

VIEWPOINT: JEREMY CORBYN, THE PLP AND HISTORICAL VISIONS OF THE LABOUR PARTY

Matt Dawson

The re-election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party has demonstrated the fundamental split between two visions of the party. One vision, from Corbyn and his supporters, sees Labour as both parliamentary party and movement in which power rests with the members seeking to enact radical change. It would be crass to see this, as many of Corbyn's opponents do, as a social movement beyond parliament not interested in government, but it is a view that in a party of **campaigning, protesting and winning power** policies should not be compromised for the sake of parliamentary convenience/due to corporate pressure. As **Hilary Wainwright has put it**, a party with parliamentary representation but not one committed to parliamentarism.

The second vision, **held by much of the PLP** is that Labour is a parliamentary movement. It exists to elect MPs who then, being Labour MPs, will implement socialist/social democratic measures which are in the interest of the nation. Any impediment to electing MPs is an impediment to Labour; a leader who cannot command the allegiance of their MPs is therefore not able to lead a parliamentary party. This was indicated by Owen Smith's key claim, whether tactical or not, that the leadership contest didn't concern a difference of policy (with the exception of a second EU referendum) but of electability. Smith, at least initially, presented himself as like Corbyn, but 'electable'. The question of whether the shadow cabinet should be elected by MPs, or by members, is a further example of this dividing line. This debate is also about the history of the Labour Party. But, reflecting much contemporary political debate, this history is seen to begin in 1997 or 1979. For many on the Corbyn side, the problem with the Labour Party was the emergence of Blairites. This group, in capturing the party, led to the embracing of neoliberalism and the disastrous Iraq war. The result was a betrayal of the working class origins of the party. The implicit claim here is that under Old Labour there was a socialist component which was extinguished by New Labour; one's commitment to socialism had to be **'whispered'**. This is why writers like **Jeremy Gilbert** have seen Corbyn's leadership as a battle for hegemony against the neoliberalisation of Labour. For the anti-Corbyn side, this is all a replaying of the early 80s, in which the Bennites (of which Corbyn was part) emphasised 'far Left' dogma rather than gaining votes. This was a betrayal of the working class, since if Labour isn't elected, they can't improve their lives and a Tory party led from the right (then as now) will be unchallenged. The claim that Corbyn's opponents in the PLP **should stay in the party and develop strategy from the backbenches** indicates this group also sees their way to victory as similar to the 80s. This suggests that prior to the Bennite challenge Labour had placed the pragmatism of electoral success above the ideals of socialist dogma. As **Chukka Umunna put it** after Corbyn's initial election, 'the original intention of Keir Hardie and the party's founders' was the obtaining of governmental office.

But, to understand what is currently happening in Labour we have to be aware of its longer history and how the current conflict, while partly one between left and right, is more fundamentally a result of the contradictory pressures within the party, demonstrated in an earlier debate.

In 1972, Zygmunt Bauman published an English translation of his book *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labour Movement*. This, stretching from

1750-1955, argued that the British labour movement, and the party it gave birth to, had developed from the banning of trade unions to their (albeit partial) acceptance. This allowed them to establish the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and elect MPs. At the same time the unions were expanding from occupation-based guilds to class-based representation. Their vision of socialism was based not on a particular ideology but a vision of collectivism as the means to social change, vindicated by the successful battle to legitimise trade unions. Parliamentary action was simply the next step in such collectivism.

The size of the movement made some form of organised leadership, an elite, essential. This created the need for a certain type of leader – an administrator rather than an agitator to use Bauman's terms – and provided the means for social mobility within the movement. This led to views which defined the early Labour party: the embracing of middle-class intellectuals in this new elite; the acceptance of anachronistic institutions such as the House of Lords given the possibilities for mobility; and leaders in the mould of Ramsey MacDonald and Clem Attlee. The LRC, and then the Labour Party, quickly became the elite of the Labour movement, invested in some measure of the status quo. They wished to improve the lives of the working class in order to, as T.H. Marshall put it, make them 'a civilised being' according to the standards of contemporary society, not to transform it (1992:8).

E.P. Thompson (1972) provided an excoriating review of Bauman's book. He argued Bauman's history was selective, overlooking radical labour movements from below, and often outside the Labour party, such as Chartism, Owenism, popular radicalism and local forms of working class leadership. In doing so, Bauman overlooks how the Labour party leadership has always been contested from within by the Left. This was unlikely to come from trade union leaders, but did come from shop stewards and affiliated groups to the party, such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

Bauman and Thompson's debate points to the tension that has run through the party's history. The idea of Labour having an elite has been true; its high echelons have mostly been staffed by 'career politicians'. Furthermore, its record as a mechanism for radical social change is somewhat patchy: *'As to what [The Labour Party] positively was, the answer is simple: a Labourist party...the subordination of the working class to the nation, militating against radical recasting of the latter by the former, but rather incorporating the one into the regulation of the other'* (Elliott 1993:124). As Thompson commented elsewhere, the party based its conception on social change upon a 'parliamentary fetishism' in which 'all advance must wait upon legislative gain' (Thompson 1960:8). In doing so, ideals of an alternative society have been displaced to equate radicalism with the existence of a Labour government; as Herbert Morrison once put it 'socialism is what a Labour government does'. The members were there to assist in elections.

In this sense, it would seem the anti-Corbyn groups have the correct view of party history. But, this overlooks that from the start the Labour party has included a variety of internal left-wing groups. Its 'broad tent' nature, and its emergence from, at times, a radical labour movement, has allowed it to absorb left-wing attacks internally and still present a Labourist view to the country. It has been assisted in doing so by almost universally having leaders from the right of the party. At certain points in the party's history this left-wing has entered into open conflict with the right, whether that be on opposition to World War I, the secession of the ILP in 1932 and later Bevanite and Bennite factions which united various groups, including feminist and anti-racist

activists, under their banner. In many ways, the Corbynite movement is the latest in the long series of internal conflicts within the party. Therefore, for the anti-Corbynites to see groups such as Momentum as attempts to infiltrate Labour from 'outside' overlooks how the Party has been successful precisely because it has been able to maintain these groups within.

Furthermore, such leftist groups have often been the voice of reason against the status quo upheld by the elite. For example, while the first Labour colonial secretary and trade union leader J.S. Thomas met civil servants with the words 'I'm here to see there is no mucking about with the British Empire' (Elliott 1993:38) it was the ILP – including their leader and 'Red Clydesider' James Maxton (Brown 1987) – who were advocating an anti-imperial line. So, while the PLP is correct to present a history of the Labour party akin to the one put forward by Bauman in 1972 it is worthwhile remembering that, as Thompson criticised Bauman for, this is only a partial telling of the history of the party, and its emergence from within a, at times radical, labour movement.

One thing that has made the Labour party successful has been its ability to maintain internally these radical left-wing voices. However, this also requires the pro-Corbyn side to reckon with the challenge they face, which probably runs beyond the next election. Their goal is not to 'return' the party to a previous state but to remake it. Such a radical movement has existed before, but it has occurred largely outwith the party and within the broader labour movement, rather than being centred upon the party. The opposition they face is not solely the result of the 'capture' of the Labour party by Blairite groups but rather the same challenge faced by a generation of socialists who, convinced Labour was the only means to secure radical change in Britain, sought to push it towards this outcome. Rather than using partial visions of the history of the Labour party in which today is an unprecedented crisis we should be aware that it could be seen as the latest instance of the long running contest between visions of the party as an elite led project of amelioration and a mass movement seeking radical change.

References

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