The Corbyn gamble
What future awaits for the Labour Party?

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Socialism afresh or the replay of a doomed tune?

“There are moments in the Labour Party's history when Labour has, tragically, been radical without being credible,” wrote Gordon Brown in 2006, in a pre-amble to the re-issuing of Anthony Crosland’s The Future of Socialism. “The challenge (...) is that in our programme and policies we be both radical and credible.” A decade later, it is precisely in this perspective that the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party should be portrayed. What Corbyn represents is a lurch to the left in the wake of Labour electoral defeat in May. A highly unlikely choice under most circumstances, Corbyn’s candidature gained strength through an appeal to the discontented. His steadfast claim that a different Britain is possible gained impressive mandate. The call for profound social change was a source of great enthusiasm during the mass meetings of the leadership campaign over the summer. Yet it is not in these quarters that forthcoming elections will be won. Corbyn’s challenge in the longer run is not to preach to his congregation but to persuade the wider British public, including the southern parts of England where so much of the Labour Party’s momentum has been lost since the heyday of New Labour in the late 1990s.

The basic tenets of Corbyn’s economic policies are well known: strengthening workers’ rights and the role of trade unions; expanding the welfare state, funded by a more redistributive system of taxation; and a return to more public ownership, starting with the railways. Abroad, his rallying call is for a more humane foreign policy. Corbyn’s political gravitas over the last decade has been carried by the Stop the War Coalition. As prime minister, he would be opposed to retaining Britain’s nuclear deterrent, seeking to establish more distance in the special relationship with the United States and a reorientation towards the Middle East. And in relation to Britain’s own social hierarchies and institutions, his article for this journal in 2007 – “Is Britain a democracy?” – suggests some of the ideas he would pursue. House of Lords reform and enhanced accountability for government are among them, alongside empowerment in the workplace.

Many areas remain unclear in Corbyn’s agenda for reform, such as the scope for decentralisation of both public services and democracy as such. Where individual empowerment was a key to New Labour’s political message, collective empowerment is essential to Corbyn. What it amounts to, say some, is the same as the political agenda of the early 1980s, which culminated in electoral disaster for Labour and a decade and a half of neoliberal reforms under a Conservative government. Will history replay itself, or is Corbyn’s future for Labour of a different kind? The articles of the present issue of British Politics Review take different approaches as the dilemma of seeking profound social change on the back of a credible strategy for government. Will Corbyn succeed? The months and years ahead will tell.

Øivind Bratberg and Atle L. Wold (editors)

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How can we solve the past and future mysteries of ‘Corbynism’?

By Glen O’Hara

The election of Jeremy Corbyn as the UK Labour leader is, on the surface, something of a puzzle. Mr Corbyn has been a Member of Parliament for thirty two years. He is extremely Left-wing even by the standards of Labour’s Parliamentary Left: between 1997 and 2010, he was the Party’s most rebellious MP of all. He has never been appointed to any post, or elected to any office. The last time he ran for election for Labour’s Shadow office. The last time he ran for election for Labour’s Shadow Cabinet in Opposition, he came bottom of the ballot (in 1996).

Very few Labour MPs support him: though he attracted the requisite 35 votes to get on the members’ ballot paper, only perhaps 15 actually wanted him to become leader. The rest of those Labour MPs nominating him wanted him in the contest to ‘widen the debate’, a ritual inclusion of a Leftist that usually ended up with them coming bottom. Now Mr Corbyn finds himself as leader of a Parliamentary Labour Party that agrees with almost none of his positions at all, but backed by a new and enlarged membership that sees him as the exemplar and guarantor of a ‘new politics’ of the Left.

How did this happen? As befits such an unexpected upheaval, there were many reasons for Mr Corbyn’s election, some of which will follow through into Labour’s general campaigning and influence the shape of British politics for years to come. The first reason for Labour’s choice was that, following the surprise election of a majority Conservative government in May, many activists despaired of ever winning again - turning instead to an example of a man who had not substantially changed his view, and who had stuck to a resolutely ‘Old’ Labour style and substance, since the 1970s. In this way, they proved their intellectual commitment to a straightforward, clear politics of higher spending, renationalization and campaigns for immigrants’ and refugees’ rights, all of which had seemed questionable under the temporizing and uncertain leadership of Ed Miliband. Many a Labour activist said to themselves: if we can’t win, why not at least be true to our principles?

Labour’s membership had also been drifting slowly leftwards under Mr Miliband’s leadership, as he had consciously rejected the centrist politics of Tony Blair in an attempt to differentiate himself from Labour’s unpopularity during its last years in power. Combined with many thousands of new members who joined the Party even after the list of candidates who had been published – and ‘supporters’ who were allowed to register, with few checks as to their loyalties and for just £3 – this was also an example of a crowdsourced or ‘flash mob’ politics that saw young, idealistic and Left-wing Britons flock to the Mr Corbyn’s banner as the one a man who could at last take over and lead a British political party from the unequivocal Left. Labour had, in the 2010 and 2015 elections, done very well in relatively liberal and cosmopolitan urban seats, most notably in London, further strengthening the relatively Left-wing nature and outlook of the Party.

Added to all this, a tight-knit, effective anti-austerity and anti-war group of campaigns had already formed around Left-wing groups such as the People’s Assembly, Stop the War and the various anti-Conservative activist in mostly lending their weight to the Left – a crucial difference to the last time that side of the Party looked likely to win power, when the unions had leaned to the Right.

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This successful campaign for the leadership does, however, present Labour with an enormous problem, familiar from the United States – where Presidential candidates must talk to Left- or Right-wing activists to win their party’s nomination, but then tack as hard to the centre as they can in order to win votes running up to the general election.
The fact is that most of Labour’s activists did not vote for Mr Corbyn to make Labour more ‘electable’ in any traditional sense. Polling for the survey company YouGov has shown that they were more concerned to stay true to what they perceived as ‘Labour principles’ than they were focused on winning elections. That was more than adequate to seize the Labour leadership: but now means that Labour activists face an electorate that is in many respects deeply hostile to Mr Corbyn’s overall vision.

Many individual policies that Mr Corbyn has espoused are relatively popular. The renationalisation of Britain’s railways, rent controls on private landlords and higher taxes for the wealthy all garner large majorities when the public are surveyed. But these specifics hide a wider alienation from Labour’s new positioning as a strongly Left-wing party. Other policies are unpopular. Abolishing university tuition fees, the cap on the amount any household can receive in benefits, or establishing a maximum wage are all opposed by more Britons than support those ideas. And the ideas for which Mr Corbyn is most well-known – withdrawal from NATO, Irish reunification, unilateral nuclear disarmament, large reductions in defence expenditure – are very unpopular indeed. He has abandoned any hopes that Labour as a whole will adopt the first two policies; his personal promise that he would never himself use nuclear weapons, made at Labour’s autumn conference, has started the process of pushing towards a much less militarily capable and interventionist United Kingdom.

The symbolism of Mr Corbyn’s leadership has been very damaging in this respect. He declined to sing the national anthem on his first official engagement as Leader of the Opposition. He found himself ‘too busy’ to join the Queen’s Privy Council at the first opportunity, and equivocated about whether he would kneel or bow. As a lifelong republican, the public may well feel that there is no reason for him to betray his principles; but the idea that he is some ways less than patriotic may well have fixed in the public’s mind in a way that reflects very badly on a man bidding to be Prime Minister. He has mused, as a backbench MP, as to whether Britain needs any armed forces at all. He has been embroiled in a number of controversies about his meetings with representatives of Hamas and Hezbollah, and his links to Northern Ireland’s IRA during the 1980s. His behaviour as leader has made these problems worse. By appointing the deeply controversial Seumas Milne as press liaison and head of strategy – Milne is a journalist who accused Americans on 9/11 of “reaping a dragons’ teeth harvest they themselves sowed”, and has been accused of downplaying Stalin’s crimes – as well as employing other figures from the far Left in the leader’s office, Mr Corbyn has reinforced the impression of exotic Leftism that many of his actual policies do not usually justify.

