

Strength in Division

Left-Right Antagonism and the Practice of 'Split Leadership'

In 'The Discourses', the infamously astute republican thinker Niccolo Machiavelli argued that the strength and vitality of the Roman Republic, compared to other republics, lay in the fact that it successfully institutionalised the inevitable antagonism between the people and the elite. Thus, each held the threat posed to the republic by the other in check, and republican liberty was preserved. Machiavelli mercilessly mocked the pieties of republican thinkers who imagined a harmonious transcendence of this antagonism. He recognised that a sustainable balance of opposing forces could produce something stronger and more resilient than efforts at harmonious unity could realistically hope to achieve.

Machiavelli's insight is one that the Labour Party, in the midst of its current travails, would do well to remember. The history of the Labour Party is also one of antagonism between opposed forces. Simplifying somewhat, we can see the recent implosion as a recurrence of a tension that has structured the history of the Party from its inception. This tension plays out between a Left that is focused on Labour as a transformative social movement, and a Right that is focused on the acquisition of Parliamentary power (with plenty of folk in between). When the Party functions at its best, the role of the Left is to keep the Right honest, to block its tendency to surrender too much in its electoral pursuit of power, to prioritize short-term tactics over long-term strategy. The role of the Right is to keep the Left focused on the point that principle is impotent in the absence of power, that sacrificing electoral success (or deluding yourself concerning the prospects of such success) for ideological reasons surrenders the field to an enemy who will not advance the interests of the people that the Labour Party is meant to serve. There are, sadly, relatively few points in its fractious recent history in which the organisation of the Labour Party has successfully institutionalized this antagonism. Yet this institutionalisation is vital to its ability to succeed as a political party.

Today it seems that the Labour Party is closer to a split than anytime since 1981. The Left, with its leader in place, responded to a rebellion of the vast majority of its MPs by reaching, once again, to its long established vocabulary of betrayal and plots. It continues to assert its claim to represent the true flame of socialism and to stress the need to rebuild as a social movement, even at times seeming to downgrade the importance of becoming the governing party. The Right draws on its long-practised appeal to electability, to being a credible government-in-waiting. It claims to represent the interests of those who will suffer once more if the field of government is effectively abandoned to Tory rule. This tension came to the fore in the recent PLP revolt against the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and the leadership election in which Corbyn was unsuccessfully challenged by Owen Smith amidst controversial NEC rulings and legal challenges concerning voter eligibility. Corbyn's overwhelming victory in that election settles the leadership question in the short-term but it does not address the underlying problems that led to the challenge. What it may do, however, is provide a space in which the Labour Party as a whole can engage in a process of reflection.

So let us stand back from the field of internecine conflict and ask if an institutional change might help alter the terrain. Suppose, for example, the role of leader of the Labour Party were divided into three roles:

- The Chair of the Party, elected by members, who has the role of re-building Labour as a social movement across the country.
- The Leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party, elected by the MPs, with the role of mounting effective parliamentary government and opposition.
- The General Secretary of the Party, elected by members and MPs (through an electoral college), who occupies the role of organising party campaigns and, with the other two leaders, working out its strategy.

Such a structure aims not to overcome but to balance the tensions between Left and Right – as Labour party structures have generally tried to do – in order to realise the strength and vitality of the Labour movement in a parliamentary form. How might this help? It is relatively easy to see Jeremy Corbyn's real strengths coming to the fore in the role of Chair of the Party without being undermined by his all too obvious weaknesses (and the same would have been true of the late Tony Benn). Similarly, the General Secretary role is a natural fit for figures like Tom Watson and Stella Creasy today. As for Leader of the PLP, well there are several plausible future candidates: Lisa Nandy, Clive Lewis, Keir Starmer and Dan Jarvis would be among those uncluttered by the past. But the deeper point need not be tied to reflection on current individuals: rather it is to acknowledge both that leadership of the Labour Party requires a range of diverse skillsets that it is unreasonable to expect any individual to possess, and that 'unitary' leadership exacerbates rather than productively channels Left-Right tensions in the Party -- whatever side the leader of the day may come from.

No doubt there are flaws in this proposal; it would be surprising if there were not. But despite the potential flaws in this exact solution, it is crucial that we take institutional reforms like it into serious consideration. Such considerations remind all of us who care about the Labour Party that we can be antagonists without being enemies. Indeed, our antagonism, properly channelled, is not a weakness, but may rather be the source of strength of our party. Standing back from the current fray and looking at party structures may offer prospects for avoiding internecine conflict or, worse, a split that benefit no one and harms us all.

