

Commentary

Nigel Farage is no Ramsay MacDonald: Comparing the Rise of Reform with the Rise of Labour

This is a topical commentary about the December 1923 general election and the first Labour government's accession to office in January 1924. These distant events have acquired a contemporary resonance because they are the only previous example of one of the two large parties in Britain being democratically displaced by a rival. Between 1918 and 1923, Labour took the place formerly occupied by the Liberals as the chief party of the reforming left, culminating in nine months as a minority government in 1924. Labour and the Conservatives have been in either first or second place at every subsequent general election. Today, the question is whether we are about to witness another seismic political realignment: the decline of the Conservatives and their replacement on the right by Reform UK. The history of the 1920s obviously will not give us an answer to that question, but the analogy can focus our analysis as we think about what it takes to remove an established party from a pre-eminent position in the British political system.

History shows that breaking up the duopoly of the two large British political parties is hard to do, at least as far as England is concerned (Scotland and Wales departed from alternating Conservative and Labour governments with the advent of devolution in 1999). Since the 1920s, many bold political entrepreneurs have sought to disrupt the English electoral marketplace, and some have succeeded in carving out a particular niche, but they have in the end always foundered on the old firm of Conservatism and Labourism. So why did the Labour Party succeed in replacing the Liberals in the first place?

One obvious answer is that the elections after the First World War were the first to be held under a wider franchise, which now

included all men over 21 and women over 30 (subject to a property qualification). The partisan attachments of new voters were up for grabs, and this increased electoral fluidity. But why did Labour and not the Liberals emerge as the more popular repository of the anti-Conservative vote? Class politics had become more electorally salient, partly because of the expansion of the electorate but partly because of a general shift in the issues that dominated political debate dating back to the turn of the century. Politics gradually moved away from the classical Liberal reformist agenda of Irish home rule, franchise expansion and religious liberty. Instead, a predominantly working-class electorate became increasingly focused on wages, unemployment and inflation. While Labour was in principle well suited to this new issue space, before 1914 the Liberal Party had in fact already shown that it could best the Conservatives on the terrain of class politics. Led by an array of talented political leaders, notably Hebert Asquith, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, the Liberals had introduced basic state welfare measures funded by progressive taxation and in the process confronted the forces of inherited privilege in the House of Lords. It is reasonable to suppose that the Liberal Party might have continued in this vein, with the Labour Party as a junior coalition partner, if necessary, had the First World War not intervened.

The war drew the state into more extensive management of the economy. Class consciousness became more pronounced among the electorate as the working and middle classes clashed over a fair distribution of wartime sacrifice. This undoubtedly strengthened the Labour Party's electoral support, but ultimately it was the response of political leaders

to this changing social context that sealed the Liberal Party's fate. A catastrophic breach between Asquith and Lloyd George over the conduct of the war split the party asunder. Lloyd George Liberals allied themselves with the Conservatives and competed electorally against both Asquithian Liberals and Labour. The Liberals no longer represented a unified anti-Conservative pole within the party system, opening the way for Labour to take its place.

All of which is to say that, while shifting social cleavages and economic discontent can place pressure on existing party alignments, something has to go seriously wrong with one of the existing two large parties before there is sufficient electoral space for it to be replaced by an alternative. Has the Conservative Party reached such a tipping point today? It has not split, but the track record of its last stint in government has blocked it from emerging in the short to medium term as a rallying point for voters dissatisfied with Labour.¹ The Conservatives appear to voters to be even more culpable than Labour for the poor performance of the UK state and economy. Equally, the current Conservative leaders have shown little sign of any creative thought about how they might deal with this reputational problem.

The problem for the Liberals in the 1920s was deepened by the positioning of the Labour Party as a moderate alternative government. Labour presented itself as a constitutionalist party, respectful of the parliamentary system and disdainful of the revolutionary socialism that was surging elsewhere in Europe. Labour appealed beyond its class-conscious base by projecting an image that former Liberal voters would view as a viable alternative. This does not sound like Reform at all. While Nigel Farage has tried to distance his brand of populism from radical right street politics, Reform is still not a party that exactly screams moderation and respect for parliamentary tradition. Perhaps the key point here, though, is less about 'moderation' per se than about a challenger party having a clear sense of which voters it wants to win over from the existing two large parties and the pitch that will appeal

to them. Just as Labour sought to win over cautious Liberal voters in the 1920s, Reform is trying to attract support from right-wing or socially conservative voters who feel unrepresented by Labour and the Conservatives and desire a radical shock to the existing system.

