Corbynism and Its Futures

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On September 12th 2015, Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party. It is difficult to convey to outsiders just how unexpected this occurrence was. A member of parliament representing a socially mixed North London constituency, Corbyn had been a stalwart of the most radical current in the party for over 30 years, a member of a more-or-less openly Marxist tendency which today has only a handful of representatives within the parliamentary party, and was widely assumed to have a negligible political base in the country at large.

Corbyn had secured sufficient nominations from members of the parliamentary party to enter the race only minutes before the deadline had closed on June 15th. In the days that followed, bookmakers were offering odds of around 100/1 against him actually winning the contest. Neither he nor his closest advisors believed his chances to be any better than that. It has become a truism of mainstream political commentary in the UK in recent months to observe that this was the single most unexpected political event to have occurred since Labour won the 1945 general election in the wake of World War II.

PARLIAMENT FOR DUMMIES

For the benefit of readers not familiar with UK politics, it will be worth explaining some details of the British political organization before going any further. The UK is governed according to a classical parliamentary model, such that executive authority rests with the Prime Minister, who is almost invariably the leader of the largest party in the House of Commons (the elected legislature). Technically, the national legislature, parliament, is made up of two chambers: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. However, the latter comprises a mixture of government appointees and hereditary aristocrats, wields no power except to delay legislation, and is regarded even on the right as lacking authority or legitimacy. As such "parliament" is often treated as synonymous with the House of Commons; elected members of the House of Commons are referred to as "members of parliament" (or more commonly, MPs), and for all non-ceremonial purposes, the UK effectively has a unicameral system of representation. Each MP represents a single, geographically-defined constituency with a population of around 100,000.

Unlike almost every other parliamentary system in the world, and unlike even the systems for election to all of the more recently created legislative bodies in the UK (such as the Scottish parliament), there are no mechanisms to overcome the inevitable discrepancies which arise between the share of the popular vote won by each party nationally and their actual representation in the House of Commons. So a party in theory can achieve close to 20% of the national vote without achieving any parliamentary representation, if that vote is nowhere concentrated in particular constituencies. This produces a situa-

tion not entirely unlike the American party system, and less like that in most European countries. The two main political parties are of necessity large and at times quite incoherent aggregations of different political traditions and interests; in any normal parliamentary system they would be represented by distinct political organisations. It also produces a situation in which elections are almost entirely decided by the votes of a few hundred thousand swing voters in marginal constituencies (of which there are only 50–100, out of a total of 650), and in which any party that can secure over 40% of the vote is likely to enjoy a full parliamentary majority, untroubled by the messy politics of coalition and compromise.

It is easy enough to see why this absurdly undemocratic system has proven so resistant to reform, despite repeated calls for the introduction of proportional representation over the decades. Every Prime Minister who has ever had the opportunity to reform it, almost by definition, has found themselves in a position of exercising supreme executive and legislative authority, untroubled by the checks and balances of the US system or the coalition politics of a proportional parliament, on the basis of (at most) 43% of the popular vote. Who would give up such easy power? To date – nobody; the one manifesto promise which Tony Blair transparently broke as Prime Minister was to hold a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons.

Within the Labour Party itself, the group of Labour Members of the Parliament – the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) – has a specific role in that the Party Leader must be drawn from its number and all candidates for the leadership must secure nomination from at least 15% of its membership to be allowed to stand in a national leadership election. During the Blair years, the party leadership took great pains to ensure that only individuals fitting a very narrow set of criteria, both ideologically and presentationally, were selected as candidates in winnable constituencies. There was less that the Blairite leadership could do to ensure that the actual party membership conformed to their idea of what good citizens should look like, so instead various mechanisms were introduced to ensure that the membership, and in particular the local party organisations in which activist culture tended to be strong, lost almost all influence over either policy-making or candidate-selection.

THE INTERNAL POLITICS OF THE LABOUR PARTY

To understand the emergent situation, it's also necessary to have some sense of the internal political topology of the Labour Party. Broadly speaking, there are four main political currents which can be identified as still active in the party: the "hard left," the "soft left," the old Labour right, and the Blairites. None of these have had any official institutional form, although there have been formal organisations clearly associated with specific tendencies (such as the organisation Progress, which effectively functions as a Blairite caucus and cheerleading team). These are at best casual labels for tendencies which are themselves internally differentiated, but they are useful reference points nonetheless.

The old Labour right has historically tended to support social democratic redistributive programmes and Keynesian industrial strategies, while being

ideologically committed to NATO, Atlanticism and nuclear deterrence, and having no interest in any radical anti-capitalist programme or in indulging the democratic demands of grassroots members or other political and social constituencies. In class terms this tradition is arguably the product of the historic post-war alliance between organised labour and industrial capital. One of the most interesting and misunderstood features of the old Labour right politics is the ideological nature of its Atlanticism. The best way to understand this is to recall that the Cold War, in its earliest phases, was not fought between Gorbachev and Reagan (which is the phase now best remembered in the West), but between Stalin's USSR and the New Deal administration in the US – an administration which did much to shore up and support the expansion of Western European social democracy. For this particular tradition, then, Atlanticist and pro-nuclear commitments are not merely a symptom of craven deference to the imperial hegemon across the Atlantic. Rather, they are an expression of a historic allegiance to democratic socialism against state-capitalist authoritarianism. This may be nonsense when considered with any degree of objectivity, but it is what adherents to this tradition actually believe.

The hard and soft left can be understood as emerging from the bifurcation of the traditional left after the moment of its greatest success in the party: the early 80s. The members of the hard left are still sometimes referred to as Bennites, a reference to their iconic leader Tony Benn, who came close to taking the deputy leadership (and arguably even the leadership) of the party at that time. Bennism is an odd mixture of Marxist analysis and aspiration, a hypothetical commitment to working with social movements, and a "Labourist" political strategy little different from that favoured by the old Labour right: in other words, a strategy which assumes that the Labour Party alone, seeking to win parliamentary majorities within the existing parliamentary system, is a largely sufficient vehicle for the implementation of its programme. That programme has traditionally been conceived as a classical left-Keynesian one of nationalisation, exit from the EU, imposition of capital controls and increased taxes on the rich (although the Bennites were always also interested in more radical measures such as the extension of co-operatives and workers' control in industry). There is no sign that today the hard left would try to implement anything so old-fashioned. The shadow finance minister, John McDonnell, despite a reputation for being the most "hardline" of the Bennites, is an open-minded and inquiring thinker who has been building an impressive network of advisors, including such luminaries as Thomas Piketty and Mariana Mazzucato.[1] In fact there would seem to be no difference at all now between the emergent McDonnell programme, and economic proposals issuing from traditionally "soft left" organisations such as Compass.[2] When it comes to the question of whether Labour is a social movement or a mere vote-winning machine, the Bennites have always been the tendency in the party which has been least committed to the idea that winning elections is the only realistic political goal of the Labour Party at any given time. Unfortunately, they have also generally been reticent – to the point of silence – about what coherent alternative strategy could actually forge a road to socialism, and thereby they have presented a public face which

[1]. http://www.labour.org.uk/blog/entry/the-new-economics

[2]. http://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/plan-b-a-good-economy-for-a-good-society/

often seems simply indifferent to the basic Gramscian question: how do you build a winning social coalition from a position of weakness?

