Transforming Labour: The ‘New’ Labour Leadership of Jeremy Corbyn

The General Election transformed Jeremy Corbyn’s standing – both inside and outside the Labour party. **Andrew Crines** argues that while Corbyn remains an ineffective parliamentary leader he has the opportunity to reshape British social democracy, and Labour politics.

Jeremy Corbyn’s election to the leadership in September 2015 set in motion a political narrative of inevitable defeat at the ballot box. This was predicated upon the assumption that he did not have the leadership skills needed to lead and manage the party. Given Corbyn’s lack of cabinet experience and record of consistent rebellion against the leadership of Labour’s leaders since Neil Kinnock it became almost self-evident that Corbyn would not be able to lead Labour to electoral victory.

In terms of how these positions were academically justifiable then we can employ the criteria laid down by two established figures of political leadership, Leonard Stark and Fred I. Greenstein. Each set out a typology of skills needed for effective political leadership. As Heppell observed each represent ‘a useful analytical framework through which to examine those who seek to become Prime Minister’ (Heppell 2012: 5). Stark argues that to win a leadership election the candidate *must* be acceptable to the parliamentary party, be electable to non-aligned voters, and also display leadership competence in their day-to-day party management. On each of these measures there is evidence to suggest Corbyn failed. For example, he was unacceptable to the parliamentary Labour party as evidenced through the no confidence vote; Labour was running far behind the Conservatives in opinion polls thereby suggesting Labour was unappealing to the voters under his leadership; and his leadership style lacked the competence of [arty management that a leader needs. Thus if we employ Stark’s typology even loosely we can find evidence to argue that Corbyn’s leadership is a failure.

For Greenstein a leader must be an effective public communicator; possess effective organisational capacities; display political skills for collegiate party management; have a clear personal vision for how they want their leadership to inspire the party; possess cognitive style, and finally emotional intelligence. On these criteria there is evidence to suggest Corbyn also failed. Indeed, he struggled to engage with the media as evidenced by retreating from reporters; he was unable to organise and execute a convincing reshuffle of his shadow cabinet; he failed to display political skills over major divisions in the party such as on the Syria vote or the issue of Trident renewal; he appeared to be driven by ideology rather than cognitive abilities on issues such as Brexit post-referendum; and finally he seemed highly emotional in parliamentary and in other media engagements. Indeed, this includes displays of anger and annoyance at both members of the Commons and interviewers. Thus if we employ Greenstein’s typology we also find evidence of leadership failure.

Despite the result of the general election, therefore it must be concluded that Corbyn remains an ineffective Parliamentary *leader* although he is a highly experienced *campaigner.* Indeed, Corbyn’s campaigning style connects directly with voters because he galvanises supporters through highly emotional campaign rhetoric. This does not forgive his leadership issues, however it does suggest that through engagement with a close leadership team future issues could be averted.

**Labour Under Corbyn**

So why was Corbyn’s leadership largely considered a failure by commentators prior to the 2017 General Election? One salient issue throughout Corbyn’s tenure as Labour leader has been internal divisions within the party over his leadership. On becoming leader in September 2015, Corbyn was immediately plunged into a sustained dispute with the PLP over how he managed the party. However this remained mostly behind closed doors until the dismissal of Hilary Benn from the Shadow Cabinet. This dismissal, which occurred at 12.50am on June 26 2016 precipitated a lengthy series of resignations against Corbyn’s decision (Boffey *et al* 2016). In part this was because the dismissal was seen as revenge for Benn’s Syria speech, however it also suggested a lack of political skills given the consequences for party unity. The consequence of the resignations was, however, a self-imposed clear out of moderates and a subsequent injection of MPs more loyal to Corbyn into the Shadow Cabinet.

It is also worth briefly reflecting on the publication of the now infamous ‘loyalty list’ of members of the PLP drawn up by allies of Corbyn. As an indicative example of the hostile relationship between Corbyn and the PLP, this illustrates the depth of discontent between the two and one of the reasons why his leadership was seen as a failure (Pine 2016). Indeed, it appeared that Corbyn was losing control of the party and by doing so he would be unable to lead it into a successful General Election.

Yet it was the referendum on the United Kingdom’s continued membership of the European Union which precipitated the most significant breakdown between the two competing wings of the Labour party. Corbyn’s role in the Remain campaign has been criticised for being largely lacklustre and uninspiring, relative to his energy in his leadership campaign(s). Peter Mandelson criticised Corbyn saying, ‘not only was he most of the time absent from the battle, but he was holding back the efforts of Alan Johnson and the Labour In campaign. I mean they felt undermined, at times they felt actually their efforts were being sabotaged by Jeremy Corbyn and the people around him’. He also refused to share a platform with Remain campaigners from other parties such as David Cameron. After the Leave vote, the PLP responded by organising a vote of no confidence in his leadership which led to 80 per cent of Labour MPs voting for him to resign. Corbyn, however failed to do so and was later challenged for the leadership by Owen Smith.

This leadership election was a battle for the type of Labour the party wanted to be. The moderates framed this election around whether Labour should be a parliamentary party or a protest movement. Ultimately, Corbyn increased his mandate and the PLP accepted defeat in trying to unseat him. What followed was a period of despondency in which the narrative of inevitable electoral wipe out was repeated by Labour politicians, academics, and commentators. It is here where I must reflect on my own contribution to this narrative. In a piece for *the Huffington Post* I argued ‘Corbyn needs to go’ in order for Labour to rebuild. More substantially, ‘he is demonstrably unfit to be leader of the Opposition or to be Prime Minister. He lacks the personal skills needed, the temperament, or the ability to balance an argument between competing perspectives. He is also holding Labour back from being a credible party of government. Indeed, it is unclear if Labour is even a credible party of opposition’ (Crines 2017). This argument was predicated upon an application of the Stark and Greenstein criteria of his style of leadership, rather than his success as a campaigner, at which he is clearly far more effective.