This is a potent and toxic mix, and Mr Corbyn will certainly struggle to gain a hearing among the public. He is the least popular Leader of the Opposition ever, for this stage of his tenure; Labour languishes six percentage points or so behind the Conservatives, a position that has only been significantly worse during the heights of Margaret Thatcher’s post-election honeymoon and the economic boom of late 1987. His popularity may not decline to quite the depths that Mr Miliband’s plumbed in the autumn of 2014, for he starts with an unusual number of excited supporters – faced only by many more detractors – and fewer ‘don’t knows’ who could make up their minds against him. But if his popularity and Labour’s poll ratings decline at the rate that they usually do from this initial (and in this case ironically-named) ‘honeymoon’ period, many Labour MPs fear that the Party will be routed when it next faces a General Election in 2020.

For now, that date is simply too far away to mount any confident prediction: Labour’s divided camps are looking to the May 2016 elections, to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, London Mayoralty and English local authorities, as a crucial first test. If Labour does very badly in those contests, a whispering campaign against the Corbyn leadership will undoubtedly start, since most of the Party at Westminster are entirely unreconciled to the new dispensation. Can Mr Corbyn mobilise Green voters, young people and previously unengaged non-voters to come to the polls? Or are Labour’s centrists right when they insist that convincing and converting ex-Conservatives is absolutely vital if Labour is to remain a viable force? Most of the polling evidence so far points to the latter conclusion, but real votes in real ballot boxes will soon start to prove who is right.
The general election of 2015 was hardly the finest hour of the British Labour Party, so much is clear. It is also clear that nowhere was the defeat greater than in Scotland, where the numbers really speak for themselves: reduced from 41 to merely a single MP, essentially means that the once dominant party in Scottish politics now enjoys not greater representation in Westminster than do the Scottish Conservatives, a party often derided as having next to no support in Scotland. What is less clear, however, is where one should go from here.

Which strategy should Scottish Labour adopt in order to regain its momentum and seriously challenge the new dominant party in Scotland, the SNP? With the Greens knocking on the door, suggesting seriously that they could become the second force in Scottish politics after next year’s Holyrood elections, Scottish Labour seems to have no time to lose.

The new leader of Scottish Labour since August this year, Keiza Dugdale, was thus dealt a worse hand than any previous leader, but perhaps thereby also greater leeway in terms of putting her mark on things. At least there was no opposition from Jeremy Corbyn to Dugdale’s insistence that Scottish Labour had to gain greater autonomy from the Westminster party than what had so far been the case. In the wake of Johann Lamont’s resignation as leader in October 2014 on the grounds that Scottish Labour, in her view, was being treated as a “branch office” by the central party, this was perhaps to be expected, but Dugdale’s “independence line” nevertheless marks an important new departure and suggests that she will indeed seek to take firm leadership of the party in Scotland.

What does this newfound autonomy entail? The demands Dugdale put forward were that Scottish Labour should be given full independence over policymaking, candidates selection (for all elections, including Westminster), and management of local constituency parties, i.e. membership – thus arguably all the central levers of a political party.

The independence line which was set out at the recent party conference in Perth is then to be accompanied by a strategy of attacking the SNP from the left: the nationalists talk of equality, but what are they actually achieving in position? Moreover, Dugdale’s proposal for an elected House of Lords, situated in Glasgow, reveals a politician prepared to promote fresh new ideas, aimed at challenging the main opposing party (the SNP is critical of the Lords, but presents no alternative). Beyond this, however, Dugdale has yet to develop her policies, and one of the decisions reached at the conference – that Scottish Labour is now opposed to the renewal of Trident, the British nuclear deterrent - went against her wishes (if still a policy which underlines the independence line). On this point the current troubles of Labour in Britain as a whole also became very apparent. While the Scottish opposition to Trident had the approval of Jeremy Corbyn, it earned a stern rebuke from the shadow defence secretary Maria Eagle, who emphasised that Labour’s defence policy is determined at the UK level, and that it remains one of commitment to Trident renewal.

All-in-all the strategy set out by Dugdale seems a sensible one, and perhaps it is also the only one that can be adopted if Scottish Labour is to have any chance of rising from the doldrums again. Yet there is a danger that it could play into the hands of the SNP because, by making Scottish Labour more independent from the central party, is Dugdale not simply reinforcing Scottish separateness? And how will Labour handle any future disagreements on policy such as that which occurred over Trident renewal? It has been a long-standing strategy of the SNP to put the supposed interests of Scotland as a whole up against what is held to be the interests of England as a whole, and Dugdale’s independence line may end up reinforcing this.

That is, however, in the future, and the first test for Dugdale and Scottish Labour will be the elections to the Scottish Parliament in May next year. Given the massive lead the SNP currently enjoys in the polls, they no doubt have a mountain to climb.
Back to the future: is it Corbyn or Cameron who is living in the 1980s?

“The Labour Party is now a threat to our national security, our economic security and your family’s security.” David Cameron 2015

“The policies which our Labour opponents now propose would put at risk all this hard-won security” Conservative Manifesto 1983

A frequent refrain from Westminster wise men is that Corbynism represents a regressive move back to the 1980s. The signifier here, “the 1980s”, works in two ways: it conjures up electoral apocalypse, and it provides apparent proof of the redundancy the left’s ideology. These beliefs combine to constitute Britain’s 21st century conventional wisdom that Labour can only win by embracing free market reform and a foreign policy in which the UK “punches above its weight” and maintains nuclear weapons. The practices of consecutive post Thatcher governments — New Labour and Conservative — have both reproduced and reified these assumptions without really testing them. Nonetheless, it is now common to hear that Corbyn is trying to break the rules of British politics and is thus doomed.

Britain’s political pundits arguably suffer from a similar shortsightedness to political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who prophesised the end of history in the wake of American “victory” in the Cold War. They mistake supremacy in a specific historical context for timeless validation of an ideology. Taking a longer historical lens and a broader geographical one, it is clear that the argument over the role of the state and the UK’s role in the world in the 21st century has not been settled. Indeed, this contemporary conventional wisdom removes the argument from the context within which it was last contested. When Thatcher called Labour a threat to national security, the Soviet Union was believed to want to take Europe by force. When Thatcher attacked Labour’s economic statism, Britain’s state had expanded for almost 70 years and was undeniably creaking with inefficacy and rent seeking.

Fast-forward to the 21st century and the Conservative attacks (above) on Corbyn read like it is they who believe Britain is still the 1980s. Since Thatcher won, Britain has privatised everything but the proverbial kitchen sink, sheltering only the NHS, the Army and the BBC. In the process, the UK has pioneered the theoretically dubious policy of selling off natural monopolies to the private sector, and subcontracting state services. Now, it is possible to interpret this experiment in several ways but it does not look like the end of history: few would cite Britain’s energy oligopoly, private rail companies or housing sector as success stories. Moreover, looking abroad, no correlation exists between small government and growth, but a strong correlation exists between smaller government and inequality—a pattern Britain fits, and not in good way.

The question of what services the state should provide and how they should provide them is debated across the western world, in the wake of the financial crisis and faced with demographic change. There is little reason that Britain should be the exception. Three decades ago, the new right convinced the majority of the public that more market was the answer. Now that the social externalities of the free market have become the problem, more market is unlikely to remain the only answer and direction of reform. Indeed, I would speculate that similar to how the corrosive consequences of an over-sized state in the 1970s prompted Thatcherism, we may be in the early throes a paradigm shift away from the Thatcherite settlement, as inequality and the social ills it breeds, continue to grow.

Similar to how this qualitative make-up of the British economy should provide more fertile ground for reconsidering the role of state, so Britain’s 21st forays into military interventionism has opened a space in UK politics for Corbyn’s scepticism towards British militarism.

