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THE DIRECTION FOR
THE DEMOCRATIC LEFT

MAPPING THE CENTRE GROUND

Peter Kellner

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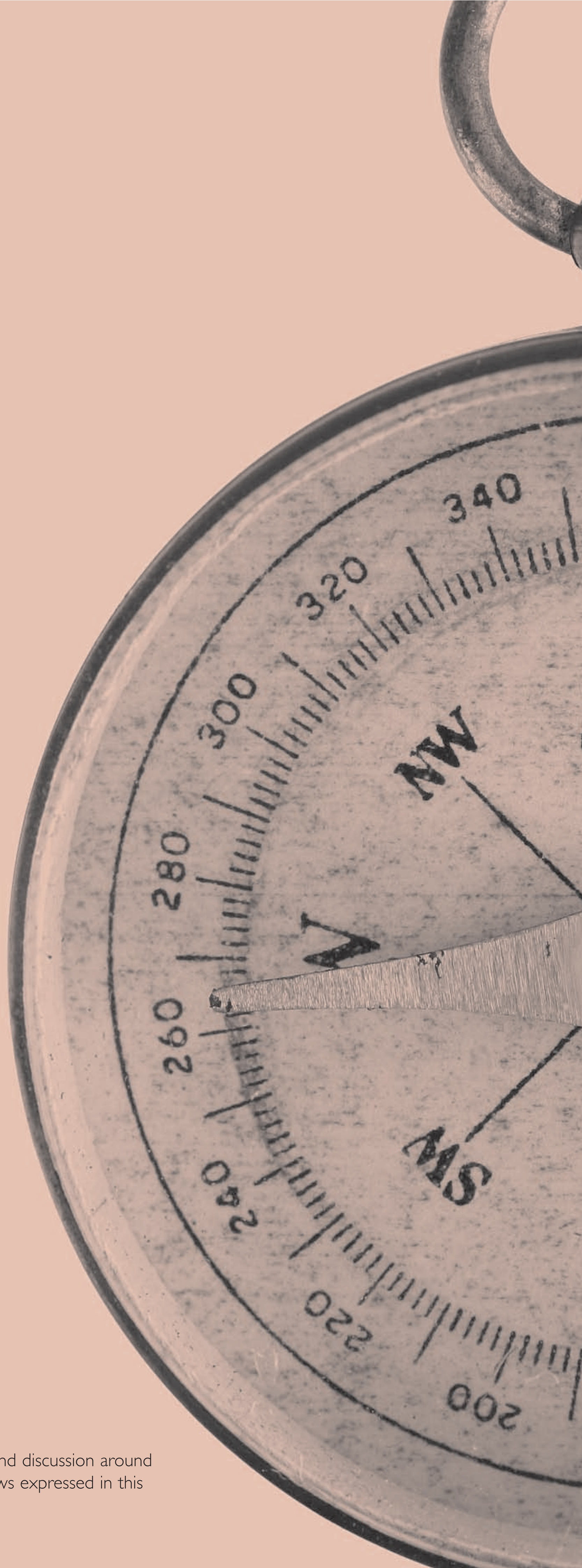
"This is a good time to think afresh about the way we do politics. The decline of the old ideologies has made many of the old Left-Right arguments redundant. A bold project to design a positive version of the Centre could fill the void."



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Mapping the Centre Ground

Peter Kellner

All three leaders of Britain's main political parties agree on one thing: elections are won and lost on the centre ground. Tony Blair insists that Labour has won the last three elections as a centre party, and would return to the wilderness were it to revert to left-wing policies. David Cameron says with equal fervour that the Conservatives must embrace the Centre if they are to return to power. Sir Menzies Campbell says that the Liberal Democrats occupy the centre ground out of principle, not electoral calculation, and he has nothing to fear from his rivals invading his space.

What are we to make of all this? It is sometimes said that when any proposition commands such broad agreement, it is probably wrong. Does the shared obsession of all three party leaders count as a bad, consensual error – or are they right to compete for the same location on the left-right axis? This article is an attempt to answer that question, via an excursion down memory lane, a search for clear definitions and some speculation about the future of political debate.

Let us start with two of the more notable speeches from the second half of the twentieth century. First, Barry Goldwater, accepting the Republic Party's nomination for presidential candidate in San Francisco in 1964:

We see in the sanctity of private property the only durable foundation for constitutional government in a free society… We do not seek to lead anyone's life for him - we seek only to secure his rights and to guarantee him opportunity to strive, with government performing only those needed and constitutionally sanctioned tasks which cannot otherwise be performed.

We Republicans seek a government that attends to its inherent responsibilities of maintaining a stable monetary and fiscal climate, encouraging a free and a competitive economy and enforcing law and order… I would remind you that extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.

