

Reclaiming community: why Labour must put local power at the heart of its vision

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Labour Party must reclaim its historic roots in community politics to rebuild trust in politics and deliver tangible improvements to people's lives. Community is a Labour value, and empowering communities can provide a hopeful political vision that strengthens resilience and belonging.

Panteg House is a grand redbrick in Pontypool, a post-industrial town in South Wales' Eastern Valleys. The building was originally home to the managing director of Panteg Steelworks, but early in the 20th century its ownership was transferred to the workforce and it became a social club owned by local steelworkers.¹ After brief stints of being occupied by the military during both world wars, today it is still a working social club – and one recently brought back into community ownership. When I arrive early in 2021, most of its rooms are overflowing with food donations. The foodbank has been organised by the dad of someone I know from childhood, and I've come along to lend a hand on a visit back home. The pandemic has led 4.7 million adults and 2.3 million children to experience food insecurity, and Pontypool is no exception.² Over a few hours organising tinned foods, I learn that Panteg House has been involved in local poverty reduction for years. It offers financial advice and mental health support, has opened a community garden, and offers space to sixty different community groups – providing services for everyone from babies and toddlers to pensioners.

In places like Pontypool, when the state has failed, the community has stepped up. It's an example of a particular power that exists in communities across the country – the ability to tackle, in innovative and effective ways, challenges that have long occupied the minds of Westminster. Poverty, loneliness, climate change, radicalisation, cohesion – these are all big-picture problems for the state, but they are also everyday issues in villages and neighbourhoods, already being solved in innovative and effective ways at a community level. Despite this power and potential, our political system continues to see communities as an after-thought, a second order issue, a nice photo op at most. But as the Labour Party grapples with increasing challenges – our own popularity with voters, a fragmentation of traditional party allegiances, and a significant erosion of public trust in politics – we have the opportunity to reclaim community as part of the solution.

Other political parties have recognised this earlier than we have. Community is now central to Reform UK's political project; it is the second of three words making up their current slogan (family and country being the other two). Three-word slogans are ubiquitous in politics, and this one is borrowed from an opposition speech from a young David Cameron, who said, 'family, community, country...these are the things I care about, they are what I'm in public service to protect, promote and defend'.³ For Cameron, a focus on community was manifested in his Big Society project which, while linked to the establishment of schemes and organisations which still operate well today, was ultimately a mask for a brutal programme of austerity, including severe cuts to the community and voluntary sector.⁴ For Farage, his slogan has so far manifested in a focus on community organising, with Reform sending its activists and candidates to volunteer in local foodbanks and leaflet grassroots football games. One Reform councillor in South Wales described the party's focus as 'local issues, combined with a genuine commitment to community welfare'; ahead of defining Welsh Senedd elections next May, Reform has reportedly been involved in community clean-up drives, grassroots sports and other traditional community organising tactics across Wales.⁵

But, arguably, if the politics of community historically belongs to any one movement, it is ours. The Labour Party was founded by trade unionists, themselves community leaders; indeed pressure from the labour movement in the early 20th century led not only to improved working conditions, but also the development of significant social infrastructure, including sports facilities, miners' welfare and educational establishments for workers who would otherwise have little access to learning.⁶ Labour has a century-old electoral pact with the Co-operative Party, founded by the co-operative movement to further its political principles of mutualism and shared ownership. Labour also has strong historical links with the social club movement; at their peak, the UK's social club movement sent as many of their members to Parliament as MPs as the trade union movement. Nick Garland tracks the influence of community in his chapter for *Rethinking Labour's Past*, concluding that 'the enduring appeal of community might also indicate its

worth...it is a concept that can resonate with Labour's own political traditions as well as with broad popular desires'.⁷ The last Labour government pioneered the New Deal for Communities, a targeted community regeneration programme for England's most deprived neighbourhoods which led to tangible improvements across the programme's indicators (spanning crime, education, health, housing and more) in the majority of target communities.

Today, the politics of community and its role in the wider labour movement has been slightly lost. Perhaps this a symptom of a post-2010 political reality, where the devastating impact of austerity on public services has dominated so much of our thinking and focus that community-level issues have seemed peripheral. Or perhaps the increasing professionalisation of politics and the (inherently positive) increase in the number of young people attending university (and the social mobility that comes with it) has meant more politicians or political aides coming from professional backgrounds than via the traditional more community and place-based routes of trade unions or social clubs. However, there is a growing interest in the politics of community within the current Parliamentary Labour Party, not least from the forty Co-operative MPs campaigning for a community focus from within.

