

Jeremy Corbyn: A Question of Leadership

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'He's a decent man, with great integrity – but he's not a real leader' is the constant refrain from Jeremy Corbyn's critics, questioning his electability. At the same time, half of the voting population has railed – in the Brexit vote – against the establishment, jam packed with would-be and retired leaders of the kind that critics want to put in Corbyn's place. Isn't it time we put the idea of leadership as we know it under scrutiny?

Let's start by distinguishing Corbyn's electability from his credibility as prime minister on the model required by our present unwritten constitution, under which immense and mostly invisible powers are concentrated on Her Majesty's First Minister.

Electability and organisation

First, the conditions for his electability. A starting point must be that the general election he will face, whenever it comes, will not be taking place in a functioning political system with a high turnout and strong levels of trust in the main political parties. Rather, it will come after more than a decade of growing disengagement from mainstream politics, especially by the young and the poor and insecure, to a point where the present government was voted for by only 24% of the eligible electorate and many constituency Labour parties have been struggling even to ensure a quorum at their meetings.

To be electable in today's mood of anti-establishment politics, any leader and party has to be able to reach out beyond the political system and give a voice to those who have no vested interest in that system. Neither left nor right in the Labour Party has been good at this, preferring to presume that the party's union links provide them with an inbuilt communication with the wider public. Corbyn, aided by the one-person, one-vote system for electing the leader has not taken union support for granted, and has shown himself able to reach out and demonstrate that he would open up spaces in politics for the disenfranchised and ensure they had a voice. He has re-engaged hundreds of thousands of young people, whether or not they are union members.

The explanation emerges in conversation with anyone under 30 who has an ounce of idealism. Gemma Jamieson Malik, for example, a London PhD student driven by housing costs to live out of London, explains: 'It's not that I'm a Jeremy Corbyn fan. It's that he's opened a space for a new politics I and my friends can feel part of. He's generated a new energy around Labour.'

Or young artist Mel Evans speaking at a local Momentum meeting: 'I haven't been to a party-related political meeting like this for ten years; they had become so boring and so pointless. Now with Jeremy I feel I have a voice and it's worth being involved.'

Typically, the young don't just engage with institutions as they are; they bring new ideas and they shake things up, producing new political configurations with the potential of attracting more of their generation. Hence Momentum, the organisation created largely by these young Corbynists is not a recognisable organisation by the stereotypes of the traditional left. It treats political education through football sessions with disaffected youth as important as left caucuses in the party, if not more so; it chooses initiatives like 'the people's PPE' over the stale, pale, male political rallies of the past.

This is the generation whose culture, including political culture, has been shaped by using the tools of the new information and communication technology to share, collaborate and network, emancipating themselves daily from overbearing authority, hierarchy and other forms of centralised, commanding domination. A collaborative, facilitating kind of leadership and political organisation is the only one with which they can engage.

In this way they are building on the innovations of the class of '68. Jeremy Corbyn's generation. For this reason, the gap between generations and classes shouldn't be exaggerated. Older working-class people of Corbyn's generation listened to Bob Dylan, and the women in their communities were influenced by and contributed to feminism.

Money where his mouth is

On the other hand, as the [Brexit result demonstrates](#), there are distinct problems to be addressed among the white working class, where strong feelings of abandonment and powerlessness have led, with the aid of right-wing media and politicians, to a scapegoating of immigrants and of the EU. Again, the current Labour leadership, with its commitment to fight austerity, is well placed to reach out to those whose lives and communities have been all but destroyed by cuts, low pay (and no pay), privatisation and casualisation. Jeremy Corbyn can commit himself to putting money where his mouth is when he says that immigration is not the cause of people's social and economic desperation.

But the Brexit vote indicates that the problems are not simply economic. What also surfaced was the problem of power and powerlessness. Here there is a confluence with the aspirations of the young to achieve some control over their future. But while the urban young use new technologies to create forms of daily collaborative control over their lives, people without easy resources of mobility and communication need other sources of control that they too can feel, in their daily lives.

Here the role of the unions is vital - but not so much in their conventional role as funders and foot soldiers for the party's election campaigns. Nor is it only about their ability to defend jobs or bargain for better wages. It is also about enabling their members and the wider workforce to obtain greater control over the organisation and purpose of their work, especially in the public sector; an increasing emphasis on the organisation of part-time and casual workers; and support for co-operatives and similar structures as a means by which precarious workers can develop collective strength.

Greater control of our working lives is limited, however, if our wider political environment is controlled by a remote, over-centralised political system through which there is little or no chance of a voice in decisions about housing, the environment or the national and international decisions of war and peace, trade and investment that shape our lives.

Beyond the 'strong man'

This brings me to the second understanding of leadership: that judged according to the criteria drawn from the nature of prime ministerial power in the British state, a position shaped by decades of adaptation – but not transformation – of the job description of the chief executive at the headquarters of a global empire.

The figure of Churchill continues to haunt. The ‘strong man’ notion of leadership by which Jeremy Corbyn appears all too often to be judged is not just a matter of a ‘macho’ style (though a strong feminist influence would help in any radical rethinking of leadership) . It is embedded in the nature of the UK’s unwritten constitution and the immense but opaque power that it gives to the executive: extensive powers of patronage, powers to go to war, be ready to press the nuclear button, to be at the table of the Security Council and NATO, and in many ways preserve the continuity of the British state.

