

At last, Britons can make a real choice

I came to a fork in the road and I took it," basealler Yogi Berra is alleged to have said. So, too, the British people – except that, unlike the Yankee star, they have to choose the Left fork, with Gordon Brown as their guide, or the Right fork, following David Cameron. No need for an immediate decision, as the PM, having studied the polls, has decreed that voters be given some time to consider where each path leads, and which they prefer.

Brown's is the more thoroughly trodden in recent years. The past decade in which he has been in charge of domestic policy has seen the state expand so that the public sector now consumes well over 40 per cent of the wealth generated by the private sector; taxes and spending on public services rocket, and the Treasury running deficits at a point in the economic cycle when even Keynes called for surpluses. Some of this spending has paid off in improvements in the NHS: more MRI scanners, reduced waiting times for cataract surgery, more doctors and nurses. But even Sir Derek Wanless, the former banker selected by Brown to recommend an increase in NHS funding, now says the taxpayer has not had value for money.

A traveller down this path will feel a bit uncomfortable as darkness closes in, because violent crime has increased, in part because Brown's refusal to fund prison construction has forced the

early release of dangerous criminals. He will also be hoping that he doesn't confront hostile forces, as his nation's military has been reduced to a shadow of its former self, and the special relationship with America is in such disrepair that calls to Washington for help are likely to go unanswered. Finally, he might find his British passport useless, because Britain will have signed up to a European constitution that will eventually submerge his country in an EU superstate.

But if the traveller to Brown's Britain of the future is a single mother, or poor, or earning a minimum wage, or claiming to be disabled, or a beneficiary of any one of the multiple tax credits that Brown uses to redistribute income from the middle class to lower-income groups, and from traditional mom-pop-and-kids families to families more broadly defined, he or she should hum a merry tune as they step smartly along. Those who choose to follow Cameron will not have as clear a view of the road ahead. They know that they will be rejecting many of the policies of the past decade – no easy thing, since it has been one of unbroken prosperity, which has seen them grow richer, at least until very recently, when taxes began to take such a bite out of pay cheques that disposable incomes fell. Still, they are being asked to



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follow a new guide when the old one seems more reassuring, less flighty.

So the Cameron path is a bit riskier. Indeed, until recently the guide who is asking the voters to follow him seems to have had a road map strewn with exits that lead to strange destinations: towns in which supermarket parking spaces are taxed; airports at which cheap flights to Spain are limited to one a year; neighbourhoods in which hugging hoodies is considered a good idea, but there is no clear view what sort of schools are to be built.

But the new guide now assures prospective travellers that all that is behind him. His and their destination is a place where first-time home-buyers will find life a bit easier, and older homeowners will be able to leave their newly valuable homes to their children,

free of inheritance tax. The road will be safer as soon as the new prisons he promises are built, and being British will still matter if foreigners are encountered along the way, even if those foreigners are unhappy because Britain has decided to remain an independent nation state rather than sign on to its proposed constitution.

But all of these are details. The fundamental choice facing voters is between travelling in the direction of more state control, or in the exact opposite direction of freedom to choose one's own doctors and schools, and to spend more of one's own money. In his speech describing just what life would be like at the end of the Brown road, the PM made it clear that he feels the state is best positioned to decide what individuals need. If the NHS is slow to innovate, there will be a £100 million central Health Innovation Council to champion "change", the new Brown buzzword; city academies, established by Tony Blair to be free of bureaucratic control and therefore a source of innovation, will be put under central control; the state will continue to claim an ever-larger portion of the nation's income and wealth. And the threat of globalisation will be met by a host of government entities designed to improve Britain's sagging competitiveness.

Cameron's inclination is different: he would like to see parents choose the schools best

suited to their children's needs, and healthcare that responds to the demands and desires of individual patients. Unlike Brown, who offers certainty and a state that is prepared to take responsibility for the care and feeding of its citizens, Cameron offers a future in which individuals will have to take more responsibility for their own affairs and the nature of their communities. For people accustomed to the paternalistic policies of the past decade, that is the road less travelled. But it is the only one that represents real change. If that is what you are after:

My impression is that Labour is so intellectually exhausted that Alistair Darling has to steal Tory ideas, while the Tories are now the source of policies that are both new and voter-friendly. Never mind that their biggest idea – ending inheritance tax for most people – provides a windfall for the already comfortable, and is subversive of the Tories' stated goal of fostering equality of opportunity. Or that they have yet to specify just how they will shift the tax burden from incomes and jobs to pollution.

The important thing is that voters finally have a choice: the reassuring certainty of the known, or the risks and rewards of a more thorough break with the past. And a good long while to decide which fork in the road to take.

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