Now a rather different speech, by Roy Jenkins, delivering the Dimbleby lecture in 1979 and sparking the chain of events that led to the formation of the Social Democratic Party sixteen months later:

We need the innovating stimulus of the free market economy without either the unacceptable brutality of its untrammeled distribution of rewards or its indifference to unemployment… You use market forces to help achieve your objectives, but do not for a moment pretend that they, unguided and unaided, can do the whole job.

You are against unnecessary centralization and bureaucracy. You want to devolve decision-making wherever you sensibly can… You want the nation to be self-confident and outward-looking, rather than insular, xenophobic and suspicious… You want the nation, without eschewing necessary controversy, to achieve a renewed sense of cohesion and common purpose. These are some of the objectives which I believe could be assisted by a strengthening of the radical centre.

The Goldwater and Jenkins speeches were plainly very different. Goldwater relished deserting the centre ground, while Jenkins sought to define and occupy it. Yet in one important respect, the two speeches occupied similar positions in their two countries' political evolution. In both cases their author's personal ambitions were thwarted. (Goldwater was trounced in the 1964 Presidential election; Jenkins' SDP flourished briefly but, even in alliance with the Liberals, remained firmly in third place in the 1983 and 1987 general elections, before expiring.) Nevertheless, the political project set out in both speeches was carried to victory by someone else within twenty years. Goldwater's vision of liberty was adopted, and made more voter-friendly, by Ronald Reagan who won the presidency in 1980; Jenkins' concept of the radical centre was virtually identical to Tony Blair's at the 1997 general election.

What lessons do those parallels hold? Two come to mind. The first is that the adoption of centrist politics offers no guarantee of short-term success – and anti-centrist ideas need not remain in the wilderness forever.

This second lesson is that tone is more valuable than intellectual rigour to politicians seeking office. Goldwater's tone defied the spirit of his times. One of his campaign slogans was: "In your heart you know he's right"; to which his Democratic Party opponents countered: "In your gut you know he's nuts". In contrast, Jenkins's well-modulated appeal for moderation attracted many admirers. However, much as I would like to say that Jenkins's lecture was more rigorous than Goldwater's speech, honesty compels the observation that the reverse was true.

Goldwater expressed a clear view of the role of the state. Jenkins, bluntly, did not. It is possible (though not necessarily desirable) to apply Goldwater's maxims to a wide range of policy issues, and work out what to do. Jenkins's speech was too full of fuzzy language for that. He applauded market forces – but only to the extent that delivered social benefit. He railed against centralisation and bureaucracy – but only when it was "unnecessary". He wanted social cohesion and a national sense of common purpose – as long as it did not snuff out "necessary controversy".

The philosopher Karl Popper argued that the only interesting statements are ones that can, in principle, be falsified, for this means they can be properly tested to discover if they are true. "Mortgage rates in Britain are lower than they were 20 years ago" is a statement than can be checked against hard evidence. "Britain stands tall again in the world" fails the Popper test unless the concept of "standing tall" is clearly defined.

Popper's dictum can be applied to political arguments. They are worth serious attention if, and only if, one can imagine their opposites being advanced by a sane advocate with a straight face. Goldwater's speech passes this test (it is possible to pose the rival view that collective action taken by a democratically elected government is "the only durable foundation for constitutional government in a free society"). Jenkins's speech does not. Who wants market forces that fail to deliver social benefits and operate within a framework of unnecessary centralisation and bureaucracy? Who yearns to undermine common purpose and ban even "necessary controversy"?

The point here is not really to mock one of the most thoughtful and articulate politicians of recent times. Rather, it is to suggest that if even Roy Jenkins was unable to offer a more rigorous definition of the centre ground, then maybe the concept itself needs close examination. To the extent that the SDP enjoyed a brief period of immense popularity, it was because Jenkins and his colleagues played the right electoral mood music, caring and consensual at a time of rapidly rising unemployment, and not because they had anything fresh to say about the size and role of the state.

This prompts the question: is it occupation of the centre ground per se that holds the key to victory, or is it the sense of reassurance with which it is normally associated? One way to test this is to look for times when reassurance has been found in places other than the Centre. Consider three leaders who achieved large swings to win power from opposition: Clement Attlee, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. None were regarded as centrist politicians at their moment of triumph. Attlee offered a large extension in the economic and social role of the state compared with pre-war Britain; Thatcher and Reagan promised a large reduction from the size it had reached in the UK and the US by the late Seventies.

It can also be argued that none of the three were especially reassuring either. However, elections involve relative, rather than absolute, judgements: which candidate or party is best, not which is perfect. Attlee, Thatcher and Reagan all came to power at moments of national catharsis. Reassurance was in short supply in all three elections; but in each case the uncertainty of the new appeared to offer more hope to more people than the familiarity of the old. To that extent, Attlee, Thatcher and Reagan sounded more reassuring than Winston Churchill, James Callaghan and Jimmy Carter.