To give both more strength and nuance to our argument, we offer a comparative perspective. Labour can learn something from what social democratic parties have done in other countries to balance internal tensions between the Party Left and Right, or more generally between the Party's activists and its parliamentary 'professionals'. It is important to recognise what went well in these attempts, as well as what went badly. We look at the case of the German SPD, which has operated different models of 'split leadership' at different times over its post-1945 history, with varying, but sometimes considerable, success. While Labour's current task is to combine effective opposition work in Parliament with strengthening its appeal among the broader electorate for the next General Election, we look mostly at times when the SPD was in power, and occupied the Chancellorship. The reason for this focus is that these naturally are the times when the 'purer' moral convictions and socialist/social democratic ideology of most of the activists is set to clash even more directly and violently with the demands of 'Realpolitik' – in this case, with the ever-present need to compromise in

order to retain, and defend, governmental power. So what promises to work in these times has, *mutatis mutandis*, an even better chance of working under less pressure – as long there is *any* willingness among leading personnel to set aside personal animosities and put their differences and antagonisms to work together for the Party and its electoral prospects.

The SPD currently operates with a split leadership that is somewhat similar to the model we propose above, even though the office of the Party Chair (*Parteivorsitzende/r*) is, in terms of its mandate, quite dominant. It is currently held by Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel. The Party Chair is in charge of holding the party together and expanding its membership (or at least to halt, or slow down, the decline in membership, Labour's current membership expansion being the absolute exception for traditionally established social democratic parties all over Europe). The Leader of the Parliamentary Party (*Fraktionsvorsitzende/r*), currently Thomas Oppermann, is elected by Party MPs, and combines the function of the Chief Whip, wherein they are assisted by the Head of Parliamentary Affairs (*Parlamentarische/r Geschaeftsführer/in*), with the role of primary official spokesperson on all matters of policy, thus enriching the whip role with some responsibility for policy content. The General Secretary (*Generalsekretär/in*), currently Katarina Barley, is in charge of everyday party communication, and, most importantly, the organisation of campaigning.

What is important to emphasise from the outset, however, is that the solution to the tensions between Left and Right within parties of the kind we outlined above is not to be searched in a somehow perfect institutional, formal balance between the different offices. Institutional clarity is important, but the success of split leadership depends crucially on the different roles being occupied by the right people at the right time – people with the right party pedigree and reputation. If that is so, even initially surprising constellations of leadership roles, not fully corresponding to the two schemes outlined above, can work. And they can work also when heavyweights occupy subordinate Party roles that are not part of the Triad of offices described above – as we will also show below.

The two historically most famous split leaderships were the ones between Willy Brandt (Party Chair 1964-1987, Chancellor 1969-1974) and Herbert Wehner (Leader of the Parliamentary Party 1969-1983), and the one between Brandt, Helmut Schmidt (Chancellor 1974-1982, deputy Party Chair 1968-1984), and Wehner (the first 'Troika'). Throughout his own days as Chancellor, Brandt retained the Party Chair; his main task in that role was to combine 'warming the soul of the party' with a clear moral, democratic vision of the task of German politics – including coming to terms with the past – with reaching out to sections of the German population who were not part of the traditional social democratic clientele (such as unionised workers). The main tribute to his success in this role was the SPD's result in the 1972 Federal elections of 45.8%, the highest the SPD achieved in its entire history. Due to this success, and the moral authority Brandt had gained in this role, he retained the Party Chair all the way through Helmut Schmidt's Chancellorship and for some time after, until 1987.

In Germany's proportional system, even a result on the scale achieved by Brandt's SPD was no guarantee of stable government. During the Brandt-Schmidt era, the pugnacious former communist Herbert Wehner was in charge of the Parliamentary party. He was well-suited to the task of getting his hands dirty, if needed, in order to organise stable majorities. Wehner did so arguably most famously in 1972, during a 'constructive' vote of no confidence, in which CDU/CSU leader Barzel had good chances of being elected Chancellor, due to internal problems in the SPD/FDP coalition.¹ Wehner ordered SPD MPs not to stand up and vote, in order to deter potential defectors. The opposition was still set to win, and lost surprisingly by the narrowest of margins. It later transpired that at least two

opposition MPs had been bought by the Eastern German Stasi.ⁱⁱ Wehner later admitted that he had known about something “dirty” going on (although he did not explicitly admit to knowing the details), while emphasising that Brandt had not, and did not have to; that was *his* job.ⁱⁱⁱ Now -- and this is the ‘surprising constellation’ element in this case -- Wehner was not only very successful in his role, but continued also to be generally respected and trusted by Party activists despite his dirty hands, because of his ‘double’ pedigree. As a former communist labour leader, he was not only above any suspicions of doing any favours to centrist and right-wing forces due to this ideological pedigree, but also, and somewhat paradoxically, above any suspicions to sacrifice the party’s electoral prospects to ideological purity. That was shown by his double migration from communism to social democracy, in terms of both party membership and programmatic orientation: Wehner had had a key role in drafting, and pushing through, the SPD’s 1959 *Godesberger Programm*, which officialised the Party’s endorsement of a market economy, marked its retreat from traditional Marxism, and paved the way towards later electoral success. It is this combination of left-wing pedigree and party loyalty, in the sense of wanting his team to beat the other team at almost any cost, which explains why he could both retain the trust of the Party, including its activists, and be effective in his role.

