

What happens to Labour now?

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I was sharing thoughts with a quite well known journalist yesterday (it does not matter who). They asked me what is going to happen to Labour now. They were familiar with my history with that party and made it the premise of the discussion that Jeremy Corbyn will win the leadership election this summer, with which idea I do not necessarily agree, entirely, as yet. Assuming they were right though I offered an opinion as I am rarely short of one.

I suggested that a number of consequences would follow.

First, I said there would be no general election. There would be no incentive for Theresa May to call one when there was no effective opposition. There was no chance Labour would cooperate to deliver an election given the shambolic state they are in. No one else can agree to it. So, we face four more years of this parliament.

Second, I could not see almost any of those who have resigned from the shadow ministerial team going back to work for Jeremy Corbyn. In that case, as at present, there would remain more than forty vacancies in that team. Labour could not provide an opposition as a result.

Third, in this situation the SNP might try to embarrass Labour and put forward a shadow ministerial team, maybe bringing in Plaid Cymru, the SDLP and Greens, to become the official opposition. If they could suggest a bigger shadow ministerial team was available they might have a claim to do so.

The threat that this might happen would force the hand of the 170 or so Labour MPs who very clearly will not be supporting their party leader, but who have now, by default, already selected their own group leader in Owen Smith. I believe they will be forced to act and have little to lose from doing so. There are three obvious reasons for that.

First, every one of them faces the risk of deselection by their constituency parties. Even if they hung on as the candidate the chance of Labour winning more than 100 seats in 2020 after four more years of shambolic opposition looks optimistic to me.

Second, facing four years of frustration and impotence they will be forced into action.

Third, their duty will overcome all other considerations: there isn't an option available in UK politics for the largest group of opposition MPs to sit on their hands and say they will not oppose anyone but their own front bench: it is their duty to the electorate to oppose and that they will have to do.

With their backs against the wall I expect this group to form an opposition first, and a party second. On this basis Labour will fracture this Autumn, because it would have to: democracy would demand it of these MPs if they think they cannot serve under Corbyn.

There is of course no guarantee that this split will in any way guarantee a new party success: I really cannot see an SDP phenomenon happening again, but that may be a good thing. Political euphoria (like political cults) collapses. But that said, if such a party is to succeed at all it has to be radical. Unless it is it will simply provide an agreeable pastime to these, by then former Labour MPs, before political retirement will forcibly beckon, come what may.

What in that case does radical mean? It can only be an embrace of a radical approach to Brexit and the opportunities it provides or the whole thing will be a waste of time. My discussant agreed. As they put it, the left has to overcome its paradoxical position. There are free economic freedoms. They are of capital, goods and labour.

The left is happy about restricting the movement of capital whether through measures to beat tax abuse, by the adoption of financial transaction taxes, and much else.

It is also happy to prevent the free movement of goods, to protect Port Talbot for example.

And in reality we have always restricted the free movement of labour: we do not have an open border policy except with the EU, and yet suggesting changing this offends the left considerably, although not the population at large. On this most apparent of the 'freedoms' the left has to now make up its mind because this will dictate the future of Brexit.

Demand free movement and there is no chance of restricting capital and trade, and we will be left like Norway working in a fundamentally neoliberal system where we have no say and so chance of changing things. Accept limitations on movement and leave the single market and controls can be imposed on capital and trade as well when required, as the left would reasonably expect.

It's a pretty fundamental choice to make, and an essential one. Forming a new party of the left that does not accept the reality of Brexit and give it a left wing stance (which happens to be consistent with current policy with the world excepting the EU) would be

a waste of time. Do so and there is an electoral offering which can be the foundation for a radical economic policy.

None of this is going to happen yet: there is a Labour Party election to deal with first. But failing to think about the implications of that election would be a big mistake. And the time to do that is before the event, much as this seems to have gone out of fashion in the UK. This is why I make these suggestions now.