# THINKING IN STRAIGHT LINES

Progressive Britain Paper **PBOO3**

## The country is more progressive. So why is the left losing?

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PROGRESSIVE BRITAIN

**CHRIS CLARKE**

# ABOUT THIS PAPER

The question of why Labour has been out of power for more than a decade is at the heart of all the work we do at Progressive Britain.

A question this complicated and emotionally charged is always going to be extremely difficult to answer. It is unlikely there is any one perfect explanation. But we support rigorous, evidence based and intellectually honest attempts like this one because they give the party the best chance of learning from the past, and winning again in the future.

Inside you will find a long view of the trends that have been changing the country and the party, along with positive and practical ideas on how to adapt to them and be successful again.

The pamphlet is the third Progressive Britain Paper – PBOO3.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## CHRIS CLARKE

Chris Clarke is the author of *The Dark Knight and the Puppet Master*, a critique of left populism. He has worked in local government and the third sector, across themes relating to social cohesion and community engagement. He has been employed as a community organiser and social researcher, and as press officer for several Labour candidates and politicians.

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PROGRESSIVE BRITAIN

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper sets out to help answer the question that many in Labour and on the left in general have been asking in recent years. With people's attitudes swinging in our favour on a range of social issues, and even post-pandemic on economic intervention, why do we keep failing to win a general election?

Such a question will never have one definitive answer, but the analysis here suggests we must pay much greater attention to the role of education in how people vote, and are distributed around the country. If we do, we can tailor our policy and messaging to appeal to the broad swathes of constituencies in England in particular who have left the party – without compromising our values or vision.

## I. The realignment in UK politics is rooted in education levels

Analysis of swings over the last decade shows constituencies with low formal education and high educational deprivation swinging to Tories.

Cumulative 2010-19 swing versus proportion with no qualifications (English seats only, colours signify holding party, correlations for Lab and Tory-held seats picked out)

This realignment favours the right in terms of electoral arithmetic, because non-graduates are more evenly distributed across constituencies.

## II. The split is between direct and systemic reasoners

The cause of the divergence between voters with different education levels does not come down to values as much as we sometimes imagine; it relates to differences in logic and language. This lies at the root of many 'culture war' issues.

Voters with higher formal education are more likely to favour *systemic* logic. Labour has increasingly appealed to those who see things in this way. Those with fewer qualifications prefer *direct* logic. The Conservatives, especially under Boris Johnson, have captured this audience.

This distinction does, it is true, point to genuine differences on some policy positions (e.g. 'Toughness on the causes of crime' (systemic) versus 'Toughness on crime' (direct)).

But the so-called culture war debates in the UK are often not divides about core values or existential questions like abortion or climate change, as they are in the US. Instead, they are frequently about definitional questions, exposing rifts in analysis and logic.

(The focus on direct and systemic causation is a hypothesis. Despite making extensive use of secondary research, the topic would benefit from additional primary research.)

> **"Direct causation is dealing with a problem via direct action. Systemic causation recognises that many problems arise from the system they are in and must be dealt with via systemic causation."**
>
> **– George Lakoff**

## III. The 2010s have seen rising education levels and growing political complexity

Voters with higher formal education are more likely to favour systemic logic. Labour has increasingly appealed to those who see things in this way. Those with fewer qualifications often prefer direct logic.

The Conservatives, especially under Boris Johnson, have captured this audience. The causes of this realignment relate to rising university access and the complexities thrown up by globalisation. These factors divide direct and systemic reasoners.

## IV. Boris Johnson is a master of direct reasoning

Boris Johnson has pioneered an ultra-direct approach, based on metaphors (e.g. "bung Brexit in the microwave") and on the ridicule of systemic reasoning as 'woke'. This lets him attack his opponents in ways that seem authentic, yet which are consistent with socially liberal attitudes on some issues (he is not *culturally* conservative, as such). But it is a fundamental departure from Cameron's attempts to modernise the Tories, which sought to recognise the role of society and the complexity of international relations. Labour must see what is attractive about 'Johnson-ism' – in that it promises actions not words, and bestows agency upon voters – as well as what is wrong with it.

## V. Some progressives mis-use systemic logic

Conversely, an ultra-systemic approach has been adopted by some leftist groups in recent years. This takes the form of language which implies everything is linked (e.g. "climate justice *is* social justice") or which equates complicity in a system with direct harm (e.g. through references to a range of behaviours being "acts of violence").

These approaches alienate directly minded voters, making the progressive critique of 'the system' more confusing rather than less. They also have a negative impact on wider systemic thinking, guiding it into non-progressive cul-de-sacs.

## VI. There are three steps for Labour to address this

Labour must win back direct reasoners, to avoid becoming a party which speaks solely to university towns and urban hubs. There are three steps to closing the gap:

**1. Labour must acknowledge the value of direct reasoning.** There are times when A plus B really does equal C. We must ditch the idea that direct and systemic logic are in competition. We will demonstrate our competence through being willing to speak directly when we need to.

**2. Labour must distance itself from those who misuse systemic thinking, or render it woolly and impenetrable.** We should avoid culture war slogans, which make structural arguments more confusing rather than less.

**3. Labour should use the post-Covid period as a moment, like 1945, to argue for big systemic and societal reforms.** To bring direct reasoners along, this needs to be done in a practical way, which is crystal clear about what the changes are, why they matter and how exactly we will make them.

# INTRODUCTION

In South Thanet, during the 2015 General Election, I remember a conversation with a potential Labour voter. We were at an event in a community centre and I was the press officer for the Labour candidate. It was a very working-class area, and was also at risk from UKIP. The man, who was out of work, had come with his young family – partly to see our celebrity guest, Labour-supporting Ross Kemp.

During my short chat with the man I referred to the estate as being a 'poor area' – one which needed the extra resources that only a Labour government could offer. This was true – the neighbourhood was subsequently listed among 206 'left behind' wards identified by Local Trust[i] – but it didn't feel right to say it. I quickly corrected myself that the estate was 'more deprived' and then re-calibrated a second time, stating that it was 'less affluent'. Finally, I settled on a formulation of words I was happy with: 'It may or may not be less affluent than other areas'.

The man stared at me, bewildered by a sentence which had been diluted into meaninglessness, and we parted ways. I had come across as mealy-mouthed and weird.

The recollection came back to me in September 2021, as I watched Keir Starmer triangulate on the spot when asked about the difference between 'women' and 'people with cervixes'. Like me, Starmer's lack of confidence on the topic imposed a set of linguistic riders and caveats, causing him to seek refuge in labels and jargon.

This tendency is widespread. And it is often driven, albeit obliquely, by a desire to acknowledge the wider 'structural' and 'systemic' factors behind an issue. My description of areas which 'may or may not be less affluent than other areas' came – when I think about it – from the 'society's fault' thinking which drove my politics. I was frightened of appearing to so bluntly describe an area as poor, in case it looked like I was saying its poverty was of its own making.

The result was that the individuals in both scenarios appeared hopelessly out of touch: unable to call a spade a spade, and more interested in identifying the right terminology than in solving the problem. As I'll go on to argue, I think this explains Labour's woes in the 2010s, and helps us to answer a question which has plagued the Labour Party in recent years: why, in an increasingly progressive country, have progressive parties increasingly struggled?[ii]

i. The 'left' and 'progressives' are not the same thing in theory or in practice but, in the context UK politics at an electoral level are effectively synonymous with (and united within) the Labour Party. In this paper we will be mainly concerned with Labour and its electoral performance, so for that reason will sometimes characterise the two groups together. Both can be taken to mean 'left of centre'.

One can debate exactly how progressive we are in Britain, but I would argue that people today are, on balance, more committed to equality, sustainability and fairness than they were ten, thirty or fifty years ago – including on questions like immigration and crime. Yet a curious cocktail of factors means we've been unable to capitalise on this. Indeed, Labour have done particularly badly at the polls in the past decade, during the period when progressive advances in social attitudes were accelerating fastest.

This was demonstrated by the decision to leave the EU in 2016, as well as by the Tory landslide in 2019 and the loss of the Red Wall. The 2021 local elections and the accompanying Hartlepool by-election implied that many of the central dynamics were in action post-Corbyn. The party needs to find a way of correcting this if it wants to win.

At the time of writing it should be said that the Conservatives look far from hegemonic. They have been trailing Labour in the polls and Boris Johnson's personal ratings have been tanked by the 'party-gate' scandal. When I began looking into what made him such an effective political force (which I explore in Part IV of this paper), the blind spot he clearly holds when it comes to his own behaviour was not quite so clear and perhaps didn't seem so relevant. It remains to be seen if Johnson can fire up voters again, or if such rank hypocrisy will finally tarnish his brand once and for all.

Of course, Johnson's unpopularity is partly down to the efforts of Keir Starmer, who is doing an excellent job of reforming his party. But there's a risk that, with Labour's lead over the Tories extended by the 'party-gate' scandal, we fail to ask some of the key questions which the past decade has thrown up.

What was it that put Johnson in such an electorally unassailable position in the first place? Why have the increasingly egalitarian attitudes of the UK population not been reflected by our politics? Why did Blackpool South, the third most deprived constituency in England, defect in 2019 to an Etonian who had won the Tory leadership by promising tax cuts for the richest? What has driven the realignment of the past few years? And how can we ensure that it is Starmer, not Boris Johnson's successor, who comes to occupy the terrain that the Tories so effectively moved in on during the 2010s?

This paper seeks to answer these questions. It begins with a premise, based on my own data analysis, which is that education levels are the primary driver of the political realignment in the past decade. It then forms a theory about why education has become such a key electoral fault line – based on ideas about communications and causation. And from here it makes an argument about what Labour can do to reverse the realignment, if my theory is right.

The focus on direct and systemic causation, set out in Part II, is a hypothesis rather than a piece of primary research. Despite making extensive use of secondary research, the topic of political attitudes and causation would benefit from a more solid basis of academic and polling evidence.

Ultimately, this paper is a rebuke to the idea that the UK is polarised beyond salvation, or that our culture war debates are akin to those in the US (although I don't deny that we could move in that direction if progressives play their cards wrong). It contests the notion that substantive divides on social issues now form the basis for our politics. And it challenges the comparisons that some have made with the 1980s, when deep reservoirs of cultural conservatism needed to be navigated and challenged by Labour, on issues like gay rights.

Thus, I hope, the arguements below provide reason for optimism for Labour and other progressive parties. Illiberal social conservatism and tooth-and-claw libertarianism are not popular. We're not looking at sizeable majorities who favour the politics of Jacob Rees-Mogg. And we are not witnessing a yawning ideological chasm.

Rather, we are seeing a disconnect in communications and logic, partly of our own making and partly thanks to wider factors. Addressing this does not require huge policy concessions, but it does demand that we explain our ideas more clearly and work harder to understand our opponents.

# PART I: THE REALIGNMENT IN UK POLITICS

The start-point for this paper is a simple question: 'The country is more progressive, so why is the left losing?'

The UK population has become more egalitarian in recent decades, on questions like gender,[2] race[3] and sexuality.[4] On the environment – traditionally an issue which preoccupies liberals more than conservatives – attitudes have become much greener.[5] And research shows that both main parties' voter bases moved gradually to the left on economic positions too, between 1992 and 2019.[6]

These general trends apply across age groups and social grades. It is not a case of different groups diverging beneath the surface; there are not large sub-sets of people growing dramatically more reactionary.[ii] The gradual tendency, across society, has been towards left liberalism.

Explicitly racist 'Blacks Out' campaigns by mainstream parties, like the one run in Smethwick in the 1964 General Election, would be wholly untenable now. Likewise the sorts of homophobic by-election run in Bermondsey in 1983, which asked electors to choose the 'straight candidate'.

Yet this shift towards socially liberal values is not the story of our politics in recent years – insofar as left-of-centre parties have been unable to capitalise. The late 2010s saw, by way of illustration, a supporter of the death penalty become ensconced as Home Secretary, at a point in time when the public appetite for hanging criminals was the lowest it had ever been.[7]

In short, the populace is not shifting right-wards in the way that many feel, and nor is it as polarised by social issues as some claim. Yet positive changes in attitudes within the population aren't being reflected in the makeup of parliament. The public moved to the left culturally, during the 2010s, yet the right of the Tory Party were the electoral beneficiaries.

Some liberals – including those on the centre right – might say this doesn't matter. James Kanagasooriam describes a process where, on issues like gay marriage, "the final leg of the progressive relay race is often run by someone in a blue vest."[8] True cultural conservatives observe a similar process, but see it much more negatively: "Conservatives keep winning elections, but really it feels like we're governed by the Critical Race Theory department," complained one Spectator article in 2021.[9]

ii. For example, between 1991 and 2017, agreement with the statement "A man's job is to earn money, a woman's job is to look after the home and family" fell across all gender groups, age groups, class groups, income groups and income brackets (https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39248/bsa35_gender.pdf)

And some on the left sporadically make a similar claim. They suggest that Ed Miliband or Jeremy Corbyn can take credit for moving the 'Overton Window' from opposition, even though neither became Prime Minister.

It is true that the modern Tory party now tends to talk a good game on some of these issues, with David Cameron using the language of social liberalism and Boris Johnson deploying the rhetoric of the economic left. And there have been some positive steps.

But if you look at UK policies on the Ukraine refugee crisis, the universal credit rollout or international aid, it is hard to argue that we have a progressive government in conservative clothing. And, either way, it is a betrayal of Labour values for the party to reduce itself to the status of a pressure group.

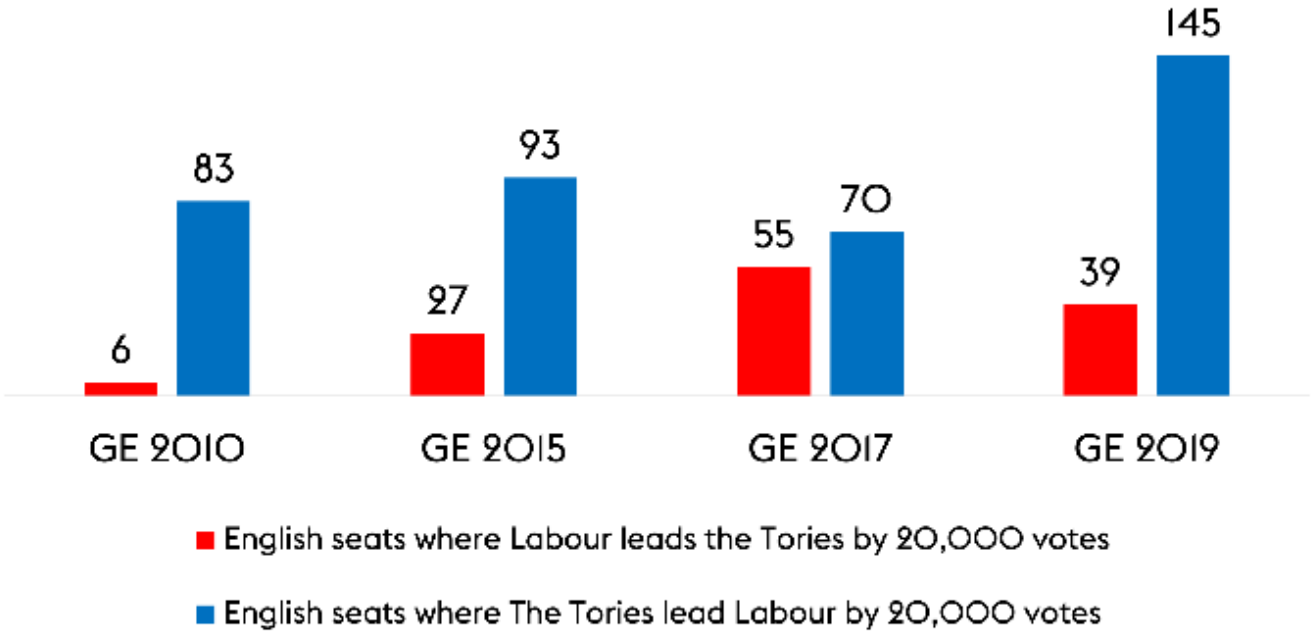
## Geography and culture

So, why are the progressive values of the country not reflected in our politics? Two elements explain the apparent contradiction: a geographical realignment in the country, accelerated by Brexit; and a culture war debate, played out online and in the media. Both of these phenomena undermine at the ballot box the egalitarian shifts in public opinion.

Underlying the first element is the fact that, while almost every part of the UK has moved in a progressive direction, many areas are only a bit more progressive than they were a couple of decades back, whereas a few are significantly more so. The 'mean average' constituency is, I think, decidedly more socially liberal. But the 'range' between the most and least liberal has grown.

As Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford point out in their book, *Brexitland*, those in less liberal parts of the country "are much more comfortable with diversity than their parents or grandparents. They often resent accusations of racism and xenophobia...as they feel they have moved away from the prejudices of their parents." These advances are not appreciated by the most liberal groups, "whose attitudes have moved further and faster."[10]

Chart 1: Polarised seats over time




The result of this expanded range is that Westminster politics is more polarised, despite all parts of the population moving in the same direction. When an issue falls on a cultural fault line, it has more capacity to divide the 'very liberal' from the 'quite liberal' – Brexit being the prime example. There were 6 English seats in 2010 where Labour led the Tories by over 20,000 votes, and 83 where the Tories led Labour by the same amount. In 2019 these figures had increased to 39 and 145 respectively (see Chart 1).

How much is this parliamentary polarisation down to the attractiveness of Corbyn and Johnson respectively? I would say not very much. Neither were especially popular going into the last election. But there were clearly growing sections of the country who simply could not stand one or the other, and were willing to vote en masse to stop them becoming Prime Minister.

Overall, the Conservatives benefit most from the growing gap between very and quite liberal parts of the country. The reason for this is that places which have become *a bit more* liberal in the past couple of decades outnumber those that have become *a lot more so* – the latter having pulled away from the former. This, in turn, is because the most pronounced types of left liberalism increasingly coalesce in a comparatively small number of urban centres. In particular, younger graduates have migrated towards cities.[11] Bohemian enclaves and networked hubs

of this kind now seem to talk a different language to other areas. Labour speaks this dialect fluently, but the Tories have been better at communicating with everywhere else.

The second element, the culture war, describes a set of very aggressive public arguments. These function on the basis of talk radio style 'debating points', many of them so trivial as to barely matter. Yet they create a 'narcissism of small differences', percolating into everyday conversations and evoking deep, existential questions about who we are as a country.

Kirsty McNeill and Roger Harding argue, in a pamphlet for the Fabians, that "the culture wars should best be understood as an elite strategy rather than a public opinion reality... Even the term itself is a frame pushed by culture wars peddlers."[12] While I fundamentally agree with this, it's important to stress that the differences within the country are not baseless. There must be reasons why certain groups of voters would take one view on a culture war debating point and those in another area would take another – even if the differences are far milder than the culture warriors on both sides claim.

Generally speaking, the basic structure of the geographical changes at play are mirrored by the ripples which the culture war creates. The latter element works to inflame the former, meaning that each cultural wedge issue reinforces the wider rift, inviting people to take either-or positions. And, because the arithmetic of this generally favours the right, it is in the Tories' interests to amplify these wedge issues.

