

# Britain - The defeat of Corbynism: digging deeper

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**Phil Hearse takes a closer look at the anatomy of Labour's historic defeat.**

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*[Long read]*

'Why we lost' is a recurrent theme in left-wing blogs and magazines, and naturally so. Many, like Laura Piddock's painfully honest Letter to the Movement[1], are full of defiance and determination not to bow down – either to the Tories or to the Labour Right. Which, of course, is admirable.

But you cannot help feeling that analyses which start and end with Brexit, or focus on the presentation of the manifesto, are not really going to the heart of the matter. We need to stand back and look at the whole Corbyn project and draw conclusions that go beyond the perfectly reasonable notion that socialists have to now redouble their efforts to base themselves on struggles in workplaces and communities.

I remember a discussion I had with friends in December 2015 about the recent election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader. I said I thought the right wing of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) [*The parliamentary party of the Labour Party in Parliament, the Labour MPs as a collective body*] would go for Jeremy as soon as possible. Some others thought they might wait for him to be defeated at the then-scheduled 2020 election – and then get rid of him and attack the Left.

Neither of us accurately predicted exactly what would happen: there was the 'chicken coup' in 2016, in which the Right failed to remove Corbyn, but in retrospect the longer perspective was closer to the mark.

None of us, incidentally, mentioned the term 'anti-Semitism', and we would doubtless have thought that an offensive on this front would lack all credibility. You live and learn.

### **The Labour Right: a clear and present danger**

But we were right on the fundamentals. The Labour Right would never be reconciled to a Left leadership, and would do everything possible to overthrow it, using whatever means came to hand. Because, after all, they are politicians who represent the bourgeois order, and they will always side with the capitalist class against anything that has a whiff of anti-capitalism about it.

That, of course, is ABC for Marxists – but it was never fully grasped by many Corbyn supporters, including a good number at the highest level.

This is the main thing I would say. It was always literally incredible to imagine a radical left-reformist programme, with many measures against the immediate interests of British and international capitalism, being implemented by a parliamentary party dead set against it.

The weakness of the Corbynistas at the PLP level was overwhelming. You can see that from, among other things, the composition of the various incarnations of the Shadow Cabinet.

Keir Starmer a left-winger? If in doubt, read *The Case against Keir Starmer* on the Verso blog [\[1\]](#). Angela Rayner? – ask anyone who fought against her in Unison. Emily Thornberry? Do me a favour. Indeed, at times, Corbyn had difficulty getting a Shadow Cabinet together at all.

The only way that a radical left programme could have been forced through the PLP was by altering the composition of that body, by unleashing a huge mandatory re-selection campaign, which would have meant throwing the party into civil war at every level.

But already in 2016 it was clear that this was the opposite of what the Corbyn leadership wanted, as the party apparatus went into overdrive to prevent local parties de-selecting right-wing MPs.

Right from the beginning, the right wing of the PLP made 'no de-selection' a centre-piece of their demands. Indeed, the original reason for Chris Williamson's huge unpopularity with the majority of the PLP was his touring 'democracy roadshow' demanding mandatory re-selection of MPs.

### **Momentum: a historic failure**

Which takes us to another problem. How would you get such a proposal, for mandatory re-selection, thought the NEC and Conference? After a time, of course, open selection was adopted, but too little, too late. Winning on this issue would have depended on mobilising Momentum and the Corbyn base more generally. Reluctant union leaders would have been hugely pressurised by a mass campaign.

It would have been a hard fight. It would have been a fight in which the whole of the establishment got behind the PLP Right, with Blair, Brown, Alistair Campbell, and the old Blairite crowd, not to mention Jess Phillips and Tom Watson, being urged on vehemently by the Tory press and the BBC.

But Momentum was not used in that way. It was never meant to be that. Jon Lansman could run it as a bureaucratically dominated front with prescribed tasks of internal and external elections – because the Corbyn leadership gave him license to do just that, right from the very beginning.

When a scheduled Momentum conference was cancelled in 2016, it was clear that the leadership wanted to chloroform any democracy inside the organisation. In fact, Momentum was a model of 'vertical' organisation that the leader of any 1950s Stalinist state would have been proud of.

Not only were Momentum local groups forbidden to communicate directly with their own members, they were refused lists of local people who had joined Momentum. All mailings had to go through the national office, which then sent them out to local members – if approved.

All this was justified on spurious data-protection grounds. Momentum was limited to a few nationally-run campaigns, carefully designed to be as non-controversial as possible vis-à-vis the party's right wing.

