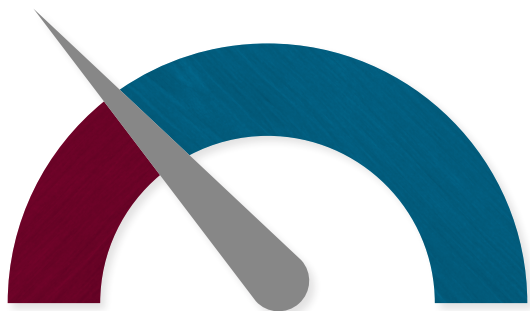


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# **NEVER AGAIN**



## **LESSONS FROM LABOUR'S KEY SEATS**

**Edited by Sally Keeble and Will Straw**

Fabian Special

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Fabian Society  
61 Petty France  
London SW1H 9EU  
[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk)

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# Never Again

Lessons from Labour's key seats

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**Edited by Sally Keeble and Will Straw**



## About the authors

**Andrew Adonis** is a Labour peer and was transport secretary and schools minister in the last Labour government.

**Jessica Asato** in Norwich North increased Labour's vote by more than one thousand but saw the Tory vote increase by more.

**Polly Billington** was thwarted in Labour's second target seat of Thurrock as UKIP's vote rose from 3,390 to 15,718.

**Rowenna Davis** inherited the narrowest of majorities in Southampton Itchen but saw the seat become a Conservative gain.

**James Frith** increased Labour's vote in Bury North by 6 percentage points but lost by just 378 votes.

**Sally Keeble** served as MP in Northampton North from 1997 to 2010 but saw the collapsing Lib Dem vote shift to the Tories, costing Labour the seat for a second time.

**Luke Pollard** increased Labour's vote by nearly 4,000 in Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport but lost by 523 votes.

**Will Straw** helped Labour increase its vote by 2,000 in Rossendale and Darwen but saw UKIP more than quadruple their support.

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Andrew Adonis

The polls were the source of false hope. Not just national polls but constituency polls, which appeared to give a more fine-grained and accurate picture of what was happening on the ground.

In fact, what the national polls showed in England was practically a dead heat on voting intentions, but with a significant deficit for Labour on both leadership and economic trust. So the lesson for next time is not to take false hope from the polls unless – as in the Blair years – they show a decisive lead on all three measures: voting intentions, leadership and economic trust. And constituency polls are too volatile to mean much.

The good news is in London. A combination of demography, strong campaigning, a positive pan-London and pro-growth programme for the capital, and an excellent record in London borough and city-wide government over the past 15 years, has given Labour a power base which yielded net gains in 2015 and a springboard for next May's mayoral election.

The bad news is practically everywhere else.

The essays in this collection by defeated candidates tell a fairly similar story of an energetic ground campaign but an inadequate national campaign. The verdicts are of a defeat in the broad realm of ideas and positioning, not individual policies or leadership and campaign failures.

“We lost the argument over linking the contribution people make to society and what they take out in cash or kind,” says Sally Keeble. One of the effects of this was to enable UKIP to take root in Labour areas because of (in Luke Pollard’s words) “a disconnection with communities, distrust in politicians and a debate that was leaving people behind.”

Will Straw highlights welfare as a key issue. “Wherever I turned there was a palpable sense that the system was devoid of any sense of contribution” and Labour “was seen by too many people as the defender of the status quo.” Jessica Asato highlights waste in partially reformed public services as a key theme, and Polly Billington stresses the importance of public services that are responsive to local needs in areas as basic as cleaning the streets properly and cleaning up after dogs.

So what’s to be done? New leadership gives new opportunities. Will Straw suggests three principles of reform: devolution, “encouraging a climate of contribution and reciprocity” and “moving scarce taxpayer resources from income support to shared institutions,” such as new homes instead of housing benefit and better paid jobs instead of jobseeker’s allowance.

This means accepting some of the lines of George Osborne’s summer budget and promoting an agenda of productivity, devolution and stronger families and communities. For example, Labour should be championing the new levy for apprenticeships and campaigning to promote and extend the opportunities they provide for young people. We should be supporting city regional mayors and devolved institutions, and seeking to make a success of them, as with the GLA in London under Ken Livingstone. We should, as James Frith argues, put a pro-growth and pro-business approach at the heart of our politics, and not, in Rowenna Davis’s graphic phrase, assume that people are simply “needy, greedy or

irrelevant.” On the contrary, everyone has a positive contribution to make, and we should be championing it.

Moreover, as Sally and Will argue in their conclusion, the next election will be won or lost in England. There are too few marginal seats in Scotland to make the difference even if we regain the initiative north of the border.

We must be leading the campaign to protect our jobs, industries and future in the forthcoming EU referendum. Polly Billington argues that we need to champion “fair movement” rather than “free movement” of citizens within the EU. Defining what is meant by “fair movement” is a key issue and needs to be resolved over the next year. David Cameron will define it in terms of migrants’ benefits; if we are seeking a broader definition, it is as yet unclear what this would amount to in practice.

As these essays show, Labour did not have a problem with the quality of its candidates in key seats in 2015. Nor with the commitment and pragmatism of our members at large. Our challenge is to secure strong and effective leadership, positioning and policy.



Sally Keeble

*Sally Keeble – who served as MP in Northampton North from 1997 to 2010 – saw the collapsing Lib Dem vote shift to the Tories, costing Labour the seat for a second time. She outlines that “our biggest challenge is projecting economic competence” and sets out three ideas for the future around tackling the productivity crisis in our economy, focusing on the increase in household debt, and ensuring that we have plans for a taxation structure which does not alienate the key, aspirational voters whose support will be crucial to us in 2020.*

When you door-knock a street and bump into the Conservatives doing the same thing while a small plane flies overhead trailing a ‘Vote UKIP’ banner, you know you’re somewhere electorally significant. This is Obelisk Rise, Northampton: quintessential middle England, neat homes, well-tended gardens, hard-working families, deserving pensioners, people who look after their own, pay into the system and live by the rules. It’s a key part of a constituency which has always reflected the national mood at general elections. Thatcherite Tory, Blairite Labour, a three way marginal with the Tories slightly ahead in 2010, and a clear Tory majority with a collapsed Lib Dem vote in 2015.

But it’s not as settled as it seems. Northampton is a town in transition, and the tensions are reflected in the politics. Just 70 miles north of London, bordering some safe rural Tory seats, it was the only target seat for the party to gain in the county:

we already held, and sadly lost nearby Corby. The traditional boot and shoe industry which once provided a political base for Labour gave way to a mixed economy of distribution and financial services, growth fuelled by new town development that brought an influx of incomers from London and other big cities. Grumbles of 'It's not our town any more' directed at the 1970s incomers became cries of 'It's not our country any more' directed at the more recent arrivals from Eastern Europe. In both cases there is palpable resentment at the exclusion of local people from the decisions that have shaped their community.

There's a gritty, self-reliant pragmatism that has produced some radical results. The strong tradition of women's economic participation is reflected in the employment practices of big local employers who were ahead of the Labour government in introducing family-friendly working, employers like Barclaycard and Nationwide that has a huge administrative centre next to Obelisk Rise. Many Northampton parents alternate night and day working shifts to share their care of their children, or rely on flexible non-state providers for wrap-around care. Immigration has created diversity, and there are substantial south Asian, African and Caribbean communities. But Labour can't take their votes for granted, as a study by the think tank British Future has shown.

Obelisk Rise is home to many people running small businesses, local civil servants and financial service employees; but it's not all as prosperous as it looks. A woman in her early 30s who opened her front door said she normally voted Tory, probably did last time, couldn't quite remember (too much to do) and probably would again, although she wasn't happy with things because life had been too hard in recent years. . She was a single parent, bringing up her young son on her own. She was just about keeping things together financially. The real problem, she said, was that she worked in a local supermarket – one of the big household names – and was on

very low pay. She observed that others in her situation didn't work and seemed to get everything. We had a long discussion about hopes for our children, Labour's commitments on childcare, the living wage, the energy price freeze. And she said she'd think about it. She was someone who should have been a Labour supporter, but wasn't convinced by our offer.

As columnist Mary Riddell put it at the Fabian's post-election summer conference, transactional policies only get you so far, you need a big picture. There were times that our 2015 manifesto policies spoke to the individual needs of swing voters. The commitment on GP appointments resonated especially with pensioners who had to wait two weeks and more to see their doctor. But our approach relied on voters being able to scroll through a drop down menu of policies until they found the bit that fitted them. What we didn't offer was a coherent big picture, so our opponents painted one for us, and painted us into a corner with three big scare stories to frighten people into voting Tory. Ed Miliband. The deficit: how could you trust people who crashed the economy and left a note joking about it? And the SNP: the idea that Nicola Sturgeon would tell a Labour government what to do spoke to the 'it's not our country any longer' resentments and segued into the issue of immigration and the UKIP attack that it was Labour that opened the floodgates.

There was an element of luck in all of this. No one could have foretold that Ed Miliband's photocall with a bacon sandwich would end in such disaster, or that Nicola Sturgeon would be the star of the leaders' debates. But the Tories' threefold attack showed an emotional intelligence as important as political intelligence in motivating people to vote, and which our campaign lacked. There was also a fine grain targeting that made sure these high level, trenchant, negative messages went to the right homes, the ones where people were susceptible to voting Tory, as in *Obelisk Rise*.



Meanwhile, there was a different dynamic in the new town council estates in the east of Northampton. Once the homes of aspirational incomers, these had been handed over from the new town corporation to the council. They'd been badly neglected, and needed the kind of housing investment, service decentralisation and regeneration that had been pursued by progressive local authorities elsewhere. None of these had happened in Northampton, and the community was suffering. A leafleting session at one of the local school gates was going well, until a particular group of young mothers arrived pushing their buggies. "Labour no, we're voting UKIP," they shouted gleefully. "We can't get jobs. We can't get houses. It's all the fault of the immigrants." When the group moved off through the estate, children in tow, one young woman lingered behind. "It's not all true about the immigrants," she said. "I went for a job interview, but I didn't get it because I couldn't read the (workplace) signs."

Our ground war in Northampton adapted to the different realities in local communities. In some areas we focussed on careful discussions with undecided voters. Many of these would have been Liberal Democrats in 2010, although they'd always been coy about identifying themselves. The assumption that they would come to us was not well grounded. Many said they were considering voting UKIP, which initially seemed a surprising switch for supporters of a pro-European, socially tolerant party. However, this misunderstood the nature of the Lib Dem vote, a big part of which had previously been an anti-politics protest vote. In other areas we were involved in community campaigning with local groups with some notable successes, as in stopping the closure of domestic violence refuges. Of course we had our targets to achieve in voter contact, and sometimes these seemed overwhelming. A small but dedicated team mobilised volunteers to contact many thousands of voters. What they achieved was astonishing;

without their commitment the results would have been very much worse, and they are the real heroes of the ground war. But the swing voters knew they were electing a government not just an MP, and the ground war wasn't enough.

