The popular centre:

How progressives can beat the populist challenge

By Hopi Sen

Policy Network
Third floor
11 Tufton Street
London SW1P 3QB
United Kingdom

t: +44 (0)20 7340 2200
f: +44 (0)20 7340 2211
e: info@policy-network.net

www.policy-network.net

policy network paper

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The financial crisis and its aftermath has brought with it not only economic dislocation and disruption, but a huge political challenge to established political parties. From both ends of the political spectrum, populist parties such as the UK Independence party, National Front, Swedish Democrats, True Finns, Syriza, Podemos and the Five Star Movement present a threat to both the centre-left and centre-right. With politics itself seeming to have failed, both centre-left and centre-right parties struggle in their response. Some are tempted to try and 'out-populist the populists'. Such a strategy is, however, fatally flawed. Instead, centrists should develop a social and economic reform agenda that is both highly likely to be achievable and perceived to be so. Moreover, by focusing on small, concrete steps, it is possible to demonstrate that politics can have significant, meaningful outcomes. But centrists need to do more than this: they should allocate blame for the failure of politics where it belongs: with politics and the state itself and embrace reform of both the practice of politics and the structure of the state. By combining focused, concrete, limited social policy changes with a passion for reform of a failing politics and governance, it once again becomes possible to construct a popular centre capable of beating the populisms of right and left on their own terms.

About the Author

Hopi Sen is a former Labour party staffer, contributing editor to Progress and political commentator.

Introduction

Centrists across Europe are wrestling with how to respond to a wave of populism gaining succour from a broad distrust and dislike of conventional 'establishment' politics. This paper argues that populism appeals today because it offers voters a clear holding to account of the failures of conventional politics. The two primary flaws of populism lie in the misallocating of blame for those failures and proposing solutions that have little chance of success. In normal times, centrist reformers find it trivially easy to respond to such populist challenges because it is possible to point to the successes of gradualist and reformist politics. From such gains, centrist reformers claim the credibility to offer attractive solutions to other issues, usually by offering policies that appear to have a realistic prospect of forward progress. However, when it seems politics itself has failed, this strength becomes a major weakness. Centrists struggle to respond to populism, possessing neither a more believably 'positive' offer, nor a coherent, convincing case that radical populist change will be less effective at achieving the voters' demands than reformism.

In this analysis, the risk for the British Labour party and the centre-left more widely lies in attempting to compete with populists on their own terms, pledging a diluted approximation of populist ambitions. This is because even an approximation of populism is likely to be regarded as incredible by sceptical voters, while, to those attracted by radical solutions, a diluted populism will be a pale imitation compared to the real thing. Such a 'centrist populism' combines the disadvantages of populism with the disadvantages of moderation, appearing both temporising and risky, overly complex and overly ambitious. Instead, the challenge of rebuilding a popular centre is to restore trust in politics itself by two complementary strategies.

First, by proposing a social and economic reform agenda that is highly likely to be achievable and is perceived to be so. This means understanding not only the limits of your effective power, but also the limits of what the electorate believes lies within your political capability. Given the public perception of politics as broken, this will generally mean a narrowing, not a broadening, of the political 'offer'. By focusing on small, concrete steps, it is possible to demonstrate that politics can have significant, meaningful outcomes. Given a prevailing mood of distrust and doubt, this represents a major achievement that gradually earns a willingness to consider further steps.

The second step is to allocate blame for the failure of politics where it belongs: with politics and the state itself. The popular centre should thus embrace reform of both the practice of politics and the structure of the state. Furthermore, being able to deliver reform provides a signal that politics can function properly. This points to a consensual, cross-interest approach to political reform, one that consciously eschews partisan perspectives. Too often, we talk of political reform, but we mean a sharp calculus of political advantage.

By combining focused, concrete, limited social policy changes with a passion for reform of a failing politics and governance, it once again becomes possible to construct a popular centre capable of beating the populisms of right and left on their own terms.

The populist threat

"Nothing is more striking than the simple innocence of the men who insist, whenever an objective is present, on the prompt production of a patent scheme guaranteed to produce a result. Human endeavour is not so simple as that".

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, campaign speech, 1932[1]

Existing political parties have been threatened by the rise of anti-establishment parties across Europe, whether these movements are regarded as of the right (the French National Front, Swedish Democrats, True Finns), the left (Greece's Syriza, Podemos in Spain), or sui generis (Italy's Five Star Movement). In Britain, the UK Independence party has gained substantial support over the last decade, topping the polls in the recent European parliament elections, making this the first national election since 1906 when neither Labour nor the Conservative party had won the popular vote, and securing two stunning byelection gains from the Tories.

