

Labour in the countryside

Cathy Elliott

Despite a difficult few months for Labour, we are seeing some green shoots of hope where we might not have expected them. The Batley and Spen by-election was a narrow hold, but what was particularly intriguing was that the party appears to have attracted a new sort of voter from the more rural or semi-rural parts of the constituency in the Spen Valley, including the villages around Cleckheaton and Heckmondwike. Meanwhile, whilst it is never ideal to lose your deposit, it was also welcome and interesting to see the Tories lose what everyone thought was a safe seat in Chesham and Amersham to the Liberal Democrats – without a doubt partly because of tactical voting. Some of the issues raised on the doorstep included HS2 and planning reform: both of which matter to local people in part because of destruction of the greenbelt and other natural habitats and areas of beauty.

After a terrible year in which the natural world on our doorsteps has been a great consolation to many, there are reasons both principled and electoral why Labour should care about the countryside. This is clearly a point that the leadership already accepts: Keir Starmer's speech to the National Farmers Union in February – the first Labour leader to address them in thirteen years – received a cautiously warm welcome from farmers whose livelihoods are increasingly vulnerable because of Brexit, but also because of long-term trends that make it increasingly difficult to make a profit from food production. It also heralded the start of a wide-ranging review into rural and farming policies by the Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Luke Pollard MP. He outlines his initial thoughts and priorities in this issue. His renewed focus on listening to farmers and rural people, on supporting rural communities and economies, and on reducing carbon, and food miles, and halting the downward pressure on animal welfare and nature-friendly farming standards is extremely welcome.

It is important to note, though, that being serious about rural policy and the concerns of rural voters in no way entails abandoning the values that Labour has always held dear, or what matters in urban areas or to urban voters. Gareth Southgate's vision of England as a self-confident place in which football players have the courage to kneel against racism has been compelling this summer partly because it is relevant to the whole of the country (although [people in the devolved nations](#) ~~Wales and Scotland~~ may choose different sportspeople to support). Kneeling alongside Londoners and Mancunians like Raheem Sterling and Marcus Rashford has been Kieran Trippier, who went to my old school in semi-rural Northern England. Culture warriors may be entranced by a vision of the rural that is white, socially conservative, affluent and somehow emotionally and culturally separate from our great cities. However, the emotions conjured by the summer's football hint that this simplistic dualism cannot withstand inspection of the deep interconnections between rural and urban that exist on this small island [nor its links with the wider world](#). The contributions in this edition demonstrate that the countryside isn't white, nor necessarily socially conservative, affluent, or outside of Labour traditions and history. They also explore the ways in which the countryside matters to us all and what its future might look like.

The countryside isn't white

As Corinne Fowler explains in her article about her work on the National Trust's brilliant, and now (in)famous, Colonial Countryside project, there have been people of colour living and working in the British countryside for thousands of years. Painfully, though, she also shows that the history of the countryside was formed through slavery and colonialism in ways that cannot be disentangled from its present and must be faced. Despite the best efforts of the right-wing press to vilify her and the National Trust's work on researching the histories of its properties, Fowler sticks admirably to the principle that the best approach to a culture war is not to fight it. She acknowledges that the conversation about histories of racism can be as painful as it is necessary, and advises a compassionate and patient approach to these necessary unearthings.

Kate Swade and Tabitha Baker's contributions both point towards the ongoing involvement of people of colour with the land. Baker's rich account of the lives, hopes, and concerns of rural voters includes people living on Roma traveller sites. This is an ancient way of life that is put yet again radically under threat by upcoming Conservative legislation to outlaw any kind of camping outside of official campsites. In addition to targeting this imperilled minority, the new laws will criminalise all sorts of engagement in the natural world. Kate Swade from Shared Assets, meanwhile, shows the importance of enabling people from non-farming backgrounds, particularly people of colour, to enter into agriculture and bring new ideas and diversity into farming. She criticises the binary way of thinking that suggests that the countryside should either be handed over to 'rewilding' projects that would displace food production, or alternatively farmed more and more intensively. This reductive approach can be replaced by a focus on the entanglements between people and the land as pioneered by the real-world projects she describes run by those most marginalised in the countryside, including people of colour and those from traveller backgrounds.

The countryside isn't always affluent or necessarily conservative

Lord Bassam and Lady Young provide a compelling account of the Lords' enquiries into rural communities and seaside towns. They provide hard data about the poverty in our rural areas and the ways it is exacerbated by problems that are specific to rural areas such as poor infrastructure – particularly broadband and public transport – as well as unemployment and unaffordable housing. Baker's article provides a rich complement to their article. Through her in-depth qualitative research with rural voters in South West England, she demonstrates that poverty and poor infrastructure blight her interviewees' lives in concrete, everyday ways, such as not being able to get to work or hospital appointments. Both these articles show in different ways that although divisions between cities, towns and country are deeply felt and resentments are real, the countryside is very far from the stereotypes of leafy Tory shires. These issues of poverty and failing services need to matter to Labour because they are central to our values.

Lucy Natarajan, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and John Tomaney's article reporting on their work in the **tiny** village of Sacriston in County Durham provides a similarly rich account of the lives of people in rural and semi-rural areas, in particular the efforts that people go to take care of other people in their own communities. This community effort ranges from a deeply impressive Covid response, to running sports

clubs and Scouts and Guides; and from supporting the physical and mental health of pregnant residents, to running multiple annual cultural events. This organising is deeply rooted in the politics of place and the desire to bring the community together, but it is hindered by the lack of government-provided services, thanks to years of cuts.

