**Chapter 7 – The Labour Leadership Election(s) of Jeremy Corbyn**

Jeremy Corbyn is a seasoned campaigner, a passionate democratic socialist, and appears dedicated to the causes he believes in. Throughout his political career on the backbenches, he has pursued his interests largely detached from the complexities of Westminster politics. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s, he sought to promote what he saw as peaceful campaigns across the Middle East, South Africa, and also civil rights in the United Kingdom, amongst others. He was a strong voice against post-9/11 military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, and has continued to call for peaceful solutions in Libya, Syria, and a more balanced dialogue with Iran. As a consequence of this focus, he was never regarded as a serious contender for a position at the frontline of British politics.

However, through a process of changes to the leadership selection rules following Labour’s return to opposition in 2010, a door was opened by which a contender from the left of the party was in a competitive position for the leadership. Those changes were precipitated by the Falkirk scandal, and the need for the incumbent leader, Ed Miliband, to demonstrate he was willing to reform the relationship between Labour and the trade unions.

Following Labour’s 2015 electoral defeat, the subsequent leadership race would reshape the nature of Labour politics when Corbyn was successfully nominated by some members of the PLP. Over the course of the campaign, Corbyn would galvanise his existing supporters, inspire new ones, and speak a language to the Labour Party which it had not heard since the 1970s. This was the language of democratic socialism, nationalisation, economic planning, and most importantly – state intervention to save industries. It was enough to present a new message of hope to a selectorate tired of the politics of compromise and austerity. Indeed, it was enough to win Corbyn the leadership, and with it a new era in Labour Party politics which this chapter will evaluate. It is important to note, however that ‘Corbyn had been propelled to the leadership at the behest of an increasingly hard left membership’ and that ‘the membership was more concerned with ideological purity and control over the party, as opposed to the compromises necessary to win power’ (Crines et al, 2018).

**Changing the rule book – the leadership selection process**

The Labour Party has enjoyed a long relationship with the trade unions since its formation (Johnson, 2017). The relationship has been mutually beneficial insomuch as the unions and their members gained a voice at the heart of the party. Equally, some high profile Labour representatives – such as Alan Johnson – were drawn from the trade union movement, bringing with them unique and valuable insights into the concerns of workers. Furthermore, unions financed the Labour Party as a political body. This has, in part, enabled Labour to function as a political party since 1906 and to promote the ideals of collective bargaining, collective action, and opposition to the policies of the Conservatives. As such it can justly be described as a close-knit vital relationship. Moreover, ‘since the creation of an Electoral College in 1980, the Labour Party has opted to involve the extra-parliamentary membership in its leadership contests, but this has often revealed a tension between the preferences of Labour MPs, and those of the extra-parliamentary members in the constituency parties and affiliated trade unions’ (Dorey and Denham, 2016). This tension has continually led subsequent leaders to amend the leadership rules in order to show they are capable of modernising the party. This would again be an issue of Ed Miliband.

Indeed, for Miliband the relationship between the party and the unions again became fraught with difficulties for the party leader. On an individual basis, this was because he was perceived to have been selected by the trade union vote in 2010, thus perpetuating the illusion that he owed them a debt of gratitude. There was the risk that opponents to his leadership both within Labour and outside may seek to gain political capital from this as a way of showing ‘misplaced’ loyalties. To counter this perception, Miliband would be compelled to demonstrate more than most that he was not in the so-called pocket of the unions and so would need to distance himself from that perception. A significant issue arose in 2012 that would enable Miliband to begin a process to reform the relationship. In a similar manner to previous reforms, it would focus on the process of leadership selection.

*The Falkirk controversy*

The sitting MP for the Falkirk constituency, Eric Joyce resigned from the Labour Party following a series of drunken incidents and violence in the Commons ‘Sports and Social Club’ bar (BBC, 2012). No charges were subsequently brought and he remained as the MP, although he opted not to stand for re-election in 2015. This selection process would trigger a series of competing interests that would ultimately lead to legal action.

