

Why Wouldn't They Be Reconciled? Corbyn's Leadership and the Recalcitrance of the Parliamentary Labour Party

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Abstract

One of the most striking features of Labour Party politics during the years of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership was the recalcitrant lack of cooperation that he received from many Labour MPs, even after his remarkable success in the 2017 general election. This article systematically examines a number of possible explanations for this behaviour, including genuine divisions within the party over the issue of institutional anti-semitism and over the politics of Brexit. Ultimately, it concludes that the most plausible explanation for MPs' opposition to Corbyn is simply the lack of material motivation for many of Labour's elected representatives and officials to pursue the end of a Labour government led by a political faction with which they themselves are not aligned.

Keywords: Labour Party, Corbyn, factionalism, Momentum, Labour First

WHY, EVEN FOLLOWING his dramatic success in the 2017 general election, did so many Labour MPs remain hostile to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of their party? Less than a year after a majority of them had tried and failed to remove him as Labour leader, Corbyn secured an outcome which almost every member of the parliamentary Labour Party had believed impossible under his leadership. In terms of vote share alone, the 2017 result represented the most dramatic improvement on the prior election result achieved by any opposition party since 1945. In terms of actual parliamentary seats gained, it was Labour's best result for twenty years. Labour didn't win the election, but no party has ever come from as bad a position as Labour's at the 2015 election and then gone on to win the next one; never mind doing so a mere two years later. And yet, the antagonism of a large bloc of Labour MPs towards Corbyn subsided for no more than a couple of months in the wake of that unexpected upturn in Labour's fortunes. While the hostility of Labour MPs towards Corbyn during the period 2015–7 is perhaps more easily explicable, the persistence and even intensification of that animosity after the 2017

election raises questions about the basic political motivations informing the behaviour of a range of key institutional actors within the Labour Party, and its social and administrative networks.

Can Labour never win from the left?

Anti-Corbyn sentiment among MPs during the period 2015–17 can arguably be explained on the basis of a very widely shared assumption of the time. This was the assumption that Labour could never improve upon a prior election result by moving politically to the left, and that the election of radical leadership always presaged a drastic deterioration in Labour's electoral position. Corbyn's election as leader represented the most decisive leftward shift in the party's history, and this clearly alarmed MPs and others who assumed that this could only spell electoral disaster. To be clear, it was not merely the impossibility of Labour winning an election while moving to the left that was widely assumed to be self-evident. Rather, it was widely assumed that Labour would always

struggle to improve its electoral position at all while moving to the left.¹

The June 2017 election result confounded this view entirely and might, therefore, be expected to have prompted a serious public interrogation of some of the analytical and strategic assumptions informing the politics of Labour's established mainstream and that of its key institutions: the parliamentary party and the party bureaucracy. We could compare this situation with the large-scale and dramatic interrogation of the assumptions informing postwar leftism that took place over the course of the 1980s in the wake of the unexpected success of Thatcherism.² But it is very striking that no examples of any such substantial intellectual or organisational rethinking amongst Corbyn's pre-2017 critics and opponents can be identified. To the extent that those critics made any analytical response at all to the 2017 election result, there were two main types of reaction, each of which sought to play down its historic significance. One was to stress the unique incompetence of Theresa May and her team as political opponents. The other was to point out that Labour was not winning votes from the right kind of voters in the right kind of places to be able to win a parliamentary majority. Both arguments have merit, and both might have been expected to contribute to a wider conversation about how to move on from the surprising success of June 2017. But, none of the people making those arguments made any attempt to deploy them in the service of such a conversation. Instead, they were deployed largely as special pleading, in a persistent rhetorical effort to downplay Corbyn's achievement and to legitimate continued opposition to his leadership.

