

This morning's political landscape is a victory for the...

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Three years ago I wrote a book called the Courageous State. There were those, of course, who predictably thought that a book that suggested the state had a role to play was deeply left wing. Actually, the book was about the need for individuals to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, on the virtues of the mixed economy, and on the need for politicians who recognise when the state is the best provider of services and who shamelessly step up to the mark and deliver what only the state can efficiently supply - of which there is much.

We do not have a Courageous State. Instead we have what I described as a cowardly state. That is a state where politicians do not believe in the institutions they run. That is because they believe instead in the mantra of competition that neoliberals have promoted as the prevailing logic of service supply. As a consequence they believe for ideological reasons and, candidly, for reasons of personal gain, that it is their duty to step back from decision making and hand over tasks to private sector companies. The absurdity of this is obvious from the fact that many of those private sector operators then become monopoly suppliers of services and the contracting process that grants this absence of choice is frequently staged between a few predictable outsourcing companies whose ability seems to be mainly in controlling access to the contracting process.

The destruction of political confidence that has resulted from this process is, however, of crucial importance, as is the message delivered that the UK's political class is neither competent to deliver and will usually step back from any opportunity to do so. The result is the political scenario that the UK faces today. The LibDems, who compromised their principles most when the Orange Bookers turned them neoliberal and made them into the biggest political cowards in the land, have paid the highest price. The Conservatives, after leading a government bent on destruction, have surely now lost all chance of a second term in office, coming third a year from a general election, whilst Labour are very clearly not making the gains they need to secure a mandate for office because no one knows what mandate they want - other than the right to shrink government further.

In the circumstances the success of UKIP - as revolting and worrying as I find it personally - is, I suggest, understandable. People want leadership. They want politicians who know what they are about. They want politicians who will make decisions and not pass the buck. They want politicians who they believe will use the powers afforded to them to deliver what they promise. UKIP appears to fit that bill, even down to being honest about saying it will shrink the state and unashamedly declaring it will set out to do so, however misguided that is. Most of all UKIP says it will use state power to control immigration, and for many people that is the touchstone of the fear that typifies the life of quiet desperation that for too many is the inevitable consequence of our current economic structuring of society as hope is denied to most in the UK.

What is required to address this? Courageous politics, of course. The type of politics that has motivated some to defend the NHS. The issues based politics that motivates the Greens. The type of politics that once motivated Labour to deliver social reform. The sort of politics that says the power of the state should be used to deliver hope when there is only despair, and to make sure that the promise is delivered upon in very tangible ways. What's tangible? Homes, schools and health care are. So too are care for the elderly and jobs for the young. Green energy is another obvious deliverable. But at the same time so is a level playing field for tax on which all honest businesses can compete. And companies that value everyone within them by paying fair rewards from top to bottom are another sign of the potential for hope. These are the tangible signs that the state can deliver for everyone that mainstream politicians will not even dream of, let alone talk about in ways that convince anyone.

And so UKIP offers a message that builds on the fear, instead of the hope.

That is the price we pay for cowardly politicians. The sort who want power but do not have the courage to use it. People are, rightly, fed up with that politics, which they see on offer from too many and they have resoundingly rejected it - most of all by not voting for people who do not believe in the process of government they are seeking to control. But they have also delivered the purveyors of fear a message of support. And that is very worrying.

Is there any chance that a courageous politician will step forward before the general election? I wish that might happen. I live in fear that it will not. And that's what really worries me.