



# LABOUR COUNTRY

*How to rebuild the connection  
with rural voters*

*By Tobias Phibbs*

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## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

During 2017, the Fabian Society carried out a range of qualitative and quantitative research. We convened an advisory panel of senior Labour politicians and experts, held focus groups, conducted both a national poll and a survey of Labour party members, interviewed Labour activists in rural areas and encouraged local party branches to host discussions around the theme of Labour in the countryside. All have contributed to the findings of this report.

### The definition of rural

The notion of rural is contested. For this report, we have adopted the classification of the ONS and taken it to refer to any settlement of fewer than 10,000 people. We have sometimes – again taking our lead from the ONS – further separated this rural classification into two subcategories: ‘town and fringe’ and ‘rural’. These refer to more and less built up settlements respectively, all of which have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

### Focus groups

In October and November 2017, we carried out three focus groups with rural voters. These discussed what living in a rural area is like, the participants’ political concerns and their perception of political parties in general and the Labour party in particular. The groups were composed of between seven and 10 people – all either Labour voters in 2017 or those who had considered voting Labour but in the end had voted for another party. Participants were selected from across the social classes.<sup>1</sup>

The first session took place in St Asaph in north Wales in the constituency of Vale of Clwyd, which Labour narrowly regained from the Conservatives in the 2017 election (on an 11.9 per cent swing, having lost the

seat in 2015). The second took place in the village of Probus in Cornwall, with participants coming from the neighbouring villages of Malpas and Tregony too. All are in the constituency of Truro and Falmouth, which remained Conservative in the 2015 election but experienced a 22.5 per cent swing to Labour. The final group was in Clay Cross in North East Derbyshire, with participants drawn from nearby villages including Duckmanton. This year, the Conservatives took North East Derbyshire from Labour with a 12.5 per cent swing. Each location, then, had a very different profile. And there were differences between and within the groups, particularly in participants’ views of the Labour party, but there was also much in common across the groups.

### The poll

YouGov carried out polling for the Fabian Society from Tuesday 7 November to Thursday 9 November 2017. In total, 3,619 adults were polled across Great Britain, 696 of whom lived in a rural area in England and Wales. Questions covered voting intention, political priorities and life values.

### Labour party members’ survey

The Fabian Society hosted a survey on SurveyMonkey aimed at Labour party members with rural connections. 984 people filled out the survey, of whom 60 were elected Labour party representatives, including some parliamentarians. The survey was open from 22 March 2017 to 8 January 2018. Questions covered political priorities, how respondents believed rural communities felt towards the Labour party, how well the Labour party was seen to understand rural areas and the steps Labour could take to improve its standing in rural areas. The sample was self-selecting with the survey promoted in

a LabourList article, the Fabian Society website and on social media.<sup>2</sup>

### Labour activists’ written and oral evidence

The Fabian Society interviewed Labour activists and councillors in rural areas whose thoughts fed into this report. We also received several written submissions from experienced rural Labour organisers, activists and officers, including a collective submission from a local party branch.

### Advisory panel

Senior Labour figures and rural experts (listed below) sat on an advisory panel for this research project. They met twice in 2017 to discuss Labour’s rural problem and the Fabian Society’s research. They also commented on drafts of this report.

- Ruth Davis, RSPB
- David Drew MP
- Maria Eagle MP
- Lord Maurice Glasman
- Helen Goodman MP
- Lord Jim Knight
- Hywel Lloyd, Labour COAST&COUNTRY
- Lisa Nandy MP
- Lord Jeff Rooker
- Baroness Jan Royall (chair)

The project was supported by the Countryside Alliance, but the Fabian Society maintained editorial control. **F**



The Countryside Alliance is a 100,000-strong membership organisation which exists to promote and protect the rural way of life.

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I take full responsibility for this report, its findings, recommendations and all of its mistakes. **F**

**FABIAN  
SOCIETY**

A Fabian Society report  
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Like all publications of the Fabian Society, this report represents not the collective views of the society, but only the views of the individual writers. The responsibility of the society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the labour movement.

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## Executive summary

THE LABOUR PARTY'S origins are as rural as they are urban. Industrialisation and enclosure drove people from the land, and villagers and city-dwellers alike formed the labour movement together to defend their dignity and livelihood.

Despite Labour's strong performance at the last election, it risks becoming electorally and culturally adrift in rural areas. To win a general election, Labour must capitalise on the demise of Ukip and the weakening of the Liberal Democrats to gain seats in both rural and semi-rural constituencies. A YouGov/Fabian Society poll conducted in November 2017 shows the electoral challenge facing Labour:

- **The Conservatives lead Labour by 54 to 31 per cent in rural England and Wales.** In contrast, in urban Great Britain, Labour is beating the Conservatives by 46 to 37 per cent.
- **The more rural the area the greater the Conservative lead.** In the most dispersed rural areas the Conservatives lead by 57 per cent to 27 per cent. In those rural areas designated 'town and fringe' the margin is 51 per cent to 36 per cent.
- **Demography alone does not explain the scale of this challenge.** The Conservatives lead Labour amongst working class rural voters by 49 to 35 per cent, and the Conservatives perform much more strongly with young rural voters than young urban voters.
- **But there are also reasons for hope.** Labour is leading the Conservatives among those who voted remain in the EU referendum by 45 per cent to 34 per cent.

The reasons for Labour's electoral challenge are first and foremost cultural. Labour is seen as a party of, by and for urban people. To address this Labour must learn to speak in the language and to the priorities of rural England and Wales. It can do this by:

- Campaigning to conserve small, local institutions that tie together rural communities
- Extending the notion of 'rural-proofing' to incorporate not just policy, but campaigning, organising and party culture too
- Supporting local Labour parties to develop a long-term community organising approach that can rectify the inherent difficulties involved with canvassing in rural areas

At the heart of the cultural divide between rural and urban areas is a rural paradox. Young people, especially graduates, are leaving rural areas for cities in search of economic opportunities. Yet our research shows that people enjoy living in rural areas and have little desire to leave them, while many people living in urban areas harbour a desire to move somewhere more rural.

As a consequence, ageing rural communities are becoming culturally and economically adrift from the wealthy, liberal cities which receive disproportionate policy attention and funding.

Consequently, Labour should pursue an economic strategy that delivers for rural areas and helps overcome the cultural and economic divisions in society. This would focus on enabling rural people to find economic success and social status close to home, without having to move to a big city. The strategy should consist of:

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### 1. A place-based industrial strategy to rebalance the economy:

- support for small-scale enterprise and manufacturing
- place-based investment
- support for technical education

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### 2. Better rural transport:

- the restoration of the rural bus routes lost since 2010 and the municipalisation of bus services
- reviewing the effects of the Beeching cuts to rural train services

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### 3. Local, affordable and attractive housing:

- democratic local involvement in planning
- affordable and social housing to meet local need
- small-scale development on disused plots of land
- architectural form that fits the environment
- a fairer taxation policy

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### 4. A post-Brexit agricultural settlement:

- a new support system that values the labour that sustains our countryside, rebalanced towards small-scale and marginal farms as well as the provision of public goods. **F**

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## SECTION ONE: LABOUR'S CHALLENGE

Despite Labour's strong 2017 general election showing, it has not yet been able to fully capitalise on the falling away of Ukip and the Liberal Democrats, both of whom had a historically strong rural vote. This section introduces the political, cultural and organisational challenges Labour will need to address to overcome this rural electoral deficit. Chapter one introduces focus group findings, Fabian Society/YouGov polling and additional research to demonstrate the electoral and political challenge Labour faces. Chapter two focuses on how Labour can bridge the cultural divisions that prevent it from being seen as a natural party of the countryside.

# Chapter one: Labour's rural problem

THREE YEARS AGO Maria Eagle MP, former shadow secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, wrote a report on Labour's performance in rural communities. She found a party lacking an authentic rural voice and going backwards electorally. The report concluded that the path to a Labour government ran through rural England and Wales.<sup>3</sup> The Labour party has since been buoyed by the 2017 general election result which saw it achieve its highest vote share since 2001 as the Conservatives lost their majority. Yet the national swing was uneven and disguised frailties in Labour's coalition. The more urban the area, the greater the swing to Labour.<sup>4</sup>

To win a general election it remains the case that Labour must do better in rural constituencies and in rural parts of urban constituencies. However, new YouGov/Fabian Society polling shows that Labour trails behind the Conservatives in rural areas, with evidence that the more rural the area the less support Labour has. While demography plays a role in this discrepancy, Labour's levels of support amongst both working class voters and voters aged below 50 are lower in rural areas than urban areas.

The labour movement has not always had such a fraught relationship with rurality. Its history should give Labour politi-

cians pause for thought and a place to start thinking about the renewal of Labour's rural tradition. From the farm labourers who became the Tolpuddle Martyrs when they established the world's first trade union, to the mutual improvement societies and non-conformist Christianity that laid the foundations for the Labour party, Labour's origins are every bit as rural as urban. In South Wales, for example, rural pit villages created a network of well-stocked public libraries which became focal points of emancipatory self-education, where miners found inspiration for radical politics in the classical canon. When in 1906 Labour MPs were asked their favourite books and authors, John Ruskin narrowly beat Charles Dickens and the Bible to claim the first spot.<sup>5</sup> A critic of industrial capitalism, Ruskin advocated rural craftsmanship in harmony with nature. Another on the list was William Cobbett whose *Rural Rides* lambasts the political class and industrial capitalism – called simply 'The Thing' – for their role in maintaining agricultural poverty, while delighting in the beauty and variety of the countryside.

The party's increasingly urban feel is in part a reflection of the changing composition of the labour market. At the end of the 18th century the much-mythologised tragedy of enclosure came "like a Bonaparte" and "let not a thing remain", as poet

and manual labourer John Clare wrote, destroying the agricultural commons and paving the way for industrialisation and the move to the cities.<sup>6</sup> The Labour party was founded roughly 100 years later, in part to represent in parliament those working people who had been displaced – both those living in newly industrialised cities, and those who had been driven off the land into other rural employment, particularly mining. Since then the proportion of the population living in rural areas has con-

To broaden its electoral coalition and speak across cultural divides, Labour should renew its rural tradition

tinued to decline. But there are still many millions of people living and working in rural areas, and many more who would like to. The population of rural England alone is greater than the entire population of London. To broaden its electoral coalition and speak across cultural divides to the whole country, Labour should look to renew its rural tradition.

## The electoral challenge

Labour currently holds just 32 of the 199 constituencies designated as rural, having lost two rural seats and gained five at the 2017 general election. Of Labour's 75 target seats for the next election, 16 are rural.<sup>7</sup> But the impact of Labour's comparatively poor performance in rural areas is not confined to these 16. Many more seats are not designated rural but have a sizeable rural component: a further 28 target seats have more than 3,000 rural inhabitants; 20 more than 7,000; 16 more than 10,000; and six more than 20,000.

In these semi-rural seats, Labour is frequently winning in the urban centre and losing the seat because of heavy losses in the rural surroundings. Take Shrewsbury and Atcham, a typical 'doughnut' constituency in which the town of Shrewsbury is surrounded by rural areas. At the 2017 general election Labour won in Shrewsbury itself, but ended up losing the seat by nearly 7,000 votes due to heavy losses in the rural areas. This seat is classified as urban despite containing nearly 30,000 rural inhabitants who swung the election in favour of the Conservatives. Looking defensively, many Labour marginals currently held by Labour, such as Hyndburn, fit the same pattern. To win an election, then, Labour will require more than urban consolidation; Labour will have to win over rural voters in constituencies across England and Wales.

New polling for the Fabian Society (see box one) shows that Labour faces significant challenges in rural areas. The Conservatives are beating Labour in rural England and Wales by 54 per cent to 31 per cent.<sup>8,9</sup> By contrast, in urban Great Britain Labour is beating the Conservatives by 46 per cent to 37 per cent.

Breaking down these results paints a striking picture of Labour's rural disconnect. Our poll, in accordance with ONS classifications, divides the broad rural categorisation into 'rural' and 'town and fringe' voters (who still live in settlements of fewer than 10,000 people). The more rural the area, the lower the level of Labour support. In those areas designated rural, the Conservatives lead Labour by 57 per cent to 27 per cent. In those designated town and fringe, the lead is 51 per cent to 36 per cent.

This electoral deficit cannot be explained away by demography alone. Our poll shows that support for Labour in rural areas is lower across socio-economic groupings than in urban areas. In Great Britain as a whole, Labour is beating the Conservatives by 42 per cent to 41 per cent amongst ABC1 voters and 44 per cent to 40 per cent amongst C2DE voters. In rural England and Wales, the Conservatives are beating Labour by 57 per cent to 29 per cent amongst ABC1 voters and 49 per cent to 35 per cent amongst C2DE voters.