"Soft left" is the name still sometimes given to a tendency which crystallised in the wake of the battles between the hard left and the old Labour right in the early 80s.[3] Historically, this tendency shares much of the analysis and aspiration of the hard left, but tries to marry this with both electoral pragmatism and a more open attitude to political strategy. The early soft left also saw itself as learning lessons from Mitterrand's failure to implement much the same economic programme as that recommended by the Bennites. The soft left was never happy about the idea of leaving the EU, although exactly what alternative they proposed was never fully clear (a weakness which led a number of the soft left to embrace technocratic neoliberalism, becoming leading Blairites, in the 1990s). This group also tends to be more interested than any other in a broad range of democratic demand. As a result, the soft left is the current which has been most enthusiastic in advocating major reform of the UK Constitution, even when such a reform would reduce the chances of a majority Labour government being able to implement its programme unhindered by the need to work with other parties. "Soft" was never merely a pejorative term, but was a self-designation by which members of this tendency sought to distance themselves from the perceived rigidity, dogmatism, sectarianism and macho style of the "hard" left (a style which, importantly, many members of the "hard" left political tradition would today themselves find embarrassing). If any tendency represents the political centre-of-gravity of the actual Labour Party membership over the past few decades it is the soft left, and at least two of its leaders (Neil Kinnock and Ed Miliband) have been identified with it.

The Blairites only emerged in the 90s. They never had much of a base in the party, and remain committed, like their "Third Way" comrades in countries like the US and Germany, to a neoliberal socio-economic programme boosted by some meritocratic social reforms (a program designed to enable social mobility without reducing social inequality – of course this is a physical impossibility and such programmes only ever succeed in increasing inequality). In class terms, the Blairites represent a historically novel alignment between a professionalised political elite and sections of finance capital. Their weakness in the party was evinced by their candidate (Liz Kendall) coming in as a humiliating fourth in the 2015 leadership election. Interestingly, when Labour has not been in government, they have tended to be more sympathetic to calls for proportional representation in parliament in comparison with the hard left or old Labour right: it seems to suit their self-image as Europhile modernisers. This is not a self-image which has anything to do with the reality of their behaviour in government, however; in such situations they have always adopted a position of unwavering Atlanticism and utter indifference to serious democratic reform.[4]

HOW ON EARTH DID JEREMY CORBYN GET ELECTED?

In this context, how did it ever come about that a figure from the smallest and weakest of these tendencies found himself leader of the Labour Party? In retrospect it seems clear now that two key changes in the culture and constitution

3. See http://www.theguardian.com/comment-isfree/2015/jul/24/soft-left-labour-splinter-party

4. Of course, the Blair government did implement major democratic reforms, especially the devolution of significant legislative powers from the Westminster to the newly-created Scottish parliament. But these were manifesto commitments which had been made when the soft left was still in charge of the party, which Blair actively tried to jettison, but found that he could not because of the strength of the civic movement for devolution in Scotland.

of the Labour Party since 2010 made possible Jeremy Corbyn's eventual shock victory. One was a significant change to the rules governing the election of the party leader which had entirely unexpected consequences. Again, it's necessary to understand some technical details of the Labour Party constitution and its history in order to understand how this change came about.

Throughout its history, the Labour Party has been an organisation composed of multiple elements and informed by competing ideas as to what kind of organisation it should be. Founded at the beginning of the 20th century, explicitly in order to achieve the goal of getting working class trade-unionists into parliament, Labour was from the beginning a federation of other organisations: principally of unions and socialist societies. Indeed, in its earliest iteration there was no such thing as an individual member of the Labour Party – only by joining one of its federated components could an individual become a member of the party.

From the very beginning there was a marked tension between the idea of the party as a vehicle for a democratic mass movement, and the understanding that its sole function was to create, maintain, service and serve the interest of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The latter view largely prevailed at a national level until the beginning of the 1980s, although since early in the century there had been many municipalities in which Labour was able to transform local communities without access to, or support from, national government. Up to this time, electing the leader remained the sole prerogative of the PLP. The early 80s saw both an influx of left-wing activists to the party and a radicalisation of key sections of its membership and of the trade unions: this was the high water-mark of Bennism. Faced with the open hostility of the Thatcher government both to trade unions and to any form of socialist politics, as the Thatcher/Reagan/Brezhnev phase of the cold war intensified, many activists were radicalised by a belief that some final showdown between capital and labour, at least in the UK, was in the offing.

It is also worth remembering here that the earliest manifestations of British neoliberalism – the monetarist programme of public spending cuts, and the rapid contraction of Britain's industrial manufacturing base – did not begin under Thatcher, but were already well under way by the time of her victory over the incumbent Labour administration in 1979. In particular, the 1974-79 Labour government had capitulated to an IMF-imposed structural adjustment plan in an attempt to stabilise the currency, becoming the first major government in the "developed" world to do so. Widespread disillusion with the party and with its old right-wing, from which the prime minister and finance minister of the period had been drawn, was therefore understandable, and fierce battles were fought between right and left over issues ranging from policy and programme to the presence of openly (or secretly) Trotskyist sections within the party.

Perhaps the bitterest of these fights emerged from the struggle to empower both members and affiliated organisations (in particular the unions) in the election of the party leadership. The compromise outcome of this battle was the creation of an electoral college granting one third of votes for the leadership to the PLP, one third to the unions, and one third to the "constituency parties"

(local party organisations controlled by and representing individual members). Although the Left was never satisfied with the amount of power which the parliamentary party retained under this dispensation, it was enough of a blow to the right of the PLP that a significant section split off to create the ill-fated "Social Democratic Party."

Significantly, the other key demand of the Left at this time was for mechanisms that would reduce the independence of MPs from their constituency parties. Labour MPs have traditionally not been bound by mandates from their members, and have not been easy to remove once in office; this independence has been jealously guarded by Labour MPs since the formation of the party, and has always been resented by its more radical rank and file. Some concessions were made to the demand for more accountability for MPs, but these were largely rescinded and even reversed over the course of the 1990s, as the parliamentary party became more and more compliant to an increasingly-centralised leadership, while local parties lost almost all of the power which they once had.[5] In practice, the electoral college also allowed the PLP to remain by far the most important section of the party when it came to electing that leadership.

Here is where things become ambiguous and rather complex. The Blairites had always understood the weakening of local constituency parties as central to their goals, believing them to be a breeding ground for activists who were by their very nature unrepresentative of, and isolated from, the wider public. They were always more complacent, however, about the idea of empowering individual members, believing (with some reason) that the typical individual Labour Party member was not an activist, did not participate in the culture of their local constituency party, mainly relied for political information on national media outlets and on the party's centralised communications structures, and as such could be expected to be largely compliant with the leadership's programme at any given time, and to support programmes and leaderships which were more likely to be popular with a wider public, especially with swing voters in marginal constituencies, than would be those supported by full-time party activists. At the same time, almost all sections of the Labour party elite have been infatuated by American politics since the 1940s, and have traditionally been slavish in their devotion to the Democratic leadership at any given moment (the spectacle of former Blairite cabinet ministers taking career breaks to train as community organisers in imitation of Obama's early career is a particularly embarrassing example).[6] Partly for this reason, the idea of holding open primaries to select the party leader and parliamentary candidates had always appealed to Blairites as well as to sections of the soft left (US readers should note that the primary system is not normal in most liberal democracies, where the norm is for the selection of candidates to be confined to full party members). The soft left had tended to see open primaries as a potentially meaningful democratic reform while the Blairites believed that the introduction of primaries or any comparable system could only weaken further the influence of committed party activists, whose influence they believe can never be weak enough.

