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How the Labour heartlands lost their faith in politics

The loss of the Red Wall might not be just Labour's problem. Sacha Hilhorst writes that voters in ex-mining constituencies are not only disappointed with Labour, but with all politicians who they see as self-interested and corrupt. Reform UK, however, are set to reap the rewards of these disaffected voters.

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Less than a year into government, the Labour Party is in trouble, not least in its erstwhile industrial heartlands. If winning back much of the so-called Red Wall was one of the party's major achievements at the 2024 general election, the newly minted MPs representing post-industrial constituencies in the midlands and the north have been highlighting the precarity of the party's support in their seats. A [statement](#) from the self-styled Red Wall Group did not mince words: "The natural affinity to voting for Labour has died."



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Did it? My work suggests that, yes, there has been a loss of support for the Labour Party specifically, but above all, many have come to loathe politics altogether. The research focuses on Mansfield in Nottinghamshire, which has often been described as the archetype of a disaffected post-industrial constituency. As I describe in a recent [paper](#) for the British Journal of Sociology, many of the 93 people I spoke to and spent my time with expressed a profound scepticism about politics. Roughly one third of the regular residents I interviewed understood politics largely or predominantly through the frame of *corruption*. Politicians lie, one ex-miner told me, “for their own means, basically. To see if you’re suckered into it or not. [...] They feather their own nest.” Referring to then-prime minister Boris Johnson, another interviewee said: “I don’t think for one minute that he makes any decisions. I think he’s just the mouthpiece for it all. Just... I just think that whoever’s paying the money for whatever agenda they want him to push at that moment. [...] You know, I just think corruption is just massive.”



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It is difficult to overstate just how much people generally loathed politics. Statements like the above were not limited to people on the fringes – they were widely shared and often rehearsed together, as a common form of pub conversation and small talk in community spaces. The intensity of hatred for politics far outstripped negative sentiments about immigration – which were much more variable and generally more complex. “They sort of look after themselves, the politicians”, said Robin, the ex-miner I cited earlier. “They don’t [do] what they say, they don’t keep to what they say they’re going to do. They tell lies. It shouldn’t be like that.” Later on in the interview, he added: “They’re making millions, aren’t they?”

This is what the current government squandered when its ministers accepted donations and Taylor Swift concert tickets: the opportunity to harness this anti-political energy for a progressive reform agenda and the opportunity to set itself apart from “politics as usual”. Mansfield is currently (once again) a Labour seat, but by current [polling](#) – however little that means, years out from the next general election – Reform UK would win the seat with a huge 15 percentage point margin. Some Labour advisers have recommended aping more of Reform’s policies, especially on immigration, but having fallen foul of the vernacular political ontology expressed in corruption talk, the party will not

win votes this way – it will merely play into the sense that politicians will say anything to win votes. Not only is it unconvincing, it is insulting. As Mary, one of my interviewees, put it: “sometimes I just think, these people, they say what they think we want to hear. And I find that quite annoying. That, I find that as if they think we’re thick.”

While a dislike of politics is hardly unique to Mansfield, there is evidence to suggest that ex-mining constituencies are particularly politically disaffected. Geographers Maria Abreu and Calvin Jones find that ex-mining constituencies “are highly politically disengaged, with low levels of trust and political efficacy, and low involvement in the political process”, even compared to economically and demographically similar places. This certainly applies to Mansfield, although it is a comparatively recent development. Residents used to turn out to vote at the same level as the country at large, despite being in a mostly very safe Labour seat, with turnout reaching 82 per cent in the ‘92 election. In the most recent elections, it was 55 per cent, compared to 60 per cent in the country overall. Many of my interviewees, who had been politically animated by the Brexit years, now vowed to never vote again. Mary: “I’ve said to you haven’t I, I ain’t voting again, I can’t be arsed with it.”

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The depth of anti-political sentiment is all the more striking because historically, workers in places like Mansfield were pivotal in the fight for democracy. Positioned at chokepoints in the energy supply, they were able to leverage their power as workers to win social and political rights. Their power as workers also resulted in extensive social provision and a powerful moral narrative about their hard work and merit. Politicians eagerly expressed these sentiments. As I write in the paper, “Social provision was perceived as a *token of care*, which allowed political representatives to prove they were on the miners’ side. They offered a shared moral imaginary available to miners and their representatives alike, structured around care, community and hard work.” Whether true or not, a vote for these politicians was imagined as a social bond: you vote for the Labour MP because you are a worker, he will affirm your merit as a worker, and support the provision of amenities to reflect it.



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Some of these modes of narrating politics have persisted to the present day. Although the welfares, socials and leisure facilities were a fairly straightforward reflection of the strategic position occupied by mining areas at nodes of energy production and distribution, they were popularly understood in moral terms. Interviewees often expressed the view that such facilities were a reflection of people's hard work. The present-day working class in Mansfield works no less hard, but now does so in care homes, supermarkets and distribution centres – positions which do not convey the same power as mining did. Meanwhile, levels of public and semi-public provision have been sharply curtailed after the twin ravages of deindustrialisation and austerity. Because these provisions had been narrated in moral terms, the loss of them is also a moral slight. Everything had been cruelly “taken away.”



In the absence of large investments in public services, commons and shared amenities, the sense of decline is likely to persist, further driving the appeal of corruption talk and raising the risk that its underlying politics will fuse with more explicitly authoritarian and racist political projects.



Seen in this light, corruption talk is both a forceful explanation for decline (there is no money because politicians have pocketed it) and a moral response to the perceived lack of care from politicians. If public provision and political representation were narrated in moral terms to begin with, it is perhaps easier to understand why the rejection of politics also occurs in deeply moral terms. Well-documented wrongdoings such as the 2009 expenses scandal merge with bits of local gossip and speculation and occasional outright falsehoods to produce a compelling narrative of pervasive corruption, which in turn dovetails with the sense that political representatives have done “nothing about anything” while the town lost beloved amenities and jobs. This brings to light the connection between the structural changes wrought by deindustrialisation and the erosion of support for the political system altogether.

The research offers a glimpse of the scale of the challenge facing the government and to some extent all of UK politics. In the absence of large investments in public services, commons and shared amenities, the sense of decline is likely to persist, further driving the appeal of corruption

talk and raising the risk that its underlying politics will fuse with more explicitly authoritarian and racist political projects.

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