

The ‘Unelectable’ Elected Man

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With minutes to go before Big Ben struck noon on the 15 June 2015, the 100/1 outsider Jeremy Corbyn squeezed his name onto the Labour leadership ballot paper. Reaching the 35 MP threshold for the initial nomination process turned out to be one of the many difficult obstacles for ‘Team Jeremy’ to climb. His stated reason for standing for the leadership came from a desire to ensure that a full and rounded debate about the future of the Labour Party would be had. And open up the debate he did. Over the next few months, as the leadership contest heated up, political heavyweights such as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson entered the fray, supported by the likes of Jon Cruddas and (Lord) John Hutton, who were following up their post-mortems of the lifeless body of the Labour Party post-2015 election.

After the monumental disappointment of the general election, the rhetoric that ‘Labour was too left wing to win’ advocated the view that there was no appetite amongst the electorate for a socialist or egalitarian construction of society. Yet the groundswell of support for the anti-austerity message of social movements such as *The People’s Assembly Against Austerity*, plus substantial support for Jeremy Corbyn during his leadership election campaign, pointed in the opposite direction, suggesting that Labour was not left wing enough. The British national press, aided by a number of senior Labour Party members, claimed that a left-wing Labour platform would be unelectable. New Labour’s critique of the Party under Miliband was simply consistent with the dominant neoliberal narrative that left-leaning, or socialist, politics is a danger to the public good. This view conveniently ignores the empirical evidence that the English electorate are hungry for just such an alternative to the present societal arrangement.

Shortly after the election defeat in May 2015, Lord Hutton, in a *Newshight* interview, and Jon Cruddas, in an independent review, proffered the view that anti-austerity was not what the public needed. Hutton claimed that:

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There's a limited appetite, a dwindling appetite for the old-school socialist menu which we had on offer. I think we've really got to be grown up now and take a long, hard look at ourselves and ask ourselves the question what sort of party we want to be.¹

There are several assumptions underlying this statement that, once teased out, can be used to challenge Hutton's view of society. Chief amongst these is the view that the Labour Party exists as an entity that must decide on its own stance and direction, independent of the individual views of its members. Secondly, Lord Hutton's statement seems to assume that any appetite for 'old-school' socialism that may exist is now confined to history, and that such an idealistic, immature position must be abandoned if the Labour Party is to 'grow up' and become a political force again. Finally, there is the all-important value assumption that, after a 'long, hard look at ourselves', Labour's immature offering of socialism should be discarded in favour of something more mature. This is reminiscent of the reprimand a disappointed parent might give a naughty teenager. Such assumptions necessarily imply that the alternative neoliberal, capitalist structuring of society is the desired and 'mature' view, and one that Hutton has clearly decided is the favoured approach of the electorate in Britain.

A few months later, Jon Cruddas reiterated Lord Hutton's political line in his Independent Inquiry into why Labour lost the election, the conclusion of which was:

... that the Tories didn't win despite austerity, they won because of it. Voters did not reject Labour because they saw it as austerity lite. Voters rejected Labour because they perceived the Party as anti-austerity lite.²

The report found that 58 per cent of the 3,000 people surveyed agreed that cutting the deficit was a top priority during the election and deduces that, 'the unpalatable truth for the left is that the Tories did not win despite austerity, but because of it'. Perhaps, if a survey had been conducted of the tens of thousands of people, whether or not they were Labour voters in May, who attended Jeremy Corbyn's hustings up and down the country during his campaign, then the inquiry might have produced wildly different results. It may have put forth the argument that voters rejected Labour because it wasn't

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anti-austerity enough. Instead, Cruddas gathered data and chose to analyse it in a particular way, one that remains confined within the mould set by the assumption that the centre ground is where political debates are won and lost. Corbyn, from the outset, was determined to break that mould and have a different kind of debate.

But the cast was (and still is) a hard one to smash. Tony Blair was not so subtle in his prognosis of Labour's future or the desires of the electorate. In an assault on Jeremy Corbyn that appeared mid-campaign, the former leader's pleas to the electorate were apocalyptic in tone. In an article published in *The Guardian* in August, he hysterically claimed that if Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader the Party wouldn't just face defeat, but total annihilation. His opening sentence, 'The Labour Party is in danger more mortal today than at any point in the over 100 years of its existence', echoes the assumptions inherent in Lord Hutton's verdict, that the Labour Party is an entity that can be fatally wounded. The value assumption behind Blair's statement lies baldly in the neoliberal camp that a Corbyn (and thus a socialist) win would make the Labour Party unelectable. In a speech in London entitled *Power for a Purpose*, Gordon Brown reiterated the mantra that the Labour Party needs to be 'electable ... popular, and not simply a party of protest ...' in order to be returned to government in 2020. While his speech was a thinly veiled attack on Corbyn, Peter Mandelson went all out by appealing to the three mainstream candidates to quit the leadership contest *en masse*, in the hope that it would be suspended.