From committed Labour voters there was strong support. Some were people working in NHS or council services directly affected by the cuts, some were anxious about the future, especially work and housing prospects for their children. Many were appalled by the impact of coalition policies on vulnerable friends and neighbours: people on disabilities hit by benefit cuts, older people stranded in hospital through lack of social care, and young families sofa surfing as their homelessness applications were refused. As the months went by the hardship got worse and the casework mounted.

Ultimately, however, there just weren't enough. The bedroom tax was an icon of Tory viciousness, but it affected a minority. And whilst there was a growing unease about coalition social policy and its impacts, these were mostly seen and felt by the people least likely to vote. But, really, we knew all along that this strategy couldn't work. Part of the lessons learned after 1983 was that Labour couldn't win elections on the basis of our core, traditional working class vote. Demographic changes meant that vote wasn't big enough then, and it certainly isn't now, especially in the South and the Midlands. This is what Giles Radice's *Southern Discomfort* publications in the early 1990s were about, and to which New Labour was finally the answer.

We can't wait that long again. We need to learn the lessons now. Along with a credible leader we need a big picture that will appeal beyond our core vote. With the collapse of the Lib Dems, the voters we need to reach are now embedded in the Tory and UKIP ranks. Our biggest challenge is projecting economic competence. We have a strong case to make here against the Tories, of a nascent recovery stifled

by a too severe austerity package, of a failed deficit reduction strategy, and now of an economy characterised by increasing inequality, especially affecting young people, and constrained by a legal commitment to permanent surplus 'in normal times'. It's a policy slated by 77 leading economists as a "risky experiment."

The case for deficit reduction is incontrovertible; Chuka Umunna dubs it "the right thing to do". But we need a strategy for the trajectory and the timescale and a political rationale or we will be identified with policies which will cause real hardship. Ultimately, however, much of the argument about the deficit is about the last Labour government, which by 2020 will be a decade ago. We need to move on to look at the challenges of the future. One of the biggest is the productivity crisis in our economy, arguably one of the biggest risks to our recovery. Of the G7 countries, only Italy's productivity rates are further below the pre-crisis levels. It's a record that went largely unchallenged during the coalition years, constraining our growth and helping lock us into a low wage culture, trapping those hard-working Northampton families on the minimum wage, and also hitting Government income. The Office for Budget Responsibility called productivity growth the "most important and uncertain judgement" in the economy. 'Fixing the Foundations' was the Conservatives' clunky, top-down response, its proposals limited by the party's wider policy constraints. A taskforce bringing together economists, entrepreneurs, business people, educationalists and trade unions to develop a strategy could be a useful measure for our new leader to define an economy that works for working people and for employers. It would also herald a more inclusive approach to policy formation.

Another looming challenge is the increase in household debt, predicted to rise by 2018 to about 170 per cent of household income, the 2008 pre-crisis level, This is expected to be

partly linked to the increase in house prices – for the lucky ones who are able to afford to buy their own home – but there's also expected to be an increase in unsecured debt by students and working people struggling to pay the bills on limited salaries. There are macro-economic consequences to this, and on the personal level there is potential misery. We need a response to these new pressures which so often fall on the aspiring, home-owning people of middle England.

We also need a taxation structure that meets new circumstances. By 2020 there are likely to be changes in public perception of taxation. Tory changes to income tax will take those on the lowest wages out of income tax, and an estimated 800,000 middle income earners out of higher 40p rate tax. Some of the changes are illusory. Cameron's blandishments that people working under 30 hours a week on the minimum wage will never again have to pay income tax ring hollow. People who work 30 hours on the minimum wage – even after it goes up in October – don't earn enough to pay income tax anyway, although they do pay national insurance. The same doesn't apply to George Osborne's new minimum wage, aka the 'national living wage'. Even if people only work 30 hours a week, they will be above the income tax threshold. More to the point, people working on the minimum wage – whether old or new – don't earn enough to bring up a family.

But whatever the Tory false promises, and whatever our need to increase government income, Labour cannot in the run up to 2020 be the party that proposes an income tax regime that would start introducing income tax for poor people again, or that would seem to cap the aspirations of teachers, nurses and police officers by putting them back in the higher rate tax band. Equally, shifting, as the Tories have done, from tax on income to tax on consumption, won't work without commensurate increases in tax credits or other income support for low income families. There are two areas

for change. One is by tackling the inequalities in the tax system which by 2020 will be more entrenched, especially with the dismantling of tax credits shown in the summer budget. A second is a targeted and hypothecated tax, such as the 1997 windfall tax to fund the most pressing areas of public service expansion, such as housing for young people.

And there's long overdue reform of national insurance. Northampton's politics are about self-reliance. People look to government for the basics, health and education services, as part of their life-style and hope for the future, but they expect to succeed through their own efforts. We lost the argument over linking the contribution people make to society and what they take out in cash or kind. Tory attacks, however unfounded, on our record of welfare spending were corrosive as Will Straw addresses in chapter three. We need to restore confidence, through greater devolution of decision-making, transparency and giving people more control over public finances. Making the national insurance card a smart card for taxpayers' government accounts could help people manage their tax, check their earned benefit entitlements and restore some sense of control by the people over their public purse.

I don't believe the Conservatives' agenda will deliver a better life for people in Northampton North any more than it will put the country on track for the brilliant future of which it is capable. I bitterly regret that it wasn't possible to get beyond the negative, but effective Tory rhetoric and persuade people to support a different course for our town and our country with a productive, high skill, outward looking, progressive economy. Economic credibility is key to getting people in Obelisk Rise to support such a programme, and delivering that is Labour's – and especially our new leader's – most important task.

## 2: THE NEED FOR STRENGTH

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Rowenna Davis

*Rowenna Davis – who inherited the narrowest of majorities in Southampton Itchen but saw the seat become a Conservative gain – argues that Labour “started with a fundamental distrust of people... [and] seemed to assume that people were either needy, greedy or irrelevant.” She calls for greater humility and trust of English people by “reconnecting our party with their lived experiences of work, family and place, and by asking them to deepen their contribution to community and country.” If we want to win, says Rowenna, we will have to appeal to people’s “sense of identity as well as their paycheck”.*

### Part one: understanding loss

One door on election day will never be forgotten. Knocking up in the blustery afternoon sunlight, a mum comes to the door. She says she’s voting Conservative, because she’s worried about the economy and can’t have Ed Miliband as prime minister. Dad pokes his head around too, says he usually votes Labour, but will probably go UKIP because he can’t trust us on immigration. Their eldest son stays upstairs. They say he’s 18, but he won’t bother voting because he thinks we’re all the same. At this point, we’re working from a list of households that are supposed to be solid Labour. That day we lost Southampton

Itchen, a seat that had supported us for over two decades, by over 2000 votes. Along with that family, one of our last red islands in the south was drowned in a sea of blue.

Sometimes heartbreak is understandable. No matter how much I love Labour and the history, values and traditions of our party, we knew we'd gone off track. No matter what the polls said, you could smell it. You could feel it at that door on election day, when that one family summed up exactly why we lost. You felt it when you dismissed a UKIP voter's concerns about levels of European immigration with promises to hire more border guards, or when you tried to deny someone's concerns about our economic record. These concerns were legitimate, but on some level, we just didn't listen to people. We didn't listen to them, because we didn't trust them. We cannot be surprised that they didn't trust us. Humility, not denial, must therefore be the beginning of renewal.

For those of you who don't know Southampton Itchen, it's a highly marginal seat in the south of England that we won by just 192 votes in 2010. It's the eastern side of the city of Southampton, a port city that has seen huge deindustrialisation over the last 20 years. The likes of Ford, Pirelli and Vosper Thorneycroft which used to provide dependable, respected work for huge numbers of people in the city, have now disappeared, to be replaced with more white-collar, unstable work. This decline, along with a rise in immigration particularly from Eastern Europe, became the dominant focus of the election. There remains however in Southampton, a real decency amongst the people and a strong sense of community. Even if they disagree with you, they'll for the most part keep the door open and talk it through, like that family on election day. If we want to win a new majority, we must desperately win back seats across the south, and Itchen is the low hanging fruit. If England is ever to see another Labour government, we will have to earn back the trust of the people here.

Much of the conventional analysis about why we lost is right. Our low credibility on the economy, poor leadership ratings, the strong message discipline in our opponents, the long-coming earthquake in Scotland and a hit from UKIP in the marginals collided to keep us out. But our failure was deeper than circumstantial. Many of the choices we made – or didn't make – about our narrative, policy, organisation and culture led to failure, and we need to take responsibility for that.

It started with a fundamental distrust of people. The leadership seemed to assume that people were either needy, greedy or irrelevant. Citizens needed to be looked after, disciplined or ignored. Above all, they were not to be trusted. There was no space for community, contribution or country. Whilst the people were shut out, we offered the worst of the market and the state. We mimicked the worst parts of capitalism by reducing citizens to consumers who were assumed to vote on individual calculations about profit maximisation such as cuts to their energy bills. But we also pursued the worst of the top-down, highly centralised state; if only the government could impose mansion taxes, bankers' bonus taxes and the 50p rate, we assumed our country would be fixed. Despite attempts to the contrary by the likes of Jon Cruddas, we lost touch with our country. We were left with a cold, utilitarian narrative that was ultimately based on adversity between the classes and a distrust of the English people.

Like so many other parliamentary candidates up and down the country, we tried to win people back. Locally we raised £150,000, recruited over 200 volunteers and flooded the constituency with over half a million pieces of direct mail in six months. We ran community campaigns, managed to save our local NHS walk-in centre and received weekly media coverage. We worked flat out for two years. Although we made mistakes and there is always more you can do, I



don't believe we could have got the extra votes we needed to win through local work.

The final news was brutal. I remember the phone call at 3am from my hotel room on 8th May. From the first word my agent spoke I knew it wasn't even worth a recount – the Conservatives won in Southampton Itchen with over 2,000 votes. We were gutted, shocked and deeply heartbroken.

In the cold light after the election, it's important to note where these votes went. We lost support in many directions in Southampton Itchen, but our biggest hemorrhage was to UKIP. Our local candidate was – by his own admission – disorganised and underfunded, but he tripled his vote from the last election, gaining 6,000 votes. We had been told by senior figures in the party that UKIP was a boon to Labour, splitting the right of the country, but not for marginal seats like ours. In these white working class communities, particularly on the coast, UKIP tore our vote apart. The safer, older council estates in areas like Weston and Thornhill that used to be solid Labour were now significantly disillusioned. No matter how hard we worked these areas, significant national differences, particularly on immigration, meant that we couldn't stop the tide. Without wishing to disrespect the excellent work of my colleagues campaigning in Southampton Test, I believe we managed to hold Itchen's neighbouring seat because the demographic simply had more liberal, middle class, student and immigrant voters to win. This loss of the white working class vote is a crisis for our party, not just because we lost, but because it raises an existential question about who we represent. We have always won by uniting working and middle class people in England. Without that first half, you have to question why we're here and where we're going to go.

