

Shattering the government's veneer of credibility

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The [Fabian Society is apparently warning today](#) that Labour faces the prospect of falling to having no more than 150 MPs in a future parliament. Now I know the Fabian's and Jeremy Corbyn have an uneasy relationship but the Fabians are also not on Labour's real right wing. And they have history on their side. The forecast is wrong, of course (all forecasts are in some way) but that is not the point. The warning message is the point.

That message seems to be saying three things. The first is that Labour has no idea how to recreate unity within the party. Second it says it is hapless when it comes to Europe. Third, the broader policy picture from Labour is little better. The result is it is gifting the next election, already, to the Tories.

That is bizarre. In summary, the Tories are doing well despite having no idea on how to create real unity within the party (as this year will prove), being totally hapless on Europe and having little broader policy offering to make. They are surviving behind the merest veneer of competence and the gross injustices of the first past the post system.

Let's be clear that I am not excusing either party for its haplessness: incompetence is unappealing from wherever it comes and right now it is being offered by the two major party leaderships in Westminster. But if that is the case and continues, as seems likely, what are the prospects?

First, I can't see the Labour leadership sorting itself out right now. I wish I could but I don't have that confidence. Nor [do I see them saving themselves with a Progressive Alliance](#), although it is the only obvious route to take. There is too much tribalism for that.

Second, don't presume the Tories will have an easy ride to 2020. They will not, by a long way. Hard and soft Brexit factions are waiting to fight deals out. I am suspecting deep divisions to become apparent as a result. All third party factors are weighed against them too: the fact that the economy is going to have a really rough time will dent their credibility, as will rising debt and failing services. The Tories could still snatch defeat from Brexit.

But what if the Tory addiction to power does somehow drive their veneer of competence onwards? Who opposes then, because opposition is needed?

One source of opposition is in the Lords. The [mounting criticism of university reform](#) that is becoming apparent is important in this context. It is cross party. It opposes a Tory fundamental, which is market liberalisation. It says we can't afford the risk because of Brexit. And most Lords will realise that there is nothing in the slightest Conservative about this planned reform, which means they are on safe ground with the population at large in opposing it. I anticipate ongoing dogfights to grind the processes of government down over this issue, but it would help if Labour could get itself organised.

Then there are fights to be had outside parliament. I foresee two. One is on health, and in particular GP services about which I know something as my wife is still technically a GP although she has been unable to work because of ill health for some time. The junior doctors may have lost their fight, but there is a bigger one to come here. The demand that GPs provide a seven day a week service is one they simply cannot meet: there are not enough GPs to do it. And unlike the junior doctor dispute, no one will die if a GP is not open on a Sunday. Emergency health care of a very high quality is already available seven days a week in the UK. This demand from the government is simply about consumer choice, not medical need. So GPs need to say no. They do not need to resign from the NHS. Nor do they need to give up contracts. They just have to say they can't open because there are no doctors available to actually provide the service, and nor can they recruit any because there are none available to take the jobs. This is not about refusing to open because they don't want to. It would be about refusing to open on Sunday because the alternative is closing on Tuesday and that is not viable. If GPs refused to simply cooperate with dangerous practices on this issue the government could be beaten. And the government can't close all the GP surgeries in the country and say they will re-open them privately: there isn't an alternative pool of GPs to work privately. The NHS could be a frontline, and the GP service is at the forefront of it. But Labour has to make clear it supports their position to win from this and it is not clear they are.

Then there is local authorities and social care. As I have already noted, some councils now think they cannot set legal budgets next year. Those that are doing so are in some cases resorting to asset sales to make ends meet. A crisis is looming, and not just in Labour areas. What this requires is local authorities to work together. If leadership is not coming from Westminster and council leaderships are being put in impossible positions then it would seem obvious that they should work together to solve their problems, and the best way to do that would be by bringing a judicial review to ask the government which of their legal obligations they are allowed to ignore so that a priority in law breaking can be established. It sounds an absurd request, and yet this law breaking is going to happen so they must seek guidance on what to do. Such a case could be enormously significant and parties must come together to support it.

The point about these three suggestions is that they all shatter the veneer of competence. And that is critical now. Because it is that which will end the apparent credibility of this incompetent government.