And while it is true that the rural population is older than the urban population,

this too fails to explain the discrepancy between levels of rural and urban support for the Labour party. There is good news for Labour – the party is ahead of the Conservatives among rural under-50s. But the lead is within the margin of error and far smaller than in urban areas. 48 per cent of 18 to 49-year-olds would vote Labour in rural England and Wales, compared to 56 per cent in Great Britain as a whole.

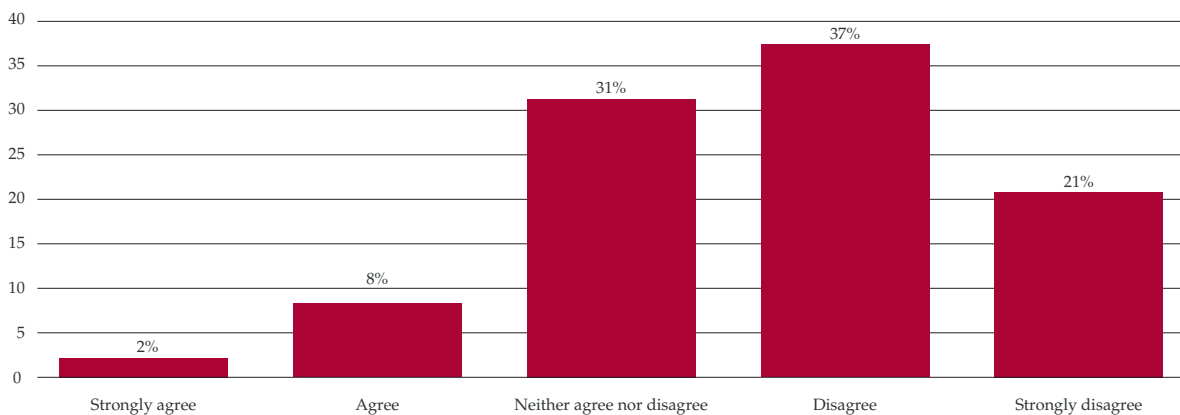
## The political challenge

Rural communities, then, have an aversion to Labour that goes beyond what might be expected on the basis of demographics. The research we carried out for this project suggests that the reason for this under-performance in rural areas is a widespread perception that the political class doesn't understand or care about rural areas, and that the Labour party in particular is a party of the cities, by the cities and for the cities.

It is true that hostility towards the political class is something that much of our divided nation shares, and this stretches beyond geography and party political affiliation.<sup>10</sup> Political disaffection and contempt for the political class were common to all three of the focus groups we conducted [box two details the participants' views on politics in their own words].

But while such sentiments are common in the country at large, they were construed in rural areas as a particular expression of countryside and small town

**FIGURE 1: Labour party rural members' survey: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'The Labour party completely understands rural life?'**



anger. Politicians as a whole were said to be either ignorant of or actively hostile towards rural areas. A farmer from Probus, Cornwall summed this up succinctly, saying: “Do you know what, they haven’t got a clue. None of them.” The general feeling across the focus groups was that Labour needed to think “outside the box, not just in cities.” In particular, in all groups people discussed Labour losing its way under New Labour, when it ceased to be “about the working class.”

Rural Labour activists echoed the thoughts of our focus group participants. Many said that Labour doesn’t resonate with or understand rural areas, and that under New Labour it had failed to support rural areas adequately. Labour, one rural councillor said, “don’t have a clue about the countryside”. The secretary for a rural constituency Labour party, in reference to the New Labour years, described how “rural areas have been studiously, deliberately and consciously ignored and abandoned by the Labour party” and the “plight of the rural poor is completely ignored.”

The more rural the area, the less Labour is seen to understand people who live in the local area. In urban areas 39 per cent of voters agree or strongly agree that Labour understands people who live in their local area while the same percentage disagree or strongly disagree. In rural England and Wales, however, just 35 per cent of town and fringe voters and 25 per cent of rural voters agree or strongly agree, with 45 and 61 per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing respectively.

These findings were further reinforced by our survey of Labour party members. As figure one illustrates, of the 701 who answered the question only 10 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that Labour completely understands rural life, compared to the 58 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed.<sup>11</sup> Colourful language was frequently used by respondents to describe the extent to which they felt the Labour party nationally was out of touch with rural communities.

The perception that Labour does not understand rural communities is not just about policy, however. It is also about culture. There is a sense that Labour is not just a party for cities, but also of them. Our polling shows that the more rural the area, the less Labour is seen to share voters’ val-

ues. Whereas in urban Great Britain, 42 per cent of voters think Labour shares many or all of their values, just 38 and 32 per cent of town and fringe and rural voters do respectively.

## Conservatives were described as representing the wealthiest landowners and lacking understanding of normal people

### Reasons for hope

But our research also found reasons for optimism. Rural support for the Conservative party does not imply active enthusiasm. The Conservatives have a stronger lead over Labour in declared voting intention than when we asked people about the extent to which the parties shared their values or understood the community. The Conservatives are 16 points ahead of Labour with respect to voting intention (looking at all adults, including people unlikely to vote), but are only 11 points ahead when we asked whether each party shared respondents’ values and understood people in the area.

In particular, many rural Conservative voters believe that the Conservative party neither understands people who live in their area nor shares their values. Of 2017 Conservative voters in rural England and Wales, 11 per cent felt that the Conservatives don’t share many or any of their values (a further 7 per cent weren’t sure), and 24 per cent believe that the Conservatives don’t understand people in their area very well, or at all (with a further 9 per cent unsure). This highlights that a significant proportion of the Conservative vote is soft.

In the focus groups too, Conservatives were described – including by Conservative voters – as representing the wealthiest landowners and lacking understanding of normal people. A Conservative voter in Clay Cross, for example, said: “I just don’t think they understand the average person, the normal person and how they live.” And when asked whether the party understood rural areas or were ‘for people

like me’, almost all participants – including Conservative voters – answered either neutrally or negatively.

Yet we know that in some rural areas, particularly post-industrial seats in the midlands such as Bolsover and Bassetlaw, there was a significant swing from Labour to the Conservatives in the 2017 general election. In Clay Cross, part of the rural constituency of North East Derbyshire which the Conservatives won in 2017 for the first time since 1931, several in the group were Labour to Conservative switchers. To the extent that there was a policy reason for switching it was Brexit – “out means out pal, let’s go” as one woman put it – but there was neither faith in nor attachment to the Conservatives.

While those in the focus groups were all people who had considered voting Labour, and thus were unlikely to be ‘true blue’ Conservative voters, this indicates the softness of significant tranches of the rural Conservative vote. These findings offer Labour genuine hope in rural areas. And they are congruent with a growing body of evidence: polling of rural voters since the coalition government came into power in 2010 has shown widespread dislike of the Conservative government. For example, 86 per cent of rural voters felt ‘taken for granted’ by the Conservative-led government in 2014.<sup>12</sup>

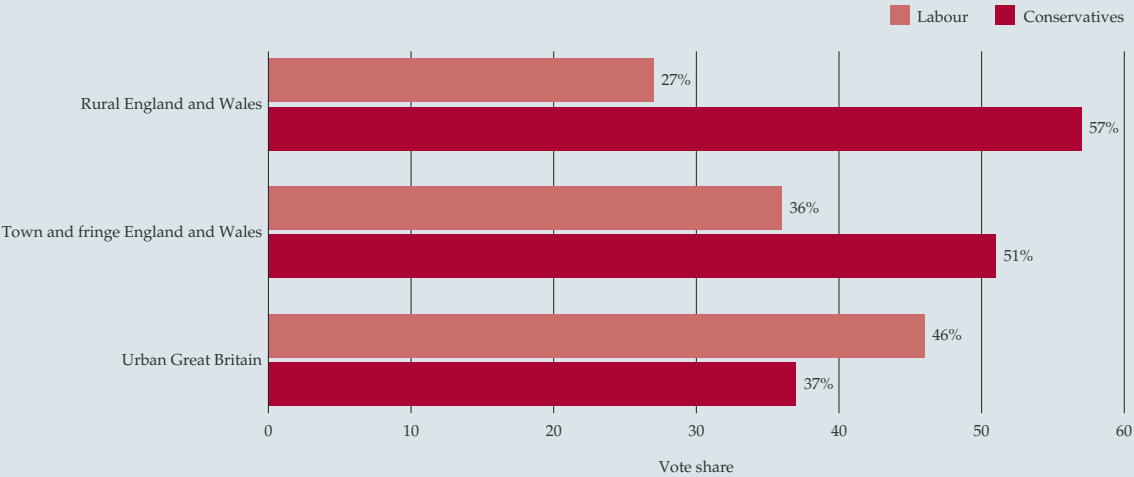
Another reason for hope lies in the collapse of the alternatives in rural areas, as the Liberal Democrats and Ukip have fallen back from their respective 2010 and 2015 successes. While much of the 2015 Ukip vote went to the Conservatives in 2017, around 40 per cent either didn’t vote or voted Labour.<sup>13</sup> With an anti-establishment campaign against the Conservative incumbents, Labour might be able to win over some rural former Ukip voters. More significantly, the Liberal Democrats were often the main opposition to the Conservatives in rural areas. With the return to two-party politics that is no longer the case, and Labour’s excellent performance in Cornwall shows the benefits are already being felt. There is no guarantee that the Liberal Democrats’ current predicament will last indefinitely, and Labour should avoid complacency and step up its efforts to establish itself as the main opposition to the Conservatives in rural England and Wales. ■



**BOX ONE: POLL FINDINGS**

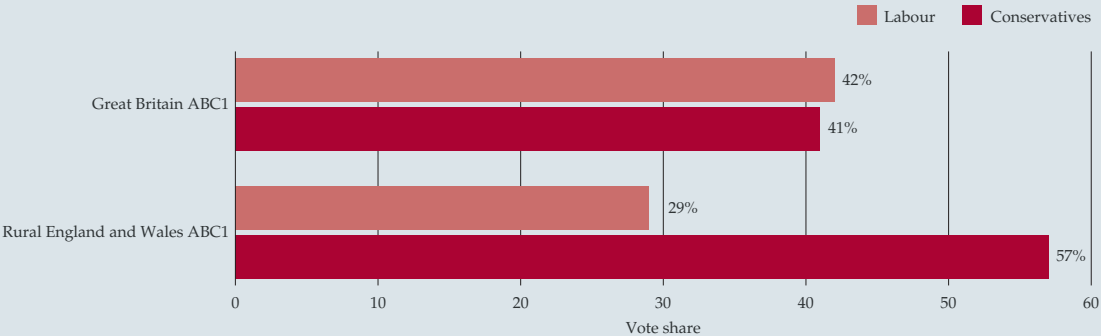
The Conservatives are leading Labour in rural England and Wales, and the more rural the area the greater that lead.

**Voting intention**

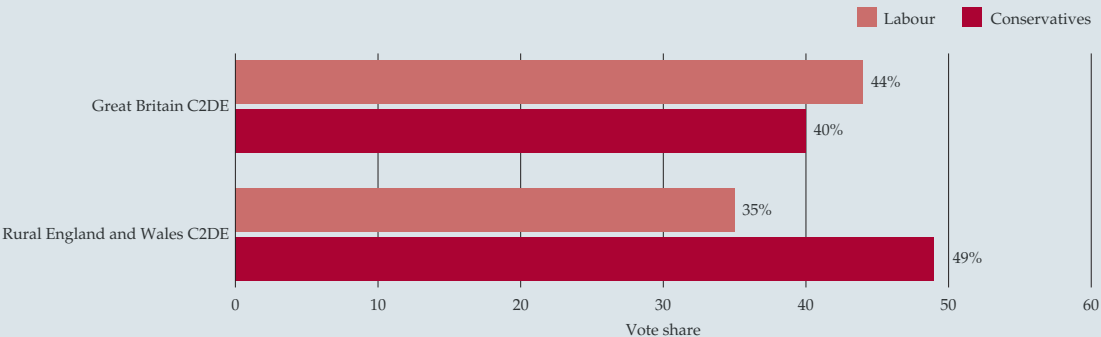


Labour leads the Conservatives amongst both ABC1 and C2DE voters in the country as a whole. In urban areas this lead is extended further, while in rural areas the Conservatives are leading Labour amongst both ABC1 and C2DE voters. Class, then, does not account for Conservative lead in rural areas.

