

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4372>



Britain

Corbyn consolidates his position

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV493 - February 2016 -

Publication date: Friday 5 February 2016

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Since day one he has been under relentless attacks from Blairites and others on the right wing of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) who wanted to destroy him before he had been able to establish his position.

The media have denounced him for everything he has done – or not done – from day one; not singing the national anthem, not being prepared to press the nuclear button, not bending his head low enough at the Cenotaph, [1] being a ‘supporter of terrorism’ and having dinner with the Stop the War Coalition.

The Labour right followed in their wake, trumpeting the same causes. This is the same right wing that shaped the Tory-light and cuts-light policies that lost Labour the last election, whose reaction to that defeat was to declare that campaign had been too far to the left and to win in 2020 the party had to move further to the right – even more Tory-light. The acting leader at the time, Harriet Harman, proposed accepting the Tory budget and cuts agenda.

The right has problems, however.

Corbyn has consolidated his position and is stronger now than when he was first elected. He has broken the cross party consensus on some of the key issues in British politics, raised the level of the political discourse in the process. This has pushed the political situation in the Labour Party to the left and repopularised radical ideas.

He has openly welcomed migrants and asylum seekers to this country – speaking at the welcome refugees’ demonstration on the very same day (12 September 2015) as his election triumph.

He has given full support to the junior doctors [2] and he has taken up the issue of low wages; saying that he would ban the big corporations from paying dividends to their shareholders unless they could show that they are paying a proper living wage to their workforce – both their direct workers and their contracted workers.

On the Andrew Marr television talk show on Sunday January 17, as well as backing the junior doctors in their defence of the NHS, he called for the repeal of the anti-union laws, and said that he would reverse the law against secondary picketing. He also said, at the international level, that he would negotiate with Argentina over the Falklands (Malvinas) islands.

He has set his face against the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system – the holy grail of the British establishment. He also held the line against war – and taken two thirds of Labour MPs and a slender majority of his then shadow cabinet in the vote against military intervention in Syria despite the huge attacks on him for doing so

The membership of the Labour Party has grown dramatically from around 201,293 before the last election to 388,407 on 10 January 2016, not far behind the existing, very short lived peak of membership of 407,000 after Blair was elected as Prime Minister in 1997. [3]

Given that those numbers also conceal some resignations from a section of the right who couldn’t stomach him at all, it’s also a party which is significantly further to the left than it was. Corbyn is reshaping the Labour Party towards his own political positions – though there remains a fair way to go.

Even if the right wing was able to force a fresh leadership election, (and it is not clear that any significant number of them now see this as being in their immediate sights) Corbyn would only increase his majority. If they tried to exclude him from the ballot paper they would split the party.

Perhaps this, as well as their own internal divisions, is why there is no obvious candidate around whom the right can rally – instead desperate cries that it must be that person every time yet another malcontent grumbles at Corbyn.

Oldham West success

The right has another problem.

They were desperate for Labour to lose the Oldham West and Royton by-election (on 3 December 2015, just three months after Corbyn's election) but it did not happen. Contrary to their expectations, Corbyn has had a positive response from the electorate as well

Labour won the seat with a majority of 10,722 and a 62% share of the vote – higher than at the general election. Predictions of a dramatic UKIP victory were dashed as its vote declined from the general election rather than increasing.

When Jeremy Corbyn said Labour's win in Oldham demonstrated the strength and appeal of its anti-austerity message he was absolutely right. Oldham reflected the changes Corbyn has made since he became leader. Labour is now an anti-austerity party, despite the squeals of pain and anger from many of its MPs.

Corbynism was also behind the defeats the Tories have suffered in Parliament in recent months – the U-turn over tax credits and the cuts to police numbers. The £5.7 m contract to train the staff to work in Saudi Arabia's brutal justice system was scrapped after Corbyn intervened.

This is in sharp contrast to Labour's performance under Miliband – not to mention Brown and Blair – where it was often hard to tell the difference between them and the Tories. It is precisely by showing that austerity is not inevitable – and neither is war – that Labour can win at the polls, convincing people that there is a point in turning out.

The May elections [\[4\]](#) are big challenge for Corbyn but the signs are that Labour will do well, including in London despite the fact that the mayoral candidate Sadiq Khan is not a Corbynite. In any case even a poor result in May would not necessarily be terminal to the project since he appears to be looking to build support over the next two to three years,

Scotland remains a major problem for Corbyn, and that is not going to change whilst he sticks to a unionist position. Corbyn is well to the left of the SNP but whilst he sticks to a unionist agenda he will make no progress north of the border.

Of course the place where things are most difficult for Corbyn is in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

His shadow cabinet reshuffle, despite its mauling by the media for taking too long, as if there was a limit for such reshuffles, has strengthened his position by removing some of those who were openly defying his leadership. [\[5\]](#) It included the removal of Trident supporter Maria Eagle from the defence brief and her replacement with Emily Thornbury who opposes it – and who was very sharp in her backing for Corbyn in the media during the debate on Syria.

