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Focus article

Boosterism and belonging: ‘pride in place’ and the levelling-up agenda

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Introduction

One of the most telling criticisms of Boris Johnson’s manifesto commitment to ‘*level up every part of the United Kingdom*’ (Conservative Party, 2019) is that it was almost impossible to explain what it meant. The Levelling Up White Paper (HM Government, 2022) is a 297-page riposte to that accusation. It is a riposte, though, that continues to raise questions about exactly what the government is seeking to achieve – questions that have been complicated even further by the selection and subsequent defenestration of Liz Truss as Johnson’s successor in September 2022, and the onset of a new wave of fiscal austerity.

Highlighted in the introduction is a mission to ‘restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost’ (p. xiv). It is worth examining why government should anchor its case for levelling-up in such ideas, and how this translates into ambitions expressed in terms of ‘pride in place’. It is worth exploring, too, how notions of civic pride tap into deeply held senses of belonging and identity, and what kind of approaches might take such emotional connections and attachments more seriously. This paper argues that feelings of personal and collective security are foundational to such discourses, tapping into deeply-felt views about place and community. They are issues to be taken seriously. They therefore require serious policy responses to the challenges of secure and affordable housing; the state of local social infrastructure; and the quality of the local built and natural environment.

Pride in place: an empty signifier for 2020s Britain?

Section 3.4 of the White Paper proclaims a mission to ‘restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging’ – a mission that echoes to some extent the community-focused aspirations of the Blair government’s National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal published 20 years earlier (Cabinet Office, 2001). The overarching mission covers several policy areas, each encompassing a bundle of initiatives:

- Regeneration, bringing together development of brownfield land, high street rejuvenation and investment in green spaces.
- Communities, covering issues such as support for young people, civic participation, a review of neighbourhood governance and 'community covenants' setting out how public bodies will work with community organisations.
- Culture, heritage and sport, including funding for heritage buildings and support for grassroots football.
- Housing, including reforms to improve the quality of the private rented sector and help first-time buyers.
- Planning, including modernising the planning system and 'fostering beautiful places'.
- Crime, including tackling crime hotspots, reviewing community sentencing, and tackling antisocial behaviour.

In the context of a policy programme led by issues such as economic productivity and improved transport connections, this nods to the hyper-local or even parochial experience of place (Tomaney, 2013). Place is a sensory experience (Ingold, 2011): the sight of peeling paintwork on an empty shop, the smell of tipped rubbish and the negotiation of feet around broken paving stones all create a sense of place as loss and disintegration. The White Paper describes pride in place in terms of local assets – green spaces, libraries, football clubs – and aesthetics such as *'a beautiful built environment'* (p. 206). Indicators of pride in place are offered such as *'people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community'* which will *'have risen in every area of the UK'* by 2030.

The failure to define pride in place at any point in nearly 300 pages is telling. Pride in place can be seen as an example of Ernesto Laclau's concept of an empty signifier: an expression that points to an absence, which political actors then compete to fill (Norval, 2000). Ideas such as 'fairness' or even 'democracy', for example, are seen to relate not to an ontological reality but to aspirations for a state not yet achieved or believed to have been lost, about which actors may formulate different articulations of what might be signified. Empty signifiers are important aspects of political discourse because they allow coalitions of interests to be created around slogans such as 'Take back control' or 'Make America great again' (Schmidt, 2017). These can mean different things to different people but channel support towards the parties most closely associated with the slogan. In politics, different factions often compete for ownership of the signifier (Moon, 2013).

So in the White Paper, pride in place exists both as an aspiration (who wouldn't want to feel proud of their place?) and as an indicator of absence (it's an ambition because somewhere along the line, we must have lost this pride). Instead of definition, the paper offers historical illustrations, leaning heavily on the Renaissance and Industrial Revolution as a shorthand for bygone golden ages (Hall, 1998). In piggybacking on the opulence of Renaissance Florence or the Industrial Revolution, the White Paper attempts a sleight of hand in which the benefits of urban agglomeration (Porter, 1990) are presented as if they were distributed universally, both in terms of population groups and in terms of location. The 'six capitals' that allegedly drive the success of Seoul and New York today are also apparently the foundation for levelling up rural areas and rebuilding *'social capital and self-reliance in our most abandoned neighbourhoods'* (page xxiv).

