

# Middlesbrough: Just Another Brick in the Red Wall?



**Joanna Williams**



Joanna Williams is the founder and director of Cieo. She previously taught at the University of Kent where she was Director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Joanna is the author of *Women vs Feminism* (2017); *Academic Freedom in an Age of Conformity* (2016) and *Consuming Higher Education, Why Learning Can't Be Bought* (2012). She co-edited *Why Academic Freedom Matters* (2017) and has written numerous academic journal articles and book chapters exploring the marketization of higher education, the student as consumer and education as a public good. In addition, Joanna has written about education, feminism and gender for many popular outlets including the *The Spectator*, *The Sun*, *The Telegraph* and *American Conservative*. Joanna is a regular columnist for the online magazine *Spiked*.

*“Nothing they do in London makes any difference to what happens in the Boro.”*

I was born in Middlesbrough in 1973 and I lived there until leaving for university in 1992. This was not a good time for the town. Middlesbrough suffered badly from the closure and restructuring of heavy industry that took place from the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s. Unemployment reached 24 per cent in 1985, the highest in the UK outside of Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup> For families everywhere, being without work meant bills mounting up, bailiffs knocking on the door and interminable waits for the ‘giro’ (benefit payment) to arrive.

Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister throughout almost all of my childhood. Rightly or wrongly, many of the adults I knew held her personally responsible for the loss of their jobs and the economic crisis facing their town. To us children, she took on a mythical ‘bogeyman’ status and, as ‘the milk snatcher’, became the subject of playground taunts. Growing up, it seemed very clear to me that in Middlesbrough, people voted Labour. The town was not just another brick in the red wall, it was a cornerstone.

Today, Middlesbrough still makes headlines for topping various league tables of deprivation.<sup>2</sup> But this public profile is not shared by all the town’s residents: many prefer to emphasise the social solidarity, community resilience and individual entrepreneurialism that coming from Middlesbrough fosters.

The, at times lazy, journalistic association of Middlesbrough with deprivation makes the town seem unique in ways it is not. With a century-long history of industrial decline, exacerbated over the past five decades, Middlesbrough shares much in common with similar places such as Hull, Stoke-on-Trent, Blackburn, Hartlepool and Blackpool. There are many ways in which Middlesbrough, and the experiences of its residents, are typical.

The 2019 general election result appeared to confirm a long term trend: the red wall is now crumbling. Middlesbrough still returned a Labour Member of Parliament, Andy Macdonald, but by a far smaller margin than in elections held in previous decades. Some of Middlesbrough’s voters shifted allegiance to the Conservative Party but many simply did not bother heading to the polls at all. The ‘None Of The Above’ candidate won by a landslide.

In this essay, I consider the views and experiences of these non-voters through interviews carried out in one ward of the town in March 2020.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cityevolutions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/180220-Working-Paper-9-Case-Study-Report-Middlesbrough-Stockton.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://inews.co.uk/news/most-deprived-areas-uk-list-ranking-blackpool-north-jaywick-637877>

Prior to the coronavirus epidemic, there was a national focus on how the economy of the north in general and the Tees Valley region in particular could be developed. Such discussions have taken place for almost a century, although only occasionally with positive impact on the ground. However, the need to invest in the region seemed to become more urgent when securing the votes of recent Conservative converts was at stake.

Post-Covid, there is likely to be an even greater need to get the economy of the region back on track. The risk is that in the clamour of competing priorities, the voices of Middlesbrough's residents are overlooked. History shows that the most successful attempts at economic regeneration in the town have drawn upon local knowledge rather than distant interests. Restoring faith in democracy, and allowing the residents of Middlesbrough greater control over their destiny, is integral to achieving this aim.

### **Whatever happened to the Infant Hercules?**

*"This remarkable place, the youngest child of England's enterprise, is an infant, but if an infant, an infant Hercules."* – William Gladstone<sup>3</sup>

Gladstone, speaking in 1862, praised the remarkable energy of a region on the banks of the River Tees that had transformed itself from a tiny rural hamlet into a furnace of the industrial revolution and home to tens of thousands, in little more than three decades. In the nineteenth century, Middlesbrough - with its steel production, iron ore mining, ship building and chemical plants - became a thriving, prosperous and productive new town. Burgeoning industry demanded workers, who in turn required homes and amenities. Middlesbrough's streets grew with its industrial output.

