

How the East was lost... and how to win again

a study by
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January 2011

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Introduction

This paper has its origins in two fringe meetings in autumn 2010 which discussed the Policy Network paper by Giles Radice and Patrick Diamond about Labour's bad result in southern England called *Southern Discomfort Again*. From different vantage points, we both felt that if there was anything worse than Southern Discomfort, it was Eastern Discomfort – and discomfort is rather too mild a word for the near-death experience Labour endured in Eastern England in 2010. Lewis Baston had studied the figures and the long term trends, and Bob Blizzard had been MP for Waveney from 1997 and was Eastern Region Whip in the Labour government until he was narrowly defeated in May 2010, seeing colleagues and friends defeated as well.

While Radice and Diamond reported focus group research, we have used different methods. We look at the facts and figures of the electoral geography of Eastern England, and we also interviewed nearly all candidates who fought key seats for Labour in the East

of England. We are grateful to all of them, and to the journalists who also gave us their observations about Labour in the East. Our conclusions are, of course, our own and our interviewees do not necessarily agree with them.

Our concern is with Eastern England, but there will be aspects of our work which will also have application in other areas.

Our report is written to give an unflinching look at the bad results Labour suffered in the East, but more than that to offer some ideas for how we can change our policies and the way we do business, to reclaim the ground we have lost. We are both passionately committed to the return of a Labour government at the next election, and for this the party needs to make serious gains in Eastern England. We hope that our report is a constructive contribution to making that happen.

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Executive Summary

Part 1

Labour needs the East of England

- It has the second-largest number of the marginal seats we need to win of any region.
- It has more Labour voters than Wales or the North East, but far fewer Labour MPs.
- Its population is increasing and therefore its proportion of MPs in future parliaments will increase. It will be the fourth-largest of the 12 regions of the United Kingdom in the next parliament.
- Labour cannot afford to ignore such an economically dynamic region if it is to be a national party.
- By appealing to voters in the East, we also appeal to swing voters in marginal seats in other regions.

Labour's results in the East of England were disastrous

- The East now has fewest MPs and was Labour's worst region in 2010 in terms of swing to the Tories.
- The East lost a higher proportion of its Labour MPs than any other region. For the first time since 1938, we have no Labour MPs in East Anglia.
- Since the mid 1970s there has been a general trend towards the Conservatives in the region. The trend was dramatically interrupted in 1997, but has resumed with a vengeance.
- Our base in local government in the region has been demolished.

Part 2

Issues that made a difference in Eastern constituencies

- The unpopularity of Gordon Brown.
- Immigration.
- Perceptions of the way the benefits system had been operating.
- 'Time for a change' and 'fairness'.
- Economic management was not a harmful issue at the time of the election.
- Responses to the 'expenses scandal' varied hugely between different constituencies.
- Voters often appreciated the work of incumbent Labour MPs.

Which voters we lost

- We lost support across the board in Eastern seats, except in the few seats with substantial BME communities
- Yet more voters who had switched to us from the Tories in 1997 reverted back.
- Our core vote 'hollowed out' by staying at home or voting for other parties, including Conservative.
- The Conservatives ran strong campaigns in some seats that energised their own supporters.

Organisational capacity

- Compared to the 1980s or 1990s we were relying on very small numbers of people even in key seats
- However, we often managed to campaign vigorously because of the hard work and commitment of our activists.
- The drop-off in organisational capacity in some seats we lost in 2005 was catastrophic and reflected in the results in 2010.

General regional problems

- Labour perceived as 'northern, industrial, or else perhaps metropolitan and elitist
- An entrenched Conservative culture in the region which has taken ownership of the politics of the 'countryside'
- Labour is dependent on core support coming out to vote in localities, some of them very deprived, that are islands within a sea of Conservative support
- Labour in government was seen as not responsive enough to the needs of areas in the East that had voted for us.
- Labour activists are often put off travelling to campaign in key seats by the long distances involved.
- We may organise as an 'Eastern Region' but this concept does not really exist in electors' minds. There are really three sub-regions – East Anglia, south Essex and northern Home Counties – with different cultures and political priorities.
- Labour needs to think in terms of the three sub-regions and appoint spokespeople of the East who will be credible to people in the East and represent people in the East to the Labour Party nationally.
- Labour needs to adopt key seat candidates early. But it also needs to exercise tougher quality control in seats where the Conservatives currently have large majorities.
- The culture of Labour Party meetings needs to change.
- We need to learn from areas where we have had success in council elections (Stevenage and Luton) and ensure that our councillors are an asset to the party in general.
- The national Labour Party should redistribute some resources to assist organisation and recovery in the East.

Part 3

- Labour has an opportunity to re-emerge as the progressive option in large swathes of the East of England because of the Liberal Democrats' acceptance of Tory policies.
- However, we basically need to win direct converts from the Conservatives because the right-of-centre vote share was high in many Eastern seats.
- We need policy positions on the key issues on economic management, migration and the benefits system that reflect a tough-minded sense of 'fairness' held by many voters in Eastern England.
- We need to have bold policies to address housing and transport problems, which are acute in the East of England.
- Labour needs to establish itself as a political force within the East of England at all levels and not come across as outsiders.

Part 1

The Electoral Background

1.1 Eastern England: A key region for Labour

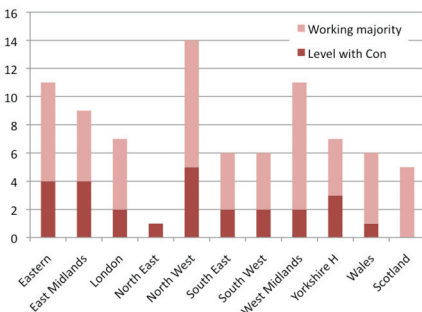
Some people might initially think that it does not matter if Labour is weak in Eastern England – ‘it’s a Tory region’ or a ‘nice to have’ on top of Labour’s basic coalition of support in other regions. We profoundly disagree. Quite apart from honouring Labour’s mission as being a national party, the East is vital for Labour’s future. We cannot afford to have the East of England become Labour’s equivalent of the Tory wilderness in Scotland.

1 Eastern England is rich in marginal seats

Of the 83 seats Labour needs to obtain an adequate working majority of 30 in the House of Commons, 11 are in the East. This is second only to the North West (14 seats). The West Midlands is level with the Eastern region on 11 target seats.

Of the 26 seats Labour needs to gain to draw level with the Conservatives in the House of Commons, the North West has the highest number (5 seats) but the East and East Midlands are only just behind with 4 seats each.

Labour’s target seats by region, on 2010 election results and boundaries



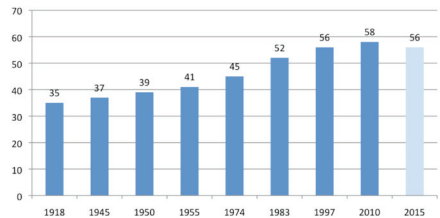
Just because marginals in the East are more scattered than those in the North West and West Midlands does not make them less important.

It might be theoretically possible for Labour to win power again without making progress in the East and south, but it would require running the table in other regions and winning some improbable seats.

2 Eastern England has a growing population and will be of increasing electoral significance.

The proportion of MPs representing constituencies in Eastern England has been growing steadily over time, from 5 per cent in 1918 to 7 per cent in 1974 and 9 per cent now.

Eastern England MPs



In the next boundary changes Eastern England will overtake Scotland and the West Midlands in its number of MPs. The table below shows the number of MPs each region will have, based on early 2010 numbers (the precise allocation will be on returns from December 2010).

	<i>Current</i>	<i>New</i>
South East	84	82
North West	75	69
London	73	69
Eastern	58	56
West Midlands	59	54
South West	55	53
Scotland	59	52
Yorkshire & Humber	54	50
East Midlands	46	44
Wales	40	30
North East	29	26
Northern Ireland	18	15
England	533	503
Britain	632	585
United Kingdom	650	600

Eastern already has more MPs than East Midlands, Wales, North East, South West or Yorkshire & Humber, and in 2015 it will overtake Scotland and the West Midlands. Only London, the South East and the North West will be larger. Already, the total number of Labour voters in 2010 in the Eastern region (564,581) was more than the total number of Labour voters in either the North East (518,263) or Wales (531,607). However, Labour's Eastern voters returned two MPs while there are 25 from the North East and 26 from Wales.

Labour simply cannot afford to be uncompetitive in the East if it is to have a long term future as a party of government. Without proper Eastern representation the task of winning nationally will just become harder and harder.

3 The East is a leading indicator of national trends

As an area of population growth and relative economic success, the East of England sometimes serves as an advance indicator of trends that will later affect other regions (the same is true, as Giles Radice and Patrick Diamond noted, of the South of England in general). It is the canary in the mineshaft

and the sickly condition of Labour in the East should concern the party nationally. The economy has been based here for longer than elsewhere on small and medium sized companies rather than large industrial concerns and if our Leader, Ed Miliband, intends Labour to be the party of small business this will be a particularly effective political approach in the East.