Rightwing parties have been most obviously affected by the new alternative parties, as many themes of modern populism – a hostility to Europe, immigration, bureaucracies, elites and centralisers – are typically associated with the right. This is especially the case when populist appeals to national identity, tradition and authoritarian social attitudes have overlapped with the existing 'popular' appeal of many centre-right parties, as Tim Bale and Paul Webb have explained.[2] As a result, Ukip was at first primarily seen as a political threat to the Conservative party. However, just as the success of the National Front in France has not only affected the French right, so the appeal of Ukip is not simply limited to supporters of the Conservative party. According to Peter Kellner, a quarter of Ukip's current supporters voted for either the Liberal Democrats or Labour at the 2010 general election.[3]

More generally, European centre-left parties have struggled in their response to the mood of discontent with 'conventional' politics in which these new movements and parties have thrived. Whether the unpopularity of the French Socialists in government, the struggles of the PSOE in Spain, or the recent decline in support for the Labour party ahead of the general election next May, the centre-left has found it hard to co-opt or confront the new populists and win elections. Even victories, as in Sweden in September and Denmark in 2011, have been percived as the right losing rather than the left winning: there was little or no increase in vote share.

This has led to lively debate about the best way to respond to this new air of populism, a debate occasionally tinged with panic. In Britain, the success of Ukip has led Labour thinkers and strategists to argue that a response is required. Thus, Maurice Glasman, the founder of 'Blue Labour', calls for Labour to stop being so 'middle class',[4] and find a way to appeal once more to working-class voters attracted to UKIP. Writing for the thinktank Class, a former Labour member of the European parliament, Glyn Ford, suggests that Labour must expose the xenophobia of Ukip, while at the same time addressing the core concerns of its voters.[5]

That Ukip has an appeal to the left is not uncontested. Paul Webb, a professor of politics at the University of Sussex, argues that most of the party's voters see themselves as being on the right, and notes that Ukip supporters view Labour even less positively than the far-right British National party.[6] However, as Rob Ford and Matthew Goodwin, the authors of Revolt on the Right, suggest,[7] much of Ukip's success has been among older, white, working-class men, a group most Labour supporters probably feel 'should' be voting for their party. As Goodwin writes: "Ukip is now growing faster than Labour among blue-collar workers, those with no qualifications, the over-65s, whites and men."[8] In short, whether or not those voters moving to Ukip are attitudinally 'of the left', they represent a group whose interests Labour feels it represents.

1. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 'Campaign address on progressive government at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco', 23/09/1932, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=88391

2. Paul Webb and Tim Bale, 'Why do Tories defect to Ukip? Conservative Party Members and the Temptations of the Populist Radical Right', Political Studies, Vol 62. Issue 4 (2014), pp961-970

3. Peter Kellner, 'Where Ukip gets its support', Prospect, March 2014, https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/02/24/where-ukip-gets-its-support/

4. Cited in Michael Savage, 'Labour's core vote hit hard by Ukip', The Times, 28/04/2014, http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article4074563.ece

5. Glyn Ford, 'How can the European left deal with the threat posed by xenophobia?', Class, April 2014, http://classonline.org.uk/docs/Glyn_Ford_Final.pdf

6. Paul Webb, 'Are Ukip a threat to Labour?', Policy Network, 7/01/2014, http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4544&title=Are+UKIP+a+threat+to+Labour%3f

7. Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, 'Why Ukip and the radical right matter for progressives', Policy Network, 10/04/2014, http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4620&title=Why+UKIP+and+the+radical+right+matter+for+progressives

8. Matthew Goodwin, 'Left right behind', Progress, May 2014, http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2014/05/15/left-right-behind/

This working-class support for Ukip is sometimes claimed to stem from a wellspring of dissatisfaction with modern politics that predates the rise of the party itself, stretching all the way back to Thatcherism and Labour's accommodation to post-Thatcherite politics.[9] According to this argument, 'traditional' parties have neglected the concerns of these voters and sought to appeal to 'centrist' voters, often by accepting an 'elite' or 'neoliberal' worldview. As a result, these voters first withdrew from politics, then sought alternatives that spoke more directly to their concerns. To address this, some thinkers, such as Glasman, argue that the cultural, identity and economic concerns of these dissatisfied voters must to be taken more directly into account by the existing parties.[10] Others argue that Ukip must be attacked on a more explicitly economic basis. Seeing the party as effectively racist and a negative force in Britain's social fabric, commentators such as Mehdi Hasan on the left[11] and Alex Massie on the right[12] suggest that Ukip must be confronted directly for offering a political programme that threatens Britain's tolerant diversity. These competing analyses point out the tension for the centrist and those on the left alike. If the appeal of Ukip and other populist parties is rooted in both dissent from 'elites' and a dislike of policies such as greater immigration, high welfare spending and 'political correctness', how can parties of the left appeal to such voters without compromising the core tenets of an open, liberal, diverse, socially just party?

