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Only you can stop the swivel-eyed activists;

If the prospect of Trump or Corbyn in power scares you, it's time to make sure that the voice of moderation is heard

Philip Collins

In "The Caucus-Race and a Long Tale", the third chapter of Alice's Adventures In Wonderland, Lewis Carroll presents a scene that will be familiar to anyone who attends the meetings of a political party. Alice gathers all the animals on the riverbank to discuss how to get dry. The Mouse gives an irrelevant, boring lecture on William the Conqueror and a Dodo says the answer is to hold a caucus-race in which everyone runs round pointlessly in a circle. My mind goes back to Labour party meetings in Islington twenty years ago in which the local MP, a nice young man of no great ambition called Jeremy, resolved to send another stiff letter to the United Nations, on constituency headed notepaper, about East Timor.

The internal plumbing of political parties, with their obscure obsessions, would be merely farcical if it were not that we have decided to entrust the future of the free world to these people. Here and in the United States, they are about to make some big decisions on our behalf. Party activists are toying with Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump as candidates for president. In Britain, Tory members will, one unappointed day before 2019, select the next prime minister. If Jeremy Corbyn does admit to the rest of us what he knows himself, which is that he hates being leader of the Labour party, the job of leader of the opposition might be available too. The members will resolve battles between Labour MPs fighting to survive when the boundary review deprives the party of 24 seats.

Members of political parties have never been more powerful. Yet there has never been fewer of them. The Conservative party has about 100,000 members, not quite as many as the Scottish National Party. The Liberal Democrats have approximately 60,000, about the same as the Greens and Ukip has about 40,000 members. In May 2015 Labour party membership was 200,000. That has now doubled, as enthusiasm for Corbyn waxed over the summer, to 400,000, close to the peak of 1997. Much more of that and Jeremy Corbyn will be more popular with his own tribe than Tony Blair.

The brief enthusiasm of new Labour members is thoroughly misleading, though. The total membership of British political parties amounts to just 1 per cent of the electorate. Thirty years ago it was already a minority but it was at least four times the size it is today. The trend holds all over Europe too where fewer than 5 per cent of the total electorate are a member of a political party. The absolute numbers who join political parties in Europe have halved since 1980. The gap between political parties and the electorate they encounter outside their committee rooms has never been wider.

It is important to note that this is not the division that is usually reported. I have heard until I weep the cliché that the public has become disillusioned with politics. The constant search for non-ideological politics, so the story goes, has taken the pith out of the contest. Centrist politics is boring and so the public seeks the entertainment of more colourful characters. Hence Jeremy Corbyn, hence Bernie Sanders, hence Donald Trump, hence Boris Johnson. Mainstream politics, apparently, is finished and anyone who, like Tony Blair, fails to understand Corbyn and Sanders is by implication out of date, a fool, or both.

This analysis might make sense if David Cameron were not leading a Conservative government with an overall majority in parliament and if Hillary Clinton were not about to become President of the United States of America. The hold of the traditional parties is weakening but there is not much evidence that public allegiance is tending to the extremes. If this is a revolution it's one of those that ends where it begins, with the members of the usual family in control.

This is not the revolt of the public against the party leadership. It is the revolt of the party activists against the public. In 1951 the French writer Maurice Duverger distinguished between "cadre" parties in which power is concentrated at the top and "mass" parties in which the activists are powerful. The trend in all political parties has been towards the latter and the paradoxical consequence is that the parties have got further out of touch with the public as a result.

Centralised parties ignore their activists and listen instead to the public. In the grassroots model of a party, Jeremy Corbyn remains the darling of the new Labour members and Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have some of the same appeal for the Republicans and Democrats respectively. But when these choices are put before a wider electorate they will instantly be exposed for what they are: the pointless running round in a circle of the caucus-race.

One hundred thousand such members will choose the next prime minister of Britain. It will be the first time that the reformed Tory leadership election, under which ordinary members get the final say, is conducted while the party is in power. Last year's general election was an audition between David Cameron and Ed Miliband for the highest office. It is outrageous that the post of prime minister should be appointed by members of the Tory party alone. A change of prime minister should trigger an immediate general election. The same goes for 2007 when Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair without the voters having their say.

Until that changes, there is no option other than to flood the political parties with new members. Many people say they don't want to join a mad tea-party. To which the answer is that you can't separate the membership from the members. An influx of moderates makes the party moderate. The members most needed by the political parties are the very people who would never dream of joining one.

So let the cry ring out to the army of the uninterested and the cavalry of those with better things to do. I implore you box-set guzzlers, book-lovers and dog walkers to abandon such pleasures and traipse instead down to your constituency party or association. Free us from the tyranny of the interested minority and their six impossible resolutions before bedtime. I am relying on you to take the decision of who is prime minister or opposition leader out of the hands of those who care too much but know too little. Hurry to the meeting. You have nothing but lose but your evenings.