

Winning the southern regions

Report from the Southern Taskforce

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Introduction

The three southern regions - the South West, South East and Eastern - are varied and diverse. Some communities are highly integrated into the Greater London economy; other areas are marked by their inaccessibility from much of the rest of the country. There are concentrations of significant wealth and both urban and rural areas as poor as anywhere in Britain. The southern regions include some of the key drivers of the advanced, hi-tech and creative economy, whilst other areas struggle to reverse the decline of traditional employment.

In these English regions Labour's electoral support is lowest. We face the biggest challenge to make One Nation Labour a reality.

The electoral challenge

In 1992, Labour had 10 MPs (of 177) in the three southern regions. We won a total of 59 in 1997, declining to 10 (of 197) in 2010.

In 2001 and 2005 our relative success in targeting marginal constituencies masked the decline in Labour's vote.

However, Labour's local government base was reduced dramatically, from 537 seats won in 1997 to 139 in 2010.

Though we have as many MPs as in 1992, our local government base is much weaker than at the same point ahead of the 1997 election.

Our relative success in holding on to our Westminster seats came at the expense of neglecting the wider party in southern England. Many southern CLPs have developed a 'Labour can't win here' attitude.

Some local Labour parties, including Exeter, Stroud, Hastings and Ipswich, showed how effective local campaigning could keep Labour as the leading party in their local government.

The political challenge

Does Labour's poor showing reflect a profound difference in the outlook of southern voters? Polling suggests this is not the problem.

Asked about their core values, southern voters reflect much the same spread of views as voters in the rest of the UK. They have similar priorities on the most important issues and also share very similar fundamental values.

We can be confident that there are sufficient voters who broadly share Labour's values to make a strong southern strategy successful. But the challenge is significant.

Labour is less likely to be seen as active in southern communities.

Southern voters are somewhat less likely to say they are clear what Labour stands for.

And, on key policy issues, Labour enjoys a smaller lead than it enjoys in other English regions.

Voters whose values would tend to lead to a Labour vote in other regions are much less likely to vote Labour in the southern regions.

The demography of the south means that there are also more 'hard to reach' voters – those who, while sharing our values, rarely or inconsistently vote Labour in any parts of the country.

Southern voters are more likely to take a valence based approach to issues – that is, they are more likely to say 'I don't mind who owns or runs the railways, only that they are run efficiently' - than voters in the North or Scotland - who are more likely to favour the policy position of 'nationalisation'.

Southern voters are the least likely to associate themselves with any political party, and those that do are less likely to say they have a 'very strong' association with that party.

These regional differences strongly support our belief that Labour needs a clear and specific southern strategy, and that we cannot deliver One Nation Labour simply by hoping that southern gains will come off the back of national progress.

A Southern Labour Strategy

We want to establish a strong identity with Labour as a southern party and develop a tradition of support for us. This will require a consistent strategy over many years.

We have to

- Win the support of voters who, in another part of England, would probably be regular Labour voters;
- Win the support of voters who share our values but who nonetheless are often not Labour voters in other parts of England either.

The key elements will be:

To show, through our language and message, that we are rooted in the life of the South and share, day to day, the concerns of southern voters;

To have a credible critique of the coalition's failings in the South, and why these reflect the values and priorities of the coalition parties;

To show that our own policies directly address the issues and problems of southern voters and have been developed with them;

Where we can, we need to point to examples of where Labour campaigns, or Labour councils, have shown how Labour values make a difference;

To build the organisation that demonstrates that we are an integral part of communities across the southern regions, and the effective media and communications that needs to accompany it.

Southern Labour's key messages

In consultation events members were asked to identify the issues of most importance to potential voters where they lived (rather than the issues that might be most important to them, or the most important national issues).

The most consistent themes were:

- The state of the economy, the need to generate optimism about the future and opportunities for younger people;
- Fairness, covering both inequalities in income and life chances and the working of the welfare state

The three most common policy issues were:

- Housing
- Transport
- Migration

It is essential that we describe the southern regions in ways voters would recognise. The South is neither identical to other parts of England, nor is it without its own distinct problems.

What Labour thinks about the South

In brief

In southern England, too many people and places aren't sharing in the prosperity enjoyed by a few, and too many hard working people struggle to get a fair deal for themselves and their families.