Since the European elections, debate within the Labour party has attempted to resolve that question. Some have argued that Labour needs to 'talk about immigration', while others have argued that concern about immigration is best seen as a signifier of concern about economic insecurity. Some Labour politicians, such as Sadiq Khan, apologise for the party's previous stance on immigration, and argue for more restrictions in the future,[13] though these admissions focus on the former government's approach to transitional measures and do not directly address questions of the free movement of labour across Europe.

In the runup to the European elections, the Labour party attacked Ukip for being 'Thatcherite'[14] and sought to expose it as a party of the radical right economically. At the same time, Tony Blair and some of those associated with New Labour argue for stating the positives of immigration, often combined with an emphasis on preventing abuses and better management of the consequences of immigration by seeking to mitigate real negatives felt by individuals and communities.[15] These varying responses indicate that it is broadly accepted that the rise of populism requires a reply from the centre-left. The question is what that answer should be.

Response one: left populism, or what's wrong with being popular?

This first response is typically advocated by supporters of a more traditional 'left' politics. If the 'mood of the times' is one of disgust at, and dissent from, the political consensus of the last 30 years, and its so-called 'neoliberal agenda', then why should the left not confidently offer its own form of populism? It is worth taking this analysis seriously. In the rock satire Spinal Tap, Nigel Tufnell, the lead guitarist, is confronted by a record label manager who suggests that the group's album cover is sexist. Tufnell responds: 'What's wrong with being sexy?' A similar question should occur to any politicians discussing populism in a democracy. If you believe in democracy, then what is wrong with being popular? Why is the correct response to a populism of the right not to offer a populism of the left?

After all, populism is a contested term. As Tim Bale, chair in politics at Queen Mary, University of London, suggests: the term 'populist' is often used in political debate with barely concealed contempt.[16] Yet is it such a poisonous position? You can, after all, claim Julius Caesar as a 'populares'. More recently, politicians of the left, as diverse as Huey Long, the Great Depression-era governor of Louisiana, and Latin American presidents such as Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa and Evo Morales, have shown that

9. Phil Burton-Cartledge, 'Ukip is what you get after 30 years of neoliberalism', New Statesman, 4/03/2013, http://www.newstatesman.com/austerity-and-its-discontents/2013/03/ukip-what-you-get-after-30-years-neoliberalism

10. Cited in Savage, op. cit.: "This is a long-term trend since 2001, in terms of the working-class vote just declining quite dramatically. The Labour middle-class vote held up [in 2010]. It was the working-class vote that died. These are often people who are earning, who have jobs, but they don't see Labour as representing their interests." http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article4074563.ece

11. Mehdi Hasan, 'The great Ukip racism debate: debunking the six great myths', Huffington Post, 6/05/2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mehdi-hasan/ukip-racism-myths_b_5271986.html?utm_hp_ref=uk

12. Alex Massie, 'Don't be fooled, Ukip is not a libertarian party', The Spectator, 27/11/2012, http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/alex-massie/2012/11/dont-be-fooled-ukip-is-not-a-libertarian-party/

13. Sadiq Khan, 'We were wrong, we are sorry: senior Labour MP pens open letter to UKIP voters', Daily Express, 25/05/2014, http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/478076/We-were-wrong-we-are-sorry-Senior-Labour-MP-Sadiq-Khan-pens-open-letter-to-Ukip-voters

14. Ed Miliband, 'A vote for Ukip would be a vote for the very worst of Thatcherism', Daily Mirror, 30/04/2014, http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/ed-miliband-vote-ukip-vote-3476030

15. Adam Withnall, 'Tony Blair: Nigel Farage and Ukip are 'deceiving' British public and 'holding back' the unemployed with immigration rhetoric', The Independent, 2/06/2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tony-blair-nigel-farage-and-ukip-are-deceiving-british-public-and-holding-back-the-unemployed-with-immigration-rhetoric-9472289.html

16. Tim Bale, 'Countering populism: snog, marry and avoid', Policy Network, 24/04/2013, http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4374&title=Countering+populism%3a+Snog%2c+Marry%2c+Avoid%3f+

such a position can be electorally successful. In Louisiana and Latin America, an enormous contrast between rich elites and the poor masses powered a strongly redistributive agenda. It is not hard to see parallels with western European societies today. Given the huge wealth generated for a few, and the recent collapse of the economy, which has led to a significant increase in economic discomfort felt by millions, should not such a left-populist approach work elsewhere? Furthermore, why reject populism when the purpose of modern left politics is to win power through popular support? If you are a democrat, rejecting the old conception of the 'irrational mob', and, moreover, a social democrat, believing in the importance of equality, why on earth would you not want to be populist?

