

## 7 | THINGS DON'T ONLY GET BETTER

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*New connections and communities, new ways of standing strong together, can grow out of the intense disruption of the ways of the past. It is incumbent on the left to draw on the things people value from history and fashion them anew. The key to forging a new solidarity is connection and power. The left needs to think of its role – and the role technology can play – in bringing people together with shared interests and helping each other develop knowledge, skills and opportunities.*

I fought a seat in 2015 where the community is proud of its past and anxious about its future. Where change is rarely seen in an optimistic light, but more often a threat. Where patriotism and solidarity were something people almost grieve for: things ain't what they used to be.

Thurrock's experience of globalisation has been harsh. Industries like logistics need fewer people and more skills than in the heyday of the docks. Retail work doesn't provide either the security or the pay that the trade unions had managed to negotiate in factories, paper mills and ports.

Pay is one thing: the loss of connection, community and shared experience arguably has more profound implications. You may get a pay rise, or gain a skill, but can you regain the connection if the workplace disappears, the physical community changes beyond recognition, and the

people you knew simply aren't there for you any more?

What Thurrock and places like it experience first, the rest of the country experiences eventually.

The left has emptied out its intellectual reserves by relying on a rational, redistributive state to offset a market that fails to pay a fair wage or give people the security they need to live. Whilst noble in its aims, this approach has left Labour with next to nothing to say about the other elements that make up a happy and fulfilling life.

Over recent years, a few on the left have tried to come to terms with some of the aspects of global change that were overlooked by the last Labour government. There have been many descriptions and analyses of that sense of solidarity lost and the decline of community, but little particularly successful in identifying what we might do about it.

Our efforts to understand the profound nature of this change have almost inevitably been tainted with pessimism and powerlessness. Our prescriptions have been tinged with nostalgia too, reverting to 'offers' we made in the 1980s or 1990s. We can't afford that anymore.

We now need to find a way to shape the changing nature of Britain in a way that will encourage the values we adhere to. We believe we achieve more together than we do alone: what is solidarity going to look like as the 21st century progresses?

New connections and communities, new ways of standing strong together, can grow out of the intense disruption of the ways of the past. It is incumbent on the left to draw on the things people value from history and fashion them anew, especially the things about which we can be proud and people feel deeply about. This will include our ability to harness our own sense of patriotism, to engender civic pride, and to bringing people together around shared effort and commitments. But to capture the spirit of the founders of the movement and the great leaders during

our times of maximum progress, we must understand that our current institutions and practices don't work anymore. We must apply our founding principles to the world as we find it and develop a solidarity for our time.

## **Reinventing solidarity**

A key point about the founding motivations of the Labour movement that is too often forgotten is that it was for working people but not only about work. Labour was a party that fought exploitation of working people by the market *and* the state. We formed independent organisations that were underpinned by principles of shared ownership, mutual bonds, relationships of support and a system of reliance. We tapped into a tradition of English life that saw volunteering, local collaboration and looking out for each other as a way of giving people the chance to make their way in life. Labour was the party of the big society.

So while Labour grew as a movement out of the need to protect working people from some of the risks of industrial employment – being sacked, being underpaid, being injured or even killed at work – it was not only that. The cooperative movement was about protecting the consumer, from flour cut with chalk dust and grit in the grain. It was giving people a voice and a place at the table: the right to have a say in the decisions that are made. And as a result of that progress we were able to elect a municipal leadership that understood the importance of pooling risks and creating public goods – free education, parks and libraries. All of these reduced insecurity by bringing people together to solve their problems and freeing individuals up to seize the opportunities that were created.

After the defeat of 2010 and the imposition of ideologically-driven austerity on public services, many communities fought hard to keep their libraries open – and

this fight captures something important about the search for solidarity in our time. Libraries became symbolic buildings in communities, representing the importance not only of learning but doing it for free, and pooling resources to ensure everyone can do so. But do they continue to do so when knowledge is accessed so differently now? 19th century libraries were the internet of their day. If we are to solve 21st century problems, we need 21st solutions. If we hanker for public space for communal self-improvement, it might not have books or librarians in it.

So rather than trying to keep hold of all the cornerstones of our past communities, the left needs to ask a more challenging set of questions. If we were to create a free place of learning accessible to all, where people can gather, share ideas and knowledge, fit for the 21st century, what would it look like today? If we are to ensure the protections people need in an Uber-ised economy, what would it look like? If we are to ensure people are comfortable and secure in their homes, what is the 21st century way of creating homes and communities that are affordable and pleasant to live in?

