

Funding the Future

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I have said for some time that we need to be worried about what is happening in this country, and beyond. I make no apology for that. I believe that we face a crisis. The weekend's developments in France support that thesis. What seems likely is that the people of that country will be faced with a choice between a Thatcherite opponent of the welfare state and a far right neo-fascist in the 2018 presidential election. The centre ground of any persuasion, the left and greens appear to have been wholly sidelined as a result in the choice that France will have to make. That is an extraordinary situation and it is time to consider the necessary conclusions because this is not just a French issue; the move to the Right is very clearly one that is happening in many countries.

In my opinion the move to the Right is now too serious to pretend it is not a threat to the stability of our societies and democracies. We need to be serious about this: if electoral choice can effectively be reduced to choice between the right and far right in France then mainstream politics has failed very badly indeed.

Some on the left will say the obvious thing to do in that case is to present a radical alternative. This is the Labour alternative at present. It does not seem to work: like it or not there is no obvious narrative to it that speaks to most people or persuade them of its benefit.

Others will suggest aping the right. This is what some others on the right of Labour seem to be doing at present. It has little better prospect than the Labour left alternative: Labour has aped other parties for some time now. People end up voting for the real thing because they are bemused as to what Labour stands for.

Then there is the moderating tendency. By default this has become identified with the LibDems. There is little doubt that despite making compromises that utterly undermined their credibility the LibDems did temper the worst of the Tory instincts between 2010 and 2015, but as a sales proposition it is very obviously hopeless.

The Scot Nats are united by a single goal.

The Greens aren't, but that doesn't matter because most people think they are.

I trust I will be forgiven for such generalities, but I think they are useful at a time like this: there is an urgent need to identify problems and the point I want to make is relatively simple. Offering compromise, moderating tendencies, policy confusion and single-issue solutions (Scotland, exceptionally, apart) is not proving to be anything like a match for the certainties of the Right at present.

To put it another way, whatever the reason people have lost the political hope that most parties, whether notionally of left, right or centre, sold them until recently. In place of that hope they have embraced the alternative, which is fear.

This is not entirely irrational. When the centre ground of politics, from Ken Clarke leftwards, has proved to have remarkably little to offer most people in terms of an explanation for how we have reached this point in history, and seems to have little obvious plan on how to move us on towards something better than people have not just abandoned particular parties, they have abandoned the whole political approach to government that those parties embraced for so long.

So debate is out, and anger is in.

Moderation is old hat, and it is OK to be extreme.

Doubt has been foregone: certainties are demanded, even if none are really available.

And the embracement of compromise has gone: inflexibility has replaced it.

With all that has come prejudice. Which is unsurprising: after thirty or more years of neoliberalism selling a 'winner take all attitude' this has, unsurprisingly permeated the political narrative. And we are left with a politics of the hard right against the far right.

Saying all this is, of course, the easy bit: suggesting we are headed for hell in a handcart is something political commentators have done for a long time. How to change the direction of the cart, and upgrade it to something looking more like a charabanc is the harder part. And, I stress, one blog cannot provide all the answers. But let me suggest an outline of the issues to which I may well return.

First we need to recognise that the structure of politics that we have all been familiar with is not only dying, but has to be discarded. That may be hard, but if old tribalism is to be maintained then the chance of a united front against the Hard Right is very low indeed, which will hand them victory on a plate, as France is proving.

What that means is that old loyalties to parties may need to be abandoned: we face a crisis to the world of politics as we know it. This is not one party in crisis in isolation. This is the system failing and unless a significant number of people can rise above the remnants of the old system and work together to build something new we will head for what might as well be called fascism. That is the real threat: there is no room for pettiness in the face of it.

Second, we need to be willing to hold our noses in that case. Like it or not there are some people whose views we might have found unpalatable who we will have to cooperate with if the fight against the Hard Right is to be won. This will be required within and beyond parties. And we will have to realise that this is the price we will have to pay for now to keep democracy alive because working with people with whom we differ will be better than being oppressed.

Third, we really do need to know what we are fighting for. If it's just about power then forget the whole thing: this will be readily apparent to anyone and will be rejected immediately. It is precisely the politics of power without principle that is being rejected by people at present. They have seen through that. So principle has to be at the heart of any such campaign.

And that politics of principle has in that case to have a clear narrative.

It will say that people matter.

It will stress that this is true individually. And collectively.

It will stress rights. But also responsibilities. Both exist.

It will emphasise the role of government in delivering justice.

It will make clear that justice is not just about law and order. It is also about the right to work, health, education, security, care, protection in old age and when vulnerable, and to participation in society.

It will stress that this is something government cannot and should not do alone: there will be a commitment to the mixed economy.

What is good about the private sector will be supported and encouraged. But that will require a a commitment to building a level playing field so that cheats cannot abuse honest businesses.

It will commit to sustainability. This requires a commitment to people where they are. It requires a commitment to the environment. It accepts that change is inevitable. It seeks to manage the disruption in that process.

It will require a proactive policy towards migration. Migration is not to be condemned: it is to be celebrated. But there is no point pretending it is not without its difficulties, because they exist. In that case like other processes of change, migration will have to be managed to ensure communities can accommodate those who wish to arrive in them, and survive when others wish to leave.

It will have to commit to economic stability. This is the bedrock on which democracy is built, and the yardstick by which it is measured. But this will require a much greater

understanding of the basis for economic stability, which is not the wholly arbitrary indicator of a balanced government budget. A commitment to explaining the economic realities of the world in which we live is at the heart of the understanding on which a new democracy will be founded.

It will have to commit to protecting those subject to prejudice because in an inkling that could be anyone we know or love.

It will need to respect difference and yet work for the common good.

It will have as its goal a community in which it is possible to hope.

In the process it will seek to abolish fear.

This the fight those who believe that democracy must prevail must join together to win.

It is a struggle between those who care and the Hard Right.

And for the sake of us all those who care must win.