

UK: Keir Starmer's election: the end of the Corbyn revolution

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The election of Keir Starmer as Labour leader, with 56.2% of the vote, represents a clear victory for the right in the party. Neither the fact that some on the left were seduced into voting for Starmer, nor that Rebecca Long-Bailey got 27.6% of the vote, can disguise this.

Starmer himself dispelled any doubts by his choice of a shadow cabinet of rights and centre rights, many with a record of repeated and vicious attacks on Corbyn and his supporters. Only Cat Smith and Rebecca Long Bailey consistently supported Corbyn through all the crises since 2015. Their inclusion is clearly just a fig leaf.

End of Corbynism

This marks the end of the Corbyn 'revolution from above'. Power is now in the hands of the right and centre-right who always retained their majority in the PLP and among councillors across the country. Indeed, Corbyn's inclusion of his enemies in his shadow cabinet was always a dangerous concession. Twice they used their positions to launch coups against him.

Defeated on both occasions by the mass membership of the party, they resorted to the utterly deceitful strategy of the false antisemitism accusations. In this they knew they could count on the support of the Establishment and the media. Perhaps more surprisingly, they also benefitted from the refusal of Momentum, under Jon Lansman's leadership, and even sections of the far left, notably the AWL, to condemn it for what it was.

That the antisemitism accusations were so effective is related to the more general issue of foreign policy. This goes to the very heart of Labour's longstanding support for British capitalism's global strategy, in which support for Israel is a fundamental element in its alliance with the USA.

To have as the leader of a potential governing party a man with Corbyn's record of principled opposition to imperialist wars and support for the rights of the Palestinians, among other oppressed peoples, was always completely out of the question for not just the right wing of Labour but even some on the Left.

Starmer has immediately signalled his recognition of this by appointing the right winger, Lisa Nandy, as shadow Foreign Secretary. For the same reason, he pledged to continue the campaign against anti-Zionists, most falsely accused of antisemitism, saying 'I will tear out this poison by its roots', by which he means he will continue to expel members who condemn Israel's killings of unarmed Palestinian demonstrators, as it erases the last ghostly outline of statehood.

More generally, Starmer's statement, after his removal of most Corbynistas from the shadow cabinet, indicates the direction he will take:

?This is a new team that will take the Labour Party forward in a new era. Under my leadership, the Labour Party will be utterly focused on working in the national interest, rebuilding people's trust in our party and winning the next election.?

Translated into truthful terms, this means:

?I will justify my security clearance by loyally defending our capitalists? national and international interests; I will not repeat Corbyn?s support for the Palestinians but regain the confidence of those who smeared him. I will adopt only policies the media judge would not lose Labour another election. In short, I am taking Labour back to the sort of party it was for the most part since the 1960s, the brief left interlude of recent years will fade in popular memory, just like the Benn years of the early 1980s did.?

He has tried to play the role of Her Majesty?s Loyal Opposition for all it is worth during the coronavirus epidemic, telling Sky News, ?I?m trying to avoid calling for apologies [for the lack of PPE for frontline nurses] or criticising past decisions [failure to ramp up testing earlier].?

Taken with his much publicised willingness to join a ?government of national unity?, this is his bid to make use of the national obsession with the Second World War. He wants to play Attlee to Johnson?s Churchill, using the Labour Party and unions to save British capital in the approaching crisis and then replace Churchill in the period of reconstruction.

No wonder Starmer's most admired leader is Harold Wilson, the former Bevanite, who disappointed and betrayed the hopes of the Labour left in the 1960s and 1970s. So, despite saying he will "not oversteer" from Corbyn?s policies, his other pledge to bring about change shows this cheque to the left will bounce.

?We just lost four elections in a row and therefore of course we need to change. If we don?t change, we will lose the next general election.? This can only mean change from the policies adopted under Corbyn.

The celebration of his victory by all the press, from the Mirror and the Guardian to the Sun and the Telegraph, indicates that Britain?s ruling class knows that Labour is now back in a safe pair of hands. That does not mean, however, that they will now take the pressure off Labour. On the contrary, having tasted blood they will demand more, to make sure the left can never again come within an ace of electoral victory.

Sensing this, Keir Starmer has promised to ?end factionalism? but he does not mean purging the party of those who systematically sought to discredit not only Corbyn but the whole party. No, what he means is that he accepts the right wing narrative that ?factionalism? was caused by the Corbynite left and that it was right wing MPs, such as Margaret Hodge, who were the victims of it, a total inversion of the truth.

