

Bernie Sanders and the Clintonite Neoliberal Consensus: The End of a Campaign

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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The slimmest of hopes, which got extremely threadbare in the last month, was nursed that Bernie Sanders might have taken his support base and made it into a third movement. A US political scene so typified by the banking retainers, the counterfeit pioneers and fraudulent managers, could have done with a new force.

Sanders, having watered and cultivated a genuine counter to a Democratic stream so deeply compromised, ultimately succumbed to the Clintonite machine. His July 12 message reads in part tones of regret, condescension and capitulation. There is also that sense of self-deception. "Let me begin by thanking the 13 million Americans who voted for me during the Democratic primaries." [1]

Sanders proceeds to state that the "political revolution" (rather exaggerated) had commenced "to transform America and that revolution continues." Such wishful thinking can only assume form in the guise of a genuine electoral force, rather than egging Hillary Clinton from a well closeted behind.

Sanders seems to think otherwise, engaging in the rhetoric of a phantom revolution that will somehow survive a Clinton seizure. "Together, we continue to fight to create a government that represents all of us, and not just the one per cent -a government based on the principles of economic, social, racial and environmental justice."

Having conceded to Clinton in the primary race, and his failure to net the number of delegates and super-delegates necessary to net the presidential nomination, Sanders proceeded to accept such mathematics as a definitive conclusion.

It need not have been the case, at least if you accept the proposition that US politics need not be eternally binary in its character. The House Speaker Paul Ryan alluded to this dilemma with a response to a voter's question on Tuesday in a CNN town hall event: "It's a binary choice. It is either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton - you don't get a third choice." [2]

Well Sanders might say that his rival had won the nomination process for the Democratic party; that was no reason for the Vermont senator to assume that he could not take that force of creation out of the sewer of major party politics and create a parallel force. Since the primary in New Hampshire, the US has borne witness to exactly that fact, a rumbling indignation for reform.

Instead, Sanders waded deep into the waters with an endorsement. Clinton "will be the Democratic nominee for president and I intend to do everything I can to make certain she will be the next president of the United States."

A mealy-mouthed way of justifying capitulation in political contest is to suggest that the broader cause, rather than the individual, matters. The Great Figure of History argument becomes a matter of individual forces on the ground, with great ideas supposedly assuming a force of their own. (Ideas never move, run or jog without inhabiting some body and mind, a point sometimes missed in these debates.)

Thus, Sanders can claim that during the course of campaigning, he “learned from all of that is that this campaign is not really about Hillary Clinton, or Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders, or any other candidate who sought the presidency.” After this rather telling observation of denial, his forgiving escape hatch was that the electoral campaign “is about the needs of the American people and addressing the very serious crises that we face.”

This gesture of abandonment is profound. The Sandernistas and those loosely associated with him as a genuine source of change had come up with a figure who disassociated himself from politics as personality. The reality is that millions were readying themselves to vote for him come November precisely because he was Sanders, meshed with the ideas of basic social democracy.

Rather than admitting, in a time characterised by anti-establishment politics, that Clinton had to move over or be damned electorally, Sanders gravitated to the siren call of the establishment. As he put it rather unconvincingly, the battle with Clinton involved disagreement about a “number of issues,” because that is “what democracy is about.” It would have been an even greater exercise in democracy to run as a third presidential candidate.

If one were to be generous, Sanders has provided a truly foolish reading of the electorate, one that assumes character and idea to be divorceable matters. Clinton always hoped that to be the case; her character does not have much for going for it. The demerits for both the presumptive nominees, Democrat and Republican, are considerably heavier than that of Sanders.

The Clinton approach from hereon in is one of masquerade: appropriate the Bernie Sanders aura, give the impression that the party has somehow miraculously moved leftward, and snap up a stash of votes come November.

The approach of the Republicans will be self-defeating, clinging to the fiction that the Clintons are somehow progressive. This ignores the fundamental fact that Bill Clinton, during his presidential tenure through the 1990s, made parts of the GOP strategy plan relatively progressive by way of comparison. Stunned by this embrace of hard right ideas, the Republicans would be kept out of the White House till 2000.

The Sanders chapter in US political history gives us an enduring reminder about candidates and their campaigns. Be wary of any language of change that is merely the language of promise. Keep in mind that US politics remains a “binary” choice, an effective non-choice bankrolled by financial power. The best way Sanders could have thanked his individual supporters and voters would have been representing them to the end. He preferred to haul them over the coals of political surrender.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

- [1] <https://berniesanders.com/prepared-remarks-bernie-clinton/>
[2] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/12/politics/paul-ryan-highlights-town-hall/index.html>

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Kampmark](#)

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