

Hon. Mark Oaten on the end of Left-Right politics

Monday 3rd October 2005



The Gladstone Club
1 Whitehall Place London SW1A 2HD

The sign over British Politics reads: "Over-crowding on middle ground. Please move to left or right". But nobody wants to. It's reminiscent of the scene from Robin Hood. The last guy's arrow is dead centre of the bulls-eye of public sentiment and there are no prizes for shooting to left or right, no matter how close. The day is only won by splitting the incumbent's arrow right down the middle. Is that then the gauntlet for the challenger party? The Gladstone Club met to consider this balance in British politics which for the moment was nowhere more dynamically poised than at the LibDems' party conference. Fresh from his conference speech, which had the journalists coining terms like 'moderniser', we were joined by Home Affairs spokesman Mark Oaten to share his thoughts on the way forward.

Mark Oaten expresses impatience at left-right characterisations. And you can see why. Firstly, both terms are discredited; the left tainted with lunacy, strikes and inefficiency, the right with 'sleaze', bigotry and self interest. Secondly, seen through left-right spectacles the LibDems are in a fix. If Mark Oaten is right then Liberal Values is and has always meant a third way uniting left and right for a bright new future rendering left-right thinking obsolete and meaningless. But let's look at the fix first.

If 'left' means anything, it means redistribution from rich to poor. So long as LibDems argued for an extra penny on income tax (2001) and a 50p band on high earners (2005) they were clearly moving on labour's left flank. A move that delivered more seats than at any time since 1920. Had their success been great enough to kick the Cons into the long grass then they would now comfortably occupy the rive gauche revealing New Labour by default as the New Right. Mark Oaten lamented: "I was one of those who thought we missed a once-in-20-years opportunity at the last election". What did he mean? That a bigger heave would have done it? I don't think so. Then he must have meant that the leftward lurch never had enough votes in it to achieve the decisive result. The route to becoming the second party, to escaping once and for all the 'wasted vote' bind, then lies straight through middle England. The fix is this: how can the LibDems now credibly address a rightish constituency having lately staked ground left of Labour?

Nevertheless the 'modernisers', Mark Oaten, Vince Cable and others are clearly for ditching higher tax policy. It's not a

move to the right, he says, it's not about right and left, its about Liberal values. When public services were in need of cash injection they advocated high tax but now they are getting record investment, the political landscape has changed. Liberal Values are not stuck on an ideology.

And perhaps they are right. After all the original 'left', the left side of the French Revolution National Assembly, were actually laissez faire 'new money' men, the class whom Marx would later call bourgeoisie, and we would recognize as 'right'. Maybe the terms have already become meaningless. How is it that New Labour can introduce the private sector all over the place and at the same time tax and spend at record levels?

Perhaps there need be no contradiction between those who think of themselves as 'social' liberals and those who are more 'enterprise' oriented. Mark Oaten asked who is against social justice? Who does not believe that the lives of the worst off in society should be improved, that social exclusion, sink housing estates should be tackled? Similarly, everyone wants small businesses to prosper, public services to be efficient, "I don't think these things are opposites. I think they are complementary – we need to stop getting hung up over public versus private provision. Why should it matter who provides the health care so long as it is free at the point of delivery?" Perhaps this was the essence of Tony Blair's 'third way'. Perhaps it has always been true and only the language and thinking of left-right ideology has made it seem otherwise.

Is there not, though, an absolute measure of 'left-ness' in the percentage of domestic product taxed and spent by government? National sentiments must have quietly moved a long way left in the last 15 years because even Conservatives are very wary of suggesting smaller government. Talking about efficiency savings in the running of public services avoids talking about whether such services should be public provision in the first place. The original free trade economic Liberals would have expected an Englishman to be sufficiently economically independent to order his own children's education.

Public sector provision per se is a socialist idea. The very primary logic of it was to wrest control of major productive industries away from private ownership in order that the wealth surpluses being

made might be socialized instead of privatized. It was all about property. Marx would abolish what he called bourgeois property, the property through which one class extracted service from the rest; rental incomes from real estate, profits from ownership of firms and so on.

But Marx had not seen the democratization either of home ownership or of share ownership (through pensions). He might have said that such 'petit bourgeois' property serves as a camouflage and protection for the big property holdings. Now you would be hard pressed to find a socialist willing to roll back these two pillars of 'property owning democracy'. What about a liberal?

Ian Mason of the School of Economic Science challenged Mark Oaten to pick up this question of property. In response to Mr. Oaten's portrayal of the political pitch, he gave his own: the Conservative party had always represented the interests of property in land and now Gordon Brown's vision "a home-owning, share owning, asset-owning democracy" places the two main parties 'shoulder to shoulder'. And yet, he claimed, the free pursuit of unearned incomes and the tax burden on sales and employment are the causes of inequality and poverty. The principle, which he said was true to the spirit and tradition of Liberal Values; was that with property ownership must come obligation. By which was meant a switch of taxation off earned incomes onto property incomes. Well that would be a highly distinctive policy adventure. It certainly could not be classed 'right' and is not really 'left' either. It is in fact a very Liberal idea, last in vogue when they last had this many seats.

Would Mark Oaten pick it up? He confessed that his vision of bold and brave Liberal Values might fall somewhat short of such radicalism. In that, the politician's instincts may reflect middle England's. We may all have become addicted to the promise of property income. Would even the have-nots feel cheated if the lustre of that gold were dimmed with fiscal obligations?