

Corbyn's rise and fall and the challenge for the left

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The dramatic rise of Jeremy Corbyn, from his election as leader of the British Labour Party in 2015 until his devastating defeat in the 2019 general election and subsequent resignation, presents socialists with important lessons and serious choices for the future. It was dramatic in several ways. He was the most unlikely and indeed reluctant candidate for the position but won the leadership election in 2015 by a landslide (with 59.5% of the vote against the combined vote of 40.5% for his three right wing opponents) having secured barely enough nominations to be included on the ballot paper. He survived sabotage from the Party apparatus, mass resignations from his shadow cabinet and a vote of no confidence from the Parliamentary Party in 2016. He subsequently won a second leadership election against the right-wing candidate Owen Smith in the summer of 2016 with an even bigger vote. He created an insurgent movement of the left increasing the membership of the Labour Party to well over 500,000. His name was chanted by thousands at rock concerts and on the football terraces. He addressed enraptured mass meetings in all parts of the country. He rocked the political establishment in the 2017 general election by increasing Labour's vote by over 10% and coming within a whisker of beating Theresa May, the Tory incumbent. He presided over a progressive set of Labour Party policies that incorporated opposition to austerity, war, inequality and racism, nationalisation of key utilities, action on climate change and a decent minimum wage. He stood for the many against the few. The devastation of his subsequent defeat in 2019 was felt most in the dashed hopes of the many thousands who believed that these policies could at last be implemented by a Labour government and that decades of neo-liberalism and privatisation could be reversed.

This article will attempt to explain why this defeat happened. It will look at the sustained assault on

Corbyn prior to the near success of 2017 by his own backbenchers and party apparatus, aided by the mainstream media who were all equally horrified at the prospect of this success. It will examine the use of allegations of anti-Semitism that did so much to derail his project. It will assess the influence of the trade union bureaucracy and the damaging concessions that Corbyn was forced into making, particularly over the question of Brexit that dominated and determined the outcome of the 2019 election. It will make an initial assessment of the transition from Corbyn to the new leader Keir Starmer and the future direction of travel for Labour. It will also ask the question 'Where now for the left?'

Corbyn's record

There is a personal dimension to this narrative as well. As an activist in the NUT (now the NEU)¹ in Corbyn's constituency I was involved alongside him in numerous disputes and campaigns since I first met him on a picket line in the early 1980s. I can attest to the fact that he is not just a campaigner for the issues dear to the hearts of socialists, he is also a kind and decent man who shied away from personalising conflicts despite being constantly attacked for adopting what were seen as controversial positions. He had a remarkable capacity for engaging with those that he met and was unfailingly polite and sensitive. He championed the causes of the left on Anti-Apartheid, Anti-Racism, for Irish Unity, for Nuclear Disarmament and opposition to the Iraq War. In his constituency he developed a reputation for unassuming but relentless campaigning for decent housing and for the rights of migrants. An unlikely testament to his legacy came from the former political editor of the right-wing Daily Telegraph Peter Osborne. In an article entitled 'Stepping down as Labour Leader, Corbyn can hold his head high' he writes 'There is one cardinal rule of British politics, decreed by the great British historian AJP Taylor,

radicals and visionaries are condemned to be ostracised and despised in their lifetimes. They never get within a whiff of power unless they sell out. They get stopped by the establishment. But there is one compensation. Their ideas win in the end. 'He goes on to conclude 'Corbyn got the big issues right. The establishment will never forgive you for that.'² We may quibble with the precise formulation of Osborne's assessment, but there is more than a kernel of truth in it.

