

12 | AN AGE OF REASSURANCE TO MATCH OUR AGE OF AUSTERITY

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The belief that it's 'the economy, stupid' and that Labour should chase the aspirant voter, which has imbued recent Labour thinking, is much less true than before the Lehman Brothers collapse. The voter that Labour must really focus on now is the socially conservative voter. It was among these voters that Labour's vote collapsed at the last election. And it is these voters whose numbers have grown as previously aspirant voters have become too anxious about today to dream of a better tomorrow.

The move to a more credible fiscal position demonstrates Labour understands the logic of austere times; now the party must find the language. That language should aim to engender a sense of belonging, to remind us all that social order is the foundation stone on which strong communities are built, and to rekindle our love of country. Solidarity and reciprocity make for the best communities and these are Labour values. To foster both requires an 'age of reassurance' to match our 'age of austerity.'

In opposition you must use the long campaign to address your real weaknesses. Only if you are successful will you have the luxury of playing to your strengths in the short campaign. Governments may lose elections, but only to oppositions that have built up thought-through, credible, and cogent positions on the key issues; positions

that are consistent with values. The ideas set out in this book take Labour a further step in this direction.

But to win next time we must understand how the electorate is shifting; and it is shifting, often in ways that turn much of Labour's ingrained logic on its head. A recent YouGov poll asked whether low interest rates were good or bad for your finances. 36 per cent said bad, just 23 per cent good. In the 2005 general election campaign Labour posters boasted of 'the lowest interest rates since the 1960s.' In 2015, one of the loudest questions for Labour may well be 'what will you do for savers?'

Extensive polling based on the British Values Survey¹ – which uses social psychology to identify dominant motivations – demonstrates a dramatic shift in values that has changed the rules of the game. Today Britain's electorate is more polarised, less aspirant, and, overall, more socially conservative, than it has been for decades. It is the last of these shifts – the growth in socially conservative values – that Labour underestimates at its peril.

As part of the polarisation of voters, there has been a hardening of attitudes amongst many of those that Ronald Inglehart once termed 'post-materialists'. This group of voters simply puts creating a fairer society above all else. The post-materialist voter is typically the most socially liberal. They are not so much loyal to tribe as to the notion of egalitarianism, and see politics as a choice between progressive parties: Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green. Many had – over time – coalesced around the Liberal Democrats. Some deserted Labour in the belief it had lost its soul, others over integrity on Iraq.

But many of those from this values group, who chose the Liberal Democrats at the last election, recoiled at the very idea of the party they supported going into coalition with 'the party of unfairness.' Already, to these voters the integrity and soul of the Liberal Democrats is more battered than Labour's after 13 years in government. They

are compromised by their acquiescence to Conservative principles and, however hard they try to differentiate themselves within the coalition, at the next election Labour will be well placed to make gains amongst these voters.

Ed Miliband's exposition of a more ethical capitalism, his critique of managerialism and much greater emphasis on egalitarianism, are music to these voters' ears. Many of the contributions to this pamphlet, such as those by Helen Goodman, Kate Green, and Will Hutton, provide a harmonious accompaniment to this message. Labour's activists too are increasingly drawn from this values group. They are energised by a shared passion to create a fairer society.

Of course, David Cameron is not willing to vacate this territory. Protecting international aid budgets, the 'big society' and talk of happiness indicators are all designed to detoxify the Tory brand and appeal to progressive voters. But whilst the Tories are doing so much that hurts the poor and turning the health service upside down, they will struggle to make significant progress with this group.

Historically Labour's support has predominantly been based on a coalition between these post-materialist voters and more socially conservative 'old Labour' voters. Tony Blair changed the dynamic by marching Labour – probably more firmly than ever before – towards the aspirant voter. For much of the last few decades the swing voter has been most likely to be found among voters who are both aspirant and socially conservative.

However, today the belief that it's 'the economy, stupid' and that Labour should chase the aspirant voter, which has imbued recent Labour thinking, is much less true than before the Lehman Brothers collapse. There are fewer aspirant voters, and those that there are simply are not listening. Nearer the election their numbers may swell again and they will listen more intently, but right now the aspirant voter is disinterested, disbelieving and small in number.

The voter that Labour must really focus on – our real weakness – is the socially conservative voter. It was among these voters that Labour's vote collapsed at the last election. And it is these voters whose numbers have grown as previously aspirant voters have become too anxious about today to dream of a better tomorrow. Rowenna Davis speaks eloquently to this constituency, celebrating our social conservatism, rather than tiptoeing around it. Others should digest the importance of her argument.

Most socially conservative voters are receptive to messages about fairness that also work for post-materialist voters, particularly on health, and are angered by the greed of the few. Many share with the post-materialists a belief in the notion of the kind of activist state spelt out by Chuka Umunna. However, beyond debates about fairness and more collectivist solutions to our economic challenges Labour rarely speaks their language.

