

A moderate proposal

Why political centrists must rediscover their passion

They need to be clear about what opposing populism does and doesn't mean, argues Yair Zivan



illustration: dan williams

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William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming" was written as a warning about the state of the world. Although "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" has perhaps become the most famous line of his poem, it is two other lines that should concern us all. As an estimated 2bn people across the world head to the polls in 2024, Yeats's warning that "the best lack all conviction" while "the worst are full of passionate intensity" resonates loudly.

Democracies are being torn apart by extremism and [polarisation](#). The gains made by the [far right in the European parliamentary elections](#) in recent days are only the latest sign of the rising dangers of populism. Its impact will continue to be felt across European politics for years to come.

The political discourse pushed by illiberal leaders labels opponents as enemies and traitors. Proponents of illiberal democracy in countries like [Hungary](#) and Turkey systematically undermine the institutions which hold liberal democracy together. The election in Brazil in 2022 left voters a choice between [the hard-left politics of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) and the hard-right politics of Jair Bolsonaro. South Africa's [recent election](#) saw the rise of the radical left-wing politics of the EFF and the populist left-wing politics of MK. In response, the moderate centre too often seems to lack the courage of its convictions—and certainly lacks the passion and intensity that drive its more extreme rivals.

As centrists look to regain the political upper-hand, a crucial task for the preservation of forward-looking liberal democracies, they need to be clear about exactly what centrism means (and what it doesn't) and why those who identify as centrists, myself included, believe it is the best path forward.

That understanding starts with a clear distinction between the political centre and the political middle. The centre is a set of beliefs, values and ideas. The middle is a fluid point on the political spectrum that gets dragged from side to side, depending on whether the right or the left is exerting more pull; in Europe the illiberal right is currently a stronger force, while in Latin America it is the socialist left.

The values around which centrism is built are the importance of moderation, pragmatism and compromise; an embrace of complexity; a commitment to liberal democracy; the belief in equality of opportunity; and the belief that through balancing tensions people's lives can be made better. Centrism seeks out the most productive and effective approach to tackling the tensions between globalisation and local communities, civil rights and security, religion and democracy, free markets and social safety nets. It creates a tent broad enough to accommodate moderate liberals and moderate conservatives who no longer feel at home in their old political camps.

But the allure of populism is strong. Politicians from either end of the political spectrum promise simple solutions to complex problems. When they fail to deliver, as they inevitably do, there is always someone else to blame. They divide society into us v them, the real people v the elites, locals v outsiders, oppressed v oppressor, and pitch those groups against each other in a battle for total victory. Those on the other side don't think differently; they *are* different. There is no space for nuance or complexity. Any hint of compromise is seen as betrayal.

Denouncing extremist politicians as racists or neo-fascists does nothing to address the source of their appeal. There is a politics which feeds on genuine grievances and justified fears. People are worried about losing their jobs as a result of technological advances, not least AI. They fear losing their national identity owing to uncontrolled immigration. And they are fed up with a politics which doesn't seem to deliver for them.

By embracing complexity and nuance, centrism can be the antidote to the over-simplification of populism and extremism. The seriousness with which it approaches thorny problems provides solutions that really do improve people's lives. But centrism has struggled to find a way to counter the fear and anger which dominate political discourse today. It has to offer an emotional as well as an intellectual response.

The answer is for centrism to become the politics of hope. Centrists are hopeful about the future and about human nature. They are not naive, nor are they searching for utopia, but they believe that with the right approach progress can be made. Societies can solve problems and create opportunities without losing their sense of identity, community and purpose. Humanity has repeatedly shown a capacity to overcome obstacles that seemed insurmountable, when societies are governed well and offered hope.

Indeed, there are many examples of where centrism has worked, and where a united opposition has come together to defeat or seriously challenge illiberal populism. A striking recent example was the election in Poland last October, in which a coalition of opposition centre-left, centrist and centre-right parties ousted the right-wing populists of Law and Justice, who had sought to undermine the rule of law. Another is the success of Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Greece's proudly moderate prime minister, in wresting the country back from the radical-left populists who had ridden to power on the back of a severe economic crisis.

At a time when politics can feel bleak and when politicians trade in fear and anger, that sense of hope is among the greatest contributions centrism can make to public life. It is needed more than ever. ■

Yair Zivan is the editor of "The Centre Must Hold: Why Centrism is the Answer to Extremism and Polarisation" (Elliott & Thompson, June 27th 2024).