

Losing Momentum? The power struggles that are hobbling the Corbyn movement

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Momentum movement faces two crucial problems, says **Robin Pettitt**. It explicitly allies itself with the Corbynite wing of the party. Yet it has also become a battleground for three groups: Bennites, a wave of new members, and the so-called 'Trots' or 'entryists'. Meanwhile, the movement has been torn between a traditional branch-based structure and a 'virtual' model.*



People's Momentum, or Momentum for short, was set up with the [express purpose](#) of harnessing the 'energy and enthusiasm' generated by Jeremy Corbyn's successful campaign for the leadership of the Labour Party. It is effectively Corbyn's leadership campaign given more [permanent form](#). To some extent, this makes a lot of sense. The leadership election that saw Corbyn rise to the top of the party also saw a huge increase in membership: from around 200,000 in 2015 to more than 500,000 in early 2017. This is by any measure an impressive feat at a time when parties are struggling to attract politically-active voters who tend to favour less formal forms of political engagement.

However, getting people to join a party is the easy bit. Keeping them from lapsing and getting them active is far more problematic. As one UK party organiser told me in an interview for my project on Recruiting and Retaining Party Activists:

I think now there is much more of a premium in reaching out to supporters. The target audience and those who want to get engaged, but who do not want to pay the [fee] for a membership. Supporters are important, and moving beyond membership. It is much more valuable to me to get someone who is willing to knock on doors than someone who is willing to pay [fee].

So in the context of needing to win elections, having more members is less important than how many people (card-carrying members or not) are willing to actually go out and campaign. It also illustrates the view that formal membership is less important than a willingness to be active. Indeed, as originally envisaged, Momentum would be

a broad-based campaigning group bringing together anyone attracted to the Corbyn camp's ideological outlook:

'While all of the individuals setting up Momentum are members or supporters of the Labour party, the group anticipates that many thousands of people who are not [Labour supporters] will be involved in the wider social movement'.

The organisation has been controversial and frequently [criticised](#). However, it is clearly important to find some way of keeping new members engaged and to reach beyond the traditional party member model, and make use of supporters who are not formal members. Both are at the heart of what Momentum was set up to do.

However, Momentum faces (at least) two crucial problems. The first is that **it is explicitly sectarian**. It does not aim simply at getting Labour supporters active. It is quite clear that it aims at getting people active who are sympathetic to the ideological position of the Corbyn camp. In other words, it could be seen as being not about getting Labour supporters active, but about getting the 'right' kind of supporters active. If one does not support Corbyn-style political views, one is not welcome. Momentum could then be seen as not about helping the Labour Party to win, but to help Corbyn's supporters to win.

One member of the Labour Party's centre-right [wrote to Jon Lansman](#) that: 'we find it strange that the winning candidate in a Labour leadership election would sustain the life of the campaign after winning, rather than seeing their role now as having responsibility to unite the whole party.' This is to some extent an unfair criticism since there are numerous organisations set up by Labour Party members with the purpose of promoting specific policy positions. In some ways Momentum is not that different an idea from [Progress](#), an organisation associated with the right wing of the Labour Party. Nevertheless, it does limit the potential for Momentum to encourage activism if they are only interested in certain kinds of Labour supporters, and if these supporters are then viewed with suspicion by other elements of the party and therefore likely to get a frosty reception from non-Momentum activists.

The second problem is that **Momentum has become a battleground between three groups within the movement**: the traditional (and by now rather old) Labour left, sometimes referred to as Bennites; younger, politically-engaged campaigners; and members of the various small political groupings to the left of the Labour Party, such as The Socialist Workers Party, Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the remnants of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The traditional left is focussed more on the internal politics of the Labour Party and tend to favour traditional organisational structures. The younger campaigners are in Momentum because of their desire to campaign for issues close to their heart. They have much less interest in formal organisational structures. The final group, the 'Trots' as they are sometimes (somewhat inaccurately) referred to, are accused of seeing Momentum as either a vehicle for influencing the Labour Party ('entryism'), or as the [foundation for a new party](#) to challenge the Labour Party from the left.

The disagreement between the three groups has become encapsulated by an increasingly **bitter struggle over how Momentum should be organised**. On one side are people who want a traditional local branch structure with locally-elected delegates going to national policymaking meetings. On the other is a model based on internet voting and debate – i.e. a 'virtual' organisation. The traditional branch-based model is exactly what the younger campaigners are not interested in. Not for them long-winded branch meetings in draughty civic halls. It is also a structure that the 'Trots' are expert at dominating. The virtual model is more attractive to the younger activists, and is probably also easier for Momentum's Jon Lansman to control.

The struggle seems to have been, at least temporarily, won by Lansman. Momentum's new constitution is based on the virtual organisational model. It also requires full fees paying members of Momentum (as opposed to affiliated supporters) to join the Labour Party by June 2017. This seems to be aimed at getting rid of the 'Trots'. However, some far-left groups (such as the so-called 'Labour Party Marxists', which seems to be a front for the Communist Party of Great Britain) are encouraging their supporters to join the Labour Party so as to be able to remain in

Momentum. At the same time Lansman's opponents are organising what one might call 'alt-Momentum' meetings separate from the 'official' Momentum structure. This is clearly a big problem for Momentum's ability to function as a mobilising force. Younger campaigners, especially, are likely to be put off by debates over organisational structures, and by the bitterness of the dispute.

In short, what Momentum was set up to do is clearly hugely important, especially in the light of reports that large numbers of new members who joined after 2015 (i.e. very likely driven by the leadership campaign and Corbyn's subsequent leadership) have started [leaving the party](#). It is critical for a party to energise its members to become active; to maintain the enthusiasm of new members; and to reach out to non-member supporters. All of this is what Momentum was set up to do. However, the sectarian nature of the organisation and the ongoing power struggle, including the presence of an alt-Momentum, have the potential to fatally undermine Momentum's prospects of achieving its aims.

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

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