Helmut Schmidt’s Chancellorship 1974-1982 was accompanied by further diffusion of Party leadership. Schmidt’s appeal to the broader electorate largely rested on his more centrist stance, and his prioritising of an ethos of duty to his office (epitomised in his self-description as “first employee of the Republic”) over a more comprehensive social democratic vision. These features equipped him well for dealing with the crises of the late 1970s, especially the rise of extreme left terrorism, and the accelerating arms race between NATO and the Warsaw Pact; although though the latter did eventually contribute to his fall. His governing style also made him much less popular with the party Left than Brandt. Accordingly, Schmidt contented himself with the role of Deputy Chair of the Party, while Willy Brandt continued in his role as Party Chair, and Wehner as Leader of the Parliamentary Party. Wehner’s and Brandt’s authority in their respective roles held the Party together and enabled Schmidt to cling on to power without losing party support.

A similar split between Chancellorship and Party leadership role was attempted by Gerhard Schroeder in 2004, when the ‘Agenda 2010’ reforms (and cutback) of the German welfare state, initiated by his SPD/Green coalition, started to threaten the identity of the SPD as a social democratic party in the eyes of many of its activists. Schroeder stepped down as Party Chair in 2004, ceding the place to Franz Muentefering, who had been General Secretary from 1999-2002, and Leader of the Parliamentary Party from 2002-2005. From 2004, Muentefering thus occupied two of the three main Party roles; Schroeder none. It is well-known that, in the end, this leadership split wasn’t crowned by electoral success. The SPD did not only lose the snap elections in 2005, which Schroeder had called in order to win a new mandate for remaining reform policies. A significant part of the party’s Left departed in 2004/05, and eventually joined forces with the PDS (successor party to the Eastern German socialists) in a new left-wing party. Electorally, the SPD has, so far, not recovered.

The important message for our purposes, however, is that split leadership did have some clear benefits in this case, as well, even though it could not offset the larger forces at work. Whatever view is taken of the Hartz IV reforms, the split leadership structure freed up Schroeder to concentrate on appealing to the broader electorate, while Muentefering (as Party Chair) was charged with explaining government policy and stabilising a contracting Party base. Even though Muentefering had, up to that point, not been especially known for left-wing positions, he had a firm reputation as an extremely loyal ‘party soldier’ (*Parteisoldat*), helped by his modest family background (in farming) – two significant

parallels to Wehner. Notably, in his new role, he also started a debate about the problematic role of investment funds in a globalised economy (labelling them 'locusts'). He thus brought a new left-wing topic, which had formerly been mainly the preserve of small groups of globalisation critics, into mainstream German political discourse, and diverted some of the attention of Party activists from the failings of their Chancellor to the global economic forces constraining his policy options. Schroeder's campaigning led the Party, which had been trailing hopelessly in the Polls since the start of the reform Agenda, to a result of 34,2% in the 2005 elections, just 1% behind the CDU/CSU's: something most observers had judged impossible at the beginning of the campaign. Had the SPD won, it would have presided over the recovery of the German economy that followed, instead of being the minor partner in the grand coalition 2005-9.

Let us conclude our overview of SPD split leadership models by having a look at the latest attempt, which was remarkably unsuccessful. This was the 'Troika' of Sigmar Gabriel (Party Chair since 2009), Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Parliamentary Leader 2009-2013), and Peer Steinbrueck (elected candidate for Chancellorship in 2012 for the Federal Elections 2013). The label was a homage to Brandt, Wehner, and Schmidt. An important parallel was that the more centrist Steinbrueck held no high Party offices, like Schmidt.^{iv} This seemed a promising set-up, with the more left-wing Gabriel leading the Party, the more centrist Steinbrueck appealing to the broader electorate, and Steinmeier in charge of effective everyday opposition in Parliament. The results, however, were disappointing; the SPD achieved only 25,7% in the Federal Elections, a marginal improvement over Steinmeier's 23% in 2009. The reasons for this defeat are not to be located only in the SPD's line-up. The likely main reason is Merkel's extremely effective occupation of more centrist social democratic positions since 2005. But unlike the Schroeder/Muentefering split in 2004/5, the 'Troika' seems to have had *no* positive effect whatsoever. One reason was that, despite the promising official set-up, both Party activists and the general public failed to perceive an effective division of labour in appealing to both Left and Right between the leaders, and regarded them mainly as merely a gang of the three most powerful men in the Party. While Gabriel has been in charge of the Party since 2009, he has a reputation of being somewhat erratic and too enamoured of new ideas at any given time, lacking a clear and stable vision to which activists could warm over time. Steinmeier does have a reputation for pragmatism and Party loyalty, evidenced by his acceptance of the hopeless candidacy for Chancellorship in 2009. But he has a past mainly as a functionary (having assisted Schroeder through all stages of his career since 1993), and thus, even though he is no longer uniquely associated with the Party Right and Schroeder's reform agenda, he completely lacks a pedigree of Wehner's kind, despite a similar working class background. The Troika thus ended up effectively imbalanced and insufficiently capable of shoring up Party Left support for Steinbrueck's attempt to fight Merkel over the centre ground. Gabriel and Steinmeier could not do for Steinbrueck what Wehner and Brandt had done for Schmidt, and, to a lesser extent, Muentefering for Schroeder.

