Bridging the Brexit divide

Lisa Nandy

Addressing the gulf between Britain’s towns and cities
Brexit is pulling the country, and the Labour Party, apart. Behind the disagreement about whether a second referendum or a negotiated exit is the least damaging option, there is a much deeper and more fundamental fissure.

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It started not in 2016, but several decades earlier, when the industry began to disappear from Britain’s towns. Coal mines, mills and factories that were once the heart of British industry closed, forcing young people to seek opportunities elsewhere. Successive governments pursued a strategy of investing in cities in the hope the benefits would trickle out to surrounding towns. As a result, our towns have aged while cities have grown younger. This is why, on almost every measure – whether the EU, immigration or human rights – a gulf has opened up between our socially conservative towns and our socially liberal cities. We are now, as the academics Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker put it, ‘two Englands’,¹ one of which is significantly more likely to believe that politicians don’t care about them or their area. In many towns across the country there is a growing sense that the political system is illegitimate, unresponsive and deeply uninterested in the reality of people’s lives.

This is how a crisis, caused by an economic model that failed to deliver in many parts of the country, became a culture war that threatens to undermine liberal democracy altogether. As political parties have failed to grapple with these divisions, populists have moved in to fill the gap.

There are those on left and right, as the academics Harry Pitts and Matt Bolton\(^2\) put it, who luxuriate in the flames licking at the sides of liberal democracy. The system of checks and balances that protect us from the tyranny of the majority are now under attack in every arena – from the civil service and the judiciary to Parliament and the mainstream media.

For Labour, this is also an existential threat. The coalition that has propelled us into power three times in the last 100 years is an alliance of middle- and working-class voters, drawn from those two Englands, and with similar alliances in Wales and Scotland. The slow march of working-class voters away from Labour has been accelerated by Brexit and our response to it. The characterisation of Leave voters as somehow extreme, racist or stupid effectively writes off 52 per cent of the electorate and whole communities on the basis of their views about the EU. It may well prove to be the final death knell for Labour’s traditional coalition, and any hope of unifying the country or forming a majority government again.

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There are yet signs of life – and they exist much closer to home. In Greater Manchester, Mayor Andy Burnham has bucked this trend, proving to be a popular figure who has taken on the issues that matter most to people – town centres, buses, trains and life chances for young people – and started to develop an agenda that works for very diverse parts of the city region. He inherited a mayoral model that replicated all the worst elements of the national system – over-centralisation, remote decision making, trickle-out economics – and has begun to turn it around. The recently launched Town of Culture competition is an explicit rejection of a model that aims to suck Lancashire and Cheshire’s towns into the urban sprawl, and instead celebrates their local identity, history and contribution. While politics is driven by division, place is proving a unifier.

It works because it is about handing people power, agency and control over their own lives. The vote to leave the EU was driven by a rejection of a political system that had shrugged its shoulders as jobs disappeared, young people left, and with them the spending power that sustained the pubs, high streets and bus networks that were the beating heart of the

community. In the face of this, ‘Take Back Control’ caught the mood like no other slogan in my lifetime. The People’s Vote campaigners fail to understand that this was about autonomy, agency and power even three years after the referendum – perhaps best summed up by the frequently used slogan ‘nobody voted to make themselves poorer’.

But there are other potentially polarising areas where Labour is getting it right. One of those is climate change, which has been a similarly divisive issue for Labour’s sister parties in other countries. Most notable is Australia, where it has driven a coach and horses through Labour’s traditional coalition in urban and non-urban areas and descended into a culture war. It has the potential to do this in Britain, where stark warnings about climate catastrophe prove to be disempowering; where the migration crisis caused by climate change is already being preyed upon by the far right; and where disruption to public transport from groups such as Extinction Rebellion is creating real problems for working people. Instead, Labour has devised the Green New Deal, with a promise of clean energy jobs in those towns where people built Britain’s wealth through back-breaking work in the mines over the last century. This is a positive vision for the future that has the potential to create alliances in the fight against climate change and become a game changer in those communities after 40 years of decline.

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The next challenge is to democratise those decisions, and to support communities and councils to develop their own clean energy schemes as part of a national plan to cut carbon emissions. The lesson from 13 years of Labour government is that the clean energy scheme co-owned and run by hundreds of local people survives, while the Sure Start conceived and run from Whitehall does not.

5 See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-50079716
Taking power out of Whitehall and handing people the reins to determine the future of their communities, their children and their public services is the only way to bring the country back together. The cause of our current crisis is powerlessness. It can only be met by restoring it back to those people who rightfully own it. This was always a core part of Labour’s tradition, but in recent years we wrongly came to believe that redistributing wealth on its own was enough, while leaving the existing power structures undisturbed. Now, with a clamour for more control in our liberal cities and our conservative towns, we will only unite the country by ensuring people have it.

It can be done, but in the culture war that has engulfed Labour, as well as the country, is anyone prepared to try?

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