At the time of his resignation Joyce’s local constituency membership comprised of 100 members (Joyce, 2013). The local shop steward, Stephen Deans was the Chair of Unite in Scotland and also the Chair of the Falkirk West CLP. Following Joyce’s resignation, Deans began a process of recruitment to draw in sympathetic members who may be more inclined to support a nominee backed by Unite. Deans focused on the local *Ineos Grangemouth Refinery* where Unite had been a key player in resolving a pension dispute in 2008, and therefore were more likely to be supportive of the Union. The recruitment campaign was highly effective, given after a short time, the membership of Falkirk West increased to over 200 members (Wintour, 2013), more than doubling the membership thereby gifting the Union a significant voice in the process of selecting an alternative candidate. In response to this the outgoing MP, Joyce wrote that the local office was being flooded by Unite members, thereby leading to the union threating to take legal action against him (Joyce, 2013).

Moreover, documents from the local Unite office highlight the success of this recruitment strategy, saying ‘we have recruited well over 100 Unite members to the party in a constituency with less than 200 members. Fifty seven came from a response to a text message alone, [and] followed up face to face. A collective effort locally, but led and inspired by the potential candidate’ (BBC, 2013b). This demonstrates that Unite were enjoying a degree of success in supporting their preferred candidate, Karie Murphy. Despite this there were concerns over the democratic integrity of the strategy and the means Unite were using to grow the membership of the constituency office.

Ultimately, concerns over the process were referred to the National Executive for an investigation on the grounds that it appeared as though the Unite union were engaging in inappropriate tactics (Wintour, 2013). The NEC concluded that the process needed further investigation. This was also in part precipitated by the suggestion that Unite were paying the membership fees of the new members *en bloc*. Joyce criticised Unite by saying ‘the amateur, hubristic and irresponsible actions of a small number of Unite officials at the top of the organisation will require some rules to be changed to prevent another Falkirk’ (Joyce, 2013).

As a consequence of the investigation, Murphy withdrew from the selection process. Deans described the allegations and subsequent investigation as an attack by a ‘Blairite rump’ and that it represented an ‘attack on the work Unite has been doing in the constituency to recruit its members into the Labour Party’ (Aitken, 2013). The framing of the attack is key in understanding the continuing resentment towards the so called Blairites and their ideological impact upon the party. Despite this, given the nature of the allegations the Labour Party Central Office implemented ‘special measures’ to suspend the selection process by taking direct control of the CLP (BBC, 2013c). The NEC investigation had found ‘sufficient evidence to raise concern about the legitimacy of members qualifying to participate in the selection of a Westminster candidate’ (BBC, 2013c). This conclusion would halt Unite’s bid to affect the selection process and that an alternative should be found. Moreover, the NEC ruled that those who joined after Joyce announced his intention to resign would not be able to participate in the selection process.

Alongside this both Murphy and Deans were suspended from the Labour Party, thereby prompting Len McCluskey to argue in a letter to members that ‘the rights of Falkirk CLP members [were] being ignored’ and that ‘Unite is being subjected to a behind-the-scenes smear campaign’ (BBC, 2013d). As the scandal gained national prominence, so did the need for the leader to take direct action. As such, Miliband referred the NEC report to Police Scotland following the evidence of irregularities in the process, which was followed up by the Conservative MP contacting the Chief Constable suggesting Unite had committed fraud (BBC, 2013e). The police, however concluded that ‘there are insufficient grounds to support a criminal investigation at this time’ (BBC, 2013f). Whilst the police investigation yielded no criminal process, the optics of the process looked deeply problematic for a party seeking to win office.

Falkirk represented something of a sea-change moment in how candidates were to be selected. It also raised broader questions over the relationship between the unions and the Labour Party. Arguably, the incident highlighted the fear of modernisers of union members being used to select parliamentarians via the back door. For example Peter (Lord) Mandelson argued at a Progress conference in 2013 that Miliband was ‘storing up danger for himself and for a future Labour government over Parliamentary selections’ (Wintour, 2013) unless the relationship was examined again. Indeed, according to *The Guardian*, some senior party figures and a former minister had called for the Labour Party to break the link with the unions entirely as a consequence of this controversy (Watt and Syal, 2013).

Politically this left Miliband in a problematic position. He was unable to disregard the controversy as a piece of local difficulty because it had escalated into the national media, and also caused disruption within the party. As such, a process of renewal would be necessary. Reforming the relationship between the party and the unions had historically been fraught by controversy, as seen under Gaitskell’s attempts in 1959, Kinnock in 1984, Smith in 1993, and Blair in 1995 (see Thorpe, 2008). It was also close to the election period, thus damping the appetite for a protracted debate about that relationship. However, Miliband needed to demonstrate that he understood and responded to the Falkirk controversy.

