Completing England

A Policy Network Paper

John Denham
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About the Author

John Denham is the former member of parliament for Southampton Itchen from 1992 to 2015. He served in the last Labour government in a number of roles, including secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills and subsequently for communities and local government. He is now professor and convenor of the Centre for English Identity and Politics at the University of Winchester. He is also a visiting professor at the London School of Economics, and chairs Culture Southampton and the Southern Policy Centre, a policy forum for central southern England, launched at Winchester University in 2014.

About this paper

This paper argues that Westminster, and particularly the Labour party, has failed to understand the particular politics of England – as opposed to Britain. During the devolution process that has taken place during recent decades, first to the devolved national assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and more recently to the city-region mayors that have emerged across England, the voice of England as a nation has not had its own representation, despite most English people identifying themselves as English rather than British. Marginal constituencies in England will be critical for Labour to hope to win a majority in the next general election, as many of these former Labour strongholds voted in favour of Brexit and have become to slip away from the party. Labour must embrace English identity and the need to rethink English representation, not just for the sake of regaining power in Westminster, but also in an attempt to heal the cultural cleavages that the referendum result showed we can no longer afford to ignore.
Labour doesn’t like to talk about England. In March 2018 it published 8 consultative policy documents. Most were largely or entirely about England, but only one actually mentioned England by name. Some embarrassingly confused UK wide policy with devolved and English-only policy without distinction or apparent recognition. This was more than sloppy thinking and sloppy drafting. Twenty years after devolution Labour has yet to think about the governance of England or its position within the union.

Yet Labour should know that the key to the problems facing the whole union lie in England. It is only by winning England that Labour can get back into power with a clear mandate. By the next election due in 2022 it will have been 21 years since Labour last won the English popular vote. In 2015, fear that a weak Labour government might gift the SNP the whip hand over England helped deliver Cameron’s majority. May’s disastrous 2017 campaign still achieved a 60 seat lead in England over Labour. Outside the cities and university towns Labour actually went backwards, losing a number of working-class constituencies and seeing others become marginals. Seats the party held until 2010 have apparently slipped beyond reach.

The failure to take England seriously has inflicted damaging governments on the electorate who have taken catastrophic strategic decisions. It is English people, particularly those outside London, who are taking the whole of the UK out of the EU. The appeal of ‘take back control’ was at its strongest amongst English voters who felt bypassed and ignored. All too telling is that Remain campaigned as ‘Scotland stronger in Europe’ and ‘Wales stronger in Europe’ but in England it campaigned as ‘Britain stronger in Europe’. England was, apparently, not even worth mentioning.

Contrary to the London-centric assumption across politics, the media, business and academia, more people identify as English than British. If the left fails to win those who identify as English, it fails to win England.

England manifests the most intense forms of current political tensions. It is a deeply divided country. There is an economic gulf between London and the South East and most other regions. It is divided by income and wealth, not just between the prosperous and the struggling regions but within the richer areas too. Some cities are doing well while a few miles away once-thriving market and industrial towns are losing their purpose and their able young people. It is now the poor white working-class children in towns and coastal communities who do least well in school, not the ethnic minorities of the large cities. Nonetheless race and faith, prejudice and discrimination, are still significant cleavages.

England is divided, too, by the outlook and values of its citizens. Age, class, and education are becoming strong predictors of who holds which of the two dominant ‘world views’: individual cosmopolitan liberalism, or collectivist communitarian social conservatism. The values divide is reflected electorally. English identifiers voted most strongly for Brexit, while those identifying as British voted Remain. Labour support lags amongst the English but leads amongst the British. In 2001, there was little difference: indeed, if Labour had polled as well with English identifiers as with British in 2017, it would probably have won.

