What Is the Future for England?
Jason Cowley
In conversation with Andrew Kelly

Andrew Kelly: Good evening, everyone. I'm Andrew Kelly from Bristol Ideas and I'm hosting tonight's event with Jason Cowley. Jason is an award-winning journalist, magazine editor and writer, and has been widely credited with transforming the fortunes of the *New Statesman*, both as a magazine and a website. In 2020, he was voted editor of the year (politics and current affairs) for the fourth time at the British Society of Magazine Editors awards. His new book, which we're talking about today, is *Who Are We Now? Stories of Modern England*. Jason, thank you so much for joining us.

Jason Cowley: Andrew, it's great to be here, so thank you very much indeed.

Andrew: And thank you for this book, which we've been using extensively in our work already. You ask many questions in the book, some of which we'll discuss tonight. They include, for example, the need to define what England is, who are we now? What do we owe each other as citizens? And what are we prepared to do about it? And what might we become? But I want to start with stories because you structure the book around a series of stories which then illuminate a lot of these points. In the book, Andy Haldane, a former Bank of England chief economist and an adviser on the level levelling up agenda, talks about the need for stories. And I want to just ask you about a couple of these now, get you tell us a little bit about the story, and what it illuminates for you about things like Englishness, English identity, and what we might become. And the first one is Mohammed Mahmoud.

Jason: Mohammed Mahmoud, yes, the Imam at Finsbury Park. Andrew, the book asks a question, 'who are we now?', and the subtitle is 'Stories of Modern England'. It's a political book, and it's really about England over the last 25 years, really, from the election of Tony Blair in 1997 right through until the pandemic and the aftermath of the pandemic. But it's not a work of

polemic. It's not a work of hard political analysis. It's an exploration of what George Orwell called the social atmosphere of the country.

I was particularly interested in writing about England. I was born and grew up in England, within the framework of the larger British state, at a time of fragmentation for the British state. We've seen the rise of Scottish nationalism, and I think what that's done over recent years, as Scotland has grown more confident, or the Scottish independence movement has grown more confident and assertive, is it's forced upon the English a reconsideration of who they are.

But as I say, I wanted to explore the social atmosphere of the country, and I wanted to do it through telling stories. So I look at particular stories that interested me from the last 20-25 years. And for me, the stories I've chosen are microcosms. So through smaller stories, I'm able to explore bigger themes, some of the big themes that have transformed the country in recent times.

Now the story you mentioned of Mohammed Mahmoud interested me in particular. When Theresa May had become prime minister after David Cameron had been swept from office after his defeat in the 2016 Brexit referendum she called a snap general election. She didn't need to, but she chose to do so. She was up against Jeremy Corbyn and she expected to win comfortably. But during that campaign, there were some serious terror attacks. Most notably, I think people will remember the attack on the concert goers at the Ariana Grande concert at the Manchester Arena. As people were leaving the concert, many of them children, a suicide bomber attacked. A terrible event, many were killed. So there was this period of deep unease, anxiety. There are two other Islamist terror attacks in London during that period of the general election campaign.

And then I recall waking one morning – actually the morning of my birthday, 19 June 2017 – to discover that there's been another terror attack in Finsbury

Park, the site of a notorious mosque, where for a period the Imam there was a character called Abu Hamza, a radical Imam who radicalised a lot of young Muslims during that period of his tenure at Finsbury Park. So I thought, oh no, there's been another attack, and this time it's in Finsbury Park, North London, of all places.

But as I discovered more about the story, it was quite remarkable because it was Ramadan and a group of worshipers had come out of two mosques – there's the big Finsbury Park mosque and there's a much smaller mosque – they'd come out of the two mosques. It was very late at night and they were gathering. It was a very warm summer night. And waiting in a white van was a white nationalist, a far-right nationalist, who had been radicalised on Twitter and social media, and was a follower of the far right group the English Defence League, a very disturbed figure. And he had come to London from South Wales, actually, although he was English, to carry out a terror attack, and he wanted to kill ordinary Muslims. And he drove his van that evening straight into a group of worshippers, scattering them.

One guy was terribly injured, others were lying in pain on the floor. And the Imam who I was interested in, Mohammed Mahmoud, was inside the mosque. He had just finished late night prayers. And he was sitting in his office reflecting, and an Algerian gentleman burst into his office and said, 'There's been an attack outside, you must come, you must come.' And Mohamed Mahmoud didn't know what he would find. It's quite a dangerous part of London, it was late at night. He hurried down the stairs, came out into the street and saw this scene – in effect, the scene of a terror attack, but he didn't understand that immediately. And he saw that there was a guy lying on the floor who had been seriously injured. Others were lying on the floor, too, in pain. And there was another guy, a white guy, lying on the floor who was about to be attacked. He'd already been punched a couple of times. And there was a sense that a group was closing in on him, and he could have even been kicked to death.

