

SEVEN

UK LABOUR: CREDIBLY REDEFINING LEFT OF CENTRE

conversation with Colin Crouch

What would you say is the historic position of the Labour Party in the UK political system and where does it currently stand?

Certainly, since the Second World War it has been the second or main party in the country – that remains the situation today. It, and the Conservative Party, used to dominate the system completely. That is no longer true, there are more parties in the system. Labour's position as – currently, number two, potentially number one – remains as it has been for the last 70 years.

Where would you see the strengths and weaknesses of the UK Labour Party in particular, especially against the backdrop – as some were saying – that, under Corbyn, it might – or might not be – a role model for other parties to follow?

Its main strength is an extraordinarily strong and growing mass

membership. A highly enthusiastic mass membership, including a lot of young people – but actually people of all ages, men and women. Also, what you might call White British and people from various ethnic minorities as well. That's the main thing that's really going for it. It also has a strength, in that it has been willing – and this is where it does differ a bit, I think, from some of the other parties in Europe – to make a break with the Third Way kind of politics, and begin to express criticisms of the way capitalism is operating – which is something that New Labour and the *Neue Mitte* didn't do.

If you look, for instance, at the development of the membership, why does the Labour Party experience such a sudden influx of new members? What is the driver behind this?

I'm not sure. It's true there is an organisation called Momentum – which is a very clever leftish group organising that. That doesn't explain it, they've got to have fertile ground on which to mobilise. I think there is a generation, especially of younger people, who were looking for a politics that was different from what Blair and Brown were offering – and who seem to have found this in the Labour Party.

In what way do you think the very specific British political context plays a role? How is it comparable or not to other European countries? You've had a history of seven years of austerity, you obviously have the Brexit decision. There are a few political circumstances that are quite different from elsewhere in Europe.

I also think a characteristic, that is actually a bad characteristic, of our politics is helping Labour at the moment – paradoxically – and that is our voting system, that really makes it difficult to have a splitting of parties on the centre-left and the left. People, if they want to vote for the left, they're really only ever got one party.

The group around Corbyn, a rather left-wing group, managed to get control of the central machine, that then gives them control of the whole party. In Germany, the equivalent of the Corbyn takeover of

Labour is the formation of *Die Linke* as a separate party, which then leaves the SPD with the problem of forging a new identity for themselves somewhere between what they became in recent years and what *die Linke* are now. There are similar parties to the left of social democrats in Scandinavia.

I think, the British voting system means that – if a group manage to get control of a party – they don't have to form a splinter group. You've therefore got a party that stands a very good chance of being the Government. You're not supporting a little fringe, but a core party. I think that's the main difference with the rest of Europe, actually.

So, you reckon the different workings of the UK political system mean there is an opportunity to take over an existing machine, whereas elsewhere – probably driven by proportional representation electoral systems – the incentive is much more to split off and form a splinter group?

Yes, that's right. The same is happening on the right. The Conservative Party have been able to take over the xenophobic position that UKIP were representing. It no longer really has a threat to its right, it achieves that by itself moving to the right. Both of our main parties have moved more to the extremes, and away from the centre – which, as I say, is something that you have to do in a two-party system, a majoritarian system like ours. It's a paradoxical answer, that one.

It's interesting, because it's the complete opposite of the perceived wisdom – which is that elections are won in the centre.

Yes, yes. Germany gives an even bigger example of that, in the sense they've become an even bigger multi-party system. What happens when the centre has become unpopular? That's the question everybody is asking. I don't think there is a single country in the

democratic world – apart from, possibly, Portugal – where that question is not having to be asked now.

If you look at the weaknesses of the Labour Party, where do you identify its core weaknesses?

One of the things I mentioned as one of its strengths is also a weakness, that is the move away from the Third Way position. At the moment – this is at an early stage of development – they’re getting some credit for that, from – especially – some young people. It also, of course, puts off another kind of voter. It’s not clear how they can fully develop this position that is to the left of where Blair was, but trying not to go so far to the left that it becomes unrealistic. The crucial test for that will come with – if they were a Government – positions on debt and whether you bother to do anything about debt, and what do you do if there is capital flight?

So, the strength they’ve got is also a potential weakness. At the moment, even though the present Conservative Government is in total internal chaos – and is not managing Brexit very well at all – a majority of people still says they trust the Conservatives more than they trust Labour. That’s because Labour is perceived by a lot of people as having moved too far to the left. It is that move to the left that has saved the party from further decline, so it’s a very bitter sweet kind of situation.

If you relate this to some of the concepts of people’s parties, which – at least on the surface – claim to have an offering for pretty much everybody in society: Is it, in your view, a mistake to see this all as moving from the centre rather than viewing it as an opportunity to increase the space covered by social democracy? If one thing seems to be prevalent across different countries, social democracy – the space that social democracy covers – has been squeezed.

