

# Peter Lee and Localism Today

Rachel Reeves

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Peter Lee offers an example of Labour politics rooted in a local community and founded on finding practical solutions to local problems. To follow his example today, Labour needs to work to localise power, build an industrial strategy based on the needs of the everyday economy and democratise the way our economy works.

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In recounting Peter Lee's story, John Tomaney offers a powerful account of the source and character of Labour's strength in one of its traditional heartlands. Many of these communities, especially in the North East and Midlands, detached from global growth and benefiting least from the knowledge and creative economies, have been drifting away from Labour since midway through the last decade, a process which continued – despite our success in Britain's cities and university towns – in June 2017.<sup>1</sup> All too often, in Tomaney's evocative phrase, the party hangs on thanks to the 'diminishing moral and physical capital accumulated' by past generations.

My own predecessor as Leeds MP, Alice Bacon, grew up in in the febrile atmosphere of a West Yorkshire mining town in the run-up to the General Strike of 1926. Raised by a father immersed in trade union activism, local politics and community leadership, Alice recalled that 'there was never a time when I decided to join the Labour Party' – she was born into it.<sup>2</sup> For someone like her, to join Labour was 'as natural as breathing'.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to imagine that would be true of many working-class girls growing up in a town like Normanton today.

Historically, Labour's strength in towns and villages across County Durham, Yorkshire and elsewhere was rooted in a claim to represent the working people of those communities. That didn't just mean representation in terms of their material and social needs, but also in a proximity and sensitivity to local culture and identity. Communities aren't static, and Labour needs to be in step with social change; we are a more diverse society, and the importance of taking into account gender, sexuality and ethnic diversity when we think about identity and equality is – thankfully – far more widely acknowledged than it was in the first half of the twentieth century. In part, recovering Labour's closeness to the communities it seeks to represent is about ensuring that the party, at every level, from councillors and activists to the Shadow Cabinet, is more representative of them. It means working closely alongside local groups trying to improve those communities – whether it is local trade union branches, faith groups, or campaigns like that in my own constituency in Leeds West, to preserve local institutions like the Bramley Baths and Library – as well as articulating Labour's priorities in a way that speaks to the way people feel about work, family and place.

As Tomaney and Ruth Davis have argued, these values can sit comfortably alongside – and provide a basis for – an inclusive, egalitarian, green politics.<sup>4</sup> Work, especially, needs to be considered not as a source of drudgery to be replaced in an automated, post-work future, but – when properly regulated and remunerated – as a source of meaning, autonomy and dignity.<sup>5</sup> Labour, after all, was created as the party of work, to give a voice to ordinary, working-class people in Parliament.

To deliver good work and prosperous, interconnected communities, an appreciation of everyday values and experiences must be married to a radical political economy. As Tomaney tells us, Peter Lee 'practiced a demotic socialism focused on practical solutions to every day problems', such as the provision of clean water and decent housing. Labour's early pioneers in local and municipal government placed front-and-centre issues like these, which formed the basis of the everyday economy: those sectors which provide the foundation for our everyday lives. Alongside the provision of utilities and housing, this includes health and social care, education and retail parts of our economy.

We need to better consider what today's equivalents are of those causes which animated our forebears in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century.

Some – such as housing and the need for security in work – are not new at all. Others have emerged or grown in salience more recently, like the need for far more expansive systems of care provision, or for the overhaul of the most bureaucratic and disempowering parts of our welfare state, like the Work Capability Assessment. And like Labour's early leaders, we need a vision of politics that goes beyond material concerns. Our epidemics of loneliness and mental illness relate to the increasingly disconnected nature of our society, and progressive politics should offer an answer to this.<sup>6</sup>

The everyday economy, and especially care, will provide a huge – and increasing – number of jobs in the future, disproportionately filled by women. However, these sectors also frequently suffer from low productivity, and offer low wages and insecure working conditions. The benefits to the people working in these sectors from an industrial policy concentrated on advanced manufacturing are limited. An industrial strategy with the everyday economy at its heart can drive up living standards and bring politics closer to those communities excluded from the benefits of the thriving, globalised parts of the modern economy.

