

The end of politics as we know it

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Andrew Rawnsley's columns in the Observer [have not found much favour with me of late](#). Full of neoliberal angst at the rise of Jeremy Corbyn they have typified mainstream left paranoia that there may be an alternative to neoliberalism. This morning, in contrast, I have to agree with him, in part. [His argument is that](#):

The big truth that is being exposed by this battle is that Labour is really two parties and they can no longer stand each other's company.

And:

Likewise the Conservatives, whose schismatic event over Europe is ahead of them, would be more honest with themselves and with the electorate if they were to divide into their two major constituent parts.

I even agree with his analysis as to why these dysfunctional relationships survive:

[I]f this were a country with some form of proportional representation, both the Labour party and the Conservative party might well have divided into four parties long ago. What stops this happening is first past the post because it is an electoral system that mercilessly punishes splits.

And there we part company: it had to happen. Rawnsley, having filled his allotted 800 words shrugs his shoulders and ends his piece. There is not a hint in his column that anything might change. This is the way it is, he implies; the party that splits with least impact in the public perception will, he clearly thinks, go on to sweep all before it.

Maybe he is right. Maybe, after all, Jeremy Corbyn will not win the Labour leadership. Maybe the left will be happy about that. Maybe all those unions will fund a Burnham / Cooper compromise after all. Maybe the Tories will not split over Europe. Maybe the EU sceptics and the electorate will forgive a prime minister who said he would renegotiate the UK's EU membership and then fails to do so despite which he asks for endorsement for staying in. Maybe a great many other things might happen that will deliver a majority government in 2020. I certainly don't know and nor does anyone else.

But to presume the supposed centre ground status quo around two party democracy (even the rump of two parties) will survive is, of the options available, a slim one to back. The reason is that to do so presumes that this is what people want. I see little evidence to support that.

First, two party politics very clearly has less appeal than it once did. Partisan loyalty to a party has also very obviously declined. The tribal split that fuelled the party divide and created a system suited to first past the post no longer exists, and there is little chance of it being reproduced.

Second, neoliberalism has effectively guaranteed this. The whole logic of the 35 year old neoliberal exercise has been to destroy organised labour. That was its explicit intent and it has, to quite significant degree, achieved it, although not in the way it intended. Unions have not been smashed out of existence as neoliberalism intended. What neoliberalism created in terms of changed working patterns achieved the goal of destroying labour unity instead. The definition of people's politics around work has as a result become largely irrelevant when people have such fluid perceptions of what work is and might be for them.

Third, that same process of destroying standard definitions and understanding of work has left people alienated from a model of politics - the neoliberal model - which defined itself on the basis of destroying a particular form of understanding of work as represented by organised labour working for large scale employers - but which has had nothing to put in its place and has as a result had to force people into low paid, frequently meaningless, work to ensure social control. Disenchantment with politics has resulted but so far has had little mechanism to express itself bar abstaining, which has happened in ever increasing numbers.

And that is why Rawnsley is wrong to shrug his shoulders. People now implicitly realise that the centre ground that at least three parties in UK politics would like to populate has no answers to the question that they want to ask, which is "what's this all about then?" If the utopia that neoliberalism has to offer is low paid, insecure, largely meaningless work that provides those doing it with little chance to fulfil their potential then people are going to look for an alternative. The SNP, Greens and UKIP represent three alternatives. The Lib Dems ceased to be one. Labour's left provides another such alternative, with the fact that it has something to say that appears to make sense just adding to the appeal.

None of these options may provide the answer people are looking for. I strongly suspect all the alternatives have much more thinking to do before a coherent programme is clear that might address the issues needing to be solved. But the point is, coming back to Rawnsley, to assume that all such alternatives will fail and will have little impact on the centre-ground of politics, which first past the post will ensure survives in his cosy world-view, is just wrong.

Of course it is true that there have been spectacular splits that have failed before. I well remember the early 80s. But these splits have tended to happen when a new prevailing narrative had emerged. So the Liberals died in the twenties when Labour offered a new voice. And likewise Labour split in the 80s when the Tories offered a new voice. If there are splits now it is against a different background. Neoliberalism might be exceptionally powerful. Economically you would think it the only game in town. But it's also failing, spectacularly, to meet need and expectation. That's the background to these current potential splits. And as a result nothing is like the early 80s in this scenario, for left or right.

I think we're seeing the death throes of politics as we have known it.

I hope we can reinvent democracy to embrace the politics to come. That may be the greatest challenge for all to face.

And in the face of that the presumption by some that the old rules still apply seems to me to be the best indication that change is, in fact, inevitable because it confirms that prevailing centre ground thinking has nothing new to offer anyone except the preservation of power for a few who may not wish to give it up.

Let's hope they can be persuaded to do so, peaceably.