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It's time for Labour moderates to jump ship

With deluded extremists in firm control of the party, the centre left must take inspiration from Macron's path to power

Rachel Sylvester

Just before a tsunami hits land the sea recedes. The ocean floor is exposed, coral reefs become visible and fish are left flapping on the beach. There is a moment of calm and then a roar, similar to the sound of a jet engine, as a wall of water heads towards the shore. This is what is about to happen to the Labour Party.

Last week hundreds of Labour councillors were left stranded and gasping for breath as the tide of popular support withdrew from their party in the local and mayoral elections. In Labour's heartlands - from the West Midlands to Teeside and Glasgow - vast swathes of territory were laid bare. But these were only the early warning signs that foreshadow the impending flood. The real disaster will hit in the general election on June 8 when dozens of Labour MPs will almost certainly be swept away by a giant Conservative wave crashing onto the shore and turning the country blue.

This is not an exaggeration.

Labour is on the verge of being destroyed as a credible electoral force, but Jeremy Corbyn and his allies are in denial about it. Already they are blaming everyone else - their own MPs, the mainstream media, Tony Blair, even the voters - for their party's fate rather than accepting responsibility for its unpopularity.

There is an extraordinary lack of self-awareness among these warriors of the hard left. Despite all the warnings from those who have been on the doorstep, they appear genuinely to think that exposing the electorate to a Labour leader who prefers singing The Red Flag to the national anthem will be a vote-winner. Meanwhile John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor who says there is "a lot to learn from reading Das Kapital", assumes it is reassuring to Middle England to know that he is in charge of Labour's tax and spending plans. On the Today programme last week he described himself as a "hard-nosed bureaucrat" who would reinforce his party's economic credibility, but to most people he looks like a hard-wired ideologue who recently appeared on a platform in front of the Communist and Baath Party flags.

The hard left, egged on by the alt-left social media, are living in a parallel universe. In denial about their political flaws, they have convinced themselves that the voters will flock to their cause once saved from their state of false consciousness. As self-righteous as they are deluded, they will not give up their hold of the Labour Party because they are the heroes of their own movie who cannot allow themselves to be defeated by the villains they have appointed to the role. There will be no compromise with their internal critics any more than there will be with the electorate.

If the centre-left moderates are to save their values from annihilation when the deluge arrives then they are going to need an ark, and after months of prevarication they may finally be ready to build one. The election of Emmanuel Macron in France proves that the liberal centre can - with the right leader - harness the anti-establishment mood just as effectively as the populist right. It also shows that a new party, or movement, can go from inception to power in little more than a year. Already the astonishing success of En Marche!, combined with the catastrophic failure of the Labour Party in last week's local elections, has altered the mood among some on the centre left.

Yesterday, Lord Mandelson, the architect of New Labour, told me that the "simple truth of Macron's victory is that he won by leaving his party, not despite doing so." In case the message had not been clear enough, he stressed: "We have to understand just how fed up people are with traditional party structures."

Of course, the French presidential electoral system is different to the British one; it would be harder for a new party to break through here than it was for a single candidate to come from nowhere to end up in the Élysée Palace - but the gap in the political market for a credible voice of the centre is exactly the same here as it was in France. With the Tories veering off to the right and Labour careering to the left, there are many voters in the middle who feel politically homeless. As David Miliband argued earlier this year, in the context of what he called the "extraordinary" Macron phenomenon: "As long as there are people with the values who yearn for a different kind of society then you're going to

have a party that tries to put those values into practice." Tony Blair's new Institute for Global Change is in place to help shape a new party. Former Labour donors are already queuing up to give money to any alternative movement that could provide a credible opposition to the Conservatives. Even MPs who have always had a "football club" loyalty to Labour are privately willing to contemplate that a party that has been hijacked by the hard left may no longer be the best vehicle for their beliefs.

On Sunday night, as news of the French result came in, Matt Zarb-Cousin, a former spokesman for Mr Corbyn, tweeted that Macron, who had just beaten the fascist Marine Le Pen, "represents the very politics that fuels support for the far right". It was a bizarre inversion of the truth that shows just how deep and unsustainable the divides in the Labour Party are.

Critics of a new party always cite the failure of the SDP as evidence that there is no point trying to break the mould, but politics is far more fractured and less tribal than it was in the 1980s. The few remaining traditional loyalties were severed by the EU referendum. Labour's traditional base has all but disintegrated, with many white working-class voters switching allegiance to the Conservatives (often having gone through the Ukip gateway) and liberal metropolitans feeling alienated by Mr Corbyn. As one MP puts it, with brutal honesty: "Labour no longer has a core vote."

The Conservatives' apparent dominance is based on the fact it has hoovered up Ukip, which means it may not be as stable in the long term as it seems. In an age of fragmentation, the insurgent can have influence even without winning power. Europe cuts across party divides.

Macron was lucky in his opponents but he also seized the moment and made his own chances. Promising to champion "neither left nor right", he was unapologetic about his beliefs, declaring on a visit to London earlier this year that "in the current environment if you are shy you are dead". Yesterday he insisted: "Europe and the world are waiting for us to defend the spirit of enlightenment, threatened in so many places."

Centrists in this country need to show their courage. There is nothing to lose any more. Labour is drowning - it's time for the moderates to take the plunge and break away.