Yet Middlesbrough's heyday was to be short lived. By the end of the First World War, the iron ore reserves were coming to an end, higher quality steel could be imported more cheaply than Middlesbrough could produce it, and ship building was moving elsewhere. By the 1940s, Middlesbrough's industry was already becoming reliant on state subsidies and, at the same time, increasingly subject to decisions taken in head offices remote from the town. One impact of state funding and national directives was to entrench Middlesbrough's role as a town dependent upon heavy industry at a time when other areas were increasingly beginning to diversify into manufacturing.

For Middlesbrough's residents, the years between 1950 and 1975 were a time of sustained economic growth. The late 1960s until the mid-1970s were a particular boom period, fueled by new investment in heavy industry and in supporting infrastructure much of which came from the national government. By the early 1970s, Middlesbrough was considerably more

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tees-48024370>

industrialised than Britain as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Although the short term impact of this state-sponsored industrialisation was greater prosperity, it had consequences that would work to the region's disadvantage in the future. For example, heavy industry was subsidised at the expense of diversifying the local economy while, at the same time, state investment was not sufficient to make sectors such as steel production internationally competitive in the long run.

Between 1975 and 1985, Teesside suffered more than almost any other region from the national economic downturn. Across the country, heavy industry either closed or faced large-scale restructuring. As so many of Middlesbrough's residents were employed in this sector, unemployment became a widespread problem. In 1985, unemployment peaked at 24 per cent across the region as a whole and up to 40 per cent in parts of the town centre. What work was available was often unskilled, poorly paid or 'cash in hand' (ie: conducted off the books with no tax paid).

From 1985 until 2007, Middlesbrough's economy began to recover slowly. There was some branching out into new industries such as renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and biofuels as well as the production of gas and oil off-shore. This created new employment opportunities although not on a scale that could replace the jobs lost in terms of either number or remuneration. Towards the end of this period there was growth in the service sector with jobs created in retail, administration and call centres and there was also growth in the public sector, particularly in health and education. The town benefitted from investment in museums, parks, art galleries and the creation of Teesside University from the former Polytechnic.

Middlesbrough was less affected by the economic crash of 2008 than other places in the UK although recovery, from around 2011 onward, was notably slower than elsewhere and productivity still lags behind most other regions. Middlesbrough now has a higher proportion of people employed in lower-level service occupations. As Emil Evenhuis notes, 'By far the strongest growth in employment over the years has been in the public sector, in particular in health and residential care – with about 20,000 new jobs added [since 2008] – and education – with an increase of about 10,000 jobs.' The expansion of the public sector has helped create much needed new employment opportunities in the area; but has also reinforced a trend towards low-productivity service activities. Retail and warehousing provide a growing number of low-level service jobs in the private sector.

Employment in managerial and professional occupations has grown slightly since the early 1990s but is still underrepresented in the area. Likewise, some jobs have been created in

---

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this section, I am indebted to work completed by Emil Evenhuis, Structural Transformation, Adaptability and City Economic Evolutions An ESRC-Funded Research Project under the ESRC Urban Transformations Initiative WORKING PAPER 9 Case Study Report MIDDLESBROUGH-STOCKTON AND TEES VALLEY, 2018. Available at: <https://www.cityevolutions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/180220-Working-Paper-9-Case-Study-Report-Middlesbrough-Stockton.pdf>

highly specialised areas such as engineering, IT and digital media. Teesport has continued to expand and, following the 2019 election and the UK's departure from the EU, there has been talk of establishing a Free Port.

One impact of the five-decade long shift from an economy dependent upon heavy industry to one dependent on public sector service activities is a de-skilling of local residents. The rapid decline of industry meant much of the existing skills-base was devalorised. Some skilled workers left the area to find work elsewhere, others took new jobs that demanded very different and often lower level skills, while those who faced unemployment saw their skills quickly become outdated and redundant.