This results in gimmicks like the 'war on woke' – led by many senior Conservative MPs – which aims to create schisms between the quite liberal and the very liberal. Such strategies zero in on debates at the extreme end, like the pulling down of statues, which divide the two. This approach has worked fairly well in the past few years, from the perspective of the right.

The net effect of the above is that the most progressive parts of the population have become estranged from everyone else, geographically and in the media, at precisely the point where they need to bring others with them. The resulting challenge for Labour is both to bridge an electoral chasm which many have come to regard as inevitable, and to find a position for itself in an increasingly binary set of culture war debates.

iii. The same phenomenon has occurred in other Western democracies. But a combination of Brexit, the UK's greater regional inequalities, and the arithmetic of First Past The Post (FPTP) means it's hit British progressive parties especially hard.

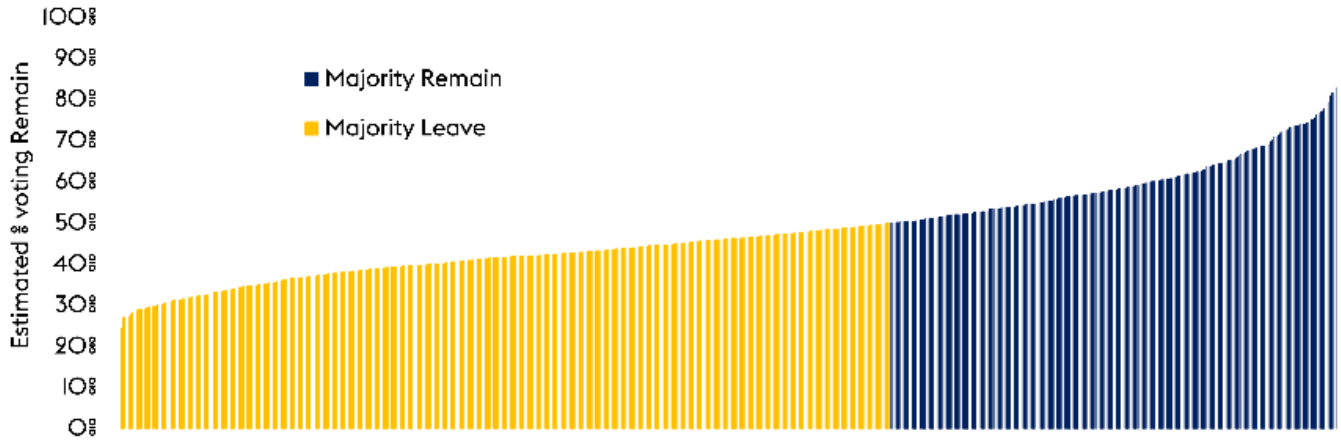
## ‘Very liberal’ votes stacked tall, ‘quite liberal’ votes spread wide

Let’s look in more detail at the geographical element. The 2010 and 2019 elections were both bad nights for Labour – although 2019 was obviously worse. But what we saw, during the intervening nine years, was a dramatic re-ordering, beneath the surface, in terms of which parts of the country Labour could rely on and where its appeal lay. Universal swing has become a thing of the past, with some constituencies moving dramatically in one direction and others going in the other. The changes that occurred, in the nine intervening years, went far beyond the additional seats which were lost by Labour.

To reiterate, the shifts that have occurred generally harm the left. It is true that there are a number of Tory held seats which might be attainable for Labour or the Lib Dems in the not-too-distant future – the ‘Blue Wall’, as analyst Steve Akehurst has dubbed it.[13] But the socially conservative right have, overwhelmingly, been the beneficiaries.

Chart 2 shows part of the reason why, reiterating the point made above. It visualises the structure of the 2016 Remain vote across all UK constituencies, as estimated by Chris Hanretty.[14] Whilst I think Brexit is a symptom rather than a cause of the realignment, Remain voting is generally associated with social liberalism, and can be used as a rough proxy for the distribution of what I describe as ‘very liberal’ attitudes.

Chart 2: Estimated support for Remain across Westminster seats (England, Scotland and Wales)

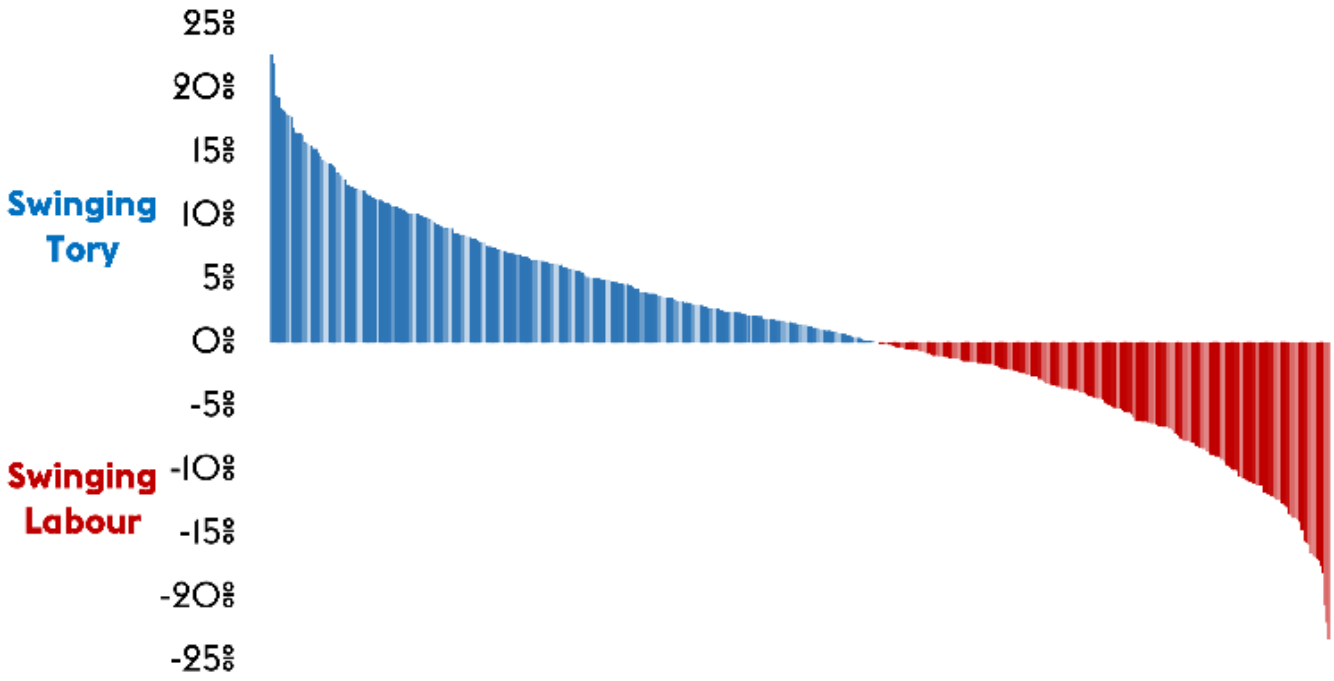



As we can see, there are many more majority-Leave seats than majority-Remain. Whereas the Leave-Remain ratio in 2016 was 52%-48% in terms of votes cast, it was 64%-36% in terms of Westminster constituencies.[iv]

The Remain campaign triumphed in fewer seats, but won by more handsome margins in those it did win – hence the steep incline once you get into 'majority Remain' territory. If you take Scotland out of the equation, this pattern gets even more pronounced.[v]

Chart 3, below, depicts the seat-by-seat cumulative swing from Labour to Tory and vice versa, in English parliamentary seats during the 2010s. It essentially treats the period between 2010 and 2019 as if this were a single electoral term, rather than three. The chart looks, for reasons of consistency, at English seats only (as do the charts which follow on, later in this section). This is primarily for reasons of consistency as some data, such as that for deprivation, is not directly comparable with that in other parts of the UK. But it is also an acknowledgment of the different political contexts within the other three nations.

Chart 3: Cumulative 2010-19 swing (English seats only)




iv. This perhaps explains why, in countries with Proportional Representation (PR), it has been harder for right populists to capitalise. This is not to suggest that PR is the answer; it would not change the fact of Labour's fall in working-class support. But it would remove some of the geographical factors.

v. If we look at the 2019 General Election, we can see the party political incarnation of this. 24 English seats had gaps of more than 30,000 votes between the two main parties. Despite the Tory landslide, however, 17 of these were won by Labour.

The seat with the biggest cumulative swing from Labour to the Conservatives is Mansfield (23⅝ points). The seat with the biggest cumulative swing the other way – once you set aside the slightly unusual case of Bradford West, George Galloway's old stamping ground – is Lewisham West and Penge (22⅝ points).

Despite both experiencing massive shifts, only one of these seats changed hands. Mansfield saw a 6,012 Labour lead over the Conservatives in 2010 become a 16,306 Tory majority in 2019. In Lewisham West and Penge, by contrast, Labour's 7,012 advantage over the Tories at the start of the decade had trebled by the time of the last General Election, to become a thumping 21,543 majority.

This points to Labour's wider problem. In total, 304 English seats swung cumulatively to the Tories between 2010 and 2019, whereas only 227 swung towards Labour (the Conservatives having started the 2010-19 period in government, let's not forget).[vi]

To focus on the extreme ends of the spectrum, 75 English seats swung Tory by 10⅝ points or more during the 2010s, whereas just 49 swung to Labour by the same degree. The former are listed below and the latter further down and the subsequent map shows how they're spread across the country.

Table 1: More than 10⅝ point cumulative swing to the Tories (⅝ point size of swing to the Tories in bold, colour of background shows current largest party)

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | MANSFIELD | **22.65** | 26 | TAMWORTH | **14.60** | 51 | SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE | **11.55** |
| 2 | BASSETLAW | **21.90** | 27 | CHATHAM AND AYLESFORD | **14.35** | 52 | NORTH EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE | **11.35** |
| 3 | NORTH WARWICKSHIRE | **19.40** | 28 | CLACTON | **14.15** | 53 | COPELAND | **11.30** |
| 4 | STOKE-ON-TRENT SOUTH | **19.30** | 29 | TELFORD | **14.05** | 54 | LOUTH AND HORNCASTLE | **11.20** |
| 5 | BRIGG AND GOOLE | **19.25** | 30 | WENTWORTH AND DEARNE | **14.05** | 55 | WEST BROMWICH EAST | **11.15** |
| 6 | BOLSOVER | **18.40** | 31 | REDCAR | **14.00** | 56 | STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS | **11.15** |
| 7 | CLEETHORPES | **18.25** | 32 | KINGSTON UPON HULL EAST | **13.85** | 57 | SITTINGBOURNE AND SHEPPEY | **11.10** |
| 8 | CANNOCK CHASE | **18.15** | 33 | MIDDLESBROUGH SOUTH AND EAST CLEVELAND | **13.70** | 58 | BLAYDON | **10.95** |
| 9 | STOKE-ON-TRENT NORTH | **17.90** | 34 | ASHFIELD | **13.40** | 59 | WORKINGTON | **10.95** |
| 10 | AMBER VALLEY | **17.85** | 35 | WANSBECK | **13.30** | 60 | ELMET AND ROTHWELL | **10.90** |
| 11 | WALSALL NORTH | **17.75** | 36 | WEST BROMWICH WEST | **13.10** | 61 | SOUTH DERBYSHIRE | **10.85** |
| 12 | WAVENEY | **16.85** | 37 | ROTHER VALLEY | **12.80** | 62 | PENISTONE AND STOCKSBRIDGE | **10.70** |
| 13 | BOSTON AND SKEGNESS | **16.45** | 38 | EASINGTON | **12.80** | 63 | HARLOW | **10.65** |
| 14 | DUDLEY SOUTH | **16.40** | 39 | BARROW AND FURNESS | **12.35** | 64 | SOUTH WEST NORFOLK | **10.65** |
| 15 | DUDLEY NORTH | **16.40** | 40 | YEOVIL | **12.35** | 65 | SHEFFIELD SOUTH EAST | **10.55** |
| 16 | SEDGEFIELD | **16.40** | 41 | THURROCK | **12.20** | 66 | NORMANTON PONTEFRACT AND CASTLEFORD | **10.50** |
| 17 | PLYMOUTH MOOR VIEW | **16.30** | 42 | NORTH NORFOLK | **12.15** | 67 | HOUGHTON AND SUNDERLAND SOUTH | **10.40** |
| 18 | LEIGH | **15.70** | 43 | NORTH WEST DURHAM | **12.10** | 68 | CITY OF DURHAM | **10.35** |
| 19 | SOUTH BASILDON AND EAST THURROCK | **15.65** | 44 | GREAT GRIMSBY | **12.05** | 69 | BROMSGROVE | **10.25** |
| 20 | GREAT YARMOUTH | **15.45** | 45 | MORLEY AND OUTWOOD | **12.00** | 70 | WASHINGTON AND SUNDERLAND WEST | **10.15** |
| 21 | NORTH EAST DERBYSHIRE | **15.45** | 46 | NUNEATON | **12.00** | 71 | BOSWORTH | **10.15** |
| 22 | BISHOP AUCKLAND | **15.20** | 47 | HALESOWEN AND ROWLEY REGIS | **11.95** | 72 | CHESTERFIELD | **10.15** |
| 23 | CASTLE POINT | **15.20** | 48 | SCUNTHORPE | **11.85** | 73 | STOKE-ON-TRENT CENTRAL | **10.10** |
| 24 | SHERWOOD | **15.20** | 49 | NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE | **11.65** | 74 | DONCASTER NORTH | **10.10** |
| 25 | BLYTH VALLEY | **14.80** | 50 | REDDITCH | **11.55** | 75 | NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME | **10.05** |

vi. The two speaker seats, Chorley and Buckingham, aren't included here.

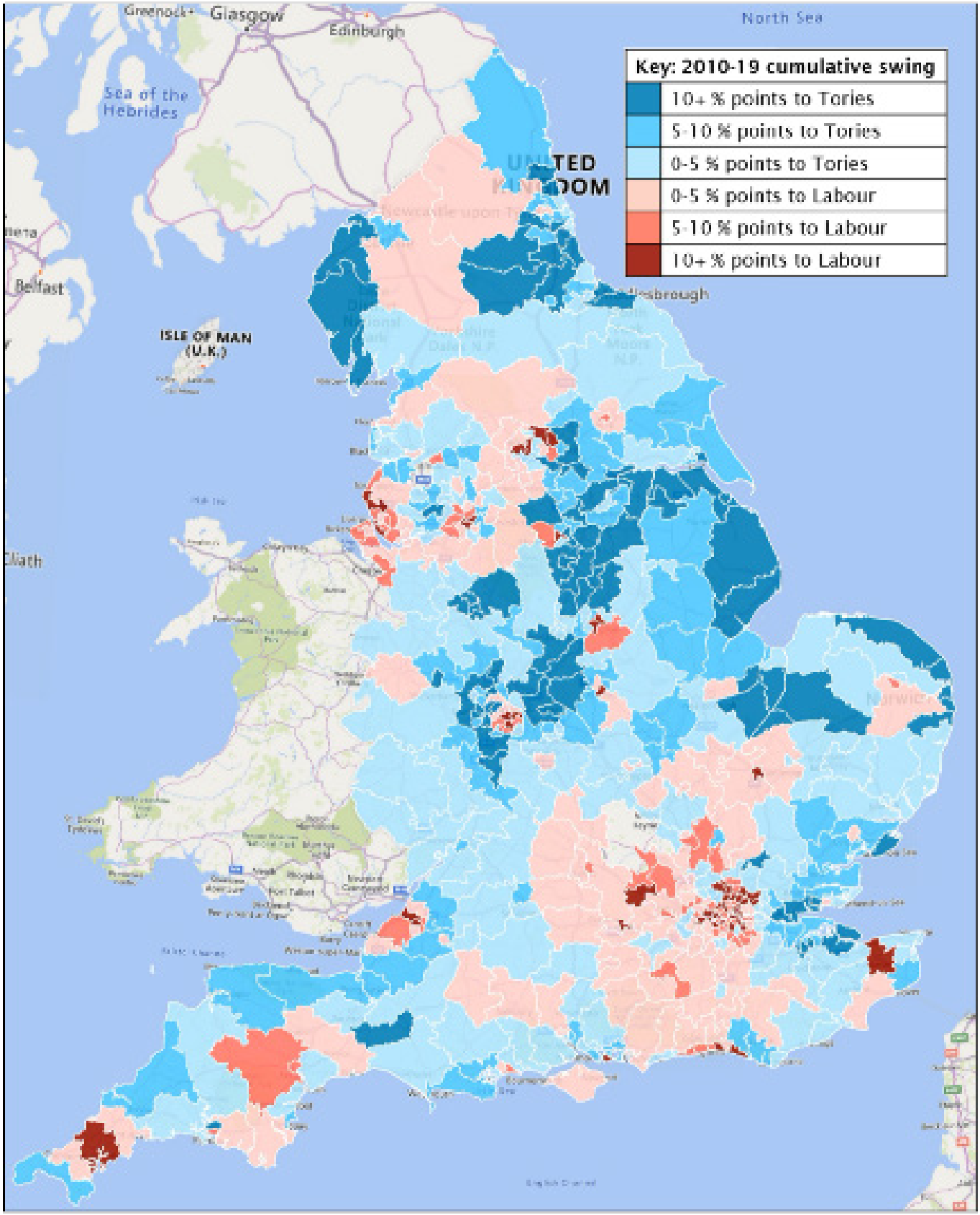
An interesting one to spot, among those swinging most dramatically to Labour, is Putney. It was gained by Labour in 1997, at the party's high-water mark, with a majority of just under 3,000, yet was retained at Labour's electoral nadir in 2019, with a majority of nearly 5,000.

