

Labour's great impasse: who should lead the Party?

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6/27/2016

With the prospect of a general election in the very near future, is Corbyn Labour's best shot? If not, can he be forced to go? And if he does go, who could replace him – considering his popularity among grassroots members? In the almost complete absence of leadership and direction from the government, the Leave campaign, and the opposition following Brexit, [Eric Shaw](#) considers Labour's dilemma(s).



The Labour party is facing its most serious crisis in its century-long history. The Brexit vote has delivered seismic shocks to the British political system and Labour has been caught up in the slip stream. Mass resignations from the shadow cabinet have placed the Corbyn leadership under immense pressure. The rebel frontbenchers (and many other MPs) claimed that his lacklustre, half-hearted and insipid performance in the referendum campaign is responsible for the mass defection of Labour voters from the remain side.

It may well have been that Corbyn's contribution to the campaign could have been more dynamic and inspiring but given that voters chose to ignore the combined voices of big business, finance, the universities, most economists and even David Beckham, it was hardly decisive. The chief reason (a minority of) Labour voters opted for Brexit was immigration, and it seems implausible they would ever have been influenced by the pronouncements of the leader who least shared their views on this issue.

Whether the rebel MPs were deluding themselves or being disingenuous in pinning the blame on Corbyn is unclear. But what really precipitated their move against the leader was something rather different: a drastically shortened electoral timetable. Suddenly the party was confronted by the prospects of an election in months, not years. If Corbyn was to be ousted from the leadership, something many MPs desperately wanted, they had to act immediately. Hence the urgent calls and text messages over the weekend.

There are multiple reasons why so many Labour MPs wish to evict Corbyn – matters of domestic and foreign policy, values and strategy – but the overriding one is electoral. The message both from the polls and on the doorstep is that Labour cannot win under its present leadership and indeed, may suffer further losses.

Does leadership and personality really matter as much as these MPs assume? The consensus amongst election analysts is that it does. Evaluation of the qualities of the rival party leaders is a short-cut to electoral decision-making, a way of sidestepping the complex process of assessing and comparing policies. The willingness of voters to choose a party is heavily influenced by their appraisal of the leader: whether he or she is seen to be trustworthy, attractive and possessing the requisite skills for a Prime Minister.



So far, voter judgment of Corbyn has been highly unfavourable. Negative perceptions emerged early in his leadership and experience suggests that once initial impressions have congealed they form a gestalt through which later observations are filtered. The leader's standing has not been helped by the repeated message of internal party critics that whilst he may be decent and honest, Corbyn is simply not up to the job of PM.

The recent general election in Canada demonstrates how much leadership image matters. The Liberal party which had been crushed in the previous general election was lagging third place in the polls. Then it elected a man who though the son of a famous former Canadian premier had negligible political experience. But young Justin Trudeau was dashing and handsome, and with an infectious personality. The Liberals cruised to victory forming their first majority government for years. Of course other factors played a part but the truth, unpalatable as it might be, was that personality, appearance and image all count.

So it is not surprising that so many Labour MPs are desperate for a change in leadership. But they face formidable obstacles. Corbyn was elected on a wave of enthusiasm amongst Labour's rank and file and evidence of (pre-referendum) polls indicate that he retains their allegiance as that of the major affiliated trade unions.

Blairite MPs may have even hardened that support as anger and resentment has mounted with what has been seen as the disloyalty displayed by their relentless and well-publicised sniping against Corbyn. As things stand it seems highly likely that he will, in any contest, be re-elected, and perhaps by a large margin.

Some Labour MPs hoped that the requirement for contenders to secure the nomination of 35 of their colleagues would block Corbyn from standing, but legal advice is that this would not apply to an incumbent and, in any case, would enrage Corbyn's adherents.

A leadership election, then, is very much on the cards. But does Corbyn have a credible opponent? To be credible, a candidate:

- Must have the capacity to muster substantial support from within the party membership;
- Must possess the skills and qualities to convey to the wider electorate an image of him/herself as an effective, trustworthy and appealing leader;
- Must have both the desire and the ability to re-unite a fractured party.

The predicament of the non-Corbynistas is that, at present, there is no potential candidate who is able to meet all three conditions. MPs associated with the Blairite wing would be both hugely divisive and have little prospect of enlisting much support. The stature of Corbyn's main opponents last year (Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper) has not grown whilst Hilary Benn appears to have ruled himself out of the contest. Perhaps some lesser known figure may emerge (Keir Starmer?) but they would struggle to make an impact.

So can Corbyn survive? The odds are on him winning a re-run of last year's election. But while he possesses a solid power base amongst the rank and file and the affiliated unions opposition to him in the PLP is overwhelming. It is difficult to imagine how in the British system of Westminster government a Leader of the Opposition so openly disavowed by so many of his MPs can retain but a vestige of authority or credibility.

Corbyn's followers contend that the very strong democratic mandate he received ten months ago has given him entitlement to leadership. In terms of Labour's rulebook this is correct, but throughout its history it has only been able to operate as an effective force where the main elements of the party, the constituencies, the unions and the PLP are welded together in reasonable harmony. This emphatically is not happening at present.

At time of writing, more than half the shadow cabinet has resigned whilst the influential (and canny) deputy leader, Tom Watson has urged the leader to reflect on whether he wanted to endure a "bruising" internal battle. So far Corbyn is insisting he will stay and his troops – in the pressure group, Momentum and the unions – are mobilising. But, in truth, his position seems to be untenable. Labour has reached an impasse, that is to say (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) "a position from which there is no escape."

About the Author

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