One problem with a low-skill economy is that it can confirm low aspirations, particularly in young adults who perhaps see little practical benefit to achieving formal qualifications. Nonetheless, as Evenhuis points out, the percentage of people with no qualifications has dropped, and is now only slightly higher than in other parts of Great Britain. The percentage of people with qualifications at degree level equivalent or higher has increased from around 10% in 1990 to about 28% currently, but is still lower than the rest of the UK, where it is at about 35%.

### **Whatever happened to the donkey with the red rosette?**

When I was born in 1973, Middlesbrough was in Teesside. But by the time my younger siblings were born, Middlesbrough was in Cleveland. When my father was born in the same town in 1952, Middlesbrough was in North Yorkshire. Today, Middlesbrough is in the council borough of Middlesbrough, the Tees Valley authority area and the ceremonial county of North Yorkshire.<sup>5</sup>

To some extent, this is just an amusing anecdote - a local peculiarity. However, it also demonstrates the extent to which national policy churn has had an impact on the town. The area has been subject to successive waves of local government restructuring, each new initiative often dismantling progress that had been made in the rush to establish new organisations. At times of severe economic crisis, such as in the late 1970s, the area lacked a coherent voice on the national stage. In the 1980s and 1990s, initiatives to rejuvenate the economy proliferated but they were often fragmented, poorly coordinated and nationally-directed rather than addressing the specific needs of the town's residents.

Policy churn, particularly when combined with inappropriate national directives and a general lack of resources, made sustaining positive change more difficult than it might have been otherwise. It also served to distance local people from what happened to their town.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tees-48024370>

There is some evidence that this has changed in more recent decades with a more consistent and coordinated approach to local government emerging.

The national parliamentary constituency of Middlesbrough has long been a Labour stronghold. It has returned a Labour candidate in every election since its current formation in 1974. Even as a child I remember hearing the bitter comment that 'you could stick a red rosette on a donkey and people round here would still vote Labour.' Back then, this was most often said with cynical nods to the apparent ineffectiveness of the sitting MP, Sir Stuart Bell. Bell entered the Commons in 1983 and remained Middlesbrough's MP until his death in 2012 prompted a by-election. Despite complaints about Bell's work rate, the donkey retort was made with resignation: it did not come with a serious suggestion that people should direct their vote elsewhere.

In 2017, the Conservative Ben Houchen was elected as Tees Valley Mayor. In the general election held that same year, the constituency of Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, adjacent to Middlesbrough, went to the Conservatives to much public fanfare and the first serious discussions about the breaching of what had once been assumed impenetrable Labour heartlands.

In the 2019 election, Middlesbrough once more returned the Labour MP, Andy Macdonald. Yet Labour's share of the vote in Middlesbrough was down by 15.2 per cent on the 2017 election result. Perhaps of greater significance, voter turnout stood at 56.25 per cent - down 2.2 per cent on 2017. By way of comparison, the national turnout for the 2019 general election was 67.3 per cent; in other words, an additional 11 per cent of Middlesbrough's voters decided no candidate was worth the effort of a trip to the polling station on election day. It seems that even here, the red wall is crumbling.

The collapse of the red wall shows it can no longer be assumed that voters in northern towns or former industrial areas will dutifully back a Labour candidate. Many commentators have been quick to conclude that this means thousands of previously loyal Labour voters have now switched allegiance to the Conservative Party. For some, this is undoubtedly the case. But, as the Prime Minister indicated in his victory speech delivered the day after the election in Tony Blair's former Sedgefield constituency, these votes are perhaps better considered 'lent' rather than permanently assigned. Others, as we see in Middlesbrough, are making a deliberate decision to reject all mainstream political parties and to avoid the polls altogether.

