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Britain

The British Labour Party's Quest for the Past

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Another knight rode to Sir Tony's aid: Sir Keir Starmer, Knight Bachelor (Kt) and leader of the Labour Party following the demise of the left-wing Jeremy Corbyn. "I don't think it's thorny at all — I think he deserves the honour," Starmer unashamedly told British television. [1]

In his public persona, Sir Keir represents in many ways a poor rescuer of Blair and his legacy. Largely regarded as lacking the charisma and political content expected of party leaders, his 46% approval in the polls in June 2020, after being elected party leader, was hardly inspiring. By May 2021, much worse, only 17% of those polled thought he was doing things well, while 65% thought he was doing badly.

Only the endless self-destructive scandals and missteps by Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson, revealed since the fall of 2021, had finally put the Labour Party ahead of the Tories in December 2021 by 39% to 32%. But Starmer's personal rating was still a mere 28% positive to 51% negative. His usefulness to the Labour Party center and right wing, however, runs deeper.

As for Blair, the memories of Iraq and his fake intelligence "Doggy Dossier" that sent troops there, the fragmenting of the National Health Service, the private financial initiatives that threw many of its hospitals into deep debt, and the preservation of Margaret Thatcher's anti-union laws during his tenure as Prime Minister (1997-2007) remain too strong and "thorny" for too many people to see anything noble.

But Starmer's embrace of Tony Blair is more than a symbolic bow to the disgraced former Prime Minister and his centrist "Third Way," "New Labour" political legacy. A late November reshuffle of Labour's shadow cabinet (top policy spokespersons) was widely viewed as "a ruthless shakeup...accelerating Labour's shift to the centre under his (Starmer's) leadership." [2]

Underlying the move to resolute centrism in the post-Corbyn Labour Party was the return of Yvette Cooper, a New Labour stalwart under Gordon Brown (prime minister 2007-2010). At the same time, Starmer sought to establish himself and Labour in the eyes of capital as the safe alternative to erratic Tories. Starmer addressed the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) to assure industrial capital he would "never spend money just for the sake of it" and promise "stable government." [3]

Labour now holds regular Zoom meeting with Britain's five leading business organizations. This culmination of Starmer's seemingly low-key reign was, in fact, just one of the more visible or at least publicized acts in what amounts to a brutal attempt to erase the six years of the party's left trajectory under Jeremy Corbyn, and thoroughly isolate the party's political left. With its bans, witchhunts and autos de fe, it was truly a 21st century counter-reformation.

Reform and Reaction

Jeremy Corbyn was elected party leader in 2015 by 60% of the membership vote with more than three times the vote of runner-up Andy Burnham. He survived an organized "coup" in the form of a (non-binding) vote of no confidence by 172 to 40 Labour Members of Parliament (MPs), and in June 2016 was re-elected by 62% — despite efforts of the party bureaucracy to disqualify thousands of potential Corbyn voters by what they sometimes called a "trot hunt." [4]

Programmatically as well as stylistically, Corbyn's election moved the floundering Labour Party well to the left on the social democratic scale. More a reform than a revolution politically, it nonetheless saw party membership double to over 564,000. Its vote increased in the 2017 parliamentary elections by three-and-a-half-million over 2015, a significant portion of the working-class vote returned to Labour, and the far right United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was virtually destroyed.

Although Labour fell short of victory by little more than two percentage points, it deprived the Conservatives of their majority and was the best return Labour had seen in decades. [5] But this upward trajectory of Corbyn, the party's left, and its radical direction were too much for the party's center and right members of parliament and the party bureaucracy. The counter-reformation was on.

Long before Starmer became leader of the Labour Party and initiated his campaign to destroy Corbyn and the party's left wing, the party bureaucracy joined the center and right of the Parliamentary Labour Party in the effort to get rid of Corbyn. Journalist Owen Jones, in his sympathetic but critical account of the Corbyn years, described the party bureaucracy and its actions:

"These officials were Labour's equivalent of the civil service; they were expected to serve whoever the membership had elected with strict, rigorous impartiality. Instead, they acted as a hostile political faction, conspiring and plotting not only to bring down their leadership, but even wishing ill on the party's own electoral prospects." [6]

In fact, things were actually even worse than that.