Breaking the link entirely would have dire consequences for the Labour Party, not least because of the money which is given to the party, but also because of the longstanding relationship between the two. Needless to say Labour benefits from income from other sources, however breaking the link entirely was never a realistic option. Yet, changes to the process by which the unions contribute towards the selection of the leader were likely. To begin this process, Miliband asked Ray Collins to recommend reforms to how the Labour Party functioned internally (Collins, 2014). The subsequent report recommended the abolition of the Electoral College in favour of a system of true ‘one member, one vote’ thereby giving members of the PLP, CLPs, and unions an equal say in who became the new leader (Collins, 2014). This would reduce the perception of excessive union power in the selection of the leader. In addition to this, ‘registered supporters’ would be encouraged to pay a small fee in order to cast a vote in the leadership election. This would enable non-party members who were sympathetic to Labour’s agenda to have a say in the democratic process. The winning candidate would need to secure over fifty per cent of the total vote in order to be declared the winner after a process of elimination (Collins, 2014).

Trade union members would also be able to ‘opt in’ to the political levy (rather than opt out). This ensured that the unions would still have a close relationship with the Labour Party without the perception of undue influence over the winning candidate. The new leader would also benefit from not appearing to be in the pockets of the unions. Moreover, candidates would also need the support of at least fifteen per cent of the parliamentary party in order to be nominated, thereby gifting MPs the role of ‘gatekeeper’ (Collins, 2014). This also sought to ensure the new leader would benefit from their support.

These reforms were intended to redress ongoing questions surrounding Labour’s relationship with the unions following on from the Falkirk controversy, and also to make the Labour Party more democratic in how it selected the leader. The reforms would need to be ratified by a special conference, which it duly did in March 2014 with eighty six per cent of conference delegates supporting them, as well as Tony Blair and the wife of John Smith, Elizabeth (Bale, 2015: 218). As such, whilst Miliband’s reforms have since come under subsequent criticism (New Statesman, 2015a), it is important to note the level of support the new rules enjoyed at the party conference. Consequently the new leader of the Labour Party would be elected under the new system.

More generally, whilst Miliband had sought to demonstrate the electability of the party under the moniker of ‘One Nation Labour’, it ultimately failed to galvanise the electorate. Indeed, at the 2015 general election Labour lost twenty six seats on a swing of only 1.6 per cent to Labour (BBC, 2015a). As had become the tradition since Kinnock, Miliband resigned shortly afterwards, thereby initiating a leadership election under Collins’ new rules. Those rules would produce an outcome that neither Miliband nor the rest of the PLP expected in the days after the general election.

**The challengers for the leadership**

Following Miliband’s resignation, Harman became the acting leader to preside over the leadership election. She also simultaneously announced her intention to stand down from the deputy leadership when the new leader was appointed (Wintour and Mason, 2015a). Given Labour had only 232 MPs, the number of nominations required to stand stood at thirty five. Again there were a number of candidates that were rumoured to stand but declined to do so. These included Diane Abbott, Stella Creasy, Tristram Hunt, Alan Johnson, David Lammy, John McDonnell, Alison McGovern, and Owen Smith, amongst others (Crerar, 2015; Hayward, 2015; BBC, 2015a; Morning Star, 2015; Bartlett, 2015; Smith, 2015). Chuka Umunna and David Lammy both began the process of seeking a support base, however they ultimately withdrew from the contest. This demonstrates the wealth of potential talent available to the Labour Party, however, for a variety of reasons they believed their talents would be best applied elsewhere.

The front runner amongst parliamentarians was Andy Burnham, who secured sixty eight nominations, whilst Yvette Cooper secured fifty nine nominations. Liz Kendall secured forty one nominations, and Jeremy Corbyn secured lowest number of nominations with only thirty six (Payne, 2015). This indicates the level of support for each candidate from the parliamentary party and the level of support they could expect to enjoy in the event of their victory. The parliamentary party represents the depth of support a leader has in the Commons, thereby enabling them to hold the government of the day to account. Moreover, it is also the talent-pool from which a leader draws most of their administration, therefore a united party behind the leader is vital in showcasing their leadership competence to the electorate.