## Part two: rebuilding hope

For a long time in British politics, the left has been considered the more compassionate side of the political spectrum, whilst the right has dominated strength. During the 2015 election campaign, Labour retreated further into its comfort zone, with our leaders and candidates – including myself – talking more about foodbanks and the bedroom tax than about economic opportunity and national security. On the doorstep, people would often agree with us that the NHS was going downhill and welfare reform was punishing the vulnerable, but we mistook agreement on those issues with support for our party. This was a mistake. Compassion is not enough. As political columnist from the *Times* Tim Montgomerie has argued, the party that wins is the party that is stronger and more compassionate than the others. He has called for the Conservatives to embrace the ‘Good Right’. If we want to win in 2020, we will need to build the ‘Strong Left’. This is the best way to win back UKIP voters and switch Conservatives. What follows is an outline of some basic principles that expand on what the Strong Left could mean, built on the experience and understanding of why we lost a marginal seat in the heart of England.

### 1. Trusting people

The people of England make this country what it is. They, not politicians, are the ones who build the economy, raise families and win wars. If we want to earn their trust, we have to trust them first, and they can sense it when we don’t. ‘Why won’t Labour give us an EU referendum?’ was how this was most commonly expressed on the doorstep, but it went deeper than that. We seemed to assume that people were either desperate or selfish, which meant they either needed to be given tax credits

## Never again

or taxed. That leaves a lot of people out. I remember struggling to answer a working woman who owned her own home with her husband about what we were offering them. A better approach would be to start from a position of trust in people, which remembers that people in genuine need can still contribute to their community, and that high earners can provide jobs, apprenticeships and opportunities as well as tax receipts.

### 2. Work, family, place.

Once we trust people, we can begin to build a political agenda around their lived experiences. For most people I've met, this starts with what they do, who they love and where they live. Work, family, place. We can build up from that. It's a very simple agenda that was advocated by the great American community organiser Arnie Graf who came over to help the party before the election, as well as Jon Cruddas, but was ultimately overruled by the party's high command. A simple and powerful example of how this might work in practice is the introduction of regional banks like they have in Germany, where finance is decentralised and available for local regions and sectors, rather than being heavily concentrated around finance in the capital. Such a policy would help deliver more balanced growth, and mean that people wouldn't have to move out to move up in the world; they could keep their connections with family and place because job opportunities would be more locally available.

### 3. Contribution

If we want to make this country a better place, we are going to have to involve the people who make it, particularly in terms of wealth creation. But too often in the run up to 2015, Labour talked about doing things 'for' people rather

than working 'with' them. Under Ed Miliband's leadership, people were going to be 'given' everything from home insulation to free childcare, but we never seemed to ask for anything back. As Will Straw outlines eloquently elsewhere in this pamphlet, to regain trust we must restore the principle of contribution to welfare. This principle should also be extended to public services, as Southampton has done with the residency requirement for council housing, and through introducing a proper system of vocational education so that citizens are given the skills they need to add real value to our economy.

#### 4. Devolution

If you want people to contribute, you have to make sure power is close to them. At present, almost all of the power in our country is locked in two places, the City of London and the Palace of Westminster. When power is that distant from people, it's little wonder they feel alienated or apathetic. Although Ed Miliband did pay lip service to devolution, in practice few changes were proposed. One of his most trusted advisers told me after the election that we decided to go for a mansion tax rather than the far more rational and fair system of extra council tax bands because the leadership thought that the former would bring in more money to the central Treasury rather than being handed out to local authorities. Similarly, our ultimate aims on the health service were more about central control than about community care and prevention. A far better approach would be one of subsidiarity. Again, there were suggestions about how to do this. Lord Maurice Glasman had suggested German models of regional banks, worker representation on the boards of companies, and the "Third Model" by which representation on the boards of public sector bodies would

be controlled by a third users, a third workers and a third owners to ensure a balance of interests in local services.<sup>1</sup>

## 5. Patriotism

If we want to win, we will have to appeal to people's sense of identity as well as their paycheck. The closest we came to this was Ed Miliband's appeal to 'one nation' Labour, possibly his most successful speech, which was later abandoned. Too often in the campaign we were reduced to talking about economic facts, but we forgot to tell a story about who we are and why any of this mattered. Ultimately, this is why I believe the SNP did so well in Scotland, and also why the Conservatives' last minute attack on us being propped up by Nicola Sturgeon hit us so hard. Immigration was by far the most common concern on the doorstep, and as Polly Billington argues, there must be some sense of national identity and common purpose to bind us together as a nation. This is only possible if our borders are controlled in a strong and fair manner, and the people I met on the doors did not have faith that the European free market of labour was the best way to make that happen.

I love Labour, and more than anything I want us to win. This country needs us to. To do that, we need to bring back families like the ones we met on election day, persuading Tory switchers to come back to us, rebuilding trust with UKIP voters and earning the support of new voters. We need to take back seats like Southampton Itchen and turn the desperate tide in southern England. The most effective way to do that is to build the Strong Left. This means trust-

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike principles one to three above, devolution did not come up as an issue on the doorstep, but it is a necessary part of the rest of the agenda, and when I did bring it up with people, I was always surprised by how warmly it was welcomed.

ing the English people and reconnecting our party with their lived experiences of work, family and place, and by asking them to deepen their contribution to community and country. Together we can win, not by mimicking the right, but by working with our people and our history to build our own conception of what it means to be good, to be strong, and to be English.



### 3:THE CLUE'S IN THE NAME: The party of work

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Will Straw

*Will Straw – who helped Labour increase its vote by 2,000 in Rossendale and Darwen but saw UKIP more than quadruple their support – argues that Labour’s inability to tackle its perceived weaknesses over welfare meant that it was not able to win power and scrap vile policies like the bedroom tax. He argues that “Labour was seen by too many people as the defender of the status quo, the defender of a system that they simply could not comprehend as fair.” Will says it was a mistake that Ed Miliband was so reluctant to talk about welfare. He calls for the next leader to set out welfare reforms based on Labour values around spreading power to local people, greater reciprocity, and moving scarce resources from income support to shared institutions like children’s centres.*

**O**f all the unjust and mean-spirited things that the Tories did from 2010 to 2015, the bedroom tax was perhaps the worst. Hundreds of people in Rossendale and Darwen were affected by a policy which arbitrarily charged tenants £15 per week for having an ‘extra’ bedroom – often needed for a carer, visiting child or if the partners sometimes slept apart, for example for health reasons. When we campaigned on the issue in one affected housing estate, a man in his forties who’d never voted before signed up for a postal vote because of the terrible effect it was having on his mother’s finances and health.



On my various visits to the local Citizens Advice Bureau, I would hear horror stories about the 'work capability assessment' or the sanctions regime. While aiming to push people into work they left too many people destitute and devoid of dignity. In one particularly egregious case, a man had his jobseeker's allowance removed for 13 weeks for failing to attend a training course purely because he had followed a family court order and spent the day with his children who lived with their mother.

But our failure to win Rossendale and Darwen – 70th on the target list and therefore needed to govern with an overall majority – means that the bedroom tax will continue for another five years. Those affected will pay close to £4,000 over the course of this parliament. Meanwhile, our plans to reform the sanctions regime lie on the scrap heap with every other idea in our manifesto.

It is crucial that we understand why we failed to win and are therefore unable to help improve the lives of those affected by such harsh uses of state power.

Rossendale and Darwen is a geographically odd constituency – two areas with little sense of common community divided by a windswept moor. They were bolted together in the early 1980s by officials at the Boundary Commission with little understanding of the area. For example, it is impossible to drive from one side to the other without leaving the constituency.

But Darwen and the four small towns which make up Rossendale share a number of characteristics. A generation ago, most jobs were in the textile and slipper factories with this employment supporting thriving market towns. There are now just a handful of medium-sized manufacturers left while a third of people commute to Greater Manchester with thousands more working in the bigger neighbouring towns of Blackburn, Burnley and Accrington.

Labour has tended to hold the inner-city wards, at times in competition with the Liberal Democrats, while the Tories have been more popular in the leafier rural areas and villages which take up more of the geographical space. Labour won the seat in 1992 by 120 votes which increased to over 10,000 in the 1997 landslide. Janet Anderson served as MP throughout this period until 2010 when the Tories gained a 9 per cent swing – double the national average – and racked up their own majority of 4,493.

I was selected in September 2013 and had 20 months to build a campaign and take the fight to the Tories. But while we increased our vote by 2,000 the national tide against us meant that the Tories' majority increased. The seat now requires a bigger swing to win back but will no longer deliver an overall majority because of our decimation in Scotland,

The area was hit hard by the most recent recession and whacked again by the unfairness of the spending cuts which targeted northern councils. As a result, real hourly pay fell 16 per cent over the parliament in an area already beset by low pay. Like many other areas, the use of food banks spiralled, indebtedness rose and many families struggled to make ends meet despite working every hour they could – many on zero hours contracts.

Labour focused for much of the parliament on the 'cost of living crisis,' a phrase rarely uttered outside the Westminster village. But it was other issues that came up on the doorstep. Top of the list were the NHS, immigration (discussed in detail by Polly Billington elsewhere in this pamphlet) and 'benefits'.

Despite Labour's vocal campaigning, people rarely wanted to talk about the bedroom tax unless they were directly affected. Instead, they wanted to know what Labour would do about the family down the street on benefits who'd 'never done an honest day's work in their life' or why some families jumped up the housing ladder. Others asked why their

savings meant they were not entitled to the same benefits as someone who had never bothered to put something away at the end of each month.

I remember a particularly difficult public meeting on school transport reforms proposed by the council as a result of spending cuts. One couple gave me a tough time, asking why families who already got free school meals also got free school transport when they had to struggle to find the daily fares and lunch money for their kids.

People felt particularly aggrieved when they themselves ended up on the dole after decades in work. I met many people who would ask why the job centre was more concerned about box ticking exercises and pointless training courses than helping them get back into their chosen profession. Disgusted at the failure to be treated with respect for their contribution over many years, they chose to rely on their redundancy pay or spouses' salaries instead of turning up once a fortnight to sign on.

Whatever your political perspective, Britain's welfare system is far from perfect. Taper rates and arbitrary thresholds create poverty traps while the quality of the service provided by job centres is often unacceptable. It would be virtually impossible to start with a blank sheet of paper and come up with the system that we currently have in place.

Those with actual experience of the system – claimants and staff alike – rarely seemed happy. Wherever I turned there was a palpable sense that the system was devoid of any sense of contribution. Our 'benefits' system appeared to too many to be an arbitrary transfer of cash following an undignified and intrusive application process. Neighbours looked on and could not work out why some benefited and others did not.

Yet Labour was seen by too many people as the defender of the status quo, the defender of a system that they simply could not comprehend as fair.

It might make us feel uncomfortable and it might be unfair, but the public thought that we were on the side of people who don't work. Post-election research from Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for the TUC showed that 54 per cent of people who had considered voting Labour thought that the party should be tougher on those 'abusing the welfare system'.

Ed Miliband famously forgot to mention the deficit in his 2014 conference speech. He didn't even plan to talk about the welfare system.

