



## **NORTHERN DISCOMFORT**

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## *Explanatory Note*

*Working class Labour voters have “nowhere else to go...”  
Peter Mandelson<sup>1</sup>*

*This pamphlet was written in summer 2019 before we knew there would be a general election. Tragically the election proved that a substantial part of our analysis was in fact accurate.*

*It wasn't published at the time for a variety of reasons. Also, it is not intended to address the situation in Scotland, which we acknowledge needs to be tackled.*

*We publish it now because there is clearly a huge task ahead and many of the ideas in here are of direct relevance. We have added some preliminary analysis from the 2019 election in order to gain a better picture of the current state of play.*

*As one german thinker long ago said “philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it”. (Marx 1 Theses on Feuerbach).*

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<sup>1</sup> Bloody Nasty People: The Rise of Britain's Far Right, Daniel Trilling, 2012 - From a conversation Peter Hain described as having with Mandelson

## Foreword

Our country is the second most unequal in the world.

In recent years, a colossal amount of wealth has been transferred from those 32.7 million people who work for a living and the thousand most wealthy individuals in Britain. In the same time frame, many public services which were built to help people facing difficulties have been stripped back to the bone.

The idea that if you work hard and have talent you can rise to the top has been shown to be nonsense.

Think about it even for instance, and you will see that the ancient rigid British class system still endures, but with a modern vicious twist.

It is hard not to see what is happening as a kind of class war, waged by the rich against the rest of us. And that as Warren Buffet has said, it is the most wealthy who are winning the battle.

Within modern Britain there are many different types and styles of life and we are right to celebrate our diverse nation. The differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan life styles has been much commented upon.

But the answer to the problems facing working people must not be a **culture war** amongst ourselves. Divide and rule is an old tactic. A culture war which pits poorer people often in England's towns against metropolitan city dwellers, more plugged into our economy's growth nodes, is entirely wrong. To put things right, we need unity between these groups.

And yet there is a real danger, following the Brexit vote, and now clearly seen with the 2019 election results, that a culture war is indeed happening. The only beneficiaries of this are the Tories.

But the real cleavage in Britain is not between town/country on the one hand and city on the other, or or north vs south. It is between the 99% and the 1%, as the Occupy movement taught us.

Following the 1992 election defeat, right wingers in the Party launched a full scale assault on Labour's structures, culture, values and policies. This assault accelerated with the seizure of the leadership by a small group around Tony Blair.

We were told that we could secure a great prize but that we must pay a price. They offered the party electoral victories in exchange for selling a part of its soul.

Blair's core electoral strategy was based on a vulgar idea that Labour's "heartlands" in industrial communities had nowhere else to go except to vote Labour. Instead of a unifying policy of long term restructuring of our economy and society which would have helped both 'southern aspiration' and heartland areas he thought he could pocket the votes of the latter and take them for granted.

Standing on a platform of assumed heartland votes, New Labour then set out to win Southern middle class voters. They thought that they could move forward by realigning the Party with a set of assumed values supposedly embedded within these Southern communities.

For a time, the tactic worked in the sense of delivering majorities in the Commons.

We do not agree with those who condemn the whole New Labour period. Much work was done to improve the lives of our fellow citizens and in former mining constituencies like ours. But the measures which were taken were essentially ameliorative rather than transformational. They did not tackle the underlying problems which continued to haunt us.

Out of fear of Southern voters' flight, many of our radical purposes were abandoned.

But - and this was clearly predicted at the time - the key assumption that heartland communities would then remain blindly loyal, soon began to break down. And this process accelerated as the tsunami of de-industrialisation and austerity, combined too often by the breakdown of hitherto strong communities, began to bite into the heartlands.

After the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader, Labour began to change. It was in the first leadership campaign, for example, that we addressed problems in one of our great heartlands in the North of England when we launched "[Northern Future](#)". For the first time in many years we had a policy paper that clearly gave voice to the North of England, and indeed working class people.

But the powerful forces in the Party who remain wedded to the failed New Labour project continued to make their case - and in increasingly strident ways - now even gaining traction amongst the "soft left". And there are extremely strong elements in the wider society, who out of fear of a perceived threat to their privileged position, are determined to push the Party backwards.

You don't have to look far to find 'progressives' who would write off the majority of people in the heartland communities as backward looking, racist or reactionary. Or even simple minded, uneducated. Regrettably, there were those in the party - including some in important representative positions - who reacted to the EU referendum result by seeking to overturn its result thereby giving the impression that the party would turn its back on the majority.

Back in the 1990's, the archetypal intellectual work which lay the foundations for New Labour is the short pamphlet written by Giles Radice, then MP. It was called "[\*Southern Discomfort\*](#)".

Its purpose was to break the Party's structures, sever the attachment of the Party to its heartland communities in the North, cut the links to the trades unions, and abandon collective provision of public services.

And its central argument was that Labour's future lay with the country's new demographic in the South.

This whole approach was profoundly flawed, but it hasn't completely gone away. It is time the Party broke with it once and for all.

Radice argued that Labour back then had a problem with "aspirational" voters in the South of England. Now it is clear that a new problem has emerged; this time in our 'Northern' heartlands.

This short pamphlet will show why we reject the divisions which are opening up once more, this time counterposing the "metropolitan progressive" vote to the rest of the working class.

Our Heartlands are to be found all over England, in parts of Hastings, Hartlepool, or Hackney. For the purposes of this pamphlet and for the sake of simplicity we refer to them as characteristically "Northern" because it is here where these characteristics are both deep-seated and widespread.

In the 2019 election, almost every single English Labour seat which we lost (except two) were in the North and the Midlands, Labour's so-called 'red wall'. And now, out of our top 50 defensive marginal seats, 84% are in the North and the Midlands.

Our losses were concentrated in the Brexit-voting areas, traditionally Labour-identifying. It is worth noting that of these losses only Stroud and Kensington were remain seats. Sadly, Labour were seen by too many as having turned our backs on them.

There can be no route to a Labour majority which doesn't pass through these areas. Indeed, we will show that in our Heartlands there is a clear route through to a radical Labour government, provided that there is tolerance and understanding of cultural differences in the place of a potential culture war.

We reject totally the caricatures which you often read portraying workers as backward looking. Equally, we must reject other forms of discrimination. The fight against racism must never end and we know that it raises its ugly head everywhere. But, as we saw, it was in the great northern city of Liverpool when the neo-fascist Yaxley-Lennon went calling, that he was driven back in the recent elections. And it was in Manchester that the people rallied in unity against the hate crimes committed by terrorists.

This pamphlet is not a simple academic exercise, however. It is a call to arms. We call on the Labour Movement in the deindustrialised “Northern” heartlands once more to lead the fight for social justice.

We are confident that we can win.

*Jon Trickett MP*

*Ian Lavery MP*

*June 2019*

## Introduction

Britain today is a divided nation. These are economic, cultural, regional and electoral divides which makes the task of understanding the present much more difficult. The divides often overlap or conflict with one another, or are simply politically constructed myths.

For example we have seen Brexit reduced to a culture war between North vs South, progressives vs regressives and “somewheres” vs “nowheres”. It is true that the North voted in higher numbers for Brexit than London or Scotland, for example. However, it is a lazy assumption to pin this on “racist” northerners”. We must not forget that on average a quarter of BAME voters backed Leave.<sup>2</sup>

In fact we believe it is economic inequality, austerity and the alienation felt by many due to the vulnerabilities of living in a globalised, financialised, market economy, that have been the key forces in fuelling division.