Any evaluation of other possible explanations for this opposition must start here. Even at the historical moment when it would have seemed almost unavoidable, Corbyn's critics and factional rivals within the party made no

serious or good faith effort to engage constructively with his project, to arrive at a consensual strategy with Corbyn's supporters, or even to draw lessons from his success that might contribute to furthering their own goals or political agendas. This observation is not intended as a condemnation; merely as an observation requiring some kind of explanation. The main actors in the story have themselves never been willing to discuss the episode in frank terms, but many Labour MPs and much of the party bureaucracy did demonstrate, for four years, an attitude toward the elected leadership that was, at best, unenthusiastic and uncooperative. This was documented in the notorious 'leaked report' into the internal handling of anti-semitism complaints commissioned in 2019 by the party General Secretary, Jenny Formby, the contents of which have never been factually disputed, despite the claims by some involved to have had their legal rights infringed by the report's unofficial publication and by its lack of contextual explanation for their behaviour.³ But, it was also self-evident to anybody either directly involved in Labour politics during the period, or following the social media accounts of many Labour MPs, that there was extraordinary antipathy and continuous organised opposition towards Corbyn's leadership coming from the Labour benches.

We must also be careful when considering perhaps the single most obvious explanation for MPs' hostility to Corbyn during the 2018–19 period: his own unpopularity with the electorate. It is certainly true that this was a significant issue by mid-2018, and one that MPs hoping for re-election at a coming election could not be expected to ignore. However, it is also crucial to note that Corbyn's popularity ebbed and flowed during the period of his leadership, and he enjoyed a brief period of

¹See, for example, P. Collins 'New times: Phillip Collins on why it's time for Labour to abolish its crisis', *New Statesman*, 22 September 2016; <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2016/09/new-times-philip-collins-why-its-time-labour-abolish-its-crisis> (accessed 2 June 2021).

²S. Hall and M. Jacques, eds., *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.

³A. Perry 'Emergency meeting on Labour's leaked internal report—Alice Perry's NEC report', *LabourList*, 24 April 2020; <https://labourlist.org/2020/04/emergency-meeting-on-labours-leaked-internal-report-alice-perrys-nec-report/>; R. Siyal 'Labour was warned antisemitism report was deliberately misleading, leak reveals', *The Guardian*, 24 July 2020; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/24/labour-was-warned-antisemitism-report-was-deliberately-misleading-leak-reveals> (both accessed 2 June 2021).

net popularity during the summer of 2017. This did not prevent the press from continuing to undermine him at every turn, and it did not engender any significant attempts by his former critics on the Labour benches to build on his popularity, or extend it.⁴ If anything, they largely seem to have been stunned into passivity for a few short months, only to resume their attacks on him as soon as his popularity began to dip again.⁵ It hardly takes a conspiracy theorist, or even a partisan of Corbyn, to observe that this is not the behaviour of political actors who seem strongly motivated to further the cause of their party and its leader. The question is, what was motivating this persistent and apparently incorrigible hostility?

The issue of anti-semitism

Insofar as explanations for this non-cooperation have been offered since 2017, they have frequently involved claims that Corbyn and/or his leadership team and/or his factional supporters in the party were complicit with institutionalised anti-semitism, and that this imposed a moral imperative of non-cooperation on MPs. Some critics of this position have argued that the level and frequency of anti-semitism within the Labour Party was always exaggerated by Corbyn's factional enemies, that some reported complaints of anti-semitism were malicious—being motivated more by a desire to discredit the party or certain factions with it than by any genuine concern for the issue of anti-semitism—and that in many cases a deliberate conflation was made between anti-semitism and criticism of Israeli policy by political actors sympathetic to the latter, and antithetical to the organised left. Evidence for these views is presented in the 2018 book edited by Jamie Stern-Wiener, *Antisemitism and the Labour Party*.⁶ But

⁴B. Cammaerts, et al., 'Media representations of Jeremy Corbyn: from watchdog to attack dog', London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Media and Communications, London, 2016.

⁵For example, L. Fisher and K. Burgess, 'Labour MPs condemn Corbyn cronies', *Times*, 17 April 2018; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/labour-mps-condemn-corbyn-cronies-jx3blfqsm> (accessed 2 June 2021).

⁶J. Stern-Weiner, ed., *Antisemitism and the Labour Party*, London, Verso, 2019.

ultimately, such claims are on their own terms difficult to adjudicate. What is arguably less so is the behaviour of Corbyn's opponents once he had agreed to accede to all of the demands of his most stringent critics regarding the definition and prosecution of anti-semitism within the Labour Party.