The salience of community perhaps speaks to a desire to bring politics as close to ordinary people as possible. Earlier this year, the Co-operative Party worked with HOPE not hate to further understand voters' perceptions of the national versus the local.⁸ We found high levels of distrust and disengagement with national politics, but a deep sense of connection with communities. When asked to name the most important aspects of a good community, access to high-quality local services ranked highly, but so did a sense of belonging and shared identity, as well as neighbours who look out for one another, access to shared local spaces, and local councillors who work hard. We found that most people feel proud of the place they live and say they want more power at the local level. Pride, belonging, identity, trust, connection – these are gold dust concepts for national politics, and it is at the community level that they are strongest. But, as Sacha Hilhorst notes, in far too many places politics and community are now seen as opposites, with local Facebook groups – hives of community activity – often banning political content viewing it as divisive and unproductive.⁹ This has cleared a path for Reform UK, which presents itself as 'a community-minded alternative to filthy politics'. It's a smart strategy from Reform, and one that is working. But Labour in power has the opportunity to do more: to pair a renewed focus on community politics with a serious policy package of community empowerment.

At the time of writing, glimmers of a communities agenda have emerged from the Labour government. They have begun to fulfil historic commitments on community ownership, legislating for a new Community Right to Buy, giving community groups first right of refusal when valued community assets are put

up for sale, and committing funding to unprecedented support for community-owned energy schemes via the Local Power Plan (part of Great British Energy). The Plan for Neighbourhoods will deliver billions in community-level investment, distributed via new Neighbourhood Boards made up of residents, local businesses and community organisations. The Chancellor's recent Comprehensive Spending Review committed further neighbourhood spending, as well as a new Local Growth Fund to revive forgotten local landmarks and high streets. Many of these steps were set out in Labour's manifesto, and speak to the enduring influence of communitarianism within the party, but some of them are new. Whether or not they are a direct response to Reform's shift towards community, they will help defend the political ground.

What these undoubtedly positive individual policy commitments do not amount to is an overarching vision from the Labour Party for communities, what they could be, and why they should matter. The commentariat has often criticised this young Labour government for lacking a narrative or guiding direction in its communications and messaging. In my view, that diagnosis is too narrow. What Labour has lacked over the course of its first year back in government is a clear vision of the country that we are seeking to build and that we will strive to leave behind – and it is that missing vision which should in turn be shaping and guiding communications and narrative. There has been an understandable focus on fixing fifteen years of Conservative failure, but warnings of tough times and difficult decisions should always have been paired with an articulation of what lies on the other side. The government's 'five missions' are far too broad, covering almost all social and public policy areas, and are based on the areas in which voters already expect governments to deliver (name a government in recent decades that hasn't promised to improve the economy, NHS, education, crime, and climate). These measures, while important, will not move the dial on political trust, and they do not amount to an inspiring political vision.

What if the political vision was to harness the power of communities, and to strengthen and empower them for the future? It wouldn't be a vision without foundation; just two years ago, the Prime Minister, then Leader of the Opposition, spoke of a 'a politics which trusts communities with the power to control their destiny'. He argued that 'real change comes from unlocking the pride and purpose of British communities', and promised a 'Take Back Control Bill' to allow communities to 'create wealth on their terms and in their way'.¹⁰ This was an ambitious, hopeful vision for communities and the people within them. Crucially, it demonstrated an understanding of the importance of ownership: 'take back control' was a compelling slogan because it combined the promise of a better future with a sense of rightful ownership, taking back what is perceived to be rightfully ours.¹¹ There's a reason markets react when a corporation changes hands, because they understand that with ownership comes influence and control. The same is true for ownership of local assets: no one likes

it when a chain acquires the local pub because we understand that it will, as a result, feel more distant and less familiar.

Community ownership – as one core aspect of a wider community empowerment agenda – gives community groups the power to not only shape the assets and spaces they care most about, but to own them too. It gives local people a tangible stake in the immediate world around them. I recently revisited David Lammy's reflections on the 2011 London riots, in which he makes a strong argument for community ownership as a route to connecting people more closely with their community, with the aim of driving up respect for their immediate environment, especially among young people.¹² These lessons deserve to be remembered.

What community ownership offers above all is the opportunity to build something that can't just be taken away. Communities have suffered the consequences of the invest-cut cycle; just as quickly as one government has dedicated resources to building up community services and assets, the next government has dismantled it all. Hundreds if not thousands of community spaces have closed over the last two decades. Youth clubs, swimming pools, libraries, pubs, community centres – in many, many places across the country, these spaces are a distant memory. When these things disappear, so do the opportunities to meet and mix with other people from your community, to have conversations with people you wouldn't otherwise know, to build connections. Much has been written about immigration as the potential cause of far-right riots last summer, but far less about the long-term impact of community asset erosion. HOPE not hate, in the most recent of their vital annual 'Fear and Hope' reports, identify opportunities for social connectedness as being key to building communities resilient to hate and division.¹³ Community ownership is what allows these spaces to be saved when they are at risk of closure, and revived where they have disappeared. It takes community assets out of that invest-cut cycle, and puts the fate of a place in the hands of those who actually use it. A Labour government which boosts community ownership, makes it more accessible, and expands its scope and reach will leave behind a network of assets that can't just be taken away.