This record suggests that it is indeed reassurance that provides the trump card, not a centrist ideology. For much of the time the two go together: extremism equates with risk, centrism with safety. But when centrist politics fail, radical alternatives, skilfully expressed, can sometimes seem less dangerous than the status quo.

There is another lesson to be learned. It is that a leader who does manage to succeed with a radical prospectus then has the chance to redefine the Centre. In 1945, Attlee won a landslide victory offering radical change – a National Health Service, comprehensive national insurance, a large dose of nationalisation and a massive programme of government-funded reconstruction, especially in housing. Within six years the Conservatives had accepted the post-war settlement, and become electable again. What had been left-wing in 1945 had become centre-ground politics by 1951. Thatcher and Reagan also shifted the centre ground, this time to the Right. Labour (under Blair) and the Democrats (under Bill Clinton) were able to return to power only when they accepted that the Centre had moved.

This analysis points a rather bleak conclusion. The political centre has no character of its own. Its personality at any given moment is defined by the passions on either side. Yet that borrowed personality has the power to ensnare all but the most wilful politicians in its potent embrace.

Many people on the Right and Left have sought to warn against being seduced by the Centre. Consider this quotation:

The fight for the centre ground between all three parties is in danger of throttling British politics… Every party declares for markets and public services, social concern and economic growth, tough and tender; draining the weary phrases of meaning. When uttered through red or blue lips they mean quite different things, but shared language avoids confronting voters with authentic, hard-edged political choices...

The public should always be wary of any politician that says his or her party should reclaim or occupy "the centre ground". The centre ground is the imaginary space between competing parties and, because of this, if it exists at all, it is always moving… Politicians that seek to occupy the centre ground offer no real hope of change to the problems of the present day. What they are doing is saying they are content with the status quo – they are offering no real alternative.

In fact, that is not one quotation but two. The first paragraph is drawn from a Guardian column by Polly Toynbee, the second from an article by Brian Montieth, a leading member of the right-wing Selsdon Group. From opposite ends of the political spectrum comes a shared analysis of the centre-ground politics. The same point was put even more pithily a quarter of a century ago, when there was first talk of creating a centre party to challenge both Labour and the Conservatives:

A centre party would have no roots, no principles, no philosophy and no values.

Older readers may recall who said this, and give a wry smile. For those who don't remember, or are too young, its author was Shirley Williams, writing in the Guardian just nine months before she helped to found the SDP.

So is the centre ground a sad, dispiriting place, which politicians with spirit and vision should avoid? Not necessarily. For a start, it is normally the place where vote-winning reassurance is to be found: the victories of Attlee, Thatcher and Reagan were the exception, not the rule. Today's conditions in Britain are fairly normal. This was illustrated by a series of questions that YouGov posed during last year's general election, and again this spring. Respondents were asked where they placed themselves, and prominent politicians, on a scale from left-to-right. Excluding don't knows, more than two-thirds plumped for "centre", "slightly left-of-centre" or "slightly right-of-centre".

Tony Blair is generally seen as close to the Centre, but Michael Howard last year was mostly seen as well to the Right. David Cameron is regarded as somewhat less right-wing than Howard was, but he is still seen as further from the Centre than either Blair or Gordon Brown; and Conservative MPs generally are still characterised as right-wing as Howard. In short, Blair's perceived ideological location has helped Labour, while Howard's perceived stance damaged the Tories; and although most voters consider Cameron to be less extreme than Howard, the new Tory leader still has work to do to make his party ideologically acceptable.

It is important to be clear about what these findings mean. They are not an objective measure of anyone's position on the left-right scale. They are the subjective views of a representative sample. What they do show is that the general concept of the Centre has a powerful appeal. It is hard at the moment for any party or politician to sweep the country if they are widely seen as significantly to the Right or Left.

So, except at times of crisis or upheaval, the appearance of being in or near the centre is vital. But what about the substance of the politics of those who claim to occupy this space: must it be as mushy as Shirley Williams said in 1980? Or can a politics of the centre ground be devised that has roots, principles, values and a distinct philosophy?

One attempt to flesh out the concept of the political centre was the Limehouse Declaration, issued in January 1981 by the Gang of Four: Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers – and Shirley Williams. It became, in effect, the launch document of the SDP, which was formally unveiled two months later. Not surprisingly, the Limehouse Declaration contained echoes of Jenkins' Dimbleby lecture, but was in some ways more specific:

We do not believe in the politics of an inert centre merely representing the lowest common denominator between two extremes. We want more, not less, radical change in our society, but with a greater stability of direction.

Our economy needs a healthy public sector and a healthy private sector without frequent frontier changes. We want to eliminate poverty and promote greater equality without stifling enterprise or imposing bureaucracy from the centre. We need the innovating strength of a competitive economy with a fair distribution of rewards.

Despite its call for "radical change", the Limehouse Declaration was a cri de couer for centrist compromise. What it did not do was address the hard choices that such a compromise would involve. It wanted to resolve the conflicts between tax and spend, public and private, enterprise and equality, but offered no guide to how to achieve these desirable ends. It identified the problem – avoiding "the lowest common denominator between two extremes" – but not the solution.