The "Antisemitism" Purge

In the spring of 2020, an 851-page report to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on the problem of antisemitism in the party, prepared under then Corbyn supporter General-Secretary Jennie Formby, revealed among many other things that the party's bureaucracy hoped and worked to defeat Corbyn in the 2015 leadership election. Most extraordinarily, it even wished for a defeat of the party in the 2017 general election in order to discredit Corbyn.

Drawing on staff emails, WhatsApp messages, and other hard evidence, the report concluded that senior staff and others "openly opposed the party leader." This carried over to the 2017 election "when many staff including senior staff made it clear that they did not want Labour to win the general election, while other staff were 'working to rule' and hiding information from the Leader's office." [7] The report was leaked to the press soon after completion.

The fondest hopes of these subversive bureaucrats were dashed by the significant gains Labour made in the 2017 general election. The counter-reformation, however, simply took another direction. This was the "antisemitism crisis" that began in March 2018 when MP Luciana Berger demanded to know why Jeremy Corbyn had praised a mural by the American artist Mear One in London's East End that clearly displayed antisemitic tropes.

Berger herself had been the victim of numerous antisemitic messages and threats, although most as it turned out not from Labour Party members. Corbyn's staff tried to argue that Corbyn was just defending public art which was being threatened. That didn't wash, and the Labour affiliated Jewish Labour Movement joined the attack on Corbyn that would last for the next two or more years.

The question of antisemitism in the Labour Party is a difficult one, because it does exist and there was a history of it in the party as Owen Jones and others on the left have documented and even the leaked Labour report affirmed. [8]

Yet for some, support for Palestinian liberation and criticisms of the state of Israel for racism are seen as antisemitic in themselves.

Jeremy Corbyn

Corbyn, a strong supporter of Palestinian rights, became the target of a relentless campaign that attempted to associate him and his leadership with antisemitism. One does not need to deny the reality of antisemitism to argue that much of this campaign was motivated by opposition to Corbyn and his politics by the party's right.

Indeed, prior to 2015 when Corbyn became leader, the leaked report stated that the bureaucracy's Governance and Legal Unit (GLU), which handles disciplinary issues, "appears to have done only small amounts of work relating to disciplinary cases." In fact from 2015 to February 2018, the bureaucracy including the GLU did very little on antisemitism cases.

What the leaked report shows, however, was that antisemitism was used as a factional tool. In fact, when the party's leadership and bureaucracy came under the pro-Corbyn direction after Formby took over as General-Secretary in the spring of 2018, it did a far more aggressive job of investigating and disciplining cases of antisemitism than under those who were his main attackers. [\[9\]](#)

Even before that, Corbyn intervened to get the GLU to act more quickly on antisemitism cases. At times this became so "zealous" that some on the left felt Corbyn showed an "alarming willingness to throw good people under the bus." [\[10\]](#)

The antisemitism campaign directed against Corbyn, however, was far from limited to internal factionalism. It raged publicly in the mass media and on the BBC in the form of a highly one-sided documentary. It drew in major leaders of the Jewish community and generally demonized Corbyn and even the Labour Party as a whole among British Jews, who had already left the Labour Party in large numbers.

There can be little doubt that this high-profile campaign, along with a confused position on Brexit and by this time disarray among the Corbyn forces, played a role in the disastrous losses Labour faced in the 2019 general election.

These included the loss of 2.6 million votes and 30 seats compared to 2017, many of them long-time Labour seats in the so-called "Red Wall" of the North. It also lost virtually all of the gains in working-class voters made in 2017. Some Labour MPs bolted the party openly, while wealth-and-business-backed money flowed into Boris Johnson's campaign.

That Corbyn made mistakes in the antisemitism crisis and in the 2019 election is beyond doubt, particularly in proposing to open the door to another vote on Brexit. But the most remarkable fact is the degree to which Labour MPs and party bureaucrats had been willing to discredit the party as whole in order to get rid of Jeremy Corbyn once and for all. [\[11\]](#) This effort didn't end there.