**The Snap General Election**

On April 18 Theresa May called for a general election to be held on 8 June in order to strengthen her hand in the Brexit negotiations. The Conservatives were in a commanding position in the polls, and Labour appeared to be heading towards the wipe out predicted by many over the course of Corbyn’s leadership. This appeared to be the trajectory until the Conservatives released their manifesto, which shifted the dynamic of the campaign away from May and towards Corbyn. In part this was because of growing public disquiet over issues such as social care, fox hunting, the loss of benefits for pensioners, and the introduction of new Grammar Schools. The Tory manifesto projected an image of an arrogant Conservative Party that wanted to reverse the Cameronite rebranding and embrace a more classic form of social conservatism. Corbyn and the Labour Party were able to take the campaign to the Tories by framing their attacks against the ‘nasty party’. Indeed, the calling of the General Election enabled Corbyn to re-enter an arena in which he has enjoyed substantial success – the campaign.

Despite this, however, it was still expected by commentators that the Conservatives would increase their majority. This was because Corbyn appeared to be talking to large crowds of his own supporters and neglecting the voters Labour needed to attract in order to win the election. This was based upon the long established and confirmed assumption from previous elections that the youth vote tends to be very small. Few expected that Labour would gain seats. Thus when the exit poll was announced, it appeared to come as a shock that not only had the Conservatives lost their majority but also Labour had increased its number of MPs, vote share, and number of votes. Corbyn had performed better than Neil Kinnock in 1987, thereby not only confirming his position but reshaping the attitude of his parliamentarians towards his leadership. The surprise came from those such as myself who expected Labour to pay the price for Corbyn’s ineffective leadership since 2015. Instead a disciplined, well-run six-week campaign that promised ‘for the many not the few’ attracted new voters. It must also be noted that May’s campaign was highly ineffective, largely because of her retreat from the public arena and apparent ‘bunkerisation’

**Reconstructing Social Democracy?**

Corbyn has subverted expectations and is now a new position of strength. The main concern about his leadership is no longer valid – he *can* increase the number of MPs therefore it is *possible* to win a General Election under his leadership. This reframes the relationship between the two by gifting him not only a now largely supportive Parliamentary party but also new MPs who were elected for the first time under Corbyn’s leadership and have a deeper sense of loyalty towards him. For those who never doubted his policies, simply his competence, this outcome comes as a sharp relief. It also gifts Corbyn a new opportunity to renew British social democracy around his socialist vision. Given the assumed trajectory of defeat few have listened to the socialist traditions that Corbyn and his inner circle represent. Corbyn comes from the Bennite tradition of the Party which puts industrial democracy, state ownership, social policy, and equality of outcome at the heart of their socialism (for more read Benn, 1979).

To articulate such a vision for the 21st Century there are a number of issues that need to be considered. When looking at Labour’s social democratic renewal there is a tendency to look backwards to the issues of the 1950s. For example, the issues of industrial relations, trade union rights, social cohesion, and renewing the political system (constitution). These issues remain relevant today, however the arguments that justify them have changed to reflect the onset of globalisation, social liberalism, and the ambitions of the modern British citizen. If the Labour Party is able to unite around a modern approach to achieving these ambitions then social democratic renewal may be able to produce a post-capitalist approach to economic and social policy.

Needless to say over the coming years Brexit will frame a great deal about how UK economic and social policy is approached. Corbyn’s position on Brexit runs contrary to many of the classic social democratic assumptions because it reduces rather than enhances the UK’s position on the world stage. Furthermore, renewing social democracy outside collective bodies may prove problematic given European social democratic parties position themselves within EU institutions, thereby detaching Corbyn further from opportunities to influence supranational, progressive developments.

**Renewing Democracy**

In 2015 I argued that ‘Corbyn rests within a great tradition of Labour renewal. His vision for renewal must strive to take older ideas of equality of outcome and make them relevant to an electorate who have grown accustomed to neo-liberalism in every facet of society’ (Crines 2015). On reflection, despite the many issues raised over Corbyn’s leadership, following the 2017 General Election this is still possible. However, in order to present a renewed social democracy it is vital that the modern generation be involved in the intellectual process. Put simply any reconstruction of social democracy needs to address the concerns of the new generation that has grown up in a free market economy.

Fundamentally, this new generation tends to expect transparency in how political decisions are made and also global interconnectivity through avenues such as social media. In terms of social democratic renewal the millennial generation and their expectations connect easily with Corbyn’s conception of open (direct) democracy. For example, Corbyn’s approach to politics aims to involve others in decision making by ensuring their views are heard. This is contrary to more traditional forms of decision making which is by authority figures with their own agenda. Yet Corbyn invites others to shape the agenda of the party. From this can flow genuine democratic engagement and youth citizenship. This represents an opportunity for Corbyn to reshape how politics is conducted not just in the Labour party but potentially the UK as a whole if Labour is able to increase its number of MPs again – and potentially form a majority government. From Wilson’s *scientific socialism* to Blair’s *New Labour*, Corbyn has a chance to offer a vision of Labour renewal that puts him and his leadership into these Labour traditions.

Andrew S. Crines

University of Liverpool

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