All of these demands had been effectively acceded to by the end of September 2018, and yet, throughout the year that followed Corbyn was subject to an intensifying—not a de-escalating—barrage of criticism from sources that had been routinely partisan against him since the beginning of the 2015 Labour leadership campaign.⁷ By this time, it was being reported by various allies of Corbyn's inside the party bureaucracy that hostile sections thereof had been obstructing the efficient investigation of complaints of anti-semitism throughout that period. At the same time, the proportion of members against whom complaints of anti-semitism were eventually upheld was, on the best available calculation, 0.3 per cent.⁸ Greg Philo and his colleagues, in their 2019 study *Bad News for Labour*, found strong evidence of online anti-semitism perpetrated by figures claiming allegiance to Corbyn and the Labour Party, but found equally compelling evidence that this did not in any way represent the views of members or the branch level experience of typical activists, and had been magnified out of all proportion by figures—especially prominent MPs—who were politically opposed to Corbyn and his leadership.⁹

None of this is to deny that any of Corbyn's critics had legitimate concerns. Rather, it suggests that any detached observer might question the motivations and priorities of actors in this drama who had consistently demonstrated their political hostility to Corbyn and

⁷D. Sabbagh 'Labour adopts IHRA antisemitism definition in full', *The Guardian*, 4 September 2018; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/04/labour-adopts-ihra-antisemitism-definition-in-full>; Editorial, 'The Observer view: Labour leadership is complicit in antisemitism', *The Observer*, 14 July 2019; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/14/observer-view-antisemitism-in-labour-jeremy-corbyn> (both accessed 2 June 2021). See also G. Philo, et al., *Bad News for Labour: Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief*, London, Pluto, 2019.

⁸Philo, et al., *Bad News for Labour*, p. 52.

⁹Ibid.

his supporters, prior to involving themselves in the debate over Labour anti-semitism. They seem to have devoted very little effort to constructive resolution of an institutional problem for the Labour Party, and consistently high levels thereof to criticising and de-legitimising Corbyn. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the latter amounted to a higher priority for them than the former. Of course, this observation in itself only lends credence to the view that the desire to rid the Labour Party of institutional anti-semitism was not, in fact, the singular overriding priority of many of those anti-Corbyn actors who involved themselves in debates and polemic over the issue. It does not resolve the problem of what, in that case, can be assumed to have motivated them.

The politics of Brexit

The sense that something more than moral outrage at anti-semitism may have been at stake in motivating such behaviours is reinforced by the very similar pattern of behaviour exhibited by much the same set of actors over an apparently unrelated set of issues. In 2016, the justifications given by MPs for backing Owen Smith's challenge to Corbyn's leadership made little reference to the issue of anti-semitism, mostly revolving around the charge that Corbyn's failure to lead the campaign for a Remain vote with sufficient elan and enthusiasm could somehow be held responsible for the national vote to leave the EU.

This claim was always problematic. The formal Remain campaign had been led by Alan Johnson, a former MP who has rarely been shy—before or after, or during Corbyn's leadership—about expressing animosity towards him, and by centrist Labour establishment figure, Will Straw.¹⁰ The consensus among their wing of the party before 2017 had been that Corbyn could only prove an electoral liability. So it seems unlikely that in early 2016 they saw him as a potential asset which, as they would later imply, they had been sadly frustrated by their inability to

¹⁰For example, Press Association, 'Jeremy Corbyn not up to job of Labour leader, says Alan Johnson', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/08/jeremy-corbyn-not-up-to-job-of-labour-leader-says-alan-johnson> (accessed 2 June 2021).

deploy during the referendum campaign. This issue notwithstanding, the empirical facts simply don't support the claim that Corbyn didn't involve himself in the Remain campaign to a high degree, given the amount of time that he spent actively campaigning for it.¹¹ It's clear that there were strategic disagreements between Corbyn's office and the rest of the Remain campaign over such issues such as whether, for example, Corbyn appearing alongside Tony Blair to call for a Remain vote would help the cause, or would only reinforce the public sense of Remain as an establishment project. It's also very clear that Corbyn's office was correct in making the latter assumption, given the success of the Leave campaign in ultimately mobilising anti-establishment sentiment.

