

Given a binary choice between Tory chaos and Labour har..

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Labour won both of yesterday's by-elections in what were seemingly rock-solid Tory seats.

The swing in Tamworth was 23.9%, with the LibDems falling to a miserly 1.6% as people very clearly voted tactically to be rid of a Tory.

In Mid Bedfordshire the swing was 20.5% even though the vote was split three ways. The Mid Beds win was the biggest majority (by number) overturned in modern by-election history.

That's the facts done. Now what to think about it?

First, note that in both cases turnout was low, as is always the case in by-elections. The biggest winner, by far, on the night was indifference. The diehards turned up to vote: the more casual voters simply stayed away. That's important: it isn't the diehards who decide general election results. The casual voters do. The usual warnings on extrapolation of this result to a general election (which will, nonetheless, happen) apply in that case.

Second, both former Tory MPs had disgraced themselves in differing ways. It was hardly surprising that there was additional anti-Tory sentiment in these locations. Voters had reason to be angry with the previous choice by the incumbent party, and their choice of candidate, even, in the case of one of these seats. That was clearly a factor and, with other recent wins, will not be replicated at a general election. Again, caution is required.

Third, let's also not avoid the fact that this was a very good night for Labour. These exceptional swings can only confirm the opinion that they had a good party conference, face a government in total meltdown and appear to the casual observer to be disciplined (which voters like) and so continue to have every reason to think that they will be in government sometime next year.

This is precisely the reason why I will continue to focus on what they have to say here. There is little point paying much attention to anything the Tories say now: the reality is

that most of what they plan will not happen. They probably do not have parliamentary support for much of it, despite their apparent majority. They will limp through the next year before, most likely, heading to the Opposition benches for at least a decade, and very much longer if only Labour had the sense to do PR.

There is another reason for that attention, though. Instinctively, even as a non-party loyalist, I would, as a person of left-of-centre orientation, prefer a Labour to a Tory government based on past understanding of what those parties are. But, the past is not always a good guide to where we are now, and with Labour, it certainly is not.

More than ever, Labour is profoundly neoliberal. Its instincts are to always let the market lead. This is even true in one of its more radical policies, which is GB Energy. As far as I can work out that is nothing more than a private sector contracting exercise. That is profoundly unLabour.

Worse, is the intolerance within Labour. Its own membership has felt that. But the narrative is also intolerant, whether towards benefit claimants, or to protestors, or to people not living in 'hard-working families', whatever they might be. The idea of Labour being a party of inclusion is now wholly absent as far as I can see.

And then there is the simple fact that, almost predictably, given everything it is saying about financial prudence, none of Labour's figures seem to add up. Its claim that it can deliver growth and then enhanced government services not only defies what is known about the proper ordering of these events if they are to happen but also contradicts the obvious truth that in a recessionary environment only increased government spending breaks the downward cycle. There is no sign that Labour understands this. As a result, all it says is economic nonsense. It's just not quite as bad as what the Tories say as far as the electorate is concerned.

In other words, Labour is only ahead because, given a binary choice between chaos and hardship, hardship wins. That's not enough reason to be cheered by the prospect of a Labour government.