Unfortunately, not only did the Labour government fail to understand this, they actually perpetuated the problem by refusing to develop a vision beyond Thatcherism. Working class voters were taken for granted in this agenda and that legacy still hangs over the Party.

Remember, it's now 15 years since Labour won a general election. The country is crying out for a change of direction. This is the meaning of all the recent events.

But how can we be sure that we can win again? Perhaps one starting point in searching for the answer to this question is to look at what Labour did the last time we had lost a number of successive elections.

It is useful to recall the publication of a pamphlet called *Southern Discomfort*<sup>3</sup> by Giles Radice. This was a key text for the New Labour revisionists and it was the catalyst for developing one of their central strategies.

Audacious in its recommendations, the pamphlet argued that the characteristics of the British were changing fast. It followed therefore - the author said - that if Labour was ever to win again it had to adapt to these new patterns.

Although these changes in the character of the British people could be found everywhere, Radice claimed they were most advanced in the South of England.

And it was calculated that the working class in our Northern heartland areas, and elsewhere, would stick with Labour because they had nowhere else to go. And that these ‘core voters’ in

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<sup>2</sup> [Lord Ashcroft Poll](#)

<sup>3</sup> Radice, G, *Southern Discomfort*, Fabian Review, 1992 <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:baw923sat>

any event were a declining electoral force and in order to win we had to change our approach based on alleged Southern characteristics.

After the death of Leader John Smith, much of the development of the Party, rebranded as New Labour, was designed to appear as a rupture with the history, electoral practices, policies and values of our Party.

For a time Labour convincingly won a series of elections. However, it has often been argued that we would have won these elections in any event - so tired had the country become of the rampant excesses of the Tories.

But what then began to happen was that our vote in the heartlands began to atrophy. In a series of interventions following the 2005 election it was pointed out that these were the consequences of the New Labour turn.<sup>4</sup> The increasing significance of "Labour's Missing Millions" of people who had voted for us in 1997 but no longer were, would lead to defeat if we continued down the same path.

It is abundantly clear now that the short term gains achieved by the *Southern Discomfort* hypothesis, with its abandonment of Labour's core values, would lead to long term problems.

Labour's former Deputy Leader Roy Hattersley had regretfully written that New Labour could always secure a majority by neglecting the poor and 'pandering to the tax averse 'suburban middle classes'.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs Thatcher was even clearer. Speaking about Tony Blair, she had said 'He won't let Britain down'.<sup>6</sup>

Losing our central purpose of social justice and our electoral coalition of uniting workers 'by hand and by brain', both in the North and the South, left us adrift as a Party and consequently pushed around by the currents of globalised finance.

We now manifestly have a 'Northern Discomfort' problem, deeper than the issues which faced us at the time of the New Labour revisionists.

This pamphlet points out that large tracts of the country, in every town, city and rural community, are experiencing deep seated problems. These issues are found in the North in great measure but can be found everywhere, **including in pockets of the South**. The middle class too are experiencing existential changes but for the moment we will focus on Northern Discomfort as a way of referring to the wider problem.

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Trickett MP, Guardian, 2007 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/20/labourvalues>

<sup>5</sup> Rawnsley, A, Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour, 2001

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

One final point is that if we can agree that a part of the problem facing the Labour Party resides in “Northern” Communities, then we can equally show that the solution lies there also.

## Falling Behind

There is a widespread view, strongly held in the North, but elsewhere too, that the economic and political system isn't working well for working people, especially in former industrial communities.

Dissatisfaction with the current economic arrangements are perhaps felt more acutely by those navigating the Universal Credit system, relying on foodbanks or trapped in insecure work. But the fact is that most people experience some kind of economic injustice everyday due to the dominance of financial capital. Whether that is rip off energy bills, train fares sky-rocketing, being locked out of the housing market or having no say in the closure of bus routes, libraries and high street shops.

Economic decisions are out of working people's control because their political power has been eroded to almost nothing. This plays out differently in different regions, and also within them.

It's worth pausing to explain why. Because, if the British Political Establishment, and the key centres of economic power, are all located in London and the South East (and inhabited by people from southern and/or middle class backgrounds) then it is inevitable that other regions would be forgotten. Working class people in the North feel distant from wealth and opportunity located hundreds of miles away.

After all, most of the FTSE company HQ's are in London as are the financial institutions. But the Tory Party is a uniquely Southern political club (with a few outreaches elsewhere). But when New Labour began its focus on Southern - and middle class - Discomfort, the circle was complete.

The consequences of this orientation are everywhere to be seen.

The North – which was the engine room of our national prosperity for so many decades – has been left decisively weakened by a triple whammy:

- De-industrialisation which was the Thatcher government's lasting legacy has left many parts of the North stripped of purposeful economic activity;
- Centralisation of power in the Cities of London and Westminster means that the key decision-makers have often had little regard for Britain's regions;
- Austerity, which forced the working people of our country to pay off the debts of the bankers through lower incomes and reduced public services, added a further vicious twist to the North's difficulties.

The North is a vast area covering millions of people, far bigger than many countries in Europe. Too many of our communities have been left behind in the global economy. Whole areas lost

their primary economic purpose and have yet to find a new role, with the inevitable impact on morale, identity and direction.

Our infrastructure is weak. Investment has been lacking. Our businesses are not as profitable as they need to be. Communities have been damaged, and there has been an unacceptable spread of low pay, part time and temporary working, agency labour etc.

If we look at investment in transport, for example, we see that over the last 10 years, the North received £289 per head on transport, while London received £708 per head on average. Central government spending in London more than doubled since 2012/13 in real terms, rising more than in any other region, and more than double the rate of increase in the North.<sup>7</sup>

Looking to the future, this inequity continues: £4,155 transport spending per capita is planned on London, compared to just £1,600 per capita planned on the North – 2.6 times more per capita spend on London than in the North, and five times more per capita spending than in the North East or Yorkshire and the Humber.<sup>8</sup>

Austerity has hit the North particularly hard. Since 2009/10 total public spending in the North has fallen by £6.3 billion in real terms - more than any other region. In contrast, the South East and South West together received a £3.2 billion rise in public spending.<sup>9</sup>

Not only is infrastructure investment not coming into the North, neither are jobs, especially professional ones. The table below shows where the boom in jobs is coming from, and it's not the North of England.