In order to appeal to, to understand and be understood by the swing voters in the swing seats nationally, we need to look to the East where there are a lot of these voters. Fighting to win in the East, and getting the message right, will help us win across the Midlands and South, and in the marginal seats in the North.

We need to ensure that we have the policies and organisation to win back the East. This is the main motivation behind this report.

1.2 The 2010 Election Disaster

The result in the East was a bitter defeat for Labour. In most regions the 2010 election was for us rather like 1992 in terms of the number of seats and the pattern of the votes. In Scotland, it was 1997... but in the East we were back to 1983. The roll-call of seats lost is depressing: MPs in seats like Basildon South & East Thurrock, Harlow, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich and Watford went down to heavy defeats. In Waveney, Bedford and Norwich South the margin was smaller and if anything harder to bear. The loss of experienced and popular representatives was painful. In Stevenage and – agonisingly narrowly – in Thurrock new candidates failed to hold on. In some seats we held until 2005 we were humiliated. Luton was a bright spot in a very dark picture. Kelvin Hopkins and Gavin Shaker carry a great burden in terms of representing Labour in the East, and the East in the PLP. We all hope that the burden can be shared a bit more fairly after the next election.

Whichever way one looks at it, Eastern England saw the worst Labour losses. It now has the smallest number of Labour MPs of

any region (both from one town, Luton, which is on the edge of the region). It had the worst loss rate for Labour of any region, with representation down 85 per cent on where it stood in 2005.

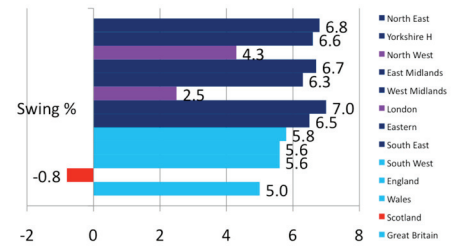
Labour's experience differed enormously from region to region. The party in Scotland can regard 2010 as a famous victory; in London we held firm in most places, and in the North East and Wales a slippage in votes did not dent Labour's dominance much in seats. It was a defeat but not a disaster for colleagues in the North West and Yorkshire, and a serious setback for Labour in the Midlands. But from the perspective of the East and South, it was a massacre.

Comparing the number of first, second and third places for Labour in 2005 (allowing for boundary changes) with 2010 makes it clear how badly Labour's position has deteriorated in the Eastern Region.

	2005	2010
First	13	2
Second	30	18
Third	15	38

Most Eastern seats, even in 2005, saw Labour as the main non-Conservative force (40 out of 58, excluding Lab/LD contests in Norwich South, Watford and Cambridge). Most Eastern seats in 2010 had Labour in third place. This included Watford (Labour in 2005); Hemel Hempstead, St Albans and Cambridge (Labour in 2001). In contrast to Labour's 1980s low point, when the Lib Dems had one (North East Cambridgeshire in 1983) or no (1987) seats, they now have four and are the largest non-Tory party in the region in seats and votes.

Swing to Conservative 2005-2010



Eastern also had the highest swing of votes from Labour to Conservative from 2005 to 2010 of any region, 7.0 per cent. This was well above the Great Britain average of 5.0 per cent. The next worst regions were all along the east side of England – North East, East

Labour seats by region 2005 and 2010

	2005 old boundaries	2005 new boundaries	2010	Change actual 05/10	% change
Eastern	13	13	2	-11	-84.6
East Midlands	25	26	15	-10	-40.0
London	44	44	38	-6	-13.6
North East	28	27	25	-3	-7.7
North West	61	60	47	-14	-23.0
South East	19	17	4	-15	-78.9
South West	13	12	4	-9	-69.2
West Midlands	39	38	24	-15	-38.4
Yorkshire & Humber	44	41	32	-12	-27.3
Wales	29	30	26	-3	-10.3
Scotland	40	40	41	+1	+2.5

Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber and South East. While the North/ South dimension of British politics is often acknowledged, there appears to be another less recognised East/ West divide.

1.3 The Longer Term Problem

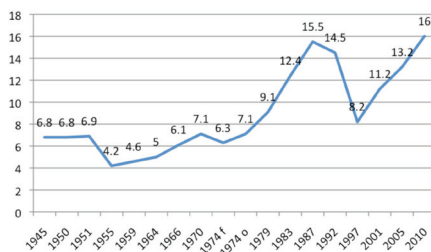
It would be one thing if the Eastern region had provided an unusually bad result in 2010 to compensate for a strong result in a previous year (for instance, London swung more than average in 2005 but much less in 2010).

However, this is not the case. East was a bad region in 2005 as well with a 4.2 per cent swing to Conservative, the worst region except London. We lost seats in Harwich, Braintree, Welwyn Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Cambridge and Peterborough; saw majorities in seats like Harlow trimmed right down, and were knocked out of contention in several seats such as South West Bedfordshire and rural areas of Suffolk where we had been close in 1997 and 2001. Even in 2001, when Labour held nearly all its less expected gains of 1997, two of the four direct losses to the Tories were in Eastern (North West Norfolk, Castle Point) and the other two adjoined it (Romford, Upminster). The problems are clearly deep seated.

Looking further back, the pattern of decline is even clearer.

There was not much of a pattern until the 1970s. Although it was one of the more Tory regions it was not that far from the national average, and Labour maintained a strong position in the 1950s. The strength of agricultural trade unions kept large parts of rural Norfolk marginally Labour, and in Essex and Hertfordshire there was a large inflow of working class Londoners moving to the New Towns. But between 1974 and 1987 there was a massive swing to the Conservatives that created the region's current status as a Conservative stronghold. In 1997, however, Labour achieved a higher than average swing in the East and brought its divergence from national patterns back down towards 1970s

Pro-Conservative lean in Eastern England 1945-2010 (percentage point)



This chart shows the difference between the percentage-point lead of the parties in Eastern England and England as a whole. For instance, if Labour is 1 point ahead in England but the Conservatives are 5 points ahead in Eastern region in one election, this would appear as a 6-point pro-Conservative lean in the East.

levels – but the New Labour tide ebbed faster in the East than elsewhere. By 2005 it was back up to mid-1980s levels of divergence and in 2010 the East was the furthest away it has ever been from the national average. The Conservatives have consistently polled a higher share of the vote than they have nationally, and Labour lower, and the tendency has become stronger over time (with the notable exception of 1997).

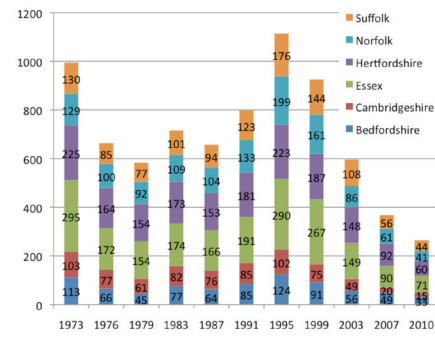
There were not many constituencies that had previously voted Labour but failed to in 1997 or 2001, but eight of them were in Eastern England (four in East Midlands, three in Wales and South East, two in the South West, London and West Midlands, one in North West). There were a fair number of constituencies that voted Labour for the first time ever in 1997, but only one such in Eastern England, Harwich (there were five in the South East).

Labour has also lacked bedrock in the Eastern region. We cannot seem to rely even on our better areas not to desert us in bad years – there is no seat we have not lost at some point in the last 20 years.

	Labour seats
2010	Luton North, Luton South
1992	Cambridge, Ipswich, Norwich South, Thurrock
1987	Norwich South
1983	Ipswich, Thurrock
1979	Harlow, Ipswich, Norwich North, Norwich South, Thurrock
1970	Norwich North, Hitchin (Stevenage), Thurrock, Watford

A worrying trend that has set in recently is the destruction of Labour's council base. We are at a historic low point in every county that comprises the region in terms of the number of elected representatives we have. Even in the 1980s we managed to retain around 600 councillors at the low points, but in 2010 we are down to 264 (before the local elections in May and September the total was even lower). These are concentrated in a few strong points – Stevenage, Luton, Ipswich and Thurrock account for 98 of them.