The combination of an ailing major party and a well-positioned challenger is, therefore, as evident today as it was in the 1920s, but there remains the question of what the two existing large parties will do in response to this situation. In 1924, the Conservative and Liberal parties legitimised the Labour Party by enabling it to take office as a minority government. This was despite the Conservatives emerging from the 1923 election as the largest party (with 258 MPs) and the Liberals coming a close third behind Labour with 158 MPs to Labour's 191. This first Labour government was brief but nonetheless consequential. As the Labour leadership recognised, it was above all an important signal to the electorate that Labour now offered the most plausible mechanism for a non-Conservative government. Asquith, the Liberal leader, offered his support for a Labour minority government because he incorrectly assumed that Labour would reveal itself as unfit for office and a repentant electorate would return to the Liberals afterwards. The motivations of Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative leader, are more obscure. He believed his plans for tariff reform had been repudiated by the electorate, since both Labour and the Liberals commanded a free-trade majority in the House of Commons. Baldwin seems to have cooperated in handing Labour the keys to 10 Downing Street because he thought it important that a constitutionalist rather than a revolutionary Labour Party was given a place in the British political mainstream. But he may also have preferred the Labour Party as the principal opposition to the Conservatives because he judged it a less formidable rival in the contest for government than the Liberals.

Today's Conservative and Labour parties may well face a similar set of dilemmas after the next general election. For the Conservatives, the example set by the Liberals in 1924 offers a haunting warning. If the Conservatives agree to be the junior partners supporting a Reform government, either tacitly or as part of a coalition, they are sending an unmistakable signal to right-wing voters, donors and

¹T. Quinn, N. Allen and J. Bartle, "'Surge-and-collapse' under first-past-the-post: Reform UK's electoral threat to the Conservative Party", *The Political Quarterly*, forthcoming.

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interest groups that the Conservatives are finished as one of the two main parties of government. It is also entirely possible that supporting Reform in government would lose the Conservatives some of their remaining voter base who are squeamish about Nigel Farage. After Labour left office in 1924, the Liberal vote collapsed in the subsequent general election, Labour's increased slightly and the Conservatives' markedly increased, as former Liberal voters unhappy about the party's support for Labour defected to the right.

For Labour, a party system in which its principal rival is Reform would be a much worse political outcome for everything the party cares about than if the Conservatives retained their position. For better or worse, Baldwin was correct in his judgement that the Labour Party, if brought inside the state, was not in fact going to blow up the constitutional and social order that he and his colleagues sought to defend. Can any Labour supporter look at Reform, which takes inspiration from the Trump movement in the United States, and see a putative government that would respect existing liberal democratic norms and principles of social justice? A Reform government would not marginalise the radical right but rather embolden and empower it. Nigel Farage is no Ramsay MacDonald, keen to secure establishment respectability for his movement and class. Farage is more akin to the radical socialist orators that MacDonald and the early Labour leadership distrusted and kept far from power.

A Reform government would therefore be contrary to the political interests of both Labour and the Conservatives. But can they, in fact, do anything to prevent it? For Labour, the to-do list is reasonably clear if hard to

achieve: the party needs to govern in a way that improves people's lives and build a political coalition that can beat Reform at the next general election (in tacit concert with the Liberal Democrats). However, a basic requirement for both these tasks is the ability to explain, clearly and memorably, the threat posed by a Reform government. Labour ministers are currently too prone to lapse into carping criticisms about the impracticality of Reform proposals. But the point about removing indefinite leave to remain, for example, is not that it would be too difficult to implement; it is that it would be inhumane, unfair and damaging to social cohesion. The Labour line has to be hardened in a way that makes the political and moral stakes much clearer to voters. Meanwhile, the problems faced by the Conservatives are even more daunting. Quite how the party gets out of its current fix is not easy to see. At a minimum, the Conservatives need to repudiate loudly their previous period in office, to rebrand the party and to police a clear boundary about what counts as acceptable political positioning to their right. It is unlikely that any of these things will happen, though if the party retains its historic instinct for political self-preservation, it ought at least to be clear that on no account should it allow itself to be co-opted into supporting a Reform government.

In short, the next few years are going to pose some demanding tests for both Labour and the Conservatives if they are to arrest the rise of Reform. Unfortunately, it is hard not to suspect that meeting these tests is beyond the powers of both current party leaders.

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