It could have been a terrible moment. But Mohamed Mahmoud said, ‘Stop, please. Nobody touch this man. We must call the police. We must stop.’ And everyone stopped immediately. He commanded such authority because of his reputation inside the mosque. Only young, in his mid-to-late 30s, very distinguished scholar, local man, grew up in North London. And he restrained the crowd, growing all the time, more and more people coming, many of them worshippers from inside the mosques, many of them demanding revenge on the attacker. But Mohamed Mahmoud held them back, restrained them, calmed them down, waited for the police to come. And the attacker, who was called Darren Osborne, was taken away in a police van.

It was a remarkable moment, I think, at a time of deep anxiety, division and polarisation. And he was absolutely determined that nothing happen to Darren Osborne, that the rule of law must be respected. Because he knew what the potential consequences were if Osborne had been beaten to death that night. And immediately he went back inside the mosque, carried out evening prayers. It was silent. People were scared. They didn't know what to do. The police closed off the area. And then on his way home, he received a phone call from one of his friends who knew what had happened and asked him about it. He said, ‘What happened?’ And Mohamed Mahmoud said, you know, ‘Not so much.’

The following morning, because he’d worked through the night, he slept late, and he was woken by his wife to say, ‘Look, everyone's talking about you on social media, on the BBC News. The Mayor of London is coming to Finsbury Park, the Prime Minister is coming to Finsbury Park, Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party is coming to Finsbury Park, all of them want to meet you and talk about what happened and your intervention that night.’ The following day Prince Charles came to Finsbury Park to see the Imam, to talk to him.

And that stayed with me, that story, not least because I know that part of London – it’s very close to the Arsenal Football Stadium where I used to go

every week – I'd followed the story of Abu Hamza and the radicalisation of the Finsbury Park mosque. But here was something different. This intervention that evening changed the narrative of that summer. And that's what interests me in the book – these little moments of grace under pressure, these moments of heightened public stress where somebody intervenes and changes the narrative and tells another story about what's possible.

Many months later, maybe even a year later, I went back to speak to him. He had now moved to a much bigger mosque in East London, the East London Mosque. And we had a very, very long conversation, just before the first lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic. We sat inside his mosque and had a very, very long conversation about who he was, what he wanted, what he thought about Islam, what he thought about being a Muslim in Britain, was he a British Muslim, or a Muslim in Britain. He told me he'd been born in Egypt, but came [here] as a very young boy, had grown up in London, and he felt English. And he talked to me about his vision of England, his vision of Islam, and I found him an utterly fascinating figure to talk to and write about. And I call him the noble Imam of Finsbury Park.

And that's just an example of one of the characters who appears in my book. I tell his story, but also we listen to what he has to say about his own experiences. And at one point he actually left England to go to Cairo, where he wanted to study and indeed he and his wife expected to live there, but he missed England. He said he missed queuing, he missed the NHS, he missed London, he missed Finsbury Park, and what he discovered was that London and England – that was his home. And so that's just one of the stories I tell.

Andrew: That's one of the people – there are a number of others in the book. But I also wanted to talk to you about a place which is very personal for you, and which is very important in the postwar, 'new Jerusalem' period in British life and politics and work, which is Harlow, one of the new towns.

It's significant for you personally, but it also tells an important story, doesn't it? How dreams can disappear over generations.

Jason: Yes, Harlow in Essex was one of the new towns created just after the Second World War by the Clement Attlee Labour government, which won a landslide victory in 1945. Attlee had served as Winston Churchill's deputy prime minister in the wartime coalition government, and he was swept to power after the war on this kind of wave of optimism and this desire to build what Attlee called the 'new Jerusalem'. And Harlow was a grand and noble experiment. Many, many people from east London, where my parents came from, had experienced the Blitz. Many houses have been destroyed or bomb-damaged. And many, many people after the war had to be rehoused. Back then, that part of West Essex was sparsely populated and that was chosen as one of the sites for one of the postwar new towns, and it was developed around existing villages. There was a village of Harlow, which actually is mentioned in the Domesday Book. It was a long-established settlement, but it was rural and small.

Growing up in Harlow, as I did in the 1970s, for me it was just where I happened to be born and where I happened to go to school, and where I happened to live. When I came to London in my mid-twenties to work as a journalist, I met lots of people who had very exotic backgrounds, had lived overseas, had been to famous schools and had different experiences from me, and I thought at the time that I didn't have a story. My own experience of growing up in a new town was small and parochial. But, actually, as I've got older and reflected on it, I've realised what an extraordinary place it was to grow up.

