

Labour Party leadership: can Keir Starmer really maintain party unity?

*Keir Starmer convincingly won the leadership of the Labour Party, gaining strong support in the parliamentary Labour Party, unions and the membership. However, as the controversy over a leaked report into internal party disciplinary procedures shows, unity is not a given. **Max Kiefel** compares the challenges Starmer faces to the circumstances of his two predecessors as party leader, and argues that it is not enough to create party unity, he must also lead the party to respond effectively to the Covid-19 crisis.*



Keir Starmer. Picture: Chris McAndrew, [UK Parliament](#) / Attribution 3.0 Unported (CC BY 3.0) licence

Keir Starmer was elected leader of the Labour party on 4 April, and he has already faced several challenges as leader of the Labour party. The first has been to devise a strategy to respond to coronavirus. At the same time [an internal party report was leaked over the Easter weekend](#). Almost perversely, this report has the potential to distract the leader's focus from a global pandemic. Commissioned in the final months of Corbyn's leadership, the [report found evidence of bullying, potential racism and a deliberate misallocation of campaign resources](#). The culture of factionalism is said to have contributed to the party's incapacity to handle complaints of anti-semitism. To this end, the report is the first major test of Starmer's claim that he would unify the party, which was the central pitch of his leadership campaign.

Given so much political commentary has spent the last five years obsessing over the twists and turns of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, it is a reflection of the strange times we live in that Starmer's leadership win was relegated to the back pages. That said, the nature of party leader campaigns is that they focus on leadership characteristics rather than differences in policy or strategy. This can make for a dull and often lengthy affair. Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has only further disrupted 'normal' politics and will do so for some time to come. But we remain largely in the dark as to Starmer's envisaged direction for the party and how he will achieve party unity.

Starmer's choices for Shadow Cabinet shed some light. While the return of Ed Miliband to the frontbench, as Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, has been the principal focus of most coverage of Shadow Cabinet appointments, [Starmer has received cautious praise from across the party](#). He has avoided contentious selections, and while he cleared out a lot of Corbyn's core supporters this was not total. Starmer has assembled a team that is competent and policy focused – though one potential problem is the lack of emotional communicators who can resonate with the public outside of Westminster.

But any capital that Starmer may have gained from his Shadow Cabinet decisions has been blown up the leaked report. [Corbyn supporters feel vindicated](#) by evidence of entrenched factionalism from the party's right-wing, while evidence of racism and internal party staff working against the party at the 2017 general election have [provoked justifiable outrage from across the party](#). Starmer has commissioned an inquiry – a report into the leaked report – with [the terms of the investigation](#) covering the circumstances of the leak as well as the contents of the report.

Ultimately, the way that Starmer manages this will set the tone for his approach to party unity. The report is evidence that political parties are not unitary organisations. The Labour party contains internal actors – MPs, affiliated unions, grassroots organisations like Momentum and party bureaucrats – who at times will have competing visions for who the party is for and how it should function. But there are a variety of strategies to achieving party unity and managing internal conflict so that these internal actors comply with the vision of the party leader.

Starmer can look to his predecessors to see that power is not maintained in the Labour party through consensus. Party unity was never an option for Corbyn. Instead he mobilised mass support amongst the party's grassroots members along with the backing of union leaders to wage a more confrontational battle against the bulk of his parliamentary colleagues. While these colleagues may have opposed Corbyn's ideological and strategic reorientation of the party, the 2016 attempt at his removal showed there was little they could do. Confrontation with the parliamentary party may have contributed to Corbyn's popularity around the 2017 election as it was an endorsement of his outsider status, but this dynamic was not sustainable. Moreover, this shifted as Brexit became the salient issue. Prolonged periods at the dispatch box at Westminster saw Corbyn's outsider image wane, while ultimately sustained briefings against his leadership and the party's disastrous handling of the anti-semitism issue increased public perceptions that Corbyn lacked credibility.

Prior to Corbyn, when Ed Miliband was elected leader in 2010 he declared that [‘the era of New Labour has passed.’](#) The problem for Miliband was that, with his narrow victory over his brother, former Foreign Secretary David Miliband, he had not gained the support of the majority of his parliamentary colleagues or the mass membership (he relied on affiliated members from the trade unions for a very narrow win). As such, he lacked a clear source of internal power to pivot the party in his direction. His Shadow Cabinet was filled with MPs who had served New Labour governments and were concerned that Miliband would [‘lurch the party to the left’](#). Thus, Ed Miliband expended a substantial portion of his early political capital on maintaining party unity and managing internal disputes around policy rather than providing the public with an image of a political leader. Miliband's diplomatic approach just seemed to water down his own promise of radical reformism, and the result was that he came across as [‘full of empty slogans and fake folksiness.’](#)

There are two, almost contradictory, lessons that Starmer can take away from his predecessors. Firstly, party organisation matters. Prolonged internal confrontation is disruptive and if Starmer cannot get all the constituent elements of the party – MPs, members and the bureaucracy – working in unison then his leadership will be constrained. Secondly, a singular focus on internal party politics is damaging. The public care a lot more about Covid-19 than the leak of an internal party report. It's what Starmer says about the pandemic that matters. The Opposition has a substantial role to play in ensuring the lockdown does not end prematurely, and that frontline workers and vulnerable people in nursing homes are provided with maximum security.

To thread these lessons together, Starmer cannot afford for this report to distract his focus, but the way that he handles its contents matters for the long-term trajectory of his leadership. The ambiguity around Starmer's emergence as leader means that he managed to draw support from across the party spectrum. A failure to hold those accountable for bullying and undermining will anger the left, while pushing too far could provoke concern amongst the centre and right of the party. But achieving party unity will ultimately come through aligning the party's values and competence in responding to the prolonged effects of Covid-19.

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About the author



Max Kiefel is a PhD candidate in the Government Department at the London School of Economics. His research focuses on Social Democratic party organisations.

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