



KEY OBSERVATIONS FROM THE 'WINNING AGAIN IN COAST & COUNTRY' REPORT

The staff of Maria Eagle's office produced their '[*Labour's Rural Problem – Winning again in coast and country*](#)' report during the summer of 2015, during the later period of her service as Shadow Secretary of State for Defra. Findings based on desk research, HoC Library information and some 30 interviews and survey responses.

The report focused on Labour's performance in seats that are defined as rural by ONS – for technical reasons this did not include all of the seats that could also be defined as coastal, nor any seats in Scotland – it is, therefore, an analysis of Labour's electoral performance beyond the cities, across England and Wales.

The definition of urban used by the ONS is a centre with a population of over 10,000; yet even with that low urban threshold the UK rural population amounts to almost one million more people than live in London (9.3m to 8.4m). For 'sparsely rural' that total UK population is over 500,000 – greater than all but a handful of the UK's most populous cities, certainly greater than Bristol, or Cardiff, and a little higher than that of Edinburgh. Using the ONS definition there are 199 'rural seats, in three categories of population.

It is important to note that Labour does hold seats in each category, i.e. seats that are significantly rural (33% - 49% rural), that are more than 50% rural (rural50) and seats that are more than 75% rural (rural75), yet only holds 30 of the total 199. In 2015 only 19 'rural' seats were targeted, with a solitary success in Wirral West (and that being something of a locally specific campaign).

In 2020, based on Fabians research, Labour needs to win at least 28 of these rural seats for a majority. All of the 28 have been Labour before, relatively recently (i.e. in 2001).

Is there something in the nature of the seats that means we are now less successful? Figures from the HoC Library show such seats are:

- Older (43 yrs, compared to national average of 39.5 yrs, & Labour seats at 36.5 yrs) – Labour's rural challenge is linked to our 'grey' challenge;
- Lower incomes – gross median salary £25,893, close to median for Labour held seats of £25,818, both lower than the national median - £27,263;
- While showing a greater range of median incomes, a few are over £28,000 (e.g. Gower, Staffs Moorlands), others with less than £22,500 (e.g. Camborne & Redruth, Carmarthen W& Sth Pems);

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- Employment concentrated primarily in wholesale & retail, manufacturing, and public services, with some significant proportions of self-employment (at ~ 20% compared to national average of 15%);
- Unemployment (by % JSA) suggests two main patterns, some areas with higher JSA (particularly Welsh coastal) and others with much lower JSA (even for low income areas like The Wreckin or the Forest of Dean);
- Educational attainment in English seats at levels (54.5% A*-C) similar to seats held by Labour (53.6%), both lower than the national average (56.4%).

Overall that suggests a rural population that is older, more isolated (less connected) relatively poorer while having higher levels of employment (potentially lower paid, with higher rates of home-working and self-employment in some areas).

WINNING IN THE COUNTRY, AND ON THE COAST

There is scope to win these seats, and we have won them in the past – in practice they are what wins general elections. Given some of the similarities between them, we must also question some of our methods. Do they help us fight such seats? And what can we do to improve our methods and practice to ensure we do reach those who do or could vote Labour?

Surveying a range of members, activists, and PPCs from those seats we could and should win, highlights a number of practical challenges we need to address, as follows:

- Labour needs to take non-urban communities seriously, if we continue to treat them as an after-thought or worse then we will never be able to build the relationships required to allow our message to be heard;
- The issues & solutions need to be heard from people living in these places - greater engagement with non-urban Britain will build an understanding that many of the issues these communities are similar to those we fight for in urban areas – on transport, connectivity, jobs, housing – average wages are £4,500pa lower, transport costs £1,00 higher & homes 10x average rural wages;
- Labour needs to have a vision & an offer for these communities, and not leave the territory to be defined by vested interests e.g. landowners, the NFU or CA;
- A 'rural' manifesto is the start of an engagement, not something to publish in the last week of a five-year election cycle;
- The variety and diversity of Britain means local parties must be allowed to frame messages and offers to reflect local circumstances;

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- Winning in these areas will take time; such is our recent neglect and undue focus on 'targeting'. That means we have to take an approach that:
 - Takes a parliamentary term / five year view, or longer;
 - Supports all CLPs to have a continued presence in their constituencies (avoiding the ebb and flow of PPC / no PPC), i.e. at least a website with named contacts and local messaging, supported by Shadow visits and active engagement;
 - Ensures a Labour voice for those parts of Britain we are yet to represent, e.g. a nominated Lord or the 30 rural & 24 coastal MPs;
 - Reverses the drop in Party support incurred when a seat is lost, akin to '*going from Premiership to Vauxhall conference in one go*';
 - Improves our field practice, moving on from GOTV to **Go Find The Vote**, avoids staff who '*don't do villages*', and starts early (regardless of PPC selection).

Conservatives take many of these non-urban seats for granted. A thoughtful Labour approach, building on our history (Tolpuddle), achievements (National Parks) and a new engagement with these communities would offer them an alternative, would at least divert tory resources and in many cases help build our momentum across the UK towards 2020. Such an approach will also counteract the increased 'rurality' of many constituencies post the 2018 boundary review.

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