

The Centre Must Hold:

Why centrism is the answer to extremism and polarisation

(Ed.) Yair Zivan

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I start with a disclaimer: my copy of this book is a review copy which, on its title page, tells me it is an uncorrected proof and on the back cover says 'not for sale or quotation'. Since I bought it in a charity shop, that instruction can no longer apply. The book was due for publication on the 27 June 2024.

The editor, who has held senior positions in the Israeli government and opposition, worked for prime minister Yair Lapid in the 18-month coalition government formed in 2021. This gave Zivan 'a front-row seat to see how a centrist-inspired government can work.' (p. xi) He blames the downfall of this fragile coalition on the extremes of some of the eight parties that originally signed up to it. Nevertheless he says:

The experiences of those eighteen months, one of the great political experiments of modern times, and the centrist leadership I saw up close as we met with counterparts from all over the world led to the conception of this book. (p. xii)

The result is a book which should be carefully studied by every member of Keir Starmer's cabinet, to stop them wandering away from the pragmatism of 'progressive realism' (© David Lammy) into the treacherous world of ideology.

Zivan was able to get 36 contributors to write short essays on Centrism, defining and proclaiming the concept. Centrism with a capital 'C' is no longer to be treated as some mushy middle ground, but should be respected as an -ism in its own right. There is even philosophy behind it, giving Centrism a sheen of intellectual credibility (although in this regard it's perhaps not surprising that there's no mention of the Buddhist 'middle way'). How to define it? Jennifer Rubin, a *Washington Post* columnist, says 'Centrism, in short, stands for the proposition that ideological tensions are best resolved when we borrow the best from conflicting perspectives'. (p. 57) From the various contributions I detect, however, that the people best placed to do this may be regarded as 'centre-left', such as Clinton, Blair, Macron and Biden. But honours can occasionally go to non-left figures such as John Major, who was prepared to countenance contacts with the IRA prior to the Good Friday Agreement – something that Thatcher would never have tolerated.

So far, so good. Who in their right mind wants Farage, Trump, Le Pen and their ilk bellowing their lies and hate speech in our ears? Having said that, how is it then that Centrism has such a shallow grip on the political imagination of electorates around the world? How can its fruits be so easily reversed by the very ideologues it denounces? Dr Micah Goodman, an Israeli philosopher suggests:

. . . the vital centre (as a face of moderation) can be effective, but only if animated by a fighting creed, realism and courage. There is a world of difference between the parody of the centre that believes in the possibility of eliminating conflict from politics through rational deliberation and overlapping consensus, and a muscular centre that espouses pragmatic policies without making rotten compromises. (p. 25)

Here is the underpinning of the radical centre, a muscular approach which, in the language of Starmer, is mission-driven – delivery, delivery, delivery. This ‘delivery’ is to be loudly proclaimed even if it doesn’t change the fundamentals very much. We won’t promise what we don’t think is deliverable. Our ambitions must be dialled down. The question arises, who is keen on the dialling down? Who has said that this or that cannot be achieved? Perhaps a recent article in openDemocracy, ‘Lovebombed by lobbyists: How Labour became the party of Big Business’, will provide a few clues.¹

What dialling-down Centrism implies is precisely the reason people search for alternatives. Centrism is an oxymoron – it is muscular timidity. If we consider the most egregious example of this, it is in the political response to climate change. Every year at UN’s climate change COP meetings, grand agreements are reached which either kick the can down the road or kick the can much further down the road. Each conference ends with fist bumps and slaps on the back. We have now, in the target of ‘net-zero’ (with no specified date) a typical Centrist ‘solution’ which allows for as much compromise as necessary to maintain the illusion of grown-up politics. The Centrists have yet to grasp that climate change is not an ideology but straightforward science. It is climate change denialism that is an ideology.

It is the dream of Centrists that big win solutions will always resolve difficulties. The high priest of this messianic strain is Tony Blair, whose Institute of Global Change, with its 800 staff, must by now be a nascent shadow world government – at least in Tony’s imagination. In Blair’s contribution to this book he says

¹ <<https://shorturl.at/FYRmW>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/lovebombed-by-lobbyists-how-starmer-labour-became-the-party-of-big-business/>>

Tech is the *only* way climate transition can happen while preserving living standards – particularly in developing economies. We need to deploy existing tech at scale, while we innovate and develop new solutions in parallel, to achieve the emission reductions the world needs. (p. 55 emphasis added)

This is a typical Centrist proposition. Its major concern is to achieve a goal with barely anybody noticing. Tech will do this, even if it is yet to be done at scale or still needs innovating. But that is not the *only* way. Government could implement policies to effect behavioural change much more quickly – if it thought that the problem was as real as it keeps telling us.

Given that this book has been conceived and edited by a close advisor to a former Israeli prime minister, one might expect some comment on how the Centrists could have tackled one of the world's most intractable conflicts. How would the Centrists prepare the ground for a two-state solution? Did Yair Lapid's short-lived government set about reversing Israeli settler colonialism of the West Bank? How did it set about reducing the legitimate causes of Palestinian anger? As an illustration of what Lapid's Centrism meant, he did have an exchange of greetings with President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority; but whilst claiming he was in favour of a two-state solution, he also maintained that illegal Israeli West Bank settlements should be permanent, and Israel should have total control of Jerusalem. Many contributors to this book identify Centrism with liberty, democracy and justice. Yet none of them finds time to show how these values have been turned into reality for millions of Palestinians.

Reading this book I had a feeling that what is being spoken of is a justifiable concern about the extremes – notably right-wing extremes. However, the best response seems to be merely a rebranding exercise with a bit of soul searching thrown in. In the light of a retrenchment from so many 'Third Way' failed nostrums, we now have muscular, vital, radical Centrism.

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