

Why Corbyn's leadership is being judged neither prematurely nor by the wrong standards

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Supporters of the Labour leader believe he is being judged by the wrong standards, and that opponents are unable to understand the leadership style he is offering. [Eric Shaw](#) draws on political theory to explain what that leadership style actually is and writes that, despite Corbyn's merits as an individual, his concept of leadership is not what Labour requires.



Labour is experiencing a crisis of leadership. And this matters. Most voters judge parties less on issues of ideology – values and goals – than on the capacity to deliver. Which party can manage the economy most efficiently? Which is most competent at governing? Here, the role of party leader is often decisive. Assessments of party leaderships are short-cuts for broader evaluation of policy and capacity. Does a leader come across as a credible, trustworthy and convincing future Prime Minister? Does he or she sound the part? Is he/she a good communicator, persuasive, and appealing?

Labour's predicament is that Jeremy Corbyn is hugely unpopular. His poll ratings are worse than for any comparable leader in British polling history. The gap between his standing and that of Mrs. May is now alarmingly wide. In a [recent poll](#), 17% approved of Corbyn's leadership and 58% disapproved. The comparable figures for Mrs. May were 46% and 33%. (In both cases, the rest had no opinion).

But there are those amongst his many supporters within the party who argue that Corbyn is being judged both prematurely and by the wrong standards. Those attracted to him were looking for a *different model of leadership*, whose role is to empower, to galvanise and to operate as a standard bearer of a new mass movement.

It might be useful to explore [James MacGregor Burns's](#) distinction between 'transactional' and 'transforming' leadership. The former envisages leadership in terms of a transaction between the leader and other players in the party. For example, a leader may seek the co-operation and compliance of others through offering a range of incentives, such as policy concessions and personal advancement. Each party to a bargain would be aware of the power resources, proclivities, and preferences of others, and would engage in a process of mutual adjustment.



Transforming leadership, in contrast, envisages as the crucial leadership functions teaching, inspiring and energising, with fervor and dedication in the service of promoting a party's collective purposes. Endowed with clear visions, transformational leaders are primarily concerned with the advocacy and pursuit of wide-ranging values – such as social justice and equality – and are loath to engage in too many compromises that might jeopardise them.

This approach meshes well as the radical (or 'hard') left's model of the party. Labour's prime purpose should be to

give effect to the ideals and objectives with which it was historically associated. These should be embodied in policies determined by the wider party, and not by any parliamentary conclave. The role of the leader should be to [‘rally their own side effectively’](#), to appeal to the party’s base and to facilitate both its democratisation and ‘an empowerment of a new grassroots movement.’ Corbyn’s role as a transforming leader is, in short, to invigorate, mobilise and enthuse as the new voice and standard-bearer of a remoralised party.

Corbyn’s ability to perform this role has undoubtedly been severely handicapped by an unrelentingly and often venomously [hostile media](#). It also needs to be said that his limitations as a communicator and his inability to convey the impression of a man possessing the skills and stature of a prime minister in waiting has not helped.

This is widely recognized (at least by his critics). But, even more fundamentally, his very concept of leadership– the leader as transformer – is flawed. Here it may be useful to take the argument further by citing [Weber’s distinction](#) between ‘the ‘ethic of responsibility’ and the ‘ethic of ultimate ends.’ A political leader who accepts the former is animated by a prudential and calculating spirit, is acutely aware of the consequences of any action, and sees political choice in terms of balancing priorities and awkward trade-offs.

But the ‘ethic of responsibility’ can too easily slide into opportunism, careerism, self-serving actions and mere expediency. It is this that the ‘ethic of ultimate ends’ vehemently rejects. It stands for a more steadfast, determined, and uncompromising form of politics driven by principle and honesty. Corbyn’s appeal for many in Labour’s ranks is that he embodied this ‘ethic of ultimate ends’ and rejected Labour’s customary mode of leadership, with all its equivocations, evasions, and half-measures.

The danger is that the personal appropriation of a higher morality and a disregard for pragmatism and compromise can transmute into unyielding and obdurate political stance. As [Weber commented](#), ‘the believer in an ethic of ultimate ends feels “responsible” only for seeing to it that the flame of pure intentions is not quenched.’

This might be compatible with effective leadership when a leader directs a tightly centralised party with full mastery of its key institutions. But Corbyn presides over a party in which power is dispersed among a whole range of institutions, several of which are centres of resistance to his rule. Labour is riven by multiple divisions, over policy, strategy, ideology and, most of all, internal organisation. Most damagingly, it is suffering from a veritable crisis of legitimacy. At present, Corbynistas and their critics lack a shared understanding of the ground-rules and values (democracy, accountability, and representation) which should underpin and validate the way in which power is distributed, decisions taken, and sovereignty located. In short, Corbyn both lacks consent and is hemmed in by institutional constraints, without control of decisive levers of power and the confidence of key players.

In such circumstances transforming leadership imbued by an ethic of ultimate ends is peculiarly inappropriate. Labour is a pluralist organisation composed of people attached to a range of often divergent interests, objectives, and values. When this is compounded by profound internal divisions, the skills of a transactional leader are essential.

This mode of leadership [‘requires a shrewd eye for opportunity, a good hand at bargaining, persuading, reciprocating.’](#) It demands an orientation to leadership governed by the ethic of responsibility, incorporating an open and conciliatory style of engagement, a [‘capacity to modulate personal and political ambitions by patient calculation and realistic appraisal of situations’](#) and an overriding emphasis upon the importance of reaching consensus and coalition-building. It involves accommodating public opinion with membership preferences, regulating disagreements, astute political maneuvering and a capacity, above all, to hold the party together. Corbyn has merits – decency, honesty, integrity – but it is not at all evident that concept of leadership is what the party requires.

About the Author

Eric Shaw is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Stirling.



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