

Jeremy Corbyn is the New Left

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What are the reasons for the meteoric rise of Jeremy Corbyn, who now seems highly likely to be elected as Labour's next leader? In this article, [Bart Cammaerts](#) explores why Corbyn is succeeding despite much of the media and Labour party figures coming out forcefully against him, writing that he represents the renewal of a pronounced leftist discourse and agenda.



In the UK, but also abroad, the rise of Jeremy Corbyn is witnessed with both astonishment and trepidation. I wrote this piece originally for a Belgian [broadsheet paper](#) as they asked me to explain the apparent success of Corbyn, and this is a translated, but also an edited and expanded, version of the newspaper article.

In the rightwing press, but as much in the centre-left media, Corbyn is depicted as a 'loony lefty', an 'unelectable' radical, and potentially the worst thing that could ever happen to the British Labour party and the left in general. His firmly leftwing ideas are deemed to be 'unrealistic', Marxist, and of a bygone era. The Labour establishment, including New Labour dinosaurs such as Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, have all waged a viciously negative campaign against Corbyn, eagerly amplified by the attack dogs of the mainstream media. So how come, with such negative and vitriolic press coverage and large segments of his own colleagues up in arms against him, Corbyn is still the frontrunner in the race for the party leadership? A number of factors play a role here, I will discuss the two main ones.

Of course, the new procedure for electing the party leader, introduced by Ed Miliband, cannot be ignored. As many of you will remember, in order to counter accusations that he was under the spell of the labour unions, Miliband [opened up the vote](#) for party leadership to non-members and required union members to explicitly pledge their allegiance to the party before being given the right to vote.

The option to become a *registered supporter* proved to be highly popular. As many as 100,000 Britons have paid £3 or more to sign up as a registered supporter. By comparison, the regular members are currently at about 280,000 (also an increase by 80,000 since the 2015 general election), another 100,000 people are predicted to vote through their union membership. Democracy and stimulating participation can of course have unintended consequences; it appears many of those registered supporters are fans of Corbyn and in addition to this many union members will also vote for Corbyn, who has become the preferred candidate of many unions. As a result of all this, Corbyn became a very serious contender indeed. Most [polls suggest](#) that it is highly likely that he will be the next party leader.

However, there is more to his success than changed procedures or even potential infiltration from the right and from the radical left, as is [being suggested](#) here and there. There are much deeper political and social reasons explaining why Corbyn and his outspoken leftist ideas have become so popular in such a short time. Corbyn's rise fits in the prolonged quest of the left to rediscover a new identity, to regain a sense of pride and to rebuild confidence in the strength and moral authority of its own message.

After the elections last spring, which Labour convincingly lost, the right of the party, referring to the past successes of New Labour, saw its chance to attack the somewhat more leftwing course of Miliband and to argue for a 'Tory light' agenda. What they forgot, however, was that the grassroots of the party and the progressive segment of the British population had turned their backs on the so-called third way and on New Labour. Put differently, many people are more than fed-up with the left blatantly accepting the basic logics, values and arrogance of neoliberalism. Instead, many want a serious, forceful and ideologically robust opposition to the current Tory government, their righteous rightwing discourse and their supposedly 'unavoidable' cuts.

It is in this political context that the success of Corbyn needs to be viewed. In many ways, he represents a different kind of politician, a man of principles and convictions rather than a smooth operator willing to do anything to get into power and be 'electable'. He is someone who has the maturity and gravitas, but who at the same time has always remained honest and sincere to his political convictions, a rare treat in the current political realm. To many people, he comes across as likeable, reasonable, and rational when they cut through the negative media representations. Above all, Corbyn has the very rare gift of presenting leftist ideas, such as the redistribution of wealth or the provision of high quality public services, as if it were the most normal and sensible thing to do. Rather than pandering to the right, Corbyn represents, despite his age, the renewal of a pronounced leftist discourse and agenda, fit for purpose for the 21st century.

What we have seen in recent decades is the deliberate de-ideologisation and normalisation – some would say naturalisation – of rightwing and neoliberal solutions to solve the many problems of our society. Rightwing solutions are, in other words, common sense, full stop. Alternative solutions, on the contrary, are denoted as ideological, as biased, as dangerous and loony. It is high time that the (centre-) left learns this lesson and starts to propose leftwing solutions again as sensible solutions, as the real common sense and as fair and morally just. That is exactly what Corbyn is trying to do, with success and this 'unstrategic' strategy might even make him 'electable' in the long run.

About the Author

Bart Cammaerts has recently written an academic article on the discursive war of position between neoliberalism and its alternatives, entitled: '*Neoliberalism and the post-hegemonic war of position: The dialectic between invisibility and visibilities*'. This article has been published in the *European Journal of Communication*.

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