More fundamental than any of these objections, however, is the simple fact that the success of the Leave campaign was obviously the consequence of decades of demographic, cultural and political change, as well as specific, long-term, ardent campaigning by the tabloid newspapers.¹² This was an epochal political event, but one that some analysts might well have regarded as predictable ever since the capture of key sections of the popular press by right-wing authoritarian populist ideologies in the 1970s.¹³ As such, the idea that the outcome could be attributed to the lack of enthusiasm or the strategic predilections of one individual, over a short period of campaigning, was always tendentious at best.

The politics of the parliamentary Labour Party

I want to consider here two further possible explanations for the persistent hostility of so many Labour MPs to Corbyn's leadership, even in the wake of the 2017 election result. The first, and in some senses the most obvious, is simply that they were ideologically opposed

¹¹T. Walker, 'Brexit: clearly not Jeremy Corbyn's fault', *Red Pepper*, 8 August 2016; <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/brexit-clearly-not-jeremy-corbyns-fault/> (accessed 2 June 2021).

¹²R. Ford and M. Sobolewska, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹³A. Barnett, *The Lure of Greatness: England's Greatness and America's Trump*, London, Unbound, 2017.

to Corbyn's political and programmatic aims, believing that any attempt to carry out such a programme could only end in disaster. This might seem like a very simple proposition, and in some cases it would be. Throughout its history, a significant section of the Labour Party's constituent institutions have had no meaningful commitment to progressive social reform beyond the bare minimum necessary to differentiate a Labour government from a Conservative one, and this has always applied to at least a notable portion of the parliamentary party.

But what does it actually mean to have members of a nominally democratic socialist party who are in fact opposed to anything resembling a recognisable democratic socialist (or even social democratic) programme? It is important to differentiate at least two possible understandings of such 'opposition' here. One would be the most obvious: the politicians in question simply being opposed to any significant regulation or inhibition of capitalist interests in the pursuit of collective goods; such opposition springing either from personal ideological conviction, or from a determination to serve corporate and commercial interests under all possible circumstances.

But another meaning of 'opposition' might relate to the question of what particular actors regard as politically feasible, as opposed to what they regard as ultimately desirable. This is certainly an important distinction for understanding the subjective, conscious motivations of such actors, as at least two pieces of evidence suggest. One would be the polling of Labour MPs that seems to show general support for a set of policy priorities and preferences—or at least for a set of 'economic values'—that would, if carried to their logical conclusion, amount to a fairly substantial social democratic reform programme.¹⁴ The other piece of evidence I can offer is, unfortunately, anecdotal—if nonetheless fairly authoritative: several Labour MPs of many years standing, including both past and present Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet members, have personally described to me the difference between what they see as an authentically 'Blairite' minority within the parliamentary Labour Party, who

would not regard the implementation of a social democratic programme as desirable, however feasible it might be; and a 'Brownite' or 'soft left' majority who would not have understood their opposition to a programme such as Corbyn's in such terms, but in terms of its complete unfeasibility under present social, political and economic conditions.

In practice, it is academic which of these perspectives a given individual holds, if there is no likely circumstance under which someone holding the second perspective could be induced to change their view as to what might currently be politically feasible. As such, we can arguably situate most serving Labour MPs on a continuum of opinion that includes each of these positions. This is understandable from a cultural and historical perspective. Almost any current Labour MP grew up in a political and cultural climate defined by the widespread assumption that there was simply no future for anything resembling the left-wing politics of the twentieth century, whether in its reformist or revolutionary forms. The historic defeats of both Soviet communism and British and American social democracy in the 1980s were understood as irreversible, with any attempt to return to their methods and programmes being seen as misguided. Many assumed that the only possible outcome of such a return to 'traditional' socialism on the part of organisations, such as the Labour Party, could be either certain electoral defeat, or even an atavistic resurgence of popular authoritarianism.¹⁵ At the same time, perhaps more problematically, the legacy of the New Left—that had defined itself against both Soviet state socialism and post-war bureaucratic paternalism—was largely derided, dismissed, or ignored during this period. It's notable here that many of the thinkers who were responsible for creating this climate of opinion in the 1980s and 1990s—the formative period for most people who are likely to have been MPs during 2015–20—have long since recanted those views, even while their personal influence on public discourse has waned.¹⁶ But,

¹⁴T. Bale, et al., *Mind the Values Gap: The Social and Economic Values of MPs, Party Members and Voters*, London, The UK in a Changing Europe, 2020; <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Mind-the-values-gap.pdf> (accessed 2 June 2021).