During his entire time as Labour leader, Ed Miliband made only one major speech on the topic, in June 2013. The speech was well-meaning and sought to explain why the rising social security bill was down to a lack of decent jobs, low pay and insufficient house building. But it fell on deaf ears because it failed to address the questions that most people were themselves asking and therefore reinforced their negative perception of Labour.

Instead of using wonky language, Ed Miliband should have trimmed the near 5,000 words and focused instead on one of his phrases which actually resonated with voters and showed that we understood their concerns:

*"Labour – the party of work – the clue is in the name ... I want to teach my kids that it is wrong to be idle on benefits, when you can work."*

Instead of one mid-term speech, he should have made it the centrepiece of his entire campaign, returning to the theme and its consistency with our founding principles again and again.

It is, of course, true that TV programmes like *Benefits Street* provided a skewed view of life on social security in Britain. The right wing press stoked the idea that the rising welfare budget was due solely to 'workshy scroungers' when state

pensions and tax credits for working people make up the largest components.

Meanwhile, the Tories and their cheerleaders sought to make social security a 'wedge issue' provoking Labour to get on the wrong side of the electorate – never more so than through the exploitation of the 'welfare lifestyle' of killer Mike Philpott by George Osborne during the 2013 local elections.

But Labour walked into their trap by failing to understand that Osborne was tapping into a widely held sentiment rather than shaping public opinion. Post-election polls in 2010 showed that welfare was one of the three biggest weaknesses for Labour after immigration and our economic record. So why did it take three years for Ed Miliband to make his big speech and why was there then near silence for the next two? Why was there no wider programme designed to convince people that the whole party was really serious about welfare reform?

Our failure to understand voters' concerns or even sound as though we were listening meant that no one was paying attention when we pointed out the Dickensian fallacies behind Iain Duncan Smith's reforms. Without credibility on the issue, we were talking solely to our own supporters when we explained that the sanctions' regime was pushing people into destitution, that the ATOS work capability assessment was removing dignity from disabled people, and that the bedroom tax was profoundly unfair.

So what should we have done differently and what should Labour do now?

Many of the answers lie in the watershed *Condition of Britain* report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (disclaimer: although I work at IPPR, I had nothing to do with this project). It argues that the well-intentioned objective of tackling income inequality through cash transfers has narrowed public policy and come to regard real people and

their families as little but numbers on a spreadsheet – removing their ability to make the best for themselves. The report documents a shift since the 1970s from a welfare system based on contribution to one based on means testing with a consequent drop in public support and therefore legitimacy.

At its heart the report sets out three principles of reform: spreading power and responsibility away from Whitehall to local people; encouraging a climate of contribution and reciprocity by rewarding those who have paid in more; and moving scarce taxpayer resources from income support to shared institutions: children's centres instead of child benefit, new homes instead of housing benefit, guaranteed jobs instead of jobseeker's allowance.

But Ed Miliband failed to take forward the ideas, leaving it to other parties to pick them up. In frustration, Jon Cruddas lamented after the election that IPPR "spent two years on a fantastic rethink around modern social policy when there is no money around. Long-term preventative work right from early years, mental health, prison reform, job guarantees, adult social care, based again around radical public service reform and devolution of services. Despite all the work, in the end we had nothing to say on that."

This cannot continue. Despite their tough rhetoric and cruel policies, the Department for Work and Pensions is failing. But Labour must have its own clear and unambiguous account of what a modern social security system is for, who deserves to get it and why. We could even borrow an aphorism from Tony Blair and talk about being "tough on inactivity and tough on the causes of inactivity."

There can be no justification for people who are abusing the system – even if it is true that they make up a tiny fraction of the overall numbers. But neither should we allow our disgust with the current system to mean that we regard someone being on social security as a win.

Only a third of those with disabilities and fewer people with a mental health condition are actually in work. But I met very few disabled people in Rossendale and Darwen who have absolutely no capacity or interest in working. The problem is that the system doesn't seek to support them.

I regularly visited charities – like Rubicon and the Stubblelee Community Greenhouses – which sought to give volunteering opportunities to people with serious medical conditions. These people and their carers could not understand why this activity wasn't recognised as a route back to work. Indeed, these charities often found that their public funding was under threat – undermining the work that they were doing in the community.

Over one third of people who have been ruled 'fit to work' by the Work Capability Assessment won their appeals. Yet little has been done to bring in a dignified assessment of someone's capabilities and then help them find work – even if just a few hours a week.

Neither Ed Miliband's single welfare reform speech nor (astonishingly) the party's 2015 manifesto contained the phrase 'full employment' – a concept that had, in previous elections, been a central plank of Labour's mission. Without this guiding principle, how could members of the public be convinced of our seriousness to eliminate idleness which was, after all, one of Beveridge's five giant evils.

The Labour Party's primary role is to win power. Over a century it has used that power to advance the rights of working people, to create lasting institutions like the NHS, comprehensive schools and the state pension, and to encourage our country to be more at ease with itself and accept people of different races, sexual orientation and religion.

Without power we are nothing but a campaigning organisation howling with righteous indignation but neutered and unable to change anything for the better.

As we have just found out for the second time in a row, winning power in a democracy is challenging. If we want to win again, we must start by listening to the public on the issues that matter to them. When they tell us that Britain's social security system is a problem, they mean it. They are not just responding to scare stories in the right-wing media and we are not pandering to the right by listening to their concerns so long as our solutions are based on our values. But when we disregard the question, we cannot expect people to listen to any of our answers.

In this election the public largely chose to ignore us. Hundreds of people in Rossendale and Darwen, and millions more across the country, will continue to live without hope and dignity because of our failure. We certainly have our own work to do.





## 4: THE POLITICS OF UNCERTAINTY AND THE PERIPHERY

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Luke Pollard

*Luke Pollard – who increased Labour’s vote by nearly 4,000 in Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport – argues that Labour failed to follow through on its ‘one nation’ mantra. With the courage to argue for investment-led growth, this could have been effective in winning over voters in the south west. He writes that, “in an ever more connected world, it is not uncommon to feel ever more alone and isolated.” He argues for policies that are built from “communities upwards, not Westminster down” but cautions that this must be done authentically: “Re-engagement with communities who are falling away from us takes energy, grassroots activism and time listening, not triangulation, tokenism and Toryism”.*

There is a dangerous fallacy commonly held by many in Westminster that the south west of England is a straightforward fight between the Lib Dems and the Tories. Thanks to the ascendancy of UKIP you can now throw in a bit of purple to the fight but, apparently, it’s not one where Labour is involved. Not only is talk like this incorrect but it represents a perilously blinkered world view that could all but rule out a future Labour government. Few doubt that to win in 2020 Labour has to win in the south – but integral and contingent is the need to win in the south west too.

The psephological challenge for Labour in the south west is that the constituencies where we are in contention are

limited and they are geographically spread island battles surrounded by seas of blue. In 1997 Devon and Cornwall returned four Labour MPs. By 2010 we were reduced to two and Ben Bradshaw's 'Fortress Exeter' now stands as the last bastion of parliamentary socialism west of Bristol, with Labour greatly depleted in local government too.

With the near inevitability of English Votes for English Laws, the political importance of winning in cities like Plymouth should be apparent. Labour must have sufficient ambition to see that we need a determined fight across the entire nation, especially in southern England.

As a Plymouth lad I have become all too familiar with having to explain to the political classes that Plymouth is not a Liberal Democrat seat, and neither is it close to Portsmouth. Plymouth is a straight Labour-Tory fight. Its two parliamentary seats are marginals: just 523 votes won a second term for the Tory MP in Plymouth Sutton and Devonport where I was Labour's candidate. Plymouth Moor View now has a Tory MP by just 1,024 votes defeating Labour's excellent sitting MP. The margins of defeat in Plymouth were not huge, but they were big enough. Labour HQ resourced the seats well with organisers and leaflets, plenty of leaflets, but it wasn't more paper we needed, it was better policies and a better politics.

Plymouth, and places like it, is where Labour should focus relentlessly in the coming years because we represent all the constituent parts of Labour's electoral problem in the south: a growing UKIP presence in traditional Labour voting communities; a swing towards the Greens not only from students but Labour's more liberally minded vote; and plenty of floating voters who chose blue over red, again, unconvinced by our overall economic narrative.

## Politics of uncertainty

In an ever more connected world it is not uncommon to feel ever more alone and isolated. The old certainties of left and right are fading. A full time job no longer means you can afford to pay the bills or pay for childcare. Precariousness and change are now commonplace in Plymouth. Devonport Dockyard and the Naval Base now employ a fraction of its postwar peak. Securing a dockyard apprenticeship no longer means a good job for life and with further defence cuts hanging over the city, more job losses will surely follow.

For many the promise of a decent home of your own is out of reach too. 40 per cent of people in Plymouth Sutton and Devonport rent in the private sector – higher than in most areas outside London. Over-crowded, poor quality housing remains commonplace. The choice of affording the rent or saving for a deposit is one faced by thousands. By the time of the next general election, 50 per cent of people will be renting in the private sector in Plymouth. Good news for landlords, whom we must be careful not to alienate, but not always positive for renters. Uncertainties in pay and the rise of zero hour contracts further compound a city suffering from the legacy of low pay and under-investment.

In Plymouth, Labour was squeezed to the left by the Greens and to the right by the Tories. UKIP's populist positioning meant they ate into our vote on both the left on immigration and the right on issues like the economy. Whereas many UKIP voters who switched from the Tories went back home in May, those more recent switchers from Labour did not and our data collection wasn't sophisticated enough to spot this in time.

In the Fabian Society's excellent report *Revolt on the Left*, Plymouth was identified as one of the places Labour was

susceptible to a UKIP surge. The debate following this report spoke to a belief that UKIP would win MPs on the back of their newly found popularity. Locally, we knew Labour voters moving to UKIP would help the Tories win instead. The report assessed the reasons behind UKIP's popularity in former Labour strongholds: Labour's disconnect with communities, distrust in politicians and a politics that was leaving people behind. It is a report well worth rediscovering.

For me and my team, the findings chimed with what many grassroots activists had been saying for some time: that UKIP was a threat to Labour's core vote and our national strategy both had to engage and persuade switchers but also had to reconnect with and reassure our traditional communities. This was a lesson learned too late, if at all, by the leadership. All too frequently instead of seeking to understand why we were losing lifelong Labour voters to UKIP and address that issue, the party nationally adopted a knee-jerk approach and hid a reasonableness and balance on policies like immigration behind awkward PR tricks like the infamous controls on immigration mug. It felt like too little, too late and lacked the authenticity our voters were rightly demanding. Re-engagement with communities who are falling away from us takes time, energy, grassroots activism and listening, not triangulation, tokenism and Toryism.

Labour gambled that in exposing the uncertainty in people's lives and the fragility of the recovery, voters would believe Ed Miliband and Ed Balls' prescriptions would be better for their families than those offered by David Cameron and George Osborne. It might have been vacuous and ill-defined but the Tory's 'Long Term Economic Plan' trumped our 'Better Plan'. The absence of a consistent economic narrative and an over-belief that a Labour lead on the NHS would trump a larger lead for the Tories on the economy hit our vote hard in marginals. In times of uncertainty, people look

for hope but they also look to minimise their risk. When it came to the crunch it was a case of better the devil you know with Cameron than the uncertainty of change with Miliband.

