

Mile End Institute

English Identity and Radical Politics

October 2015



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Introduction

Professor Michael Kenny, Director of the Mile End Institute Queen Mary University of London.

Jon Cruddas' speech at the Mile End Institute was a key milestone in British politics since the 2015 election.

It was discussed far and wide, offering the first in-depth examination of the significance of the election for the party, from one of its leading contemporary figures.

Jon reported the results of a major research project examining why Labour lost the election in May.

Stressing the party's inability to strike a chord with voters on vital issues, such as the lack of trust it enjoyed as an economic manager and its stance on immigration, he argued that it had paid the price for ignoring the resurgence of a distinctive sense of Englishness, and had failed to break from a tired, statist approach to social improvement and economic management.

He showed too how disconnected the party has become from the traditions and vernaculars of English political culture.

This publication includes a transcript of that speech as well as articles by two of the panellists who debated with him at the Mile End Institute.

Jane Wills, Professor of Geography at Queen Mary University of London, identifies the kind of pragmatic radicalism which has long been associated with the self-help tradition of voluntary endeavour in England.

But she also questions the capacity of Labour - or indeed any political party – to involve itself at the community level, and be seen as anything other than a rival or an obstacle to those engaged in this kind of activism.

This raises some important, and difficult, questions for those who advocate community organising as the paradigm through which the party should start to renew itself and re-find its purpose. This, she suggests, will now be much harder to achieve than is often suggested.

David Skelton also made a thoughtful, important contribution to this discussion.

He is head of the think-tank 'Renewal', and has argued for some time that the Conservative Party needs to speak to the hopes and fears of citizens in all regions of England, and present itself anew to working-class voters.

He identifies a deepening emotional and cultural disconnect between the Labour party and many of its former supporters, and points to the political competition that is opening up over working-class patriotism.



Professor Michael Kenny

Professor Michael Kenny is Director of the Mile End Institute and Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London. He is Fellow of the Centre on Constitutional Change and Academic Fellow of the Constitution Unit, University College of London.

Michael is currently conducting a research project examining the implications for politics and constitutional policy of "English Votes for English Laws". This project builds on a wide-ranging study of the politics of English nationhood which he completed with the support of a Major Research Fellowship awarded by the Leverhulme Trust, 2012-14. His monograph on this topic, published with Oxford University Press in 2014 - *The Politics of English Nationhood* - will be issued in paperback in 2016. This book examines the historical and normative dimensions of the transformation of English national identity in British politics.

Introduction

Multiple identities

The question of when a sense of cultural Englishness became salient, and what kind of collective interest the English feel is at stake in the domestic union, has become the focus of considerable academic debate as well as political interest.

In my own work in this area I have gathered a wealth of different kinds of evidence, and employed various research methods to assemble the complex story of the renewal of English national identity, which I have traced back to the early 1990s.

There is a constant temptation to see Englishness as a fixed, determinate entity that rises or falls in strength, and is - we are often told - essentially conservative, if not reactionary, in character.

Instead, I argue, we should understand the multiple ways in which an English imaginary has been framed and contested in recent years, and become more sensitive to the values, hopes and anxieties that are projected in relation to it.

As well as grievance-fuelled invocations of an angry English identity, there are other politically resonant ways in which Englishness is claimed and understood, and its historical story told.

There persist, for instance, more moderate and mainstream conservative-style notions of the value of defending English traditions and supporting a growing sense of recognition for a purported English interest.

Elsewhere, a more self-consciously modernist and multi-cultural sensibility is presented as a powerful ethos and the extraordinary cultural diversity and creativity associated with its peoples is emphasised.

These broad perspectives enable different sections of the population to advance claims about feelings of political dispossession, and make claims for recognition in a context where the vernacular languages of mainstream politics have quite significantly attenuated.

Self-government

For many political progressives, the very idea of English nationhood smacks of Toryism and empire.

But there is good reason to suggest that the reluctance of liberals and leftists to engage with Englishness, and reclaim the languages of patriotic radicalism, and indeed of the radical, voluntaristic and liberal streams of thinking that flow throughout English culture may ultimately be self-defeating.

The reluctance of liberals and leftists to engage with Englishness may ultimately be self-defeating

This is the argument made by Jane Wills in her article, reproduced here.

The Labour Party refused, after the introduction of devolution, to acknowledge that there were distinct and important national questions on the mind of a growing number of people in Scotland, and latterly England.

Its rout in Scotland in 2015, and inability to respond to the Conservative charge that it would govern at the behest of the SNP, suggest that this stance left it unable to speak meaningfully to the values, fears and ambitions of a significant number of voters in these contexts.

Beyond considerations of party politics, there are other important questions to be pursued in relation to English national identity and culture.

Is there a more pervasive shift towards sub-state attachments and a turn against the state-wide forms of patriotism that liberals favour? Or, as in Scotland, might this trend be framed in democratic terms, as indicative of a rising appetite for self-government in some form or other?

The current Government certainly believes that the latter is to some extent the case, and is seeking to respond to this ethos through its controversial proposals for English Votes for English Laws in the House of Commons and also through its plans to decentralise powers to some of England's largest cities and city-regions.

