

Britain: My support for Jeremy Corbyn is about much more than ‘reclaiming Labour’

“We need a different kind of political organisation from that which represented working people in the Keynesian age”

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Hilary Wainwright says she is backing Jeremy Corbyn for Labour leader as part of a transition to organisation beyond parliamentary politics.

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Wherever you turn, democracy is being closed down: the EU/IMF trying to crush the elected Greek government; New Labour picking apart Ed Miliband’s leadership while closing wider debate on the party’s future by trying to ensure a new leader of their ilk; concerted Tory attacks on trade union rights and social security. I felt trapped. And a Labour leadership election that made the choice of washing powder look like competition seemed only to mock my predicament. But then I’m not in the Labour Party, so maybe, I’d been thinking until recently, I could just close my eyes and turn off the radio.

Then, to my delight, I heard that Jeremy Corbyn was going to try to get on the ballot paper (followed soon after by Alexis Tsipras’s equally heartening call for a referendum). It’s not that I look to Corbyn (or Tsipras for that matter) as knights in shining armour coming to the rescue. No, Jeremy Corbyn is just one of a modest band of Labour MPs, building on the tradition of Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone, who don’t ask to see your party card before joining struggles and debates beyond the walls of Westminster.

Then he made it into the contest. Without a moment’s hesitation, I clicked on the link that, at the cost of three quid, would enable me to vote for him. The cost of two pensioner swims at the London Fields lido! To be honest, the Labour Party isn’t worth that valuable three quid. But a platform for someone who not only insists that there is an alternative, but stretches himself to support everyone who is fighting for it, is beyond anything that money can buy.

Transitional demand

It might sound perverse, but I believe Jeremy Corbyn should be supported not as an attempt to ‘reclaim the Labour Party’ but as a transition to a political organisation beyond the Labour Party and beyond parliamentary politics.

In this sense his campaign today is not of the same order as Tony Benn's campaigns for the deputy leadership in 1981 (against Denis Healey) and the leadership in 1988 (against Neil Kinnock). These were campaigns that were part of concerted attempts to turn the Labour Party into a genuinely socialist party, just at the moment when neoliberalism was gaining its pervasive, octopoid grip on British politics. Though I was collaborating with Tony Benn on issues of industrial democracy at the time, I did not support his leadership campaigns. I believed – and continue to believe – too strongly that there were deep structural limits to the possibility of turning the Labour Party into a truly socialist body.

Jeremy Corbyn's campaign is taking place in a context where a thoroughgoing neoliberal politics has taken over the UK state – and much of the Labour Party apparatus with it – and hollowed them out of all live forms of democracy. Moreover, through destroying the welfare state and any legitimacy for a progressive tax system, neoliberal economics has destroyed all material bases of a public good or even moderately just national economy.

The economic and political conditions for social democracy no longer exist. The prevarications of both Ed Miliband and Andy Burnham are indications of this. Their goals are social democratic but the world of a mixed economy, where the profits of a productive capitalist sector could be taxed and redistributed to provide universal welfare, social security and a public infrastructure for the benefit of all, no longer exists. It has been replaced by a financialised global capitalism, where financial flows shape politics rather than politics intervening in a productive economy tied to territory and geographic markets. In the face of such global monsters that have already weakened the organisations of labour, social democracy as we have known it is visibly too weak to be an effective champion of social justice.

Reflecting on the fate of once powerful and popular social democratic parties, from the Greek Pasok, through the Italian Communist Party to the German SPD, the French Socialists and British Labour, it is clear that social democracy depended on the normalisation of a Keynesian macro-economy – productive capital, the aspiration of full employment, decent wages and social security (hence a strong market for the goods produced), taxable profits and a nationally regulated currency and trade.

Many of us from the generations born and socialised in the years before neoliberalism became hegemonic have tended almost unconsciously to treat some version of Keynesianism as the orthodoxy and the norm. Our arguments against neoliberal austerity measures are often that 'It doesn't make economic sense', meaning that they cut demand and destroy markets, leading to a vicious circle of unemployment, lower demand, the closing down of production and a lower tax base, leading to a weaker welfare state.