Yes. I think all social democratic parties are facing an increasing split between their two core constituencies. Labour is no exception

here at all. The two core constituencies are the old industrial working class – which is declining but is still the main base – and the new, mainly female, professional classes – especially in the people-related professions – which is a growing group.

In a way, the social democrats and the Labour Party have had quite a benign situation. You’ve got this old stable group, they’re declining but there is this new future-orientated group that’s coming towards you. That coalition, everywhere – including Britain – is being put to the test by the rise of xenophobia, which is tending to be more attractive to the old working-class population. Whereas a more cosmopolitan liberal outlook is obviously far more attractive to the new middle-class constituency of social democratic parties.

Social democratic parties are always riding two horses, and these two horses are starting to go different directions over a very major issue.

Labour has been spared the consequences that, say, the SPD have faced on that, by taking up a completely ambiguous position in our last general election. They were saying, on the one hand – to the old industrial working class – “Look, we’re in favour of Brexit, we’re fed up with immigrants in the country.” Then, saying to the middle class professional electorate, “Look, you know we’re the ones who really support the liberal European values.” They were able to take up a contradictory position because they’re in opposition, so that’s another problem they would have in government.

That position is obviously unsustainable, so that straddle has to end at some point?

Yes. I suppose they’re hoping that Brexit will be all over before they have to form a government. It won’t be, because Brexit and its consequences will go on for quite a long time.

You alluded, already, to a few threats to the Labour Party. If you look at the landscape, broadly, where do you see opportunities for Labour and where do you see specific threats for the party?

The opportunities are to build on this space that they’ve acquired

now, to build on the trend you see in the leadership. These are mainly men and women who've spent their lives as protestors, never ever thinking they would be anywhere near government – always taking up left-wing protest positions.

They've now seen there could be something more substantial for them. You can almost watch them learning, as you observe them in successive television interviews. They get more statesmanlike, more mature, more considered in their views. They haven't shifted to the right, or anything of that kind, but they're just getting more articulate and more able to see that proper left-wing politics is not a very simple thing – it's complicated. So, they are learning.

I think these are the strengths, these are the opportunities, that they've got – that ability to try to define a new left-of-centre position that is somewhere between the Third Way and an old social democratic position. I'm not sure they're completely there yet, but I must say- I've always been rather opposed to that kind of politics – a strong left. I didn't vote for Jeremy Corbyn in the election within the Labour Party, but I've got increasing respect for what they're doing as each week passes.

The main threat they pose is that too many people will be frightened that this is a return to... The Conservative newspapers – who totally dominate political debate in this country – see them as almost synonymous with Stalin, and certainly see them as a dangerous, irresponsible left. If enough people believe that, then they have a serious threat.

The other threat they have is that they have – one day – to really work out what they want to do about our relationship with Europe. As Michel Barnier (*chief EU negotiator*) pointed out to Britain – but I think he was talking to the Labour Party, last week – “Do you really want to go off and follow Donald Trump in a deregulated market society?” Labour is officially backing Brexit now. There has always been a left-wing anti-Europe position in Britain, they've taken up that position now. Anyone who is ruling Britain after Brexit is going to have an awful time. Labour will have its own particular torments.

So, basically, you see the opportunities and threats as correlated in the sense that it is really all about winning the credibility game. In the sense of presenting to the British public that it's not a return to early 1980s style hard left politics, and – at the same time – fighting the messages that are being published by the mainstream media – the right-wing media – that is a completely incredible opposition?

Yes. In an atmosphere where, I think, a large part of the general public is more willing to see a need to challenge capitalism. They probably wouldn't use that language, but people are fed up with the rich getting richer and richer, they're fed up with the arrogance of large corporations, they're fed up with the cynicism of the privatised public services. The atmosphere is right for a more critical economic approach. As long as they can, both, convincingly make that a responsible approach and actually convince people it is a responsible approach.

You already alluded to one of the key challenges – that social democracy has always been composed of two different groups, that used to go side by side but now are increasingly on diverging trajectories. How do you think social democracy in general, and the Labour Party in particular, should react to the threat of populism – and especially right-wing populism?

My own view on this, I like to present as being an intellectual view – I think it's actually a deeply emotional one actually. I am not willing to tolerate any concessions at all with xenophobia. Right-wing populism is a slightly different phenomenon, the one that worries me is xenophobia – the hatred and fear of foreigners.

As soon as you follow xenophobes, you legitimise what they're saying. As soon as you accept, "Oh yes, there is a problem," you start to define an Islamic problem, a Jewish problem. You define, then, a whole group of people as a problem. Once it's accepted that a whole

group of people are a problem, then the way is open for increasingly unpleasant solutions to that problem.

We had made a lot of progress in our societies in the west, especially in Germany – but everywhere – in simply getting that kind of racist discourse made completely illegitimate so that people would no more talk in that way about an ethnic minority than they would use foul and filthy language in public. It became one of those moral things. Events like the election of Trump and the Brexit vote have changed all of that. In this country, now, there is a legitimacy of anti-foreigner discourse.