On living standards

Many people think that everyone in southern England is comfortably off and doing fine. There are communities and individuals who are very well off, but it's not like that for most of us. The gaps between the very richest and the very poorest areas and families are wider in the South than anywhere else. For hard working families, it's more expensive to become a first time buyer than anywhere else. More southern families have been hit by higher university fees. There are rural counties and

struggling coastal towns where wages are well below average. At the same time there are many towns where the cost of housing and travel to work means the real cost of living is way above the national average.

On communities and public services

The towns, villages and cities of southern England have distinct and proud identities and a strong sense of community. But they can feel under pressure from rapid population growth and migration, from new housing and second homes, and from economic change. They often lack the powers and resources to handle change successfully.

On the economy

Many of Britain's most competitive businesses are based in southern England, supported by some of the strongest research universities and best educated population. More people here work in the private sector. Millions run their own business and millions more work for small companies. But there are rural areas, coastal towns and inner cities which lost out even in the good times. And there are individuals and families who have not been able to share in wider success.

Southern Labour's aims are simple:

- To win a fair deal for hard working families who are struggling with the cost of living and worried about their future;
- To close the gap between those communities and families that are losing out, and the rest of the South.
- To support the enormous role the South's businesses have in enabling the region and the country to pay our way in the world.

Our view of the Government's record

We have a clear, relevant and true critique of the Conservatives and LibDems

The Tories and LibDems are out of touch and have let down the people in the South who trusted them at the last election.

In support of this we would say:

The Tories and LibDems have made things harder for hard working families.

They have failed to challenge the companies that are pushing up fuel bills, rail and bus fares. They have failed to build houses that local families can afford to buy or rent. They've hit ambitious families by trebling university tuition fees for their children. Despite all their promises the banks are still not lending to small businesses. They have failed to deliver the broadband, road, rail and construction investment business needs to compete.

And they have been unfair to those who are already finding life most difficult. They have cut public spending in the poorest urban areas more than in other parts of the South. They have cut tax credits that helped people in the lowest paid jobs get by. They've widened the gap by cutting income tax for millionaires while making millions pay more. They have tried to cut wages for nurses and other health workers in the South West and ended fair wages for rural workers.

Southern Labour's offer

Our southern message must be linked explicitly to our One Nation values.

One Nation Labour believes that Britain should work for everyone, not just a few.

Britain is always stronger when we can all play our part. The South's businesses can only help Britain pay its way in the world with a Labour Government and Labour councils that understand their needs, are on their side, and are willing to support them actively.

Britain's economy is always more successful when it works for all working people. We will invest in infrastructure, including transport and broadband, to bring new jobs to hard pressed coastal communities and to support the South's leading businesses and services, and develop southern regional banks to support growth.

Wealth isn't just created by a few at the top, but by all working people. We will take tough action to tackle spiralling prices from the gas, electricity, water, rail, bus and petrol companies, and encourage employers to pay a Living Wage.

We offer a change in the way this country is run and who it is run for.

We will invest in house building so that more young families can afford to buy or rent a home of their own.

We will control immigration and act to make sure local people get a fair deal and everyone plays by the same rules.

We will make sure the towns, villages and cities of the South have the resources and power they need to strengthen communities and handle change. In the southern regions, Labour will make sure the areas that need it most get a fair share of public spending.

Labour action in the South

We can already point to practical Labour action on many of these issues:

- Labour-run Exeter will build two thirds of the social housing in the entire South West from 2014.
- Labour Councils in Plymouth, Oxford, Harlow, Thurrock, Ipswich and Norwich are introducing a Living Wage for their employees.

- Labour has led the campaign against super-peak fares and enabled nearly 4000 people across the country to switch to lower cost fuel companies.
- Labour has worked with trades unions to oppose Conservative and LibDem plans to cut the pay of NHS staff in the South West, and to abolish the agricultural wages board.

Messages to avoid: 'the North-South divide', 'the Tory South'

Our key messages and analysis must be reflected by all Labour representatives. Efforts in the South can be undone by ill judged or casual language.

'North-South divide' implies everything is difficult in the North, and everything is fine in the South. It ignores the sometimes different but particular problems of the South, like the cost of buying homes, the waiting times for social housing, the impact of population growth, the cost of commuting and, fundamentally, the inequalities within the South. When the phrase is used by Labour representatives it implicitly conveys the message that the North needs Labour but the South does not.

