

What is the left for?

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What is the left for? I ask the question for good reason. The good reason is that the left does not seem to know the answer.

If we accept that the parliamentary representation of the left in the UK as a whole has been predominantly the preserve of the Labour Party, with the Liberal Democrats having provided a refuge for some, then whatever identity the left has had has largely been lost. This fact now sets these two parties apart from most others.

The Conservatives remains a party for something: they promote the interests of wealth.

The SNP and Plaid Cymru have unambiguous underlying themes of interest.

The same is true of the Greens.

And UKIP.

To a very large degree the interests of the major parties in Northern Ireland are clearly identifiable.

But, to pick an easy theme, what are the Liberal Democrats for now?

And, come to that, is anyone really confident about the purpose of the Labour Party?

I will from here on ignore the Liberal Democrats: they are, I suspect, a spent force in British politics, destroyed by their Orange Book tendency and no longer as a result a part of the left. But that still leaves Labour.

It is easy to say what Labour was. Founded in the midst of the class struggle of the late 19th century it combined Fabian vision and trade union muscle in a desire to create parliamentary representation for the working people of the UK so that they might enjoy a better standard of living.

I am confident that in my life time I, and millions of others, could say that this defined

what we knew Labour was for. Although they might never have won elections I believe that this was true under the leaderships of both Neil Kinnock and John Smith.

Then everything changed. Until Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party it could be identified for what it was for. From the moment that he led it that changed. What Tony Blair was for was power. He intended to achieve it by not being something: Blair's Labour Party was not the Conservatives.

It is entirely true to say that John Major's government was so bad that it gifted Blair the opportunity to be elected on the basis of being anything but Major's Conservatives. It is equally true that so bereft of potential leaders were the Conservatives in the post-Thatcher era that Blair could keep on winning, whatever happened (and remember that he won after Iraq). But I suggest that it was during the Blair years that Labour forgot what it was for.

This was not, however, without consequence. Whilst Labour might have defined itself on the basis of what it was not, the obvious development of the idea was to define politics on the basis of what you opposed.

So the Conservatives opposed a whole string of things including trade unions and anything that protected working people; professional people who might know what they were talking about; environmentalists; Brussels and most things that felt like human rights.

UKIP opposed the EU, the euro and migration.

Plaid Cymru, the SNP and Sinn Fein in their differing ways opposed Westminster.

The Greens opposed unsustainability.

And in all this Labour simply continued to oppose the Conservatives.

The Liberal Democrats meanwhile became the parrot-monger in chief of an oppositional rhetoric to Labour because the Conservatives had given them the power they had always craved but which Labour had not delivered for them. It was that decision to define themselves as being in opposition without ever offering a positive vision of what they were for has consigned the Liberal Democrats to history.

There is now a real chance that Labour is now heading the same way, and there is no clear indication that it understands this. The current dispute between what I might call the Momentum and Parliamentary wings of the Party are in a sense pre-historic: the tensions between the Fabian and trade union traditions have never really gone away, with the Fabian's always dominating the parliamentary party and unions the constituencies. It is easy to see the continuation of that divide in the current struggle. But what that struggle does not as yet reveal is much vision, and this remains where the crisis is located.

Those criticising the PLP have good reason to do so. It has made power its goal. Once the Conservatives recovered a semblance of cohesion Labour lost to power, twice. That was because Labour had forgotten what to do with power. That the Conservative led governments that replaced it had little clue what to do in office has not, so far, been enough to damn them: opinion polls suggest they still match Labour head to head. On its own terms the PLP has failed. It was very obvious that new leadership was needed. It is equally clear why the pre-2010 membership of the PLP has no idea how to supply the required vision: vision is something they have never embraced, power having always been the goal in itself.

That said, the Momentum wing also has difficulties. If the PLP has utterly embraced managerialism (metaphor: the message is more important than the content) then the left of Labour has always been about vision without much understanding of delivery, largely because the prospect of getting near power always seemed so remote.

I unambiguously prefer the message of the left in the current dispute. That is not hard to say: it would be hard to find a message that the rest are delivering. But wise parties know that they have to combine message content and delivery, and for that to work they need three things.

The first is a vision. Call it a plan if you will: it's the thing both Blair on Iraq and Cameron on Europe so clearly lacked, but both are only metaphors for a wider failing.

The second is a delivery mechanism. This is a sound economic programme without which not much else is possible.

The third is the ability to persuade. There is no doubt that in the twenty first century this matters, a lot.

All three have to be present, unless the major opposition is so lacking in at least two when the deficiencies of an elected party are grudgingly ignored.

New Labour never had a vision: no one knew what the 'third way' was unless it was anything that Old Labour had not done.

New Labour's economics were neoliberal, founded on debt fuelled growth.

