



Don't Elect Him, He's Unelectable!

Lorna Finlayson on hidden agendas, being realistic, and Jeremy Corbyn

There are two main ways to shoot down an idea, in politics as elsewhere. One is to say that it is bad. Another is to say that it is 'not realistic'. Often, it is easier to reach for the second. Few people want to say, for example, that a society in which everyone's needs are met and all are able to find fulfilment in their productive activities is not an attractive prospect. But many more will say that this is not on the cards, for some reason: because of the political climate, 'public opinion', 'human nature', or whatever else. The kind of scheme that promises such goods either has no chance of being enacted in the first place, or if it were enacted, would dramatically fail to deliver its promise: it simply wouldn't 'work'.

This reply is not reserved for avowedly revolutionary politics. It is also used to deflect and discredit proposals that lie squarely within the parameters of existing political systems. The Tories' George Osborne, for example, will not profess—openly, at least—anything but the utmost concern for the welfare and prosperity of ordinary 'working families'. Instead, he argues that any alternative to his party's brutal austerity is unrealistic as a means of improving the lives of even the worst off in society: Britain will 'go bust', 'borrow beyond its means', and the poor will suffer even more. And from the moment that Jeremy Corbyn began seriously to rattle the machinery of the British political Establishment—by looking like he might actually win the Labour leadership contest, rather than sitting unthreateningly on the ballot paper as proof of the broadmindedness and generosity of his opponents—one word was repeated more than any other, apparently in a desperate hope that saying might make it so: Corbyn was 'unelectable'.

Like the Tories' Thatcherite rhetoric of 'There Is No Alternative', the declarations of Corbyn's unelectability are claims about what is (and is not) 'realistic'. Part of the reason Corbyn will not be elected, they claim, is that 'public opinion' will quite rightly recoil from the prospect of a Corbyn-led Britain. But in saying that he is 'unelectable', their emphasis is on the alleged fact of unelectability itself, not on whatever it is about him that explains or justifies this alleged fact. (Of course, it is clear enough that many of the same voices would also be deeply dismayed if the unrealistic were

somehow to come to pass: Corbyn is a Bad Thing.) By talking in terms of unelectability, presumably, they hope to sway those who don't personally think that Corbyn is wrong or dangerous: we may agree with him—we are supposed to think—but he's just not electable, and so with heavy hearts we must turn our backs on him, to save the Labour Party from the oft-mentioned 'wilderness', and the nation from the Greater Tory Evil.

People judge and describe things as 'realistic' or 'unrealistic' for political reasons—in every sense of the word 'political'. They will, for example, use judgements of what is 'realistic' and 'unrealistic' to make certain events more or less likely. If repeated often enough, the claim that Corbyn is 'unelectable' may actually succeed in making it so. And cries of 'Unrealistic!' can be political in the sense of functioning as a thin cover for expressions of distaste, where for whatever reason it is impolitic to cry 'Bad!'. The discourse around Corbyn's leadership illustrates particularly clearly the extent to which what counts as 'realistic' is subject to political forces. For he has been called 'unelectable' when all the usual indicators—opinion polls, his constituency record of returning majorities over the last eight elections—seem to point in the opposite direction. Without any sense of irony, we are told, effectively: 'Don't elect him, he's unelectable!'

The fact that such discourse can be used not only to further political ends, but to disguise overtly political 'value' judgements, shows us something important. The masking effect can only work thanks to a tendency to see judgements of what is 'realistic' as somehow non-political. They may, of course, be used for political purposes (as can virtually anything), but—we are supposed to think—they are not in themselves political judgements in the way that other judgements are—like, for example, the judgement that re-nationalizing the railways would be a bad idea, or that Corbyn is a threat to 'our national security'.

On inspection, many of these paradigmatically 'political' judgements may show themselves to assume or imply something about what is and is not 'realistic'—and so by the logic under consideration here, they would cease to be political too. But let us leave that aside. What I want to highlight here is a certain way of thinking about the role, relative to politics, of concepts such as 'being realistic'—a way of thinking that I believe is very pervasive, although it almost always remains unarticulated. According to this way of thinking, there are, on the one hand, political positions, proposals, and judgements; and on the other hand, there is a stock of 'referee' notions or devices, which we may use to approach, compare, and assess these political objects. For example, when weighing up the relative merits of two theories, we may ask which is the more 'coherent' or 'intuitive'. Or when considering a practical proposal, we may ask whether it is detailed enough and, above all, whether it is 'realistic'. Here, detail, coherence, intuitive fit, and 'realistic-ness' act as our standards, and the candidates that we think score the highest, relative to those standards, are the ones that should find our favour: they provide the independent basis upon which political conclusions may be reached and rested.

Invariably, however—and this is particularly clear in the case of 'being realistic'—the notions in question turn out to be in some way political already. What counts as 'realistic' obviously depends on how you think the world works: it depends on what you think people are like, what you think they are capable of and will (and will not) tolerate; and it depends on what you take to be the characteristics, tendencies, and prospects of social and economic systems like capitalism. To see this is to be in a position to look more critically at the near-universal tendency to equate the more realistic with that which involves the smaller deviation from the status quo. Small changes often are easier to bring about than larger ones. Sometimes they are also more sustainable. But when and to what extent this is the case is a contested matter—and the contestation is essentially political.

The point is most clearly made via an analogy. Suppose we are arguing about how best to promote the health of a patient: you propose a programme of far-reaching lifestyle changes, involving diet, exercise, and so on; and I propose something far more modest—perhaps a 20-minute walk every Boxing Day, and a yoghurt drink on Sundays. In this case, it may well be that my proposal is woefully inadequate and will almost certainly lead, before long, to the patient's untimely demise. However, I claim that my proposal is the more realistic. Yours, after all, involves

rather radical changes, which will be very difficult, and which the patient may not be prepared to stick to. What anti-capitalists and others classed as ‘radicals’ or ‘extremists’ may say is that the political status quo is as deadly and unsustainable as this patient’s current lifestyle. Proposing smaller changes is not more realistic, but less. For it pretends that the incumbent system, or any minor variation on it, is compatible with an acceptable outcome, when in fact the only thing that can support human flourishing—or even human survival—is a more drastic re-organization of our social life.

Of course, none of this provides a proof of the wisdom of revolutionary politics, or even of Jeremy Corbyn. What it does say is that we do not necessarily have to accept our opponents’ interpretations of the standards that are used to arbitrate in political disagreements, even—and, I would argue, especially—if those interpretations form a dominant narrative. There is no politically neutral understanding of what it means to be ‘realistic’ in politics—and if we want to argue about political questions, we will have to live with that. As for Corbyn, it would be foolish, in defiance of the nay-sayers, to assume his invincibility, or to put all our eggs in his basket. The same powers that repeat the mantra of his unelectability like a spell will continue to do whatever they can to thwart him, along with all he stands for and all who stand with him. But if his story so far has taught us anything, it is that there was a little more possibility—and a little less predictability—in our politics than we thought.

[Lorna Finlayson](#) is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Essex. This post was inspired by her recent book, [The Political Is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). Her research interests include political philosophy and its methodology and theories of ideology, as well as feminist philosophy and philosophy of the social sciences. Her forthcoming book is entitled [An Introduction to Feminism](#), and will be published by Cambridge University Press.

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