A brilliant opportunity was lost, with a force of perhaps 40,000-plus, to push back and isolate the PLP right wing. It was an opportunity spurned, because the Corbyn leadership appeared to have the risible idea that significant compromises could be reached with the Right, which would allow the radical Corbyn project to go ahead, without a show-down fight.

### **A compromised programme**

What would have happened if Labour had won the 2019 election? Doubtless, political mayhem, with the right wing of the PLP linking with the Tories and the Lib-Dems to vote down each radical measure. This counterfactual cannot be tested, because the PLP Right found a way to 'get' Corbyn before such a political 'disaster'.

Given the composition of the Shadow Cabinet and the PLP, Corbyn, notwithstanding the relative radicalism of the 2017 and 2019 election programmes, was forced into numerous concessions and compromises. Labour's position was awful on Trident, NATO, and immigration/free movement.

But the worst climbdown was in relation to the anti-Semitism smear – in reality, an attack on pro-Palestinian solidarity. This all but sealed the fate of the Corbyn leadership, even before its incomprehensible Brexit compromise/disaster.

It made Corbyn look – at best – like a weak and incompetent leader apparently tolerating racism in the Labour ranks. Probably, the inner Corbyn entourage knew the anti-Semitism allegations were largely fabricated and grotesquely inflated by the Tory media campaign. But they decided not to fight, but to apologise, apparently in the belief that this was the best way to diffuse the situation.

In a conference call with North East England party activists before the election, Seumas Milne is reported as saying that encouraging things like petitions from Jewish academics against the witch-hunt 'would make matters worse'. This was a catastrophic error of judgement and utterly irresponsible. It opened up the whole of the Left to accusations of anti-Semitism, not just Labour Party members. It weakened and marginalised pro-Palestinian activists. And it will doubtless encourage the use of the same tactic internationally.

### **McCarthyism by another name**

Many left Labour activists were dismayed and astonished by the refusal of the leadership to fight on the issue. But this failure of nerve and principle by the Corbyn leadership did not arise in a vacuum. We do not know, but I would bet, that members of the Shadow Cabinet like Keir Starmer and Emily Thornberry said they would resign if the allegations of anti-Semitism were bluntly repudiated.

The anti-Semitism witch-hunt relied for its success on the willingness of the majority of the PLP to use any weapon, to sanction any slander, to undermine and defeat Corbyn.

The witch-hunt was a brilliant strategy for the Right. First, it touched on a raw nerve that might throw the Left into confusion – the accusation of being racist, which the Left could never have imagined.

Second, it was an accusation that pre-empted any effective reply or refutation. You cannot prove a negative. If you apologise, you admit fault. If you declare what is happening to be a ‘witch-hunt’, you can be branded an ‘anti-Semite’, or at least a fellow-traveller.

This was one of the many parallels with the McCarthyite witch-hunt in the United States, when people were frightened to speak out for fear of being accused of being ‘communists’ themselves.

Third, it could go on forever: so long as there were people in the Labour Party who supported the Palestinian resistance, the potential was there for another round of anti-Semitism allegations.

### **Brexit racism: ducking the challenge**

On Brexit, the problems do go back to the referendum – and before. In 2015 it was self-evident that Corbyn was lukewarm about a ‘yes’ vote.

What was lacking here was any real understanding of the role that Brexit was playing in British politics, and of the way that leaving the EU had become the banner of the Far Right, including UKIP, but especially (as events have since proved) the right wing of the Tory Party.

It was already there in the 2004 European election, when UKIP got 16% of the vote, and in 2009, when they got 17%. Once Farage became UKIP leader in 2006, the party made a decisive swing from being just an anti-EU party and becoming an anti-immigration party – and its fortunes improved immediately.

In 2009, Bob Crow and the Socialist Party organised the ‘No 2 EU’ campaign – a disastrous choice which was the precursor of the later ‘Lexit’ campaign.

Not understanding the role of Brexit in bringing the Tory Right closer to power was linked to something else: a failure by many on the Left to understand this simple fact. The basic strategy by the Far Right was to split the working class on its weakest front: that is, to exploit the fact that some of its most politically backward sectors were open to racism, xenophobia, and nationalism.

The widespread idea that the Left and anti-racist campaigns had permanently defeated racism was false through and through: a utopian pipe dream. The core of nationalist reaction is the ruling class and the petty bourgeoisie; the genius of Brexit was to consolidate this base with a reactionary section of the working class.

Of course, a large majority of the working class are opposed to racism and xenophobia. But mobilising around Brexit, the racists and xenophobes were able to draw others behind them.