### The politics of the periphery

Governments of all colours have failed the south west. Much of the politics of the west country is defined by strength in standing up for our region, not against a central government opposed to us, but one that barely recognises our existence, the validity of our troubles and the importance of addressing them.

The south west had nine target constituencies on Labour's 106 target list and Plymouth Sutton and Devonport was a must win seat near the top. Despite this I lost count of the times I was told by advisers to shadow ministers that Plymouth was "too far away" to visit. It is only *too far away* if there's a narrow geographical constraint on your thinking or a self-defeating requirement for MPs to be back in parliament for the evening vote. Both paths only lead to defeat. Many Labour figures did make the visit and their support meant a lot to me and my volunteers.

When the storms of 2014 washed away the railway line at Dawlish and with it our sole train line to the rest of the country, the south west's sense of isolation came to the fore. David Cameron promised that money was no object in repairing the line, but the money for future resilience was not forthcoming. For three months Plymouth was cut off, paying a high economic price for being the only major British city served by only a single train line. Alternative routes for our precarious train line have been kicked into the long-grass. For a region with a strongly held belief that we don't get our fair share from London, we became even more convinced that we

were being failed again by government but importantly by an opposition unwilling to capitalise on this weakness and propose an alternative.

This is where Labour's 'one nation' approach should have come to the fore by leading calls for the south west to have its railway line upgraded as part of Labour's bold infrastructure plan. A succession of shadow transport secretaries lent their support to our efforts to get a better railway but were unable to promise any money. Labour's obsession with only promising costed policies all but ruled out the type of grand investment the south west desperately needs.

The Tories seemed to have no such problems with a veritable spending glut around the region's marginal seats. They had embraced pork barrel politics and the voters liked it: the PM promised a new stadium for Cornwall on one trip, new trains on another. In contrast Labour announced that a vital road upgrade in the south west would be paused to pay for a freeze in rail fares. Few voters in Plymouth could point to where the A358 is, but it didn't matter. It allowed the Tories to contrast their investment in the wider south west with Labour cuts – the opposite of the narrative Labour should have been forwarding.

There is little doubt that the Tories were held to a different standard by the media because they were seen to have fiscal credibility. Any unfunded spending commitments by Labour would have further damaged our credibility. It was Labour's failure to grasp the nettle of fiscal credibility in 2010 that cost us the opportunity to match the Tories' uncosted spending spree in 2015.

Labour's approach was too tied to the Tory narrative of Labour's over-spending. Our messages were confused and the well-intentioned but limiting costing of all our policies left creative solutions and desperately needed infrastructure investment in the too difficult box. Bean counting did not

create a grand vision that inspired voters. A less cautious, investment-led approach to growth could have addressed this while still allowing for proper costings.

Labour announced our support for infrastructure spending but could rarely point to examples outside of London or the north to hammer this point home. That's because there weren't enough of these projects in the regions. HS2 and Crossrail are both worthy ventures but the absence of rail schemes Labour backed elsewhere was stark.

This vacuum was ruthlessly exploited by Tory strategists who created a sense that the Tories better understood the south west and were prepared to put their money where their mouth was. Perception is reality and the Tories won the politics of the periphery comprehensively in the south west when they should not have.

Labour must learn from these episodes, not by embracing unfunded spending commitments, but by being serious about our economic mission – and not just where Labour seats are plentiful and the lay of the land familiar, but where it is not and where we have to win. Would a commitment to a new train line have won the election for Labour in Plymouth? Probably not, but it would have helped. When the Tory majorities in Plymouth were so slight, doing the right thing frequently delivers electoral upsides.

Perceptions matter and none more than the Conservatives' fabricated risk posed by the SNP. The concerns raised by voters about the SNP were a timely proxy for fear and worry in an uncertain world. You would be hard pushed to find a marginal seat further away from Scotland than the one I stood in, but perhaps that was precisely the point. Labour's decision to move 'Plymouth's submarines' to Scotland in the dying days of the Brown government acted as an all too recent reminder that Scotland was and remains a direct



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threat to our city's economic fortunes – something the Tories exploited ruthlessly.

The potent cocktail of the nationalist threat, perceived weakness from Labour's top team and the lack of a coherent economic narrative combined to create an uncertainty about what a vote for Labour would actually deliver.

## Winning back the south west

The grievances and isolation of the west country are not paranoia – we *are* being ignored by government. Labour must first recognise that and secondly act upon it. Our next manifesto must be unapologetic about embracing regionalism, investment-led growth and devolution of powers to cities and regions. For the south west Labour needs to embrace the importance of investment in transport, housing and defence: not only a different tone but different policies.

Winning back trust amongst Plymouth's traditional Labour voters who voted UKIP in May is a task that will not be successful if we don't overhaul our understanding of why people deserted us. That starts with genuine conversation where Labour does more listening than talking. Restoring faith in Labour will take time and our technical coding of voters is patently insufficient to take voters on that required journey. To win we have got to win back voters on the left as well as the right. We will win back their trust by accepting the validity of their vote in 2015, listening and understanding to their concerns and then jointly formulating responses that will address those issues.

The Labour party must truly understand the needs, requirements and opportunities outside London and the Labour-held seats of the midlands and the north. From Plymouth in the south west to Thurrock in the south east we need a new strategy for all of the south. Token efforts and awkward

attempts to 'translate' Labour policies to make them fit must end. Our policies need to be built from communities upwards, not Westminster down. Importantly, resources must be allocated to deliver these policies.

As a necessary precondition our new leadership team must take the time to truly listen to and visit the communities we need to win and that includes Plymouth. Between the leadership election of September 2010 to polling day in May 2015 the leader of the Labour party visited Plymouth precisely once. A single visit is not enough. Our next leader must do better.

Marginal seats come in all shapes and sizes, some near to London, some further away. Whether we call our approach 'one nation' or some other formulation, we have to be a truly national party and that includes valuing the south west as much as any other region. Without Plymouth returning two Labour MPs instead of two Tory MPs in 2020, the next leader of the Labour party would have to content themselves with being leader of the opposition and that alone. With Plymouth, and cities like Plymouth, turning red they could be prime minister.



## 5: WINNING PUBLIC TRUST ON PUBLIC SERVICES

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Jessica Asato

*Jessica Asato – standing in Norwich North – examines why Labour was not trusted to run public services and why our arguments for more resources, for the NHS in particular, fell on deaf ears. She argues that voters simply did not believe that we would have been able to hire 20,000 new nurses. Instead of being devised and cascaded nationally, she argues that new policies – for example on coastal unemployment or innovative older people’s care – should be developed locally and used to “demonstrate we have listened and learned”. In order to show Labour is serious about unnecessary waste, she calls for public servants to be rewarded for developing good ideas that cut costs without affecting frontline services.*

**I**t has become a cliché to say that all people want from public services is a good local school for their children, a GP who will see them when they need to, and their bins collected on time. But just because something is tired, it doesn’t mean it is wrong. From the hundreds of hours spent listening to what local residents in Norwich North had to say about their local services, the desire for proximity, timeliness and effectiveness was what came across to me most. Yes, there was concern about who provided and delivered services, though mainly when services were going wrong or there was a lack of accountability. Mostly, people wanted to know that the tax they were paying was being well-used and that there would be high-quality,

competently administered, personalised and local services there when they were needed.

Norwich North was the seat which should have given Labour a majority of one. Instead the Tories held it with an increased majority and share of the vote. It has been a swing seat since 1983, having previously been Labour since the 1950s and was one of the devastating near misses in 1992. In the East of England Labour gained only two MPs, both from Liberal Democrat incumbents, leaving us with only four MPs in the whole of the region.

Almost all of the seat is suburban, 45 per cent in the boundaries of the city of Norwich, and the rest in Broadland – a district council run by the Conservatives and now without a single Labour representative. Demographically, the seat has one of the highest proportions of older people in the country but also many new families in the growing private estates on the edges of the constituency. Norwich Union (now Aviva) used to provide a decent job for life for white collar workers but is now a much slimmer operation with frequent redundancy rounds. The many factories (Start-Rite and Bally shoemakers, Rowntree-Mackintosh sweets) which provided blue-collar jobs have all closed. Retail is now one of the biggest employers in the city, while jobs in the many business parks and international airport are growth areas.

Like all Labour candidates, I care passionately about our public services and was keen to find out what the local community wanted to protect and change. I was left with the inescapable impression that most people do not want to have to work out which service will be best for them, they do not really want to spend time on elected committees helping to shape services, and feel that public money was wasted under the Labour government.

Where local services were threatened – the potential closure of a local walk-in centre or the local school being forced to become an academy – there was increased involvement. But even then, many voters were left unmoved or almost resigned to the decline or sell off of public assets like Royal Mail. As someone who strongly believes that users of public services should be engaged and involved in their provision, I found my conversations with voters quite challenging. Among former Labour voters, I found the antipathy quite marked. On the one hand there was real anger at how public services were being treated by the government; on the other a sense it would not make any difference whether Labour or Tory won.

Despite record levels of investment in our schools, hospitals, the birth of sure start, the renaissance of public spaces like leisure centres, parks and playgrounds, Labour in government was seen as a destroyer of services, rather than a saviour. Indeed many opinion polls blamed Labour for government cuts more than the government itself, which boggles my brain until you realise how effectively the Tories laid the ‘global financial crisis’ at our door. There are many reasons why we never got credit for our time in government – viewing public servants as detractors rather than ambassadors for Labour’s public service reform was one of them. But the constant apologies and ‘burying’ of our record in government by Ed Miliband contributed to it too.

So the response I had quite often on the doorstep was, ‘if we can’t trust you on immigration, the economy, expenses, why should we believe your record on the rest?’ Our failure both in government and subsequently to lay claim to our greatest hits has left our public service cupboard empty. Labour is neither trusted to run services efficiently or to reform them effectively where needed. Arguments for

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increased funding, now desperately needed, fall on deaf ears because we 'wasted' taxpayers' money last time.

### Moving our campaigning forward

It feels a tough task at the moment for Labour to build a mantle of competence, effective delivery of public services and thrift, but we have to do so if people are to give us their support in 2020.

It has to start with how we campaign. I lost count of the number of new campaigns we rolled out in the election. Whether it was the anti-privatisation bill, the 48 hour GP guarantee, or the 20,000 extra nurses, there was a petition and model press release to go with it. But the problem with all of these campaigns was that we took a national message and assumed it would work in Norwich North – telling people we were listening to them, when in fact we had no idea whether the 48 hour GP guarantee was a genuine response to conversations in our region with voters or the result of a focus group.

As it turned out, there was real concern about GP access, though only in some areas of the constituency. Some GPs were revered far more than politicians and so voters were not going to sign a petition which did not accord with their local experience. Mostly though, voters greeted us with incredulity: 'You can't guarantee I will get to see my GP in 48 hours!' or '20,000 nurses – you'll only get that many if they're all immigrants. My daughter won't get a look in.'

