

Watching Lips in Corbyn's Britain

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Global Research, September 16, 2015

The laundry list for the attackers on Jeremy Corbyn grows by the day, traversing the inane and the insipid. There come, not in any necessarily important order, from views about not picking women for his inner cabinet (note, several refused to even want to be in the cabinet to begin with) to his stance on combating terrorism and not retaining Trident.

Then latest storm in a tea cup issue was whether he, well, sang at the national service for the Battle of Britain. This was always going to be touchy, as it was an occasion commemorating the 75th anniversary of the battle in which Britain repelled the Luftwaffe with weapons and Churchillian rhetoric.

Politicians are watched closely on such occasions, if only to see if they stumble up on protocol. Smile at the right moments; curtsy at others. When it came to Corbyn, horror of horrors, he decided not to burst into full song when the anthem was sung.

The situation reached a certain absurdity when the *Guardian* reported that, "One onlooker at the service said they had watched Corbyn for several minutes as the national anthem was being sung and did not see his lips move." Either the entire audience was daft, or this onlooker was the only one not on the patriotic sauce.

The tut tuts were positively deafening from Tory MP Sir Nicholas Soames, whose claim to fame is being Winston Churchill's grandson. To not sing the anthem was simply "very rude and very disrespectful".

Soames, the child of public occasion, stunted by convention, could only assume that Corbyn was himself being the infant of the occasion. "It was an extremely disrespectful thing and I think he needs to make his mind up whether he is a grown-up or not." Presumably, pacifist republicans tend to be in the swaddling clothes of principles and morality.

Naturally, the school teacher in Conservative MP Andrew Rosindell suggested that he could teach Corbyn the words, showing a true sense of proportion. The newly elected Labour leader should "understand that the British people are overwhelmingly supportive of our monarch and our constitution". By all means, old fellow, behave in such an inappropriate manner in private, but for matters of state, well, duty called for a different face. "It is his duty, and the duty of any leader of any party that seeks to be prime minister, to accept that we are the nation that we are." At times jingoist, very monarchist and fundamentally antediluvian, naturally.

The conservative *Spectator* even went so far as to take issue with the official Labour statement released on behalf of Corbyn. "As he said in the words issued this morning, the heroism of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain is something to which we all owe an

enormous debt of gratitude. He stood in respectful silence during the anthem.” To which Isabel Hardman would conjecture “what the difference between respectful silence and stony silence is.”[1]

That said, even Hardman had to accept that Corbyn, despite knowing that such a stance might infuriate onlookers felt it “more important to stick to his republican pacifist principles” many of which are shared by numerous Labour admirers.

Corbyn did have his defenders, and not necessarily from familiar quarters. “The fact he was there properly dressed, wearing a tie, good on him,” remarked a member of the Defence Select Committee, Conservative MP James Gray. “He is a pacifist and not a royalist but he has gone along and stood in the front row.”

At state functions, fluff and convention matter, not substance. Never mind that Corbyn was sincerely remembering the role of his parents in the war. “My mum served as an air raid warden and my dad in the Home Guard.” And never mind that he was wearing the Air Raid Precautions medal from his mother. No, his damn lips did not move. Not doing so was not merely pissing on the parade but shitting on it.

Corbyn has made some concessions, such as accepting the post of privy councillor from Her Majesty, whom he has expressed a desire at certain points to abolish. Protocol watchers will certainly be keeping an eye on the next round of Corbyn’s republican defiance. Will he, for instance, kiss Elizabeth II’s hand come the time he formally accepts the post?

The *Spectator* suggests Corbyn make a borrowing from the late Tony Benn, who, when faced with the dilemma, placed his thumb across the back of the Queen’s hand as he took it, thereby kissing his hand instead of that of the Royal Personage. “And we all stood there,” recalled Benn in his political diaries, “holding our little red boxes, I mean it really was ridiculous.”

Corbyn is simply not playing by the rules, battling those who believe we are wandering, as Matthew Arnold might have put it, between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. In doing so, he may be annihilated, or storm the barricades with success. There is no harm in trying, and if a British politician can, as the fiendish Michael Gove fears, bring people onto the streets, and not sing the national anthem on commemorative occasions, then hurrah for that.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Note

[1]

<https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/09/labour-defends-jeremy-corbyns-respectful-silence-during-the-national-anthem/>

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