

# No 'suicide note': Jeremy Corbyn, not his manifesto, is what holds Labour back

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Labour's manifesto is not the hard-left document its opponents would have you believe, writes **Robin Pettitt**. It has little in common with the infamous 1983 'suicide note', not least in its moderate stance on defence. The manifesto advocates gradual change and some of its ideas, such as a National Education Service, are innovative. What is holding Labour back is its leader – and the MPs who nominated Jeremy Corbyn in the 2015 leadership contest bear responsibility for that.*



Jeremy Corbyn launches the Labour manifesto at the University of Bradford, May 2017. Photo: [Tim Green](#) via a [CC-BY-2.0 licence](#)

After a draft of the [Labour 2017 manifesto](#) was leaked, the predictable comparison was instantly with Labour's ill-fated 1983 '[longest suicide note](#) in history'. However, it is also quite clear that this is not a classic Old Labour/Bennite-style manifesto, regardless of what some of the [more dramatic newspaper headlines](#) might say. Yes, it is certainly more state-interventionist than is the current economic orthodoxy, but there is also plenty to show that Labour's offering is really quite different in 2017 compared to 1983.

Perhaps most noteworthy in the context of Jeremy Corbyn's own strongly stated views on nuclear power, [especially military](#), is the issue of nuclear weapons. Jeremy Corbyn has publicly [stated his opinion](#) that he would never use nuclear weapons (somewhat curtailing the power of deterrence). This position was not much in evidence in the 2017 manifesto, which committed the party to renewing Trident. The leaked draft included the relatively moderate caveat that 'any prime minister should be extremely cautious about ordering the use of weapons of mass destruction which would result in the indiscriminate killing of millions of innocent civilians' – a sentiment any sensible human being would surely agree with. However, even this suggestion – that mass-murder on an unprecedented scale should not be rushed into – has disappeared from the final version. This is certainly a long way from the unilateralism of the 1983 manifesto. Even the UK defence industry (i.e. the making and selling of weapons) is praised as 'world leading'.

This should not be underestimated as a feature in the manifesto: 'we're good at making weapons (to kill people with), and this is a good thing'. This is clearly a long way from the caricature of Labour being hell-bent on leaving the UK defenceless against the Russians, terrorists, North Korea and [probably the Spanish](#). How committed Corbyn actually is to these points is impossible to say, but one can imagine that he was not full-throated in his support. However, the very fact that these policies are in the 2017 manifesto makes the 1983 comparison somewhat weak.

## A social democratic, populist manifesto

In addition, some of the supposedly radical state-interventionist policies are rather modest. The supposed 'renationalisation' of energy suppliers is merely the creation of state-owned supplies entering the market to compete against private suppliers. Yes, there is more to it than that, but it is hardly an all out state takeover. Further, the renationalisation of the railways is again both moderate and gradual. The proposal is to bring railways back into public ownership as the existing franchises expire. Trains on the East Coast Mainline were run by the state for five years [with reasonable success](#), so the plan is not without precedent.

There are also genuinely innovative suggestions in the manifesto, especially the proposal for a National Education Service (NES) – overtly echoing the creation of the NHS. The NES is supposed to create a cradle to grave education system, free at the point of use. Labour argues that this will help parents return to work quicker and give people better opportunities for up- and re-skilling. In what is supposedly increasingly a 'knowledge economy', both nationally and globally, and with the job market undergoing rapid change, necessitating more frequent career changes this proposal makes perfect sense. Indeed, a cradle to grave education system would help alleviate some of the challenges of an ageing population. Opportunities for post-retirement education could help with combating both loneliness and dementia.

Further, [polls suggest](#) that many of the policies are quite popular. This then is not a red-to-the-bone socialist out-of-touch document, but a solidly social democratic populist map for gradual change. Admittedly, there is a big question over how it will all be paid for. Conservatives (in the broad sense of the word) have predictably, and perhaps rightly, [attacked Labour](#) on this issue.

## Labour's problem is Corbyn's credibility

However, the popularity of the individual policies and the extent to which they are affordable is not what will hold Labour back. The problem is the lack of credibility of Corbyn and his team as a believable government in waiting. Corbyn has [consistently trailed Theresa May](#) in terms of 'best prime minister' and as best on a wide range of issues. That the Conservatives see May as an asset is exemplified by their [focus on 'Theresa May's team'](#) rather than 'The Conservative Party'. Corbyn, by contrast, is seemingly [something to be avoided](#) by Labour Party candidates. It really does not matter what your policies are if the electorate does not believe that the supposed PM in waiting is not capable of doing the job. It is highly unlikely that Corbyn will be able to do much to change how he is perceived by the electorate during the remaining few weeks of the campaign.

In short, the manifesto itself is perhaps unlikely to be the main area of discussion when it comes to debating why Labour suffered in the election the way every poll suggests it will. Instead, it is likely that there will be two opposing views:

- 1) Labour's defeat was caused by Corbyn's chronic inability to project himself as Prime Ministerial material; or
- 2) Corbyn was undermined by hostile right-wingers in the parliamentary party, who played into the hands of an equally hostile right wing press.

There is no doubt that the Parliamentary Labour Party's moderates/hostile Blairites (delete according to your personal beliefs) will focus on the first option, whereas the 'hard left' will focus on the second. Whilst it is true that Corbyn did not enjoy the support of a significant majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party, there is enough evidence to suggest that the main problem for Labour in 2017 is Corbyn's lack of Prime Ministerial credibility. In that case, if one is to assign blame for Labour's likely defeat on 8 June, it lies squarely with those moderate Labour MPs who nominated Corbyn in the 2015 Labour leadership election without any desire to see him win, but rather to '[widen the debate](#)'. That clearly looks likely to have been a mistake of epic proportions.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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