The Corbyn Project: a View from the UK Grassroots

Heather Mendick

(London)

In the BBC documentary *Labour - The Summer That Changed Everything*, about the 2017 UK General Election, there is a scene that became a thousand memes. On election night, we see *Labour* MP (Member of Parliament) Stephen Kinnock with other Party members in a pub awaiting the results. The television announces the exit poll predicting a hung parliament, *not* the *Labour* wipe-out that many professional politicians and pundits, Stephen included, had been anticipating. He stares blankly at the screen, unable even to fake enthusiasm for his party's projected parliamentary gains. The voice-over remarks: 'I'm not sure what Stephen's face is revealing but perhaps he's realising the Corbyn-free tomorrow he's been thinking about might never actually come'. This scene captures two things relevant to this article. First, this is the moment when Jeremy Corbyn's *Labour Party* avoided the fate of our sister parties across Europe as our popular support increased

rather than collapsed. Second, Stephen's face signals the difficulties of changing the direction of an existing party whose infrastructure, including its MPs, was formed within a different political culture.

Across Europe we have seen 'the rapid capitulation of … social democratic heavyweight[s] in times of austerity', dubbed pasokification after its first victim, Greece's *PASOK*. *PASOK*, the main party of power in Greece since its democracy was restored in 1974, went from being the country's largest party with 160 seats representing 43.9 per cent of the popular vote in 2009 to being its smallest party with just 13 seats and 4.7 per cent support in 2015. Similarly,

> [i]n France, the incumbent Socialist Party polled a mere 6.4 per cent in the 2017 presidential election - its worst-ever result - and won just 30 seats in the National Assembly (down from 280). In the Netherlands, the *Dutch Labour Party* was reduced to 5.7 per cent in the same year (a fifth of its previous vote). And in Germany, the Social Democratic Party

(SPD), the grandfather of the European centre-left, achieved a new nadir in last September's election, winning just 20.5 per cent of the vote and 153 seats. (Eaton 2018)

In contrast parties of the left that reject austerity have gained electoral support: Greece's *Syriza* in 2015, France's *La France Insoumise* (France Unbowed) and the Netherlands' *GroenLinks* (Green Left) in 2017, and since 2014, *Podemos* in Spain.

In the UK and Portugal, established left parties, the *Labour Party* and the *Partido Socialista*, have revived by adopting anti-austerity politics. In the UK, there is a left insurgency similar to those in Greece, France, the Netherlands and Spain however *not* through a new party of the left but within our country's social democratic heavyweight. This Corbyn Project has attracted hundreds of thousands of new members, expanded the electorate and engaged many young people in electoral politics for the first time. *Labour*'s internal revolution has parallels with the left insurgency in the US *Democratic Party*, perhaps because in both countries, the lack of proportional representation makes it difficult for new parties to gain ground. In taking on and attempting to transform an existing party with over a hundred years of history, you gain an infrastructure of elected politicians, including MPs like Stephen Kinnock, and thousands of local councillors; a party apparatus of paid staff, internal committees, and detailed rules and practices; and affiliations by the trade union movement and socialist societies. In this article I discuss the experience of engaging with this infrastructure from a grassroots perspective.

The elected politicians

In Parliamentary Socialism, Ralph Miliband argues *Labour* has never been a socialist party because its MPs are committed to top-down reformism, or Labourism, over the bottom-up radicalism favoured by much of its grassroots. He ends by asserting that this cannot change because *Labour*'s parliamentarians will never relinquish their veto over the leadership. Yet, in 2015, they did. Previously, *Labour*'s leader was decided by an electoral college with a third of the votes going to each, the *Parliamentary Labour Party* (PLP), the membership and the trade unions. In 2015, this changed to One Member One Vote and the electorate included people paying £3 to register as a supporter. Now MPs' votes had the same value as those of rank-and-file members. But MPs could still 'protect' the party from a socialist leader as all candidates needed backing from 15 per cent of the PLP. In response to a remarkable grassroots campaign, some MPs lent their nominations to Corbyn despite supporting other candidates.

They did this because they could not imagine him winning. As Corbyn's support grew, they launched vitriolic

"They fear you."
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attacks in the media against him and his supporters. These continued after we won culminating in June 2016's attempt to undemocratically remove Corbyn as leader via mass resignations, negative press briefings, bullying and a no-confidence vote supported by 172 out of 229 MPs. This 'Chicken Coup' was resisted by mass demonstrations and *actions coordinated by Momentum, the successor organisation to the Corbyn* for Leader Campaign. Even after Corbyn was re-elected leader in 2016 with increased support and after *Labour* made electoral gains in 2017, the assault continued. One MP called Corbyn 'a fucking racist and anti-semite' and the Twitter hashtag #TrotsRabbleDogs combines some of the insults thrown at party activists by members of the PLP during summer 2016.

