

Moderate politicians take note: the middle-ground electorate does not just contain Remainers and 'Tax & Spenders'

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

'The Second Coming' (1921)

The populist tide rolls on in Europe, further emphasised by the huge rise in support for the Sweden Democrat party. Meanwhile last week's reawakening of Tony Blair and Vince Cable, combined with the visible excesses of both left and right in politics, might lead many to think that a new moderate movement is possible.

However there is an unspoken assumption of middle ground politicians in the UK that all middle ground people voted 'Remain', and that they all advocate the soft left politics of 'tax-and-spend'. As long as these attitudes persist, there will be no coherent majority of the centre.

This commentary looks at how the straightjacket of conventional political thought needs to change when confronted with the seismic underlying forces that are changing our world today.

There is no doubt that politics is in a fragmented state, not just in the United Kingdom but globally. The emergence of populism over the past five years may appear to have its roots in dissatisfaction with what was seen to be a self-interested centre ground elite, but its real drivers have more to do with economic dysfunctionality. The intense polarisation of wealth and suppression of living standards since the financial crash of 2000 and, in Europe, mass migration within the continent caused by the imposition of a single currency before full political integration had been achieved, has taken its toll, and ruling centre parties are being punished for their failure to anticipate these changes.

Some of those in the centre ground see the emergence of President Macron in France as a hopeful sign that new leadership can emerge, and indeed it is: but perhaps they fail to realise that Macron's approach is based on logic, and a purpose which looks forward - not backwards. His vision of an integrated Europe has definitely caught the public imagination in his own country, but it is a vision for France, not for the United Kingdom.

UK centre ground politics will not find its vision in a united Europe, and it needs to understand that. There are many moderates who see the need for Brexit in logical terms. As a member of the European Union, we have spent most of the past four decades arguing for 'no ever closer union', but 'ever closer union' is essential for making the Eurozone coherent - and Macron knows that. ([See Commentary 25/6/18 - European leadership in need of direction](#))

Exiting the European Union is therefore a logical necessity for the United Kingdom if the Eurozone is to survive. If centre ground politics is to see a resurgence, it must develop an approach which accommodates Brexit.

The other big legacy issue weighing down the middle ground is their addiction to 'tax-and-spend'. We've seen another push in the last week for big government: in the latest IPPR report called 'Prosperity and Justice', which proposes higher taxes and yet more universal distribution.

They fail to understand that individual freedom and empowerment are the things which all people aspire to, not paternalism, and that targeting support for most the most disadvantaged provides a much swifter and more reliable path to any egalitarian society than universality can ever provide. ([See Commentary 14/5/18 - The Intoxicating Mix of Power and Paternalism](#))

At The Share Centre and The Share Foundation's Child Trust Fund 16 birthday party last week, Ruth Kelly spoke eloquently about the principle of asset-based welfare on which this scheme is based. It is of course a universal scheme,

but it is also progressive - with a real focus on the most disadvantaged young people. The next 11 years will prove how this type of targeting and empowerment can change lives for those who need it most.

Most of all, the middle ground in politics needs to understand the new realities of big business and technology much better, because these are the real game changers.

In 2008, governments - including ours - bailed out the banks: but in doing so they also transferred a massive amount of power to the corporate world, which would otherwise have been shaken to the core as it was in the 1930s.

So today's politician needs to explain to big business that now it is their time to return that favour: not just by paying fair taxation and reforming employment, as proposed in the new IPPR report, but also by welcoming direct participation in the ownership of their businesses - for both employees and customers – and by providing much improved corporate governance standards and communication, and by developing and empowering young people.

Tomorrow's successful middle ground politician needs to understand this: that individual freedom in an egalitarian capitalist society is the key to finding Britain's place in the new post-Brexit world. That's a big journey from where they are today.

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