Corbyn undermined

So, what brought about the demise of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party? Whilst the issue of Brexit was the primary cause of the party's defeat in December of last year (an issue I will deal with below) it is vital to acknowledge in more detail the scale of the internal Labour Party opposition to Corbyn that had dogged him since his leadership victory in 2015. From the outset Labour MPs undermined him. They gave the lie to their oft reiterated commitment to Labour as a 'broad church'. Much of this hostility from the parliamentary party was up front and personal. It gave practical expression to the unabashed desire of Peter Mandelson, the architect of Blairism, to 'work every single day to bring forward the end of his (Corbyn's) tenure in office ... every day to do something to save the Labour Party from his leadership.' Their first major offensive was a well-orchestrated series of 21 resignations from his shadow cabinet among them his successor Keir Starmer. A shadow cabinet that reflected a wide spectrum of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

This was followed by a vote of no confidence in his leadership passed by the PLP with huge majority of 197-40. Then came an attempted coup and leadership challenge from Owen Smith July 2016. Corbyn won even more convincingly than before, by 61% to 38.2%. Clearly his popularity with the membership stood in sharp contrast to the hostility of his parliamentary 'colleagues'.

But Corbyn faced a further threat. There was a fifth column in Labour HQ among senior members of the apparatus who played a particularly underhand and pernicious role. The full scale of this sustained attempt to undermine Corbyn from within only came to light in April of this year. A leaked report into the workings of the Party's Governance and Legal Unit³ showed detailed

email evidence of the horror with which his leadership was viewed by many Labour staffers and the scale of their efforts to undermine him in the run up to the 2017 election. It is abundantly clear that many of them, including senior staff, wanted and expected Corbyn to lose. They boasted of 'political fixing' to ensure the selection of right-wing parliamentary candidates in winnable seats, they set up a secret operation to promote the election campaigns of these right-wingers and undermine the overall impact of Labour in the election. They engaged in openly vile racist and sexist abuse of Corbyn's allies, most notable Dianne Abbott, shadow Home Secretary. They denounced anyone who disagreed with them as a 'Trot'. They reacted with dismay to the actual result of the election in which Corbyn's standing was enhanced. 'The opposite to what I had been working towards for the last couple of years' said one. Another opined 'We will have to suck it up. The people have spoken. Bastards.' Their reaction was consistent with that of the majority of the PLP who would have preferred Corbyn to be humiliated rather than increasing Labour's vote by 10% and coming so close to winning.

The abuse of Anti-Semitism allegations

Corbyn's standing was enhanced by the election campaign and its outcome, but any illusion that the attacks would cease was quickly dispelled. The weapon chosen by the right, both inside and outside Labour was the false allegations of anti-Semitism against Corbyn personally and accusations that the party as a whole was institutionally anti-Semitic. One of the key revelations of the leaked report by the Governance and Legal unit was the deliberate sabotage of investigations into serious and more credible allegations of anti-Semitism among Labour members. Many of these allegations were deliberately not investigated so that they could subsequently be used as evidence of Corbyn's 'unwillingness' to act on them. As Jonathan Cook puts it 'These officials, the report notes, oversaw a litany of errors and delays in the handling of complaints ... because they knew this was an effective way to further damage Corbyn.'⁴ Despite the fact that even the Home Affairs Select Committee at Westminster (a body unsympathetic to Corbyn) found 'no reliable, empirical evidence to support the notion that there is a higher

prevalence of anti-Semitic attitudes within the Labour Party than any other party’, the attacks intensified.⁵ Between 2017 and the 2019 election the snowstorm of allegations was such there was an almost automatic juxtaposition of the words ‘Labour’ and ‘Antisemitism’, a juxtaposition chorused almost universally in the mainstream media. As Michael Rosen, author, poet and Jewish socialist, pointed out so graphically if you were opposed only to ‘anti-Semitism in the Labour Party’ you were really opposed to the latter not the former because the existence of anti-Semitism in society as a whole is not acknowledged and the preponderance of anti-Semitism in the parties of the Right is wilfully ignored.⁶

Corbyn sustained the most blatant personal abuse on this issue. The front page of the Jewish Chronicle pictured Corbyn with the epithet ‘Racist and Anti Semite.’ Margaret Hodge, a former leader of Islington Council and now a senior Labour MP called Corbyn a ‘fucking anti Semite’ to his face in public. This false narrative was played out unchallenged not only in the right-wing press but most disgracefully in the ‘liberal’ Guardian and the ‘unbiased’ BBC.⁷

But Labour’s response to this offensive was woeful. It conceded to it rather than challenged it. With the support of the leadership of the UNISON and UNITE unions the NEC of the Labour Party was prevailed upon to support the IHRC definition of anti-Semitism which included in its examples of anti-Semitism the description of Israel as a racist endeavour.⁸ This conflation of opposition to Israeli policy with anti-Semitism was crucial. It revealed the real underlying cause of the hostility to Corbyn. A staunch supporter of Palestinian rights and critic of Israel’s oppressive assaults on its people had to be demonised. It is ironic that even as this ideological offensive was being played out in Britain, the Israeli Government passed the Nation Law explicitly stating that ‘national rights in Israel only belong to Jewish people’.⁹ Non-Jewish Israeli citizens were excluded!

