

Labour dreams of a slightly better Britain. But a truly great country is within reach – I've lived there

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In its terror of jeopardising slow, marginal change, the party has sacrificed its ambition. It has stigmatised hope

I am often asked why I hate this country. Whenever I criticise our political culture (which has been rather a lot recently, for obvious reasons), I am asked by various pleasant people on the internet why I am so ungrateful to the country that naturalised me. The simple answer, of course, is that you don't have to hate a country to point out what is wrong with it. The more complicated answer is that sometimes, you point out what is wrong with the country precisely because you believe – because you know – it can do better. Because you have hope.

My own hope was cultivated in a country that doesn't exist any more. It grew every time I found solace in times of precariousness – which I did, over and over again. I arrived in the UK in the mid-noughties, with little money and even fewer connections. I went to night school and survived by finding the cheapest canteens and supermarket deals, and taking temping jobs all over London. I stuffed envelopes and answered phones (badly – I was told I was too curt, and was not invited to return). And when cracks did inevitably appear, in jobs or homes or immigration applications, I came to depend on a growing network of friends and partners who came through for me.

Life was not easy, but it was *viable*. What little disposable income I had stretched to cheap pubs, groceries, buses, entertainment and, eventually, the foundations of a life. Undergirding it all was the public realm. I rented rooms in council estates in east and west London where there was always a staffed office to help out. The first time I used the NHS during a serious illness and hospitalisation, I couldn't believe that there was nothing to pay. I stood in front of the hospital chemist's till clutching my prescription, waiting for and dreading the bill. After being told there wasn't one, not for the treatment or the medicine, I walked out in a daze, half expecting someone to run after me to say that there had been a mistake. To someone from a country with a threadbare public sphere, it felt like a dream.

I romanticise it all, of course, in hindsight and in comfort. There was stinging racism, mostly in workplaces, that I had neither the skills nor the luxury to challenge, and moments of profound uncertainty and alienation. But my experience in that period was brought into relief by what followed: the financial crisis, austerity and a hostile environment that almost deported me. It felt like

closing time on the sort of precarious but survivable, and ultimately prosperous, existence an outsider like myself could forge.

The council estates were sold off to developers, and with them the offices that gave support and advice, and the stalls and shops that sustained those communities. Every local library that I used has been turned into flats. In their place new, expensive things were erected. Metallic new-builds, low-lit restaurants, identikit shopping outlets, cool pop-ups. And we were the lucky ones. In other parts of the country, that infrastructure was replaced by nothing at all.

You might know this as “gentrification”, but it was really a sort of class cleansing. And it was down to a post-2008 settlement that determined that the financial crisis had been the result of public sector spending, rather than of a failure of regulation. It was decided that private investment and consumerism were the keys to growth, deficits had to be eliminated, and the welfare state simply was no longer affordable. So the country became inhospitable to those unable to spend, unable to earn high incomes, or unable to work at all.

The fallout of those slash-and-burn years is vividly clear in the shape of a cost of living crisis, a public health crisis and roiling labour discontent. I bring the promise of my history to these times with the expectation that that connection is surely clear by now: that divestment from the state has made us vulnerable to shocks; that we have been unable to effectively distribute the rewards of all that private wealth creation, which squatted on the site of the old public realm, unable to transform it into a hospital bed, a cheap home or an affordable energy bill. And I am told that, yes, a long-awaited Labour government may finally be on the cards, but there is not much now that we can change, so please be a grownup.

With the instruction to settle comes a stigmatisation of hope. It is seen as not just misplaced but suspect, disqualifying. If you have hope, then you must believe you can change things, which means you are capricious, not to be taken seriously, and certainly not to be allowed anywhere near mainstream politics.

It's bleak, but I get it. The iron grip of what felt like never-ending Tory rule, a huge defeat for Jeremy Corbyn's agenda in 2019, and a particularly disastrous and corrupt current government have yielded a self-inflicted lowering of

expectations. Labour finally has a shot, you see, and must not squander it by offering any solutions that involve a head-on collision with the economic and political status quo.

If we can just trust in Keir Starmer's vague but ambitious pledges, we have the chance to have an NHS "for the future", be a green energy superpower, insulate homes and devolve some power from Westminster. If that doesn't excite you or seem to relate to your life in any way, then would you rather have another Tory government? Is that what you want?

The argument – the rebuke, in fact – is that you risk being able to achieve anything at all if you dare to suggest policies that might actually rebalance the economy. Why bother, if you can win without any of that headache? And so you cannot take on large corporates and redistribute their astronomical profits, or reverse a privatisation of public utilities that has done nothing but gouge customers for poor services, or deviate in any real way from the rightwing press's poisonous line on immigration and race that obscures an expansive, diverse modern Britain.

And so low expectations become a virtue – a mark of maturity, skill and electoral viability. Not being excited becomes the pre-requisite of a Labour government. "We can't promise all the things we want to do," said Emily Thornberry in an interview with this paper last week. "But to get rid of this lot and have some decent people on board who know where they're going and why they're going there is *all right*. It's *all right*!"

And I guess it will be all right, if your ambition for a Labour government does not involve those who are striking and struggling to eat and keep warm, those who can't survive, let alone thrive. If you believe that the key to it all is the groundhog day of being "open to business". But don't tell me that I am naive, indulgent or sabotaging Labour's chances if I believe that there could be more; for listening to myself when I think *this does not feel good*. Don't tell me to ignore my eyes and ears when I see and hear in Starmer not a political master but a leader [reneging on his promises](#), constantly calculating which of the people desperately awaiting his government he can afford to ignore because they have no powerful advocates.

Perhaps I have let what was simply a formative personal experience inform my politics too much. Perhaps my good fortune was down to luck and privilege, rather than the bountifulness I attribute it to. But I can't shake the feeling that if I had arrived in the UK in more recent times, I would not be here, writing these words you are reading, telling you that it is all right to have hope. That to have hope for a country, despite all instructions to submit to what we cannot change, is to love it.