Regional inequalities and the collapse of Labour's 'Red Wall'

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The abandonment of Labour should be understood in the broader context of regional inequality and regional policy

The capture of Labour's so-called 'red wall' of seats by the Conservatives in the general election of 2019 has attracted much media and public interest, reflecting its significance in shaping the election outcome. The term was coined by a former Conservative strategist, James Kanagasooriam, when he referred to a 'huge "red wall" stretching from North Wales into Merseyside, Warrington, Wigan, Manchester, Oldham, Barnsley, Nottingham and Doncaster' which continued to return Labour MPs despite demographic and cultural characteristics increasingly similar to Conservative seats in the South.[1] Based on their support for 'leave' in the 2016 Brexit referendum and their growing support for the Conservatives in recent elections, these areas were successfully targeted by the Conservative campaign. In this article, the 'red wall' is defined as the 41 seats won by the Conservatives in Northern England, the Midlands and Wales (including six won in 2017) that had been historically held by Labour over several decades, excluding marginal seats.[2]

The collapse of Labour's 'red wall' symbolises a dramatic reversal of the traditional electoral geography of the United Kingdom, with Labour losing support in many working-class areas where the Conservatives have gained, attracting the votes of older, less educated, working-class and white people.[3] While closely linked

DOI: 10.3898/SOUN.76.01.2020

to the Brexit vote and these voters' hostility to Jeremy Corbyn, this is a longer-term trend evident since 2005. Labour's support is increasingly concentrated in the larger cities, which cannot provide enough seats for a parliamentary majority, making towns in particular a critical battleground for future elections.

The 'red wall' is comprised of post-industrial towns and rural areas surrounding the big Labour-supporting cities of the North and Midlands. Many of these areas are characterised by relative economic decline rooted in their long-standing experience of deindustrialisation. Ensuing patterns of economic insecurity and precarious work have been reinforced by over a decade of depressed living standards and austerity.[4] At the same time, regional policy has become increasingly city-centric, focusing on the redevelopment of the major cities of the UK.[5] Consequently, many residents of post-industrial towns and outlying areas in the North and Midlands of England feel marginalised and 'left behind' by economic change, social liberalism and the relative prosperity of other areas.[6] Their disaffection is part of the broader pattern of political discontent and populism across Europe and the United States, characterised as the 'revolt of the rust belt'.[7]

This article seeks to explain the Conservatives' capture of 'red wall' seats, looking beyond electoral trends and cultural characteristics to place it in the broader context of patterns of regional inequality and regional policy in the UK. Drawing on two recently published books, it outlines the political attitudes and values of 'red wall' voters in order to assess these areas' future political prospects, particularly in terms of the Conservatives' ability to deliver their 'levelling up' agenda and Labour's future strategy.[8]

Regional inequalities and regional policy

The UK has one of the highest levels of regional inequality of any major European economy, reflecting increasing regional divergence over recent decades.[9] Globalisation has accentuated these entrenched regional economic inequalities to create three increasingly separate economies: the dynamic economies of London and the South; the weakly performing regions of the North and Midlands of England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and Scotland, which is more prosperous than the second group.[10] Widening regional inequalities from the 1980s have coincided with the abandonment of redistributionist regional policies in favour

of neoliberal strategies designed to support the growth of the most economically competitive regions, leading to a concentration of infrastructure investment in London in recent years.[11]

Between 1977 and 1995, the UK experienced a clear pattern of economic divergence on both the north-south and urban-rural dimensions.[12] The South East of England and affluent parts of Scotland grew, while the North and Midlands of England and Wales lost ground. Rural areas and shires enjoyed growing prosperity whereas urban industrial centres like Merseyside, South Yorkshire, the West Midlands, South Wales and Teesside fell behind. Since the 1990s, the pattern has been one of divergence between London and the rest of England and Wales. Productivity and earnings in London are around a third to a half higher than the UK average, although some of the benefits of this go to commuters to London who live in the South East and East of England.[13]