There was something of a clear ideological split emerging amongst the candidates with both Burnham and Cooper occupying the classic Croslandite social democratic camp, whilst Kendall occupied a more revisionist social democratic perspective mostly associated with Blair (Wintour, 2015). In contrast to each of the other candidates, Corbyn was seen as coming from the more traditional left of the party closely associated with Benn (Wheeler, 2016). This is significant as it was the wing of the party which had largely been in retreat since 1983. It is also important to remember that Corbyn’s participation within the leadership election was seen simply as a way of broadening the debate to ensure left wing perspectives were heard whilst the discourse would still be dominated by the social democratic tradition(s) (Helm and Boffey, 2015). Indeed, given the dominance of social democratic thinking amongst the nominated candidates, it would be highly likely to inform the debates over course of the leadership race.

In terms of the media responses to their nominations Burnham was described as the figure most likely ‘to unite the Party and win back power’ (Coogan, 2015) who ‘listens to party members and the public’ (Tomlinson, 2015). Cooper was commended for her hard work in the local constituencies during the campaign (Howard, 2015). Kendall was described by *The Sun* as ‘the only player they have’ and that she was the candidate the Conservatives ‘feared the most’ (Stone, 2015a; Liddle, 2015). The reaction to Corbyn’s nomination from the media was more critical, saying his election would be a disaster for the party, whilst Owen Jones in *The Guardian* argued Corbyn ‘offers a coherent, inspiring and, crucially, a hopeful vision’ (Jones, 2015). In order to determine why the responses to each candidate were as described, it would be worth briefly outlining some of the positions and arguments each of the candidates used in order to be elected as leader.

*Andy Burnham*

Burnham’s case to be the new leader was predicated upon his belief that the party needed to ‘rediscover the beating heart of Labour’ (Beattie, 2015). To do that he sought to place the greatest emphasis on three areas of domestic policy – these included education, a national care service, and the welfare state. These areas were likely to appeal the most to the selectorate as they reflected core social democratic ideas tied to egalitarian aspirations. In terms of education, he pledged to end the ‘growing market of free schools and academies’ that had accelerated under the Cameron-led coalition government and were likely to continue under the new majority Conservative government. This went beyond the 2015 election manifesto, which had simply pledged to end new free schools and academies whilst leaving the existing schools untouched. Fundamentally, he argued that he wanted ‘true parity between academic and technical education’ and that he would ‘restore a local role in overseeing schools’ (Watt and Perraudin, 2015).

In terms of a national care service, Burnham pledged to pursue a policy he had proposed in 2010 to integrate social care into the National Health Service. He pledged to ignore ‘difficult headlines’ by raising more revenue through taxes to fund the change, and that Labour should not fear the reaction of the ‘Tory Press’ (BBC, 2015b). The objective of the policy was to ensure that ‘everybody is asked to make a contribution according to their means’ in order to ensure ‘everybody has peace of mind of knowing that all their care needs, and those of their family, are covered’ (BBC, 2015b). As a broad aspiration this reflected Burnham’s longstanding commitment to social care as a universal right for all that should be funded through taxation on a par with other avenues of social welfare.

His position on welfare was thrown into the leadership campaign during the passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill in July 2015. Critics such as the Chief Executive of Barnardos, Javed Khan argued that the bill represented a ‘Pandora’s box for Britain’s poorest families’ because it allowed the benefits cap to be reduced whilst also pledging £12bn in welfare cuts (Khan, 2015). Harman, as the acting leader, instructed the PLP to abstain, thereby prompting criticism that the strategy ‘underlines Labour moral and intellectual bankruptcy’ (Guttenplan, 2015). In the shadow cabinet, Burnham argued that Labour should instead table an amendment to the bill, which it duly did. However, when it failed in the Commons, Burnham ultimately abstained on the passage of the bill (Segalov, 2015). For Labour activists, this represented a major moment of decision when determining who would be best to be the new Labour leader, which Burnham later argued most likely cost him the position (Grice, 2015). Indeed, whilst Burnham can be seen as something of a classic social democrat, he was unable to galvanise the selectorate and by abstaining on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill appeared to lack some of the principles he sought to demonstrate during the campaign.

*Yvette Cooper*

Cooper was, according to *The Guardian*, ‘best placed’ to offer a clear and strong uniting vision for the Labour Party whilst also having an exceptional range of experiences to be leader (Guardian, 2015a). Indeed, she was described as ‘steadfast, consistently challenging George Osborne on economic terrain’, which given the need to provide strong opposition is a vital skill for the leadership, placed her in a strong position within the campaign (Guardian, 2015a). Moreover, Cooper had not bought into the coalition narrative that Labour had caused the financial crash. Rather she instead highlighted the role of the deregulated global economy and the sub-prime mortgage market in the US.