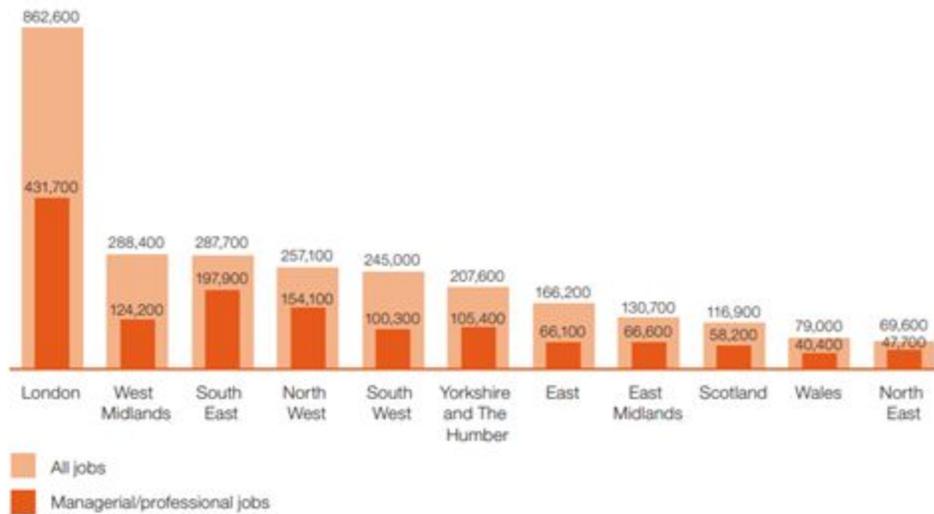
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<sup>7</sup> [IPPR North, Revealed: Transport spending falls in the North while rising in London, 2018](#)

<sup>8</sup> [IPPR North, 2018](#)

<sup>9</sup> [IPPR North, Amid the Brexit Chaos: A Plan for the Northern Powerhouse, 2018](#)

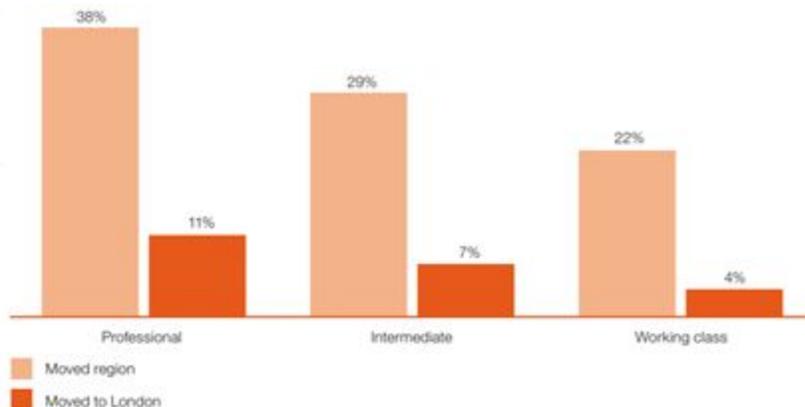
## Growth in All Jobs and Professional Jobs by Regions Since 2012<sup>10</sup>



Source: SMC analysis of Nomis (ONS)

As a result there has been what some call a “brain drain” from the North to London. However, it is clear from the table below that it’s those from middle class backgrounds who have the ability to move to where the jobs are.

## Percentage of people aged 25-60 that moved away from their childhood region within GB by socio-economic background



Source: SMC analysis of Labour Force Survey (ONS)

170,000 people in the North are on zero hour contracts<sup>11</sup>, manufacturing has declined dramatically and the failure to replace industries such as steel, coal, textiles, shipbuilding and

<sup>10</sup> [Social Mobility Commission, State of the Nation, 2019](#)

<sup>11</sup> [TUC, Zero-hours contracts are still rife – it's time to give all workers the rights they deserve, 2019](#)

car plants has left the North more reliant on insecure, precarious work for low pay and poor conditions.

We do not want to paint the North in such a wholly negative light however. There are clearly great examples of local leadership and innovation in places like Preston, Gateshead and many others. We also know that big cities like Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle are vibrant prosperous places.

Nor should the North be blamed. It is in fact the economic strategy of the past few decades - including that of the last Labour government - which has induced the decline of these industries and areas.

Instead services and non-tangible goods (finance, etc) have replaced manufacturing as the main wealth creator for the UK in terms of GDP.

The new economic focus is based increasingly on knowledge and global networks, something to which our northern heartlands have had variable access.

Also, the attack on trade union rights under Thatcher that were not reversed under the Labour government can account for the relatively weak protection of workers' rights, fair pay and decent jobs.

Zero-hours contracts are still rife – it's time to give all workers the rights they deserve. Over 20% of workers in the North East, North West and Yorkshire are on low pay, compared with 9% in London. The North also has some of the lowest levels of high pay jobs.<sup>12</sup>

15 billion hours of unpaid work are done by Northerners every year. If this were paid work, then it would be worth £146 billion in total.<sup>13</sup>

There are 930,000 volunteers working with third sector organisations alone in the North, providing 67 million hours of activity every year which, if paid, would be worth up to £800 million a year to the North's economy.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, eight of the ten worst-hit police authorities in terms of cuts are in the North.

<sup>15</sup>

IPPR North sum up the impact of austerity on health in the North clearly:

“Regional health inequality is rising as progress slows and in some cases health problems have become worse: the North-South divide in life expectancy has risen; progress in tackling major

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<sup>12</sup> [ONS, Low and high pay in the UK: 2018](#)

<sup>13</sup> [TUC, Workers in the UK put in £33.6 billion worth of unpaid overtime a year, 2017](#)

<sup>14</sup> [IPPR North, State of The North Report](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Ibid](#)

diseases has slowed; and mortality among 25-44 year olds has even increased since the mid-1990s while falling in the South.”

## “Northern” Heartlands

Before we turn to the details of our analysis, it will be useful to briefly consider the reason why the North is described as one of Labour’s great heartlands.

Of Labour’s 246 MP’s who were elected in 2017, 153 of them represented Northern or Midlands seats. Almost two thirds of all Labour MPs were elected in those English regions.

Here are the regional figures for 2017:

Region	Number of MPs	Number of Labour MPs
Yorks and the Humber	54	35
North East	29	26
North West	75	54
<u>Total Northern Regions</u>	158	115
East Midlands	46	15
West Midlands	49	23
<b>Totals (North England and Midlands)</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>153</b>

Labour had a huge majority in the English North and Midlands. Of course the same can be argued from Wales and also the London region. Labour has a number of different heartland regions, and each must be nursed.

Nonetheless, another way of measuring the relative importance for Labour of the different regions is to see where the marginal seats are located.<sup>16</sup>

If you take the post 2017 Regional location of the 25 most marginal Labour seats there were 20 in the North and Midlands and 5 in London and the South.

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<sup>16</sup> We conducted research into the 2017 Parliament 25 labour marginal defensive seats and 64 marginal offence seats in England, all of which Labour needs to gain in order to win a majority in the House of Commons. We have defined “marginal” as those seats with the lowest swing needed.

A similar pattern emerges with the most marginal seats held by the Conservatives. Of the 64 Tory seats which we needed to win to form a majority 39 are in the North or the Midlands. 25 are in London or the South. In total, therefore, we can see that the so-called “battleground seats” in any upcoming election are primarily in the North and Midlands: 59 out of 89 (66%).

This was acutely clear in the 2019 General election. Now, of those 46 seats lost in England, 44 were in the North and Midlands; 2 in London and the South. The picture is similar if we look at the new marginal seats: out of our top 25 Labour-held marginals 23 are outside London and the South.

Let’s be clear, any attempt to argue (as some were doing) that the new political dividing lines are between so-called ‘progressive middle class’ voters - mainly in the South - on the one hand and our traditional heartlands - especially in the North - could only result in electoral disaster.

The Labour Party, in order to win a majority, must create a coalition of the middle class and the working class. This can only be done with a unifying political project that recognises the need to rebalance our Party so that it represents this whole coalition rather than a vocal minority part of it.

## Revisionism, turning our back on the heartlands

As a consequence of the 1992 general election loss, there was a conscious decision by the Party establishment to recalibrate. This was a shameful moment in the history of our party.

The central aim was to win power by appealing to the “Southern” middle classes.

Nowhere is this outlined more clearly than in Giles Radice’s Fabian Pamphlet “Southern Discomfort”.<sup>17</sup>

The pamphlet famously outlines the perceived core values of the middle classes in key seats within the South of England, through focus groups and polling. And concludes that Labour cannot win in these areas as a class based Party.

