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Search is on to reshape centre-left ground in UK politics

Options include new centre party, Momentum-style campaign groups and local electoral alliances

For Britain's centre-left, the bad news is becoming unbearable. After the collapse of the Liberal Democrats, the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, and the result of the EU referendum, there appears little prospect of a moderate, pro-EU government emerging from the next general election.

On Tuesday, an ICM opinion poll gave the Tories a 16-point lead over Labour — their biggest since October 2009. Now some leading political figures argue that a new centrist political party or campaign group is the **best hope**. “There are a huge number of people for whom the referendum was a touchstone for something far wider,” said Paddy Ashdown, former leader of the Liberal Democrats. “If we are to have any prospect of a progressive government, we need to find some way of bringing [the left] together.”

Lord Ashdown, who held talks with Tony Blair in the 1990s about a Liberal Democrat-Labour merger, has launched More United UK, a group that will support moderate, pro-EU candidates of whatever party. Since launching on Sunday, it has signed up 18,000 supporters — albeit a fraction of those who have signed up to vote in the ongoing Labour leadership contest.

An opportunity exists on paper: 16m people voted Remain in June; under Mr Blair, Labour won a third consecutive parliamentary majority as recently as 2005. “The electoral sweetspot in Britain is slightly to the centre-left on economic issues. On social issues [such as immigration] it is less liberal than the Labour party has allowed itself to become,” said Tim Bale, a professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London. “There is no party occupying that territory.”

Yet all of the options for reshaping the centre ground face difficulties.

A new centre party

The most radical option, a new vehicle would probably be built around moderate Labour MPs and the Liberal Democrats. It could aim to attract David Miliband, the former foreign secretary, and Sadiq Khan, the newly elected mayor of London.

The success of the UK Independence party — and the emergence of upstarts such as the Women's Equality Party — suggest some voters are ready for new political brands.

One Labour donor, the owner of football club Hull City, Assem Allam, has said he would provide financial backing (although, tangentially, his attempt to “rebrand” his football team Hull City as Hull Tigers ended in failure).

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The question is whether any realignment would strengthen the centre-left, by creating a new Blair-style coalition, or weaken it, by alienating blue-collar voters and the hard left. After four Labour moderates created the Social Democratic Party in 1981, the Conservatives stayed in power for 16 years.

Support for a new party “is very difficult to do polling on. If you were just to ask people would you vote for a new centre party, that wouldn't necessarily give you very reliable figures,” said Roger Mortimore, director of political analysis at Ipsos Mori.

One obvious rallying cry would be celebrating EU membership: more people voted Remain in the referendum than voted for Mr Blair's Labour party in 1997 or Mr Cameron's Conservatives in 2015. But the results are not easily compared (due to different electoral formats), and many working-class voters are Eurosceptic. Moreover, by 2020, the scheduled date of the next general election, the simple issue of EU membership may be less important, said Mr Mortimore.

David Miliband and Sadiq Khan are seen as key players if Labour splits and a new moderate left party is created © FT; PA

An electoral alliance

A lower risk version would be for centrist, pro-EU voters and politicians to behave tactically at a local level. So the Liberal Democrats would not campaign heavily, or even put up a candidate, where doing so would damage a moderate Labour candidate.

Yet this strategy might also offer lower rewards, because it would not provide a single national leader and manifesto for voters to congregate around. It would also resemble the experience of the Liberal party and the SDP, who allied in the 1983 and 1987 general elections before merging. “If [a new project] is to be successful, it has to look completely different to what happened in the 1980s,” said Mr Bale.

Centrist pressure group

Lord Ashdown’s initiative, More United UK, is trying to emulate the success of upstarts such as Ukip and the pro-Corbyn group Momentum. If it reaches 25,000 supporters, it has pledged to start accepting donations that would then be channelled to moderate politicians.

The risk is that the grouping becomes like Lord Ashdown’s own party, the Liberal Democrats — popular among well-educated types in London, Oxford and Cambridge, but without support across the country.

Clockwise from top left, the SNP, Women's Equality Party; Plaid Cymru; the leftwing pressure group Momentum; MoreUnited and Ukip © FT

Muddling through

If Labour loses the next election, Jeremy Corbyn is likely to resign, according to his ally, the shadow chancellor John McDonnell. That raises a prospect for moderate Labour MPs — wait for Mr Corbyn to fail, and then regain control of the party, perhaps with David Miliband as leader.

This strategy is not without its problems. Mr Corbyn has suggested that all Labour MPs should be subject to reselection in their constituencies, meaning many moderates could be excluded from the next parliament. By 2020, many working-class voters could have shifted to nationalist parties — such as Ukip, the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru — reshaping British politics in a different way.