Trident critical

The fight over Trident is absolutely critical. Although there are some dissenters, for the majority of the Tories and the Labour right, defending Trident is a central issue. It's about revelling in Britain's imperial past and her status in the future.

So preventing Trident replacement would be a massive blow for the British ruling class, as well as a huge victory for Corbyn who has championed this cause all his life.

The majority of the population is opposed to Trident renewal – for example on Question Time on Friday Jan 15 for example the studio audience was strongly with Livingstone on the issue. Meetings up and down the country building for the demonstration to build for the February 27 demonstration have been well attended.

Scrapping it will be overwhelmingly popular amongst individual Labour Party members but voices from the top of some unions – Unite's Len McCluskey and GMB's Paul Kenny for example – have been raised in opposition.

In Unite's case, McCluskey's comments – unless he is being misquoted – would seem an extremely skewed interpretation the union's policy – which while it rightly talks about the need to maintain jobs and skills, is absolutely against Trident renewal . [6] Unite's Scottish Secretary Pat Rafferty for example spoke in favour of the resolution against Trident which was adopted by Labour Scotland's conference last year.

Corbyn is rightly countering their arguments by saying that Trident jobs should be switched to renewable energy production. This is a much stronger argument than the idea of submarines without nuclear weapons – an idea which doesn't draw on the strength of the work that has been done over defence diversification over decades.

In this the fortieth anniversary year of the Lucas Aerospace plan, when shop stewards in the plant which was largely making products for the defence industry, came together with radical scientists and produced detailed blue prints for 150 alternative products that the plant and its workers could be converted to produce, the time to build on and popularise such ideas has never been more urgent.

But what horrifies the right even more is the way Corbyn is proposing taking the decision on Trident. He has said that it will be the membership, either at conference or a membership vote, that will decide the issue – sidelining the Parliamentary LP and the policy forums.

In taking such a position, Corbyn is not only seeking to reach out to those more likely to support his convictions on this vital issue but to strengthen both the level of democracy and of political debate in the party in a more fundamental way. This is obviously a threat to the PLP and to the right not only on one vital issue of opposition to weapons of mass destruction, but on a broader and more long term basis.

Momentum – a challenging project

Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell were right to launch Momentum as a social movement both inside and outside of the LP. It is an ambitious project for which there are no blueprints.

Corbyn's election campaign went way beyond the existing Labour left when Momentum was launched there was a

leadership waiting in the wings that would be seen as legitimate by the movement as a whole. So it seemed fair enough at the beginning that there was a Launch Reference Group composed of four of the new Corbyn supporters in the PLP and two others. [7]

Membership remains a loose concept. Everyone who signed up for Corbyn's campaign was asked to get involved and huge numbers did – somewhere between thirty and forty thousand. There are around fifty local groups (there is no list) which vary in how they organise – some meet regularly, others don't. Some are open to all Corbyn supporters, others are LP members only.

Momentum has been active on a range of issues from voter registration –where government changes could see over 2 million losing the right to vote, to opposition to Osborne's planned tax credits cuts. They mobilised for the Oldham by election and were visible on the climate change and student protests.

In the run up to the Syria vote, Momentum made a huge effort to support Corbyn by both by on line and in person lobbying. East London Momentum organiser Imad Ahmed spoke at the December 12 demonstration Since the beginning of 2016, Momentum mobilised against the Rail Fare Rip-Off and to support the junior doctor's action.

This is very positive – organising people to defend the key aspects of Corbyn's policies both by public campaigning and putting pressure on the PLP with the weight of so many new activists.

What future for Momentum?

There are questions some questions about campaigning – the fact that Momentum nationally has not been involved in the campaign against Trident for example is definitely a weakness.

But it's on the questions of structures and democracy that the greatest problems lie. The future of Momentum as an organisation is more problematic than the Corbyn project itself. The presence of non-members of the LP – which has been endorsed by both Corbyn and McDonnell – is opposed not only by the Labour right but also by some on the Labour left.

Some seem to have the mistaken view that the best way to deal with the idea that Momentum is dominated by the 'hard left' is to concede ground – as if when you give someone an inch they will go away quietly. Momentum is under attack for its political principles – who is involved is a secondary question for the media and the right.

One question is whether Momentum should affiliate to the Labour Party as a socialist society. Many arguing this position suggest that this means that only members of the Labour Party can be members of Momentum. This is not true. Currently Labour has almost twenty affiliated socialist societies, each with their own rules. The Socialist Health Association for example has long been an affiliated socialist society but its members and office holders don't have to be members and of the Labour Party – and indeed neither do its office holders [8] It set out a structure in which regional representatives and others would initially not be elected, though elections were promised –within six months:

Attempts to hold a National Committee meeting in January had to be abandoned following a protest letter from more than a dozen Momentum organisers from London [9]

A further letter from 'Team Momentum' responded [10] that there would be regional (and national) meetings to

Corbyn consolidates his position

elect delegates to the national committee which would meet on February 6. That is not far away and I have yet to hear of any regional gatherings yet though some local groups have elected their delegations.