Nevertheless, the Limehouse Declaration reads rather better today than, say, Labour's 1983 general election manifesto. Gerald Kaufman rightly called this "the longest suicide note in history". At least the Gang of Four identified one of the central problems of late twentieth century politics – how to move on from the traditional battle between Left and Right – even if their solutions were defective. Labour in the early Eighties got both the problems and the solutions wrong.

What about Labour in the Nineties? If we apply Tony Blair's famous test for new policies – what works? – to his own political strategy, then plainly he and the party have been staggeringly successful. He set out to capture, dominate and retain the centre ground. He achieved all three objectives. David Cameron's attempt to imitate Blair's centrist politics is an example of flattery at its sincerest.

Blair's initial way of describing the centre was highly effective. Drawing on the earlier electoral achievements of Bill Clinton, he employed the powerful rhetorical device of triangulation. Instead of identifying one opponent, both men acquired the habit of identifying two – the ideological Right, which denied the need to moderate market power, and the unreconstructed Left, which denied the need for competition to drive up standards.

In a way, the two men were right to triangulate. They persuaded millions of voters in the United States and Britain that they could be entrusted to govern sensibly. But triangulation merely reinforces the sense that Centre is defined by what it is not, rather than by any positive merits of its own. Is there a way to specify the politics of the Centre that can be justified on its own terms, rather than as the negation of ideological positions that have now become virtually redundant?

The debate about the Third Way was supposed to fill the gap. As the very term implies, it came into being as a piece of triangulation. This is how Clinton put in his State of the Nation address in January 1998:

We have moved past the sterile debate between those who say government is the enemy and those who say government is the answer. My fellow Americans, we have found a third way. We have the smallest government in 35 years, but a more progressive one. We have a smaller government, but a stronger nation.

Blair, who had been in office less than one year when Clinton said this, adopted the phrase "third way" and sought to give it a British dimension. Readers of this article will need no reminding that the exercise ended in failure, with the term becoming a source of such ridicule that it had to be abandoned by Blair and his allies.

Why did it fail? In short because it supplied no agreed answer to the question posed at the time by Tony Wright, one of the few people who is both an MP and a political scientist:

It seems to me that we have a developing practice without a theory. Isn't the Third Way about remedying this deficiency? If not, what?

Paradoxically, a major part of the problem was that the debate was largely confined to supporters of New Labour. Two of the main attempts to take the debate forward were a Nexus conference in February 1998 (prompted by Blair's policy unit; the Tony Wright quotation comes from that conference) and a seminar chaired by Blair in Downing Street in May 1998. Both were populated by New Labour's supporters. Had serious thinkers of the Right and the traditional Left also been present, New Labour's advocates might have been achieved more, in the manner of scientists testing the robustness of their theories by exposing them to peer-group criticism.

Instead, the debates descended into competing, often indulgent and sometimes opaque monologues, with many speakers (including, it must be admitted, the writer of this article) seeking to appropriate the Third Way "brand" for their own version of post-ideological progressive politics, rather than stake out a truly distinct ideology of the Centre. The Third Way's most prominent exponent, Anthony Giddens, then director of the London School of Economics trod this path, made this point explicitly in a BBC interview:

You're still trying to follow the same kinds of values, the traditional left-of-centre values. Inclusion, do something about inequality, create a solidarity society which cares more for vulnerable people - all those things are still core values. But the new politics says you can't cope with those values, you can't reach them, simply by using the old political ideas. You have to find something new. In that debate it doesn't really matter if you use the term 'Third Way', because it has different histories in different countries. For me, you could just substitute 'modernising social democracy'.

In the end, discussion of the Third Way never really broke free from its origins as the child of triangulation, given birth by social democrats seeking to come to terms with the modern world. By 2001, the term "Third Way" had been quietly dropped by those who had been its keenest advocates.

Twenty-five years after the Limehouse Declaration, fifteen years after Bill Clinton adopted the tactic of triangulation, and five years after the demise of the Third Way, tensions remain between the formal and practical concepts of the political centre. We are left with a seemingly unsatisfactory choice: between a concept of centrist politics that lacks rigour, and the desires of most politicians and most voters, who see the Centre as a haven of sanity in an insecure world.

Can this dilemma be resolved? Are rigour and centrism compatible, or is the search for a clear-cut, positive definition of the political centre doomed to fail?

If the Centre is to have some real meaning, it must address those issues that have historically defined the ideological battleground: on the one hand, the role of the state, taxation and public collective action; and, on the other hand, the role of individuals, acting, spending and investing alone or voluntarily in association with others. Here is where Right and Left fought each other throughout the twentieth century; here, if there is a centre that goes beyond blandness and triangulation, is where our quest will find its destination.