Whether these moves will satiate this growing cultural and political mood is now one of the existential questions facing British politics.

Introduction

Politicisation of the English question

Each of these debates stems from the gradual shift in the nature and meaningfulness of an avowedly English national identity, and gain traction from the very recent developments in high politics chronicled above.

At their core are democratic and conceptual questions which political scientists are increasingly summoned to consider.

In what sense is there now a shared English interest that needs delineating, recognising and institutionalising in the UK's systems of politics and government?

And can these shifts be successfully introduced in separation from other constitutionally resonant questions such as the awarding of new powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the establishment of more powerful city-regions (and potentially county regions) in England?

Is the establishment of the Northern powerhouse in competition with the institutionalisation of an English politics and governance, or an interlocking component of it, as George Osborne argues?

And, perhaps most fundamentally of all - what kind of national and constitutional forms of understanding are now required for the largest national grouping within a former imperial, but now pluri-national and highly multi-cultural state?

The English may well be groping towards new (and old) ideas about themselves, their traditions and their fate, and it may take some time before they settle - if indeed they ever do - upon a new dominant narrative.

But what is increasingly apparent is that a majority are no longer inclined to stick with the 'noble lie' that they are English in their culture and British in their citizenship and institutional affiliation.

The shift of national consciousness away from these familiar parameters is creating the conditions for the politicisation of the English question, and for the growing centrality of inter-territorial relations in the UK.

For defenders and critics of the British state, the national culture of the English has for a long time been taken to be cornerstone upon which its institutional and constitutional edifice rests.

Critics, following Scottish intellectual Tom Nairn, have waited impatiently for the English to rub the constitutionally conservative sleep from their eyes and wake up refreshed as

a modern, European citizen-people, ready to demand popular sovereignty as others have done before them, and cast aside the fantasies and mystique of the ancien regime state.

Defenders, including leading political scientist Richard Rose, have long pointed to the distinctive capacity of the Westminster party system to aggregate and dissipate regional and national interests.

Yet, in the current period, it is striking that it is from within the party system itself that a major source of the politicisation of these cleavages is to be found - both within Scotland and, latterly, in England.

The politicisation of questions of English identity and interest is unlikely to be a short-lived or reversible phenomenon, even if a variety of strategies to mitigate, contain and marginalise it may well be developed.

But deep-lying shifts in popular sentiment have removed part of the bedrock of the Westminster model, and contributed to a recognition at elite level that the tacit consent of the English for the systems of politics and government with which they live can no longer be assumed and now needs to be engineered.

Deep-lying shifts in popular sentiment have removed part of the bedrock of the Westminster model

While the conventional wisdom that the English are dispositionally disinterested in constitutional and national questions still persists, a growing number of observers and participants are aware that something much more deeply rooted, profound and unyielding is in motion - a major re-orientation in the way that the English regard themselves and who they are.

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This is the context in which Jon Cruddas, and other leading Labour voices, are raising the question of whether the party needs to jettison its British-wide and top-down political outlook, and become a more federal, nationally rooted entity, and forge a much clearer English Labour identity.

This is a major issue for the party itself, but for British politics more generally. It is only one of a number of profound, territorial questions making themselves felt in political and policy circles.

This publication is part of the Mile End Institute's contribution to this debate, and we look forward to continuing the discussions in our ongoing research.

Jon Cruddas: Labour is Lost in England

The full text of Jon Cruddas' speech to the Mile End Institute,
Tuesday 22nd September

Big organisations often require cathartic moments to change and renew themselves. Well this certainly is Labour's moment.

Personally, I had assumed that the defeat in 2010 was of a piece with 1931 and 1983 - the three worst defeats in our history.

Yet 2015 was worse still.

So in the last few years two terrible defeats and then a Party turned upside down. The first obvious question now is do we rebuild our party and politics or do we spin out of control?

So the first point to make is that this moment needs careful consideration given the scale of defeat.

Today political parties need a strong core in order to hold them together. In my party's case, Labour needs to be connected to the common sense of the British people to import ballast and resilience.

Let's start with a simple statement of fact.

Nobody in the Party has a monopoly on ideas. No-one possesses the solution to Labour's crisis; there are no tablets of stone.

During the Policy Review 2012-2014 we began the project of Labour's political renewal. There's a space in the party that stretches across the political spectrum for developing this collective work:

- rethinking Labour's politics
- connecting up with our Council and City leaders
- building up our community organising and networks of thinkers, social entrepreneurs, and policy makers

But to develop this is a huge task given our electoral failures and global crisis of social democracy.

How do we learn from our traditions; understand the present; build a politics for the future.

Tonight I want to talk a bit about this with reference to what we know about our recent defeat, and do it with specific reference to England.

So let's start with some of Labour's English traditions.

180 years ago in June, the great radical and journalist William Cobbett died. He is best known for his book *Rural Rides* describing his travels in 1821 through Southern England.

Not a bad departure point given Labour's present discomforts.



