

I can't vote for the left's idea of big government

Nothing Starmer says he will do horrifies me but when it comes to the eternal political divide he is on the wrong side

by Matthew Parris, Saturday 29th June, The Times

Although it is the highest market town in England, Buxton sits in a bowl. The railway out climbs up and over, then downhill to Manchester. Near the village of Dove Holes you pass the watershed. Ahead, the falling rain will find its way by a thousand bogs and streams into the Irish Sea. Behind, falling water seeps and tumbles down towards the Trent and the North Sea. To the onlooker nothing marks this divide – just some apparently level, rather marshy ground. You must travel some way in either direction until the gradient steepens and gravity, at the outset marginal, kicks in. Only then do you realise the importance of the direction you chose.

There are watersheds, too, in the world of political philosophy. I located mine when I started university at the age of 19. The year was 1969 and our country was, as we so often are and are now again, rather flailing around. We'd had a Labour government under Harold Wilson for five years. There was no socialist revolution but a bit of an economic mess. Trade unionism was exerting a baleful influence and the government was trying to control prices and incomes in order to combat inflation. Failing industries were being propped up on an increasing scale but seldom fixed. We were creeping towards ever bigger, flabbier, more expensive government.

The Tories at Cambridge seemed a ghastly bunch. To me, a middle-class, non-public-school colonial outsider, it was all cravats, sherry parties and meetings with pompous speakers. Labour were just dreary: high-minded but (I thought) somewhat impractical in ideas that were too dependent on public spiritedness as a mainspring of human behaviour. Briefly joining the Liberals, I realised they were more interested in talk than practical politics, and quit. So I joined a liberal Conservative fringe grouping called Pest: Pressure for Economic and Social Toryism. But I watched from outside.

And this is what I saw. That, though in 1969 it was already fashionable (as it remains fashionable today) to argue that modern politics was about “what works”, therefore “left” and “right” were no longer useful terms, the left-right divide remains eternal. It was the big one: the divide about what makes people tick. To that 19-year-old, as to this 74-year-old, it seemed my destiny to pull back from the slope towards big government.

This eternal tension is between a belief in personal freedom and a belief in the good that government can do. You will retort that one can believe in both, and you are right. Not one of us believes government can never do good, and not one of us believes personal freedom is undesirable. But in public administration, which is what politics mostly is, moments arise again and again, key moments when we feel the tension and have to take a view. More government or less? The collective or the individual? That is the watershed.

How far should we raise rates of taxation to boost welfare benefits? Do we take “free at the point of use” as the immutable founding premise of state healthcare? Do we allow citizens to lift their own children (as they hope) above the rest by paying for private education? How much power do we give collective labour to infringe on the rights of individual employers and employees to strike their own deals?

Let's acknowledge that in every case there will be strong arguments both ways. But which way do you jump? Again and again in government, you have to jump. No general rule can cover such decisions. Facts, circumstances will change, priorities will be different,

emergencies will arise, the pull in either direction will vary from case to case. Even as a libertarian you will sometimes allow that the good that government can do should trump liberty. Even as a Marxist you will sometimes allow that personal choice should trump the collective good. There is no rule but there are gravitational pulls. Which is yours?

Mine has never shifted. I am more raw, more sensitive to the dangers of collectivism than to the dangers of personal freedom. I know of course that things could swing too far my way. I entertain no dream of a Tory promised land. I'm Conservative because of what I'm not: a socialist. The Tories are a dreadful party, but socialism must be kept from advancing.

For the moment, and at this election, the collectivists are set to win the argument. So close are the two main parties to each other's stated position – so fearful, in particular, is Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party of frightening centrist voters – that the terrain feels rather like that marshy and apparently level ground near Dove Holes.

So July 4 will not feel like a watershed. Nothing Starmer now says his government would do horrifies me. But he will find, as all new leaders do, that government never proves the bold pursuit of a promised, fixed, dragon-slaying course, but instead a monthly, weekly, daily slew of often small decisions by which leadership is tormented: midges, not dragons. Individually they may feel insignificant, unrelated; but cumulatively their resolutions begin to lend colour, habit and slant to an administration.

A bankrupt city council needs a bung. An unscrupulous boss exploits his self-employed couriers. A steel manufacturer threatens to go offshore unless subsidised. The NHS, waving shrouds, begs for another massive rescue. Five people die from vaping. A vital public service faces a strike for more pay. And, every time, the more-government rather than less-government decision will seem eminently justifiable. To the question "sink or swim?" the natural answer always feels like water wings. They can save the moment.

But slowly a picture forms. Unless it is Starmer's nature to refuse the line of least resistance more stubbornly than the evidence so far suggests, the picture will be of a government interventionist as much by accumulation as design. His demeanour, less commanding than scolding, reminds me of a quite cross aunt. But reproachfulness is not a strategy: his habit will be to interfere.

Opposition will matter. Not because the Tories can even hope to be many: it's the argument, not the Commons majority, that has to be mustered. A good opposition gets the nation thinking and its news media talking. It provides focus. A good opposition is what I want the Conservative Party to provide.

I don't, cannot, argue that the Tories deserve re-election. Should I then vote for the party, Labour, that I fear will give us a flabby, shapeless administration, at the mercy of events and tilting leftward? No. Labour must have opposition. I've left the Tory party but I'm still that 19-year-old Conservative. They'll have my vote.