

Labour Party (Britain): Corbyn continues to consolidate

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Veronica Fagan looks at the position today.

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Jeremy Corbyn's remarkable election as Labour leader was part of a broader radicalisation across Europe – the same process, in different conditions, which has seen the growing impact of parties such as Podemos in the Spanish State, the Red Green Alliance in Denmark or Bloco in Portugal.

From day one, the media have trounced him for everything he has done, or not done: not singing the national anthem, not being prepared to press the nuclear button, not bending his head low enough at the cenotaph, supposedly being a 'supporter of terrorism' or having dinner with the Stop the War Coalition. Only the Tory crisis over the EU referendum has shifted their focus.

The Labour right followed in their wake, trumpeting the same causes. This is the same right wing that shaped the Tory-lite and cuts-lite policies that lost Labour the last election. They claimed that the campaign had been too left and to win in 2020 the party had to move further to the right. Acting leader, Harriet Harman accepted the Tory budget and cuts agenda.

The right in the Labour Party wanted to destroy Corbyn before he was able to establish himself.

But he has consolidated his position and is stronger now than when first elected. He has broken the cross-party consensus on key issues in British politics and raised the level of the political discourse in the process. This has pushed the Labour Party to the left and re-popularised radical ideas.

He openly welcomes migrants – speaking at the welcome refugees' demonstration immediately after his election triumph and later visiting the now closed 'Jungle' camp in Calais.

He fully supports the junior doctors' action and opposes the Tory Housing Bill. He received a standing ovation at the National Union of Teachers Easter conference where he made clear that he opposes the government's forced academisation.

He has taken up the issue of low wages; saying that he would ban big corporations from paying dividends to their shareholders unless they could show that they are paying a proper living wage to their workforce – both direct and contracted workers.

He has called for the repeal of the anti-union laws, and would reverse the law against secondary picketing. At the international level, he said he would negotiate with Argentina over the Falklands islands.

Trident

He has set his face against the renewal of the Trident weapons system – the holy grail of the British establishment. Preventing Trident replacement would be a massive blow for the British ruling class, as well as a huge victory for Corbyn who has championed this cause all his life. Corbyn, together with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, have strengthened the movement – resulting in the biggest demonstration against nuclear weapons in Britain for many years on February 27.

Scrapping Trident will be overwhelmingly popular amongst individual Labour Party members but voices from the top of some unions—Unite's Len McCluskey and GMB's Paul Kenny for example—have been raised in opposition.

In Unite's case, McCluskey's comments – unless he is being misquoted – would seem an extremely skewed interpretation the union's policy – which while it rightly talks about the need to maintain jobs and skills, is absolutely against Trident renewal. Unite's Scottish Secretary Pat Rafferty for example spoke in favour of the resolution against Trident which was adopted by Labour Scotland's conference last year.

Corbyn is rightly countering their arguments by saying that Trident jobs should be switched to renewable energy production. This is a much stronger argument than the idea of submarines without nuclear weapons – an idea which doesn't draw on the strength of the work that has been done over defence diversification over decades.

In this the fortieth anniversary year of the Lucas Aerospace plan, when shop stewards in the plant which was largely making products for the defence industry, came together with radical scientists and produced detailed blue prints for 150 alternative products that the plant and its workers could be converted to produce, the time to build on and popularise such ideas has never been more urgent.

But what horrifies the Labour right even more is the way Corbyn is proposing taking the decision on Trident. He has said that it will be the membership, either at conference or in a membership vote that will decide the issue – sidelining the Parliamentary LP and the policy forum.

In taking such a position, Corbyn is not only seeking to reach out to those more likely to support his convictions on this vital issue but to strengthen both the democracy and the level of political debate in the party in a more fundamental way. This is obviously a threat to the PLP and to the right, not only on the vital issue of opposition to weapons of mass destruction, but on a broader and longer term basis.

Corbyn held the line against war – and took two thirds of Labour MPs and a slender majority of his then shadow cabinet with him in the vote against military intervention in Syria – despite the huge attacks on him for doing so.

The membership of the Labour Party has grown dramatically from around 201,293 before the last election to 388,407 on 10 January 2016. This is not far behind the existing, very short lived peak of membership of 407,000 after Blair was elected as Prime Minister in 1997. Given that those numbers conceal some resignations from a section of the right who couldn't stomach him at all; it's a party which is significantly further to the left than it was. Corbyn is reshaping the Labour Party towards his own political positions—though there remains a fair way to go.

Of course the place where things are most difficult for Corbyn is in the PLP.

His shadow cabinet reshuffle, which the media complained took too long- as if there was a time limit for reshuffles - has strengthened his position by removing some who were openly defying his leadership. It included the removal of Trident supporter Maria Eagle from the defence brief and her replacement with Emily Thornbury who opposes it - and who was very sharp in her backing for Corbyn in the media during the debate on Syria.

Even if the right wing was able to force a fresh leadership election, and it's not clear that a significant number of them currently see this as being in their immediate sights, Corbyn would only increase his majority. If they tried to exclude him from the ballot paper they would split the party.

Perhaps this, as well as their own internal divisions, is why there is no obvious candidate around whom the right can rally - instead desperate cries that it must be them every time yet another malcontent grumbles at Corbyn.

Oldham West success

The Labour right have another problem.

They were desperate for Labour to lose the Oldham West and Royton by-election in the autumn but contrary to their expectations, the electorate was positive about Corbyn.

Labour won the seat with a majority of 10,722 and a 62% share of the vote—higher than at the general election. Predictions of a dramatic UKIP victory were dashed as their vote declined from the general election.

Corbyn said Labour's win in Oldham demonstrated the strength and appeal of its anti-austerity message and he was absolutely right. It reflected the changes Corbyn has made since he became leader. Labour is now putting forward anti-austerity arguments, despite squeals of pain and anger from many of its MPs.

Corbynism is also behind the defeats the Tories have suffered in Parliament in recent months - including the U-turn over tax credits and the cuts to police numbers. The £5.7m contract to train staff to work in Saudi Arabia's brutal justice system was scrapped after Corbyn intervened. And together with disabled campaigners, Corbyn can claim credit for forcing Ian Duncan Smith's resignation and the reversal of plans to cut Personal Independence payments.

As Tory disarray deepens, he has made a significant impact over their inertia over the steel crisis and then over Cameron's scandalous behavior over the Panama papers.

This is in sharp contrast to Labour's performance under Miliband - not to mention Brown and Blair - where it was hard to tell the difference between them and the Tories. It is by showing that austerity is not inevitable - and neither is war - that Labour can win at the polls, convincing people that there is a point in turning out.

The May elections are a big challenge but the signs are that Labour will do well, including in London despite the fact that the mayoral candidate Sadiq Khan is not a Corbynite. All the opinion polls put Khan well in the lead over Tory Zac Goldsmith - and even the hostile Evening Standard concedes Labour may take some of the seats in outer London in the Assembly elections which happens at the same time.

Scotland remains a major problem for Corbyn, and that is not going to change whilst he sticks to a

unionist position. Corbyn is well to the left of the SNP but whilst he sticks to a unionist agenda he will make no progress north of the border.

But even a poor result in May would not necessarily be terminal to the project since he appears to be looking to build support over the next two to three years.

Veronica Fagan

P.S.

* "Corbyn continues to consolidate". April 19, 2016:

<http://socialistresistance.org/8289/corbyn-continues-to-consolidate>