In response to this offensive greater emphasis was placed on damage limitation than rebuttal. There was no effective counter-offensive. What was needed was an unequivocal assertion that criticism of Israel and support for the Palestinians was a principled internationalist position and had nothing to do with anti-Semitism. This, coupled with a clearly repeated determination to

root out all forms of racism from the Party, would have provided a credible counterpoint to the false allegations and would have provided the Left with a clear bulwark in its defence. But there was no attempt to counter the activities of either the parliamentary party or the party apparatus. No MPs were disciplined. No staffers sacked. Not only did Corbyn and his supporters not control either the party apparatus or the PLP, there was no serious attempt to make them accountable. By way of contrast when newly elected Tory leader Boris Johnson, was faced with resistance to his stance on leaving the EU from 21 leading Tory MPs he promptly withdrew the whip from them.

Election defeat and resignation

There is no doubt that the anti-Semitism offensive and its relentless personal attacks on Corbyn impacted detrimentally on Labour’s 2019 election campaign.

There was not the same sense of confident insurgency of 2017. There were fewer mass rallies and it seemed that the wind had been sucked out of Labour’s sails. This was compounded by the central policy issue of Brexit and the stark contrast between the Tory’s simple message and Labour’s convoluted position. ‘Get Brexit Done!’ was a brilliantly simple electoral slogan. Labour’s policy, with Starmer as its principal architect and supported by key union leaders, was an almighty fudge. The 2018 Labour Party conference overwhelmingly agreed that a second public vote be left on the table. Corbyn himself wrote to members to say Labour would campaign for Remain against a no-deal or a Tory Brexit as well as being committed to a second referendum. The impression was created of indecision and paralysis.

Corbyn’s own view had previously been critical of the EU and Britain’s position in it. He could have stuck to those instincts and argued the case for leaving from a progressive perspective. Instead Labour was put in the position of reneging on its commitment to abide by the result of the 2016 referendum. It made it look as though it was on the side of the ‘Establishment’ undermining the will of the people while Johnson posed as the people’s champ. Reality was turned on its head and a new ‘reality’ was created and triumphed.

This article is not the place for a detailed analysis of the election defeat in terms of voting patterns and demographics – for this read Kimber 2020,¹⁰ but the sim-

ple statistic that of the 52 seats Labour lost 50 had voted leave in the referendum speaks for itself. That is not to say that other factors were irrelevant, and they include the legacy of Blairism progressively weakening the Labour vote and the role of Labour councils implementing austerity measures, but the overarching reason for the defeat was the fudge on Brexit. Failure to acknowledge this fact has characterised much of the rationalisation from the Labour Right following the defeat. Keir Starmer in his interview with the Financial Times cites Corbyn's leadership and an over-complicated and unwieldy manifesto as the actual reasons and plays down Brexit by arguing 'Look, there is no pretending that there is an easy position that we could have adopted that would have pleased everybody across our party and across all of our voters'. This explanation somewhat disingenuously sidesteps his own role as proselytiser for Remain.¹¹

Corbyn's inability to exercise even a modicum of control over the PLP or his own Party apparatus to some extent reflected his instincts to conciliate and avoid ad hominem arguments despite being on the receiving end of sustained personal abuse himself. In the pre-election leadership debates with Johnson he tried to stick to policy issues and eschewed the opportunity to go for his opponent's jugular. Johnson's racism, untrustworthiness, sense of entitlement, opportunism and lack of any principle apart from self-aggrandisement were given a free pass. Corbyn who had taken to the streets as a campaigner innumerable times, is not a street fighter. He eschews personal attacks. Sadly, this made him look weak. A Labour loggerhead Clyne who was a staunch Corbyn supporter and who canvassed in eight marginal seats in the North West, describes how this played out on the doorstep: 'it was more common to encounter a vague emotional negative hunch, a discomfort from the way they felt about him. Regardless for their strong rational agreement with his policies many "didn't like him", he was a nice old man who engages in calm discussions, but they would rather have a more relatable person who gets angry sometimes...people vote emotionally as well as rationally.'¹² This description chimes with the experience of other canvassers I have spoken to.