So my argument is that though the conditions for Corbyn’s electability are entirely within our grasp – especially if his critics in the Parliamentary Labour Party showed some of the respect for party unity that the left has shown throughout the party’s history – his credibility as prime minister would require an effective challenge to the centralised nature of power in our political system, including the anti-democratic ‘winner -takes-all’ electoral system. This challenge would need to be made now, while in opposition, with extensive popular participation. This has been his declared goal but he and the shadow minister responsible, Jon Trickett, have been demoralisingly slow in progressing it. The ‘new politics’ that Corbyn proclaims surely needs to be an explicit agenda of institutional change, not simply a change of style at the front bench dispatch box.

Questions of institution and of policy are closely allied. Jeremy Corbyn’s critics are rarely explicit about how far their criticisms of Corbyn are of his capacities to match up to the responsibilities of highly concentrated power. Or whether, in fact, the implicit issue at the heart of the rebellion, maybe not shared or recognised by all the resignees, is a disagreement on policy: on nuclear power, war, security, respect for the continuity of executive power – a disagreement that will surface and become explicit as the repercussions of Chilcot for our political system and established forms of political leadership, become clear. And finally a belief, reflecting the influence of shadowy pressures coming from ‘the permanent state’ who quite simply will not allow a socialist who means what he says, to be Prime Minister .

Either way, it would be perverse, in the face of the strength of anti-establishment feeling from young and old, to replace a leader committed to breaking establishment power with one who is committed and ready to preserve it.

The [results of Spain’s recent election](#) point in a similar direction. There, the voice of a new politics, Unidos Podemos, failed to continue its stunning electoral rise, partly because its leader Pablo Iglesias started to act like a conventional politician and the party leadership closed down its local activist circles. In other words, electability in the context of today’s anti-establishment consciousness requires radical political reform and the alliances to achieve it, not an obsession with being an establishment in waiting.

A further challenge from Spain and from the experiences of the Latin American left which influenced the leadership of Podemos, is this: a distinctive feature of the radical left worldwide is the emphasis that it places on action and organisation beyond parliament. The importance of this is not in counterposition to action in and through parliament but rather as a necessary source of counterpower to the powerful vested interests that have blocked or

undermined radical policies for which elected governments in the past have had a popular mandate. After the problematic experiences of left governments in Latin America, however, it is necessary to go further and distinguish between different forms of extra-parliamentary popular organisation from the point of view of the kind of counter power they create. Left leaders in Latin America, whether Nestor and Cristina Kirchner, Hugo Chavez, Eva Morales or Lula Da Silva have tended to act when in government as if left populist street mobilisations were sufficient as a source of counter power. This approach has proved difficult to sustain and inadequate as a means of broadening popular support. It rallies supporters but it does not provide a sustainable way of creating alliances and reaching out to the disaffected. For the deeper, more power-sharing kinds of popular participation, other, usually more local, experiences from Latin America are more promising.

For example, participatory budgeting in the Workers' Party's early days when significant sums of money were allocated through municipalities sharing decision-making power (not simply consulting) with citizens who organised themselves through autonomous institutions of mass participation or again in the Workers Party early support for the land occupations and cultivation by the MST (The landless movement) . The point about these two examples is that they involve political support for and collaboration with, autonomous citizens' organisations asserting their transformative capacity through material, productive initiatives of a sustained kind, and in a way which illustrates the kind of society that would be possible if they could be spread more widely. In fact, in the case of the Workers Party in Brazil, it's leadership not only failed to generalise such participatory initiatives but made alliances within the corrosive political system, in order to gain and remain in office but at the cost of abandoning wider sources of power to change society.

For Corbyn, such opportunities to support and help build transformative power through genuinely participatory methods – beyond simply mobilising support – are provided by radical trade union initiatives concerned with the purpose and content of their members' work (for example recent positive campaigns of the NUT reaching out to parents and the wider community); they are evident in the environment movement around experiments in democratically organised renewable energy sources; they are illustrated historically in the radical economic policy of the GLC, in workers initiatives towards diversification of the defence industry away from weapons of mass destruction (like Trident) and in the many feminist initiatives to bring about changes that liberate women here and now through expanded and democratised public services. Corbyn has talked about following through his belief in the wisdom of ordinary people by drawing up the Labour Party's manifesto in a participatory manner, rather than going off to write it with his advisers. This could provide an opportunity once his mandate has been renewed in the forthcoming elections, to move beyond the defensive stance of many of his first nine months, and build a genuinely participatory politics.

Our best chance of ensuring that the widespread anti-establishment sentiment becomes a force for democracy and not for reaction, is to [support Jeremy Corbyn](#) in building such a creative, participatory process but at the same time to take our own initiatives in a collaborative, networked movement for political change. Times are so interesting and moving so fast that it is easy to become absorbed in a Corbyn focused spectator support. What is needed however is practical support, especially initiatives through [Momentum](#) which is open to being a platform for a wide range of creative actions.

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