All these reactions reflect the (neoliberal) assumption that being left wing is somehow so utterly unpalatable that the electorate should find the thought of it thoroughly stomach turning. It fundamentally misunderstands the nature of an idea such as socialism, forgetting who and what the Labour Party was set up to represent, as well as ignoring the nature of the electorate as a dynamic, free-thinking force.

That there exists an entity that is the Labour Party is indisputable, but it is an organic body composed of *all* its members. The same is true for the electorate. The notion that these collectives could be torn asunder by an idea such as socialism is so transparently untrue

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as to be laughable. Especially if the concept is described in the manner of the late Tony Benn, who elucidated its real meaning when he enunciated the idea as '*Social-ism*', and explained that it is about trying to construct a society around production for need and not just for profit. Cruddas in his review acknowledges that the majority of the electorate understand that the economic system, as it is presently constructed, is inherently unfair. And it is this injustice that Corbyn is seeking to challenge with his reinvigorated debate about the meaning of socialism and the future of the Labour Party.

So how has Jeremy Corbyn managed to ignite such passionate discussion among hundreds of thousands of people across the UK? One answer is that he offers a real alternative to the homogeneity of the established political class, many of whom consider politics to be nothing more than a career move. It is becoming increasingly self-evident that a large proportion of the electorate is beginning to think that another way is indeed possible. Even before the leadership campaign truly got underway, this view was borne out by the success of *The People's Assembly Against Austerity*'s demonstration of 20 June 2015. An enormous cheer went up for Jeremy as he addressed those assembled in Parliament Square. He asked those present to 'stand up as the brave people did in the 1920s and 1930s' to ask for 'a state that takes responsibility for everybody – to ensure that nobody is destitute ... everybody caring for everybody else. I think it is called socialism'. It was clear from the crowd's response that the appetite for a more egalitarian way of organising society is burgeoning. Commentators who suggest that socialism is dead, or that a vote for Jeremy is to render the Labour Party unelectable, clearly haven't met the electorate! There were 250,000 of them stood in front of Westminster one weekend in June, all calling for an alternative to austerity and celebrating the prospect of that being socialism.

Further evidence of the hunger for an alternative to the homogeneity offered up by the centre ground is the fact that Jeremy Corbyn received the largest mandate of any Labour leader in the history of the Party. Corbyn received 59.5% of first-preference votes, having gained the support of 49.6% of full members and 57.6% of affiliated (mainly Trade Union) supporters, and he managed to do

this in the face of rampant establishment hostility. By sidestepping the mainstream media, an (almost) unmediated political message could be disseminated. Away from, and in spite of, the influence of voices such as Blair, Brown and Mandelson's, Team Corbyn, and the man himself, presented to the electorate 'straight talking, honest politics'.

The effectiveness of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership campaign was the ability to quickly assemble hustings up and down the country, largely via a strong network of tens of thousands of volunteers in sync with social media. As the contribution by Ben Sellers in this book lays bare, the reach of such an anonymous social media collective is extensive. During the three months of the leadership election, the 'Jeremy Corbyn for Leader' Facebook page and the 'JeremyCorbyn4Leader' Twitter profile attracted tens of thousands of likes and followers respectively. These spawned many regional offshoots. Meetings were organised in the blink of an eye as the #JezWeCan meme took off. The positive, organic enthusiasm of Corbyn's grassroots supporters translated into the historic election result for the new Labour leader.

To date, since becoming Leader, Jeremy Corbyn is weathering the mainstream media storm, which vehemently and constantly upholds the view that the UK does not want socialism and that there is no alternative. This is largely due to bypassing of the dominant narrative by social media and social movement campaigns, but it is also thanks to the huge appetite people have for the ideas put forth by Jeremy. The value assumptions inherent in the statements analysed earlier are being challenged by the new politics and Corbyn is changing the fundamental consistency of Labour, by including *all* members of the party. Politics in the Marxist sense, as that concerning social relations, given half a chance might actually transform the political arena from the Punch and Judy Show that is Party Politics into something that, without any other agenda, is focused on ensuring a fair and equal slice of the cake for all.

With the renewed vigour of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, and his desire to develop a new kind of politics in association with grassroots movements, more people are now re-engaging with the political system. If the momentum continues it is

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possible that a Labour government will be elected in 2020 on a socialist platform and that many more commentators than Paddy Ashdown will be eating their hats!

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G04yBNTnmug&list=PLJxnQXiytATt3SR_GROIO2dzFXhXHggr
2. <http://labourlist.org/2015/08/labour-lost-because-voters-believed-it-was-anti-austerity/>