The key to such a left-populist position is to argue the rightwing populist has made incorrect assumptions about the electorate's true desires. If the right populist incorrectly diagnoses the interests of the people, it then follows that their agenda can be replaced with a 'correct' diagnosis and, from this, develop a policy agenda that truly reflects what the people desire. It is by challenging these assumptions about the interests of the 'many' that many left thinkers believe that the left can trump the populist concerns associated with the right. For example, remove insecurity and low pay as threats, and concern over immigration should fall. If the rightwing populist is a peddler of false consciousness, this can be exposed by a more truthful analysis of voters' interests. Indeed, it is straightforward to construct a populist agenda for Britain's left. Just as it is possible to craft a popular list of policies that tend to the right (immigration, nationalism, authoritarianism on crime, Europe, welfare crackdowns), it is entirely possible to find issues with vast popular support that are associated with the left (higher taxes on the rich, ending tax avoidance, rail renationalisation, full employment, higher wages, rent controls and so on).[17]

In Britain, the left-populist argument against right-populism is based on this insight: there is a better, more just, popular agenda available to the left than exists for rightwing populists; embrace this wholeheartedly, and reap the electoral awards. This is basically the prospectus offered in Britain by Len McCluskey, the general secretary of the Unite trade union,[18] as well as several leftwing journalists and campaigners, such as Owen Jones,[19] John Harris,[20] and Polly Toynbee.[21] Without caricaturing these positions as a single 'left viewpoint', it is reasonable to suggest they represent a shared belief that Ukip, and others on the right, mistake or divert the real interests of the discontented, and that if voters were offered a popular left agenda that spoke to their genuine needs and priorities, then the populists of the right could be defeated.

This analysis leads to an agenda that identifies 'left-inspired' popular desires, with clear evidence that proposes that broad electoral support exists for such policy positions. Its proponents usually describe this offer as a radical social change in the interests of the many. The details of such an agenda varies, but one can paint it in broad strokes: better pay, more jobs, improved public services, and a fairer nation as markets are circumscribed to limit insecurity and taxes are gathered and spent to reduce inequality. So, why would any social democrat recoil from such a prospectus?

Response two: but that just won't work!

The first answer is that, for its critics, a left-populist policy may possess a broad attractiveness, but it is flawed. It is crafted primarily for its appeal, not its efficacy. In other words, no matter how desirable the end, the means simply will not attain it. This is usually because the centrist believes that while the 'popular' issue is a real one, it is incorrectly diagnosed or the proposed solution is erroneous. A populist might blame welfare recipients, bankers, energy companies, bureaucrats, and elites for acting against the best interest of the people. They might well be right, but not so right that the villains are to be blamed for everything.

17. For examples of high polling for leftwing policies see: http://hopisen.com/2012/the-shattering-of-a-mythical-consensus/

18. Matthew Holehouse and Stephen Swinford, 'Len McCluskey tells Ed Miliband, turn left or lose election', Daily Telegraph, 1/04/2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ed-miliband/10737500/Len-McCluskey-tells-Miliband-turn-left-or-lose-election.html

19. Owen Jones, 'Labour needs a politics of hope to counter Ukip's politics of despair', The Guardian, 26/05/2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/26/labour-politics-hope-ukip-despair-nhs-ed-miliband

20. John Harris, 'Is it time for a leftwing version of Ukip?', The Guardian, 9/09/2013, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/09/time-for-leftwing-ukip-labour

21. Polly Toynbee, 'How Ed Miliband can continue to make the political weather', The Guardian, 3/12/13, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/03/ed-miliband-tories-labour-osborne-autumn-statement

If the centrist responds to a bold popular claim with a slightly mournful 'but that just won't work!', then, to the centrist, a populist policy agenda can appear to be a knowingly inauthentic piece of political theatre. This is perhaps why opponents often describe populists as snake-oil salesmen and quacks. The centrist anti-populist believes, at some level, that the populist is not a true believer, but instead a political cousin to Harold Hill, the travelling salesman in the 1957 musical The Music Man, who uses the corrupting influence of pool halls in order to sell musical instruments to worried parents. I find it surprisingly easy to imagine Nigel Farage, the leader of Ukip, singing: "Ya got trouble, my friend, right here in River City." But this suspicion is impossible for the anti-populist centrist to prove. One can never demonstrate that a rival is actually aware that their policy prescriptions will not deliver the results they promise. The centrist can only imply, or suspect, or judge this to be the case by their past results or, indeed, lack of them.

Is everyone who proposes a popular but untried solution a dangerous populist cynically manipulating public concerns? Clearly not. There are many cases where a reformer thinks public discontent is justified and the solution proposed is workable. After all, is it a populist position today to support old age pensions or a health service, and to suggest that some people must contribute to paying for them? Is it populist to suggest people feel a real attachment to national identity and this attachment deserves respect from elites, or that discipline in schools is a positive good? In such cases, a policy stops being populist, and starts being an acute democratic solution to a real problem. The liminal space between populism and centrism is far wider than it appears.