The pamphlet was a device to re-orientate the Party in three ways:

- 1) To accept the underlying premise of Thatcherism – individual aspiration. As Thatcher herself famously said: her greatest achievement was “Tony Blair and New Labour”.
- 2) To rewrite Clause IV to show the Party accepts (maybe even embraces) capitalism and disengage in class politics
- 3) To change how we tax and spend within the regions

It is clear that this was an ideological project as much as an electoral one.

However, this recalibration of the party away from its core values and class politics has led to the current problems we have seen in the North which appear to be taking on a similar trajectory as the Party’s collapse in Scotland in the 2015 General Election.

Radice’s pamphlet conducted surveys in 5 marginal seats in the South East (a region that today has 84 constituencies). All were Conservative voters who considered voting Labour. A narrow pool for an allegedly rigorous piece of work.

From these surveys it was found that “class no longer has much relevance” to people in the South. Also they rejected Labour values of “equality for all” and the redistribution of wealth, with one respondent calling poor people “lazy”. However, there was a strong support for public services such as health and education.

The takeaway points Radice emphasises are interesting. He says:

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<sup>17</sup> Radice, G, Southern Discomfort, Fabian Review, 1992 <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:baw923sat>

*“The Labour Party must show that it stands for the freedom of the individual.....Labour cannot afford a class approach.”*

In summary Radice claims the only way for Labour to win is by abandoning class politics, and engaging in the politics of the so-called ‘aspirational’ individual; end the dominance of the trade unions through party restructuring; rewriting Clause IV to accept capitalism; and allowing for differential taxation for regions.

Much of Radice’s analysis was taken up by New Labour. However, in spite of this decisive move by Labour’s then leadership, the presence of class remains a central fact of British life.

An article in the Guardian (2016)<sup>18</sup> pointed out that:

*“Although just 25% of people now work in routine and manual occupations, 60% of Britons regard themselves as working class.”*

Referring to a report by Evans and Mellon of the University of Oxford, the article quoted the following:

*“People who see themselves as at the bottom of a structure in which there are a few super-rich and then everyone else might well think of themselves as ‘working class’ relatively speaking, even if they do hold a middle-class job,”*

In any event, still there are just under 50% of the population who hold occupations in categories C2,D and E which are traditionally regarded as working class.

It is perhaps worth noting, for the sake of clarity, that by working class we mean workers in post industrial areas, as well as in metropolitan areas, across race and gender.

The “new” working class mainly occupy the service sector and are perhaps more likely to have higher qualifications but still remain in often very low paid jobs. One distinction that has been made between these two elements is that “traditional” working class people are often older and property owning and the “new” working class are mainly younger or BAME, with no real assets.

Claire Ainsley’s “The New Working Class” sets out a stark reminder that the working class is still a formidable electoral force:

*“The proportion who consider themselves working class (60%) has not changed since 1983. While this does not suggest there is an active working-class identity; it does suggest that we did not all become middle class; therefore to assume the electorate all aspire to be middle class is a misreading of how people feel.”<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jun/29/most-brits-regard-themselves-as-working-class-survey-finds>

<sup>19</sup> Claire Ainsley, The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts and Minds, 2018, p27

In spite of this, Labour's leaders persisted in pursuing a path which had in part been laid out in Radice's original *Southern Discomfort*. And, significantly, these views remain firmly embedded within the structures and culture of important aspects of the party and many of its elected representatives to this day.

In addition, the industrial economic base through which organised labour and the Labour Party drew its strength, and through which social bonds of solidarity were formed, has been almost totally destroyed. New industrial and economic structures (post-Fordism) have emerged.

Bonds of solidarity have often given way to individual isolation and alienation, which can find negative expression, especially in semi-rural areas suffering from decades of under-investment and little opportunity. Low wages, poor quality jobs and a loss of purpose among young people.

Also, for the past few decades the Labour leadership has been drawn from a more London focussed pool of people. This wasn't always the case; there was a period when the Party's big hitters and influential decision-makers were drawn from the North. Indeed, Radice's own parliamentary seat was in County Durham.

This has accumulated into a dangerous disconnect between the Party and the Northern working class communities it was born from.

As we can see in the next section, because the North has been ignored and taken for granted for so long, its voice has been suppressed and its development slowed by successive governments and indeed the Labour Party.

## Heartlands Atrophy

Focus by the British Political and Economic Establishment on so-called growth nodes in the geographic south, and its corollary - the decline of post-industrial communities - has led to widespread dissatisfaction with the way that the country is run.

This has impacted on support for our party.

From 1997 to 2010 Labour lost 4-5 million voters – the missing millions. Some moved to the emerging fringe parties at the time like UKIP, but most stopped at home and didn't vote at all.

In 2017 we saw a similar trend, though less pronounced because of our radical offer to the country, as well as our respect of the referendum result. We won the Kensington and Canterbury but we lost places like Mansfield and North East Derbyshire. Even in some “safe” Labour Northern seats, our majorities went down.

The legacy of Radice's *Southern Discomfort* has left its mark on the Party's structures in three ways.

Firstly, it has spawned a new “career” route into politics. It is astounding that in 2017 only 4 Labour MPs came from a manual work background whereas 129 came from professional political backgrounds.

The truth is that as politics became more of a career, politicians have become increasingly drawn from small, closed socio-economic circles decreasing numbers of Labour MPs represented the communities into which they had been born.

Secondly, their approach became increasingly managerial, and technocratic as we separated ourselves from our core values and lost the sense that our heartland areas remained core to our whole project.

Thirdly, the Party membership itself is now concentrated in the South, mainly in London. Although there are 117 Labour seats in the North of England, there are only 140,000 members. In the South, including London, we have 64 seats and 205,000 members.

There are 3,199 members for every Labour seat in the South and 1,196 members for every Labour seat in the North. Clearly, there is an asymmetry with where members and voters are based.

Labour Party offices even reflect this, with the political centre headquartered in London and the back office headquartered in Newcastle.

Perhaps surreptitiously there were deeper reasons for the revisionism of the nineties which were purely ideological.

*Southern Discomfort* sought to take the Party away from its Trade Union roots and reduce the power of the unions within the party.

New Labour policies such as the commercialisation of public services, the continued freedom of the City of London and of course the Iraq war began to alienate northern working class voters who saw their traditional party betray their values.

This is why we lost millions of voters from 1997 – 2015.<sup>20</sup>

In 2015, after the election defeat of Ed Miliband, commentators were convinced that what lost the election was a failure to tap into the hopes of “aspirational” voters.<sup>21</sup> But the truth was that a decline in working class support was the issue, as shown below.<sup>22</sup>

	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	%c change 1997-2017
AB (%)	31	30	28	26	27	37	+6%
C1 (%)	37	38	32	28	30	40	+3%
C2 (%)	50	49	40	29	30	41	-9%
DE (%)	59	55	48	40	37	47	-12%

This changed in 2017 when, for the first time in decades, Labour announced a manifesto more in tune with our core values. It could have gone further but it was this along with a leader with authenticity and the acceptance of the Brexit referendum result, that helped us to claw back a considerable element of our core support.

However, as the table below shows, there is still much to do in order to gain back support in our “northern” regions.

