

Britain: Keir Starmer, the Labour Party, and the Labour Left

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Stay or leave? Simon Hannah argues that is no longer the main question.

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It was clear from the first moments of Keir Starmer's leadership that he was no friend of the Left and would do his utmost to wrestle the Labour Party back to the 'sensible middle ground' so beloved of social-democrats.

Starmer and his supporters see the Corbyn era as a tragic mistake and have no compunction whatsoever about ruthless surgical removal and cauterisation of the radical Left if necessary. Starmer's shadow cabinet pick saw a purge of all left MPs from senior positions.

The new strategy of being 'forensic' and 'not oppositional for opposition's sake' means that the political critique of Johnson and his botched handling of COVID and Brexit is now reduced to a whisper. Confused and confusing parliamentary tactics around votes for the immigration bill and the overseas operations bill (a charter for war crimes without repercussions) have further undermined the sense that Starmer's leadership has any principles or political backbone.

Of course, you could argue that these are pragmatic decisions to make Labour 'electable' again. But merely underlines how poisonous and reactionary bourgeois electioneering can be.

Whilst Starmer supporters are pleased with this course (curse?) of inaction – because Labour has gained in the polls – it means that Starmer appears painfully centre-ground and uninspiring. He is a man drained of ideas and energy: an empty suit. People compare him to Blair, but this is to insult to Blair – at least he had a coherent ideology. It is worth pointing out that Ed Miliband's Labour was also ahead in the polls on occasion, which is why so many predicted a hung parliament in 2015.

The witch-hunt

Away from the problems of Labour strategy and (lack of) politics, there lie the wretched debates over the witch-hunt and anti-Semitism. It is as clear as day that Starmer and his people want to draw a line under the issue and just move on, and they will do so by suspending and expelling whole swathes of the Left, and otherwise paying people off. The Labour Left, for its part, does not seem able to focus on anything else, outraged at what it sees as an ongoing factional attack.

The suspensions of officers of CLPs and disciplinary action against Corbyn are ridiculous and wrong. These are bureaucratic measures based more on public relations than any principles of democracy.

Suspending CLP chairs and other officers for even allowing a motion to be tabled is heavy-handed and smacks of a leadership at war with its membership.

In as much as the debate on anti-semitism has been shut down, we can note a worrying trend. It is 'thought crime' territory to take disciplinary action against people because they take issue with key findings of a report. Real anti-semitism – prejudiced opinions and actions directed against Jewish people – should mean instant expulsion. But criticising a report on the matter?

Corbyn's suspension was an example of this creeping expansion of the disciplinary process to include even discussions about the issue, as opposed to actual examples of discrimination or racism. Labour should be fighting anti-semitism and all other forms of racism, wherever they occur.

The problem for the Labour Left is that its trajectory is shaped by the problems inherited from Corbynism. These problems are structural and ultimately mean that the fight-back is chaotic, inchoate, and indecisive.

Corbynism was always an alliance of different forces. One strand argued for the adoption of radical policies that were outside the Labour tradition and, indeed, antithetical to Labourism. Another reasserted the primacy of a kind of left social-democracy as a 'common sense' response to austerity and neoliberalism. This tension was sustained as long as Corbyn was leader, but now, especially in the face of a purge, the Left lacks a clear strategic response.

Some people are urging activists to stay and fight 'the long game' (to be clear: a long game that has been going on since 1900). Others have already walked away.

Rudderless Left

There was much hope that the energy and impetus of the Labour Left could survive the downfall of Corbyn. It is now clear that it cannot. Whilst the resurgence of the Labour Left was an understandable response to the failure of the anti-austerity social movements and the weakness of Ed Miliband's leadership, the reality is that most Labour members were willing to give Corbyn a shot because they concluded that the reason Miliband lost in 2015 was that he lacked principles and should have been much harder in opposing austerity. When Corbyn did better than expected in 2017, members were content to wait and see what would happen next. The election defeat in December 2019 means that the Labour Left will not gain power in the party for a generation.

This does not mean that all socialists should immediately leave the Labour Party. Labour is still the party of the trade unions and is the only credible alternative to a Tory government, so to abandon it as a site of struggle and politics is short-sighted.

However, it is clear that the Labour Left will shrink back to what it was a decade ago, a vocal minority opposition current in a vaguely left-of-centre party. Calls to 'stay and fight' mean putting motions to CLPs and signing online petitions. It means putting motions to Labour Party Conference that get defeated or ignored.

I am not saying that these things are pointless. They keep political arguments alive and sharpen contradictions. But they will not produce a new left leadership for Labour, not for another 20 years. That ship has sailed. And, with irreversible, runaway climate change looming, with the world sinking ever deeper into crisis and chaos, what exactly is the strategy in relation to an electoral party that may not even win an election in the next decade?

Simon Hannah

P.S.

- “Keir Starmer and the Labour Left”. Anticapitalist Resistance. 9th December 2020.:
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/keir-starmer-and-the-labour-left>
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