My wife and I walked past a group of young people in Oxford the other day. Admittedly, they were drunk. They were singing a song against Jews. Before Brexit, that would not have been possible. It simply wouldn't have happened. The further you accept the legitimacy of a xenophobic discourse, the more that the debate moves in their direction. I think there has to be a fight in favour of liberal values.

We're watching, by no means the most ethical institution in the world – UEFA, the European Football Association – running its anti-racism campaigns. Uncompromisingly anti-racist, they simply say, "We're not going to put up with this." I think all people, in political life – who care about what will happen to our countries – need to take up that line – no tolerance to the intolerant. That's the starting point.

There is a very large section of public opinion that is actually very hostile to xenophobia, especially young people. They're there, and they have to be cultivated and they have to be made to see this is an issue where they need to take sides.

So, in the discussion about how to deal with populist forces, where do you stand then? There are basically two conflicting strategies. The first one is engage with them and, just basically, try to reveal how shallow their offers – or what they claim to be political offers – are. Or, on the other hand, the position that Jürgen

Habermas – for instance – is also presenting. By engaging with them, you actually enter their turf and legitimise some of the discourse they present. The consequence is that it becomes more mainstream, and it opens the gate for them.

I think there is a third position. Of course, a large number of different kinds of people are xenophobic – including some very wealthy people. There is this picture, there is a liberal elite and an illiberal population. There is a very nasty part of the right-wing elite which is very racist. To the extent that there is a wider social phenomenon out there, that has been expressing itself in things like the Brexit vote, the vote for Donald Trump.

This is very much associated with people living in areas – especially previous industrial areas – that are now left behind. These are people that feel, “The future has nothing to offer us. Everything is taking place without us. The areas in which we live have become miserable and wretched, they have no future. If we get new employment, it’s just in warehouses and call centres. What life is this?” That seems, to me, a legitimate complaint for people to be making.

I think it comes out, a bit, in Germany – especially in the east – people saying, “What has happened to our *Heimat*?” Their *Heimat* can be their local city, their local region.

Public policy needs to ensure that as many areas as possible can see themselves having an economic future they can be proud of, because they feel their city is engaged in something that’s going somewhere. People can only believe in the future if they see the future around them. I think there are issues of urban policy – and local economic policy – that have got nothing to do with xenophobia on the face of it which may actually be the most substantive answer of all.

Related to this, you talked about the divergent paths on which the traditional core supporters of the democratic parties and the cosmopolitan – more internationally-minded – constituency are going. What do you

think is the driving force behind that split, why are these two paths diverging now? Previously they seemed to be – if not happily married together – at least, it was much easier to form a coalition among those people.

Because these issues weren't at the forefront. Globalisation, immigration, the refugee crisis – and then added on top of that, terrorism – these things have all come together to make national identity politically relevant in a way that it hasn't really been in Europe or the United States since the Second World War.

I think, it's quite possible that in the 1950s – if there had been challenges of this kind – we'd have had the same effect. In fact, to some extent we did actually. Certainly, in Britain we had race riots in the 1950s. We had similar things in the 1960s, at that point we were still sufficiently close to the Second World War and to Adolf Hitler for all establishment politicians to say, "This is the road down which we will not go," and completely excluded it. Politicians who did try to exploit it were marginalised and excluded.

Now I think, partly, the combined challenge of globalisation, refugees, immigration, terrorism, is much bigger. All we were dealing with in the '50s and '60s were small numbers of immigrants, it wasn't combined with the other things. Secondly, we're that much further away from the memory of what fascism was about. I think that's really explained, why now?

Okay. Against this backdrop, the final question. There is a lot of soul searching across social democratic parties, and also within the Labour Party of course, on how to handle these kinds of issues that we've been talking about. Do you see – maybe, even, just in part – any good role models or parties that seem to have a more successful way of dealing with these challenges than others?

Not yet. You see, there is the deeply ambiguous case of Emmanuel Macron in France. He's the only leading politician –

there are very good examples of excellent men and women in every country, but he's the only prominent leader – who is really out there defending passionately a cosmopolitan liberal approach. That's linked with some social policies that, it seems to me, could go in a direction that will undermine what he's trying to do. If he tries to make the labour market less and less secure, he will only make more and more people feel insecure. If you feel insecure you vote for the *Front National*.

So you don't think that anybody has found, even, a half-baked solution yet?

Not people in leading positions. Go to any country, you will find quite a lot of people active in politics who are thinking in the right directions – thinking about reconstructing a world in which people feel they've got a future, they've got security and a life they can be proud of.

You'll find a lot of people think in these ways, it hasn't quite got through to the leadership yet – because they're still really worried about the basic simple issue, “Do we really have to follow xenophobia? How far can we dare stand against it?” You see this in Denmark, in Austria, various countries. I think, with a little time, they might start to stop panicking and then say, “Come on, what are the more substantive issues under all this? Can we not just address those issues, rather than getting involved in debates with racists directly?”