In the grassroots, people are angry. Ordinary members are suspended and expelled for social media posts or public comments criticising MPs. Yet if we complain about MPs' abuse, we are told their comments 'do not go any further than political discourse' or that complaints have been passed onto the whips without any discernible action. Abuse aside, it is possible that the Corbyn Project will be destroyed by *Labour* MPs who refuse to back a future Corbyn government. This raises the issue of the selection and deselection of parliamentary candidates which are the responsibility of local parties. *Momentum* have campaigned for members to choose Corbyn supporters to contest marginal *Tory*-held seats at the next General Election. But this leaves in place the current PLP many of whom oppose socialist policies, like nationalisation and international relations based on peace and human rights. Do we trust MPs to fall into line? Do we support a few local parties to deselect Corbyn's most virulent opponents? Or do we attempt

mass deselections in the hope of creating a fit-for-purpose PLP but risking bitter and divisive battles that may split the party and ruin our electoral prospects?

These questions apply - albeit less urgently - to local government. In Haringey council, 'zombie Blairites' were attempting 'to shove family homes, school buildings and libraries into a giant private fund worth £2bn' and to hand over control of this Development Vehicle to a private company with a terrible track record on public housing projects. Local *Labour Party* members organised through *Momentum* to replace councillors who supported this policy ignoring whether they had backed Corbyn. Initially a big media story about 'hard left' attacks on 'moderates', the new councillors are now in place and are no longer in the spotlight. Haringey's targeted and policy-focused approach to deselection may work at a national level.

The party structures

The PLP are highly visible. *Labour*'s paid staff, committees and rules are not. At least until you bang up against them. But *Labour* staff were as disturbed by Corbyn's win as MPs. As Alex Nunns describes in his book tracing Corbyn's 'improbable path to power', at the special conference announcing the 2015 leadership winner: 'Party staff wear sullen, sad faces to match the black attire they are sporting, symbolising the death of the party they have known'. Although *Labour* has an extensive Rule Book, it requires interpretation and staff often control how it is applied. In 2016, then General Secretary Iain McNicoll obtained legal advice allowing him to argue that an incumbent leader is not automatically on the ballot if challenged, so Corbyn would need to secure MPs' backing to stand again - something they were unlikely to grant now they knew he could win! When overruled by the *National Executive*, McNicoll successfully advised them to restrict the electorate, took some Party members to court to stop them voting, and presided over a purge of left wingers by trawling their social media accounts, suspending them en masse and removing their votes in the leadership election.

Few of us who joined or rejoined *Labour* to support Corbyn's leadership had anticipated facing a vast bureaucratic apparatus of officers, meetings, conferences, rules, committees and delegates. Nor had we imagined the extent of the resistance we would face within our own party. Winning the leadership and piling in members initially had little effect as the party's unchanged infrastructure persisted in working against us. At a local level, people encountered dull report-filled meetings where they were treated with suspicion. Local *Momentum* groups sprang up around the UK, creating

spaces for people on the left to meet each and organise ways into the labyrinthine *Labour Party*. In many local parties, there are now contested elections for unglamorous administrative voluntary roles which previously nobody had wanted to do. There are competing slates of candidates at every level from local to national and competing agendas for regional and national conferences.

When the left gains control of local parties, we can give our own meanings to the Rule Book, but we are still constrained by it. Policymaking illustrates this. We inherited a system created under New Labour in which the policy motions that members submitted to National Conference had to be ‚contemporary', meaning they related to events occurring in a short window between early August and early September each year. Further, contemporary motions on only eight topics could be debated each year. This left most policymaking in the hands of the National Policy Forum, an opaque and inaccessible body, and severely restricted members' input.

To address such democratic deficits and look at 'how our hugely expanded membership becomes a mass movement which can transform society', *Labour* launched a *Democracy Review* in 2017. Although parliamentary selections were deemed too controversial to be included, it was far reaching covering local government, policymaking, mobilising members, making our party more representative and all of the party's internal structures. However, many of the *Review*'s key recommendations were rejected by the *National Executive* (which even after three years lacks a reliable pro-Corbyn majority) and/or subject to further reviews. This includes nearly all of those on policymaking. The *National Policy Forum* remains unchanged but in a small concession to members the contemporary criteria for Conference motions has been dropped and more issues will be debated. We will see what members can do with these and other changes in the coming years.