The label of 'populism' does not tend to be applied unless you disagree with either the reality of the problem or distrust the workability of the solution. This is a strategic weakness for the centrist because whether a solution to a problem will work or not can never be definitively known beforehand. When centrists criticise the populism of others, they really seem to be saying that the problem (or target) are incorrect, or, if the targets are correct, that the proposed solution is unworkable, and that, at some level, the populist is aware of this. This objection to populism is problematic due to the relative stances of the populist and the 'existing order', because it can be far from clear who is in the best position to judge the achievability of popular solutions.

It is no coincidence that populist approaches to politics tend to be marked by phrases like: 'saying what people really think', 'standing up for the people against the elites', and 'the voice of the common man'. The populist's attempt to identify his or her stance with the interests of the people gives this position its power.

A populist politician often claims a superior connection with 'popular' concerns and attitudes to existing politicians, who are constrained by various complicities with power, interest-groups and so on. This means that, if the centrist denies that 'the people' can be given what they want, their objection can easily be presented as partial, or the result of appeasing interests opposed to the people. In such an argument, practical objections to change become symbols of a compromise with the system itself, a tone marked by use of phrases like 'technocrat' as an insult. Express doubt that a financial transaction tax can pay for generous pensions for all, and it is easy for this to be dismissed as an argument designed simply to serve the interests of bankers and traders, rather than an objection to be considered on its own terms. It is clear a managerial or technocratic objection to populism is unlikely to succeed on its own, as it does not respond to the positive ambitions a left populism can rightly claim for itself.

Centrists need something more than mere nay-saying. In response to populism, whether of the left or the right, in normal times centrists have two, contrasting 'popular' alternatives. First, centrists could argue that both left and right populists misdiagnose the political interests of the people, in the same way left populists make this case against right populists. As we have noted, it is possible to generate significant polling majorities for widely divergent policy offers, from anti-immigration nationalism to redistributive confiscation. Some of these are conflicting (a call for lower taxes and better public services, for example), but by no means all. The first popular centrist alternative is to claim these contradictory messages are reconcilable and that there does exist somewhere 'a popular centre' which can be defined and offered, and this popular centre is more attractive to the electorate than either the populism of the right or left, as it is able to select the 'best' targets and issues from both sides.

Such a position might be an averaging, or an anthology. It could mediate between desires or simply select the most desired: tough on immigration, but redistributive, aggressively cracking down on crime, and anti-European. In effect, the argument here is that the centre can 'out-populist the populists', because the centre is a better place to be located in order to to select the most politically appealing policies.

Those on the centre-left and centre-right might then argue to their more radical colleagues that they have the priorities of the people wrong because they focus only on a small proportion of what voters seek: 'Voters may wish to hear from us about immigration, Europe and tax cuts (or rail nationalisation, health spending and tax justice) but that is not <u>all</u> they want to hear.' In a world of competing popular appeals, it is arguable that the most successful electoral position is located from where as many voters as possible can be reached.

This first argument is, in reality, a competing populist offer: 'Your populism is weaker than mine in securing the support of the people.' Once this is established, it is a relatively simple political move to argue that those to the left or right of the centrist have an interest in 'falling into line' with a centrist political offer, because otherwise they risk a more complete defeat by political opponents. So Conservative party moderates argue that because they can gain the support of moderate voters, a centrist conservatism is more 'popular' than Ukip's populism. A social democrat moderate makes the same argument to their socialist or green-influenced colleagues.

The second alternative focuses on efficacy. This alternative springs from the earlier insight that the populist has diagnosed important concerns, but argues they have either defined the problem incorrectly or are offering a solution that will not address those concerns. This means the populist, whether of left or right, is offering a false prospectus. However, instead of merely objecting, the centrist can offer an alternative with a greater hope of practical success. This critique can run from 'Yes, you are right that this is a problem. Here is a better, more practical way to achieve the same end' to an outright condemnation of the attempt to punish an exposed and vulnerable group for causing a problem not truly of their making, thus preventing a real solution emerging.[22]

Such a pragmatic approach ties well with a 'valence' approach to politics. If the answer to populism is about efficacy, then to the centrist 'what matters is what really works'. This second centrist response to populism can be summed up as: moderation and practicality is the most effective route to achieving reasonable and broadly held desires. These two centrist populisms can be combined, as John McTernan, a former adviser to Blair, notes, so 'real' popular needs are met, alongside an emphasis on the practicality and delivery of attaining these relatively modest popular demands. McTernan quotes Norman Kirk, the former New Zealand prime minister: "New Zealanders don't ask for much: someone to love, somewhere to live, somewhere to work and something to hope for."[23]

22. This latter is the theme of Richard Hofstadter's 'The paranoid style in American politics', Harpers, November 1964, http://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/

23. John McTernan, 'Don't lose heart, there are ways of defeating Ukip', The Times, 28/04/2014, http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/thunderer/article4074391.ece

In normal times, faced with this popular centre, populists of the left or right are confronted with a double bind. First, the centrist can offer a more popular agenda than the populist. Second, the centrist can offer an agenda likely to meet many voters' desires, as they can be more practically achieved than those of the populist. It is easier, for example, to limit low skill-immigration than halt all migration, or to create training programmes for the young unemployed than to end unemployment altogether. Moreover, achieving ambitious change contains a proportional risk of failure.