Saying all this does not necessarily enable you to see your way through the parliamentary Brexit maze. But it does at least give you the correct starting-point.

Corbyn, on the other hand, was undone by the obvious attempt at ‘triangulation’ – the attempt to unite the incompatibles, encapsulated in the ridiculous position finally adopted by the 2019

Conference immediately before the election.

Ridiculous because it was obvious that a large majority of voters did not want a second referendum, and it was, to say the least, speculation that a new deal could be negotiated with the EU. And when Jeremy Corbyn said that in a new referendum he would remain neutral, he looked spectacularly weak and evasive.

I must also say something hardly ever touched on by the Left in England: that Labour's crass refusal to face up to the national question in Scotland has seen Scottish Labour reduced to near zero, and that Corbyn's visit to Scotland in the last days of the 2019 election campaign was a disaster.

Once again, the British labour movement has failed the test of the national question – bizarrely demonstrated by Lisa Nandy apparently referring to Spain's suppression of the Catalan national movement as a model that might be used in Scotland.[2]

### **Building on air**

Corbyn became Labour leader 30 years after the defeat of the miners' strike and then the defeat of other powerful groups of organised workers like the printers and the dockers. This succession of defeats was only partially offset by victory in the poll-tax struggle of 1989-91.

These defeats prepared the ground for the neoliberal transformation of the workplace – the breaking of union power, the atomisation of the workforce, the unfettered rule of the boss and the supervisor, the lack of job security, the driving down of wages, the ratcheting up of workloads.

Corbynism's base was less rooted in the strong unions of the industrial working class, less experienced in the labour movement, and less battle-hardened in strike struggles than Benn's base had been in the 1980s.

But it was much more advanced on questions of liberation politics and – initially – full of youthful determination and energy, manifestly on display in the mobilisation for the 2017 general election.

But this enthusiasm was betrayed by the treatment of Momentum's membership, and the party Left more generally, as a stage army of canvassing fodder and internal election troops.

Corbynism was ideologically brittle, and often tactically naïve, at least in terms of the massive historic tasks it faced. Nothing else can explain its rapid decline, from the heights of 'Oh Jeremy Corbyn' at Glastonbury and Tranmere Rovers in 2016, to the politically punch-drunk performance at the 2019 election and the demoralisation of whole sections of the Corbyn base since the defeat.

The central Corbyn leadership did not understand the depth of the reactionary onslaught it would face, especially after it has given the right wing a shock by its forward steps at the 2017 election. Powerful forces, in Britain and internationally, were determined not to allow that to happen a second time, a determination revealed by the campaign cooked up by the Conservative Party and its media friends to smear Jeremy Corbyn as a Czech spy in the 1980s.

This campaign collapsed in the High Court when Tory Deputy Chair Ben Bradshaw admitted it was all made up. But it was open season: you could say anything about Jeremy Corbyn and get mass publicity for it. Fortunately, the Labour Party nationally fought back against this slander. More important ones later, they caved in on.

## Conclusion

So what are we saying? Corbynism was assailed on all sides, and every other party was happy to go along with the most slanderous accusations against Corbyn (including, shamefully, the Greens, who stood in some constituencies against Labour Left candidates and split the vote).

But those with the main responsibility for the 2019 election defeat are the right wing of the Labour Party, who were happy – with their media allies in the Guardian, Observer, and Channel 4 News – to use any weapon, any slander, to bring Corbyn down.

Momentum was not a fit instrument to fight them. It made concessions on the witch-hunt, it was top-down bureaucratic, it kept its members on a tight leash, and in consequence the great majority simply lapsed into inactivity.

To face the future, the Left must draw up a balance sheet of the last five years – staring reality in the face – and rebuild itself around mass struggle: against racism and xenophobia; in defence of multiculturalism and migrant rights; in solidarity with the Palestinians and all other oppressed people globally; against fossil-fuel capitalism and climate catastrophe; and for social reform in the context of ongoing neoliberal attacks on working people.

Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, and the Tory media cooked up a scheme for defeating Labour and Corbyn. In this, they were ably assisted by the Labour Right. But the Johnson/Cummings regime have no workable plan for post-Brexit British capitalism. A renovated Left can emerge in the many struggles, local, national, and international, that are now inevitable.

### **Phil Hearse**

[1] <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/02/letter-to-the-movement>

[2] Comments that she subsequently tried to row back on.

<https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/lisa-nandy-defends-catalonia-comments-21296937>

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### **P.S.**

Mutiny, 18 February 2020:

<https://www.timetomutiny.org/post/the-defeat-of-corbynism-digging-deeper>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4555-the-case-against-keir-starmer>