Jon Cruddas

Jon Cruddas has been Labour's MP for Dagenham and Rainham since 2001. He was appointed Labour's Policy Coordinator by Ed Miliband. After the 2015 election defeat he led an independent inquiry into why Labour lost.

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It was the Industrial Revolution. The countryside and its economy were in upheaval. Cobbett was a farmer's son. He writes with a deep love of the land and its people. He feels the dislocation and their pain at the loss of their common culture and the breaking up of their way of life.

He wonders at the gardens, fields and woods he passes. He watches the clouds overhead and learns the histories of the parish churches that populate every village. He contrasts all this with the noise and the strife of the cities. He sees before him a rotten government, an oppressive state and an economy that exploits people's labour. He calls this system the Thing.

Cobbett is conservative and a traditionalist and this paradoxically makes him into a radical. He champions the cause of the people against injustice and Old Corruption.

'I, as far as I am concerned, am quite willing to trust to the talent, the justice, and the loyalty of the great mass of the people - I am quite willing to make common cause with them, to be one of them.'

A simple creed. It is for me the source of Labour's political renewal. Not doing politics for people or to them, but with them. A politics that grows out of the people it represents.

Labour's history lies in working people organising to protect their families from dispossession. To struggle for fair wages and a decent home. To create a better future for their children. A politics about work, family, home, and country. And against all that threatens them: the arbitrary power of the state; the brutal, anonymous forces of Capital.

At the heart of our Labour movement remains a deep instinct to protect our common life, our neighbourhoods and the landscapes we belong in. An instinct that has led us to defend our freedom from the domination of the market and the state - a politics of conservation, if you will.

In England it forged a unique brand of socialism that owed a profound debt to romanticism; one that was anti-scientific and artistic in orientation. One barely visible on the left today.

Obviously since the Nineteenth Century society has changed.

The economy is transformed. We are living in a post industrial age; new kinds of work, a changing class system. Labour has struggled to change with the times. It has lost its connection with the English people. Many do not know what the Party stands for. In May we lost everywhere to everybody.

We set up an Independent Inquiry into why Labour lost.

We wanted an objective, empirical analysis of what happened at the election.

We didn't want the results compromised by being run through the party machine.

In 2010 there literally was no inquiry as to the nature of the defeat.

In 2015 we all need to know the worst; to own the defeat.

Over the summer we released our findings for England and Wales. You can read them online – and lots more is still to come. There is no way to dodge around this: it tells us a deeply worrying story.

Of a Labour Party that is out of touch with the country and becoming progressively more so.

This is what we found:

First. It was pragmatic-minded voters who dealt Labour its devastating electoral defeat.

Voters whose main concern is their personal financial circumstances abandoned us; many at the last hour. We lacked economic credibility. They didn't trust us with their taxes.

Second. We lost because voters believed we were anti-austerity.

The Tories won because of austerity. Voters did not reject Labour because they saw it as austerity lite. They rejected Labour because they thought the Party was anti-austerity lite. The Tories message on the deficit was clear, Labour's was not. The Tories were trusted to manage the country's finances, Labour was not.

Labour has struggled to change with the times. It has lost its connection with the English people.

Consequently, an anti-austerity alliance with the SNP does not have support in England. Labour's defeat in Scotland did not set a precedent for a leftward shift in England. The SNPs anti austerity politics only increased the risk that Labour represented to English voters.

This is of course difficult to swallow. This does not mean we accept the Tory economic strategy; rather it means we failed to effectively contest that story.

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Third. Labour is losing its working class support and UKIP benefits.

Since 2005 voters who are socially conservative are the most likely to have deserted Labour. They value home, family and their country. They feel their cultural identity is under threat. They want a sense of belonging and national renewal. Tradition, rules and social order are important to them. Labour no longer represents their lives.

These small c conservative voters are twice as likely to be from socio-economic groups DE as AB. Their desertion represents the collapse of Labour's traditional working class base.

It fundamentally challenges the assumption that the emergence of UKIP damaged our Tory opponents rather than ourselves. Actually, it suggests it was the other way around!

Fourth. Since 2010 Labour has marched decisively away from the views of voters on issues that are fundamental to our electoral prospects: immigration, personal financial interest, welfare, public services, and business.

In short, that Labour is out of step with the wider electorate and this divide is growing.

We asked the 3,000 people we polled: 'what was the main reason you voted for party x?' An open question, no prompting. Here is what they said about why they would not vote Labour:

'Give everyone who isn't working as much money as they want from the people who work their asses off. Let everyone in the country.'

'A free for all on benefits.'

'Still preaching the welfare state pie in sky politics....'

'Will spend all your taxes on benefit scroungers !!!!'

'Benefits for all.'

'Tax those that work and pay high benefits to those who don't want to work.'

'Want to take from hard working people and distribute it more evenly to the poor on benefits.'

This was the drumbeat heard time and again. It is tough stuff.

This is not to accept these sentiments.

Put simply, we can seek to change the minds of the public but we should not ignore them.

Fifth. Labour is becoming the toxic party.