¹⁵A. Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity, 1998; G. Mulgan, ed., *Life After Politics: New Ideas for the Twenty-First Century*, London, Fontana, 1997.

¹⁶For example, compare Charles Leadbeater's paeans to liberal individualism in his two contributions to Hall and Jacques, *New Times*, 'Power to the person' and 'Thatcherism and progress'—with his

it's their positions of the 1980s and 1990s—or at least, those positions as understood by particular social and institutional networks—that have shaped the worldview and political assumptions of many of today's professional politicians and their closest media allies. In particular, this applies to the networks of technocrats, managers and policy specialists who formed Labour's preferred pool from which to draw parliamentary candidates throughout the period 1994–2015.¹⁷

To the extent that such MPs remain wedded to these views—consciously or unconsciously, and for whatever reason—it would be logical for them to refuse cooperation with Corbyn and his supporters even after the June 2017 election. But it is also clear that these views are not shared by a majority of Labour members, nor by a large number of Labour supporters—including, presumably, many of the over-10 million who voted Labour in 2017. This leaves us with, at the very least, serious questions to consider regarding the health of a democratic system wherein such a large constituency can go effectively unrepresented, while the representatives that they elect remain unwilling to express openly their disagreements with them. Again, it is important to stress here that, while prominent retired figures such as Peter Mandelson have openly denounced Corbyn and his supporters on purely political/ideological grounds, almost no sitting Labour MPs were willing to give voice to a clearly-expressed political critique of Corbyn or Corbynism during the entire period of his leadership.

The defence of institutional interests

The foregoing argument has addressed the premise that Labour MPs' lack of cooperation with Corbyn might have proceeded from simple ideological disagreement with his programme. But, any such explanation for their behaviour, as we have seen, ultimately rests on some fairly complex and necessarily tendentious assumptions regarding the nature of MPs' political beliefs and ideologies. This is potentially problematic—for no other reason than that it assumes MPs to

advocacy of democratic, networked collectivism in C. Leadbeater, *We-Think: Mass innovation not Mass Production*, London, Profile Books, 2009.

¹⁷P. Allen, *The Political Class: Why it Matters Who Our Politicians Are*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

hold consistent, coherent and clearly articulable beliefs. This itself may be a mistaken assumption, given the consistent evidence generated by psephologists as to the relatively piecemeal and contradictory nature of the political beliefs held by most individual citizens. But, there is one rather simpler explanation available for such opposition, that I think must be taken very seriously. This is that many MPs perceived the rise of both Corbyn and the movement associated with him as a major threat to their institutional privileges, and those of their closest political allies.

In the early days of Corbyn's leadership, and especially in the wake of the failed attempt by MPs to depose him in 2016, there was a constant stream of media speculation as to the likelihood of right-wing MPs being subject to de-selection by their local parties, which never really died down until the run-up to the 2019 election. Given that almost no attempts were made to organise the local 'trigger ballots' that would have initiated re-selection processes within local constituency parties, it seems safe to suggest that this issue was always something of a 'red herring'. Arguably more important was the perceived threat to their roles—and, in some cases, livelihoods—on the part of Labour's regional and national officials, and its network of many thousands of local councillors. It is important to understand here that in constituencies represented by a Labour MP, the local MP's office will typically act as an informal communication and organisation hub for networks of party officers, officials and local councillors, and will often play an unofficial role in enabling political factions sympathetic to the MP to organise against their internal opponents.

There are two major organisations that play an explicitly factional role on the right wing of the Labour Party: Progress and Labour First.¹⁸ It is notable—and crucial for understanding the politics of the Labour Party in recent years—to understand that the very existence of these organisations, while not a secret, has never been extensively reported on by any of the key media

¹⁸H. Pemberton and M. Wickham-Jones, 'Factionalism in the parliamentary Labour Party and the 2015 leadership contest', *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2015, pp. 5–21; 'Factions: Is Labour a broad church?', Apple Podcasts, n.d.; <https://podcasts.apple.com/ga/podcast/factions-is-labour-a-broad-church/id1125000940?i=1000375553519> (accessed 3 June 2021).