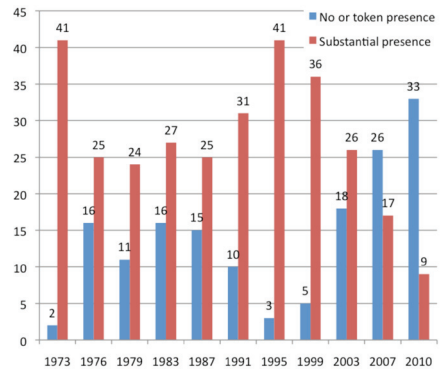
Total number of Labour councillors in the Eastern region, 1973-2010



Labour is also shut out of local representation as never before. At our lower points before, like the mid 1970s and late 1980s, we were unrepresented on 4 or 5 councils. Now we are without councillors in 16, and with a marginal presence in another 17. In only 9 councils in the East is there a Labour group of more than 10 people. The damage that this does to

Labour's presence in local communities and people's consciousness cannot be overstated. The party is unprecedentedly thin in the region – we have an MEP, but east of the M1 (if one regards Luton as being on the M1) we have no MPs and one Labour council (Stevenage).

Labour's representation on councils in Eastern England 1973-2010



'Token presence' is 1-3 councillors, 'substantial presence' is 10 or more.

1.4 Conclusion

Eastern England could become for Labour what Scotland is for the Tories – and because its population is growing and it indicates future trends in England, that is even more alarming. The Conservatives are still in a miserable condition in Scotland, with one seat in the Westminster parliament. They have also been shut out of most of the great northern cities, lacking any elected representatives in Liverpool, Sheffield, Manchester or Newcastle. Once destroyed in the 1990s they were unable to rebuild, and saw the mantle of opposition to Labour pass to the Lib Dems, Greens and others. There is no automatic swing of the pendulum towards the main party of opposition, and Labour cannot take it for granted that Eastern seats will return to the fold once the Conservatives become unpopular.

The Conservatives in Wales, by contrast, were beaten as badly as their Scottish or northern urban counterparts in 1997 but they have returned to contention, and from no seats in 1997 or 2001 they seem now to have developed some strong seats. If the Conservatives, at the depths of Labour's troubles in 2009, can win a Euro-election in Wales and then win 8 seats in the 2010 election even while they failed to gain an overall majority, then Labour should not be defeatist about the party's chances in Eastern England.

Winning in the East must be a top priority for Labour.

In our report, we aim to look in more detail at what happened in 2010 from the point of view of MPs and candidates in the key seats. We examine which issues hurt us on the doorstep, what we did wrong (and right) in terms of organisation and strategy. We offer some thoughts on why Labour's problems in the East are so deep, and also some suggestions for how we might re-establish Labour as an attractive political home for people in the East of England.

Part 2

What went wrong in 2010?

In November 2010 the authors interviewed nearly every Labour candidate in ‘key seats’ in the Eastern Region, including defeated MPs; a few candidates in seats we held between 1997 and 2005; and some representatives of the media. We asked the same questions in each case, although we gave the interviewees the opportunity to draw things to our attention that were not addressed in the standard questions. We are grateful to all of them for sparing the time.

The questions we asked were broadly divided into two areas – those about the campaigner’s experience in their own constituency and those looking at their perceptions about the wider region.

2.1 Campaigning in Eastern Constituencies in 2010

Expectations and the result

Other than in Luton the results were worse than expected in every case, or at least at the bottom of the range of possible outcomes. This was not because expectations were unreasonable or deluded. It was obvious that 2010 was a very difficult campaigning environment and Labour would struggle to hold its support, and many of our interviewees were experienced campaigners who knew their seats well.

MPs who expected to hang on ended up narrowly defeated. In several cases the Conservative majority was significantly larger than expected, leaving us a harder task to rebuild. Nationally, to win 258 seats was towards the top of the range of expectations, but in the East we were at the bottom. Something had clearly gone wrong with our understanding of what was happening during the campaign.

The issues that damaged us

Two issues emerged head and shoulders above the others as putting voters off Labour in May. These were leadership and immigration.

It gives the authors no pleasure to report that Gordon Brown’s **leadership** was unpopular with people who might otherwise have voted Labour in Eastern England; we both feel that history will look much more favourably on his achievements than people do now, and that the wisdom of some of his decisions (in taking action to stimulate the economy in 2008 in particular) is obscured by a barrage of coalition and media propaganda.

However, we must be realistic and it is clear that Gordon failed to communicate with the electors in Eastern England – they did not feel inspired by his leadership or sense that he was ‘on their side’ or understood their concerns. As well as a contest of issues and constituency candidates, general elections are a choice between different national leaders and while there was little enthusiasm for David Cameron, the public’s poor regard for Gordon Brown cost us.

‘It was more about the way they saw us, what we sounded like, the personality of Gordon Brown rather than the issues. They felt we had nothing to say to them’.

It would be facile to say that this is not relevant anymore because we have a new leader of the Labour Party. We will have to make people feel that they want Ed Miliband as Prime Minister – that he is someone who understands and respects the way of life of ordinary people and will help them meet their aspirations. The lines of attack against him are already apparent and we need to make it clear that this caricature is false. If there are Prime Ministerial debates in 2015, we need people to be willing to listen to what Ed Miliband says, in a way that they were

not willing to listen to Brown in 2010 even if the substance of what he was saying was often absolutely right.

Immigration was the policy issue that played hardest across Eastern England. Only very rarely did it appear in the form of racial prejudice (although it was noted in some seats with retired and relocated white Londoners). Most often, voters expressed the view that the consequences of the scale of immigration resulted in a reduction in employment opportunity; downward pressure on wages for skilled working class trades (such as construction); housing shortages; and pressure on public services such as schools. Another reason that voters were angry about immigration was the perception that migrants often got jobs and housing ahead of people who had paid their taxes for many years and that this was simply unfair. Above all immigration was seen to be out of control and Labour had failed to control it.

The region has particular characteristics that made immigration more of a political problem than elsewhere. Most of it (Peterborough, Bedford and Luton aside) does not have much history of ethnic diversity. There was more of a cultural disconnection between migrant communities, including those from within the EU, in the East than elsewhere and probably more mutual misunderstanding.

The other reason that people in the East felt it was such an issue was because of growing population – there was no housing stock to absorb extra population and the result was either rising prices or overcrowding, which established residents dislike because it makes the area as a whole seem shabby.

They blamed Labour as the government party of course, but also felt that we were too intolerant and didactic about the way we approached the issue.

'We gave people the impression that we wouldn't allow them to talk about it.'

Below these two predominant issues, which featured in nearly every constituency, there were a number of other national issues that were important in some seats.

Some of the issues are not really separable, in that there were two that were more like themes. One was **'time for a change'** – that Labour had been in power a long time, got stale and it was time for fresh national leadership. Some voters who took this view were angry with us, while others had a positive view of many Labour achievements but still felt that our time was up. In some areas it took the form of no longer listening to anything we said, so the most bizarre stories and rumours were recounted on the doorstep as fact and there was nothing we could do to persuade people otherwise.

Another theme was **'fairness'** – a word whose definition is always stretched by politicians but which many voters in the East felt in 2010 in terms of justice in the way public services worked. This was mentioned often in terms of migration and the **benefits system** – a perception that it was not working as it should. Many people believed that the state would do nothing for you if you had paid in over the years in tax and by working hard and then you fell on hard times, but would tolerate others less deserving jumping the queue and having selfish and lazy behaviour rewarded. Labour, they felt, did not care enough about abuse of the system.

'It was either, 'I should be getting benefit, and I'm not' or 'they're getting them, and they shouldn't be'

Campaigners report that 'doing something about benefits' is one of the Conservative-led government's more popular policies on the doorstep.

Interestingly, **the economy** and Labour's competence to run it were not a huge problem on the doorstep in the 2010 election (although recession must have indirectly made people more critical of what they saw around them). In some constituencies Labour's handling of the economy was a positive factor,

with Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling being given – sometimes reluctant – credit for their handling of what voters realised then was a very dangerous situation. It has become more difficult for Labour because of the wave of propaganda since the new government took office. During the election, even in hostile seats, there was a sense that on the economy:

‘face to face you could put the case and win people round’

The controversy over **MPs’ expenses** in 2009 had surprisingly little impact on most constituency election results in the region. The exceptions were obvious, and the effect went both for and against Labour. The impact was very bad in Norwich North for obvious reasons, and was still apparent in 2010

although less so than in the by-election. In Luton, however, where it was a major issue Labour were able to draw a clear contrast between the departed Margaret Moran and the two candidates in 2010; the ‘by-election like’ conditions in Luton South and Labour’s clear strategy saw a difficult seat being held. In most other seats there was little effect, other than a general ‘anti-politics’ gripe, although opposition politicians campaigned against Charles Clarke’s (properly declared) outside earnings in Norwich South and there was lingering ill-will in Stevenage.