One factor that heavily influenced debate in the run up to the 2019 general election was Brexit. In Middlesbrough, at the time of the 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union, 66.1 per cent of voters backed leave while 33.9 per cent voted for Britain to remain in the EU. The referendum results do not map directly on to constituencies, but

such figures do provide a general sense of feeling in the local area. No doubt many factors drove the two-thirds vote to leave the EU but in a town that appeared battered by decisions taken elsewhere, the desire to ‘take back control’ held an obvious appeal.

At the time of the 2019 general election, the Brexit a majority of Middlesbrough’s citizens voted for had been thwarted at every turn. Westminster appeared further from Middlesbrough than ever. In response, some voters switched party allegiances. But many more became entirely disillusioned with politics in all its forms. This has potentially serious and long-lasting implications for British democracy. Put bluntly, some people now have more of a voice in shaping the future of the country and influencing national decision making than others.

### **Voter turnout**

The constituency of Middlesbrough has recorded a lower voter turnout than the national average in every general election since its initial formation. Yet, as the table below shows, there have been large variations in this turnout gap. In 1987, the turnout in Middlesbrough was only around 4 per cent less than the national average but by 2010 this gap had grown to almost 14 per cent.

<b>General Election</b>	<b>National Voter Turnout</b>	<b>Middlesbrough Voter Turnout</b>
1979	76%	67.9%
1983	72.7%	66.4%
1987	75.3%	71%
1992	77.7%	69.8%
1997	71.4%	65%
2001	59.4%	49.8%
2005	61.4%	48.7%
2010	65.1%	51.45%
2015	66.2%	53.14%
2017	68.8%	58.46%
2019	67.3%	56.1%

It is worth noting that although always below the national average, Middlesbrough's voter turnout has consistently followed national trends. This suggests that the town's citizens are not out of kilter with people elsewhere in the country. The same issues that influence voter turnout across the country are also having an impact in Middlesbrough.

In this paper I try to offer a more nuanced portrait of the views of Middlesbrough's citizens than is captured by an election result alone. In March 2020, prior to the coronavirus lockdown, I spoke to shoppers outside a supermarket in the Berwick Hills and Pallister ward of Middlesbrough. I was particularly interested in exploring the motivations of those people who did not vote in the previous year's general election. To this end, I spoke with 25 people who had not voted in order to gain a sense of the views of this least-represented group. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the people I spoke with.

### **Berwick Hills and Pallister**

Berwick Hills and Pallister is a ward within the Middlesbrough parliamentary constituency. Geographically, it encompasses around 4 per cent of the total area of Middlesbrough. At the latest count, it was home to 9,368 residents which is 6.77% of the total population of Middlesbrough. Women outnumber men in Berwick Hills and Pallister by 55.1 to 44.9 per cent. The mean age of people in the area is 36 compared to 38 years across the whole of Middlesbrough. Almost all the residents are white (97.2 per cent) compared to 88.2% for Middlesbrough as a whole and 85.4% for all of England.<sup>6</sup>

Most people in Berwick Hills and Pallister (28.7 per cent) live in houses that are rented from the council, compared to 10.6 per cent for Middlesbrough as a whole and 10.1 per cent for England. A majority of adults in the area are in work. 1488, or 15.88 per cent are employed in Socio-Economic Classification (SEC) 6 or semi-routine occupations and almost the same number, 1480 are employed in routine occupations. A smaller number of people, 514, are employed in lower supervisory and technical positions while 909 people who live in Berwick Hills and Pallister have never worked or are long term unemployed. Some of these people may be out of work due to ill health. 680 (7.3%) of the area's residents report being in bad health and 235 (2.5%) report being in very bad health.

Given this labour market profile, it is perhaps unsurprising that residents in this area have lower than average levels of qualifications. Almost a third of people (32.78 per cent) of

---

<sup>6</sup> All data related to Berwick Hills and Pallister sourced: [https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Ward-Profile-Berwick\\_Hills\\_and\\_Pallister\\_2015.pdf](https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Ward-Profile-Berwick_Hills_and_Pallister_2015.pdf)

people in Berwick Hills and Pallister have no qualifications at all, compared to 22.5 per cent of the population of England as a whole. At the other end of the spectrum, 5.08 per cent of Berwick Hills and Pallister's residents have level 4 qualifications and above compared to 27.4 per cent in England as a whole.

