

Jeremy Corbyn's rhetoric is effective because his style of engagement contrasts so markedly with the other candidates

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Jeremy Corbyn, the veteran left-wing MP for Islington North, has shaken up the Labour leadership race, and now enjoys frontrunner status despite holding a rather different political outlook from the majority of his colleagues on the Labour benches in Parliament. But what lies behind his success? Rhetorical expert **Andrew Crines** argues that Corbyn's success is in part rooted in the different kind of communication that he has used, which differs from mainstream politics in general and his rivals for the leadership in particular.*



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On August 1 this year I decided to visit Liverpool to hear the prospective leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn speak to his supporters. Part of the reason to do this was to discover if his support was a constructed myth; how he addresses the audience; and the make-up of the kind of audiences he was attracting. It would also provide a first-hand account of his rhetorical style, and see which communicative strategies he is using. It would also be of interest to contrast those to other leadership contenders.

The first suggestion to debunk is that his support is a myth. In a room designed for approximately 800 people, 2000 came to hear him speak. The hall was standing room only, and even then there was little space to stand. This suggests that he has a following which is inspiring disaffected members of the electorate. The size of the audience was helped by Corbyn speaking at the Pride rally earlier in the day. Furthermore the audience was comprised of a range of age groups, however the most dominant groups were the young and older voters. Thus he had an audience who were eager, keen, and ready to listen to his message.

It is also interesting to note how the meeting was organised. A choir led the audience in a rendition of The Internationale, although few knew the words, thus they resorted to humming. This was followed by a chant of 'The

Workers United Will Never Be Defeated'. Tony Mulhearn, the prominent member of the Socialist Party and, before that, Militant Tendency addressed the crowd ahead of Corbyn to ensure the audience was sufficiently prepared for the main event.

This created a highly charged atmosphere in the room. Indeed, the often overused phrase 'buzzing' could apply in describing the mood of the audience. It was an audience which expected to be led in a noble cause, rather than spoken to about the realities of governing. This was coupled with the growing temperature, which may appear superficial on the surface, but helped feed the emotional energy in the room. Within this context, Corbyn arrived on stage (having been kept off it in order to create an entrance).

Corbyn talked about mass inequalities, promises of renationalisation, expectation of a renewed socialist Labour Party, and the hope of creating a more socially just society. These represented the core of his message, and needless to say the audience was highly receptive to his message. However, it is here where a distinctive style of rhetoric is evident, relative to his leadership competitors. Corbyn does not talk about specific policies, nor does he explain how his aspirations will be carried out. Rather he offers an idealistic vision of Labour's future, rooted in direct action and protest. Whilst Burnham, Cooper and Kendall talk about issues which (if elected) would have an impact on the lives of those in need, Corbyn's rhetoric is focused purely upon inward renewal and creating a more left-leaning party.

His supportive audiences don't question this because the character he has constructed for himself is one of authenticity. This character is one of honesty, caring, and left unity. Put simply, he is trusted by his word because his style of engagement is very different to the conventional post-Kinnock wisdom that one 'doesn't play politics with peoples lives'. In contrast, Burnham, Cooper, and Kendall are seen as members of the Westminster elite, and therefore cannot be trusted because they represent the mainstream. This is despite the fact Corbyn has been an MP since 1983, yet his lack of cabinet experience is seen as a positive in constructing his rhetorical character.

Corbyn's rhetorical style also stands out because of the set piece performances which are being used to create supportive audiences. This creates the momentum which has put him in a strong position to succeed Miliband as leader. Whilst his leadership contenders focus upon the issues of social welfare, economic management, and combating the Tory narrative on Labour's incompetence, Corbyn is offering a clean break. Indeed, he argues that seeking Westminster power isn't necessary because the power of protest is sufficient. This conception, however, is easily refuted by a recent example. In Liverpool he was protesting the privatisation of RBS only days before Osborne pursued the sell-off. This illustrates that whilst the power of protest is significant, it can simply be ignored by the government of the day.

More generally, the Labour leadership election is likely to be decided by second preferences. It is not immediately clear who a Corbyn supporter would choose as their second preference, however supporters of other candidates may be more inclined to nominate a second candidate. Thus, whilst Corbyn has the momentum amongst the £3 supporters, second preferences of Labour members may yet produce an alternative leader with greater potential to appeal to the all-important centrist voter. Indeed, should a candidate other than Corbyn win, then it remains probable that the £3 supporters will step back into the wilderness once more. Either way, consequences of this leadership election will frame the subsequent debate about the future of the Labour Party regardless of who emerges as leader.

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