Furthermore, the issue of gender was significant. In its history, Labour had failed to elect a female leader of the party, and given Tom Watson appeared to be the frontrunner for the deputy leadership (against Stella Creasy, Angela Eagle, Caroline Flint, and Ben Bradshaw), it was important that female voices were heard at the top of the Labour Party. Given Liz Kendall was unlikely to win the leadership according to opinion polls, Cooper argued she represented the best opportunity to redress this issue. She was also described by *The Guardian* as a ‘down to earth feminist’ that could appeal across the ideological and gender divide by highlighting the damage austerity had caused, especially to women (Guardian, 2015a).

As a campaign strategy, however Cooper initially appeared to be cautious in her style, preferring to target second voter preferences (Howard, 2015). However, as the campaign continued over the course of the summer, she became more brazen in highlighting her experience as a Minister of State for Housing, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, as Shadow Foreign Secretary, and as Shadow Home Secretary (New Statesman, 2015b). By doing so she was able to demonstrate her skills and awareness of major issues relating to social welfare, finance, foreign policy, and home affairs. Indeed, she was well positioned to advocate policies in areas such as universal childcare, combatting terrorism, civil rights, and social housing. During the campaign, she also promoted policies likely to garner the support of the selectorate in area such as the economy (introduction of the 50p income tax rate); the introduction of a living wage targeted towards the social care sector; and the building of over half a million new houses. Cooper was a highly experienced candidate and appeared convincing in debates and other outlets during the campaign.

As a candidate for the leadership, Cooper represented a classic social democratic perspective informed by social justice and egalitarianism. Given Labour had failed to select a female leader, she also presented an opportunity to demonstrate Labour’s commitment to gender equality. Furthermore, she was a candidate that the Conservatives would find formidable. Indeed, the *New Statesman* argued that ‘history teaches that even the strongest governments can unravel with remarkable speed, which is why Labour must be in a position to offer a credible alternative. The best hope of it being able to do so, in the present circumstances, is the election of Yvette Cooper’ (New Statesman, 2015b). This was a strong endorsement of Cooper’s skills and abilities as a prospective leader. Moreover, unlike Burnham, she voted against the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, thereby allowing her to demonstrate her commitment to those values she argued would make her an effective leader.

*Liz Kendall*

In contrast to Cooper, Kendall was the least experienced candidate to secure the nominations for the leadership having been elected as an MP at the 2010 general election. Under Miliband, she served as a Junior Health Minister and later the shadow Minister for Care and Older People (BBC, 2011; Parliament.uk, 2018). In terms of the development of Labour thought she contributed towards the *Purple Book* whereby she argued for greater attention to the education of young children (Kendall, 2011). As such she was considered one of Labour’s new stars on the revisionist ‘third way’ right.

Kendall was broadly described as the ‘Blairite’ candidate in the leadership election given her sympathies for continuing the modernisation agenda – although she rejected the description (Guardian, 2015b). She also rejected the more left-leaning arguments of Burnham and Cooper by seeking to argue that Labour needed to appeal to Conservative voters in order to survive. She had argued that under Miliband Labour had ‘far too little’ to say to middle class voters and that the party needed a ‘rethink about who we are and what we’re for’ (Shipman, 2015). To achieve this, she suggested that Labour needed ‘fundamental reform’ which ‘is essential to the future survival of our party’ (Riley-Smith, 2015). For many within the Labour movement this suggested a further abandonment of core principles that made the Labour Party essentially social democratic, and an even more distant relationship with the trade unions. For supporters, however, this was a necessary approach to renewal which would enable Labour to unseat the Conservatives electorally.

The electoral viability of such a strategy was predicated upon her argument that the voters rejected left wing arguments and values. Indeed, she argued that ‘we decided the British public had shifted to the left because we wished it to be so’ (Mason, 2015). She also rejected Miliband’s analysis that Labour did not overspend; that the energy price freeze was ‘undeliverable’; that tuition fees should not be cut; and that Labour should not reject free schools as an ideological point (Mason, 2015). This placed her at odds with the broader direction of travel of the other candidates who instead sought progressive reform in these areas. Moreover, in terms of the public sector, she argued that ‘there is no point saying you believe in economic responsibility and being careful with taxpayers money if public services are a reform-free zone’ (Wintour and Mason, 2015b). For Kendall, it was a sector that needed to be reformed in order to reduce waste whilst seeking to protect vital services.

