

A moral maze

Simplistic notions of good and evil in politics are to blame for many of the left's schisms. The latest breakaway is no exception, writes *Chris Clarke*



Chris Clarke is author of Warring Fictions: left populism and its defining myths

THE FORMATION OF the Independent Group (TIG) is the latest example of the left's historic tendency to split. Although the breakaway grouping contains three Tories, TIG's balance of members – and the values espoused – lean left far more than right. Early indications suggest Labour will take the biggest electoral hit.

The journey from Corbyn's election in 2015 to TIG's formation in 2019 essentially follows a well-trodden path, whereby the left turns on itself. To prevent a full-on fragmentation, we need to understand why this happens.

The resigning statements from TIG MPs offer some answers. Brexit aside, their problem was more with a non-inclusive style of politics than a set of manifesto pledges. The MPs cited the ultra-partisanship, abuse and policy dogma which they felt was represented by the Corbynite left. They suggested that approaches based on class war, cold war and culture war had made Labour a non-progressive party: anti-internationalist, institutionally racist, sympathetic to authoritarianism, and at odds with the interests of Labour voters.

Precisely how correct they were about this is for another day. But their diagnosis is important.

For many on the left, the political spectrum is a moral spectrum. The right is seen as spiteful, selfish or both. Individuals, countries, institutions, parties, and even religions are arrayed by the left along a scale – from victims to villains and from benign to malign.

This is less pronounced on the right and is, I think, central to the left's tendency to split. More moderate Labourites – those regarded as closer to the 'bad' pole – have their motives and principles traduced. And, as soon as a distinction is drawn and someone ends up on the 'wrong' side, it becomes a clash of good and evil: left-wing White Knight against right-wing Dark Knight. A narrow difference about nationalising water ends up as a Manichean struggle, with abuse and double standards entering the debate as a result.

Of course, most of us believe our values represent the fairest and most sensible way to run the country: as someone on the left I certainly do. But once you make this a moral question, deeper cleavages open up. So, while the values espoused by the right – personal responsibility, tradition, individual choice – are, in my view, harmful in their consequences, they are not malevolent in their intentions.

The case against 'Dark Knight' thinking is both ethical and electoral. For starters, the notion that 'left equals moral' encourages tribalism over pluralism. Humans are complex, and an individual can simultaneously be working-class,

a Tory, a gay rights campaigner, a banker, a climate change denier, and a supporter of higher taxes. But the Dark Knight mentality asks us to condemn the whole based on a part. As well as being a gateway to extremism, this prevents a 'broad church' appeal at the ballot box.

Moreover, the notion that the political spectrum is a moral one contradicts the idea that people are, in significant part, products of nurture. It's no coincidence that older people disproportionately hold socially conservative views. Or that those from Tory families are more likely to vote Tory. Or that those drawn to the far-right are often out of work. We can deduce who's right and who's wrong through trying to disentangle ourselves from our own lived experience and vested interests. But why let this bleed into moral judgements?

Lastly, the Dark Knight analysis causes the left to invest specific policies with moral worth. Methods like public ownership or non-intervention abroad become de facto good. As well as creating policies that often contradict Labour values, this too has a knock-on effect on electability. The public's hunch is that the ability to say 'this far but no further' is absent from the Labour left; that the emotional attachment to nationalisation or pacifism is so strong that the party would pursue them come what may.

The Dark Knight mentality is most pronounced on the hard left, where politics is defined by 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' positions, and by the 'no enemies to the left' mantra. In 1930s Germany, this led to the dismissal of everyone even a notch to the right of the Communist party as 'social fascists', interchangeable with the Nazis. In the age of social media, it has created a new set of caricatures – 'centrist', 'Blairite', 'neoliberal' – which cast ideological neighbours as sworn enemies.

However, the issue goes beyond the vices of the hard left. Milder Dark Knight assumptions have historically been common throughout the Labour movement. Like a 'Tories are lower than vermin' mug, sitting harmlessly in the cupboard, a spirit of moral partisanship runs deep. A tacit acceptance of the Dark Knight prism is part of the reason why, for moderates, the 'red Tory' accusation is so offensive.

In light of the breakaway TIGgers, the approach among some is to double down on Dark Knight approaches, accusing the newly independent MPs of Toryism and self-interest. This is suicidal for Labour and will only shrink the tent. Instead, the party must challenge the Dark Knight, us-against-them instinct and ask ourselves whether it is either effective or true. ■