Lord Reith, the first director general of the BBC, was chair of the new towns committee, and he said the new towns were, in his words, 'essays in civilisation'. Lewis Silkin, the Labour minister who introduced the New Towns Bill in Parliament, which ultimately led to the New Towns Act, cited Thomas More's Utopia. This was an idea to build a social democratic utopia.

Everything would be provided by the state – our housing, our schools, our libraries, our recreational facilities. An old friend once said to me that growing up in Harlow was a bit like living in the old Eastern Germany but without the Stasi. It was an extraordinary place. And the idea was to create kind of noble citizens of the future. But of course, there was a lot of investment at the beginning but that didn't continue, so over the decades, the town was neglected, was run-down.

It was a bit like Bristol today. Initially it attracted a lot of progressives to live there. Socialists, even communists, came to live in the town, and they formed what you might call the middle-class intelligentsia. There was a very sophisticated art scene, a wonderful local playhouse. But much later, by the time when my family left the town when I was 18, in the '80s, it was very run-down. It would continue to be so for many years afterwards.

In the book, the story that I tell about Harlow is linked to a killing that took place in the town, just after the Brexit referendum, of a Polish migrant called Arkadiusz Jóźwik who had come to live in the town where his mother had already moved to from Poland. There was a late-night fight in a shopping centre. He was punched, he fell, hit his head on the concrete and was taken to hospital but died. And it was reported immediately by the Essex police as a hate crime because Jóźwik had been heard speaking Polish. And the local media then reported that, and the world's media suddenly descended upon Harlow. *The New York Times* said that a Polish guy had been kicked to death by a pack of angry young people in the town. It was nothing of the kind. So I came back to investigate the so-called Brexit murder to find out what actually happened. And as it turned out, it was an act of manslaughter. It was a drunken fight and Jóźwik had unfortunately been killed.

But for many, what happened that night, the so-called Brexit murder, symbolised what had gone wrong not only in Harlow, a former utopian settlement, perhaps now a dystopia as perceived by some, but also in England. A majority of the people living in England had just voted for Brexit.

Jean-Claude Juncker, then President of the European Commission, in his president's address, referenced this attack in Harlow, and said look what's happening to England. This cannot be tolerated. EU citizens being murdered on the streets of Essex. Of course, he wasn't murdered. It was much more complicated than that. But it was a fascinating story, not only through which to tell the story of Harlow, but also to look more widely at the social atmosphere in England at that time after the referendum.

Andrew: You point to the referendum as one of the issues that we faced. You talked about the Scottish independence vote; the potential breakup of Britain, there was the recession, there was Labour's red wall falling and then there was COVID. You do wonder about the resilience of us all to get through all of these things, and today with inflation predicted to go above 10% and the cost-of-living crisis already here and likely to get worse. And so there are these issues, big issues, global issues, which affect the country. There are the issues about things like the demise of a dream from the Second World War.

Why is it important to define Englishness and define English identity? Why do we need to do that?

Jason: There's a line I like from George Orwell, from his essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn', which he began in the spring of 1940 and finished during the Blitz on London in September 1940 and beyond, as the bombs were falling. He said it is of the deepest importance to try and determine what England is before getting to what part England can play in the huge events that are happening. That comment from Orwell was really the starting point for the book. Because as you say, Andrew, huge events have been happening over the last decade. We had the financial crisis, we had the great recession that followed, the period of austerity. We had the Scottish independence referendum which almost led to the breakup of the British state. It was a narrow victory for the status quo but very narrow. We had David Cameron's surprise victory in the 2015 general election, which then led to the 2016 Brexit referendum, which you might say the establishment lost – an

astonishing vote for Brexit. You had the rise of Corbynism from the radical left in the Labour Party. We then had three years of so-called Brexit wars, right through until Boris Johnson won a decisive majority in 2019. Then we went straight into the pandemic. And now we've gone straight into the war in Ukraine. To use Orwell's phrase, huge events have been happening.

I think we have to determine what England is, who the English are and what England wants, particularly as the UK itself seems so fragmented at present, not least because of the rise of Scottish nationalism, but also the rise of Sinn Féin, both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It really is a period of convulsions and change in the United Kingdom itself, and there's no guarantee the UK will survive. Let's hypothesise that there is a second [Scottish] referendum or there is a border poll in Ireland – simultaneous border poll in the north and in the Republic – and the British state breaks, that inevitably forces upon those of us who live in England – 86 per cent of the population in the UK live in England – to try and understand what England is.