We asked voters a question about their voting preference. Did they, 'always vote' for a particular political party, 'sometimes vote for it', 'consider voting for it' or, 'never vote for it'.

The toxicity score for each party is measured by the proportion of the electorate that say they will 'never vote' for it. Labour is now as toxic in the South as the Tories are in the North. Among the over 60s, 45 per cent say they will never vote Labour – and the significance of this age demographic will grow over the coming years. And Labour is more toxic amongst socially conservative voters than either UKIP or the Conservatives.

Labour is now as toxic in the South as the Tories are in the North

I take three lessons from these findings in England and Wales:

The first is that the electorate is economically radical and fiscally conservative.

The English electorate holds radical opinions on the economy. 43 per cent agree that, 'I am most likely to vote for the political party that redistributes wealth from rich to poor'. 60 per cent agree with the statement, 'the economic system in this country unfairly favours powerful interests'. This rises to 73 per cent amongst UKIP voters and 78 per cent amongst Labour voters.

But fiscal responsibility trumps economic reform. Voters understand the Tories are unfair on the economy; there is no liking for them. But they do not trust Labour with their taxes and with the country's finances. Until their trust is restored they will never support Labour's radical economic policies. Labour needs to understand that the electorate is both economically radical and fiscally conservative.

This could well prove to be a major opportunity for Labour if we use this insight effectively.

The second lesson is that identity and belonging drive politics.

The response to the SNP amongst Welsh and English voters reflects the growing politics of identity and belonging, and the increasingly federal nature of the UK. Labour needs a more federal politics to accommodate our national differences. There is a need for a Labour politics of recognition here; that

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there is a space for an English Labour Party to represent the interests of the English people.

It would also compliment the existence of the Scottish Labour and Welsh Labour parties in our rulebook.

The third lesson is that Labour is becoming an exclusive cultural brand.

The desertion of socially conservative voters heralds a broader trend of working class detachment from Labour both in the electorate and in party membership. Labour is now overwhelmingly a party of the socially liberal and progressively minded. They express Labour values that tend to be universalist principles such as equality, sustainability and social justice.

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The party is losing connection with two thirds of the electorate who are either pragmatic in their voting habits or who are social conservatives and who value work, family, and their country. The idea that Labour can recover its lost voters by winning non-voters has no grounding in English political realities. To win Labour has to take them from the Conservatives.

Labour is dangerously out of touch with the electorate. It stands on the brink of becoming irrelevant to the majority of working people in

the country. It must renew its essential character in the eyes of the great majority of the people. Not in isolation from them.

So then onto the challenges of the future

Our first challenge is political economy.

Labour needs a new political economy that is pro-business and pro-worker. We have to re-establish relations with the business community and build a coalition of support amongst the self-employed, private sector workers in key sectors, and forward looking businesses.

Labour's old central state driven approach of redistribution, regulation and macroeconomic management will not solve our economic problems. Tax and spend is no longer the radical option. We need a political economy that combines financial prudence with economic radicalism:

- reforming the institutions of economic governance, of economic and industrial democracy
- reforming corporate governance
- creating employer/employee partnerships
- putting workers on boards
- pioneering new models of services, production pioneering new models of services
- production and ownership that give individuals and communities power and control
- supporting people to develop the skills, power and knowledge they need to act as economic citizens.

Our second challenge is an English Labour Party and a federal and democratic UK.

We have to break out of the traditional top-down, Whitehall knows best approach, and take decisions about England out of Westminster and hand them to our regions, cities and communities.

So we need a broad alliance for change - constitutional reform, devolution of power, and citizen empowerment that stretches from Clacton to Bristol, Newcastle to Penzance.

The corollary is a more federal UK Labour Party. More autonomy for Scottish and Welsh Labour to respond to their own national politics. An English Labour party to help identify the politics and policies we will need to win a majority of English seats.

England will decide Labour's future.

Our third challenge is a Labour politics of shared responsibility and contribution.

Labour's politics need to recognise the power of relationships to transform people's lives for the better. We talk about childcare, equality, rights, but not enough about family and relationships. We tend to be paternalistic, technocratic and statist. We talk about retail offers and 'delivering services to people' and neglect to ask how we can help people to help themselves.

Associated with this: high levels of immigration have created a demographic revolution which has happened in a very short time span.

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For example, the insider/outsider questions that are thrown up pose real challenges to how we approach the contribution to and consumption of public services. We have one of the most segregated school systems in the rich world. Our housing policy locates rich and poor households in separate enclaves. Confronted with dislocation and insecurity we don't ask, 'how are we to live together?' but celebrate people's differences- we have no notion of the Common Good.

England needs to rebuild a common life recognising our different identities with a sense of mutual obligation and national renewal

In general, we avoid talking about culture and identity and instead talk about an instrumentalised economics. Our failure has allowed UKIP to speak for those who feel dispossessed and left behind.

So Labour needs a politics of social integration. England needs to rebuild a common life recognising our different identities with a sense of mutual obligation and national renewal.

Our fourth challenge is to own the future of technology and innovation.

