

Can we build a new consensus?

Published: January 14, 2026, 5:31 pm

There are likely to be two aberrational political events this week. One is the return of an SNP government in Scotland with a large majority in a system designed to prevent such an event occurring. The other is the election of Sadiq Khan as Mayor of London by a reasonable margin, if polling is correct. That the latter need not be the case is something that we are now, of course, familiar with.

One of these events is designed not to happen. The other, in the context of what is supposedly happening in the Labour Party and its fortunes nationally, seems an unlikely outcome.

Three quick thoughts. The first is that just as pre-2008 'normality' has gone from the economy so has it now gone from politics. I think we would be wise to assume neither will return. The era of consensus between two major political parties (which survived the change in opinion in 1980) would appear to have gone, and I suggest for good (interpreting that word in two ways).

Second then, the appearance of relatively strong popular agreement on a candidate or party that may be on display in these two elections will be misleading. The local elections will tell a very different story across the country as a whole, suggesting that consensus may be becoming harder to find.

Third, in that case we have to rethink how politics turns into government, at whatever level is being considered. If voters are rejecting the old consensus (and I see every reason why they should) then there are real risks trying to preserve it. The chance of doing so will, in any event, reduce if the Conservative Party has a massive fall out reaction to the EU referendum vote, as again seems possible.

My point is that consensus coalitions may cause harm. They look like, because they are, attempts to preserve a dying order. It is hardly surprising that the appeal of entering into them is declining for minority parties. But in that case, what next?

Again, three ideas. First, electoral reform has to happen. It is just not possible to sustain

the argument for first past the post in a multi-party system.

Second, old tribalism has to be consigned to history. Both the big parties will be punished (and Labour already is in Scotland, at least) for not appreciating this. The need for partnerships is essential if politics is to reflect the reality of what people are thinking. Despite the Corbyn membership boost for Labour the reality is that most people are not party focussed in their political thinking and can see strengths and weaknesses in a range of parties and candidates.

Third, new consensus building is needed, but it will have a very different feel to the old consensus around political economic ordering that has dominated debate since WW2. Now is the time for social and environmental consensus building too, at least between parties, with the recognition that no one view of society, that largely reflects the interests of its elite, may emerge as a result.

Is that too much to hope for?