Such a position seems almost impregnable when there are proceeds of growth to be shared. It is hard to argue against 'what matters is what works' when policy appears to be working well, and almost impossible to argue against it when the electorate themselves seem to be more or less satisfied with the direction of the country. The question of how a functioning system should distribute rewards remains politically live, but a combination of political positioning and the ability to distribute gains means that the extent of the immediate change required appears limited, however ambitious the eventual destination.

What matters is what works, but what if things aren't working?

So far, so straightforward. The centrist position is fundamentally not a lack of social ambition, but rather one that argues that gradual, careful adjustment is sufficient to the task. As we have seen, this can be argued successfully on both electoral and policy grounds against those who seek more radical solutions when politics appears to be functioning well.

Yet this response to populism becomes fatally flawed and quickly loses both political and intellectual coherence when confidence in efficacy is undermined. Rather than operating from the strength of a broad electoral appeal and a record of past success, the centrist is reduced to competing on the same ground with the populist but with far less clarity of either targets or solutions. The centrist reformer appears less ambitious, hopeful, credible and appealing than their more radical rivals, and struggles to compete in either prospectus or energy. This is where centrist politics finds itself today.

Co-opted populism and counter-populism

This raises the question of whether there can be a popular centre in a period of crisis. One route would be to pursue a sort of populism-lite. The centrist identifies a series of unpopular 'targets' – whether they are the banks and energy companies, or immigrants and welfare recipients – and proposes policies that would negatively impact upon them to the benefit of the rest of society, but in a toned down form compared to the genuine populism of both left and right. This populism-lite has been adopted by both the centre-left and centre-right today. Its principal weakness, however, is that by identifying such targets but only proposing a limited response to the problems they allegedly cause, the centrist concedes a major component of the populist argument, without any credibility in terms of efficacy.

For example, if you argue that unfettered free movement of peoples across Europe is disruptive and destabilising, and, therefore, that transitional arrangements should be put in place for putative future EU entrants, you are proposing a solution that cannot address the magnitude of the problem you are accepting exists. You will, moreover, soon be outbid by someone willing to promise the end of free movement altogether.

Even if such a political position were to secure electoral victory, it is a recipe for disaster in government, as both the Conservative party and the French Socialists have discovered. By suggesting populist objectives (pledging to end 'rule by Brussels' in the case of the former, and austerity in the case of the latter) but ultimately proposing only relatively minor adjustments in policy, the electorate is dissapointed when you fail to achieve what your rhetoric hinted you would like to. Nor does it seem that such a programme gets credit for the real achievements that are delivered, whether lower migration or higher taxes on the wealthy. These outcomes are judged against a far higher standard, and one that the centrist cannot hope to meet merely by incremental change.

The last line: putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again

Instead, the key to the popular centre is to turn populism's most powerful insight about times of crisis against itself. This insight is that conventional politics has failed, and this failure has severe consequences. One right-populist claim is that because 'traditional' politics cannot achieve any social goods at all, the best that can be managed is a wholesale rejection of dangerous, uncomfortable change. This is usually expressed though a suspicion of disruptive outsiders, from immigrants to mobile capital. On the other side, some populisms are founded upon a belief that the causes of political failure are easily identifiable, isolated and addressed. It follows from this that worthwhile change would be simple and easy, if one only has the will and the ambition to pursue a radical remaking of society (for example, by forming a new nation state). This is the argument most often made by the populist left and the libertarian right. These two populist alternatives are two sides of the same coin, founded on a rejection of the moderate contention that challenges, while complex, varied, and never open to simple resolution, can, in fact, be overcome and steered towards better outcomes.

The strength of populism is that it has identified a clear and significant target responsible for the failures of the past. Yet because the world is indeed complex, the causes of events rarely straightforward, and progress often discomforting, securing change is difficult, hard-won, and complicated. This is even more so when it seems the system is not functioning well. In other words, the weakness of populism is that it assumes a primacy of political will over a world that does not bend so easily to such demands. This makes it possible to challenge the radicalism of populism on its own terms. If the prevailing mood of the populace is that politics has failed to solve even the most straightforward problems, then there exists the possibility to exploit the gulf between this assessment and the attitude of the populist, that politics alone possesses the power to either control all damaging forces or remake society entirely. From this insight into the limitations of politics, it becomes possible to build an appealing alternative.