England is an example of a nation, one of the largest nations, that is also not a nation state. There's a recognisable England going back, way back, before the Norman Conquest in 1066. I think England and Denmark are probably the oldest nation states in Europe. So here's an old country that has somewhere got a bit lost within Britishness, I think. And that, for me, is a key question not to be answered through polemic or assertion, but through exploring the social atmosphere, but also talking to people – diverse people from different backgrounds. Black England, Muslim England, the old new towns, people living in the red wall. And so it goes on. What makes a nation cohere? How do we find a politics of the common good? And what brings us together at a time of polarisation and indeed crisis? So these are the big themes that are running through the book, I think.

Andrew: And also you're trying to put forward a more positive view than the declinist narratives that we get. I haven't yet read Douglas Murray's new

book, for example, but there is this kind of decline-ism, if I can call it that, that exists amongst some.

Jason: Yes, I touch on Murray and the declinist writers, some of them in France, some in Germany and elsewhere, during my conversation with Mohamed Mahmoud. I'm not a declinist. I'm searching for a more benign, kinder, more gentle, more progressive Englishness. One of the things I like about Britishness is that it's not about ancient national roots. It's civic, it's inclusive, it's non-racial, it's plural, it's about multiple identities, about compound identities. And I like that about Britishness.

I want for Englishness something similar. One of the pressures on anyone who writes about England, particularly from a progressive position or from the left, is that there's a sense that Englishness has been associated with reaction or nostalgia or loss or melancholy. No doubt there is some of that, in a sense, of what it means to be English. Running through English literature is this stream of nostalgia, from Shakespeare right through into the poetry of, say, Philip Larkin or Housman and others. But I'm looking for something better. Because I'm interested, Andrew, as I said to you, in a politics of the common good, or what George Orwell called common decency. And that exists, I think. It exists in the country; it exists in the people I speak to. And we saw some of that in the pandemic, particularly in the early weeks of the pandemic, when we did glimpse a different kind of England and indeed Britain. We saw this flourishing of social solidarity, I think. Look at those 750,000 people who responded in the first weeks to the government's appeal for volunteers. Look at those people who were working on the frontline in essential services. They couldn't work from home and do Zoom calls. They went out to work at a time when we had no vaccines – we didn't even know if we would have vaccines. But I think we saw the possibilities of how we could work, communicate and do politics differently after the pandemic. Perhaps I sound a little bit romantic, but it's preferable to declinism, I think, and pessimism.

Andrew: I think, absolutely, essential. I think these are interesting issues that we talk about in Bristol as well, about the balance- or the conflict sometimes - between the heritage of the place and the future-looking creative city that exists now. The bringing down of the Colston statue was an important moment for the city, and had to be navigated very carefully by the leadership of the city.

When you're talking about pluralities – plural societies, plural policies, plural identities – how do we develop these? And how do we acknowledge these? The pandemic was very interesting. It was tragic in so many ways. But it was interesting I think precisely for the ways you've described it. We've been discussing this recently for a project we're doing next year on the writer Colin Ward and the concept of mutual aid, and how that happened during the pandemic. I noticed in my street, we set up a street WhatsApp group to help people and that's still going now. And maybe there is a longevity to this which isn't going to disappear quickly.

Jason: Yes, I think this idea of plural identities is really important in attempting to find a more progressive modern Englishness. We saw something important happening around the England football team, I thought, last summer at the Euros, which had been delayed by a year because of the pandemic. England are led by a very thoughtful character called Gareth Southgate, a former player himself, but he has political instincts and has thought very deeply about what it is to be manager of the team, and to represent and lead a group of young multiracial players, some of them political activists themselves: Raheem Sterling on race issues, Marcus Rashford on poverty issues, Tyrone Mings on poverty issues, and others too. And after the terrible murder of George Floyd, which kind of unlocked something I think that had been long repressed, and there was a necessary reckoning – you mentioned the toppling of the Colston statute – there was a necessary reckoning with deeper structural racism, historical racism, the pressure of the imperial past, colonialism, slavery. Suddenly these big, big themes were being talked about, debated, discussed, and in

interesting ways. And Southgate's team began to take the knee and they themselves were arguing for a different approach.

And of course, Andrew, in the late '70s and early '80s, the England football team in particular, some of those who followed it were associated with a particularly unpleasant far-right hard nationalism, and the flag of St George back then was associated either with eccentrics or the far right. Many of the supporters flew the Union Jack rather than the flag of St George. But that's changed now.