**Voting intention among ABC1 voters**



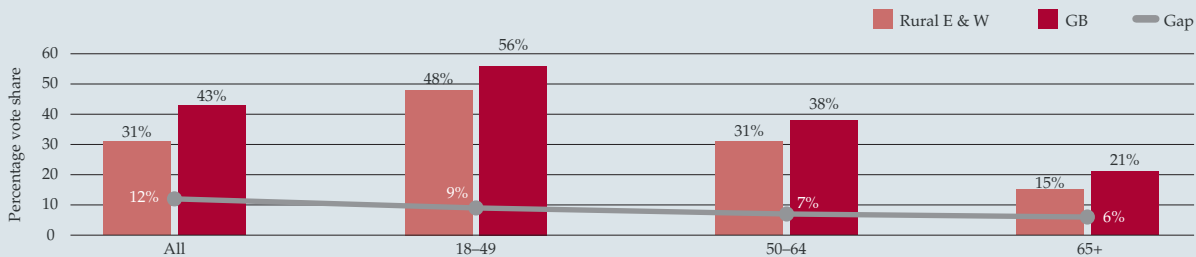
**Voting intention among C2DE voters**





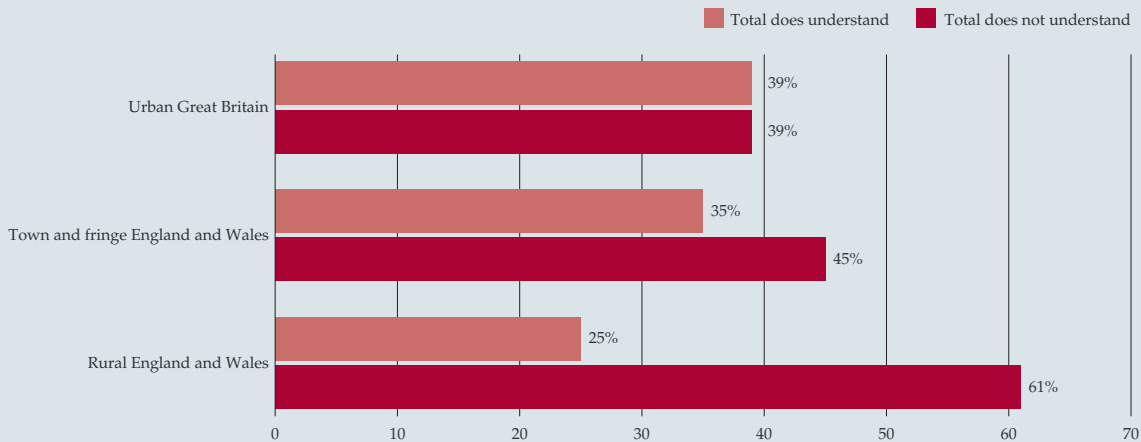
While Labour narrowly leads the Conservatives amongst the under-50s in rural areas, it does so by a smaller margin than in urban areas. Less than half the gap between Labour's share of the vote in rural and urban communities can be explained by the older population in rural areas.

### Labour's share of the vote by age

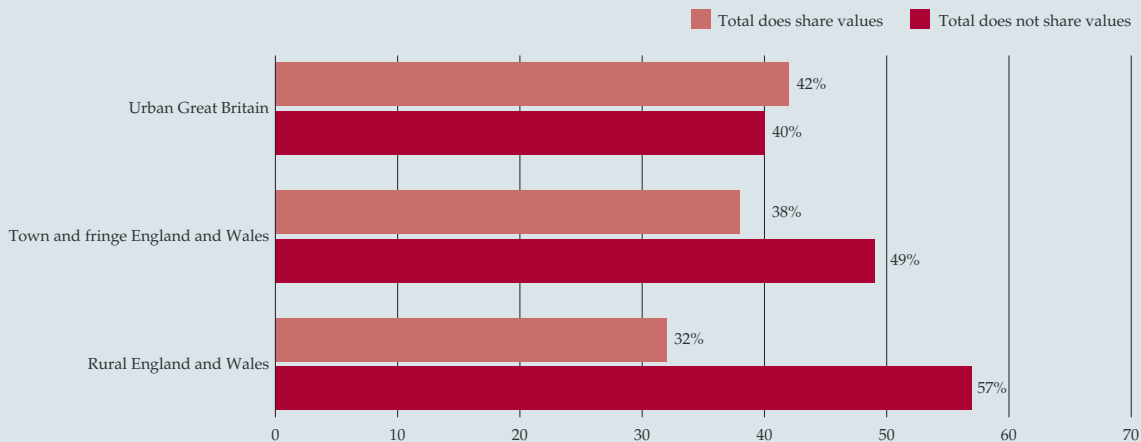


The more rural the area, the less Labour is seen to understand people who live in the local area and the less it is seen to share respondents' values.

### How well does the Labour party understand people who live in your local area?



### To what extent does the Labour party share your values?



While many urban respondents – of all ages, regions and social economic groupings – reported wanting to move to a more rural area, very few people living in rural areas reported wanting to move to somewhere more urban.

Urban Great Britain: To what extent would you like to move to a more rural area?



Rural England and Wales: To what extent would you like to move to a more urban area?



## BOX TWO: IN THEIR OWN WORDS – RURAL VIEWS ON THE POLITICAL CLASS

### National disaffection

There was near-unanimous belief in all three groups that the political class as a whole lacked understanding of both working class and rural communities.

*"I don't think them in Westminster really know what it's like in places like this"*  
– Woman from Clay Cross

*"I just wish they would listen, just really, really listen to the average person."*  
– Woman in Clay Cross

*"Do you know what, they haven't got a clue. None of them. If they wanted to do something, come down and speak to the people in the countryside and understand the way of life and how things tick down here."* – Man from Probus

*"Nobody understands. You just get sick and fed up with it actually."* – Man in Probus

### Local engagement

This national disaffection was paired with a degree of local engagement and an acknowledgement that some local politicians do 'get it'.

Dennis Skinner is "straight", "the old style", "traditional" and "he doesn't take his expenses and stuff like that, he just works for the community." – Various, including Conservative voters, from Clay Cross

*"[Former Liberal Democrat MP David Penhaligon] was the voice, wasn't he, of Cornwall."* – Woman from Probus

### The Conservative party

Across the three focus groups, the Conservative party was given short shrift, including in Clay Cross where the majority of the group had voted Conservative in 2017.

*"A lot of these Conservative MPs [are] big landowners that have nothing to do with farmers or farming people at all. Toffs."*  
– Man from St Asaph

*"I just don't think they understand the average person, the normal person and how they live."* – Conservative-voting woman from Clay Cross

### The Labour party

There were mixed views on the Labour party across the three focus groups, with groups in St Asaph and Probus more positive and Clay Cross more negative – perhaps reflecting the varied swing at the 2017 general election in the three locations. But there were some constant threads through all the groups, notably that Labour lost its way under Tony Blair and New Labour.

*"Labour, to me, means having a baby, like that's as much as it means."* – Woman in Clay Cross

*"Labour were always for the working man. If any understand, it would be Labour. [But] Tony Blair put a total foot in that, didn't he? He did that. To me, Labour represents a strong prime minister like Harold Wilson when he were in and the members of parliament like Dennis Skinner. Strong men. They were proper Labour men."* – Woman in Clay Cross

*"Since New Labour, I think that turned the whole thing on its head so they're all practically the same party really."* – Man in Clay Cross

*"They've just done my head in. They just do my head in."* – Woman in Clay Cross

*"Labour became the New Conservatives, and now hopefully it's getting back to what Labour should be about, which is about the working class."* – Man in Probus

Labour should "spend more time in rural, underprivileged areas." – Man in Probus

*"A lot of my generation have faith in the Labour party."* – Young woman in Probus

*"Labour is big cities. London is a prime example."* – Man in St Asaph

*"You couldn't really toss a coin between Tony Blair and David Cameron, they're*

*both the same person in a way."* – Woman in St Asaph

### The Labour leadership

In Clay Cross, the leadership was not recognised as offering a significant departure from the New Labour years: *"everyone says the same thing and they're the same"*. This was a widely agreed sentiment. However, the leadership of the Labour party was raised frequently by participants in the Probus and St Asaph groups. On balance, participants felt that Jeremy Corbyn was real, authentic and more in touch than the previous leadership, but that he could have done with more strength. While the Labour party as a whole was seen as a primarily urban party, Corbyn himself was not described in those terms.

Corbyn is "just a bit real. Just a bit more normal." – Woman in Probus

*"He does commute everywhere himself. He gets on all the trains, buses."* – Woman in Probus

*"He spoke as an ordinary person would speak to another."* – Conservative voting woman in Probus

*"A nice chap [but] you need someone with a little more force."* – Woman in Probus

*"I don't think they've got a decent prime minister, you know, not a prime minister, but prime minister material, for donkey's years, because I wouldn't vote for Corbyn and I would not have voted for... what were his name? The last one?"* – Woman in Clay Cross

*"He is the first politician I've liked in my life. First time I've really bothered, all my family voted for him in the end."* – Woman in St Asaph

*"I like his blunders, I like his gaffs, because he's honest, he is himself. And I think that the sincerity and normality appeal to people, because we are sick of being talked down to and patronised."* – Woman in St Asaph

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## Chapter two: Rural culture and organisation

TO WIN in rural areas, Labour must do more than just craft better policy: it must speak in the language and to the values of rural life in order to, over time, become a natural party of rural communities. If it is to do so, it must understand and honour the things which rural voters value. In our focus groups participants identified six features of rural life they particularly liked: a strong community; pride of place; the beauty of the countryside; a good family life; high levels of security; and a slower pace of life. Box three outlines these in greater detail in the words of focus group participants.

This chapter first argues that by aligning itself with rural areas and the countryside, Labour can show itself to be a patriotic party with affection for the country it seeks to serve. It then details the cultural faultlines our research showed exist between urban and rural areas, before suggesting four practical steps Labour could take to resonate culturally in rural England and Wales.

### Country and countryside

Labour's lack of cultural resonance in rural areas is damaging not only because of rural votes lost. There is a perennial quality to the romanticism many of us – including those living in cities – feel towards the countryside. If Labour could earn the right to be seen as a 'natural party' of rural areas, it might persuade even urban voters who see in the Labour party a lofty cosmopolitanism of Labour's one nation credentials.

Through centuries of English and British literature and art there is a vision of a pastoral life lived in intimate associa-

tion with family and neighbours, animals and the land. It is hard to avoid either a sentimental portrayal of this vision in our national literature and art – whether in Coleridge, Wordsworth, Clare, Constable or Housmans – or a snobbish mockery of it as seen in Kingsley Amis, for example, or in the pages of some national publications, especially after the Brexit vote.<sup>14</sup>

### Rural areas reflect the particularity of place and so serve as a focus for quiet patriotism

Pinning down the time before urban anxiety took the place of our ancient Arcadian rhythms proves a trickier task. Welsh Marxist Raymond Williams spent his childhood in a village in the Welsh Black Mountains before moving out to the Cambridgeshire fens. In his book *The City and the Country* he charts a history of this kind of sentimentalism, always harking back to a world just disappearing out of view along with one's childhood, from the time of the book's publication in 1973 back through George Stuart's influential 1911 *Change in the Village*, the early 19th century's William Cobbett and John Clare, all the way to Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia* and beyond. Each were convinced that the "decisive change" had "happened during their lifetimes."<sup>15</sup> To some extent, the rural idyll from which we imagine we have fallen is in fact a "myth functioning as memory".<sup>16</sup>

And yet, that rural areas play a role in the national psyche that is closer in proportionality to their geographical land spread than their population density should not surprise us, and nor is it reason for alarm. Perhaps more than cities, rural areas necessarily reflect the particularity of place and so serve as a focus for quiet patriotism. There is nothing necessarily reactionary about this romanticism. In England and Wales artistic visions of the countryside have often been suffused with a radical edge, reflecting a kind of Tory anarchism found in radicals and artists like William Blake, William Morris, Ralph Vaughan Williams, George Orwell and John Betjeman.

Perhaps as a consequence of this association between country and countryside – the two sometimes even serving as synonyms – the latter is a place in which even urban dwellers feel they have some entitlement to, that it is part of their home and their inheritance too. As Philip Larkin put it: "The sense that, beyond the town / There would always be fields and farms" to which "we can always escape in a car" is a source of comfort for us all.<sup>17</sup> The countryside belongs principally to those who live and work in it. And yet, while there have always been clashes between those rooted in rural areas and those for whom the countryside offers respite from an urban life, the rights to public roaming won by the likes of the Ramblers attest to a sense of collective national ownership of the countryside. As Sir Roger Scruton has written: "Hedges and walls speak of private rights to exclude people; footpaths, bridleways and green lanes speak of the public refusal to be excluded."

Ours is a negotiated countryside, one that belongs in a certain measure to all of us.” Labour has typically been on the side of the roamers and rambles, but what we treasure in the countryside is the result both of this negotiation and the managed landscapes that rural dwellers have maintained.

The content of British second world war art and propaganda spoke to this sense of collective ownership of the countryside. The music of Vera Lynn, the paintings of Paul Nash, the propaganda posters depicting rolling hills and meadows and commanding: ‘Your Britain; fight for it now.’ In each, the countryside is somehow indelibly British. Consequently, we should not see a defence of the countryside and revitalisation of rural areas as being of relevance only to those living in rural areas. The countryside is part of our shared inheritance and it is integral to the identity of us all, whether we live there or not: by being seen to be on the side of rural areas Labour can effectively speak to the whole nation.