The fact that Labour increased its vote share in many areas during the 2010s is sometimes overlooked, during a decade that is seen as one of all-out decline for the party. But all that this dynamic really does is explain how vote share can be misleading. Labour's late surge and high vote share in 2017 is now lauded as a near victory for the left. Yet the fact that the party was still so far from a majority demonstrated how concentrated and cosmopolitan its vote had become. Data journalist Ben walker tweeted, in early 2022, that a 2001-style vote share would, in 2022, yield 312 Labour seats rather than the 412 it won the party at the time.[15]

Table 2: More than 10% point cumulative swing to Labour (% point size of swing to Labour in bold, colour of background shows current largest party)

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | BRADFORD WEST | **23.3%** | 26 | LEEDS NORTH EAST | **12.4%** |
| 2 | LEWISHAM WEST AND PENGE | **22.0%** | 27 | HAMPSTEAD AND KILBURN | **12.3%** |
| 3 | BRISTOL WEST | **20.6%** | 28 | KENSINGTON | **12.1%** |
| 4 | BIRMINGHAM HALL GREEN | **18.1%** | 29 | TRURO AND FALMOUTH | **12.0%** |
| 5 | BRADFORD EAST | **17.5%** | 30 | WYCOMBE | **12.0%** |
| 6 | POPLAR AND LIMEHOUSE | **17.1%** | 31 | BIRMINGHAM LADYWOOD | **11.9%** |
| 7 | PUTNEY | **16.9%** | 32 | HOLBORN AND ST PANCRAS | **11.8%** |
| 8 | CAMBRIDGE | **16.9%** | 33 | BIRMINGHAM HODGE HILL | **11.8%** |
| 9 | HOVE | **16.8%** | 34 | ILFORD SOUTH | **11.7%** |
| 10 | BETHNAL GREEN AND BOW | **16.6%** | 35 | BRISTOL NORTH WEST | **11.2%** |
| 11 | EALING CENTRAL AND ACTON | **15.9%** | 36 | ILFORD NORTH | **11.2%** |
| 12 | CANTERBURY | **15.7%** | 37 | SHEFFIELD CENTRAL | 11.1% |
| 13 | PORTSMOUTH SOUTH | **15.6%** | 38 | SEFTON CENTRAL | **11.1%** |
| 14 | HORNSEY AND WOOD GREEN | **14.7%** | 39 | BATTERSEA | **11.0%** |
| 15 | MANCHESTER GORTON | **14.7%** | 40 | CHIPPING BARNET | **10.9%** |
| 16 | READING EAST | **14.1%** | 41 | LIVERPOOL RIVERSIDE | **10.9%** |
| 17 | LEEDS NORTH WEST | **13.9%** | 42 | LEWISHAM EAST | **10.8%** |
| 18 | CHINGFORD AND WOODFORD GREEN | **13.8%** | 43 | NOTTINGHAM SOUTH | **10.7%** |
| 19 | MANCHESTER WITHINGTON | **13.8%** | 44 | NOTTINGHAM EAST | **10.7%** |
| 20 | ENFIELD SOUTHGATE | **13.5%** | 45 | BRENTFORD AND ISLEWORTH | **10.7%** |
| 21 | HAMMERSMITH | **13.5%** | 46 | LEICESTER SOUTH | **10.5%** |
| 22 | WALTHAMSTOW | **12.9%** | 47 | BRIGHTON KEMPTOWN | **10.0%** |
| 23 | LEYTON AND WANSTEAD | **12.8%** | 48 | TOTTENHAM | **10.0%** |
| 24 | BERMONDSEY AND OLD SOUTHWARK | **12.7%** | 49 | HACKNEY SOUTH AND SHOREDITCH | **10.0%** |
| 25 | DULWICH AND WEST NORWOOD | **12.6%** | | | |

The simple truth is that, if Labour continues to pool its votes in cosmopolitan hubs, it will be consigned to eternal defeat elsewhere and will continue to be decimated at the ballot box. The overwhelming majority of the seats the party needs to win to gain a majority at the next election are in towns, rather than cities, according to the Fabians. And most of them are currently held by the Tories.[16]


Key: 2010-19 cumulative swing
10+ % points to Tories
5-10 % points to Tories
0-5 % points to Tories
0-5 % points to Labour
5-10 % points to Labour
10+ % points to Labour
North Sea
Sea of the Hebrides
Glasgow
Edinburgh
Belfast
ISLE OF MAN (U.K.)

There is no route to power for Labour that does not involve a significant number of these seats starting to swing back the other way. Keir Starmer has taken a string of essential steps to start turning around the tanker since becoming Labour Leader. But it will require discipline and ruthlessness to reverse the realignment to the extent needed.

## The progressive alliance mirage

The idea of a 'progressive alliance' often acts as a balm here. It implies that liberal progressives of all kinds can club together and win. Assuming that this idea goes beyond case-by-case cooperation, then there are many practical questions to be inquired of it. These have been asked by others and I won't go into them here.[17] But the chief objection I can see – even if the arithmetic panned out perfectly and the genuine policy differences between left parties were overcome – is that the 'progressive coalition' notion does not seek to reverse the realignment above, or even to properly acknowledge it.

Former Labour heartlands have not been lost to the Greens and the Lib Dems, nor thanks to the Greens or Lib Dems splitting the progressive vote. The Greens did not stand in Mansfield in 2019, and the Lib Dems won just 1,626 votes.

There are some seats, with small swings to the Tories, where the amalgamated votes of progressive parties outnumber those of the Conservatives. And there are also serious questions to be asked about how Labour can appeal to Tories without, for example, alienating Labour-Green swing voters.

But the progressive coalition idea accepts, by implication, that many of the country's poorest communities – those who are supposed to benefit from egalitarian politics, and where Labour used to be strongest – are now lost to the Conservatives forever. According to this strategy, the progressive left acts in the interests of those whom it cannot convince to vote for it. This may suit some. But we should remember that Labour is not just a progressive party; it is also one which aspires to be of and for the interests of the people it was created to represent.

## The underestimated role of education

One can immediately see, from the above lists of constituencies, that those swinging to the Tories are different sorts of places from those going to Labour. But what makes them different? What is it, exactly, which means that Mansfield has become an impregnable Tory fortress whilst, over the same time span, Lewisham West and Penge has become a place which weighs the Labour vote? And why are culture war strategies so successful at separating the former from the latter?

Does the difference come down to deprivation? Not really. Mansfield is the 117th most deprived English seat, of 533, and Lewisham West and Penge is the 192nd. Seats swinging to the Tories are, it is true, more deprived. But there are countless outliers. Manchester Central is the 17th most deprived constituency in England, but has seen a 7% point cumulative swing to Labour. The explanation is not simply about poverty and wealth.

Chart 4 looks at the proportion of people with no qualifications and with no university degree in all English seats. It then breaks this into quintiles, and shows the average 2010–19 cumulative swing in each of the quintiles. The top quintiles for no qualifications and no degree – i.e. the 20% of English seats that score highest for each – have seen big cumulative shifts towards the Tories (over 6 points in each case).

This pattern plays out neatly as you go down the quintiles. The lowest 20% of seats for no qualifications and no degree – i.e. the fifth of constituencies with the highest levels of formal education – have swung towards Labour in a similarly dramatic fashion (by more than 5 point in each case). This certainly helps to shed some light on the 'Mansfield versus Lewisham' conundrum: 16% have a degree in the former, compared to 37% in the latter.

Chart 4: Cumulative 2010-19 swing versus education levels (English seats only)

When we compare education with alternative explanations for the realignment we find, at a constituency level, that low formal education correlates with high Tory swing more than other potential metrics. Chart 5 shows the 'no degree' figures from Chart 4 (in green), next to datasets which provide four other potential explanations for the factors driving the realignment: social class (blue), ethnicity (orange), age (brown) and deprivation (pink).

Deprivation correlates only slightly with high Tory swing. But in the case of class, ethnicity and age, there are also strong parallels. If a seat has:

a) a below average number of graduates

*as well as*

b) an above average proportion in social grades C2DE

c) an above average proportion of white British heritage *and*

d) a higher than usual average age

then odds on it will be Tory-held or moving in that direction.

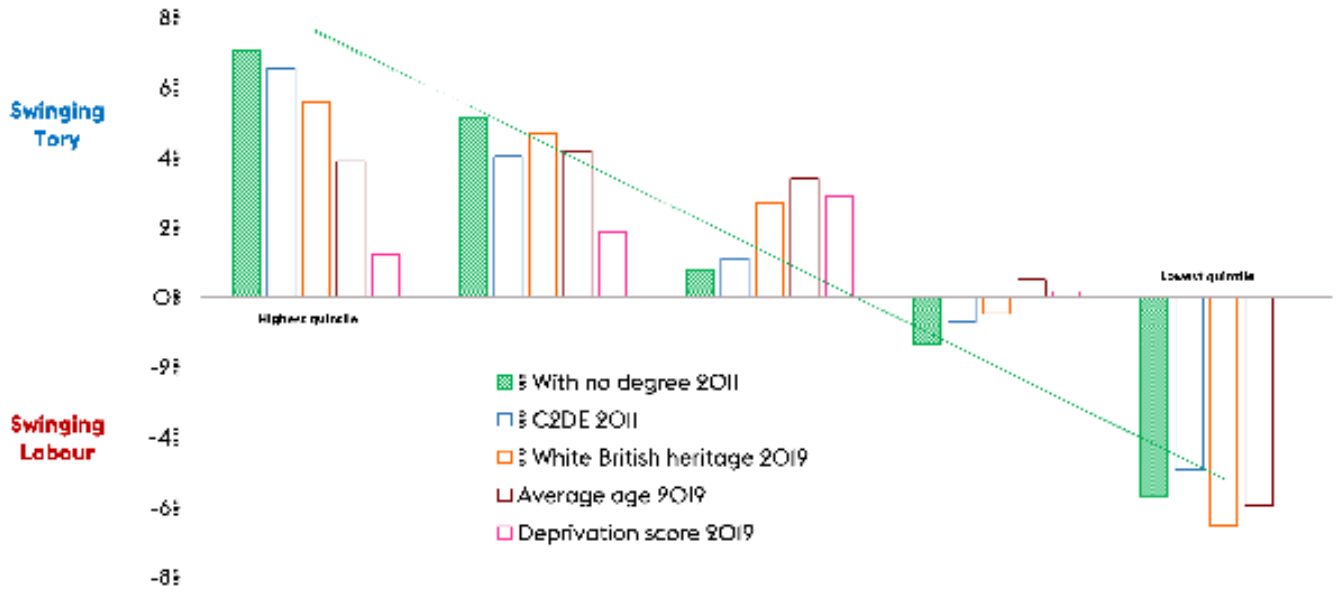
Of 123 English seats which fit this description, 99 are now Tory-held (as of the Hartlepool by-election in April 2021), compared to 67 in 2010. And, in total, 107 of these 123 places have swung towards the Conservatives since 2010. The 16 places that are bucking the trend and swinging to Labour are mostly in the South West – where the collapse of the Lib Dems has created an unusual dynamic. And a few are in Merseyside – the part of England where the working-class aversion to voting Tory is most ingrained.

It is important to stress, however, that degree education correlates more strongly than class, ethnic makeup or even age. If we were to draw trend lines onto Chart 4 for these metrics, they would all be a little flatter than the green trend line for 'no degree'.[vii]

Indeed, I wonder if education pre-empts some of the other relevant factors. C2DE voters swinging to the Tories are less likely to have high academic qualifications, for example. And older voters are more likely to have left school at 16 or earlier, having grown up in an era when very few went to university.

vii. Another question here, which it would be interesting to examine in more detail, is the role of place. Do non-graduates in graduate-heavy areas vote differently to their counterparts in graduate-light areas, for example?

Chart 5: Cumulative 2010-19 swing according to different factors (English seats only)




## Electoral consequences of regional inequality

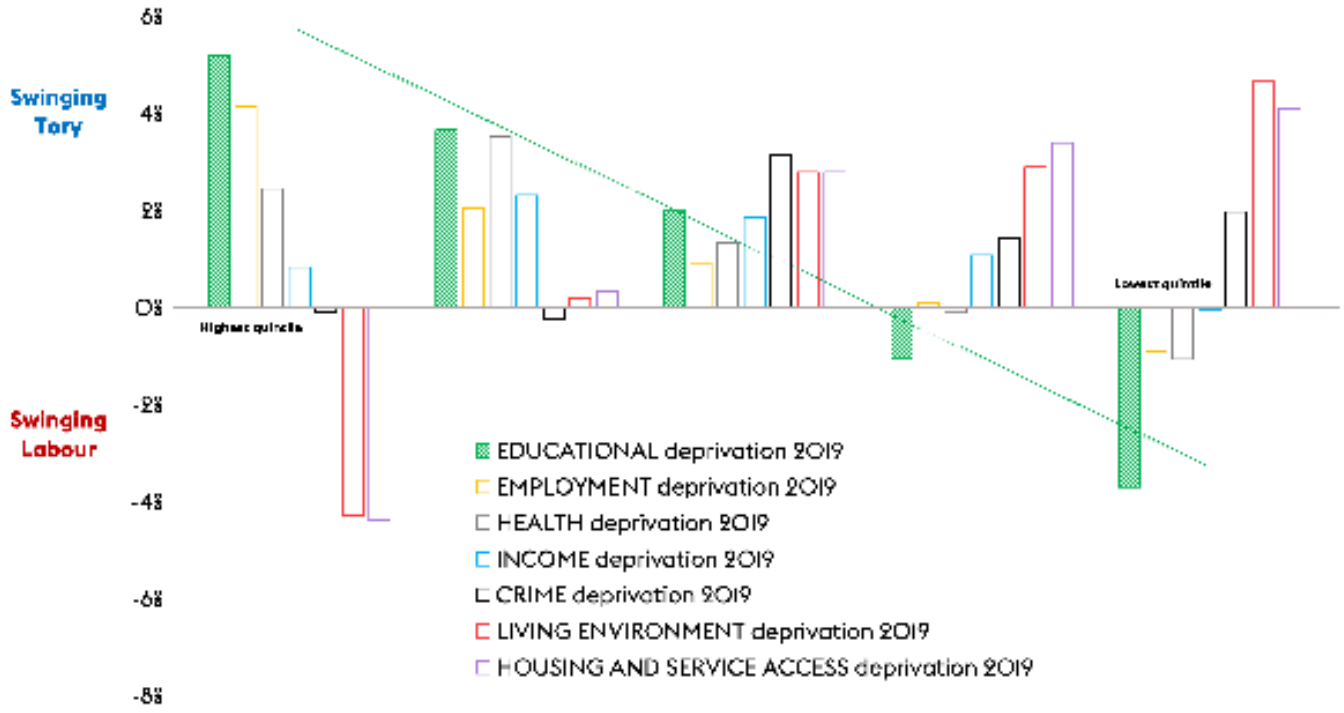
Chart 6 corroborates the central role which education plays, using a different dataset. It looks at the seven 'domains' identified by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). These are the specific types of deprivation which the IMD monitors in order to form its deprivation scores for each area.[18]

One of these domains is 'educational deprivation'. Again marked in green on the chart, this definition of deprivation is based on attainment across different school key stages, as well as on school standards, absence rates, adult skills, literacy, access to training, routes into further education, etc.

The correlation is the same. Constituencies in the top quintile for educational deprivation have seen a cumulative swing of 5.19% points to the Tories, on average. Seats in the least deprived quintile for education have seen a 3.70% point swing to Labour, on average. There are also correlations with a swing to the Conservatives when it comes to employment deprivation (in yellow), and to income deprivation and health deprivation (in blue and grey respectively).

viii. Do 'educated' voting norms percolate through or 'rub off'? And is it simply the fact of studying which changes attitudes at the ballot box, or is it down to the wider fact of having moved towns to a more transient, big city community?

Chart 6: Cumulative 2010-19 swing according to IMD types of deprivation (English seats only)




By contrast, two of the other IMD domains – living environment (red) and housing/service access (purple) – exhibit the precise opposite dynamic. Places which are deprived according to these definitions have been swinging to Labour in significant numbers since 2010. Areas with more 'crime deprivation', as the IMD would define it, are also a little more likely to be swinging to Labour.

Within this, we can see a dynamic which is heavily informed by the relationships between city hubs and everywhere else. This is the product of a country with big economic imbalances, and is part of the reason why Labour must seize the initiative on 'levelling up'.

In essence, deprived communities who live *away* from our city hubs have significantly worse employment prospects and life chances, with a lack of skilled jobs and few opportunities for training or other types of progression. Your likelihood of being on benefits or income support will probably be higher, and your life expectancy may be lower.

But deprived groups who live *within* city hubs do not necessarily enjoy a gilded life either: they inhabit crowded, built-up areas, with an impossibly competitive housing market, high homelessness and a lengthy queue for the library or the doctor's waiting room. They are slightly more likely to be the victim of a violent crime and much more likely to be hit by a car or experience pollution.

Put very crudely, poorer communities in about two thirds of the country cannot get a decent job and those in the other third cannot get a decent house. The former are swinging Tory and the latter Labour.

Ashfield, Redcar and Barnsley East, for example, are all in the top quintile for educational deprivation and for employment deprivation, but in the bottom quintile for housing/service deprivation and living environment deprivation. These places have seen cumulative swings to the Tories of 13⅝ points, 14⅝ points and 10⅝ points respectively. In Streatham, Chelsea and Fulham and Bristol West, by contrast, roughly the reverse is true: acute housing deprivation, but a wealth of opportunities. These constituencies have seen swings to Labour of 7⅝ points, 9⅝ points and, in the case of the latter, a whopping 21⅝ points.

These questions point to quite big questions about who Labour is really 'for' – given that the nature of deprivation is so different in different parts of the country. As the academic Glen O'Hara wrote, in a 2017 blog, "Whose thinking is really, really 'Labour'? The seventy-year-old ex-factory worker in Lincolnshire who owns his own house outright, or the thirty-year-old graduate mortgage broker renting out a tiny room in South-East London?"[19]

## Educated, not 'right'

Educational deprivation, however, remains the most interesting element – and the one which we'll focus on most in the rest of this paper. It seems to consistently overlay almost perfectly with cumulative swing to the Conservatives, at least among English seats.

The level of educational opportunity in an area is *a* primary driver – if not *the* primary driver – of our electoral realignment. And it seems likely that it impacts on the sides which people take in the so-called culture war, too. Those who are not degree-educated are less likely to have heard of the term 'woke' or to identify with it, for example.[20] And they are more likely to feel that the pace of cultural change is too fast.[21]

Clearly there is no *necessary* relationship between educational levels and cultural attitudes. Many of the architects of contemporary British right-wing populism (be it Nigel Farage or Dominic Cummings) are anything but educationally deprived. But, as academic Paula Sturridge

notes, "It has long been established that those who have experienced higher education are more liberal" as a rule, when it comes to "issues of authority, tolerance, and the rule of law."[22] Meanwhile, work by Elizabeth Simon into why the educational divide overlays with Brexit loyalties finds that it primarily comes because attainment levels translate into a certain set of cultural attitudes (rather than because different educational experiences translate into different economic interests).[23]

Surridge goes on to point out that "the effects of education on voting behaviour at general elections has received very little attention." And it's for this reason that I think it's particularly important to look at it here. Why should levels of formal education carry such sway over whether groups are 'quite liberal' or 'very liberal' when it comes to social issues?

We'll go on to explore this question in Part II. But just in case it needs to be said, before we do, the above findings don't vindicate or 'prove right' those who support liberal and left-wing causes. Education and intelligence are fundamentally different, and the electoral instincts of graduates are no loftier – no more prone to accuracy, perspective or a concern for the public interest – than those of people who leave school at 16. It should be seen as an indictment of the progressive approach that we've lost so many voters in the seats with the fewest opportunities and the worst life chances.

Indeed, if being more formally educated did mean being cleverer, then degree-educated progressives would have done a much better job of bringing others with them. As I argue later on, part of the problem is that left-of-centre graduates have adopted a corkscrew logic to some of the big social questions – failing to think in straight lines and explain ideas properly, and instead relying on a new campus vernacular which only makes sense to the initiated.

At any rate, a huge question which progressives must ask is precisely why this educational disconnect has opened up – and why now? The phenomenon is not unique to Britain or the British left – although 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) means it's arguably more electorally challenging. But it's as acute here as anywhere, and the shifts in the past decade are particularly striking.