Just before the Euros, Gareth Southgate wrote an essay called 'Dear England'. What he did, and I write about it in the book, is he located himself in a tradition. He said, I'm a patriot, I was very proud to represent my country, my grandfather fought in the Second World War, I'm a monarchist, I support the armed forces, but at the same time, I'm manager of a young, progressive group of players, many of them with liberal politics, and I support them, I support their activism, and I support their desire to take the knee before matches. And what Southgate said, speaking as many politicians are afraid to do so, he said in England – and I paraphrase, but he said this – in England, we've been lost a little bit in relation to our identity, but I think my young group of players, in their diversity and attitude, can show and demonstrate a different kind of Englishness. So what Southgate says is you don't have to choose between diversity and tradition – you can bring them together in interesting ways. But nevertheless, in our diversity, what brings us together? That, I think, is an open question. In a big secular plural democracy, how do we create cohesion and unity? There's no easy answer to these questions, but they were questions that fascinated me.

It was interesting that Southgate, a football manager, leaned into these issues rather than avoiding them as so many of our politicians do. They don't in Scotland, of course, where they've managed to construct a much more coherent narrative around nationalism and national identity. And, indeed, by, in many ways, defining themselves against England and London in particular.

Whereas when the English came to define themselves against something, they chose to define themselves – not all English, but many – against the European Union.

Andrew: It's a really important essay, I think, and I would urge everyone to read Southgate's essay.

Jason: Absolutely, yes.

Andrew: And in your book, you engaged with the writer Alex Niven who called it Southgate-ism, I think, and it's worth reading about that as well.

The English in a way, you could say, have revolted in recent years over the Brexit vote and over the election of Boris Johnson, in the bringing down of the red wall. What would make a positive, progressive patriotism, nationalism, however you call it? I was very much taken with the Oldham Council leader who then became a member of parliament. He was talking about his place reversing what has been decades of neglect, and it's almost like we've got to spend decades now building this back up again. He talks about where the industries of the future are coming from, which will not only give his people work but will mean that people don't go to other places to work. He talks about rebuilding the fabric of place, and I thought that was an important statement. I'd like to ask you a bit more about that.

Jason: Yes, this is a chap called Jim McMahon who's a Labour MP, local guy, former leader of Oldham Council. He's now in Keir Starmer's Shadow Cabinet, but he's little known. Working-class guy, never went to university, but representing a constituency such as Oldham, where all around him he sees decline. The great mill towns of the English northwest, if you visit them – and I have been visiting them for decades, because my wife is from one of them, she's from Bury, north of Manchester – they have wonderful civic buildings: town halls, great churches, former libraries, Victorian libraries, arcades, Victorian arcades. But in many of these mill towns, the buildings are

neglected. In Oldham in particular, many of them are derelict or semi-derelict, they're not even in use. So as you walk the streets of some of these old mill towns in the northwest, you're haunted by the ghostly traces of what they once were. Dynamic, thriving, small, small towns with great civic pride and a sense of purpose and a sense of unity. And not far away, of course, there's the great metropolis of Manchester.

So today when Jim McMahon goes up onto one of Oldham's windy peaks (Oldham's very hilly, so there are many peaks), and looks down at Manchester – maybe a little bit more than five or six miles, but not far away at all – he sees all of the red lights of the great metropolis. He sees the cranes, he sees all the construction work, the red lights at night, the skyscrapers, the apartment blocks. And then he looks at Oldham and it's dark, and it's quiet, and it's empty, Many people tell him that they have to leave Oldham in order to find a job.

And so a theme really here is what you might call spatial inequalities. Manchester's very, very close to Oldham, to Burnley, to Bury, to Rochdale, to some of these once-great towns, but they could be in another country. So that's why the idea of rebuilding the fabric of place I think in these towns is so important. What happens to a town – and it's happened to Harlow in different circumstances in Essex, where I grew up – what happens to a town when it loses its sense of purpose? And these are important questions to ask. There are no easy answers. But again, it's about trying to create what I call the politics of the common good, and to bring a sense of purpose and pride, civic pride, back to these once-great towns. And you can imagine these grand civic buildings, they stand as a rebuke to generations of politicians who have neglected these places and done nothing for them.

And if you want to understand why Boris Johnson swept to victory in many former Labour heartland seats in these areas, why many of the people in these areas, though former Labour voters, ignored the party's leadership and voted for Brexit… Well, you have to visit them and speak to the locals who

live there, and also look at the buildings that were once the embodiment of what these towns were, when they had purpose.