We are just at the start of the internet revolution. Our new digital age is changing society and modernising the whole base of our economy. Technological innovation is facilitating new cultural practices and models of production. People will be able to design and make the things they live with.

Digital government can create better communication, more collaboration and sharing of data between services. It can make services and transactions more efficient, and simpler for people to use. And it can be used to rebalance power between citizens and the market and between citizens and the state. This is the future and Labour must lead the way- how these epochal changes can allow us to re-imagine the very notion of modern citizenship, democracy, hierarchy and accountability.

The fifth challenge is a strategic foreign and security policy for Britain.

The UK lacks confidence in the world. We lack a coherent foreign policy. Labour needs to reclaim a sense of direction for the country both internally and externally.

We need to strengthen our pro-European politics with a clear position. We should recognise the reservations many of our

citizens have about giving up our sovereignty to Brussels about joining the European currency, submitting to overseas jurisdiction, and being exposed to the free movement of labour and open immigration.

We need two categories of EU membership. The first category of core nations in the Eurozone signed up to full union with its own distinct fiscal policy and democratic governance. The second category, which would include the UK, for countries who do not want full union to be their final destination. Britain will then be free to play a leading alliance building role in Europe.

The final challenge is simple. It's about us. The Labour Party.

Do we possess the will, the energy, the political judgment to transform the Labour Party and make it fit for the 21st Century? Outside of a few urban centres Labour is in a state of political decay. The fantastic recent growth in our membership and supporters does not change this reality. Our structures are broken, our culture is decaying. If we don't change we will lose those who have joined us.

Political parties are hollowed out. Faced with complexity and unpredictability, they are losing their role in society. Innovation and change happen outside them. The traditional tools of policy makers - regulation and money - are limited in solving complex problems and when money is limited. Westminster and Whitehall are like a giant publishing houses churning out reports, policy documents and papers that few read. Policy making is removed from the people who implement it and from those it will affect.

There is no one big idea or single grand reform that will rebuild the Labour Party and renew our politics. We need comprehensive but incremental change. Empowering the membership to participate won't work if the party is inward looking, generating its own pet policies that voters reject. Labour has to turn outward. Task its members to:

- build community organisations
- set up and work with social enterprises
- create policy with the public in deliberative and open for a
- co-design public services with front line workers and users
- collaborate and support Labour City and local authorities for real time change

Labour must become an organisation that convenes, creates and spreads power amongst those who have none.

Jon Cruddas: Labour is Lost in England

In conclusion, I want to a couple of points about what Labour stands for.

The traditions of English liberty that William Cobbett championed are about self-determination. Their conservative instinct raises the question of equality because each individual is irreplaceable in our mutual dependence. Equality is the ethical core of justice. It is the necessary condition for social freedom which is the basis of a settled life. Edmund Burke describes it as 'that state of things in which liberty is secured by equality of restraint'. In the past we called it fraternity.

But why is it that the notion of fraternity - the cornerstone of a specific English socialist tradition - and wider ethical concerns are so rarely discussed within Labour? Because they used to be. Their omission is not accidental.

Today we talk a lot about money transfers and economicistic concerns for distributional justice. This can appear as over rational, utilitarian, cold and technocratic; remote and bureaucratic.

Today we also talk a lot about rights; the need to confront economic and social disadvantage with codified redress to the law- often described pejoratively as the preserve of the 'liberal left' with their concerns for democracy and liberty. Yet we can also trace this thinking back to 19th century radical liberalism, Tom Paine, Chartism, to John Lilburne and to the Levellers.

Here is the basic point.

These two dominant frameworks within the left speak to specific philosophical approaches to questions of justice; of how we should build our society. One approach concerned with welfare and utility the other with questions of freedom and rights.

But there is another tradition- more ethical in orientation. Concerned with nurturing the human characteristics upon which a good or just society is formed. Concerned with questions of virtue, fraternity and the Common Good. It is one most closely associated with William Cobbett, Richard Blatchford, and most importantly with William Morris.

This approach to justice lies deep within the history of English socialism and the fight against human dispossession but today lies exiled from Labour thinking.

I would argue that this exile speaks to Labour's detachment from England that our data and our enquiry reveals.

Sure it will be a difficult task to retrieve this tradition and re-establish an authentic English Labour voice.

Charlie Mingus once said 'anyone can make the simple complicated. Creativity is making the complicated simple'.

Where might we start?

Well we could start this project of renewal with a return to the legacy of Tony Blair. Early on Blair quite consciously drilled into the history of ethical socialism to establish an approach to justice anchored around the notion of the Common Good and a uniquely English socialist arc; it would not have been unfamiliar to Cobbett.

He refracted these concerns into a story of English national renewal and shared sacrifice; a modern patriotism. It created energy and power because of its humanity; by the way it bent its ethical properties into those of the country and successfully contested the national story.

The genius of the political project was the way it blended its specific approach to justice with a renewed left patriotism. People responded. Tragically by the second term Blair had collapsed these insights into an uncritical support of globalisation and a utilitarian politics.

