

What if Labour win?

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I took part in a discussion yesterday on what might happen to left of centre politics if Labour does, as expected, win this year's general election. The assumption was that it would do so on the basis of a profoundly right wing platform, which it appears that it has every intention of delivering when in office. Firm conclusions were not reached, but I thought it worthwhile sharing some of those thoughts that I presented.

We will, of course, know more about the likelihood of Labour having a substantial majority in the Commons after this week's local council election in some parts of the UK. If, as seems likely, a very large majority is in the offing, my suggestion was that a number of problems will have to be faced by Labour, almost immediately.

The first is that once any post-election euphoria is over and it becomes apparent that Labour has not only no plan, but also no intention, of changing the Tory approach to government, with austerity remaining a likelihood, then significant buyers' remorse will rapidly set in amongst the population in general. This will be fuelled by a mainstream media that will be all too willing to criticise every move that Labour makes. Keir Starmer's honeymoon period with the British public might be very short.

If, at the same time, Labour has a substantial majority (by which I mean anything on the scale of 80 or more, with that figure being deliberately picked because it was the level that Boris Johnson achieved in 2019 that has not delivered the Conservatives a basis for continuing power) then Starmer will face a very particular problem. This will come from a multitude of existing and new back benchers who are not ultra-loyalist to him, but who nonetheless think that they might have a good prospect of retaining their seats in the future, and who will, therefore, have the confidence to challenge his leadership within the constraints of the party within Parliament. They will, of course, know that nothing they do will prevent him from getting his way, but they will also simultaneously be aware that they can present alternative thinking with relative impunity in this situation. In other words, Starmer is likely to have a considerable problem with party discipline if his majority is too large.

Thirdly, political instability in Scotland will not be the blessing that many think it might

be for Labour. Governing Wales has not proved easy for Labour, and they have relied upon coalition agreements there. The same might be true in Scotland if the SNP leaves government. The potential for embarrassment that this might create - especially if Labour has, as a result, to govern with the support of the Tories - might be very significant, especially when the Labour front bench team in Scotland is particularly uninspiring.

Fourthly, there will always be what Harold McMillan was reputed to have described as “events”, which by definition have the capacity to undermine the best laid plans of any politician. The particular risk is that these events might require additional spending that will prove that Rachael Reeves supposed commitment to ironclad fiscal rules is skin deep, and probably non-existent. The whole promise for government that Labour has made might be shattered in that case.

Put these factors together and although right now the realistic prospect for getting almost any of the ideas that I am currently promoting into the Labour manifesto appears decidedly limited, in reality the demand for policy alternatives, with explanations being available on the way in which they might be funded, could be very high quite soon after the general election happens.

I am old enough to be aware the politics is not a short-term game. This year’s general election does not offer me any good reasons for significant hope. But, I seriously expect that change will follow thereafter, because I cannot imagine any way in which Starmer and Reeves can succeed with the policy proposals that they have made. In that case policy options for those anywhere on the left of the political spectrum must be available.

I am living in hope.