This combined history explains why there was very little opposition when the Labour leader at the time, Ed Miliband – who had been elected by the elec-

5. For example, the process of making party policy was changed so that constituency parties played a far less significant role; rather then policy being decided by the annual national conference, to which constituency parties could send motions and voting delegates, it was passed onto a body known as the "national policy forum," which included some representatives who were elected by members voting individually through postal ballots, but who lacked any organic connection to the everyday life of local parties. The NPF in effect came to be completely under the control of the central leadership, especially as very few members voted in the elections to it, not knowing anything about most of the candidates, who tended to be party hacks (i.e. activists who were always loyal to the leadership and usually in search of political career advancement) that none of the ordinary membership had ever heard of.

6. http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/feb/19/james-purnell-retrain-community-organiser

toral college in 2010, despite his rather weak support within the PLP – introduced a radical change to the leadership rules, granting equal authority to all party members, while creating a new category of registered party "supporter" who would only have to pay a nominal registration fee in order to join and acquire full voting rights. This was widely seen as an attack more on the continued influence of the trade unions (the other third of the electoral college) than on the PLP; neither the PLP nor the right of the party generally seem to have perceived the changes as any threat to them. Blair welcomed the changes enthusiastically.

This was the first change which made Corbyn's victory possible. The other was subtler, but almost as important. It must be understood here that Corbyn's actual support in the PLP – the proportion of PLP members who openly campaigned for him and cast their votes for him as individual party members – does not come close to 15%. Under normal circumstances, he would not ever be expected to have achieved enough nominations to get on the ballot. However, an important precedent had been set during the previous leadership election. The favourite to win the leadership at the time, Ed Miliband's more right-wing brother David Miliband, the darling of the Blairites and of the PLP, had made a gesture of asking a proportion of the MPs who had been planning to nominate him, to nominate instead Diane Abbott. At that time, Abbot was the only black woman in parliament, and a well-known public face of the hard left.

There were a number of motivations for the gesture. On the one hand it was impelled by an honest commitment to liberal feminism and liberal anti-racism which the Blairites share with other "left" neoliberals around the world; that there should be no women or black people on the ballot was an embarrassment which they genuinely wished to avoid. On the other hand, it signified the absolute confidence of the Blairites – and indeed the rest of the party – that the hard left had absolutely no hope of impacting the contest in any significant way, never mind actually winning it. In this sense the gesture was symptomatic of the widespread belief that the Left was effectively dead as a political force in the UK, and the conviction among Blairites that the New Labour project to isolate and neutralise the Left within the party had been completed. This is not to say that the Blairites simply controlled the party. It was fully recognised at the time that David's younger brother Ed, associated with the soft left, might, as he eventually did, win the 2010 leadership election. But it was assumed that the Bennite tradition represented by a handful of MPs – most of them, like Corbyn and Abbott, representing London constituencies – was an irrelevance which its vanquishers could now afford to indulge with some opportunities to campaign and speechify. We should not attribute too much cynicism to this gesture – a genuine belief in the value of internal debate and democratic pluralism does seem to have been part of David Miliband's motivation for "lending" some of his nominations to Abbott, as was described.

In 2015 the situation was slightly different. No candidate had quite the level of support from the PLP which David Miliband had enjoyed in 2010, and the leading candidate – Andy Burhnam – had less reason to be complacent about a rival candidate to his left (from where he hoped to draw much of his sup-

port). On the other hand, Jeremy Corbyn was a more personally popular figure with the party and the PLP than the often-abrasive Diane Abbott (who of course has to contend with racism and sexism in ways which Corbyn doesn't), being widely perceived as an extremely decent human being and a highly conscientious campaigner and constituency representative. And it was widely assumed that Jeremy Corbyn was about as likely to become leader of the Labour Party as Trotskyist postman Olivier Bensancanot was to become leader of the French socialist party. So with the help of some votes lent by supporters of other candidates, following the 2010 precedent, Corbyn got on the ballot at the last possible moment (having been pushed to stand by colleagues who felt it important that a Left voice was heard in the contest). We can be fairly sure that given what followed, this is a precedent which will never be acted on again.

What followed was an unprecedented influx of members and supporters into the party, almost all of whom joined or registered in order to vote for Corbyn. Although huge rallies in support of Corbyn were held around the country, there is little dispute that social media played a decisive role in enabling his otherwise disaggregated potential support base to coalesce and recognise its collective potential. Most evidence suggests that the new members were roughly equally divided between older former members returning to a party which had become too right-wing for them under Blair's leadership, and younger members, most of whom had never previously belonged to a political party, although some may have been members of the Greens or small far left groups. At the same time evidence also shows that a significant section of the existing membership, most of whom would have voted for Ed Miliband in 2010, voted for Corbyn rather than the perceived front-runner and soft-left candidate, Andy Burnham.

This switch of allegiance from a small but strategically significant section of the membership is notable here.The success of the New Labour project was always predicated on the willingness of both the old Labour right (who will traditionally support any programme or leadership they think likely to deliver electoral success) and the soft left to defer to the leadership of the Blairites, whose cadres were mostly former members of the soft left themselves. Indeed, Blairisim arguably emerged from the attempt of the soft left in the late 1980s to develop a programme and an electoral strategy which responded effectively to the UK's transition to a largely post-industrial economy.[7] As such it took a long time for many members of the soft left tradition to accept that rather than being a radical project for egalitarian and democratic modernisation, New Labour in government amounted to little more than a total capitulation to the hegemony of finance capital.[8] By 2010, however, this fact had become apparent to enough of them to enable Ed Miliband to confound predictions by beating his Blairite brother to the leadership.

By 2015, the over-caution, incoherence and ultimate electoral failure of that leadership had led a significant section of the established membership to the conclusion that perhaps the Bennites had been right all along. My own position as an individual party member, historically associated with the more radical end of the soft left, was spelled out in an article published on the open Democracy

7. See, for example, https://jeremygilbertwriting.wordpress.com/2013/11/

8. c.f. https://jeremygilbertwriting.wordpress.com/2004/11/03/the-second-wave-the-specificity-of-new-labour-neoliberalism/

website in July 2015 that was surprisingly widely-read for a 5,000 word political essay.[9] Put simply, that position was, as it remains, that the soft left strategy had now been tested to destruction, and that the only logical response was to support Corbyn's bid for the leadership, while arguing for a far more imaginative strategy than the Bennites had ever previously shown themselves capable of implementing.

9. https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourking-dom/jeremy-gilbert/what-hope-for-labour-and-left-election-80s-and-'aspiration'

THE CRISIS OF THE BRITISH PARTY SYSTEM

So we have dealt with the detailed politics. What of the broader social context and the long-term political implications of these developments? At a national level, the emergence of Corbynism can be seen as merely the latest episode in the story of the long-term break up of the British party system. In the postwar period, Britain effectively became a two-party democracy, with the residual rump of the Liberal Party retaining support almost exclusively at the rural fringes, in parts of Scotland and the English West country that had remained almost untouched by industrialisation. A slight revival of Liberal fortunes in the 60s and 70s coincided with the Labour split of the early 80s, resulting in an alliance and then a merger between the new Social Democratic Party and the Liberals, ending in the formation of a new centrist party – the liberal democrats, which was able to secure 17–22% of the vote consistently over the course of the 1990s and 2000s (although it never got more than about 12% of MPs). The 2010 election result finally saw that party hold the balance of power, entering into a coalition with the Conservatives, its leadership apparently believing that a coalition with Labour was unworkable and that "stable" government was necessary to save the country from economic collapse.