But you have to agree that for a long time New Labour did know how to deliver a message, even if it was largely lacking in content.

In contrast the left have an imprecise vision: whilst clearly rooted in the socialist tradition with a bias to working people and an instinct for liberals causes that message has not been refined to represent a plan, in my opinion (and, I stress, this is a personal perspective).

I would also suggest that as yet Labour does not have a clear economic plan, and I can

say this as the person who supposedly wrote it (I will return to this issue in a moment).

Thirdly, however looked at the present Labour leadership have not got their communications together. I am regularly told that Labour do not get media coverage because the press releases are not available when required and stories are not pitched on time for the news cycle. Some of that may be misinformation, but I am not entirely sure of that.

I am also aware that the current Labour leadership is really hard to reach, which is no way to communicate.

And at the same time many of those expected to deliver in the shadow cabinet really did not know what the line that they were meant to communicate was.

These are the reasons why I suggested Jeremy Corbyn needs to stand aside for someone who can achieve these aims.

That though would be utterly pointless unless there was a clear understanding from a new leader on the first two issues: vision and delivery. The two are of course linked but on this issue of linkage the current Labour leadership also needs to improve its act.

John McDonnell was right to look at very obvious delivery problems when he became shadow chancellor last year. If I may, again, take a personal perspective on this issue, of course I was pleased that my messages on People's QE and the tax gap were adopted by Jeremy and John. I also thought a focus on tax allowances, the Bank of England and management of the Treasury were appropriate. All are necessary as part of a new delivery mechanism. Some, I think survive, although the Bank of England review has fallen by the wayside right now and I am unsure about the review of the Treasury.

But, and this is a very big but, going back just to the issues I was most involved with, People's QE and the tax gap were not issues raised for their own technical sake. There were policy goals that they fulfilled.

They were intended to fund a Green New Deal (rename it as you will: I do not care). That was about beating austerity, providing counter-cyclical investment, releasing what we called a 'carbon army' that created new jobs in every constituency (this being the core message) that would build the sustainable energy, transport, IT and housing we need. All this was designed to be delivered in a way that promised stable inflation, manageable debt and critically, when it comes to tax, a fair and progressive tax systems where all were going to be treated equally before the law whatever income they had, wherever it came from and whether they were large or small, a company or individual, national or international. That tax goal in itself was not simply a management issue; it was intended to create opportunity for honest people and businesses to invest knowing there weren't people unfairly undermining them. Tax,

industrial and social policy was integrated, in other words.

But last summer we only heard the PQE and tax gap bits: the managerial delivery elements and not much of the vision. The plan did not as a result hang together in the way the whole Green New Deal did. To put it another way, and to come right back to the beginning of this piece, there was no statement of what the policy was for. I maintain that I created good delivery mechanisms that I hope and believe will be used. But they have to fitted into a bigger plan.

The means that the left then has to know what it is for.

Economics is not enough, although vital.

Sound management of messaging is essential, but there has to be content and then both content and message have to appeal.

But there has also to be the answer to the most fundamental question, which is 'why?' Why vote for the left?

Slogans do not work here unless they are representative of substance: for decades party managers have come up with pithy phrases to encapsulate the supposed themes of party congresses and all will have fallen by the wayside in days. The 'why' has to reflect a deep seated reality that is economic, but much broader.

Go back to the start where I summarised what the other parties are about in single words. Wealth. Independence. Sustainability. They are pithy and sufficient to understand the offering.

So what is the left's offering in a single word that can really represent what it is all about? My best suggestion is justice.

Justice at work and at home; on housing, education and health; for people with disabilities and those who are discriminated against; on tax and access to economic opportunity, including the chance to create your own business; internationally where peace is a vital goal and conflict resolution the way to achieve it; between generations on natural resources and pensions; between those who have wealth and those who have not: the list goes on but the word is a constant.

And that word embraces the issues of real concern. Justice recognises conflict and demands plans to solve it. Immigration is an obvious area where this has to happen.

Justice recognises difference too, and the need for respect but not separation.

Justice is unambiguous that the aim is fairness, but not enforced similarity.

Justice demands equality of treatment but has to respect choice and the free will that

makes us the people we are.

Justice says we care but it requires action, because justice has never happened by chance.

Justice is about knowing when to intervene and when to leave well alone.

Justice respects polarity, but seeks to embrace it within a totality.

Justice, then, demands a plan. It cannot be delivered without one. And in politics planning is the single greatest absent skill.

Justice is what the left is about and, I suggest, everything else is secondary.

It is the single word that can resonate and is understood by almost everyone, instinctively as to what it implies.

Justice underpins societies in the way nothing else can.

That should be the appeal of justice.

Justice requires an advocate.

That's the job of the left.

Can the left resolve its issues around that theme?

I hope it might.