

Corbyn's Labour Party; Freedom of Opinion not welcome here

by Theodore Dalrymple

There was a time when taking the pledge meant abjuring strong drink, but members of the Labour Party will soon have to take a different pledge: to abjure strong language online. Apparently Labour MPs have been inundated, or whatever the correct term for it is, by abusive electronic messages. One MP alone, Ruth Smeeth, has received 25,000 abusive messages, including anti-Semitic ones.

There's democratisation for you! Give everyone a say and what happens? Not a Socratic dialogue but an outpouring of bile. The social media, so-called, have destroyed one of the most precious of our freedoms, namely our freedom from opinion, if insult and abuse can be called opinion. As for Mr Corbyn's supposed desire for a kinder, gentler politics, it seems to have evaporated into a cloud of vituperation.

This is a powerful reminder (and, as Doctor Johnson said, we need more often to be reminded than informed) that hatred is often the reverse side of the coin of humanitarian sentiment. Those who claim to wish humanity well often in practice wish their neighbour ill.

But it would be a mistake to conclude from any of this that Mr Corbyn is unelectable. After all, hatred is by far the strongest political emotion and it takes very little for it to spread far and wide and deep. Talk of the demise of the Labour Party is premature: we heard it before when Mrs Thatcher won her third election, and we hear of the death of the Tory Party after Mr Blair's third election victory.

When things go badly – as they always do if you wait long enough, which is often not very long at all – people seek an alternative, even if by all rational calculations the alternative is worse than *status quo*. That the enemy of my enemy is my friend is undoubtedly false; but it is a mode of thought, or at least of feeling, that is deeply inscribed in human instinct, which very few people try to control. Thus, if there were a serious economic downturn or some other hardship that occurred under the present dispensation, people soon would look for another.

It is true that as things stand Mrs May would win hands down if there were an election tomorrow. But a day – an hour in the age of the social media – is a long time in politics. Underestimating political opponents, however feeble they may seem, is a mistake, especially if their stock-in-trade is hatred and resentment.

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