

CORBYN – WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?



Image: Getty images

Friends and foes of the Labour Party are united in agreeing that Jeremy Corbyn will shake up British politics and make it more interesting...I worry that the opposite will happen: when the novelty has worn off, parties will retreat into their ideological comfort zones and settled, lazy prejudices.

The Tory hegemony of English politics will be entrenched; there will be less competition for marginal, swing voters; and politics could become sterile and predictable: a dialogue of the deaf.

That isn't to minimise the achievement of the Labour Left and Corbyn personally. They have seized the moment brilliantly and achieved with little effort what decades of plotting, revolutionary Socialism and propagandising failed to secure.

I suspect that seizing control of the Labour Party is a sufficient prize in itself, a massive bridgehead for political colonisation. There will in due course be the General Election but that is well over the horizon. Who wants to be the British Tspiras anyway?

So, the Left is happy. And so are the Tories. Their candidate has won. A long period in power beckons. They have shown in the last 6 months that they have a clear agenda to roll back the frontiers of the state far further than was possible under the Coalition and to weaken what remains of the public sector. They now have an easier ride. Of

Vince Cable

course the smarter Tories will not underestimate Corbyn. But they have an easy target. We shall see the deployment of Tory big game hunters armed with automatic weapons pursuing this ancient lion through the political bush. Even the dimmer marksmen can't miss. As someone who lost my seat in May largely due to a successful Tory offensive based on middle class fears of Milliband socialism (and the SNP) I could write the winning Tory narrative now.

The key battle-ground, as before, will be economic policy. It is outrageous that the Tories have managed to corner the market in –perceived-economic competence. But they have. The Corbyn answer won't stand up to much scrutiny. It consists of taking bits and pieces of attractive and sensible policies and then sticking them together totally out of context and wildly exaggerating the impact. As a former member of the Coalition I can agree with him that we ought to be doing more to stop tax dodging, making more public investment in infrastructure, housing and innovation, using unorthodox monetary policy to support growth and opposing the proposed Osborne cuts which are ideological rather than economic in origin. But I won't be persuaded that 2+2+2 is 222. More importantly, nor will the public.

So where does this leave the Centre and Centre Left of politics? Who will speak for the millions of people who reject the Tories and want something more socially responsible and compassionate, but do not identify with this new, populist, movement on the Left? The leading figures of the Blair/Brown era (who are much reviled on the Left but did progressive things in government) have disappeared from the battlefield. I sense that many of the mainstream activists who remain have largely given up and, perhaps subconsciously, feel that since the Tories appear unbeatable right now, why not indulge in a bit of comfortable fantasy?

I sense that the mood is a bit like that at a once great Premier League side –a Newcastle or an Aston Villa- which can no longer compete with the big money boys. On an outing to Stamford Bridge or the Etihad, the choice is to defend and scrap for a draw or put on a crowd pleasing display which produces three glorious goals but leads to a 6-3 thrashing. The latter is where they're heading.

There is some short term interest in where these three goals come from. If, as I expect, Corbyn proves to be a shrewd populist in the Livingstone mould he could inflict some damaging blows on the government working with the SNP and on some issues with dissident parties and with mine: Syrian intervention? Trident? Heathrow? But before long the Tories will get him. And the bigger issue will remain as to how British politics mobilises a credible, centre left, alternative to the Tories, capable of winning power and changing things for the better. My party meets at Bournemouth in a week's time, battered and bruised after a terrible election, but with an unforeseen opportunity opening up. The road out of the wilderness may be shorter than we feared. ■