By Paul Beaumont
The opposition to the Iraq war, in which Corbyn played a central role, cut across party lines and established a firm argument against military adventures. Iraq undermined both the public trust in politician’s decision-making and the public’s belief in the utility of military force to do anything but multiply the problems it seeks to solve. Indeed, that Ed Miliband’s opposition to Syria constituted one of his few certifiable successes is symptomatic of the public’s new scepticism towards “muscular humanitarianism”. Times have changed in relation to military threats, aims and strategies. Contra the Cold War, when security discourse crowded out ethics, the absence of serious existential threats and the prevailing human rights discourse provides Corbyn’s anti-militarism with mainstream resonance.

The question is whether he can convert these relatively favourable conditions into an electoral success. It is rather too soon to tell, especially given the wild card of the EU referendum. However, while some analysts claim that Corbyn’s small post-election bounce has emerged in the “wrong places” (Labour strong-holds), it is worth remembering many of the same commentators swore that Corbyn would usher in a mass exodus of voters to the Conservatives. Further, he has also come under unprecedented attacks from both the press and his own party during his leadership campaign. Under these circumstances, a relatively small bounce, the solidification of Labour’s voter base and expansion of membership, must count as a qualified success.

However, to succeed long-term Corbyn needs to convince the wider public that his economic and foreign policies are credible and not just ethical. While some of the conditions may be amenable to press the nuclear red button, but has said less about how abolishing Britain’s nuclear defence would liberate immense funds for other purposes. He emphasises the immorality of austerity measures that hurt the poorest, without explaining sufficiently that investment in human capital, infrastructure, and redistribution to the poor will stimulate the economy more efficiently than cutting taxes for the rich. On the economy at least Corbyn is moving into more substantial debates. By seeking advice from renowned economists such as Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty, Labour can counter with authority the tale of austerity as “cruel, but necessary” that has prevailed since 2010. Labour should do the same with its foreign policy: there are plenty of credible ex-British Generals who could be called upon to make anti-interventionist and anti-nuclear arguments.

"The trouble is that Corbyn’s disposition lends him to emphasise the ethical arguments against austerity and military interventionism without the practical argument for why these policies benefit Britain as a whole.”

Ultimately, holding up a black mirror to Conservative economic and foreign policy will only get Corbyism so far. To appeal to the middle classes Labour needs to unite ethics with self-interest: doing the right thing can also be the best thing. Whether this would be enough for Corbyn himself is doubtful – given the hostility of the press and his own party — but I suspect that the terms of the debate concerning the social contract will change regardless. In fact, the smart money might be on the Conservatives to compromise and begin using state apparatus to address inequality. It is not unthinkable that George Osborne could become Britain’s 21st century Bismarck: a pragmatist willing to use un-conservative means to pacify the lower classes and retain power. Indeed, by raising the minimum wage they may have already begun.
For many years, Jeremy Corbyn enjoyed membership of the Labour Party’s backbench ‘awkward squad’. He voted against the Party whip repeatedly, on the economy, on defence, on education, on every major initiative he disagreed with personally. One recent report suggested David Cameron, who admittedly entered Parliament eighteen years after his new opposite number, has yet to vote against Labour as many times as Corbyn has.

His views stand out particularly starkly in the area of foreign and security policy. Here Corbyn holds a series of quite firm stances that place him at odds with the British political mainstream. He opposes the use of force under almost any circumstances. Most British people are open-minded, depending on the situation. He supports unilateral nuclear disarmament. Most British people do not, though many are open to persuasion. He has called in the past for the break-up of NATO and he tends to blame major international disasters on some variety of US imperialism. Few of his countrymen share these positions. Now he sits on Parliament’s front benches, occupying the position of Leader of the Opposition. For the first time, after all the rebellions, the speeches and the back-bench cantankerousness, the awkward squad holds power.

Until the Iraq War, however, Corbyn’s election would not have mattered much to the broader sweep of British foreign policy. Parliament had limited influence over what remained a preserve of executive authority, and the Leader of the Opposition had limited influence outside of Parliament. Major decisions happened in Downing Street or at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. They were announced in the House of Commons, but nothing more.

Since Iraq, however, the picture has grown more complicated. Seeking domestic legitimacy, and struggling to hold his fractious party together, Tony Blair gave MPs a chance to veto the invasion. They did not take it, and Blair got his war. Looking to differentiate himself from Blair, Cameron asked MPs to endorse NATO’s no-fly zone over Libya. Just thirteen (including, of course, one Jeremy Corbyn) said no. Facing the prospect of military action in Syria, Cameron felt he had to follow past precedents and his own repeated promises. He again allowed MPs a vote. But on that occasion they refused him, unable to shake off the memories of Iraq. He acquiesced, withdrawing the threat of force from the table. And a new parliamentary convention was born.

Britain’s Prime Minister retains the formal right to direct the armed forces in the name of the monarch. The power forms part of the ancient ‘royal prerogative’, the remnant of historic executive privilege left untouched by centuries of gradual transition to democracy. Nothing has changed in legal terms.

But the royal prerogative itself is a conventional power. Its scope, limits and parameters are nowhere set down in writing. Everyone who matters simply knows what the rules are. Conventions of this sort can change. They can change through legislation. But they can also change quite rapidly, unexpectedly and even unintentionally as elite and social attitudes shift. They change when precedents accumulate to such a point that they simply become the way that things are done.

That was what happened with parliament’s war powers. Cameron found himself, over Syria, unable to ignore parliament’s will without consciously contradicting his own earlier promises and conduct. Having emphasised the importance of parliamentary judgement, he could hardly ignore it just because it conflicted with his own. After all, MPs even endorsed the Iraq War. He was embarrassed, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Political conventions are not like laws. It is not illegal to ignore a political convention, and Cameron could have tried to do it. But just as leaders who break the law face legal penalties, those who violate political rules widely regarded as legitimate (as this one is) face political punishment. Leading a coalition government and already facing internal dissent, Cameron felt unable to take the risk.

The new ‘parliamentary prerogative’, then, brings fundamental change to how Britain makes foreign policy decisions. It brings the House of Commons to the heart of decisions about the use of force. Even before Corbyn’s election as Labour Party leader, this raised a number of implications.
First, parliament now functions as a forum for domestic role contestation. The sort of ‘role’ a state plays in the world depends on two distinct sets of pressures. It depends on what other states expect a state to do. It depends, also, on what a state’s own domestic decision-makers want it to do. MPs are now decision-makers, at least in certain policy areas. Questions they raised in earlier eras about Britain’s great power status or its position as first ally to the United States now matter much more. Corbyn’s view, that Britain should stop aspiring to global leadership and distance itself from the US, can now potentially affect actual policy decisions. It must be taken into account.

Second, parliament now provides a public forum for major policy debates. On one level, this is a positive development. It makes governments, who know whatever they decide the need also to ‘sell’ to parliament, to make better decisions in the first place. It gives MPs the chance to bring their particular ideas and expertise to bear on the major foreign policy issues of the day. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee recently published a report arguing against extending Britain’s present military campaign against ISIS into Syria. The report is simple, lucid, and difficult to argue against. It probably helped convince the government, which seemed ready to ask MPs for a decision, to think again.

Third, parliamentary involvement subjects military deployment decisions to the vagaries of partisan politicking. Governments must negotiate difficult intra- and inter-party bargains to ensure sufficient support. Cameron failed to win over enough of his own back-benchers in 2013, and to line up Ed Miliband’s support. Blair did not make that mistake in 2003, nor did Cameron himself in 2011 or 2014.

The political dimension is the most significant. It is especially so in light of Corbyn’s election, given his preferred foreign and security policy stance, which opposes most of the things a British government might want to do in the area. There is no government less well placed to win a parliamentary vote on military action than a weak Conservative one. Conservatives in general tend to view military force more favourably than members of other parties. When a Labour government proposes military action, it can expect opposition support, as it did in 2003. But Conservatives cannot be complacent. They have to do deals. Cameron and Miliband came to agreements in 2011 and 2014. The 2013 vote went wrong because they failed to compromise. That need already disrupts policymaking. Britain is bombing ISIS in Iraq and not in Syria because that was Miliband’s price for his support, not because of any strategic calculation.

