalition, especially in polarised times.

The greater complexity of the electoral map will be reflected in the election inquests within and across the parties in the autumn of 2024. The Conservative leadership contest will reflect the challenges for a party focused on the loss of voters to its right to Reform, but which lost a significant proportion of voters in the centre too, and swathes of constituencies to the Liberal Democrats and Labour. There is an early tug-of-war within the Labour Party about how much emphasis to place on different types of electoral challenge next time around: half of Labour MPs have the Conservatives in second place, but significant numbers have Reform, the Green

Party and the SNP as the constituency runner-up. There will be a more variable party contest across nations and regions.

It is also a public good to have a governing party which is aware of the need to govern for a 'coalition of everywhere'. This should place more limits on the polarising politics of 'dividing lines'. The politics of 'realignment' in 2019 may have proved considerably more contingent and temporary than many claimed. The nature of Boris Johnson's winning electoral coalition created political incentives for the last government to amplify differences – not just between those who had voted Leave or Remain in the EU referendum, but in the underlying demographic cleavages reflected in the 2016 and 2019 votes. That created political incentives to amplify differences between older and younger voters, between metropolitan cities and large towns, between majority and minority groups. By contrast, the Labour government has not just an ethical imperative but a self-interest in seeking to do the opposite.

The core purpose of democratic politics is to aggregate differences in order to make collective decisions. A government which holds constituencies which are urban and rural, in the north and south, across the nations and across generations, has both a self-interested as well as ethical imperative to bridge divides. The gains and losses of the 2024 general election reflected a somewhat asymmetric political strategy for how to seek a coalition of everywhere. A core challenge in government may be to find the practical tools to restore that balance: a decade of national renewal will depend on showing that everywhere really does mean everywhere.

## **Lessons from New Labour? The disruptive power of identity**

The Britain of the mid-2020s is a different country from that in which New Labour came to office a generation ago. Levels of immigration and ethnic diversity are much higher. It is a more secular country as well as a more plural one. All faiths are minority faiths now, with 46 per cent of the population identifying as Christian, even nominally. The pace of change has increased, in terms of technology as well as demographics. The major political arguments within the New Labour governments at the time were primarily about the role of the state: public spending and taxation, how to reform public services, and how far to make an argument about inequality. Its legacy on issues of identity was often one of unintended consequences which have shaped the social challenges of the 2020s. So there are several uncanny echoes of the identity issues of the New Labour era in the identity challenges which the new government will now face.

New Labour had wanted to tell a different story about national identity. Its struggle to make that resonate was symbolised by how the Millennium Dome, inherited from John Major and Michael Heseltine, became an iconic and expensive failure when it came to new narratives about identity, though the local impact in the regeneration of North Greenwich was more tangible. It is striking, in hindsight, just how much this new story of British identity was primarily articulated as an exercise in ‘rebranding’ which would shift the way Britain’s identity was perceived abroad by international audiences, rather than one which sought to engage at home about the content of this new national identity.

The much more consciously multinational United Kingdom may be among New Labour’s most profound identity legacy. The peace settlement in Northern Ireland, and devolution to Scotland secured broad public consent. Consent was successfully extended in Wales after its knife-edge referendum. But the failure of regional devolution in the north-east left New Labour with no account of what to say or do about England. The future of a more fractious and perhaps somewhat disunited Kingdom remains an unfinished story. The new government could have an opportunity to unlock the stand-off over the future of the Union, largely stalemated in the decade since the Scottish referendum of 2014, after its strong performance across England, Scotland and Wales in 2024.

Race and diversity were considerably more peripheral in New Labour’s creation than they are in a politics which reflects a more diverse society a generation later. There was strikingly little ethnic diversity in government or parliament – and almost none at all among the circles shaping ‘the project’ in the 1990s. There was a strong electoral imperative, closing the gender gap in voting, behind the successful breakthrough for women in parliament. That did not extend to prioritising race too, since this was intuitively associated with an inner-city core vote and the party Left. The 1997 landslide was a missed opportunity for race and representation. Just four out of 187 (2 per cent) of Labour’s newly elected MPs in 1997 were from visible minorities, an identical proportion to the pre-1997 PLP. It was little noticed at the time that New Labour had an all-white Cabinet for its first five years until Paul Boateng became the first Black British Cabinet minister in 2002. (David Cameron appointed the first British Asian Cabinet ministers). No Asian women entered the Commons until as late as May 2010.

There has been a rapid acceleration in ethnic diversity as a new norm in British public life, primarily after 2010. The 2024 General Election saw a record rise in the ethnic diversity of the House of Commons. The 90 ethnic minority MPs make up 14 per cent of the House, reflecting the 14 per cent of the eligible electorate from visible minority groups. The UK parliament is the first in a major western democracy to close this gap. The increased share of ethnic minority voice and presence,

across parties, may sometimes make navigating issues of race and diversity more challenging, that dissonance also marks progress in a diverse democracy.