Moreover, she also unnerved the party with her argument that it did not ‘have a god-given right to exist’ (Mason, 2015). The premise of her argument was that Labour needed to be relevant in order to attract the support of those who voted for the Conservatives. Indeed, she rejected the notion that Labour’s policies were electorally convincing, despite losing in 2015, saying ‘lots of people told me they couldn’t see Ed as prime minister. But we didn’t lose because of his personality. We lost because of our politics’ (Mason, 2015). This was a dramatic argument that challenged the existence of the Labour Party and the premise of social democratic policies. Indeed, such perspectives appeared to have more in common with a liberal approach to economics and a reduced role for the state in the provision of universal standards and services. Given the climate of the leadership election it proved unconvincing.

In summation, the three candidates described above were nominated for the leadership by the PLP believing old arguments and appeals would still resonate with the selectorate. Under the Electoral College system, the voters would have been restricted to the parliamentary party, the affiliated unions, and long standing party members. With that selectorate, one of the three described above may well have secured the leadership. Indeed, ‘Corbyn would have been unable to win had this remained in place’ (Crines et al, 2018). However, each candidate above failed to consider the ramifications of the Collins review and the broadening of the selectorate towards ‘affiliated members’. This injected an entirely new dynamic which hitherto had not been a major issue – namely, the left wing vote that went well beyond the confines of the Labour Party. As discussed over the coming sections, Corbyn’s nomination did far more than widen the debate within the party.

**The political philosophy and activism of Jeremy Corbyn**

Corbyn’s nomination was, according to some who put his name forward, done so simply to broaden the debate within the leadership election and to ensure a traditional socialist voice was heard (and defeated) amongst the social democratic conventional discourse of the other contenders (Cox and Coyle, 2016). Under the previous selection process this may have been a valid strategy (as seen in 2010 when Abbott was included for the debate and subsequently defeated), however with the broadened electorate following the changes to the leadership selection rules it was far riskier than initially appreciated. In part because a galvanising voice from the socialist left would solicit support from across the entire left including those who were outside of the party. As Crines et al., (2018) note ‘the development of these new leadership election rules created the opportunity for a revolt of the grassroots that was not as feasible under the previous Electoral College system’ (Crines et al, 2018). Put simply, those who had been disaffected by the various modernisations since 1983 would be afforded an opportunity to cast a vote in the leadership election which may lead to a ‘factory reset’ of the party. Such members of the disaffected left included those who left because of Blair’s changes to Clause Four, the Iraq War, and the general sense that Labour was no longer prepared to challenge the economic assumptions of a capitalist economy.

In Corbyn’s party, the so called disaffected would be afforded an opportunity to shift the ideological direction of the Labour Party and with it, the broader political climate in British politics. To some extent it could be argued that Corbyn has – since becoming leader – been broadly successful at this, however, in order to understand how and why he represented this shift, it would be fortuitous to briefly look at his political background. By doing so, it would be possible to identify his ideological beliefs thereby demonstrating his appeal outside of the Labour Party as well as to some within it.

*The Political Philosophy of Jeremy Corbyn*

As a fundamental point, Corbyn considers himself to be a ‘democratic socialist’ (Calamur, 2015). As an ideological perspective this seeks a combination of political and industrial democracy as well as state ownership of the wealth generated by corporations (Busky, 2000). As a core point, democratic socialists argue that capitalism as a concept is fundamentally flawed because it deprives the workers of thosebenefits that come from their labour. For democratic socialists, capitalism is a state of exploitation before liberation through the seizure of capital.

Capitalism also runs contrary to the democratic socialist ideals of equality, liberty and solidarity within a collectivist economy. This would necessitate an industrial strategy predicated upon a strong democratic voice for the workers through the trade union movement. This philosophy is distinct from the more authoritarian interpretations of socialism because of the emphasis placed upon democratic process. Indeed, democratic expression and representation of the workers is a fundamental element of Corbyn’s philosophy and those who seek to promote it. Yet, some would argue that ‘the adjective democratic is added by democratic socialists to attempt to distinguish themselves from Communists who also call themselves socialists’ (Busky, 2000). Despite this distinction, Corbyn’s understanding of socialism is predicated upon empowerment through direct democracy.