sources that are regularly read or consumed by typical party members, namely the BBC and *The Guardian*. The failure of the mainstream press and broadcast media to report accurately on Labour's internal politics is exemplified by their treatment of Labour First. This is one of the longest surviving internal factional organisations in the party's history, and also one of the most aggressively and explicitly sectarian, having no clearly defined purpose other than to prevent the organised left from gaining influence within the party. It is also routinely successful in influencing local and constituency level candidate selections, as well as elections to the party's National Executive Committee: the organisation's key organiser and spokesperson, Luke Akehurst, being a current elected member of that body. And yet, its very existence has rarely been acknowledged by, for example, political reporters for *The Guardian* or the BBC, never mind its influence and operations being actively investigated and reported on.

Local factional organising efforts do not normally advertise their affiliation to either of these organisations, or make any explicit reference to their existence. For example, attempts to organise right-wing 'slates' of candidates for elected positions within local and constituency parties will often be made by party members with direct links to these organisations, but those efforts will almost invariably present themselves to casual party members as being conducted by non-aligned groups of local 'moderates', rather than as allies or members of organised intra-party factions. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that these organised networks and organisations have played a crucial role in determining the political composition of the parliamentary Labour Party and the large population of Labour local councillors in the UK, for several decades. A key objective of both Labour First and Progress throughout their respective histories has been to influence the selection of parliamentary candidates and candidates for local elections, and they would not have persisted for so long had they not enjoyed some success in achieving these aims.

Importantly, Progress and Labour First had no significant rivals for factional dominance within the party—apart from each other—for many years prior to the launch of the pro-Corbyn membership organisation, Momentum, in 2015. As such, it is easy to see why the very existence of Momentum—as a much larger and more

dynamic organisation, allied directly to a popular leader—posed a serious threat to the personal and collective interests of key networks of political actors who had not been subject to any such serious threat since the 1980s. This surely explains the quite extraordinary levels of invective directed at the organisation throughout its history, by MPs and their factional allies within the party, despite the fact that its only significant activity throughout that time was to mobilise party members to canvass for Labour candidates during the 2017 and 2019 elections, with considerable success.

This also goes a long way towards explaining the ongoing and apparently unappeasable hostility of Labour MPs to Corbyn's leadership, even after the historic success of the June 2017 election. Many of these MPs belong to formal and informal networks of mutual support, whose main function is to ensure that control of key party posts (elected and appointed) remains in the hands of those networks and their members. The existence of Corbynism as an organised movement and, in particular, the demonstrable organising capacity of Momentum, posed an immediate threat to the ability of those networks to retain control of those posts. As such, it presented a material threat to the social status and income of many members of those networks, irrespective of any ideological differences they may or not have had with Corbyn and his supporters.

It is important to grasp here that the personal material circumstances of most Labour MPs, full-time officials and local councillors are such as to classify them as among the most affluent third of the UK population. As such, they do not belong to those social groups who would have the most to gain from a radical change of direction to the essential priorities of the UK government, or among those who have lost out from forty years of persistent neoliberal hegemony. So, there is nothing irrational about them pursuing courses of action that prioritise the maintenance of their localised institutional privileges over the objective of securing a Labour government—especially if that government is likely to pursue a radical break with the previous four decades of policy consensus. To this extent, the onus of proof must be on any commentator or analyst who claims that such a calculation of interests has not motivated the fiercest opponents of Corbynism within the Labour Party since 2015.

Of all the explanations for MPs' behaviour during the period 2017–19 that we have considered, this seems to be the simplest, the most robust, and yet the one that has received the least attention from political commentators. The MPs in question belong to social and professional networks made up of individuals who simply have no personal interest in seeing a Labour government elected, under circumstances such as a Corbyn leadership. Labour remaining in opposition indefinitely would pose little direct threat to their livelihoods, lifestyles or social status. By contrast, the final success of the Corbyn project in securing an election win might well have proven extremely damaging to them, especially if it had led to large-scale substitution of local councillors and party officials by pro-Corbyn replacements. Commentators and analysts who insist that the primary motivations of such actors are principled, 'values-based' and ideological will object to this interpretation of events. As I have suggested, however, given all the facts, the onus of proof is on them. It is up to them, I think, to demonstrate that a simple calculation of material interests—conscious or unconscious—did not play the role that I am positing, in driving the behaviour of Labour's organised right-wing, and the large number of Labour MPs who are formally or informally connected with it, between 2015 and 2020.

