

The “power vs. principles” conundrum – or why Labour can’t get a grip

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Labour’s future direction is at stake. Its leader has the backing of a large part of the membership yet appears to have no prospect of forming a government in order to deliver upon his vision. Although the trigger was the (tokenistic) addition of Jeremy Corbyn on the ballot paper in 2015, the crisis is caused by more than Corbyn. [Artemis Photiadou](#) and [Sean Kippin](#) explain why current events are instead about Labour’s fundamental, and repeating conundrum: electability or ideology.



There’s a saying that history does not repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes. Labour’s history seems to rhyme rather precisely around every four decades. Whenever Labour was mauled in an election, its instinct has been to respond with a lurch to the left, before then entering into a period of crisis in which the centre and right attempt to expunge that left. This pattern can be reaction to defeat, but radical leaders emerged in the aftermath of financial crises that wrought profound damage on the public sector and on Labour’s constituency.



It happened in 1932 with [George Lansbury](#), it happened again in 1980 with [Michael Foot](#), and it is happening once more today with Jeremy Corbyn. And while there are comparisons to be made between these leaders, the current situation is ultimately linked to two recurring questions about Labour’s identity: how it responds to the far-left, and what it looks for in its leader.

Far-left pressure

Labour’s problem has always been how to manage its far-left faction. Such pressure is inevitable because Labour was created outside of Parliament and from the bottom up. Being a marriage of middle class socialist intellectuals and working class trade unionists, its 100-year history is replete with instances of it fighting with itself – with those considered by the party mainstream to be entryists, or those who attempted to make Labour more radical. Actions against this latter group were famously taken against Trotskyist groups, with the expulsion of members of the *Socialist Outlook* in 1954 and of the *Militant* in 1982.



Exacerbating this tendency is the fact that [radical views are normalised following financial crises](#), and so may become more widespread amongst members. Evidence for this is that Corbyn’s views [resonated across Labour’s grassroots](#). But although leftward turns may resonate more with those already belonging to a centre-left party, [they do not with the rest of the country](#), creating a tension between Labourites who prioritise winning elections and those who prioritise strict adherence to a set of unbendable principles.

Since Labour can ignore neither the perspective held by a large number of its membership, nor abandon the rest of the country, the elections that result from these “power vs. principles” crises tend to be fought between candidates

who back similar policies – Labour tried to appease Bennites by electing the similarly radical Foot, and now a part of Labour rests its hopes with Owen Smith, who, at least publicly, [shares](#) many of Corbyn’s views.

So while [parallels between Corbyn and Foot](#) have been drawn, Foot was Labour’s unity candidate and, ironically, won the contest on the basis that he would prevent a split. Contrarily, Corbyn has shown something approaching disdain towards non-supporters: he presents [himself as an outsider](#), and has [threatened MPs with deselection](#), as if the leader owns those the people have elected. What is being settled, therefore, is as much about leadership style as it is about ideological direction: the question of how willing a prospective leader is to reconcile their views with others’ in order for the party to function properly.

Corbyn’s appeal is in part his refusal to apologise for his beliefs, and his desire to state unequivocally that he is left-wing. His stridency is seen as contrasting poorly with those in Labour who seek to meet the Conservatives half way over issues such as benefit cuts or privatisation – considered by many of their fellow members as something approach evil. This may not be surprising since Labour has long retained a preference for strict adherence to principles – even in Tony Blair’s zenith in 1999, [over three fifths of the membership](#) believed the party should stick stolidly to its principles, even if it meant losing an election.

And so what these “power vs. principles” moments make more pronounced is a question Labour has yet to satisfactorily address: what does it expect from its leader?

The Labour leader’s role

Being comprised of grassroots, trade unions, and the PLP, Labour does not think with one single mind – as we now see in flashing lights. Its *only* hope of articulating a vision lay in a leader’s ability to unite these groups.

A talent for “appeasement” is necessary, but by no means sufficient. Even given the recent rises, Labour’s membership amounts to less than 1 per cent of the electorate. With a clear link between leaders’ [approval rates and election outcomes](#), his (for it is always a he) appeal to outsiders matters enormously. If anything, this wider appeal is key in predicting whether the vision they preach to the 1 per cent during the leadership campaign has any prospect of being realised – otherwise what is the point?

And while current approval rates indicate zero prospect for Corbyn’s vision, there is also a question for Owen Smith’s supporters about what exactly they expect of him – to “win back the party”, to go back to exercising effective opposition, to win a general election, all while preventing a split? Labour has probably written off its chances of success in the next election, even if Smith were to emerge victorious. Their best hope may be that he reprises the role of his fellow Welshman, Neil Kinnock, who shifted Labour away from the fringes, leaving the stage clear for a more electorally appealing successor.

Preventing a split may also be beyond anyone individual’s control, as it was in 1981 when the “gang of four” broke away and formed the SDP. And although the SDP did not become a threat in the long-run, thanks to a combination of residual loyalty to Labour and the First Past the Post electoral system, its short term impact was catastrophic. In the 1983 election, Labour won only 27.6 per cent of the vote – a mere 2 points more than the SDP/Liberal Alliance. The Conservatives gained a landslide majority of 144 against their evenly divided opponents.

Seeing beyond Labour

Debates and contests are part and parcel of democracy. Democracy also imposes a duty on the opposition to scrutinise and challenge the government. The unforgivable result of Labour crises is the party’s inability to fulfil this duty during them. While the 1979 election triggered a disaster that trapped Labour in opposition for 18 years, it also saw the Tories go on to treat the country as their playground over that same time, to the considerable loss of those Labour traditionally represented. The same spectre now haunts us.

Frustratingly, and even though there was a mechanism in the leadership rules to prevent such an outcome – a

substantial nomination threshold – the decision of many MPs was to follow the path taken in 2010 when Diane Abbott was nominated largely on the grounds that the contest would benefit from the presence of a black woman in an all white male field. This time, a white man was incorporated in a more diverse contest on the grounds that the election would benefit from a debate only his presence could facilitate.

The PLP's short memory was in evidence here. Having gotten away with it in 2010, and although the PLP is uniquely placed to mediate between the competing demands of electability and ideology, the MPs of a party which has from birth battled radical factions from within nonetheless saw it fit to nominate Corbyn – a radical and notoriously rebellious MP with no previous experience in a senior position. The parochialism of British politics also contributed. Labour MPs assumed that they were immune from the populism of left and right sweeping Europe, while they cogitated grandly about 'broadening the debate'.

A move that was designed to be nothing more than tokenistic has backfired so spectacularly that the very future of the party has been called into question. And as the debate has broadened, it revealed how Labour truly does not know itself.

About the Authors

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