

To win back the Red Wall, Starmer should avoid the politics of anger and focus on a 'bread and roses' approach instead



Instead of responding to the 2021 election results by appealing to voters' negative feelings towards migrants, Londoners, young people and welfare recipients, Labour should show how it can transform voters' lives and communities with a 'bread and roses' approach, writes [Eunice Goes](#).

The results of last Thursday's round of by-election, council, mayoral and national elections showed that Keir Starmer's strategy of appealing to a divided electorate by toning down socialist rhetoric, adopting bland slogans, and borrowing from the Conservatives' patriotic language is not working.

The Labour Party lost the Westminster seat of Hartlepool, dozens of council seats in the Midlands and Northeast to the Conservatives, as well as council seats to the Greens and Liberal Democrats in places like Cambridgeshire, Canterbury, Tyneside, Bristol, Stockport, and Sheffield. But Super Thursday was not totally disastrous for the party and there are signs of a modest Labour recovery in the South East and other parts of the country. The party obtained its [best-ever results](#) in the election to the National Assembly for Wales, re-elected Mayors for the City Region of Liverpool, Greater Manchester, London, Bristol, Preston, and won mayoral contests in Salford, West of England, West Yorkshire and Peterborough and Cambridgeshire. But it is fair to say that these successes reflect local dynamics and strategies and owe little to Keir Starmer.

Labour's disappointing electoral performance can be partly explained by ongoing structural demographic changes and contextual factors. The government's vaccine rollout has been a huge success, the furlough scheme and other government schemes (including the Towns Fund which is [channelling millions of pounds](#) to Conservative seats), cushioned the negative impact of the pandemic-led economic downturn. In these circumstances, ordinary voters do not have huge incentives to vote for change, or to vote at all.

But context offers a partial explanation for Labour's disappointing results. The party lost seats because it did not offer a clear and fresh alternative to voters: voters were unimpressed by bland Starmerism.

Starmer's relaunch

The Labour leader has reacted to the barrage of bad news by promising a 'policy review' that will focus on 'work and jobs', and with a rushed and ill-managed reshuffle of his Shadow Cabinet. He 'sacked' Angela Rayner from her roles as Labour Party Chair and national campaign coordinator, appointing her instead Shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Shadow Secretary of State for the Future of Work; promoted Rachel Reeves to the post of Shadow Chancellor; and demoted Anneliese Dodds from Shadow Chancellor to party chair in charge of policy renewal. He has also appointed the pollster Deborah Mattinson as head of strategy.

These choices suggest that Starmer's strategy will continue to focus on trying to win back the Red Wall, but hopefully now by taking an approach that works. By this I mean that Labour's strategy should aim to win back the trust of voters of the Red Wall without, at the same time, alienating the younger and more educated voters in England's more diverse cities and university towns, who, as these elections showed, feel no loyalty towards Labour either.

Finding the right alchemy that will woo the older and socially conservative voters of the Red Wall whilst keeping on board the younger, more educated, and socially liberal voters elsewhere has become Labour's quest for the Holy Grail. As the last four electoral defeats show, this is a challenging mission, but the lessons from Labour's electoral successes on Thursday and Mattinson's [insights](#) into the Red Wall might offer the beginning of a winning formula.

Since Starmer was elected leader, Labour's approach to the Red Wall focused almost exclusively on the socially conservative views of Red Wall voters. The Labour leader wrapped himself in the Union Jack and avoided any issue that could be remotely associated to a so-called 'woke agenda'. This approach did not work. A [poll](#) conducted by J.L. Partners showed that the main reasons Red Wall voters did not vote for Labour were Starmer's leadership and the fact that the party's policies were unknown to them.

Starmer and his team should accept that Labour is never going to beat the Conservatives at anger politics. The Conservatives promote the most punitive approaches on migration, crime, and welfare policy and so will always win that 'contest'. Moreover, this approach neglects the fact that the Conservatives did not win Red Wall seats by singing 'Rule Britannia' at rallies, but by promising (and in the case of Tees Valley delivering) huge public investment to the North East and Midlands.

For these reasons, instead of offering a bilious politics of anger, Labour should appeal to what Abraham Lincoln called 'the better angels of our nature'. Instead of appealing to voters' negative feelings towards migrants, Londoners, young people, vulnerable citizens who rely on benefits, Labour should show how it can transform voters' lives and communities with a 'bread and roses' approach.

Bread and roses

In her book *Beyond the Red Wall*, Mattinson identified the socially conservative values of Red Wall voters, but she has also traced the causes of these voters' discontent and resentment. The voters she encountered were crying out for support and attention following decades of abandonment, which have left pawnbrokers dominating local high streets, together with neglected parks and hollowed out public spaces.

Instead of contortionist stances on immigration and welfare, Labour should offer these voters a bread and roses approach that focuses on promoting economic security and what the Labour MP Jon Cruddas calls a 'politics of place'. This approach focuses on proposing well-paid, dignified, secure and rewarding work as well as quality-of-life issues that enable individuals and families to feel proud of their communities and enjoy life.

Promoting this agenda to a cynical electorate is hard to do while in opposition, but it is not impossible. Indeed, Starmer should copy from the Conservatives' campaign blueprint to win Hartlepool, which focused on showcasing the work of the Tees Valley mayor, Ben Houchen. Instead of vague promises, Starmer should place the achievements of the Labour government in Wales, and of Labour mayors, at the heart of Labour's campaigns. Showing instead of telling is a more effective way of persuading voters that a Labour government can make a difference to people's lives.

But this approach in itself will not suffice, especially in areas controlled by the Conservatives. To show that Labour can change voters' lives, Labour should, as suggested by [Aditya Chakraborty](#), turn their constituency offices into community hubs. These community hubs, which should involve trade unions and local activists and build on the community-building experiences of innovative councils like Preston and Salford, should be more than just local food banks and welfare advice centres. They should also be the focal point for small community projects that can turn dilapidated playgrounds into welcoming and safe places for children, organise cooking lessons, clean local parks, turn closed-down department stores into pop-up shops, co-operatives, and creative hubs for the community, run sports activities for all generations, book clubs, choirs, or mobile libraries.

Projects such as these deliver the 'roses' that make substantial difference to people's quality of life. They renew people's pride in their local communities and nurture the networks of empathy and solidarity in the neglected areas of England that turned their backs on Labour. These are not eye-catching projects; they are slower and more resource-consuming small projects that nevertheless have greater potential of winning back the support of Red Wall voters without alienating Labour supporters in urban centres than highly choreographed patriotic campaigns.

About the Author



Eunice Goes is Professor of Politics at Richmond University.

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