The Progress and Labour First factions that supported Starmer will not cease their attacks on the left. No doubt with the backing of the Board of Deputies and the press, they will demand a wholesale purge of all who still advocate democratisation of the party, anti-capitalist solutions to the crisis or internationalist policies, for example, on Palestine.

Will Starmer call them to order as factionalists? Of course not. The exclusion of Richard Burgon from the shadow cabinet and the appointment of Matt Pound, the former national organiser of Labour First, shows which way the wind will be blowing under his leadership.

Where did it all go wrong?

Muddle and confusion over Brexit, and the media monsterring of Corbyn himself, undoubtedly played a part in the defeat of December 12. So also did his own willingness to allow Johnson to wriggle off the hook of a

divided minority government by calling an election when it suited him. Crucially, before the detail of the Brexit agreement had been made public.

All of that was clear at the time but what the revelations in the leaked antisemitism report make clear now is how leading figures in the party's apparatus consciously planned for defeat in the election of 2017. Perhaps, in time, the details of what they did in 2019 may become public, but we do not need to wait for that to realise that they did everything in their power to bring about the defeat.

Why were the right so eager to lose both elections? Because, having failed with their coups, that was now the only way to remove Corbyn, their goal ever since he was elected leader. In a party whose whole existence is focused on elections, two defeats in a row guarantees the downfall of the leader. Handing victory to the Tories was not too high a price for them to pay

The speed with which the Corbyn leadership has been rolled up and thrown away, makes it clear that the left membership never gained control of the party as a whole, particularly the parliamentary party and the bureaucratic apparatus. As the attempted 2016 PLP 'chicken coup' showed, there was hardly any shift in the balance of forces at Westminster or in the town halls. It should not be forgotten that Starmer was involved in that disloyal conspiracy.

Thanks to Jon Lansman, the organisation that many hoped would be the means of democratising the party, Momentum, was only ever allowed to be a social media and election machine. Instead of spearheading a campaign to restructure the party, it limited its members' enthusiasm to building a personality cult around Corbyn. Never was an organisation more cruelly misnamed.

For his part, Corbyn retained the powers and patronage vested in the leader's office, a legacy of the Kinnock, Blair and Miliband era. Rather than mobilising the membership against those trying to remove him, he aligned himself with the centre-left bureaucratic leaders of the trade unions, especially Len McCluskey. Together, they frustrated the wishes of the membership over mandatory reselection, then over opening the borders to immigrants and finally over Brexit. And why? Because all were agreed that the right wing had to be placated to avoid the possibility of a split.

This was the secret of the right's success; if the highest good is to win an election, then the party must be united or, as one apologist put it, the party needs both wings to fly. This was the lesson all drew from the split in 1981, when the Gang of Four left to form the Social Democratic Party, thereby helping Thatcher to her 1983 victory. Knowing that, the right wing constantly demanded concessions from Corbyn, and generally won them.

Where next for the left?

The Labour left is beginning to pick itself up after the hammer blows of electoral defeat and Starmer's victory. Novara Media, Forward Momentum, Tribune, etc. are all calling for a change of direction. Many of them are focusing on Momentum as the most likely starting point, especially with its (largely fake) leadership elections coming up.

The quite extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic and the lockdown may have paralysed all normal political activity, but they do not stop discussion and debate. Red Flag will certainly contribute to that debate and our immediate priorities will be defence of those policy gains that were made under Corbyn and the continued fight to democratise the party with a sovereign conference and automatic reselection of MPs and councillors.

The current crisis, however, has also opened many people's eyes to the consequences of the economic

policies of both Tory and Labour governments; an NHS with no spare capacity, a crippling shortage of both supplies and staff, millions of workers reliant on foodbanks, even when in jobs, and, the other side of the coin, the need for central allocation of resources and requisitioning of essential property and equipment.

While Starmer and the right are assuring Johnson of their loyalty and unwavering support, the left need to be linking the lessons of Corbyn's rise and fall to the fight to win the party to a programme to take democratic control of all society's principal resources so that they can be rationally planned to meet people's needs, not to ensure the continued rule of the wealthy once the immediate emergency is over.

As the lockdown is relaxed but the economic crisis deepens, this government will set out to claw back the billions they have been forced to spend. In order to prevent any toleration of this by Starmer and the right wing, let alone any kind of 'tripartite' collaboration in austerity, we will need more than a democratised rank and file organisation inside Labour.

We will also need a parallel force in the trade unions and in the local communities. The Labour left needs to play an active role in mobilising them for what will be for many the unfamiliar tasks of class struggle. We have no need and no interest in waiting for a general election. We need to radically change the balance of forces and kick out Johnson and his gang. Then, and only then, will a government with real socialist policies become a possibility.

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