

The Labour Party is more than the shadow cabinet, and Corbyn must learn to engage with it

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The three-day reshuffle of the shadow cabinet might have helped Jeremy Corbyn stamp his mark on the party but he needs to do more to ensure his leadership lasts, writes [Eunice Goes](#). She explains the Labour leader must engage with all groups that have historically made up the party, while his rhetoric should focus more on policies that [resonate](#) with the public. Doing so will require a stronger vision of what he means by 'new politics' and, crucially, a better communications strategy.



By Westminster standards Labour's shadow cabinet reshuffle was 'shambolic' and had the key ingredients of a 'pantomime'. At least, it was in those terms that it was described by a large number of Labour politicians and Westminster watchers. It certainly wasn't slick, or edifying. Taking the best of a week to complete a modest shadow cabinet reshuffle was revealing of the limited authority the leader Jeremy Corbyn has over the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

Against the wishes of the Labour leader, the Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn and the Shadow Chief Whip Rosie Winterton kept their posts. However, Corbyn was able to assert his authority in other ways. He moved the pro-Trident Maria Eagle from Defence and appointed the anti-Trident Emily Thornberry to the post. He also imposed some ground rules on Hilary Benn and got rid of Michael Dugher and Pat McFadden on the grounds of disloyalty.

Even though the slowness of these announcements made them sound more chaotic than ruthless, these decisions helped Corbyn to stamp his mark over the PLP and to send three important messages to his party colleagues. First, his 'new politics' of openness and democratic debate has limits. In particular, he will not accept to be humiliated or ridiculed by members of his shadow cabinet (as he was by Maria Eagle when she [rebutted him](#) over Trident). Secondly, he signalled that defence, and in particular his opposition to the renewal of Trident, is central to his own agenda and as such constitutes a red line area. Thirdly, by removing or reassigning shadow cabinet members who undermined his authority, he showed that he will remain party leader for as long as it will be possible. In contrast to George Lansbury, the pacifist labour leader to whom he has been [compared](#), he will not offer to resign.

A more cohesive shadow cabinet will certainly make life easier for Corbyn. He will be able to concentrate on developing his agenda and on being a more effective opposition leader. And without colleagues in the Shadow Cabinet ridiculing him he will look more authoritative. Yet this will not be enough to ensure the survival of his leadership.



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What Needs to Change

If Corbyn gained a little bit more control over Labour he will have to learn how to deal with an increasingly despondent and angry PLP. The shadow ministers who were sacked and those who, like Jonathan Reynolds, Stephen Doughty and Kevan Jones, resigned did not go quietly. The problem for the Labour leader is that these five individuals will join the Angry Brigade of Labour backbenchers who will do everything to prevent him from leading the party. But tellingly, apart from disruption, this Angry Brigade has nothing to offer in terms of alternatives to Corbynism.

If Corbyn wants to prevent the repetition of the bitter and chaotic moments of his first four months as leader, he has to change his approach. Firstly, he needs to urgently improve his communications strategy. The manner in which the story of the reshuffle was leaked to the press would embarrass a first-year student of Communications. His team needs to develop a more constructive relationship with the Westminster press, but also needs to learn how to deflate attention from embarrassing stories, how to create positive stories, how to rebut damaging information, and so on. In addition, Corbyn himself should have some media training to avoid PR disasters like those about never wanting to use the nuclear deterrent or the shoot-to-kill policy. This may sound terribly frivolous, but without a professional media strategy, Corbyn will be condemned to devote most of his time reacting and correcting PR blunders.

More importantly, Corbyn needs to be clearer about what he means by 'new politics', an otherwise woolly concept that has been interpreted by his enemies as a licence for 'anything goes'. But he also needs to accept its limits. The aim of transforming Labour into a broad social movement with wide popular appeal (incidentally Liz Kendall had the [same ambition](#)) is worth pursuing but it cannot be the sole ambition of the Labour leader.

Labour is not Podemos

Corbyn also needs to accept the fact that the Labour Party is not Podemos. You cannot set aside more than 100 years of history to create a party with the loose and democratic policy-making structures of Podemos. Above all, the

grass-roots movement Momentum cannot replace the Labour Party. If Corbyn is really interested in democratising Labour's policy-making structures he needs at the very least to involve everyone – from the PLP, to the trade unions, not forgetting the Fabians, the Co-operative party, the constituency parties and all the other groups that shelter under the party's big tent – in the process.

But if he cannot transform Labour into the British Podemos he should learn a few lessons about its success. Podemos emerged out of grass-roots campaigns around concrete issues, like home evictions, that affected a sizable proportion of the Spanish population (and crucially its middle classes) whose lives had been turned upside down by the global financial crisis. It helped that those activists were neither talking about Marxist dialectics nor using the technocratic language of mainstream social democracy. Instead, Podemos have insisted that their 'modest objectives' were about [making sure that](#):

all children go to public schools clean and well-fed; that all the elderly receive a pension and be taken care of in the best hospitals; that any young person – independently of who their parents are – be able to go college; that nobody have their heat turned off in the winter because they can't pay their bill.

Finally, the popularity of the leader Pablo Iglesias – who is a very savvy media operator – is not an irrelevant factor to Podemos' success.

So, what lessons can the Corbynistas extract from Podemos? It would definitely help the Labour Party if its leader focused more on the mundane issues that affect the everyday life of British citizens. Instead of battling against the renewal of Trident or for some great international cause, Corbyn should focus on the parts of his agenda that actually resonate with British [public opinion](#). His language also needs to change. References to Little Red Books, Enver Hoxha, or re-education camps should be banned even if they are meant as jokes. Instead he should discover a more localised, concrete and emotive language with which ordinary voters can relate to. None of these lessons will give him the rock-star status of Pablo Iglesias but they just might help him to develop some important attributes that so far have been missing from his project: focus and (some) credibility.

About the Author

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