

*Broken Heartlands:  
A Journey Through Labour's Lost England*

Sebastian Payne

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**John Booth**

**W**hether Boris Johnson gets bored with No 10 or nervy Conservative Party funders push him out of the door, the author of *Broken Heartlands* finds little to comfort those hoping to see Sir Keir Starmer in Downing Street any time soon. While the Labour leader may want to flush his efforts to block Brexit down the memory hole along with his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn, he has far to go in building trust and hope in many parts of England.

To measure the scale of that task, the Whitehall editor of the *Financial Times* spent time in ten of the constituencies the Tories won from Labour in 2019. Apart from three years as an undergraduate at Leeds University, Sir Keir Starmer has spent his entire life in the Home Counties and is a London-based MP. Sebastian Payne, by contrast, is a Northerner by birth and education, and set off from his birthplace on the bank of the Tyne and headed south. Along the way he added polling analysis to interviews with politicians and electors from Blyth Valley in the North down to Coventry North West in the Midlands, from Great Grimsby on the East Coast across to Heywood and Middleton in Greater Manchester. Two extracts will give you some flavour of his findings.

Here's Payne with David (now Lord) Blunkett, the former New Labour Home Secretary:

'Blunkett agreed with my emerging conclusion that Labour's collapse in the red wall was in part due to structural changes, not purely the immediate consequence of Brexit and Corbyn's leadership. The collapse of heavy industry, followed by the financial crisis and austerity cuts to public services, resulted in a complete change in people's lived experience.

The old world of apprenticeships that were "relatively well paid" in shipbuilding, engineering and steel gave people "dignity in work and the community", Blunkett said. "When that disintegrated, as it did in the early eighties and nineties, it wasn't replaced. It was a mistake we

made. It wasn't that we neglected the so-called 'red wall' seats, we did a fantastic job on transforming the lives and the prospects and the opportunities. It was that we didn't understand that there needed to be a model, a very different prospectus in terms of that security, that feeling of community." '

And here's the author's description of Johnson's arrival for the 2021 by-election in the constituency of Blunkett's one-time Cabinet colleague, Peter (now Lord) Mandelson:

'At midday, the prime ministerial motorcade pulled into the car park, Range Rovers with blue sirens, and Johnson leapt out onto the campaign trail. With Jill Mortimer, the Tory candidate, he paced up the seafront in his trademark blue suit – sans coat, despite the weather. He was mobbed. Soon, the traffic piled up as every car stopped to point and shout, "Boris!" He was the Pied Piper in the middle of a hurricane.'

When Johnson asked them if the Conservative Party could count on their support, Payne writes: 'No one said they were backing Labour. The response was unlike any I have seen to any politician on the campaign trail, in any election: dozens of Hartlepudlians wanted selfies and elbow bumps with the prime minister.'

Many may be surprised that a wealthy Old Etonian, known for loose morals and double-dealing, should be afforded such a welcome in one of the poorest parts of England. But, as Payne gently reminds us, it's not as though Labour's long-term occupants of the 'red wall' and elsewhere are paragons of virtue themselves. Mandelson was twice forced to resign from the Cabinet and Blunkett's intertwined private and public life has not been straightforward either. Then remember New Labour leading lights Ed Balls and Yvette Cooper joining lots of MPs in flipping homes at the taxpayers' expense at the height of a painful recession while some of their colleagues in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) were being jailed for expenses fraud.

Imagine the impact of that behaviour on trusting Labour voters where the economic guts of your community have been ripped out, the train line has long disappeared, bus services are poor and the high street looks like a set of rotten teeth. Wouldn't you chase hope wherever you could sniff it?

For many of those Payne interviews, Labour had not supplied enough of that. But by 2019 the Conservatives had Johnson's cheerful optimism and some recognisably-local candidates in constituencies where that disappointment was keenly felt.

One place Payne visited was Wakefield where New Labour MP Mary Creagh had been parachuted in from London. An ardent Remainer, she

typified the party's problem in 2019 even though the 'New' brand had long been discarded. Payne writes:

'According to number cruncher Chris Hanretty, 70 per cent of Labour constituencies voted for Brexit yet just 5 per cent of Labour MPs supported leaving at the time of the referendum.<sup>1</sup> The cracks emerged in 2016 but did not fully break open until three years later.'

The author suggests that many 'red wall' Labour MPs had not secured an identification with their austerity-hit electors strong enough to resist the flattering attention paid them first by Nigel Farage and then by pro-Brexit Tories. Creagh's pre-2019 near-neighbour in Don Valley, Caroline Flint, had seen the writing on the wall, but her efforts to support a Theresa May 'soft Brexit deal' came too late to save her. She tells Payne:

'We failed to understand people's concerns about Europe and about immigration. They voiced their concerns in the 2014 European elections, where UKIP won. They voiced it again in the 2016 referendum. They actually voiced it again in 2017. And then, when they still weren't being heard, they made it loud and clear in 2019.'

Flint, records the author, was scathing about her London colleagues who were unwilling to debate the impact of immigration. She tells him: 'There was a London-centric point of view about this. They didn't understand what was going on in these areas and almost didn't want to hear it, it's too uncomfortable.' Payne concludes: 'She sighed at the attitude of her Labour colleagues: "If you think it's going to be a flip back, then you are being as complacent as you ever were."'

I can understand her frustration. It always seemed odd to me, living in London but regularly visiting family and friends in the 'Labour heartlands', that many party Remainers – from Tony Blair in his prime ministerial pomp to Starmer in his pre-2019 efforts to undermine Jeremy Corbyn<sup>2</sup> – failed to address the growing popular feeling against continued European Union membership. For many Labour members 'being European' trumped political practicalities. Marching in support of a People's Vote wearing a 'Love Corbyn, Hate Brexit' T-shirt didn't amount to a winning electoral strategy in 2019. 'Take Back Control' and 'Get Brexit Done', by contrast, suggested decisive action, something Payne says many in the 'red wall' relished.