When we are not trusted to organise a happy gathering in a brewery, we need to change the way we campaign. That means truly localised community campaigns or regional initiatives, backed up by the national party. People want to know exactly how your policy will affect them in their area. I kept being asked – how many nurses will Norwich get? How

will you provide the extra capacity in our GP's surgery to get 48 hour appointments because they are already stretched?

Policy in the party felt like it was being made on the hoof for a few *Guardian* headlines and a think tank speech in Westminster, rather than strategically thinking about how it would convince voters in our marginals. Instead we should road-test our policy by running it first in marginal seats, and then launch it after extensive battleground research. We must not treat voters like idiots either. If we cannot answer reasonable questions such as how we are going to recruit 20,000 nurses when we are already in a recruitment crisis, we are only further demonstrating our incompetence. Better not to have a policy than one which is as porous as a string bag.

Furthermore, we cannot just campaign against cuts, we must provide an alternative. It is quite easy to see how the next five years will become one long campaign to protect everything we hold dear. Clearly, some of those campaigns will be successful and we ought to be manning the barricades if there is a realistic chance of changing the government's mind. But shouting loudly and going on marches never won us power. If the government shuts a service or sells it off, we need to be clear with people about whether we will reinstate it, or let it go. People understand that you cannot get everything back once it has gone, but they hate prevarication.

Given that the party quite rightly has a national policy-making process, it is not always easy to balance the need to respond to day-to-day political developments, strategic policy for key seats and the final manifesto. But instead of coming up with a policy nationally and rolling it out to all seats, why not come up with policy locally – for example on ports, or coastal unemployment, or innovative older people's care – and use it to demonstrate we have



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listened and learned? Policy is only useful if it helps us to win an election. I think most of the manifesto was decent progressive policy, what a crying shame it never got put into practice.

## More effective, timely and local public services

It would be counter-productive to go back to a situation as in the later stages of the Labour government where we are arguing about 'reform' of public services versus 'protection' of public services. We need to work from the public's perspective and set ourselves some tests before we agree to accept the status quo. Here are a few ideas which might help to both answer some of the problems citizens have with services while ensuring we are always on the side of continual improvement when it is needed.

### 'Computer says no'

The most frustrating part of interacting with public services is when the system is too inflexible to cope with the human being it is meant to be helping. The government has tried to introduce a 10 minute grace period for parking fines, for example, but it is clear that there are still too many instances when law-abiding people fall foul. Issuing discretionary 'credits' to public servants who are public-facing could help to make the system work better for people. The TV programme 'Little Britain' made it a national joke, but it is so demoralising and dehumanising when the 'computer says no'. By giving public servants the ability to find a solution to a situation rather than relying simply on the rules could introduce a sense of humanity to what is after all paid for by the public. Ensuring a manager reviews each time the discretion is used could help to guard against fraud, but

also highlight where the system might need to be fundamentally changed.

### 'Fighting against the system'

Too many people I met said they had to fight public services just to get what ought to have been theirs by right. Whether it was the mum of an autistic child trying to get an answer on whether they had a place in school, or the dad of a baby who had a severe food allergy trying to get a referral to a specialist clinic, many people were left angry by how the system felt almost designed not to help them, even when they had a clear-cut need. When resources are finite, there will always be rationing and the system needs to prevent misuse, but at the moment too many services seem geared up to stop people accessing them, rather than ensuring they get the help they need. Understanding this and working to develop new ways of making services responsive to people should be Labour's mission. Our slogan should be 'getting you what is yours by right'.

### Embracing technology (but keeping services offline too)

The UK government seems incapable of delivering complex IT projects, but our public services need to move with technology or will cease to be relevant to people. It is amazing how many of the same pieces of paper you still need to send to different government agencies – why can it not all be stored in one place on a virtual government cloud? It would save so much time, applicants' money and presumably prevent agencies losing important information. If we need to invest to save, we should be clear what the savings are and how we would keep the project on track. We should be up front with the public that these areas need public expendi-

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ture and why some things cost so much – paying people properly for example rather than outsourcing work abroad.

On the other hand, some services are only offered online in a cost-cutting exercise which results in absurdity. For example, Defra's Rural Payments Agency only allowed farmers to apply for common agricultural payments online (now quashed). Given that the government abandoned the roll-out of super-fast broadband to all areas of the country, it left many farmers incapable of applying for the support they needed precisely because of their remote location. There are many older people, or people with learning support needs who prefer to interact with public services in person or on paper. If we are to have choice in public services, should we not give people a choice of doing it in the way with which they are happiest?

## Keeping it local

Ensuring public services are high quality often means merging resources – specialist hospitals are a good example. By having specialist cardiac or cancer units, you can increase patient survival rates impressively. But this often acts against what people locally might want – to keep their A&E, maternity unit and so forth. At the moment people are not really given an option – if the government wants to close something, there's a consultation and unless there is a serious legal challenge like in Lewisham, it tends to close. Why not offer people another option which would be to raise a local precept to cover the cost of retaining a service for a certain period? Many people I spoke to said they would be willing to pay extra locally for a service they truly valued. If a local community felt they could take on the running of a service, why not give them the opportunity to do so?

### Tackling waste

The people who raised the issue of wastefulness in public services most with me were public servants. From nurses, to teachers, to jobcentre staff, to refuse collectors, everyone had a good idea of how they could save the public money (and their own taxes). So why do we not reward public servants who come up with a good idea to cut costs without cutting the frontline service? Labour must be and be seen to be as dedicated to reducing waste in the public sector and making every penny go further. Indeed if we are going to have any 'reforming zeal' in public services, it should be on the basis of spending every penny of taxpayers' money in the most effective way. That means being clear with the public where efficiencies have already been found and celebrating it with our local councils, many of whom have been at the frontline of squeezing every last penny from their ever-decreasing budgets.

### Invest to save

Many of our policies focused on using investment to save taxpayers' money in the long-term. It makes an awful lot of sense, for example, to invest in children's mental health services to ensure those problems do not develop into severe long-term problems. This argument rests at the heart of so many of our public policy problems – early years, youth offending, vulnerable mothers and so on. Unfortunately, we never seemed to really have the confidence the Treasury would accept our arguments when it came to the ding-dong of departmental spending reviews. So while the policy was there, the 'getting more bang for your buck' argument was not. We should dedicate much of the next five years to working with research organisations to calculate what we could save in the long-term if we invested early, but crucially, we

should say what we would then do with that money. Will it be cut from the budget, or reallocated, or given back to taxpayers perhaps? It is how we will create a more socially just and equal society, so let's work out how to do it properly.

Our position on public services is not what will win us the next general election, though the Tories' record on dismantling them may help. But between now and then, our approach to public services will demonstrate whether we have understood what the public were trying to tell us at the election: that they did not trust us to run public services competently, that they thought we wasted their money, and that they thought we were going to do that all over again. By focusing our thinking on how we can address those essential fears about a future Labour government, we can put in place one of the many blocks we need to be given a chance to govern again.

## 6: IT'S THE COMMUNITY, STUPID

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Polly Billington

*Polly Billington – who was thwarted in Labour’s second target seat of Thurrock by UKIP’s vote rising from 3,390 to 15,718 – argues that although our immigration policy was an improvement it only addressed economic concerns and was not prepared to confront cultural issues. She writes that “we have been frightened to have the conversations, so the conversations have gone on without us.” Instead, Polly calls for Labour to “bring people together on a local level to forge a shared identity based on civic pride and shared values.” She also argues that Labour got it badly wrong and lost trust in “denying people a say on our membership of the EU” and sets out a number of lessons for the referendum campaign ahead.*

When we examine the reasons why we lost in communities like mine, some people might be puzzled since so many of our policies look designed with Thurrock in mind. Tackling low pay, cracking down on zero-hours contracts, a jobs guarantee for young people facing long-term unemployment. The apprenticeships, the childcare, the NHS pledges, the energy bill freeze. All would have made some sort of difference to our ‘squeezed middle’ and the struggling families who have got caught in a low pay, low skill job trap.

But the reality is, it did not matter how many things we said we would do, and how positively they were received in the abstract, people did not believe we would be able to

do the things we promised. Because we cannot deal with the dog mess.

Thurrock lies immediately to the east of London, a community of small towns and villages, expanded by post-war council estates. Container ports and docks, plus a huge shopping centre, Lakeside, make logistics and retail our core industries. It's also home to many London commuters as new homes spring up that cater for ambitious young families. Many of those families have moved from elsewhere – including Eastern Europe and West Africa – mostly via London as the capital's housing market overheats.

As part of our regular listening exercises in Thurrock, we launched a door to door residents' survey on what matters to people. This was designed not to tick boxes but to open up a conversation, a device to get people talking, and a way for us to be able to gauge what sort of immediate problems we might be able to help with.

It will come as no surprise to anyone who has conducted such surveys that the two most common responses were dog mess and immigration.

Now it is true to say that some residents would never be happy unless we had a super-surveillance state to crack down on errant dog owners. And others would never be happy unless we shut the borders completely. But just as some owners and their pets make life a misery for others regardless of how canny the council gets, likewise we could not halt the winds of globalisation which have blown harshly through this community. If you cannot deal with these two ends of the public policy spectrum, it is much harder to persuade people you can do anything on housing, zero-hour contracts or the minimum wage. All these policies that could have changed people's lives, and were met with approval in theory, were conscribed to the no-man's land of broken promises.

A lot of this scepticism about delivery would be significantly improved by regaining economic credibility. But as the extremities of global economic forces hit some communities harshly, and force a decline in social solidarity, economic credibility will be harder to win and won't take us all the way. It's the community, stupid.

This is particularly true of previously Labour voters who went to UKIP in May. We had little to offer them. As a result, in many parts of England but particularly the south, the Tories were able to increase their majorities in key marginals as UKIP wooed away voters whom we had, over many years, come to consider 'ours'.

They are not any more, without some serious work to rebuild our relationships and understand people's fundamental anxiety about loss of control and power.

We must start by acknowledging a mistake. We got it wrong by not offering a referendum on our membership of the European Union. People should be allowed to have their say on such an important question. It might not be the most pressing issue for voters, and committing to a referendum would not have shot UKIP's fox. But we lost trust by pursuing an out of touch 'we know best' approach.

Labour must have something to say about our relationship with the EU. During the referendum campaign to come, Labour cannot just be pro-European for the sake of it, we need to have a distinctive voice. Labour should be making the case for change to improve the EU for working people. And we should be clear-eyed with the public about what the implications are when considering change. We should explain what shutting the borders would actually mean, the cost not only in jobs but also in freedoms, in protections, in connections, in peace and in security.

We should also be honest in a way we have yet to achieve, about the pros and cons of free movement, so that people



can see we get it. We need to understand the perspective of someone running their own business who hires from abroad as soon as they expand, as well as that of the young person struggling to get a job, competing with others from around the world for the chance to make sandwiches or sell t-shirts.

And we also need to outline what the advantages and disadvantages might be of some sort of middle way. What are the economic and social implications for our country if we moved to 'fair movement' rather than 'free movement', with EU immigration to meet skills shortages?