## **Why didn't people vote in the 2019 general election?**

### **Not interested in politics**

The main reason people in Berwick Hills and Pallister gave for not voting in the 2019 general election was that they had no interest in politics. Some, like Jack and Kaylee, were not registered to vote.

"I don't really keep on top of politics. I don't see how it makes any difference, to be honest. I've got more important things to worry about. I'm not registered to vote. I suppose I should really, I've just never bothered getting round to it."

Jack, 18 - 24, unemployed

"I'm not registered to vote. I'd only just turned 18 when the election was on and I never bothered registering. I'm just not interested in all that sort of thing. I'd sooner leave it to other people to decide. I wouldn't know who to vote for anyway."

Kaylee, 18 - 24, works in a cafe

Younger people, particularly those aged 18 - 24, were the people most likely to say they were not interested in politics.

"I didn't vote. I'm not really interested and I don't know enough about it to be honest and I don't see the point."

Harry, 18 - 24, apprentice mechanic

"I've never voted. Honestly, I never even knew that there was an election on. I'm just not interested in all that. It doesn't make a difference no matter what you do."

Chloe, 25 - 34, carer

Alongside a lack of interest, young people (like Harry and Kaylee above) were likely to say they didn't know enough about either politics in general, the issues being discussed at the time of the election, or the positions taken by the main parties.

"I was at work on the election day so I never voted. I'm just not interested in it and I don't know enough about it. I'm not bothered by anything like that; it doesn't make any difference to me."

Lauren, 18 - 24, at college and also works in a shop

Some of the people I spoke with described themselves as lacking knowledge about politics but actually seemed to have far more of an understanding about relevant issues than they gave themselves credit for.

“I didn’t vote because I just didn’t know enough about it. I work in finance so I need to know about the economy but I don’t really keep up with anything else that’s going on. And I don’t believe they’ll do what they say they’re going to do. I did vote once, for Labour, but I wasn’t that bothered about them this time round. I voted Remain in the referendum. I honestly don’t think the system is as broken as people think it is and I think better the devil you know.”

Jenny, 25 - 34, works in financial services

To some extent, a lack of interest and a lack of knowledge about politics are two sides of the same coin: many of the young adults in Berwick Hills and Pallister do not see politics as offering any explanation or potential solution for the issues they face in their daily lives and so see little motivation in learning more or becoming involved with a political party themselves.

### **Voting won’t make a difference**

Non-voters expressed an overwhelming sense of disillusion with politics. They saw voting as a futile exercise.

“I’ve never voted, not once. It just doesn’t interest me. None of it benefits me and nothing makes a difference anyway. It doesn’t matter whether you vote or not and it doesn’t matter who you vote for. None of it makes a difference.”

Amanda, 35 - 44, carer

For some, such as Carole and Paula, this disillusion stems from the impression that politicians are driven by self-interest and are not really concerned about the people they are elected to represent.

“There’s no point in voting, they’re all just out for themselves. They do what they want, it doesn’t matter what we say. It’s the same with the council, no one listens to us.”

Carole, 65+, retired, looking after grandchildren

“I don’t vote. They’re all the same and I hate the lot of them. They’re not bothered about us and whatever they do doesn’t make any difference to us one way or the

other. Whether you vote or not, everything stays the same. Politicians are all only in it for themselves so I don't see any point in voting. People tell me I should but there's just no point."

Paula, 45 - 54, carer

Both Louise and Marek saw elections as 'a con' with people being given an illusion of choice or power but no capacity to make any meaningful difference to their lives.

"I don't do politics. I've never voted. I think it's all a con really. They like to pretend they're bothered about us and that how we vote will make a difference. But I know it won't really. They're not bothered about us and it won't make a difference. It's just a big con."