Regional trends in income and wealth since the 2000s present a more nuanced picture. While median household income *before housing costs* has grown faster in London since 2007, it has grown by less in London than the rest of the country when compiled *after housing costs*, reflecting higher property values and rents in London.[14] There is strong evidence of regional convergence in incomes at lower levels of pay, influenced by policy measures such as the minimum wage, National Living Wage and in-work benefits, while incomes have diverged between regions for higher-paid people.[15] Meanwhile, regional inequalities in wealth have increased markedly, based on rising property values in London and the South East.[16]

Over the past couple of decades, cities have been identified as engines of economic growth and innovation by leading researchers and policy-makers.[17] The underlying argument is that the geographical agglomeration of economic activity in cities fosters innovation and productivity gains, as concentrations of firms and skilled workers generate knowledge spill-overs. In the UK, agglomeration thinking reinforced the emphasis on city centre regeneration in the major secondary cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and Birmingham that had originally emerged in response to deindustrialisation in the 1980s and 1990s. Outlying towns and districts were rendered increasingly marginal to this metropolitan agenda, based on the assumption that the benefits of investment in city centres would spread to the wider region, assisted by improved connectivity to enable people to access jobs in cities.[18]

Regional inequalities

Following its abolition of the regional development agencies created by Labour - replaced with a fragmented array of local growth initiatives - the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government engaged with a broader regional agenda from 2014, driven by the former Chancellor, George Osborne. This new regional approach had two principal overlapping elements. First, devolution to selected city-regions, based on negotiated 'deals' between the government and local leaders.[19] Manchester led the way here, through the Greater Manchester agreement of November 2014, and this was followed by deals with other city-regions, largely in the North and Midlands. In most cases, devolution has involved the establishment of directly elected 'metro mayors', such as Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester and Andy Street in the West Midlands. The second element was the new pan-regional initiatives, principally Osborne's flagship Northern Powerhouse (NPh) and the parallel Midlands Engine project. The NPh sought to bring the major Northern cities together as a kind of transformative urban counter-weight to London, based on the theory of agglomeration.[20] As such, it has privileged the core cites of the North, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and Sheffield, particularly in the 'peak Powerhouse' period of 2014-16.

The vision of bringing these cities closer together to realise the benefits of agglomeration on an expanded scale requires new transport investment to improve east-west links across the Pennines. The key initiative here is the £70 billion Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme (sometimes termed HS3), which includes a new line between Leeds and Manchester via Bradford, linked to the two Northern arms of the HS2 project from London and the West Midlands to Manchester and Leeds, as well as significant upgrades to other parts of the trans-Pennine network.

In the context of concerns about a divide between thriving cities and 'left behind' towns, economic and social indicators provide a more nuanced picture than electoral trends. The core parts of the larger city-regions have generally seen faster productivity and employment growth than their surrounding regions.[21] The rate of job growth in the main regional cities was three times faster than in Britain's older industrial towns from 2010 to 2016.[22] Yet income per head grew more slowly in central cities than in their wider regions between 1997 and 2017.[23] Earnings also tend to be higher in the outer parts of cities than their centres, particularly in affluent commuter suburbs. Looking at 'red wall' seats specifically, employment grew less quickly in these places than in other areas, particularly the large cities, from

2010 to 2019, while pay fell more sharply, especially compared to other parts of the North, Midlands and Wales.[24]

Based on gross disposable income per head, the table below lists the regions in England and Wales with the lowest incomes (relative to the UK average), and the slowest growth in income, from 1997 to 2018, revealing those which are both poor and falling behind. The list contains a mix of places, including some larger

Regions with the lowest incomes (UK = 100), England and Wales (ranked by 2018 income) and slowest growth of incomes