Yet it is the Conservative party that have successfully made themselves into the natural party of the countryside. As early as the 1920s and 30s, as Michael Woods has argued, they successfully “evoked a romanticised bucolic countryside founded on agriculture” and “critically positioned the Labour party and socialism as among the key threats to the countryside.”<sup>18</sup> There is no reason why this association should persist. There is much to conserve in rural areas but the Conservatives have shown no aptitude for the task. Their economic liberalism has led to the demise of the social assets which sustained a common life. In rural areas, the loss of post offices, pubs, bank branches, sports clubs, high street shops and farms – not to mention the coalition government’s attempt to sell off the forests – is compounded by isolation and felt acutely.

Labour, on the other hand, while very far from perfect, has often delivered for rural areas when in power, notably under the Clement Attlee government (in which Labour won 69 of its own list of 203 rural constituencies, constituting a quarter of Labour’s national vote<sup>19</sup>) and in the early years of New Labour. Some of the party’s proudest achievements lie in rural areas, from the creation of the Agricultural Wages Board in 1947 and national parks in 1949 through to the practice of

rural-proofing all policy, first established in 2000.

Labour’s rural problem is as much a product of a lack of cultural sensibility as a deficiency of useful policy: it does not shout loudly enough about its achievements, nor does it seem to value them highly enough. Labour should seek to embed in party myth and national consciousness its role as defender both of rural areas and the rights of those working there, and of urban dwellers seeking nourishment in the countryside. To achieve this, Labour must pay more than lip service to the culture divides that exist between urban and rural communities.

### Rural and urban culture divides

Labour is viewed by many rural voters as being a party for the cities, as chapter one and box two explore in some detail. This perception is a reflection of the culture divide between urban and rural communities and it is one that Labour must challenge to win a majority in the country. This culture divide can be broken down into three interrelated components: a perception of urban snobbery towards rural areas; the cultural conservatism of rural areas; and rural scepticism about the state.

### Urban snobbery

Labour’s association with the cities leads to an association of Labour with urban snobbery towards rural areas – a sentiment that was shared almost unanimously by participants in all focus groups. When asked to think about how people living in cities thought about rural areas, most participants not only thought those living in cities looked down on rural people, they had first-hand experience of this snobbery.

In Probus, for example, participants variously described being seen of as, “a bit stupid or thick”, “backward”, and a “country bumpkin.” Likewise, a woman in St Asaph thought that people in cities think they “are more sophisticated”, while others thought that rural people were considered “behind the times”, “thick”, “country bumpkins”, and the “Wurzels”.

In Clay Cross too, the same language and themes were used, with one woman describing how people in cities thought rural areas are “full of inter-breeds or things like that” and others remembered being called “country bumpkins” and “hillbillies.” For one man this snobbery crystallised

around the issue of Brexit: “A lot of people didn’t respect, especially people living in London, I felt were blaming it on people of the north as if we didn’t have a clue about anything, because we don’t live in London.”

Rural Labour party members who responded to our survey frequently echoed these findings with experiences of urban snobbery they have experienced in their own constituency Labour parties (CLPs), including from party officers. One member spoke, for example, of the “regular derogatory jokes” and “townie elitism” targeted towards rural dwellers and farmers in CLP meetings. Others spoke of the persistence of stereotypes of rural people as either simple-minded or aristocratic toffs, even within CLPs with large rural hinterlands.

### Cultural conservatism

Labour is in danger of being seen as an exclusively progressive and urban party which is out of touch with working class and middle class rural communities which tend towards cultural conservatism. Both the focus group participants’ reticence about change and extensive previous research bear this out.<sup>20</sup> This conservatism is not about hostility towards minorities or women, and nor is it about a zealous support for the free market. Instead, people in rural communities are more likely to have the kind of conservative disposition famously described by Michael Oakeshott as “to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.”<sup>21</sup>

This was a finding echoed in our interviews with rural Labour activists and in the survey of Labour party members. For example, a rural Labour councillor said, Labour is “only looking at urban, liberal” voters but “London life doesn’t fit communities I’m trying to represent. Socially the communities here are quite conservative with a small-c,” while a rural Labour activist said: “Remember, the [rural] working class is socially conservative and they’re not interested in your Blairite social liberalism or your Thatcherite economic policies supported by Labour. They’re not interested.” Similarly, Labour party members who responded to our survey frequently cited





begin to upset the Conservatives' position as the natural party of rural communities.

### 1. Conserving rural life

For many in rural communities, the Conservatives are the natural party of government and a vote for them is as reflexive and natural as it is in Labour's safest heartland seats. The Drifffield and Rural branch of the Labour party in Yorkshire held a meeting with their members (among them a gardener and horticulturalist, an equine instructor and a former agricultural union branch chair) and a local farmer, a local farm labourer and a gamekeeper to discuss the reasons for Labour's underperformance in rural areas. They concluded that: "Rural voters are not so much anti-Labour as anti-politics, and somehow manage to see the Conservative party as non-political, as the natural party for running the country."

Even for rural residents who are open to voting Labour, the Conservatives are less likely to be an anathema in the way they are for many urban Labour voters. Denigrating Conservatives as the enemy and labelling them 'evil Tories' is unlikely to play well. Instead, the Conservatives' failure to be proactively conservative and safeguard that which is good in rural life opens a space for a potent Labour attack.

When it comes to support for farming communities after Brexit, for example, the ideological opposition to state subsidies of the free-market wing of the Conservatives will clash with the traditional conservative association with farming and rural life. The

**Labour can position itself as the party able to conserve what is best about rural areas precisely because of its radicalism**

Conservatives are pulled in two conflicting directions by their economic liberalism and a Burkean tradition which favours actively conserving valuable parts of our heritage. They are therefore vulnerable to losing some of their core vote. It must be Labour, not Ukip or the Liberal Democrats, which

Labour's reflexive progressivism as clashing with the values of rural voters. One wrote that typically, "rural dwellers tend to be socially conservative. The Labour party has entirely neglected this group; in favour of cosmopolitan, liberals"; another said, "rural areas tend to be traditionalist and socially conservative."

One woman in our Probus focus group channelled Edmund Burke particularly succinctly, saying: "Somebody will come down from up country and they say, 'it's a fantastic place, these villages are wonderful', and the first thing they want to do is change it. I just find that so annoying. I said, 'This has been going for several years and everybody's really happy, so why try to change it?'"

#### Scepticism about the state

Our research found nuanced rural attitudes towards the state. Interviewees and survey respondents reported widespread unwillingness to depend on the state, particularly when it came to social care and welfare benefits, with one rural

Labour councillor describing dependence as "utterly humiliating." As another rural Labour activist put it: "Who wants to rely on the state? It's horrible." Interviewees and survey participants described how this scepticism about state power leads to an unwillingness to depend on the state for welfare or to outsource family care. But this pride in independence does not translate to a support for unregulated markets. There was much support for local public service provision, with participants in St Asaph arguing that sparsity should be accounted for in public spending formulas (in the context of the NHS).

#### Practical politics

Overcoming the entrenched scepticism many in rural communities have towards the Labour party requires both a change in Labour's image and approach, and time. But through a locally rooted politics with a focus on practical issues, embodying rural language and imagery and engaged in patient community organising, Labour can

profits by defending the interests of farmers and the countryside. Labour can stress that the Conservatives are tearing up, rather than conserving, our national heritage.

The same is true for a large number of issues discussed elsewhere in this report. Burke wrote that: “To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ, as it were) of public affections.” By defending the constituent parts of Burke’s little platoons – the rural post offices, pubs, local bank branches and diverse high streets – Labour can help sustain civic life and position itself as the party able to conserve what is best about rural areas precisely because of its radicalism.

## 2. The right approach to animal welfare

One issue which has been too prominent in the Labour party’s approach to rural issues is animal welfare. The Labour party has sometimes given the impression that it believes rural issues can be reduced to animal welfare issues. This is mistaken and has left a lasting impression among some in rural areas that the Labour party does not understand them – or, worse, is actively hostile to them. Many in rural areas care deeply about animal welfare, as do many in urban areas. But this issue is simply not the key priority for rural voters. In no focus group was animal welfare mentioned as a political concern.

The first publication released by Labour for the 2015 general election (with an ostensible focus on rural matters) was solely focused on animal welfare issues. Protecting Animals was published in February 2015. On its front cover was a badger.<sup>22</sup> The eventual publication of a sensible rural manifesto came with a reduced fanfare. It was published with less than a fortnight to go before election day. Such a chronology makes it appear that Labour views rural areas in caricature.

Aggressive support for some animal welfare campaigns (including some based on lies and rumours such as the animal sentience row that flared up in November 2017) can leave a negative impression on certain rural communities, including working class rural communities.<sup>23</sup> The ban on hunting with hounds is now a settled issue with wide support across the country. Yet, as one Labour councillor in rural Cornwall said, “even 10 years

on” there are “ex-mining villages where a proportion of the working class vote may raise the issue of fox hunting”, with “real hostility [to Labour and the ban] at times”. This is a “clash of culture more than of political identity.” There is no need to retread old ground. Instead, the Labour party should think constructively about interventions that will improve animal welfare while resonating widely with people living in rural areas. It should avoid prioritising policy which is pushed by what Michael Woods argues are “urban issue groups” and is thus seen to be an urban imposition on rural communities.<sup>24</sup>

## Rural-proofing will help develop policy with nuance and flexibility in its application to rural areas

There is no shortage of places to start. Often the interests of rural communities and animal welfare go hand in hand, as with the widespread problem of sheep worrying when dogs that are let off leads attack sheep, often fatally. Labour could lead a high-profile campaign to enforce by-laws to keep dogs on leads near sheep farms, improving animal welfare and protecting agricultural workers at the same time. Numerous other non-contentious animal welfare initiatives could be promoted, including some featured in Labour’s new Animal Welfare Plan. Labour should, for example, pledge to: improve transparency and standards in abattoirs; support British farmers and their high standards of animal welfare and environmental regulation, opposing any trade deals that would diminish these standards and hurt British farmers; and ban Chinese lanterns and dangerous forms of plastic which can hurt pets, wild animals and livestock alike.

## 3. Extending rural-proofing

The Labour government’s 2000 rural white paper led to the introduction of rural-proofing of policy. This involved the inclusion of rural communities in the policy-making process and an annual

report by the Countryside Agency into the rural aspects of the year’s policy. While the process was never perfect and was seen by some as only providing retrospective lip-service to rural concerns, it succeeded in raising the profile of rural issues across government departments. David Drew MP argues that by 2004 – notwithstanding the creation of the Commission for Rural Communities in 2005 – this focus began to be sidelined and from 2004 to 2010 this decline in rural considerations in the policy-making process continued.<sup>25</sup> The coalition government accelerated the decline in the importance afforded to rural matters, closing the Commission for Rural Communities in 2013.

Labour’s 2017 general election manifesto promised to reintroduce “a ‘rural-proofing’ process so that all our laws, policies and programmes consider their impact on rural communities”.<sup>26</sup> This is a welcome start that should go some way towards correcting what one rural Labour councillor described as an approach entirely “centred on a presumption of urban background”.

Under Ed Miliband’s leadership, for example, it was not clearly communicated whether the proposed mansion tax would affect farmers, many of whom are asset rich because of the size of their farmlands, but income poor. Rural prospective parliamentary candidates were being probed on this issue and were not able to give clear answers. Rural-proofing will help develop policy with nuance and flexibility in its application to rural areas.

But policy is not everything, and to be truly effective Labour’s rural-proofing will have to go beyond policy into all aspects of its organising and campaigning to make it clear that rural communities are no longer an afterthought. Labour should extend the concept of rural-proofing to include everything from policy to campaigning, public speeches and literature. Labour in England could take its lead from Welsh Labour in this regard, with rural imagery and language woven into everything the party does.

This starts at the top. Successive Labour leaders have made overtures to rural communities. Before his 1997 election victory, Tony Blair was filmed on a farm in green wellingtons and gave an interview to Country Life in which he said: “I wouldn’t live in a big city if I could help it. I would live in the country. I was brought up there,



really.”<sup>27</sup> While the accuracy of his last claim is dubious, it shows the desire of Labour leaders to present themselves as one nation politicians able to speak for town and country alike. Jeremy Corbyn has the advantage of a genuinely more rural upbringing, something he too has drawn upon: “I was born in rural Wiltshire and grew up in Shropshire where I first took part in Labour politics. Labour must become as much a party in the communities like the one in which I was born as it is for people in inner-city constituencies like the one I represent.”<sup>28</sup>

But making allusions to one’s back-ground won’t be enough. Instead, Labour has to speak the language of small town and rural England. It is perhaps easier to define what this is not than what this is. In 1999 New Labour set up a major new body, the Countryside Agency, to improve the rural environment and rural communities.<sup>29</sup> Much of their practical activity was valuable. In 2003, however, it published a major report, *The State of the Countryside 2020*, which exemplified what rural language is not. Littered with the empty euphemisms of corporate management speak it predicted that the future stewards of England’s landscapes would not be farmers but “choice managers”.<sup>30</sup> It is a great credit to the Labour leadership today that vocabulary like this seems to have taken a back seat.