There were also **local issues** in some constituencies, most notably hospital closures and reorganisations which worked in the Conservatives’ favour in places such as Ipswich and Welwyn Hatfield. However, campaigners

The flow of the vote 2005-10

	Con 2005	Lab 2005	Con 2010	Lab 2010	Con change	Lab change	Con % change	Lab % change
Norwich Nth	12,443	19,212	17,280	13,379	4,837	-5,833	38.9%	-30.4%
Ipswich	13,785	19,020	18,371	16,292	4,586	-2,728	33.3%	-14.3%
Watford	14,631	16,572	19,291	14,750	4,660	-1,822	31.9%	-11.0%
Stevenage	14,314	17,602	18,491	14,913	4,177	-2,689	29.2%	-15.3%
Waveney	16,542	22,492	20,571	19,802	4,029	-2,690	24.4%	-12.0%
Thurrock	13,659	19,017	16,869	16,777	3,210	-2,240	23.5%	-11.8%
Bedford	14,244	17,657	17,546	16,193	3,302	-1,464	23.2%	-8.3%
Harlow	16,204	16,434	19,691	14,766	3,487	-1,668	21.5%	-10.1%
Basildon S&E Thurrock	16,290	17,195	19,624	13,852	3,334	-3,343	20.5%	-19.4%
Gt Yarmouth	15,795	18,850	18,571	14,295	2,776	-4,555	17.6%	-24.2%
Luton Sth	10,879	16,577	12,396	14,725	1,517	-1,852	13.9%	-11.2%
Luton Nth	12,656	19,095	13,672	21,192	1,016	2,097	8.0%	11.0%

		Labour vote retention		
		Better than average	About average	Worse than average
Conservative vote gain	Better than average	–	Watford	Norwich North Stevenage Ipswich
	About average	–	Harlow Bedford Thurrock Waveney	Basildon
	Worse than average	Luton North	Luton South	Great Yarmouth

often felt that local issues were helpful to Labour in places such as Luton, Stevenage, Waveney and Basildon. An advantage in tapping into local issues we will not have next time, except in Luton, is that an incumbent MP can serve as a strong local representative voice and their personal profile helps retain votes and get Labour's case listened to.

We examined three potential sources of the strong swing from Labour to Conservative in the marginal seats. Switchers to New Labour in 1997 returning to the Conservatives; re-energised Tories who had not been turning out since 1997; and the 'hollowing out' of Labour's traditional vote. All these factors affected the result in the Eastern region. In each seat we also looked at whether demographic or boundary changes affected the result. Overall the impact of short term demographic change since 2005 was limited and boundary changes were not the reason for Labour's rout in the East.

Switchers

Direct switching to the Conservatives was perceived as part of the reason for Labour's bad result in seven of the eastern seats, often a strong factor. However, in some seats such as Ipswich the Conservatives made inroads into previously solid Labour areas and voters who had been Labour supporters before 1997.

Several interviewees felt that there was less of a barrier to switching directly to the Conservatives in the East than in other regions. Labour voters, not just those who came over for the first time in 1997 and felt weak attachment to the party, were willing to consider the option of voting Conservative and switch over in elections where they feel Labour are performing poorly.

'For Labour to do well it needs to get it all correct and do that bit extra'

Part of this is the relatively affluent demographic characteristics of the vote in the East, but there was also a pervasive sense that there was something cultural about this as

well. There was less gut Labour loyalty, fewer people who, as one of our interviewees put it, feel that:

The worst Labour government is better than the best Tory government.

An energised Conservative vote

In many of their target constituencies the Conservatives achieved impressive increases in their numerical vote against which even a Labour vote that was little down on where it stood in 2005 (as in Bedford) was not enough. Several Eastern marginals were clearly won with the help of an above-average boost in the numerical Conservative vote, notably Norwich North, Ipswich and Watford.

Conservative sympathisers were more attracted than before to going out to vote in 2010. This happened across the country, but in seats where the Conservatives had spent money on their constituency campaign this was particularly apparent. The Conservatives invested huge amounts of money and effort in their marginal seat campaign in 2010 – the strategy was known as 'Ashcroft money' but it came from other sources as well as Lord Ashcroft.

Several of Labour's campaigners in the target seats recognised that they were dealing with a highly organised Conservative campaign. According to one defeated MP:

'We've never seen a Tory campaign like the one this year'

The Conservative in that seat was well funded and a better, harder-working and more professional candidate than we had had previously and there was 18 months of campaigning from them of an order better than anything before.

The Conservatives' steady barrage of local publicity, doorstep work and nationally-organised phone canvassing and direct mail stimulated turnout in their stronger areas. The benefits from a strong, personalised campaign around the candidate over the long term were apparent in several seats.

'Hollowing out'

Conversely, Labour suffered in many seats from 'hollowing out'. This broad term means that the areas and types of voters on whom Labour has traditionally relied were no longer strong in their support. Rather than a huge switch to another party, the typical pattern was of declining turnout and a scatter of votes to the Lib Dems and minor parties and sometimes switchers to the Conservatives even in 'council estate' wards. Areas that were formerly voting Labour by margins of 60-80 per cent were still returning Labour councillors, but with 40 per cent of the vote on a low turnout, which means that the ward's contribution to Labour's net strength in the constituency falls disastrously.

One of the differences between the East and the South proper is that among general prosperity in the East there are some pockets of acute deprivation, particularly in the more

distant parts of the region in Great Yarmouth, Waveney, Kings Lynn and the Fens, which have few parallels in the South East. More than elsewhere, Labour in the East is dependent on retaining a connection with a core vote which is often an isolated minority within the constituency as a whole.

Hollowing-out costs us more in the East when there is a strong Tory vote than elsewhere. We had an advance indication of this in 2001, when we lost North West Norfolk not because of a political swing against us but because of complacency, disengagement and low turnout in the King's Lynn urban wards.

'Labour had concentrated on getting the middle class to vote for us. A consequence of this was that estates didn't come out. As the years went on, our support there fell away.'

	<i>Major factor</i>	<i>Smaller factor</i>	<i>Helpful</i>
Switchers back	Ipswich Norwich North Harlow Basildon Watford Clacton	Waveney	
Hollowing-out	Waveney Stevenage Cambridge Great Yarmouth Welwyn Hatfield	Bedford Norwich North Luton South Clacton	
Tory mobilisation	Bedford Luton South Ipswich	Waveney Norwich North Harlow	Luton North (by its absence)
Small-I liberals/ BME		Watford Cambridge	Harlow Luton South Luton North
Boundary changes	Basildon Clacton	Cambridge	Norwich North Stevenage
Demography	Welwyn Hatfield	Harlow Basildon Ipswich (over long term) Waveney	Luton North (over long term)

The televised leaders' debates

The main new feature of the 2010 campaign was the debate between the three main party leaders. Following the first debate there was a surge in the opinion polls for the Liberal Democrats and hard as it is to recall now, a period of what was called 'Cleggmania'. Labour's campaigners in the East had mixed views about what really happened as a result of the debates, but the main impression was that uncertainty was injected into the local campaigns. Suddenly there were a lot of 'Don't Knows', which campaigners often interpreted as people thinking about possibly voting Lib Dem.

Local organisational capacity

Our findings on the state of Labour's campaign in 2010 were mixed. It was clear that campaigning in some seats was done by very small teams, with the number of volunteers being a fraction of what the party had available in the 1980s or 1990s. Some key seats relied on the dedicated efforts of as few as 6-10 people on the doorstep each night. Outside the key seats the level of activity was even more skeletal, and the contrast in some seats between the work put in when we defended but lost in 2005 and what was possible in 2010 was tragic and reflected in disastrous election results.

However, the brighter side of the findings on organisation in the constituencies is that Labour did a lot more with less, or often the same numbers as we had in 2005. Candidates reported that the work rate of the people who did help was phenomenal, and that often people's time and talents were used more efficiently than they had been in the past. Some seats benefited from an infusion of new volunteers, often young people, whose energy and enthusiasm lifted the whole local campaign.

Support from the centre

During the short campaign itself, many candidates were happy with the number of **visits** received by leading Labour figures, with

Eddie Izzard's tour early in the campaign being remembered with particular appreciation. The problems were more in maintaining such a presence of Cabinet level Labour politicians outside election time, over the mid-term and the long campaign.

There was also praise for the Party's **printing service** and the template for the election address, which was useful and well-organised, and the central distribution enabled scarce local resources to be deployed to good effect. However, one problem that arose later in the campaign was a lack of consultation and even notification of centrally-organised direct mail in target seats in the East – some was high quality but others were not well suited to local needs.

However, the big issue that emerged from the survey was that the national campaign didn't give people a reason to vote for us:

'I don't think people knew what the national messages were'

More detailed findings on campaign organisation are contained in a separate annexe presented only to Labour Party leaders and officers.

2.2 Why was Eastern England so bad for Labour in 2010 (and before)?

A discussion point arising from Giles Radice and Patrick Diamond's work on *Southern Discomfort* is whether there is anything culturally distinct and 'southern' about voters in the southern regions, or whether the south simply had more voters in the demographic categories that were inclined to desert Labour. Was there a 'pure' regional effect, or was it down to a national pattern that some types of voters switched, and the south happened to have more of them than other regions?

