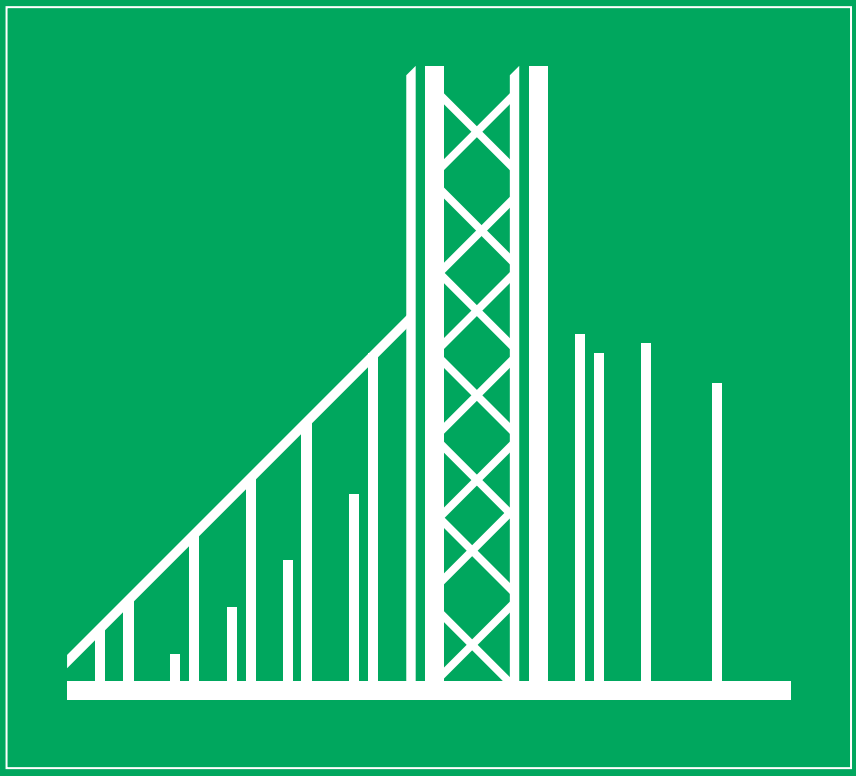
BUILDING BRIDGES

LESSONS FROM BASSETLAW FOR THE COUNTRY

SALLY GIMSON



Fabian Society
61 Petty France
London SW1H 9EU
www.fabians.org.uk

Fabian Ideas 652

First published December 2020
ISBN 978-0-7163-0652-8

Editorial director: Kate Murray
Assistant editor: Vanesha Singh

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

designbysoapbox.com
Printed and bound by DG3, London, UK

To find out more about the Fabian Society, the Young Fabians, the Fabian Women's Network and our local societies, please visit our website at www.fabians.org.uk

FABIAN IDEAS NO. 652

BUILDING BRIDGES

LESSONS FROM BASSETLAW FOR THE COUNTRY

SALLY GIMSON

INTRODUCTION

LESSONS FROM BASSETLAW

One of the features of Labour's disastrous 2019 general election that has been most commented on was the fall of the 'Red Wall'. Labour lost 43 seats across the Midlands and the north in the 2019 general election, adding to the six it lost in 2017. All were seats which had voted to leave the EU in the referendum and all were in manufacturing and ex-industrial heartlands. Their fall led to the end of almost 100 years of Labour dominance in these traditional working-class constituencies.

There has been a lot of debate about why those places were lost, but very few practical suggestions about how to win them back. Where better to look than Bassetlaw, a seat which saw the biggest swing to the Conservatives in the country?

For a brief moment in 2019 I was Labour's candidate for Bassetlaw, the northernmost part of Nottinghamshire, which first voted Labour in 1929. I was selected as an act of rebellion by the local constituency party which feared they were going to have a "Momentum candidate" foisted upon them by the national party. Despite the local party having selected me, I was de-selected by the national party a week later, and a candidate, considered to be more left-wing and loyal to Jeremy Corbyn, installed. If there was to be an experiment in whether the command and control type of socialism favoured by Corbyn and his supporters could win in the heart of England, this was it.

Labour did not just lose Bassetlaw, the constituency returned a Conservative MP Brendan Clarke-Smith with the biggest swing in the country to the Conservatives. From being a Labour-held seat just two years before – John Mann had won with a majority of 4,852 in 2017 – it has become a very safe Tory seat with the current MP there enjoying a majority of 14,032. The decline of almost a quarter in Labour's vote share was the greatest experienced by the party in any constituency at that election. In December 2019 Bassetlaw broke all the wrong records.

So what happened and are there any lessons that can be drawn to help Labour next time?

I came into Bassetlaw as an outsider from London, although my roots are

much further north in Edinburgh. But I built up links in the constituency and had already spent a lot of time in the East Midlands fighting the rural Tory seat of South Leicestershire 10 years before. Bassetlaw is a place which was once open to the world with workers coming from all over the country and further afield to work in the Nottinghamshire mines. The people, who remember working closely in dangerous conditions with others, are direct and to the point with each other and with outsiders.

Of course, each constituency has its own issues but some of the ideas here from Bassetlaw will also be vital to winning back other seats in other areas Labour lost. There are lessons about how to win here which apply to the whole country, including how Labour can organise and build alliances between different kinds of voters, and in particular older voters who have abandoned Labour for the Conservatives all over the country.[1]

There is much more in common between people in Red Wall seats and those in cities where Labour did well than many would have us believe, not least because the smaller towns in the Midlands and north are where many parents and grandparents of city dwellers live. Organising, and finding policies and ideas which build wide coalitions of voters against the Tories across cities, towns and the countryside and across generations will be key to winning in 2024. It will only be by showing how we can build back for all of Britain that Labour has a chance of winning the next election.

SUMMARY

Throughout this pamphlet, I discuss a number of policies to help Labour reconnect with the voters it has lost, particularly with older voters in the East Midlands and the north, in places like Bassetlaw. Labour needs to recreate relationships with these areas, town by town, village by village, street by street. It should feel like renewing old friendships, reconnecting with the non-conformist and creative impulses of the Midlands and northern England and rediscovering the early 20th century socialist sensibilities of rural life. Bassetlaw and places like it must become central to the story of Britain again, and Labour needs to respect what they have to offer and be rooted in them once more. This is about devolving wealth and democratic control and giving areas like Bassetlaw clarity of purpose about their role in the country's future, as part of a whole Britain strategy. As a priority we should bring people together, particularly those who are less well-off, older and isolated, making sure towns and villages are as connected and as innovative as cities like London. Labour should lead on intergenerational projects, encouraging the next generation to stay or return to the towns and countryside with an offer of a green-centred, healthy, sustainable and affordable lifestyle, shared by all.

My key recommendations are:

- Support local Labour parties to build structures everywhere which can connect with voters, particularly valuing the strength of members who can organise, campaign and build life-long caring relationships with neighbours to rebuild trust in the party.
- Devolve power to English regions with local representation for smaller communities, so that policy is built around those in Northern and Midlands towns and villages as well as those in cities and the south east.
- Develop a green new deal that uses assets already on the ground: the old mines, connections to the grid, and large tracts of land in places like Bassetlaw which mean the constituency could power the country again with green energy.
- Invest public money in fast fibre broadband to every home in areas that most need it.
- Set up a democratically-controlled, bus-centred, green, affordable transport system specifically to join up towns and rural areas,

so people can connect more easily and have access to public services and a local nightlife.
- Rethink town centres and villages so they are places people want to live, work and study and enjoy cultural activities. Learn from other countries about incentives to attract and retain young people and families: through grants, an artistic offer, excellent schools, a life-long learning offer, forest nurseries and specialist colleges to train high-skilled nurses, construction, engineering and digital workers.
- Build sustainable, affordable eco-housing and retrofit local houses so communities are powered by green energy.
- Ensure families and older people have easy access to well-funded out-of-hospital telemedicine and local small shops.
- Make sure there is local control over the environment on issues which unite the country, including encouraging biodiversity, artisanal apprenticeships, funding flood defences, incentivising sustainable farms and protecting public country parks.
- Encourage and give financial backing to local leaders to put on education and community-building programmes, working with CPRE, the countryside charity, to build bridges between Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) residents, younger immigrant communities and older white communities.
- Learn from the German experience about financing and welcoming refugees to villages and small towns.

Sally Gimson
December 2020

CHAPTER 1

FROM THE GRASSROOTS

For Labour to succeed, it needs to be rooted in local communities. That is as true in London as it is in Bassetlaw. We cannot take anywhere for granted. My first experience of standing as a councillor was in a supposedly safe seat in London. We lost it for the first and last time because the Tories built a coalition against us which united middle-class streets and working-class estates in local grievances – and Labour did not have the relationships locally to counter that. It taught me that to win trust as politicians we could not just present people with a shopping list of all the good things we had done for them (or were going to do for them), we had to talk to people and listen to them. We had to work on building connections street by street, and between communities. It is what I have done as a politician ever since, convincing different communities that they have shared interests reflected by the Labour party and that we can act together for change. Understanding grassroots values is key to building these connections. For many Labour voters across cities, towns and rural areas, being safe and secure is important. Safe jobs, safe streets and being safe globally are all linked to people's need for security – and Labour has an obligation to offer that sense of security as a bare minimum. The loss of the Red Wall seats reminds us that we lose voters if they believe we are not interested in building a secure future for Britain in the world.

When the general election in 2019 was announced, Bassetlaw was not a serious Tory target seat, unlike the neighbouring seats of Bolsover, Ashfield, Rother Valley and Don Valley. The local Conservative party in Bassetlaw was in disarray after a dismal performance in the district council elections in May (winning just five seats out of 48 seats). It had not even selected a parliamentary candidate.

In contrast, the election machine that Bassetlaw CLP had built was formidable, mainly thanks to then MP John Mann and to his wife, Jo White, the deputy leader of the district council. This was demonstrated in May 2019 when Labour gained four more council seats, including three new seats in rural wards, taking Labour's majority on Bassetlaw district council to 26.

Despite the scale of this victory, the local Labour party knew that Corbyn and Brexit were huge issues on the doorstep, and that it had secured votes in a local election which would not be so easily won in a national one. In September 2019, when John Mann announced he would not be standing again, many in Bassetlaw CLP quickly concluded that its only chance of success was having a moderate left candidate who understood the constituency. A handful of credible local candidates including the leader of the district council had put themselves forward, but none of them were expected to be shortlisted.

So when the application process was reopened for 24 hours to encourage more female applicants, some party members took matters into their own hands. On a rainy afternoon in October, I received a call from James Naish, a young district councillor. "We are looking for a good woman candidate," he told me. "You are our last chance." I protested. I was an ex-Camden councillor who was ardently pro-remain. But it did not put him off. They wanted, he said, a non-factional moderate woman to be *their* candidate, someone who could represent Bassetlaw strongly in parliament and who understood community organising. The applications closed at 5pm that day and by then it was 3.30pm. I knew what I had to do.

In hindsight, it was odd that James approached me – a complete stranger – but that has been the style of the Labour party in Bassetlaw. The leading activists are smart, direct and rely on community organising principles. The party typically identifies and recruits local leaders to be councillors and campaigns on issues that matter to local people – like Bassetlaw Hospital – through developing one-to-one relationships, on a street by street, village by village basis. They have successfully built alliances between old working-class estates and middle-class villages with typically Tory voters. And they have begun to engage with the younger, newer communities with less attachment to the area, who are moving into the new housing which is being built. Councillors have addressed concerns which matter to them like flooding and the adoption of roads. They have a string of positive election results to prove it.

One of the most impressive examples of relational leadership in Bassetlaw is councillor Josie Potts from the ex-mining village of Manton, near Worksop. People respect her and when they are in trouble, automatically go to her. She became involved in the local Labour party when she was a school cleaner and joined Mann's inquiry into heroin addiction which was wreaking havoc in her community and directly affecting her family. I remembered reading Mann's 2006 Fabian pamphlet The Real Deal[2] arguing that heroin addiction should be treated as a medical problem to help people rebuild their lives. Josie helped formulate that approach. And she remembers Mann afterwards literally tapping her on the shoulder to ask her to stand as a councillor. In Manton she has relationships built over many years and which she continues to nurture. She raises money for local football teams to go on tour to Brazil, deals with problems from anti-social

behaviour to benefits, and makes the Easter bonnets for the annual parade. She commands thousands of votes for the Labour party.

On the other end of the spectrum is councillor Kevin Dukes, an ex-city businessman and IT teacher. He too had roots in the area having been to secondary school in Worksop. He had found Mann one day in his kitchen asking him to stand in the villages around the Welbeck ducal estate, an idea Kevin first thought preposterous. But he knew many people on the estate and the nearby villages because his wife runs the Harley Gallery for the estate owners, and he lives in the old gardener's cottage. As a result, Kevin became only the second Labour candidate to win a council seat in the ward. He is a leader, although of a very different kind to Josie.