The case of the German SPD is an illuminating one. It demonstrates that while split leadership can be effective, it is not a panacea. No party structure can resist the vagaries of larger political circumstances or the influence of powerful personalities. Germany's political system is also distinct from that of the UK. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition is an official, non-party, position, which does not exist in the German system. Labour is constrained to build up a candidate for PM through work in Parliament. In Germany, opposition candidates for Chancellorship tend to become established first as regional prime ministers (Brandt, Kohl, Schroeder), and occupy high *Bundestag* positions only later, if at all (Kohl was parliamentary leader of the CDU/CSU 1976-82). Successor candidates for the governing party also come from the regions (Kiesinger) or tend to be built up as ministers, just as in the UK (Erhard; Schmidt, though he had been parliamentary leader 1966-69 before joining Brandt's

government; Merkel had been federal minister 1991-98, and then Party Chair from 2000 and parliamentary leader 2002-05, during Schroeder's Chancellorship). UK devolution, especially if extended to English regions or an English Parliament, may make the analogy closer: it is worth recalling in the past strong municipal government was an important training ground for UK politicians (Joseph Chamberlain, Herbert Morrison). At the same time, the variable outcomes of split leadership in the German context illustrate two additional factors that must be present for it to be successful.

First, those who occupy the roles must be strongly rooted in the Party : they must not only reflect the composition of the Party adequately, and look after (and be seen to look after), the interests and views of the respective segments they represent. They must also, as a team, demonstrate a *collective* commitment to the Party in its internal diversity over the advantage of any faction. Second, they must have (and be seen to have) the competence to do the job well; they must be trusted to act effectively. These conditions matter for both party unity but also for public perception: both in terms of building party membership and electoral appeal. A unitary leader from the Left may help build membership and, for all his flaws, Corbyn's success on this front should be seen as remarkable against the backdrop of declining party membership across Europe. A unitary leader from the Right may deliver significant electoral success and, for all his flaws, Blair delivered a remarkable run of electoral success. However, it is highly unlikely that any unitary leader could deliver both of these today. Our view is that effective split leadership offers the potential to deliver both strong membership and electoral success, alongside effective parliamentary performance. Leading the Labour Party requires, at least, recruiting and mobilizing party membership, guiding electoral strategy and campaigning, managing the PLP, and coordinating effective parliamentary opposition or government.

This is a demanding set of requirements, which are unlikely to be effectively combined in a single figure. Labour should not only develop a collective leadership via the specifically British convention of the Shadow Cabinet. It should also consider dividing political and ideological, rather than only policy, roles between leading figures. Different individuals drawn from different areas of the Party can play differing roles in ways that collectively enhance the Labour Party's ability to fulfil its fundamental mandate: advancing social justice – locally, nationally and globally - and protecting the vulnerable against exploitation and domination. The proposal that we have put forward should be read as a starting point for reflection on the positive role that split leadership can play in both channelling the internal antagonisms of the Party and giving it a form of unity that can command allegiance across its ideological spectrum.

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ⁱ The German constitution only allows 'constructive' votes of no confidence, in which a new Chancellor has to be elected.

ⁱⁱ K. Wiegrafe, 'Bahr und die "Brandtschutzwochen"', *Spiegel*, 15th October 2013
<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/misstrauensvotum-gegen-willy-brandt-abgeordnete-bestochen-a-927875.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Manfred Goertemaker, *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Von der Gruendung bis zur Gegenwart*, (Muenchen: Beck, 1999), p. 554.

^{iv} There had been another 'Troika' in the run-up to the Federal Election in 1994, which the SPD lost, once more, to Helmut Kohl's CDU/CSU. It consisted of Rudolf Scharping as Party Chair and candidate for the Chancellorship, Oskar Lafontaine, and Gerhard Schroeder. We do not analyse it in detail as it was so ill thought-out and executed that it cannot even be regarded as an attempt to unite Party Left and Right. The more centrist

Scharping was officially too dominant, as both candidate and Party Chair, while neither Schroeder nor Lafontaine (who commanded the Party Left) were loyal to him.