What might such a popular centre look like? It might begin by accepting the popular view that the political system is not working, and instead of allocating blame for this to an external force, allocate it where it belongs: to the system of governance and politics itself, and, furthermore, to politicians' own expectations, claims and demands of politics. A large proportion of the electorate would assent to this insight.

Next, instead of trying to disguise the array of problems that exist, the popular centrist would recount them enthusiastically, aware that they are only stating the obvious. This would make it clear that the popular centre accepts that the very failure of politics to solve, or even anticipate, all problems demonstrates that politics is not, and cannot be, a tool capable of creating a perfect society. Instead of seeing politics as primary, a popular centre would see it instead as an essential, but ultimately a secondary, regulator and director of other forces. This position would accept that politics is only one

factor among many – including technological changes, the behaviour of other states, and economic, demographic and social shifts – that change the world around us. So much is obvious, given the limitation of politics of all varieties to even anticipate recent technological and financial structural shifts. However, rather than concluding that radical structural shifts are needed and they must be led by politicians, the popular centre could instead argue that the evidence of past failure shows that politics can only ameliorate, anticipate and affect these forces, it cannot remove them, or eliminate them entirely. One should rightly blame politics for its own flaws, therefore, but not for every ill in society. In this, the popular centrist would be rejecting a key element of other populisms, but going with the grain of public opinion, since the electorate have already observed the inadequacy and partial success of political intervention at first hand, and have low expectations of future political success.

This position requires one further step to work. If trust in the efficacy of politics has broken down, the first task of the popular centrist is not to fight political opponents to their left or to their right, but instead to restore trust in the efficacy of politics itself. The core popular centrist challenge is to prove again that politics can function well at the messy business of meeting needs. Without rebuilding trust, the moderate reformer is left exposed to both the despairing and the impossiblist, with no better argument than rivals to their extremes, and, in some ways, a much worse one. This makes the re-establishment of political trust the essential mission of a popular centre in a time of crisis.

The popular centre's challenge: how can you ever trust me again?

How does one rebuild trust? Politics after a crash is like a faithless boyfriend, or an inadequate employee. Does a loud pledge of loyalty, or the promise of outstanding future performance, mean very much in that situation? Or would a daily act of supportiveness or punctuality slowly re-establish credibility?

The popular centre's advantage is that such a project goes with the grain of existing public attitudes to political puissance. The evidence around us is that simply willing a good end does not produce good results; unexpected developments and pressures can, and indeed do, derail even the most careful plans. Therefore, instead of setting our sights at greater and more extensive changes, the primary challenge is to get the most basic functions working again: to prove that there are some things that do work, that can be changed, that can be improved, however slight, or apparently modest in ambition, these might be. Rather than try to address huge popular concerns, the primary task is to focus on credible, incremental change, creating for politics the capital for further change.

We can, therefore, define a difference between the popular centre and populism as this: the populist of the extremes asks, 'what can I offer you that you want?', while the popular centrist asks, 'what would most demonstrate that I am worthy of your trust?'

What is likely to earn trust? The first and most obvious step is to secure economic stability, then, later, growth and broader prosperity. The left is often surprised when conservatives and free marketeers gain popularity during recessions, crashes and crises. "The system has failed," we say. "Clearly people will reject the advocates of the system." As Martin Pugh relates in his history of the Labour party, during the 1930s, "the confidence of socialists in the inevitable discrediting of capitalism proved to be optimistic despite the prevalence of mass unemployment."[24] Such misplaced confidence is not unknown to more modern advocates of socialism. Often, though, those who are asked to deliver security are those in situ when the economy stabilises. It may not be due to their work. Their efforts may even have been counterproductive or destructive. Yet, they can claim to be trustworthy, to have done as asked, and to have saved the day. The likes of Stanley Baldwin, the British prime minister during the 1930s, Angela Merkel, or even, perhaps,

24. Martin Pugh, Speak for Britain: A New History of the Labour Party, Bodley Head, 2010, p186

David Cameron can make this case. So the first challenge for the popular centre in such circumstances is to be the party of economic stability: to be a party that emphasises practicality, safety and the reduction of risk and then, once achieved, of growth and prosperity more widely spread.

To extend this further, the challenge is to be the party which, while accepting that politics cannot control events and is often at the mercy of forces well beyond mere politics, recognises that only by accepting the very real limitations of politics can you master the changes that are possible and desirable. Do not underestimate or seek to overturn public doubts over the efficacy and use of politics, but instead use that doubt as an ally in delineating which changes are both needed and achievable. This might seem unambitious to the progressive-minded, but it suggests that, on the big social questions, the priority is to demonstrate that you can do something well, thus earning permission to do more later.

For social policy, this means a focus on small, tangible, easily communicated and credibly delivered steps forward. The direction of travel can be clear and hopeful, setting out that something can indeed be done, but crawling before you have permission to run should be a positive boon. It follows from this that the credibility of the detail of a policy becomes as significant as the policy itself. Whether it is a programme for raising wages, improving housing stock, creating employment, or investing in infrastructure, the biggest error would be to mistake the attraction of a bold promise for the value of a believable programme.