It turned out I was another attempt at finding a leader to create a coalition around. Admittedly I was recruited when all credible local options had been blocked. But I was a person whom the local party believed might be able to build an alliance between Bassetlaw – a constituency which felt forgotten, neglected and badly treated nationally – and London, that might help bring in investment. Constituencies like Bassetlaw feel cut off and want people who have connections and networks outside the area. For the local party, particularly one which has been so successful with relational politics, having *their* candidate, supported by *their* activists, was essential.

When I was shortlisted, I was considered by NEC representatives to be a candidate who had no hope of being selected by the local party, therefore giving their favoured candidate a free run. How could a middle-aged, middle-class woman, and a remainer, possibly have a chance of being selected in a working-class Red Wall seat?

It was wrongly assumed that the Josies of this world wouldn't dream of supporting a middle-class Londoner.

And it was her backing that helped me win others over. "I say it as I see it," Josie said in her gravelly voice when I first met her. "I don't mess about." It was a nerve-wracking experience when I first met her because no one wins anything in Bassetlaw Labour party without her. She is in her 70s, she has seen everything, and she is no pushover. She climbed into my car and we spent the afternoon on the estate chatting on doorsteps, winkling reluctant party members out of sheds and standing in kitchens discussing bus stops. All the people we met had worked for Josie at election time, for which they were rewarded with boxes of chocolates left in their porches. Only at the end did Josie pronounce her verdict. "You're all right. I'll support you." Josie and Jo's support and their ability to bring others with them was enough to swing it for me at the selection hustings, where we won by a close margin in the final round.

The unwavering support of Josie, Jo, Kevin and many others – and a properly constituted democratic ballot – meant nothing in the end. I was deselected by party HQ barely 10 days after official Labour photos of me as the candidate had been published in the local press. I fought back with lawyers. We enlisted

the help of the media to challenge the party, but to no avail.

My deselection was not just about me though – Bassetlaw CLP as a whole felt like it was being punished. Josie issued a plea to Corbyn on local television. She rang senior shadow cabinet ministers, including Emily Thornberry MP, to give them a piece of her mind. Jo White told local TV networks and newspapers about her dismay. A team of activists went to Nottingham to demonstrate against my deselection with placards. Jo remonstrated directly with the NEC. The local Labour party's unique character was being directly attacked and Bassetlaw residents quickly cottoned on. And local people saw the Labour councillors and activists who they respected publicly humiliated by the central Labour party.

Ultimately the swing against Labour in the country was too great even for the best MPs and the strongest CLPs in Nottinghamshire. Brexit, combined with Corbyn, crystallised into a distrust of the Labour party generally. Even Gedling, where a popular Labour MP worked with an excellent Labour district council, fell to the Tories, who now hold eight seats in Nottinghamshire: a clean sweep except for the three seats in Nottingham itself. But in Bassetlaw the result should have been closer and now the mountain to climb to come back is steeper than it should be.

Labour under Corbyn lost because it did not share the values of its voters in Red Wall seats, particularly about the armed forces and the royal family. The hatred within the ex-mining villages, not to mention the Tory-leaning villages, for Corbyn and "Momentum" as Josie explained, was widespread. When I was canvassing, women on estates round Worksop would politely come out and explain why they could not vote for the Labour party and then the men would emerge and shout about Corbyn, Hamas and the IRA and how they could never vote for the party while he was leader. There was a visceral distrust in many local households of the fact that Corbyn had met with Gerry Adams and IRA volunteers openly at the height of the Troubles in the 1980s and that he consistently refused on TV to specifically condemn IRA violence, saying instead that he condemned all violence.[3] They also distrusted his support for organisations such as Stop the War. Yes, these perceptions were undoubtedly stoked by the popular media – but a large number of people in the constituency are ex-servicemen and women. I spoke to people on the doorstep who had been sent to Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq by a Labour government, causes for which their friends and relatives had died and they had been injured. Above all, in spite of the toxic legacy of Iraq, these residents lamented the weak, anti-interventionist position that the party had adopted over recent years including scepticism even towards Nato.

It is not just in Bassetlaw. The army historically has recruited young men and women from areas across the Midlands and the north and asked them to risk their lives when the country was under threat. Their children and grandchildren no doubt will be asked to do so again. Numerous small villages in

Bassetlaw from September and October onwards are decked with war memorial displays, often designed and set up by local residents. The latest trend is for black aluminium cut-out "Tommies" and knitted poppies. During VE day celebrations this year on the Manton estate all social distancing was abandoned while people partied.

Remembering the fallen is a unifying community activity across class and political sympathy, and especially among older people. And the local Labour party which is still so embedded in Bassetlaw understands that. Labour members and councillors in the constituency run the Royal British Legion and many remembrance activities. The biggest event I went to was the Legion's gathering in Worksop organised by Labour activists for the anniversary of the D-Day landings. The Worksop Miners Welfare Band and the Seaforth Highlanders pipes and drums band from Mansfield were the main attraction. Loyalty to the Queen is also a Labour value in Bassetlaw and what I thought of the monarch was the first question that Audrey, an activist in her 80s asked me. On this too, Corbyn, the republican, was distrusted.

The Tories were able to turn that distrust of Corbyn – together with Brexit – into a coalition against Labour, creating a populist English nationalism which squeezed the party, just as Labour in Scotland had been squeezed by Scottish nationalism five years earlier.

What also became clear during the election campaign was that Labour did relatively well in these East Midlands and Northern seats in 2017 because many sitting Labour MPs who understood their constituents persuaded their voters that Corbyn would never win and that they would personally make sure the party changed if electors trusted them locally. When that did not happen and indeed Corbyn and the central party appeared strengthened by Labour's relative success in that election, voters saw their Labour MPs – including many they liked and admired – as powerless. As indeed they were.

There are important lessons for the national party to learn from the grassroots here.

First, relationships are important – between the party and voters on the ground, and between local and national parties. Polling, while vital, is not a substitute for relationship-building, particularly as we can end up, as Deborah Mattinson admits in her book Beyond the Red Wall, not polling the people we take for granted.[4] Although the Conservatives have been winning since 2010, it masks the fact their relationships with voters have been fraying at the edges too. Their party has been hollowed out locally, and they have relied on a centralised machine, money, good messaging and the international momentum of nationalism to win so decisively.

If local Labour parties can maintain and build relationships with voters in places like Bassetlaw and, importantly, are supported to do so from the centre, the party can win and hold on to seats. To do this, the party has to identify and champion local leaders who understand what is going on and what is changing on the ground. Our biggest relationship

assets, and those who are often overlooked and taken for granted in local Labour parties, are the older and retired women who know everyone in the community and their families – and bother to chat to them. One of the things which working as a community organiser at Citizens UK taught me, is that it is easy to overlook real leaders in communities because they are often not the loudest people in meetings, or those who hold office or positions of power. But if you ask them to bring 30 people to a meeting, they can do it because they know everyone and people will go out of their way for them. Most recently we have seen female organising be incredibly successful in the United States at signing up voters in Georgia. We need to recognise and celebrate those local leaders on the ground in the UK Labour party too. And make sure that we are also using digital tools to reinforce the relationships they have already, learning from the success of this in the US.

Second, having a relationship with older voters does not mean always agreeing with them. In fact, it can mean agreeing to disagree and winning the wider argument to build a coalition around the country. Labour Together's Election Review 2019[5] is clear that Labour should be finding the things we have in common between cities, towns and the countryside rather than what divides us. It does mean taking the views of the north and Midlands seriously and being able to have the argument and understand how people and views shift. Our relationship-building should feel like reviving old friendships. In Bassetlaw, people do believe in Labour values of fairness and equality for everyone as the support for footballer Marcus Rashford's campaign for free school meals over the holidays has shown.[6] The Labour party has to have faith in people, particularly older people. We need to understand and woo them and take an interest in their lives, their families and the things that matter to them, wherever they live in the country. Keir Starmer has understood this in his initial positioning in which he has distanced himself from Corbyn with op-eds in the Daily Telegraph about VE Day and talking about his own patriotism.

Having these conversations is not just about better messaging and an effective digital campaign on Facebook directed from the centre, nor can it be pandering to what people in London think it is that people in the East Midlands want. It needs to be informed by what is happening on the ground and be a respectful two-way process.

Third, the party must build organisation where there is none, and reward parties which create relationships across communities, develop local leaders and win elections. Surprisingly perhaps Labour failed to think this infrastructure was important in "safe seats". The tragedy of Bassetlaw was that it was winning locally in 2019 because it had a local party which had organised to do just that. It had resisted what had happened in neighbouring Ashfield, Bolsover and Mansfield where the Labour party had imploded and the independents had taken over locally.

The local party had recognised that Labour's decline in support was directly aligned to seasoned Labour voters growing old and dying and no longer leaving the workplace gates on election day and being told to go to the polling stations and vote Labour by the local union activists.

They had watched seats like Sherwood and Mansfield turn Tory and understood that it was because members were relying too much on the traditional working-class communities to come out and vote when in fact the housing estates which were built on the collieries were bringing new people into the area. These were people with fewer local connections where the umbilical cord had been cut and generational loyalty to Labour had gone – and to whom it was also essential to appeal in order to win a majority.

But it seemed as if no one nationally much cared one way or the other. This was not only an insult to the local parties and MPs, but to the people who were expected to vote Labour regardless.

That respect for local parties who represent and understand their communities means we need to retain the principle of a local party choosing its parliamentary candidate. The candidate does not necessarily have to be a local, but does have to be chosen locally. We cannot go back to a command and control system where candidates are imposed on local parties just because they are loyal to the leadership. New candidates also need to be credible and high calibre leaders who know how to create coalitions both within their communities and within the country. The seats Labour needs to win back will demand the strongest, most enterprising MPs the Labour party can offer because the scale of the challenge is enormous. We should not be afraid to stand Black candidates in white-majority constituencies. And we must never again make assumptions about what people want. We also need to identify 'the Josies', the key workers who are leaders and who have done great things in their communities and kept them going during the Covid-19 crisis. Constituencies like Bassetlaw want MPs who can strongly represent them in parliament and understand the local community. This way, policies can be designed which do not leave their constituencies behind – whether that be proposals to evenly distribute wealth, tackle climate change, or embed public services that work for everyone. That process of identifying talent cannot just be done from London. Regional offices and constituencies need to be empowered to work with organisations within the Labour party from the trade unions to the Fabians and Labour Women's Network to start talent-spotting local candidates for 2024 and building a pool of candidates who can be both local champions who understand their communities and outstanding policymakers.

CHAPTER 2

ON THE EDGE

Like many Red Wall seats, Bassetlaw stands on the edge of places. It consists of two towns, Worksop and Retford, and an emerging new town built on the site of an old colliery, Harworth and Bircotes, where housing and employment growth has been targeted. The constituency boasts no fewer than 72 villages. Although the Bassetlaw is in Nottinghamshire, it is too far from Nottingham to feel very connected to the city. The Worksop side of Bassetlaw is almost in South Yorkshire and people go to Sheffield to do their shopping and to Doncaster when they need trauma care. Most importantly in Worksop they support Sheffield football teams. In Retford the people look south towards Newark and east towards Lincoln.

Being on the edge of other places means losing out on infrastructure, on good jobs and on power. People who live in Bassetlaw in full-time employment earned £553 a week in 2019, around £34 less than the average in the UK, with women earning almost £90 a week less than women in other parts of the country.

But wages for jobs actually in the constituency are much lower. Full-time employees working in Bassetlaw in 2019 were paid a gross average wage of £489.10 per week[7] which is reflective of the preponderance of low-skilled jobs and an under-qualified population, though when compared with other places now in the Sheffield city region like Chesterfield and Doncaster, average pay in Bassetlaw is higher.[8] Only an estimated 16.3 per cent of residents are qualified to NVQ Level 4+ (ie to degree level and beyond), compared to 40 per cent of the English population, and only 29.1 per cent of residents work in high-value managerial, professional and technical occupations.[9] Some 22 per cent of the population are over 65 compared to 18 per cent nationally. By 2036, 30 per cent of the population is forecast to be over 65 compared to only 16 per cent in Camden and 20 per cent in Sheffield.[10] The median age in Bassetlaw is the highest in Nottinghamshire at 45.7, though all the seats in Nottinghamshire lost to the Tories have a median age over 40 (the national average is 40). In Nottingham by contrast the median age is 29.7. Life expectancy is a little bit lower

and childhood obesity a little bit higher than in England as a whole. But more people own their homes – around 70 per cent – and fewer rent privately (only 11 per cent) than in the country as a whole. In 2016, 68 per cent of the population voted to leave the EU, well above the national average.

