

We need to talk about class

It's time to discuss the elephant in the room, argues Cllr Mandy Clare (Eddisbury CLP)

Those of us who have recently campaigned on the doorstep in lower income wards can likely agree that we have reached a tipping point in terms of losing what remained of the trust and patience extended by the working class toward the Labour Party. The party that we love and have been relieved to see come back to its socialist roots has traditionally represented working class interests first and foremost, and historically removed many of the barriers to working class representation. This tipping point can only be partly explained by the perception of having been ignored by politicians regarding Brexit.

Whether applying to become a party employee or a candidate in local or parliamentary elections, there is a gulf between what is more readily available to middle class comrades and their working class counterparts. As a party, we struggle to even discuss the topic, and increasingly use phrases like "working people", as if the problem will go away.

We have been socialised not to mention class in polite company. Party membership is predominantly middle class. Analysis by Professor Tim Bale of Queen Mary College found that 77% of Labour members fall into category ABC1 (middle class), compared to a national average of 62%.

Even within a party committed to anti-austerity, raising the issue of class is usually met with middle class defensiveness, guilt or denial. We're told that work and education have changed. That true class divisions no longer exist. That we're all working class now. That it's divisive to talk about class. That class is self-defined. That nobody wants to identify as working class anymore. That class is too difficult to define. That a Corbyn-led government will sort all that out. That it's a can of worms. That we should just talk about policy.

Even among groups recognised as under-represented and subject to discrimination, including women, LGBTQ, BAME and people with disabilities, those who have advanced have been mainly middle class. However you cut the cake, there is still a layer missing.

The proportion of privately educated Labour MPs remains significantly above the 7% national average. One in five MPs who weren't privately educated attended a grammar school. Private schooling is just the tip of the iceberg of what sets middle class students ahead of the pack in education and career prospects. Private tutoring has become the norm for many middle class children in state schools. Every child apart from me that got accepted into the local grammar school had home tutoring, and I was one of only three working class kids in the school.

Channel 4 analysed MPs' previous careers and found that well over half of all MPs had worked in politics, business, law, finance and accounting, while only 1.3% came from manual or engineering backgrounds. Labour MPs came from a wider range of backgrounds but hardly any had worked in semi- or unskilled jobs, on insecure contracts, or managed with no savings or problem debt for any substantial portion of their life prior to becoming an MP.

Huge class divisions within politics skew policy and lead to a large section of the electorate feeling unrepresented. "They aren't like me", "what do they know about my life?", "I'm never voting again" and "they don't really care" is what we are hearing on the doorstep in traditional Labour

communities. The party can grasp this issue and control the narrative, or watch as it is taken over by others who don't want the leadership to succeed.

The Blair era saw a steep drop in the proportion of working class MPs. A recent study by UCL found that this, combined with the rise of career politicians, shifted the Labour Party towards a more right-wing policy stance on welfare. The term "careerist" is underpinned by analysis of factors such as the language used in MP when promoting party policy. The research examined the policy preferences of both groups within the Labour Party before and during Blair's leadership. It shows that working class MPs – those with a manual labour background – were substantially more in favour of traditional welfare policies and policies that benefitted working class communities than their careerist colleagues.

Career MPs – ones with a background in politics or a closely related profession – were more likely to adopt policies to attract swing voters. "Put bluntly", the author says, "careerist MPs are much more likely to blow with the political winds". This is not lost on many traditional Labour voters.

The background of selected PPCs has not altered very much over the last four years. The electorate, whether it supports Corbyn or not, is still substantially middle class, and that will be reflected in how policy is shaped and how much working class voters trust us as a party. They need to recognise their own lives when they hear our voices speaking up as their representatives.

In the 2015 leadership contest, apart from Jeremy, none of the other candidates believed the membership or the public would support a more socialist agenda. Despite a hostile media, the exponential rise in party membership and the General Election proved them wrong.

It shouldn't be such a surprise. A quarter of adults in the UK have no savings, and, according to the consumer data company CACI, this proportion rises to 60% of those on incomes below £13,500. Average house prices are well above £200,000 and repossessions increased by a third, year on year, during the final quarter of 2018. A large section of the working class is really struggling. They recognise when the party is on their side, but also when we don't quite hit the mark. More working class candidates would give us the insight and experience to directly inform our policy direction to the public.

Daily stress and financial pressures are only the beginning when it comes what holds back working class activists from becoming party representatives. A series of other unseen mechanisms, including the lack of the "right" connections, self-confidence and encouragement combine to keep all of the meaningful and visible roles within the preserve of the more financially secure, who often have networks and visibility on their side. Better-off activists tend to get accolades because they are able to do more political "work", and so are more visible within their CLPs. Campaigning and attending events don't come free. Greater leisure allows middle class activists more time to prepare for meetings and make the right impression.

We should recognise these factors and not make assumptions about people's suitability for a post based on their ability to "shine" or appear more dedicated. If someone on a low income has a consistent and positive involvement, a strong allegiance to the values of the party and some understanding of how its structures work, that should be valued and supported for what it is. Consistency and quality should count, not just quantity.

Thatcher turned large parts of our industrial centres into wastelands. It had a devastating impact on working class identity, pride and opportunity. Instead of empowering the working class, the party under Blair turned its back. The hope and belief that politicians could be other than self-serving fell away over a long period. The working class didn't imagine that our party abandoned them – it did. Brexit despondency and anger is the latest chapter in a long story.

Having a Corbyn-led middle class Labour team who promise to change things for The Many, great as that is, will not, on its own, be good enough. Middle class staffers may calculate that we can afford to lose working class votes, but we abandon them to their eternal distrust of politics, while trading on their name. If we do this, we do not deserve to win.

We need measures to ensure that we are monitoring party appointments and selection processes so that we urgently boost working class representation at every level, including senior and more visible ones. We have many intelligent and committed working class activists within our ranks. Promoting them would send a clear and positive message to the public.

Class cuts across every single policy area, and we need direct working class activist input into policy making. We need mentoring, training and funding programmes in place for working class candidates, and suitable publicity to encourage people to step forward.

It should be as acceptable to discuss class as it is to address any other area of under-representation. It's not personal and not about blame, any more than a BAME activist raising equalities issues means a dislike of non-BAME comrades. It's about recognising and addressing barriers that hold people back unfairly. There is no legal protection against discrimination or under-representation on the basis of class. We, of all parties, need to break this taboo.

Working class under-representation was notably absent from the equalities section of the Democracy Review. We need to go beyond paying occasional lip service and set up a working group to gather evidence and set out urgent measures to address this glaring party oversight.