Alongside social reform, there needs to be an emphasis on reform of the state and its institutions. It may seem irrelevant to talk of institutions during a moment of economic and social crisis. Yet if trust in the institutions of governance and elites has declined, a rebuilt popular centre urgently needs to rebuild confidence in the competence and representativeness of institutions.

This might be about devolution or democratisation, but, at its core, it must be about the effectiveness and accountability of power. This would involve a critique of parties and structures: of the narrow sources of authority within existing political movements, of political funding, and of the ineffective nature of policy development and accountability for policy failure.

Roosevelt developed new institutions and organisations to respond to social needs, while also proposing the regulation of the economic power of financial titans. Italian reformers today talk of a new constitutional settlement. In Britain, France, and Germany, it feels that there is a relatively limited desire to reform the state itself, not least because broadly speaking, progressives do not tend to hold the state itself responsible for recent failures. It is not we who are to blame, but the banks, after all. Yet the opposite is true, as the populists argue. It is not just the banks, but politics which crashed and now requires careful reconstruction.

What institutional reforms might be of use? Reforms that demonstrate the role of the state in ameliorating risk and distress and in managing the dangers that financial instability can create for citizens are most important. To improve regard for the effectiveness of the state when it comes to provision, the popular centre should advocate new systems for managing and controlling pensions; new organisations to deal with how we help the elderly; more support for parents; and insurance and protection for workers from unexpected but life-changing events. Moreover, the popular centre should embrace auditing and inspection regimes that would give better warning of building fiscal, investment and prudential pressures. The popular centre can also advocate significant changes to the way our democracy functions. It is essential here not to mistake political reform for partisan manoeuvring. Too often, when parties talk of political reform, underneath their proposals lies a careful calculation of party political interest: who gains from proportional representation, devolution to cities, regions and nations, an elected senate, 'English votes', or boundary reviews?

If rebuilding trust in the effectiveness of politics is a mandatory mission, then building a political reform programme that recognises that almost all political actors have valid grievances with the current system is key. In the British context, the Conservatives are right that the boundary system is currently biased against them and delay in reviews has not served them well. The Liberal Democrats are right that while first-past-the-post has delivered clear leadership at Westminster, it has also created politically uncompetitive, one-party states in large swathes of local government. Labour are right that the regions and cities of England have been denuded of power, while Whitehall has adopted policies in education and local regeneration funding which have reduced democratic oversight and innovative capability. It should not be beyond the wit of politics to produce a democratic reform agenda that met all of these legitimate complaints, and thereby demonstrated that not only is political reform possible, but that a popular desire for change could be met, and an 'out of touch elite' could, in fact, respond to public disquiet in a functioning and collaborative way.

This then, is the basis for a renewed popular centre: a recognition of the fundamentally secondary role of politics as a driver of social change, given the multiplicity of sources of innovation and change in the modern world, and, proceeding from this, an emphasis on placing an unrelenting stress on stability in economic performance and effective representation of the public will as the fundamental role of governance in the face of powerful, fast-changing forces.

The aim of this agenda would be to prove that, properly delivered, the state can still provide the basics of national life: a reasonably growing economy; a responsive democracy; and public services that are accountable and spend the money invested in them effectively. Once these basics are established, confidence in the efficacy and utility of both politics and government will return. Once they do, the popular centre should focus on the larger ambitions of social reform: issues that if the electorate does not believe the state can competently address, it will have no desire to embrace. In short, the mission of the popular centre in uncertain times is nothing less than the restoration of faith in the capability of government to deliver gradual improvements and prevent catastrophic failure.

Why is this a 'popular' approach, rather than mere technocratic pragmatism? Because it asserts that, within the real limits it faces, politics can make significant changes to society and accepts the verdict of the electorate that the institutions and structures of society have failed in this task and therefore need significant reform. The key difference with populism is that it allocates the blame for this failure internally, not externally. The fault is in us. Given that it is politics that has failed and is derided, attacking the structure and systems of politics itself is a fundamentally popular approach. Given that politics is dysfunctional and currently clearly not in a position to deliver wider social change, this creates the political justification for a programme that sits well within the reduced parameters of credibility.

By working with the electoral insight that politics has 'failed', and accepting the limitations such a failure represents, the popular centre can develop a political position which is defensible against both the impossibilist and despairing populist. 'Yes,' it says, 'we can solve these big problems, but it will take time, and patience, and effort.' This tempers the natural confidence and hunger for change of the reformist with the scepticism borne of failure that nothing worthwhile comes easy. This position is neither defensive nor conservative, nor does it offer castles in the sky. It is the radical centre, remoulded for an uncertain, unhappy age.