The legacies of New Labour

Lewis Minkin, in his classic study of Blairism, demonstrates clearly how the New Labour project was dependent upon a ruthless and quite unprecedented project on the part of a small political faction to take control of the party machinery, its networks of officials, its decision making and executive bodies, and its processes of candidate selection.¹⁹ In effect, Minkin shows that the New Labour project effectively did away with any notion of 'The Labour Party' as an institution to which all internal actors should demonstrate a loyalty higher than that which they might owe to any particular political tendency or sectarian grouping. In 2015, the majority of Labour MPs, councillors and full-time officials were individuals who had come into office under the aegis of that agenda: between 2010 and 2015, Ed Miliband

¹⁹L. Minkin, *The Blair Supremacy: A Study in the Politics of the Labour Party's Management*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014.

had made little attempt, and had even less success, at replacing the New Labour network with one more in line with the politics of his own 'soft left' support base. As such, their behaviour was entirely understandable. This was a generation of political professionals who, in most cases since the beginning of their careers, had been socialised into a specific conception of politics, consistent with the key organising ideas of New Labour. According to this conception, the role of the Labour politician is to represent the interests of their constituents by advocating for ameliorative reforms to the way in which neoliberal policy is administered, and to the way in which capitalist interests are furthered. But it is never to advocate for policies or political strategies that would constitute any serious departure from neoliberal norms, or threaten to limit or reduce the power and influence of corporate institutions to any significant extent. This is not, in any meaningful sense, a politics of reform: it is a politics of compliance. From the perspective of such a politics, any attempt to revive a genuinely reforming political programme—however moderate—is by definition illegitimate; such that any organisational tactics and any form of propaganda required to delegitimize or defeat it can be considered justifiable.

Of course, as we have already mentioned, this is not a view shared by most Labour Party members or supporters, and it is not one that is ever publicly advertised or explicitly acknowledged by its adherents (apart from occasional outliers such as Peter Mandelson). The gap between the reforming aspirations of large sections of the electorate, and the working assumptions informing the behaviour of many of their supposed political representatives, is surely a phenomenon worthy of note. This may not be surprising to anyone who has studied Labour Party politics thoroughly over the past few decades. But, it is striking to note that this state of affairs simply does constitute an everyday point of reference for mainstream journalistic and political discourse in the UK, which makes any effective remedy, for the foreseeable future, sadly difficult to envisage.

After Corbyn

Can the Labour Party overcome the impasse produced by this fundamental conflict between its base, its members and its key institutions, and the failure of public media institutions even to

report accurately on its affairs? It seems unlikely under present circumstances. The managerialist politics to which Labour's right wing remains committed is not only out of tune with the vast majority of members and supporters: it seems increasingly dated and ineffectual in a world of instant communication, peer-to-peer information flows and constant online interaction. Since 2016, the Conservative Party has moved decisively towards a nationalist populist programme, but under Keir Starmer's leadership, Labour has embraced a strategy that was formulated at a time when the characteristic features of Tory ideology were still the austerity economics of George Osborne and the elite, socially liberal cosmopolitanism of David Cameron.²⁰ Neither Starmer's embrace of social conservatism and symbolic jingoism, nor the sacking of left-wing frontbenchers, nor the ritual humiliation of Corbyn himself, nor the campaign of suspensions of Corbynite

members and local parties engaged in by General Secretary, David Evans, since 2020, seem to have done anything to improve Labour's polling performance over the past year. Given the analysis above, we might assume that they were never really intended to achieve any such outcome; and that the demoralisation and disempowerment of the Labour left has been pursued as an end in itself.

How long will the people whom Labour is supposed to represent, and above all the party's own members, put up with this? Perhaps, once the pandemic ends, Boris Johnson's popularity will fade and nobody will be asking that question. If not, then the answer may be: 'not very long at all'.

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²⁰Starmer's head of policy, Clare Ainsley, published her book *The New Working Class: how to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes* in 2018, but its arguments were effectively a re-hash and rationalisation for the 'Blue Labour' position that had been defined by figures such as Maurice Glasman during the period of Ed Miliband's tenure as Labour leader, 2010-5