Before sketching one possible definition of the Centre that meets this criterion, three preliminary points should be made. The first is that what follows is offered as an exercise in analysis, rather than advocacy. It does not propose a single political strategy that all politicians should adopt. Far from it: democratic politics needs differences for parties to argue about. This is intended as a mapping exercise for a centre-ground terrain in which differences can and should persist.

Secondly, however, nobody who engages in this debate is, or can be, wholly objective. As a Labour Party member for more than 30 years, I believe the right place for the party today is at the progressive edge of the political centre. My analysis is intended to be relevant to all three of our main political parties; but I cannot pretend that I come to this subject free from all bias.

Thirdly, the following definition proposes an ideological location for the Centre, not a complete programme for government. It sidesteps a variety of contentious matters, such as the monarchy, electoral reform, defence, nuclear power, fox-hunting, Iraq, identity cards and the European Union. This is not because these issues are unimportant, but because there is no distinct "Right", "Left" or "Centre" position on any of them. Each has the capacity to bring together people from across the political spectrum – and to divide members of each party.

This definition of the Centre contains three components: autonomy, respect and transparency.

Autonomy. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet empire and, in Britain, Labour's abandonment of the 1918 version of Clause 4 of its constitution, the proper role of collective action has been a topic of sometimes convoluted debate. It retains a place at the very start of Labour's revised Clause 4:

The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone.

However, a moment's thought shows that this means little. The economics of free-market societies are dominated by private companies. They are collective institutions – indeed the very word "company" reflects the notion that "by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone". At the same time, of course, private companies are free to take their own decisions; they are answerable to shareholders rather than local or national government.

The real issue is not whether any society does better if people work together. This is self-evidently true. The tougher questions are: how far should people and institutions be free to act autonomously, as long as they obey the law, and how far should they be accountable to state bureaucrats (as the Right would put it) or democratic processes (as the Left would put it)? Should the "common" in "common endeavour" have an infinitely varied meaning, encompassing any grouping where people come together; or should it refer mainly to society as a whole, as represented by public institutions at national, regional and local level?

Posed like that, the answer should be obvious. Today's Centre (as defined here) applies the wider, more fluid definition of "common endeavour". It favours autonomy. It wants people and institutions to be independent, except where there are compelling reasons in particular cases to curb or override that independence. It holds this view both for moral and practical reasons: because it is right, and because experience tells us that people and institutions normally work best when they can think and act for themselves. This applies to us as individuals, or joining forces in private companies, community organisations, religious groups, political campaigns and free trade unions.

This version of the Centre also applies the principle of autonomy to state services. It favours as much freedom as possible for schools and hospitals, as well as companies quoted on the stock exchange. It believes that the default position should be autonomy, rather than government-direction; and that the onus lies with politicians to justify curbs on that autonomy – whether by regulation, taxation or state control. In all three cases, the instinct of the centrist is: less is better.

Other people disagree fundamentally. They argue that autonomy favours the rich and powerful, and that the only way to create a fairer, more cohesive society is through collective, public action, democratically controlled. Higher taxes? No problem – these give governments the ability to achieve their social goals. This is a perfectly proper set of views. It defines the Left. The Centre believes that the advantages of autonomy normally outweigh its drawbacks.

To some extent, the difference today between Left and Centre reflects rival interpretations of the way western societies and economies have developed since the Second World War. Sixty years ago progressive action and collective action were virtually synonymous. The democracies had engaged in history's greatest manifestation of government-directed public enterprise in order to defeat Nazism and fascism. A consensus, that went far beyond those who believed in class struggle, asserted that post-war Britain also needed national direction, to repair the devastation of war, sustain full employment and provide cradle-to-grave welfare. Even the Conservatives signed up to this view by 1950.

That consensus has evaporated. The post-war settlement has broken down. The free market, which had been discredited by the pre-war slump, has adapted itself to new conditions. Above all, the rise of consumerism has changed the way most people live their lives. When the most urgent needs are a home, a job, affordable basic health care and enough money to keep hunger at bay, collective action has great appeal. The arrival of cars, television, foreign holidays and computers, not to mention the massive growth of the service sector, has changed all that. The difference between 1945 and now is that sixty years ago collective action was more obviously the way to solve that era's national problems and, at a more personal level, the way that most people felt that their own lives could best be improved. Today, neither thing is true.

As a result, a significant gulf has opened between the Left and Centre. It is visible in the disputes between Tony Blair and his critics within the Labour party. The (Blairite) Centre looks at the case for collective action on a contingent basis. It asserts that the state had a far greater role in the 1940s than it does today. Blair's critics on the Left disagree. To them, collective action underpins its theoretical and ethical view of society. Its virtues are permanent, and survive not just the growth of the consumer society, but also the parallel shift in the world of work, with the decline of coal-mining, steel production and the big production-line factories. Even if the case for state socialism has been tarnished by the failures of the Soviet system, the Left continues to believe that collective action and class struggle remain both vital and relevant.

