

Why major party reforms had to be sidelined during Jeremy Corbyn's leadership



***Bradley Ward** argues that while Jeremy Corbyn's leadership was initially drawn towards a more grassroots vision of rank-and-file democracy, this came into tension with the demands facing the leadership in the context of intense intra-party factionalism. In a Brexit-dominated political landscape, the constraints facing internal party democracy meant that major party reforms were increasingly sidelined.*

Despite the promise to [continue with the legacy of his predecessor](#), Keir Starmer's first twelve months in office have been characterised by glaring attempts to distance his 'new leadership' from the last vestiges of Corbynism. This is evidenced by Rebecca Long-Bailey's sacking from [the Shadow Cabinet](#); the decision to withhold the whip from Jeremy Corbyn and [ban local parties from discussing the case](#); the [dismantling of the Community Organising Unit](#); the policy of 'abstentionism' on bills seen as anathema to progressive values; and an unwillingness to embrace some of the more daring policies of the previous leader. For many critics on the left, these moves have divided the party at a time when everyone should be working together to tackle the big issues of the day. Those who defend Starmer, however, see these moves as important first steps towards showing the rest of ['the country they have their Labour Party back again'](#) after the rollercoaster of the previous five years.

The difference between Corbyn and Starmer becomes even more pronounced if we look at internal party politics. The current leader's management of the party can be usefully framed through what [Robin Pettiitt](#) has described as the 'parliamentary independence' view which believes that the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) 'ought to be free from interference from the extra-parliamentary party – that they are responsible, through elections, to the voters broadly and not more narrowly to the party members'. In contrast, Corbyn's initial approach to party management espoused what Pettiitt describes as the 'grassroots control' vision of party politics, in which the extra-parliamentary party — in particular Labour's membership — should hold jurisdiction over the PLP. This vision boosted Corbyn's popularity among Labour's rank-and-file, particularly those on the left, who were frustrated by what they saw as years of neglect by the party leadership. Had previous leaders listened to the membership, they argued, electorally damaging policies like the Iraq War and austerity-lite would have been avoided.

However, as I outline in a [recent article](#), very few reforms were achieved during Corbyn's tenure. The two proposals which generated considerable enthusiasm among the grassroots — open selection and the [Democracy Review](#) — were both effectively aborted at the 2018 party conference. 'Members-led' democratisation proved increasingly difficult in the face of resistance emanating mostly from the PLP and party bureaucracy, but also from sections of the trade union movement. Many MPs were naturally opposed to an agenda which threatened to undermine their autonomy in parliament; some trade union leaders were also concerned that an empowered membership might dilute their influence, and provide a distraction during a critical electoral moment.

Brexit further exposed the latent divisions which might explode in a party more thoroughly committed to internal party democracy. Research at the time demonstrated that the membership was overwhelmingly committed to a [second referendum](#), whereas the leadership were reticent to follow this path because of the threat that it posed to Leave-voting constituencies. This increasingly contributed to [splits at the apex of the party](#). A faction surrounding John McDonnell came round to supporting a second referendum because they believed it would stave off a parliamentary exodus (especially following the breakaway of seven MPs who went on to form Change UK), appeal to Labour's grassroots, and protect Labour in pro-Remain seats at risk. An opposing faction, meanwhile, were convinced that supporting a second referendum would be seen as a devastating betrayal by Leave-voting Labour supporters, sparking an electoral decimation in seats Labour could ill afford to lose. As Labour hurtled ever closer towards a general election, it appeared to be trying to ride two horses at once, and substantial internal party reform risked further amplifying these dividing lines.

In this context, it is understandable that internal party democracy was sidelined. Party reforms were soon swamped by electoral matters, particularly Brexit and the escalating antisemitism crisis. However, from the left's perspective, this may be seen as a missed opportunity. This is for two reasons. First, since the 1970s, Labour's democratic socialist tradition has made the case for extending internal party democracy to deepen the linkages between '[state and party, and between party and people](#)'. By taking control of the leadership, this was arguably the most realistic chance to embed this vision. Second, without the means to hold the PLP or the leadership to account, it is difficult to envisage a pathway through which the Corbynite grassroots can resist Starmer's incursions, let alone exert meaningful influence over the party. Despite its heightened visibility during the Corbyn era, the '[popular left](#)' is now likely to remain in the margins of the party.

This brief genealogy of internal party democracy during the Corbyn period enables us to understand both why Corbynism crumbled so quickly and how Starmerism solidified its emerging position. The inability to lay sufficient groundwork for '[Corbynism without Corbyn](#)' provides one explanation as to how the party transitioned from Corbyn's apparent '[total control](#)' to a leader who offers a very different vision of parliamentary politics and who is able to largely ignore the protestations of the grassroots left. As the 'grassroots control' vision of party politics was never embedded, the current parliamentary leadership has been able to sweep aside the left without serious repercussions — perhaps, for example, in the form of selection contests before the next election. Although this has enabled Starmer to marginalise the left, this may prove counterproductive in the long-run as it continues to make the party look disunited and less credible in the eyes of the electorate. More broadly, the rise and fall of internal party democracy also raises important questions around if, and how, a more grassroots vision of internal party democracy is possible within an established centre-left party.

About the Author



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