The advocates of devolution, electoral reform, and community empowerment interviewed by Baker, Natarajan, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Tomaney are testament to the progressive and thoughtful ideas coming out of the countryside. Meanwhile, it was an honour to get an article from a working farmer, Richard Bramley, for this edition, and his voice from the sharp end of farming is equally thought-provoking and interesting. All of these ideas emerge from a lived experience of the land and a deep entwinement in non-human processes as they entangle with human activity.

Meanwhile, the blight of second home ownership to local communities is another common thread running through many contributions to the issue. The Labour government in Wales is currently considering urgent measures to tackle this problem as increasing numbers of villages in beautiful rural and coastal areas have more second homes than locals. When this happens, it is destructive to community cohesion, businesses and local services, with villages left as ‘ghost towns’ in winter when owners stay away, and local people priced out of decent housing. It also threatens Welsh as a living, community language, and this drives resentments that are deep and hard to reverse. We leave advocacy on this question to Plaid Cymru at our peril: Dexter Govan’s evocative account from the recent Scottish Parliament elections would have been incomprehensible to readers just ten years ago when Scottish Labour was still powerful, and shows how easily resentments can curdle into support for nationalism and separatism. Meanwhile, whatever happens in Wales, ~~on~~ the issue of second homes should be watched with interest in the areas ~~in all the countries~~ ~~of~~ throughout the UK that are affected by similar concerns.

Rural issues are not separate from traditional Labour ideas and concerns

Neil Ward and John Tomaney both outline Labour’s long history of effective and meaningful work in rural areas, whether that was providing services such as healthcare and housing or advancing a devolution agenda that has brought power, voice and political participation closer to people. Tomaney also sets out the constitutional history that has neutered local government’s ability to provide meaningful political leadership, and suggests recovering Labour’s tradition of municipal socialism in ways that are relevant outside the municipalities.

Many of the tentative answers to the questions posed in this edition emerge from Labour thinking and chime with Labour values. Ideas about agroecology, carbon sequestration in the land as part of food production and local authority farms may be new to some *Renewal* readers, but the importance of good quality social housing and well-funded local authorities with meaningful powers will not.

Labour people may not be sentimental about the green belt, but the ideas for community land management explained by Swade will be familiar and draw on both socialist and co-operative traditions. Ward’s contention that large cities are not necessarily best at producing either economic growth or happy lives is corroborated by work on place and community in this edition and beyond. And Swade’s detailed

explanation on how the countryside can do a good job of providing both these things is a testament to the creative bottom-up thinking that we must embrace.

What's next?

As the politicians writing in this edition are all too well aware, Labour has won many rural and semi-rural constituencies before. Ben Cooper's detailed analysis based on Fabian Society research demonstrates that we are a long way from doing so again, but it is not impossible. The signs from recent elections are tentatively promising, but nothing can be taken for granted. And, as Cooper also explains, the need is to target specific rural voters not constituencies: it is where the interests of the urban and rural interleave and entangle that our work can have the most impact. Labour has a proud tradition of representing the whole of the country, in which all people need the same things – homes they can afford, healthy lives, good food, clean air, convivial and mutually supportive communities, involvement with the non-human natural world, a good education, and a say in the decisions that affect them – but have different relationships to the ways these things are produced and provided.

This speaks to the importance of Luke Pollard's approach of listening and not assuming in rural areas. There is a rumble of discontent from rural voters – including farmers and others who may not be considered as Labour's core vote – in many of the articles in this edition, and this is a great opportunity for Labour as well as principled reason for action across the left. The single strongest point of agreement across the contributions to this issue – which I share – is the importance of constitutional reform to enable political decisions to be taken by those affected. This is a question of making everyone's vote count, to be sure, but it goes well beyond this, and touches on how we provide people with the opportunities to get involved in shaping their communities. This could be a question of community land management or the involvement of farmers in solving wider national and international issues of climate change and biodiversity loss. It might be the pioneering of local forms of deliberative democracy, or support for well-funded Labour councils harnessing and enabling the community spirit of the volunteers and activists whose voices shine through these articles in so many ways. In all cases, these possibilities offer a huge opportunity for Labour, and it is there for the taking in precisely those areas where the Conservatives think they are strong, as well as the areas they have just won.

There is a lot more to say. In this short edition, there has not been room to address all the facets of rural politics that we wanted to. The focus of most of the articles is on rural *England* (and Govan's article on Scotland is not about rural areas). Yet, there is much to say about what the Welsh and Scottish governments are doing on issues of food security and farming. This editorial has touched upon the criminalisation of traveller populations and the problems wrought by second homes, but both of these issues also merit fuller consideration. We could also do more to include the voices of people of colour and travellers in the journal itself. And there is more to be said on all the issues raised by the short articles in this issue, many of which feature in Henry Dumbleby's recently published National Food Strategy.¹ This document has been in the headlines mainly for its recommendations on sugar and salt taxes, but it contains a huge array of detailed analysis and recommendations on farming, environmental stewardship, trade and public education which are worthy of further consideration.

I am therefore grateful to *Renewal*'s editors for inviting me to continue seeking out contributions on the multiple topics that inform the politics of the rural and I hope to curate a kind of 'rural corner' on an occasional basis in future editions. To begin with, we are looking forward to a response to this edition by Hywel Lloyd, from Labour Coasts and Country, in the next issue and we appreciate his help in developing the current crop of contributions. Watch this space for a seedbed of ideas and opinions on the potential for a rural renewal for Labour.

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ⁱ Henry -Dimbleby, 'National Food Strategy: Independent Review': <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org>, 2021.