All true in Keynesian terms. But the Keynesian consensus is no more. It has been killed, not simply replaced, by neoliberalism and capital's shift from production to finance, from making profits out of producing things to making money out of money. Indeed neoliberals sought political power, with the backing of financial interests, exactly because Keynesianism was leading to the erosion of profits. That is, Keynesian economics favoured the growth of a strong labour movement with its bargaining power massively strengthened by full employment and social security. This, in neoliberal and corporate eyes, was unacceptable and had to be destroyed.

Campaigning for Corbyn

So what does all this have to do with Labour Party leadership elections and campaigning for Jeremy Corbyn?

In the past, social democracy's symbiotic relation with Keynesian macro-economics worldwide provided the context shaping internal debate in the Labour Party and other social democratic parties. For social democracy went with the grain of the Keynesian mixed economy. Internal debates were about how far social democratic governments should push the mix towards a greater or lesser state component. Neither option posed a problem for existing parliamentary institutions or the moderating division of responsibilities between the unions (industrial matters minus politics) and the Labour Party (politics minus any active alliance with the unions).

This context began to change as the post-war economy hit problems – the 1973 oil price rise; a combination of inflation with recession; an intensification of global competition; the rise of financial speculation and financial instability. This had direct consequences for working-class communities – factory closures, cuts and so on. And this in turn unleashed a radical extra-parliamentary politics, in the unions as well as coming from the radical social movements that had been incubating in the cities, especially since 1968 – the women's liberation, student, housing and community movements. All with an increasingly transnational orientation – observing, as they did, the increasing power of global capital.

This created the politics that both Tony Benn and, in a different way, Ken Livingstone tried, against ruling class outrage, to put into practice. This involved 'the labour movement' becoming less a cautiously constrained alliance between trade union leaders and a professional caste of parliamentarians and more a matter of radical, activist politicians strengthening their assault on capital with support from highly politicised workplace leaders. These were often closely allied, through trades councils, cultural and research collectives and the like, with social movements of a socialist bent (socialist feminism, left gay politics, radical tenant and community groups).

This in turn, along with the generalised increase in the power of labour, provoked a rabid response from economic elites, who had long been champing at the bit of the Keynesian consensus. This became the basis of the neoliberal class war on labour led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

We still have much thinking to do about the ramifications of the left's defeat in that class war. One implication, becoming clear in the Euro-elite's treatment of Greece and Cameron's continued austerity and privatising measures, is that there is definitively no return to the compromises of the Keynesian consensus. Victories – for example, against water privatisation or for protective legislation – can be won here and there but only through strong extra-parliamentary movements gaining support from sympathetic politicians.

The levers of national governmental power have either become useless in the face of global financial flows (for example, to tax corporations or combat tax avoidance) or, in the case of the EU, international treaties block state intervention in the market or use debt to prevent radical governments from using the powers they could have (as with Greece). Across the world, a new kind of politics of resistance to this is developing that seeks to mobilise all possible sources of counter-power. In particular, it doesn't limit itself to gaining the power of being an elected government – it is simply not sufficient. It seeks rather to disrupt the day-to-day oppressions and injustices on which the neoliberal order depends and to create new transformative relationships of mutuality and democracy out of resistance.

Beyond, not against, the ballot

It is important, at this point, not to counterpose this grassroots transformative power to the distinct and, on its own, limited power of electoral politics. 'Beyond the ballot box' does not equal 'against

the ballot box' [1]. While it has become clear in the past three or four decades that electoral politics is a blunt instrument for radical change against the global strength of the corporate market, it is equally clear that the full realisation of people's transformative capacities will be enhanced if those organising and sharing these capacities gain support from state bodies, local and national, through legislation, redistribution and measures.