I'm very interested in how we build what might be called the conservation areas of the future. How do we dignify ordinary people's lives? How do you create those kinds of intermediate institutions between the market and the state? Churches, community centres, mosques, synagogues, sports facilities, high streets, parks, where people can come together, commune, interact, socialise. How do we do that, Andrew? These are really important questions and I think they're too often neglected. So I'm pleased you focused on Jim's comments about the need to rebuild the fabric. Do you rebuild a fabric or do you re-weave a fabric? Whatever the metaphor is, I think it's an important metaphor about the fabric of place.

Andrew: One of the questions I was asked to ask you fits in well here, which is about the levelling up agenda, and how serious that is. Can it deliver on what seems to be fairly limited resources? I would argue too that levelling up is not just a matter between, say, north and south. It's also needed in a city like Bristol, ostensibly very successful, financially well-off, though with some of the poorest places in the country. But the focus is looking at the former definition of levelling up than the one I was talking about. How serious do you think that agenda is?

Jason: I think it is serious. It would be cynical to say it's not. I mean, Boris Johnson… he's a chancer. He's an opportunist. You don't need me to tell you what Boris Johnson is. But at the same time, some of the most serious people around him are in that levelling up unit. For example, you mentioned earlier Andy Haldane, the former Chief Economist of the Bank of England. I mean, Andy's not a man of the right. He has communitarian instincts. And he's on secondment from the RSA, where he's now Chief Executive, working within the levelling up unit because he thinks there's an opportunity to do something here. It may not happen. Michael Gove's there. Whatever you think of Michael Gove, he's one of the most active ministers that Johnson

has. He's energetic and he's intelligent. There's a Christian Conservative called Danny Kruger, who's not a libertarian. He believes in the good that government can do. And there's a guy called Neil O'Brien, who's from a northern background, went to a comprehensive school then went to Oxford, and he's one of the cleverest Conservative MPs, a former head of Policy Exchange, and he's in the unit as well.

But what I'm hearing is that although they're sincere in what they want to achieve, they're being blocked by the Treasury. Behind the scenes, there's a lot of arguing. They make proposals and they're pushed back by Sunak and his team. So at the moment, there's a lot of rhetoric. I'm not yet seeing something that I think will be transformative.

Labour understands what the Conservatives are trying to do, and their argument is we can do it better. But the argument I hear on the ground in many of these former Labour heartlands, is that actually we've been living under Labour councils for decades, and the experience of living under these councils has often been one of disappointment. So it's complicated.

You mentioned areas of deep poverty in Bristol, which of course there are. And often one neglects the poverty in the more buoyant cities. In London too, [there are] some of the poorest boroughs in the country, deep intergenerational inequality and poverty. But London's caricatured as a kind of city of metropolitan sophisticates. It's much more complicated than that. But we have to try and reduce the spatial inequalities. And we have to try and rebuild these areas to encourage people to stay in them and to find a sense of purpose and also good work, good, well-paid work.

Andrew: In a way you need the kind of visionaries of the new towns to be a new wave of visionaries for towns and cities that have been left behind.

Jason: You do, and of course crisis creates opportunity. The desire to create the new Jerusalem, as it was called, came out of the horrors of the Second

World War and the sacrifices that had been made not only by those who fought in it, but those who were left behind on the Home Front. And then after the war there was rationing and austerity. But nevertheless, there was a sense of common purpose. Somehow along the way we've lost that, I think, that sense of greater common purpose. I mourn its loss. And I'm always, through my writing and my work at the *New Statesman*, looking at ways to recapture it. I don't like sectarianism and vicious polarisation. I'm always trying to look for those potentials for compromise and pragmatism.

Andrew: Well, that certainly comes across in the *New Statesman*, Jason. You know that we're eager subscribers and read it regularly. I was asked also to ask you about democracy, and about…

Jason: These are big questions you're asking me, Andrew.

Andrew: I know, I know. And I appreciate that the answers are difficult to come to. But I think refining the questions are really important, as you've done, but you've also signalled quite a lot that can be done. Not just the inspiration of people like Orwell, the work of Michael Sandel, but also some specific things.

One thing I wanted to ask you is about when the Blair settlement happened for the devolved nations, we didn't get an English parliament, but the Welsh got theirs and the Scots got theirs, and there's the body in Northern Ireland. Do you think an English Parliament would help?

Jason: Some people believe it would. I'm sceptical. Tony Blair's Scotland Secretary, George Robertson, a Scottish Labour MP, later head of NATO, said at the time of the introduction of the devolution reforms and the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, this will kill Scottish nationalism stone dead. Well, that didn't work out as they intended. Quite a complacent comment.

