

Will Labour be welcome back?

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Almost unnoticed in the last few weeks is the fact that there is, officially, a political Opposition in the UK. It does have quite a lot of MPs. And it has been almost silent. As the country has descended into chaos Labour has seemingly been elsewhere.

This weekend Labour does, finally, begin to get over the election last December. It will, at least, have a new leader again. Very soon it might also have a shadow cabinet once more. Some form of 'normal service' might be resumed.

What I can only hope as a person who is not a Labour Party member and who has no intention of being one, is that Labour adopts policies appropriate to this moment. Most especially, Labour's total desire to deliver austerity, imposed upon it by its dedication to the idea that the government's books must be balanced, has to be abandoned.

I am not seeking to re-open the debate on what Labour's fiscal rule, with all its opt-outs, actually said. We all know it was full of holes. The problem was its very existence.

Putting a fiscal rule that ultimately says you will balance the books and cover spending with revenues at the heart of your policy, means that you are making money, the maintenance of wealth and the preservation of the status your priorities, in my opinion. That is because fiscal rules are not created to deliver full employment. They exist to keep City and Treasury economists, with their shared obsession that government is harmful and private wealth creation is good, happy. And that is the wrong priority, most especially now.

Do not get me wrong: I think the private sector is vital. I will not say otherwise. I seek its preservation. That is why I have so strongly criticised this government's coronavirus planning, which will destroy vast swathes of it unless further transformed sometime soon. So I am not advocating pure Clause 4 socialism, because I believe very firmly in a mixed economy.

But as someone who has worked in the private sector for a long time, I know that the mixed economy cannot function without strong, and enforced regulation.

Any more than it can work without tax law that is broadly based, progressive (because that fuels demand) and rigorously enforced so that all are on a level playing field.

But most of all what it cannot survive without the essential services that the state supplies, the demand that they create that underpins a great deal of corporate activity, and the implicit guarantee that is provided in times like this.

We need an opposition that believes in this.

That believes full employment is its task.

That understands that if it delivers full employment budgets will balance,

That appreciates that borrowing - and deficit spending - until that point is reached is just fine, because it's just providing the cash that the economy needs to function properly that the private sector cannot or will not deliver.

And that without this thinking all talk of Labour being anything but Tory-lite is meaningless.

I am not optimistic. Corbyn and McDonnell were nowhere near getting any of this. I am not at all clear that Starmer, as the likely leader, is. But I can live in hope.

To which I would add one thing: if my hope is not fulfilled I will, be saying so, very loud and clear.