Despite its closeness to Sheffield, Bassetlaw is not part of Sheffield city region nor indeed, is it a part of the so-called northern powerhouse because it is not quite in the north. It is a constituency which is mostly described as an 'ex...': ex-mining, ex-industrial.

This is the fate of many areas outside cities and city regions all over Europe. Jobs which pay well are in cities and are high-value service jobs such as finance, tech, culture and advertising which attract graduates and younger people. Researchers from the Centre for European Reform highlight this and the higher productivity among graduates and argue in their report The Big European Sort?[11] that policymakers have two choices for places like Bassetlaw. Either they put more investment into their towns and rural areas so that they are not "left behind", or they increase investment in cities – their transport systems, skills and housing to encourage more people to go there.

Bassetlaw's population has increased by around 4,400 people in the last few years from around 113,000 in 2011 to 117,400 in 2019.[12] Cheap land means thousands more houses are slated to be built in the constituency: 10,000 by 2037.

Like many Red Wall seats, Bassetlaw is relatively well-connected, mostly by the M1, A1M and A57 which is why distribution centres have been built there. Trains run through Retford towards London, Edinburgh and Doncaster. But the east to west rail connections between Worksop and Sheffield (which is half an hour away in the car) are slow and unreliable. Although Bassetlaw is in Nottinghamshire, the rail links to Nottingham are not direct and even by road it takes 45 minutes to reach. Buses are expensive and run intermittently, and, although a substantial proportion of the population do not have a car, there are many places that cannot be reached without one. The transport infrastructure is still from a pre-1983 era where it was accepted that everyone would have at least one car, petrol was relatively cheap and most people wanted to travel north to south by train to go long distances. This was also a time when high streets were thriving, and a youngish population lived in villages with pubs; many could still walk to work and bring home wages which were comparable to other parts of the country.

In common with many rural areas, huge cuts to public services have meant even more services have been pulled into nearby cities and the two towns. Much to the disappointment of local residents, large new developments at Harworth and Bircotes have been built with unadopted roads, and with few shops. People have to drive out to Ikea or to malls like Meadowhall near Sheffield.

As Lisa Nandy MP, Britain's most powerful voice for towns, points out, these are communities which struggle. The people who live there find it difficult to pay their mortgages. They feel that they "survive

rather than thrive". Most hurtfully of all they often feel they are no longer central to the story of Britain, because that story has been given to cities.

If Labour is to unite the country and win back these seats, it is going to have to convince people that their lives can change for the better. This means plans to create a green industrial economy across Red Wall seats with proper regional tax regimes and financial incentives, building on former industrial infrastructure. Bassetlaw could have high-skilled jobs and help power the country once again as it did in the past.

The quality and pay of jobs in Bassetlaw started to decline proportionally to London and the south east in the early 1990s with the closure of the mines. The rush to replace mining jobs first by the Tory government and then by New Labour led to the construction of large distribution centres because of the area's rail and road links. Wilko (which was Wilkinsons at the time) opened on the site of the Manton Pit in 1994 to employ up to 1,800 people who had been made redundant the same year. Wilko is still a large employer, but offers hard, repetitive work, packing and sorting boxes of hardware to be transported around the country.[13] It is also low-waged and for most, low-skilled work. Despite long-standing trade union recognition, pay and conditions are getting worse. In 2019 workers threatened strike action[14] after the company introduced compulsory weekend working. Then in 2020, in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis they were told that sick pay would be cut.[15]

Sports Direct in Shirebrook is just over the constituency border in Bolsover which packs and dispatches goods around the country. During the Covid-19 pandemic, staff were worried that safety precautions were not being followed which they claimed might lead to outbreaks on the crowded warehouse floor.[16] B&Q and Amazon are also large local employers – and another warehouse for logistics operations has been given planning permission in Harworth in the north-west of the constituency.[17]

It is an economy based on large sheds and the Tories are now doubling down trying to pretend that they have high hopes for a freeport around East Midlands airport in Leicestershire which will most likely just exempt companies like Amazon from more tax[18] rather than help local people with good jobs.

Even if jobs in logistics were well-paid with good terms and conditions, none of these companies are likely to be major employers in the long-term. While e-commerce has driven up demand for logistics and warehousing, operations are already cutting staff and replacing them with robotics and digital sorting systems. Wilko itself has automated 85 per cent of its "e-fulfilment centre" in nearby Ollerton.[19]

The decline of the high street is affecting the profitability of some of these firms too. Wilko and Sports Direct rely on an in-store presence. It is particularly tragic for Wilko, an iconic northern hardware store and it represents a double whammy for communities which are losing out on both jobs and shops. The business saw a 65 per cent decline in its profits in

February 2020[20] and cut thousands of its lines even before Covid-19 which partly explains the local squeeze on workers' terms and conditions.

For logistics companies that survive like DHL, the development of automated systems, autonomous vehicles and in some cases 3D printing-based manufacturing mean there will be little need for a large workforce. Bassetlaw and places like it may well see yet another wave of job losses in the near future. Other sectors in the north and Midlands, like the automotive industry, are also likely to see huge job losses.

As well as low-paid caring jobs for the ageing population funded mostly by the county council through private contractors, the other major employers locally are public services – Bassetlaw Hospital, Ranby Prison and Rampton high-security hospital, which is the biggest employer in the area, with 2,500 jobs. Rampton holds 274 inmates including many of the country's most dangerous killers. Before his retirement in 2005 Ray Fielding, a Labour activist and leading light in the local British Legion worked there as a mental health nurse for many years. Although terms and conditions are not as good when he was employed in the early 2000s, a nursing assistant who works maximum overtime can double their basic £25,000 salary and a qualified mental health nurse can earn a lot more. It is though, difficult and sometimes dangerous work.

Given the local jobs market, is not surprising then that some young people who do not want to work in public services – and do not fancy the low wages, worsening conditions and instability in the logistics industry – up and leave, to go to the big cities of Sheffield, Nottingham or even London. It is the older generations who remain.

Labour needs to create plans for a new industrial base to keep younger workers in the area and make sure their jobs are highly paid. The party needs a strategy which looks for the strengths of areas, rather than seeing them as problems. One obvious source of those new jobs in Bassetlaw is energy production, building on the area's long tradition of mining. An energy-producing base would give new purpose again to the area and restore pride to its population. It will not be good enough – as Labour did when it was in power – just to offer top-up tax credits and public services like Sure Start centres to poorly paid workers. These were short-term measures without a longer-term strategy. Indeed, in Bassetlaw, children's centres were set up in the larger population areas, and some local politicians felt that they did not benefit less well-off children in smaller villages. As the Institute for Government pointed out in its report on the implementation of children's centres, there was some rural-proofing done, "but it took effort and adjustment to make it work in practice and some of our research participants felt that government policies would benefit from more consideration of such specifics."[21] In other words, Labour was seen to be designing services for cities rather than for towns or rural areas. Then when the Tories swept many in-work benefits away and starved local government

of money, children's services closed or were reduced and the flimsy government protection workers and their families enjoyed evaporated.

The infrastructure is there. It is just not being used. Three power stations in the constituency contain connections to the national grid and could be repurposed for green energy production: West Burton, Cottam and High Marnham. The cooling towers of West Burton and Cottam still dominate the landscape in the east of the constituency and rise up to meet you as you drive down the A620 out of Retford. They have only just closed. EDF owns them and has said it will clear the sites within five years. There are no incentives for the French company to do otherwise. It could be different if there were regional or national industrial plans and interest from the government. The railway lines that connected mines and power stations are still there too.

Wind turbines could be erected on mining sites. Solar panel farms and battery technology be developed there too. As a recent IPPR report on building back after Covid-19 suggests, we should be investing in carbon capture and hydrogen technologies.[22] Again, these former mining sites would be perfect places to do this. As housing has already been built here and thousands more houses are planned on brownfield land in the constituency, there is an opportunity to use the green electricity directly to heat and power those homes.

Research and manufacturing hubs to build the materials for turbines and solar panels could be set up by nearby, encouraging talented young people and others to move to the area because of the expertise that would have to be developed. The relatively cheap housing would be an incentive, particularly if it was built to the highest sustainable standard. When the Nottinghamshire pits needed more people, workers and their families came from Scotland, Newcastle and around the world to work in them and provide services. There could be a development corridor across the East Midlands and South Yorkshire taking in the towns and the old mining areas, building on the vision Dan Jarvis, mayor of the Sheffield City region has in Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley for green energy generation.

Many local councillors in Bassetlaw see the possibilities. Councillor Kevin Dukes, who worked for a major international company before standing for local office, walks around the rural area he represents every day. He says how dismayed he is to see the old power stations and the many connections to the national grid which exist, the old railway lines, the abandoned mines. He just sees wasted opportunities.

The heat which lies beneath the old mines might also be extracted to warm the villages around them and new housing estates which are being built. There has been a lot of discussion about extracting heat produced by cities. In Camden, for instance, a project was carried out to bring heat from the local hospital to a nearby housing estate, and Islington has proposed extracting heat from the tube network. But there is much less national discussion in policy circles about extracting geothermal heat from old mines. The area is perfect for

working out how to develop new technology. The Coal Authority understands the potential[23] and already pumps water from ex-mines to stop them flooding, but the heat goes nowhere. There is, engineering academics say, a heat capacity in the UK's mines of 36 billion GWh of heat storage capacity, more than annual demand. As a report by Durham Energy Institute[24] puts it: "Britain's abandoned coal mines have often been viewed within the lens of the negativity of the 1970s and 1980s. We now believe these hold the key to a new community responsible approach to decarbonisation." The biggest project in Europe is at Heerlen near Limburg in the Netherlands. There, 200,000 square metres of new and retrofitted buildings are heated with a seven-kilometre network from a circular district heating system.

But in the UK there are no large-scale projects which have been built. The only proposal currently in Nottinghamshire is for a 60-home project in the city of Nottingham. There is one other project in County Durham where engineers are investigating whether water from the old Dawdon mine could be used to heat a proposed 1,500 home garden village in South Seaham.[25] It is still being consulted on. There should at least be a national and regional feasibility plan looking at the possibilities in the whole area including across Nottinghamshire and South Yorkshire, where there is also interest in heat extraction from old mines.

Currently, development is piecemeal. It is led by Labour-run Bassetlaw district council whose powers are limited to planning (and are likely to be limited even further if new planning laws are approved by parliament). A small local strategy is emerging because of councillors like Jo White and Kevin Dukes. The council wants to have a housing development on the site of the former power station in Cottam with the ex-power station in High Marnham developed as an energy hub for solar energy and battery development. These two projects would create homes and highly-skilled jobs, whilst producing enough energy for local power, with electricity left over to be fed back into the grid.[26]

There are individual projects dotted around the countryside, including a handful of solar farms producing local energy up to 8 megawatts each. And small solar community energy schemes are powering local businesses from the Harley Gallery to the local sewage treatment works outside Worksop. There are only two mini-wind developments in the constituency.

The story of Rampton and Woodbeck Parish council – an area on the border between the constituencies of Bassetlaw and Newark – and their foray into renewable energy is an example of how, without a regional and national vision, it is so difficult on a micro-level to be ambitious about any renewable energy schemes.[27]

The parish council there owned land near to the psychiatric hospital and the old Cottam power station, and councillors wanted to use a renewable energy grant they had received from the Rural Community Energy Fund to develop solar and wind energy. They hired an environmental engineer to look into it.

But he concluded, "that solar and wind were not viable at the moment due to both the large connection costs by Western Power Distribution [£18m] and the inability of the network to cope with the additional load of the solar or wind farms." This was despite the quarry land they wanted to use being opposite the old Cottam power station. The parish council ended up consulting on a biomass district heating project which was abandoned because there were not enough local people who wanted to take it up.

Time is short, the power stations are being closed now. The window to act is narrowing. Even by 2024 things will have moved on and an incoming Labour government will need to act fast to start creating high-tech energy jobs in this part of the country. Labour will have to put forward incentives to replace some of the large logistics sheds with big green energy plants and specialist research and development parks.

Bassetlaw and surrounding areas need to be designated a renewable energy generation powerhouse. It needs regional democratic leadership, through a devolution settlement which grants tax-raising powers to incentivise change and regional green investment banks to bring in public and private money. The national grid needs to be able and willing to take the additional power generated.

It could be a huge part of bringing not only good, well-paid high-tech jobs to the area but also a sense of belonging and importance to the whole country. It would make a place like Bassetlaw essential to Britain's future rather than its past. And that would be the most important achievement of all.

But it would need a completely different way of doing things and thinking about geography and investment. There will never be a coalition between semi-rural constituencies and cities until there is a more equal settlement between London and cities in the north and Midlands – and those cities and their rural and ex-industrial hinterlands. This has to be at the core of Labour's plans to build back after Covid-19.