Yet the Labour party’s language and imagery remains visibly urban. Addressing this has the potential to resonate beyond rural constituencies. In writing speeches, literature and party election broadcasts, activists should consider the use of rural locations; examples from rural life; and language with rural allusions and themes.

#### 4. Long-term organising

The dispersed nature of housing in rural communities makes it unavoidably

harder to canvass using traditional methods. When you are standing for a council by-election in a ward 14 miles long, as one rural Labour activist we interviewed had, knocking door-to-door is not easy. A seat like Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman’s constituency) is 356 square miles; a typical London constituency is more like 3 square miles.<sup>31</sup> And those MPs in urban seats with a significant rural hinterland usually find it easier to concentrate resources in the dense urban areas rather than squandering effort on inefficient rural campaigning.

But this does not mean organising on the ground in rural areas is impossible or not worth the effort. Rather than simply door-knocking and data collection, in rural communities community organising and the spread of support through word of mouth have a real capacity to improve Labour’s standing. At present, even within predominately rural constituencies, often the rural areas of the constituency are overlooked in favour of the more urban conurbations. The vice-chair of one rural Labour branch told me that their “thriving, active branch” is “geographically as well as culturally distant” from the constituency executive committee who are focused on the major town in the area. She also described how the “regional party appear to consider us a lost cause. Their input in recent years has been negligible.”

There are three immediate steps Labour could take to improve its approach to organising in rural communities:

- First, it should encourage the selection of candidates for rural campaigns from the rural areas themselves. They should be local leaders in their community who have earned the trust of local residents. The urban professionalising of politics has been a Conservative process as much as a Labour one, and so by prominently featuring identifiably rural leaders in rural areas, Labour can effec-

tively distinguish itself from the political class as a whole and better represent the country’s diversity. Selection panels should consider the benefits of more regional accents; more plain-speaking; more politicians who have done the sort of jobs common in rural areas; and fewer who have followed the now traditional route of university, a plush urban graduate job in politics, the third sector or the media and then on to hold political office.

- Second, local Labour branches should be given more support from CLPs, regional parties and the national party in order to throw themselves into local campaigns and community life. Whether it is a campaign to save a post office or a pub, or participation in village fetes or fairs, Labour should be involved. (At times it should be willing to take a back seat in these campaigns too; developing support for the party should be secondary to the local campaign.)
- Third, it should modify its target seat strategy. A short-term utilitarian strategy based on the concentration of resources into a few select target seats leads to the draining of support and morale from rural constituencies deemed unwinnable. When the Liberal Democrats went into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010 there was a huge space for campaigning in rural areas of the country like Cornwall, Somerset and Devon in which the Liberal Democrats had traditionally been the opposition. Instead, calls from Labour parties in these areas were ignored and rural Labour activists were pushed into going to campaign in the nearest big city. Instead, in the context of an expanded party membership, rural activists should be encouraged to stay and campaign closer to home. **F**

### BOX THREE: IN THEIR OWN WORDS – WHAT RURAL PEOPLE VALUE ABOUT RURAL LIFE

#### A strong community

When asked to talk about their local area, almost all responses referred to the community spirit and friendliness.

*"When we had the flooding everybody got together, everybody helped each other because there were a lot that lost everything. So there was a lot of community spirit there."* – Woman from St Asaph

*"If you've got no milk, you could knock on anybody's door and they would give you a cup of milk. Well, you couldn't do that in London, could you?"* – Woman from Clay Cross

*"Villagers are really good. They're always there for each other."* – Woman from Probus

#### Pride of place

The tight-knit community feel generated civic pride and identity which manifested itself differently in each group. There was little animosity towards outsiders but rather a parochial pride and desire to defend what makes their home particular.

*"This is Derbyshire and it should remain as Derbyshire. You shouldn't change the area too much."* – Man in Clay Cross

*"People are protective of what they've got down here, because it is pretty special."* – Man in Probus

*"If you make friends with a Cornishman, it'll take a long time before you make them as a friend, but they'll be a friend for life."* – Man in Probus

#### Beauty of the countryside

The proximity to beauty and countryside walks was frequently raised by participants in all groups, along with the tranquillity, spaciousness, quietness and darkness that city life makes impossible.

*"When you walk the dog, it's just so peaceful, you know, we've got permission from*

*the farmer and we can walk through his fields and so we walk through the fields and have all the sheep following us."* – Woman from St Asaph

*"There's lovely walks on your doorstep, like, you don't have to go far and you can walk for miles."* – Woman from Clay Cross

*"The countryside is unspoilt and green and it's quiet and dark."* – Man in Probus

#### Family

Another theme that came through very strongly was the importance of putting family before career, and providing a proper childhood for young children.

*"What I like around here, my kids aren't streetwise, they didn't have to think when they went out."* – Man in St Asaph

*"People know whose kids are whose. Say one had an accident, they'll know where the parents are."* – Woman in St Asaph

*"It's a good place to bring your kids up and they can have a proper childhood."* – Woman in Probus

*"Somebody said to me today they got held up by the tractors. I ring the father and go, 'Just tell them to pull in'. That's all you've got to do. And it works."* – Man in Probus

*"I chose to put children before my career, to be poor and happy for a bit, because I just think at the end of the day, when you go to the graveyard, you know, it doesn't go, 'Oh they did a 50-hour week' it says, 'Father', 'Brother', 'Grandmother'. Where does [a focus on career and material things] end? And what does it bring you in the end? I'm not sure it brings you that much."* – Woman in St Asaph

*"I got a bit older, got married, had a daughter and thought, 'I don't want that [city] life, I want to live here'. But it's funny because a lot of my friends who are still living in London or Manchester or Leeds now, a lot of them are single, you know, very lonely. You're not getting in from work until 8 o'clock, you're knackered, you have your tea and go to*

*bed. I don't feel like I'm missing out."* – Woman in St Asaph

#### Security and crime

The absence of crime relative to cities and large towns was frequently brought up as a factor for choosing to live in a rural area.

*"The crime rate is really quite low."* – Woman in St Asaph

*"Bigger cities have got a lot of crime."* – Man in Clay Cross

*"There's a lack of crime, [although] you might get a bit of sheep rustling, I suppose."* – Man in Probus

#### Pace of life

In all groups most participants felt that people living in rural areas and people living in urban areas – particularly London – have different attitudes to life. Much of this was put down to the friendliness of rural areas, which was contrasted with the anonymity of urban areas. But there was also a sense that in rural areas people took things more slowly and with more care.

*"I've been on that commuter belt, I've been where people don't speak to you when you say hello in a morning, and they're all bustling around and they're all fixed to get to work and a faster pace of life."* – Woman in Clay Cross

*"I can't imagine people [in city centres] being as friendly as what they would be in a village environment. Because, I think people have just got like tunnel vision when they're in a city. Me and my husband went to London a couple of years ago and we got off the train, stepped outside and we both went 'oh', you know, because we're not used to it. We were like, 'oh my god.' We were glad to get back here, you know."* – Woman in Clay Cross

*"I once asked a bus driver a question [in a city] and he looked at me like I'd got three heads, because they're just not used to people doing that, they just scan the card and nobody acknowledged each other."* – Man in Clay Cross

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## SECTION TWO: A LABOUR AGENDA FOR RURAL AREAS

In combination with a cultural and organisational approach that situates Labour as a party comfortable with rurality, Labour must articulate a policy agenda tailored to rural needs that can win over rural voters and, once in government, serve their interests. The Fabian Society/YouGov polling shows that political priorities in rural and urban areas largely align. When asked about the most important issues facing the country, respondents from both rural England and Wales and urban Great Britain identified Brexit, healthcare and immigration as the top three.

Once rural-proofed, much of Labour's current policy agenda can deliver for the countryside. This section considers how Labour could build on its existing offer in four policy areas that are particularly important to rural areas. Chapter three considers an economic strategy that could bring new life to the rural economy. Chapter four argues for investment in public transport to address rural isolation. Chapter five outlines an approach to housing in rural areas that works with, rather than imposes on, rural communities. Finally, chapter six looks at how support for farming should be delivered post-Brexit.

### Chapter three: A rural economy strategy

*"It's hard when fowks can't find their wark  
/ Wheer they've bin bred an' born; / When  
I were young I awlus thowt / I'd bide 'mong  
t' rooits an' corn / But I've bin forced to  
work i' towns, / So here's my litany [...] But  
now, when all wer childer's fligged,  
/ To t' coontry we've coom back. / There's  
fotty mile o' heathery moor / Twix' us an' t'  
coal-pit slack. / And when I sit ower t' fire  
at neet, / I laugh an' shout wi' glee"*

Frederick William Moorman

*"Well Cornish lads are fisherman / And  
Cornish lads are miners too / But when  
the fish and tin are gone / What are the  
Cornish boys to do?"*

Roger Bryant

**T**O WIN OVER rural voters, Labour will need to address the relative economic decline most rural areas have faced in recent decades. Economic prospects have clustered in cities, with a growth in the knowledge economy and high-tech gradu-

ate jobs. At the same time the numbers engaged in traditional rural employment such as mining and agriculture have radically shrunk. Whereas the rural economy has traditionally centred on vocational work with jobs for life, today the economy favours those willing to be flexible and continually retrain. As a consequence, people moving into rural areas tend to be older and wealthier, while people moving out of rural areas tend to be younger and highly educated. This is a potent social and economic combination for rural communities which value stability so highly. Now more than ever, Marx and Engels' famous description of the accelerationist logic of capital looks apt: "Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that

is solid melts into air, and all that is holy is profaned."<sup>32</sup> This modernisation has created economic and cultural challenges for rural areas which are existential.

**The message is clear:  
people like living in rural  
areas and have little  
desire to leave**

Yet the message from both our polling and focus group research is clear: people like living in rural areas and have little desire to leave them for cities. Our national poll found that people in rural areas are much less likely to want to move somewhere more urban than people living in urban areas are to want to move somewhere rural. We asked rural respondents how interested they would be in moving somewhere more urban on a scale of 0-10, with 0 representing 'I would definitely not

like to move to a more urban area' and 10 'I would definitely like to move to a more urban area'. The average score was just 2.4 (for rural voters it was 2.3; for town and fringe it was 2.6). Even amongst 18 to 49-year-olds the mean score was only 2.8. By contrast, when urban voters were asked how interested they were in moving somewhere more rural the mean vote was 5.1. These results held true across voting intention, social grade, region and referendum vote. Likewise, in no focus group did more than one person express an interest in moving to a big town or city when asked.

Resolving this rural paradox – on the one hand the appreciation of rurality; on the other the feeling that to find a better life you have to move somewhere more urban – is at the heart of addressing economic decline in rural areas. A young former Labour activist from rural Cornwall described her first-hand experience of the process of "forced migration" by which young people fail to find suitable work anywhere near their home and so are "compelled to leave for better opportunities."

This chapter explores people's experience of both economic decline and transience. It concludes by outlining the principles for a place-based industrial strategy to rebalance the economy with rural communities at its heart.

### **Economic decline in the rural economy**

The sense that rural areas have been forgotten at the expense of cities, especially London, came across strongly in all three focus groups. In Probus, for example, a man said that "rural areas are generally overlooked" while another participant thought that: "If you go, you know, to Bristol, West Midlands, London, there's loads more money." In St Asaph a participant described the area as "struggling economically", and another said being in rural north Wales felt like being "the poor relative" of better connected, urban areas.