Region	*1997*	*2018*	*Change*
Nottingham	77.0	62.2	-14.8
Leicester	77.6	62.9	-14.7
Blackburn with Darwen	78.4	65.1	-13.3
Hull	68.8	66.5	-2.3
Sandwell	76.1	68.3	-7.8
Birmingham	81.8	72.4	-9.4
Bradford	86.3	72.6	-13.7
Coventry	83.7	72.7	-11.0
Stoke-on-Trent	76.8	73.4	-3.4
Wolverhampton	82.9	73.8	-9.1
Gwent Valleys	82.1	73.8	-8.3
Walsall	82.4	73.9	-8.5
Swansea	87.9	74.6	-13.3
South Teesside	83.5	74.7	-8.8
Liverpool	78.4	75.1	-3.3
Derby	86.3	75.6	-10.7
Blackpool	88.6	75.7	-12.9
Sheffield	86.4	76.6	-9.8
Luton	85.8	77.0	-8.8
Gwynedd	82.6	77.0	-5.6
Portsmouth	86.8	77.2	-9.6
Greater Manchester North East	84.1	77.5	-6.6
North and North East Lincolnshire	85.9	78.4	-7.5
Durham CC	85.6	78.4	-7.2
Greater Manchester North West	92.3	78.5	-13.8

Source: *Measuring Up For Levelling Up*, pp76-77

cites, smaller cities, peripheral parts of larger conurbations and towns outside conurbations and post-industrial areas. Twenty of the twenty-five regions are in the North and Midlands with only two in the South.

The realignment of the 'Red Wall'

The Conservative capture of 'red wall' seats reflects what Jennings and Stoker term the geographical bifurcation, or polarisation, of British politics, as people in larger cities have increasingly voted Labour while those living in towns and rural areas have supported the Conservatives.[25] This polarised pattern is also evident in other Western democracies.[26] In the UK context, the Brexit referendum exposed this pattern of intra-regional polarisation, with older industrial areas of England voting 'leave' in high proportions, while the 'leave' vote was substantially lower in the core cities.[27]

Rather than representing a sudden one-off event associated with Brexit and Corbyn, the realignment of 'red wall' voters is deep-rooted, based on Labour's 'weakening relationship with working class Britain'.[28] This can be traced back to the late 1990s and New Labour's strategy of building a broader electoral coalition by appealing to middle-class voters, leading to the gradual alienation of its working-class base. This left Labour vulnerable to counter-mobilisation in working-class areas, evident in the electoral success of UKIP between 2013 and 2015 and the Conservatives in 2019. UKIP was highly successful in mobilising older, working-class voters with few educational qualifications in Labour seats in the North of England.[29] As such, it is likely to have acted as a bridge from Labour to the Conservatives for many switching 'red wall' voters.

The Conservatives began to target working-class seats in the North and Midlands from 2012, responding to Labour's vulnerability and the growing electoral appeal of UKIP. The NPh initiative gave them a regional narrative ahead of the 2015 general election, becoming a central feature of the campaign. The NPh was part of an effort to foster 'a Tory hegemony' by redefining the political centre ground and marginalising Labour, based on the appropriation of the regional agenda.[30] Osborne's promotion of the NPh was influenced by his special adviser, Neil O'Brien (now the MP for Harborough in Leicestershire and leader of the 'Levelling Up Taskforce' of Tory MPs), who aimed to make the Conservatives the 'new workers' party' through a

strategy of 'blue-collar modernisation, focused on the North and Midlands'.[31] Brexit boosted this strategy, with Theresa May targeting Leave voting seats in the North and Midlands in 2017, increasing the Conservatives' vote share, but winning only six pro-Brexit seats from Labour.[32]

The Conservative strategy for the 2019 election represented a continuation of the approach of May and her special advisor Nick Timothy, abandoning the social liberalism of Cameron and Osborne to appeal to socially conservative working-class areas of England that had voted for Brexit. The North was central to this strategy, with Boris Johnson as the new prime minister pledging his support for the NPh and 'left behind' towns as part of an effort to 'level up' growth and opportunity across Britain.[33] Breaking with austerity, Johnson's commitments to addressing regional inequalities, tackling crime and immigration, increasing infrastructure investment and providing more resources for the NHS were designed to appeal to Leave-supporting Labour voters, alongside the clarity of the campaign's central message of 'getting Brexit done'.[34]