So today we have lost our language and existence in the everyday lives of the people. We can account for this historically. Modern left rationalism is not accidental. It expresses the victory of economicistic and technocratic thinking. Ethical concerns have lost out to utilitarian and rights based models of justice.

The task today is to learn from these mistakes and build a new Labour politics of the Common Good specifically here in England

In 2015 we woke to a country we could barely recognise. So the task today is to learn from these mistakes and build a new Labour politics of the Common Good specifically here in England.

To conclude Labour is not in good shape in England. We collided with the electorate in May and our post-election research has empirically exposed the scale of our problem.

We can either ignore it or try to understand it.

The clock is ticking we had better change tack soon or face the consequences.

Bridging the Gap with the People

Professor Jane Wills of the School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London responds to Jon Cruddas' speech '*Labour is Lost in England*'

In his powerful speech, Jon Cruddas calls on the Labour Party to reconnect with the people of England.

To this end, he outlines the extent to which the Party is failing to represent popular sentiment over welfare spending, immigration and economic restraint.

Yet rather than calling on the Labour Party to move on to this populist ground, Jon focuses on the need for the Party to reconnect with English culture more broadly defined.

He argues that the Labour Party should "become an organisation that convenes, creates and spreads power amongst those who have none".

I'm not sure that this is something that the Labour Party will be able to do

To establish this ground he cites William Cobbett whose book *Rural Rides* (1830) reflected a love of country, a passion for its people and a recognition of the struggle involved in defending an established way of life.

In his appreciation of the work of Cobbett, Robert Blatchford and William Morris, Jon calls for a more rooted kind of Labour politics.

However, to this end, Jon calls on the Labour Party to start building the local institutions and social enterprises that might allow ordinary people to defend their way of life today.

Indeed, he argues that the Labour Party should "become an organisation that convenes, creates and spreads power amongst those who have none".

I'm not sure that this is something that the Labour Party will be able to do.

A practical people

The strand of English culture that Jon describes so well has been about self-determination, about local people setting up independent institutions to get things done.

This is the English culture of friendly societies, trade unions, Clarion cycling clubs and the Women's Institute (Scruton, 2001).

The same spirit of self-organisation has been evident within our religious life as Methodists set up new structures within the shell of the Anglican Church in order to reflect the aspirations and interests of a once neglected part of the population.



Professor Jane Willis

Jane Wills is Professor of Geography at Queen Mary University of London. Her research over the past two decades has been on: The changing geo-political-economy of work, employment, labour supply and labour politics; New forms of urban political alliances with a particular interest in community organising; and the politics and practice of localism in the UK. Key projects and publications include ESRC and Trust-for-London-funded research into the living wage campaign and the importance of community organising in fostering the political alliances on which it depends, ESRC-funded research into low waged labour in London, the increasing dependence on foreign-born labour and the wider implications of this for policy, development and (in)justice. Her interest in community organising also underpins a new Leverhulme Funded project entitled Politics and Place that seeks to explore the history and practice of localism in the UK.

Bridging the Gap with the People

Today, this same spirit is evident in the work of people engaging in neighbourhood planning, those setting up new community groups and local sports leagues for kids.

People have created local organisations to get things done and they are rarely focused on politics and especially not on party politics

However, such work is generally resolutely practical and non-partisan.

It is why the English are often described as a practical people and sitting in a university, we should also acknowledge the anti-intellectualism of this part of our national tradition.

People have created local organisations to get things done and they are rarely focused on politics and especially not on party politics. Indeed, local people are likely to fight to keep party politics out of local community life.

Reactionary radicalism

Historical experience highlights the way in which this rich tapestry of English organisational life only becomes politicised when people are confronted with things that get in the way of their work.

This is the lesson of the group of men who later became known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

During the 1830s, in a small village in Dorset, a group of agricultural workers some of whom were lay Methodist preachers, were facing a real cut in wages. In order to defend their income and carry on feeding their families, they swore an oath to form a local union as part of the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers.

When they were confronted with the landlord, the sanction of local magistrates and eventual deportation to Tasmania, local people had to make common cause with those in other places in order to mount a protest to secure their return.

The organisation was rooted in local experience and this predated its politicisation.

This is a strand of English culture that has rightly been described as ‘reactionary radicalism’ and Jon calls it ‘a politics of conservation’, and it is central to the origins of the Labour Party.

When the Labour Representation Committee met for the first time in 1900 the delegates represented as many as 65 trade

unions, all of them small by today’s standards, with some just a few hundred strong.

These unions recognised the need to federate over shared interests in order to pursue their specific goals.

That first meeting was split between the trade unionists who wanted to ensure the modest goal of securing Labour’s interests in parliament and the delegates from the three socialist parties some of whom were set on securing ‘the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange’ (Williams, 1949, 18).

The Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party and the Fabian Society were outnumbered at the time, but some of their delegates had a more ideologically-driven approach to the work they were doing.

They wanted to achieve socialism whereas the trade unions were interested in pursuing rather more concrete concerns (such as better wages, improved conditions, and the right to strike without the threat of Taff Vale).

Thus the Labour Party has always been a broad church of traditions that reflected different parts of the English culture from which it was born.

