

10pm, 8 June 2017: a small crowd is gathered outside the BBC building in central London, staring at the exit poll for the UK General Election projected on the wall. Contrary to all predictions, the Conservatives have lost their majority in Westminster. Almost as shocking is that the Labour Party, led by self-proclaimed democratic socialist Jeremy Corbyn, has not encountered the debacle everyone foresaw and has actually gained seats. The following day, the surprise is even greater: the data show that Corbynist Labour won 40 percent of the votes cast, the party's best result since 2001, peaking at a staggering 64 percent of the vote share in the age group 18-24.

Fast forward a few weeks: two groups of protesters clash in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. On one side, the attendees of the Unite the Right rally, some proudly waving their Nazi flags; on the other, antifascist counter-protesters bearing badges of the US Communist Party and of the Democratic Socialists of America.

So long, political centre: gone are the days when the main parties of Western democracies were fighting to occupy the political centre, trying to outdo one another in a game of who was more moderate; now the stances kept on the periphery of the political debate by left- and right-wing centrists regain prominence.

Tony Blair, who repeatedly refused to endorse Corbyn in the election campaign, now grits his teeth and admits it is possible Labour could win an election from a far-left position. Hillary Clinton's seemingly undisturbed path to the White House started with the threat posed by the surprising rise of democratic socialist

Bernie Sanders and ended with her spectacular election defeat, when blue collar workers in the Midwest, many of them former Obama voters in 2008 and 2012, turned to Donald Trump, unperturbed by his denial of climate change or his far-right stances on immigration.

The list goes on: the rise of Marine Le Pen in the French elections, Geert Wilders leading his far-right Party for Freedom to second place in the Dutch Parliament, the Greeks turning for the first time in history to a far-left movement in 2015 and, now, the unprecedented entry of the far-right party Alternative for Germany into the Bundestag. But why is it that those ideas kept at the periphery of the political spectrum are now more attractive than ever, while the centre loses relevance?

Historically the centre has been determined, informed and shaped by its peripheries, and herein lies the flaw of the political centre today. Too many times, the contemporary centre has functioned in a vacuum, with the mainstream ignoring peripheral stances as they were considered irrelevant, unworthy of attention and not dangerous. In the midst of Jeremy Corbyn's rise to the Labour leadership in the summer of 2015, when polls were already showing his remarkable advantage over his competitors, Tony Blair suggested that those Labour supporters whose heart was with Corbyn "should get a transplant". Donald Trump has been ridiculed by most of the mainstream media and mocked by many within his own party, who considered him unable to lead the Republicans because he was "not a true Conservative". Yet on both occasions voters unequivocally chose the peripheral over the centrist.

What renders the peripheral movements more appealing than the political centre may not be the policies they propose, whose details are often unpopular. Moreover, when in power, those coming from the political periphery often show inexperience and inadequacy: Brexit negotiators appear disorganised, Mr Trump has achieved little as President, and Alexis Tsipras has ditched his far-left stances and is implementing the austerity plan the European Union has presented to him.

What makes the peripheral positions appealing is that they address issues the electorate is sensitive about and that the political centre does not consider worthy of attention or ignores. Donald Trump, for example, was mocked for his anti-international trade protectionist promises by many, including Hillary Clinton, who never really mentioned such issues in her rallies. Yet Trump undoubtedly struck a chord with factory workers in states like Ohio, who had lost their jobs because of globalisation.

To regain prominence and eliminate the possible threats coming from the extremist views of the peripheral areas of the political spectrum (both left and right), the centre must stop pretentiously dismissing the stances coming from those peripheries and accept the need to be informed and influenced by them. That is the role of the centre, and the characteristic that renders it the political position from which real positive change can come. The centre must look at the peripheries, decipher the messages coming from them, confront any issues the electorate might care about and offer more plausible solutions than those peripheries are able to provide.