The current battle-line between Left and Centre is most visible in relation to the public services. The current debates about the future of education and the NHS concern, at heart, the degree to which schools and hospitals should be free to take their own decisions and the degree to which they should be regulated and controlled. In the real world, few people advocate either total autonomy or total control. The difference is that to the Left, the overriding purpose of public institutions is to execute detailed publicly-decided strategies, as this is the only way to guarantee fairness. To the Centre, the best solution is the maximum autonomy, because it produces more innovation, more responsive services and therefore better outcomes for society as a whole; this autonomy should be circumscribed by only that degree of regulation that is necessary to prevent broad public purpose being undermined.

To which someone on the Left might respond: autonomy is not a characteristic of the Centre at all, but of the Right. Were autonomy the only issue, such a response would be wholly valid. But there is more to the Centre. For, in addition to autonomy, we need…

Respect. In this context "respect" brings together all the ways in which individuals and institutions should be curbed, or curb themselves, out of respect for the interests of others. There are obvious examples:

Pollution. The "polluter pays" principle is well established. If a company pollutes the air or the water, it should be stopped, or made to clear up the mess, or compensate the victims of its actions.

Smoking. Some time ago the battle was won to ban smoking on public transport. Now it is to be banned in offices, restaurants, pubs and other indoor locations, in order that non-smokers do not suffer from "second-hand" smoke.

Minimum wage. The present government has outlawed companies paying their workers less than a minimum hourly wage. This is plainly an interference in the right of employers to negotiate freely with their employees

Workers rights. There are other laws, ranging from health and safety to holiday entitlement and redundancy laws, which limit the rights of companies to do as they might wish.

Equality legislation. Most people, though by no means all, agree that the law should punish employers, or the providers of public or private services, who discriminate against employees, job applicants or customers on the grounds of gender, religion or ethnicity (or, in many cases, age or disability).

Beyond such specific examples, which concern the rights of specific potential victims of others' decisions, are wider social issues, where the territory is still contested:

Do food companies, supermarkets and fast-food outlets bear any responsibility for the rise in obesity? If so, should their behaviour be curbed in any way?

Do pubs and drinks companies bear any responsibility for the rise in alcoholism, and for the anti-social consequences of drunkenness – including violence, road accidents and family breakdowns? What about the extra costs of policing town centres when the pubs close? What principles should apply to the curbs we place on the sale of alcohol?

Likewise with casinos and the dangers of addiction to gambling – to what extent should individual gamblers take responsibility for their own actions, and to what extent, if at all, should those who provide the opportunity to gamble be required to act "responsibly"?

Should state schools be free to admit whom they want and to teach what they want – or should they be required to abide by certain rules on their curriculum and admissions policies?

Wider still are social objectives that may be harmed not so much by the specific actions of a minority of identifiable people and institutions, but by the cumulative impact of many millions of autonomous decisions. Such problems include:

* Climate change
* Poverty
* Health inequalities
* Unequal access to good state schools, even with "fair" admissions policies

Just as the issue of autonomy divides the Centre, as defined here, from the Left, so the issue of respect divides the Centre from the Right. To put the point more formally, it is a dispute about the nature of externalities, and what should be done about them.

In some areas there is broad agreement. Few free-marketeers would defend the right of companies to pollute the air and the water (although it is common for companies to try and evade their obligations). Indeed, the "polluter pays" concept is one that has been developed by market economists. Here the externality is clear-cut. The perpetrators should be identified and held to account.

The issue dividing Right and Centre is whether the concept of externalities should be extended to more diffuse issues such as health, education, crime and poverty, where the culpability of individuals and institutions is hard to measure but the aggregate impact of autonomous decisions arguably immense. The division concerns not the fact that the actions of autonomous people and institutions have social consequences, but how those consequences should be addressed. To the Right, state action to curb social externalities is for wets and wimps. When people choose to smoke, or eat unhealthy food, or drink too much, or gamble away their wealth, that is their problem. Freedom must include the right to make bad personal mistakes. To interfere with this right is to head down the slippery slope to serfdom.

The Right rejects the charge that this is a heartless creed. Instead, it argues that the market can tackle social issues more efficiently than the state if it is allowed to get on with its job. For example, if enough people want to drink in smoke-free pubs or eat in smoke-free restaurants, then enough publicans and restaurateurs will satisfy this demand by banning smoking on their premises: the coercive power of the law is not needed.

The Right also makes a more subtle point. The case for regulation and bans often rests on facts that are contested. The impact of second-hand smoke is a case in point; so, far more importantly, is the danger of climate change. The Right argues that a free market allows people to make up their own minds about what is true, as well as how to behave. Coercion implies a certainty which is sometimes unwarranted about the alleged dangers of "anti-social" behaviour.

