Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

The mediocrity of chasing the middle ground [1]

Written by **James Lawson** [2] | Thursday 7 March 2013

The economy is stagnant, government spending continues to rise, and we?ve lost our AAA rating. With the recent rejection of boundary reforms, and the UKIP-led humiliation at Eastleigh, it?s no surprise that some Conservative backbenchers are grumbling.

Cameron is adamant that he will not ?lurch to the right? in response. His focus remains on the centre. After all, the median voter theorem tells us that majority rule voting will select the outcome most preferred by the median voter. But is success as simple as chasing the middle ground?

Firstly, the median voter theorem only works along one-dimension, 'Left' v 'Right'. This is hopelessly simplistic as the public?s views vary across issues. When we vote, we are limited to choosing a party package and we each have different priorities within those packages.

Secondly, it relies on there only being two parties, and assumes that those at the extremes will vote on side. Yet there are at least three significant parties.By some estimates UKIP cost the Conservatives a number of key marginal seats at the last election too. The winner of the 2010 election was actually ?none of the above? ? more people avoided the ballot box altogether than voted Conservative.

Thirdly, the theorem assumes that preferences are ?single-peaked?. Instead it?s possible to have different views on the same issue depending on the scenario. For example, one might in theory oppose paying for state schools. Yet, after being taxed for education, one might then prefer to pay a bit more voluntarily to get better state schools and thus avoid the additional cost of going private.

Finally, chasing the median voter has limited grounding in the public good. Public Choice theory teaches us that politicians and voters are liable to government failure. Some will act selfishly, voting to promote their wellbeing at the expense of the masses. Excessive focus on the centre also guarantees that principles are left behind in the wake of the latest opinion polls. U-turns can turn off past loyalists. Many who did support the Conservatives now lack enthusiasm, and the Government is generally criticised for its chameleonic approach.

Yes, the Conservatives had lost three elections in a row, and were ?toxic?. Yes, there are votes to be won in the centre, and policies should be presented in terms that resonate with the public. However, votes may also be won by pursuing radical policies, by building enthusiasm amongst core voters, by reengaging non-voters and even by turning 'right'. One shouldn't just focus on the middle ground, there are many votes to be won elsewhere.

Having never won a General Election, Cameron might consider his predecessors. Margaret Thatcher was radical, faced an entrenched socialist status quo and was more ?right-wing?. She delivered three electoral majorities, enthused her core vote, won over many ?working class Tories? and left a legacy that shaped the political world.

James was a founder of the Liberty League[3], who are hosting the upcoming Freedom Forum[4].

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