Policy priorities have played a part. See, for example, the preoccupation under Jeremy Corbyn with free higher education, rather than with adult skills or early years – a choice which would, in practice, have expanded the educational gap. Yet the biggest divide, I think, is about how people think and talk. Increasingly in the past decade, the UK has come to feel like a country divided by a common language.

The rest of this paper focuses on how this can be overcome. With the Tories in crisis after 'party-gate', there is an opportunity for Keir Starmer's Labour to re-connect with the groups lost, and to escape from the electoral corner which the party finds itself painted into.

# PART II: DIRECT AND SYSTEMIC CAUSATION

Writing after the 2021 local elections, the former Tory MP David Gauke described the difficulty of finding the 'correct vocabulary' for the electoral realignment that's taken place:[24]

> It is not a matter of 'left' versus 'right'; 'leave' and 'remain' worked quite well but is now outdated; 'populist', 'authoritarian' or 'nationalist' sounds pejorative; 'social conservative' does not really reflect Boris Johnson's approach to life; 'culturally conservative' is better but not perfect. A consensus on neutral terms to describe the two sides of the new political divide would be a small step forward.

New terms have been proposed before. These relate, for instance, to divides between communitarians and cosmopolitans or between 'somewheres' and 'anywheres'. And they have a lot to them.[ix] But each of these alternative distinctions also, I think, risks overstating the extent of the core values divide.

'Cosmopolitans' in Hackney or Brighton, for example, might spend their weekends tending community gardens or 'buying local' – pursuits, surely, which 'communitarians' would approve of. And many Brexit-supporting 'somewheres' have articulated their rootedness by voting for those who champion 'Global Britain' – a slogan which sounds tailor-made for 'anywheres' and 'citizens of nowhere'.

There is also an *a priori* question about why education feeds a difference in values in the first place – regardless of how broad or narrow these differences are.

## More that unites than divides us

Hence, it is not obvious that the realignment at play stems from deep divisions on policy, nor even that an impassable chasm now exists when it comes to cultural attitudes. Unlike America, British society does not contain high levels of pro-life social conservatism, or significant minorities who oppose free healthcare and deny the existence of climate change. As Kirsty McNeill and Roger Harding point out, "there is no evidence of anything remotely close to a US-style religious right in the UK."[25]

ix. The full list of segmentation approaches here might include: Somewheres and Anywheres; Communitarians and Cosmopolitans; Pioneers, Prospectors and Settlers; Liberals, Centrists and Authoritarians; Identity Liberals, Necessity Liberals and Identity Conservatives; Bridged and Bonded communities; Open and Closed approaches to globalisation; and Post-materialist and Materialist values. It would also span research into the six moral taste buds, the 'big five' personality traits and plenty beside. My exploration of 'direct' and 'systemic' thinking does not look to contest these, but rather aims to supplement them, examining an aspect of the story (causation) which is based on language rather than ideals, and which is talked about less.

Rather, the present 'polarisation' can feel like a gigantic non-sequitur: two sides with more in common than they realise, constantly misunderstanding each other and frequently being mischaracterised by high profile culture warriors on either side.

There's plenty of evidence to support this idea. Analysis by UK in a Changing Europe finds that Tory voters are dramatically to the left of Tory MPs in economic terms – closer, in fact, to the Labour electorate and to the MPs they abandoned in 2019 than to their new Conservative representatives.[26] Likewise, insights from the Tony Blair Institute show that voters who left Labour in 2019 supported the idea of "A mainly socialist society in which public interests and a more controlled economy are most important," yet plumped for the Conservatives at the ballot box.[27]

And the same is true on social issues. Polling from Red Wall seats shows that electors there – who supposedly abandoned Labour on cultural grounds – in fact have views on immigration, diversity, climate change and even trans rights which are a) not dramatically different from the country as a whole and which are b) fairly progressive.[28] They may be less liberal than those in inner London, but they are not moving in the opposite direction.[x]

If attitudinal rifts are overstated, then why do we appear to be in the midst of a culture war? And why do progressives appear to be *losing* that culture war at the ballot box – with Labour heartlands going Tory and Britain leaving the European Union under the hardest terms possible?

I have put forward (in Part I) education as a lens through which to view electoral geography, and to understand why ostensibly progressive voters are not choosing progressive governments. But there is a further question: why is one party so much more effective at appealing to groups with high levels of formal education, while the other appeals so much more to everyone else?

I would suggest that we start by looking at variations in analysis and language – i.e. factors which are rooted in education – rather than focusing on ideology. In many of the political debates which are most contentious, this appears to be the true source of difference.

Crime is a good example here. Most of us share basic values on this, and would agree that crime is bad, justice is good and the weak should be protected. Yet the kinds of policies we advocate to achieve this vary wildly, depending on our life experience and the extent to which we see individuals or social systems as primary agents in the world.

x. Other recent studies – including Dr Frank Luntz's work with the Centre for Policy Studies, More In Common's 'Dousing the Flames' report, the Fabian's 'Counter Culture' paper, and a major research piece by Ipsos MORI and Kings College London – reveal an array of findings which are quite similar.

Depending on our analysis, we can end up with answers at one end of the spectrum which focus only on the responsibilities of the perpetrator, right through to those at the other end which regard poverty and social conditions as solely culpable.

## Direct and systemic

A 2016 blog by the psychologist and linguist George Lakoff sheds further light on this.[29] Foreshadowing the victory of Trump, Lakoff described the political divide in modern America as coming down to two essential types of causal reasoning: 'direct' and 'systemic'. "Direct causation is dealing with a problem via direct action. Systemic causation recognises that many problems arise from the system they are in and must be dealt with via systemic causation."

In the US – where a culture war has raged for some time – conservatives favour the former and liberals the latter. Whether this would have been the case in the era of Lincoln, Eisenhower or Lyndon B Johnson is another question. But, according to Lakoff, it certainly is now.

As an example of direct reasoning, Lakoff describes the antics of "the Republican Senators who would go out and make snowballs in Washington in winter and then say, 'What do you mean about global warming? It's snowing here!'."[30] Whilst this direct logic may obviously be faulty to a liberal eye, Lakoff notes that it is also deeply intuitive.

As he elaborates elsewhere:

> From infanthood on we experience direct, simple causation. We see direct causation all around us: if we push a toy, it topples over; if our mother turns a knob on the oven, flames emerge. Picking up a glass of water and taking a drink is direct causation. Slicing bread is direct causation. Punching someone in the nose is direct causation. Throwing a rock through a window is direct causation. Stealing your wallet is direct causation.
>
> Any application of force to something or someone that produces an immediate change to that thing or person is direct causation. When causation is direct, the word *cause* is unproblematic.

Lakoff identifies several sub-types of systemic causation, by contrast. And he emphasises that all of these are, unlike direct reasoning, at odds with how our brains process things. They are cases where A plus B does not equal C. And, like exceptions to a grammatical convention, they must be learnt rather than felt.

One interesting factor, picked up on by George Lakoff, is that systemic thinking often requires us to discuss propensities and likelihoods, whereas direct thinking is more concrete. You can use systemic logic to identify a correlation between deprivation and crime, for instance. But there will be anomalies, outliers and exceptions to the rule. Only over a sustained period will the link between deprivation and crime come to feel like 'common sense'. This is not true of direct logic, which deals in absolutes.

Lakoff goes on to describe how Donald Trump tapped into these divides. The policy of building a wall on the Mexican border horrified systemically minded Democrats, for instance. But it was seen as a sensible policy to secure the border by direct minded Republicans. Other, less controversial questions boiled down to the same distinction.

Through taking the ultra-direct, ultra-literal approach that he did, Trump was able to win over direct minded former Democrats in Rust Belt states. He lost, in the process, the support of some systemic thinking Republicans – those in the Mitt Romney mould. But, from his point of view, the trade-off was worth it.

The direct-systemic gap can lead to different policy positions on certain issues – such as immigration or fiscal responsibility. So it isn't simply about language or presentation. It is not fully 'policy agnostic'. You could say that the direct approach to issues like crime is itself a type of socially conservativism. And to a degree you'd be right. But we are not, ultimately, talking here about the sorts of yawning ideological chasms that progressives sometimes imagine.

Table 3

| | 'Direct' reasoning | 'Systemic' reasoning |
|---|---|---|
| *Social policy* | Individual responsibility | Social conditions |
| *International Trade* | National agency | Rules and conventions |
| *Cultural preferences* | Tangible | Abstract |
| *Foreign policy* | Realpolitik ('action') | Diplomacy ('words') |
| *Economics and/or migration* | Zero-sum | Positive-sum |
| *Equality and discrimination* | Literal definitions | Structural definitions |
| *Crime and punishment* | Deterrence | Prevention |

The table above sums up some of the oppositions, in terms of decision-making and policy formation, which might flow from the direct-systemic split.

(The Appendix at the end of this paper engages in more detail with the Lakoff analysis, and references some of the key passages he's written about direct and systemic causation.)

## Causation and UK democracy

Does this divide, described by an American linguist, hold water in the UK context? In my view it increasingly does.

I would argue that the direct versus systemic distinction derives in large part from educational attainment – and that it's created many (although not all) of the divides which have opened up in Britain. It now forms the underlying basis of the so-called culture war and plays a major role in determining which way seats swing and which side of politics individuals are drawn to.

The EU Referendum of 2016 is a good example. Brexit created a festering wound in our politics for the latter part of the 2010s, and turbocharged the educational realignment described in Part I.

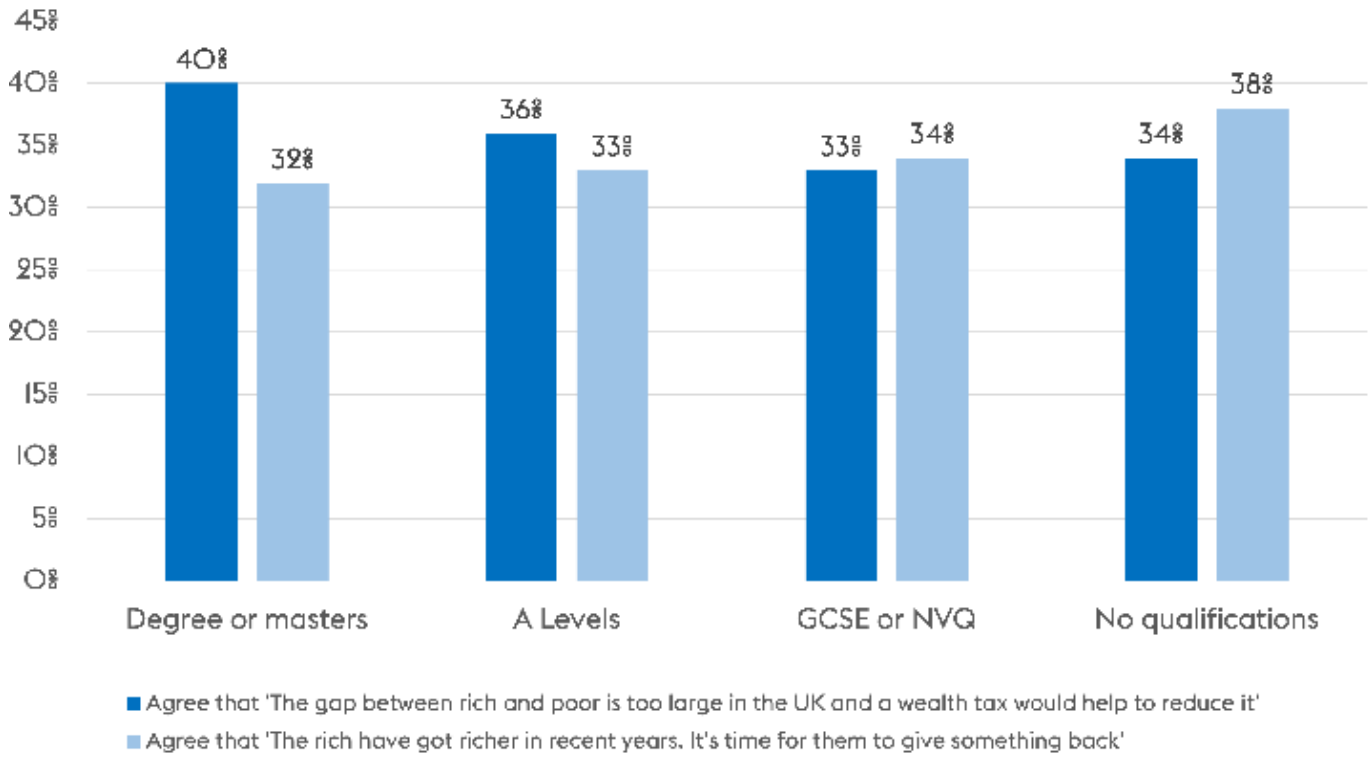
The original Leave-Remain divide did, it's true, have a genuine values difference at its core. But a great deal of the rancour during the five years following the vote was not based on competing visions of what sort of country we should be. Rather, it was between those who saw Brexit as a simple process wrongly presented as complex by its opponents, and those who saw it as a complex process wrongly cast as simple by its supporters.

The deepest fury from Leavers was with the apparent disregard, by 'bureaucrats' and 'bean-counters', of a *direct* instruction from the people. And the strongest anger from Remainers was with the 'demagogues' and 'liars' heading up Vote Leave, for having pretended that withdrawal from an immensely complex *system* could be done easily and without compromise.

The distinction between direct and systemic reasoning can help with other questions too, such as voters' often paradoxical attitudes to tax. Why is it that many of those who are best off seem to be most worried about wealth inequality, for example, or that middle-class voters are more relaxed about progressive tax increases?[31]

Chart 7 shows a nuanced distinction in terms of how these sorts of questions are framed, based on polling by Ipsos MORI. It reveals that those with degrees are more likely to support the statement 'The gap between rich and poor is too large in the UK and a wealth tax would help to reduce it'. Those with no qualifications are more likely to agree that 'The rich have got richer in recent years. It's time for them to give something back'.[32]

Chart 7: Attitudes to inequality by highest qualifications (Ipsos Mori, July 2020)




The differences are subtle but important, especially given that the two statements were tested back-to-back with the same sample. Those with less formal education may be exercised about the behaviour of the rich or the treatment of the poor, according to this. But they're more likely to see the actual distance between the two (the 'gap between rich and poor') as a second order question. It is rooted in a systemic notion, after all – one based on the wider structure of society – not on the immediate interactions between people and groups.

I'm going to use the distinction between direct and systemic causation in the rest of this paper to make an argument about the true source of the British political realignment – and to try and think about how Labour can challenge it.

I believe more formally educated groups are more likely to be systemic reasoners, and less formally educated groups are more likely to be direct reasoners. As the size of the former

group has grown, Labour has both wanted and needed to appeal to it more. The party has lost in the process much of its ability (at least at the national level) to communicate with the direct thinkers who once comprised a significant part of its base.
Systemic reasoners remain a minority – and an increasingly geographically concentrated one at that – hence, the more Labour gears its appeal solely to them, the more it's at the mercy of the FPTP arithmetic.

## Is 'directness' pejorative?

A quick question here, before we move on: is the distinction I make offensive to direct reasoners, especially given my point about the role of formal education? This question matters because social categorisations should avoid disparaging one side more than the other.

I do not intend it to be pejorative, but the answer to this question ultimately depends on whether those described as 'direct reasoners' would see it as a negative label. And the truth, on this point, is that I simply don't know (any more than I know what systemic thinkers would make of my description of them).

But I suspect that many would not see it as an insult, and would wear their directness as a badge of honour. Being a direct reasoner means saying it as you see it, after all, which is only an insult if you pride yourself on looking where the problem is not. To many direct reasoners, I think the label would be taken to mean being practical rather than theoretical – 'real world' rather than abstract.

For my own part, I certainly see the value in both models of causation. I tend to think that systemic reasoning is a more sustainable and ethical way to run a society. But I also think it can be woolly and frustrating if mis-used or over-used. Direct reasoning is often necessary to get things done and to think through either-or questions. This is especially true when systemic approaches to a problem (which often happen upstream of the problem itself) have not had time to have an impact, have not yet been initiated in the first place, or have failed.

## UK politics and the 'direct versus systemic' distinction

Looking back, the UK's electoral range has always been defined, in part, by George Lakoff's two ways of reasoning. The Tories are historically prone to champion direct approaches, based on individual responsibility. Labour supporters tend to blame society – proposing policies which aim to fix the system.

You could clearly tie this in with deeper elements of political philosophy. A cornerstone of left liberalism for example, is the idea that people are products of society – of the wider system which they emerge from, in other words – and that their behaviour and life outcomes must be understood in this light. Conservative ideologies place far more emphasis on individual responsibility.

Crime is again an obvious example. Following the 1993 murder of Jamie Bulger, John Major famously said that "Society needs to condemn a little more and understand a little less." Tony Blair, by contrast, framed his 1990s youth crime policies on the basis that "If you create a group of people who believe they've got no stake in society it's hardly surprising if they behave anti-socially."[33] Major and Blair were both relatively moderate by the standard of their parties, but a core, qualitative distinction between 'direct' and 'systemic' attitudes to crime still separated them (at least in the early days of Blair's leadership).

Despite being ideologically drawn to different types of causation, however, both main parties in the UK have traditionally held a coalition of both direct *and* systemic reasoners within their voter bases. Direct thinking can lead to left-wing conclusions and systemic thinking to right-wing ones. Indeed, the two parties have tended to do best when appealing to both.

The Tories, for example, traditionally appeal strongly to lower-middle-class, home-owning directly minded voters, who believe in personal responsibility and self-reliance. But they have also tended to attract systemic thinkers: business people, and the readers of centre-right broadsheets. These latter parts of their electoral bloc vote Tory on the basis that, in their view, a global capitalist system involving freer markets and fewer regulations is the best way of achieving a prosperous society.

The ideological premise of the Labour movement, meanwhile, is more aligned with systemic approaches – at least in terms of how the party's members and politicians tend to view things. Government intervention in the economy represents an acknowledgement that social conditions definitively influence life outcomes and must be equalised or regulated. Yet a great many members of the party's traditional base are likely to have been direct reasoners, for whom voting Labour was a simple case of protecting their jobs or getting money into their communities.

Historically, both parties have understood and accepted elements of the other perspective. David Cameron was a conventional, directly minded Tory in some ways, promising to reward those who'd 'done the right thing'. But his stances on the environment, international aid and income inequality, in the early days of his time as Tory leader, were an acknowledgement that his party could not ignore social and structural factors (aka systemic reasoning) if it wanted to win.

Meanwhile, Labour have historically embraced elements of direct reasoning. The 1945–51 governments signed up to the principle of a nuclear deterrent, for example – in an acknowledgement that realpolitik approaches were sometimes necessary on foreign policy. And New Labour's 'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' slogan represented an almost-too-perfect example of how the party has successfully woven together direct and systemic parts of the electorate. However much you concede the underlying systemic factors behind crime, Tony Blair effectively said, you must be serious when it comes to the direct question of public safety.

The key change, during the 2010s, was that these uneasy coalitions broke apart. The Conservatives increasingly addressed direct causation, and Labour addressed systemic causation.