The role of Momentum

Another key issue in any analysis of the Corbyn years is the role of the left-wing pressure group Momentum.

Its supporters were popularly portrayed as Corbyn's shock troops who had rode roughshod over the existing Labour machine and its mainstream 'centrist' MPs. As we have seen the truth is more sobering for those who may have had great expectations of its potential. When it was set up as a Corbyn-supporting, high tech insurgent movement the claim was that it would be focussing on the wider political campaigns whose supporters had been inspired by Corbyn's success. It would be a movement not a grouping. But partly because of the way it was controlled by its founder Jon Lansman it has performed a much more limited and ultimately limiting role. Not only did Lansman support the adoption of the IHRC definition of anti-Semitism, he shifted the focus of Momentum onto internal party manoeuvres and electoral campaigns. He changed the constitution in 2017 to make it exclusively an organisation for Labour members and to remove any democratic control of the organisation. There is no doubt that its 40,00 members were a considerable asset, but their focus was primarily on canvassing rather than political campaigning. It seemed more like an organisation whose purpose was to harvest votes rather than mobilise voters. Its own analysis of the 2019 defeat makes interesting reading.¹³ It is almost exclusively focussed on technical forms of communication and is effectively devoid of any sustained political analysis. Its strategy was 'aiming to use digital tools and distribute organising techniques to unleash the power of Party members and contact tens of thousands of voters in marginal constituencies.' It claims that the campaign on the ground 'was held back by an archaic and dysfunctional Party machinery'. There may well be some validity to these criticisms, but none of them focus on the key political issues at stake in the election. It is not primarily technique and technology that wins elections. It is political momentum of a different kind. In referring to the deficiencies of the Labour Party machinery no reference is made to the scale of sabotage by senior staffers of which Lansman presumably had some inkling of. No mention either of the role of right-wing Labour MPs who tried to undermine the campaign at every turn.

Starmer's debut

In many respects Momentum was the dog that didn't bark and there is no evidence that those members currently campaigning to make it more accountable and relevant to wider political campaigns will succeed. For example, an agreed left slate for the Labour NEC may be desirable but the idea that even if this were successful it would be able to challenge Starmer's authority is wishful thinking. All his actions so far as leader indicate a clear intention to bury the Corbyn project and turn Labour into the party of 'loyal opposition'. Any credible Labour leader in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic would give a voice to the anger and distress of frontline workers in health and transport and hold to account the criminal complacency of the Tories mishandling of the crisis, not seek to work with them in the 'national interest'. Unbelievably, Starmer's response to Johnson's chief adviser Dominic Cummings' brazen breaches of the lockdown in not explicitly calling for his sacking puts him to the right of many Tory MPs.

His singular unwillingness to back the education unions who are refusing to go back to unsafe schools is a consequence of this. His unquestioning adoption of the British Board of Deputies ten pledges directed at Labour's 'anti-Semitism' includes acceptance of 'Jewish representative bodies being given the right to regular and detailed updates' of internal Labour investigations even when these bodies can include people who are not Labour members.¹⁴

Even more revealing is his response to the leaked Labour report into the Governance and Legal Units' activities. He has called for an enquiry that would 'examine the background and circumstances in which the report was commissioned, and the process involved' and for 'measures to be put in place to protect the welfare of the party members and party staff concerned or affected by the report'. The work of the unit is continuing, with some of those senior staff members identified in the leaked report still in place. This coupled with appointment of David Evans, Starmer's preferred candidate and a former fixer for Blair, as the new General Secretary bodes ill for those who are looking for accountability. If further evidence were needed a new raft of expulsions of members who have dared to raise their voices in criticism of Israel and question the stance of the leadership is in full swing.