More broadly, community could and should be a central political ideal for this Labour government, and offers a distinguishing, authentic vision. The argument Starmer made in opposition for communities to be given the tools to control their own destiny was a good one, and should be revived and expanded. Labour could seek to formulate a maximalist offer to communities, pledging to rebuild the social infrastructure that has vanished in large parts of our country, delivering new community assets that otherwise would not have existed, and emphasising the importance of having community spaces for all and the opportunities that follow when they are there. We should be actively looking to improve the statistics already collected by government, which measure people's

satisfaction and pride in their community. We should be looking to radically shift power and ownership into communities, empowering the people who know their place best to shape it and have a stake in its success. Labour representatives at every level of government, as well as candidates, should be trained and supported as community champions, utilising trusted local media and communicating Labour achievements through a community lens.

Importantly, Labour should do all of this because collective action as the route to progress is Labour's political DNA and because it speaks to our values, to our history and to our vision for society. In his first interview after withdrawing from the Presidential race, Joe Biden said 'the biggest mistake we made, we didn't put up signs saying "Joe Did It."'¹⁴ Every piece of community empowerment work done by this Labour government should be celebrated and repeated again and again as a Labour achievement and as a public demonstration of Labour values. In doing that, we have the opportunity to link the Labour Party to tangible improvements in people's local lives, which will in turn begin to rebuild trust in the idea that Labour – and politics at large – is a vehicle for change. Community politics are Labour politics, and that's the mindset we must reclaim, not only to win again, but to strengthen our democracy and our voters' faith in it.

I started with an example of community at its best, and I'll end with one too. The Lawrence Weston housing estate in North Bristol was constructed as part of Britain's post-war housing boom. Like so many other estates constructed in that period, the experience of residents was far removed from the once glorious vision of the social housing revolution. They felt neglected and forgotten by politicians, their estate scored highly across indices of deprivation and, crucially, its last remaining public spaces (the local swimming pool, leisure centre, and college) had closed their doors. But a group of residents came together and decided to do something about it. As community leader Mark Pepper writes in the Co-operative Party's first *Community Britain* report, 'our area needed improving and nobody was going to help us, so we needed to get off our backsides and help ourselves'.¹⁵ With the support of a local community energy group, residents installed a solar farm, and later a community-owned wind turbine. The significant energy produced is sold to the National Grid and, because the energy is community-owned, its profits are reinvested into community assets and activities. This has funded, amongst many other things, the revival of the lost community centre. Residents are now planning on building new local, affordable, and energy-efficient housing.

Quoting Pepper again:

What Ambition Lawrence Weston has done is bring people together to try and improve our lives. Off the back of that, people are voting more – they're more engaged in local politics. They're less socially isolated because they are involved in

*projects that allow them to spend time with other people. They're more connected because they learn about other cultures at Friday night supper clubs, challenging their own myths and false beliefs about each other.*¹⁶

Lawrence Weston is a story of local people, dissatisfied with their lot, coming together to fight for something better. It is community at its best, demonstrating the power of ownership and the tangible improvements that it can unlock. It's an exceptional story, which has been held up in the national media and at political conferences as a shining light of what is possible. But in pursuing the politics of community, Labour has an opportunity to take stories and projects like this and make them commonplace and ordinary. We have an opportunity to leave behind stronger, more resilient, more connected communities, and a better country as a result.

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Notes

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- 4 Ben Kisby, 'The Big Society: Power to the People', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 181, No. 5, October-December 2010, pp484-491.
- 5 Sienna Rogers, 'Reform Focus On Grassroots In Wales As Members Help Food Banks', <https://www.politicshome.com>, 12 January 2025.
- 6 Sacha Hilhorst, *Places To Come Together: Rebuilding local solidarities against the far right*, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2025.
- 7 Nick Garland, 'Social democracy, the decline of community and community politics in postwar Britain' in Nathan Yeowell (Ed.), *Rethinking Labour's Past*, Bloomsbury, 2022.
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- 9 Sacha Hilhorst, op cit.
- 10 Labour Party, 'Keir Starmer's New Year's speech', <https://labour.org.uk>, 5 January 2023.
- 11 Tim Haughton, 'It's the slogan, stupid: The Brexit Referendum', <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk>, 2025.
- 12 David Lammy, *Out Of The Ashes: Britain after the riots*, Guardian Books, 2011.
- 13 Anki Deo and Misbah Malik, *Fear & Hope 2024: The Case for Community Resilience*, HOPE not hate, October 2024.
- 14 Richard Luscombe, 'Biden says it was his 'obligation to the country' to drop out of presidential race', <https://www.theguardian.com>, 11 August 2024
- 15 Co-operative Party, 'Stories from Community Britain', <https://party.coop>, 2025
- 16 Ibid.