CHAPTER 3

AN OFFER FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE

Bassetlaw is essentially a rural constituency full of little villages, although the population lives mostly in Worksop, Retford and the emerging town of Harworth and Bircotes. Like so many other areas in the north and Midlands from the bellwether seat of North West Leicestershire to Bishop Auckland, industrialisation took place in the countryside.

Some 77 per cent of land in Bassetlaw is used for agriculture of some sort according to the latest the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) statistics from 2016.[28] Agriculture is fundamental to the area, more so than many neighbouring constituencies, although the number of people who actually work in farming is small. Around 1,000 people are employed: half of whom are actual farmers (full and part-time) and the other half labourers. The majority of the land is used for arable crops, mostly cereals. A smaller proportion is for grasslands and keeping livestock. Pig farming in particular has increased in Bassetlaw in the past 10 years.

If Labour, which has essentially positioned itself as an urban party, can come up with a credible rural offer for people who live in areas where the countryside is a large part of their lives, then it will not only help in marginal seats and those the party lost, it will mean the party can think about making inroads into Tory constituencies in the north and south and challenge the Tories on their home ground.

Understanding and owning the language and the emotional meaning of the countryside is important, as well as addressing the feeling many voters have in places like Bassetlaw that Labour is simply not a party for them. One of the successes of the SNP in Scotland has been tapping into the romance Scots feel about the Highlands,[29] though few voters actually live there. Welsh Labour has done the same. Labour in England, and in places like Bassetlaw, need to connect with the romantic socialism of the English countryside of the north and the Midlands, while putting it into a British context. The 2018 Fabian Society report Labour Country[30] tells a strong story about the language, connection, sensibility and message which Labour needs to

develop. The report reminds us that the Labour movement started in the English countryside with the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the agricultural labourers who set up the first trade union, and many of the mutual improvement societies. And more recently, the cultural radicalism of John Ruskin, William Morris and the arts and crafts movement, formed a creative basis for a kind of socialism which challenged industrial production and the extreme poverty found in cities in the late 19th century. These are values of equality, nature and community; wellbeing and happiness which have resonance in the modern age and across social class.

Methodism, to which the Labour party is said to owe more than it does to Marx, runs deep across the area. In Bassetlaw, the numerous chapels attest to its importance. The chair of Bassetlaw Labour party is a leading light in his Methodist church and the Crossing community hub in the centre of Worksop has performance space which bills itself as one of north Nottinghamshire's top public concert halls. The Harley Gallery in Welbeck just outside Worksop is devoted to crafts, and the Worksop ramblers are still going strong. Methodism and other non-conformist Christian denominations like Quakerism have a tradition of public service and volunteerism which is not showy, not overtly political but strongly felt. My family on my mother's side is from the Staffordshire countryside. My great grandfather was a gardener and Methodist lay preacher and that non-conformist idea of public service still runs deep more than 100 years later. Labour needs to explore its old emotional connection to these quiet radical impulses, which are often suspicious of the establishment. They run strongly through a lot of the population of the Midlands, and are reflected in the values of many older local members of the Labour party. We need these sentiments to be an important part of *our* Labour story again – and part of that bridge to be built with the radicalism of cities.

The fundamentals of a rural offer are about creating a countryside which promotes the glories of the natural world (be that through tourism or leisure). Bassetlaw is full of those wonders – from the National Trust land at Clumber Park through to Sherwood Forest itself and the limestone gorge at Creswell Crags with its caves which were lived in during the ice age. These tracts of nature need to be valued across the north and Midlands for the health and wealth of the nation as a whole.

Sustainable food is also one of the new battle-lines where Labour will need to have strong policy proposals because it goes to the heart of the country's future stability as we leave the EU. Labour will need to make sure that we have good, secure, affordable food.

We have already seen fears both in the countryside and in cities about a trade deal with the US which might drive down high British animal welfare standards including the introduction of chlorinated chicken into the poultry market. Labour needs to do what the government has promised and focus money on climate, eco-systems and tourism, encouraging farmers to deliver for the public good.

Leaving the EU should present an opportunity for Labour to rebalance subsidies from large landowners and big farms to smaller greener farms. New research by academics from Sweden and the Netherlands shows that the most EU farm subsidies now go to the richest farmers, who employ the fewest people and are among the most polluting and least biodiverse.[31] Some EU farming subsidies even go to urban areas. These are the kind of things that infuriate those struggling in Bassetlaw. Labour must be at the front of driving change and creating a more equitable countryside policy over which Britain has control.

But this cannot be done from London. Indeed some of the perversities of the EU system are because of over-centralisation and poor monitoring systems. British scientists, while welcoming the potential opportunities for redesigning agriculture policy now Britain has left the EU, are concerned that what the EU did will be replicated on a Britain-wide level and Defra will not manage the delicate balance needed to subsidise the right things and the right farmers which will lead to perverse outcomes. And that was before Covid-19.

Biodiversity and climate change are left-wing causes which can unite cities and towns in a common purpose. These issues should be led by the countryside, not left to the individual and free market. The real effects of climate change are felt most strongly in the countryside, not only its impact on farming but also on local housing and infrastructure. In Bassetlaw the massive flooding in November 2019 was a visible and devastating reminder of how vulnerable towns are to massive swings in the weather. Worksop and surrounding villages were severely damaged after the river Ryton overflowed, and flooding remains a danger every winter. But there has been little financial support for flood defences for the town either from the government or the Environment Agency. The Labour district council leader Simon Greaves believes this is because assets in Bassetlaw are not seen as being as valuable as those in Sheffield or wealthier cities, and that support has been given to places with higher 'gross value added' in terms of the goods or services they produce. These are strongly-felt grievances, and local people believe that money, not human need, accounts for such decisions.

Nationally the party has to press for more protection for local residents as well as making the case that there needs to be an international effort to control the change in the climate which leads to freak weather conditions.

If Labour is to make sure that leaving the EU creates a more equal countryside, the party has to consider how more power could be devolved and must realise what it takes for places like Bassetlaw to genuinely feel they have an equal share in the whole country's future. Local residents in Nottinghamshire need the tools to control the big decisions which affect their area. They cannot be dismissed because the value of their land and houses is less.

That could mean introducing a system of hyper-local village and town mayors, paid a full-time salary as is often the case in Germany or investing

town and parish councils with more power on a micro-level, not just to run their communities but also to argue regionally for local needs. Such mayors could raise the alarm if biodiversity is getting worse, pollution is increasing or small farms are being driven out of business by inequitable subsidies.

Labour has to work out how to get rural voices at the table. As the House of Lords 2019 report from the Rural Economy Committee, Time for a Strategy for the Rural Economy points out too little policy is "rural-proofed". It is centrally decided and designed around cities and urban populations, and this affects infrastructure development including transport and internet connections, as well as services and access to jobs. All this entrenches rural and town poverty as well as a feeling of being left behind. Labour will have to tackle this if it is to govern for the whole country.

CHAPTER 4

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION

The development of modern infrastructure in Britain has been uneven over many years with most development in London and the south east. In its report on regional and economic inequality, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy argues that the disparity in Britain is extreme compared to other OECD economies and that the official methodology for appraising investment (the Treasury green book) has reinforced regional inequality, with most infrastructure – including rail and fast broadband – in London and the south east.[32]

This extreme centralisation has been bad for northern cities. Mayor Dan Jarvis has been infuriated about green book rules for many years and wants this in-built bias in Treasury calculations to change. He sees it as an enormous block to investment or development in his area round Sheffield and regionally.[33] There has been an acknowledgement from the government of the problem in recent industrial strategies and now by the chancellor Rishi Sunak, who announced green book changes in November 2020.

If that bias is bad for Sheffield, it is even worse for all those areas outside cities, like Bassetlaw. Labour needs plans to address this grossly unfair imbalance. Infrastructure should be based on people's need and not just where it will bring the most bang for its buck.

One of the biggest national investments we need is in fast broadband across all rural and town areas. Commuters already live in Bassetlaw because housing is cheap and they enjoy village life. But with the Covid-19 crisis, more people are likely to want to work from home and if we are to have a real green revolution with less reliance on the car, then regularly driving long distances to work has be a thing of the past.

People cannot and will not work from home without access to very fast broadband and comprehensive mobile coverage.

There are, according to the latest figures, still two per cent of households in Nottinghamshire which are "too remote" for broadband, and for those with a connection, the average speed of 30mbps is quickly becoming inadequate. Already it is not enough for a family of five and this will soon be the case for everyone as data use rises rapidly.

A recent National Audit Office report warned that the current broadband coverage is not future proof and that rural and hard to reach communities are still not getting adequate broadband coverage from the current superfast programme because the government had prioritised coverage over quality.[34] The government has committed to 'gigabit capable' coverage which relies on 5G or fibre to the doorstep rather than full fibre which is easier to maintain.[35] The report warns that:

> "The department is working towards finalising its plans for its future programme to support nationwide gigabit coverage. In doing so, it must manage the tension between meeting a timeline and serving those in greatest need. Failure to do so risks leaving those left behind by the superfast programme even further behind and widening the rural divide."

Indeed, the UK has the lowest rate of full-fibre broadband connection in Europe. And the East Midlands, the north east and the east of England lag behind the rest of Britain, including Scotland.

According to Ofcom, not only will full-fibre broadband help with data-intensive streaming services and the internet of things (where you can control your fridge and heating system through wifi), but it will create jobs in infrastructure, increase productivity and help remote working. To achieve these aims Labour committed at the last election to nationalising BT and making the service free. Both the ideas were laughed out of court in places like Bassetlaw. People did not believe that nationalising BT was necessary, possible or even desirable. It was certainly eye-wateringly expensive. And they did not see why wifi should be free since most people could afford it. As the people who Deborah Mattinson spoke to for her book Beyond the Red Wall said:

> "Where Labour went wrong last time was promising lots of things that we knew they couldn't do. It has to be affordable and it has to be realistic.' Others agreed. 'Free wifi for everyone!' someone remembers and the whole room laughed at the sheer folly of it all."[36]

In their eyes, modern technology possibly needed to get ahead in the world was being made unattainable because the Labour party was more interested in ideology than in pragmatism and would be unable to deliver on its promises.

But prioritising full-fibre broadband at reasonable prices to homes and businesses with private and public money would certainly not be laughed out of court. There are lessons here from Spain, where the government is trying to address a big rural depopulation crisis. More than half of Spanish homes now have full-fibre broadband and rural areas are being connected up thanks to financing from public-private partnerships. The Tories under Boris Johnson have substantially watered down their proposals for full-fibre broadband to go to every household in the country by 2033, instead concentrating on their

gigabit programme. And secondary legislation to oblige housebuilders to put gigabit broadband to every home has yet to be enacted despite being promised in March 2020.

So there is space here for Labour to make full-fibre broadband part of a package to connect up northern and Midlands constituencies with the latest technology, putting people in greatest need, and those in the most rural and least accessible areas first. Labour should also be making it a requirement for every new house built to be connected to full-fibre broadband.

Excellent connectivity allows work hubs to be set up in converted agricultural and industrial buildings in villages and towns, similar to the shared working spaces in cities. During Covid-19 pubs have done this on a very small scale[37]. Rural areas like Bassetlaw have lots of people setting up small businesses and more could be encouraged to do so. They are often single traders and allowing them to come together would also help some of those businesses grow and learn from each other, replicating the kind of networking that happens in larger urban centres. The disappearance of post offices means there are far fewer commercial community spaces where everyone regularly goes to carry out business. Such rural hubs, as well as workspaces, could offer room for local public services and support the elderly and young families.

Indeed it is perfectly possible to live in Bassetlaw and go to London or Sheffield twice a week for meetings – many people who live there do that already. This way of working at least part of the time from home is one of the proposed new working models.[38]

Fast connections which allow lots of data to be downloaded would also mean that research parks connected to universities could be set up with teams of specialists outside cities enjoying a better quality of life but also within reach of large universities in Sheffield, Derby and Nottingham.

Having more connectivity helps elderly people in towns and in villages who have poor access to health services and care, a problem endemic where the population is ageing. In Bassetlaw, some 15 per cent of people live more than 30 minutes away from a GP surgery and many hospital services are in Sheffield and Doncaster. Full-fibre stable broadband would mean telemedicine becomes more possible, so that GP consultations and hospital appointments can happen online. And a technology-enabled home can alert doctors and carers if an elderly person has a fall, among many other things. Covid-19 is driving these developments faster and Labour has to follow the lead of other European countries and make connections accessible to everyone using public and private money.