Our principles of solidarity felt easier when there was less mobility and change, where differences between people were fewer and codes of conduct were dyed in the wool. In a world where codes of conduct conflict and experiences and traditions risk dividing people who live alongside each other, we must consider how we create a solidarity that protects our freedoms and increases our understanding of each other. The most recognisable indicator of globalisation isn't cheap clothes from Primark but the massive social change in our communities combined with wage stagnation. We need to find a powerful 21st century solidarity capable of bringing together radically changed communities.

## Connection and power

The key to this is connection and power. Economic inequality is deeply rooted in the inequality of access to power and to skills and knowledge. The left could keep redistributing cash forever, but unless we tackle these fundamental inequalities we won't achieve a more profound equality of dignity, control and mutual and self-respect.

Solidarity in the 21st century needs to be the way we fight the isolation that entrenches inequality and about the way we aggregate power. Labour needs to think of its role in connecting people with shared interests or the ability to help each other with knowledge, experience, skills, opportunities – and also kindness.

Much of the pessimism of today's analysis is seated in a feeling that people aren't there for each other anymore. In fact kindness is facilitated in some extraordinary ways: complete strangers respond to calls for help across Facebook, raising money, cleaning houses, donating goods. Many of these kindnesses actually connect people who don't live far from each other, and yet don't 'know' each other. This actually helps to develop the wider networks that contribute to a community's resilience.

However, the strength of weak ties – Mark Granovetter's argument that we are more resilient through knowing more people a bit rather than a few people a lot – doesn't negate the fact that physical proximity, the geography of connection, is essential to the success of renewing our tradition of solidarity. Technology is at its most powerful when it combines connection in the digital realm with a real life relationship. The IPPR's Zero Carbon London plan is a good example of this. It stresses the importance of digital connectivity and smart use of data to make our cities more liveable, but also recommends the reparishing of London, to connect decision making more closely to where people live. Decisions made locally, by people who

can see the whites of each other's eyes, are as important as amassing data about how millions of people move around.

This is also about establishing the rules of the road. As a result of the biggest immigration wave in our country's history since 2001, communities are having to adapt to new people moving in. Even with the strictest immigration controls, that isn't going to stop altogether. Establishing common codes of behavior, what is expected of each other and what is not OK, requires connection and confidence in the ability to arbitrate and understand. Fractured communities find this harder, lose the chance to learn from each other and lose the 'strength of weak links' by turning in on themselves.

This is about resilience: about widening your networks beyond family and neighbours, your work friends and the street, to a community where you can rely on skills and expertise not held by your close circle. How can the left enable these sorts of networks to flourish? One current trend is towards devolving power to big metropolitan areas, but what will this mean for those small towns, coastal communities and suburbs where millions of people live? What does solidarity mean when economic insecurity is compounded by rapid social change and the chance to improve your life is at the far end of an expensive train line?

## **Solidarity in the new world of work**

Inevitably, solidarity in the 21st century should be about a sense of place and belonging, connecting you to those who live nearby, and giving you individually more reach than you would on your own. And that applies to work too.

Since work is changing so much, and workplaces are less conducive to creating solidarity, now is a crucial moment for us to reconsider how we might establish solidarity at work.

We should be asking ourselves about the risks people now face at work. Building in a voice for the workforce at the top table is an essential in big firms. In small ones, support for job creation, and a renewal of the principles of good employer standards would help raise the bar. Already online, at [glassdoor.co.uk](http://glassdoor.co.uk), workers share tips on who are good and bad employers. That too is a transparency that facilitates choice for the individual but doesn't yet scale it to collective action to change things.

Insecurity is a huge issue for the ranks of the self-employed and small business people now, just as it was for the casualised dockers and factory workers before trade unions gave them protection. But the solutions vary because the freelance web designer and the casual construction worker's experience of insecurity, where they might find support and how they might develop resilience, are not the same.

This doesn't mean there isn't solidarity, but it is more likely to manifest itself in networks of information and support, without the formalised channels of organised labour. It creates communities of interest and connection both online and offline to facilitate access to work, to skills and to know-how. And it also gives you something in common.

People pool risk and opportunities, share ideas and ask for support, crowd source solutions and crowdfund projects in ways that would have been impossible only a few years ago. The skills and know how to do this are now the big divide.

So the task of the left should be to take on the massive failure of our education system to tool people up for the demands of 21st century work. There is almost nothing about the current system that enables people to learn across their working life, acquire skills that are transferable across industries that change so fast that progress in the job is almost impossible without regular upgrades. If

our technology updates itself this fast, why don't we think in a similar way about our own skill sets?

The greatest threat to opportunity and security today – and therefore the greatest barrier to the ability to share in community and build social bonds – is the digital divide, which gets wider the faster technology develops. In a world where people are self-organising to support each other, in a world where everyone, from barristers to baristas, can be freelance, where construction workers and accountants can find their community, online and offline, to share know-how and skills, tips and leads, the biggest risk is being cut out of those networks.