The trade unions

In contrast to the PLP and staff, trade unionists gave pivotal support to the Corbyn Project. They backed left candidates in winnable seats for the 2015 General Election giving Corbyn some of his original MP nominations (Nunns 2016). The labour movement's shift left along with grassroots pressure led to nine unions including the two largest endorsing Corbyn for leader. The leader of the *Communication Workers Union* said: 'There is a virus within the *Labour* party, and Jeremy Corbyn is the antidote'. Other leaders were less forthright, but they added credibility, votes, money, staff, office space, even fire engines for rallies. Most union leaders backed him again in 2016 and are highly critical of

PLP rebels. The *Fire Brigades Union* has re-affiliated to *Labour* and other trade unions support Corbyn from the outside.

In 2016, a rare junior doctors strike had broad public support. *Labour*'s Health spokesperson Heidi Alexander triangulated saying that *Labour* had sympathy for the strike but would not endorse it. She instructed *Labour*'s top team not to join picket lines. Corbyn ally and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell ignored this, standing with strikers as did Momentum activists. Alexander was following mainstream *Labour* MPs' practice of distancing themselves from the unions

a picket line in your constituency it is your responsibility to join it"'.

This shift mirrors one at the grassroots. At my first local party meeting after rejoining *Labour* in September 2015, I was one of several 'new' members. We were repeatedly told by longstanding members that they were a successful local party focused on campaigning, aka going door to door to identify *Labour* voters with the aim of winning elections. There is a tension at the heart of *Labour*'s current internal struggle between seeing electoral politics as the only relevant locus of action and seeing our goal as being to create a social

Corbyn Vote Labour rally
© Jenny Goodfellow ()

that founded and finance the party. Gradually this has shifted and in 2018, the Economist's political correspondent tweeted: 'John McDonnell says a memo has gone round *Labour* MPs: "If there's

movement that can both win elections and sustain a transformative legislative programme. Unions are central to the latter vision. As left members have taken on local roles, we have

rejected a narrow idea of campaigning, backing strikes with solidarity action, publicity and fundraising.

However, the influx of nearly half a million members, many wanting direct democratic input into *Labour* policies and practices has created conflict with the party establishment including the unions. In 2018, Christine Shawcroft, then members' representative on *Labour's National Executive* and *Momentum* vice chair, posted on *Facebook* before deleting it, that the major trade unions "stick it to the rank and file members time after time after time. It's also time to support disaffiliation of the unions from the *Labour* party. The party belongs to us, the members". It is likely union representatives on the *National Executive* voted down the more radical *Democracy Review* recommendations. At the Party's 2018 National Conference, most votes were backed overwhelmingly by member and union delegates alike, but there were some divisions. Union delegates who have half the votes blocked debate on whether or not all incumbent MPs should face a contested selection process prior to a General Election, something 92 per cent of the delegates representing members wanted on the agenda. So while links between *Labour* and the trade unions are stronger than ever with the Corbyn Project's commitment to the labour movement and to workers' rights, there is an unresolved cultural gap between the two that is also reflected in differences between the larger more cautious established unions and the newer more radical ones organising precarious workers.

Conclusions

The Corbyn Project has much in common with other anti-austerity electoral projects across Europe. In this article, I focused on a distinctive feature, its actualisation via an insurgency in the UK's main social democratic party. Change is slow and huge energy is expended in internal battles. The existential tension in the *Labour Party* between top-down gradualism led by parliamentarians and bottom-up radicalism led by social movement activists has always favoured the former. We must change this. Michael Foot, a past *Labour* leader also on the left, said, 'A left Labour MP is only as good as the movement behind them'. This applies a hundredfold to a left *Labour* government. If a Corbyn-led government is going to enact a socialist programme it needs a large, active and democratic movement behind it.

To win power we need to maintain *Labour*'s 'broad church', its wide electoral alliance, while moving the party left on both policy and practice and building outwards into communities to create a participatory political culture across society. Interviewed in 2015 soon after first winning the

leadership, Jeremy Corbyn explained:

> I want a party structure and a union structure that allows your intelligence to come forward and be part of our policy-making. … So the need is to reach, to widen our organisation to make us a community-based party.

This has been slow to realise. Only in summer 2018 did *Labour* finally appoint community organisers. Even now their work is shaped by our electoral system as they are concentrated in the marginal constituencies that *Labour* must win to form a government.

Momentum originally set out to 'organise in every town, city and village to secure the election of a progressive left *Labour Party* at every level, and to create a mass movement for real transformative change'. This expansive vision was possible because *Momentum* was less constrained by electoral politics than *Labour*. But *Momentum* has moved away from this ambition, narrowing its reach to focus on organising nationally in *Labour*, creating social media content and campaigning in marginal constituencies. It is *Labour* that now offers the best hope of enacting its original vision of building a mass social movement. *Labour* has always been, as Simon Hannah puts it, "a party with socialists in it'". It remains an open question whether we can prove Ralph Miliband wrong and transform it into a socialist party.

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