Double disconnect

As late as 1949 Clement Attlee could write in the preface to Francis Williams’ book *Fifty Years’ March* that the story of the Labour Party was characteristic of the nation by “showing the triumph of reasonableness and practicality over doctrinaire impossibilism”.

Yet over time, the trade unions and the wider society changed dramatically, not least because of the work of the Labour Party itself.

Although Jon didn’t have time to explore this part of the present conundrum for Labour, the trade unions are today only a shadow of what they were in the past.

Over time, trade unions have become much larger and more remote from rank and file workers and they also no longer reflect the English traditions of the past.

More than half of all trade unionists are now found in the public sector, and fewer than 1 in 5 workers in the private sector belong to a union.

Joining a union is about insurance at work, it is much less about local association and self-organisation.

Bridging the Gap with the People

The Labour Party thus faces a double disconnect, on the one hand the trade unions from which the party came no longer have a strong connection to working people, and on the other hand, the national party no longer has a strong connection to working people through its own party organisation or its election address.

English history tells us that independent self-organisation comes before its expression in politics and it is not clear how Labour can overcome this disconnect with the people.

Talking to history

Jon calls on the party to create the organisational infrastructure from which a new spirit of England can be born but such organisational activity is only likely in the absence of party politics.

The Conservative Party seems to have grasped this much better than Labour, and the Localism Bill (2011) is a modern example of permissive legislation that grants new powers to local people who are able and willing to engage in new forms of local organisation.

Even if the neighbourhood forums that are developing evolve into parish or community councils, they are likely to remain non-partisan in the future.

Using the state to legislate in order to create the space for local people to challenge the state is proving successful but in so doing, people are as likely to come into conflict with the Labour Party (in the town hall and parliament) as they are to find new ways to connect.

Moreover, in terms of connecting to the spirit of English people, it would seem that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has proved much more able to echo the sentiments reported by Jon - around concerns over welfare spending, levels of immigration and the need for economic restraint - than the Labour Party will be able to do.

Indeed, the new leader, Jeremy Corbyn, represents a strand of English identity that has always been part of the Labour Party - as the minority ideological group from the socialist parties in the early days - that is now more dominant as a product of the rise of the welfare state, higher education and high levels of immigration.

Along with those associated with the ideas called 'Blue Labour', Jon mourns for a lost Labour tradition, but I am not sure that the Labour Party can make it come back nor that most of the Party's members and its backers would want it to come back.

Jon Cruddas may be talking to history rather more than he is reflecting the future of his party and its connection to England.

English history tells us that independent self-organisation comes before its expression in politics and it is not clear how Labour can overcome this disconnect with the people

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The Patriotic Working Class Vote is up for Grabs

David Skelton, Director of Renewal, responds to Jon Cruddas' speech '*Labour is Lost in England*'

Jon Cruddas analysis of Labour's English problem is as incisive and provocative as you'd expect from one of the best thinkers in politics.

It underlines a detachment between the modern Labour Party and those patriotic, English voters who were once the party's core, as reflected so well by Martin Pugh in his 'Speak For Britain'.

This detachment means that British politics is in flux and that the patriotic working class vote is genuinely up for grabs for the first time since the war.

Most of the findings of the Cruddas analysis are stark and illuminating. It's maybe a sign of Labour's post-election shock and stupor that they seem intent on ignoring them.

He found that Labour has lost its economic credibility and suffered because of that and "the collapse of Labour's traditional working class base."

In short, over recent decades, Labour has become a party of metropolitan liberalism.

This represents an existential crisis for Labour if they don't respond to it quickly - they cannot exist on metropolitan liberalism alone

On a whole range of issues, many of their most senior representatives don't share the values of the majority of English people and don't speak the language of the people.

And with the election of Jeremy Corbyn, they've doubled down on this, leaving them even more detached from the values of the people and further away from power.

This represents an existential crisis for Labour if they don't respond to it quickly - they cannot exist on metropolitan liberalism alone.

Traditional core

Indeed, it was this that partially inspired me to set up Renewal.

I'd lost count of the number of times that people said to me, "Labour used to be my party, but it's not any more... they don't speak for people like us any more" or some variant of that.



David Skelton

David Skelton is Director of Renewal, which has the aim of broadening the appeal of the Conservative Party, particularly among working class voters, Northern voters and voters living in cities. Renewal was launched in 2013 with the goal of making the Conservatives the new "workers' party", language that is now used by the Prime Minister and formed a major part of the Conservatives' election campaign. Renewal pushed for Conservatives to embrace the Living Wage, take measures to narrow the North-South divide and to tackle the shortage of affordable housing. It also campaigns to increase the number of working class MPs in Parliament generally and the Conservative Party in particular. Before this, David was Deputy Director of Policy Exchange. He appears regularly in both broadcast and print media and is a long-suffering fan of Sunderland football club.

The Patriotic Working Class Vote is up for Grabs

These were voters who may well still have voted Labour but had lost any genuine sense of emotional attachment to the party.

The patriotic working class used to look to Labour, and representatives from Bevin to Healey, and think it stood for and understood them and represented a natural extension of their community. That's simply not the case anymore.