Most Labour candidates in the East felt that there **were** specific things about Eastern England that made it particularly difficult territory for Labour, leaving aside the demographics which did indeed make

specific seats such as Ipswich very vulnerable. A common view was that if you picked up a number of Eastern towns and set them down somewhere in the North, they would be strongly Labour. In this section we explore some of the regional-level issues.

A cultural disconnection

'We were fighting the perception that Labour was not for the East'

Many interviewees spoke of a feeling that the East was always weak territory for Labour, which is true up to a point – although the statistics in Part 1 show that the party's disadvantage was fairly small before the 1970s and has tended to get worse and worse relative to the national picture since then (except in 1997). The East lacks the cultural and demographic underpinnings of Labour support. One interviewee put it particularly well:

'We fall between two stools in terms of Labour's coalition of support. We've not got the metropolitan agenda of school choice and so on, and we don't have the industrial working class traditions of the north.'

The East in general also lacks black and minority ethnic electors, who form a crucial part of Labour's coalition in many of our stronger areas, particularly London. It lacks large scale industry, and there was a feeling among some voters that Labour was 'northern, industrial and not competent' (or alternatively perhaps metropolitan and elitist).

Labour in the East has to face another pervasive problem, of depth of support. Even in good elections, our seats are still widely scattered rather than in groups: 'red islands in a blue sea'. We did not have a majority of seats in any of the counties of the East even in 1997 (though we were level with the Tories in Bedfordshire).

There has been a long-term trend in politics for urban areas to become more Labour and rural areas to become more Conservative,

and for Labour to become identified with the interests of large urban areas and the Conservatives to do well in rural areas and take ownership of the political identity of the 'countryside'.

There has been gradual demographic change as commuters and retirees move outwards from London, and while in some areas retirees have brought Labour traditions with them, in others it has involved a kind of 'white flight' from London and a search for a quiet, traditional environment away from cities and industry and the modern world.

Local networks of power – local authorities, appointments to government boards, business networks – are all dominated by the Conservatives and Labour in power did too little to challenge the local establishment in the East. The sense that there is something 'normal' and maybe even 'non-political' about being Conservative still exists in a lot of rural East Anglia and Essex. There is a Tory squirearchy which still exists in the eastern counties and the party in general is 'embedded'. The combination of economic growth, traditional power structures and a conservative culture has produced strong right-wing power bases in other countries such as Bavaria, northern Italy, Alberta and the southern United States, and in the last few decades on a smaller scale Eastern England.

Breaking through against the cultural ascendancy of the Conservatives in the East will not be easy, although it is possible – the inroads Labour made in 1997 were impressive.

Economy, infrastructure and government policy

Labour in government sometimes did not take enough account of the interests of the East.

There was a perception that public investment was mostly about poverty relief, although there is a need to provide infrastructure (housing, roads, public transport, schools, and hospitals) to accommodate and encourage growth.

'It was a constant struggle to get the Labour government to pay attention to the region, particularly looking at infrastructure investment'

The East of England received the lowest of public expenditure per head of any of the regions (*inventing Our Future*, EEDA 2008 p8) and the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) was always the Regional Development Agency with the smallest budget. The economy of the East is more private sector than that of other regions.

Lack of Eastern figures in Labour's leadership

The lack of safe Labour seats in the East meant that Labour in government after 1997 lacked an experienced group of Eastern Labour MPs who could serve as a counterweight to strong regional groups in the north and Scotland and be the 'Eastern voice' of the Labour government. Charles Clarke was the East's only Cabinet Minister in 1997-2010.

Candidates in East Anglia in particular were likely to report in our interviews that there was a feeling of being generally ignored by Labour – in terms of spending, visits from leading figures and attention. This feeling was not found so much in the parts of the region that are closer in to London or on the north-south trade routes. There was a tendency, candidates felt, for Labour's leaders to make an appearance in Cambridge and feel that they had 'done the East'. Even in the initial planning of the party's officially sponsored debates during the subsequent leadership election, there were none proposed for Eastern England – the logistics and expense seemed to weigh more heavily than the signal this was sending to a region where we need to regain so much ground.

Even in government there was a feeling that

'the party hierarchy don't treat the region as important'

The party's leading figures will be from outside the region, and unless we take great care the policies the party devises will be drawn up without enough input from the East (and South) – in which case, we cannot be surprised if people from the East feel that Labour is not offering them much. Not unreasonably, people in East Anglia in particular may see Labour as talking at them from outside, not being part of a genuinely local political debate.

An interviewee said that:

'We need authentic local voices and candidates speaking for us in East Anglia'

The generation of MPs who won seats in 1997 had by 2010 established records as strong local figures in their own constituencies, but we lacked a presence across the wider area, and we will need candidates who can bring the sort of local credibility to the table that people such as Angela Smith, Tony Wright and Bob Blizzard did in the run-up to 1997. Our current weakness in local government makes this a challenge.

The lack of Labour seats in the East means that Labour's problems in communicating with the electorate in the region are much worse in opposition.

'Hopeless' seats

Ever since 1950, a majority of the region's seats have been Conservative, and this will be difficult to overcome. But Labour's campaigning strategy (rational though it may have been in some ways) amounted to defending a shrinking core; constantly surrendering territory to the Tories; and also opening up the political space for the Liberal Democrats to become the main non-Tory force in many areas.

'The message that we don't bother in 'hopeless' seats gets over'

As well as weakening Labour in the neglected areas, this message seeps across into the seats we do win – if we don't care about most of the seats in a county, the people who

we are trying to talk to can be forgiven for being cynical about our approach and not understanding where we are coming from.

By 2010 the Labour Party had collapsed in parts of the region. CLPs did not exist in any functional way in some rural areas, and even in some areas where there had recently been ruling Labour groups on the local council we were leaving most seats uncontested in local elections.

'Labour just isn't visible in so many communities'

Mid-sized market towns are not being won for Labour because traditional Labour voters on the council estates don't turn out, and the surrounding areas are so Tory – in local elections often without a Labour candidate. Labour has weakened in villages where we were a presence until comparatively recently, with the case of North Norfolk – a rural seat with a substantial Labour element in the 1980s and up to 2001 – being particularly severe. However, it is a story told in microcosm in other areas. Burston in South Norfolk (venue of the famous annual Labour Movement rally) had a Labour councillor from 1995 until 2003, but not even a candidate in 2007. Labour's council representation in Uttlesford (Saffron Walden) was eliminated in 2003 and in 2007 our two brave candidates in the entire authority came a poor third.

In some ways our bad result in 2010 was a delayed response to the collapse of organisation and activity which was taking place over some time, and was already evident in 2005. We survived for a while on the basis of Totes and other local fundraisers, which enabled organisers to be employed even in some difficult seats into the 1980s, but without them we were vulnerable. Labour has retreated too far, concentrating on the 'known vote' in our areas of comfort, ceding territory to the Conservatives and the role of opposition to the Liberal Democrats or Greens.

People do not feel part of an 'Eastern region'

The 'Eastern Region' exists as a governmental area and for European elections (and we pay tribute to the solid support Labour's Eastern MEP Richard Howitt has given the party across the region), and this is reflected in our organisation.

But it does not exist in people's minds.

It is pointless to talk in terms like 'NHS waiting lists across the Eastern Region were down x per cent with Labour...' because people do not feel an affinity with something called the 'Eastern Region'. It is another manifestation of how we became much too inward-looking and governmental and used language and ideas that make sense in Whitehall and Westminster but fail to connect with the electorate.

The southern regions of England are where Labour's problems are most acute, and where also the sense of regional identity is weakest. When the regions were first being established in 1999, the East had by far the weakest sense of identity, in that only 52 per cent of people in the East could name their region, the lowest figure for any other region being 66 per cent and the rest over 75 per cent (*Economist*, as cited DTLR *Your Region Your Choice*, May 2002).

People tend to know what you mean when you talk about 'Yorkshire' or even the 'West Midlands' but not really when you talk about 'Eastern England'. The midland and northern regions either have a single metropolitan area as a regional 'capital' (such as Newcastle in the North East, Birmingham in the West Midlands) or more than one rival centre, one of which tends to be predominant (like Manchester, Leeds, Bristol and Nottingham which all have counterweights).

For most of the East and South East, links in to London are stronger than links to different parts of the region. Several regions have sub-regions, but the links between them are particularly weak in the East – Peterborough,

Watford and Great Yarmouth hardly seem part of the same grouping. People may recognise smaller groupings, but not 'Eastern'.

Culturally, there are three regions which together make up 'Eastern'.