Louise, 25 - 34, part-time carer, mother of three

"I didn't vote because nothing changes. Voting is just a way to keep people calm. It makes people think they can have a say in what happens, it makes people think they can make a difference but this is all just a trick. We don't really have a say. Nothing ever changes. It's just a ploy, to keep people in order, to stop people taking things into their own hands."

Marek, 25 - 34, builder from Poland

This sense of disillusion speaks to a long-standing disengagement from politics that extends far beyond issues arising in the immediate run up to the 2019 general election or the current state of any major political party.

### **Politics is London-centric**

One reason for long standing political disengagement among people in Middlesbrough is geographical. Politics is viewed by many as something that takes place in London and London can seem very distant from Middlesbrough. Darren and Kim express frustration that decisions taken in London have little positive impact upon the lives of people in Middlesbrough.

"I don't bother voting, it's all just a con in my opinion. No matter who you vote for it's always just what people in London want that happens, not what people round here want to happen."

Darren, 35 - 44, works in a factory

“I voted Leave but I never bothered voting in the election. Nothing they do in London makes any difference to what happens in the Boro so why would I bother? It’s just a waste of time.”

Kim, 25 - 34, works in a shop

What emerges is a sense of London as not just geographically remote but as a place that embodies different values and ideas than Middlesbrough.

“I don’t vote. It’s pointless. Total waste of time. I’ve never voted. They should just let ordinary people run the country, people from round here, not the government, not people from London.”

Craig, 45 - 54, long term sick

In describing people from London as not being ‘ordinary’ or like ‘people from round here’, Craig suggests not just that politicians are self-interested but that, far more fundamentally, they do not share the same values, beliefs and principles that shape the priorities of people in Middlesbrough. Although local politicians may come from Middlesbrough themselves, the need to conform to the demands of a particular party and work to the priorities of Westminster, may make them seem no longer ‘one of us’.

### **Disillusioned with the Labour Party**

We have already noted that Middlesbrough has traditionally been a Labour stronghold. One reason people who had previously voted in elections gave for not turning out in December 2019 was disillusion with the Labour Party.

“I’ve only ever voted once and that was for Labour. But they never did what they said they were going to do. None of them ever do what they say they’ll do so it’s all just a waste of time. I’m not interested in politics any more.”

Sarah, 25 - 34, full time mother

Some expressed the view that Labour had changed over time and the party no longer reflected their views.

“I never got round to voting because I was at work that day. I would have voted for the Conservatives but in the end I was just too busy and I couldn’t be bothered. I used to vote Labour every time but I’m never doing that again. They’ve never done anything for us. I voted Leave, I really wanted us to leave the EU. I’ll see how this lot gets on and if they’re any good then I’ll vote Conservative next time.”

Melanie, 45 - 54, works for local council

“I was poorly on the election day. I’d been thinking about voting Labour, I’ve voted Labour in the past. But I wasn’t that bothered by them this time and in the end I was poorly so I just didn’t go out. It didn’t seem worth the effort.”

Sophie, 18 - 24, catering

Many expressed the view that Labour was no different to the Conservatives and that, indeed, all the main political parties were just the same.

“I didn’t bother voting because none of them are doing anything for us. They come out with all this stuff when the elections are on but then none of it happens. It doesn’t make any difference. I used to vote Labour all the time, all my family were Labour. But not any more, Labour’s just the same as the rest of them now.”

Joyce, 65+, retired carer

“I’ve got no confidence in any of them. They’re all just the same. So voting’s a waste of time. I used to vote Labour but now they’ve turned out to just as bad as the rest of them so I just don’t bother voting at all.”

Matthew, 35 - 44, builder

The Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, was singled out for particular criticism and a reason for people not voting.

“I was at work for 13 hours straight the day the election was on and by the time I’d finished I just couldn’t be bothered going down to vote. I didn’t see the point anyway, it wouldn’t have made any difference. I used to vote Labour before, but not for a long time now, and definitely not with Corbyn in charge.”

Pamela, 55 - 64, works in a supermarket

“I’m 73 years old and I’ve voted Labour all my life, I voted Labour each time since I was 18. But they’re just as bad as the other lot now, so what can I do? There’s no one for me to vote for. Corbyn’s messed the Labour Party up. It’s an outrage. I’ll never be able to vote for that party again.”