This might go down well initially, since the anxiety of many I spoke to in Thurrock was the lack of availability of jobs for local young people, and being undercut by unscrupulous employers flouting our rules. 'Free movement' looks like a free for all to many. They may also conclude that this would result in a slowing down of the rapid cultural change we have experienced here over the last 15 years or so. Or after discussion, they may be swayed by the arguments of openness and opportunity cutting both ways.

The fact is we have been frightened to have the conversations, so the conversations have gone on without us. If we re-enter those conversations without opening them up, we will end up sounding like we are defending the status quo. And the status quo is leaving far too many working people behind for us to think it is our preferred option.

As a result of that grown-up, open discussion, acknowledging anxieties of cultural change as well as economic squeeze, we may be able to suggest some practical ways forward. You never know, people might listen. We could support the right to work, but it should be linked to the principle of contributory welfare that gave the original concept such wide support across the country after the second world war. We could propose a social insurance card for EU citizens who move abroad, putting a stop to recruiters only hiring

from abroad and redirecting EU funds to areas where public services are strained due to high levels of immigration.

There are some real risks for Labour right now, in responding to a devastating electoral result by conceding important ground as a sign we have 'listened'. One such risk is that the Labour party is tempted to match the Tory policy of restricting in-work benefits to those coming from the EU. We should oppose creating a two-tier labour market based on nationality. It will not tackle low pay but it could encourage employers to hire those who are not entitled to in-work benefits, as they will dip in and out of work more easily. It is a straightforward race to the bottom: a party that believes in decent pay and a level playing field among workers should oppose it.

Being straight with people is the least we can do. It will be much harder to make the case for staying in the EU to a large proportion of our voters unless we make our own case for change within Europe and that will start with admitting the limits of what is possible. The alternative to this is they are duped by politicians, like those in UKIP and the extremes of the Conservative party who weave a myth of independence that would be costly for all.

And in order to do this we need to address immigration. Many will say it felt as though we 'addressed' little else. But the reality is whatever we said did not pass the smell test of leadership, competence or sincerity based on people's experience of those in power.

Our pledges sound like they meet people's demands, but the reality is unlikely to match people's experience. We said we would spend more and make our borders stronger. People I spoke to would nod and agree. We might even have been able to find a measure to prove in government that we had achieved our pledge. But while people are still suspicious of the family who has moved in next door, a

specific pledge of money to hire a specific number of staff to 'strengthen' our borders goes nowhere near addressing the anxiety, and arguably plays into the growing belief that we cannot do anything about it. In fact, our practical and specific proposal on this might even help to fuel cynicism about the effectiveness of immigration policy – just as the Tories disastrous cap did.

Instead, we could be really bold and honest and say the following:

“We don't control immigration within the EU (except when we catch criminals) and we have an uphill struggle managing illegal immigration from beyond because we are a popular destination. We are popular because we speak English, we have the rule of law and there are jobs for those who want to work hard. As conflicts make people more desperate and the world becomes easier to travel around, those with money, wit and fitness will want to make a go of it here. The best we can do is manage this situation and make the most of it for our nation which has always been pretty good at giving people a fair crack of the whip. We also need skilled people from across the world for our economy to grow, and some of them do start their lives here working in *Pret a Manger* or driving cabs. That is the opportunity we offer, and we want that for all.”

This will mean resisting crazy policies such as caps on the number of immigrants. It is the NHS, our tech sector and construction industry that would really lose out from shutting the borders or withdrawing from the EU. The harsh reality would focus the minds not just of business, but anyone who wants an affordable home or free healthcare.

It is an important step forward over the last five years that Labour woke up to reality and began talking about immigration. But we only dealt with the economic part that we were less squeamish about.

We need to push further out of our comfort zone and talk about the cultural impact of immigration and the way some communities have changed rapidly over the past few decades.

For people coming to the UK it is about hope and destiny – things that cannot be measured on a bar chart. One of the most patriotic crowds I ever met was in a Pentecostal church on Diamond Jubilee weekend. The congregation was mainly Nigerian, almost wholly West African, with the choir decked out in Union Jack scarves, and every verse of God Save the Queen was sung with gusto – and elaborate harmonies.

For those whose community changes because of immigration, the debate is not just about sums but also the languages spoken around them and the food available in the local supermarkets. Change is seen as something that happens 'to' you. 'No one ever asked us,' was a familiar refrain.

To put it simply, people already settled in Britain not only want migrants to contribute but also to join in. Increasingly this joining will need to be a positive act, rather than an accident of birth. Arguably all of us should take the citizenship test and oath on turning eighteen. It would help us all to understand what we are signing up to as adult citizens.

As progressives we should aim to mould a national identity of which all people who want to sign up and play by the rules can be part. This should be rooted in the traditions of the UK, and its component nations, as well as articulating the values we share with those who choose to join us.

Without articulating a modern Englishness, Labour risks losing connection with people for whom their English identity is very precious. It is important that England has its own Labour party just as Scotland and Wales do. We should

use it to focus on understanding what we share as a nation and draw on the radical tradition of England that has been sidelined for too long. From Thomas Paine to Tolpuddle, the matchgirls in Bow and the women Ford workers in Dagenham, the Battle of Cable Street to the New Era Estate campaigners, England has always had a tradition of radical fairness. It's time to revive and embrace it.

Lots of the worst anxieties in Thurrock were exacerbated by cultural difference rather than caused by them. Liam Byrne MP introduced his "Rules of the Road" campaign to tackle complaints about anti-social behavior in his ethnically diverse inner Birmingham community. It helped new arrivals adjust to life in the UK but it also reminded everyone else that dumping your dead sofa in the front garden isn't OK, and neither is large groups of people drinking and singing in the street late into the evening. Community cohesion can be built at a grassroots level by agreeing local customs which all members of the community would sign up to and comply with. The scheme aimed to promote a sense of pride in an area felt by all members of the community regardless of their background.

Local parties should also build a more visible presence in the community. Camden Labour party members do not hand out leaflets or stickers at the local fete: they run the barbecue. In 2014, Southampton's local Labour councillors and John Denham arranged the city's first St George's Day festival. The day showcased the best of England from bulb planting to bhangra dancing. Events like this help forge an English identity not based on blood and soil but one that reflects the country as it is in the 21st century. Too often our awkwardness about discussing English identity and values means we resort to mechanistic approaches to the benefits of immigration and managing the downsides. Instead we should bring people together on a local level and forge a shared identity based on civic pride and our shared values.

In order to win we need to reach out to people who voted Conservative in May but we cannot forget large parts of our working class base that turned to UKIP. We should never try to 'out-UKIP UKIP'. We should be straight with people. We cannot and nor should we pull up the draw bridge and turn back the clock 50 years. But Labour got it wrong when it came to an EU referendum and only addressed some of people's anxieties about immigration.

Over the next five years, Labour needs to rebuild trust in our ability to actually address people's economic anxieties. But if we want to reconnect with our working class base, Labour needs to find a language that acknowledges the importance of belonging to a community and promotes a strong national identity.

We can talk about facts and figures all we want. But when it comes to issues like managing immigration, the solution lies in our ability to build cohesive communities.



## 7: BACK IN BUSINESS

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James Frith

*James Frith – who oversaw an increase of 6 per cent to Labour, bucking the national trend, but lost Bury North by just 378 votes – makes an impassioned case for Labour dramatically rethinking its attitude towards business. He criticises the failure to build on Labour’s excellent record on enterprise and skills in government by engaging properly with the business community. He argues that Labour should celebrate the role of good business in promoting mobility for both entrepreneur and employee. Labour ended up giving the impression it was critical of success. “Small firms,” he writes, “do far more every day to keep people gainfully employed, paying taxes and contributing to our economy, than any professional politician might.”*

It’s 10 years since my first real involvement in a general election. Five years since I ran a general election campaign as a volunteer. Three years since I began campaigning to be a candidate, whilst raising a young family and running my own business. Two years as the Labour candidate for Bury North. And I fell 378 votes short of becoming a Labour MP.

This level of dedication to the cause is not unique. It gave Bury North, marginal seat number 40 before the election, a near 6 per cent increase to Labour in May 2015. It’s now number four and the most marginal Tory seat in the north west, but it is still Tory. There were hundreds of other Labour candidates, volunteers and members who fought as hard for this election, only to be let down by a national political posi-



tion. For us in Bury North to lose by such a fraction leads us to question the political weather we attempted to set nationally and the leadership. Today, the need for a Labour government hasn't gone away just because we lost. The need to explain what one is for is greater than ever.

Bury North is in the top half of the borough of Bury, in Greater Manchester. We are at the end of the tramline from Manchester and one short, direct journey to Media City and its new BBC-led industry. Like many constituencies in the north west of England, our history is as a former mill and textile town with oversize end terraces, distinctive Lancashire landscapes, good ale, tight family communities and a friendly approach.

Bury has award-winning markets, we've entrepreneurs, foodies, brilliant eateries, superb shops, excellent sports teams, community libraries, protected lands, faith groups, innovative charities, play areas and beautiful parks, good links to bigger places, a wide range of employment, new ideas for developing our success and a sense of identity across our eight townships that's passionately felt. Sadly, we remain underfunded and overlooked as a town. We've a £60 million funding gap in our NHS budget – money we are owed. Bury Hospice is in crisis with only four of its 12 beds available. Elsewhere, many of Bury's new business start-ups have struggled for the funding and talent they need to grow. Not a single business in Bury got a loan from the government's small business lending initiative in the last parliament. Cash flow and access to credit, even with a sound order book, remains a huge issue for aspiring and eager small businesses, whilst larger firms wishing to relocate to larger premises face the burden and doubt of being asked for personal guarantees by the banks. All too frequently, students from our brilliant colleges have to leave for bigger towns and cities if they are to get the work they're after.

It is this broad analysis that led to our general election campaign in Bury North to focus on a #FairDeal4Bury. I am convinced that it was this feature that took us as close as we came in Bury North against the national trend. #FairDeal4Bury focussed on five key areas of life, *NHS Bury, Your Local Services, Bury's Families and Communities, Business and Jobs in Bury* and *Our Young People*. We keenly covered all aspects of each area and their relationship to Bury North, making clear my position, record or expertise as candidate on each of them. Furthermore, we offered ideas and engagement through casework on how I would perform as their Labour MP. As someone with a business, a life and a young family away from politics, no defender of politicians was I, but a passionate defender of politics and spoke of the need to rediscover the possibilities of politics as the best way to change people's lives and get our fair deal for Bury.

I spent a lot of time personally speaking to local employers, business breakfast groups and working people living in marginal wards in our marginal seat. We ran street stalls, surveys, addressed rotary clubs, met with market traders and further education organisations along with high profile activities around Small Business Saturday. Local business people supported us with contributions for an office and supplies, complementing the full time organisational and operational support provided by the regional party and the money I raised in the field. We were brilliantly supported by my union, the CWU, who ensured that the great mass of direct mail got into people's homes, helped with funding and volunteers along with helpful insights on the industries they represent and the issues they are facing.

Despite all this public engagement, we were always up against an assumption that Labour was anti-business. This read across to many as also being anti-private sector worker and too pro-welfare.