The party's supporters punished it savagely for this decision in 2015, its vote share collapsing from 22% to 7%. This did not benefit the vote share of the two major parties, however. The Greens have been a force in local and European elections since 1989, and secured over 1 million votes in 2015, despite only winning one constituency. The right-wing populist, anti-Europe UK Independence Party (UKIP) also only won a single MP in 2015, despite achieving 12.5% of the national vote, becoming a significant vehicle for both working-class and petit-bourgeois protest votes against a political class which is perceived as remote and self-interested. This clearly parallels the rise of right-wing populist parties in other European countries, although it is also worth noting the specifically British features of the situation. In particular, actual classical racism, and even national socialism, of the type associated with far-right parties from the Golden Dawn to the Front National, is historically very weak in the UK, where xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment are not easily translated into support for more extreme forms of racism, from which the UKIP leadership is obliged to distance itself on a daily basis. More significant than any of these developments, however, was the fact that at the 2015 General Election the Scottish National Party annihilated the Labour Party in its traditional stronghold of Scotland, winning almost every constituency and depriving Labour of over 40 seats that it had previously held.

THE SCOTTISH PRECEDENT

The situation in Scotland is a crucial element of the context here, and is the outcome of an extraordinary and, again, unexpected sequence of events. Scotland was accorded a high level of national autonomy by the Blair administration, achieving a level of independence comparable with that of a US state or a German Land. In recent years the social democratic, pro-independence SNP has been building support steadily at municipal and Scottish levels. The SNP government called a referendum on independence from the UK in 2014 which it convincingly lost – but only in the face of visible panic on the part of the entire British establishment as the polls began to show a far higher level of support for independence than had been expected, forcing all of the major party leaders (including Cameron) to promise significant extensions to Scotland's devolved autonomy should the country choose to remain part of the United Kingdom.

The pro-independence campaign was widely reported as the most exciting instance of grassroots mass mobilisation seen anywhere in the UK within living memory, and succeeded in consolidating an explicitly anti-neoliberal, anti-austerity social democratic common-sense and rendering it hegemonic within Scottish political culture. The entirely unexpected sequel to the "No" victory in the independence referendum campaign was a huge influx of newly-mobilised left-wing activists into the SNP and, to a lesser extent, the Scottish Green Party, as well as a massive surge in support for the SNP at constituency levels. The collective desire of the Scottish people was therefore expressed in a remarkable series of events which were seemingly unplanned and unwilled by any section of their own political leaderships: independence was rejected, but so was the Scottish section of the Parliamentary Labour Party (widely perceived as supinely Blairite in character), as the political complexion of the SNP was itself transformed from being mildly social democratic to much more determinedly so, a large bloc of radical SNP MPs was installed in parliament to represent the Scots there, and significant extensions of devolution were secured. Both nationalism and neoliberalism were comprehensively rejected.

There's no question that this turn of events proved a major inspiration for those who believed that the Labour Party in England and Wales could also be radically transformed by an influx of committed radicals over the summer of 2015. At the same time, the SNP victory effectively dealt a body blow to Blairism in the Labour Party which greatly increased Corbyn's chances of success. On a larger scale, however, all of these developments can be seen as responses both to the weakening of neoliberalism's hegemonic authority across the European Union, and to the ongoing pluralisation of national polities and cultures which has been a feature of the entire period since the end of the 1960s.

NEOLIBERAL EUROPE

My contention for some years – and of course I'm not alone in this – has been that the emergence of neoliberalism as an actual political project must be understood in large part as a reaction by capitalist elites to the terrifying upsurge of democratic demands which emerged in the 1960s.[10] There was nothing inevi-

10. See Jeremy Gilbert (2014) *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (Pluto); see also https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jeremy-gilbert/moving-on-from-market-society-culture-and-cultural-studies-in-post-democra

table about the adoption by those elites, from around the mid-1970s, of the general neoliberal programme: a set of ideas and proposals which had been issuing from the Mont Perelin Society and its legatees for several decades by that point. Rather, in the mid-70s these ideas and policies provided a convenient set of discursive tools for responding to a new historic situation. This situation was characterised both by an incipient technological revolution which offered capital the opportunity of rescinding many of the concessions made to governments and organised labour in the post-war period, and by a rising tide of democratic demands to which capitalism had to find an answer if it was to survive the 70s at all.

From the late 60s onwards, the automation of manufacturing, as well as the outsourcing opportunities created by new communications technologies and the containerisation of shipping, created historic opportunities to shift the balance of power between capital and labour in the core manufacturing countries. At the same time, the possibility that socialists might use the new computer technologies to facilitate their own objectives was something that certain sections of the capitalist elite were themselves acutely aware of.[11] At the same time again, the scale of material expectation from populations who were becoming used to ever-rising living standards, and the intensity of the democratic challenges to existing distributions of power and authority issuing from new social movements, were such that liberal democratic capitalism appeared to face a genuine existential threat. "Actually existing neoliberalism"[12] – to which ever-expanding private consumption and debt was always fundamental – was a response to this situation. It both neutralised many of those demands (by enabling private consumption and facilitating a pluralisation of consumption-oriented lifestyles), and re-asserted the supremacy of finance capital over both industrial capital and the rest of the population for the first time since the great crash of 1929.[13]

A crucial element of this process has been the gradual evisceration of democratic institutions and almost all forms of public and collective agency since the 1970s. Again, this is a situation in which neoliberalism and the interests which it expresses have taken advantage of an underlying social and cultural shift. The pluralisation of lifestyles and the democratisation of values which characterise "postmodern" societies were clearly anticipated by the cultural revolution of the 1960s. But the most far-sighted ideologues of that revolution always saw its impetus to cultural pluralisation as inseparable from a certain collectivism. This collectivism was expressed most clearly by demands for a genuine democratisation of both culture and politics which would have seen that pluralisation become the condition of possibility for the extension of radically participatory and deliberative mechanisms of self-government across much of society. This, after all, was the shared goal of thinkers and activists from Angela Davies to Alexander Dubcek; from Port Huron to Santiago. The founder of my own discipline, Raymond Williams, made his case for them as early as 1961.[14] The brilliance of the neoliberal response was to make this process of pluralisation instead the context for an individualisation and marketisation of politics and culture which would ultimately undermine many of the democratic gains of the

11. https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/04/allende-chile-beer-medina-cybersyn/

12. https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/nf8081_02gilbert.pdf

13. See David Harvey (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Verso)

14. Raymond Williams (1961) *The Long Revolution* (Chatto & Windus)

15. See Wendy Brown (2015) *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books); Colin Crouch (2004) *Post-Democracy* (Polity).

previous century.[15] Instead of radical democracy, we got a process of ongoing and ubiquitous privatisation, administered by a technocratic elite accountable only to their masters in the bond markets and the banks.

From this perspective, arguably neoliberalism's greatest triumph has been the creation of the European Union as a technocratic institution, irrevocably and constitutionally committed to the implementation of the neoliberal pro-gramme. There was nothing necessarily inevitable about the EU becoming what it has – at the turn of the 1990s, with the implementation of the famous "social chapter" of the Maastricht treaty enshrining workers' right across the continent (driven by the Spanish socialists, at the peak of their political effec-tiveness), it seemed plausible that the EU could become institutionally ori-ented towards a sort of redistributive Euro-Keynesianism. The hegemony of neoliberalism in both Germany and the UK in the 90s and 2000s, even under nominally social-democratic administrations, buried that dream forever. The consequences of this, and of the political weakness of the Left across Northern and Eastern Europe, have been dire. Since the crisis of 2008, European gov-ernments, particularly those in the Eurozone (which the UK is not) have been locked into an austerity agenda which has contrasted sharply with the weakly Keynesian reflationary policies of the Obama administration, and which has predictably failed to produce growth comparable to that in the US.