Kevin, 65+, retired ICI

“I’ve voted Labour in the past but not this time. If I had voted, I’d have gone with Boris, I really didn’t want Corbyn getting in. I did vote in the referendum, I voted Leave, I wanted us out, so we could just be our own country. But in December I didn’t get round to voting. It just didn’t seem worth it this time. I honestly didn’t see the point.”

Joanne, 35 - 44, full time mother to four children under the age of 10

There could be a number of explanations for the antipathy to Corbyn. One issue that arose was, unsurprisingly, Brexit.

## **Brexit**

As we have already noted, people in Middlesbrough voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum by a considerable margin. At the time of the 2017 general election the Labour Party maintained a fairly neutral position on Brexit but by 2019 had become far more explicitly anti-Brexit and in favour of a second referendum. Labour's resistance to Brexit had been noted by potential voters.

"I never bothered voting this time around. I've voted in the past. I voted for Brexit because I thought it was really important that we get our country back. And I've voted Labour in other elections. But I'm not a fan of Corbyn. I think Labour would have stood a better chance if Corbyn hadn't been leader. But this time round I never even bothered voting. I thought they were all confused about Brexit. The public voted for Brexit and it should have happened long before the election. They should have been working together to make sure it happened. But instead they were all just as bad as each other, they were all trying to stop it. So I didn't see any point in voting."

Gary, 55 - 64, self-employed builder

As Trevor notes, the reluctance of both major parties to enact the result of the referendum reinforced a more general sense of cynicism with politics in general.

"I used to vote all the time but I've given up on it. I don't even watch the news any more. I voted to Leave in the referendum. That was an important one. We should definitely be an independent country, we never should have gone into the EU in the first place. But then there was all this scaremongering. They were telling us we'd lose everything, that it would cost us billions to get out, and the youngsters believed this. But we'll still be able to sell products country to country. If Italy wants to sell us tins of tomatoes we'll still be buying them after we've left the EU. Anyway, I voted to leave but when the politicians get in, they don't do it. So I've just given up on following it all now. It doesn't seem worth it."

Trevor, 65+, retired from ICI chemical plant

## **Disillusioned with the Conservative Party**

Disappointment at Brexit not having happened did leave at least one former voter disillusioned with the Conservative Party.

“I didn’t bother voting because I didn’t know who to vote for, I don’t like any of them. I’ve voted Conservative in the past but I don’t like Boris. I voted to leave but none of them took it seriously.”

Steve, 35 - 44, works off-shore

## **Conclusions**

When I grew up in Middlesbrough in the 1980s, it seemed to me that politics was inescapable. One of my first memories is of being asked by my infant school teacher to name three Members of Parliament; I have no idea why. As a 17 year-old, I spent every A level Spanish lesson trying to goad my teacher into debating the Gulf War. I was usually successful, much to the detriment of my Spanish.

It wasn’t just me. Middlesbrough’s turnout in the 1987 general election stood at 71 per cent - the highest it had been since the constituency was first formed. The gap between the turnout in Middlesbrough and in the rest of the country was just 4 per cent. From striking miners collecting money in the town centre, people selling left-wing newspapers on street corners and campaigners distributing leaflets outside the gates of my sixth form college, politics was life itself and not a distinct sphere that could simply be rejected.

By the time of the 2005 election, voter turnout was just 48.7 per cent, more than 13 per cent below the national average. In little more than twenty years, Middlesbrough went from being a town with a highly politically motivated population to one where most people did not vote. Although turnout was up slightly by 2019, it was still below the national average and, as the interviews recorded here note, it is not unusual for people now to say they have no interest in politics.

With things having changed so much in such a short space of time, it seems clear that disengagement from formal political processes is not an inevitable feature of life in Middlesbrough. Neither, despite what some of my interviewees said, is not voting necessarily indicative of a lack of interest in politics. Many of the non-voters I talked to were passionate about their community, knowledgeable about a range of national issues and opinionated about what needs to happen to improve their town. It would be very wrong to characterise the residents of Middlesbrough as politically apathetic.