These divisions do not readily equate to differences between ‘left’ and ‘right’. Older working-class voters are much less keen on rapid immigration and diversity than their university educated grandchildren (though more from resistance to change and loss of community than from racism) but are strong supporters of public ownership of utilities and infrastructure and the NHS. Young liberals meanwhile tend to be less keen on redistribution and the welfare state, and more likely to blame poverty on the individual than are their old ‘conservative’ grandparents.
Those divisions are not unique to England, of course. Similar divides are manifest in almost every other western European nation too. Once great social democratic parties have lost votes to populist parties of right, left, and centre that often offer strong forms of identity politics. Labour suffered the consequences in Scotland and is yet to show it has found the way back. Corbynism exceeded expectations in 2017, but only the most optimistic would believe Labour is now immune from the social and economic forces sweeping across Europe.

In 2017, Labour did particularly well in metropolitan, city and university constituencies, but did less well, even losing support, in many smaller towns with older voters who have spent less time in education. At the next election, most of the English seats that Labour needs to win (and some of the key marginals we need to defend) are in smaller towns, often with a good number of rural communities. In these working-class communities the number of key voters feeling ‘more English than British’ is likely to be significantly higher than those feeling ‘more British than English’.

Labour’s need to address England stems, then, not from a narrow nationalism or parochialism but should be seen as a necessary condition for fulfilling Labour’s core mission: to restrain the excesses of free-market capitalism and to bend the economy to work for the common good, and not only for a minority at the top. To build a society ‘for the many not the few’ it is not enough for a lot of people to feel that they are losing out while others are enjoying the perks. It’s too easy to turn that resentment against others (including migrants, disabled people, claimants, and anyone who is different).

Labour’s support needs to be built on a strong sense of shared identity, common interests and a determination to work together to build a better society. National identity is not the only source of shared identity, but it is one that is held dear by many voters.

Identity politics is not new. Voters have always looked for parties and candidates who will ‘stand up for people like me’, and who will give notions of identity more weight than detailed policy or ideology. This is a particular challenge for the left. The old working-class identity – based on large workplaces, high levels of trade union membership, and tightly knit communities – that generated loyal support for a mass working class party is much weaker than it used to be. The working class is still there, but it no longer has the same deep collective sense of identity.

In an insecure, uncertain world people still look for shared identity, often based on the place they live and the nation they belong to. In a very unequal society where many feel they are not listened to, it can be a powerful voice for change. The sense of national identity is often strongest amongst people who feel they are doing less well in a fast-changing world; Labour should not only seek to represent these voters, but should also aim to transform their lives and improve their opportunities.

Across Europe, the populist right has been more effective at tapping into this politics of people, nation and place, by promoting a divisive politics that is often xenophobic and racist. Unfortunately, the left has often made things too easy for the populist right by failing to respect national identity, or by labelling anyone who feels proud of their nation as racist and nativist.

In a contemporary version of Blair’s ‘who else can the working class vote for?’ strategy some Labour strategists seek victory on a bedrock of liberal cosmopolitan support, hoping for sufficient residual ‘core’ Labour support to deliver a government. This is a highly flawed strategy both arithmetically and morally. Clearly, there are too few seats of this kind for Labour to build a majority on without also making the effort to regain working-class support in other constituencies too. Moreover, if older, poorer, less well educated, working-class voters are no longer a priority for Labour, a key part of the party’s purpose will have been lost.
The strategic objective must be to broaden significantly the group of people who regard Labour as ‘the party that will stand up for people like me’. There is no avoiding finding the common ground across a divided England.

In part, this will require a convincing economic strategy that can attract both the aspirational (and relatively non-ideological) voters who are key in any election and those, poorer, more socially conservative voters the party has put off over the past 20 years. There is clearly potential support for a more interventionist, more nationalist economic approach that does use public procurement and state initiatives strategically to develop UK business, while offering a less open approach to the speculative purchase and break up of UK companies. If coupled to measures to improve working conditions and rewards in the foundational (everyday) economy, and a clearer message on small business, innovation and enterprise, Labour seems to be edging towards a popular approach. Be that as it may, these issues are fairly widely discussed; the remainder of this essay will focus on two critical but widely ignored issues: the need to bridge cultural divides and the need to reform the governance of England. Economic policy alone will not do the trick.