The idea of pride in place links aspiration (could Fleetwood be the next Florence?) with nostalgia, a sense of belonging deeply inflected with an awareness of loss. As Lewicka (2014) highlights, nostalgia is not simply a case of harking back to a rose-tinted vision of the past, but can be *'a powerful psychological tool on which people spontaneously rely in order to restore self-continuity disrupted by major life turns and traumatic events'* (p.53). Visions of prosperity are contrasted with the kind of everyday

experiences that fill MPs' inboxes and constituency surgeries: the high street is shuttered, roads are full of potholes, the police don't respond to local crimes and landlords let houses rot. The White Paper gestures towards notions of being 'left behind' (Bolton et al., 2020) and to the real local needs to restore and repair social and physical infrastructure that has become increasingly frayed through a decade of austerity in the wake of long-term shifts such as deindustrialisation.

The expression 'pride in place' taps into populist narratives of decline and loss and the need to deliver on the promises of the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2019 general election. It is geared to register with the working-class communities that switched their allegiance from Labour to the Conservative Party in the so-called Red Wall constituencies of the midlands and north of England, recognising the frustration and disappointment associated with the aftermath of successive regeneration initiatives from the 1990s onwards.

Place attachment and loss

In promoting pride in place, the White Paper enters risky territory. Belonging and identity are not easily reduced to issues such as the apparent vitality of a high street or the aesthetics of buildings. The White Paper correctly judges that place is emotionally important and residents' sense of attachment to places is deeply felt; it is mistaken in implying that such attachments can be easily harnessed to support a 'levelling-up' agenda.

Place attachment is a term associated with environmental psychology and borrows from John Bowlby's theory that infants are biologically programmed to form attachments to their care-givers. Place attachment is presented as a comparable emotional bond between people and places, predicated on ideas of safety, security and nurture: visceral needs that bring the material and emotional together in gut reactions of affirmation or rejection. Place attachment therefore impinges on policy and politics, where questions of security (of home, self and community) are prominent in public discourse. Place attachments have '*a strong positive effect in defining our identity, in filling our life with meaning, in enriching it with values, goals and significance*' (Guiliani, 2003: 137). However, these bonds '*form and change over time*' (Manzo and Devine-Wright, 2021: 1), which allows them to become contestable in the political arena.

Anton and Lawrence (2016) distinguish between 'place identity', which concerns the personal meanings and feelings associated with a place, and 'place dependence', which concerns the ways in which a place meets a person's physical, social and economic needs. These assessments of the importance of a place are highly subjective and depend on personal stories and circumstances, but also operate at a social level through group behaviours and shared cultures (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Importantly, they are often heightened through a sense that the place that is valued is lost or threatened (Fullilove, 2005).

Fear of loss, or experience of loss, can drive policymaking. Alice Mah (2009), studying neighbourhoods in Newcastle-upon-Tyne that had been slated for clearance, coined the phrase 'devastation but also home' to describe local residents' attachment to places perceived by the local authority as a problem. Projects such as Granby Four Streets in Liverpool (see <https://www.granby4streetsclt.co.uk/history-of-the-four-streets>) draw energy from these complex emotional connections: a combination of personal histories, desire to hold on to places that are valued as 'home', and anger at the actions or inaction of public authorities and private enterprise. While there is no single community voice, circumstances enable some to become amplified: local pride can be expressed in terms

of fury at government and resistance to external intervention, and it is frequently confrontational and hostile to the approaches of outsiders. Place attachment can be a far cry from approved expressions of local pride, such as painting shopfronts in heritage colours or entering 'Britain in Bloom' contests; but it can also influence policy decisions, such as the decision to abandon the UK government's housing market renewal programme after the 2010 election, following vocal criticism of its effects on communities (Minton, 2009).

This sense of pride as critique is, perhaps unsurprisingly, missing from the White Paper. Where communities have adopted self-help approaches it has often been as an act of defiance, asserting their own right to create narratives of their future and demanding or acquiring control of local assets. Projects such as the Hastings Commons (see <https://hastingscommons.com>), which is repurposing empty buildings in the heart of a struggling seaside town for a mix of social and business uses, pursue objectives that fit the government's levelling-up agenda but directly challenge its bland conceptualisation of local pride.

