

{ AUSTERITY POLITICS }

JEREMY WARNER

There could scarcely be a more unappetising time to be in government, says Jeremy Warner

In the run-up to the last election, George Osborne would sometimes confide in friends that he dreaded government because, as chancellor of the exchequer, he was destined to become the most hated man in Britain – a political ‘Mr Nasty’, who would slash benefits, cut public services and raise taxes. Even Scrooge would struggle to compete with the mean-spirited austerity Osborne was about to impose on the country.

The chancellor’s worst fears seemed to be confirmed last summer, when he was roundly booed while presenting medals at the Paralympics. By contrast, Gordon Brown, the previous prime minister, found himself cheered. This must have come as a surprise even to Brown. That little more than two years after losing the election, the man who presided over Britain’s worst-ever financial crisis should be greeted like some sort of fondly remembered elder statesman is quite a turnaround.

Wherever you look among the over-indebted deficit nations of the West, incumbent governments find themselves badly down in the polls. Less than a year after becoming prime minister of Spain, and with no fewer than five austerity budgets now behind him, Mariano Rajoy is almost as discredited as his socialist predecessor. In Italy, Mario Monti, initially greeted as a saviour after the corrupt frivolity of Silvio Berlusconi, is similarly resented now that the medicine is being applied. Meanwhile, France has taken



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only a matter of months to fall out of love with its new socialist prime minister, François Hollande.

In any case, the UK chancellor is hardly alone. Whether of the left or the right, governments are being forced to do things that manifestly make their populations less well-off, cutting entitlements, reducing public services and raising taxes. There

could scarcely be a more unappetising time to be in government.

A particularly acute form of opprobrium seems nevertheless to be reserved for Mr Osborne. Rightly or wrongly, Osborne is seen to relish the task of wielding the axe. Ideologically, he’s a small-state, supply-sider in his economics. For choice, he would go much further than many of his colleagues in the

coalition government in cutting back on the welfare state.

And herein lies the paradox, for despite his image as a heartless slasher, Osborne is actually much closer to public opinion than you might imagine. The latest British Social Attitudes survey shows a veritable collapse in support over the past decade for social security spending. Where once the Tories were regarded as cruel and unfair for wanting to slash benefits, it now seems they can’t be tough enough. People don’t like tax increases, and there is still majority support for spending on public services, particularly the National Health Service. But they resent welfare, which is now quite widely seen as a lifestyle choice whose exponential growth has been driven by immigration.

The message for Osborne is therefore quite clear. Despite the opposition of his coalition partners, a freeze, or even cut, in working-age benefits would be politically quite popular, particularly if matched with some kind of reduction in middle-class taxes. If he plays his cards right, the ‘Mr Nasty’ of politics could yet turn out to be an unlikely people’s champion. ♦



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