

# Introduction: Corbynism and its Aftermath

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IN THE SUMMER OF 2015, all but one of Labour's leadership hopefuls committed to 'austerity': that blend of cuts to public spending and tax increases that might more accurately be labelled 'Osbornomics'. The contrast between Jeremy Corbyn and the other candidates competing to take the place of Ed Miliband was sharp. Corbyn, until then a relatively unknown MP who had spent his entire career fighting for lost causes on Labour's back benches, had been a vocal critic of Blair. New Labour, for its part, had successfully hegemonised the Labour Party: its style, personnel and 'realist' outlook persisting even after five years under the more left-leaning Ed Miliband, a fact that the preference for 'balanced budgets' held by Labour's other leadership candidates testified to. Often seen as a deeply principled politician, it is fair to suggest that context had caught up with the outlook of Jeremy Corbyn, rather than the other way around.

In the wake of the financial crisis and its long after-effects, the persistence of New Labour's style and content as defining idioms for Labour politics was looking increasingly anachronistic by 2015. Many economic experts had declared that the era of fiscal conservatism was over. In 2014, Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*—with its robust denunciation of the inherently inegalitarian tendencies of advanced capitalism—was well received far beyond the fringes of the radical left. If anything needs explaining in such a context, it's not why Corbyn emerged as a popular figure, but why no other member of the professional political class had the sheer ambition or imagination to grasp the moment, presenting themselves as a post-austerity leader for post-austerity times.

One possible explanation was uncertainty about exactly who Labour's political coalition now was or should be, after decades of

dramatic social change. A common, though always tendentious, interpretation of this dilemma sees Labour's voter-coalition as divided between a socially conservative but fiscally liberal group of traditional Labour voters located in towns, and a socially and fiscally liberal base in cities. Attracting crowds along his spectacular campaign trails, from Mansfield to Manchester, Corbyn initially appeared capable of speaking to both camps. The shock election result in 2017 surpassed what even his admirers had hoped for. Yet, by the end of 2019 it was over. The general election that year was a chilling experience for activists, reflected in party members' preference for the leadership of Sir Keir Starmer over the Corbynite candidate, Rebecca Long-Bailey.

Why has it proven so difficult, to date, for discussion of Corbynism as a political phenomenon to go beyond either the uncritical adulation of his advocates, or incurious dismissal by his critics? In part, the answer must lie in the fact that the very deep divisions between the left and right of the Labour Party in the 1980s have never really been overcome, and to some extent were only exacerbated by the period of New Labour's internal hegemony. These differences, as became apparent during the years of Corbyn's leadership, are not merely questions of individuals occupying different points along a continuum of opinion, from centre to centre left, to radical left. Rather, they involve fundamental epistemological and analytical disagreements over the core questions of what has happened to Britain since the 1970s, what forms of knowledge about that issue might be considered legitimate, and what forms of political intervention may be possible.

As Eric Shaw points out in his book on Blair's party, New Labour was created through the construction of a stark contrast with a supposedly

'older' traditional and left-wing Labourism. 'Old Labour' was, according to these critics, a 'spent force irretrievably bound to a stockpile of ill-conceived, irrelevant, dogma-driven and damaging policies'.<sup>1</sup> Philip Gould played a vital role in the making of this narrative. Gould provided Blair with insights into the views of swing voters that, in turn, received a selective briefing to the press, who printed the findings of New Labour's research uncritically (no mention was ever made, for example, of voters' persistent support for the 'old' policy of nationalisation).<sup>2</sup> This apparently 'post-ideological' approach to Blair's politics was hard to dismiss, as was the accompanying language. One woman in a focus group apparently told Gould that 'When I was a child there was a wardrobe in my bedroom. I was always scared that one night, out of the blackness, a monster would emerge. That is how I think of the Labour Party.'<sup>3</sup>