Beyond the Red Wall by the pollster Deborah Mattinson conveys the attitudes and priorities of largely older voters who switched to the Conservatives in 2019. These attitudes are underpinned by a deep sense of loss and resentment rooted in the relative economic decline and political neglect of their communities. Mattinson's informants expressed a strong feeling of physical separation and isolation from the rest of the country, underpinned by poor transport connections to nearby conurbations. This sense of isolation was often expressed by voters themselves as feeling 'left behind' by other parts of country, not only London and the South, but also adjacent large cities. The lack of opportunity for young people was a recurring concern, particularly in terms of employment, education and training. Anger was expressed at the physical state and appearance of their towns, with boarded up high streets symbolising decay. Much of the blame for this was directed at Labour councils, who were criticised for presiding over decline and demonstrating a lack of ambition. Responsibility for austerity also tended to be attributed to Labour councils rather than national government.

Brexit was seen by Mattinson's voters as offering a possibility of hope in an otherwise underlying pattern of political disillusionment. It heralded a widespread optimism, with leaving the EU viewed as a trigger for revitalising manufacturing and bringing back jobs as well as controlling migration. These first-hand accounts

of voters' hopes for industrial renaissance accord with quantitative analyses of the geography of political discontent and populism, which identify local economic decline as one of its principal drivers, alongside lower employment and a less educated workforce.[35]

Labour was widely seen as out of touch and inauthentic; the party of the South, of idealistic middle-class students and welfare 'scroungers'.[36] Reflecting a shift in the public narrative - from an unquestioned sense of these areas as comprised of 'Labour towns and people' to one of 'Labour no longer representing us' - these often older, working-class voters had overcome their traditional attachment to Labour and aversion to the Conservatives.[37] The personal appeal of Johnson played a central role in their decisions to support the Conservatives; he was viewed as positive and patriotic, with an optimistic vision for the UK.[38] Here, realignment can be seen as representative of a particular 'structure of feeling', as 'a class-specific generational connection of values, attitudes and kinds of perception as experiences'.[39]

Reviving the 'Red Wall': political prospects

'Levelling up' growth and opportunity across the UK is a political priority of the Johnson government. It is central to their commitment to deliver for former Labour voters in the North and Midlands. Yet 'levelling up' remains a slogan, with the government having provided little elaboration of what it means in practice beyond a general intention to promote growth in less prosperous parts of the country.[40] The geographical focus of levelling up remains unclear: the North and Midlands as a whole, large city-regions such as Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool or 'left behind' towns?[41]

Infrastructure investment is the most prominent part of the government's levelling up' agenda. Johnson agreed to go ahead with the flagship HS2 project, following a review triggered by its spiralling costs, although uncertainty remains over the two northern arms to Manchester and Leeds.[42] He also signalled his support for the complementary Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme, with Chancellor Rishi Sunak confirming funding for the new Leeds-Manchester section in the spring budget of 2020. A range of infrastructure and housing projects in the North and Midlands have also been approved in response to the coronavirus crisis. Yet the links between infrastructure investment and levelling up, however this is defined, have

never been spelt out. While there is a need for increased transport investment in the North and Midlands, research indicates that high-speed rail schemes such as HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail have geographically uneven effects, often fostering further agglomeration around their main urban hubs.[43] This is likely to benefit large cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, potentially increasing intra-regional inequalities in the absence of countervailing measures to boost towns and outlying districts.