At a time when Johnson's personal popularity is plummeting in line with that of his party – a fall from a 26-point lead over Labour at the end of March to 4 points currently – Labour should be on the offensive. Instead they are holding fire even to the extent of refusal to criticise the recklessly premature ending of the coronavirus lockdown.

What kind of Party?

This leads to the critical question for socialists. While there are many who, for a range of reasons, cannot see a home for themselves outside of Labour there is also a considerable number for whom Labour provides no answer.

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Lenin's birth it is a good time to re-examine the need for an independent revolutionary alternative to Labour. This is far from being straightforward. As Chris Harman argues in 'Party and Class' we have to address 'the immense practical and political problems of building socialist parties in actual historical circumstances, of the twist and turns that are needed from time to time to ensure that the revolutionary organisation is combining principled politics with an organic connection to the most militant and active sections of the class.'¹⁵ There is no recipe or blueprint for this task. A prevalent view on the left is that the complexity of sustaining this combination invariably leads to the creation of politically irrelevant small left sects. In his article 'In defence of party building' John Molyneux takes issue with Dave McNally dismissal of these 'micro parties'.¹⁶

MacNally argues that socialist organisations are 'indispensable' for workers self-mobilisation, but he explicitly rejects the attempts of revolutionaries to create them. It becomes an abstract aspiration rather than an attempt at practical implementation.

In his critique of Dave McNally's position John Molyneux argues that any serious attempt to build a revolutionary party cannot be based on any group seeing itself as the keeper of the holy grail or as MacNally puts it 'the custodian of the authentic revolutionary tradition'. Instead it needs to respond to constantly changing political circumstances in order to take the struggle forward. The way it responds will shape its organisational impact. This requires a nimble-footed approach to strategy and tactics consistent

with its theoretical traditions. In my own course of involvement with the International Socialist/Socialist Workers Party over 40 years this has manifested itself in a wide range of initiatives which sought to relate revolutionary politics to the changing nature of workers' actual struggles. Among them were the establishment of Factory Branches, building Rank and File movements in the unions, initiating united front organisations like the Anti-Nazi League and to a lesser extent the Right to Work Campaign, electoral initiatives like Socialist Alliance and Respect and relating to the rise of Corbyn and the phenomenon of mass growth in the Labour party. Some of these initiatives were more successful than others, but they were all characterised by a genuine attempt to engage with concrete political circumstances in a way that advanced working-class struggle. More recently Stand Up to Racism and Unite Against Fascism have been bulwarks against institutional racism, the Tories' creation of a 'hostile environment' for migrants and the various attempts of the far right to organise.

Our present historical moment provides specific challenges rising out of the Coronavirus pandemic. Public paper sales and weekly branch meetings – frequently caricatured as the staple of life in a revolutionary group – are no longer possible. We must think how we can respond with imagination and creativity to the way in which society and mainstream politics has responded to the deadly virus.

How do we organise in the Lockdown? What forms of debate and discussion can be sustained and more problematically, how can these debates lead to effective actions in these difficult circumstances? In a period of crisis new initiatives can be developed that demonstrate the resilience of ordinary people and the potential for struggle. The strong sense of community solidarity for the NHS workers is a good example – the Thursday 'claps' have become a manifestation of something more profound than a communal gesture. In many places they have been turned into effective political protest at the ineptitude and criminal complacency of Johnson and the Tories. Socialists have been at the heart of these developments. At the same time new forms of meeting and discussion have been effectively utilised to generalise from the specific nature of the crisis. Zoom meetings, Facebook, YouTube and other aspects of an ever-expanding range of social media have taken the

place of more traditional physical gathering. We have helped to initiate and to host meetings that have dealt with a range of issues contingent on the crisis. Such issues include mental health, climate catastrophe, the economics of pandemics, public health policy, health and safety at work initiatives, international perspectives on the virus, the differential impact on the BAME community, the impact of the crisis on domestic violence and the social inequalities laid bare by the different experiences of self-isolation.