One way to really understand the socially conservative voter is to unpick two issues that are core to their psyche: immigration and crime. In fact, for socially conservative voters, at root they are one.

In the latest YouGov poll voters put immigration as the second most important issue facing the country, behind the economy. It has been like that for many years. A recent international Ipsos-MORI poll found that, of the 23 countries covered, Britain had the second highest level of concern about immigration. At the end of a deep recession Mrs Duffy did not berate Gordon Brown over her standard of living.

That immigration is a significant issue for many is well understood, but what is less understood is why. Labour treats immigration as an economic issue. In government we gave the distinct appearance of seeing migrant labour as a tool to aid economic growth, nothing more, nothing less. We subverted the social to the economic. Even when we apologise over immigration we do so as if the only

thing that mattered were its economic impact. But, for the socially conservative voter, rapid social change challenges social mores, and threatens the moral codes by which we live. It provokes deep anxieties about 'where I fit in' or even 'if I fit in?'

The last Labour government halved crime. Yet ask most socially conservative voters whether they believe crime is lower than it was fifteen years ago and the response is often complete disbelief. For these voters fear of crime is very real. It is spurred by a belief that the social norms which govern daily life are under threat and that children don't learn right from wrong anymore; that there is moral decay.

In boom times the aspirant voter is in the ascendancy. In these circumstances, for most voters, rapid cultural change is merely seen as necessary consequence of economic progress. When, as now, economic confidence has been shattered, the socially conservative voter is in the ascendancy, and many perceive rapid social change as a threat to our sense of belonging, our identity and our safety. Labour lost the argument on crime for the same reason it lost the argument on immigration.

By either barely talking about cultural issues or by treating them as if they were economic we are betraying our greatest weakness. We compound this by treating economic issues as if they were divorced from the social and the cultural. In an age of austerity it is not just that we cannot afford to trade numbers, we simply cannot connect with numbers. Perhaps we fear that cultural narratives lead inexorably to a nasty brand of politics that exploits fears to divide us from each other, but history teaches us that it is when we fail to or address palpable anxieties about social change that this brand of politics thrives. We do not have to close our borders, just open our minds to the very real anxieties that mass immigration provokes. A debate is long overdue and in his piece Andrew Harrop boldly opens the door to it.

In England, when the Conservatives fall in the polls, UKIP – a party whose appeal is based almost exclusively on culture and identity – rise. And north of the border we are reminded that when the politics of culture and identity are fused with egalitarianism its allure can be potent. Ed Miliband's heritage and considered approach to politics make him one of politicians best equipped to address issues like immigration adroitly, without awakening the beast of xenophobia from its slumber.

This is not the 1980s, when – despite repeated evidence to the contrary – many Labour activists, and some in its leadership, took the view that if the aspirant voter did not support our conception of fairness, it was their problem. There is no chance of the current Labour leadership falling for that fallacy. And for all the anxiety about our economic message, attrition cuts and declining living standards are providing ample opportunity for us to regain ground.

But if our cultural antenna is not attuned this will count for much less than the received wisdom supposes. The move to a more credible fiscal position – exemplified by Rachel Reeves's contribution – demonstrates we understand the logic of austere times; now we must find the language. That language should aim to engender a sense of belonging, to remind us all that social order is the foundation stone on which strong communities are built, and to rekindle our love of country. Englishness should not be bypassed on the way to Britishness or internationalism. Solidarity and reciprocity make for the best communities and these are Labour values. To foster both requires an 'age of reassurance' to match our 'age of austerity.'

Our economic message should be built from the ground up – connected to community and family – and based on the three pillars of responsibility, endeavour, and thrift. Already Ed Miliband's best speech was delivered last summer, when he made responsibility a golden thread that should run through all walks of life – from the boardroom

director to the council house tenant. Ideas, like Kitty Ussher's call for a return to contributory principle, should resonate with voters in austere times: you put something in you get something back when you need it.

The next election will not just be about which party offers a better life, but which can provide the emotional nourishment we need to feel good about our way of life. In the north tribal loyalty to Labour will see us through but further south, without emotional succour, many of Labour's potential voters will be easily dislodged by the Conservatives. Ed Miliband has avoided the obvious trap of only playing to our perceived strengths. He has also opened the door to many of the right arguments, but hitherto he has weighted these to one part of the congregation, the post-materialist voter. These voters are vital to our mission and will take us further than technocratic analysis suggests, but not far enough. It is now time to address Labour's real weakness and to celebrate all that is good about the country we seek to govern.

Endnotes

- 1 The British Values survey was started by Pat Dade and Les Higgins in 1973 and segments the population into 12 groups based on their dominant motivations.