Momentum will only succeed in its political aims if it sticks to a democratic road. This means all the structures should be open to everyone who supports the project. It's important that this is argued within Momentum groups – nothing is yet a done deal.

The need for an alliance to defend Corbyn's policies remains necessary – which means that other ways of bringing together his supporters will develop, if Momentum fails to meet the challenge.

Corbyn's popularity is based on his policies and principals. People are fed up with empty spin and they want some policy substance and he is providing that. It is crucial, therefore, that he sticks to the left-wing agenda on which he was elected – and at the moment he is doing just that.

The best way of defending the Corbyn project, which is stronger today than when he was elected, is to mobilise in defence of those ideas and to debate as widely as possible how to take forward the dynamism and enthusiasm which led to his election in the first place.

[1] At the official commemoration of the dead of the two world and other wars in November 2015.

[2] See ["Junior doctors – fighting to defend our NHS"](#), ["Junior doctors' strike: What the dispute is about"](#), the movement is continuing with all-out strike action called for 10 February.

[3] The number of actual resignations since Corbyn's election is less than 4000 – as distinct from the numbers who stopped paying which has brought the total leavers to 8500. For the period between the general election and Corbyn's election the figures were 1300 resignations and a total of 5500 leavers. So there is a clear increase in right wingers leaving but way below the 30,000 claimed by Mandelson.

[4] Local elections renewing sections of local authorities will be held on 5 May 2016, and will include the crucial election of London's directly-elected mayor, a post currently held by leading Tory Boris Johnson.

[5] The reshuffle of the shadow cabinet named in September 2015 took place over 2 days in early January, see [The Guardian](#) ["Corbyn's more unified shadow cabinet ... after a 34 hour-long reshuffle."](#) and ["Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet reshuffle: who's in and who's out"](#).

[6] See [Unite Trident policy: peace and disarmament](#).

[7] Clive Lewis MP, Rebecca Long-Bailey MP, Richard Burgon MP, Kate Osamor MP together with Councillor Sam Tarry and Jon Lansman (prominent member of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy and author of the Left Futures blog).

[8] See [SOCIALIST HEALTH ASSOCIATION](#)

The current position with Momentum structures is confused and problematic. The obvious place to decide how the organisation should be structured is a meeting of all Momentum supporters rather than structures created and imposed from the top.

Just before Christmas, members received an email summing up the organisations work together with information about the formation of a national committee. [\[](#)"In order to reflect the diversity of the movement and its grassroots nature, the National Committee will be made up of two representatives from Scotland, Wales and each of the nine English regions, two from each national trade union and representatives of established Labour left organisations. The committee will be gender balanced and will include BAME and disability representation. Initial representation from regions and nations and equalities groups will be based on consultation as prescribed by the reference group, but will be elected within six

months.”

[9] Key parts of the letter include: “we believe that the decision making processes for Momentum at a national level must be made absolutely transparent. If decisions are made about who can attend Momentum meetings, whether Momentum will become a membership organisation, or how the national organisation will be structured, it has to be clear who is making these decisions” and:“Principally, we hope that local groups will be able to have real input in deciding what national structure Momentum should adopt, and that any eventual structure will include significant representation from local groups, allowing local activists real democratic influence over the organisation’s national direction”.and “In the context of the above concerns we have no confidence in the national committee meeting being organised for the 16th January.”} . Even the protest letter accepted that only LP members can be involved in decision making. [[We agree that Momentum decision making meetings should exclude members of other parties. We would like to note that this isn’t because we have anything against members of other parties, but rather that if members of other parties are allowed to have influence over the decision making processes in local groups it may inhibit our ability to build positive links with Constituency Labour Parties, and ultimately to fight for Labour election victories.

[10]Over the next month, we will build towards the first meeting of our National Committee on Saturday 6 February with gatherings of delegates from verified local Momentum groups in all nine English regions, Scotland and Wales.

Momentum staff members will be in touch in the coming week, to organise the regional meetings with group organisers, trade unions and other relevant stakeholders. These regional (national in the case of Wales and Scotland) meetings will elect delegates to the National Committee. In the instances of Scotland and Wales, staff members will be a point of contact as you organise your meetings and selection process independently. Each region or nation will elect two delegates, at least one of whom must be a woman. The North West and the South East will have three delegates due to their size, at least two of whom must be women. London will have four delegates, at least two of whom must be women. All delegates will be Labour Party members.

As well as elect their delegates, these regional gatherings may debate all issues on the forthcoming agenda and present their own comments, proposals or amendments. These papers will be presented to all members of the Committee....