

Constructive opposition, and the gulf between the parties

A letter to the Herald, January 2010

Sir,

Robert Saunders complains about the number of times Conservatives have not opposed government legislation in its entirety (Herald letters, 22 Jan).

A more common complaint about British politics is that it is too tribal and adversarial, with one party always opposing the other's measures, regardless of merit. It's easy to see how such an impression gets reinforced by the weekly spectacle of Prime Minister's Questions.

In fact there are many things on which rival parties agree. To my mind it is right that in those circumstances an Opposition doesn't oppose everything just for the sake of it.

In politics, you can expend a lot of energy posturing, or you can focus on what practically you can get done. Given the numbers of Labour MPs in the House of Commons, there is little chance of voting down a whole Bill in principle. But you can sometimes at least change parts through amendments, working together with MPs from other parties. This is part of what we call constructive opposition – as David Cameron promised when he became party leader.

Mr Saunders says the statistics prove there is little difference between Labour and Conservatives, and only the Lib Dems could represent real change. This is the line that Lib Dem HQ settled on recently, to try to undermine the Conservatives. Actually, it is almost the exact opposite of the traditional Lib Dem line of attack, but expect to hear it often in the weeks ahead.

I can assure Mr Saunders that there is plenty of fundamental difference between Labour and my party: differences in principles, values and outlook. You can see those differences in our relative attitudes towards enterprise, aspiration, the family and the role of the state.

But the biggest difference of all is in our approach to the economy and fiscal responsibility.

Reverting to type, Labour simply refuse to face the reality of a £178bn deficit. Conservatives know that no responsible government can take that attitude, and we will be frank with the British people about the difficult things that will have to be done.

What of the Lib Dems? Mr Saunders says his party would close tax loopholes, bring in a tax on mansions and cut tax by £700 for everyone else, while reducing class sizes and developing one-to-one tuition. I agree that sounds nice, but I'm afraid it doesn't even come close to adding up.

Yours

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