

Reversion to the mean: what chance after Brexit?

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I am not going to say that it's a fact of life that everything reverts to the mean. Partly that's because that's not true of ageing, as I know. And means can themselves move, of course, which implies that the supposed reversion to that which was normal is not true: new normals can emerge. And yet, I do think there is power in the idea that means do prevail. Or, to put it another way, that extremes do not.

It hardly needs saying that we are living in an era of extremes. English nationalism has given us Brexit. White racism has resulted in Trump. India is suffering populism. China continues with oppression. Poland and Hungary teeter on the edge of departing from parliamentary democracy. Examples are too easy to find.

This is not surprising. I would suggest that the prevailing political narrative of my whole adult life has led to this situation. Neoliberalism is a cult in pursuit of individual gratification based on indifference to the wants, needs, cares and concerns of others. It is as far removed from the type of behaviour that can form the basis for sustainable communities as it is about possible to get without disorder prevailing. It's hardly surprising that some have tipped over into behaviour that is not just profoundly anti-social, but is socially antagonistic.

For much of the neoliberal era the left has found it profoundly difficult to counter this culture. The wisdom of ages; that care, compassion and concern for the other is the basis for a life well lived, was forgotten on the left as well as the right. The prevailing narrative of growth promoted by an economic theory that ignored the consequences of externalities to the point where life on earth is now threatened, was too readily adopted by the materialist narrative of the left that had long obsessed with the means of control of capital as if that was the answer to all questions, when it is far from being so, important as it can be on occasion. The result was a left-wing embrace of financialisation that incapacitated the ability to oppose its excesses. The decline of social democracy as we knew it was the inevitable result.

In the absence of an alternative economic narrative, or sufficient concern for the environment to underpin one, the left has made identity politics its defining quality.

This has delivered indisputable and welcome cultural change but it has not, and I suggest cannot, delivered a platform for government, whilst the culture of nationality and place has been too readily ignored for fear of being considered racist when the two need not conflict. The right has exploited the left's absence from debate on this last issue to the full.

So what now? When the right has moved to the extreme what is left, in more than ways than one?

The confusion is readily apparent in Labour in Scotland. The echo is seen in the party in England and Wales. The fractures have been on display in the last week. What is apparent is that Labour has no idea as to how to embrace the national identities of the UK, including being Scottish.

It also seems to have little comprehension as to what a commitment to democracy means, and so is rudderless in a constitutional void, which is where this country is.

Whilst it also appears to have no guiding ethos to tell it what message to deliver. For example, is it green, when it is paranoid about the Greens? Or is it really so committed to the past that it has to talk of a Green Industrial Revolution, which frames the whole issue of change in a nineteenth-century framework it feels so comfortable with when what is needed is a twenty-first century New Deal that goes so far beyond controlling the means of production?

And is it committed to full employment or a fiscal rule; [a dilemma the SNP has also to resolve](#)?

What too is its compelling offer of a programme for government, when it is itself so confused, whatever its diehard enthusiasts say?

In that situation can it provide the leadership needed to bring together a coalition to oppose Brexit when it has never been able to resolve the paradox of being a party largely committed to Remain whilst led by a person committed to Brexit, but too afraid to admit to anything as a consequence?

The answer for Labour is that the answer to any of these questions is not clear.

Just as it is not wholly so for the SNP, which also matters as it is, by far, the third-largest party in the country at present.

In that void of leadership there will be confusion. I continue to expect hard Brexit as a result: I think it unavoidable at present. I'd be only too pleased to be wrong, but cannot see how at present.

So, I move on from the calamity of Brexit, as it will be socially, economically and politically, and ask what then? Will that disaster lead us to something worth having?

Where will the new mean be?

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland it will be within those countries: they will reject the English nationalism that has so resoundingly rejected them.

In each, but most especially in Scotland and Wales, these moves will, I think, be reflected in a thorough embrace of a Green New Deal, modern monetary theory, a commitment to full employment and new socially based objectives for societies built on the priorities of the twenty-first century, in which rampant materialism will begin to fade, as it must if we are to survive. There will a reversion to a social-democratic norm in both countries, I am sure.

Whether Labour plays a part in either case is wholly dependent upon their ability in both places to break from the norms that the English party has created. In Scotland, in particular, that means an end to the commitment to the Union, and London focussed economic policy. It's an ask that Labour has very clearly not risen to as yet. Wales will learn the lessons, but for its sake it needs a pluralism that requires diminution in Labour's control of the narrative there, which control has not always resulted in an identifiable policy framework for Wales to date.

Northern Ireland's future depends on the success of a new relationship within the island of Ireland. That's a topic for another time.

And in England? The return to the norm will be hard. We are a society that may be as nearly divided as Northern Ireland once was, with all the resulting risks. The culture of extremism is more embedded than in Wales and Scotland. The result is that the risks are higher, and the transition more uncertain.

It is apparent that the Cummings led right is now willing to fundamentally challenge all that was identifiably English (the veneer of Britishness having now evaporated). The rule of law is threatened. Parliament is dismissed as an enemy of the people, when it is sovereign. And no stated alternative is offered: this has all the appearance of a kleptocracy in the making, supported by a culture of fear, threats and fascist indifference to all but a media created core within society with that core only identifiable by its vision of a country and society that never was.

What can challenge this? How can those who have a belief in the common good, to coin a phrase, take back control? Or, as I might put it, rebuild the good life?

We cannot revert to the old mean. A constitution built around a royal prerogative and the supposed powers of a monarch who is dedicated to not using them cannot work. We need a new, written constitution. We are in a mess because of its absence.

That means we need a new electoral system. And state funding of democratic parties to ensure viable pluralism.

As well as restrictions on the control of the media, whether physical, broadcast or online, whilst maintaining the right to dissent, which is fundamental.

But there has to be something more than that. Changing the rules of the game will not be enough. Politics really does need to play a different game.

Although many deny it, this means that the Left has to rethink its priorities. Both the SNP and Labour have at present put fiscal rules intended to limit borrowing at the core of their agendas. Both imply as a result that they think money matters more than people. The audience they are seeking to appease is banking. The constraint implies austerity, whatever is claimed. The message is clear. When push comes to shove they think fiscal constraint more important than full employment and balancing the books at an arbitrary point more important than saving the planet. And this is wrong. And it is why both parties are not reaching their audiences in the way that they should. If people are alienated from politics and are moving right to find something they think has meaning it is precisely because the left will not say that they matter.

And people and the planet do matter. If they are not what is left of centre politics about?

The reality is that the new mean on the left has to put full employment within the constraint of carbon limits at the heart of its thinking.

It has to understand government is a wealth creator when it does this and drop forty years of thinking that it is dependent in the private sector for tax favours.

And it has to make tax the instrument for preventing inflation, as modern monetary theory suggests, and not the tool for balancing the budget.

In the process tax has to be used as a tool for creating the social justice we do not just want, but need if we are to have economies that deliver for all.

In these simple ideas are the foundations for a new mean that, quite literally, would have meaning for people.

But if the left carries on as it is, dedicated to a long gone ethos and status quo that is fixated on an outdated view of capital that is beholden to finance then we are stuck with the right for a very long time to come.

The choice is for the left to make. There is very little sign that any leadership is as yet really willing to take the leap of faith that is required. No wonder people are alienated from politics.