## The 'direct versus systemic' distinction in politics and culture

Example 1) Tabloid and broadsheet

There is an interesting moment in Tony Blair's memoir, *A Journey*, where he discusses the appointment of Alastair Campbell as his Director of Communications. Having considered potential candidates from the Independent and the Guardian, Blair explains that he chose Campbell because "I wanted a tabloid person."[34]

As I wrote in April 2021, in a blog entitled 'Against their Interests', Labour's 1997 victory came, in large part, from appealing to deprived seats without a cultural history of voting for the party.[35] These included seaside towns, New Towns and a range of other places which do not quite fit Labour's idealised version of a working-class community. As Peter Kellner puts it, "Tony Blair's Labour Party attracted millions of instrumental, non-union working-class voters with jobs in the private sector."[36]

This success stemmed, in part, from the New Labour project's lack of squeamishness about tabloid language. Tabloid publications, after all – and particularly the red-tops – speak in a fundamental way to direct causation. The Sun's right-wing stance comes from a sledgehammer appeal to 'Pull your socks up', 'A+B=C' reasoning. They emphasise simple, 'no nonsense' answers to almost every type of problem.

Through a greater willingness to couch things in this way, New Labour was able to speak to the voters it had been losing during the 1980s. Progressive social policies were framed as the removal of arbitrary hurdles, or as efforts to improve fairness and help people to get on. And the focus was on specific, everyday issues, such as those listed on the famous 1997 pledge card.

The image below shows two tabloid headlines from the past few years. Both are from newspapers which many progressives hate. Yet both are also rare instances where these papers take the progressive side of a given quarrel.

The first headline, in the Daily Mail, is a great example of how the direct, tabloid approach tends to treat issues around racism. The piece is written in praise of a young British Asian woman, who stood up to the leader of the English Defence League (EDL).[37]

I suspect that a great many Daily Mail readers would applaud her unreservedly, and would view the EDL's overt brand of bigotry as contemptible. Hence why the Mail covered the story in this way. But these readers would also see no contradiction between opposing what the EDL stands for and wanting to see immigration figures cut (as a 'common sense' measure in tough times).

This is the consequence of a more direct mentality – one which tends not to construe things in terms of a complex network of cause and effect, or to see a particular link between tabloid rhetoric and EDL-style racism. To a systemic reasoner, or someone who subscribes to a much more structural definition of racism, these links may be obvious – hence why few of those with this mind-set read the Mail.

The Sun headline is an even more interesting case study.[38] It identifies a form of discrimination that's more subtle – based on Islamophobic biases in the algorithms of car insurance websites. This is a far more sophisticated type of inequality than the Mail example, and the paper covers it in a very direct way. Their focus is on basic fairness and the removal of barriers. Car insurers "cannot say Mohammeds are worse drivers than Johns," a source is quoted as saying.

These two stories are interesting. They're obviously outliers, compared to the thrust of both publications' editorial line. But they show that direct mentalities do not automatically mean taking the right-wing side.

There are lessons here for Labour in 2022. Despite falling print circulations, after all, the major tabloids continue to have big readerships, comprised mostly of those who are not degree-educated. The Mail Online is the UK's most read and recognised news brand.[39] Yet a mutual antipathy has grown up, over the course of the 2010s, between several of the major tabloids and the Labour Party membership. This goes back far beyond 2010 in historic terms, of course, but it's as strong now as ever.

Perhaps this has partly happened thanks to the Labour membership's post-2010 'reassessment' of Blairism, which ultimately led to the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Leader. But I would argue that it has also occurred because Labour has become a much more systemically minded party in the past few years, which does not speak the direct language of the tabloids and, often, does not seem to wish to. When Keir Starmer wrote a column for The Sun in 2021, he was widely criticised by the left, for example, even though his message was a progressive one.[40]

For the party to win, this needs to change. Progressives must remember that the tabloids are, at core, commercial entities, selling a product of which their political leaning is only a small part. There is much to be learned from how they communicate with their audiences and understand their readers' priorities.

It is notable, for example, that a tabloid paper (the left-leaning Mirror) was so instrumental in exposing 'party-gate' – a scandal based on a clear affront to direct reasoning, rather than on more complex systemic failures in how the Government handled the pandemic.

Example 2: 'You're fired'

In *Beyond the Red Wall*, Deborah Mattinson's exploration of attitudes in Red Wall seats, working-class ex-Labour supporters are asked to cite individuals from outside politics who would make an ideal national leader. Three people emerge.[41]

One of the three, Wetherspoons founder and Brexit fanatic Tim Martin, subscribes to many of

the stereotypes which some left liberals might have about the Red Wall – at least in terms of the political positions and the cultural preferences Martin represents. But the other two – Alan Sugar (of The Apprentice) and Martin Lewis (of MoneySavingExpert.com) – are more unusual choices.

Alan Sugar is particularly surprising, given what many think they know about Red Wall voters. Sugar is a London-based billionaire and philanthropist, most commonly seen on the BBC in a helicopter, circling The Shard. He appears to be pretty socially liberal, and presents himself as a globally minded businessman with fingers in many pies. He was a former favourite of Margaret Thatcher, converting to New Labour in the 2000s and becoming a member of the House of Lords.

Moreover, he is a staunch Remainer – criticising what he calls the "posh boys' Brexit." He went so far, in 2018, as to demand that Boris Johnson and Michael Gove be prosecuted for lying about the '£350m for the NHS' figure, and even suggested that the referendum result could be declared void.[42]

It is hard, on this basis, to see why this would be the chosen candidate of 'Somewheres', living away from the country's economic hubs. Or of collectivists, in post-industrial ex-Labour heartlands. Or of social conservatives, hostile to cosmopolitan and individualistic values. Or of those hurt worst by Thatcher in the 1980s and allegedly betrayed by New Labour. Or of those who are suspicious of Westminster bubble politicians. Or of staunch Leave voters who are exercised about Brexit.

Yet Mattinson's research finds that he is. And perhaps this supports the idea that we progressives are imagining rifts within the country to be much deeper, when it comes to policy substance and social attitudes, than they really are. So much of the impasse instead comes down to language, logic and how the left explains itself.

Alan Sugar is, after all, an exemplar of direct causality. "He gets things done," one Red Wall voter tells Mattinson. This explains, perhaps, why few would badge him as a member of the 'London metropolitan elite', despite the evidence.

"I don't do nonsense, I don't do time wasters," Sugar explains in the opening credits of The Apprentice. "The one who sells the most will win. The one who sells the least will lose. And on the losing team one of you will get fired." His performances in the boardroom are characterised by a series of refrains which appeal explicitly to directness and common sense. "Who's responsible for the failure of this task?" "Why shouldn't I fire you?" "I don't do time wasters."

The show's understanding of prejudice and discrimination, meanwhile, is very much a direct rather than a systemic one, with any overt bias regarded as an idiotic distraction from the hunt for the 'best candidate'. Although he has strayed into dinosaur opinions about gender on

Twitter at points, his persona on the programme (which is how most people encounter him) is fairly consistent on this point. When Apprentice contestants at one point used sexist stereotypes to sell products, they were severely reprimanded by Sugar – as well as by his deputy, Karen Brady – on the direct basis that such stereotypes were old-fashioned and stupid.
The Apprentice is, of course, a pastiche of the business world. It often strays into the downright ridiculous. Many left liberals would be horrified at the idea that we have anything to learn from an arch-capitalist like Sugar – even at the level of language. But perhaps, if Labour wishes to do well in the seats it could once rely on, we need to overcome this type of squeamishness.

The third Red Wall candidate for 'ideal national leader', meanwhile, is Martin Lewis, of the website MoneySavingExpert.com. Lewis is perhaps the most interesting choice, in that he's the most middle-class, at a surface level. But the enthusiasm for him is clear, within Mattinson's research, with one Red Wall voter going so far as to describe Lewis as a personal hero.

The thing about Martin Lewis which stands out is his emphasis on demystifying complex ideas around finance and big business, and boiling them down in an accessible way. This is driven by a goal which is, in its essence, egalitarian – namely that of protecting ordinary consumers' wallets, and of giving them the insight and agency to make choices for themselves.

If we look at Lewis' video[43] and explainer[44] from before the 2016 EU Referendum, we see this approach in action. The pros and cons are broken down and deciphered, from a place which is as close to neutral as most could manage. Only at the end does Lewis say how he himself intends to vote: "I'm generally risk-averse, and that pushes me just towards an IN vote for safety, maybe 55% to 45%. Yet just as my dream holiday isn't necessarily yours, no more is my choice of what's right a call for you to follow me. Far better is follow the logic."

The Martin Lewis approach assumes minimal information but maximum intelligence. It breaks complex issues into their constituent parts, bridging the gap between the systemic and the direct. And it explains options and ideas to people, rather than telling them what to think.

# PART III: DRIVERS OF THE SHIFTS TAKING PLACE

To recap, each of Britain's two main parties have, in the past decade, specialised in a distinct type of reasoning, articulated via their communications, policy and culture. Labour has increasingly become the party of the uber-systemic and the Conservatives that of the ultra-direct.

This has caused both parties to lose a slice of their traditional electoral coalitions to the other. But its electoral consequences have been particularly dire for Labour. Direct thinking is more intuitive to start with, even for many who are instinctively drawn to progressive ideas. And those who deploy it are both more numerous and more geographically spread out to start with. The result is that an increasingly socially liberal country votes in growing numbers for a Conservative party tacking to the right on cultural issues.

By trawling through historic YouGov polling on criminal sentencing, we can roughly chart the change that's happened. As the table below shows, 2010 Tory voters were around 10½ points more likely to agree with statements favouring toughness in the criminal justice system than 2010 Labour voters. 2017 Tory voters were around 25½ points more likely than 2017 Labour voters, and 2019 Tory voters were around 35½ points more likely than 2019 Labour voters. The questions and contexts are different, so the levels of agreement vary. But the gap clearly grew.[xi]

It would be fascinating to have polled the country, at either end of the 2010s, on the more exact question, "Do you ultimately believe that 'toughness on crime' or 'toughness on the causes of crime' is the best approach to reducing criminal activity?" This is as good a proxy for direct versus systemic as I can think of. And I believe it would have revealed significant changes in terms of voting behaviour, with those who are 'tough on crime' now overwhelmingly grouped around the Tories, and those who are 'tough on the causes of crime' increasingly drawn to Labour.

xi. There does not seem to have been any YouGov polling on this during the 2015–17 electoral term, and for the sake of consistency I have not used data from other polling companies.

Table 4

| Date of poll | Sentiment | Tory voters | Lab voters | % point gap | Most recent GE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| June 2011 | Sentences handed down by the courts are too soft | 89% | 80% | 9% points | 2010 |
| Aug 2011 | Custodial sentences are effective at punishing offenders and preventing them from committing crimes again | 69% | 58% | 11% points | 2010 |
| June 2012 | The Government must get tougher with criminals, insisting on longer prison sentences | 55% | 40% | 15% points | 2010 |
| Jan 2013 | The sentences given to people who commit crimes are not harsh enough | 84% | 73% | 11% points | 2010 |
| | | | | | |
| Feb 2019 | The Government must get tougher with criminals, insisting on longer prison sentences | 47% | 25% | 22% points | 2017 |
| Sept 2019 | The sentences that the courts hand down to people who have been convicted of crimes are not harsh enough | 87% | 58% | 29% points | 2017 |
| | | | | | |
| Sept 2020 | The sentences that the courts hand down to people who have been convicted of crimes are not harsh enough | 89% | 52% | 37% points | 2019 |
| Apr 2021 | The sentences that the courts hand down to people who have been convicted of crimes are not harsh enough | 81% | 53% | 28% points | 2019 |
| Aug 2021 | The sentences that the courts hand down to people who have been convicted of crimes are not harsh enough | 82% | 47% | 35% points | 2019 |

Certainly, if we look at support for Brexit – a key factor in the electoral realignment described earlier – we find a polarity on this issue. Remainers tend to register between 50–60% support for 'harsh' prison sentences, whereas Leavers poll between 80–90%.[45] Blue Wall Tory Remainers are more likely to be systemic thinkers, this suggests – at least when it comes to criminal justice – who find the bluntness of the Tories under Boris Johnson unattractive. Red Wall Labour Leavers, by contrast, may applaud his straight-talking style as a breath of fresh air.

So, why have the two political parties, in each case a coalition of different styles of thought, ideology and material interests in the 20th century, started to polarise around a direct and systemic distinction? And why now?

## Rising levels of formal education

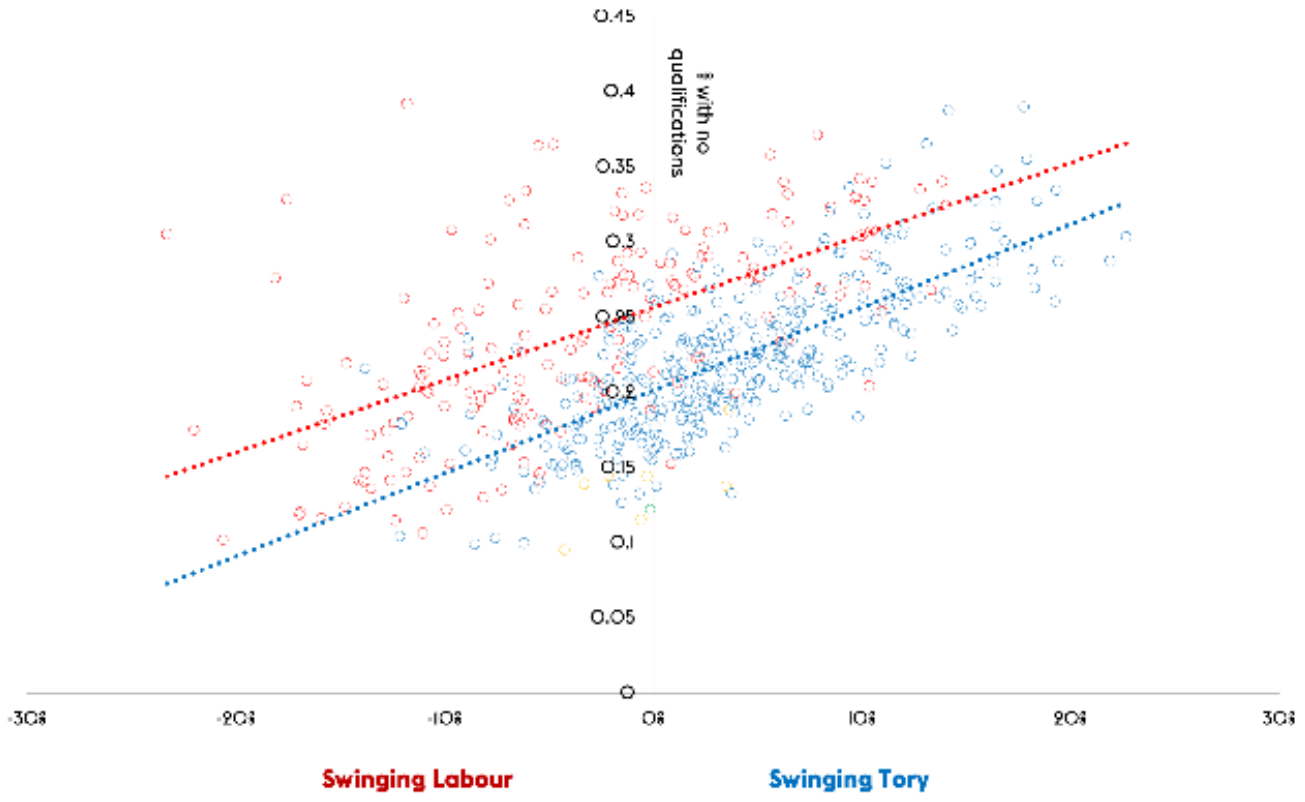
The first part of the answer relates back to education levels. Chart 8, below, reminds us of how important this is. It visualises, for all English seats, the proportion with no qualifications on the vertical axis. And it shows the cumulative 2010–19 swing to or from the Conservatives on the horizontal axis. The colour of each dot signals the party which currently holds the respective seats.

As the trend lines show, for both Tory and Labour held seats, fewer qualifications means a greater swing to the Tories. At present, 63 of the 75 seats swinging to the Tories by 10% points or more have at least 25% with no qualifications. This is true of just 5 of the 49 seats swinging to Labour by the same margin.

There have always been more and less formally educated parts of the country, of course. So what has suddenly prompted attainment to determine voting patterns?

I would say that, in a nutshell, significant increases in education have created a larger section of the population who are systemic reasoners. The expansion of university access is a factor here, of course, exemplifying the more recent manifestation of this shift and perhaps explaining the ultra-liberal attitudes of many in 'Generation Z'. But rising education levels cannot be defined in these terms alone. We have also seen, over consecutive decades, extensions of how long people stay in education and improvements in the quality of education itself. Alongside this there have been wider increases in how easy it is to access information (e.g. the advent of the internet) and in the breadth of experiences that the typical person has (e.g. increased foreign travel).

Chart 8: Cumulative 2010-19 swing versus proportion with no qualifications (English seats only, colours signify holding party, correlations for Lab and Tory-held seats picked out)




Each of these steps are likely to have amplified the number of systemic thinkers in our society. And in recent years, with over half of young people now going to university, this has reached a sort of critical mass. This is not sufficient for systemic thinkers to be the majority (although they may be starting to form a majority among young people). But it is such that they now represent a sizeable minority, and have a political voice which cannot be ignored. They are increasingly dominant in the media and among political opinion formers.

In short, Britain, like most developed countries, now has a large and growing minority who are degree-educated, post-materialist in their values and, almost certainly, fairly sceptical about overly literal policy solutions.[46] Middle-class younger adherents may be second or third generation systemic thinkers, for whom the idea that problems are 'society's fault' comes as second nature and does not need to be examined or unpacked.

Over time, this means that more people are 'tough on the causes of crime' and less are 'tough on crime'. In the US, the 1994 preference for toughness on crime had already reduced by 2002.[47] And the appetite for tough sentences continued to fall in subsequent years.[48] On this side of the Atlantic, the direction of travel is the same – with harsher attitudes to sentencing becoming less popular even in the past couple of years.[49]

If there is as much overlap as I suspect between the cohort who are young, degree-educated and middle-class and those who are systemically minded and 'tough on the causes of crime', then it is important to stress that this group will not be spread evenly – for all of the reasons discussed earlier. Systemic thinkers will be more likely to live in cities and to have moved away from their home towns.

This represents a significant change. A few decades ago, we might imagine, society as a whole would have subscribed to patterns of reasoning that were closer to one another (and that were generally more direct). But the expansion of higher education – and the uneven class, age and geographical distribution of those who have accessed it – means this is no longer the case.

To put it simply, our higher rates of university education mean that some areas have been moving towards systemic reasoning much faster than others. And the interplay between these groups and the direct reasoners in other parts of the country is creating new political conflicts. The latter are kicking back against a new set of systemic rationales which, to them, seem like vacuous nonsense. The former are infuriated by direct approaches to social issues which, to them, appear hopelessly over-simplistic and reactionary.

Hence, we're not seeing a whole chunk of society slide right-wards on social issues. But we *are* seeing a significant new group of better-off and better-educated groups shift to the liberal left, with a growing disconnect emerging between the systemic explanations and definitions which they favour and the direct ones upon which older and less affluent non-graduates have traditionally relied. Hence the divide, discussed in Part I, between the quite liberal and the very liberal.

