Paul Benneworth: Labour must rediscover its campaigning roots

18 May 2015 by The Journal

Paul Benneworth is shaken by the implosion of coherent opposition that followed the Conservative victory

Ed Miliband

Last week’s election was my first as a proper ex-pat. In 2010, my family home was still in Tynemouth and I made sure I was working from there in early May.

This time we are live in Holland, making the stakes higher. A big swing to Ukip and Britain leaving the EU could really change my life.

So I’d registered months in advance for a postal vote, and my preferred candidate won with an increased vote and majority.

But the elections’ wider repercussions have shaken me to my core. Not so much the Tories’ unexpected victory, but the total implosion of any kind of coherent opposition.
The basis of any healthy democracy is opposition. Politics involves choosing winners and losers, and without losers having someone to speak up for them, societies become a winners’ dictatorship, dysfunctional and divided.

So it’s not just Labour who will suffer if they don’t recover from their latest defeat. It’s everyone whose interests, ideals and values could be expressed and articulated by a progressive, left-of-centre movement.

Symptomatic of this is the party’s post-mortem, with a range of factions’ speakers lining up to say little more than ‘I told you so’. These siren voices imply a simple solution: if Labour would just move to the left or right, and disown or embrace modernisation, or the unions, then they’ll romp home come 2020.

But what the squabbling factions are ignoring is the imminent question of why people stopped voting for them, and who are they speaking for. Since the Winter of Discontent, they’ve struggled to shrug off public perceptions that they’ve been speaking for the unions, even if unions remain today a broad social movement covering one in four of us.

Central in Labour’s reinvention was Tony Blair’s Clause Four moment, abandoning Labour’s historic commitments to public ownership. Blair, Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband all further weakened and challenged the union link.

But if Labour were clear they’re no longer speaking for the unions, it’s not clear for whom they are speaking. The incoherence of their message – literally etched on an eight-foot stone slab – gave votes a sense that they were only speaking for themselves, and Labour’s sole purpose is advancing their machine politicians’ careers.

And that’s a problem, because one of the Tories underlying strengths is that they are clearly standing up for their backers. If you are a winner, a house-owning pensioner in the top tax bracket, then you’re one of the ones chosen to enjoy five fat years.

For the rest, five thin years seems likely. Labour needs to find a way to speak for these losers, not just triangulating alternatively policy proposals, but really making a difference.

Austerity’s rise has seen a huge growth in citizen activism from those challenging increasingly brutalised market and state intrusions into our collective welfare and happiness. From student resistance to the world’s highest average tuition fees to challenging Tory landlords expelling working residents from their homes, increasing numbers are engaging actively with ‘street politics’.

Labour has a long and proud tradition as a campaigning organisation, making a difference in opposition and changing the game when in power. Part of Labour’s failure today must be seen as a failure to reconnect with these street politics and speak up for these protesters.

Labour must rediscover these campaigning roots and embody its core principles of fairness, solidarity and social justice. Its next election campaign must be built on its campaigning achievements in loyal opposition. Rather than frittering funds on Ed’s Commandments, Labour should be putting its money where its mouth to stand up to increasingly unforgiving market forces. Only then can the North East benefit from a healthy democracy truly driven to make all our lives better.

Originally from the North East, Dr Paul Benneworth is a senior researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.