

Labour's Lost Loves

(I am publishing tomorrow's blog now following Sir Keir's speech)

Welcome to the 1990s. Labour has dusted down the Mandelson playbook. It has staged a conference to show its not so new leader can purge the party of the left. We've had the policy toughness, denying the wish for a higher minimum wage. We've had the personal toughness, forcing out a Shadow Cabinet member for refusing to loyally celebrate lower pay. We've had the mood music toughness, with the handful of Starmer supporters sent out to portray the socialists in the party as a disloyal rump. The result was a watered down change to the constitution, a defeat of the official minimum wage policy in the vote and plenty of tv debates revealing the big split at the heart of the party.

We will watch to see how they now fare in the polls. Commonsense tells you that stoking a civil war and trying to purge the Labour party of its socialist heart will not add votes. The polls probably rely more on how well or badly the government does anyway. No amount of striving got Labour into competitive shape between 1979 and 1992. The disaster of the Exchange Rate Mechanism pro EU policy by John Major shot them back into contention when the full magnitude of the recession it sparked became clear. No amount of modernisation and reform got the Conservatives back into competitive form, from 1997 to 2007. Labour's even more disastrous banking crash and Great recession then rocketed the Conservatives into first place in the polls.

For years Labour and Lib Dems have relied on their hostility to Brexit to provide opposition to the Conservatives. Now Brexit is largely done, with many voters wanting it properly finished by taking control of Northern Ireland trade and fish, continuing with hostility to the majority view does not look productive. The Remain bias of Opposition parties over the last few years has come across as backward looking, negative and anti democratic and ensured their big defeat in 2019. So today they need to look for something else. They seem to be moving towards two possible areas of difference with the Conservatives .

The first is they wish to out green the Conservatives, and to focus green policy on a more determined rush to net zero. This will help them with younger voters and with a certain kind of well qualified urban elector, but it will leave them well short of a majority. They will find that as the election draws nearer so they will be pressed on what a faster approach to net zero means. If it means dearer heating and transport, the need to spend a lot of money on ripping out the gas boiler, an enforced earlier switch to electric cars, the need to pay high carbon taxes and the rest they will find many voters will not support that in the privacy of the ballot box. Voters will say they support the idea of net zero for fear of retaliation, but they will not vote for policies that deliberately limit their freedoms or make them worse off.

The second is the wish to be generous and kind to the rest of the world and

to see the crusade against poverty in global terms. They will stand up for the restoration of free movement with the continent, for higher levels of overseas aid, for generous definitions of asylum seeking and the idea of running here a World Health Service free for all. Again that will cement various groups of socialist voter, but will not shift the dial to retake the Red Wall seats they lost in 2019.

Sir Keir Starmer's essay did not reveal any great talent for finding the big political idea that people want, nor any ability to encapsulate in great phrases and pithy arguments what Labour is about. The negative of just taking socialism out of the Labour party does not spread enough joy and hope to the many but comes with the price of division.