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Political change is on the way

The UK Labour Party wants to return voice and choice to local communities – with a citizen-led People's Convention

Hush! Just be quiet a moment. Listen carefully. There is something rustling in the undergrowth. If you are really still, you might even hear it in the Westminster jungle. It's difficult to recognise what it is at first or where it is coming from, but it is there: voices from large parts of England. Voices signalling deep unease, a sense that things are not as they ought to be.

When talking of England, many commentators speak about areas that have been 'left behind'. Our small towns and villages once sustained by industry or agriculture, or our seaside towns formerly fuelled by tourism. They talk of the people who live there, and how they have remained still while everything around them has changed.

But these places and people haven't been left behind. They have been held back. And let's not be mealy-mouthed about it. They have been held back because wealth and power is concentrated in too few hands, among people whose primary purpose is to reinforce their own privileged position, by strangling the life out of our democracy.

And there's a cultural gulf too between those who rule and the rest. Between the two, we might join with EM Forster who remarked: 'They had nothing in common but the English language.' In more ways than one, Westminster and the City are a world away.

While those with power treat politics like a game, and rig it in their favour through all manner of tricks, most people just want our country to be a fairer place. It's not much to ask.

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If you work hard and play by the rules, you should be able to get on in life. The life you lead should be purposeful; the bonds that tie your communities together ought to be strong; and

runaway train moving at breakneck speed to an unknown destination.

the place you inhabit ought to be familiar.

But all too often this is not how it is.

Globalisation like a runaway train

I live in a small Yorkshire village in the heart of England. Here neoliberalism has bitten deep: libraries gone, schools bankrupt, hospitals barely coping, empty shops, pubs closed.

Youngsters trapped in a village with no youth services and few prospects. The mines long ago shut down; no local jobs except warehousing. The only choice is to travel miles for a job or maybe move away forever. No real apprenticeships and if you are lucky enough to get to university, it's more or less certain that you won't come back; and wherever you end up you'll be in debt up to your neck.

And what about the appearance of the place? It's rapidly changing. New houses everywhere, few of them at an affordable price. Identikit estates you could find anywhere in England, each ignoring the local distinctive architectural vernacular that gives a place its identity.

Our village is becoming a small town. It's not that we are NIMBYs; we need new housing but no one ever asked those of us who live here about how it should happen. The distance between our village and the next is now little more than a couple of fields. In the end there is a risk we will merge into one amorphous settlement with our centuries' old local identity lost.

This change, rapid and profound, has induced in people a deep sense of alienation and frustration. The experience of globalisation feels to many as if the country is on a runaway train moving at breakneck speed to an unknown destination. Yet many of the passengers are occupying carriages that have been – perhaps deliberately – decoupled from the engine.

The result is that an ever-growing number of people feel that they are being screwed over by a system that isn't working for them, and that the needs of their communities are ignored.

A citizen-led People's Convention

But if the experience of change has resulted in a fear of the future, should

the Left then offer a return to a presumed golden past? The answer is no. Let us not needlessly peddle nostalgia like our political opponents. Let us have real purpose and vision. As Abraham Lincoln once said: 'The best way to predict the future is to create it.'

Our response has to be to offer a new kind of modernity, one with hope at its core. Of course, we need to break with the neoliberal economic consensus, the source of much of our troubles.

Politics must become something we do, and not something that is done to us.

But we must acknowledge that our politics – its structures and culture – is also at fault. It is for this reason that I have come to the view that we need deep democratic reform.

We need a new politics that fulfills the democratic promise of universality and popular sovereignty by returning voice and choice to local communities by wresting control from the tiny golden elite circle that has been utterly irresponsible in its exercise of power.

For, as it stands, the central organising value underpinning democracy – that of majority rule with the rights of minorities protected – is simply not operating as it should. This has led to widespread alienation from party politics and a crisis of legitimacy in how the country is governed.

In the face of this and in order to recover faith in our political system, we need a political, cultural and institutional revolution which reasserts the principles of community, universality and equity.

Our ultimate aim must be to give people the capacity to act in the face of a rapidly changing world, which deprives them of agency. We must give them the tools to turn their frustration into productive energy capable of transforming their communities and this country for the better.

This is why the Labour Party has committed itself to creating a citizen-led People's Convention to change the way we are governed. But we are not looking for a quick fix; no single policy will give us the outcomes we want. We are looking to initiate a wholesale transformation of our democracy, breaking up political power wherever we can and giving it back to the regions and communities that have for so long been deprived of it. Politics must become something we do, and not something that is done to us.

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