

ON LESSER EVILISM

WITH A UK general election looming, pundits at the *Guardian* and *New Statesman* have been urging the Prime Minister in waiting, Keir Starmer, to set out a credible plan for government. Labour, we are told, ‘desperately needs to stand for something’; it ‘needs a big idea’, a ‘political vision’ that ‘resonates with the majority’, a ‘clearer policy platform to win voters’ trust’.¹ Yet there is nothing particularly obscure about Starmer’s programme. Petty authoritarianism, ‘fiscal discipline’ and fealty to the White House are the hallmarks of his politics, which he practises with perfect coherence and consistency. Those for whom this type of politics is either blandly uninspiring or actively repellent do not need further clarification of Starmer’s beliefs. For them, the only reason to vote Labour is to dislodge the governing Conservatives after a dismal decade and a half in office. As the ballot approaches and the polls narrow, the Starmerite commentariat will begin to register this fact. They will become less concerned with defining Starmer’s ‘vision’ and more focused on addressing this pool of potential abstentionists—urging them to put aside their qualms and vote for the lesser of the available evils.

I

The argument can appear unassailable. The lesser evil, by definition, is the least bad of a given set of options. To refuse to accept the least bad is to prefer the worse over the better, which seems obviously illogical. This, it is often implied, is not only a failure of rationality but also of morality. By failing to minimize the bad, you are in a sense responsible for the ‘surplus’ that is embodied in the realization of the greater rather than the lesser evil. This is often linked rhetorically with notions of maturity and immaturity. The argument of the lesser evil is styled as ‘grown-up politics’: accepting that we cannot always have what we want,

that we must sometimes swallow our disappointment and make do with second worst.² Those unwilling to do this are cast as unable to master their own impulses for the greater good. They are stubborn, petulant, selfish, clinging to their idealism out of spite or vanity. Or their behaviour is painted as an expression of privilege. It's easier to say 'Damn the consequences' if you will be immune to them anyway, while others suffer the brunt. In other words, those not receptive to the argument of the lesser evil are spoilt children.³

Even if we feel instinctively that something about this familiar line of argument is fraudulent, it can be difficult to pin down the error. Perhaps the most obvious response is to point out the way it directs our attention onto a question that matters much less than others we might ask. Why are we debating whether or not to vote for A, who is (let us suppose) marginally less odious than B, rather than thinking about how we came to be faced with such an appalling choice in the first place? Because, it is tempting to answer, diverting the public with this relatively inconsequential question is rather useful to those with power: as long as we're busy debating A versus B, we will feel like we're involved in political decision-making, but without being in danger of actually changing anything. And if A versus B is so boring that many people lose interest in 'politics' altogether, so much the better.

2

Part of the reply, then, is that it often doesn't much matter whom we vote for or whether we vote at all. This, once again, is a stance liable to be accused of immaturity, a kind of adolescent nihilism, although it need be nothing of the sort. There is much that can be done other than voting—and even if there weren't, this wouldn't make voting any more effective a means to social change. Yet there is a grain of merit in the accusation that indifference to the electoral game is a luxury. Édouard

¹ Simon Fletcher, 'Keir Starmer's Labour Desperately Needs to Stand for Something', *New Statesman*, 28 July 2021; Andrew Marr, 'Labour Could Face an Election Next Spring. Keir Starmer Needs a Big Idea, and Fast', *New Statesman*, 6 April 2022; Kiran Stacey, 'Labour Figures from 1997 Victory Warn Starmer Against Cautious Approach', *Guardian*, 5 October 2023.

² Ian Dunt, 'Starmer Victorious: Finally There's a Grown-Up in Charge', *politics.co.uk*, 4 April 2020.

³ Neil Midgley, 'We're Spoiling Our Children and Turning Them into Brattish Corbynistas', *Telegraph*, 20 July 2016.

Louis makes the point, in *The End of Eddy*, that even minor political events, like passing a bill or changing a policy, may be crucial for the poor—an occasion for despair or relief—in a way that is less likely for the rich. The precariousness of individual lives is such that small developments have major implications. A bureaucratic mistake, a delayed operation, a rent increase or a visa problem can set them unravelling. The hollowness of liberal democracy doesn't mean that different outcomes within that system are not consequential, up to and including the distinction between life and death. Neither point takes away from the other. So if it doesn't matter, it also does—at least sometimes.

3

The point about narrowing our attention, though valid, does not constitute a direct riposte to the lesser-evil question. It says only: we should be talking more about other things. Sure, says the lesser evilist: but you've still got to hold your nose and vote for Starmer—or Macron, or Scholz. In the UK, this might seem a bit rich in light of recent political history. Where was the chorus, in 2017 and 2019, insisting that right-minded people support Labour in order to avoid the greater evil of the Conservatives? No, Corbynism had to be stopped even if it meant letting in the great *bête noire du jour* of all sensible liberals, Boris Johnson.

4

It is sometimes—very often, no doubt—a good idea to choose the less bad of multiple options, none of which we like very much. We recognize this in any number of everyday expressions, from 'damage limitation' to 'the best of a bad lot' to 'the devil you know'. It is no more than a reflection of the fact that we not only can't have everything we want, but frequently have no choice but to have something we actively don't want. That holds all the more starkly in politics. So, the point of questioning political arguments that make appeal to the 'lesser evil' is not that arguments of this kind are always wrong.

5

But lesser evilism is not the watertight construction of common sense that it purports to be. In fact, it's full of holes. For one, the argument as it is usually voiced is crudely consequentialist: you must do whatever can be expected to produce the best (or least bad) consequences.