Its strength with metropolitan voters is not offsetting the destruction of Labour's relationship with its traditional core.

This disengagement is even starker in working class areas, as shown by the depressingly low turnout in many safe Labour seats - even below 50% in some places.

But disengagement in politics amongst Labour voters isn't a Labour problem, it's a problem for politics as a whole.

Just look at the gap in turnout between middle class and working class voters. Seventy-five percent of professional voters turned out to vote, compared to 62% of skilled working class voters and 57% of unskilled working class voters.

Too many voters see a politics that doesn't relate to themselves or their experiences.

That's not just a Labour problem, that's a political problem, especially when disengagement turns to anger.

Aspiration

We saw in Scotland how weak Labour's hold is on some of their 'heartlands', in which, as Fraser Nelson succinctly put it, Labour have spent too long "winning without fighting".

The votes of patriotic working class voters are up for grabs and they have little time for the exaggerated market liberalism of parts of the right or the metropolitan liberalism of parts of the left.

Dogma of right or left matters far less than security, community and love of family and nation

Note from Jon Cruddas' analysis that such voters are actually quite economically interventionist and still think the economy is tilted in favour of vested interests.

Dogma of right or left matters far less than security, community and love of family and nation.

All too often, politicians of the left don't use the word 'aspiration'

at all and politicians of the right seem to define it as 'escape' from community, ignoring the fact that most people don't want to escape their community and actually aspire to a better life within it.

The future of politics depends on how politicians of both parties respond to this pervasive sense of disengagement.

Inequality

Conservatives can take a number of steps to ensure that they are the party to do this. It's crucial that the government defines its mission as one of creating a country of opportunity, where everybody, regardless of background is given a fair shot, accepting that many voters don't feel they get this fair shot at the moment.

And this should reach into every aspect of government policy.

And Conservatives shouldn't be afraid to link this to the public debate about inequality.

They should argue clearly that education, job creation and wage growth are all crucial to tackling underlying problems of inequality and poverty and that the left has nothing to say on these issues.

Conservatives should remain focussed on tackling the root causes of poverty and be comfortable describing this as a moral mission.

At the same time, Conservatives shouldn't shy away from criticising corporate excess, such as when executive pay bears little or no link to performance.

In terms of sharing prosperity, the announcement of a National Living Wage was a decisive step to making this happen, emphasising that the benefits of economic growth should reach everybody in society.

The government should make clear its fundamental mission is to improve life chances and opportunities for people who have felt neglected by politicians for too long.

Similarly, housing has always been a fundamental part of the Conservative message when it has been at its most powerful and broadest.

The goal should be ensuring that some of the lowest paid people are able to move into home ownership, meaning that government should focus on boosting housing supply.

The Patriotic Working Class Vote is up for Grabs

The ‘Northern Powerhouse’ should also be expanded to cover those former coalfields, steel and mill towns that are still suffering from the after effects of deindustrialisation, including high unemployment and worklessness and poor health and education outcomes.

Too many communities have been devoid of hope for too long, feeling that politicians have either ignored them or taken them for granted.

Steps, such as tax incentives and investment in infrastructure, should be taken to dramatically revive the economic fortunes of these areas that have been suffering for decades.

Tory opportunity

Tackling this disengagement also means having more politicians who look and sound like the areas they represent.

There’s still a real shortage of working class representation in the House of Commons as a whole and on the Tory benches in particular, with around half of Tory MPs being privately educated, compared to only 7% of the population.

Measures to introduce a ‘bursary’ for low income candidates are an important step to ensure that Parliament is more representative of the country as a whole.

Jon Cruddas presented a realistic route to a Labour recovery. But his party has darted in the opposite direction

Jon Cruddas has set out the immense challenges facing the Labour Party.

He also presented a realistic route to a Labour recovery. But his party has darted in the opposite direction and seems intent on ignoring the general public and their traditional voters.

The problems of disengagement and disenchantment are also challenges facing politics as a whole, but they could also represent a fundamental

realignment of British politics if Conservatives take the right opportunities to address them.

The election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader enhances this Tory opportunity and increases the threat to Labour.

The map of British politics could look very different in a few decades time.

Appendix

A video of Jon Cruddas speaking at the Mile End Institute on 22 September can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=1&v=BTaXInI7Bb0>

A video of the panel discussion with contributions by Jane Wills, David Skelton and Madeleine Bunting can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSvf3gk90Gs>

A summary of the media coverage of Jon Cruddas' speech can be found here:

<https://storify.com/MileEndInst/labour-is-lost-in-england>

The Mile End Institute is a major new policy centre established at Queen Mary University of London this year, building on the foundations of our predecessor organisation, the Mile End Group. Drawing on our unique location within a Russell Group University situated in London's East End, the Institute brings together policymakers, academics and diverse local communities to address the major challenges facing policy, politics and democracy in the UK. The Institute calls on a large pool of expertise from the Schools of History and Politics under the guidance of our patron, the constitutional historian and cross-bench peer Peter Hennessy.

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