Since Corbyn is unlikely to agree to military action regardless of what Cameron offers him, the choice the Prime Minister faced when considering intervention against ISIS in Syria was simple. He could try to corral his own backbenchers, to ensure his slender twelve seat majority held up. Or he could try to convince Labour MPs to rebel against their new leader.

His power to do the former was already weakened by, of all things, the Fixed Term Parliaments Act of 2011. It removed the Prime Minister’s power to designate any particular vote a confidence motion in the government. In 2003 Blair won some recalcitrant Labour MPs over by effectively threatening to resign if he lost the vote on Iraq. Cameron is less well able to make that sort of credible threat. He is not his party’s most successful electoral leader ever. And he cannot threaten that voting against a particular action will bring a Conservative government down.

Cameron’s scope to do the latter Meanwhile, depended on two things. It depended on how far Labour MPs were prepared to defy a newly-elected leader and vote with the hated Tories. And it depended on how far Corbyn’s own record of defiance counted against him amongst his own back-benchers.

Cameron now seems to have decided Corbyn’s likely refusal to do any kind of deal on military action represents too much of a block to risk a further parliamentary vote. And he is bound by his own past precedents not to extend Britain’s action against ISIS into Syria without one. The awkward squad once sat at the fringes of parliament, criticising vociferously but never exercising power. Now, by preventing Cameron even seeking a vote, the awkward squad have won. The British public did not support them. Most British people favour extending RAF actions against ISIS into Syria. But Jeremy Corbyn opposes the use of force, period. And even though he is not actually in power, the parliamentary prerogative grants him influence. MPs lack the power of initiative. But Corbyn’s anti-militarism brings their veto rights clearly to the fore.

“Cameron now seems to have decided Corbyn’s likely refusal to do any kind of deal on military action represents too much of a block to risk a further parliamentary vote. And he is bound by his own past precedents not to extend Britain’s action against ISIS into Syria without one.”
The Labour Party's immigration dilemma: which way under Corbyn?

The Labour party faces an acute dilemma on immigration, which though not created by Jeremy Corbyn’s election as leader, has been exacerbated by it. While Corbyn, and many Labour Party members who voted for him in the leadership election, tend towards an open – and openly progressive – approach to immigration, others within the Party believe that Labour’s decision to liberalise immigration policy when in government during the early 2000s significantly contributed towards its defeats in the 2010 and 2015 general elections.

Immigration has become increasingly salient – voters ranked it as the second most important issue in the 2015 election – and opinion polls suggest that a majority of Britons would like to see the number of immigrants reduced. Corbyn and his Shadow Home Secretary, Andy Burnham, thus face the unenviable task of constructing an immigration policy that can command support from a broad swathe of opinion – from pro-immigrant progressives to those who defected from Labour due to immigration.

This is the British variant of a dilemma faced by social democratic parties across Europe. As immigration to Europe has increased since the 1990s, the centre–left has found itself divided between pro-immigrant progressives on the one hand, and immigration-sceptics on the other, who argue that a restrictive approach is needed to protect the interests of the native working class, the core constituency of social democratic parties. Immigration is one of the central issues in what Hans Peter Kriesi and others have argued is a new socio-political cleavage between the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalization, with centre-left parties struggling to articulate a programme that speaks to both.

Interestingly, within the British Labour Party this cleavage does not map neatly onto those who are for and those against Corbyn. On immigration at least, Corbynites and Blairites could potentially find common cause, but they face an influential critique from figures such as John Craddas, Frank Field, and those associated with the ‘Blue Labour’ movement who argue that the party needs to be much tougher on immigration if it is to shore up its working-class vote in the face of the UKIP challenge (more on which below). Labour’s previous two leaders tended towards the latter pole, with Gordon Brown developing an increasingly nationalist language during his leadership (such as his call for ‘British jobs for British workers’) and Ed Miliband apologising for the Party’s supposed mistakes in government. One of Labour’s five key election pledges in the 2015 campaign was ‘controls on immigration’ – a slogan inscribed on a set of election mugs, then on the ill-fated ‘Edstone’.

As if resolving these internal tensions was not enough of a headache, two features of the external environment make Corbyn’s task harder still. Firstly, despite a spectacular failure to achieve their net migration target, the Conservatives are still more trusted by voters on immigration than Labour. In 2010, David Cameron promised – ‘no ifs, no buts’ – to reduce net migration to under 100,000. In fact, under the Conservative-led coalition government net migration increased from 252,000 to 330,000. Yet far from being electorally punished, the Conservative’s won an unexpected majority. In ways that bear comparison with the debate over austerity, Labour has been entirely unable to capitalise on the Conservatives’ poor record, and indeed it has often found itself on the backfoot defending decisions it took while in government over a decade ago. One element of an effective opposition on immigration will be to expose the folly of the Conservatives’ migration target, and develop a clear position on proposals to restrict access to benefits for EU free movers, which is central to Cameron’s renegotiation ahead of the EU referendum.

Secondly, the rise of UKIP has done and threatens to continue to do serious damage to Labour. Under Nigel Farage, UKIP has repositioned itself as a populist anti-immigrant party, in a deliberate attempt to broaden its electoral appeal. While UKIP once relied on Europhobic ex-Tories for its support, it has eaten into Labour’s working class vote, especially in the North and the Midlands. Indeed, in the 2015 general election, there is considerable evidence to suggest that UKIP cost Labour a number of seats in key Labour-Tory marginals. Paradoxically, the Conservatives’ failure to reduce net migration may have helped them to political victory by stoking concerns about immigration, which triggered defections from Labour to UKIP.

By James Hampshire

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What, then, can Corbyn’s Labour do? Should Labour try to downplay the issue in the hope that it will go away? Should it tack right and try to compete with the Tories and even UKIP? Or should it seek to articulate a progressive, pro-immigrant position and hope that sufficient parts of the public can be persuaded? With immigration at the top of the public agenda – both EU free movement and the influx of refugees to mainland Europe – and with UKIP poised to further capitalise on public anxieties, Labour cannot afford to ignore the issue. Nor can it plausibly tack to the right in an attempt to claw back lost votes. Acceptance of the Conservative’s immigration stance, not to mention UKIP’s anti-immigrant fantasies, would give credence to their opponents, and would look like just the kind of opportunist, triangulated politics that Corbyn stood against.

So Corbyn’s Labour needs to craft a progressive language to persuade voters that immigration is not the threat many of them apparently believe it to be, and devise a set of policies to show that a Labour government would do a better job of managing migration. The good news is that this is surely the course of action that Corbyn and the newly mobilised party members would themselves want to see. The bad news is that it will involve facing down the growing ranks of immigration sceptics across the Party, as well as the Conservatives and UKIP, and, perhaps most difficult of all, the anti-immigrant right-wing press. It is a daunting task which requires shifting the ‘Overton Window’ on immigration. There are, however, some (limited) reasons to be cheerful. Attitudes towards immigration are not as uniformly hostile as headline polls suggest. When the public are informed about actual numbers and when they are asked to differentiate between types of migrants, attitudes become considerably more positive. And there is surely space for a rational, informed approach to immigration policy, articulated in a language that appeals to voters’ better instincts and to Britain’s historic engagement with the wider world.

A good start would be to convene an expert council on immigration, similar to Labour’s recently established Economic Advisory Council, and ask it to conduct a broad review of immigration and asylum policy. The commission could be tasked to establish a clear evidence base for policy, which takes into account the multi-dimensional effects of immigration (not just labour market impacts), and makes recommendations on the most effective way to manage flows and integrate newcomers. There is an urgent need to remove some of the political sting from the immigration debate, which has led the Conservatives to commit to a policy that they know cannot be delivered, and which can only further undermine public confidence. There is an opportunity here for Labour to attack the Conservatives, not only on substance, but on competence and trustworthiness.