The starting point is to frame Labour’s message in the language of identity; of nation, people and place. The party has lost its ability to express its politics in the language of progressive patriotism even though, for most of the 20th century, it was second nature to Labour leaders. Even Tony Benn, doyen of the current Labour leader, was comfortable locating his own politics in England’s radical traditions.

A progressive patriotic message has to embrace both English and British identities, and, at local level to have a strong relationship with the history and culture of our cities, towns and villages. For the foreseeable future, most English residents are likely to say they are English and British. Many are also likely to identify strongly with the place where they live. Labour needs to respect all these identities (as well as identities of faith and race). At present, Labour too often simply fails to talk about or respect England or English identity, even when we talk about Britain, faith, race or the place we live. Most English people just don’t want to be ignored. They want to know that Labour respects their identity. They want to know that Labour will stand up for people like them. English identity should neither be dismissed, nor people who feel English ignored. It does not mean that we should assume everyone is (or ought to) be English.

Labour can hardly bring itself to mention England and often treats English identity with distaste and disdain. It is common to hear Labour activists who reject the cross of St George and who associate any form of English identity with ‘pandering to UKIP’ or the racism of the English Defence League. For example, in the Stoke Central by-election some activists refused to deliver leaflets bearing the St George’s flag. These widespread attitudes actually play into the hands of the populist and xenophobic right. Labour rejection of English identity invites these groups to define Englishness on their terms. In part, this lack of empathy reflects Labour’s membership who are much more likely to identify as British, not English, than the population at large.

That’s not to say that there are no racist or xenophobic attitudes to be found amongst some English identifiers (as there are amongst British identifiers), but the great majority of people do not believe someone has to be white to be English. Ironically, some of those who do count themselves on the liberal left.

A practical early step would see Labour saying ‘England’ when it means ‘England’ (for example when discussing tuition fees) publishing an English manifesto on all areas of devolved policy, creating structures that allow English party members to be consulted on English policy (as their fellow members in Wales and Scotland can do), and allowing Labour candidates to stand as English Labour (as with Welsh and Scottish Labour candidates).
A progressive patriotism for England and for Britain poses politics in terms of the best interest of the majority of people of the nation. It asks who owns, controls and benefits from the assets of the nation, including its people. It believes that the measure of government, of big business, of every powerful institution is how well they deliver for the common good. It sees political change as something to be brought about by the people, not by the elect of a political party. It frames our internationalism as the best way of pursuing our national interests and the national values and ideals that we want to promote more widely.

A progressive patriotism will also aim to find broad common ground on divisive issues as Labour has done in the past on law and order. The most pressing – and the one that has done most to alienate former supporters is migration. Immigration has recently dropped down voters’ list of concerns, though nothing suggests a significant shift on views of the issue. There is a substantial centre ground of opinion that values the contribution of migrants but that also wants to feel confident that the immigration system is properly run. The dominant Labour view prioritises free movement over controls and the party is reluctant to argue that rules should be enforced. Ensuring that migration primarily serves the interests of current residents is a classic progressive patriotic issue. Whether the party can reach beyond the idealism of its members to embrace the centre ground will be the touchstone of its ability to reach into England’s heartlands.

The third aspect of Labour’s England problem is its lack of interest in England’s governance. England is now the only part of the UK governed permanently – on most domestic policy – by the UK government, and not by its own elected parliament or assembly. It is the only part of the old imperial state and parliament that has not yet been reformed, in a process that started with the partition of Ireland in the 1920s and continued when Scotland and Wales were enabled to take authority for themselves from Westminster in the 1990s. England has had no such rethink; nor has Labour Labour embedded its attachment to the old unitary state in its approach to Scottish and Welsh devolution, pretending that devolution was simply an authority to exercise powers on behalf of Westminster. That pretence has been exposed by subsequent legislation that makes the reversal of devolution impossible, at least from any initiative of the government in Westminster. But Labour’s approach to ruling England through the UK parliament remains unchanged.