Economic deprivation was felt to be particularly damaging for teenagers and young adults. As one woman in Clay Cross put it, there are "lots of things going on for the younger ones but there's not really much for the older ones to keep them out of trouble." A man in his twenties in Probus said: "Down here, there's not a lot really there. As nice as it is." Research from the

Sheffield Institute of Education bears this out: young people brought up in rural areas who choose to stay face a significant 'rural pay penalty' amounting to several hundred pounds every month.<sup>33</sup> Combined with higher living costs this leads to reduced spending power for young people which has a knock-on effect on the viability of local shops and services.<sup>34</sup>

## **The loss of bank branches was felt not just as a loss of a financial service, but also a social one**

The lack of local amenities, services and good shops was another major concern for the focus groups. Participants in St Asaph raised the lack of accessible hospital services, and a recent Public Health England report shows that while 97 per cent of urban residents live within 8km of a hospital, only 55 per cent of rural residents enjoy the same proximity.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in both St Asaph and Clay Cross the last local bank branches had recently closed, to the dismay of residents. The loss of bank branches was felt not just as a loss of a financial service but also a social one, particularly for older people – as one woman put it: "My grandma, she will only ever go into a bank to talk to them, she wouldn't trust online banks." In 1988 there were 20,600 bank branches in the UK; in 2017 there were only 7,200.<sup>36</sup> Rural areas have been the hardest hit, and as a parliamentary briefing on branch closures shows: "Even if the total was to stabilise, the negative impacts of closures in small rural areas are qualitatively and distributionally different from the benefits of an additional bank in a main shopping high street."<sup>37</sup> Where a village or small town lacks a bank branch, the ATM becomes a lifeline. But there are 129 postal districts (with a combined total of 110,900 people living in them) without a single ATM.<sup>38</sup> And now Link, which manages ATMs in Britain, has plans to radically reduce the number of ATMs on high streets. Research by the consumer group Which? has shown it will be rural areas that are disproportionately affected.<sup>39</sup>

While there was appreciation in the focus groups for the good amenities that did

exist – in St Asaph, the pub and the gym were highlighted; in Clay Cross the toddler mornings and Zumba class – there was dislike of the changing character of high streets. The closed bank branch in St Asaph had seemingly been replaced by "loads of takeaways". And in Clay Cross, where there had been a "busy market years ago when I was a kid," now the high street was described by one woman as, "fast food, nail bars, hairdressers, tattoo parlours and charity shops". The loss of diverse high streets has been a major concern since at least 2004, when the New Economics Foundation published its first report on Clone Town Britain. It found an alarming and rapid increase in the homogenisation of high streets surveyed across the country's cities, towns and villages.<sup>40</sup> This homogenisation, which has continued apace since 2004, has an impact on the pride people feel in the place that they live. A councillor in Cornwall told me that residents in his small town felt like "their history and community is being slowly pulled apart. A lot of the institutions that made up the heart of the town are disappearing." For example, his town had recently seen the closure of a historic post office and the moving of its library which was affecting people's sense of "civic pride, the status of the history of their community." To a small town or village, the loss of just one or two important shops, historic buildings or institutions can be significant.

The statistics back up these feelings of economic decline and neglect. Even the poorest in cities have much greater levels of upwards social mobility, for example, than their counterparts in rural areas. This holds true both in rural areas of generalised social deprivation, such as Sherwood in the east Midlands, and in pockets of deprivation in otherwise wealthy areas such as the Cotswolds. As the Social Mobility Commission's 2017 State of the Nation report shows, "people who grow up in a remote rural or coastal area or in a former industrial area face far higher barriers to improved social mobility than those who grow up in cities and their surrounding hinterland."<sup>41</sup> And Centre for Towns data shows that the more rural area the quicker a population has aged, with social mobility remaining low despite young people – especially graduates – leaving small towns and rural areas.<sup>42</sup>

## Change as loss

Yet despite the economic problems that rural areas face, focus group participants (like the public at large, as our poll shows) did not want to abandon their communities. Nor were they keen on the rapid churn of people in and around their villages and small towns. Participants identified rapid change and the movement of people into and, especially, around the UK as a challenge to the strong community life they valued so highly. Whereas in 2005 Tony Blair described, with echoes of Marx and Engels, how globalisation would benefit only those who were “swift to adapt, slow to complain”, participants understood communities as relatively stable things, threatened by transience.<sup>43</sup> Change was often understood as loss, as the destruction of valuable things that were once held in common. This was particularly the case in Probus and Clay Cross.

There was a strong and unanimous feeling in Probus that there were too many outsiders from “up country” in Cornwall. People with second homes and disrespectful holidaymakers were singled out for watering down Cornish distinctiveness and community. A woman claimed that “second homes kill villages”; a man gave an example: “Down in [a nearby village] there’s about half a dozen lights on in the winter.” Holidaymakers (and, to some extent, non-Cornish people who had moved to Cornwall) were described as ‘emmetts’ – which participants described

areas, I don’t like that at all. And like, our young’uns then, they’ve got not a shot at a house at all, and they’re having to move out the area. I like to keep mine with me, do you know what I mean? Like we all used to when we were kids, you had a house in your village and that were it. You can’t do it now.” Another participant agreed, arguing that they should keep the community “as tight as possible”, clasping her hands together into a fist.

The result of more mobility was seen to be a decline in community spirit; a woman in Clay Cross said: “There was more of a community spirit [in Clay Cross] then than what there is now because there’s more people coming into the area now, isn’t there?” Others agreed, with several participants repeating almost verbatim that, “people used to leave their doors open” in the past.

This parochialism was also evident in people’s understanding of identity, place and distance. A woman in Clay Cross talked about how she had to live “away from my family”. It turned out that her family were less than a 20-minute drive or bus journey away in a nearby town. Similarly, a man who had lived in Probus, Cornwall for years described how: “My dad’s from Cornwall, he’s Cornish and I’m not even Cornish proper, I wouldn’t call myself Cornish, but you still feel really protective of your county.” Whereas Sadiq Khan can say that anyone who moves to London is a Londoner, things are not so straightforward elsewhere.

The geographer David Harvey describes the process by which technology and globalisation reduce the limits that time and space place on the transmission of goods, services, people and even culture as ‘time-space compression’.<sup>44</sup> This has not occurred to such a rapid extent in rural areas, and nor would rural people want it to. Distinctive places, the people in them and the spaces between them can matter greatly.

In the focus groups there was a widespread view that these destructive changes were inevitable, and that nothing could be done to prevent them. In Probus, for example, a woman talked of the strong Cornish identity the area had, “not so much now, but in the past...”, while a man talked about the relatively undeveloped local area, before qualifying: “But yeah, obviously that’s all changing.” In Clay Cross, a woman

talked about new housing developments as “the sign of the times, it’s the change.” This wistfulness about the inevitability of change was perhaps best expressed by a man in his thirties from Probus who said that living in the area was “a bit like going back in time, which is nice.” It would be too easy to write all this off as nostalgia; the things which people spoke about losing – from market days to bank branches, post offices to a more stable community – were tangible, even quantifiable.

## The limitations of geographic and social mobility

Rural communities have not, in the main, reacted to relative economic decline by embracing Tony Blair’s call for flexibility, transience and innovation in the new high-tech, global economy. Instead most rural dwellers want to stay put and there is reticence about the relentless pace of social and economic change. This fits squarely within a labour tradition that resists dehumanising changes to work and community life. Such a resistance indicates that a restless form of geographic and social mobility is no solution to the issues the rural periphery faces. The limitations of social mobility have been well understood since sociologist and Labour party activist Michael Young coined the term meritocracy in the late 1950s, yet a form of social mobility which has in practice amounted to a one-way ticket to London for a small number of academic high-achievers has dominated the agenda of much of the centre-left and right for far too long.

When areas are hollowed out of the industry that provided work and the institutions that sustained a common life, many young people – especially graduates – will leave in search of economic opportunities, however invested in their home they feel. What happens to the people and places that they leave behind? As Michael Merrick said recently in a piece for Radio 4: “In a contest between home and academic flourishing, some choose home; not because of ignorance, but because of a refusal to shed heritage as participation fee.”<sup>45</sup> This, of course, is not about limiting people’s freedom to move and work as they wish. But many young people are finding themselves effectively forced out of rural areas to find economic opportunities, leaving behind ageing communities politically,

## Distinctive places, the people in them and the spaces between them can matter greatly

as the Cornish word for ants. They were perceived to be ignorant of local customs, littering and driving around small country lanes with oversized cars. As one man put it: “There’s just no consideration.”

As with Probus, in Clay Cross concerns about transience were mainly bound up with concerns around housing. One woman talked about the way in which the council housing scheme was no longer oriented to the local community. Instead, “We’ve got people coming from other





economy and culturally adrift. Labour's priority must therefore be the development of an industrial strategy which will enable people, if they wish, to stay put and lead a decent life rather than encouraging them to abandon their home and culture in the name of social mobility – a necessary corollary of which is the left behind.

### **A place-based industrial strategy to rebalance the economy**

A place-based industrial strategy cannot just be about the number of people who are employed, given employment is at a record high. Not every job confers equal status on its holder and it is the fall in the perceived social status of workers as much as their level of economic distress that is the cause of feelings of abandonment and decline.<sup>46</sup> The rural economy must not only provide jobs but decent jobs which give workers meaning and dignity. The legacy of Liberal Democrat David Penhaligon – identified by participants in the Cornish focus group as the object of an enduring and respected collective memory – is instructive here. Born locally, he went on to be a powerful advocate for Cornwall, arguing in terms with strong contemporary resonance for rural areas which have suffered deindustrialisation: "You need more in an economy than just tourism, ice cream and deckchairs. Our mining industry is not a figment of the last decade or the last two decades. It has occupied Cornishmen and it has produced wealth for this century, the previous century and probably the last 2,000 years; and what we're asking the government to do is to recognise the great contribution we have

made for the wealth of Britain, and in this time of great trial and tribulation to come to our assistance – that's what we're asking our government to do." This does not mean resuscitating dead industries with few prospects, but supporting the economic revivifying of rural places based on a new approach.

Redressing this place-based imbalance in our economy and culture is arguably the central task of not just the UK government but of governments across the world as they seek to square the disruption of technological advance and globalisation with a sustainable and lasting domestic settlement. Labour could build on its 2017 manifesto with an industrial strategy guided by three interconnected principles: support for small-scale manufacturing and enterprise; the need for place-based investment; and support for technical education.

### **1. A revival of small-scale manufacturing and enterprise**

Twenty years ago, political theorist Paul Hirst argued that the UK's rural economy could recover from the decline in agriculture, mining and other forms of traditional rural employment by learning from the example of areas of rural Denmark, Ireland and northern Italy. All adapted to economic decline (in particular the decline in agricultural employment) with a revival of small-scale manufacturing. In northern Italy for example, manufacturing centres were established in small towns and rural areas in the 1980s and 1990s. Local financial

institutions provided capital for the local economy, and industrial districts were regulated by "cooperation between local public bodies, trade associations, local industrial training schools and labour unions".<sup>47</sup> Small businesses and the self-employed engaged in high-skilled manufacturing found niche markets and a viable future in a global economy. Regions which adopted such an approach, such as northern Italy, continue to show economic resilience relative to their near neighbours.<sup>48</sup>

Germany's highly successful *Mittelstand* – the small and medium-sized firms that constitute nearly all of the German economy – offers a similar model.<sup>49</sup> It too has created a viable economic future for rural communities. The defining features of the *Mittelstand* firms offer an alternative path to decline for the British rural economy: concentrated ownership (many of the small firms that make up the *Mittelstand* are family owned); longevity and secure jobs; businesses embedded in their local community; specialised and highly skilled skillsets; and an engaged workforce with an emotional attachment to their workplace and vocation.<sup>50</sup>

If Labour in government were able to help promote such an economy in rural England and Wales, it would also enable small towns and rural communities to maintain their distinctiveness, rather than collapsing into commuter towns, retirement villages and endless suburbia. As Hirst argued: "Rural areas do not have to be divided between the well-to-do commuters, the retired, telecottagers,

wealthy farmers – and the rural workers, scraping by with intermittent and generally badly paid waged work. A society of yeoman – artisans, small entrepreneurs, skilled workers – could well return, if we work at it.”<sup>51</sup>

## 2. Place-based investment

To create such a rural economy Labour should build on its 2017 manifesto with a genuinely place-based industrial strategy. This would have three main components: the provision of low-cost financial support to rural enterprise; investment in rural infrastructure; and support for the small shops, services and institutions that bind together rural communities.

The government's new industrial strategy is an urban-focused missed opportunity. It pays only lip service to the need for a place-based approach. One of the five foundations of the government's new industrial strategy is place, which highlights geographic inequalities and pledges to “introduce new policies to improve skills in all parts of the country, create more connected infrastructure, back innovation strengths, ensure land is available for housing growth, and strengthen our cultural assets.” Yet of the meagre funding supporting this admirable aim, the majority will be spent on improving intra-city transport to “drive productivity by improving connections within city regions”.<sup>52</sup>

Labour, on the other hand, will need to complement sectoral industrial strategies with a place-based approach. In its 2017 manifesto Labour committed to the creation of regional development banks endowed with capital to support local enterprise.<sup>53</sup> These should be sensitive to the requirements of rural communities, with care taken to ensure investment is not overly concentrated in the urban conurbations. In their early stages rural businesses may not be as productive or profitable as their urban counterparts, in part owing to factors such as time and travel costs. If the regional development banks were to afford funding on the basis of likely overall contribution to GDP or productivity, it is likely that rural areas would be overlooked. Another funding model Labour should explore is cooperative rural credit unions, which have historically played a significant role in Germany in providing low-cost ac-

cess to capital for rural people, particularly the poor, looking to establish small firms.<sup>54</sup> These could be helped in their early years with state funding.

Labour will also need to invest directly in rural infrastructure, including digital infrastructure. Labour's 2017 manifesto pledged to “rebuild communities ripped apart by globalisation and neglected for years by government,” with “investment fairly shared around every region.”<sup>55</sup> Here too Labour will have to ensure that the particular needs of rural communities are taken into account in the spending formula, with sparsity and rural communities' ageing population considered. Fibre optic broadband should be rolled out across the country as a prerequisite to the creation and growth of small-scale firms. Chapter four contains further proposals for a Labour strategy on infrastructure to win over rural voters.