## A complex world

The second factor explaining the schism between direct and systemic reasoners is complexity. Vast shifts, driven by globalisation, have made the world more overwhelming.[50] This has drawn into relief the distinction between direct and systemic reasoning – with the latter a harder and harder sell.

Brexit is, of course, the ultimate example, with the 2016 vote effectively acting as a plebiscite on globalisation. The Leave campaign's 'Take Back Control' slogan was an appeal to direct reasoning, and a primary issue underpinning the referendum was immigration – a policy area where direct and systemic divides are particularly acute.

The well-known 'lump of labour' fallacy, for instance, is the epitome of how direct causal reasoning is applied to migration policy.[51] It suggests that more immigration means less jobs to go round. Studies have repeatedly debunked this, yet the 'lump of labour' fallacy is also deeply intuitive. It subscribes to a clear rationale, which makes sense according to its own logic. You wouldn't let more people into a jam-packed football stadium or onto an over-full night-bus – why is a country any different?

If you interpret the world in a very direct way then the chances are that you buy into the 'lump of labour' idea. You do not have to be a nativist, a xenophobe or even a social conservative to do so, and thus to be sceptical about rising migration during straitened times.

The Conservatives' austerity policies are another example of direct reasoning winning the day. The idea that the 2008 crash was caused by Labour 'maxing out the national credit card'[52] was central to the logic behind the Tory spending cuts that followed in the early 2010s. If you work up a debt in real life it's usually because you've spent too much. And even if you have not, and the debt is the result of bad luck, you often have to take it on the chin.

The size of the national debt was, in fact, the result of a global crisis and the massive bail-out that followed; a complex, international domino effect, which required governments around the world to step in. The UK was more vulnerable to this, as a result of its large financial sector. But every developed nation saw major fallout.

Yet explaining this was hard. Failure to do so meant that Labour struggled to set out what was wrong with austerity, despite the obvious hardships it caused. For the average direct thinker, for whom the notion of spending your way out of debt was a contradiction in terms, the outrages of austerity were simply the unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of 'tightening your belt' in tough times. The moral arguments made by Labour could only have carried weight had the party explained, in direct and non-judgemental language, what the alternative was and why it made sense.

Interestingly, after the 2015 election defeat, Jon Cruddas MP described the electorate as "both economically radical and fiscally conservative."[53] He pointed out that 60% of voters agreed that 'The economic system in this country unfairly favours powerful interests', but that 58% also agreed that "We must live within our means, so cutting the deficit is the top priority." This blend of economic radicalism and fiscal prudence represents a very 'direct' view, interpreting

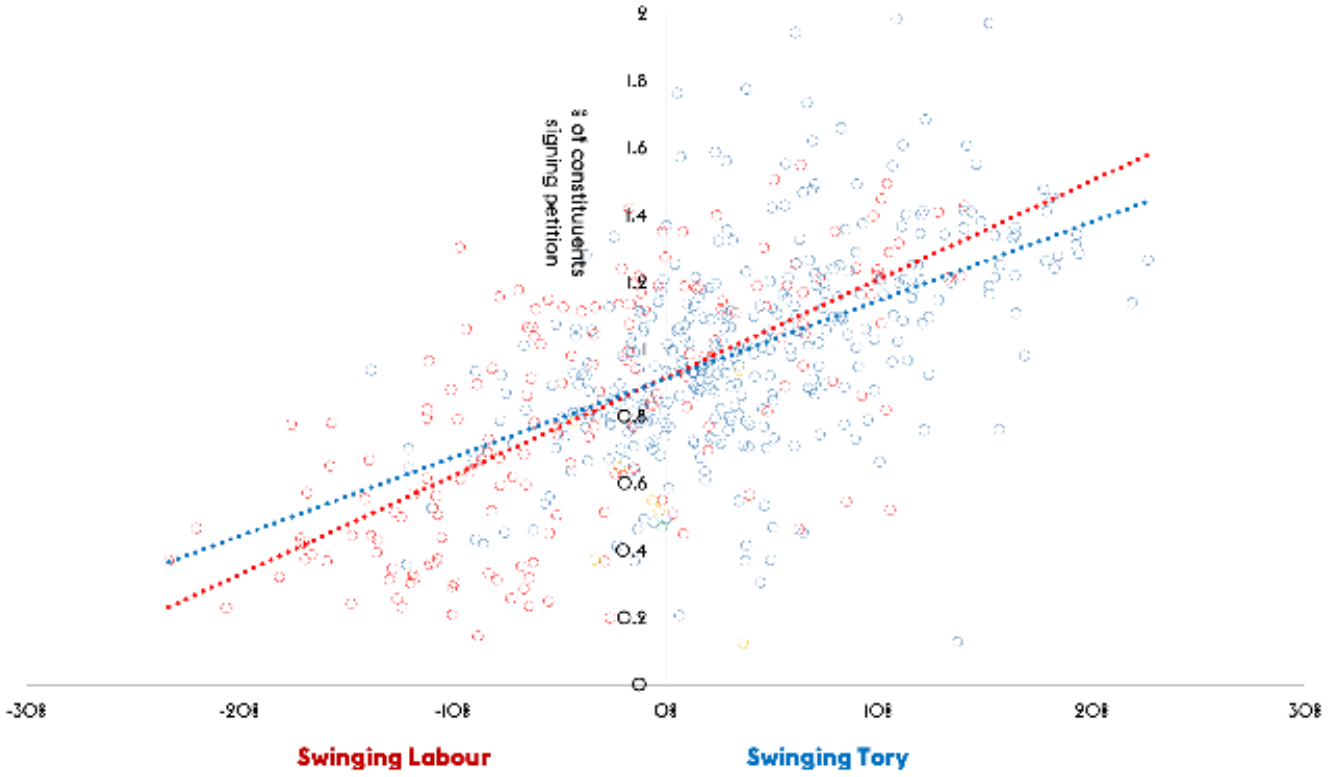
the money in the economy as a zero-sum proposition, but wishing to see it distributed fairly. Labour never really grasped this, and instead saw the 2015 election result as a vote for winner-takes-all Thatcherism.

As well as seismic events like Brexit and the 2008 crash, there have been countless smaller fissures in the past few years, where an interconnected world has created extra complexity.

Chart 9 shows the percentage of residents in each English constituency who signed a petition calling for the government to ban citizens who'd fought for ISIS from returning to the UK.[54] It came following the high-profile debate in 2019 about Shamima Begum – a radicalised British teenager who had her citizenship revoked after she joined ISIS.

As we can see, seats where high numbers signed the petition have, overwhelmingly, swung towards the Tories. This is interesting because the statement at play corresponds almost perfectly with direct logic. Why on earth should someone who has left the UK to go and fight for a death cult be allowed back, a direct reasoner might ask? A national poll for Sky News showed that 78% of Brits agreed with the decision to revoke Begum's citizenship.[55]

Chart 9: Cumulative 2010-19 swing versus proportion signing petition to ban all returning ISIS members (English seats only, colours signify holding party, correlations for Lab and Tory-held seats picked out)




Indeed, to disagree with the statement – or, at least, to disagree strongly – requires you to be a confident advocate of two types of systemic analysis. Firstly, there is in the conventional liberal belief that people are products of the socio-economic systems from which they emerge; that Begum joined ISIS when she was still a child and thus was not responsible for her actions; that children's development is determined by wider social factors; and that even a radicalised ISIS fighter should be regarded as a product of their surroundings.

And secondly, there is the internationalist understanding that no country acts in isolation; that a stateless individual must be the responsibility of someone; and that the UK must comply with the laws of the global system even when we don't much like it, or risk other countries doing the same to us.

Whether on the EU referendum, the 2008 crash or the particular case of Shamima Begum, we've thus seen a number of events, in the past 10 or 15 years, where global interconnectedness has created intensely complicated problems. The progressive answers to these challenges have been far harder to boil down than the conservative ones. And my hunch would be that, with each of these events, a sliver of direct reasoners have swung right-wards in party political terms, and a sliver of systemic reasoners have swung left.

# PART IV: DIRECT REASONING AND 'JOHNSON-ISM'

Conservative dominance in the 2010s has been enabled by the geographical realignment described, and has been helped by the gap between systemic and direct causation. But political nous has also been needed, to turn these raw ingredients into electoral success.

In particular, the Tories have been excellent at appealing to direct reasoners over the past decade. Even before the 2010 election, George Osborne was speaking eloquently to this group, as we've already seen, via the devastating accusation that Gordon Brown had 'maxed out the nation's credit card'. But the strategy reached its apex in 2019, when Boris Johnson's Conservatives battered Labour with a promise to 'bung Brexit in the microwave'. During the 2019 campaign, Dominic Cummings allegedly told Tory strategists to frame their pitch as "Blairism without caring about the causes of crime."[56]

Johnson's success came from his willingness to prise apart direct and systemic reasoners. He appealed solely to the former, in ways that his predecessors had not been willing to. And he was happy to jettison the latter in the process – hence the effective abandonment of Remain-voting Tory seats, and the ejection from the parliamentary party of many systemically minded Conservative MPs.

## The London riots

The story behind Johnson's approach to direct reasoning can be charted back to summer 2011, I think. Specifically, it can be traced to 6th August, the first day of the London Riots.

The riots were a curious phenomenon: four days of directionless chaos, devoid of any political agenda but disproportionately carried out by those living in acute deprivation among the UK's most unequal inner-city areas. They created a perfect dividing line between direct and systemic explanations.

On the conservative right, Max Hastings wrote a Daily Mail op-ed which included some quite unbelievable language. Hastings referred to the rioters as "wild beasts" reliant on "animal impulses". His conclusion, while less incendiary than the rest of the article, was telling: "Those at the bottom of [contemporary] society behave no better than their forebears, but the welfare state has relieved them from hunger and real want. When social surveys speak of 'deprivation' and 'poverty', this is entirely relative."[57] His point was that no direct barriers existed, and that the rioters essentially wanted for nothing in tangible, material terms.

On the left, by contrast, the Guardian's Gary Younge explained that: "This tinder in the box was lit at least as much by the long arm of the law as the invisible hand of the market."[58] Younge set the riots in the context of progressive uprisings which took place that year, including the Arab Spring. He and others on the left linked these events to one another, and pointed to socio-economic conditions, poverty and early austerity policies as explanations for what had happened in London. They argued that relative inequalities mattered, because they determined whether people had an equal stake in society or a fair shot at life.

The Younge analysis may have more to it than the Hastings one, but it was a hard sell for anyone not fully convinced by the systemic approach. As we saw in Part II, the *gap* between rich and poor is less likely to be regarded, by those with fewer qualifications, as a problem in and of itself. A direct reasoner might see why a starving person has no option other than to steal bread, why the 1960s colour bar was a moral affront, or why the victims of an Egyptian despot might wish to topple that despot. But they would be less likely to understand why a teenager who's just seen their nearest children's centre close has no choice but to burn down the local corner shop. When a systemic thinker writes that the London Riots were 'inevitable' given the social context, what a direct thinker may hear is that they were 'justifiable'.

In the debates following the riots, we thus saw a dynamic within the commentariat which was increasingly based on non-sequiturs and misunderstandings. Direct reasoners observed motiveless wrongdoing by people who needed to be taught a lesson. Systemic thinkers saw the young and the poor, fighting against a society rigged against them.

If we again ransack the YouGov polling archive, we find the seeds of a realignment already in evidence, just one year into the decade. The table below shows agreement with various statements about the London Riots, taken from a single poll. It depicts the proportion of those in agreement with each statement that voted Labour in 2010 – along with the proportion that said, as of August 2011, that they intended to vote Labour at the next election.

The rows in yellow reflect statements aligned with systemic reasoning – i.e. those which emphasise wider social causes, or which express scepticism about the effectiveness of harsh punishments and vigilante actions. The rows in grey emphasise statements aligned with direct reasoning, emphasising choice and agency, and an 'eye-for-an-eye' approach to justice.

Table 5: Sentiments/statements about the London riots, Channel 4 poll, YouGov, August 2011

| Sentiment/statement | Agreement among those who voted Labour at GE 2010 | Agreement among those intending to vote Labour at next GE |
|---|---|---|
| *'Systemic' sentiments* | | |
| One reason for the riots was social inequality and the gap between rich and poor | 22% | 26% |
| One reason for the riots was government cuts | 20% | 23% |
| Looters should receive a non-custodial sentences, or not be punished at all | 8% | 11% |
| Those guilty of criminal damage should receive a non-custodial sentence, or not be punished at all | 16% | 20% |
| Local residents who came together in an effort to stop the rioters were wrong to do so | 12% | 14% |
| *'Direct' sentiments* | | |
| One reason for the riots was poor parenting | 46% | 44% |
| One reason for the riots was insufficient punishments for offenders | 36% | 34% |
| I would personally use/ threaten violence to defend my property from looters | 55% | 52% |
| The police response to the unrest was not tough enough | 84% | 82% |
| Those guilty of violent disorder should get more than a year in prison | 64% | 59% |

Differences, in the case of each sentiment, are small – often too small to be of statistical significance. We must remember, after all, that this was extremely early in the decade. The two party leaders on offer were David Cameron and Ed Miliband.

But all of the shifts in question point the same way. Systemic sentiments garnered more support from those planning to vote Labour than from those who had done so the year before; direct sentiments garnered less support. If we look at pretty much every YouGov poll from around this time, the same pattern holds true.

## 'Johnson-ism'

At the political level, David Cameron responded to the riots using his favoured blend of direct and systemic explanations, at a ratio of around 2:1. His general response was initially very 'tough on crime' but was subsequently also fairly 'tough on the causes of crime'. The Tories promised to address the causes of 'broken Britain' by providing support for troubled families.[59]

The most interesting figure, however, was Boris Johnson - The Mayor of London. He was not, at this point, seen as a future Prime Minister. But I remember watching on the news as he showed up in Clapham with a broom, to defy David Cameron's party line and proclaim that "It's time we heard a little bit less about the sociological justifications for what is, in my view, nothing less than wanton criminality."[60] His words were booed by the liberal, London audience. But he elevated his voice over the crowd to reiterate his point. He repeated the sentiments later, to a bystander.[61]

The scene was a telling one (especially with the benefit of hindsight, as we watch Boris Johnson undergo a spectacular fall from grace, two years into his premiership). It showed that the then London Mayor, who'd presented himself to voters as a liberal Conservative, was a Thatcherite at heart. He had no time at all for structural or systemic arguments. Whether or not he rode a bike to work, this set him apart from the modernisation project which the Tory Party had undergone during the previous few years, which relied on hugging tight both direct and systemic voters.

To the extent that Johnson has principles, they can be boiled down, I think, to an unswerving faith in direct reasoning and individual efficacy. This is especially true in relation to himself. I would not be surprised if it had genuinely never occurred to him that he had a privileged upbringing, or that his achievements owe anything to factors other than his natural talents. This is not something I would say of David Cameron or George Osborne.

Johnson's famous quote about his time as a young journalist in Brussels is telling here: "I was just chucking these rocks over the garden wall, and I'd listen to this amazing crash from the greenhouse, next door, over in England, as everything I wrote from Brussels was having this amazing, explosive effect." Reading this back it is worth recalling George Lakoff's description of direct causation in its purest form ('punching someone in the nose is direct causation, throwing a rock through a window is direct causation').

This enjoyment of direct reasoning is the closest thing that exists to 'Johnson-ism'. It marked his political career over the decade following the London Riots, and particularly his behaviour when it came to Brexit. Slogans like 'Take back control' and 'Get Brexit done' emphasise blunt, 'A+B=C' reasoning, of the kind that plays well with tabloids. They are appealing to a direct reasoner but appear deeply irresponsible to those of a systemic bent.

## Direct answers to systemic challenges: Brexit and Covid

Johnson's alleged optimism, meanwhile – which is always reliant on a negative reading of present society (as pliant and pusillanimous by comparison to what it could be) – is based on a sense of Britain's limitless agency as a nation. His Brexit metaphor of an "oven ready deal"[62] which he would "bung in the microwave"[63] corresponded to direct voters' emphasis on common sense and getting things done. You have as much efficacy when negotiating with a trading bloc of 27 countries, he told voters, as you do in your own kitchen.

By returning once again to the initial Lakoff description of direct reasoning ('if our mother turns a knob on the oven, flames emerge') we see why metaphors like this are so powerful. They draw a link between big, complex social issues and the normal, everyday actions through which we navigate the world. They cohere with ideas of common sense as a result, helping to reduce inherently intricate questions to simple processes of cause-and-effect.

Steps like the proroguing of parliament were an attack on those who suggested things might be more complicated. Indeed, Johnson's conversion to all-out right-wing populism came from a clash between direct rhetoric and a democratic structure which was inescapably systemic.

On Covid-19, meanwhile, Boris Johnson's trajectory followed the same logic. His big technical failings in relation to the pandemic came through the ultra-direct thinker's strong sense of personal efficacy. An invisible, airborne virus, after all, is hard to take seriously for someone of an extremely literal bent. As former Tory MP Rory Stewart puts it, "To be good at lockdown, you need to be very detail-orientated, very concerned with getting to the bottom of the science, very attentive to what's happening in other parts of the world."[64]

These systemic ways of thinking are characteristics which Johnson simply does not have. The British Prime Minister consistently implied that we could front the virus out or brush it off, and this led to a chaotic and unscientific approach, with lockdowns routinely announced several weeks too late.

Conversely, the Government's sole success in relation to Covid-19 was the decision to buy the vaccine and roll it out quickly. How much Johnson had to do with this is another question. But the outcome was while other European countries were more cautious about health approvals, the UK's ethos allowed us to push through our programme of jabs at speed. The vaccine rollout provided a story of actions trumping words. This carried weight long after other countries' rollout rates had caught up, because of what it symbolised.

In the instance of the vaccine, the direct approach paid off. Polling towards the end of the pandemic, in summer 2021, showed where it had and had not borne political fruit. Johnson's

approval rating was +17 among those with no qualifications, and -26 among those educated to degree level.[65] Up until 'party-gate' it looked like this would be the abiding takeaway from Covid-19, and that Johnson's popularity with non-graduates would mean he had the last word.

## The idea of the 'Great Man'

Boris Johnson's faith in direct reasoning may stem from 'no such thing as society' Thatcherism, but it also taps into something different – namely the 'Great Man' theory of history. Whereas the former uses direct reasoning to emphasise prudence and individual responsibility, the latter uses it to understate systemic explanations of events – boiling everything down to the agency of immense and far-sighted individuals.

Johnson seems to see himself as one of these 'Great Men', with his apparent adulation of Winston Churchill stemming from an effort to cast himself in this mould.[66] His indifference to rules – including those he's set himself – comes as a result of this. So too his attraction to vanity projects, which was a defining feature of his time as Mayor of London.

In *The Churchill Myths*, by the academics Bill Schwarz, Richard Toye, and Steven Fielding, the authors describe in detail how Boris Johnson's own book, *The Churchill Factor*, plays upon this idea.[67] Johnson's biography sets out its stall from the very outset, the authors explain, by proclaiming that:

> He [Churchill] is the resounding human rebuttal to all Marxist historians who think history is the story of vast and impersonal economic forces. The point of the Churchill Factor is that one man can make all the difference.

