



By: **Harvey Morris**

UK political rivals court the working class



A debate at the prestigious Oxford Union recently **concluded** with an overwhelming vote in favour of the proposition that Labour has failed the working class.

The 88-25 verdict will have barely registered as even a glancing blow by the ruling party. However, it reflected a wider mood across disgruntled Britain that extends far beyond academia's city of dreaming spires.

Almost one year into its term in office, Keir Starmer's Labour is trailing in opinion polls, as is the defeated Conservative Party. Both face the rising popularity of Nigel Farage's Reform, the main winner in local elections at the start of this month.

In the latest YouGov **survey** of voting intentions, Reform topped the chart at 29 per cent, ahead of Labour's 22, with the Conservatives trailing in fourth place with 16 per cent, below the Liberal Democrats.

Across the political spectrum these rivals are asserting that only they can be trusted to protect the interests of those they portray as hard-working families at the bottom of the income scale.

It seems then that Britain's often maligned working class is back in fashion as politicians either confronting or exploiting the country's economic malaise seek to stack up future votes.

Defining the working class

The question, as ever in class-conscious Britain, is who exactly constitutes the working class?

Generations of theorists, sociologists and statisticians have set themselves the task of not only defining the working classes but also addressing shifting societal attitudes towards them.

An academic study of the findings of a Great British Class Survey **conducted** by the BBC public broadcaster over a decade ago

identified five strata within the working class, from newly affluent workers to the 'precariat' at the bottom of the heap.

Social caste is not defined merely by income and occupation

But, as the study acknowledged, social caste is not defined merely by income and occupation. Perhaps in the UK it is more related to family origins, education, lifestyle or even accent, to which the British ear is so instinctively attuned?

Recent **research** published by Essex University found that children as young as five associated the so-called standard English of the southern middle class with higher intelligence.

There was a time, dating from the 1960s, when a working class regional accent was the essence of cool. Think of The Beatles and all those gritty proletarian films in which the venue for drama switched from middle class drawing rooms to the factory floor.

But, if that was something of a heyday for the lower orders, it failed to eradicate the lingering prejudices attached to those viewed as working class.

When economic times are hard, there is a tendency to blame the victim for society's ills. Depending on circumstances, the working class can be variously portrayed as reckless union militants holding the country to ransom or as feckless idlers feeding off the state.

The working class is back

In recent years, however, there has been a growing perception, supported by statistics, that the trend towards improving conditions and opportunities for the working class that marked the half-century or so since World War II is going into reverse.

Already in the 1980s, Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher's reforms, which involved battles with the labour unions,

deindustrialisation and a trend towards a service economy, were blamed for the decline of many working class communities.

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Nevertheless, Labour prime minister Tony Blair felt able to declare in 1999 that “the class war is over”, echoing his proudly proletarian deputy, John Prescott, who had earlier proclaimed: “We are all middle class now.”

Now times are hard, the working class is back and every politician is scouring for their votes.

A battle for votes

Labour, the traditional party of the working class, is threatened by a perception that it has been hijacked by a middle class metropolitan elite, despite Keir Starmer’s constant reminder that his father was a toolmaker.

Meanwhile, Reform’s Farage (ex-public school, former commodities trader) is pitching his agenda towards the working class, pressing for improvements in benefits and the nationalisation of some key sectors.

Before Reform’s local election wins, Britain’s most senior union leader denounced Farage as a fraud for posing as the champion of the working class.



Underlying the wider Labour debate is the need to provide some tangible benefits for the working class – Keir Starmer

Trades Union Congress boss Paul Nowak **told** the Guardian: “I don’t think he really wants a sensible relationship with trade unions any more than I think he really cares about the interests of British workers or industry or those working-class communities.”

He urged the Labour leadership not to move rightwards in the hope of banking working class votes. Since the local results, however, there has been pressure to do just that when it comes to such issues as immigration, once again the public’s top concern, according to the latest polls.

One of Starmer’s key tasks in the coming months will be to avert any public rifts within his party, amid reports of policy tensions at the top.

Underlying the wider Labour debate is the need to provide some tangible benefits for the working class without pandering to what are sometimes caricatured as their proletarian prejudices.

There is a growing sense that the working class is losing out. Doors to social mobility are closing and life prospects are diminishing.

No doubt some participants at the Oxford Union debate would identify as working class, which would have been considered unthinkable just a few generations ago. But in class-conscious Britain, even the ‘wrong’ accent can still be a barrier to advancement.

It has even been proposed that class discrimination should be outlawed in the workplace and elsewhere in order to offer the working class the sort of protections already afforded to minority groups.

The diverse working class may feel ignored at times. They can rest assured though that, at election time, politicians will always be angling for their votes.