Finally, Labour should introduce legislation to support the distinctiveness and diversity of rural high streets. A policy basis for protecting the pubs and post offices, village shops and bank branches that have been closing down at such a rapid rate can again be found in Labour's 2017 manifesto. In particular Labour proposed, “chang[ing] the law so that banks can't close a branch where there is a clear local need”.<sup>56</sup> This assessment should take into account rural isolation. Further legislation should also be introduced to discriminate in favour of locally owned, independent shops – this could be done, as New Economics Foundation has proposed, by changes to the tax system or a greater role for community land trusts.<sup>57</sup>

Research from Northumbria University has shown that there is a correlation between rural communities having a pub and their overall wellbeing and cohesion.<sup>58</sup> Rural pubs – so often the hub around which much of rural life revolves around – are closing down at an alarming rate and require support. This will mean continuing to break up the monopolies pub-owning companies (or pubcos) wield over the industry, in so doing reducing the price of beer and protecting pubs from being sold on to developers.<sup>59</sup> It may also require – in villages where there is only one pub – designating pubs as community assets and supporting them through rate relief schemes.<sup>60</sup>

## 3. Support for technical education

The final component of this strategy is renewing the labour movement's historic support for skilled craftsmanship and technical education. This can create a virtuous cycle in which, as economist Peer Hull Kristensen has written: “Entrepreneurship and educational transformation create a self-reinforcing mechanism, as new small craft-based enterprises have a high inclination to hire and educate apprentices who in these areas will often create their own business.”<sup>61</sup>

Many of the rural jobs which technical education historically provided training for have gone. But with appropriate public and private support technical education could spark a growth in small-scale, high-skill manufacturing that would bring secure and meaningful employment to rural communities. Additionally an ageing rural population is creating a range of new jobs – most notable among them care work – which are vocational in nature, poorly paid and undervalued. Technical education for care work could lead to a rise in pay and conditions, and improve rates of retention. Training for nursing, construction and agriculture will also require further support as the country reduces its reliance on European migration.

Technical education must be supported both in material terms through further government funding and in cultural terms by its promotion in status to that of a university degree. Successive governments have prioritised numbers of students attending university and higher education has been safeguarded while further education has faced deep cuts. But young people seeking success in life should not be funnelled automatically through the university system. For those in rural areas this too often means abandoning home, with diminished prospects for returning owing to the lack of graduate jobs in rural areas.

Instead, Labour should complete what it started in the 2000s and ensure a successful route for the 50 per cent who don't attend university, promoting technical colleges and apprenticeships as an equal alternative to university. Shadow education secretary Angela Rayner's insistence that we should learn from the German system with its high-quality technical education system is welcome, and it should play a central role in any future National Education Service.<sup>62</sup> **F**



## Chapter four: Isolation and infrastructure

CENTRAL TO THE growing divide between cities and rural areas is the deficiency of public transport in rural areas which is exacerbating social isolation for many, particularly older people. While major new infrastructure projects are linking core cities, bus routes and train services between towns have been cut to the bone. It was the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats who together in government cut rural bus services. Labour can – relatively cheaply – invest in rural public infrastructure and show that it, not the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats, is the party that delivers for rural areas.

While it is true that rural households are more likely to own cars than those in urban areas, significant minorities still do not – 14 per cent of households in town and fringe areas and 6 per cent in rural areas have no car at all, while 44 per cent and 35 per cent respectively have only one car.<sup>63</sup> For those unable to depend on access to a car – young people, older people and those in one-car households – regular and reliable public transport is essential. Without it rural people can suffer profound isolation, cut off from not only community but the means of subsistence.

Yet current spending on public transport is profoundly imbalanced. From 2016-2017 to 2020-2021, it has been calculated that London alone will receive more than half of the entire nation's spending on transport. £1,943 will be spent on transport per person per annum in London, compared to £220 in the north east, £212 in the south west and £190 in Yorkshire and the Humber.<sup>64</sup> Given that much non-London public transport spending goes towards large city-based projects like HS2, it is likely that even less is spent on rural people than these regional figures suggest.

All focus groups shared a view that transport links were not good enough as a result of the closure of bus routes and the lack of affordable trains. In Probus a man described the state of public transport as “pretty shocking”, while a woman in



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St Asaph described it as “terrible because it’s very expensive, it’s very limited, you’re kind of locked into only a few places, otherwise it’s very difficult and takes hours to get anywhere.” In Clay Cross, a man thought that, “A local train station would be beneficial to the area because traffic, locally, has increased, it would be really good to link up these local villages to Chesterfield.” Other participants remembered politicians talking about bringing in a new train station to replace the one closed in the 1960s, but that the talk – as they expected it would – had come to nothing.

### Rural bus routes are often the lifelines that keep older people connected to the outside world

There were also concerns about the increase in congestion in the roads that the lack of public transport creates. A man from Duckmanton in the Clay Cross group, for example, bemoaned the cars “com[ing] down at ridiculous speed”, meaning his

son can’t play safely outside. Similarly, a woman in St Asaph complained about “a lot of parking on pavements” which was dangerous for her disabled son.

#### Closed bus routes

Since 2010/2011 there have been £99m of cuts to supported buses in England and £5m in Wales, translating to 2,900 bus services facing either closure or cutbacks.<sup>65</sup> A total of 134 million miles of coverage have been lost in the last decade alone, reducing bus coverage to levels last seen in 1989.<sup>66</sup> These cuts have particularly hurt older people living in rural areas, many of whom do not have access to a car.<sup>67</sup>

Cuts to bus services can seem insignificant when contrasted with issues like Brexit and a crisis in the NHS, or even big transport projects like HS2. But rural bus routes are often the lifelines that keep older people connected to the outside world and each closed service contains many personal stories of anguish. Older people are isolated – unable to get out to meet friends, do the shopping, take part in activities like bingo or dancing or to get to church services. They are even deprived of the social contact that they used to get on

the bus itself. As one woman said in an Age UK report: “It might sound silly but we miss the company because when we all got on the bus you all said ‘good morning’, ‘good afternoon’, and they were all people you went to school with because we’re all pensioners, but now we don’t get to see each other.” The impact of these cuts reduces access to essential public services. The closure of bus routes that connected rural villages near Durham, for example, means that people now must take the bus into the city to change for a bus to take them to their GPs’ surgery in a neighbouring village.<sup>68</sup>

### Dr Beeching’s axe

While buses are the most important aspect of rural public transport, the closure of 13,000km of railway lines and 3,700 stations between 1950 and 1980 hit rural communities particularly hard.<sup>69</sup> After increasing his majority in the 1959 general election, Conservative prime minister Harold Macmillan appointed Ernest Marples minister for transport. Marples was the former director of a road construction company in which he continued to own 80 per cent shares. He believed, along with Macmillan, that the future of British transport lay in roads.

In 1961 Marples commissioned Dr Richard Beeching to write a report into the state of British railways. It recommended drastic cuts. Each one of the sites of our focus groups – Clay Cross, St Asaph and Probus – had railway stations which were permanently closed down. In Clay Cross and Probus this was as a direct result of the cuts recommended in the Beeching report. In St Asaph passenger trains stopped running earlier, in 1955, although the Beeching report contributed to the closure of the line in 1965. The road construction company which the minister for transport once ran went on to build large chunks of the roads that replaced the railways, including the extension of the M1 into London.

By the time Barbara Castle, minister for transport in the new Labour government, introduced the 1968 Transport Act which allowed public subsidies for the railways, it was too late. More than 50 per cent of the country’s railway stations and 25 per cent of all route miles had been closed down – and nearly 70,000 jobs had been lost.<sup>70</sup> Rural areas, which were the least profitable, were the worst hit. The railway stations, many of which were architecturally fine

buildings as well as crucial transport links, were left to rot. The effects of the Beeching axe are still felt in the geographic periphery of our country, whose cultural, political and economic distance from the core has only expanded in recent years in part owing to its infrastructural isolation. 2017 LSE research into the Beeching cuts found that they caused “population decline, relative decline in the proportion of skilled workers, and declines in the proportion of young people in affected areas.”<sup>71</sup>

The Beeching axe was directly identified as a cause of poor transport links in the Probus focus group, with a participant saying: “When they closed all the branch lines, the railways, that was back with Beeching. If they had been kept going, I think Cornwall would be a lot easier place to get around. Or other places in the country actually. Rural places around the country.”

The government has recently announced their intention to open new railway stations and lines, reversing some of the Beeching cuts. However, the government’s Strategic Vision for Rail does not go far enough. That its headline commitment is for the restoration of the Oxford to Cambridge route to complete the London – Oxford – Cambridge ‘golden triangle’ shows that the strategy is focused on connecting the already successful urban centres.<sup>72</sup> Although it is rural lines that were disproportionately affected by Beeching, they rarely merit a mention in the government’s report.<sup>73</sup>

### A policy agenda to tackle rural isolation

The Conservatives’ transport agenda has been dominated by flashy plans and costly gambles, most notably the £56bn HS2 project. Labour should eschew this hubris and invest instead in the buses and train services that connect small towns and rural areas to each other and the wider world.

#### 1. Reopening rural bus routes

Labour’s 2017 manifesto pledged to “introduce regulations to designate and protect routes of critical community value, including those that serve local schools, hospitals and isolated settlements in rural areas”.<sup>74</sup> Labour should go further still: the cuts to bus routes forced by national cuts to local government spending since

2010 should be reversed. If government supported local councils to reverse them in their entirety this would cost £104m, a fraction of a percentage of the money being spent on HS2 or the £18bn per year spent on transport in London alone.<sup>75</sup> Not only are the cuts exacerbating levels of loneliness and isolation at a time when our ageing population demands the opposite, there is also evidence that every £1 spent on public bus funding generates up to £3.50 in wider social benefits, such as improved health and wellbeing.<sup>76</sup>

### These new railway stations could serve as sources of local pride in small towns

This reversal of the cuts should accompany Labour’s 2017 manifesto pledge to “extend the powers [of councils] to re-regulate local bus services to all areas that want them, and support the creation of municipal bus companies that are publicly run for passengers not profit”. This will bring with it standardised and capped fares and more comprehensive cover. A high-profile and deliverable commitment to rural bus services has the capacity to generate public support amongst the older and rural voters who have in recent years been abandoning Labour.

#### 2. Reviewing rural railway stations and services

Labour should commission a comprehensive review of the social and economic impact of the Beeching axe. Many closed stations and lines are unlikely to have sufficient traffic to justify their reopening. But with higher population density and levels of commuting, and within the context of a newly nationalised rail service with cheaper fares, it is likely the review would lead to the restoration of some railway stations and lines that serve less well-connected and less affluent areas. These new railway stations could serve as sources of local pride in small towns as well as transport links, and as such should be built in a style that accords with local wishes. ■

## Chapter five: Rural housing – local, affordable and attractive

**H**OUSING IS AN issue that many believe splits the national need for a mass programme of housebuilding against the nimbyism of suburban and rural areas. In fact, rural and urban communities alike are in dire need of genuinely affordable housing, with hidden homelessness in rural communities growing fast. IPPR has found that from 2010 to 2016 rural local authorities recorded average combined increases in statutory and involuntary rural homelessness of between 32 and 52 per cent.<sup>77</sup> And housing is an equal priority for people living in urban and rural areas. Our poll showed that 21 per cent of urban voters and 20 per cent of rural voters identify housing as one of their three most important issues. Labour is likely to make solving the housing crisis a top priority in its next general election campaign. It should do so knowing that, if it avoids a top-down approach and is sensitive to rural interests, it will enjoy the support of many rural voters.

### Lack of local, affordable and attractive housing

Our report's findings identify the basis for an approach to housebuilding in rural communities which could command a consensus. While there was hostility to new developments in the Probus and Clay Cross focus groups, it was a qualified hostility and there was acknowledgment of the need for new housing – so long as it was affordable, principally supporting the needs of locals and in keeping with the local style.

In Probus there were fears about, as one participant put it, the “nice, rural area, which is beautiful gradually disappearing” but this opposition was not uniform. Four problems were identified with plans for new housing. First and foremost, people were angry that the new houses were “for other people, not for local people”. As one woman put in, there were both “too many new houses and not enough

affordable houses for people that are down here”. Second, there were worries over the capacity of existing infrastructure to support new residents, with one participant concerned that “the surgery and school aren’t big enough for the new estate that they’re going to be putting in the top”. Third, there were concerns about the form of the new houses, with one woman saying “they don’t fit with the environment”. And finally, there were concerns about the quality of the new housing: “In 20 years they’ll be falling to bits,” one man said.

In Clay Cross too, there was anger about development. One woman said: “From my house, across the road, it’s all green belt and everything but they’re building on there, nearly 300 [homes], they’re building up farmlands.” But again, this opposition was qualified – the belief that these homes were not being built for locals was the cause of local opposition. Outsiders buying second homes, for example, “bumps prices up and people who live in that area can’t afford to buy”.

