

Has Labour run out of road?

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The Hartlepool by-election result is a wipeout for Labour:

Tories win Hartlepool with majority of almost 7,000

In Hartlepool the result is now being announced. Here are the key figures.

Jill Mortimer (Con): 15,529

Paul Williams (Lab): 8,589

Mortimer has won with a majority of 6,940

That is only the second by-election gain for a party in office in 40 years.

It is the first time Hartlepool has not had a Labour MP in 60 years.

And I know all the excuses, like the right-wing vote being split for years. And I really don't care about them. The simple fact is that if the people of Hartlepool think that the Tories - who so very obviously do not act in their best interests - have a better narrative for government than Labour do then Labour has got something very deeply wrong.

And I agree with them. It is exceptionally hard to find a reason to vote Labour right now. There is no reason to do so. Labour's current vision is about as exciting as pink blancmange, and a bit less enjoyable. And I can't ever recall having had an enthusiasm for blancmange.

I have absolutely no doubt that Labour will go into its usual left and right fights, with Starmer driving for the right. But this split is in itself meaningless.

The Labour left that was tried for a few years did not deliver, not least because as I saw from close quarters John McDonnell never got over deficit paranoia, whilst the social vision of many in the left, with its obsession with identity politics, alienates many, including the young who implicitly agree with what it promotes.

And to be blunt, the Labour right has literally no vision at all, and has not done since the third way was exposed as simple managerialism with no principles to sustain it.

The left - and I say the left deliberately because I do not know where Labour now fits into this - needs three things.

The first is a belief that government can act for the common good. It lost this before Blair came to power. Remember, Blair and Brown actually ran government surpluses for a while - taking money out of the economy rather than using their majority to effect change. The markets mattered more than people. I can honestly say that People's QE changed that. It's just a shame that, as I predicted in 2015, it's taken a Tory to deliver it.

The second is a story as to what this common good is. Without narratives there is no such thing as politics and Labour has been bereft of a narrative for so long it does not know what they look like now. This narrative should be about freedom from fear. It is then about jobs, fair pay, investment in communities, providing homes, ensuring there is a Green New Deal, rebuilding the NHS, providing training that people want, where they want it, recreating the social safety net, and most of all about providing support so that hollowed out communities can have a purpose again. This requires radical levels of investment, clear direction, a focus on goals and a willingness to act in ways that Biden is showing but which Labour has forgotten is even possible.

Third, Labour, or whoever replaces it if it is not willing to change, has to make clear how different it is from the Tories, and not ape them, which it has done now for so long that it is hard to recall when there was ever red water between them. And again, before I am told that Corbyn was different do recall Labour had a fiscal rule that referred to a maxed-out credit card and I will tell you the difference was less than skin deep.

I don't blame the people of Hartlepool for not voting Labour. I am profoundly sorry that they voted for a party that I think is taking us towards fascism. I see no solution in that. But nor did they see a solution in Labour. And I share that with them. There is no solution in Labour right now.

The question is, where does the Left go now?