- East Anglia, which is Norfolk and Suffolk plus north Essex (including Colchester and as far south as Chelmsford) and the eastern part of Cambridgeshire. It is distinct from London, centred on Norwich and to a lesser extent on Ipswich and Cambridge, and has a substantial rural and small town component.
- South Essex, which is one of the most distinct areas of southern England – tied to London but not part of it, a suburban belt developed by working class Londoners rather than middle class commuters. Harlow and even Broxbourne are the edge of this area.
- The other lacks a good name but is essentially 'Home Counties North' – Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and western Cambridgeshire, which has close links to London, new and expanded towns with London influence, and is more connected to other areas such as the north end of the South East at Buckinghamshire/ Milton Keynes and the Northamptonshire end of the East Midlands.

The lack of a focal point to the Eastern Region poses particular problems for organisation and campaigning and perhaps even for Labour's way of thinking. We tend to rely on a regional or sub-regional metropolitan area as the anchor of Labour's presence. Even in areas of general weakness, we have been able to rely on Leicester or Bristol, and usually on Plymouth and Southampton, to serve as a base for a Labour MP to put the case to a wider area subject to that city's influence. These sub-regional capitals often also demonstrate Labour's ability to run local government, and at least keep us in the local political conversation.

The East is harder. It has only three towns with more than one constituency (Norwich, Luton and – just about - Southend) and these are only two-seaters rather than large metropolitan areas. Their influence as centres does not extend very far, with the partial exception of Norwich which has strong influence in Norfolk and a weaker presence in the consciousness of the rest of East Anglia. Nor are they large enough to create constituency-sized areas of solid Labour strength based on working class or ethnic minority residents in the way that Nottingham or Plymouth, and larger cities, do.

The M1 and A1 towns in the northern Home Counties (Watford, Stevenage, Luton, Peterborough) are at least on Labour's trade routes that stretch from London to the heartlands of the north and Scotland. It is relatively easy when planning an election tour for one of Labour's leading speakers to fit in an engagement in one of these constituencies. Outside election times, speaking at CLP meetings, media events and supporting local campaigns are all easier for ministers or shadow ministers to accomplish on a Thursday or Friday in these areas than in the heartlands of the Eastern region. It takes a specially planned trip to address a CLP in Great Yarmouth or King's Lynn, or even in Ipswich.

List of interviewees

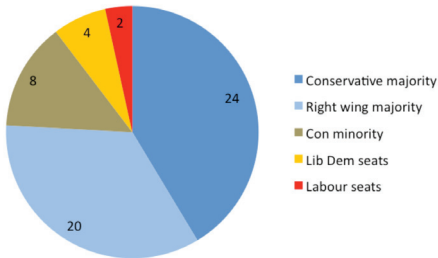
Bob Blizzard (Waveney)
Charles Clarke (Norwich South)
John Cook (Norwich North)
Barbara Follett, Brian Mitchell (Stevenage)
Patrick Hall (Bedford)
Ivan Henderson (Clacton)
Mike Hobday (Welwyn Hatfield)
Kelvin Hopkins MP (Luton North)
Richard Howitt (MEP, East of England)
Chris Mole (Ipswich)
Bill Rammell (Harlow)
Gavin Shaker MP (Luton South)
Baroness Angela Smith (Basildon)
Claire Ward (Watford)
Tony Wright (Great Yarmouth)
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge)

Part 3

How should Labour reconnect with Eastern England?

The strategy in the East needs to start with a clear recognition that we need to gain directly from the Conservatives.

Eastern Region Seats 2010



In 24 seats out of 58, the Conservatives had an overall majority of votes cast, but in another 20 the combined vote of Tories, UKIP and BNP (plus Independent Bob Spink in Castle Point) could be said to represent a right wing majority of votes cast in 2010. The Conservatives prevailed despite the lack of a right wing majority in eight seats (Bedford, Ipswich, Norwich North, Peterborough, St Albans, Stevenage, Watford and Waveney). Several of our future targets (South Basildon & East Thurrock, Great Yarmouth, Harlow and Thurrock) had a majority of votes cast for the Tories or to their right.

Consolidating a 'progressive' vote may win Labour more seats in other areas, but to make serious inroads in the East requires us to reduce the right of centre share of the vote in many seats. Returning to our categories of vote loss in 2010 and reversing them, we can hope for Conservative 'hollowing-out' into low turnout and votes for UKIP and Lib Dem but this is beyond our control – we need to concentrate on reversing our own 'hollowing-out' and winning switchers from the Conservatives.

Labour made particularly notable progress in the 1997 election in Eastern England, gaining direct switchers from the Conservatives and temporarily reversing the region's long term trend to the Conservatives. It is therefore worth looking at what worked in 1997 and what we lost in terms of political message, communications and organisation between 1997 and 2010.

But time and circumstances move on and we need some solutions that are new and specific to the context in 2011-15 and beyond.

In this section we look in turn at each of these areas and consider what Labour can and should do to regain ground in the East. Our recommendations draw on the discussions we have had with Labour's campaigners in the East, but are our own.

3.1 Policy Direction

As in 1997 we need to build a picture in the public mind of Labour as a party with:

- Strong, likeable leaders who connect with ordinary people
- A competent approach to managing the economy, to back up the caring values people always know we have
- An commitment to real change, political integrity and a big offer for the worst-off that will inspire people to start voting again
- An understanding of aspiration and willingness to provide a framework for people to achieve their ambitions
- A commitment to fairness, which means not only helping those less well off but not tolerating selfish and antisocial abuse of systems, be they benefits or banking.
- Strong values about equality and diversity, but not blindness to the problems that an international economy and workforce bring for working people.

Labour in 1997 was a coalition of the aspirational middle, liberal professions and the disadvantaged – we have lost a lot of the first to the Conservatives, the second to the Lib Dems and the third to non-voting. In most of the seats of the East, the crucial categories are the middle (now ‘squeezed’) and the worst-off (liberal professionals are a crucial element really only in Norwich South, Cambridge and St Albans of the seats we won here in 1997). Our policies should be aimed at reconnecting with these broad groups. Perhaps particularly in the East, people desire ‘tough minded’ leadership and solutions – they do not respect leaders who are not capable of saying ‘No’ or who are easily taken in. People generally know that Labour care, and often will concede that the public services were better for our 13 years in power, but they need to be reassured that we are not pushovers.

Early 2011 is far too early to be concentrating on policy details. The risk is that by the time the next election comes, the world will have moved on, and our ideas will either not be relevant or have already been stolen and modified by the government parties.

However, it is never too early to think about the broad outline of what we need to be offering, and how we need to be talking.

Economy

On economic competence, the damage here appears to have largely been done after the 2010 election, rather than being something that voters did not like about us during the election. This is a difficult reputation to acquire from opposition – part of the reason for the Conservatives’ failure to win an overall majority in 2010 despite everything going their way must be that voters were unconvinced about their capability of running the economy well.

We cannot know what the picture will be like at the time of the next election, but the government’s strategy is clearly to front-load the pain and hope that, as in 1983, the economy will have turned around after a disastrous period and they will be in a position

to reap the political benefits. Labour cannot afford to bet everything on the hope that people will think the government’s economic strategy was a failure. Satisfying though it may be to ride hostility to cuts and unemployment in mid term, we need more if we are going to win the general election.

We should avoid hackneyed ‘campaigning against the cuts’ rhetoric, and be precise about which cuts we are opposing. The government (and voters) will respond to general rhetoric against the cuts by saying that something needs to be done about the deficit, while singling out particularly unfair or damaging cuts puts them more on the defensive and uses the power of anecdote (see below) in our favour.

We welcome Ed Miliband’s ambition of making Labour the party of small business – small and medium sized business is a particularly important element of the economy of the East of England.

Migration

We have to have a clear message on immigration. It is not enough to say that you can talk about it, it’s not racist – we need to address the fairness issue. We need to have a story about keeping the numbers under control, and the simplistic Tory answers from the 2010 campaign will have been discredited by the time of the general election. People will be disillusioned with the Tories but we need an answer that is, and is felt to be, fair both to the British (regardless of their ethnicity or origin) and to immigrants.

The concept of an ‘orderly queue’ and ‘fairness’ in allocation of public services, as understood by the voters, needs to be taken on board by Labour. We also need to see immigration in terms of fair employment conditions. It is a fair point for a skilled worker, who has spent time and money studying and training for their trade to worry about being undercut by unregulated competition from people who do not have the same professional credentials.

Benefits

There is no future in being painted into the corner of being the party of the benefit claimant. This is not part of Labour's mission in government. Attlee's welfare state was about helping the disadvantaged and old, and uniting society, not enabling selfish behaviour at the expense of the community (and that is what abuse of the benefits system amounts to). The principle of ensuring people are better off in work is right, although complicated to put into practice (much as Gordon Brown in particular tried to achieve just this). There was 'no fourth option' in the 1997 New Deal, and the ability to use sanctions against people abusing the system, even though this was perhaps insufficiently used.