AUSTERITY IN THE UK

The UK is in fact caught between these two positions in a quite peculiar way. The actual implementation of austerity by the UK government has been half-hearted at best, and modest growth has returned to the economy largely because of the government's willingness to follow the Fed in implementing quantitative easing and historically low interest rates. On the other hand, the government, and more importantly their allies in the press – have consistently deployed a pro-austerity rhetoric in order to construct a familiar political narrative. Accord-ing to this narrative, the reason that living standards, wage levels and public spending have still not returned to pre-2008 levels – and never seem likely to – is that the previous Labour government spent too much money, saddling the country with an enormous deficit which it is now obliged to pay off as quickly as it can, while unchecked immigration and the pernicious parasitism of lazy welfare-claimants remain an excessive drain on the public purse. Despite no statistical evidence for their validity, all polls suggest that the latter elements of this tale are, depressingly, very widely believed, including by poor, settled ethnic minority communities.[16]

The former myth, according to which it was the Labour government rather than an international financial meltdown which generated the UK govern-ment's substantial deficit, has always been a tougher sell for the elites. After all, they are themselves widely remembered for their part in unravelling the global economy. As such, this story is far less widely believed. But it doesn't really matter. The reader will recall my explanation that only a few hundred thousand voters in the UK ever really determine the outcome of elections, and it is to this particular group of voters alone that this message has been ruthlessly and

16. https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpubli-cations/researcharchive/3188/Perceptions-are-not-reality-the-top-10-we-get-wrong.aspx

relentlessly targeted by key media outlets (most notably newspapers such as the Daily Mail). They believe it, and that is enough. By their very nature, these swing voters in marginal constituencies tend to be easily manipulated, individualistic, with a "consumer" attitude to politics. They represent middle-income groups in what is sometimes called "Middle England." This imaginary territory is composed largely of small to medium sized towns whose economies are dominated by retail and commercial services, and whose culture tends to be dictated by the large media and commercial corporations whose institutions (stores, malls, newspapers, TV channels) that provide the framework of everyday life and the main channels of information. State schools and the institutions of the National Health Service remain powerful bastions of a different, more egalitarian culture to that propagated by Capital and its agencies. As such, they have been a source of frustration for neoliberal ideologues since the early days of Thatcherism. They are, however, increasingly powerless to extend that culture beyond their most immediate constituencies (direct employees and daily service-users). Under these circumstances, it is easy enough for political and financial elites to convince large numbers of such voters of whatever story they want to.

NEOLIBERAL HEGEMONY IN DECLINE?

This, I think, is quite typical of the way in which neoliberal hegemony is engineered across Western Europe and much of the rest of the world. Today that hegemony remains effectively unchallenged in Europe, as the fate of the Syriza experiment to date has made painfully clear. But that does not mean that its reach and its potency are as great as they were prior to the financial crisis of 2008. Hegemony is a complex situation, and can take multiple, internally differentiated forms. One of its most obvious and recurrent features is the capacity of those who enjoy it to present a particular political agenda, or state of affairs, as effectively unchallengeable: as that to which there is no alternative; as common-sense, no less. At the same time, it is always a mistake to confuse hegemony with a situation of simple, active, enthusiastic endorsement for hegemonic projects on the part of those who are subjected to them.

Throughout the era of neoliberal hegemony, in fact, actual neoliberal policies have rarely enjoyed a significant popular mandate. In the UK, for example, no opinion poll since the mid-1980s has shown majority support for the extensive programme of public-sector privatisation which has been arguably the defining government policy of the period. The social groups who have benefitted from this programme and in whose interests it has been conducted – finance capital and those class fractions in the media, the tech industries, retail, etc. who are most directly in its orbit – are routinely deferred to by politicians and policy makers. But they are not regarded by the wider public as possessing any special legitimacy or moral authority. Instead, a vast and continuous expansion of credit-financed private consumption is surely what has secured consent to the continuation of this basically unpopular programme amongst large sections of the public. I would contend that across most of Europe, only relatively small, though strategically-significant populations (senior executives, for example) ever really bought into the neoliberal world-view (this may or may

not constitute a significant difference between Europe and the US). As such, from the mid 1970s until the crisis of 2008, it was neoliberal capitalism's promise of private luxury which was the basic condition for consent to it, rather than any real ideological enthusiasm for it, or even any widespread acceptance of its norms, that led the way. This is not to suggest that such a means of winning consent was ineffective, however. Quite the contrary – when the public already agrees that the government is doing the wrong thing, but has decided to accept the bribes anyway, what possible argument can self-respecting Leftists use to try to dissuade a cynical citizenry?

Under such circumstances, even those groups who were most opposed to neoliberalism were until recently forced to accept it as something that effectively could not be challenged at a public political level, except in purely symbolic or theatrical terms. In the UK this acceptance took the institutional form we have discussed: the most traditionally radical sections of Labour's natural support base, and the vast majority of its membership, acquiesced to the leadership of the Blairites, or at least declined to challenge their legacy in any serious way.

The 2008 crisis manifested the inability of financial elites and governments to reproduce a growth model based on continual expansion of private debt, and this ability has really not returned since. Unsurprisingly, it is precisely in those places and amongst those social constituencies where their capacity to keep offering compensations for the gradual erosion of democracy and social solidarity has been weakest that political opposition to neoliberalism has emerged most dramatically. The obvious examples here are Greece and Spain, but even in the UK, among those sections of the population who either cannot be bought off (because there are no resources left to buy them with) or won't be, that a left resurgence has emerged which seems unlikely to abate any time soon. This is a particularly notable phenomenon among the young, who across Europe, have seen the gradual erosion of social and economic entitlements since the 1970s, to the point where many now have very little left to lose.

In the specific case of the UK, it is notable that most opinion polls and social attitude surveys have demonstrated the existence of a pretty consistent bloc of public opinion since the beginning of the 1980s, which in effect endorses a Marxist perspective on all important issues, and which probably consists of around 20–25% of the electorate.[17] A recent extensive survey of contemporary political opinion showing the same finding was widely reported as demonstrating how out of touch Corbyn and the new Labour membership are with "ordinary voters." because only about 20–25 % of such voters agree with them on all (rather than just some) major issues.[18] But in any normal parliamentary democracy, a body of opinion shared by a quarter of the population would be expected to have significant public representation. It was, I think, symptomatic of neoliberal hegemony at its height that this 20–25% was pretty much denied representation altogether, and that it largely acquiesced in this denial. At the moment when neoliberal hegemony is weakening, but not yet subject to any major political challenge, it is understandable that this constituency should begin to revive a sense of its collective identity and political potential.