Starmer and Labour's Inquisition

With the support of the party's right, center and big funders, Keir Starmer handily won party's 2020 leadership

election against Corbyn ally Rebecca Long-Bailey and centrist Lisa Nandy by 52%, partly on the promise to continue Corbyn's programmatic policies. Starmer had been in Corbyn's shadow cabinet although he was one of those who resigned in preparation for the "coup."

Any advocacy of a left policy, however, soon disappeared as Starmer studiously avoided policy statements of any kind. Even supporters began to complain that he didn't seem to stand for anything other than not being Jeremy Corbyn.

His attempts to define his leadership notably in a document written just before the 2021 party conference, which contained seven references to "public-private partnerships" and none to public ownership, and his speech at the conference were notable for their lack of policy content. [\[12\]](#)

More recently Starmer opted for patriotism, an assuring speech to British capital's leaders, and finally after the New Year offered the nation(s) a "contract with the British people" meant to distance himself from the open corruption of Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson and re-establish "trust" in government — that is, Starmer's hypothetical government. [\[13\]](#)

Beneath all the lawyerly evasion and bland persona, however, was a ruthless campaigner determined to dislodge Labour's left-wing root and branch. Imposing a regime of internal discipline that would have been the envy of Jesuit founder Ignatius Loyola on so faction-ridden an organization as the Labour Party was, of course, not possible. Discipline, banishment, and isolation were the fate only for the party's left.

As party leader, Starmer wasted no time in banishing heretics. In June 2021, Rebecca Long-Bailey was dismissed from his shadow cabinet for alleged antisemitic remarks. In October, Starmer "removed the whip" from Corbyn, suspending him from the Parliamentary Labour Party. The excuse was that Corbyn had said the extent of antisemitism in the party had been "dramatically overstated for political reasons," a statement as true as it was unacceptable to the new leadership.

Shortly afterward Starmer-appointed General-Secretary David Evans banned MPs and party members from discussing Corbyn's suspension at party meetings. The pro-Corbyn organization Momentum found that 20 Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) had passed resolutions in support of Corbyn, Eighteen demanded that the suspension be withdrawn, and four called for the "right to political debate." The leadership ruled at least 16 of their motions out of order. [\[14\]](#)

In July of 2021, Labour's regional office shut down the London party conference because the conference arrangements committee chair Kathryn Johnson criticized Starmer. [\[15\]](#)

The Starmer apparatus also took charge of numerous Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) or their annual meetings in order to shut down possible opposition. This was done in the Bath CLP when the party's South West Regional Office took over. But as a report in Labour Briefing states:

"This takeover is not limited to Bath, but has been repeated across other constituencies, notably Bristol West, with co-ordinated messaging and regional officers taking over AGMs (Annual General Meetings), ignoring the rulebook and weak justifications of wrongdoing by EC (Executive Committee) members. [\[16\]](#)

CLP chairs and secretaries in Bristol, Nottingham and elsewhere have also been suspended by the party apparatus. [\[17\]](#)

Disciplinary cases examined by the party's National Executive Committee (NEC) had already risen under Corbyn, but when Starmer acolyte David Evans took over in mid-2020 they soared and expulsions leaped from two a month under Formby to 20 according to NEC data, while fewer were referred for further review by the party's National Constitutional Committee. [18] Among those expelled was film-maker Ken Loach for the sin of supporting others he considered unfairly expelled. [19]

Starmer crowned his attack on party democracy at the 2021 conference with an attempt to roll back the one-member-one-vote system of electing the party leaders to an electoral college system. This would have given the Parliamentary Party disproportionate influence and limited candidate access by raising the required percentage of MP support from 10-25%. Union intervention helped defeat the electoral college proposal, but the MP endorsement level was raised to 20%. [20]

A Hollow Movement in Decline

The absence of any mass upsurge of outrage and rebellion against this regime by the seemingly huge numbers of Corbyn supporters is explained largely by the disappearance of Corbyn's mass support among the membership that had flooded the party between 2015 and 2016.