One other priority for connecting up the countryside is getting full 4G coverage – at the moment only 91 per cent of the country is covered and this particularly affects rural areas. Developing 5G in rural areas will also be important if farming is to become more automated: not only can 5G enable fields to be harvested without a single person on the tractor, but it

also allows data to be collected about the environment in real time including whether crops need watering, fertiliser or pesticides. It can help increase biodiversity. New technology may mean even fewer unskilled jobs in farming, but other jobs such as data analytics and farming management would increase. Technology, of course, is no substitute for human contact but fully developed technology outside cities allows people of all ages to live there. Labour needs to be at the cutting edge of this technology and arguing for it as a way of connecting people both metaphorically and literally and putting the communities of places like Bassetlaw first, rather than London or the south east. For older voters in the Midlands, this is about creating a mixed community with young people and families encouraged to stay near to their parents, without sacrificing good jobs.

The other way to connect is through public transport. The lack of bus services in rural areas has left many young people, single parents, the disabled and older people who do not have a car stranded and reliant on the kindness of neighbours or their parents. A fifth of households in Bassetlaw do not have access to a car or van according to the district council profile.[39]

Local people say they find it difficult to do shopping or to get jobs which involved any kind of travel or shift work. The Rhodesia Children's Centre has many single parents living around it. It has been frequently saved because of the intervention of local councillors, but when I was campaigning there, the midwifery service was no longer visiting their village. Women had stopped going to vital antenatal appointments a short drive away, simply because they did not have a car.

The lack of transport affects young people too. Partly due to the high cost of insurance, only 38 per cent of 17 to 20-year-olds now have a driving licence in the UK.

So, as well as the economic pull of cities, a better transport system is another reason to move out of the countryside for the young. In Bassetlaw as in many other areas, buses are not always reliable, run infrequently and stop before 6pm. Nottinghamshire county council which is responsible for buses has cut a third of funding from its bus services over the past five years.[40]

When it comes to rural buses, there is little central planning and none of the digital technology that exists in cities, with only a few piecemeal pilots around the country. Bus services fall into a spiral of decline, as fewer people use the buses, fewer bus routes are put on because private bus companies, which have seen their subsidies slashed over the last 10 years, are losing money. Extra money for bus services across the board in England has fallen by 43 per cent or £162m. The way some subsidies are designed around diesel fuel also makes it difficult for existing bus services to convert to renewables.

Local authorities are stymied by legislation even if they had the money. Government has made it illegal for municipal authorities to run their own bus services. Franchising – which allows local areas to decide how their bus services are provided, determine routes, as well as setting fares and standards

of services – is against the law outside metropolitan areas in England, except in Cornwall where it was brought in as part of their devolution deal.

If Labour is to show that it really cares about rural areas in the East Midlands and north of England, it will have to deal with the bus problem and do something radical. Piecemeal voluntary schemes which exist up and down the country, however worthy, are not enough. Sorting out the buses is not only electorally necessary, but fair because it is the most disadvantaged, including many women, who are the most affected by the catastrophic collapse in services. Indeed, buses could be considered a feminist, as well as a socialist issue. As one ex-Labour MP from a Red Wall seat told me: "It's seeing all those women on the buses that really brings it home to you."

Moreover, if we are to reduce carbon emission from cars, it will be increasingly important to have clean, planned transport services. The Campaign for Better Transport in its report The Future of Rural Bus Services in the UK identified European examples of central planning of bus services in the Netherlands and Germany which are built around the needs of the town and rural communities and answerable politically to local people through democratic control. This includes making sure the bus service matches local demand, as well as integrating buses and trains so the timetables connect and they do not run on similar routes.

Technological solutions are being trialed around the world, including driverless electric shuttle buses to take people the last mile or so from a town to their village or home. In many parts of our country these could run along old railway lines – and Bassetlaw has plenty of disused lines round its old collieries.

In rural Japan where lots of older people live, taxi subsidies have proved successful, popular and only slightly more expensive than bookable bus services. In places like Bassetlaw, electric shuttles and cars could be part of a strategy combining renewable energy and battery technology, with electric vehicles being used to balance the supply and demand of a town or village's energy supply.

Modern ticketing infrastructure which Transport for London uses, and technology like London's CityMapper which tracks when various modes of transport are arriving, combined with ride-hailing technologies including a cooperatively-owned Uber-style service, could make planning and paying for journeys a lot easier. Britain is ahead of so many countries on this technology and we are trialling much of it in cities, particularly in London, and yet completely ignoring the needs of towns and rural areas as if it is not necessary to have innovation here.

For Labour there is an opportunity to devolve government and give local politicians the power to design accountable transport services built around the needs of local people. The fact that this could be integrated into a strategy and investment for renewable energy makes it even more attractive. And it might also fulfil another objective,

which was to make it more attractive for younger people to live outside cities.

It would also make the countryside around places like Clumber Park or Sherwood forest much more attractive to tourists and be part of the rural and cultural offer. Imagine if electric bike hire schemes could be integrated into trains, shuttle buses and taxis from town hubs like Retford or Worksop so that tourists could explore the local parks and forests.

There is a Labour vision to be built of a semi-rural society: extremely well connected, but also low density, with low carbon emissions, socially inclusive, with sustainable food, where people can work in or near home, with lots of green space and a much improved quality of life. This kind of semi-rural idyll can be built outside big cities. It is not a question of looking back but making sure Bassetlaw is central to Britain's future and part of a strategy for the whole island.

One of the characteristics of the political landscape, and that is true in Bassetlaw as elsewhere, is that it is extremely volatile and political allegiances are quick to shift, even among older voters. Labour urgently needs a forward-looking offer for them. And if Labour is going to claim to represent the whole country, it has to represent the 17 per cent of Britons who live in the countryside.

CHAPTER 5

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

One of the biggest worries in places like Bassetlaw is the loss of community. Civic institutions which make up communities are disappearing across the country: the social and sports clubs, the churches, and chapels; the post offices, pubs and markets. Severe cuts in public funding over the last 10 years have led to the loss of community centres, health centres and youth clubs, and where they do still exist, they are fragile. High streets in towns, which are so important to people's sense of belonging, are full of boarded up shops. And stores like Marks and Spencer, which represent for many older people happier and more prosperous times have long gone.

Communities have become more atomised in a way that is striking if you are used to living in a city. When you meet up in Bassetlaw, it is mostly not in the towns of Retford or Worksop let alone in Harworth and Bircotes. People meet in the café at the out-of-town Morrisons supermarket; at the Starbucks next to the Shell station; or in the Lock Keeper Inn on the A60 next to the Chesterfield Canal. Local people go shopping in cities or to large out of town shopping centres.

Even those older people who still go to Retford or Worksop to shop do not stay for long. They might miss the last bus. If you come by car, even though parking is free, you often do not stay because you won't be able to have a drink with a meal. As a result, town centres find it difficult even to encourage nightlife. Many restaurants where people might have gone have morphed into takeaways. Nightclubs have closed. Without efficient green public transport systems, towns do not act enough as busy hubs where people can come and go to make connections out to surrounding villages.

Bassetlaw hospital in Worksop is important for the healthcare and jobs that it offers, and it is also one of the few large institutions which still exists locally. It is a focal point which unites local communities and to which they all have access. Areas without a hospital do not even have this community institution.

If Labour is to have a plan for communities, the party is going to have to reimagine town centres and work out

how to build places which attract people to them and make them stay. Otherwise towns will continue to decline and the new houses that are being built will simply become part of a commuter belt dormitory settlements full of people who have little attachment to the area.

A first step is to encourage the arts. Public libraries are vital here – Bassetlaw district council has made sure to keep those in Retford and in Worksop. The Savoy Cinema in Worksop is still going strong. But there is a possibility of going much further to encourage performing arts and training. Storyhouse in Chester, for instance, is a charity arts centre which combines a library, cinema and an outdoor and indoor theatre and works as a local cultural hub. It is funded partly by the arts council and is a huge local success story. It is fragile and the Covid-19 pandemic may mean it has to close. But it is a blueprint for bringing arts and performance out from cities, as well as providing a place to teach performing arts.

Centres like this could also host publicly funded programmes of festivals to help reinvent Northern and Midlands towns. Small festivals of music and literature happen already, but it is not a systematic policy of renewal. Empty shops in high streets could host pop up poetry performance and exhibitions. Theatre could be brought to big, unused civic buildings – for instance there is a glorious but under-used town hall in the centre of Retford. But this will need arts leadership, and projects which encourage artists to come to towns which would not normally be considered cultural hubs. There could be a new Festival of Britain to celebrate building a different kind of country after Covid-19. And arts funding for the National Theatre to be a theatre for all the country which brings live performances to towns and villages.

Labour needs to have a policy of bringing the arts industry to every corner of the UK, and particularly to neglected communities outside cities as a way of restoring pride and connecting us with each other.

People also need to be encouraged to live in the centre of towns, to boost the nightlife. Old shops could be converted into flats and houses as part of a policy to reinvigorate the centre of towns like Retford and Worksop. This could be affordable housing for those working in healthcare and education, or for young people studying at new colleges to be built in town centres. This is what John Lewis is intending to do with some of its shops in cities.

Filling towns also helps to stop outward migration by young skilled people. Pilot programmes for such a repopulation are being trialed all over the world, from Tulsa Oklahoma which offers $10,000 to digital workers to settle there for a year, to the village of Candela in Italy which is paying people to move in. Görlitz, a city of 54,000 people in eastern Germany, ran a project last year called "testing the city – living and working in Görlitz".[41] German authorities wanted to see how a medium-sized city could encourage more people to live there. Making the place feel more important was also one of the stated aims, and Görlitz has a major problem in attracting people because of the

presence of the far right anti-immigrant party, the AfD which polled 37 per cent in the elections last September. It was a federally funded project involving only 54 people.

The preliminary conclusions were that the town needed better transport links and that cultural and leisure activities were crucial to attracting what they call 'nomadic workers' those researchers, analysts and digital and IT experts who go from place to place and work from home. Crucially part of the Görlitz strategy also involved setting up two centres for highly skilled workers, a data analysis centre and a hydrogen technologies innovation campus. Towns in the Midlands and northern England of a similar size (Worksop has 42,000 inhabitants) do not face anything like the depopulation of places deep in eastern Germany, but there may well be things we can learn about attracting people with skills to settle by creating new jobs and opportunities for young people, while not taking local jobs away.

Another way to strengthen community is to create developments which bring together food production and artists. This is the basis for an artisanal community on the Welbeck estate in Bassetlaw. The businesses are built around the art galleries there and include arts and pottery studios, a micro-brewery, a pizza-making business, a plant nursery and a cooking school as well as an investment management company and a green deal provider. There is also a forest school kindergarten. Here are the beginnings of what a business and arts community might look like although its expansion is limited because it is on a private estate and in "heritage buildings" protected by planning laws. The district council is doing this at a small scale in Worksop with a new business hub development in the centre of town. It might be replicable in some of the 72 local villages where there are people doing everything from pottery making to property development. One village in Bassetlaw has a local post office and shop which travels round to local village halls to provide a weekly service to isolated residents. Some of the small business owners and families have moved to the local villages because there is more space and houses are far cheaper than in the city, some are entrepreneurs who have stayed. But much of what they produce would be prized by the young green-minded liberals in cities and provides a new point of connection between places. As discussed earlier, part of the socialist tradition is for small scale artisanal business and specialist crafts from furniture making to cheese-making, and that tradition could be encouraged to a much greater degree. These small rural enterprises provide a bridge between the old and the new, the young and the old, the city and the town and countryside.

Another key component in creating stronger communities is building sustainable homes for people to live in. The district council, under Labour, has an ambitious local plan.[42] Bassetlaw has been told by government it needs to deliver 10,000 houses in the area by 2037, and it has identified several sites, including a 'garden village' it wants constructed near Worksop. Councillors are suggesting a sustainable green

development with shops and services, but it remains to be seen with all the changes in planning laws whether such a development is possible or viable and whether the district can attract a suitable investor.

Centrally the government simply seems to want to houses built come what may, and neither seems to know nor care about the quality of homes which are being built, as long as they hit certain targets. They do not mind whether the roads exist for these new homes, whether they are being powered by renewable energy, properly insulated or even whether they have local shops, children's nurseries or schools; and certainly not whether those homes are actually affordable to the people who live and work in the area.

Indeed, a key concern about new housing developments in some parts of Bassetlaw is that they are too expensive for local people and have been priced in order to tempt people out of Sheffield and other cities. Because of local low wages, there is an identified need for 2,578 affordable homes over the same period, including specialist housing for the ageing population, but these will be impossible to deliver unless an incoming Labour government commits to massive investment and a serious commitment to affordable housing. The current Tory government has said Bassetlaw can only have 660 affordable homes because of low land values and the "viability" of housing developments for private developers.