Labour also needs to develop a more convincing narrative on immigration than it has managed in recent years. Brown’s conversion to nationalism and Miliband’s vague promises for ‘controls’ ceded too much ground to peddlers in misinformation and prejudice. A progressive narrative, grounded in social democratic values, must not shy away from the genuine dilemmas of migration management – indeed it should face them head on – but Labour needs to do a much better job of informing the public about the facts of migration (most voters grossly over-estimate the numbers), the trade-offs involved in managing it, as well as the myriad contributions that migrants make to British society.

This narrative cannot rely – as left-liberals have sometimes tended to do – on technical language and aggregate economic data. On an issue as visceral and emotive as immigration has become, progressives no less than reactionaries must engage with voters’ on their own terms. This means striking out onto difficult terrain and explicitly discussing concerns about identity and insecurity. Oddly enough, Corbyn and Burnham, could do worse than look back to the language of the Blair governments of the early 2000s, which unashamedly defended immigration as part of a British tradition of openness and tolerance. It was Tony Blair who in 2004 talked about ‘ordinary decent British people – including generations of migrants themselves’ having ‘faith in our traditions of tolerance and our historic record of becoming stronger and richer as a result of migration and diversity.’ There are few politicians using this kind of language today. This presents an opportunity for Corbyn to stake out a more sensible position in the immigration debate, and maybe even build bridges with some of his internal critics in the process.

"On an issue as visceral and emotive as immigration has become, progressives no less than reactionaries must engage with voters’ on their own terms. This means striking out onto difficult terrain and explicitly discussing concerns about identity and insecurity."
Jeremy Corbyn, the spy genre and a Cold War prophecy

By Steven Powell

In Roy Boulting’s film *High Treason*, a group of British radicals plan to sabotage the country’s main power stations, crippling the economy as a precursor to installing a far-left government at Westminster. The plotters of *High Treason* belong to the respectable skilled working and middle classes, and are deeply embedded in British society, albeit with just enough deluded pomposity to stand out. The social historian Dominic Sandbrook describes the cast of fifth columnist as ‘a pacifist, a cat-loving and therefore clearly homosexual bachelor, two admirers of avant-garde music’ and the most contemptible of all, their leader ‘a well-bred Labour MP with a taste for rare vases’ (p.217). Boulting, a lifelong Liberal, clearly thought British communists were somewhat laughable.

And yet, it is from precisely this far-left base that Jeremy Corbyn needs to build an agenda that will have national appeal. Labour have taken a massive gamble on Corbyn, hoping that a significant change in political consensus and a clear differentiation between them and the Tories will be enough to bring them back to power; but it is at the risk, as Tony Blair warned them of ‘annihilation’. *High Treason* was released in 1951 at a time when fear of communist subversion was a recurring cultural theme, and in succeeding decades, several works prophesied a subversive infiltration of Parliament. The novels *A Very British Coup* (1982) and *The Fourth Protocol* (1984) portrayed a fictional far-left takeover of the Labour Party. The irony is that with the election of Jeremy Corbyn this cultural prophecy has come true over twenty years after the end of the Cold War, and only eight years after Blair, Labour’s most successful leader and moderniser, stood down.

In *The Fourth Protocol*, the traitor Kim Philby, living a miserable life of exile in the Soviet Union, is ordered by his Communist masters to write a memorandum setting out the history and possible future of the Hard-left in the Labour party. This forms the genesis of a plot to stage a nuclear accident in Britain, guaranteeing the election of a Labour government with a powerful pro-Soviet wing dedicated to withdrawal from Nato, the European Economic Market and unilateral disarmament. It is easy to dismiss *The Fourth Protocol* as little more than an entertaining spy story, but much of the research in Philby’s assessment of the Labour party is factually accurate. Philby describes ‘a truly brilliant coup, of which Lenin himself would have been proud’ (p.82). He is referring to the case of Andrew McIntosh, who briefly served as leader of the Greater London Council, only to be ousted from his position the day after his election by the then hard-left politician Ken Livingstone.

*A Very British Coup* is naturally more sympathetic to the idea of a left-wing government as it was written by the future Labour MP Chris Mullin. The novel opens with the line ‘the news that Harry Perkins was to become Prime Minister went down very badly in the Athenaeum’ (p.7). Perkins is an authoritative Labour leader who has swept to power after a period of corrupt Tory rule. This fictional Labour government have an agenda just as left-wing as the one Philby is planning to impose on Britain in *The Fourth Protocol*, but Perkins finds himself instantly at odds with the Establishment, especially British Intelligence, who plan the coup of the title. It is a typically British coup as there were ‘no tanks on the streets. No one had gone to the firing squad [...] no one had even been injured.’ Although it is a prophetic work, Labour strategists should not regard *A Very British Coup* as proof that a left-wing Labour leader could become Prime Minister. To begin with, Perkins is naturally charismatic whereas Jeremy ‘Strong Message Here’ Corbyn is not. Mullin, once as fiercely on the left as the fictional Perkins, gradually shifted to the centre, supporting, albeit not uncritically, Blair’s modernisation of the party and serving for a time as a Foreign Office minister. Mullin started writing *A Very British Coup* at the nadir of Thatcher’s unpopularity in 1981, when Labour under Michael Foot were riding high in the polls. By the 1983 general election, the situation had reversed, but at least in the subsequent rout two future, very different, Labour leaders, Blair and Corbyn, were first elected to the Commons.
Thirty years on, it is difficult to imagine a scenario that would propel Corbyn to victory at the next general election, but there are a number of possibilities that Labour strategists will cling to. One is that the coming EU referendum will fatally divide the Tories in the same way that the Maastricht treaty did. However, the benefit to Corbyn could be minimal. Given his Eurosceptic past it seems unlikely that he will provide inspirational leadership for the ‘In’ campaign as he was effectively strong-armed by the parliamentary party into guaranteeing Labour would not vote to leave the EU. Besides, the potential for splits is as dangerous for Labour as it is for the Tories. From the hard-bitten Bennite Dennis Skinner to the fox hunting monarchist Kate Hoey, Labour Eurosceptics are a small but surprisingly diverse group. Gone are the days when Blair could portray Labour as the enlightened party of Europe in comparison to the xenophobic Tories. Ironically, the Tory Right and Labour Left have effectively swapped positions on Europe. Frederick Forsyth now supports Britain leaving the EU, the very policy he dubbed as extreme in the Labour party of the 1980s.

However, if splits on the question of European Union return to haunt Labour then the future of the Act of Union could be even more problematic. Considering his adamant republican support for a united Ireland, Corbyn will never convince the unionist vote in Labour’s former Scottish heartlands that he wants Scotland to stay in the Kingdom. The consequence of Blair’s devolution policies is an asymmetrical political settlement. Labour’s brutal wipe-out in Scotland in the last election was punishment for prolonged incumbency, despite the fact the party had been in opposition in Westminster for the past five years. Meanwhile, the Scottish Tories have been gradually repositioning themselves as the unionist alternative to the SNP. The Scottish journalist Alex Massie put it succinctly ‘Labour are trapped. They cannot Out-Nat the Nats and they cannot Out-Unionist the Tories.’ Even if the economy slows down between now and 2020, it could well be a result of Britain’s still unresolved, and worsening, debt problem. Corbyn’s unflinching anti-austerity rhetoric will harden Labour’s reputation for unsustainable public spending. If so, the Tories will probably weather the next recession.