That requires an agenda based around regional banks to spread capital to all our regions, and the devolution of further power and resources. It also means thinking about how we can encourage advances in management and the uptake of technology in sectors like retail and care, in ways which improve rather than displace jobs. The Fabian Society's Retail Taskforce offered a wealth of ideas for improving wages, conditions, productivity and workers' autonomy in the sector, from the creation of a 'super skills council' and a new Catapult Centre for management, to a crackdown on monopolistic activities by major retailers and measures to increase worker voice.<sup>7</sup> Britain needs an enabling state which supports alternative models of ownership and the provision of public services and utilities, such as renewable energy cooperatives, credit unions and schemes to support lonely or ill people. We need to empower local authorities to do more, and unleash their potential to build wealthier, more equal, more resilient, happier communities.

Where possible, power over the everyday economy should be devolved to our regions, towns and cities, bringing them closer to the people. However, it cannot just be devolution to local authorities. Councils in turn must devolve power

within their communities, use their powers of procurement to foster vibrant models of co-operative, mutual or community ownership to empower workers and consumers, and work with anchor institutions, whether it is the local hospital, a major private sector employer, or a global university. Labour needs to understand the capacity of the state not just to regulate and redistribute from above, but to bring together and support stakeholders in their local communities to work for the common good.<sup>8</sup>

On a local level, working within the narrow confines of the powers and resources which local authorities are allowed, we can see examples of this kind of politics, such as Preston's strategy for community wealth-building, Leeds' neighbourhood networks to help older people live independent, fulfilling lives, and Hammersmith and Fulham's new industrial strategy.<sup>9</sup> Think tanks like the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and the new Centre for Towns, and initiatives like the RSA's recent Inclusive Growth Commission and IPPR's Commission on Economic Justice, have begun to outline a new approach to the economy, based around place, regional equality and more democratic forms of ownership and decision-making.

Lee's story reminds us of the need for a politics connected to the everyday lives of the people Labour seeks to represent. That rests on three pillars. First – as we saw in June 2017 – a guarantee that Government will invest in the public services, small businesses and homes that our communities rely on. Second, a language that speaks to people's everyday lives and the things that matter to them: family, place and work. Finally, we need to offer a new approach to the central and local state, which seeks to empower communities and help them build the institutions and capacities needed for resilience and prosperity going forward.

Peter Lee was rooted in his community and dedicated to improving the everyday lives of the men and women within it. To broaden Labour's coalition to win, but more importantly to ensure that we are relevant in our heartland communities, we could do a lot worse than looking to his example.

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## Notes

- 1 W. Jennings and G. Stoker, 'Tilting Towards the Cosmopolitan Axis?: Political Change in England and the 2017 General Election', *Political Quarterly*, 88, 2017..
- 2 R. Reeves, *Alice in Westminster: The Political Life of Alice Bacon*, IB Tauris, 2016, p21.
- 3 Ibid, p28.
- 4 J. Tomaney, 'Parochialism: A Defence', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37, 2013; R. Davis, 'Home is Where the Heart is', *Fabian Review*, 128, 2016.
- 5 R. Yeoman, 'Conceptualising Work as a Fundamental Human Need', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 125, 2014.
- 6 R. Reeves, 'Throwing a New Light on Loneliness', speech to Policy Exchange, 11.12.17.
- 7 C. Tait, *At the Crossroads: The Future of UK Retail*, Fabian Society, 2016.
- 8 See, for instance, J. Wilson, *Letting Go*, Fabian Society, 2012.
- 9 *Community Wealth-Building through Anchor Institutions*, Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2017; *Economic Growth for Everyone: An Industrial Strategy for Hammersmith and Fulham*, Hammersmith and Fulham Borough Council, 2017.

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