

Shallow, hostile, toxic: Corbynism's social media problem



Social media creates a bubble in which Jeremy Corbyn's supporters validate each other but convince few others, writes [Andrew S. Crines](#). At the same time, debates on Labour's future currently lack the intellectual justification which writers of the left previously enjoyed. This combination renders Labour unable to articulate a clear message about its vision for the country.

The Labour Party has a long and well-researched history of political and intellectual thinkers. These thinkers are drawn from a wide range of perspectives that includes social democrats, Fabians, Marxists, amongst others. They are each the product of longstanding traditions with origins in various protest movements of the 19th century, with some locating their opposition to inequality in the Enlightenment period. Over the course of industrialisation, they crystallised into developed political ideologies that sought changes to economic and social assumptions.

The aspiration of improving the quality of life underscored much of their mutual objectives. Indeed, whilst coming from diverse backgrounds, they were united in opposition to the exploitative excesses of capitalism and the impact it had upon the working classes. For some on the left it was about replacing capitalism with an entirely new economic order; for others the aim was to reduce the exploitation of capitalism whilst retaining the system through a mixed economy. Put simply, 'capitalism could be tamed'. Despite being united in these objectives, these traditions within the left were very much in opposition to each other, thereby creating divisions on the best ways to bring about a better society.

Today those debates have re-emerged. Some would argue they never dissipated – rather, they simply became less prominent in the increasingly interconnected globalised world. Through systems of progressive taxation and investment, society did indeed begin to improve, and so those debates became less prominent in an increasingly consumerist society. Needless to say the financial crisis threw such assumptions into the air, and gradually those same debates of old re-emerged back into Labour's political discourse.

As is well discussed in other places, the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership has been seen by many as a hopeful sign that alternatives to free market assumptions can be found and be introduced into the mainstream political discourse. The problem is that, so far, such debates lack the intellectual justification which thinkers such as Crosland, Wilson, or Giddens enjoyed. Books such as [PostCapitalism: A Guide to our Future](#) by Paul Mason, [The Candidate: Jeremy Corbyn's Improbable Path to Power](#) by Alex Nunns, and [Leading from the Left](#) by Nigel Cawthorne are restricted in their appeal to sympathetic audiences who accept many of the assumptions of Corbyn's leadership. These books lack the intellectually-charged analyses of Bevan's [In Place of Fear](#), Wilson's [The Relevance of British Socialism](#), Crosland's [The Future of Socialism](#), or Holland's [The Socialist Challenge](#). Rather, they position Corbyn as the sole driving force of Labour renewal and use emotional language over evidence-based analyses. This is not to suggest noteworthy texts are entirely absent – [The Corbyn Effect](#) features an interesting and diverse range of contributions.

In part the problem of the left's growing intellectual difficulties are a by-product of a political discourse that has become toxic. These create arenas that preclude the style of arguments that have been a feature of Labour discourse in the pre-Corbyn period. This is because social media has brought individuals and groups together in a way hitherto unimaginable. It is sometimes forgotten that before the age of Twitter there was a healthy detachment between politicians, commentators, journalists, voters, and activists. This detachment slowed down the process of discussion, but it did not end it. Indeed, it can be characterised as 'quality over quantity'. That slower pace allowed all to think more carefully about the comments or arguments they wanted to make, and how they were presented.

Arguments are best used when trying to convince, rather than silence ideas. Also considered arguments need time to be constructed and justified in a way that platforms such as Twitter do not allow. It is, however, ideal for opinions over evidence-based positions to be put in place of the kind of arguments that improve the quality of our democracy. Put simply, a slower pace isn't simply an ideal – it is a necessity within a healthy political environment.

The impact of this area upon Labour's ability to articulate a clear message has been substantial. A speedy, knee-jerk approach to political engagement prevents any meaningful attempt to connect with voters. Indeed, it can be alienating because it tends to be conducted in a hostile environment where there simply is no time to construct an intellectually informed argument. As such, it is not the arena where true social democratic renewal is possible.

This raises the obvious question of where now for Labour? The problem Corbyn has is that his leadership is very much connected to social media. It is difficult to divorce Corbynism from social media, and so this has created a safe bubble in which Corbyn's most loyal supporters validate each other but convince few others that they are right. If anything, this hostile environment for criticism can have the opposite effect. However, if Labour is to begin an intellectual journey towards renewal and change, and to construct the evidence-based justifications for a more social democratic approach to society, then contemporary Labour thinkers are going to need to take their arguments into the outside world.

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