The net result of Starmer's counter-reformation was a drop in members from 552,835 in April 2020 when Starmer became leader to 430,359 in July 2021, the last time the party published membership figures, for a net loss of nearly 123,000 members. [21]

Furthermore, the fact that the membership in the April 2020 leadership election was only about 11,000 fewer than at the height of party membership in 2017, tells us that it was Starmer's subsequent rule that brought membership down, not even the disastrous 2019 general election that spelled the end of Corbyn's leadership.

But there was more to this than a simple drop in numbers. You Gov polls in mid-2021 revealed a turnover of membership between January 2020 and June 2021. Those with a positive view of Tony Blair were replacing pro-Corbyn members. Four months before Starmer took over, 71% of members had a positive view of Corbyn, while only 37% thought well of Blair. By June of 2021, Corbyn's positive respondents had fallen to 53%, while Blair was up to 55%. Responses to the poll revealed 36% hadn't voted or weren't eligible to vote in the 2016 leadership election. [22]

Another indication of the weakness of Corbyn's active support was the difference in the number of "Registered Supporters," those who paid £25 in order to vote in the 2016 and 2020 leadership elections. These were not regular party members and simply registered as individuals to vote one time.

In 2016, 183,000 people signed up to vote as Registered Supporters, of whom 70% or 128,000 voted for Corbyn. His total vote was 313,209, so 41% of his 62% majority vote in 2016 came from these Registered Supporters. In the 2020 election where Corbyn wasn't running, only 13,626 people bothered to pay the £25 as Registered Supporters, 10,228 of whom voted for Starmer.

In other words, Corbyn's support in the leadership elections had rested heavily on voters who were not regular party members and about 170,000 of whom apparently disappeared between 2016 and 2020. [23]

Another difference was that in 2016 nearly 100,000 "affiliated members," mostly members of unions, voted by 60% or

60,075 for Corbyn, while in 2020 only 76,068 such union members voted with 53% or 40,417 for Starmer. Only 16,970 voted for Corbyn supporter Rebecca Long Bailey. Thus, there was also a drop in working-class support for the left in the 2020 election. [\[24\]](#)

Working-class membership in the party, in fact, had declined over a long time. In 2017, one survey showed that only 23% of actual members worked in working-class occupations, mainly blue collar and low-paid as defined by the British occupational classification scheme. [\[25\]](#)

The decline in working-class support during the Starmer era was further indicated by the disaffiliation of the Bakers Union and significant reductions in contributions to the Labour Party by UNITE, the UK's largest union, and the Communications Workers Union. [\[26\]](#)

That the party itself, and therefore, much of Corbyn's support, came largely from individuals who played little or no role in party affairs is reflected in the low and falling indicators of active participation according to a major study of party participation.

Of those Labour Party members polled, only 29.7% had actually attended a party meeting in 2015. By 2017 it was down to 6.9%. Membership had doubled, but even minimal participation had fallen by more than four times.

The new Corbyn supporters were not involved in contesting internal party power. Those who "stood for office within the party organization" from 10.9% in 2015 to 1.7% in 2017. Even participation in general elections, the one thing party members were usually mobilized to do, actually fell.

The percentage of those who attended a public meeting during the two elections fell from 31.4% to 25.1% from 2015 to 2017. Those who canvassed "face-to-face" dropped from 36.5% to 26.8% and those who stood for public office fell from 9.1% to 2.2% from 2015 to 2017. [\[27\]](#)

Corbynism had not been an organized or activist movement for most of Corbyn's backers. As such it was no match for the party bureaucracy and the Parliamentary Labour Party that have long dominated the party's structure and still do today.

Electoralism, Parliamentarianism, Passivism

There have been many critiques of the problems and mistakes made by Corbyn and his inner circle, not least its top-down organization. But the real culprits here, as in past Labour Party rebellions on the left, are the twin pillars of social democracy: Electoralism and Parliamentarianism.