The question of who exactly comprises this 20–25% is not too difficult to

17. c.f. http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/

18. https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/09/25/measuring-gap-between-corbyns-supporters-and-labou/

answer. What we might call "the metropolitan left" is made up in part of the London-based liberal intelligentsia that are despised by conservative commentators in all parties, but it also includes large numbers of low-paid workers in cities such as London, Leeds and Manchester, especially in the public sector. It also includes smaller university towns as well as certain "traditional" working class populations in former industrial and mining areas where socialism was traditionally popular (parts of Yorskhire and South Wales, for example). These are Corbyn's people. It has come as an extraordinary shock to the professional political classes to find that they have not disappeared, but had merely been acquiescent in recent decades. Even more upsetting is the fact that they are apparently no longer willing to accept a form of party discipline which denied them all representation and subjugated them to the authority of the professional political class. It is remarkable that none of the commentary – none at all – that has emerged from the professional British commentariat on this issue, makes the very simple point that the presence of a political constituency with this kind of politics and this kind of social base is actually typical of a contemporary European democracy. This is probably because the entire professional British commentariat knows next to nothing about European politics, obsessed as they are with their own counterparts across the Atlantic.

BLAIRITE REACTION

Neither Corbyn's critics nor his supporters seem to have any real idea what to do about the fact that this newly-recovered constituency is not going to go away and is also not capable of mobilising a broad enough social coalition to implement an alternative political programme. The panic and fear among the political class – especially elite commentators – have been palpable. Even the *Guardian* has shocked its readership with the vehemence of much of its anti-Corbyn editorialising.[19] In part, the *Guardian* has been demonstrating its loyalty to fellow members of the professional political class within the Labour Party itself, the intensity of whose petulant rage at Corbyn's victory has surprised even those who expected it. Corbyn has had to tolerate a series of disloyal public pronouncements from right-wing MPs (from both the old Labour right and the Blairite camps) which have invariably been given far more media attention than their significance warranted, as well as serious dissent from within the shadow cabinet over key foreign policy issues, such as military intervention in Syria (to which Corbyn, a long-term critic of Western policy in the Middle East, is vehemently opposed). At the same time, endless commentary from previously pro-Labour journalists as well as from the right-wing press and even from the BBC has sought to undermine him at every turn.[20]

Two main lines of attack have typified the anti-Corbyn commentary. On the one hand, Corbyn's personal style is very different from the tub-thumping populism of a Bernie Sanders. He is quietly spoken, unpolemical, a poor orator and at the same time easily enraged by the transparent bias and bad faith demonstrated by journalists and media editors. These are precisely the unpretentious characteristics for which his supporters adore him, but they are easily portrayed by enemies as symptoms of his unfitness to lead. Whether he will be able to

19. http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-8193-Guardian-on-the-wrong-side-of-history-over-Corbyn#.VpqkNDbvHUo

20. http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2015/11/nick-robinson-tackles-anti-corbyn-bias-at-the-bbc/

develop a more widely appealing public persona – whether he will even try – remains to be seen. It must be recalled at this point that this is a 66-year-old man who had to be persuaded to run in the leadership contest, and believed that he was doing so purely as a favour to his small, residual faction. He almost certainly would never have run if anyone had believed he had a chance of winning, and he cannot be blamed for lacking an immediate game plan when the unthinkable happened. It may also be that if the campaign that brought him to the leadership can sustain itself as a broader popular movement beyond 2015, then his lack of traditional charisma may simply not matter much. Nonetheless, it provides his critics even on the soft left with ample ammunition, and constitutes a source of frustration to his less devoted supporters.

The second line of attack is perhaps more significant, and is directed not at Corbyn but at his partisans. When the campaign to elect him as the party leader began to gather momentum, the cliché to which the commentariat resorted most frequently was to denounce the social media "echo chamber" for creating the illusion that he could possibly win amongst his deluded supporters. When he won – with the most astonishing mandate (nearly two thirds of the vote) – they simply redeployed this trope in order to denounce the party as a whole for its idiocy in having selected him. Such commentary is usually framed in terms of a fear that by choosing an "unelectable" leader, the party has condemned the country to permanent Tory rule. The real source of fear for the media allies of the Blairites, however, is the threat posed to them by Corbyn's express plan to see through the unfinished Bennite business of the 1980s, fully democratising the party's electoral and policy-making processes. It is not yet known precisely what form this democratisation will take, but it is widely assumed, with good justification, that if successful it will not enable a situation to persist in which the parliamentary party is made up almost entirely of MPs who transparently do not share the politics, the ideals, or even the social backgrounds of the vast majority of party members.

The grassroots organisation, appropriately named "Momentum," which is in the process of being constituted out of the groups and networks which sprang up to support Corbyn's leadership bid, has been the subject of hysterical attacks even from the deputy leader of the party, Tom Watson[21] (a kind of old Labour right throwback figure, despite being 20 years younger than Corbyn, who earned some popularity a couple of years ago for picking, and winning, a fight with the Murdoch press). The tone of these attacks has been unsurprising to anyone familiar with the history of antidemocratic discourse in the West. "Mob" and "rabble" are the terms which have been regularly bandied about to describe this entirely benign network of individuals whose only political action so far has been to run local voter registration drives.[22] Of course, the use of such terms reveals more than their users intend. Although critics on the right of the party claim to be afraid that Momentum represents a return of the secretive far-left factions who did cause major problems for the Labour leadership in the early 80s, it is clear enough that they are even more afraid that Momentum might turn out to be exactly what it claims: a genuine grassroots organisation committed to radical democracy. That is absolutely the last thing which almost any current member of the PLP wants to see wielding influence within the

21. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35009342

22. http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/dec/10/labours-dugher-calls-pro-corbyn-group-momentum-a-mob

Labour Party.

Although opinion polls have consistently shown Labour to be trailing the Conservatives since he became leader, Corbyn's first real electoral test came in a by-election in December in the Northern market town of Oldham.[23] This is precisely the kind of constituency traditionally held by Labour, but whose working class population is too distant – culturally and geographically – from any major urban or industrial centre for it to be easily incorporated into the metropolitan left. The legatees of the old Labour right have been warning for several years that unless Labour adopts a socially conservative communitarian rhetoric, explicitly hostile to mass immigration, then it will inevitably lose such constituencies to UKIP. The Blairites, conversely, warn that unless it continues to speak the language of aspiration and social mobility, Labour will lose them to the Tories. It was confidently predicted that the Labour vote would fall dramatically at this by-election – the only question was whether it would fall by enough to provoke an immediate challenge to Corbyn's leadership from within the party. In fact the Labour vote went up, boosted by a high turnout from a sizeable South Asian population whose support for Corbyn is motivated by precisely the same radical foreign policy stance (hostile to intervention in Syria, to the war on terror, and to nuclear weapons – even lukewarm about NATO membership) which the press has been telling us proves that Corbyn is unelectable.

THE FUTURES OF CORBYNISM

Where that leaves the Corbyn project now, is very far from clear. It is likely that success in Oldham could be replicated in many places with comparable demographics. But the fact is that there are many towns Labour would have to win in order to form a government in which the demographics are less favourable to Corbyn. And in fact, the local opinion polls (to which none of the commentators seemed to be paying attention in November) were predicting a strong Labour victory in Oldham. They are not predicting a strong Labour victory across the country any time soon. The polling data seems pretty clear. The metropolitan left is behind him, and its reach remains far more extensive than most commentators previously assumed. Corbyn's achievement in rallying that bloc for the first time in a generation cannot be denied. But with the media so hostile and the left such a weak force overall, the capacity of that group to extend its influence and become the leading force of a wider social coalition is at best limited.