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<sup>20</sup> IPSOS MORI “How Britain Voted”, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019

<sup>21</sup> [Jon Trickett, “It Was the Middle Class, Not Working Class, That Sunk Labour”, \*New Statesman\*, 2015](#)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

**Regional Breakdown of GE result 1997-2017 with % change<sup>23</sup>**

**	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	% change 1997-2017
North East	64%	59.4%	52.9%	43.6%	46.9%	55.4%	-8.6%
North West	54%	50.7%	45.1%	39.4%	44.6%	54.9%	+0.9%
Yorkshire and Humber	51.9%	48.6%	43.6%	34.4%	39.1%	49%	-2.9%
West Midlands	47%	44.8%	38.7%	30.6%	32.9%	42.5%	-4.5%
East Midlands	47.8%	45.1%	39%	29.8%	31.6%	40.5%	-7.3%
East Anglia/Eastern	38.6%	36.8%	29.8%	19.6%	22%	32.7%	-5.9%

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<sup>23</sup> [Post General Election Notes 1997-2017 from the House of Commons Library](#)

# Northern Soul

## 1. Labour origins, Northern values

The Labour Party was born in the North of England. The Manningham Mills strike in Bradford was where the formation of the Labour Party was initiated. Shortly after the strike the Bradford Labour Union was formed and in 1892 this became the Bradford Independent Labour Party. In 1893 this became the Independent Labour Party, which was again founded in Bradford with Keir Hardie as its Chair.

Of course we do not root the Labour Movement solely in the North. That would be a crass exaggeration. Think for example of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. Or the executions of the Levellers at Burford in the Cotswolds.

Labour's origins are in the values of class solidarity, collectivism, democracy, unity, anti-establishment, anti-racist, social justice, and economic justice values. All of these were found in abundance in the radical history of the North of England. Chartists, suffragettes, Peterloo, Jarrow Marchers and the trade union movement were all powerful there.

Our values as well as our organisations were part of communities who formed the backbone of the industrial age and created Britain as one of the world's wealthiest nations.

This wealth was built upon great exploitation; slum housing, low pay, child labour. Think of the work by Victorian analysts like Booth, Rowntree or Engels. As always a great dialectic came into play as the wealth of the capitalists grew on the one hand, so there emerged the British Labour Movement, in the North and elsewhere.

Throughout our history from the anti slavery movement in the North through to the Miners' strike and beyond, we have seen, strong deeply rooted values of hard work, fairness, solidarity, and caring for one another.

We saw these values in the community response following the dreadful attack in Manchester in 2017 when the Labour Party pointed out that the cuts to the police force had left communities exposed. We can see it also in every poor community everyday in the food banks.

These are the values imbued by the Labour movement from its inception. And these are the values which require us to stand by the area as it risks being left behind in the post industrial economic structures which are growing in the 21st Century.

Clause IV of the Party constitution sets out our central purpose: to secure equality and fairness for all "workers by hand or by brain". This careful balance between manual workers and those in professions was central to our values, and to the coalition we have always hoped and needed to build in order to win government.

Later in this pamphlet we will show how strongly other Labour values are held in the Northern heartland communities. We will also see how difficult the conditions are in those same communities which have been held back as de-industrialisation and globalisation took its toll.

Although obviously manual workers were not exclusive to the North, the history which our region shares, through the industrial revolution and beyond, there clearly emerged a culture and history of manual work “by hand” from coal mining to shipbuilding.

The communities that formed around manual work took on distinct characteristics and values. Solidarity, neighbourliness and social justice were at the core working people’s lives.

Of course, many of these industries have gone, to be replaced by very different sets of economic activities. However, that is not to say that the values of collectivism, solidarity and social justice have gone. We need only look to the success of movements like McStrike, the WASPI women and the Deliveroo strikes fighting the insecurity of the gig economy.

Nonetheless over the last 30 years we have seen a disconnect between the values of our Northern heartlands and the Labour party.

The Labour Party took the Northern working class for granted because they had been the core base of Labour support since the very foundation of the Party. There was this idea that they had nowhere to go, other than Labour.

However, just as we took Scotland for granted before 2015, we continue to take the North for granted which puts us at risk of potentially disastrous results.

## Northern Values

### i) collective provision of key services

By focussing ideas and policies that reflected the supposed aspirational and individualist values of the middle classes in the South of England, the Party took no account of the problems emerging in the North.

Barely a mention is to be found in the language of New Labour of solidarity, equality or redistribution even though these were core values of the Labour Movement from the start.

The idea that you don't close your eyes and walk past on the other side of the street if you are passing a stranger in need of help. This ethic was imbued into the Party by working class communities who understood that the next victim could be you.

'An injury to one is an injury to all' or 'Unity is Strength' were inscribed on our banners from the beginning.

This ethos of mutuality and collectivism lay deep within "Northern" communities. And it has left an indelible mark on our country which remains deeply committed to collective provision of services.

Common ownership ensures that the wealth as well as the administration of core services is placed in public hands and is operated on behalf of the whole community and not simply the wealthy owners.

It's important to recall that public ownership is not the same as top down bureaucratic 'nationalisation'.

The polling organisation Yougov<sup>24</sup> showed not only that the public defends the NHS as a provider of health services (with the partial exception of mental health services). But they also strongly believe in the collectivist principle that when any one of us is sick, then the rest of us pay our taxes to help you recover - the basis that one day maybe we, or somebody we love, could be ill, and therefore be in need of medical care.

Seven in ten (69%) people still back the basic principle behind the NHS – that healthcare should be funded from general taxation for everyone.

Other options get remarkably little public support. One in nine (11%) think there should be a hybrid system where healthcare is funded by compulsory health insurance for everyone, paid for from taxation for the least well off, and deducted from other people's wages.

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<sup>24</sup> [YouGov, Brits still love the NHS, but they are nervous about its future, 2018](#)

Only 4% believe in a more American-style system, where healthcare should only be funded by taxation for the least well off, with other people choosing to take out voluntary insurance if they wish.<sup>25</sup>

## **ii) Equality Social justice regional redistribution**

The North historically was a great engine of the Industrial Revolution with our engineers, our factories, our work force and our natural assets such as coal. To this extent, the North was also a major contributor to the ongoing wealth of the country.

Every region benefited from the wealth. We should recall that John Prescott's department created the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) which did much to mitigate the problems in England's regions.

We don't believe, however, that as the country went into a protracted process of de-industrialisation there was any sustained and comprehensive attempt to use the wealth we created in our area to build a bridge through into the new global, digital economy. The RDA's were among the first to be abolished by the Tory/Lib Dem coalition in 2015.

In pursuit of Southern voters, Giles Radice had suggested that we bring to an end the inter-regional redistribution of funds from one area to another. This can only be interpreted as an attempt to bribe wealthier areas to vote Labour on the promise that they would get to retain more of their wealth.

The idea that this should happen is an affront to the deeply rooted sense of fairness or social justice in the British psyche. By 2012, Coalition government ministers were suggesting that public sector employees should have regionalised pay agreements<sup>26</sup>. This would mean that teachers for example in less affluent areas would be paid less than their colleagues in wealthier areas.

The inevitable consequence of this would be - though it was never clearly stated - that the best teachers/doctors etc would gravitate to those regions which were already prosperous, thereby reinforcing their advantageous situation.

The TUC tested the public reaction to this proposal.