Against this, the Centre points to the risks of market failure. What if too few pubs and restaurants become smoke-free? What if the climate-change-doubters are wrong, and the failure to control carbon emissions wrecks the planet? To the Centre, it is entirely legitimate for society, collectively, to limit autonomy in order to promote broad social objectives, even if the facts about the consequences of "anti-social" behaviour are contested. It works on the basis that to wait for perfect, indisputable information can be to wait forever.

The Centre goes further. It asserts that sometimes the social need is so pressing, and the risk of market failure so great, that some services and some forms of welfare need to be provided collectively and paid for from taxation – hence the continuing need for state schools, the National Health Service and state retirement pensions, whatever the arguments between the Centre and Left as to how they should be organised. For the Right it is a live issue whether these services should be returned to private hands, with individuals taking responsibility for themselves and their families; for the Centre, concerned with both autonomy and respect, the issue is what level of state-funded welfare to provide; what freedoms schools and hospitals should have within the parameters of universal, tax-funded systems; and how power should be divided between local and national decision-makers.

One consequence of the Right-Centre division over the provision of such services is that they have different views about moral hazard – the danger that some people will take unwarranted risks because they will not face the full costs of their actions if things go wrong. In a market society individuals are fully responsible for the way they run their own lives. If they eat the wrong things, smoke too much, take no exercise, put on weight and end up needing expensive medical treatment, then nobody else has the right to intervene – so long as these couch potatoes pay for their own treatment. In other words, the market has the capacity to reward "good" behaviour and penalise "bad" behaviour without anyone's freedom being curbed by a nanny state.

However, as any visitor to the United States can attest, a free-market system does not always produce its intended outcome. For example, it has difficulty demonstrating its ability to discourage gross obesity. Moral hazard is plainly present in a socialised system; but it is not clear that, in practice, free market systems secure less risky behaviour.

Alongside those differences is a separate but parallel practical dispute. Supporters of the free market warn that the more you curb and/or tax individuals and companies, the more you stifle innovation, enterprise and wealth-creation. Policy-failure is as big a danger as market-failure; and when state action goes wrong, the harm it does can be greater and longer-lasting than the most egregious personal or corporate error. Even if each curb and tax can be justified on its own, their cumulative impact can be counterproductive. In a way, this is the individual/cumulative argument for social intervention, outlined above, turned on its head. Part of this broad aversion to curbs on autonomy is the law of unintended consequences: the danger that measures designed to do social good might end up in unpredictable, or at any rate unpredicted, ways doing social harm.

When we take these points together, we see a basic difference between two distinct visions of society: one where the market is deemed to be more capable and flexible, and less authoritarian, in securing both individual and social well-being; the other where the dangers of market failure and damaging social externalities are so great that such well-being can be achieved only with the help of an active state.

The awkward truth, to all except those wearing the tightest ideological blinkers, is that neither philosophy can guarantee paradise. The Right is vulnerable to the charge that its philosophy is unfeeling, while the Centre risks the charge that it is too ready to curb freedom and damage economic prosperity for the sake of social aims that may not achieved in practice. To say that a balance should be struck between respect and autonomy is true, but it does not take us very far. The question is: how? This leads us to the third basic component of a viable politics of the Centre…

Transparency. This should not be an issue that divides the Centre from Left or Right. In principle, most people across the spectrum declare their support for open government and freedom of information. At least, they do when they are in opposition. But in practice,

transparency tends to be regarded as an add-on, and not always a very large add-on, to the policies that Right and Left implement when they are in power.

There is a reason for this. For those who want either large government or small government, transparency is not integral to their ideology. It can even get in the way. For the more information that is in the public domain about the operation of government (if you are on the Left) or the detailed practices of business (if you are on the Right), the greater the danger that disclosure will damage your cause, by revealing the failings of those in charge. Whenever something goes badly wrong with either state power (e.g. Britain's policy in Iraq; various large-scale computer projects; military procurement) or private power (Railtrack; BCCI; Enron), secrecy and cover-up tend to be present, and sometimes contribute to disaster. And the story of Labour and Conservative fund-raising over the years – from secret donations to the Tories in the past, to Labour's recent preference for loans in order to circumvent its own disclosure rules – testifies to a reluctance to be open.

For the Centre, transparency should not be an optional add-on, but integral to its political purpose. This is because it does not have the simple pro-state or anti-state ideology of Left or Right. In favouring both autonomy and respect, a large part of its business is to negotiate trade-offs between the two. This can be done effectively and democratically only if it is done openly, with all the information that matters (including alternative analyses where the information is contested) in the public domain. This is both easier and more essential in the age of the Internet. Data and documents can be made universally and instantly available without sacrificing forests to create the paper necessary for the task. And increasing numbers of people expect to be able to use modern technology to track down the information that concerns them. One of the Centre's causes could be to use that technology to develop wider and deeper forms of consultation, with virtual "town meetings" ahead of decisions that involve identifiable groups.