The next most prominent aspect of 'levelling up' is research and development (R and D), addressing its concentration in the south of England, with 52 per cent of R and D expenditure occurring in London, the South East and East of England.[44] Efforts to disperse R and D more evenly across the UK are welcome and overdue, but this is again likely to benefit large cities - which have the assets and skills to support R and D investment - to the exclusion of other geographies (towns, outlying districts and rural areas).[45] Ministers have also stressed the importance of devolution to their levelling up agenda, although progress has been limited to the completion of the South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire deals thus far. The publication of the promised White Paper on English devolution has been postponed, while the government has adopted a highly centralised approach to the management of the coronavirus crisis.[46] Finally, reflecting a narrower neoliberal agenda at odds with the more interventionist, 'one-nation' politics of 'levelling up', the government has also championed the introduction of freeports across the UK, making a series of inflated and unverified claims about the benefits of these in terms of jobs and prosperity.[47]

In addition to these measures to promote 'levelling up' at a broad regional scale, towns are also receiving targeted support. Originally established by the May government in March 2019, the Towns Fund was expanded by Johnson, with 100 towns being invited to develop proposals for town deals. This initiative was explicitly framed in terms of the need to 'level up communities across the country' and address feelings of being 'left-behind' by the focus on cities.[48] The Fund is designed to support the economic regeneration of towns, with a focus on urban regeneration, skills and enterprise infrastructure and connectivity. As such, it offers the kind of visible investment in the physical and social fabric and built environment of towns called for by voters.[49] The selection of the (in the end) 101 towns invited to apply for Town Deals has generated political controversy, with accusations that the choices were influenced by electoral considerations. Analysis indicates that 85 per

cent of the towns selected on the basis of ministerial discretion rather than official advice were in marginal constituencies.[50]

The uneven effects of the Covid-19 crisis are likely to make 'levelling up' more difficult. Deprived urban areas have been most severely affected by the pandemic, with poverty and population density significantly increasing the risk of death.[51] One study showed that areas in the 'Northern spine of England' were most vulnerable in health terms, an area including south Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, all with relatively older and more deprived populations, as well as the large cities of the Midlands, North West and North East.[52] With higher levels of employment in sectors such as manufacturing, retail and care, rates of homeworking are likely to be lower in post-industrial towns than in larger cities, which have higher levels of employment in professional services. This means that workers in the former areas are more exposed to both the virus and job losses.[53] In response to the resurgence of the virus, the government placed large areas of the North under restrictions in autumn 2020, generating tensions with local leaders, most notably Manchester, over the designation of areas and the levels of support made available.

At the same time, the government's mishandling of the coronavirus crisis has seen its approval scores plummet since April, alongside Johnson's personal standing. Some 'red wall' voters were reporting their disappointment with the government's management of the crisis by the summer of 2020;[54] and this may be reinforced by its subsequent imposition of restrictions on Northern regions. More broadly, the government's ability to retain its Northern seats will require it to deliver on its levelling up agenda, which requires sustained political commitment and investment over a twenty to thirty-year period. The pandemic is likely to make this more difficult by exacerbating social and geographical inequalities and constraining future funding. In addition, the challenge of 'levelling up' may be exacerbated by the economic shock of Brexit, with research indicating that under-performing regions of the North and Midlands are most exposed to leaving the customs union and single market.[55]

Labour faces the problem of how to respond to the loss of its 'red wall' seats and the Conservatives' 'levelling up' agenda whilst retaining its urban support. Since the big cities cannot provide enough seats for a majority, its path to power runs through Britain's towns.[56] As such, the party confronts an acute version of David Marquand's progressive dilemma, in having to build an electoral coalition that spans both

socially liberal and socially conservative voters.[57] More specifically, Labour needs to develop a distinctive vision that sustains the support of its liberal, urban base while attracting working-class voters in the post-industrial North and Midlands. While the new Labour leader, Keir Starmer, has made a favourable impression with 'red wall' voters, they remain sceptical of the Labour Party.[58] Rather than seeking to echo the Conservatives' rhetoric of patriotism and identity to compete for the same cohort of older, more affluent voters that have dominated discussions of 'red wall' seats, a more viable approach may be to target younger, insecure workers in post-industrial areas.[59] This would involve Labour building an agenda around employment rights, job creation, public housing and transport that appeals to voters' common interests in economic security and social provision across the sometimes overdrawn geographical divide between cities and towns.

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Notes

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