We asked participants in all groups to draw posters for an imagined election which would make them consider for voting for the advertised party. In Probus especially, as figures two and three show, these posters focused on housing, with building affordable homes for local

people balanced with the need to protect the countryside because “our heritage is our future”.

### Five principles for rural housing

Focus group responses show that housebuilding in rural areas will not necessarily be met with blanket opposition from local communities. But winning support for rural development is contingent on the purpose of new housing, as well as its style and affordability. Our research and a review of the literature points to five principles that Labour should deploy when planning developments in rural communities.<sup>78</sup>

#### 1. Democratic involvement

Labour should propose local, democratic involvement with planning procedures in rural areas. At present parish councils are largely apolitical, uncontested affairs in which the same old faces are elected on a miniscule turnout for decade after decade. But when it comes to the problems that planning, particularly for housing, causes at a local level, small-scale, directly democratic structures are needed to challenge the inefficiencies and mistakes of the market.

Here a renaissance of democracy at the parish-level could smooth the path to better development. Residents are better placed than the market to decide what new housing might look like, where it could fit and who it should be for. The work of rural housing enablers is instructive here. They have experimented with local communities working not to derail planning but to transform it so that the form it takes is in accordance with existing style and the taste of existing residents.<sup>79</sup> In rural areas, where new developments represent a more acute problem to people’s sense of place, a local-led democratic process is particularly valuable in both paving the way for housing which fits with rather than disrupts the local environment, and forging a common understanding between new and old, native and incomer. In 2016 Action with Communities in Rural England led the way, introducing neighbourhood planning to 10 rural communities from Suffolk to Northumberland in which local residents had a meaningful voice in planning decisions.<sup>80</sup> These pilots need expanding and should become the norm, not the exception.



**FIGURE 2: Poster designed by Cornish focus group participants.**





FIGURE 3: Poster designed by Cornish group participants.

## 2. Affordable housing for locals

New housing should prioritise the need of existing residents. Local Labour councils should consider rolling out schemes like that developed by St Ives council, which limits new housing to those who can prove it will be their principal residence.<sup>81</sup> When prompted, most focus group participants in nearby Probus were aware of the scheme and all strongly supported it. Such an approach would limit the ability of wealthy outsiders to buy homes in rural communities as a form of asset – whether second-home owners or those buying up properties for the holiday market. This should be combined with a focus on building affordable and social housing. As Labour COAST&COUNTRY has pointed out, in 1980 24 per cent of rural homes were affordable. By 2015 this figure had dropped to eight per cent – far lower than the 20 per

cent in urban areas, despite significantly lower average earnings in rural areas.<sup>82</sup> But often even affordable homes are not really affordable. The definition of an affordable rent is 80 per cent of the average local market rent which places it out of the reach of many. Labour should therefore prioritise social housing.

## 3. Small-scale developments

A Labour government should provide more support for builders to build small-scale developments. Often housing shortages in rural areas are a question of half a dozen homes in a village, and often suitable land for such a development exists, but the big market providers are unwilling to develop at such a small scale. The example of the Hampshire Alliance for Rural Affordable Housing is instructive. It identifies plots of land in existing villages where there is

a clear need for new affordable housing for those with a close connection to the parish, and works in partnership with developers to build those homes.<sup>83</sup> Labour's recent announcement that it will consider forcing landowners to sell land at its current, rather than potential, market rate paves the way for the expansion of such an approach.<sup>84</sup> Labour councils should, where necessary and where there is local need, intervene to buy small disused plots of land and build affordable or social housing on them.

## 4. A form that fits

Architectural form in rural areas should correspond with the existing style of the community. Much of the opposition to new developments is based on how they look, with sprawling identikit housing estates seen to be out of place and upsetting both aesthetically and to a sense of place. Research by the Prince's Foundation has shown how local opposition to new housing is based on people not wanting their "town or village to lose a strong sense of identity"; "too many tall or large buildings to be developed"; "green space to be unduly threatened from urban sprawl"; nor "any change to be too rapid". Instead, new housing should be built that fits with the local environment and local preference. For example, new developments should deploy "traditional architecture" to build "houses that look like houses" which generate a "sense of place" and a "village feel".<sup>85</sup>

## 5. A fairer taxation policy

Finally, adjusting tax incentives could also free up new housing in rural areas, reducing demand without having to increase supply. A Labour government would have a number of levers to pull and should consider radically increasing stamp duty for second-home owners. **F**

## Chapter six: A working countryside

WHILE ONLY 1 per cent of the population works in agriculture, around 70 per cent of the country's land area is agricultural land. As a consequence it has an oversized impact on the national psyche, particularly in rural areas which are often surrounded by farmlands. The number of farmers may be a small proportion of the population even in rural areas, yet questions over the future of farming are of profound importance to wider questions over the future of our countryside. In order to be seen as a viable party of the countryside, then, Labour will have to show that it understands the needs of the farming community.

Participants in all focus groups made an unprompted connection between their local area and farming, stressing its local and national importance. When asked what image people might associate with their local area, the first response in Clay Cross was a "sheep". In St Asaph, one woman described farmers as "the mainstay of the country" because they produce our food and manage our land, while another woman appreciated the role of farming in instilling in children the understanding "that not all animals come in packets". In Probus, farming was described as "vital" and when one participant said, "I like the fact that I get stuck behind tractors", it was met with murmurs of agreement.

### The common agricultural policy

Today, farming faces significant short-term and long-term questions about its future viability. One of the most significant is the imminent end of the single largest component of the EU's budget, the common agricultural policy (CAP). The CAP incentivised specific forms of farming, often rewarding wealthy landowners and environmentally destructive techniques, but it also provided farmers of all types with much of their income. Michael Gove has pledged to continue these subsidies until 2024, but after that the future of government support for farming is unclear.<sup>86</sup> Without funding, around a half of all farm-

ing will cease to be profitable altogether.<sup>87</sup> Foremost among those set to struggle will be the marginal farms, often family run, such as uplands sheep farmers across England and Wales who manage some of our most loved landscapes.

But the problems facing farming in England and Wales long predate the 2016 vote to leave the EU. One fifth of all farms in England have closed in the last ten years. The smallest farms have been the worst affected, with the Campaign to Protect Rural England estimating that: "If current trends continue, few if any farms under 20ha [hectares] could be left within a generation while most of those up to 50ha could be gone in two generations."<sup>88</sup> The social and environmental benefits of diversification of both the size of farms and what is farmed are clear.<sup>89</sup> Yet the CAP has historically held back progress in this regard. First, it allocated subsidies based on levels of production. Regardless of market demand, the more farmers produced the more they were paid in subsidy – hence the notorious butter mountains and wine lakes of the 1980s. This incentivised over-production also exacerbated the destructive legacy of rapid postwar industrialisation, characterised by deep ploughing and large agribusiness, which has reduced the diversity of both wildlife and landscape, eroding topsoil and forcing out small-scale farms. Subsequent reforms to the CAP have linked levels of payment to the area of agricultural land landowners own (with around a third of the subsidy dependent on meeting various environmental requirements). This has left the vast majority of public subsidy going to wealthy landowners with small-scale farmers struggling to make ends meet left out. Free to set our own agricultural policy, we can do much better.

### Rewilding and land management

Ideologically, too, agriculture is facing threats. Some are calling for the end of the CAP to be used as an opportunity for vast swathes of farmlands to be turned over to nature as part of the rewilding agenda which seeks to, "catalyse the mass restoration of the living world, bring trees back to bare hills, allow reefs to form once more on the seabed and to return to these shores the magnificent, entrancing animals of which we have so long been deprived".<sup>90</sup> Backed by determined conservationists, a

number of small-scale projects of this have been undertaken to considerable success. Notable among them is Knepp Castle in Sussex. A 3,000-acre estate around Horsham has abandoned intensive farming in order to rewild. It is now a much-celebrated ornithologist's paradise, home to endangered nightingales, turtledoves and more. While some grazing herbivores remain – longhorn cattle, Konik ponies, Tamworth pigs and red deer – they are much fewer in number and able to roam freely. Although the estate still sells 75 tonnes of meat each year, much of the estate's renewed profitability comes from sources including tourism and grants from national bodies.<sup>91</sup>

The success of Knepp Castle is clear. Less clear is whether such projects are sustainable or desirable as a general model for farmers. The Knepp Castle estate lies in unusually difficult terrain, with heavy Wealden clay making farming exceptionally hard. It has also benefited from being one of the first projects of its kind, and as such has been the beneficiary of a level of tourism and public support that might not be afforded to those that follow.

Part of the justification for rewilding lies in a vision of a countryside returned to what is seen to be its natural state of affairs. In this view, humans are seen to be the great wreckers of wilderness, existing in a dualism with a pristine natural world that we exploit. Here conservationists hark back to an Arcadian past that never existed. Over the last 7,000 years, an ecology has built up in both England and Wales in which mankind works in relative harmony with nature; in which human labour creates both our physical sustenance and our natural landscape. Any large-scale project of rewilding would inevitably lead to a dispossession of people from the land, reminiscent of the Highland Clearances which remain a source of national resentment in Scotland more than 200 years on. Of all parties, the Labour party should be particularly attuned to the role that labour has played in making and remaking the countryside over the millennia, and particularly resistant to attempts to displace labour from the landscape.

And some internationalism would be welcome from critics of a managed landscape. It is true that in much of the world, including close to home in, for



example, the Black Forest in Germany and across great tranches of central and Eastern Europe, human activity plays little to no role in landscape management. Many of these places are areas of great beauty and home to impressive ecosystems. But diversity seen from a global vantage point must also allow for some room for a managed landscape. And what many foreign visitors admire most about the English landscape flows precisely from the fact the land is managed: the hedgerows and dry stone-walling used to apportion fields, for example, which are rarely found elsewhere and are themselves fantastical corridors of wildlife.

This does not mean that there are not significant problems with the over-intensification of farming and the environmental costs of livestock farming, particularly for beef. But solutions to these problems require working with farmers, as the rural policy campaigner Graeme Willis puts it, to encourage diversity “in what [the farming industry] produces, in who farms the land and the approaches they take.”<sup>92</sup> Logically and historically unsound dichotomies of nature versus humanity and environmentalists versus recalcitrant farmers are unhelpful. If we were to rewild our farms and reduce the amount we produce this would only lead to greater reliance on imports. Such imports would almost certainly be produced in conditions less favourable to animals and the environment. Labour should approach rewilding with caution – open to

its benefits in specific environs but wary of attempts to write the role of labour out of our understanding of landscape.

### A new support system

Labour should insist on continued support for farmers. The end of the CAP, which disincentivised diversification of scale and substance and was frequently paid months late, represents an opportunity to rebalance farming in favour of small-scale farms and public goods. A new support system could provide the basis for a farming which restores the wildflower meadows, chalk grasslands, woodlands, wetlands and hundreds of thousands of miles of hedgerow that have been lost as a result of the same agribusiness approach – sponsored by the CAP – which has pushed tens of thousands of farmers off the land and radically reduced their incomes.<sup>93</sup> A new support system could reward instead the definition of efficiency provided by Lincolnshire fen farmer Peter Lundgren: “[A]n efficient farming model [is] one which gives the farmer a decent income to provide good quality food that people want, and enhance[s] the environment and the landscape at the same time.”<sup>94</sup>

Since Brexit, there has been a growing consensus around what is required in a post-CAP support system. Labour should continue to be a part of this conversation, advocating principles that will both honour the labour that sustains the countryside and enhance the environment. Sue Hayman, shadow secretary

of state for environment, food and rural affairs has already offered Labour’s support for such an agenda, arguing for targeted support for marginal farmers and those delivering public goods.<sup>95</sup> The eight principles outlined by Sustain offer a reasonable guide to the kind of post-Brexit settlement for agriculture that Labour should advocate:

- “A clear commitment to fair, healthy, humane and environmentally sustainable food, farming, fishing and land management for the UK after withdrawal from the EU
- Ongoing support for farming and sustainable land management
- Application of the public money for public good (or benefit) principle
- A focus on targeting support to ensure money goes where it is really needed and recognising larger farms gain economies of scale so may need less support to deliver the same outcomes
- Protection and enhancement of farm diversity
- Maintenance and enhancement of standards and regulations
- Solidarity with the global south
- Trade deals shaped by people’s needs.”<sup>96</sup>



## ENDNOTES

- Participants were taken from social-economic groupings BC1C2DE, which covers those in professional and intermediate managerial roles, those in supervisory and clerical roles, skilled manual workers, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and casual labourers, pensioners and the unemployed. The only group excluded were those in higher managerial and professional roles.
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- The data this poll is from was taken between Tuesday 7 November and Thursday 9 November. There has been little change in national polls subsequently, but the national voting intention figures should nonetheless not be read as an up to date poll. Instead, it is the discrepancy between the national and rural voting intention figures which is pertinent, and can be expected to have remained near-constant since the poll was conducted.
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