In the minds of many Labour MPs in 2015, 'old Labour' was exactly what Corbyn stood for. The forging of the 'old' versus 'new' consensus—in which Britain's news media played an essential part—meant a powerful army was assembled against Corbyn from the moment his candidature was announced. In the five years of his leadership, more often than not, commentary from the 'centrist' mainstream demonstrated no capacity to see his agenda and any support for it as rational on any terms. Inadvertently, the shunning of Corbyn by 'establishment' institutions lent an underdog and populist quality to his campaigns, giving them a populist vitality and attracting a fan-like following. Both sides in this battle over the Labour Party, one out of fierce opposition to Corbyn, the other largely of necessity, thus dug the trenches still further in which progressive politics in England and Wales remains currently immobilised.

This special issue represents an attempt to overcome this impasse. No doubt, few political differences will be settled here. Rather, in editing this collection of essays we have sought to foster debate. Several essays in this collection certainly stand at odds, particularly

those offered by Eunice Goes, Steven Fielding and Phil Burton-Cartledge concerning the leadership of Keir Starmer. For both Goes and Fielding, the criticism that Starmer lacks combativeness is misguided; rather, his first task is to clear away the dead wood of Corbynism in order, however, to arrive at similar policy outcomes in the end. Burton-Cartledge is more cautious. For him, Starmer runs the risk of losing Labour's metropolitan base, whose experience of affective labour make them predisposed to issues that Starmer has thus far been weak on. In a similar vein, Jeremy Gilbert also sees Starmer's current strategy as unlikely to resolve the problems proceeding from the gap between Labour's members and supporters and the political assumptions shared by most of its MPs. His essay examines various possible explanations for the unremitting hostility of many Labour MPs towards Corbyn's leadership, even after the relative historic success of the 2017 general election.

In his contribution, Eric Shaw unpicks the ways in which anti-semitism became a key issue that undermined Corbyn's management of the party, one which was 'hopelessly polarised'. Jeremy Gilbert considers some of the same themes as Shaw, but from a different angle. Tim Bale provides original data on Labour's members, outlining the distinctions between these members and the voters that Labour must win over. This point has been made many times before, especially where the subtext is a criticism of radical policies, yet it should also be seen as a persistent reality, posing questions to which left-wing campaigners must offer answers. Bassett and Mills also offer original research, showing in their essay the relative isolation of Corbyn and his closest allies from the editors of popular news outlets on Twitter, comparing the Corbyn movement to the campaign for a People's Vote. Their argument also helps to explain distinct political strategies according to their contexts. Jonathan Dean and Bice Maiguashca show how the politics of feminism under Corbyn was cross cut with factionalism. Their essay argues for, and is an example of, reflexivity on the part of Labour Party activists.

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite hones in on Corbyn's initial desire, articulated in 2015, to re-open British coal mines, and thus the degree to which the masculine figure of the miner continues to resonate in left-wing politics. This

<sup>1</sup>E. Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul?: New Labour and the Blair Government 1997–2007*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup>D. Wring, 'Focus group follies? Qualitative research and British Labour Party strategy', *Journal of Political Marketing*, vol 4, no. 5, 2007, pp. 71–97.

<sup>3</sup>Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul?*, p. 153.

essay reminds us of the extent to which Corbyn confirmed the ‘old Labour’ narrative, in which arguably he remained trapped. The distance that both he and John McDonnell travelled from these commitments was quite far indeed, even where the road ahead—paved with futurist sounding slogans like ‘socialism with an iPad’ and commitments like free broadband—was initially unmapped. But as Sutcliffe-Braithwaite’s analysis suggests, that journey may have been rather too slow to get started.

