**Forward not back**

***Strategies that have won elections for Labour in the past cannot be relied on to win elections in the future. Instead, the party needs to ask itself some searching questions, writes Andrew Roe-Crines***

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Commentators, political scientists, journalists and some Labour politicians themselves have developed an obsession over recent years with seeking to prescribe what they see as Labour’s way back to government.

Many of them seemingly share a belief that Labour’s successes of the past can point a way forward in the 2020s. Strategies that have previously worked - in 1964 and 1997 - should inform the renewal strategies of the Starmer leadership, so the story goes.

But before we consider the party’s potential routes back to power, let us first consider the positions of the factions within Labour, broadly defined. Under the recent leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, it became fashionable for those who sit outside the ‘Corbynista’ faction to assume that Labour was on a certain path to electoral oblivion, just as happened to Michael Foot in 1983. Their belief was that Corbyn and Foot were similar - and that electoral results would be similar as a result. Their alternative to Corbyn’s leadership was to pick up where Gordon Brown had left off and to take Labour forward under a ‘reset’ post-New Labour renewal strategy that sought to present itself as an extension of ‘The Third Way’ and, by proxy, a new approach to social democracy. Yet this alternative that moderates advocated had itself been defeated in the polls in 2010, and went on to gift the Conservatives a majority in 2015. Consequently, the ‘safety-net’ that a retreat to New Labour presented to moderates would be unlikely to succeed.

It has also been fashionable to present opposition to Corbynism as a benchmark against which Labour’s current renewal strategies can and should be measured. Put simply, if a policy was advocated by Corbyn, then opposition to it now demonstrates reflection and renewal. However, the problems of the 2015 to 2020 opposition were not simply ideological. Indeed, the policies advocated by Corbyn and his leadership team were similar (if not identical in many areas) to those Ed Miliband had put forward in 2015. It was only the policy on nationalised broadband which seemed surprising, and in the post-Covid world even this plan is looking less preposterous as homeworking becomes more normal.

This leaves the Labour party in a predicament: essentially the lessons of recent electoral history appear unfit to the task of pointing a way forward for the Labour party under Starmer.

The problems Labour faces in 2021 are unique to this moment. The Conservatives today are not the party of Margaret Thatcher. They have moved on, both under David Cameron and again under Boris Johnson. Moreover, the economy is not in the same position as it was in 1997. The solutions New Labour proposed to create economic prosperity in 1997 do not map onto the current structure of the UK and global economy. Social policy and the NHS are not facing the same challenges as they did in 2015, 2017 or even 2019. This landscape leaves the Labour party with a significant strategic problem, given the propensity of Labour advisors and commentators to retreat to history to find the solutions to current problems. In the face of the current economic and social realities, the past offers no solutions, only unworkable or outdated ideas from bygone eras.

The solution for Labour must be to find new answers that fit the problems social democracy faces in 2021. But how can policies informed by social democracy be made appealing when applied to contexts never before faced by a forward-looking Labour party? First, Labour needs to reject the advice of the New Labour old guard whose counsel is best suited for the academic study of the Conservative government led by John Major, not for taking on the current prime minister. And if the Labour party wants to be in a position to seek high office, then the advice of Corbynite commentators should similarly be rejected. Corbynism (like Milibandism before it) was suited for economic and social conditions that the UK has moved beyond given the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, Labour also needs to learn that simply growing a mass movement does not translate into votes in vital seats that Labour needs to win if it ever wants to enact its programme. It is those voters that Labour’s renewal under Starmer needs to target.

To succeed, the Labour party will need to ask itself the most basic of questions – what is it for? What does the Labour party represent in the 2020s? When Keir Hardie was asked a similar question, his answer was that Labour exists to provide working-class representation in parliament. Starmer and the wider party need to find their own answer that reflects the current political world and is as simple as the one given at Labour’s formation. Being there simply to oppose is not a reason to exist – it needs to have something to fight *for*. Over recent years the Labour party has seemingly failed to see this distinction, and has become consumed by the dreams of inevitable victory whilst offering little or nothing positive to make that victory a reality.

Labour needs to find a new message. At present there is a tendency to rely on messages of old that worked well in the past (‘24 Hours to Save the NHS’, for example). When such messages are used excessively over time and when it becomes clear that the daily experiences of voters do not match those that Labour commentators portray, then voters switch off from the message. If it is to renew, Labour will not only need to explain what it is for, but also put into clear terms a basic plan for government.

The challenges Labour faces today are immense. The circumstances are different from any that Labour has faced in its history, and solutions need to be tailored to today’s problems. So what should Labour be for, not against? In my view, Labour exists to represent and stand up for the interests of all, even those who are not Labour supporters or voters. This idea has become lost over recent years as divisions have taken the party away from this mission. There should be no groups in society which it is legitimate for Labour to ignore, or to portray as ‘the enemy’. This combative form of thinking prevents Labour from being able to unite and present an appealing image to voters. Unity has led Labour to victory in the past, and it can do so again with a new ideological perspective in the 2020s. But if it is to convince voters, Labour needs to be credible.

The path back to credibility will require Labour to devise a short and simple set of domestic policies that voters can understand in three main areas of concern – jobs, housing and the cost of living. At its heart, Labour’s programme for government should be understandable, short, and clear. By setting out its stall in this way, Labour will then be able to say what it is for, and how it will achieve it, rather than simply saying what it is against. If it cannot come up with a clear offer, Labour will continue to face the multiple backlashes that come from burying the message under a sea of ideological word salad.