

What matters now is developing a pragmatic politics of ...

Published: January 13, 2026, 8:03 am

I am intrigued to see demands in Twitter this morning that I 'own' Labour's election result. The implied suggestion is that I must have responsibility for it. That's a hard suggestion to make when I am not a member of the party, did not write the ideas that helped make Jeremy Corbyn its leader for him (if they were written for anyone it was Caroline Lucas), and in June 2016 I [wrote an article in the Guardian](#) suggesting Corbyn had not proved himself up to leading the party, for which the likes of Seumas Milne never forgave me. In addition, from March 2016, when it became very clear to me that Labour thought it could sit out the Brexit referendum, I have been deeply critical of the incoherence of its Brexit Policy. I never wavered on that, however unpopular it made me.

What does that leave me thinking this morning?

First, I am sure I was right about Corbyn. He's not the man he is portrayed to be by the media. But he's not a good Labour leader either. And let's be honest, no one thought he would take that role, including me. He did, but his popularity in the party was never capable of extending beyond it. He really should have gone in 2017. It was a massive mistake for him to stay having lost once. I hope he does go soon. His era is over. And he needs to take those immediately around him, who have done great harm, with him.

Second, Labour is right to say that it lost because of Brexit. It did. By forever fence-sitting it went nowhere. It had either to be Remain or be in favour of a very soft Brexit, which would have kept most of the seats it lost last night inside with it. Passionate as I am about Remain being the best option I have shown my willingness to compromise on this since 2016. Labour said it would do that in 2017. It did not in 2019. And people wanted Brexit over and done with. Labour failed them in this regard. They have punished it. Be under no illusion, no Labour leader would have won with this policy: it simply did not work. Much of that is down to Jeremy Corbyn, like it or not.

Third, whilst there were good things about Labour's manifesto there were many things that were just not relevant. Nationalisation is not that important, as I have said time and again, most especially when regulation could achieve the same result. And it

created a massive distraction on cost. The freebies backfired too: apparently no one believed the free broadband offer, even if it was good policy. It came from nowhere and it seemed too good to be true. It turned out it was. Some of the tax policy was also not well enough thought through. There was no need to discuss the married allowance, for example, and it was a gift to the Tories. The 10% of shares in companies was also a step too far, and no one really thought they would win with it.

Fourth, what all these issues suggest was a lack of focus on what was really important. There were three issues. Norway + might have done Brexit, with an option to return built-in. The NHS, education and other public services had to be protected. And benefits had to be sorted. After that little else needed to be said. If the Tories have proved anything it is less is more. But Labour has not got there. Not by a long way.

As I said in the [June 2016 Guardian article](#):

If I was not an idealist I would not have created the ideas that Corbyn borrowed from me. And if I was not a pragmatist I would not be writing now. My appeal at this moment is for Labour to embrace these two positions simultaneously. That is because whatever Labour's pragmatic need might be it must be infused with a new sense of idealism. If not it is wasting its time and those fighting its internal wars will end up with the prize of perpetual irrelevance.

That is its reward right now. Instead of being in politics to make a difference for people far too many have been in Labour to point score. That is why I have never been tempted in. It is instead why I have been issue focussed, where I have felt (and still do feel) I can make a difference.

So what does Labour need now? It certainly does not need neoliberalism. And it does not need austerity light. But to go back to that June 2016 article again, I said of Corbyn:

And last, he has not shown the ability to accommodate those who think along other lines, which all leadership requires. I fear that suggestions that a bunker mentality was created around the leader's office are correct.

Unless Labour can break this then it has no chance. It has made significant mistakes. And most were because it kept forgetting to put those it was meant to represent at the heart of its purpose. Until it does it will not win power. Forget the infighting. Forget the blame. Forget the dogma, per se. All that matters is having the policies that work. And Labour offered too many that for far too many voters could not work, whether those in Labour thought them desirable or not. The cost is to those on whom Labour depends. And that's what matters.

I live in hope. But not much this morning. I fear the infighting, the blaming the media, the fights over anti-semitism and so much more will continue when what matters is core policy that works based on a pragmatic politics of compassionate concern. I wish

we had it. But right now, I'm not sure. What I do know is that we have a government that does not care instead.