

Are Labour just cowardly politicians?

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As John McTernan, Tony Blair's political secretary, has [noted in The Guardian](#):

Keir Starmer has everything going for him.

However, as he then notes:

Or nearly everything. Labour currently lacks one vital quality: confidence. While heading for a victory bigger than Tony Blair's landslide of 1997, the party appears to be too frightened to fight. Whenever the Tories do something profoundly amoral or un-British – such as telling refugees to “fuck off”, [as their vice-chair, Lee Anderson, recently did](#) – Labour seems scared of going on the attack. (And what Anderson said should be stated in its full unbowdlerised form.) But, like showbiz, successful electoral politics requires swagger, plus a desire to run towards the sound of gunfire, not away from it.

He hits the nail on the head. There is a problem with Starmer. He is, as I defined the breed in my 2011 book, *The Courageous State*, a cowardly politician. As I said then:

Cameron and Osborne, with their allies Nick Clegg and Danny Alexanderhave become the apotheosis of something that has been thirty years in the making: they are the personification of what I call the cowardly state. The cowardly state in the UK is the creation of Margaret Thatcher, although its US version is of course the creation of Ronald Reagan. It was these two politicians who swept [neoliberalism](#) into the political arena in 1979 and 1980 respectively following the first [neoliberal](#) revolution in Chile in 1973 that saw the overthrow of the democratically elected Allende government by General Pinochet. Since then its progress has been continual: now it forms the consensus of thinking across the political divide within the UK, Europe and the US.

The economic crisis we are now facing is the legacy of Thatcher and Reagan because they introduced into government the neoliberal idea that whatever a politician does, however well-intentioned that action might be, they will always make matters worse in the economy. This is because government is never able, according to neoliberal thinking, to outperform the market, which will always, it says, allocate resources better

and so increase human well-being more than government can.

That thinking is the reason why we have ended up with cowardly government. That is why in August 2011, when we had riots on streets of London we also had Conservative politicians on holiday, reluctant to return because they were quite sure that nothing they could do and no action they could take would make any difference to the outcome of the situation. What began as an economic idea has now swept across government as a whole: we have got a class of politicians who think that the only useful function for the power that they hold is to dismantle the state they have been elected to govern while transferring as many of its functions as possible to unelected businesses that have bankrolled their path to power.

That, I think, is what Starmer is.

He shares a characteristic with all the cowardly politicians of the UK: he went to Oxford. I accept he only did his masters there, but go there, he did. And as Simon Kuper notes in [his book 'Chums'](#), this matters.

Kuper's thesis is that the Tories at Oxford in the 80s learned politics without any substance or conviction. It was all about charade and show and nothing about doing or changing anything because why would Tories want to do that when the status quo suited them very well? So, what motivated those Tories was personal gain, and that was it.

Labour politics of the same era at Oxford was even worse. It too was about charade and show and nothing about doing or changing anything, but in their case that was because they learned the charade and show from the education system but never acquired any conviction as to what to do with whatever skills they acquired. They became mere operators of a system they did not even know how to question, because questioning of any substantial sort that might suggest change was needed was simply not on the agenda at Oxford then (or in almost any university now).

The result is that the Tories became cowardly politicians on the make for themselves and Labour has just produced cowardly politicians of the likes of Starmer, Reeves, Cooper, Miliband and (off-stage but still around) Balls, who are conviction-free zones but who think they can present a 'better-management', technocratic argument without ever questioning whether the system they are managing is failing, when it so obviously is.

Starmer lacks confidence because he has no idea what he and his government will be about because he has not got the convictions to inform his decision-making. And it shows.

Labour might be in the lead, but it's painful to watch how bad it is.