In general, there is a dilemma about cutting and means testing benefits. It aggravates the problem that people feel the system should be there and isn't for people who do well but fall on hard times. Public services should unite people, not divide them, which is the problem with safety nets. Labour should take a serious look at the role of universality and means-testing in the context of expert advice and our social democratic values.

Housing

'A huge but confused issue in the constituency'

This was the view of one of our interviewees, and we agree.

One of New Labour's failings was to see the politics of housing almost entirely in terms of the interests of the mortgage-paying middle, and to lose sight of the needs of the social sector and also the problems of affordability and supply for people trying to get a foot on the ladder. Towards the end, Labour started to get this right, but it was too late and we should candidly acknowledge that we did not do enough. There was an aversion to considering the role councils could be playing in solving housing problems.

Housing is particularly important in the New Towns, of which the East has six (the largest number in any region). The need to accommodate growth, and the government's changes to the planning system and housing finance, will create huge pressures over the next few years, particularly in the south and east. We can expect the government to fail, but we need a better and more radical answer than we have had so far. If post-war Britain, in all its austerity, could afford New Towns – which have done so much in giving people decent housing and public services and enabling their ambitions for a better life – surely Britain in 2015 can set its sights on some bold progress?

Infrastructure

Talking to people about 'infrastructure' is jargon, and we should be clear about what we mean. We are talking about building more roads, among other things. Poor road links are a serious problem for towns at the edge of the region, such as Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and King's Lynn, and deter private sector investment and the creation of quality jobs in these areas. Even Norwich, a regional capital, still lacks a dual carriageway A11 link to the M11 and London after all these years. The growth of the economy and population in some areas has outpaced the capacity of the transport network (although in others such as the M1 and A1 corridors there has been considerable investment).

Countries such as the Netherlands and Germany with good public transport tend also to have a good road network – the two are not contradictory but complementary. Public transport in the East, as well as the road network, is in need of expansion and renewal. The government agenda seems mostly to offer punishingly large rail fare rises in the parts of the Eastern region near London and Labour should work with commuters in protesting against them.

3.2 How to reach Eastern voters

There is no future in speaking 'at' the East, not from within it

it should be a big priority for the party to re-engage with areas which have seats we need to win but which are currently without Labour MPs.

Regions tend to reward parties whose leaders are identified with that region – for instance, Gordon Brown in 2010, William Hague in 2001 and Neil Kinnock in 1987 did much better in their home regions than in the country at large.

Conversely, one must expect a region where a party has a low profile and no leading figures to be more difficult to persuade. Labour is in this position in Eastern England (the South East at least has John Denham in the Shadow Cabinet, and the South West has former Cabinet minister Ben Bradshaw). Labour needs to find – quickly – leaders who are identified as Labour and Eastern to fill the gap left by Charles Clarke.

The electorate is quick to respond with hostility to what it perceives as fake, insincere or lacking genuine local roots. Labour needs to remember this in East Anglia in particular.

We have no MPs in the sub-region, for the first time since before the Ipswich by-election in 1938 (Ken Weetch and John Garrett kept the flag flying in 1983-92). East Anglian identity, as we have argued, is a stronger force than 'Eastern'. We have no majority Labour councils at the time of writing, although hopefully this will be remedied in May 2011. Our single MEP is stretched across the entire region.

The problems in other parts of the Eastern region are less extreme, because there is a bit more representation (two MPs and a unitary council in Bedfordshire, a district council in Hertfordshire) and because the regional identity is less distinct. However, we also need to watch south Essex, because it too lacks MPs and councils – although it has authentic and

active representatives in the House of Lords (Angela Smith) and the European Parliament (Richard Howitt).

Labour speakers for each sub-region

We therefore have an unprecedented problem of authentic representation in East Anglia in particular, but also in the other sub-regions. Labour needs to be part of the discussion within East Anglia, not talking at it from outside, and for this we need to think creatively in terms of our organisation and our ideas about representation. At the moment we do not have a way in, so we have to invent one.

RECOMMENDATION

We should appoint a Labour spokesperson for each of the three areas that make up the Eastern Region.

The functions of this position are as follows:

- It is a political, not organisational role, although addressing organisational issues and stimulating party activity - including ensuring new members are adequately welcomed - has to be part of it.
- To be the 'voice of Labour' in the local and regional media – a speaker who is taken seriously by the media and after a while the person whom they automatically ask for a comment whenever something political comes up – they are Mr or Ms Labour in the area in the public consciousness.
- To be the 'voice of East Anglia' (and other sub-regions) within the Labour Party so that the party is forcefully reminded of the interests of the voters with whom we need to reconnect.
- Working with party members and the national and regional party, to devise attractive local/ regional policies and advise on the national policy approaches that work best in the region; to have a voice that is certainly not less than the average member of the PLP.

- Working with council candidates on Labour's political and policy approach in the run-up to local elections

The requirements for the position are:

- Authenticity, above all. The spokesperson cannot be appointed from outside the area. They need, from the word go, deep local knowledge and sensitivity to local political culture. They should have a local background, and metaphorically and possibly literally speak with a local accent.
- Authority – someone who is listened to, either from their knowledge and experience or through a charismatic ability to get things done.
- Commitment. This is a full-time or nearly full time job and there is a huge amount of political work to do.
- Media skills – we need to get taken seriously, quickly.
- The ability to put the area's concerns forcefully if the party is neglecting them.

While we have concentrated on Labour's disastrous position in Eastern England, there are some other areas that could do with a similar approach. Kent has marginal seats but no MPs, as does Sussex (until May 2010, half of East Sussex seats were Labour and now there are none). The smaller counties of Northamptonshire and Warwickshire, plus southern Staffordshire, are also full of crucial marginals but lacking MPs.

If Labour is to win another election, the national party must recognise that the PLP is more representative of the voters we retained in 2010 than the ones we need to win in 2015.

The level of activity required means that these people would be political professionals, and entitled to be paid. It is a role that might be appropriate for an MP or a member of the House of Lords in one or other sub-region, but it should be their main role (after, for an MP, looking after constituents). It could be a reasonably well-known local Labour figure, and in this case it is only fair that the party

should pay a proper salary. While funds are scarce, it is a use of money that should pass any cost-benefit test.

Media strategy

One of the successes of Labour's campaign in 1995-97 was our media operation. We were confident in our case and quick to respond when we were misrepresented. We also made sure we were aware of

The discussion about benefits during and since the election is a telling example of the power of anecdote. The government and right wing newspapers have 'softened up' public opinion by highlighting some indefensible cases of abuse of the system. It works because it chimes with what many people see in their street or estate – cases of people who seem to be taking the system for a ride and contributing nothing to society except disruption.

Labour needs a smart, aggressive media operation that uses cases of individual unfairness – not just to arouse sympathy for those at the bottom of society, but to draw attention to how the government is failing to deliver 'fairness' for ordinary people with aspirations for themselves and their children.

Consolidating future gains

Having a designated voice of Labour from outside parliament in East Anglia should hopefully only be a temporary measure until Labour regains seats at the next election, but even if we do extremely well there is no room for taking that achievement for granted – after all, the East was Labour's second best region in 1997 after London, but then we slipped back more than other regions in the three elections after. Labour needs to put down roots in the region that will enable us to survive future adverse national trends better than we did in 2010. This involves two strands of action.

One must be to develop safe seats in the region. There are examples of seats that used to be marginal which are now safe

Labour (Slough, East Renfrewshire, Hayes & Harlington, Chorley, Tynemouth and the East's own Luton North) – demographics and regional trends play some part, but so does political organisation. We should start work now at identifying the seats which have this potential in the East, and then work at not just winning them but putting them beyond the reach of other parties. Norwich and Thurrock definitely, and perhaps Bedford and Waveney have this potential.

Another part of consolidating Labour in the East must be to ensure the party in government (or opposition) adequately represents its Eastern (and Southern) supporters at senior level. Seniority cannot be the main basis of appointments to the government. By the end of a Labour first term there must be senior Cabinet ministers identified with the South and East of England. We must not be, or appear to be, governing the southern regions and rural areas as an army of occupation, as the Conservatives do in Scotland and the big cities.

RECOMMENDATION

Labour needs a strategy to consolidate future gains in the East to stop us slipping back as in 1997-2010 – developing safe seats and ensuring senior representation.

3.3 Organisational Issues

Funds are tight, but if we're going to win again we need to make the connection locally rather than wait for a national message to do the job for us - if we do that, as in 1997, we may have to wait a long time and then see the initial benefits trickle rapidly away.

Candidates

RECOMMENDATION

We should select candidates in target seats as soon as possible.

The boundary review should not deter Labour from adopting candidates early in target seats. For the Conservatives, early adoption in the run-up to the 2005 and 2010 elections tended to help their candidates, particularly if they were previous candidates who were readopted.