In ‘95, Tony Blair had given a speech, two years before he became prime minister, where he said I want this to be a young country – we will be a young country. He was talking about a very old country, as we've established, but he wanted it to be a young country. New, dynamic, open, meritocratic, plural, inclusive. Blair wanted to embrace the new market-driven globalisation which was transforming not only the UK but Europe and the world. Globalisation lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, notably in China. It was very beneficial for the transnational elites. But there were many losers as well. I don't think Blair ever fully understood that. He thought the devolution reforms, though incoherent, would solve the national question, the Scottish National question, the Good Friday agreement would solve the Irish question, the Welsh Assembly would settle unease in Wales. But he never really spoke about England. I think maybe there was an assumption that England was too big, too powerful within the United Kingdom to be given its own parliament.

But over the years, something began to stir, I think, away from the cities, in the coastal regions, in the old now run-down new towns, in the provincial conservative shires, in the small towns, and that was an inchoate English revolt. The politician who sensed that I think more than any other was Nigel Farage of UKIP, and he mobilised what he called his people's army.

So the question was really about an English parliament. Andrew, at the moment, I don't see a kind of bottom-up movement for an English parliament. I don't even see great pressure for more devolution, although I'm encouraged by devolution within England. In other words, a balkanised or regionalised England. I'm encouraged by Manchester, London, Newcastle, indeed Bristol, having mayors. Although you told me today the people of Bristol are voting to abolish…

Andrew: Yes, by tomorrow morning, we might not have a future mayor. The current mayor would still serve for another two years, but the proposal in the referendum is to either continue with a directly elected mayor or to move to

a committee system, which is what the council had 20-odd years ago. It's complicated for many reasons, which we'd have to run a whole programme on; one factor is the growth of the West of England Mayor: combined authority mayor as against just the city mayor.

Jason: But many people who wanted English Parliament or agitate for England to have its own discrete political institutions as Scotland has, often look to Bristol, or have looked to Bristol, for inspiration. But it's interesting, this development. I'll monitor what happens overnight with great interest. I like to support greater devolution, but I'm sceptical whether we will see it within England.[1]

Andrew: I'll just bring in a couple more audience questions. Do you think that Scottish independence would give the English an opportunity to find their identity?

Jason: Jonathan, very good question, I think, and I've thought about this a lot. Because although ultimately I would like the British state to stay together – for the very reasons that I said about while I think Britishness is such a valuable identity for so many people from diverse backgrounds – what the Scottish parliament has done is enabled the Scottish people to reimagine who they are and what Scotland is. And England hasn't really had the same opportunity, I don't think. I would like to see that happen, Jonathan, I really would. How that happens, I don't know. But if the British state was to break up as a consequence of a second Scottish independence referendum – which I don't think will happen anytime soon for various reasons, but I think probably for another conversation – therefore if we don't have that existential threat to the British state, how do we create the opportunities for

[1] The referendum of May 2022 did see a strong majority for abolishing the post of the directly elected mayor to be replaced by a committee system from 2024. The turnout was 28.6% (an increase of 4.6% on the referendum that chose to have a directly elected mayor a decade earlier. The vote was: 56,113 voting for a committee system and 38,439 voting to continue with an elected Mayor.

the English to reimagine themselves, as Jonathan says? Maybe through books such as my own, I humbly suggest, Andrew.

Andrew: The second question is: there's been an alarming number of cases of child abuse, neglect, even torture, in the news recently. Can you focus on some of these in the context of England, the lack of community, breakdown of the nuclear family, even the withering away of the state (child support services and so on).

Jason: I think these are really important questions. And indeed, in the *New Statesman* at Christmas, in the leader, which is the main article which begins the magazine, I wrote about these very issues, because I was so horrified by some of these recent cases of child abuse and child murder. Children being murdered by their own parents. I'm a father myself, so I feel these stories deeply and painfully when I read about them, and they horrify me, and then it makes me think, well, why are they happening?

I think the pandemic certainly exacerbated the suffering of some of those children because they were no longer going to school. They were locked up at home and their homes became a kind of prison for them. And one despairs if you imagine what might have been happening in some of these houses. Of course, very few houses, but nevertheless it was happening. Is it austerity? Is it failures of the social services? Is it lack of funding? Is it administrative failure? Is it an inability to communicate? I mean, these are really important questions, I think, and they need to be urgently addressed. And when we read about these cases, and I won't recite any of them for obvious reasons, they're too painful, there's invariably an outpouring of public anger, a lot of expressions of anger in the House of Commons, but then it goes quiet until we read about the next case. But I wonder, in these periods of quiet, what's happening, what's being done?

