

Britain: Momentum - What does democracy look like?

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Over the last few days there has been a lot of brouhaha about what's happening with Momentum. Unpicking what is behind the controversies is complex - and suggesting what to do to move forward even more so.

Momentum is the most successful organisation of the Labour left has with over 20,000 members and 150 local groups. It came out of the remarkable campaign to elect Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in 2015 and has harnessed much of the dynamism of that movement.

A great deal has been achieved - growing Labour's membership, defeating the Tories on some critical questions, winning important electoral contests and showing that austerity and inequality are choices not inevitabilities.

But huge challenges remain. The right inside the Labour Party have not gone away and a majority of the PLP remain deeply hostile to Corbyn's leadership. Their attempted coup meant that energies that should have been used taking the fight to the Tories was diverted into winning a second leadership contest. And this, combined with a consistently hostile media, did no favours to Labour's poll ratings.

Those who support Jeremy Corbyn come from diverse backgrounds and experiences; young people alongside others with decades of involvement in the labour movement at different levels. Social media is critical to our reach, but so is the support and involvement of organised trade unions. How do we strengthen the fabric these threads can weave together?

The idea of 'doing politics differently' seems very attractive. If it means that those who suffer as a result of the decisions taken by remote politicians it makes absolute sense. If it means that those who are elected to represent people in parliaments, local councils or trade unions, it's a great idea. But if it also implies that the best or sometimes the only way to engage in politics is through surfing the internet and signing on line petitions as an isolated individual, then it can have limitations.

The horizontalist impulse has its contradictions. Power is not only exerted in obvious ways by men in suits - though it certainly is. In the 1970's, a paper was written as part of debates in the Women's Liberation movement called *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* [1]. It talked about the way power dynamics work in unstructured groups.

If someone you elected does something you don't like you stand a chance of electing someone else. If someone speaks on your behalf without your knowledge and consent, without you having the same opportunity to speak to the press as they do, you have a rather bigger problem.

In her paper Jo Freeman puts forward a number of principles for democratic structures which could be usefully applied in today's situation.

The salient facts behind the uproar in Momentum look like this:

- Momentum hasn't had a national conference since it was founded.
- It has a national committee elected from local groups, equality structures and trade unions. That national committee hasn't met for seven months.
- The national committee elected a smaller steering Committee.
- The national committee was due to meet on November 5. A major topic on its agenda was scheduled to be discussing how best to organise a national conference in February.

At a meeting of the Steering Committee called at less than 24 hours notice the national committee was postponed. Further a decision was taken that the national conference would be a livestreamed national gathering with structures being decided by e-ballot.

Further many of those who support what the Steering Committee decided are criticising those of us who have objections by suggesting that we are the ones who want to deny 'ordinary members' of Momentum access to democratic decision making. No that's not our point at all - our point is that to achieve real democracy we need to find an effective way to blend the collective ways of working of the labour movement with the greater reach new technology gives us, rather than throwing out the lessons of decades of organising in the rush to do something new.

They argue that there are problems about the functioning of local groups. If this is true, as it almost certainly is in some places, then this needs to be resolved not gone round. Only if the left is working together coherently and inclusively on a local level will we be able to challenge the right where they have control of local constituencies.

Creating an organisation with 20,000 members is a huge achievement. Developing that into one where those people and many more feel confidence that that organisation is one that each of them can have a say in its direction and priorities in order to most effectively create a world transformed would be an even bigger one. There is no fail safe way of coming up with all the right answers but, as Jo Freeman argues, there are some principles such as delegation, rotation and equal access to resources which are prerequisites.

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P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/what-does-democracy-look-like/9144>

Footnotes

[1] <http://struggle.ws/pdfs/tyranny.pdf>