An infrastructure for belonging

If we accept, as the White Paper appears to, that belonging and place attachment matter, a closer consideration is needed of what resources and policies would strengthen these bonds.

Place attachment can be associated with ideas that resonate strongly with social conservatives: home, family, and community (though of course there are many different formulations of 'community', many of which are antithetical to traditional conservative values). Such notions can be expressed defensively, through resistance to change or hostility to outsiders, or more adventurously through community-led projects and local celebrations. The White Paper's emphasis on social capital as one of the six 'capitals' that need to be boosted (pp. 45-46) overlooks the wide variety of ways in which social capital may be assessed or demonstrated and elides issues of 'weak endowments of social capital' and 'pessimistic social narratives' with social deprivation, problematising low-income places rather than the policies that help to keep those places poor.

A number of improvements to the White Paper and to future legislation could support feelings of belonging and attachment in ways that engage constructively with their complexities and contests.

At an individual and family level, the most positive way to build a sense of 'home' and belonging is to enable people to build their lives securely. It is harder for people to engage effectively in wider society if they do not know where they will live in 12 months' time, and what it will cost. Renters who are '*adrift in an anomic and anxious scramble for any vestige of security they can find*' (Bone, 2014) will be less invested in any initiatives designed to support 'pride in place'.

Affordable rents, security of tenure, and freedom from arbitrary eviction can all help to stabilise communities. The government, however, continues to rely largely on the same policy levers that have failed to resolve Britain's housing crisis for more than a decade: increasing private housebuilding, fuelled by subsidies such as Help to Buy and the most recent reduction in stamp duty; and removing planning regulations to make it easier to build extensions or convert office blocks into apartments. Although the White Paper acknowledges 'significant unmet need for social housing' (p.223) it makes no effort to address this challenge. Its aspiration to bring half of all rented housing up to Decent Homes standards is not accompanied by significant resources and fails to address issues of affordability.

Belonging and local pride, as the White Paper recognises, also depend on connections with and perceptions of the wider local environment. Engagement in local civil society and use of local facilities create the 'weak ties' that contribute to social capital (Granovetter, 1973). The White Paper recognises that social infrastructure (Kelsey and Kenny, 2021) defined as 'the physical spaces and community facilities which bring people together to build meaningful relationships', contributes to economic prosperity. But its responses – such as relying on the existing Community Ownership Fund and the possibility of a 'community wealth fund' – are a fairly timid response to the challenge and the opportunity.

We already know – for example, from Local Trust's ten-year Big Local programme (Institute for Voluntary Action Research, 2015) – that social infrastructure requires access to facilities where communities can come together, the people to support community-based projects, and organisations that give residents a real say in what happens in their areas. This community and voluntary sector infrastructure has been decimated through successive waves of funding cuts. Without putting in place sustained and flexible funding for voluntary and community organisations that supports revenue as well as capital costs, social infrastructure will continue to deteriorate.

Finally, belonging is also a question of the state of the wider public realm and built environment. The White Paper recognises the importance of 'beautiful neighbourhoods' and successful town centres, but not the damage inflicted by years of austerity coupled with rampant property speculation. Ownership models are needed that build both a long-term stake in the local environment and continuing accountability to local residents, retaining wealth within local communities (Archer et al., 2019).

This is why the model of public parks run by local authorities is still generally favoured as the best way to protect local green spaces. Funding for local authorities needs to recognise the value of such spaces to health and wellbeing, either by making provision a statutory duty or by finding other ways to ring-fence resources. Models of community ownership should be expanded and encouraged, for example by significantly increasing the Community Ownership Fund and by setting up the proposed £350m High Street Buyout Fund (Plumb et al., 2022) to bring key high street assets into long-term community use.

Taken together, what is required is a significant and sustained commitment to build people's stake in localities through a secure home, a thriving local civil society, and a natural and built environment managed through forms of local ownership and accountability and supported through ongoing care and investment. The White Paper acknowledges the problem, but falls short both on understanding the causes and proposing solutions.

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