

UK: Inside the Labour left's split

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The rise of a “New Left” grouping has exposed divisions within the Socialist Campaign Group.

It was in December 1982, in the aftermath of the titanic struggle between Tony Benn and Denis Healey for Labour's deputy leadership, that the party's left split. Those who had supported Benn formed the “hard left” Socialist Campaign Group, while those who had backed Healey, such as Neil Kinnock, remained in the “soft left” Tribune Group.

Over the decades that followed, the radical left was cast into the wilderness. Unlike Benn, who lost by just 0.8 per cent to Healey, his immediate heirs never came close to winning the leadership or deputy leadership. But for the political tenacity of John McDonnell, who chaired the Campaign Group during the [New Labour](#) era, it would likely have disbanded.

Though [Jeremy Corbyn](#) won the [Labour](#) leadership, the left's project later imploded as the party suffered its worst general election result since 1935 and Rebecca Long-Bailey was comfortably defeated by [Keir Starmer](#) in the contest that followed. Today, the Campaign Group finds itself in a familiar position – one of marginalisation.

Since the 2019 general election, five of its 35 MPs have lost the Labour whip – Corbyn, Diane Abbott, Andy McDonald, Kate Osamor and Claudia Webbe – and a further two have been deselected: Sam Tarry and Mick Whitley. Having once held numerous frontbench positions under Keir Starmer, its members are now confined exclusively to the backbenches.

As the Campaign Group adjusts to its reduced status, MPs both inside and outside of the caucus have made a radical prediction: that it will split. The fissure they identify is a “New Left” grouping that meets separately in parliament, holds awaydays, receives donations and even has its own WhatsApp group (perhaps the modern Westminster definition of a new faction). Its members include Clive Lewis, the former shadow defence secretary and leadership candidate, the former shadow women and equalities secretary Dawn Butler, Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Nadia Whittome, Kim Johnson, Olivia Blake and the Glasgow MSP Paul Sweeney.

There is sometimes a People's Front of Judea/Judean People's Front quality to left schisms. But this division reflects differences of substance rather than merely of style. One of the New Left MPs told me that the group was established to give greater attention to issues less central to the “workerist” Campaign Group: environmentalism, migrants' rights, trans rights and electoral reform. They also cited a desire for distance from the “toxic legacy” of Corbyn, who lost the Labour whip after suggesting that the scale of anti-Semitism had been “dramatically overstated” by the party's opponents.

Foreign policy is another dividing line. While 13 Campaign Group MPs signed a Stop the War statement condemning Nato expansionism the week before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, none of the New Left MPs were among them (11 subsequently withdrew their signatures after being threatened with the loss of the [Labour](#) whip).

Campaign Group MPs have previously expressed solidarity with countries such as Cuba and Venezuela but the New Left has alternative lodestars. Last year, Lewis and Whittome, along with Bell Ribeiro-Addy, visited Finland to learn from the country's social democratic achievements in housing, education and childcare, and met with leaders of the Finnish Left Alliance.

The trip took place in the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which prompted Finland to join Nato (the country has an 830-mile border with Russia).

"We spoke about Ukrainian self-determination and why it's so important to defend that practically rather than saying you believe in the principle of self-determination but you're not going to help arm Ukraine," Whittome told me. "In Finland's case, sharing a border with Russia, it knows first-hand the barbarism of Russian imperialism."

The Campaign Group insists that it is relaxed about the New Left grouping. Richard Burgon, the former's secretary (who, in a historical twist, holds Healey's former Leeds East seat), told me: "The Socialist Campaign Group has been going for over 40 years, it's always been a group where there's been different opinions on different issues, not everyone agrees on everything all the time. And that's very much in keeping with the history of the Labour Party. The Tribune Group includes MPs from other groups and then there's other groups too such as Labour First and Progress."

In a sign of shifting dynamics inside the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), the Tribune Group recently invited Campaign Group MPs to discuss the party's policy on a Gaza ceasefire in advance of the recent parliamentary vote.

But Jon Lansman, founder of the left activist group Momentum, suggested that now may be the right time for the Campaign Group to dissolve itself.

"It has long since lost its logic," said Lansman, who served as Benn's campaign coordinator in the 1981 deputy leadership contest. "Just as the left outside parliament really has to think in terms of a broader left, so does the left inside parliament. And that really does mean changing their way of thinking and changing who they work with."

"The problem with all parliamentary groups is that they're dominated by personalities and clashing personalities, and that clash of personalities is often more important than ideological differences. Most MPs are incredibly unstrategic, I despair of them really."

He added: "Clive [Lewis] and co are much more willing to work with a broader, softer left."

No formal split in the Campaign Group is expected before the general election (indeed, one New Left MP described reports of a split as "utter bollocks"). For now, most left MPs are preoccupied with keeping the Labour whip and looking anxiously over their shoulder.

Some still fear a pre-election "purge" as the leadership seeks to remake the PLP in its own image (though Starmer's chief of staff Sue Gray is regarded as a "restraining influence"). During the New Labour era, Peter Mandelson aspired to place the left in a "sealed tomb" but the lid proved loose.

One Campaign Group MP summarised the avuncular warning they had received from McDonnell: "Keep your f**king head down and if you make a mistake you're on your own." As such, the group's members have avoided resigning the Labour whip in solidarity with those who have lost it (to the disappointment of some of their foes).

The left is clear-sighted about its reversals. Though the Campaign Group remains far larger than in the past – it had just 13 members under McDonnell in 2007 – there are few potential future recruits.

Of the 150-plus parliamentary candidates selected by Labour, only five are regarded as of the left: Faiza Shaheen in Chingford and Woodford Green (who is expected to defeat Iain Duncan Smith), Chris Webb in Blackpool South, Lorraine Beavers in Blackpool North and Fleetwood, Connor Naismith in Crewe and Nantwich and the former Unite political director Anneliese Midgley who was recently selected in Knowsley and served as an aide to both Corbyn and Starmer.

Some Campaign Group MPs question whether any of the above will join it on account of its divisive reputation. For these reasons, the conversation around a New Left – one that bridges the 42-year divide between the “hard left” and the “soft left” – is only likely to endure.

“The Campaign Group is a barrier to breaking out of the left’s isolation,” Lansman concluded. “It’s over to them.”

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