More fundamentally, it is not at all clear that Corbyn and his team have any interest in achieving such a goal. They are not Gramscians, by training or instinct, but, if anything, traditional Leninists. As far as anyone can tell at the present time, their calculation is that the coming economic crash and the disarray that the Conservatives will find themselves in after the imminent referendum on membership of the EU (a large chunk of the Tory membership will campaign for exit and will not be reconciled when they lose) may be sufficient to upend all the normal rules of UK electoral politics. In such a case, Corbyn's team probably hope that they will be able to take power amidst the chaos. What they plan to do in any other eventuality remains unclear. If this is what they are

23. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35003152

hoping for, then the scenario which they envisage is not implausible: another economic crisis would be very bad for the current government, in particular because the right has invested so much of their political capital over the past 6 years in the claim that it is able to manage the economy, while making almost no pretense at being able to do anything else for the country and its people. But in strategic terms, hoping for such an outcome amounts to little more than a random throw of the dice.

In recent weeks Corbyn has chosen really to assert his authority within the party and the PLP for the first time since becoming leader, in a concerted effort to move the party away from support for the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme (unilateral nuclear disarmament was one of the totemic policies of the hard left in the early 80s). This is a move which has dismayed political pragmatists among his supporters, who see it as an entirely unnecessary and unpopular gesture which will compromise his ability to build a popular consensus against advancing neoliberal austerity. But this assumes that the latter is what he wants to do. Which isn't clear at all. Many of Corbyn's supporters simply take the view that there is no good chance of Labour winning the 2020 general election anyway, so weak is its current electoral position, and so it would be better to lose with a morally and politically substantial programme than on another incoherent and vacuous one.

STRAIGHT TALKING, HONEST POLITICS

What would it take, what could it take, besides the intervention of a series of unpredictable externalities, to carry the momentum of Corbyn's leadership campaign forward and into some strategically viable radical projects? Above all, I think, it would mean taking absolutely seriously Corbyn's popular campaign slogan – "straight talking, honest politics" – and taking that straight-talking honesty into territory which even Corbyn has not dared to explore yet.

Firstly, it would mean being honest and straight-talking about the reality of the balance of forces in Austerity Britain, and indeed in Auserity Europe. Let's be clear here. Syriza has been defeated, even if they are still standing. Podemos got about 20% of the vote: a breakthrough, but not the democratic revolution that many of us were hoping for. Closer to home, the SNP victory was glorious in Scotland, but it is also one of the factors which terrified Middle England into electing a Tory government in May 2015, and the gradual detachment of socialist Scotland from the United Kingdom does nothing to help the beleaguered English left. The metropolitan left is back on the political map in England, but it has no better idea than it did in 1983 on how to move from a position of marginality to one of political potency. Under these circumstances, there is one thing that any honest, straight talking politician will say to their followers: we are in this for a long haul, or we are not in it at all.

This is what the Bennites could have said in the early 80s, but never quite did: "We have a movement to build. In the process, we may lose the next two or three elections. As long as our enemies control the media, dominate workplaces and determine the nature of so many community institutions, they will always be able to frighten enough of the electorate into voting against us to

prevent us from winning an election. They will only allow us to come close to winning office if we simply remove all radical demands from our programme. We could do that - we could make ourselves 'electable' by becoming so 'moderate' that the existing elites they would be willing to let us form a government for a while. But to achieve that, we would have to abandon much of our support amongst the poorest sections of society, and would demoralise our own forces to the point where we would have lost more than we had gained. We might get into office, but all real power would remain in the hands of our enemies, and we would have lot the opportunity to build a real movement for social change. We have to build our forces across culture and in civil society, in order to take our positions and deepen our networks, and in order to fight what Gramsci calls the 'war of position.' We have to develop our own institutions, our intellectual networks, and above all our own media. Only then will we be in a position to form a government. This may take a decade - it may take a generation - but it is the only path open to us."

They could have said that. If they had, then a lot more people might have listened to them. But they didn't. They would talk vaguely about the need to build movements and stick to principles, but they would never acknowledge that they were probably going to lose the next election on the way to achieving their goals. As a result, they sounded more like millenarian prophets than effective political strategists. And it was for this reason as much as any other that their natural allies, the soft left, drifted into two decades of uneasy complicity with the Blairites. Of course, the past is no necessary guide to the future, and there is no certainty that a Corbyn-led Labour party cannot win the next UK general election (which is more than 4 years away). But an effective political strategy would at least have to be open, straight-talking and honest about the fact that right now victory in the short term doesn't look likely, and that the recognition of this fact requires some kind of strategy: whatever that strategy may be.

What might be an example of such a strategy? Let's consider one key issue. Any project to build a radical consensus in the UK would have to take account of the widespread endorsement of demonstrably false beliefs about the economic costs of immigration and the extent of welfare dependency in the country today, which I already mentioned. There is no doubt that Corbyn and his policy team will put forward the most radical and progressive set of policy proposals on these issues that any major party has advanced since the 1980s. The question is whether they will also acknowledge that simply having those policies is worthless without a plan to persuade the country to back them, and that however well formulated those policies may be, their opponents are in a position to put up major obstacles to them ever winning majority support. What might be a way out of such a dilemma? There may be many possible routes. One that I would suggest would be the following: instead of simply announcing a policy, announce an intention to facilitate a 2-year process of extensive nationwide, community-level democratic deliberation, leading up to a final referendum to resolve some key questions on immigration and welfare policy. Be upfront about the fact that the extent of public misinformation on these issues makes it impossible simply to propose a policy, and that instead, a national conversation,

a plan to let the people decide, will themselves be the policy put forward in the manifesto. Let democracy be the strategy. This is only one possible example of an answer to the intractable question of strategy, and my point here is not to propose a particular answer to that question. From my perspective, the fundamental problem with Corbynism as it is currently constituted is not the differing answers which it might give: rather the problem is it that, like Bennism before it, Corbynism currently seems unwilling to ask the question of Labour's strategy at all.

The other key issue about which an effective Corbynism would have to be honest and straight-talking is the breakdown of the British party system. Arguably, since the late 1980s it has been clear that there is no future prospect of a Labour government simply achieving a parliamentary majority and proceeding to implement a radical progressive programme. The existence of a substantial centrist vote from the mid-80s onwards created a situation in which Labour always had only two strategic options. On the one hand, it could have accepted the inevitable necessity of coalition, and become the leading element of a left-of-centre coalition with the liberal democrats, committed to implementing Proportional Representation and a broad social democratic alternative to Thatcherism. This was the path urged on Labour by many soft left commentators in the late 80s. On the other hand, the only alternative route was the one that it eventually took – Labour rebranding itself as a centre party which outflanked the Liberal Democrats to the right on many social, political and economic issues. This was the New Labour project in a nutshell.

As explained above, the recent self-destruction of the Liberal Democrats has not improved the situation for Labour at all, and has only intensified the obvious non-representativeness of the British electoral system. Today only a radical reform of the electoral system could give an adequate expression to the complex distribution of opinion across contemporary British society (an example of which would be the shared commitment of the soft left, Blairites, Bennites, liberal democrats and pro-EU Tories to a set of cosmopolitan values which are rejected by UKIP, Tory Eurosceptics, and the old Labour right). Under these circumstances, my own judgement is that it is more or less inevitable that at some point in the foreseeable future, a broad coalition of parties – probably including both Labour and UKIP – will have to fight an election on a joint slate committed to introducing proportional representation immediately. This may happen in 2020 and it may happen in 2040, but it is the only foreseeable way in which proportional representation will be introduced and some kind of representative legitimacy restored to the UK constitution.