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/2p86fst6>> or <[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1wTK5dV2\\_YjCMsUYIwg0I48uWWf44sKgG8uFVMv5OWIA/edit#gid=893960794](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1wTK5dV2_YjCMsUYIwg0I48uWWf44sKgG8uFVMv5OWIA/edit#gid=893960794)>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/brexit-talks-keir-starmer-demands-15604331>>.

Whether the Tories will be able to deliver on their 2019 promises is a question to which I'll return, but first a cautionary word about the phrase 'red wall'.

Payne's thoughtful travelogue, supplied with footnotes and a helpful index, reveals varied responses to the challenges of de-industrialisation. He shows how places like Consett, Grimsby and Burnley have displayed imagination in diversifying from their historic economic base while others have been less successful. Lumping them all together as 'red wall' Labour trouble spots is not respectful to those living there nor to their uphill efforts to secure a better future for their struggling communities.

The expression also implies that Labour had a near-monopoly of political loyalty in the former industrial parts of England. This was never true: many in the traditional working class always voted Conservative. Six Midland and Northern seats long held by Labour were won by Tories in 2017 despite May's poor campaign. In recent years many who had been historic Labour supporters just didn't turn out at election time.

One former New Labour minister who dodged this rising Tory tide was Andy Burnham. After 16 years in the 'safe' Labour seat of Leigh he quit to become Mayor of Greater Manchester in 2017. Two years later a swing of 12.3 per cent made James Grundy the first Tory to win the seat since its creation in 1885. Burnham tells Payne that in 2019 people 'were emotionally making a break', one that was heartbreaking for their former MP because 'he sensed Leigh had left him. The results proved it had: 63 per cent of its residents voted Leave.'

His successor shares with other Tory winners on Payne's journey a strong local connection. In many cases they had grown up in the area and had served the local community, often as councillors. This contrasts with some of the parachuted Labour MPs who by 2019 had long run out of what little popular support they ever enjoyed.

The emotional break identified by Burnham and the difficulty of re-establishing it indicated by Flint should not have surprised anyone looking north of the border. Payne writes: 'Once the historical link between the Labour Party and working-class voters is broken, it takes something new to win them back. The party has yet to find an answer for Scotland, never mind in England.'

So how is Starmer to do that given the structural, economic and societal changes that Payne says 'have made these parts of England more Conservative'? After all, he says, Johnson is making a 'clear break on the orthodoxy of the austerity years; the gap between Labour's 2017 manifesto

and the Tories' agenda in government is surprisingly small'.

When the Labour leader talks to Payne he seems to rely heavily on the Prime Minister failing to deliver, that his promises to 'level up' made in 2019 will not be fulfilled. Starmer sees his immediate task, pending Tory failure, as cleansing from the public's mind anything to do with Corbyn or Brexit while portraying the PM as a serial liar.

But the former Director of Public Prosecutions is going to have to do much more than that. After Johnson's long run of electoral success there is little the public do not know about his flaws. Payne writes: 'If Labour wishes to beat him, they will need to find a fresh emotional message that can counter the long-held feelings many have about Johnson.'

New Labour secured a 177-seat majority in 1997, twice that of Johnson's Tories in 2019. While the Blair government undoubtedly improved the lives of many, it failed to grapple with many of the UK's underlying issues. After the Iraq war and the banking crisis there was little shine left on the New Labour brand. The successors to Blair and Brown were left to pick up the English and Welsh pieces, Scotland by then having shed much of its 20th century loyalty to Labour.

Corbyn revived the spirits of Labour's surviving members, added nearly 200,000 new ones and cleared the party's debts in the process. But his weak leadership proved no match for his PLP critics, the Israel lobby and their allied establishment forces, all backed by a venomous media.

Payne records the resultant doorstep hostility to Corbyn in the 'red wall' but doesn't dig deep into its origins. Likewise in praising Starmer as his replacement, he doesn't mention the huge loss of members<sup>3</sup> and Labour's parlous financial situation since.<sup>4</sup> While the Leader of the Opposition awaits Johnson's failure to deliver, he presides over a shrinking party with sinking morale, nothing in the bank and fewer human resources on the ground where many more are needed to revive Labour's 'red wall' fortunes.

Payne well describes the 21st century proliferation of Barratt homes and Conservative inclinations in areas that once housed British industry, places whose workers afforded a comfortable billet to many Labour MPs. He sees Johnson as a non-Thatcherite Tory implementing a change programme he says Labour in power failed to bring about. But as Stewart Lansley has

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<sup>3</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/5dtt2pfe>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/25/keir-starmer-shrinking-labour-party-members-broad-church>>

<sup>4</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/524w55fc>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9957791/Labour-Party-confirms-80-staff-taking-redundancy-amid-financial-crisis.html>>

recently argued<sup>5</sup> this does not amount to a post-neoliberal shift to state policies promoting greater equality. Within the newly Tory 'red wall' constituencies fuel poverty is rife, and there are foodbanks and zero-hours contracts aplenty. As recent Johnson manoeuvrings have shown, there are also Tory MPs with small majorities openly doubtful about his leadership.

The setting to all this is as well observed by Payne as it was largely ignored by those leading Labour for many years. Whether that party founded at the height of empire by a man named Keir can now find a future under another Keir – not a miner but a knighted lawyer – we're about to find out.

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<sup>5</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/2ard8uum>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/pundits-say-british-politics-is-undergoing-a-post-neoliberal-shift-theyre-wrong/>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/2p87dbx7>> or <<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-richer-the-poorer>>