The case for full disclosure applies to the formal process of imposing curbs and taxes on individuals and companies. But it applies, perhaps with even greater force, to the culture of decent behaviour that the Centre needs to cultivate. Laws and taxes cannot carry the whole burden of making us behave well. They tend to generate red tape and large compliance costs. They encourage lawyers and accountants to look for loopholes, with the result that a gap tends to grow between formal obedience to the rules and the kind of good behaviour that the rules were supposed to encourage.

If people and institutions are to behave with respect towards others, the more that this can be done because they choose freely to behave well, the better. And the more openly they are required to act, the better. For openness allows scrutiny and informed public judgement. As most people with power, public or private, prefer that judgement to be favourable, they are more likely to behave well if they act transparently. For example, companies are less likely to behave badly towards their employees (at home and abroad), customers, society at large or the environment, if the veil is lifted on more of the decisions they take. A fear of shame can deter more fiercely than the risk of a fine.

To repeat: this proposed version of the Centre is not intended to deny the validity of other views of society. One of the worst things that can happen to is for everyone to agree, or (in the case of oppressive regimes) to appear to agree. Disagreement is vital, partly because open debate in which people challenge each others' ideas is more likely to result in better policies; and partly because democracy requires parties with different programmes.

For this reason, if the main political parties continue to compete for the centre ground, it is important that they apply the principles outlined above in different ways. If they end up with near-identical programmes, they become no more than rival managerial teams. This would be bad for public engagement, bad for turnout, bad for party membership and bad for the health of the parties themselves.

Hence the continuing need for the main parties to have outriders who challenge their leaders' centrist tendencies; and also the need for the Centre to be seen not as a single ideological location but as a span of territory, so that different people and parties can occupy different parts of it. For example, the Labour and Conservative leaderships could well agree on the need for both autonomy and respect, and for the relationship between these values to be negotiated openly – but for the Tories to give greater weight to autonomy and freedom, and Labour to give greater weight to respect and equity.

One final question deserves an answer. As we have seen, the Centre is an attractive place when things are going fairly well. But what can it offer when radical change is needed? In the past, only the Right or Left has managed to transform society; the Centre has never managed it. Blair has sought to buck this trend. So far, however, the most successful examples of achieved radical change have concerned non-ideological issues, most notably devolution. The economy has been run well but, apart from Gordon Brown's bold

initial decision to transfer decisions about interest rates to the Bank of England, the achievements have owed more to competence than ideology. The jury has not yet retired to consider, let alone deliver, its verdict on public sector reform. Certain centrist themes outlined above are visible – such as the Freedom of Information and Human Rights Act. But few would argue that Britain has been transformed as comprehensively by Blair as it was by Thatcher.

Yet a case can be made for saying that a robust Centre government can take radical action. By definition, radical change is needed when a wide gap opens up between current policies and those needed to create a better society. To craft those policies, a distinct ideology, or set of values, is needed. This is unlikely to emerge from a form of centrism that simply triangulates a course to avoid the reefs of Right and Left. However, a more assertive centrism that is rooted in its own specific view of the world, and of the relation between state and citizen, could generate radical measures when these are needed.

One obvious example is climate change: a Centre strategy would involve an aggressive approach to cutting carbon emissions, and therefore taking measures to curb individual and corporate behaviour – but using market measures (which maximise autonomy), rather than outright bans, to achieve this end. This is beginning to happen: the concept of the Centre outlined here is intended to build on current practice, not to inject wholly alien concepts to our political system. The point is that the evolution of Centre politics has much further to go. Suppose some way could be found to extend the principle of emissions trading to households. As well as increasing dramatically the demand for better insulated homes and "clean" technology travel, such measures could be linked to the fight against poverty: people who don't own cars or fly abroad for their holidays could augment their income by selling the unused portions of their emissions-allowance.

This is a good time to think afresh about the way we do politics. The decline of the old ideologies has made many of the old Left-Right arguments redundant. A bold project to design a positive version of the Centre could fill the void. In some ways, New Labour has drifted towards such a strategy, but without articulating it very well. Perhaps the coming transition from Blair to Brown will spur its explicit development. And if Labour doesn't rise to the challenge, then it is possible that the Conservatives under David Cameron just might.

By bringing coherence to the meaning of centrist politics, a political discourse can develop that is grown-up, lively, relevant to the twenty-first century – and, when necessary, truly radical. However, the fact that something is possible, and perhaps even desirable, does not make it inevitable. The political centre could be a vibrant place. Or it could be deadly dull. Which it will turn out to be remains an open question. The political parties, and especially their leaders, will have only themselves to blame if their versions of the Centre fail to rise above spin, evasion, shallow gestures and triangulation, and they find that electors grow even more disenchanted than they are already.

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THE DIRECTION FOR THE DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Southbank House, Black Prince Road, London SE1 7SJ
T: +44 (0) 207 463 0633 M: +44 (0) 7900 195591 gavin@compassonline.org.uk
www.compassonline.org.uk