We should be clear about two things here. One is that the crisis of representative democracy is by no means local to the UK and its particularly decrepit constitution. Such a crisis is a global phenomenon, typical of the era of "post-democracy" and a direct consequence of neoliberal hegemony. I have argued elsewhere, extensively, that only a return to the classical radical democratic agenda of the New Left, advocating for participatory democracy in government, and for the democratisation of public services and workplaces, can really meet the challenges posed to democrats by the complexities of 21st century culture.[24]

24. Common Ground, *ibid*. See also http://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/reclaiming-modernity-beyond-markets-beyond-machines/

25. https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/opendemocracy-theme/postmodernity-and-the-crisis-of-democracy

Introducing proportional representation to the House of Commons would hardly constitute a panacea for British democracy or the English left. But it would nonetheless be an absolutely necessary step. The problem here is two-fold: neoliberalism and the very experience of postmodernity[25] have weakened and revealed the inherent limits of all forms of representative democracy; but democracy in Britain is not even weakly representative in the way that most European democracies are.

The other thing to keep in mind is that Corbyn has not thus far demonstrated the indifference to democratic questions of which the Bennites have historically been accused. In fact, he has made it party policy to try to set up an autonomous, nationwide constitutional convention to examine the health of the country's democracy in every possible aspect, and has handed responsibility for this task to one of the most radical and intellectually expansive MPs in the House of Commons, Jon Trickett. Trickett has made clear that not just proportional representation, but a radical rethinking of British democracy in the 21st century, will be on the agenda. So the question, again, is not one of policy and programme, but of political strategy. If the constitutional convention recommends proportional representation, would a Corbyn-led Labour party go so far as to enter into an electoral pact which would include not just the Greens or even the SNP (both natural ideological allies), but also the most under-represented party ever to contest a British election, UKIP? Would they begin to prepare for the inevitable consequence of proportional representation – the breakup of the Labour Party's unwieldy coalition into at least two separate parties? Will they, in short, be honest with themselves about the fact that the story of Corbynism as a socio-political phenomenon is not merely about the return of the Labour Left, but is a part of the much bigger story of the transformation of the 20th century party system beyond all recognition? Only time will tell. But I fear that if the answer is "no," then the chances are that the country will remain largely where it is now, governed by unaccountable elites nominally representing the Labour or Conservative parties, but ultimately representing nothing but the interests of finance capital.

Of course, any such strategy would also have to have a complex class dimension. I've suggested elsewhere that the contemporary left must re-think the class alliances on which it could base itself, and in particular the potentially progressive role of key sections of the entrepreneurial classes.[26] But history suggests that it will be far easier to persuade the Labour leadership to take that kind of argument seriously than to get them to accept that the Labour Party must let go of the singular political strategy which has defined its politics for over a century: seek an exclusive parliamentary majority, and assume that from there, all else will follow. The great fear of many of us today is that this is a strategy which can never work, but also one from which Labour can never free itself. Our great hope is that the pluralist, anti-sectarian and radically democratic instincts being demonstrated by Corbyn's young supporters, especially in the process of constituting the Momentum organisation, suggests that a pluralistic and radically democratic politics may yet have a future in the UK, a future that is much brighter than its past.

26. http://www.redpepper.org.uk/the-case-for-radical-modernity/

THE FUTURE IN EUROPE

Finally, given that so may of the issues now facing the British left are international in scope and scale, what about the hopes for a pan-European resistance to neoliberalism, as called for by voices on the left such as Yanis Varoufakis and Pablo Iglesias? The coming referendum on Britain's EU membership makes this a seemingly urgent issue: can there be an effective left response?

I'm afraid, while not normally inclined to pessimism, I can only honestly answer "no." Given the history of the past 12 months, especially in Greece, there is every reason for radical leftists to argue for a speedy exit from the EU. Unfortunately, anti-EU sentiment in the UK has been entirely hegemonised by the Right for over a generation, and there is no question that a victory for the "out" campaign would be experienced almost universally as a massive victory and morale-boost for the populist right. Most importantly, there is no question that the anti-EU campaign will make immigration its central issue, promising draconian restrictions as the immediate reward for exit. The referendum is likely to effectively become a test of how much weight the anti-immigration narrative can bear in popular political discourse.[27] Progressive anti-EU rhetoric, which condemns the EU for its commitment to neoliberalism, has been a striking feature of public culture in countries such as France; it is not an active element of UK political culture at all, existing only hypothetically in exclusively leftist circles. This is why most of the active Left in the UK are likely to line up behind some kind of "progressive yes" campaign, committed to the continued UK membership of the EU, but explicitly hostile to the Schäuble agenda. Unfortunately, the mechanisms by which such hostility could be translated into any kind of direct influence over EU policy are simply non-existent. This is what post-democracy looks like.

This would change, of course, were a Corbyn-led government actually to take office. Under such circumstances, there is no question that the entire balance of forces within the EU would be significantly, and perhaps permanently, altered. There is little doubt, for example, that such a government would press for immediate renegotiation of the Greek bailout. Corbyn and his team have made very clear that a Labour party led by them should be seen as closer to Syriza, Podemos and Die Linke than to Pasok, the PSOE, or the SPD.

At the same time, it is worth understanding that an absolute commitment to cosmopolitan values, to anti-racism, and to a hospitable immigration policy is one of the few points of principle which the metropolitan left shares with the Blairites. Indeed, it was the Conservative opposition's ugly support for immigration restrictions, and its coded endorsement of anti-refugee sentiments, which did much to shore up support for Blair amongst the metropolitan left – and the soft left of the party – during the early years of his premiership. As for the Bennites in the party, this is an issue, like renewal of Trident, which they would probably rather lose an election and lose control of the party than compromise over.

As such, a hypothetical Corbyn-led government would be very likely to push for a generous and humane immigration policy across Europe, and a wider re-orientation of the EU away from uncompromising neoliberalism, were it

27. Incidentally, there is no serious chance of the UK voting for exit – the entire mass media, the leadership of all major parties, the unions and most major business interests will be lined up against it. The big question, to which nobody yet knows the answer, is how the deeply Eurosceptic Conservative activist base will react, given that for years they have been convinced that they would win this referendum if it ever happened.

ever to get the chance to do so. On the other hand, as I have explained, its commitment to a cosmopolitan immigration policy could well be the ultimate obstacle to such a government winning the support of the wider British public. What the conditions of possibility might be for such a better outcome, I hope I have helped the reader to judge for themselves.

Of course, there is one possible development in the near future which would enormously shorten the odds of Corbyn leading a future Labour government. Since the 1930s, no Labour government has been elected from opposition while a Republican was in the White House – except at the very height of global radicalisation, in 1974 (an exceptional moment in both countries for many reasons). Certainly no broader turn to the left in UK electoral politics has occurred which was not preceded by one in the United States: this is true of the Labour governments elected in 1945, 1964 and 1997. Perhaps this is because these electoral outcomes are merely epiphenomena of underlying shifts in international class relations. Perhaps it is because the floating voters of Middle England are, consciously or otherwise, likely to be impressed and influenced by what happens in the world's leading power. Either way, it is very probable that a Bernie Sanders presidency – or even a Clinton administration which had been pushed to the left by Sanders' insurgency – would make a Jeremy Corbyn premiership look and feel far more likely and far less dangerous to the English electorate, and would quite likely frighten a significant section of the press into backing down from their relentless anti-Corbynism. As has been the case for so long now, it may well be what happens in the electoral college of the United States that ultimately determines the fate of the European "democracies."

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Further reading

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https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/dan-hind/corbyn-should-support-convention-parliament-or-he-will-fail

http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/08/i-voted-jeremy-corbyn-today-and-heres-why

http://www.redpepper.org.uk/
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