Christine Berry and Patrick Diamond’s analysis of Corbyn’s policy agenda tempers some of the near-hysterical commentary on Labour’s plans for government (see, for example, the baseless claims made in the press that Corbyn was a former Soviet agent whose primary intention was bankrupting Britain). Diamond shows the extent of policy alignment between McDonnell’s plans under Corbyn and the flurry of progressive ideas that appeared in response to economic depression in the 1930s. Both crises produced an intellectual outpouring which Labour has ridden. Diamond’s essay challenges sensationalist interpretations of Labour’s agenda from a hostile media, and also the view of many of his supporters that Corbyn was an authentic tribune of socialism. ‘Social democracy’, as Diamond makes clear, might be a more accurate description of Labour’s ambition in this period. Taking a step further, Berry identifies the democratising, localist and mixed-economy spirit of the Corbyn movement, even, as she outlines, where this remained unrealised. Berry presents an eloquent case for the Corbynite programme as a prospectus for democratic socialism.

Finally, having been at the centre of many events relevant to his essay, James Meadway, a former advisor to John McDonnell, offers a critical assessment of Labour’s 2019 election defeat. Like Berry, Meadway argues that decentralisation should form a central focus for future democratic socialist endeavours. Labour’s current strength in winning metro mayoralties could well point left-wing activists in this direction. [Correction added on 27th May 2021, after first online publication: New paragraph was included.]

What are we to make of Corbyn’s legacy? Will he, like his hero and mentor Tony Benn, ultimately leave nothing but a residual, marginal tendency within the party, that waits three decades for a brief moment of apparent

political relevance? Given that Corbyn made less dramatic progress than Ed Miliband towards the classic Bennite goal of democratising the Labour Party, we might expect so. But this would be to attribute too much significance and too much uniqueness to Corbyn himself, and to the specific and peculiar forms which left politics took under his leadership. The fact is that the political and economic conditions to which Corbynism was a popular response have not gone away, but have instead been wildly exacerbated by the pandemic. The pro-Corbyn movement also raised crucial questions about the nature of party membership in a world of constant online communicative participation. Those questions will not stop being asked, even when much of the current Labour leadership would like them to be. It is simply too early to say whether the desire for radical democratisation of the party that Corbynism re-ignited has really been snuffed out or permanently contained by Starmer’s return to Blair-era party managerialism.

At the time of writing, the parallel experiments of Corbynism and the Bernie Sanders movement seem to have produced very different outcomes. President Biden has laid out plans for a public investment programme far in excess of what most commentators were expecting. This progressive turn is attributed by many to the impact of Sanders’ four years of campaigning, and the widespread popularity of his egalitarian message. Corbyn’s personal difficulty in communicating anti-capitalist politics, in a popular and persuasive idiom, is one reason for the rather different fates of their respective movements. But another is simply the UK’s absurdly centralised political system. It is very difficult to accommodate different political traditions (such as the American ‘progressives’ and ‘centrists’ who jostle for influence within the Democratic Party) in a system wherein all power, privilege and decision-making capacity effectively lies with the single figures of the party leader or the Prime Minister (who of course only wields power, technically, on behalf of the sovereign). This system now poses a very serious set of problems for Labour.

Since its inception, the Labour Party has included revolutionary Marxists and cautiously reformist liberals, as well as many shades of reformer in between. It has always struggled to contain these differing traditions.

During the era of effective two-party politics, 1945–1983, Labour leaders managed to unite these tendencies, some of the time, by appealing to a greater shared goal of defeating the Conservative Party. Since the return of multi-party politics in 1983, the only period during which party unity has been achieved has been that during which Blair and his allies effectively suppressed all internal dissent and most internal democracy. Since the general loss of legitimacy suffered by ‘third way’ politics, in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and the failure of neoliberal governments to mitigate its consequences for the poor and for the young, Labour has not found any

way to reconcile the differences between its constituent tendencies. We certainly do not expect this collection of essays to resolve this problem; but we do hope to foster a degree of open and honest dialogue. In the face of a resurgent authoritarian nationalism, there could be common ground yet for progressives, even if all that this rests upon is some shared understandings about the terms of our disagreements.

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