

# Is a new Centre Party on the cards?

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I know I was described as Jeremy Corbyn's guru last year, but that was nonsense. I've never been anyone's guru, least of all the Leader of the Opposition's. He just seemed to like some of my ideas. And I was happy to explain them to Labour audiences. Whether that helped him get elected as leader, or not, we'll never know. What we do know is that he is now under pressure to resign.

In commenting now let me say three things: first, I am still not a member of the Labour Party, and have no intention of being so. Second, I have not spoken to anyone in Labour about the issues that have arisen in the last couple of days. Third, all that follows is, then, my own opinion after getting a couple of hours away from the computer, the press, and everything else.

The first thing to say is how odd it is that Labour should be having a leadership crisis.

In an opinion poll today Labour is at level pegging with the Conservatives, who are down five points. You could argue that it should be well ahead, but equally it could be argued that the Conservatives have just enjoyed an enormous amount of exposure, and one wing of that party has just won a major election: in that circumstance for Labour to be on level pegging seems to be a quite surprisingly good position.

Second, all analysis would suggest that Labour voters turned out pretty heavily for Remain: both David Cameron and the neoliberal wing of Labour should be very pleased with this. How it could really have done very much more is a little hard to tell given that the media seemed entirely focused upon Conservative participants in the referendum campaign.

Thirdly, you would expect Labour at this moment to be united in its desire to exploit internal Conservative divisions rather than provide the biggest possible diversion it can to weaknesses within the government. And yet, it does appear to today be taking all the attention away from Tory party division. Tactically I would not have thought this is the moment to do that unless there was some continuing, other, explanation such as a profound unwillingness to accept last year's Labour party leader election result or, maybe, concern that at some point Jeremy Corbyn might come up with a real

alternative to the neoliberal agenda now pretty universally on offer. I suspect there are other, deeper agendas as well, including a concern to defend Tony Blair when the Chilcott Report comes out.

Whichever way it is looked at though 67% of Labour supporters voting Remain was not a bad result given the overall performance, which in contrast indicates just how far the majority of Conservative MPs are from being in sympathy with their own electors. To put it another way, it is the Conservatives who really do have a crisis right between the party and their supporters right now, and not Labour.

That said, around 40% of the shadow cabinet had resigned, and that's not healthy. Whatever sticking plaster held things together for the last nine months has clearly come off in the wash. Something pretty fundamental is going on, and it should be said in both the Labour and Conservative parties.

The simple reality is that a majority of Labour MPs remain fundamentally Blairite whilst a minority, who seem to have the support of most party members, are to the left, and as if to mirror this a majority of Conservative MPs are Cameronian with the party membership being much further to the right. Both parties have a crisis of the centre ground, which crisis they happen to share with the rump of the Liberal Democrats, and in all cases it is only the control but those in the centre exercise over their respective party machineries that has kept their MPs who are inclined the middle in office.

To put it another way, there may be literally hundreds of MPs in the House of Commons who have remarkably little connection with their own party membership, let alone those they are meant to represent. Is it surprising in case that so many feel disaffected?

Three thoughts follow. The first is that whatever happens now in both the Labour and Conservative parties, the fight is about more than control of the leadership: it is also about control of the party mechanism. There can be no doubt the Jeremy Corbyn has not, as yet, won this battle in the Labour Party, with an alternative leadership in waiting having been sitting in Labour Party HQ ever since he was elected. Unless, and until, that issue was resolved he has little or no hope of leading an effective Opposition. In the Conservatives the battle may be a little less obvious but there can be no doubt that the established voice did not want Brexit, does not want Boris Johnson, and is extremely worried about what is happening. That stress may be kept a little further below the surface, but I suspect that it is very real nonetheless.

Second, the outcome of this battle shapes British politics for some time to come. If, despite a leadership challenge, Jeremy Corbyn or some other person from the left wins through as Labour Party leader and can really secure control of the party mechanism as a result then that party will move quite significantly to the left for some time to come. Pretty much parallel circumstance will arise in Conservative Central office, where in effect the Taxpayers' Alliance will take over. No one could then doubt that we would be in for a much more polarised form of politics.

But, thirdly, what of the centre ground in the case? Where do those Remain Conservatives and neoliberal Labour MPs go? I am sure that in days gone by a Liberal Democrat leader would have been only too willing to welcome them, and some may have succumbed, but at this moment Tim Farron has little to offer anyone. I think few will be tempted that way. But, if as the logistics seem to suggest likely, the Labour membership votes left again, and the Conservative membership votes much further to the right than it has done for a long time, then you can see why some of those, particularly on the right of Labour at this moment, are feeling somewhat lonely and isolated and willing to take the risk in the state of confusion that currently exists to try to secure their long-term position.

Without taking sides in either forthcoming election I foresee wins for both the left and right with the centre ground losing out badly, and in Labour's case, at least, those losing looking very vulnerable to de-selection and a future outside the party machine.

So the question is what do those who find themselves in this position from both parties, and maybe some former Liberal Democrats, do now? Do they give up on politics, or has the basis for a new centre ground coalition being created?

I'm not sure that this possibility has existed before now precisely because the centre ground in both of the main parties has always had sufficient control of their party mechanisms to avoid a real need for any significant change in party structures. But, if that has changed, as I think is the case, will politics change to reflect that fact and, unlikely as it may seem, will a referendum that appeared to be dominated by a rejection of the political elite give rise to a new party that may well reflect that political elite more closely than any has done before? Stranger things have happened.