Actually, because of this question, I'm going to return to the subject myself in the *New Statesman*. I commissioned a long report by one of my colleagues

after some of the horrifying cases just before Christmas. So I need to check in on that, find out what's happened to that piece.

Andrew: Thank you very much. When it comes to where we move to, you do have some confidence that this might be the moment when we change, that the pandemic has helped create that. I always ponder the fact that this year is the 80th anniversary of the Beveridge Report. I wasn't born then, but it gave me a life where I had a guaranteed health service [and as a result] My life has been very different to generations before me. Do you think there is that kind of new settlement possible? Does it need a new Beveridge to drive this forward?

Jason: It needs something transformative, and I don't yet see it happening. It's not levelling up for the reasons that we've discussed. I think Johnson has lost a lot of moral authority, because of Partygate but other reasons as well. I don't see inspirational leaders around him. A lot of people liked his Chancellor, Sunak, because of the furlough scheme, but the recent revelations about his own tax affairs, inside his own household, I think have demoralised many.

I think Labour are still very weak. It's sort of transactional politics, rather than visionary politics of a kind we saw from the Attlee government after the Second World War. I participate in some good conversations with interesting thinkers about some of these issues – I could give a list of 15 or 20 books exploring some of these themes by anyone from Michael Sandel, Paul Collier and others. If anyone wants a reading list, I could supply it. The book was finished just as we came out of the pandemic, and I was perhaps more hopeful then than I am now.

Andrew: I think one of the key things is about giving people a future. And you grew up in a new town, you were described as citizens of the future, and we need that now, I think. I think people's concerns, whether it's the war in Ukraine or the cost-of-living crisis, any of the myriad concerns that people

have, it's about creating a new future. And one of the things about your book that I found most refreshing was there were lots of ideas. You don't need to give us a reading list, Jason, because we can pick them up from the book. But I think it's about giving citizens a future. Is there any hope for that?

Jason: Yes, there is. There's always hope. We're fortunate enough to live in an open society – I mean, just look at what's happening in Russia, for example, or China and other authoritarian states, , even in parts of Europe where we've witnessed an authoritarian turn – we still have a free media, a free exchange of ideas. So that's absolutely important. And I think there's a longing for something transformative of a kind that you outline, Andrew. How it's achieved is always more challenging. But something is stirring. Something was happening before the pandemic, it was intensified during the pandemic, and one hopes… let's see what the local elections bring today. But I sense a change in the political weather.

Andrew: I want to bring in one final question from the audience just before finalising the event. But also, very kindly, Syed has suggested a book for the rest of us to read, which is Fiona Hill's recent work. She was born in Britain, grew up in the kind of towns that we've been talking about, and talks about the lack of social mobility fueling populism and so on. That was a very interesting book, I thought, and someone I'd dearly love to have in the festival.

Jason: Yes, Fiona Hill is very interesting indeed. She a Russia expert, isn't she?

Andrew: Yes, that's right.

Jason: And I think from the northeast of England. She tells an amazing story about her Oxford interview. She was rejected. This is during the ‘80s, when Oxford was run by Boris Johnson and his chums, the subject of Simon Kuper's very amusing book. And in that book, he tells a story about Fiona Hill. She hadn't been prepared for the Oxford interview. And the story she tells is

horrifying. I think she ended up going to St Andrews University and ultimately to graduate school in the US. She had to leave England to reinvent herself to become the person that she is today. So yeah, she's an interesting thinker. Unpredictable. And has a very interesting personal story as well. Someone I'd be keen to interview myself at some point.

Andrew: The final question, Jason – it's a big question again, and we don't have a lot of time – is about the climate crisis and sustainability. Will this have an impact on England and Englishness in terms of how we deal with it and meet those threats?

Jason: I think it's less a question about England and Englishness than a common humanity, I think. This has to be addressed by all of us, wherever we are and whoever we are. And if it's not, future generations will never forgive us. So I think it's a question that transcends Englishness and England. Because it's existential. And there's a line from the writer and philosopher Edmund Burke that I like, that what it means to be who we are, it's a partnership between the living, the dead, and those who are yet to be born. I like that, that sense of kind of continuity through the generations. And we should never forget, those of us who are in the present, those who are still to come as well as those who have gone. So I think I would reference Burke in answer to your question about climate change.

Andrew: Edmund Burke was MP for Bristol for a time, so that's a nice way to end. Thank you, Jason. I do urge you to read Jason's book. It's published by Picador and just out now. It's available in our partner bookshops and in all other bookshops. Thank you for joining us tonight. And thank you, Jason Cowley. Thank you.

Jason: Thank you so much, Andrew, great pleasure.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.