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<sup>25</sup> [YouGov, Brits still love the NHS, but they are nervous about its future, 2018](#)

<sup>26</sup> [BBC News, Regional pay: George Osborne's public sector plan dead? 2012](#)

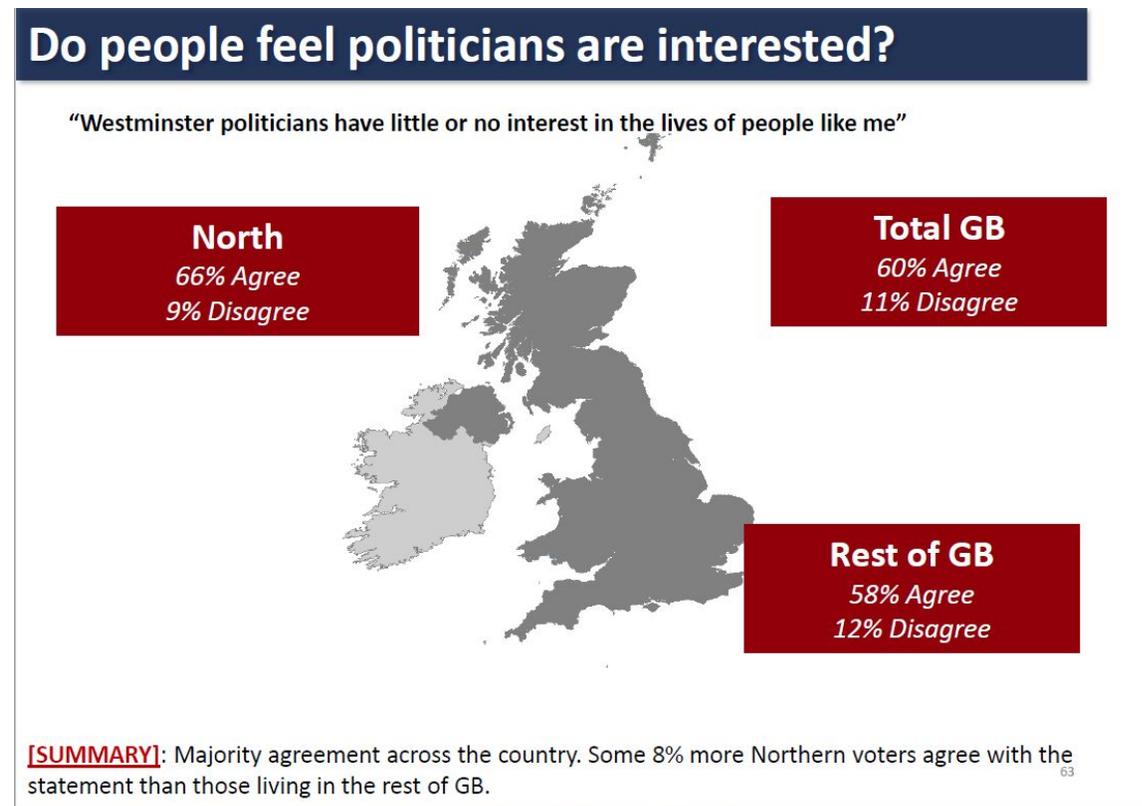
Unsurprisingly people in the North overwhelmingly rejected the idea. In Yorkshire, for example, over 70% were against the idea. Interestingly, even in the prosperous South people were against the idea, by a smaller margin, but still a majority - 54%.

### iii) Attitudes to the British Establishment. 'The dice are loaded'

One of the central tenets of the Labour Movement has been the view that the country is run only for a handful of powerful and wealthy people rather than for the whole population. Since the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Leader this view has been encapsulated in the slogan 'For the Many not the Few'.

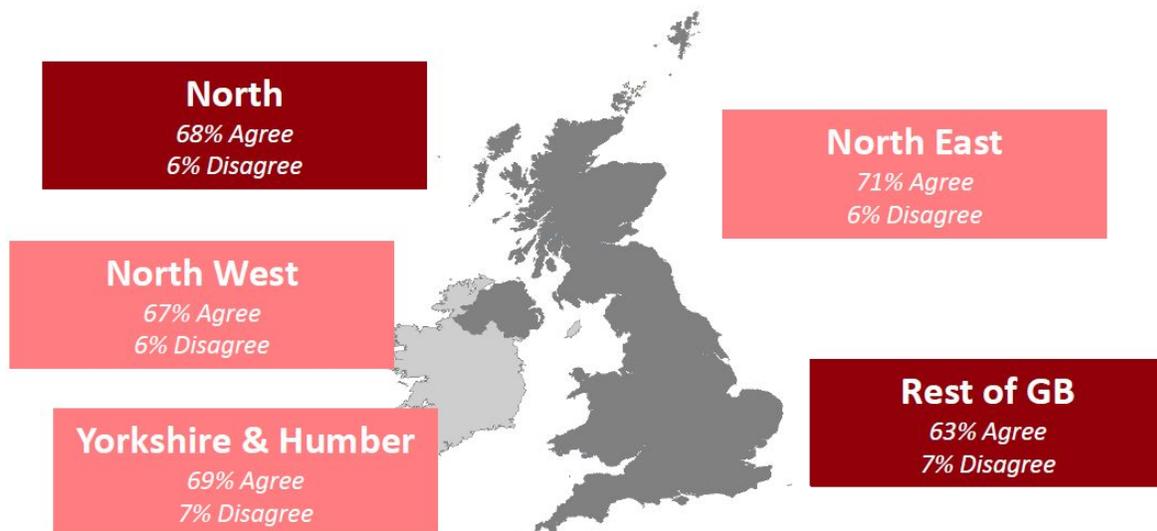
Views of this are strongly held in the North, perhaps accentuated by the geographical distance from the centres of power and wealth in London and the South East.

In a poll carried out for the Labour Party in 2016, BMG explored attitudes to the Establishment. The following graphics plus commentary speaks for themselves.



# Anti-Establishment/Westminster Quote

“The people have spoken but the establishment don’t want to listen”



**[SUMMARY]:** There is deep strength of sentiment towards this statement both in the North and across the country, and although the North East shows the greatest number agreeing, the key dividing line is social and economic rather than geographic. Among ABs just 57% agree (14% disagree), whereas among C2s and DEs some 69% agree (circ. 3% disagree). Among degree educated 61% agree (12% disagree), whereas among those with no qualifications 71% agree (1% disagree).

# Decisions about the North made in London

“It is right that most of the decisions about the running of the North should be made in London”.



↑↓ = significantly higher/lower than the total

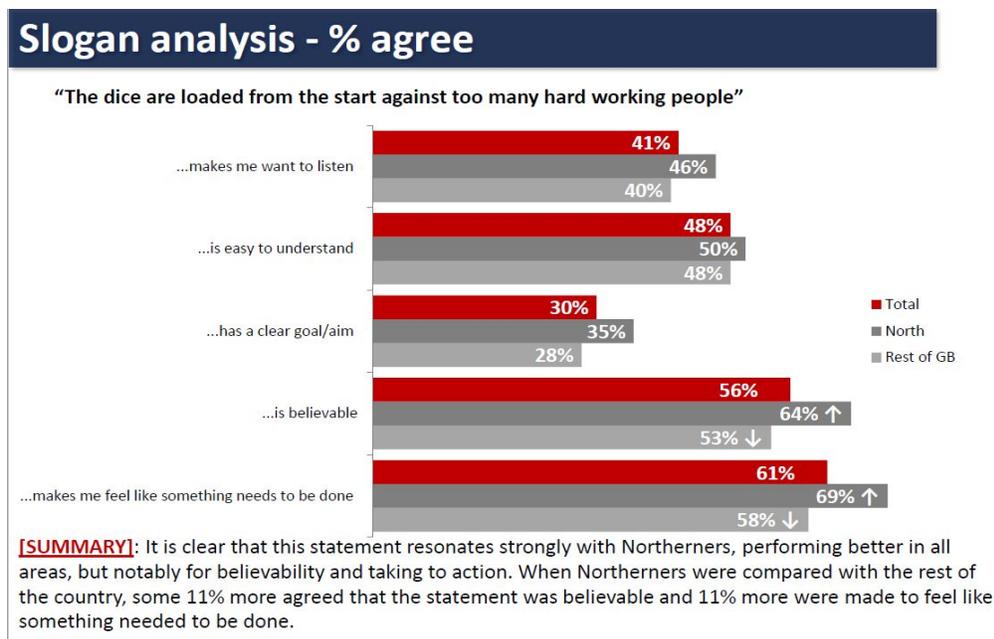
**[SUMMARY]:** Stark difference between the North and the Rest of GB – close to half the level of agreement and double the level of disagreement in the North compared to elsewhere.