Democratic socialism is also distinct from social democracy because of the abandonment of capitalism. Whilst social democrats such as Crosland argued that ‘the most characteristic features of capitalism have disappeared’ (Crosland, 1956), democratic socialists believe this is a misunderstanding of how capitalism had changed. Put simply, capitalism cannot be tamed because the central tenet of capitalism is the selfish individual. That selfishness promotes individual wealth and property at the expense of the collective. By positioning himself within this interpretation of socialism, Corbyn is casting himself as a truly transformative figure who aims not simply to tweak the social injustices of capitalism, but rather to replace it with a collectivist and democratic society. This puts Corbyn outside the tradition of all other post-war Labour leaders, each of which have been compelled to work within the capitalist framework.

*The Political Activism of Jeremy Corbyn*

It would now be worth briefly considering how Corbyn has translated this philosophy into his political activism. Put simply, his longstanding commitments to social justice and peace can be found in his early developmental years. Indeed, his parents (David Corbyn and Naomi Josling) were peace campaigners who met in the 1930s during a meeting to express support for the Spanish Republic during the Civil War (Verkaik, 2018). They also participated in the Battle of Cable Street in 1936 against Mosley’s ‘Blackshirts’. Growing up in this environment instilled a sense of activism within the young Corbyn to promote peace and cooperation where possible (Prince, 2016). It also embedded a deep distrust of the far-right and also the relationship between extreme conservatism and fascism.

As a child, he was schooled at Adams Grammar School where he became a fully active member of the *Young Socialists*, the local Labour Party, and the *League Against Cruel Sports*. Although he left school with less than impressive grades, this did nothing to dampen his sense of activism which he carried forward by joining the *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* in 1966. In terms of his formative years, this demonstrates how Corbyn became involved in activist politics as well as develop a longstanding reputation for challenging the establishment (Shropshire Star, 2015). Indeed, each of pillars of the conservative establishment were hostile to Corbyn’s democratic socialism and so he often found himself in opposition to those seeking to defend it.

This was partly seen during his brief tenure as a student of higher education. Corbyn attempted to complete a degree programme in trade union studies at North London Polytechnic, however he left shortly after starting following substantial disagreements over the curriculum (Mount, 2015). Instead, he became an organiser within the *National Union of Public Employees* where he was encouraged by Benn ‘to produce a blueprint for workers control of British Leyland’ (Corbyn, 2014). This ultimately came to nothing following a cabinet reshuffle which saw Benn change his ministerial role. In 1974, however Corbyn was elected to Haringey Council where he remained until becoming an MP in 1983 (Intelligence Unit, 1974). As a councillor, he maintained his activism for peace and solidarity. He was also chosen by his constituency to be a delegate to the Labour conference in 1978, whereby he successfully moved a motion that dentists should be employed by the NHS (Labour Party, 1978).

Given Corbyn’s growing profile within the movement, he was given the responsibility of the local party’s general election campaign in 1979. During that campaign, he organised events and canvassing which positioned him well within the local party. It also afforded him with a voice to articulate his conception of democratic socialism and to promote a social role for the state. It is also interesting to note that he was an active enthusiast of Benn’s campaign to push for internal reform of the party constitution, and that he participated in Benn’s deputy leadership bid in 1981 (Parliamentary Profile Services, 2004).

He also courted a degree of controversy during these formative years. For example he was a keen supporter of the former *International Marxist Group* member Tariq Ali and his desire to join the Labour Party (Martin, 1981). The National Executive ruled that Ali was unacceptable, however Corbyn overruled this saying ‘so far as we are concerned ... he’s a member of the party and he’ll be issued with a card’ (Martin, 1981). True to his word, when Corbyn became the Chair of the constituency party, Ali was given a membership card, which was followed by a vote of the local party by seventeen to fourteen that Ali’s membership should be ‘up to and including the point of disbandment of the party’ (Guardian, 1982). This demonstrates Corbyn’s zeal as a supporter of some who the party may consider to be unorthodox.

*Jeremy Corbyn: MP for Islington North*

These formative experiences put him in a strong position to be nominated as the candidate for the 1983 general election. The incumbent Labour MP, Michael O’Halloran joined the SDP in 1981 following his dissatisfaction with the hard left within the Islington North constituency office (Dalyell, 1999). Needless to say, this included debates over deselection of MPs, to which O’Halloran felt threatened. However, he later left the SDP to stand as an independent Labour candidate. Ultimately, he came fourth place in the general election with only eleven of the vote. As such, Corbyn was elected where (at the time of writing) he remains the sitting MP.