'The Tory South': when used by Labour representatives it inevitably conveys the impression that even Labour does not believe we really belong in the South.

Developing Labour's Message

We are working with Labour's frontbench teams, Labour councillors and others to develop the more detailed messages to support the overarching messages set out above.

This is work in progress but we will soon have a 'handbook' - available online – for the use of frontbenchers on communicating with southern message.

It will, for example, provide the facts to support key messages.

'Too many hard working people struggle to get a fair deal for themselves and their families. [Southampton, Hastings, Norwich and Thanet are all in the worst 10% of areas for child poverty.] [The average house price in Milton Keynes, Reading and Stevenage is £272k, compared to £140k in Manchester and £163k in Leeds. And the extra cost of commuting adds another £2,800 a year to living costs.]

It will show how to contrast the Coalition's record with Labour action.

In the South West the Tories and LibDems have scrapped the Agricultural Wages Board and tried to cut NHS pay. Labour Plymouth has introduced a Living Wage.

Local and regional branding

The term 'southern Labour' is useful, but relatively few parts of the three southern regions would identify themselves as 'the South'. Regional, county or more local

identities are stronger. Within the overall umbrella of 'One Nation Labour' we should explore ways of enabling additional branding at a regional or local level.

Organising in the South

Like other parties, Labour will concentrate its resources in our 31 target seats for the 2015 election and we expect this to be the priority focus for organising staff.

Rebuilding the party across the regions will take place over a longer timescale. But we will not make One Nation Labour a reality if large areas have little active Labour presence.

We propose practical and realistic measures to begin to develop activity in all other constituency parties. Our consultation meetings confirmed that CLP activists are more likely to help in target seats if they have a valued role and purpose in their own constituencies.

Ultra-targeting will become less effective without reviving Labour activity in the surrounding areas.

Journeys to work are becoming longer. Residents in Labour voting constituencies are less and less likely to work alongside neighbours from their own constituencies. Unison has noted that public service workers are less likely than they were to live and work in the same constituency. The tendency to vote Labour will be undermined if fellow employees live in areas where Labour is seen as inactive or irrelevant.

A clear role for every CLP

Target CLPs receive significant support; others can simply feel that 'Labour doesn't win round here'.

Every CLP should identify clear targets and priorities for development. This will be supported through a 'guided self assessment' after the County Council elections.

The self assessment tool will provide basic background analysis for CLPs, including identification of the areas which demographically offer most immediate opportunities for Labour. The data on membership, fundraising, voter contact and other measures which will enable all CLPs to benchmark themselves against comparable CLPs and set targets for future activity.

In electoral terms, CLPs might have as priorities:

- Holding a Labour Westminster seat in 2015;
- Winning a Westminster seat in 2015;
- Gaining control of the local council;
- Becoming the largest council group;
- Extending the size of the Labour group;
- Making a breakthrough to gain one or more seats for the first time
- Achieving a step change in local profile and impact through effective campaigns for local change

Not all seats we lost in 2010 are target seats for 2015. CLPs will be clear on the progress they need to make to become Westminster target seats in the future.

CLPs might have non-electoral targets, working for change in their communities. A few members in a small market town can still have a big impact in the local community.

The Euro-elections

All constituencies will be given targets for the Labour vote needed in the 2014 Euro-elections. A CLP achieving 2,000 votes in an unpromising area will be regarded as doing as much for a Labour victory as a CLP achieving over 10,000 votes in a Labour held seat.

Targeting and twinning

Since the Taskforce started work, 31 target seats have been agreed in the three regions:

East

Bedford
Cambridge
Great Yarmouth
Harlow
Ipswich
Norwich North
Norwich South
Peterborough
South Basildon & East Thurrock
Stevenage
Thurrock
Watford
Waveney

South East

Brighton Kemptown
Brighton Pavilion
Chatham & Aylesford
Crawley
Dover
Hastings & Rye
Hove
Milton Keynes South
Reading West

South West

Bristol North West
Bristol West
Gloucester
Kingswood
North East Somerset
North Swindon
Plymouth Sutton &
Devonport
South Swindon
Stroud

18 southern seats have been twinned with Shadow Cabinet members. All target seats will be twinned with a Shadow Minister.