At the same time new forms of organisation have been thrown up around the Covid 19 support groups that have been able to respond imaginatively to the problems of demonstrating and campaigning in the absence of mass demonstrations and rallies. It has been possible to mobilise around the premature opening of schools, solidarity with NHS workers and the disproportionate number of BAME casualties. Most recently we have seen solidarity action with the uprisings in the United States over the murder of George Floyd. These mobilisations coincide with a dramatic increase in trades union membership for the second successive year, by 100,000 in last year alone. Key workers have been in the forefront of campaigning against unsafe working practices during the pandemic and a new confidence is emerging among those wanting to fight.

In the process of these developments different political traditions are put to the test. In the face of the Tories imperative to put the interests of big business ahead of the lives of workers forms of resistance emerge. Many members of the Labour party have reacted with horror at the leadership's yearning for consensus rather than holding Johnson to account and have been actively involved in the resistance alongside those of us from the revolutionary tradition. Many leading members of the Corbyn project, including Diane Abbott, John McDonnell and Corbyn himself have joined us in Stand Up to Racism and People Before Profit Activists forums in combatting the institutional racism laid bare by the crisis and the reckless dash to abandon safety measures to prioritise the interests of the economy.

In the course of working together political ideas and affiliation can be debated. In the spirit of self-activity and resistance new alliances can be created and new audiences opened up. A fracture is forming with the reformist tradition that union action and workers

resistance can only operate effectively as an auxiliary and reinforcement to and not as a substitute for parliamentary action. It is a break that gives primacy to working class struggle in its many manifestations. Ironically, this would be much more likely to create the circumstances for achieving the transformation much more in keeping with the aspirations of Jeremy Corbyn than the Labour Party ever could be. It could also create the potential for the growth of a different kind of party in the revolutionary socialist tradition.

Notes

- 1 National Union of Teachers which has now merged with the Association of Teachers and Lecturers to form the National Education Union
- 2 Peter Osborne 'Stepping Down as Leader, Corbyn can hold his head high' Middle Eastern Eye 3.4.2020 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/stepping-down-labour-leader-corbyn-can-hold-his-head-high>
- 3 Report into the Workings of Labour's Governance and Legal Unit (May 2020)
- 4 Jonathan Cook 'How top Labour Officials plotted to bring down Jeremy Corbyn' Middle Eastern Eye 16.4.20 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-top-labour-officials-plotted-bring-down-corbyn>
- 5 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/i>
- 6 <https://twitter.com/michaelrosenyes/status/1200004950723645441?lang=en>
- 7 For a detailed chronology of this offensive see Mike Berry and Greg Philo 'Timeline of Events' in *Bad News for Labour-Anti-Semitism, The Party and Public Belief* Pluto Press, 2019
- 8 <http://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism>
- 9 1.5.2017
- 10 'Why did Labour lose?', International Socialism Journal 166, Spring 2020, <http://isj.org.uk/why-did-labour-lose/>
- 11 Adding to the obfuscation in the same interview the chief political correspondent, Jim Pickard bizarrely claimed that under the Corbyn era Labour was 'run by a small cabal of left-wingers inspired by Marx and Trotsky.'
- 12 Eyal Clyne 'Reflections on our defeat and the challenges ahead' 13.12.2019 <https://eyalclyne.wordpress.com/2019/12/13/reflections-on-our-defeat-and-the-challenge-ahead/>
- 13 'Momentum Submission to the Labour Together Review of the 2019 General Election' <https://peoplesmomentum.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Momentums-Labour-Together-Submission.pdf>
- 14 <https://www.bod.org.uk/rebuilding-will-take-more-than-mild-expressions-of-regret-the-board-of-deputies-launches-its-t> This includes for example The Jewish Labour Movement whose members do not need to be members of the Labour Party
- 15 Chris Harman 'Party and Class' in 'Selected Writing's' Bookmarks 2010 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1968/xx/partyclass.htm>
- 16 John Molyneux 'In Defence of Party Building' International Socialism Journal 163, Summer 2019 <http://isj.org.uk/in-defence-of-party-building/>