More than anything else, Labour have been unlucky; the far-left infiltrated the party not by a coup as Forsyth rendered in fiction, but by the democratisation of the party. Miliband’s ‘one member one vote’ reforms coupled with the increasing use of American style open primaries made Corbyn’s rise possible, perhaps inevitable. Open primaries are a relatively new phenomenon in British politics. It is one of the many ironies of Corbyn’s victory that this American-style format suited the Member for Islington North more than any other candidate, allowing the US-bashing radical to become leader of Her Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition. Back in 2012, Tory MEP Daniel Hannan, one of the most outspoken defenders of reforming candidate selection, claimed that open primaries were unlikely to be sabotaged because that was only, ‘a problem in theory rather than in practice.’ Corbyn’s victory is a clear example of how right wing Tories and disaffected members of the Socialist Workers Party conspired to undermine the Labour party by registering to vote in the leadership election. However, even if we exclude the ‘entryism’ factor, Corbyn still won over fifty per cent of the vote of longstanding Labour supporters, which suggests a ‘very British coup’ against him before the next election is not very likely, and it raises questions as to how moderate Labour MPs will be able to resist the agenda of a seemingly endless supply of left-wing activists.

Labour’s best hope may be that as David Cameron has promised to stand down before the next election, none of his mooted successors will likely be as popular with the British public. Cameron’s success has almost been as counter-intuitive as Corbyn’s unexpected election as Labour leader. A brilliant communicator despite having no clearly identifiable set of beliefs, Cameron gives the impression he thinks ideology is something that is on the menu at Claridge’s, and yet his malleable combination of Tory paternalism and simple, unfussy patriotism has proved a winning formula with the electorate. By contrast, one statement that was repeated frequently by the four candidates during the Labour leadership election was ‘I love the Labour party.’ As Robin Harris wrote in The Conservatives: A History, ‘No one has ever pretended to ‘love’ the Conservative Party […] It does not exist to be loved, hated or even respected. It is no better or worse than any other human institution, but for once, the Tories have been lucky enough to have a leader who can make them feel that way.’
A potent mix of political yearnings, projected upon him by frustrated left wingers, alienated young people and browbeaten public sector workers, has propelled Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour Party leadership. Post-victory, however, Corbyn’s policies have yet to acquire substance. This includes those on work and ownership about which, apart from conventional calls for more high skilled jobs and the re-nationalisation of key industries, Corbyn has said little. Indeed, Corbyn’s Trade Union commitments suggest that he may not favour policies promoting different kinds of ownership, especially in public services. His voting patterns incline him towards state control. So, he did not support Foundation Trust Hospitals, an early, albeit imperfect, experiment in broad based mutualisation, or more local autonomy for schools. The Trade Unions from which Corbyn draws his support are sceptical of corporate forms permitting the direct democratic involvement of workers, service users and communities in decision-making. Robert Oakeshott, an advocate of employee ownership, traces the root of these concerns back to 1871 when Trade Unions lost a £60,000 investment in the Ouseburn Co-operative Engineering Works. This was reinforced by the view of Beatrice and Sydney Webb, shared with the Marxists, that cooperatives would necessarily degrade from being ‘democracies of producers’ to ‘associations of capitalists’.

Today, tensions between statism and associationalism continue in the resistance of Trade Unions towards worker and user ownership, particularly ownership of public services. Given this heritage, there exists a strong possibility that, rather than promoting associational pluralism, Corbyn will re-inscribe in policy a conservative and archaic division between public service and private enterprise. However, there are other, less standard, routes to associational pluralism than efforts to overcome the public/private distinction. One road less travelled is an inquiry into the nature of work itself. In his first speech as leader to the Labour Party conference, Corbyn entered unusual territory by calling for ‘a kinder, more caring politics’. This is promising because a political philosophy based upon an ethic of care could ground policies on corporate ownership in the work people do together. Intellectual resources include Victoria Held who identifies the necessity of care for justice. Also, Martha Nussbaum who says that ‘all decent societies need to guard against division and hierarchy by cultivating appropriate sentiments of sympathy and love’. For Held and Nussbaum, an ethics of care has both an emotional content and a practice orientation. Indeed, acting with care constitutes the core of meaningful work. When we emotionally attend to the flourishing of valuable persons, animals or things, we use skill, craft and judgement. Indeed, Hannah Arendt made ‘care of the world’ a distinctively human capacity. Developing such capacities requires appropriately designed institutions, exhibiting civic values, relational quality and meaningfulness. And democratically organised, co-owned organisations are strong candidates for manifesting such normatively desirable features.

Relationships matter for acting with care. Moreover, the quality of relationships contribute decisively to organisational failure or success. For Marx, the key dimensions of alienation include the relationship of the worker to self, others, product and activities. Behind the veil of the employment contract, many such relationships are dysfunctional, and rendered meaningless. In a 2015 YouGov poll, 37% of UK workers said that their work makes no meaningful contribution to the world. Yet what goes on inside the black box of the employment relation is rarely part of public debate. Except, of course, when matters go badly wrong, as in the case of bullying and patient neglect in Stoke & Staffordshire NHS Trust, or the permissive cultures of investment banks which produced Libor rigging. Such examples suggest that poor quality work which thwarts people’s ability to act with care is not just a personal tragedy; it weakens organisational effectiveness, creating the conditions for systemic failures. Margaret Heffernan’s moral disorientation of ‘wilful blindness’ arises from voiceless, powerless, uncaring relationships. Such relationships are encouraged when we assume that work is a private transaction between employer and employee, naturally exempt from public examination and political interference.

“The contribution of skill, craft and knowledge to social and economic value creation is little considered in public debate, as is the contribution of meaningful work to individual and collective well-being.”
Consequently, the contribution of skill, craft and knowledge to social and economic value creation is little considered in public debate, as is the contribution of meaningful work to individual and collective well-being. Hence we ignore evidence of the collective harms arising from having to do meaningless work, including mental illness – a stated Corbyn concern. In her summary of the epidemiological evidence of the link between work and health outcomes, Clare Bambra finds that the damage caused by toxic psychosocial work environments can be mitigated by doing good quality work. Such work allows for control over tasks, in environments can be mitigated by doing good quality work. Such work will often be found in organisations where relational quality is a priority. Given this, it is our collective task to find those economic arrangements most conducive to fostering relationships with the right characteristics such as respect, fairness, solidarity, equality, and dignity.

Under cover of the employment relation as a private concern, workers are becoming subject to creeping forms of power. And it was power which was the lifelong concern of Corbyn’s mentor and friend, Tony Benn. Benn famously posed five questions for the powerful man: What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you exercise it? To whom are you accountable? And how can we get rid of you? He did not apply these questions solely to political governance. Benn understood that new forms of technology needed to be matched with new forms of democracy. Whilst he was Minister of Technology, he came to the conclusion that if we were to control modern technology, we would need different democratic machinery. He said, ‘We are trying to control twentieth century society with democratic tools which were fashioned in the nineteenth century.’

Benn’s key political value for addressing the power gap was participation. In his 1970s experiments in industrial democracy and worker control, known as the Benn Cooperatives, he encouraged the formation of a number of worker-owned organisations, including the Meriden Motorcycle Cooperative. These did not succeed. In the Meriden experiment, for example, cooperative ownership as a solution to save a struggling business was mixed fatally with trade union power and state subsidy. Tony Benn neglected Department of Industry advice that the business was unsound, and that government investment was inadequate. At the same time, Trade Unions were concerned that their role in collective bargaining be undermined by direct worker participation. They also believed that cooperatives promote worker self-exploitation, and by reducing labour costs result in prices which undercut the competition. On these grounds, the Benn Cooperatives never secured full Union support.

This legacy means that mutual ownership remains under-developed in the UK, and therefore represents a fruitful policy opportunity for Corbyn’s Modern Left. Michael Young, the great postwar social reformer who established the Open University and the Consumer Association, identified the welfare state with ‘impersonal centralisation lacking space for participation by users’. He encouraged mutual aid by establishing voluntary organisations including the consumers association, housing associations and cooperatives. Jane Wills argues for policies to support a ‘people’s capitalism’ based on tying capital into localities through employee ownership. This includes devices such as asset locks and multi-constituency governance to guard against the extraction of capital. Mutual aid may be reinvigorated through processes of co-production and institutionalised through a system of associational pluralism. Under such an arrangement, organisations would be constrained by an ethic of care which establishes what socially desirable relationships look like, and how the objects of work, including purposes, people and practices, are to be treated.