Most of the Labour possibilities for 2015 in the region will be constituencies based on the bigger towns which will probably be relatively little altered in the review, particularly seats such as Ipswich, Waveney, Cambridge and Thurrock where the seats are already about the right size and where the Boundary Commission would be unlikely to split them without good reason. In other seats, even when some alteration is likely, there will be constituencies based on whole towns like Stevenage and Harlow even if the rural elements lumped in with them cannot be predicted with certainty.

An early-adopted PPC will be able, as Tory candidates have done successfully in many seats, to establish their presence in the area, becoming known to the local media and just as importantly local civil society and voluntary groups. This work should not be relentlessly party political – as well as promoting the candidate and the party it should be a learning process so that candidate and party are better informed about the life of the area and more responsive. Showing sincere interest and support for local charities, committees and resident groups creates a good impression of Labour. Our re-elected MP Kelvin Hopkins is a good example of what can be done.

A PPC also performs a valuable role in 'shadowing' the Tory or Lib Dem MP. Many of these people will have won election by playing the localist card, and will be voting for policies that damage local public services, and no doubt breaking many promises they made in their 2010 election material. They need to be held to account for this by a credible local Labour spokesperson, and forced to defend themselves and their government. We need people watching, so that when one of these

MPs casts a vote against their constituents' interests, or makes an embarrassing public statement, we know about it and can act.

Once the boundaries are finalised in 2013, we should move as quickly as possible to full selections, with a presumption that the provisional selection should stand unless there are massive boundary changes or unless the PPC has failed to put sufficient work into the seat.

RECOMMENDATION

We should have stricter 'quality control' over candidates even in seats we are not expecting to win.

Candidate selection is not a matter for target seats only.

Even if they stand little chance of election in 'hopeless' seats, the quality of candidates cannot be ignored. In the 2010 election the behaviour of two Eastern candidates, particularly the candidate in North West Norfolk, caused embarrassment to the Labour Party locally and nationally.

The impression was given to voters across the region, including in marginal seats, that Labour was incompetent and unprofessional. If we were this undisciplined, how could we be trusted to make sensible decisions in government?

It also sent a terrible message to voters in the seats concerned and similar areas – we appeared not to care about or respect these places sufficiently to be bothered to put forward candidates who were fit people to represent both them and us.

A welcoming and campaigning party culture

We have a major problem with the local Labour party in many areas in Eastern England. Probably more than in other difficult regions, our culture seems stodgy and stuck in the past and this affects the effectiveness of CLPs as campaigning organisations and the

sort of local representation that we are offering people with our councillors and council candidates.

It is tragic that in a few of the better campaigns in 2010 it was a matter of the candidate and new volunteers 'working around' the party structure rather than the whole CLP working to return Labour MPs and accepting the fresh energy that our 2010 volunteers provided. The political circumstances we are now in mean that there is a large potential influx of young people into the Labour Party because of their bitter disillusion with the Liberal Democrats and opposition to the government's agenda. This will be particularly strong in the university seats, which are fairly rare in the East (Cambridge and Norwich South the principal examples, although there is a university presence in other seats like Welwyn Hatfield, Colchester, Harwich & North Essex and Luton) but it is a mistake to imagine that young politically-active people are confined to these areas. They are everywhere, including in rural areas and towns with a more traditional image.

New members and potential members often come to party meetings expecting to talk about politics, learn things and make friends, and all too often this is not their experience. Party meetings can be boring, baffling, unproductive and apparently obsessed with clauses in the rule book, and existing members do not always welcome new arrivals in a comradely way. Meetings should also involve collective action by members – perhaps delivering leaflets, or phone-banking for a by-election campaign – so that people come away from meetings feeling that they have been part of something and achieved some results. Another possibility would be to involve the local Labour Party – branded as such - in voluntary work of a not directly political nature, to show that we care actively and are involved in local civic life.

RECOMMENDATION

We should act with urgency to change the culture of party meetings to welcome new members and encourage existing members.

Councils

A theme in several discussions with Labour's 2010 campaigners was how much Labour depends on its councillors, and how their attitude can affect local politics. In Stevenage, for instance, being associated with a popular council was good for Labour, and it is notable how small the losses in local elections over the past few years have been in Stevenage. A solid council base can also serve as a strong centre to a constituency-wide campaign. We should learn lessons in terms of campaigning and policy from the areas where we have been successful in local government and local elections such as Stevenage and Luton.

In other areas a presence in the council has not been as helpful as it should be. We heard depressing accounts of councillors not being prepared to help their parliamentary candidates, even in their own wards. In some areas Labour's performance in power locally has not shown us in a good light and our council groups have not adequately reflected the talent that exists within the party. Labour councils can be examples of efficient, caring government – even in the current climate – but too often they have reflected an unambitious and stodgy party culture.

RECOMMENDATION

We should review procedures for council candidates with the aim of refreshing the party's representation once election results improve. We should also learn from good practice in parts of the region and outside.

In many areas Labour does not have any councillors at all, or only token representation. The May 2011 elections for district councils

are an opportunity to do something about this – we can expect a favourable national context and many districts will be electing all-out for a term lasting until 2015. In the mid-1990s Labour prioritised getting a 'toehold' on councils even in unpromising areas and although resources are stretched thinner now, and there is not much time, it is worth doing again. Suitable wards should be identified and candidates selected as soon as possible.

RECOMMENDATION

We should use the May 2011 council elections to re-establish a Labour voice in communities where it has disappeared in recent years.

Resources

It will take resources to rebuild the organisation we need to win in the East. If the depleted Labour Party in the Eastern Region is left to its own resources, like a sick patient, it may not recover. For example, originally no leadership election hustings was organised for the Eastern region because the RO did not have the money. At Conference in Manchester in September, eastern delegates were thanked for their efforts in the election campaign at the Eastern Region Reception, but were not offered even one free drink because RO did not have the money and no sponsor could be found for the event.

Therefore, in its social democratic tradition, the Labour Party will need to redistribute some resources to assist the weak and vulnerable organisation in the East. We hope we have demonstrated in this report why the Eastern Region is so important to Labour's overall recovery and to victory at the next general election.

RECOMMENDATION

The national Labour Party should redistribute some resources to assist organisation and recovery in the East.

Conclusion

Labour cannot afford to write off Eastern England. It should not be barren territory for us. The total number of Labour voters in 2010 in the Eastern region (564,581) was more than the total number of Labour voters in either the North East (518,263) or Wales (531,607). However, Labour's Eastern voters returned two MPs while there are 25 from the North East and 26 from Wales. We cannot call ourselves a national party if we leave Labour in the East to wither away, as the Tories have in Scotland and the northern cities. After the North West, the East is the region which supplies the largest number of seats that Labour needs to regain in order to have a working majority in Parliament.

It is possible to recover from bad results in the Eastern region, as we did dramatically in 1997 after our near-death experience in the 1980s. But we need to recognise that our organisation, our core vote, our local government base and our presence in the life of communities in the region are all in worse shape even than in the worst days of the 1980s. More than other regions, we have to contend both with an entrenched Tory establishment and some very demanding swing voters, who will not hesitate to go Tory if we disappoint or alienate them. We lack either the northern industrial traditions, or cosmopolitan diversity, that underpin Labour support in other areas.

Some of the problems afflicting Labour in the East spill over into adjacent areas. Lincolnshire, in particular, is very similar. Northamptonshire has some of the Eastern problem of sustaining the party in a county where there is considerable potential support in good years but where the Labour Party itself seems to have shallow roots which are easily pulled up when the Tories come back into contention.

The response to Labour's eastern problem must take several dimensions – policy, communications, strategy and organisation, and we have put forward some of our ideas about how to approach this. We need a tough-minded and unsentimental approach to understanding what puts people off voting for us. As a very challenging region, we feel that the East does need some help from the party nationally to provide the resources to nourish the sick patient back to health, and that the party has to be prepared to use unorthodox solutions to get us back into the discussion in East Anglia in particular – an independent-minded sub-region that lacks a Labour MP for the first time since 1938. As well as working the target seats with early-adopted candidates, we urge that the council elections should be used to plant the first seeds of Labour renewal in the barren areas, and that effort should be put in not just to regaining the marginals but converting some of them into safe seats.

Labour has a glorious past in Eastern England – the struggles of the agricultural labourers' union, the building of the New Towns, the municipal socialism of mid-century Norwich. We can have a fine future as well, despite the scale of the current challenge. Not so long ago, the Conservatives were well represented in Scotland and Liverpool, and even more recently the outer London suburbs were stony ground for Labour. A modern Labour Party should not regard an economically dynamic region as a no-go area, but invest in its political future in that region. We won 22 Eastern seats in 1997, a gain of 18 since 1992. It **can** be done.