If the government's planning reforms go through, the power of local authorities to ask for affordable housing will be even further limited. The reforms will remove 106 agreements which are usually the only way local councils can get developers to agree to affordable housing, as well as further erode the local politicians' power to demand well-designed, sustainable homes that places like Bassetlaw so desperately need.

Although the government has blamed councils for not approving housing applications, numerous studies have shown that it is developers who simply hold onto land without building on it to keep the price of the houses they want to sell artificially high. A recent analysis by Shelter from September 2020 showed 40 per cent of houses granted planning permission go unbuilt. The charity analysed data from the government and from the House Builders Federation and found in the last year alone, 100,000 houses granted planning permission had not been built.

If places like Bassetlaw and across the East Midlands are to be at the forefront of the green revolution, then there needs to be legislation to force land with planning permission to be developed in a way that is future-proofed for the environment and suitable for local people. That could be through giving local authorities more powers to act where housebuilding has stalled, through a tax on land which is slated for development, and giving power to a democratic regional authority with much more control over the types of houses which are built. Local authorities need to be able to legislate for the kind of materials that are used, what powers the houses and heats the water and whether new developments are

affordable. Green transport links, green energy, electric charging points, full-fibre broadband and small shops and work hubs must be set up to ensure these housing developments become real communities. This infrastructure should be built first, before the houses are put up. With borrowing so cheap at the moment, all this should be possible.

There also need to be incentives to build generous amounts of affordable housing. And the houses need to be the right size, built to match the demographic of the local population, so that Bassetlaw is building both for its rising elderly population as well as attracting younger people. Again, this means houses which have the right infrastructure. And as previously discussed, this means full-fibre connections for telemedicine, local shops and easily accessible transport.

It is possible, as in Scotland, to make a political decision to deliver social and affordable housing in areas like Bassetlaw. It would give people an incentive to stay local and offer them the security that comes with an affordable home.

North of the border, there is an affordable housing supply strategy which aims to deliver 50,000 homes by granting housing associations and councils capital grants to build, abolishing the right to buy and removing borrowing caps for housing authorities. According to a report by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Excellence[43], this strategy has enabled a whole mid-market sector to evolve for key workers, as well as shared equity models. The price of land in Red Wall seats makes schemes like this more than deliverable for the public and non-profit sector. There should be regional plans for similar strategies to build real, new communities in England.

There is also the opportunity to be much more innovative in the type of houses which are built: to look at the advantages of high-quality, highly-insulated, pre-fab housing. Such high-quality, pre-fab houses have been built for decades in Germany, and families who want to live outside cities often buy and plan them (rather like you might plan a new kitchen) and have them installed on their plot of land. In Sweden, 95 per cent of new build housing is created in a factory. In the East Midlands, the warehousing space and outstanding transport links are there. So is the expertise. A local firm, iHus, already works with Bassetlaw council to produce disability-friendly extensions for existing housing. Although there is some provision in Bassetlaw's local plan for this kind of housing, most of what is envisaged will be built by large developers.

There is an opportunity to experiment with both private and affordable housing in ways that are much more difficult to do in the middle of cities. If Labour were to develop plans both to introduce capital funding for council and housing association building, give incentives for factory-built houses in these areas, plus green heating and full-fibre broadband, then it might really start to challenge some of England's vested interests. This could produce housing and communities which serve more precisely the needs of the local population and respond to future climate change challenges.

Labour district councils already do some of that thinking and consulting through planning and place-shaping because these are the powers they have. But the prism of planning is limited; it is dependent on developers and it is always easy for local residents to say "no" because they do not want a new housing development on their doorstep.

There also needs to be a publically funded retro-fitting programme, which aims to insulate existing houses, connect them to green energy supplies and possibly also install full-fibre broadband. This needs to be a very simple programme and should prioritise older people in the Midlands and north. It cannot be dependent on individuals signing up to a byzantine grant application process but has to be run as a capital programme with incentives driven by new local and regional governments. As Ed Miliband MP has argued, such a scheme as part of a national green recovery plan would create hundreds of thousands of new jobs.

Labour needs to be thinking about the places where people live in a totally different way and start to build relationships street by street with local residents to understand the kind of community they want to help build. These have to be discussions which go beyond the traditional Whitehall departmental silos of housing, transport, benefits, infrastructure, business, environment and education and look at the whole. There is an opportunity while we are in opposition to build those relationships. What is it like to grow older in Bassetlaw? How you do you see the future for you, your children and grandchildren and how collectively can we make that work for all of us? How can Labour, together with you, build a society which you would want to live in and which others round the country might want to share – whether that be the houses you live in, the culture you have access to, the energy which powers your home, the transport you use, the way you earn money and the way the health and care system works? If we can begin to answer those questions, we can begin to form a future political agenda. But Labour in opposition needs to empower and finance Labour councillors and Labour community leaders to have these conversations locally to shape the national picture.

We have an opportunity to create places which belong to people, where they are proud to live and work. And places with good connectivity like Bassetlaw could well prove to be more attractive than cities, rich villages and towns in the south east: much less expensive, with a slower pace of life but with the same internet infrastructure as a city.

Covid-19 has made many businesses re-evaluate how they operate, and more people are working from home. Now is the time to develop environmentally-friendly homes with ultra-modern internet infrastructure and a strong community with outstanding public services and access to beautiful countryside. With some imagination, towns in the East Midlands could be re-invented to become the future of modern living both for the old and young.

CHAPTER 6

SKILLS AND PEOPLE

If Red Wall seats like Bassetlaw are to thrive, they need to retain their young people. The number of elderly is already above the national average and set to rise.

A good education is key to supporting young people in towns and the countryside, but it all too often becomes a route out for many young people. They do not return or they commute into cities. Towns and villages not only lose their best students, but if a potentially skilled workforce lives elsewhere, there is no reason for employers to invest in jobs. The older workforce also find they lack the skills to work in new industries and can become stuck in local lower-paid work. If places like Bassetlaw are to be places where green energy production is based, then a local workforce will need to be trained to do it.

Labour needs to develop ideas for a national programme to coordinate skilling up workers so they are ready for the well-paid jobs of the future. But a Labour government needs to be committed to lifelong learning to retrain older workers for new jobs and give young people a second chance if they do badly at school. Labour today can learn a lot from Jenny Lee's determination to set up the Open University in order to modernise the country, as well as her support for Arts Council projects across the country.

In Bassetlaw the academies are some of the best in the area. Indeed, they are better than some of the schools in neighbouring cities and GCSE results are well above the national average, although in 2016, the only year for which there are local figures available, only half achieved a full level 3 qualification – ie A Level or advanced NVQs (while the national average was 60.5 per cent). This speaks to a problem locally of post-16 education and aspiration.

Nevertheless for academic students, schools can provide a route into university and further education. The improvement in the schools up to 16 has been a local success story. But Bassetlaw finds it difficult to retain its talent. There are few programmes to do so. Higher wages are mostly to be found outside the constituency, unless you run your own business or work in a skilled healthcare job. A mental health assistant and nurse

at Rampton as previously discussed, can earn good money. In common with most places across the country though, there is little attempt to match young people's skills with the demand of industry. As Edge Foundation research shows, there is a gap between what employers want and what skills students have and there is no organisation keeping track of the size and shape of those skills shortages in the UK, let alone on a local level. If Labour is to bring skilled green jobs into Bassetlaw this will need to change and Labour will have to set up programmes not only for current jobs but for future ones.

The problem starts early. Those who fare worst are the least well-off, ie the students on free school meals according to the child and young people's profile.[44] And it starts very young. The percentage of children on free school meals attaining a good level of development at the end of reception (at 5-years-old) was, in 2016, one of the lowest in the country – at 38.5 per cent. The national average in England was 51 per cent and in the best local authorities it was 71 per cent.

And it is these pupils who are most likely to find themselves being excluded by academies and dropping out of the school: it is a problem which exercises district councillors who see local schools achieving higher academic standards by narrowing the curriculum and excluding students. The network of Pupil Referral Units – specially tailored schools for excluded pupils – has been dismantled and teenagers end up out of school and on the streets. If they are unlucky, they get involved in antisocial behaviour or drug-taking and dealing. Without qualifications they find themselves unable to get anything but menial, unstable and poorly paid jobs. This is a problem in towns across the north and Midlands, including places like Bolton to Teesside where young people are falling out of education and those children with special educational needs and on free school meals are most likely to be excluded. Not that it is easy to measure any of this on a granular district level and is mostly measured county-wide.

Labour needs to address this kind of disparity in outcomes urgently and really understand what happens on a district level in places like Bassetlaw. We have seen educational divides narrow in places like Camden where a third of children live in poverty, so it is possible, but the ways of doing it may be different in a large city than in towns and rural areas. When we talk about "the white working class" it is often these children who are referred to in places in the Midlands and north where the population is predominantly white – rather than any racial divide.

There are very few safety nets for these students in Red Wall seats, and very few opportunities locally once the school route is closed. This entrenches inequality locally and a feeling that after failure at school that there are few second chances. It is interesting that the annual Good Childhood Report identified fearing failure was one of the biggest contributors to unhappy children[45]. In Worksop and other ex-mining areas, there was a tradition of men leaving school at 14 or 15,

starting their working lives in the mines, and then retraining, either funded through the nationalised coal board or through the trade unions. Now those routes are for the most part closed, and the multi-national warehouse operators which are the big employers have no incentive to increase local skills. Indeed, they are investing in automation in order to eventually shed their current workforce, rather than upskill it.

A Labour government would have to address these complex and often hidden educational problems head-on. There has to be renewed investment in early years which specifically target youngsters in rural and town communities between the ages of 0 and 4, particularly looking at how a Sure Start model would work in areas where the population is more spread out than in cities. There must be a widening of the education system to teach a broader curriculum without watering down the academic successes of schools in Bassetlaw. This must include art and music, so that young people can follow different routes to success. There also needs to be more investment in special educational needs support. Academies need to be held to account for exclusions and off-rolling and proper psychological and academic support must be provided for those who are excluded from school.

Young people also need to have a second and even third chance at learning, as those who fall out of the education system young can find it difficult even to meet the most basic criteria to re-enter it. Those opportunities to re-enter the system have to exist in towns because young people and their families cannot afford to move. As the Fabians' New Tricks report[46] into adult learning pointed out in 2018, France and other countries have shown how the UK could make quick gains with a variety of courses and incentives to cover living and study costs.

Bassetlaw has started to tackle some of the educational challenges with plans to build a specialist training centre in Worksop. The centre which will also train health workers, as well as construction and digital workers, will be near the district hospital and has the dual aim of keeping the hospital going and skilling up young people. The council would like to bring in other further education and specialist skills centres into the centre of the town, where traditionally they were on the outskirts. Having colleges which run courses from high-skilled cookery and hospitality to engineering skills for the new green industries could be part of helping to revive town centres. And it is important that the new skills taught really do lead to jobs.

Excellent, highly-prized training colleges might also be a strength that a town could become known for locally, so that young people come to Worksop from Sheffield, for instance, to learn skills. It could be part of building a coalition between towns and cities, working with local employers, and attracting new ones to offer good apprenticeships.

Future-proofing cities has often meant bringing in affordable housing combined with universities and art schools. The universities in Sheffield for instance have transformed the centre of the city and become more involved in

city life. At the huge redevelopment of King's Cross in London, the University of the Arts prevented the area from simply becoming a soulless rich shopping and housing development. The college not only brings in young people and exhibitions, but has made itself a hub for arts innovation, helping the local council and local businesses reimagine the whole borough.

Losing the Red Wall seats needs to be a wake-up call about the dignity, not just of work, but of skilled work, creative work and life-long education, learning and skills which gives people a sense of control over their lives. People, particularly older populations in the north and Midlands need to know they are not trapped or subject to seemingly arbitrary external threats be that Covid-19, global warming, automation or immigration.

Of course, there is no way of stopping change, but there are ways of giving communities the educational tools to weather change rather than being overwhelmed by it. Labour and the Labour movement including trade unions have traditionally stepped in to fill the skills gap and that needs to happen again systematically. Working out what skills are needed where, particularly for a green industrial revolution, has to be part of Labour's plans working on a regional and national level. Towns and the countryside need to be joined up – with cities not pitted against them. Asolder people have been telling Labour on the doorsteps over and over for the last 10 years, they are worried more about their children's future than their own. We need to understand and address that fear about what happens if the next generation is less well off than the last. In Bassetlaw that is particularly poignant because the middle-aged feel they have had a bad deal and that it might be worse for their offspring. And that is tied up not only with whether their children can do well locally, but also whether they have the skills to survive in the globalised world.

Control and sovereignty – which Northern and Midlands voters felt the UK had lost – are what was promised by the Brexit vote. Labour's task if it is to win in 2024 will be to redefine what that means for individuals and communities and a life-long learning programme for 21st century skills which leaves no one behind will be key.