For Nussbaum, love matters for justice. Dignity as the basis for inclusion must be ‘nourished by imaginative engagement’. In developing his ideas for an associative democracy, Paul Hirst knew that fresh sources of social solidarity would be needed. He said that, in modern societies, solidarity ‘has to be built up from active cooperation in more complexly-divided and more individuated populations’. A promising source of such solidarity may be forged in co-owned organisations such as mutuals and employee owned businesses characterised by orientations of care towards worthwhile purposes. Such organisations reconfigure the traditional distribution of decision-making entitlements and obligations, making the provision of democratic voice a management duty rather than a gift which is awarded or removed at the will of managers. In this way, Corbyn’s politics of kindness could be more than treating people nicely in the cut and thrust of the political process. It could also be a method for inquiring into economic and social ills, such as the nature and organisation of work, thereby directing us towards novel policy solutions for a reformed political economy.
Jeremy Corbyn and the welfare state

By Kevin Hickson

Few took Jeremy Corbyn’s candidacy seriously at the start of the campaign for the Labour Party leadership and he was the rank outsider with the bookmakers. However, his support surged over the summer, aided by the party rules which allowed new members and ‘registered supporters’ to vote and the failure of the other three candidates to set out a clear alternative. By the end, his victory was decisive. One of the important factors in explaining Corbyn’s steep rise in fortune was that he was the only one of the four contenders for the leadership who voted against the Conservative Government’s Welfare bill. The others were bound by collective responsibility as members of the Shadow Cabinet and abstained as was the wish of the party whip on this issue. The Government’s Welfare bill was seen as a draconian piece of legislation which would have a negative impact on the poorest in society and Corbyn’s opposition to it was seen as a decisive break with the politics of austerity.

Corbyn argued that he would oppose what he perceived as the dominant approach to welfare reform in Britain since the late 1970s. This included both Conservative and Labour governments. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher had been elected on a clear ideological agenda informed by the New Right. The New Right was opposed to the drift towards collectivism - or socialism as they preferred to call it - that had taken place since 1945 including the mixed economy and the welfare state. The mixed economy had helped sustain powerful trade unions and uncompetitive nationalised industries which had led to national decline. The welfare state had created monolithic public services dominated by producer interests and had led to the growth of a dependency culture. The Thatcher and Major governments would challenge this through privatisation, the introduction of market mechanisms into public services and the introduction of sanctions on those claiming welfare.

The Labour Government that was elected in 1997 in some ways challenged this neo-liberal paradigm but in other ways reinforced it. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review in 1999 public spending on health and education increased substantially, poverty targets were adopted and incomes were redistributed. However, New Labour also continued with the same tough rhetoric on welfare as its Conservative predecessors had and continued to adopt market mechanisms designed to give the ‘consumer’ of public services more ‘choice’.

The election of Ed Miliband as Leader of the Labour Party in 2010 was meant to herald a new approach and he deliberately sought to distance himself from the New Labour era, in particular by arguing that the economy needed fundamental reform. However, the approach to welfare did not change fundamentally.

Signs that Corbyn would adopt a new approach to welfare not only included his opposition to the Welfare bill and his opposition to ‘austerity’ more generally but also the nature of his supporters. One prominent supporter was the journalist Owen Jones. Jones had shot to fame as a political commentator by challenging the dominant view on welfare. His book *Chavs* argued - with some justification - that the poor were being consistently demonised in Britain.

However, since being elected Corbyn has faced numerous obstacles in forging a new approach to welfare. He immediately had to form a Shadow Cabinet given that the new Parliament was about to meet and several shadow ministers refused to serve under him. Inevitably, given the nature of the press in Britain, he has faced hostile media coverage with the right-wing press keen to demonise him as an extremist and a danger to national security. He also clearly lacked the majority support of MPs and the leadership result had only succeeded in highlighting the extent of the gap that now exists between the views of MPs and the views of the rank and file membership.

He faced an immediate political dilemma over how to respond to the welfare cap which the Government was seeking to impose. Corbyn was known to oppose any such cap, while several other shadow ministers and other MPs claimed that outright opposition was politically naive given the level of public support for a cap. After initially stating that it would not oppose the benefits cap the Opposition turned to oppose it outright. Such a fluid policy stance in the early days of a new leadership may be excusable as the new Leader was still finding his feet but it gifted the right-wing press with another line of attack.

“Corbyn argued that he would oppose what he perceived as the dominant approach to welfare reform in Britain since the late 1970s.”
Going forward, therefore, Corbyn needs to set out a clear position on welfare which will both secure the confidence - or at least the acquiescence - of his parliamentary party while at the same time not losing the trust of those who voted for him among the members and supporters.

There are several dilemmas. Arguably, the most radical idea that emerged from the leadership contest was Andy Burnham’s commitment, which he had already advocated prior to his candidacy, to combine health and social care into an integrated system of ‘whole person care’ (see his chapter in Roy Hattersley and Kevin Hickson (eds.) The Socialist Way (2013)). As Shadow Health Secretary, Burnham had also expressed his reservations about markets and the extent to which the Coalition Government had promoted private sector involvement into the NHS. If Corbyn is to build a new policy on welfare capable of challenging the neo-liberal hegemony then he needs to develop these ideas, revive the idea of a public service ethos and challenge the role of markets as being the most efficient provider of those public services.

He will also need to challenge the now well-established orthodoxy on welfare recipients. Ed Miliband did this by pointing out the errors, as he saw it, of George Osborne’s rhetorical distinction between ‘strivers’ and ‘shirkers’ although this was not as consistently argued as it could have been. In order to win the argument on welfare Corbyn also needs to stress much more consistently that fraud within the welfare state is much lower than is often claimed; that tax avoidance at the top of society costs the Exchequer much more than welfare fraud; and show that the benefits bill can only be effectively and fairly reduced by tackling the twin problems of the lack of affordable housing, which increases the costs of housing benefit, and the low level of wages for which tax credits are effectively a top up.

Following the arguments of Hayek, neoliberals do not oppose the existence of the welfare state in its entirety but they do think that it is too big, should be targeted more directly at those most in need and be subject to greater stringency to eliminate waste. In place of a universal welfare state, they wish for a welfare state limited to the most needy. As shown in Britain and elsewhere, targeting welfare undermines public support for the welfare state as a whole, since targeted services only affect a minority. One of the fundamental challenges facing Corbyn is therefore to revive the idea of a universal welfare state, based on the conditionality of paying national insurance, but which is there for all should the need arise.

The current Government’s proposals to reduce tax credits immediately and to only create a living wage later will mean that, at least for a transitional period, many working people on lower wages will be worse off. Tax credits were introduced under Gordon Brown to supplement low wages. Effectively the state then provides a subsidy to private sector employers. Corbyn’s proposals for a new economy also need to be developed to show that a higher-wage economy will reduce the welfare bill.

All of this will be extremely difficult to achieve. The exercise of political power is different from being an independently-minded backbench MP and Corbyn will realise, as I am sure he already has, that public opinion can be slow to change. The fact that the neo-liberal arguments on welfare will have been presented for 40 years by the time of the next General Election only makes this an even more formidable challenge. However, a decade of austerity by the time of the next General Election - with the possibility of a further economic downturn by then - may make it a battle that can be won.
Caught between Tawney and Tony: is Corbyn’s socialism compatible with contemporary political realities?

By Jan Erik Mustad and Øivind Bratberg

After Jeremy Corbyn’s rise to the top of Labour, much focus has been on his past and his traditional socialist values versus those of the incumbent generation. Can we trace any signs in the British electorate indicating that Corbyn’s anti-establishment orientation and grassroots’ approach will win elections for Labour again? Will the new, or rather old, path lead Labour towards popular mobilisation or towards the abyss of social democracy, as we have come to know it for the past twenty years?

