

If Britain needs a new party, we'll only find out after Brexit

In this week's *New Statesman*, [George Eaton's cover piece](#) is a call to arms for 'liberal Britain' to find some vehicle – any vehicle – for opposing Theresa May's Conservatives whilst Jeremy Corbyn is busy irradiating Labour.

Remarkably, he revealed that "a close ally" (often, but not always, code for "the man himself") of George Osborne has been going around pitching the idea:

"A week after the EU referendum, the Liberal Democrat leader, Tim Farron, was taken by surprise when a close ally of George Osborne approached him and suggested the creation of a new centrist party called "the Democrats" (the then chancellor had already pitched the idea to Labour MPs)."

Further down we find Anna Soubry (quelle surprise...) basically saying that she's on board as soon as someone can get it off the ground: "If it could somehow be the voice of a moderate, sensible, forward-thinking, visionary middle way, with open minds – actually things which I've believed in all my life – better get on with it."

Such talk will surely gladden the hearts of men such as Stephen Daisley, who has [in the Spectator called](#) for a caucus of 25 or so patriotic Europhiles to resign the Conservative whip and give the legislature control of the Brexit process (although they have yet to muster to many rebels on even a single vote).

Nonetheless the challenges to setting up a new party are formidable. Set aside the hurdles erected by our electoral system – they've been overcome before, as any Liberal will tell you. Ask instead: what would a new party actually be for? Who would it serve?

British party names usually denote a philosophy, like 'Conservative' and 'Liberal', or a sectional interest such as 'Labour' or 'Scottish National'. 'Democrats' basically describes everybody, and so doesn't really describe anybody.

Such a bland name speaks to the fact that it's far from clear what the various bits of the ancien régime are supposed to unite around. They may have all found themselves on the same side during the Brexit referendum, but that doesn't mean that there aren't real differences between them. Liberalism can only claim so much political territory – to supplant Labour a new party would have to reach out left or right, and that's where the problems kick in.

An obvious answer to the sectional interest point might be 'the 48 per cent', but it can't be stressed enough that this just [isn't a bloc of coherent interests](#) on which to build anything so permanent as a party, let alone a wholesale realignment of the party system. Nor are the 52 per cent. If you doubt it, just see how [the latest NatCen research](#) is exploding the myth of a

united and outraged 'Remain Scotland'.

The referendum seems to have set something in train, certainly, but apart from a period of Tory hegemony it's not yet clear what that is. As Tony Blair once put it: "The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again." But they may not settle soon enough for Osborne and co.

It seems probable that any new party, should one emerge, would be much better for coalescing once the fault-lines of post-Brexit British politics are clear, rather than being cobbled together on the fly to conduct a Europhile rearguard action during the negotiations. A successful new party must be forward-looking; one created to 'hold the Government to account on Brexit' would be fundamentally nostalgic.

There's certainly space for a larger liberal party, now that the liberals who until recently ran all three of the major parties may need to settle for just the one. But actual liberalism is very rarely a mass-market product and it's not clear why that tendency will result in anything other than a somewhat restored Liberal Democrats.

But you never know. British politics seems to divide itself up into eras defined by the lifespan of whichever party isn't the Conservatives, punctuated by periods of Tory dominance as their opponents find their new shape. We see that pattern between the fall of the Liberals and the rise of Labour, and between the last 'Old Labour' administration and the rise of New Labour.

No party rules forever, and it's more likely than not that when this Conservative administration does leave office it will bequeath it to a new-look opposition of one sort or another. But just as you couldn't see the Attlee Government from the 20s, or the Blair one from the 80s, we probably can't see that new movement from here.