Throughout the campaign we were always trusted on the NHS. No one would suggest we spoke too little about the NHS. The problem was it's all we appeared to want to speak about. Gripping our fists and loving the NHS will never win us a mandate to govern the country. Too often we had little to say to those who felt happy with their lot as to why they should vote Labour.

Since the election I've spent my time throwing my arms round my family and throwing myself back into my business. Defeat, like success, is rarely overnight. Labour's explosive loss in May 2015 can't be put down to just one thing or person. Labour lost Labour's election campaign, not the Greens with their distractions, or the Lib Dems for turning up, nor UKIP for their toxic opportunism. Nor too was it the Tories, though ultimately they mastered the win. No. The Tories hadn't sealed the deal and Labour, we blew it.

Why did we value the quantity of contact with the electorate over the quality of conversations we had with them? Why did we adopt an overly centrist approach towards marginal seats? Clunky, Ofsted-style visits, unannounced, checked up on local campaigns and their progress against national targets. Volunteers issued with quarterly voter id targets was a new low for our movement of people. For the deal on the doorstep to be successful across the country, it has to be about the content of the conversation, determined by sound political leadership. Our content was led by an intellectual argument dislocated from everyday life for many, even with its premise on inequality proven right and ideas adopted by the Tories since in their summer budget. We have a proud and strong appreciation of those most in need of a Labour government. It is our most defined motivation. Now, we must do far more to speak to those who might be persuaded to want a Labour government in towns like Bury

and get people excited about the possibilities of us returning to power.

As a Labour businessman myself, I ask, why aren't we a party with a greater deference to business? Not just education, but business and starting up in business should be our vehicle for social mobility. For it is. We need more employers, risk takers and entrepreneurs. Labour needs them and our country needs more of them. Where the risk in an idea is embraced, an entrepreneur commits their idea to the economy, employs themselves with others and sets to the task of succeeding in business. Their business, good business, for and with others. Their contribution to the economic wealth of the whole country with a well run company, making money, providing employment, helping social mobility and paying for public services.

Social mobility is not just about equal opportunity but repeated access to opportunity. For a long time, the debate on social mobility has focussed on the notion that equality of opportunity means everyone getting a shot at something. This is just one piece of the puzzle. Based on my own life experiences, especially in my business life, if I'd only got one chance, equally with everyone else, I'd have blown it. So much is made of achieving mobility through good education, the arts and relationships with our fellow citizens but good business and sound employment promotes social mobility and makes it possible. Labour should redefine its support for business with a belief in the transformative impact that good business providing good employment can have on an individual's social mobility, providing repeat opportunity across society and increasing their economic freedoms.

At the election, Labour's political direction said very little about the future economy we'd help create, nothing of the new jobs, or the fresh ideas to deliver the greater equality we demand. Any notion of 'one nation' fell well short when

considering what people would do when they got up and went to work in the coming half decade and beyond under a Labour government. We'd change minimum wages, laws and taxes but said nothing of our design for decent jobs with an emotional investment and understanding in private job creation. Job creation is not about outsourcing the risk of public services to the private sector either – as the Tories believe. It's about a vision, a white heat revolution in pursuit of better and new. This is as much about how our universities and technical sectors work with our science industries as it is about improving the access for small business to the supply chains of big business. It is especially about helping more of the key moments to happen in a small company when they decide they can commit to a new member of the team and another draw on the payroll.

After some excellent work in government a decade ago, we forgot about skills, and said nothing on future high growth sectors that a Labour government would help bring to their tipping points, back up or spread. These sectors include high-tech, creative and green industries along with a deep commitment to help start-ups of all kinds with an approach that helps share the risk of setting up your own business and does not just stake claims on successes through taxation.

A prospective Labour government can play a vital role in ensuring the best of British business and new ideas for a fresh economy and greater equality. The model of successful growth funding successful public services is not broken, it's just too narrow. Earning more as a country from a diversified economy at full capacity and improved equality is a better way to pay off the deficit than cutting through the bone. This argument surely presents us with an electorally attractive way back to economic credibility. So let's outline a clear, enabling, pro-business argument as the prospective government. Let's articulate a plan that addresses the needs

of priority sectors and talent supply chains for growth industries; that offers incentives, shares risk, identifies regional priorities and considers the distribution of industry; that improves small business lending, helps start-ups and their cash flow, and above all shows that we've a deep commitment to business growth and new jobs. In doing so we have a chance to move away from the impression we give to the public of being judgemental, almost mistrusting, of success.

At this election, our proposition was all opposition. We spoke of all we'd stop and little of what we'd start. Our offer was a complaint. A no deal. We rightly spoke of zero hours and wrongly said nothing to those working long hours. So as we jostle and jockey for a way ahead let's make sure, well before next time, that we show we have the interests not just of those in need of a payday but those responsible for making payroll.

Let's appeal to those who know the humility and pride of what employing people feels like, creating opportunities for work, looking after a team, developing their talents and raising the bar on the best of British business. Small firms do far more every day to keep people gainfully employed, paying taxes and contributing to our economy, than any professional politician might. Let's grasp the risk and reward deal of private enterprise, harness it and help spread it as an evangelical, pro worker, business believing, Labour party. And commit to fairness and fortune for all.



### Sally Keeble and Will Straw

The 2015 general election was Labour's for the taking. The coalition was an unpopular government presiding over a period of falling living standards and stagnant growth with a prime minister who many people felt was out of touch with their lives. But the Tories ruthlessly targeted the voters they needed with a clear electoral strategy and huge resources to make their arguments count where it mattered. In the end their message was direct while Labour's was narrow and predictable. Instead of breaking through or even causing a second hung parliament as many had expected, Labour went backwards.

The electoral mountain now facing the party calls for a fundamental rethink of our purpose, a broadening of our appeal, and a related policy overhaul as radical as anything we have ever undertaken.

Astonishingly Labour strategists prepared for only three outcomes on election night – each involving a hung parliament. Instead, Labour slipped further electorally, losing 40 seats in Scotland, six in England and two in Wales. The party picked up 12 seats off the Lib Dems but just 10 from the Tories.

The net effect was a loss of 26 seats despite Labour's share of the vote marginally improving since 2010. Combined with the Lib Dem's collapse in the south west, the price is a much steeper electoral battle in 2020. Labour needs an 8.8 per cent



swing to win next time round – close in scale to the 10 per cent recorded in the landslide of 1997.

Such was the scale of the defeat in Scotland that 29 seats were lost on a swing of over 30 per cent, costing the party some of its key parliamentary figures. This means that the battleground in 2020 will be primarily in England. Of the 94 seats needed to win an overall majority of two, just seven are in Scotland, a further eight in Wales leaving 79 in England, most of them in the small towns and rural areas that are presently a sea of blue.

The scale of the challenge is particularly daunting when considering that the 5 per cent swing needed to achieve an overall majority in 2015 will now deliver only 47 extra seats in 2020. This would not even make Labour the biggest party in a hung parliament and would result in just two extra seats in Scotland.

Learning the lessons from our defeat is critical to tackling this challenge and putting Labour in a position to win in 2020.

Each of the authors of this pamphlet fought and lost in an English marginal seat that Labour will need to win to be able to form a government next time. The authors represent seats in the south west, south east, east of England, midlands and north. We have explicitly avoided a contribution from London because of the marked difference in those results.

The lessons in these essays build on some of the best studies that were published immediately after the election. Many politicians have pointed to voters' triple concerns about our leader, our position on the deficit, and the threat of being propped up by the SNP.

Writing in *Juncture*, John Curtice looked more deeply at the numbers and explained how these risks, particularly around the economy, help explain why Labour lost to the Tories among over-65s by 47 per cent to 23 per cent. There will be 1.5 million more voters aged over 65 in 2020 making the need

for a new approach all the greater. Meanwhile, despite the focus on the 'cost of living crisis,' Labour failed to capitalise on the votes of economically disaffected people who had not felt any benefits from the economic upturn.

In a fascinating slidepack, Liam Byrne has argued that any hopes of victory through a 'progressive alliance' of Labour and Lib Dem were scuppered in this election. There are simply not enough of the urban intellectuals and ethnic minority voters, who contributed to Labour's modest gains in 2015, to deliver a national majority in 2020. He draws lessons on how Labour must "rebuild the radical centre of British politics" with a combination of blue collar workers in small towns and post-industrial areas, older voters and votes lost to the Green party.

But Labour must be careful not to take ethnic minority voters for granted. As research for British Future has shown, while Labour had a clear lead among this group, the Tories scored their best ever performance with 33 per cent which was equivalent to 1 million votes. The Tories performed best with people from a Hindu or Sikh background, where they led Labour by 49 per cent to 41 per cent.

It is a measure of the task that lies ahead for the new Labour leader that to win in 2020 she or he has so dramatically to increase the appeal of the party to voters in England. Yet there will be no quick fixes and Labour faces different challenges in different parts of the country and among different groups of voters as the chapters in this pamphlet make clear.

By 2020, much will have changed. The Tories are now only constrained by their backbenchers in realising a manifesto they did not expect to implement and devised only to trade off in coalition talks. Severe cuts that we know are coming will mean lower taxes, fewer public sector workers, and another assault on the welfare state. Meanwhile, older voters are already drawing down their pension pots to pay

off mortgages or help their children instead of buying the hated annuities. In London they will soon be able leave their houses to their children without paying inheritance tax. To win a hearing and a chance of power, Labour must now tackle its policy weaknesses and electoral blind spots – especially around older people and private sector workers – and project a greater sense of fitness for office.

Without projecting economic competence and support for business, Labour cannot win. Without a more compelling account of our approach to meeting voters' concerns on immigration and identity, we will fail. Caring about public services and the welfare state is not enough, we have to demonstrate how we will reform both. Without reaching out to all parts of the country and showing we are truly a 'one nation' party, there are simply not enough seats to win.

Overcoming all these challenges is possible. But after our massive electoral loss there is no time to lose.

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# Never Again

## Lessons from Labour's key seats

Labour went into the election wanting to achieve so much: scrapping the bedroom tax, reversing NHS privatisation, cutting tuition fees. Yet the party's hopes of transforming the country were dashed by its failure to win in 'key seats', like Rossendale and Darwen, Northampton North and Thurrock, which were lost in 2010, and others, like Southampton Itchen, which were held narrowly five years ago.

In these seats the electoral pendulum swung further away from Labour. Understanding the dynamics of that defeat and the organisational and policy challenges it poses are a first step to making sure the party can win again in 2020.

Campaigning in these seats was political trench warfare. The candidates fought for several years, many of them full time, contacting thousands of voters, delivering millions of leaflets, and backing this up with community action. In this pamphlet they share the insights from their campaigns, into the lives of people who hold the key to election victory and what stopped them voting Labour this time.

With an introduction by Andrew Adonis and chapters from Jessica Asato (Norwich North), Polly Billington (Thurrock), Rowenna Davis (Southampton Itchen), Sally Keeble (Northampton North), Luke Pollard (Plymouth Sutton and Devonport), James Frith (Bury North) and Will Straw (Rossendale and Darwen).

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