

## What is the right wing of Labour for?

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John Harris [has written his most balanced article for the Guardian](#) for some time, asking:

*When are Labour party 'moderates' going to do more than just moan?*

That is an excellent question: the idea that Labour might split, and that Labour is bereft of ideas, appear to be notions entirely based upon the actions and thinking of those on the right of that Party.

As I have made clear, [not least in the Guardian over the Christmas period](#), I do not see a role for me in party politics, and am quite happy about that. But, I was interested to [read an article by my friend Jolyon Maugham](#), also published yesterday, where he indicated that he is beginning to think about these issues. He wants to do it in the context of Labour: I'm interested in the questions more generally, and because Jolyon deliberately drew his article to my attention, and it can be seen as a welcome response to John Harris, it is on his piece that I will concentrate.

Jolyon has indicated that he has interest in four themse at present, which I might summarise as:

*What do we want from our State?*

*What should be the relationship between business and society?*

*What should our tax system look like?*

*Redistribution*

All of them are important, and all vex me. But, it was the context in which Jolyon raised these that intrigued me the most since I have been asked to think about them by fellow members of my department at City University. He said:

*It has been said, and often, that candidates other than Corbyn offered little in Labour's*

*leadership elections. I think this is broadly true. But it is much less damning than might at first be thought.*

*Cooper, Kendall and Burnham thought they were competing against each other — and would have time after victory to put together a policy offer. This is, of course, exactly how good ideas are made. They do not spring fully formed from the mind of some mythical leader. They emerge from a process of deep and iterative thought. As I listened to the early leadership hustings what I most wanted was to hear someone with the courage to admit that they were still embarked on the journey of finding out what the solutions were.*

*And Cooper, Kendall and Burnham did not see until it was upon them the Corbyn steamroller. And then it was too late to respond. And in this, of course, they were mistaken — but they were far from alone.*

It is the suggestion that people want to secure the leadership of a political party and then try to work out why they might do that which intrigues me. I simply do not share the view that this is how party politics should, or even does, work. A wise friend when I was a teenager told me that if I wanted to change the world I should be a poet. If I could not manage that he suggested that I should instead be a writer. His advice then, which I continue to think to be true, was that politicians trail in the wake of poets and writers, but do not create their own political philosophies.

This is entirely logical: the skills required to be a practical, working politician are fundamentally different to those needed to create a political (or economic) worldview, and vice versa. This is not to say that the practical politician should not be interested in such worldviews: such philosophies should underpin all that they do. But, I think it very rare indeed that the process of creation can be combined with the skills of delivery, and anyone hoping that they should be is likely to be perennially disappointed.

To put it another way, the three contenders for the Labour leadership (other than Jeremy Corbyn) who had not worked out what worldview they were adopting based upon some comprehensive reading and understanding before they put their position to the Labour membership had, in my opinion, simply failed to understand the task that they were being asked to undertake. They should have known exactly what they were offering by the time that the hustings arrived.

In this sense I'm also surprised that Jolyon can say:

*And although I do not know what they were for I have little sense of what Corbyn's Labour is for either. His appeal in the leadership campaign was primarily to higher spending and a largely unarticulated notion of change.*

*Since his victory his more lavish policy offerings — for example, closing the so-called £120bn so-called tax gap or ditching the so-called £93bn of so-called corporate welfare*

— *have (rightly) been shelved.*

*And the gruel that has been replaced them has largely been drawn from Labour's 2015 Election Manifesto — that and the policy platform of Stop the War.*

I think much of this untrue. As example, Jeremy Corbyn made very clear in his New Year message that he is seeking greater investment in the UK economy: in the event of a downturn I have little doubt that People's Quantitative Easing will have a major part to play in that.

And, although the '£93 bn of corporate welfare' is not being referred to any more, a review of all tax expenditures is, and involves, as Jolyon notes in his own article, a greater sum.

Lastly, if Labour's tax review does not look at issues relating to the tax gap and how to address it then I will be, to be candid, absolutely astonished.

To put it another way, I think that Jolyon does know exactly what Jeremy Corbyn is about, but is in denial.

That some denial is, to some degree reflected in this comment:

*But whether or not you think this analysis fair, what certainly is fair is the challenge laid down by those who remain supporters of Corbyn's brand of politics: what is Labour's rump for?*

That is an interesting question, but one to which John Harris has an answer when saying:

*The makeup of what might be called the coalition of the unwilling is pretty clear: a mixture of Blairites, Brownites, the inheritors of the part of the old Labour right once rooted in some of the unions, and that great swath of Labour MPs who have no great factional loyalties but are deeply unsettled by their party's sudden left turn.*

My guess it is these people who Jolyon calls 'the rump'. Harris continued:

*Their pain, it seems, is shared by a reasonable number of activists, some of whom have decided to quit the party altogether. But so far, most of these people have displayed a remarkable lack of willingness to even understand their own predicament, let alone do anything meaningful about it.*

*Their script goes something like this. Never mind 50 years of deindustrialisation, a deepening Europe-wide crisis of social democracy, or the downsides of the Blair and Brown years, to quote the Labour-aligned thinktank [Policy Network: last year's election defeat](#) could be reduced to two key factors — Labour's failure to pay enough attention to “economic competence”, and the fact that “the public did not perceive Ed Miliband*

as a credible prime minister”.

As and when the Corbyn project implodes, goes the apparent argument, a new leader with the right plan will finally be summoned, and Labour will be back in the game.

I think John Harris is right: that is the basis of belief in what I see of the right wing of Labour. And John Harris is also right: this predicament has arisen precisely because much of Labour has not asked itself what it is about for far too long.

I have noted the questions Jolyon wants to address. If I'm honest I doubt that there would be any very significant difference between the answers that he could provide and the answers that I would give except that I now know where I am and most in the Labour Party do not. And that is the point: precisely because Labour has not known the answer to these questions, and maybe has not even asked them, let alone looked around to see who might be thinking about them (or, when it has, seems to have looked in some very odd places to find answers given its supposed political position) it has, quite unsurprisingly, been unable to answer the questions put to it by the electorate, just as three of the four leadership candidates this summer were quite unable to explain just what they were for. They could all, including Labour at the general election, offer shopping lists of nice sounding policy agendas. What was missing was any form of coherence at all, except from Jeremy Corbyn, who (with a little help from his friends) had what was, like it or not, something that looked very much like a consistent and logical narrative to offer.

So, I welcome Jolyon's questions. But if they need to be asked now by those on the right of Labour then I'd suggest that it is a decade or so before those on that wing of the Labour party are going to have an electoral platform to propose that makes a lot of sense because before they can get anywhere near that position it seems that they have, first of all, to work out what they are for. And that is a much harder question to answer.

In which case it might be very good news that Labour actually elected Jeremy Corbyn, because at least he knows how to answer the question, even if in ways many will find unfamiliar.