There was a time when if your dad was a docker, you were a docker. That was a security hard fought for. And it's gone. When the trade union and family ties can't deliver, a network of peers might just help. But the sons of dockers, however much they hunch over their smart phones, aren't necessarily reaping the benefits of the tech in their hands. It's still the ones with the social assets that are winning.

And we know one of the most toxic threats to any sense of solidarity is a welfare system that pits people against each other – where reward and need are seen as almost completely arbitrary. So as work changes, so social security must adapt, to pool risks, encourage contribution, and create a shared sense of responsibility and reward. At the heart of this must be making work pay. Subsidising low pay is not an acceptable option and our commitment to a real living wage needs to sit at the heart of a new programme for work justice.

So let's be clear: Labour's renewed solidarity must be rooted in identity, connection and community. If it reverts, as it frankly did in our 'offer' at the general election in 2015, to one based solely on economics it won't soothe the anxiety or overcome the discontents of modern Middle Britain.

From the energy price freeze through the £8 an hour minimum wage, to the crackdown on zero hours contracts,

the retail offer didn't reach anywhere near the deep anxiety about change, insecurity or sense of purpose that Labour campaigners saw close up in our communities.

## **Conclusion**

People's anxiety about rapid change in their communities often reflects a feeling of lack of control. Hence, to be honest, the salience of the arguments about sovereignty in the referendum campaign. The fact we all surrender some sort of control in order to reduce the relentless amount of choices and decisions we would have to make every day has been lost because big decisions have been made without taking people with us. This is a particularly dispiriting legacy of the New Labour years when you examine the language Tony Blair used in the run-up to 1997.

I just ask you to youtube it: clips of Tony Blair talking about change in 1994–1997. And of course then people were crying out for it. After 18 years of the Tories, a clapped out and exhausted government had run out of ideas and was entirely out of touch with the prevailing mood of optimism which Labour was able to harness by embodying it. But listen and watch more carefully. He talks of managing change. Because he knew, and Labour as a party understood, change was happening that we would have to manage. Back then we didn't say globalisation was good for you. That sort of impatience with the electorate came later, as a result of years in government. Instead we made the case for change: hence the minimum wage, employment rights, Sure Start, smaller classes for our kids, devolution, commitment to international development and yes – even an ethical foreign policy. All things that signified change and actually managed somewhat the extremes of the change we couldn't stop.

Now we know that management on some of the big things just wasn't enough: from deregulation of the banks

to the over fast relaxation of immigration controls within the EU and a shocking failure to build more homes until the crash revived our belief in an active state. When we didn't manage those big changes right, we reaped the electoral consequences.

So when we develop our solidarity for the 21st century it should be one that captures the enduring principles of the Labour movement: establishing security in order to enable opportunity. To support communities to find their own solutions to problems, connecting them to the skills knowledge and assets that will help them flourish individually and collectively. Aggregating power so that decisions are made close to people, so that responsibility, like power, is shared.

The risk is if we only talk about opportunity we overlook the importance of solidarity in creating security. And if we only talk about security, we lose the optimism and openness to opportunity that solidarity brings with it.

## **EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: SOLIDARITY**

A recent study of how public opinion towards the EU has changed since the 1970s included three particularly striking findings – which run counter to the narrative you hear that the EU is either ineffective or illegitimate. Firstly, almost half of the respondents believed that the ‘values of democracy and freedom’ were the main element underpinning the EU’s identity. This is the highest score ever, doubling the figure from before the crisis of 2008. Secondly, while almost 70 per cent think that the employment situation on the national level is bad, one third sees the EU as the player that can take ‘effective action’. It is rated higher than the capacity of national governments. Thirdly, Europeans see social affairs and employment as the core priority for the EU budget spending. This is higher than economic growth, which used to come first.

So what lessons can we learn for the future shape of solidarity across the continent? First, the fundamental values that underpin the unique European social model cannot be negotiated. The UK’s demands on workers’ rights and welfare benefits therefore risk undermining the principle that for equal work there must be equal pay.

Secondly, the citizens of Europe still believe the EU is a project that can deliver. However, to achieve social progress for all and to enhance social cohesion, the commitment to the EU as a social contract has to be renewed.

Thirdly, and most strikingly, the current slow recovery is not being felt by working families, who continue to struggle in the face of persistent unemployment and shrinking welfare states. The EU legislation that could help has been put on hold while UK renegotiations are underway. So instead of an ‘emergency brake’, we need a decisive step forward – to ensure that the idea of ‘social Europe’ creates stronger collective bonds between the nations and the peoples of Europe.

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