Not only is England uniquely subject to the direct interference of non-English MPs (as when Labour used its Scottish and Welsh MPs to impose higher university fees on England, or today, when the support of the Northern Irish DUP keeps the Conservatives in power and prevents an early general election). More important however, Parliament fails to provide a forum and focus for the politics of England in the way that the elected bodies of Scotland, Wales and, (though temporarily incapacitated), Northern Ireland do for those parts of the union.

Westminster devotes much of its time to England but does not offer a democratic forum for a coherent debate about England or its future. It is the semblance of an English parliament with neither the focus, membership or powers of a national parliament. English votes for English laws (EVEL) has given English MPs a veto on legislation but not yet a voice. The whole system inculcates the notion that England as England does not really exist.

Labour’s constitutional conservatism has had a wider cost. Scotland and Northern Ireland both delivered large Remain majorities, as did London. Wales had a narrow Leave vote – in line with the UK average but much less than England-outside-London. What is striking is that the more pro-Remain parts of the UK have all enjoyed civic processes, political debates, and political institutions that have enabled or forced them to reimagine their identities in a post-imperial world. Scotland also enjoyed its own ‘take back control’ moment when it threw out Labour in the 2015 and (to a
lesser extent) 2017 general elections. And London, of course, is the one part of England that not only enjoys statutory powers but that has its own elected leadership, assembly and mayor, and its own political institutions that have enabled and encouraged the London identity to develop.

That England provided the lion’s share of the Brexit vote was not a pathological failing of the English people, but rather can be seen as the outcome of England being denied any political identity, institutions and national debate of its own.

The symptoms England displays – the Brexit vote, the regional imbalances, the cultural divisions, the obsessive centralisation – are rooted in the failure of England, England rather than Britain – to reconsider England’s role and nature in the modern world. England, uniquely within Britain, has not been challenged to re-imagine its position in the union, its identity, and its role in the 21st century, at a time when the Empire is over. England is split culturally, regionally, and by age and education, because there has never been an attempt to articulate what the English share in common. In the absence of that national debate, and in the absence of any English political institutions, it’s not a surprise that the English more than anyone else wanted to ‘take back control’.

Westminster needs to move beyond the formal mechanism of English Votes for English Laws to allow English legislation to be made by elected English MPs. Despite the theoretical attraction of a new English Parliament, reforming Westminster to create a dual mandate Parliament looks easier and cheaper, and is more likely gain the widest public support, by avoiding the introduction of a whole new layer of government.

At the same time, it will be hard to overcome the regional disparities of wealth and opportunity, or to reduce the material divisions in England without a fundamental shift of power and resources from Whitehall to England’s localities.

This was clear in Labour’s deep-seated resistance to radical devolution of power within England. It is no coincidence that, despite radical and wide-ranging constitutional reforms, New Labour left England – with the inevitable exception of London – largely unchanged as ever. Labour’s deep hankering for the centralism of the unitary state blocked even tentative proposals for change. Many local Labour leaders helped obstruct change. By insisting that their voters identify much more strongly with their region, county or city than with England as a whole, Labour in local government came up with a national programme for reform. This has left each area struggling for crumbs. Under both Labour and the Conservatives, the term ‘devolution’ has been used merely as a means to co-opt local leaderships into the delivery of central government priorities. It remains to be seen whether the emerging city-region mayors will provide a more coherent voice for change.

While Labour demands the retention of the Barnett formula that protects the relative level of public spending for Scotland, it has watched impotently while the coalition and Conservative governments stripped resources from impoverished English regions. The party has not even broached the idea of a needs-based funding formula for every part of England and the UK.

Just as Labour needs to reach across the cultural divide and embrace English identity, it needs to rethink fundamentally its uncritical support for the unitary Whitehall state.

For those who think these proposals are distraction from the real issues, we should remember that past failure to respond to these pressures effectively has cost Labour power, has allowed Labour to slip behind the Tories in key constituencies, and even saw our whole country vote to leave the EU. If that doesn’t warrant a re-think, what will?