

Britain: The Momentum is with Corbyn - A challenge to organisations on the left outside the Labour Party

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Jeremy Corbyn's triumph in the contest to become leader of the Labour Party on September 12 was a red letter day. The scale of his success and the thousands of people – especially young people – involved in the campaign were both extraordinary.

The way he engaged in debate and discussion began to reshape politics and move its centre to the left was already apparent over the summer – and that dynamic has continued. The Corbyn phenomena has already pushed political discourse to the left and brought real politics back onto the agenda.

At the centre of what is now contested is the Tory idea – which many on the Labour benches left unchallenged or repeated in slightly softer language – that there is no alternative to austerity. On the contrary, as Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell has argued strongly, austerity is a political choice; and one which seeks to make the poor become still poorer and the rich get still richer.

The fruits of this are already apparent. The Labour Party has doubled in size and is now bigger than all the other parties put together. People are getting actively involved who haven't been before – or in other cases not for many years.

Corbyn is continuing to reach out – for example by asking people what they want him to take up in Prime Minister's Question Time. Team Corbyn is giving a voice to disabled activists, to those searching for affordable housing and to those concerned with many other and various issues. The idea that there is no difference between politicians is being challenged by this doing politics differently.

The right in the Labour Party is down- but not out. They can't cope with the fact that Corbyn has declared that the Labour Party is an anti-austerity party.

They are looking for any chance to undermine him. The first major opportunity to move against Corbyn could come after the elections next May – council elections in most parts of Britain but also elections for the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and for London Mayor. If Labour does badly, there will be attempts to make Corbyn carry the can.

But even that is not straightforward.

Labour can hardly do worse in Scotland than it did last May – even if it would do better still if Corbyn distanced himself from the Unionism which so damaged Scottish Labour then. It would help his prospects across the whole of Britain if he advocated a proportional system for all elections. It would be positive if he used the run up to COP21 in Paris to point out the ways in which the Tories agenda is contributing to rather than contesting the ravages of climate change.

Across Britain, it's clear that the Corbyn surge will mean more energy and more people working for

Labour in the elections next May than for many decades – possibly ever. On the other hand, the extent to which the relevant candidates identify themselves with Corbyn's policies and with his way of doing politics will also have an impact.

People who have joined Labour to support anti-austerity policies are not going to be enthusiastic to work for candidates who have been shutting local libraries or playgroups, supporting privatisation of local services or attacking the conditions of council workers.

This is the context in which the welcome and bold decision has been taken to transform Corbyn's election campaign into Momentum – an outward facing national network involving people inside and outside the Labour Party. To defend the politics on which Corbyn won his election – and to build a majority for them in society – a social movement is needed; a movement against austerity, against war, for civil liberties and rights at work – open to all those who support those ideas and wants to work collectively, in a democratic framework to fight to make them the majority view across Britain.

There are certainly discussions that Labour Party members themselves need to have locally and nationally about the relative priorities in democratizing party structures as well as campaigning on the streets. But organising on that basis alone isn't sufficient to do what needs to be done – or to harness the potential that the summer showed. Corbyn, McDonnell and their co-thinkers seem very clear about this and should be supported in making that point loudly.

Of course all of this poses a big challenge to organisations on the left outside the Labour Party.

Left Unity, set up to provide a political alternative for those who oppose austerity, will not surprisingly, make this discussion the centrepiece of its conference in November. Britain's undemocratic electoral system and unitary trade union movement with its specific historical relationship with its Labour (social democratic) party means that the radicalisation which led to Corbyn's victory goes against the tide of what's been happening elsewhere in Europe as broad parties of the left have come into existence over the last decade or so.

Some people have already decided that they belong in the Labour Party under Corbyn. Good luck to them and we expect we will continue to work together fruitfully in Momentum and in individual campaigns. Others are proposing that Left Unity ceases to function as a party and becomes another inside outside network – without explaining what its particular selling point would be.

Socialist Resistance thinks it would be a serious error to go down that road. We think that Left Unity should at this stage seek affiliation to the Labour Party – which we see as demonstrating the seriousness which we give to the movement around Corbyn and the transformation it has already wrought. We think it needs to retain its separate identity, its own policies, structure and leadership.

The need for a radical left party that can lead the struggle against austerity and puts forward policies which are in the interests of the many, not the few, remains absolutely indispensable. Team Corbyn's aim is clearly to forge a Labour Party which can do that – but despite the significant changes that have already taken place, there are many obstacles still ahead.

That's why Socialist Resistance will aim to continue playing a major role in Left Unity as well as enthusiastically supporting Momentum and its initiatives

Socialist Resistance

P.S.

* "The Momentum is with Corbyn":

<http://socialistresistance.org/7833/the-momentum-is-with-corbyn>