

A victory for Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership race could bring about a realignment of British politics

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Jeremy Corbyn looks set to win the Labour leadership election, despite initially being pegged as a no-hope also-ran. The conservative right are cheering him on, seeing the Islington North MP as ushering in a period of Conservative Party hegemony. But is he being underestimated? **Danny Rye** argues that a Corbyn-led party could see a realignment of not just the Labour Party, but British politics, in a way which brings the traditional left back into the mainstream.*



The unexpected ascendancy of Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership campaign has clearly been a boon for the press, the commentariat and academics. What was looking like a dull and predictable contest has been electrified, and many column inches have been filled with speculation on what it all means for the left, the Labour Party and British politics. With some notable exceptions, much of what has been written suggests bad news for the party: stories about 'entryism', warnings of internal strife and electoral catastrophe echo the travails of the 1980s. However, I may be a hopeless optimist, but this is not the 1980s and it is possible to take a more positive view without buying wholesale into the Corbyn phenomenon.

Whether he wins or loses, an opportunity exists to revitalise and reinvigorate the centre-left, by reconnecting the Labour Party with the left more broadly and challenging it to refresh its ideas. There are three aspects to this: the effect of this development on the broader democratic left, the effect on the Labour Party in particular and its impact on the key lines of debate in British politics.

Firstly, it could mean a revitalised left wing voice in mainstream British politics. The Corbyn campaign has clearly galvanised activists both inside and outside the party, and has the potential to reconnect the broader democratic left to the political mainstream. This appears to be made up of two elements: those on the left in the Labour Party and those on the broader democratic left outside it. The former – many of whom are the most active, engaged and loyal members who regularly attend meetings and are out on the doorstep making the party's case – have become

revivified and are less willing to moderate their views in the electoral interests of the party, as they had been during the New Labour era.

This may explain why Corbyn has done so well in terms of constituency nominations. In those nomination meetings, the sound of yearning for a Labour Party more true to itself and its members has been heard quite clearly. The latter, including former members and activists who had given up hope that it would ever provide a home for them again, are increasingly enthused that they might actually have some kind of voice in political debate and have thus rejoined, or signed up as Affiliated or Registered Supporters in order to vote for Corbyn. Added to that are, it appears, some who may never have voted Labour before (perhaps supporting other left-wing parties at previous elections, or who have not voted at all), but who would be willing to engage in a party they felt to be more clearly distinguished from the Conservatives and more robust in its opposition to austerity.

Secondly, the consequences for the Labour Party might be that it finally has the debate that it badly needs to have. During its dark days of electoral failure and internal conflict in the 1980s, Keith Waterhouse pointed out that, however bad things looked, there was too much life left in the party for its decline to be terminal. Indeed, the conflict between left and right, between power and principle has been part of what seems to give the party energy as much as disables it. The catastrophic rift with MacDonald in the 1930s, the battles with Bevanites in the 1950s, and those with Bennites in the 1980s were all desperately damaging to the party and yet presaged significant electoral and political successes. However, in recent years, it appeared that with New Labour, the right's ascendancy within the party was so complete that there was no longer any serious debate left to be had. Ed Miliband's defeat only strengthened the argument that any move towards the left, however small, would be electoral suicide.

But the problem for the right was that their very ascendancy has arguably made them complacent and devoid of new ideas. Thus, despite much talk about the party needing to have a 'debate', the mainstream candidates singularly failed to engage in one. Rather than addressing the question of what actually had gone wrong for Labour Party in any meaningful way or addressing the question of what the Labour Party is actually *for*, the response appeared to be simply that the party's platform was not 'right wing' or 'centrist' enough, a response at least as simplistic as one which says it was not 'left wing' enough. Some MPs lent Corbyn their nominations despite not supporting him in order to promote 'debate' and they have perhaps got more than they bargained for. Nevertheless, the party badly needs to have it and, for good or ill, perhaps that debate might finally begin. It is heartening that there does *still* appear to be life in the party and that there are enough people who still care on both sides of the debate to get involved. Thus, what was consequently looking like a routine and very dull exercise in choosing who might be the least offensive candidate to Conservative swing-voters, now looks like something much more important, or at least more interesting.

If this debate is to be productive, however, it needs to be inclusive of both the left and right of the party. Name calling and making personalised accusations will not produce anything other than bitterness. The left, revitalised by the campaign, can no longer be ignored in the party, whatever the result. But it will need to draw in new ideas, energy and expertise if it is to produce a more broadly appealing vision and maintain momentum beyond its most enthusiastic supporters. Although some of the more closed-minded elements of the left might not welcome it, something that will help this process is the somewhat belated recognition by party centrists of their own failures. Hence, Tristram Hunt and Chuka Umunna's recent call for the right and the 'soft left' in the party to cooperate on 'Labour for the Common Good', with the aim of articulating a coherent political vision for a moderate, electorally oriented Labour Party.

Suddenly the future of social democracy and the centre left is up for grabs and there is an opportunity to both produce new ideas and galvanise enthusiasm and engagement amongst activists of all stripes in the Labour movement. The danger is that this energy will be wasted on bitter infighting. The opportunity is that the creative energy this generates could be galvanised and turned into something that can respond in innovative ways to the Conservatives and their ideologically driven 'austerity' agenda.

The great risk is that a prolonged period of internal debate means that the Labour Party will be out of power for an

extended period of time. The consequences of this could be a repeat of the 1980s and 1990s in which Labour was locked out of government and a long Conservative hegemony ensured that *any* version of the left's agenda would not be implemented. This, indeed, is the fear of many mainstream Labour members and leaders. From this point of view, the ascendancy of Corbyn could be seen as a boost for the Conservative Party and its political strategy. However, and this is my third point, the opportunity is that, rather than simply attempting to navigate a landscape fashioned by its political enemies, the Labour Party can seek to reshape the terms of debate. Out of the clash of ideas, perhaps a fresh, distinctive response to austerity can be fashioned, backed up by a new generation of activists which reconnect it with the broader democratic left in British Politics. This might have the additional positive effect of helping to stem at least some of the decline in political engagement and participation.

Thus, an optimistic view might be to see this as an opportunity for *all* strands of thought in the Labour Party – left, right and centre – to respond to the austerity agenda, not by chasing the tail of Conservative political strategy but by actually developing a coherent critique and appealing alternatives of its own. In other words, challenging orthodoxy rather than simply moderating it, producing distinctive ideas, rooted in centre-left thinking and traditions, rather than moderating right wing thinking with the odd left-ish idea.

It is possible, therefore, that this could represent an important moment for the left in Britain – a realignment of sorts which brings the broader left back into the political and Parliamentary mainstream by providing it with a legitimate voice within a mainstream political party. One which forces the Labour Party to reassess what and who it is for and stimulates 'moderate' voices on the left into more imaginative responses that engage with a broader spectrum of left-wing ideas and traditions whilst maintaining the potential for a broad appeal.

Or it may be that I am just a hopeless optimist.

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