There does, however, seem to be a growing generational divide. In general, the older residents I spoke to had voted in elections previously and gave quite specific - often political

- reasons for not having voted this time around. In contrast, younger people were more likely to say they had no interest and no knowledge of politics.

The frequently expressed sentiment that 'voting makes no difference' and that 'nothing ever changes' suggests the converse is also true: that people who do vote have some (perhaps very slight) sense that their vote will, potentially, make a difference and that, in the act of voting, citizens can collectively exercise some control over their destiny. Not voting suggests people feel they lack influence and are powerless to change their communities.

Some basis for this perception may lie in the changed economic circumstances of the town. The heavy industry that dominated the town until the mid-1970s employed large numbers of workers who were often members of trade unions. The unions were able to exercise collective bargaining power and give a voice to the concerns of their members. In contrast, low-skilled service sector jobs are not only relatively less well paid; they also create a more atomised working environment. Union membership has fallen dramatically over the past five decades.

Middlesbrough's non-voters expressed a distinct sense of disappointment with the Labour Party. For some, the apparent changes in the party - encapsulated in the leadership of Corbyn - are perceived to be an act of betrayal. Unlike the Conservative Party, which was never assumed to represent the interests of working class people, the Labour Party very much was. Yet, as the 2005 election turnout demonstrates, waning enthusiasm for Labour within working class communities is by no means new. Most recently, Labour's stance on Brexit simply reinforced the message that the party does not represent the views of Leave-voting areas like Middlesbrough. It is hard to see how, under the leadership of Sir Keir Starmer, Member of Parliament for Holborn and St Pancras, this situation might be about to change any time soon.

In the coming months and years, some areas of the country are likely to be harder hit by the economic devastation that results from the coronavirus lockdown. Whereas Middlesbrough suffered most from the collapse of heavy industry in the 1970s, the danger now is that the town is badly hit by the collapse of the service sector. People who are already in low-paid and precarious jobs are likely to find they are most easily disposable.

In the 1980s, Middlesbrough's economic recovery was hampered by insufficient financial investment; decisions taken at a national, rather than a local, level; and, connected to this, unhelpful policy churn. In order to avoid making these mistakes again it is vital that established local organisations that have already proved they can be successful are not only allowed to continue but encouraged to develop further with additional revenue. People in Middlesbrough need opportunities to shape the future of their town.

In order to restore faith in democracy it is important that people see that their votes are taken seriously. The three years spent trying to fudge and thwart the vote to leave the EU sent a terrible message to the two-thirds of Middlesbrough's voters who backed Brexit. What they were told, in effect, was that their votes were insignificant and could be overturned at the behest of a small group of people primarily based in London. Now, in the midst of coronavirus, some commentators and MPs are demanding an extension to the UK's transition period for EU withdrawal. This would be a further slap in the face for those who have a teetering faith in democracy.

Middlesbrough's citizens need to see that Brexit has happened and then the town needs to be helped to reap the economic reward that leaving the EU opens up. Ambitious and aspirational plans are needed that go considerably further than just importing branches of the civil service from London to the Tees Valley. The proposal to create a free port is potentially exciting. Sectors such as engineering, IT and digital media that already have a base in Middlesbrough should be encouraged to expand further, attracting high-skilled and well-paid jobs.

The Labour Party and large sections of the trade union movement appear to have abandoned the working class. The enforced social isolation of the coronavirus lockdown makes the need for new forms of social solidarity more vital than ever. Rather than seeking to breathe life back into redundant institutions, it might be better if new ways of promoting democracy and civic engagement are able to emerge. This could be grassroots community organisations or national political parties.

At the moment, too many people in Middlesbrough feel as if voting in national elections is a waste of time because their voices will be ignored and there is little prospect of positive change on the horizon. For democracy and citizenship to be meaningful, this situation has to change. The starting point must be taking the views and concerns of people in towns like Middlesbrough seriously.