Even in London communities, which are geographically closer to the centre of power, this sense of alienation rings true. In “We are Ghosts” CLASS claim that “The city (London) is often viewed as inhabited solely by ‘cosmopolitan elites’, a narrative that erases working-class communities in the city.”

And just as in the North, social mobility is a myth: ‘Working twice as hard to get half as far’ encapsulates this reality that, regardless of talent, aspiration and effort, structural conditions provide particular groups with a head start.”<sup>27</sup>

Having established that the North feels strongly (as do many other communities) that the Establishment is not listening to the views of ordinary people, do those surveyed that the decisions being made in their interests, or those of the wealthy few?

The same poll produced the following result:



#### iv) Changing the Structures of the British State

The British state is one of the most centralised in the world. We have already seen how the over concentration of power in London and the South East works against the interests of the country as a whole.

A democratic revolution will have to run through all the parts of Britain’s power centres if we are to build a forward looking modern country.

This is fully understood by a large swathe of opinion in “Northern” areas.

<sup>27</sup> CLASS, ‘We Are Ghosts’ Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice, 2019

Here are some recent findings in a poll of attitudes towards political reform which must surely consist above all of prising the fingers of the privileged off the levers of political power.

Those who voted Leave and those who voted Remain are united in the view that democratic reform is needed – 71% for Leave voters and 66% of Remain voters agreed with the statement.

Poorer respondents (those in the C2DE social grade) are slightly more likely to agree with this statement (70%) than those in the ABC1 grade (66%). A similar difference is found between BME and white respondents, with the former more likely to agree that democracy is in urgent need of reform (70% compared to 67% among white respondents).

There is regional support for the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement by a 'Senate' that represents the entire country equally.

Among all respondents (thus not limited to Labour supporters), only 60% of those living in London and 63% of those in the East Midlands found this argument convincing, compared with 84% of respondents living in the North East, 77% in the West Midlands and 75% in the North West. An average of 71% of respondents found the argument convincing in the remaining English regions.

Similarly, those living in the North West (87%), West Midlands (83%), North East (81%), Yorkshire and the Humber (80%), and South West (78%) were most likely to find this argument easy to understand. This decreases to an average of 69% among those living in the remaining regions.

## **Post script the 2019 General Election**

Tragically in the 2019 election, the electorate chose the Tories. It gives us no satisfaction whatsoever to say that this election underscored the central arguments contained in our pamphlet. And they made the task of correcting the underlying problems more urgent.

What were the underlying trends in this election and how did they relate to the central arguments of this pamphlet?

We briefly outline below some of the details which are emerging from analysis of the election result. We warned that there is no path through to a Labour victory which is based on a kind of metropolitan triumphalism and that in particular those areas which have what we have described as having 'Northern' characteristics were vulnerable.

In 2019 we lost the following English seats:

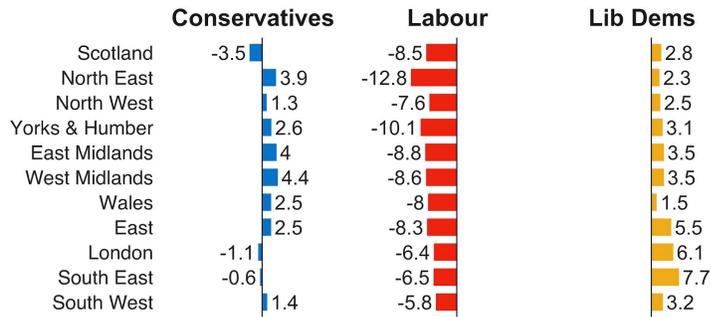
**Ashfield – Conservative gain Barrow & Furness – Conservative gain Blyth Valley – Conservative gain Blackpool South – Conservative gain Bolsover – Conservative gain Bolton North East – Conservative gain Birmingham Northfield – Conservative gain Bishop Auckland – Conservative gain Burnley – Conservative gain Bury South – Conservative gain Bury North – Conservative gain n Colne Valley – Conservative gain Crewe and Nantwich – Conservative gain Darlington– Conservative gain Derby North – Conservative gain Dewsbury – Conservative gain Don Valley – Conservative gain Dudley North – Conservative gain Durham North West – Gedling: Conservative gain Great Grimsby – Conservative gain Heywood and Middleton – Conservative gain High Peak – Conservative gain Hyndburn – Conservative gain Ipswich – Conservative gain Kensington – Conservative gain Keighley Leith – Conservative gain Lincoln North West Durham – Conservative gain Newcastle-under-Lyme – Conservative gain Penistone & Stocksbridge – Conservative gain Peterborough – Conservative gain Redcar – Conservative gain Rother Valley SNP gain Scunthorpe – Conservative gain Sedgefield – Conservative gain Stockton South – Conservative gain Stoke-on-Trent Conservative gain Wakefield – Conservative gain Warrington South – Conservative gain West Bromwich East – Conservative gain West Bromwich West – Conservative gain Wrexham – Conservative gain Workington – Conservative gain Wolverhampton North East – Conservative gain Wolverhampton South West – Conservative gain**

Anyone who cares about our party will find the list painful to read. But it is worth reading it carefully. Every single one of these seats - except 2 - are to be found in the Midlands and the North.

Here we publish the BBC analysis of the regional swings at the general election. The headline points to the aggregate win in the Midlands for the Tories. But, as can be seen, the details of the regional swings taking account of movements of both the major parties show significant regional variations.

## Conservatives won more votes in the Midlands, while Labour lost votes everywhere

Percentage point change in vote share



After 650 of 650 seats declared

BBC

It is clear that it was in the North of England and the Midlands where the greatest proportion of swing against Labour, and to the Tories, occurred.

Here are the aggregate swings between Tory and Labour:

North East	16.7%
Yorkshire and Humber	12.7%
East Midlands	12.8%
West Midlands	13.0%

To get these huge swings into proper perspective, we need to understand that there were anti Labour movements in London and the South East but they were under 6%.

The North West is somewhat of an anomaly with a swing of 8.9% and more work needs to be done. We can see a core periphery dynamic in the election result, with more economically peripheral areas falling to the Tories but big cities like Manchester and Liverpool sticking with Labour. If you were to exclude the strongly anti tory Manchester and Liverpool effects, then similar swings occurred elsewhere in the North West as in the rest of the North. You can see this clearly with the loss of so many seats such as Leigh or the Bolton seats.

Overall the 2019 results confirm the central thrust of this pamphlet. If we turn away from geography to social class for a moment, there was a swing to the Tories in the constituencies with the greatest density of working class voters.