CHAPTER 7

IMMIGRATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Liam Palmer is a Sheffield Wednesday player who was born and brought up in Worksop. He plays for Scotland because of his Scottish grandmother and also has the right to play for Jamaica because of his Caribbean heritage. He has set up the Palmer School of Excellence in Worksop to encourage boys and girls to improve their footballing and social skills, giving something back to the community which raised him.

When the pits were at full capacity workers came from all over the country and beyond. The Seaforth Highlanders pipes and drums band based in neighbouring Mansfield are still living proof of the Scottish influence. And miners also came from the Caribbean islands, Italy, Lithuania and Poland. When the coal mined in Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire was powering Britain and the world, local labour was not enough. But that story is only just beginning to be told. The National Coalmining Museum in Wakefield had its first ever exhibition to focus on migrants' contribution to the mining industry in January 2020. The mining industry was particularly affected by labour shortages after the world wars and so turned to the commonwealth for workers. Gedling colliery in Nottinghamshire was known as the "pit of nations" because it was thought that a quarter of the miners between 1950s and the 1980s were black. Hundreds worked in deep mines in Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Kent, Durham and South Wales. Nowadays there are fewer black people living in the north of Nottinghamshire, and only 2,500 people (out of 104,000) in Bassetlaw identify as black or minority ethnic.

But many local people are angry that their area is written off as undiverse and even racist and believe that it fuels yet another negative stereotype of the place where they live. Those who remember working down the mines with miners from the Windrush generation would have liked to be part of that campaign but were not asked and there was hurt among some Labour members who felt that they were not included.

In many ways the injustice done to the Windrush generation can be understood and empathised with by those whose patriotism is connected

to the armed services and the Queen and by extension the Commonwealth.

The Labour party should be leading on anti-racism campaigns across towns and the countryside and giving people the confidence there to challenge it. If young people of all ethnicities are to move to or stay in towns and villages, they need to know that their more liberal attitudes to race will be accepted. If the countryside charity the CPRE can run a series on diversity and access in the English countryside, so can the Labour party.[47]

Alliances built between the LGBT community and the older generation during the miners' strike are an example of how minorities, mainly associated with cities, can make common cause. They faced the same enemies, Thatcher, the tabloids and the police and it was solidarity which united them. The same commonalities might be found between minority communities in the city and people in more rural communities who also face economic and educational disadvantage.

It will also be important if the Labour party decides to welcome more refugees to have the support of the whole country and not just cities. Germany is a good example of how, with leadership and appropriate financial support, refugees can be welcomed into small communities. In Golzow, a village in eastern Germany, the mayor brought in 16 Syrian refugees and their families with the argument – against opposition from the far right – that the refugees would stop the village school being closed and the refugees would revive it.[48] The project is working. But it was the very local mayor of Golzow who provided local leadership and made the political case and got the funding.

By contrast in the UK, the least well-off areas had refugees sent to them, not to revive them, but because the housing was the cheapest. Little help or funding followed and local authorities who were already affected by austerity often did not have the money to cope, including the resources to help the most vulnerable of them integrate into schools. That is not to say there have not been very successful Welcome Refugees projects in the north and Midlands, and indeed nearby Sheffield has designated itself a city of sanctuary, but the Brexit vote was as much about local people feeling that they did not have local control over these kinds of decisions and were not given financial help to plan for them.

The most visible immigration in Bassetlaw is from Poland. Poles came because there was already a small community here who had remained after the war. In Worksop in 2016 the local community erected a bench in memory of ex-fighter pilot Wladyslaw Jan Nowak as part of a Wings over Worksop event. He was the first Polish fighter pilot to shoot down a German plane and a blue plaque has been erected on the front of the delicatessen he ran. Like many immigrant communities, the still small Polish community have their own shops and live in one part of town. They bring benefits. Local politicians say that one large block of flats in Worksop, which used to be plagued by anti-social behaviour, has been transformed by the influx of Polish families who now

occupy the estate. They have brought order and stability to the community. But seeing Polish families with children forming communities and setting up thriving Polish businesses can be difficult for longstanding residents. We should not underestimate the anger some people feel who have suffered a relative decline in living standards compared to the south east and London. They believe the younger better educated Polish workers, however small they are in number, drive down wages, use up limited public services and benefits, and are a threat to their precarious livelihoods. Politicians like the new local MP Brendan Clarke-Smith actively encourage this feeling. And people deeply resent being told that immigration is good for them by much wealthier Londoners who live in a capital city which has had untold money and investment poured into it over the past 40 years.

The fear of change and displacement is very real especially for an older community which is not affluent or mobile. But there is acceptance too. A local charity in Worksop which houses vulnerable young people, trained up some of their staff to speak Polish so that they would be able to deal with Polish young people who might be referred to them.

Clarke-Smith has – with limited success – tried to stoke up local 'culture wars' on race, most recently around the Black Boy pub in Retford. The pub sign, depicting a young African man in a red fez was removed by the landlady after she heard of violent threats online following the Black Lives Matter protests. She told the BBC, "It's a sad day. It will be emotional for a lot of people in the town, they do not want it to come down … But possibly it should be replaced with something more appropriate. We don't want to cause any upset." The local Labour councillor Sue Shaw said there needed to be a debate about the sign and pub name, even though it did not sit well with her.

Clarke-Smith on the other hand issued a lengthy statement on Facebook stoking up anger against BLM protestors calling them the 'loony left'. "This is not a 'debate', this is an attack on our culture, our heritage and our history. It needs calling out for what it is and challenging head-on." Yet only 13 people turned up for a protest outside the pub about the removal of the sign and the issue has since died down. Local people told the Lincolnshire Live website the MP had gone too far and was creating anger and distrust among government supporters as well as people who disagreed with the government. The local leader of Nottinghamshire Labour Alan Rhodes called for unity. Although on Facebook, the local population had been divided, some were convinced in the end the Black Boy referred to Charles II, the 'black boy' King than an actual black boy. The pub's name is staying in the meantime and the sign has been removed.

Attitudes to race are nuanced and fluid, and do not conform to easy stereotypes of small towns in the north and Midlands. Labour nationally needs to be strong on racism, and not be afraid to talk about racial discrimination and discrimination against immigrant

communities. Local Labour parties, which are predominantly elderly and white need training and support too to challenge new Tory MPs who want to sew racial and other divisions on a local level in a much cruder and more violently abusive way than would be acceptable on a national stage.

The party cannot buy either into the narrative that the troubles of local people in seats like Bassetlaw have been caused by a Labour metropolitan elite who do not care about (English) white working-class men. This is a dangerous story of racial and misogynist grievance as well one of English exceptionalism. The flight to cities from small towns and the countryside is an international phenomenon. And this profoundly anti-Labour narrative links a deep distrust of cities, and particularly the capital London, with immigration, minority communities, socially liberal values and women.

We know from our experience in cities, and campaigns like those in Barking and Dagenham, that only by challenging racism can it be defeated. Local leaders have to be given the money and financing to put on education and community-building programmes, working with the CPRE to build bridges between BAME residents, younger immigrant communities and older white communities. Labour needs to make sure that we learn from the German experience about financing and welcoming refugees to villages and small towns

If we have more immigration, the Labour party also needs to think carefully about how we can align the interests of those in towns and villages with more immigrants: not as a way of abolishing jobs or outsourcing (and thereby driving down terms and conditions), but as a way of opening up our country and bringing wealth to everyone. This is yet another reason for Labour to introduce strong job security and protections, so people enjoy employment rights which cannot be undermined by employers bringing people in from abroad or creating agencies through which to employ people and bypass labour protections. Labour must not use immigration as a quick fix to solve a lack of skills, in order to get around what seems in the short term the more costly approach of training up the population. The learning skills centre in Worksop, which is being set up will hopefully provide training for health care, construction and digital workers, people who can be trained to work as nurses at the hospital and on house-building, so that these industries do not need to recruit from abroad. We must also invest in health and other public services so that everyone has access to the best care and there is no longer a feeling of fighting over limited resources.

And Labour needs to play a leading role in international institutions which guarantee peace and security abroad, as we guarantee peace and security at home. This plays into the patriotism felt so keenly by people, particularly older people, in Bassetlaw, who feel they have sacrificed their lives for Britain, and who have a clear sense of collective British values which includes caring for others and being internationalist.

We need to develop a 'whole Britain' project which cements Britain's place internationally, protects its citizens and democracy and ensures economic equality and fairness for all. It is one which is welcoming rather than exclusionary, adapting diversity and community programmes to the countryside and towns from what we know works in cities.

CHAPTER 8

THE FUTURE

The Conservatives having been successful in gaining seats in the north and Midlands, the question is whether they can hold on to them and what Labour can do to make sure they do not. A recent report by the European Council on Foreign Relations based on YouGov and Datapraxis national polling[49] shows voters "lent" the conservatives their vote and that with the leave and remain line blurring, the electorate may well judge the government on its handling of the pandemic and how good the recovery is. Around half of those who voted Conservative last time (46 per cent) told the pollsters that they were now undecided who to vote for. Those who flipped from Labour to Tory were also predominantly older voters over 45 who were in May at least, more likely to blame the Chinese government and people not following the rules for Covid-19 than the government. The polling showed the Labour party's image has also not improved in Red Wall seats as much as it has among voters more generally. Certainly, in Bassetlaw people are still quite divided. Some defend the government handling of the pandemic, others are angry. There are several things to bear in mind.

First, the Tories are not going to give up Red Wall seats without a fight. Tory MPs, although they are a motley bunch, have their feet under the table and they are going to make the most of their status as local leaders. They profit from a first term incumbency effect. Bassetlaw hospital has been given £14.9m by the government and £3.5m has been given for a health training centre in Worksop. The constituency has also been given £104,654 for the reopening high streets safely fund.[50] None of this is transformational money, but it is enough for the MP Clarke-Smith to say that he has brought investment into a neglected constituency. These kinds of gifts of money are being made in Red Wall seats across the north and the Midlands. Tory MP Ben Bradley in neighbouring Mansfield has been trumpeting the £83,780.44 that is going to be spent on schools there; Don Valley is getting an unspecified sum for flood defences; Ashfield has been promised money for Eastwood, one of its most deprived areas. The Towns

Fund has been another way of giving money to deprived towns as part of the government's 'levelling up' agenda. The 40 most needy towns around the country got funding, but there was still a feeling of unfairness about the whole process with Tory ministers using their government positions to shore up their own seats: the secretary of state for housing Robert Jenrick secured millions of pounds for Newark-on-Trent, a town in his neighbouring constituency, while more deserving places like Worksop with a Labour district council got nothing. The National Audit Office report which looked into the matter says that: "Ministers deviated from the recommended numbers of Town Deals per region, but within a tolerance which officials decided was acceptable".[51]

The first Afro-Caribbean Tory MP Darren Henry who now represents the Tory/Labour marginal seat of Broxtowe had Boris Johnson open his office at the end of July, with Johnson promising to invest in infrastructure and technology "in every part of our United Kingdom and above all in the East Midlands". There does not appear to be much of a systemic levelling-up strategy at play here, but a lot of tactical and piecemeal gifts of money for individual projects. Nor is there any indication of how the government is going to make up the EU grants all these areas were eligible for before Brexit. As mayor Dan Jarvis said: "I knew the EU funds I did have, but I don't know what I am going to have."

Politics in Bassetlaw and many of these seats is increasingly volatile with lots of voters prepared to vote Labour, Tory or Independent depending on who they think will represent their interests. Party loyalty has been eroded and changing demographics with the large house-building programmes will erode that loyalty still further. This is a danger for the Tories. The Red Wall Tory MPs, who have been stuck in their constituencies because of Covid-19, are worried about whether Boris Johnson will deliver his promise to 'get Brexit done' in 2020 in a way that will satisfy their constituents and not be an economic disaster locally. These MPs have now formed a Northern Research Group and they are worried that the money being spent on Covid will lead – whatever promises are made – to the abandonment of the 'levelling up' agenda and that the north will yet again be disadvantaged by government policy.[52] Bassetlaw's MP did not catch the mood in his constituency either when he opposed moves inspired by footballer Marcus Rashford to provide free school meals for deprived children during the school holidays. He said he did not believe in "nationalising children" and it was the responsibility of their parents to feed them.

But not having an MP is also a problem for Labour. Bassetlaw Labour party has been very successful in recruiting councillors from different communities and building a party round the district council and the MP. But the loss of an MP means the loss of an organising base and a national representative who is in the local newspapers and discussed in Facebook groups. Communication with constituents in the form of casework has also gone. John Mann's two very efficient local staff boasted of doing the

most casework of any constituency in the country. Other local Labour parties were in a much more parlous state, taken over by the hard left, hollowed out or just ineffectual because their activists and councillors defected to become independents. Now all the Labour MPs in Nottinghamshire except in the city itself have gone, local Labour parties are likely to face financial difficulties and problems building any kind of campaigning structure. And they are going to lack the leadership, organisation and finances a local Labour MP brings.