New Labour had a commitment to multiculturalism which was often primarily rhetorical in the early years of the parliament. A modern, “young” country, as Blair like to put it, would reject xenophobia and racism at home and abroad. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook was the primary messenger of this argument, with the government placing more emphasis on how the rejection of xenophobia would reshape Britain’s approach to multilateral engagement, within the European Union, the transatlantic relationship and the Commonwealth, than on race and diversity as a domestic issue in the UK. Multiculturalism meant opposing racists who still could not accept the social reality of a multi-ethnic society. For example, Tony Blair’s 1999 ‘forces of conservatism’ party conference speech rejected ‘the old prejudices where foreign means bad. Where multiculturalism is not something to celebrate but a left-wing conspiracy to destroy their way of life’. The speech cited the assassination of Martin Luther King, the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela in apartheid South Africa and the racism hatred which killed Stephen Lawrence as examples of the forces of conservatism.

The 1998 public inquiry into Stephen Lawrence’s murder was one of the flagship interventions of New Labour’s first term. The case enabled Middle England to see policing and injustice through the eyes of a black family for the first time. An unusual coalition of support, with the Daily Mail vocal and prominent helped Home Secretary Jack Straw to quell nerves in Number Ten that it might ‘look like an attack on the police’. The Macpherson inquiry had a significant impact – though arguments about the nature of institutional racism saw the unusual alliances break up into a more familiar and politically polarised argument about how to respond to them. The Labour government had encouraged, at arms-length, the Bhikhu Parekh Commission into the future of multi-ethnic Britain, convened by the Runnymede Trust, which articulated a ‘community of communities’ conception of British identity, but retreated from it in the face of media controversy over national identity and racism which had many pre-echoes of the ‘culture war’ controversies over race, history and identity arising out of the Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests of 2020. Navigating clashes over the language and framing of race can be crucial to whether or how space for constructive policy is opened up or closed down.

Events significantly reshaped New Labour’s language and policy on race. Ted Cantele’s 2001 report into ‘parallel lives’ after the riots in the northern mill towns saw a dramatic shift in language from multiculturalism to cohesion. This was an opportunity to make the links between New Labour’s broader communitarianism, its approach to opportunity, integration and citizenship, but the recurring pattern was of a difficulty in sustaining a broader strategy. Tony Blair became another, in a

long line of Prime Ministers, to leave office regretting that an integration strategy never quite had sufficient focus as an actionable priority. Gordon Brown repeated the pattern, making a big public argument about Britishness, before seeing that squeezed out once the financial crisis dominated from 2008.

The catastrophic events of 9/11 in 2001 and 7/7 in 2005 created an especially sharp focus on Muslim integration. It is the first responsibility of governments to keep citizens safe. But too narrow or exclusive a focus on Muslim integration, seen primarily through the lens of security and terrorism can create an ‘us and them’ argument about one group is a barrier to a public narrative and policy agenda about identity, integration and citizenship that is perceived as making similar demands about the rights and responsibilities of a shared citizenship to those from every minority and majority group. For most of the last decade, Muslim integration had ceased to be so dominant a theme of identity and integration debates – as other identity arguments arose over Brexit, race and culture issues – but the impact of the Israel/Palestine conflict on UK relationships has made this more central again.

There is an opportunity for that broader agenda from New Labour’s quiet long-term legacy of educational success – with especially rapid progress in London – made Britain by the 2020s a country where ethnic minorities are more likely to be university graduates than the white British. One of the challenges of the 2020s is to ensure that these advances now break down ethnic barriers to recruitment and progression in work. A key challenge for the Starmer government’s mission of breaking down the barriers to opportunity is how to articulate and protect an agenda of fair chances for all – encompassing gender, race, social class – from the politics of competing grievances which seeks to set opportunities for different groups against each other.

Brexit is one of the most dramatic changes in the international and domestic context. It is ironic that the content of a closer relationship with European neighbours, and how far it is necessary to make a public case for it, could again become as significant a question in the late 2020s as it was a generation ago. Starmer’s government is open about its goal of closer practical cooperation with European neighbours, within the manifesto red lines that are designed to avoid reigniting the Brexit identity divides of the recent past.

One of the causes of Brexit was the way the New Labour government lost public confidence on immigration. Its focus was on asylum in its first term, though broader Home Office reform was more elusive, reflected later in the Windrush scandal. The focus shifted to European migration after 2004. What seemed a technical decision in 2004 – to not match European transitional controls on extending freedom of movement – had profound political impacts, though a faster response to managing the local impacts of the unanticipated scale of Polish

migration might have mitigated that. New Labour's inability to manage the pace of change provided some of the conditions for the narrow vote to leave the European Union in 2016. Surprisingly to some, the post-Brexit immigration system saw the public become more relaxed about levels of immigration, particularly for work and study, though that was disrupted by the high levels of arrivals of asylum seekers in small boats across the Channel.

