

US election: not another Corbyn

by GWYNNE DYER

Psephology – the statistical study of elections and trends in voting – is the darkest of the dark arts, and you can lose your soul if you delve into it too deeply. But sometimes you have to do it a bit, and this is one of those times.

On Wednesday the U.S. Senate acquitted President Donald Trump of both charges in his impeachment trial on a straight partisan vote, with only two members of the 53-strong Republican majority even voting to hear more evidence. But this doesn't mean that the other 51 really think Trump is innocent. They may be cowards, but they're not stupid.

Republican Senator Lamar Alexander acknowledged that Trump's attempt to blackmail Ukraine's president into launching a fake investigation that would smear Joe Biden, then the leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, was inappropriate. In fact, he had only voted to shut the trial down because there is no need for more evidence to prove what has already been proven.

It just wasn't a grave enough offence to justify impeachment, Alexander said, and besides, there is an election next November. I believe that the constitution provides that the people should make that decision in the presidential election that begins in Iowa on Monday, he concluded.

Alexander was only brave enough to say even that much because he will retire from the Senate this year. But he is right in saying that the upcoming presidential election is the only way that Trump can now be brought to book. That would require the Democrats to nominate a candidate who can actually beat Trump. Does such an animal actually exist?

The shambles of last Monday's Democratic 'caucuses' in Iowa, the first step in the process of choosing the party's presidential candidate, leaves much unclear, but it is becoming obvious that Joe Biden, the early front-runner and alleged 'safe pair of hands', is not the right man.

If you think a middle-of-the-road candidate is the best bet to beat Trump, Pete Buttigieg is your man. He came first overall in the Iowa caucuses with 27% of the votes; Biden trailed far behind with 16%.

If you think that only a radical break with the Democrats' traditional middle-of-the-right (MOR) stance can beat Trump, then you also have two choices: left-wing Bernie Sanders (who actually says the word 'socialism' in public), or centre-left Elizabeth Warren (who at least doesn't flinch when Bernie says the s-word).

Again, however, there was a gulf in Iowa between the two more radical candidates: Sanders got 25% of the vote, Warren only 15%. These numbers may change slightly when Iowa finally sorts out the mess in the vote-counting, but probably not by much.

So let us assume that the real choice, after a few more primaries, is starting to look like it's between Sanders and Buttigieg. Which of these men is likelier to beat Trump?

There are a couple of problems with Bernie Sanders. He would be 79 if he took office next January (and he had a heart attack last October). More importantly, he may frighten as many voters as he excites. Think: who in politics does he most resemble?

What other left-wing politician in an English-speaking country spent decades in the political wilderness, trying to sell hot-gospel socialism to a largely inattentive audience?

Who then suddenly caught the attention of the nation's despairing youth, trapped in a stagnant, low-wage economy, and built a national following that suddenly delivered him onto the main stage?

And who led his party into a national election on a radical left-wing program ? and went down to the worst electoral defeat it had suffered in half a century?

Jeremy Corbyn, the English Bernie Sanders, that's who. It was Corbyn who put Boris Johnson, Britain's mini-Trump, back in office for another five years with a huge majority in parliament. That's not the sort of outcome the Democrats want.

So what will the elders of the Democratic Party do if they find that Sanders, not Buttigieg, is the popular favourite going into Democratic Convention in July. They will probably throw their support behind Michael Bloomberg, the ultimate MOR candidate.

It could work. He's far richer than Trump.