

BACK TO THE FUTURE

At his monthly press conference earlier this week Gordon Brown repeated Labour's mantra that the forthcoming general election is a choice between competing policies, not a referendum on the performance of one party (his own) in government.

As a political tactic, this line is intended to flush out the opposition and to spread the burden of justification across the political spectrum. To make the general election about the future is to make it about something that imposes a duty of disclosure upon all political parties. There is a further objective: shifting the axis of political comparison. Instead of judging the government's performance against a hypothetical standard of infallibility, Labour wants us to see the election as a choice between flesh and blood political parties.

We may be fallible, the argument runs, but so are the other lot and you need to decide whose fallibilities you would rather live with over the next five years. To judge from David Cameron's faltering account of key elements of his party's tax and spending plans, the shift in emphasis from retrospective to prospective is doing Labour some political good.

At the same press conference, however, Gordon Brown made great play of his handling of the economy in the wake of the financial crisis. He contrasted his own adroitness with the perceived shortcomings of his Conservative opponents. Was this a pitch for votes on the basis of what has gone before, what is to come, or a bit of both? At the very least, the message seemed to be that we should see in Labour an underlying continuity between the competence and values it has displayed in office and those it will exhibit if the electorate gives it another shot at power.

The difficulty with the idea of underlying continuity is that it starts to blur precisely the boundaries that Labour is trying to maintain. If we are permitted to base our expectations about a future Labour government on how the government has conducted itself in office, then presumably we can draw on any and all evidence from 1997 onwards and not just the selective (and contestable) evidence of a slice of its more recent economic management. Extrapolation can point in many directions.

Does Labour want voters to remember the past, in the hope that the good times will have imprinted themselves more strongly than the bad? Or does it want voters to clear their minds altogether and approach the polling booths unencumbered by thoughts of what has gone before? Either way, Labour is having to confront something puzzling about voting itself, combining as it does the selection-between-options we associate with the rational consumer and the retribution-come-what-may we associate with the righter of wrongs. Which of these impulses prevails varies over time and between issues. For now, the Chilcot inquiry offers a daily reminder of how morally queasy politics can make us feel and of how voting offers us the chance to distance ourselves from the past sources of this queasiness, independent of calculations about our future well-being. Against this backdrop, weaning us off the retributive view of voting is no easy task.

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