

If he handles his leadership well, Jeremy Corbyn could become the successful rebel head of an anti-establishment party

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Jeremy Corbyn was recently announced as the Leader of the Labour Party, surprising everybody in beating established candidates such as Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper, despite having never held a frontbench role. His critics suppose that his status as an outsider, somewhat outside the mainstream of his parliamentary party, may mean that he has a short life span as Leader, but as **Benjamin Worthy** argues, these attributes served the likes of Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt and Margaret Thatcher.*



Roosevelt, Churchill, and Corbyn? (Credit: Kathleen Tyler Conklin, CC BY 2.0)

‘Have no fear’ said Churchill of Eden’s successor when Anthony Eden resigned in 1938 ‘the greatness of his office will find him out’. This week large parts of the government, the media and, perhaps most dangerously and short-sightedly, the Parliamentary Labour party are waiting, and mostly hoping, to see Jeremy Corbyn get found out too.

The facts of the Corbyn case have been endlessly repeated with glee or despair, depending on your view. He has never been close to any political office and is a lifetime rebel, [the second most rebellious MP against his own party after his own Shadow Chancellor](#). As a permanent fixture on the Labour backbenches, he has a list of lost causes that would cheer up Saint Jude and is so far to the left he writes a regular column for [the morning star](#). He has clocked up more than three decades in the wilderness and margins of political life. He is unpopular with his own party, unknown by the public and unprepared for leadership.

However, these weaknesses could actually be strengths. Being a rebel, in the wilderness, for so long could give Corbyn strengths and opportunities.

First, 'a politician who cannot bear unpopularity', argued Churchill in his colonial way, 'was not worth his salt'. Although he isn't experienced in any office, Corbyn is very used to the downside of political leadership: unpopularity, criticism and being told he is 'wrong'. Of all the MPs in Parliament, he's probably one of the most tested and attuned to political isolation. By now, he has the strength and resilience needed to sustain his principles and, after 30 years fighting, is unlikely to be upset or put out by hostility. He could probably sympathise with FDR's famous comment in his [second New Deal address](#) 'They are unanimous in their hate for me—and I welcome their hatred'.

Second, being a rebel gives a leader a powerful kind of moral 'licence' or authority to try to change things. All leaders from Margaret Thatcher to Barack Obama have set themselves up as some kind of 'outsider' against the 'system': Thatcher famously styled herself as the 'rebel head of an establishment government'. Corbyn is a genuine rebel, linked to that radicals around Ken Livingstone's GLC in the 1980s. His new licence is made all the stronger by his democratic crowd-sourced mandate (from, it should be remembered, across the whole Labour party). This can be used as leverage to shake up things-as seen with PMQs this week.

Third, being an 'outsider' and a rebel in the wilderness also lends credibility-what John Kane calls in his [great study of outsiders](#), 'moral capital'. It offers a leader a personal (almost biblical) 'narrative' or 'journey', of a kind, as John Gaffney points out, now expected in French politics. Time on the margins lends a sense of being 'apart' from the 'elite', in Corbyn's case places him far from the Oxford-Cambridge, Bullingdon Clubs and PPE. It can also give a leader rectitude of being 'right'. Not all Corbyn's causes are lost. Peace talks in Northern Ireland, opposing privatisation and the invasion of Iraq found him on the right side of history and opinion.

If Corbyn's 'rebellion' and time in the 'wilderness' can be put to good use, it places him in some potentially interesting company. From Winston Churchill's near decade on the Conservative backbenches in the 1930s opposing appeasement to De Gaulle's patient wait for France's call in the 1950s, rebellion can be a source of authority, credibility and a justification for radical experiment.

Jeremy Corbyn's leadership could, if played right, have him as the genuine rebel head of an anti-establishment party fitting a growing political mood. Office and leadership can do strange things to people-remember the fates of the super experienced, super intelligent Anthony Eden or Gordon Brown. And then there is Clement Attlee, Britain's most left-wing Prime Minister. Lambasted as a dull nonentity and described by George Orwell as 'resembling nothing so much as fish rotting from the head downwards' he is now [praised by the Daily Mail](#). Attlee reflected back on his career, and the unexpected nature of leadership, in a famous self-penned limerick:

*'There were few who thought him a starter,
Many who thought themselves smarter.
But he ended PM,
CH and OM,
an Earl and a Knight of the Garter.'*

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of Democratic Audit, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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