

A left wing policy for agriculture and rural constituen...

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I admit I do not know Marco Fante, who comments regularly on this blog. But what I do know is that he provides regular sound commentary. One comment that he made on Friday was, I thought particularly pertinent. Responding [to my commentary](#) on the local election results [he began by quoting](#), as I did:

“Overall though, we seem to be seeing an entrenchment of the status quo: a divided Britain in which big cities vote Labour and everywhere else votes Conservative,” said Carr-West.”

And then he added this analysis, which I think it worth sharing as it tackles an issue far too rarely discussed, which is how to take a left of centre policy into rural constituencies:

So Labour needs to woo areas outside of the big cities. So how do they do that? The discrepancy between their vote share and the number of HoC seats (or councils) they control has become more than conspicuous. Blairism isn't the answer. It was once a solution (?) to FPTP problems but it was on offer for the entire period between Brown and Corbyn and failed to succeed. It is (thankfully) passe and in any case it would sacrifice the new support emerging in the cities.

This question is one where we need to stop whingeing and come up with real ideas — new ones.

OK so, I will start by suggesting that Labour follow through on its acceptance of the Customs Union by crafting an agricultural policy that is too good for rural areas to resist. Technically, agriculture represents a small proportion of GDP and employment but the multiplier that flows from that into manufacturing and retail is big and it is psychologically central to regional identity in many places.

With Brexit an old system goes and the historic chance is there for a better one to replace it. There is a competing mix of considerations there for example see:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/feb/20/frictionless-eu-trade-is-vital-pos>

Politically, the opportunity here is to offer something helpful that Gove and the Tories with their burden of “free market” ideology will find hard to match. ‘Populism’ and good policy need not be at odds. Not always.

Flowing from the agricultural idea, a strong, good (and much needed) competition policy that openly favours small business (good competition policy usually does) is essential and arguably even more important. There is real conflict between the big corporate oligopolies (especially retail oligopolies) and small business even if it is understated in the UK media. The big UK retailers and wholesalers have effectively become a monopsony or oligopsony (if you don’t know, look it up) that crushes their less powerful suppliers. They also squeeze smaller competitors in the market place through abuse of market power. To that end there is an entire constituency that is unrepresented and begging for help.

Politically, This is not just about the small business-people, it is about their dependents and the regional areas that identify more closely with small business.

Moreover, this idea is really important for 4 reasons:

It is right and fair in principle.

It is pro-democratic (loosening the concentration of market power) and pro-consumer as well as being pro-small business.

It is essential to the effectiveness of Keynesian/MMT stimulus policy. In the absence of strong competition policy, economic stimulus (rising demand) will be largely captured in the form of price increases by rent-seekers with monopoly power.

It will open up a whole new constituency of both new and existing voters and broaden the party’s appeal — while the Tories being more captive to vested interests will find this hard to match (in the short term at least).

If these ideas alone were adopted, astutely pitched to the relevant constituents, ironed out and polished up over the next 2 years they would not only address important issues, they could re-shape the party’s restricted identity and position it well for the long-term. They might also be enough to turn a majority of votes into a majority of seats.

That has to be worth some wider discussion.