By Electoralism I don't mean participating in elections per se, but the belief or practice of seeing elections as the primary activity of party members and as the road to reform. Similarly, by Parliamentarianism I don't mean seeking legislation per se, but the practice of parliamentary or legislative activity and maneuver as the sole legitimate means of social change and, hence, the domination of the party by elected officials rather than members.

In this mode of politics, members and supporters are limited to being mobilized at election time and under the best circumstances being able to vote on party leaders. Together, these twin pillars of social democracy represent a politics of passivity as opposed to the self-activity of the working class in the actual class struggle, electoral or

otherwise.

These are the historical norms and practices of social democracy and the basic reason behind the universally recognized decline of membership involvement and working-class support for most social democratic parties over the last few decades. The transformation of social democratic parties in the post-World War II period — from parties that, at least in theory, sought socialism by gradual parliamentary means to those that accepted capitalism as the framework for reforms — was analyzed in the 1960s by Hal Draper. [\[28\]](#)

The British Labour Party, however, never even debated reform versus revolution, discussed mass strikes as a means of winning demands let alone taking power, and has never had a significant Marxist current like some social democratic parties at one time or another.

It does not advocate, much less organize, mass action outside of election mobilizations, not even the sorts of symbolic one-day general strikes occasionally called by European parties. Its socialism was never more than a fairly generous welfare state and, for a time, a few bureaucratically nationalized industries.

The Labour Party's shared idea of taking power is limited to winning a majority in parliament, with Britain's state bureaucracy and military having more constitutional independence than even those in the United States. Nor has it ever opposed the monarchy despite the crypto-republicanism of some of its left-wing members. No major left faction in the Labour Party has ever challenged these electoral and parliamentary norms — including Corbyn and Corbynism, or Tony Benn and Bennism previously.

Even Momentum, the Corbynista movement's activist organization outside the Labour Party, which does engage in active campaigns around issues and rose to 40,000 or more members at its height in 2019, focused mainly on national and local (Council) elections and internal leadership contests.

As its founding statement put it, "Momentum supports the Labour Party, and works to increase participation and engagement in the party to enable it to win elections and enter Government." [\[29\]](#) By March 2021, while it still acted as a pressure group on Labour policy, it had fallen to 20,000-30,000 members with little influence in the party it supports. [\[30\]](#)

Lessons for America

That the priorities of electoralism and parliamentarianism work against grassroots organization, mass mobilization and direct action is illustrated by the entire history of the Labour Party. This has meant that structurally and in practice the party's parliamentary delegation and bureaucracy dominate and determine policy.

For socialists in the United States attempting to get elected and work through the thoroughly capitalist Democratic Party, which has no members or democratic structure of any sort, even in comparison with the degraded state of the British Labour Party, matters are even more dire.

Among other things this has meant that socialists elected to Congress who have attempted to move the Democratic Party to the left have been forced to abandon their original reform programs such as the Green New Deal and Medicare-for-All. They end up supporting Joe Biden's far more inadequate reforms in the fight against not even the Republicans, but the Democrat's own right wing and spineless center.

Where members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) or candidates they have endorsed have had some state-level electoral success as Democrats in New York State, they appear to be learning to see marginal gains as real victories and aggressive district case work as equivalent to worker self-activity. Gestures of friendliness from the likes of Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer and former New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio seem to represent signs of legitimacy. [31]

One can only say, "With friends like these...." Since there is no Democratic Party membership and the centers of party power are far above the local level, DSA in some places has taken on some of the functions of the party itself. Along with that comes the danger of becoming a sort of adjunct of the party, tied more closely to Democratic electoralism and parliamentarianism than even Momentum is to those of the Labour Party.

For U.S. socialists, the lessons of the Corbyn movement, the first in decades to challenge the Labour Party's long-standing centrism and neoliberalism, are surely that the combination of electoralism and parliamentarianism are a recipe for de-mobilization and top-down organization.

Without independent mass democratic grassroots working-class political organization, self-activity, and direct action, the movement for socialism will become trapped in the morass of money-driven elections and parliamentary maneuvers dominated by party elites and the sometimes distant, sometimes immediate voice of capital within the very party they have embraced.

Source: [Against the Current](#)

PS:

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