

Blue-collar voters and the Left: Labour must reconnect with those it left behind

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*The tectonic plates of British politics are shifting. Insurgent parties such as the SNP and UKIP are challenging the century-old dominance of left and right. Whatever their ideological and policy differences, the new populists are anti-establishment and purport to speak for the voiceless, the angry and the disaffected – an appeal to working-class, blue-collar workers (often white and male) who feel alienated and left behind. Here, **Adrian Pabst** argues that Labour is highly disconnected from this group, and a profound rethink is needed if it is to offer majority politics.*



Please note: a counter-argument to this post, entitled ‘Why Blue Labour is a dead end’, is available [here](#).

In response to the rise of insurgent parties – including SNP and UKIP – mainstream parties seek to expand the centre-ground. The Conservatives are simultaneously trying to appeal to left *and* right, shrinking the state and slashing welfare while also introducing a National Living Wage of £9 by 2020 and getting businesses to fund apprenticeships. In his July 2015 budget, Chancellor George Osborne declared that “We are now the party of work, the only true party of labour”. By appealing to a blue-collar, one-nation conservatism, the Tories hope to rule until 2025, and beyond.

However, as the political [fall-out](#) from the tax credit fiasco [shows](#), the Conservative hold on power is fragile, and the much-vaunted ‘long-term economic plan’ is not benefiting vast swathes of the country. The Tories are widely distrusted and disliked precisely because their values are seen as toxic. Even if the tax credits cuts have been scrapped, the dismantling of the welfare state (in the absence of proper vocational training and more skilled jobs) amounts to a punitive campaign against the poor, punishing them for the sins of the City.

Since winning the general election, the Tories have parked their tanks on Labour territory to portray themselves as being on the side of blue-collar workers by adopting a raft of policies taken straight from the [Labour Policy Review](#) led by Jon Cruddas. This includes the already mentioned living wage; a national fund for apprenticeships paid for by business; a national infrastructure commission to generate growth and spread prosperity; and the Northern Powerhouses – devolving power and resources to English cities and counties. Even if Conservative plans for decentralisation fall well short of proper self-government and do not extend to the communities of Scotland and Wales, a Tory administration is closer to the concerns of Labour councils across England than the Labour leadership in London.

Labour’s disconnection from blue-collar workers

For decades the Labour party has ignored the concerns of its traditional working-class support. Beginning with Blair and Brown and continuing with Miliband, Labour has been wedded to an unpopular, outdated politics of borrow-tax-and-spend, using state control to dictate from the centre while unleashing the forces of the global ‘free market’ that invade every aspect of our lives – health, housing, transport, education and the family. All this has provided more opportunities for the few while also generating new levels of inequality and insecurity for the many. Freedom has undoubtedly increased, but paradoxically so has dependency. As state and market have grown more powerful, so local government and people have lost autonomy. Worker self-organisation and participation in both politics and the economy were at the roots of the labour movement and instrumental in the creation of the Labour Party. For at least 25 years, it has been pro-bureaucracy and pro-capitalism, ignoring the concerns of its core and the wider country.

Indeed, in the 2015 general election, the party not only failed to regain the five million blue-collar voters who had left Labour between 1997 and 2010, as Frank Field MP has shown in [Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics](#) (part of an essay collection I co-edited together with Ian Geary). Labour also lost lifelong Labour voters: on 7 May more than a million who had backed Labour in 2010, and before, voted Conservative for the first time. They are unlikely to return unless there is a profound rethink.

Labour's disdain for small 'c' conservative and communitarian values

Key to Labour's woes is not primarily class or geography but rather culture. The party's strength in inner cities cannot hide the fact that the places where it needed to win but lost are culturally the furthest away from Labour's metropolitan mentality. The trouble is that the rest of Britain is not going London's way. Never mind the wealth gap, it is the deepening divide along cultural lines – between a more liberal-cosmopolitan and a more conservative-communitarian outlook – that Labour has ignored for far too long.

Of course, a growing number of people in Britain are socially liberal and rightly so in certain respects. They prefer a fair and open-minded mentality to an insular and bigoted attitude (in terms, for example of ethnic diversity and reasonable levels of immigration). However, a sizeable section is also much more communitarian and small 'c' conservative than the Labour leadership recognises: most people (including many ethnic minorities) choose a fairly traditional family life, want to live in safe, stable places, and are generally sceptical about change, as [David Goodhart has argued](#). Even university graduates and professionals who are liberal-cosmopolitan tend to become culturally more conservative and communitarian as they settle down and get married. They worry far less about high mobility and much more about buying their own house, finding their children a place in a good school and living in relatively stable communities with low levels of crime and a moderate degree of trust and neighbourliness.

Labour's metro-liberal identity has alienated not just its own traditional blue-collar supporters for whom globalisation has generated new forms of cultural insecurity in addition to economic anxiety. The party's lack of cultural connection extends to 'new affluent workers' and 'emergent service workers' (bar staff, carers, call centre workers) who want to start their own business or learn a new trade but feel ignored by 'big government' and 'big business' alike. They all view Labour as the party of the liberal elites plus public sector workers and minorities – not the millions of people doing ordinary private-sector jobs. One reason why they vote Tory is because Labour shows no liking or sympathy for people whose way of life is threatened by ever-faster change, nor does it help people who want to get on and provide for their families.

Labour needs to offer a majority politics

In short, culture is the crucial issue for Labour. What puts people off Labour is its liberal-cosmopolitan disdain for patriotism and its endorsement of a social allocation system which, as Field puts it, 'favours the newcomer and the social misfit' over the vast majority who contribute and play by the rules. With the old class' divide and ideological clash fading, rival conceptions of contribution and belonging will increasingly define British politics.

In the 2015 election, the combined vote for the Conservatives, UKIP and the DUP outstripped the total number of votes for left-liberal parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP, Plaid Cymru, and Greens). Thus the idea that there is a clear and growing progressive majority is just as misguided as the idea that Labour can win by turning its back on the country's culturally communitarian-conservative core.

In conclusion: the desertion of socially conservative voters heralds a broader trend of blue-collar detachment from Labour. The problem lies with Labour and its own narrowing culture and not with the voters. Labour must broaden out its politics and its culture in order to reconnect with the whole country, not just segments of it. If it does not do this it will become a minority party of sectional interests and cease to be a national political force.

Follow the debate:

This is the first piece in a series of articles on 'Blue Labour'. A counter-argument to this post, entitled 'Why Blue Labour is dead end', is available [here](#). Adrian Pabst will respond to these critiques in a post to be published tomorrow.

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