Developing the role of Regional Boards

The role of Regional Boards should be developed with a clear role to support the development of constituencies. Regional Boards should also be encouraged to develop their role as a link between members and staff.

Working with Movement for Change

Ed Miliband has made clear his support for Movement for Change and for community organising. This fresh approach to political organising has particular

relevance to southern Labour, involving our membership and supporters in both key target seats and an effective and high profile way of working in smaller CLPs.

The Taskforce has reached a partnership agreement with Movement for Change for further work in the South West and South East regions. The partnership will include two 'innovation hubs' to showcase community organising techniques in action. Movement for Change will build an online network for these hubs, develop talented activists and run two 'Labour in the South' events.

Movement for Change has, at the invitation of the SW Regional Director, already held a workshop in Liskeard and arranged another in South Gloucestershire, and Arnie Graf has led two workshops in Southampton for Hampshire Labour members.

Encouraging networking amongst activists

All the consultation events have expressed a strong interest in active networking between activists and CLPS with similar challenges and experiences.

We recommend that the Party looks into setting up some secure networks for discussion. In the meantime, we recommend that members make use of the existing networks for the southern regions, such as [Third Place First](#), [Southern Front](#) and [Labour: Coast and Country](#).

Networked campaigns

More than ten commuter town CLPs took part in a coordinated action against super-peak fares. Coordinated campaigning is valuable for our media profile and for strengthening the collective identity of southern Labour Parties.

A similar campaign might be run around the extension of high capacity broadband to coastal towns and rural areas.

Developing a phone bank for commuter members

We recommend that efforts be made to establish a telephone bank at Brewers Green for southern region commuting members who would be available to canvass after work.

Working with trades unions

We are working with unions both bilaterally and through TULO. There is considerable interest on coordinating our campaigning messages, sharing the results of member surveys, and emphasising the importance of Labour's campaigns on the Living Wage, job security and opposing cuts in wages.

Working with councillors and the Local Government Association Labour Group

The LGA Labour Group organised a successful councillors consultation on 2nd February.

Over the coming year the Labour Group has agreed to:

- Hold a meeting for isolated councillors and small Labour Groups in the southern regions
- Establish a network for those councillors and small groups
- Give regular publicity in the LGA Labour Group newsletter to the work of these councillors, co-branded with the Southern Taskforce.

In parts of the South, parish and town councillors are Labour's only elected representatives. In response to the strong pressure from members to recognise and support parish and town councilors, we recommend that the Party, as a trial, does acknowledge the role of these councillors, encourages networking between them, and holds meetings for them at regional conferences

Communications and Media

While doorstep campaigning and community organising is important, an effective media 'presence' is essential to make it clear that we are a party of the south. We need to hear more southern Labour voices on national TV and radio to balance the inevitable predominance of senior Labour politicians from the North and Scotland. The party press officers and Leader's office need to hardwire this into their thinking when fielding media bids and planning announcements

Labour's national and media coverage often lacks a strong and identifiable 'southern' voice, reflecting the make-up of the PLP and the under-utilisation of some of our local government talent. Measures should be taken to make more effective use of Labour's southern Parliamentary and local government representation.

The Training and Development team of the central Labour party have an excellent media training scheme for PPCs, but similar support needs to be made more widely available.

The Taskforce acknowledges that the party cannot realistically extend its PPC media training to others voices of the South such as council leaders, well-known councillors or local activists, but wants to encourage media training by drawing on the expertise of relevant party members in the South.

We encourage the Regional Directors and RCOs to identify key contacts in each area and to provide support and training in communicating Labour's message.

PLP briefings will be made available, at the discretion of Regional Directors, to party members in areas where there will otherwise be little or no media profile for the party.

We need to ensure that front-bench visits gain attention or fit in with local stories. These visits need to be well-planned and targeted with a specific aim for the visit.

As identified above, well planned front bench visits need to reach those areas which may be less accessible from London, including Cornwall, North Norfolk etc.

We must ensure that Shadow Cabinet members are supported in ensuring that their twinned PPCs are fully furnished with the support they need to create good local media.

Conclusion

This report, together with the more detailed analysis on which it stands, sets out both a political and organisational strategy for Labour in the three southern regions. It is a report that makes Labour's case for the South in a way that is rooted in the lives hopes and challenges of southern voters.