



## HEADING FOR THE DITCH?

If Labour spends too much time in the middle of the road, it risks getting run over—*James Harkin*

As mainstream culture crumbles and the internet gives us the chance to bunch around the stuff we really enjoy, many of us are congregating in enthusiast communities around everything from coffee to quilt-making. Let loose in these ‘communities’, our initial curiosity is massaged by other enthusiasts into something approaching fandom.

Perhaps the best thing about enthusiast communities, however, is that they only bother to flock around stuff that they really, really love – which means that the whole heap of stuff in the middle that no-one is really mad about, everything from bog-standard Hollywood films to bog-standard coffee shops, is coming under threat. Starbucks, for example, is losing ground to small independent coffee shops on both sides of the Atlantic and is trying to do something about it. So are middle-of-the-road Hollywood films that no one can be bothered to tweet about.

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Something very similar is happening in politics, too. In the early stages of Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency, it would be difficult to over-estimate the extent to which his team circumvented the traditional structures of the American Democratic party in favour of cultivating a core group of followers who really believed in his message. By spending time talking to each other around a website, so-called ‘Obamamaniacs’ were able to reinforce each other’s loyalty to the campaign and motivate themselves to grow the flock. Then came the Tea Party, another mediated interest group wreaking the same kind of havoc in the upper echelons of the Republican Party.



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None of this could have happened were it not for the fraying of the middle ground. In my book *Niche* I grapple with the “missing middle” in all its guises – the problems which beset middlebrow culture, the disappearance of a certain kind of department store retail, the crisis of the mainstream media and the slow death of mainstream political parties. It’s only by understanding the changing political economy in which institutions operate that we can hope to reinvent them for a new era. It’s clear, for example, that the last half-century has seen a steady, painful decline in the membership of British political parties. Since the zenith of their popularity in the 1950’s, for example, the two major British political parties have undergone a relentless spiral of decline. Between the beginning of the 1960’s and the end of the 1980’s, the percentage of the British electorate marshalled in mainstream political parties fell from 9.4 per cent to 3.3 per cent. When Tony Blair won the leadership of the Labour party in July 1994, he mounted a spirited campaign to reverse the tide. For the first four years his campaign to recruit new party members looked like a stroke of genius, and succeeded in swelling party membership by 40 per cent. The problem was that most of the new arrivals felt no real affinity with the Labour party, and most of them left soon after it entered government in 1997. From a relative peak of 405,000 in that year, according to figures it submitted to the

Electoral Commission, Labour membership fell to 156,000 in 2010.

The Labour party had deliberately opened its mouth wide to gobble up a new generation of party members, but no sooner had it caught them than they began to wriggle away. As much as department stores like Woolworths, political parties had spent years edging their way towards the middle ground in search of the widest possible audience. No sooner had they arrived there, however, than they realised that they’d become perilously difficult to distinguish from one another – that they’d begun to look generic. And that, in a way, only made things worse. Like beached whales, even if they could swallow an audience of floating voters whole, from now on it was going to very difficult to hold them down. When Ed Miliband offered membership of the Labour party to anyone under the age of 27 for a penny, he was implicitly recognising that mainstream political parties have become cheap and generic – the political equivalent of a supermarket own brand.

If the Labour party is really going to renew itself, it can’t rely on selling itself cheap, reaching out to unreliable intellectual mavericks, or sending out messages on Twitter. Somehow it’s going to have to grow a fresh new political niche. **F**

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