Schwarz, Toye and Fielding go on to paraphrase Johnson's version of events at the start of World War II: "A political stalemate prevails, abetted by party foot soldiers who lack fire in their bellies. A man of destiny intervenes, realizing that to abide by the norms of political conduct would do nothing to break the crisis. He discovers, further, that reasoned argument can't do the job. Salvation lies in abandoning 'reason' and 'intellectual restraint'."

The great strength of Churchill, as a talisman for the likes of Boris Johnson, is the idea that a political actor can have limitless agency. The folklore around Churchill suggests that A plus B can be made to equal C through sheer willpower.

It is this blend of 'no such thing as society' direct thinking and 'Great Man' direct thinking which explains Johnson's political coalition. It enabled his appeal both to a right-wing Tory membership who despise the 'nanny state' and to Red Wall Leave voters who crave common sense. It allowed him to evoke Thatcher to one audience and Churchill to the other. And it let

him pose as a man of the people – despite all his public school trimmings – when he dismissed as "hogwash" or "piffle" the perspectives of those who looked at societal factors, encouraged restrained language, or said things were more complicated than they seemed.

Indeed, Johnson's instincts on the environment, up until a couple of years ago, had a clear echo of the snowball-throwing Senators described by George Lakoff. They were the very embodiment of direct reasoning. As the Independent journalist Andy Grice reminds us, as recently as 2013 Johnson denied the existence of climate change, on the basis that: "I am speaking only as a layman who observes that there is plenty of snow in our winters these days."[68] In 2012 he lambasted windfarms, which "would barely pull the skin off a rice pudding," and in 2015 he declared that "There may be all kinds of reasons why I was sweating at ping-pong – but they don't include global warming."

Johnson's views on this particular topic appear to have changed. But in him we nevertheless see the political architecture of the right-hand side in the culture war. His leadership is characterised by a preference for direct thinking on every point – prizing brute force, gut instinct and the limitless agency of the individual.[xii]

Serious concerns about racial equality or the gender pay gap can be dismissed as liberal hand-wringing (as "bunk" or "guff"). And the government can pursue protectionist, 'lump of labour' policies on growth and immigration, which fall apart as soon as they're subject to any scrutiny, but which seem to make sense when squinted at from afar.

By relentlessly flogging these ultra-direct notions, Johnson's government was able to (as Peter Kellner puts it) "ride high in the polls when their party has been in power for 11 years, when petrol is scarce, food rots in the ground, supermarket shelves have large gaps, gas prices are rocketing and Christmas is threatened."[69]

Indeed, the populist (but flawed) economic argument put forward by Boris Johnson at the 2021 Tory conference was based on a direct and intuitive set of ideas. These presented our economy as finite, with fewer migrants meaning more jobs and with collapsing supply chains allowing our domestic industries to step in and flourish. The national economy could be 'levelled up' at the same time as migration was reduced.

You don't need to be a raging authoritarian or an avowed isolationist to vote for many of these ideas. And nor do I think, at a deep level, that Johnson is driven by bigotry or nationalism.

xii. Many but not all of these features are shared by the Prime Ministers former advisor Dominic Cummings who, though arriving late on the scene must been seen as an important influence on 'Johnson-ism'. As a result of his reams of published writing on the art and science of politics we have a clearer idea of what he thinks and clearly is not in tight lock stop with the PM. But, in understanding the centrality of a clear and direct messages and action – as well as through his faith in the 'Great Man' theory of history – there are large areas of overlap.

The present realignment has simply created battle lines between those who favour simple, direct solutions and those who favour complex, systemic ones.

## 'Party-gate'

When I began writing this paper, Boris Johnson looked indestructible. His subsequent undoing, during the six months culminating in 'party-gate', has turned this on its head. Rarely has a political leader looked weaker or been less liked.

Yet no matter what eventually happens, his fall should not cause progressives to ignore the root of his appeal. His draw was his ability to embody very direct approaches to policy-making, diplomacy and general life, without appealing explicitly to prejudice or nationalism. He hereby spoke to a raft of voters, many of whom held no candle for the racist politics of Nigel Farage (who often saw themselves as socially liberal, in fact) yet who felt sick of a world where words did not mean what they said, and where every question turned out to be more complicated than first thought.

Johnson's use of relatable metaphors and his veneration of bish-bosh-wallop 'common sense' made him a formidable opponent, at his peak. He was able to pose as the guardian of direct reasoning and native wit, against forms thinking which, when articulated by the left, appeared cosseted and woolly.

The success of 'party-gate', in bringing Johnson down, came because it was as literal a story as could be conceived. Revelations about suitcases full of booze required no visual metaphor to bring them to life. The form they took in the public imagination was based on direct and uncomplicated breaches of the rules.

Ultimately, if we are to take one key lesson from 'Johnson-ism', it is that individual efficacy matters. We are all, to some extent, direct reasoners. We all believe in our power to act on the world. I am not convinced that working-class voters swinging away from Labour see themselves as 'oppressed' or feel downtrodden by austerity – concerned though they may be that society is unfair or that their children won't get a fair crack. And I suspect that many have become impatient with the language of victimhood more generally. Johnson's gung-ho style was more attractive in 2019 than the *I, Daniel Blake* condescension of the Corbyn years.

If the great New Labour take-away from Thatcher's success with working-class voters was the importance of 'aspiration', then the primary lesson from Johnson's destruction of the Red Wall should be about the importance of 'agency'. ("There's no such thing as 'No' in his vocabulary," one ex-Labour voter in the North East explains to Sebastian Payne, in his book *Broken Heartlands*).[70] If and when the Boris Johnson premiership combusts, Labour must not lose sight of this, if it wishes to win back the voters he so successfully courted.

# PART V: PROBLEMS WITH SYSTEMIC THINKING

The course taken by the progressive left has, in many ways, been an inversion of the ultra-direct route chosen by the populist right. Always ideologically well-disposed to systemic thinking and messages, left and progressive parties have increasingly become the preserve of those who favour this logic.

As the number of systemic reasoners within society has grown, Labour in particular has often pitched itself explicitly or exclusively to this group. By the time of the 2019 Election, the Labour Leadership appeared to be as contemptuous of direct logic and language as Boris Johnson's Tories were of systemic analyses.

The Corbyn era saw the idea of a 'rigged system' put forward as an explanation for almost everything, as a pretext to shy away from many of the hard questions of government. Systemic thinking under Corbyn effectively boiled down to an 'I wouldn't be starting from here' approach. It did not provide a description of how the constituent parts of the system related to each other or a genuine analysis of how the structure itself could be reformed.

The result was that Labour was regarded as the preserve of woolly thinking – good at pointing out problems but bad at solving them. Direct reasoners, many of them in frontline or manual jobs that relied on their ability to 'think in straight lines', did not feel able to vote Labour.

## From 'bread and butter' to 'red wine and cigarettes'

Also in ascent, during the past decade, has been a brand of US-born leftism which trades in hyper-systemic analyses. This type of post-liberal activism highlights important causes, but can also be very divisive. It does not simply extend systemic reasoning, but amends and re-purposes it in a number of ways. Labour under Starmer has often not known whether to hug tight or hold at arm's length the social justice movements which have emerged out of it.

Many of these movements are themselves hostile to Keir Starmer, and are quick to point out when he's failing to back them. Yet to the average direct reasoner, who is watching politics casually, Labour remains more closely aligned with these activist groups than any other major party.

In particular, the words 'systemic' and 'structural' are increasingly the favoured terms of the left, at a point when overtly hateful or hierarchical attitudes have become rarer. Yet these words are seldom unpacked or broken down, and are often assumed to require no further explanation.

In their book *Cynical Theories*, Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay trace these new social justice movements back to the post-modernist ideas of the 1960s and 1970s. Epitomised by French academics like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, these types of theory favoured 'structural' critiques, questioning science and refuting the existence of objective truth or meaning. They argued that systems which benefit the powerful were written into language, thought, and even into concepts like time and space.

A basis within these modes of critique has led, according to Pluckrose and Lindsay, to forms of 'activist scholarship' in the 2010s and 2020s which are wholly different from the liberal, modernist and rational approaches previously favoured by progressives, such as during the civil rights movements. They refer to this as the 'post-modern turn', casting it not as an extension of progressive liberalism but as a departure from it. Through channelling the post-modernist idea that objective truths are impossible to attain, the authors claim that types of identity politics have emerged which undermine the concepts both of a universal human nature we all share, and of individual agency to enact change.[71]

The result, *Cynical Theories* argues, is a styles of politics which focuses on 'deconstructing' language, which reads complex power dynamics into every interaction within the system, and which see improvements in material conditions as second order questions. A raft of formerly sturdy concepts are now dismissed as 'constructs', and statements as basic as 'water is wet' can be cast as functions of 'privilege'.

Pluckrose and Lindsay are not alone. The influence of post-modernism on politics has been criticised from a range of different perspectives, including by Liz Truss MP (a right-winger),[72] by the journalist and activist Paul Mason (a left-winger)[73] and by French President Emmanuel Macron (a centrist).[74]

I share much of the *Cynical Theories* authors' concern, in large part because of the damage which these post-modernist ideas do to systemic arguments. They substitute one form of structural critique with another. A scientific systemic analysis – which looks for the chains of cause-and-effect that hold back equality – is replaced by an ethereal systemic analysis. The latter cannot be properly pinned down, and floats beyond your grasp as soon as you think you've understood it.

Many direct reasoners are open to structural explanations of the former kind – to the notion, for example, that a car insurance algorithm could have an Islamophobic bias written into it, and that this is wrong and should be changed. But once we get into forms of activism which draw on the 'red wine and cigarettes' deconstructionism of the 1960s New Left – based not on rational and material concerns but on a perpetual interrogation against the grain of linguistic structures seen as innately oppressive – then I think we're likely to drive people into the arms of our opponents.

To be clear, these post-modern manifestations of systemic thinking are only pursued by a small sub-set of activists. But I would argue that they're as unhelpful to progressive causes as using a snowball to disprove global warming.

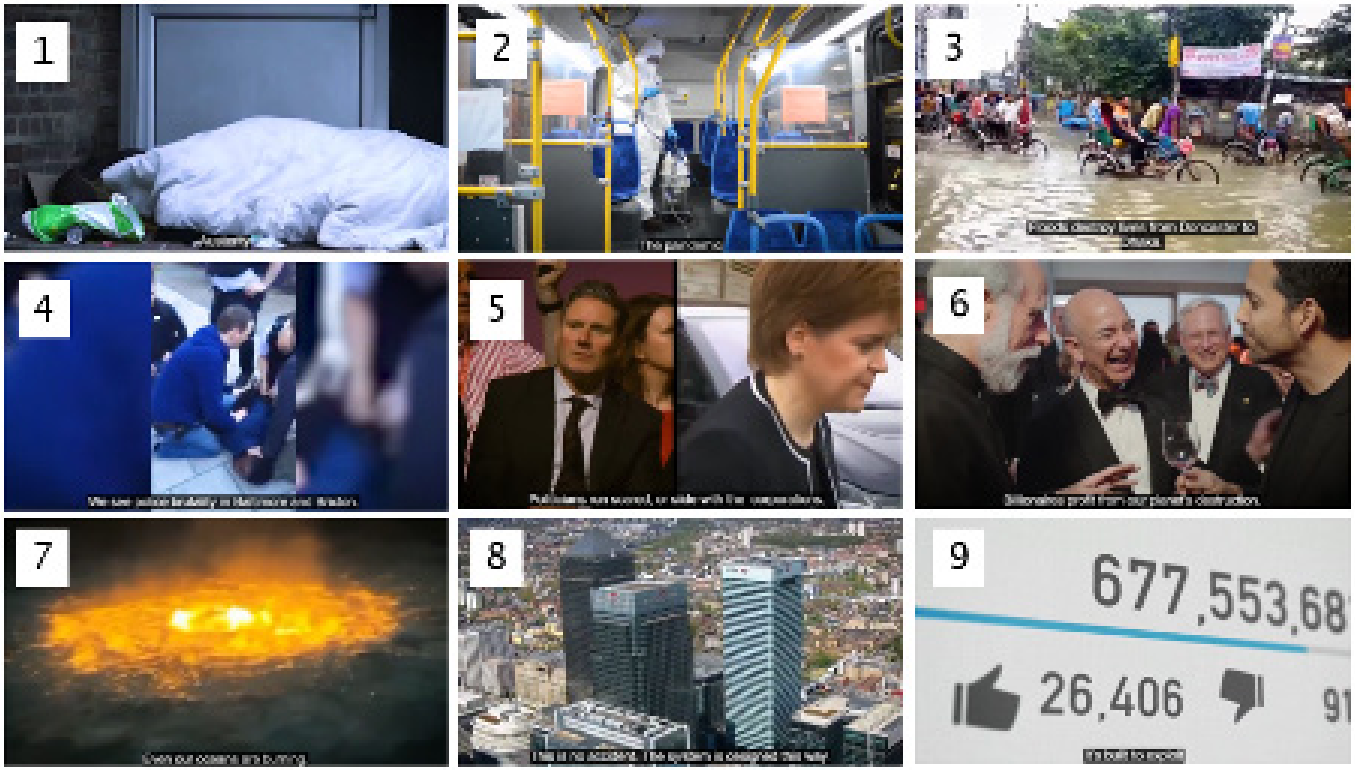
I will go on to argue that Labour needs to get more comfortable using direct reasoning and language. But systemic thinkers on the left also need to be confident in identifying when systemic and structural analyses are being misused. Below are a couple of examples of places where we can do this.

## Overwhelming challenges

Systems are large and complex. Useful systemic reasoning demystifies our social, political and economic structures, and thinks about how we can change them. Ultimately, this approach embodies egalitarian liberalism in its purest sense: a philosophy which regards social systems as an immensely powerful force, shaping who we are as people and how our lives turn out.

Unhelpful systemic reasoning, however, does something different. It suggests that all social problems are so linked, bundled together and conflated that they're insurmountable.

A video from mid-2021, released by the Green New Deal campaign, epitomises the way in which some activists use systemic thinking. (The thumbnails below show a series of stills from the opening 30 seconds). The video weaves together footage of library closures, Covid-19, Brexit food shortages, police brutality, homelessness, climate change and wealth inequality. "This is no accident," a voice-over explains. "The system is designed this way. It's built to exploit."[75]




Individuals as politically diverse as Bill Gates, Richard Branson, Nicola Sturgeon and Priti Patel are subsequently depicted as the architects of this malign system. And resistance takes the forms, within the video, of activists campaigning about Palestine, of protesters at the vigil for Sarah Everard, and of green energy suppliers installing solar panels.

Everything that is socially harmful is knitted together, according to this way of thinking, forming an interlinked web of oppression. Global warming is racism.[76] Climate justice is social justice. Civil liberties infringements are a function of 'neoliberalism'. Progressive advances that have already been made are downplayed or dismissed, because of their failure to change an impossibly large super-structure. And there is little on offer for an electorate who, as the strategist James Kanagasooriam notes, tend to view each policy issue in isolation.[77]

This kind of thinking can lead left-wingers in several directions. Firstly, it can result in despair, with people deciding that the system is too large and broken to fix. Secondly it can lead to conspiracism – to the assumption that a world so corrupt must be rigged by malign forces. Thirdly, it can lead to the utopian idea that conventional, democratic politics is pointless in the face of such powerful systems.

None of these conclusions are progressive or positive. When the Labour Party is associated with them the result is that, as Jon Cruddas MP and academic colleagues put it, the party "delivers voters only a missionary gospel of doom and gloom on the doorstep."[78]

## Not saying what we mean or meaning what we say

Another facet of this hyper-connected analysis is that it links forms of oppression which are thematically similar but which differ dramatically in scale, character and origin. A systemic thread can link a man calling a woman he does not know 'darling', the existence of the gender pay gap, and the crimes of Harvey Weinstein – all three being part of a misogynistic or patriarchal structure.

This in turn allows words which are traditionally used to describe the most extreme offenses to be applied much more broadly, as part of a wider 'system of oppression'. Examples of this 'term inflation' include references to 'acts of violence', feelings of being 'unsafe' and instances of 'triggering'. These words are frequently used to describe phenomena which don't directly relate to physical attacks or to diagnosed cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

To be clear, one can build a reasonable theory about the role of systems, institutions and their complex interactions with individuals and real world events. And this can allow you to see links between things that are disconnected in a direct sense.

My decision to purchase a garment made, I suspect, in poor conditions in the developing world may have detrimental repercussions for people I have never met, as well as for the environment. This is something which I should reflect on and change, if I can. But it is not, in itself, the murder of an individual, the killing of the planet or an act of racism. If it is then what do we call it when one person slays another with a knife, when an oil company spills thousands of tonnes of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, or when someone on the far right shouts racist slurs?

This may sound like I'm straying into philosophy, or that I'm trying to let myself – as a participant in systems – off the hook. I am not. What I am trying to avoid is the conflation of terms, in ways which make problems seem insurmountable, which undermine the severity of the most extreme issues, and which create communications barriers with direct reasoners.

This last point is perhaps the most damaging. It happens almost inevitably when highly systematic theories about how the world works butt up against the need for quotable slogans.

A particularly good example, which to be fair had only a little traction in the UK, was 'defund

the police'. What this slogan technically described was the re-balancing of funding, away from frontline police and towards social and mental health services. It referred to a "demand for equitable investments and budgets for communities across the country," [79] as one Democratic Congresswoman put it, when Barack Obama questioned the usefulness of the term.

Yet to a direct reasoner the phrase means what it says, describing the immediate reduction of police funding to zero and the cancellation of all police officer employment contracts.

## Ammunition for right populists

Progressives should not abandon their understanding of events and systems as connected. But we must resist disproportionate language and the conflation of things that are not the same or are not linked. Instead, we must identify the specifics of who or what needs to change within the system for progress to occur.

Failing to do this hands ammunition to the right, who can imply that those advocating progressive positions are playing politics or crying wolf. At its most counter-productive, the misuse of systemic logic taps into the worst fears and deepest suspicions of direct reasoners: that young people are 'snowflakes'; that the goalposts of what is progressive are continually moving; that political correctness has gone mad; and that social campaigners secretly want to instigate a revolution.

This presents easy fodder to an ultra-direct reasoner like Boris Johnson, who thrives on a situation where he can diminish the claims of his opponents as "claptrap" or "rubbish". He will often be able to discredit in the same breath wider arguments for social reform, or to crank further open the political realignment described in Part I.

# PART VI: NEXT STEPS FOR LABOUR

The above interplay hands the advantage to the likes of Johnson or Trump – whose mastery of direct logic and language poses as competence. Through setting themselves in contrast to the ultra-systemic jargon of the left, these right-wing populists are able to cast themselves as swashbuckling men of action. And, because they have the electoral arithmetic on their side in the first place – their opponents' support tending to pile up in cities – they have an inbuilt advantage.

