

## Things Can Only Get Better (if we do the work): The Politics of Hope and Regenerative Agriculture

I have often heard it said in Labour circles that we are, by temperament, optimistic folks who believe that positive change is possible, that things can only get better. Rather than optimism, though, I want to suggest that it is more useful to think about the politics of *hope*. In his darkest days of the 1980s, Václav Havel wrote that hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope entails no such conviction, but rather is the belief that some things are worth doing, regardless of how they turn out. Optimism might entail not doing anything much. Hope is an ongoing *practice*, even when things seem deeply unpromising.<sup>i</sup>

*Renewal's* thirtieth anniversary is an occasion to look forward hopefully to the issues that will be occupying us, on the left, for the next thirty years. Yet, as someone who teaches and researches the politics of nature, I realise that I do not often hear very hopeful stories about the future. This really came home to me when I read the final chapter of Lee Schofield's brilliant book *Wild Fell* which is mainly a factual account of his work as a site manager for the RSPB on a Lake District farm, but which ends in a fictional projection of what this work might mean for the future of the landscape.<sup>ii</sup> I found myself in floods of tears not only because of the beauty of the scene he describes (no further spoilers because I highly recommend that you read it) but also, I think, because I realised that I am so constantly beset by thoughts of extinctions and the depletion and destruction of the natural world that the future usually seems hardly to bear thinking about. It felt like the first time I've read a positive and hopeful story about the future of the non-human world in a long time.

Lee's work for the RSPB on an upland farm is a fine example of the politics of hope. There is no guarantee that things will turn out well. A huge variety of forces are ranged against him from the conservatism of the local farming community, to entrenched ideas about what the Lake District 'should' look like that are deeply embedded in national and romantic imaginaries as well as bureaucratically enshrined in the Lake District's status as a UNICEF World Heritage Site, to the turbulent funding and regulatory regime for farming after Brexit, to the sheer physical difficulty of doing the work of rewriggling rivers and planting trees which can always go wrong, to the deep uncertainties about what the future holds with the collapse of ecosystems in catastrophic climate change an ever-present possibility. Nevertheless, he keeps going not only with the demanding everyday tasks of conservation farming – including food production as well as creating the conditions for non-human nature to thrive – but also the patient political work of building coalitions with others, and, perhaps most importantly of all, telling stories about what he is doing and what it might mean for a flourishing, nature-rich, climate change resilient world buzzing with life.

Luckily, he is not the only person getting out of bed each morning and doing the work anyway, even in the face of the possibility that it might not turn out well, because it is work that is worth doing. Around the country, we see examples of farmers like James Rebanks, Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree, Jake Fiennes and many, many more farming with and alongside nature and sometimes writing about it or telling their stories in the range of books and podcasts documenting hopeful stories of how humans can work *with* the non-human world alongside feeding ourselves. Their many readers and listeners include a community of

farmers and conservationists developing their understanding of how hope for a thriving natural world might work in practice. And regenerative farms *are* abuzz with life, reporting astonishingly quick recovery of the natural world and the return and success of rare species in shorter timespans than most ever thought possible.

As Alex Darby argued in his review in *Renewal* of James Rebanks' best-selling *English Pastoral*, this kind of work is often a form of 'making-do' and 'making-with' – a complex bricolage of often ad hoc solutions to new and emerging practical problems that require humans and non-humans to work together.<sup>iii</sup> Just as we can contrast a politics of hope as an ongoing practice to a politics of either optimism or despair which both imply static waiting or apathy, so we can also contrast a politics of bricolage and problem-solving with utopian schemes that do not have their hands in the soil of everyday practice. This is not to say that we shouldn't have a vision or a story to tell about a better future. However, there is a striking difference between Lee Schofield's moving vision of what his actually existing daily work might lead to in thirty years and the curious visions of a 'rewilded' landscape devoid of farmers, agriculture and food production imagined by eco-modernist thinkers like George Monbiot. It is hard to know what hopeful practices might lead us to the latter future or how we would do the hard political work of building the coalition and the consent in rural communities that might enable it.

For the purposes of the *Renewal* readership, then, there are both policy and political implications to a politics of hope as it relates to nature and agriculture. In the next election, whenever it comes, there is everything for Labour to hope and play for in rural and farming constituencies. *Farmers' Weekly* recently reported that support for the Conservatives among farming communities has fallen below 50% for the first time in living memory<sup>iv</sup>, whilst Fabian Society research shows that rural voters are currently as likely to vote Labour as Tory.<sup>v</sup> This is a rare opportunity to redraw the political map in ways just as radical as we saw in the ill-fated 2019 election. To do so, whilst also supporting the non-human world, it would be wise to draw and build on the stories of hope coming out of regenerative agriculture and its story-tellers. The long-delayed and much-needed Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS to its friends) is a chance to support farmers by paying them for providing social and environmental value alongside food production. A good way of structuring the scheme would support experimentation and bricolage by not micro-managing the activities but instead focusing on supporting farmers to figure out in their own concrete circumstances how to create the conditions for land to buzz with life and evaluate them on the biodiversity they enable and sustain.

Even more important, though, is that a politics of hope requires story-telling. Hope is that curious balance between the art of the possible and the art of the impossible (to return to a phrase of Havel's<sup>vi</sup>) which allow us to re-imagine our world in ways that are daring but also pragmatic, bold but also workable, novel and creative but also rooted in where we are. It is a constant truism of politics on the left that we need a better narrative and yet that we struggle to provide one. Perhaps a patchwork of hopeful stories that project forward the work already being done by farmers, by gardeners, by conservationists, by growers in urban communities would be a hopeful place to start.

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<sup>i</sup> Václav Havel and Karel Hvižďal, *Dálkový výslech: (rozhovor s Karlem Hvižďalou)*. Melantrich, Prague 1989. This quotation has been popularised in English by Rebecca Solnit's writing on the distinction between hope and optimism, notably, Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark* Canongate Books, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Lee Schofield, *Wild Fell: Fighting for Nature on a Lake District Hill Farm*, Transworld, 2022.

<sup>iii</sup> Alex Darby "'Making do" and "making with": a politics of compassion in the English countryside', *Renewal* 29 (3), 2021: <https://renewal.org.uk/making-do-and-making-with-a-politics-of-compassion-in-the-english-countryside/>. James Rebanks *English Pastoral: An Inheritance*, Penguin, 2020.

<sup>iv</sup> Philip Clarke 'Farmer support for Tories waning as problems mount up', *Farmers Weekly*, 15 December 2022: <https://www.fwi.co.uk/news/farm-policy/farmer-support-for-tories-waning-as-problems-mount-up>

<sup>v</sup> Sophie Huskisson "Rural voters just as likely to back Labour as Tories not longer "Party of the Countryside"", *Daily Mirror*, 23 December 2022: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/rural-voters-just-likely-back-28803967.amp>

<sup>vi</sup> Václav Havel 'New Year's Address to the Nation' 1 January 1990, Prague: [http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/1990/0101\\_uk.html](http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/1990/0101_uk.html)