Social democracy itself was exhausted. Dead on its feet. Yet something new and invigorating, popular and authentic has exploded. To understand this all of us have to share our ideas and our contributions. Our common project must be to embrace the emergence of a modern left movement and harness it to build a society for the majority.

One could do a lot worse in a discussion of Corbyn’s Labour values than begin by citing his summing up of the present state of social democracy in Britain to the Labour Party Annual Conference in Brighton on 29 September. Representing the revenge of the left, even after strong warnings from senior Labours figures who argued that electing Corbyn would make the party unelectable, his grassroots’ movement has thus far staged an internal coup overthrowing the remaining parts of Labour’s centrist orientation. The new leader argues that the Labour party is the natural home for the emerging modern left movement that has recently become part of the British political landscape. It is a movement that is youthful and forward-looking, yet its leader is 66-year old whose political tenets have been solid since the 1970s. It is both ideologically focused in its yearning for socialism and non-focused in its general dismay with the political establishment. It refers to conventional leftist instruments such as state control, yet is also liberal in its search for empowerment from below. Overall, it represents a force not dissimilar from what has occurred north of the border in relation to the Scottish independence campaign.

The ambiguities suggest that the rapid rise of Jeremy Corbyn could take a set of different paths from here. What is certain is that it needs to solidify and expand. While the leadership victory has been testament of Corbyn being able to sing to his own choir, the overarching question is whether his appeal is in 2015 reaching beyond his own internal congregation. To many observers, his preaching gospel is echoing Labour in the early 1980s, a time when the party nearly dissolved itself due to leaning too far to the left. Corbyn was elected to Parliament in 1983, two years after the “gang of four” David Owen, Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers and Roy Jenkins broke out of the Labour party and formed the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the same year as the party modernisers ten years later, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Listening to Corbyn, one could easily get the impression of time standing still, but observing British society for last three decades suggests the extreme opposite, a society developing at a rapid speed.

One dimension along which Corbyn could be viewed flows from R.H. Tawney, the quintessential ideologue behind the first Labour governments in the 1920s, and Tony Blair, the only Labour leader to win three consecutive elections eight decades later. Tawney provided an ethical foundation which helped the party broaden its appeal. Yet his ethical socialism, though poignant in its pursuit of social justice, had less to offer when economic crisis struck. Ramsay MacDonald’s 1929-31 government was bereft of a strategy to counter the crisis – apolitical economy able to harness the market over time. Blair’s governments, by contrast, had governing skills in abundance, and electorally his appeal was indisputable. What was found amiss was rather the ideological integrity that any government from the left requires to energise and re-energise over time. Corbyn could easily be seen as squeezed between the two; socialist credentials and governing skills. He is on a quest for the rising electoral support which Labour experienced in the 1920s as well as under Blair in the 1990s. Yet in the current political climate of “cuts and competence” there is an obvious danger that he will never obtain sufficient electoral support if ideological integrity is all that he and Labour can fall back upon. Perhaps the most begging question is whether Corbyn would ever be able to navigate Labour back to power so that some of his anti-policies have a chance of becoming effectuated. Coming back into power is a precondition for the kinds of change Corbyn has spent so much time speaking about in his first two months as leader.
Unless there is a leftward movement of political gravity, Corbyn's road seems long and bumpy. Data from previous elections indicate little willingness on behalf of the electorate to vote for a candidate far out of the centre ground.

However, in the past five years, British politics has moved from a two-party system to become a multi-party system, opening up the political terrain. Will this trend provide incentives to Corbyn, clinging to a hope that his left-hand turn might be possible? Still though, central findings from the General Election in 2015 suggest that voters wander off in different political directions, creating new voting patterns in a changing political landscape. UKIP attracted support from dissatisfied voters across the board, the Green Party became the new political home for young and educated intellectuals while the SNP, 6 months after the Scottish independence referendum, hoovered up support from across the social strata. Imagine if Corbyn were to win back half the 1,7 millions scots who voted SNP or a solid portion of the 4,9 millions who together voted for UKIP and the Greens? And to pursue the argument even further – what if Labour under Corbyn enabled to electorally dig into the approximately 15 millions of registered voters who never turned up at the polling stations on election day in May?

Maybe this scenario is stretching the imagination too far, especially under the current circumstances. Still, the question in the coming years is how Corbyn is able to adapt himself and the party to immediate and future challenges of British society, home and abroad.

One should be careful expressing cynicism when grassroots movements, such as the one we have seen emerging in the past six months, come forward and begin to engage in political processes. Furthermore, we are not in a position to dismiss this kind of Labour narrative, although we have our doubts in contemporary British society that it will resonate with a majority of voters to the extent needed for Labour to come back into power. It is not a surprising argument, perhaps, that the politics of the shop floor developed by Corbyn's campaign will be forceful as discussion points within the party rather than in tying the knot with the British electorate. Labour has not elected a tutor or seminar leader, but one who can bring Labour back to Downing Street after two successive General Election defeats.

Blair remains Labour's most successful election winner ever. Even if Corbyn's aim is to topple New Labour and all they stood for, perhaps we can suggest keeping the emphasis on governing skills and cross-class electoral appeal highlighted by that era. There is still the suspicion though, that Corbyn prefers to win in is own way, from his own platform, not copying what his Labour archenemy did twenty years ago. Ideological clarity is in itself a virtue. But if it implies prioritising clarity over winning elections, that would not serve Corbyn nor Labour's cause.
“Will Britain end up like Norway?”
This was the question asked at British Politics Society’s evening event at Litteraturhuset in Oslo on 26 October this year. At the seminar, an engaged audience got to hear presentations from Isabelle Hertner (University of Birmingham), Chris Lord (ARENA) and Kristin Haugevik (NUPI). Presenting their individual contributions to the summer issue of British Politics Review, the three discussed Britain’s alternatives to full EU membership, as well as the general reactions from Brussels and from key member states such as Germany to David Cameron’s plans to renegotiate Britain’s EU membership terms and hold a national referendum by the end of 2017.

Whereas Chris Lord outlined four possible future association models for Britain – on a scale ranging from full membership to full outsidership, Isabelle Hertner concluded that the German position on “Brexit” could be summed up as one of “Nein Danke!”. Finally, Kristin Haugevik talked about the relevance of “looking to Norway” for the two sides in the upcoming referendum campaign in Britain.

The seminar was co-organised by British Politics Society and ARENA, the former’s role as organiser permitted by financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs through “Europamidler”. The seminar was chaired by ARENA’s John Erik Fossum, while BPS leader Atle L. Wold opened the seminar on behalf of the organisers.

Membership 2016

Membership in BPS is open to all individuals and institutions with an interest in British politics, society, language, and culture. As a member, you receive subscription to four editions of British Politics Review, invitation to all events organised by the society and the right to vote at our annual general meeting.

Your membership comes into force as soon as the membership fee, 200 NOK for 2016, has been registered at our account <6094.05.67788> (please make sure to mark your payment with your full name). If you have questions about membership, please do not hesitate to contact us by e-mail at mail@britishpoliticssociety.no

Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

Keeping to our political neutrality, the next edition of BPR will move on from Labour to cover the Conservative Party. The Conservatives have now been in power since 2010, as the lion’s share of the Coalition from 2010 to 2015 and, since last May, as a single-party majority government.

Their victory in May came as a surprise to pundits and pollsters. It saw the Conservatives back in power, with a mandate from the British public, for the first time since 1997.

The British public seem to have trust in the ‘long term economic plan’ that the Conservatives are putting forward. But the Conservatives, led by David Cameron ‘the moderniser’ for a second term (and only a second he says), face a significant pull from both the right and left of the political spectrum whilst they try to anchor themselves to the centre ground.

Is this ideological tug-o-war manageable? Especially considering the potential political cataclysm that could result from a vote to leave the EU. Will this mean a collapse of the Conservative vote, or a galvanising of the centre and right against a more radical Labour Party headed by, the supposedly ‘unelectable’, Jeremy Corbyn?

The winter edition of British Politics Review is due to arrive in February 2016.