The BBC also produced evidence that there were considerable swings in working class constituencies. In 2017 Labour won 72 of the 100 seats with the largest numbers of blue collar workers. By 2019, we won 51. By contrast in 2017 the Tories won only 17 of these seats, whilst in 2019 they won 31.

The table below shows the 2019 result broken down by socio-economic grades<sup>28</sup> and clearly shows Labour's class problem.

	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	%c change 1997-2017	2019	%change 1997-2019
AB (%)	31	30	28	26	27	37	+6%	30	-1%
C1 (%)	37	38	32	28	30	40	+3%	32	-5%
C2 (%)	50	49	40	29	30	41	-9%	32	-18%
DE (%)	59	55	48	40	37	47	-12%	39	-20%

A further indicator from the 2019 election which supports our pamphlet is the voting pattern of seats with a high density of leave voters. This high density was found to exist especially in seats with what we have described as 'Northern' characteristics.

If we take seats which voted by more than 60% to leave the EU during the referendum, we can see that the swing from Labour to Conservative was a staggering 16.5%. On the other hand, in seats with 60% or more votes to Remain, the swing to Tory from Labour was 3.5%.

What was clear at the time of writing the pamphlet, before the 2019 election, was that we could track a steady decline in working class support for Labour. In 2017 this changed because we had a more radical offer than before, and we respected the referendum result, although it was not enough to win power.

The last straw though was in 2019, when our decades-long neglect of the heartlands turned into direct opposition with the democratically expressed wishes of our heartlands.

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<sup>28</sup> IPSOS MORI "How Britain Voted", 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Labour cannot win if it becomes disconnected from its heartland areas. And it should not wish to do so. This is not simply because our core areas in the North *and elsewhere* have traditionally returned so many of our Members of Parliament (though numbers matter of course). It is also because our values emerged out of, and remain embedded within, the North and elsewhere.

We can be confident if we boldly embrace those values and build policies which are based upon them, then we can convince the country that we deserve to be elected.

Northern values - and those of all our heartlands - are to be found in large concentrations throughout the country. To the extent that we strayed away from communities with Northern characteristics, we can see that we lost votes. This applies in part to a number of recent elections. In 2017 we saw the start of a significant recovery of our position but in the intervening years the way in which the Brexit debate unfolded in the country, but also in the party, we fell back in so many communities which had faced towards leaving the EU

After thirteen years of government, Labour had made huge strides in improving public services and reducing poverty in the UK. However, the real structural change needed to breathe life back into post-industrial towns and villages that would improve the lives of people and communities loyal to Labour for a century was never fully delivered.

Our partial failure in this task meant our heartlands were particularly vulnerable as a Tory government, propped up by the Liberal Democrats, crudely experimented with austerity on the country's most vulnerable people. At the same time changes in the party under "New Labour" hollowed out the structures so that there was less involvement of individual working people in decision making. It left a disconnect between the Party and the communities it was formed to represent and as such meant we were less agile in dealing with change.

The malaise of the Northern and other Heartland areas cannot simply be treated by stuffing a few more pockets with gold. We need to get back to the values on which the party was built.

To do this we must strive to once again become a genuine working class socialist movement that is built, speaks the language and represents the interests of those we seek to represent. We must be radical in our trust of the core values and founding principles of the party, that were born out of the intolerable mass of inequality that was late Victorian Britain and are so relevant today.

Labour must review our structures and culture to ensure that voices from working class communities everywhere, but especially in the regions suffering from de-industrialisation, are heard with equal force to other groups.

Obviously this should not be undertaken at the expense of the prioritisation we have given to other underrepresented groups (BAME, women, LGBTQ etc). Indeed these groups form a large part of the warp and weft of working class communities.

To this end Labour should consider taking a number of steps.

To this end Labour should consider the following ideas.

#### **a) Party structures**

- Abandon the notion that we do not need to resource traditionally 'safe' Labour seats, embed and massively expand our community organising model in these places to empower and win for local people;
- Remove all barriers to ensuring carers, cleaners, factory workers and people from the gig economy and other low-paid industries can have their voices heard in the party and can more easily stand for elected office.
  - Review membership pricing structures and lead a mass recruitment drive in communities with 'Northern' characteristics. ○ Ensure reserved places on Labour's NEC
  - Adopt protected shortlists for people from these backgrounds;
- Review an increased role for individual "opted in" trade unionists within our party structures;
- Mirror calls for a new constitutional settlement in the UK with a complete overhaul of party structures implementing a federalised structure built from regions and nations with an NEC that reflects this;
- Form a Greater Northern Caucus that includes representatives elected from MP's, Councillors, the Membership and the Trade Unions with an annual conference. This could be an independent Northern Labour Party, much like that in Scotland;
- Set up a Northern Socialist Network to bring together the labour movement in the North and strengthen our collective voice.

#### **b) Labour policies and values which could be considered**

- Commit to ending austerity and to build universal, *local* public services, with resources allocated to communities on the basis of need. Money alone, handed down on high, will not be enough, so we envisage introducing mechanisms by which local people can participate and have a greater say in their services, without reverting to the service "choice" model of New Labour;
- The creation of a Working Peoples Audit Office that reviews the impact of every piece of legislation on the lives of ordinary people;

- Set up an extensive ‘Marshall Plan’ which includes the North and other deprived areas of the UK to target spending on post-industrial and coalfield communities to support developing industries and encourage specialisation - for example ensuring a Green New Deal has statutory objectives which guarantee social, economic and cultural outcomes;
- A policy of full employment based on full-time, permanent, purposeful green industries, starting with held back areas, and implementing strong industrial relations laws including collective sectoral bargaining;
- Turning the debate about regional pay on its head to address income inequality, much like the system in Germany where the federal government ensures equality through regional tax redistribution;
- Stem the brain drain from our heartlands and attract talented public servants to seek employment in our working-class communities by breaking up and moving departments, institutions and public bodies to the region. Incentivise or legislate for big businesses to do the same;
- Establish a Citizens’ Wealth Fund to address wealth inequality, using wealth taxes and asset sales (including assets in the Crown Estate);
- Create regional companies with the aim of taking publicly funded university research to an end product and socialising its profits and in doing so create full employment, good jobs and apprenticeships;
- Use procurement and state aid as an end to a market-driven economy.

### **c) Constitutional and political change**

- Create a Council of the North to give a strong voice to the region;
- Set up a constitutional convention with citizens’ assemblies to discuss and debate the future governance of the country, including debating the proposals in this pamphlet;
- Move beyond on the Tories’ city mayor deals to build genuinely rooted devolved institutions which give expression to popular sovereignty;
- Argue for and in government implement a democratically elected Senate of the Regions and Nations;
- Advocate a radical federal structure, including Regional Investment Banks and a transformative devolution of power.

Carrying out a once in a generation shift in the location of power and wealth of our country away from a privileged few, based as they are in a small part of central London, is the only way to change the alienation and anxiety which is felt by millions of people.

This is Labour's path to a united, modern, generous spirited, outward looking, tolerant Britain. Labour's **route** map can be confident of Labour Northern roots provided we act quickly and decisively.

Finally, we intend to launch an initiative to take forward this debate.

Get in touch with us on [Northern.Discomfort.2019@gmail.com](mailto:Northern.Discomfort.2019@gmail.com) If you're a socialist from the North, we'd like to hear from you, and don't forget to please provide your name and region.