Labour's discomfort with thinking and communicating directly meant, in 2010s Britain, that large parts of the population were drawn towards a party that promised to "slap Brexit in the microwave," and away from one whose approach they regarded as abstract and obscure. Although Keir Starmer is turning around the tanker, Labour has continued to lose ground in areas where the absence of life chances, educational opportunities and job prospects is most acute.

These parts of the population are distributed in such a way, geographically, that without them it's very hard for Labour to govern. But, above and beyond this, they are groups whom the party aspires, in an emotional sense, to represent. Without their backing, Labour has lost its *raison d'etre*.

Managing the debate between the hard-core direct and systemic camps – which has become a central strand of the culture war – will be essential if Labour is to win these groups back. A More In Common report from 2021, entitled 'Dousing the Flames', suggested that modern leaders must neither "align with cultural arsonists in inflaming conflicts" nor "stick their head in the sand and hope that the culture war simply pass them by."[80] Clear third positions need to be taken, they argued.

What might these third positions look like? I believe there needs to be three separate components to answering this.'

## A) Acknowledging the value of direct reasoning

The first element is that Labour must be genuinely comfortable with situations where direct logic is correct and proper – rather than treat the direct-systemic fault line as an either-or choice.

One of the earliest errors of the Corbyn years was when the then Labour leader refused, in 2015, to advocate 'shoot to kill' as a policy in the case of a terror attack on UK soil. He instead

advocated "preventative" approaches. This was a statement which haunted him throughout his tenure as Labour leader, with The Sun unearthing the clip for a second time two years later, after the London Bridge attack.[81]

Corbyn's words were a classic case of systemic reasoning being pursued irrespective of context. At the point of a terror attack occurring on British streets, preventative approaches have, by definition, failed.

The same was true of Corbyn's stances on foreign policy over the years. These have, without exception called for 'debate' and 'diplomacy', even when dictators were mobilising and negotiations had failed long ago.

All of this was noticed by voters. At the Stoke by-election in 2017, for instance, the Guardian's 'Anywhere but Westminster' series captured a scene which summed up the response to Corbyn. It featured a Labour door-knocker talking to a young man on a housing estate (see image below). Despite calling for investment in his community, the man dismissed Corbyn out of hand as "a dick". When pressed on why, he cited Labour's position on national security: "If someone comes over here and starts blowing us up what are you going to do? Pour them a tea and tell them to crack on?"[82]


For video click here (timecode: 08:01)

There are many situations – on policing, defence, security and even on the management of natural disasters or emergency infrastructure projects – where direct logic is necessary and right. This is why questions around these topics, despite often being hypothetical, remain politically important. In the light of Vladimir Putin's invasion of the Ukraine in February 2022, they have become more real.

You can bemoan underlying factors or favour long-term preventative steps, while acknowledging that there is a time for 'no nonsense', ultra-literal thinking. If there is a sense that you would prevaricate at these junctures, then direct reasoners will not vote for you.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought this home. It is telling that, despite the Tories' poor management of Covid-19 – not to mention Labour's historic and entrenched advantage on the NHS – many voters believed, as late as March 2021, that Labour would have handled the crisis worse.[83] This is because Labour had come to be seen as a party focused entirely on systemic factors; on words not on actions. Twelve years out of office have added to this impression, with Labour having few opportunities to show it can deliver.

Thus, I do not think that the voters of Stoke or Mansfield are looking for a patriotic conversion to pounds and ounces from Keir Starmer – or that they want Labour to ape the Tories at the level of policy. But, after five years of Corbyn, it needs to be crystal clear that Labour is not a wishy-washy party, and can think in straight lines when it matters.

Labour will always, ultimately, aspire to fix the system. But we must recognise that direct approaches are needed when that system has failed. We should never think that prison is the answer to deterring crime or rehabilitating criminals. But we must acknowledge that there are occasions when it is necessary.

Likewise, it needs to be clear that we on the left know that a police force will always be needed, however much we might want to reform it. Likewise, that we understand that there are certain circumstances under which the military might need to be deployed, even if we disagree with how they've been used in the past. Likewise, that we have the capacity to deal operationally with a natural disaster, before we start to talk about the environmental factors which caused it. And, again likewise, that we know that revenue from the exchequer is ultimately finite, even if we advocate a much more Keynesian position on the economy.

Keir Starmer's 2021 Conference speech began this job, but many of these points will need to be reiterated again and again over the next two years. Labour's Leaders in regional and local government have a particularly important role to play here, in demonstrating that the party can handle the very direct either-or questions which governing throws up.

## B) Distancing Labour from left-wing abuses of systemic reasoning

Whilst Labour can cover its bases in terms of direct causation, its analysis and ideology will always mean it is the most systemic of Britain's two main parties. For this reason, it is vital that Labour distances itself from approaches which, as we saw in Part V, discredit systemic thinking.

The risk – in an environment where a tweet by an activist can quickly make it into a national newspaper – is that mainstream progressive stances end up being crowded out of the so-called culture war debate. In the best case scenario, eccentric positions get undue attention. In the worst, because they share some DNA, they are taken as the preferred policy of all progressives, including the Labour Leadership.[xiii]

Perceptions of Keir Starmer's 'wokeness' are striking, within this. According to YouGov polling from 2021, he is seen as more 'non-woke' by the 'woke' but as more 'woke' by the 'non-woke'. Both sides think he's in the other camp. This divergence exists neither for Boris Johnson (regarded as very 'non-woke' in all quarters) or for Jeremy Corbyn (regarded as fairly 'woke' by both audiences). [84]

As Tony Blair put it, in spring 2021, "The [cultural] battle is being fought on ground defined by the right because sensible progressives don't want to be on the field at all." Labour's message, according to Blair, is "being defined by the 'woke' left, whose every statement gets cut-through courtesy of the right."[85]

In practice, the path this tends to take is as follows. A sometimes reasonable (sometimes not) piece of ultra-systemic thinking will be distilled into a mantra or slogan. This will initially be confined to a small group of online or offline activists. As we've seen, it will often very poorly represent the ideas it supposedly champions (as with 'defund the police'), and will be seized upon by right-of-centre media outlets as soon as it gains any traction.

Labour frontbenchers will then be asked to comment on the issue, and will be put in an impossible position, where they are castigated as 'woke' by loud voices on the right if they support the activity, and are condemned as reactionaries by loud voices on the left if they do not. Each petty furore provides grist for the Tory campaign mill, and lets them lever the political realignment open further.

xii. The problem is not helped by the fact that in recent years many of the most extreme abuses of systemic reasoning have been adopted by official Labour figures and their outriders.

To short-circuit this process, Labour needs some organising principles, so that the party knows what side it falls on when it comes to each campaign, cause or slogan that emerges from the activist left. This will let it sift bold, positive ideas which society may not quite be ready for (but which Labour can engage with and develop) from stances which are counter-productive or regressive.

Below are four questions which Labour might ask – of anything from a single tweet to a rally to a funded campaign to a public comment from a celebrity – to help us decide our position.

**1.Are the ends achievable?** By 'achievable' I don't mean that everything must be fully costed or doable in an electoral term – just that the cause should have a goal in sight, after which its aims can be said to have succeeded.

**2. Are the goals socially just?** More often than not, the answer here will be yes. But this is not the case on all points. The logic underpinning certain campaigns can move you into territory which runs counter to progressive ideas.

**3. Is the problem real and important (according to the language being used)?** This relates to how genuine the injustice is – especially if 'term inflation' means it is described in language which isn't proportionate to the scale or nature of the issue.

**4. Are the tactics helping the cause?** Cause and tactics are inextricable for many on the modern, activist left. Yet there are many cases where the chosen tactics demonstrably fail to advance the wider goals.

It goes without saying that there is an element of judgement in answering the four questions in any given case. This ultimately needs to come down to Labour's leadership, who will not always get it right. But I would say that, if an activity fails several of these four tests, then the party should distance itself in strong and uncompromising terms. We should be confident here that a sensible majority of systemic reasoners will back us in doing so.

## C) Explaining why and how we will fix the system

The final element requires us to set out plans to fix aspects of the system – and, just as importantly, to make the case for *why* and *how* we will do this.

George Lakoff writes that "Direct causation is easy to understand, and appears to be represented in the grammars of all languages around the world. Systemic causation is more complex and is not represented in the grammar of any language. It just has to be learned."

This suggests that systemic reasoning is not innate to human beings. And it explains why higher levels of formal education might correlate with an attraction to systemic diagnoses. Systemic reasoning has, perhaps, only become widespread in the post-war era – among the most developed and educated parts of the most developed and educated nations.

In this sense, progressives are at an inbuilt disadvantage. If someone is on an over-full train carriage and is shoved by a fellow passenger, then it's natural that their immediate irritation will be directed at the person who shoved them. Getting them to focus on the overarching failures of the rail company, the Department for Transport, the regulator or the wider macro-economy will always be a harder ask. And, let's not forget, they will sometimes have a point about the behaviour of the passenger who has shoved them.

The goal of the systemically minded left, seen this way, should be to bring with us those who lean towards direct thinking, by persuading, explaining and reassuring. If Labour is able to do this, then we can argue for genuinely radical answers to faults in the system.

Covid-19 creates an opportunity here, allowing the party to make the case for once-in-a-lifetime reforms. Conservative pledges to 'level up' and to 'build back better', empty though they often are, provide a mandate of sorts for this. Labour should pledge not only to make real on these empty promises but to go much further. And, thanks to Brexit, Johnson's party have less of a fiscal high ground from which to criticise them.

This is not to say that we should advocate a 'spend, spend spend' mentality. But the national debt will not be paid off overnight and, unlike after the 2008 crash, it is harder for the Conservatives to pin it on a profligate government or a work-shy population. Keir Starmer can promote this as a moment for rebuilding – as long as there is clarity about where the priorities for this lie and how Labour will pay for each item.

The echoes of 1945 here have been commented on before: an understated and underestimated Labour leader; a bombastic Tory Party who suddenly look like the past; a public who think that maybe Britain could do better; and a nation in the financial red through no fault of its own. But the element of the parallel which is arguably missing, for Labour, is a clear equivalent of Beveridge's 'five giants'. What are the faults in our system, at home and abroad, which we think are fixable? And how would we mend these if we got the chance?

This could seek to address adult social care, homelessness, racial disparities, prison reform, regional inequality, the gender pay gap or social mobility. It might relate to refugees and our asylum system, or to sustainability and our approach to climate change. Nothing should be considered too radical.

Labour has already begun to sketch out its ideas here, with the Green Transition front and centre. Other solutions might be found via reforms, such as the introduction of a Land Value Tax.

They might be identified through the creation of institutions – such as a national network of mental health and wellbeing hubs, or full-time, state-funded childcare for all children aged 0–5. They may be sought out using progressive targets, on climate change or on the number of refugees the UK takes – or using regulations, subsidies and taxes in inventive ways.

There might be Keynesian opportunities – to stimulate growth in new areas and in doing so rebalance the UK's economic geography – at a point in time when people are suddenly much less bound to their workplaces by geography. Or there may be infrastructure projects, which would link up the country better or find new, non-retail uses for high streets and town centres.

Policy experts will have more imaginative and thought-through ideas here than I do. And, to be clear, I'm not suggesting that we try and execute all or most of the above at once. But it is vital that Labour knows what it ultimately wants to change about the system – and that it sets out how and why it will do this.

Analogies and metaphors will be extremely important in making this happen. Linear explanations are needed, for any of the policies above. These will have to be clearly relatable, and must not be seen as partisan. Rather than falling back on emotions and morals (which to us are self-evident but to others are not), they should aim to join the dots and show our workings.

If we look at the popularity of Martin Lewis among Red Wall voters, we see at once an appetite for the unpacking of ideas in an accessible way. It is true that the rationale behind progressive policies sometimes takes longer to explain than the right-wing alternatives. But, if we can get this right, then the Tories' monopoly over direct thinking can be broken.

# CONCLUSION

Research from 2021 revealed that Labour voters were three or four times as likely as Conservative voters to support a range of campaigns associated with contemporary left-wing activism (such as Extinction Rebellion).[86] However, when the questions were reframed – in terms of support for substantively progressive positions on equalities and the environment – the gap between Labour and Tory voters closed almost entirely.

These sorts of findings have occurred elsewhere, and they support the central argument of this paper. So-called culture war debates, and the political realignment which they reflect, are not about big, substantive gaps in the sort of society people want to see. Voters who have gone elsewhere are not permanently lost to Labour. The electoral divide is down to vocabulary at least as much as values.

Yet this positive conclusion should also give us pause for thought. The implication is that we on the left have become unnecessarily estranged from many who share our basic ideals.

I have set out my theory for why this is. Systemic thinking and messaging, which is always going to be part of any left programme, has been used in such a way that it excludes those who favour more direct types of causation. We've been so busy trying to convince people that 'social justice *is* climate justice', for instance, that we have failed to register that majorities of our fellow citizens support progressive social policies and sustainable environmental policies. They just don't see the two things as linked, and are baffled by our insistence that they are.

In other words, the ideas and communications emerging from the Labour machine have not sought to explain how the system is broken or how we'll fix it. Rather, we have worked on the basis that structural and societal critiques are self-evidently right. Direct, practical problem-solving has come, as a result, to be seen as something the Tories do – not us.

Of course the electoral shifts we have seen cannot be solely explained by any one element, and that is not what I am claiming here. Many factors have driven people towards and away from Labour over the last ten years. But I do think my analysis has implications for our future success in places which have come to feel beyond reach.

Ultimately, when it comes to policy, the pills to be swallowed are not as bitter as many on the left fear. Nor is the road back to power as long as it's been in the past. If we can speak people's language again then they will return. We simply need to find our way out of the linguistic and intellectual wormholes which lead us to turn majority positions into minority ones. We need to start thinking in straight lines.

# APPENDIX: A NOTE ON GEORGE LAKOFF

George Lakoff has achieved a cult following among parts of progressive politics – with his book *Don't Think of and Elephant* having become required reading in some quarters. In particular his theories about framing are increasingly common and widely used among NGOs and activist organisations.

Lakoff's arguments feed into the debates about tactics and strategy which perpetually divide the left. They are important and they are complex. They can be deployed by the far left, to critique 'centrists' for caving in and using the frames of the right. But they can also be used by moderates, to critique radicals who adopt positions that will never gain majority support.

I should be clear that, in using the fault line which Lakoff identifies (around different types of causation), I am not seeking to apply the wider Lakoff doctrine to British politics. Nor am I aiming to present myself as an expert on linguistic framing. There are several elements of his argument which I think are wrong, or which do not translate from the US to the UK. And on certain issues the political right is caricatured by Lakoff in ways I'm uncomfortable with.

On the other hand, Lakoff's arguments allow us to consider how thought and language influence ideology, and how metaphors (e.g. the 'maxing out of the national credit card') can guide the public discourse. For me, one of his most interesting contentions is the idea that progressives of all shades share something deep – as do conservatives of all hues. As he puts it, there is "no ideology of the moderate". His focus on perception and understanding – the idea that our politics are based on how we conceive the world – is also a central ingredient for pluralism.

Important though it is to his body of work, the distinction between direct and systemic causation is, in fact, a relatively small part of the Lakoff argument. But within it I think we see a crucial divide. By understanding this we can comprehend why the prognoses and preoccupations of educated, post-materialist voters have come to differ so dramatically, in political terms, from those of other social groups – especially from those who once voted Labour but who no longer do.

The hypothesis in this paper is based on extending the implications of this direct/systemic distinction, and applying them to the context of British politics in the 2010s.

The way I use the distinction departs from how Lakoff himself might in two key ways. Firstly, I do not tend to think that all direct thinking is right wing and all systemic thinking left wing. Instead, I think that the state of affairs where direct thinkers lean one way and systemic thinkers lean

the other is a relatively new one – emerging in a context of high regional inequality, expanded university education and growing political division. On a related point, I do not think that direct and systemic reasoning are automatically at odds with each other (as the idea that one is conservative and the other is progressive would imply). I think you can use both.

Secondly, I explicitly argue in this paper what Lakoff intimates: that systemic reasoning is a modern concept, new to the 20th and 21st centuries, and that it is qualitatively different from direct thinking in this regard. In my view, direct thinking will always be more psychologically intuitive. Systemic reasoning translates much less easily into the metaphors which, as Lakoff points out, are so integral to how people understand things. The successes of the conservative right are in large part to do with direct modes of thought being inherent to human logic.

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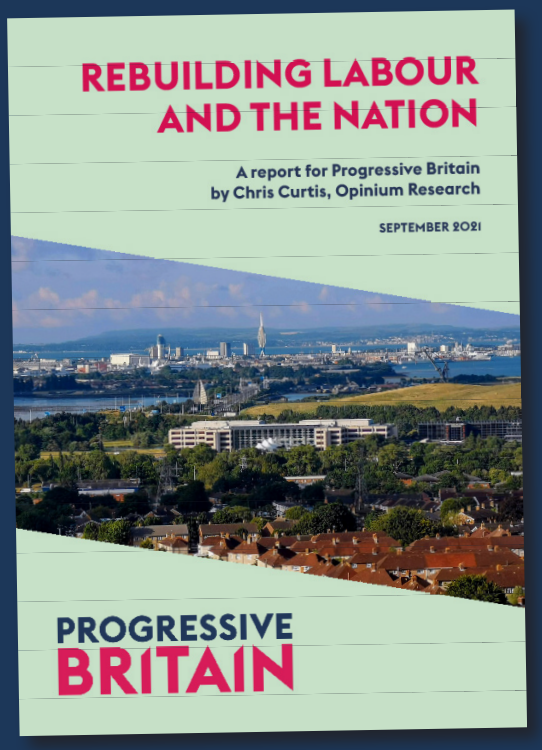


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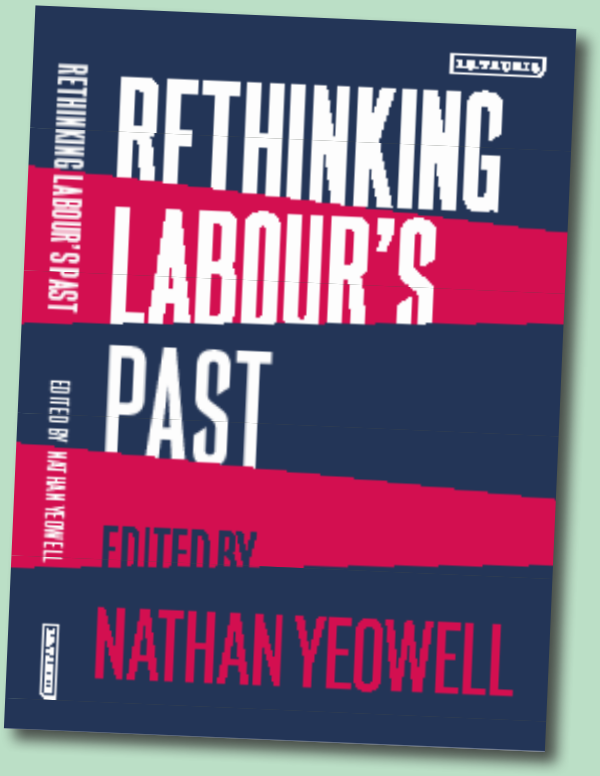


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