The new government is already under pressure as it demonstrates that a more orderly, more workable and more humane approach to managing the challenge of asylum is possible. The broader challenge is how to secure public confidence in the choices made about the pressures and gains of immigration more broadly. This is partly about how to consider the choices and trade-offs of immigration policy – considering the trade-offs of contribution to the economy and public services, with the challenges of population change on housing demand – but it is influenced too by more existential questions of identity. A government seeking to increase public confidence in how we handle immigration and integration will need to place more emphasis on an agenda of connection and contact between those who come to Britain and the communities they join – including a more proactive approach to integration and citizenship, which encourages settled migrants to become British and celebrates it when they do.

## **Why social democrats need their own politics of identity**

The politics of identity appear to present some of the core progressive dilemmas of the twenty-first century. Consider how many identity issues ricocheted through the last Parliament: Brexit ending free movement – and record immigration from outside Europe. The Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests and the polarisation over the Sewell report which responded to them. Clashes over statues and how we teach about the history of empire. Arguments about gender, biological sex and trans rights. Just as events transformed New Labour's approach to identity and integration in office, it has been the domestic impact of global events that have increased the salience of immigration and integration again. Conflict in the Middle East has seen incidents of antisemitism and anti-Muslim prejudice spike and clashes over how to police the boundaries between politics, protest and prejudice.

'Identity politics' is often used pejoratively, having been a cause for the cultural left and a target for the political right. Social democrats find it easy to disdain the idea of 'culture war' politics from the right, and are eager to address the socio-economic causes of disaffection and mistrust, but are considerably more anxious about how to navigate the politics of identity, due to its disruptive impact on the electoral

coalitions of the past, and the potential to divide opinion along class, educational and generational cleavages.

Keir Starmer has been clearest on how he does not want to talk about identity. He will seek to lower the temperature. A politics that ‘treads a little lighter on all of our lives’ may bring respite from the exhaustion of permanent cultural conflict. But he acknowledges too that articulating the politics of bringing people together is challenging – ‘harder to express, less colourful, fewer clicks on social media’ – demanding of citizens that they too respect the different views of others.

So instead, Keir Starmer’s identity politics have centred on patriotism. The Union Jack was prominent in the Labour campaign. Yet this is often dismissed as mere gesture politics, to remind people Starmer is not Jeremy Corbyn, or seen as too intangible to be worth investing political capital into it. Yet every successful leader of the Labour party has sought to demonstrate a comfort with national symbols while linking that to a ‘state of the nation’ argument too. Starmer places his ambitions for national renewal within the tradition of the governments of 1945, 1964 and 1997. His five national missions – economic growth, becoming a climate superpower, renewing the NHS, cutting crime and breaking down barriers to opportunity – are his framework to connect the public narrative of what his government cares about, with the practical challenges of delivery in office. Starmer has sounded frustrated by the media’s failure to see his missions for government as audacious. He identifies himself less as a story-teller, and more as a builder and a fixer. The Starmer government’s mission-led agenda is a laudable one. Yet this could also reinforce a social democratic tendency to see challenges of identity and belonging as mainly a minefield to avoid – and a distraction from what really matters.

Here Starmer follows in the footsteps of other centre-left leaders who sought to defuse the politics of cultural polarisation. Both Olaf Scholz in Germany and Anthony Albanese in Australia were successful enough on the campaign trail to get into office – primarily by sticking to economic issues and steering clear of identity debates – but have struggled in power. This generation of centre-left and social democratic politicians have a fundamental strategic self-interest in the politics of depolarisation. They have yet to identify the tools to do so in office as well as in opposition.

There is a public appetite to rebalance the agenda – from an age of identity to an age of economics – though their comparative salience will be driven by events and other factors. Avoidance is not a realistic option, given that there will, unavoidably, be a wide series of identity issues of the kind that every government must navigate, amongst them migration and asylum, community cohesion and inter-faith relations, security, terrorism and extremism from Islamism, the far right and other groups.

Fundamentally, the success of social democratic politics in this century depends on having a bridging mission – to reduce the social distance between different groups of citizens in an increasingly plural and diverse democracy. That will be essential to having sufficient support at the ballot box: to govern; to pursue a social democratic policy agenda on the economy, public services or climate transition; and to have more confidence in navigating identity challenges too. Social democratic governing projects will always require a cross-class coalition. One of its core 2020s challenges is to now make an authentic progressive bridging offer across Britain’s identity divides too. Bridging divides should be a core aim of a ‘decade of national renewal’ – demonstrating how this can be a practical agenda, not merely a rhetorical aspiration. Rather than hoping to avoid tensions over identity, we need effective strategies to engage with and defuse them.

**Sunder Katwala** is Director of British Future and author of *How to be a Patriot*.