

THE LABOUR PARTY'S

THIRD AGE

All social movements and political parties experience the same phenomenon, and it's clear it's time for Starmer's project, both for Labour and the UK. But is Starmer the one to bring about a new 'Age' of Labour that will be lauded and argued over for years, like Blairism? I don't believe so. Let me explain why.

Making Memories

First some personal context, I was not raised in a political family. It took me until age 18 to show a level of awareness that prompted the most basic of questions to the person who happened to be there at the time - my dad. We were in the car on the motorway. This was a very long time ago, but to the best of my memory, the conversation went as follows: Me: "So, are Labour the right-wing party, and the Conservatives are the left-wing one?"
between Labour and the Conservatives these days.

Dad: "Well, it's supposed to be the other way round, mate."

Me: "But aren't Labour talking about going to war [in Iraq]?"

Dad: "Yes, well, they used to be different. The Conservatives were the landed gentry type ones, and Labour was a party for coal miners and dock workers and things; that's why they're called the Labour Party. They used to stand up and say, 'Well, what about the workers!' and that sort of thing."

Me: "So Labour are supposed to be left-wing?"

Dad: "Yes, but these days there's no difference really."

Memory association is a funny thing. I also remember at that point, we went back to listening to one of the many tapes he kept in the car, and I still associate the music in his tape collection with the conversations we had, including this one. Things related in strange ways can form connections that resurface years or even decades later in the memory

I do not subscribe to the Fourth Turning Theory, which argues that social history comes in four distinct cycles that repeat or rhyme with their historical counterparts' ad infinitum. Though I agree history can rhyme, I see it as more of a straight line rather than a circle, punctuated by the gradual beginning and end of 'Eras' or 'Ages', which may not be apparent at the time but are a useful cataloguing tool for historians.



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Memory association is a funny thing. I also remember at that point, we went back to listening to one of the many tapes he kept in the car, and I still associate the music in his tape collection with the conversations we had, including this one. Things related in strange ways can form connections that resurface years or even decades later in the memory and it's with the idea of associative memories and collective history in mind that I consider whether there is no difference between Labour and the Conservatives these days.

Like people recalling their childhoods, I believe political parties also carry collective memories of the past—Labour in particular. The Conservative Party, by its very nature, resists change, and you could argue that fundamentally, it's the same party (to its detriment and ours) that it was 100 years ago. On the other hand, Labour is unrecognisable from the one Keir Hardie founded, but still contains associative memories. I don't say that as a positive or negative, simply an observation.

When he turned up at the Commons on his first day as an MP wearing his workman's outfit, Hardie was asked if he was there to work on the roof. 'No', he replied, 'I'm here to work on the floor'. Insert your choice of lazy political cliché here - how times have changed. You wouldn't see that nowadays. I can't imagine Yvette Cooper turning up with a chimney brush...you get the idea. Most political theorists divide Labour's identity into pre and post-Blair. 'Old' and 'New' Labour. The first two 'Ages'

But are we now witnessing the transition into Labour's Third Age, and what will it look like? It's certainly not going to be a Corbyn/McDonnell-style economic experiment. But it's become apparent it will not be a return to Blairism either.

(Even though Tony Blair has publicly backed Keir Starmer, including hosting him at the Tony Blair Institute, anointing him on stage and passing the metaphorical torch which he seemed to think still resided with him), Blair knows Starmer deep down is to the left of him in instinct, if not yet in his actions.

As I've said, however, I won't argue that Starmerism is now the future 'age' of Labour. Not at all. I don't think Labour's memory associations will allow it. I think it's a social democrat type of politics, a la Andy Burnham and Clive Lewis.

Why? Starmer is in control, and he's probably going to win. True. But I believe that you can't take the party history out of politics. Not entirely. To paraphrase a Times Radio pundit, Starmerism is a 'gaping void' politically. Instead, it takes an almost granular, case-by-case, and ideologically inconsistent series of approaches to every issue. One may call him a technocrat - making decisions using algorithms and focus groups and calibrating the right response.

However, this piece is not a criticism of Starmer's Labour. I have little doubt that politics by numbers isn't a deliberate strategy based on the principle of 'win at all costs'.

An idea I am not unsympathetic to looking back at the previous 14 years. Another deliberate strategy is seemingly naked political gestures such as accepting Natalie Elphicke into the oh-so-broad Labour church. I am straining the metaphor, but imagine a big church being shrunk significantly (it's easy to move church walls in this example, okay), then having one of its retaining walls blasted through with dynamite so it's fully exposed to the elements, making the congregation cold and wet. At the same time, they glance nervously at the now overhanging roof. Got that? Good. Then Natalie Elphicke walks in.

Under our political system, whether you like it or not, though, parties are churches. Broad, narrow, big, small, but still a logical structure with 4 walls, a roof, and a door. Keir Starmer, I argue, is simply creating an unstable structure.

He is not doing it, as critics would say, out of malice, but lack of political nous. I believe he admits (in a Sky interview) that he is not very good at politics. He sets himself tasks and accomplishes them with the drive and seriousness that took him from a council house to being the Head of Public Prosecutions, and he doesn't care much about what he has to do to achieve this.

Though not all, some people believe Corbyn should never be allowed near Westminster and should never have been in the Labour Party. He is now, of course, running as an independent in the 2024 General Election against Labour.

So, what's left? (get it?). The social democrats, I believe, are the sensible radicals. Nationalisation of public utilities, renewal of the NHS, media regulation, drug decriminalisation, real environmental and climate change policies that acknowledge the seriousness of the threat, electoral and constitutional reform and tolerant, progressive social attitudes.

All this, but paired with sensible economics, robust defence spending, support for NATO and the European Union, and an acknowledgement that we don't live in a perfect world, and sometimes you have to defend yourself and your allies.

This will be many years in the making, and there are only a few reconstructors at present, looking defeatedly at the blast-damaged, scattered fragments of masonry with their hands on their hips, doing their best to remember the building plan. It will come to them, and what a glorious day it will be, "comrades", when it does, and we enter Labour's Third Age.

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