

THE RT HON LORD OWEN SPEAKING AT “31:51:81” PROGRESS MEETING WITH POLITICAL HISTORIANS ON LEARNING FROM OPPOSITION: HOW DOES LABOUR AVOID THE MISTAKES OF PAST DEFEATS: 1931,1951,1979 ON MONDAY 16 MAY 2011:

Trying to speak objectively and as someone who has been writing a history about Heads of Governments, I think it is possible to delineate three distinct phases which happened after Labour’s electoral defeats in 1931, 1951 and 1979, a date which apart from alliteration is the correct date, not 1981. First, initial trauma, secondly, continuing division and thirdly, structural cohesion. The length of these phases differed in time and the phases differed in intensity. These variations merit detailed study by historians.

After 1931 the trauma was Ramsay Macdonald forming a National Government. The divisions slowly came to an end when Ernest Bevin and Stafford Cripps supported Clem Attlee as temporary leader of the Labour Party when the pacifist George Lansbury fractured his thigh in December 1933. Structural cohesion came in 1940 with Labour’s participation in the wartime coalition.

After 1951 the trauma was the continued political effect of the resignations in government of Aneurin Bevan and Harold Wilson. The divisions ended and structural cohesion began simultaneously in 1961 when Hugh Gaitskell and Aneurin Bevan came together to reverse unilateral nuclear disarmament and leave Clause IV alone.

Labour lost the 1979 Election in December 1978 when we allowed the Tribune Group of MPs to vote down the sanctions on Ford for making a

17% pay award. That vote should have been made one of confidence and we should have risked having to hold a General Election in January. The Winter of Discontent was, I believe, avoidable and defeat was never inevitable. After the 1979 defeat the trauma continued and was exacerbated by Tony Benn. The trauma was, of course, exacerbated by the creation of the SDP but by then the policy differences were profound and the electoral college made it inevitable that they were not changed even after a massive defeat in 1983. The divisions slowly started to end in 1985 when Neil Kinnock took on Derek Hatton publicly at the Party Conference. Cohesion came in 1992 after losing the General Election with the choice of John Smith as Labour's new leader.

Both Hugh Gaitskell and John Smith, had they lived, would have won an election for Labour in 1964 and in 1997. Gaitskell was very popular amongst the general public by the time he died in January 1963. John Smith would not have lead in the populist style to have gained such a massive majority in 1997, but it would have been a clear Labour victory with a working majority and none the worse for that.

After 2010 the trauma of defeat was greatly eased by Gordon Brown's decision to resign and not hang on as leader which misguidedly both Attlee did until 1955 and Callaghan did until 1980. Bevan, Morrison and Gaitskell should have fought for the Labour leadership in 1951. Peter Shore should have kept his hat in the ring when Michael Foot and Denis Healey ran against each other in 1980. David Miliband at the very least should have fought Brown in 1977 for the leadership. Coronations do not fit with democratic politics. The memory of the divisions between Blair and Brown have undoubtedly abated but not ended the tensions and divisions that followed the election of Ed Miliband. Cohesion now depends on the

readiness of David Miliband, Ed Balls, Peter Hain, Yvette Cooper and Andy Burnham, to name but five, to work together under Ed Miliband as George Brown, Jim Callaghan, Dick Crossman, Denis Healey and Barbara Castle did in 1963 under Harold Wilson at least until the successful 1966 election. By any standard the Labour Party is better placed in 2011 than they were in 1931, 1951 or 1979. They have a group of talented relatively young individuals with recent experience of Cabinet office. They face a coalition far less cohesive than the one they faced in the 1930s and a less experienced Prime Minister in David Cameron than Ramsay Macdonald followed by Baldwin and Chamberlain or Winston Churchill in 1951 and Margaret Thatcher in 1979.

Nevertheless, the pundits predict – not wholly unreasonably – that the coalition is likely to last until 2015 and could dominate the second decade of the 21st Century. It is perfectly possible that Nick Clegg will mirror the high political positions yet lack real influence of his equivalent Liberal leader, Simon, in the 1930s, who held every high office of State and yet very few can recall even his existence.

There are few good reasons for a political pessimism in 2011 that believes Labour will be out of office for 14, 15 or 17 years on past precedent. The all important issue of the economy, on which the legitimacy of today's coalition government is founded, is not yet looking like being resolved. Charitably, as a Crossbencher, and because most of us want to see the structural deficit dealt with effectively, the jury is still out. But there is, sadly, a very real possibility now that by 2012 or 2013 the British people will face stagflation at worst or low growth at best and become deeply disillusioned. In that situation, it is not inconceivable that the call will come from the public for a new government to be formed. Much will

depend on whether Labour by then looks cohesive and coherent. Whether it will be sufficiently self-confident to be able to offer a genuine coalition embracing the Liberal Democrats and all the smaller parties to fulfil the remaining years of the fixed 5-year Parliament.

Even if a vote of confidence is never carried, a united Labour opposition, more modestly led than for its last 13 years in office, less Presidential, more deeply rooted in the values which made the Attlee government such a great one, and more collective in spirit and in intent, could even win an outright majority in 2015. In my judgement everything depends on the speed with which the Shadow Cabinet unite, thinks afresh and anew and presents itself not as the Third Way, or its present equivalent, a Progressive Alliance, but as a deeply rooted social democratic party. A party where redistribution is not a dirty word as it never was in the SDP. A party full of ideas which are as vital in opposition as competence is in government.

A party, above all, espousing openly the merits of the social market which is itself now enshrined in the European Treaties as a term with both meaning and content. I see no need to try and invent a new term, nor to deny that Social Democrats and Conservatives will choose a different balance between the social and the market.

An issue of direct relevance is that Labour should never countenance an external market for the NHS anymore than to treat the NHS as a mere utility. There are profound questions as to how the Liberal Democrats ever endorsed this Conservative external market. The Blair government strayed across the line from an internal to an external market, but fortunately Andy Burnham, when Secretary of State for Health, rejected the ‘any willing provider’ model. Incidentally, ‘any qualified provider’ is exactly the same.

A competent government does not legislate for a fatally flawed package and then be forced to make hurried changes between the Committee Stage and Third Reading in the House of Commons.

One other important issue which Labour should not attempt to duck. The electoral college adopted in 1981 must be changed. It looks as if, at long last, it may now be changed and Labour is right to consider the concept of the registered party voter, as in the US, but it may be necessary to have only party members voting for the leader when the party is choosing a Prime Minister and speed is vital.

I believe the lessons of history are clear, heal the trauma of defeat, end the divisions and demonstrate cohesion and competence and the electorate will think seriously about giving you another opportunity.

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