District councils are likely to be abolished when the government creates unitary authorities (ie one layer of local government), in what has been billed as the greatest shake-up of local government in 35 years. If this happens it will be a further blow to Bassetlaw and areas like Mansfield, Ashfield and Gedling which will lose very local representation. For local Labour parties it will be one more nail in the coffin. In Bassetlaw's small CLP for instance, most of the activists are the 37 district councillors – and the council provides a structure around which to organise.

The Conservative leader of Nottinghamshire county council, who has since resigned, was pressing for a unitary authority in the early Autumn. But because of a lot of local opposition from both Labour and Tories, the government has put off the decision in Nottinghamshire and is piloting local government reorganisation now in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset.

The government could seek instead to introduce a metro mayor to Nottingham and its surrounding region. If this happens Bassetlaw will be out in the cold, neither part of Sheffield city region nor Nottingham city region, but in a kind of no-man's land. This is a fate that it shares with many other constituencies on the edge: semi-rural, just outside a city zone, not included in the northern powerhouse – and hence forgotten. This highlights what a difficult problem Labour will face when it seeks to devolve powers.

But in the meantime where it has councillors, Labour must build on that grassroots presence. We need to identify those older voters who went to the Tories and woo them back. That might mean employing local organisers to help recruit and motivate activists. It might mean developing a training programme, including getting local members to take non-political positions in the public life of communities. In Bassetlaw it is telling that Labour run the Royal British Legion for instance. Being embedded in local campaigns and institutions help make Labour the natural party of government. We can no longer do things "because we have always done them like this" or tell people to vote for us because we are morally right. We need to look outward and build broad-based campaigns on issues which appeal way beyond what might be thought of as Labour's traditional base, and combine that with a vision of real change which the practical people of the Midlands and the north have helped us design and believe we can deliver.

But with that relationship building, we need to make sure we understand

the numbers and use data to understand what works. We need to show respect to those in Bassetlaw and seats which flipped to the Tories. We need to give them our attention and show that we are prepared to fight to win them over and that we have earned the privilege of representing them.

CONCLUSION

To win again, Labour is going to have to do more than just understand and acknowledge the cultural reasons people voted Tory: it is going to have to have a compelling account of how it will address the economic inequalities between cities, towns and semi-rural communities. Devolution cannot just be to cities and any plans for decentralising power needs to look hard at places which are on the edge and make sure that they are not excluded from a new settlement yet again.

Labour must develop policies that build coalitions between voters in cities, towns and the countryside and which keep all of them safe. This means making sure there are well-paid skilled jobs, a strong culture of lifelong learning which appeals to older voters and a stronger NHS which is adaptable to local needs. It means investing in building affordable ecologically sustainable housing, and keeping people safe in the world with Britain being a full participant in international alliances.

In the Midlands and north, we need to manufacture and drive the green revolution. Places like Bassetlaw powered the country in the past, they can power the country again. This is important for highly skilled jobs but it also gives Bassetlaw a place in the future.

Place is important and towns and villages outside the south east of England should be nurtured as the best places to live and work. Labour should be concentrating on re-inventing cities, town centres and villages as places to live, meet, study and enjoy culture, as well as work and shop and live ecologically and sustainably.

It means taking the political decision not just to invest the bulk of public infrastructure money in London and the south east, but to use it to connect up the whole country particularly those people who are currently left out.

There should be full-fibre broadband for the whole population and a green bus and shuttle system to join places together.

We need a whole Britain policy to connect people up too so that they again feel part of the story of country. They cannot be divided by a narrow English, Scottish or Welsh nationalism or by what they look like, by their religion, or what their sexual and gender orientation is. That means remembering Labour's roots as the party which was known for building peace at home as well as in the world, whether that was through Nato,

through European alliances or through international aid.

The Tories have proved to be unstrategic and incompetent over the past year. They are worrying their Northern and Midlands' MPs because they do not look like they can develop a Brexit which will satisfy constituents and the MPs are afraid they are dumping plans for "levelling up". Labour must have practical innovative solutions, that work for the whole country including for towns and the countryside. We need to identify our common interest – so that Labour develops an agenda which fosters alliances and brings the country together rather than divides it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all the people who helped with the project in Bassetlaw including councillors James Naish, Josie Potts, Kevin Dukes; Jo White; Sue Shaw; Maria Charlesworth; Sybil Fielding; Alan Rhodes and all the other activists and councillors who talked to me about Bassetlaw and supported me last year. I would also like to thank Ray Fielding, Sir Nic Dakin, Mayor Dan Jarvis, Lisa Gee, Griff Wynne and Lord Willy Bach. I would also like to acknowledge everyone who has stood by me through thick and thin in Holborn and St Pancras. I owe particular thanks to Susie Gilbert, Cllr Rishi Madlani and Sagal Abdi-Wali who read and helped with early drafts and to Keir Starmer, Cllr Georgia Gould and Baroness Glenys Thornton. I'd like to thank the donors who made this pamphlet possible: Sonny Leong and another donor who would like to remain anonymous. Thank you too to Andrew Harrop and Kate Murray from the Fabian Society for supporting and encouraging me to write this. Thanks also to Vanesha Singh for all her work.

ENDNOTES

1 Adam McDonnell, "How Britain voted in the 2019 election", *YouGov*, December 17, 2019

2 John Mann, The Real Deal, *Fabian Society*, January 2006

3 Patrick Worrall, "Corbyn on Northern Ireland", *Channel 4 Factcheck*, May 30, 2017

4 Deborah Mattinson, "Five Things Labour should do to win back the Red Wall", *The Times Redbox*, September 21, 2020

5 Martin McIvor, Election Review 2019, *Labour Together*, June 2020

6 John Smith, "Marcus Rashford: Big support in Bassetlaw for Manchester United star's child food poverty petition", *Worksop Guardian*, October 16, 2020

7 "Labour Market Profile – Bassetlaw" June 2020, Nomis, nomisweb.co.uk

8 Stephen Clarke, "Forging ahead or falling behind? Devolution and the future of living standards in the Sheffield City Region", *Resolution Foundation*, January 2017, ResolutionFoundation.org

9 District Profile – Bassetlaw, *Nottinghamshire Insight*, November 15, 2020, nottinghamshireinsight.co.uk

10 Melissa Randall, Overview of the UK population, ONS, July 2017, ons.gov.uk

11 Christian Odendahl, "The Big European Sort? The diverging fortunes of Europe's regions", *Centre for European Reform*, May 8, 2019, cer.eu

12 Population Estimates, *Nottinghamshire County Council*, mid-2019, nottinghamshire.gov.uk

13 Wilko Employee Reviews for Warehouse Worker in Worksop, *Indeed*, 2020, indeed.co.uk

14 Wilko workers to strike over 'brutal' weekend rota, *BBC East Midlands*, September 4, 2019

15 Emma Munbodh, "Wilko to slash sick pay for 21,000 workers amid coronavirus outbreak", *Daily Mirror*, March 5, 2020

16 John Grant, "Sports Direct sparks fury by keeping Derbyshire warehouse open despite health risks", *Derbyshire Telegraph*, March 26, 2020

17 Ben McVey, "Huge new Bassetlaw logistics park set to create 3,000 jobs", *Worksop Guardian*, January 23, 2020

18 Tom Pegden, "Fresh call to create Freeport next to East Midlands Airport", *Leicester Mercury*, July 22, 2020

19 Maria Highland, "Automated packaging for Wilko", *Logistics Manager*, March 12, 2019

20 Grace Bowden, "Wilko profits and sales fall in 'incredibly difficult' year", *RetailWeek*, April 30, 2020

21 Peter Bouchal and Emma Norris, "Implementing Sure Start Centres", *Institute for Government*, 2015

22 Carsten Jung and Luke Murphy, "Transforming the economy after covid-19 a clean, fair and resilient recovery", IPPR, September 2020

23 Mine Energy Team, "Geothermal energy from abandoned coal mines", *The Coal Authority*, 2020, https://www2.groundstability.com/geothermal-energy-from-abandoned-coal-mines/

24 Jon Gluyas, Andrew Crossland and Charlotte Adams, "36bn GWh: the 'limitless' Geothermal from old UK coal mines", *Energypost.eu*, May 3, 2019

25 Roger Harrabin, "Homes to be heated by warm water from flooded mines" *BBC Science and Environment*, June 9, 2020

26 Emily White, "New green energy jobs set to be created at former High Marnham power station", *Lincolnshire Live*, February 26, 2020

27 Rampton and Woodbeck Parish Council, Rampton District Heating System Consultation, January 8, 2019

28 Detailed annual statistics on the structure of the agricultural industry at 1 June in England and the UK, Defra, October 15, 2020

29 Julie-Anne Barnes, "Nicola Sturgeon asks Aviemore artist to paint masterpiece after falling in love with painting of Highlands cottage", *Daily Record*, February 1, 2015

30 Tobias Phibbs, Labour Country, How to rebuild the connection with rural voters, *Fabian Society*, March 2018

31 Murray Scown, Kimberly Nicholas, Mark Brady, "EU subsidies benefit big farms while underfunding greener and poorer plots – new research", *The Conversation*, August 21, 2020

32 Diane Coyle and Marianne Sensier, The Imperial Treasury: appraisal methodology and re appraisal methodology and regional economic performance in the *UK*, *University of Cambridge and Bennett Institute for Public Policy*, July 2018

33 Dan Jarvis, "Let's build an economy that works for all", *Yorkshire Post*, January 22, 2020

34 Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, "Improving Broadband for All", *National Audit Office*, October 14, 2020

35 Summary of UK FTTP Build Progress Across Broadband ISPs UPDATE25, IS *Preview*, April 14, 2020

36 Deborah Mattinson, *Beyond the Red Wall*, (London, Biteback Publishing, August 2020)

37 Hazel Shearing, "Pub desks: Sick of home working? I made the pub my office for a day", *BBC News*, October 11, 2020

38 Christine Ro, "Why the future of work might be 'hybrid'", *BBC Worklife*, August 31, 2020, BBC.com

39 District Profile – Bassetlaw, *Nottinghamshire Insight*, November 15, 2020, nottinghamshireinsight.co.uk

40 Budget Books, Nottinghamshire County Council, 2020/21 and 2014/15, Nottinghamshire.gov.uk

41 Testing the city – living and working in Görlitz, http://stadt-auf-probe.ioer.eu/english/

42 Draft Bassetlaw local plan, *Bassetlaw District Council, 2020*

43 Kenneth Gibb, Funding new social and affordable housing, *UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence*, November 2, 2018

44 Performance, Intelligence and Policy Team, "Bassetlaw District, Children and Young People's Profile", *Nottinghamshire County Council*, September 2016

45 The Good Childhood Report 2020, *Children's Society*, August 27, 2020

46 Cameron Tait, New Tricks, Innovative Approaches to Lifelong Learning, *Fabian Society*, December 2017

47 Louisa Adjoa Parker, "Why black lives matter in the British countryside", CPRE, June 26, 2020, cpre.org.uk

48 Kathrin Benhold, "Syrian Children Saved a German Village. And a Village Saved Itself" *New York Times*, September 19, 2019

49 Mark Leonard, "The Brexit parenthesis: Three ways the pandemic is changing UK politics", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, August 12, 2020

50 Allocation of Reopening High Streets Safely Fund, D2N2, June 2020

51 Gareth Davies, The Comptroller and Auditor General, Review of the Town Deals selection process, *National Audit Office*, July 21, 2020

52 UK News, "Boris Johnson facing blue rebellion in the 'red wall'", *The Week*, October 27, 2020

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Gimson was selected to be Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for Bassetlaw in November 2019 but did not contest the 2019 general election. She was the Labour parliamentary candidate in South Leicestershire in 2010. Between 2011 and 2018 Sally was a Labour councillor in Camden, responsible for adult social care and the environment. Sally previously worked at a senior level in charity communications, policy and advocacy focusing on parenting, criminal justice and international freedom of expression.

FABIAN SOCIETY

BUILDING BRIDGES

SALLY GIMSON

One of the features of Labour's disastrous 2019 general election that has been most commented on was the fall of the Red Wall. There has been a lot of debate about why those places across the Midlands and the north of England were lost, but very few practical suggestions about how to win them back. Where better to look for answers than at Bassetlaw, a seat which saw the biggest swing to the Conservatives in the country?

In this pamphlet, Sally Gimson puts forward a range of policies to help Labour reconnect with voters and build a wide coalition across cities, towns and the countryside to defeat the Tories in 2024.

FABIAN IDEAS NO.652
ISBN 978-0-7163-0652-8
£5.95