I need not say more on this, for this much is obvious to *Red Pepper* readers. What I would stress is the need to abandon purisms and single perspective politics – whether pure anarchism, pure parliamentarism, pure syndicalism or any one-track approach – and instead to urge a hybrid and experimental politics where collaboration is the guiding method. And where this collaboration is organised not through a single unifying centre but through networks of co-ordination, giving a priority to inter-communication and inter-connection as a means of developing shared values and a common sense of direction.

What is needed, then, is a different kind of political organisation from that which represented working people in the Keynesian age: one that is less about campaigning for government, more about developing and interconnecting people's transformative capacities on a transnational scale – interconnecting from the local to the global – to challenge the monster that is global capitalism. But the notion of hybridity and the goal of a movement mobilising many different sources and levels of power can also recognise and value the organisations created historically and still of value but within a different framework.

Here I would argue that while the Labour Party nationally cannot be 'reclaimed', local Labour parties have often been built out of local struggles. They cannot be discarded, nor corralled into a homogenous vanguard party. They can, however, be – and indeed in many localities are already becoming – part of alliances against austerity and for democratic alternatives.

These could be part of a new politics that is less about demands on government, more about grassroots transformation, and reflecting and generalising from exemplary cases – a politics that starts from a recognition that our only resource is people's creative capacities and their willingness to realise these capacities for the benefit of all. Hence a movement as much about popular education and self-education as about winning elections; that is less about faction fights and more about welcoming diversity and creating space for reflection and debate, treating practice as experimental action from which to learn; an organisation, then, that is less of a central hierarchy and vanguard, more a platform connecting and supporting and interconnecting struggles.

A good kind of leader

Jeremy Corbyn is a good kind of leader, one among many, for this kind of plural and non-hierarchical organisation. He always makes himself available for the struggles of others and never over-estimates his own power. 'I always try to encourage people in what they are trying to achieve,' he says. 'MPs can't do everything themselves – we're not gods – but if an MP says "I will support you", that is probably a help to the campaign.'

He is willing to say 'I don't know' and always 'respects other people's knowledge, whether they are academics or not'. He welcomes diversity: 'Surely we need to have a diversity of opinion around us? It's good for us, is it not?' And he ventures into areas where the left doesn't normally go, such as religion: 'I find religion very interesting. I find the power of faith interesting. I think the faith community offers a great deal for people. There doesn't have to be wars about religion; there has to be honesty about religion.'

He supports an impressive range of struggles but he weaves a web of networks so they connect with each other, rather than going through him. At present, he can see that something new is going on, transcending traditional political allegiances. 'At a local level,' he says, 'people who are supporters of Labour and the Green Party actually work together on a lot of issues – probably with a few Liberal Democrats as well as others. There is going to be a change in politics in the future – look, for instance, at the growth of organisations like UK Uncut. Essentially it is a moral force.'

By supporting Jeremy Corbyn, we are not seeking to escape the problems that beset the left in the UK – disunity, sectarianism, parochialism, defeats by a supremely confident ruling class – through placing our faith in a charismatic leader. Contrast the dynamic that tended to lie behind rallying to Arthur Scargill, George Galloway and even, at times, Tony Benn. We are supporting someone who has no desire to be the leader but is willing to offer his energies and legitimacy as an MP as a resource for a movement that can self-consciously create a truly transformative politics, inside and outside the Labour Party and based on principles of self-governing democracy.

In his spirit of modesty, it's an opportunity to get out of a political trap into a space for debate and new radical thinking. Let's grasp it!

If you're not a Labour Party member you can still sign as a 'registered supporter' to vote for Jeremy for £3 – visit supporters.labour.org.uk or text LABOUR to 78555 before 12noon on 12 August.

Hilary Wainwright

P.S.

* "My support for Jeremy Corbyn is about much more than 'reclaiming Labour'". This article is taken from the forthcoming issue of Red Pepper:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/my-support-for-jeremy-corbyn-is-about-much-more-than-reclaiming-labour/>

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 35854), [Britain, Scotland & the rise of a new movement – Higher aspirations: politics beyond the ballot box](#).