Rightly or wrongly, though, most of us are not crude consequentialists. We think that other things matter, at least sometimes. For many of us, there is a point beyond which appeals to the lesser evil lose their grip on us, where holding our noses no longer seems like an acceptable or appropriate response.

6

Lesser evilism in electoral politics tends to conceive of consequences only in the immediate sense of one or another party being in power. But this construes consequences too narrowly. A particular party being in power is not the sole outcome of the votes cast. A vote, however infinitesimally and depending on a whole array of interrelated factors, might reward a party for how it has conducted itself; it might communicate to those in power that one issue is important to people and that another is not. When Blair was re-elected in 2005, what was arguably communicated was that you can invade Middle Eastern countries despite massive public opposition and people will still vote for you. Even granted that the Conservatives were the greater evil in 2005, a voting policy of ‘Teach New Labour a lesson’ might have had a more salutary effect on British politics.

7

Once we look beyond the immediate term, the claim that electing the lesser evil will always produce the better consequences goes from trivial to highly dubious. The point is not complicated: we’re all familiar enough with the idea of strategies that work in the short term but are self-defeating in the longer run. The problem with a politics of the lesser evil is that it entrenches an incentive structure which rewards politicians for warmongering, privatizations and corruption, placing no limits on the depths to which they can sink, thereby facilitating a ‘great moving right show’.

8

There is an internet meme that visualizes the conventional political spectrum—‘left’, ‘right’ and ‘centre’—repeated several times, each below the last. In the second line, what was previously ‘the left’ has been crossed out, and the new ‘the left’ is written in the place that was previously ‘the centre’. ‘Right’ is in the same place as before, with ‘centre’ now

half-way between the two. The third iteration repeats the process: the former 'left' has gone, and the former centre is now the 'left', with the new 'centre' now squeezed even more tightly between 'left' and 'right'. In the final line, the 'left' has jumped to where the 'right' originally stood, and the 'right' has jumped still further, onto previously far-right territory. Far from being a hypothetical scenario, this picture matches recent British political history with uncanny precision: the policies of the far-right National Front in the 1970s—like stopping immigration, rejecting the common market and scrapping overseas aid—are more or less indistinguishable from the current platform of the Conservative Party; the Labour Party, in turn, is now more or less indistinguishable from the Tories.

9

The paradox of the lesser evil, then, is that by always choosing the lesser evil you can end up with a greater one. But there is one more, gaping hole. The argument proceeds as if 'evil' were something linear, possible in principle to measure on a single scale, so that there is always an answer to the question of which of two options is the most and which the least bad. But why assume that evil has a common currency? Can two parties not be bad in different ways? How do you measure an insipid, craven evil against a brazen, swaggering one? A competent versus an incompetent malevolence? A murderous foreign policy against murderous domestic austerity?

10

Whichever dimension you focus on, though, the case for seeing Starmer's Labour Party as the lesser among the available evils of Britain in 2024 is weak. Every Labour policy that might have given the proponents of lesser evilism something to work with has been unceremoniously scrapped: the pledge of money for green-tech companies, (slightly) higher taxes on the highest earners, abolition of tuition fees, ending outsourcing to private companies in the NHS (Labour now promises to increase it).

11

As for the evil, Starmer offers an embarrassment of riches. You could be forgiven for thinking that he is engaged in some sort of performative stress-testing of the limits of the lesser-evilist argument. Starmer

has avidly defended the siege of Gaza, supporting Israel's 'right' to cut off food and water, threatened to sack anyone in his parliamentary party who calls for a ceasefire, subverted parliamentary procedures to prevent Labour MPs backing a Scottish Nationalist motion for one. He is shoulder to shoulder with the Tories on plans to criminalize the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. He backs the bombing of Yemen, while out-hawking the Conservatives on Iran, China and Russia.⁴ He has promised to speed up deportations and 'off-shore' asylum seekers—sending them overseas while their applications are being processed. He has committed his party to iron 'fiscal rules' and criticized the Tories' 'cavalier' approach to public spending. He has supported the Conservatives' clampdown on public protest, vowed to retain the bulk of its anti-trade union laws, and pledged to strengthen the security state, endorsing ten-year prison sentences for vandalizing statues, promising to crack down on petty crime and hailing Margaret Thatcher as a model of 'law-and-order' politics.⁵

12

The biggest challenge for the lesser-evil defence of Starmer is that there is no plausible reason for thinking that he actually represents the lesser evil at all, and some grounds for thinking he could be the greater one: keener yet to prove his allegiance to Washington by dragging the world to war; more brutal still in the enforcement of punitive cuts and privatizations. And the lesser-evilists' reply to all this? 'We get it. He's too timid. *But the Tories . . .*'

⁴ Asher McShane, 'Israel "Has the Right" to Withhold Power and Water from Gaza, Says Sir Keir Starmer', LBC, 11 December 2023; 'Labour Sets Out Opposition to BDS in Commons Debate', *Labour Friends of Israel*, 3 July 2023. On geopolitics, see for instance, Adam Forrest, 'Sunak Failing to Protect UK from China and "Presiding over Prison Mayhem", says Starmer', *Independent*, 13 September 2023.

⁵ See respectively: Dominic McGrath, 'Labour Considering Rwanda Alternative for Migrant Plan', *Independent*, 25 December 2023; Morgan Jones, 'Keir Starmer: We Must "Accept the Consequences" of Our Iron Fiscal Rules', *LabourList*, 19 June 2023; Rachel Burford, 'Keir Starmer Hails Margaret Thatcher as "Right" on Crime as He Launches Labour's Law and Order Plan', *Evening Standard*, 23 March 2023.