As an elected MP he became an active member of the socialist *Campaign Group*, and he also began writing a weekly column for the *Morning Star.* He used his column to promote the causes close to his heart, which included campaigns for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. Indeed, he argued that there was ‘no socialism without gay liberation’ (Wheeler, 2016). He also used the column to promote greater worker equality, a peaceful foreign policy, and a more cooperative approach to domestic and international conflict. Alongside this he also used his position as an MP to voice his opposition to apartheid in South Africa, whereby he served on the National Executive of the ‘Anti-Apartheid Movement’ (Bennett, 2016).

Corbyn was also a strong supporter of the miners during the 1984-85 industrial action, whereby he invited striking miners to the Commons (who shouted ‘coal not dole’ from the public gallery) (Wheeler, 2016). He was also strongly opposed to the introduction of the Poll Tax (Community Charge) (Benn, 2013), which he demonstrated by refusing to pay (thereby risking imprisonment when he appeared in court in 1991) (Prince, 2015). He was also a member of the *Parliamentary Trade Union Group* where he promoted the interests of a number of unions including UNISON, Unite, and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (Mullin, 2016). Moreover, he chaired a number of other groups including the All Party Group on the Chagos Islands, the All Party Group on Latin America, and he was the All Party vice-Chair of the Human Rights group (Mullin, 2016). It is evident that as an MP, Corbyn was highly active for the causes he believed in. Indeed, he positioned himself well to be a strong voice of opposition to all who appeared supportive of the status quo, and to promote causes that increased the profile of social justice.

Despite this, Corbyn courted controversy for his role in (northern) Irish politics. He argued that he wanted to initiate a dialogue with Sinn Fein, which he did by inviting Gerry Adams and his entourage to Westminster three weeks after the Brighton hotel bombing in 1984 (Swinford, 2015). Needless to say Corbyn was later criticised for saying he ‘never met the IRA’, however this was later clarified to mean that ‘he met them in their capacity as activists within Sinn Fein’ (Ashmore, 2017). This distinction, however remained controversial.

As part of his campaigns for justice, he also became a vocal advocate for the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six, whose convictions were subsequently overturned (Callaghan, 1983). It is worth noting that as a result of his activities, MI5 opened a file on Corbyn in 1990 as they believed he was ‘deemed to be subversive’ and that he may ‘undermine Parliamentary democracy’ (Dixon and McCann, 2017). Despite this, he later supported the Northern Irish peace process and voted for the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 saying he hoped for ‘peace, hope and reconciliation in Ireland in the future’ (Worrall, 2017).

However, Corbyn’s profile as a peace campaigner would come into sharp focus following the September 11 attacks in 2001 and the subsequent so called ‘War on Terror’. To demonstrate his opposition to the war(s), he helped to organise protests in London and beyond, where he spoke passionately against military action in the Middle East. Indeed, as a member of the *Stop the War* coalition, he argued that ‘I find it deeply distasteful that the British Prime Minister can use the medieval powers of the royal prerogative to send young men and women to die, to kill civilians and for Iraqis to die’ (Snowden, 2016). This attack on Blair demonstrates the contempt Corbyn held for Blair’s approach to the war, and the style of party management that the Prime Minister had adopted. Alongside this he also argued against the war in principle, and argued strongly that ‘it will set off a spiral of conflict, of hate, of misery, of desperation that will fuel the wars, the conflict, the terrorism, the depression and the misery of future generations’ (Snowden, 2016). This was a dire warning that Blair’s approach would result in decades of conflict that resulted from his imprudence. Corbyn also believed that the action was reckless and without justification from the intelligence services.

Ultimately, Corbyn’s analysis over destabilisation would prove accurate following the ongoing conflicts in the region, which has left Iraq, Syria, and Libya exposed to extremist groups such as Islamic State. Such was the sense of ongoing discontent with the manner by which the Iraq War was initiated that Corbyn joined with the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru in calling for a parliamentary inquiry into the war. The Iraq War became a defining issue for Corbyn, and his activism is often connected to his conduct during the war and afterwards, alongside his own elevation within the *Stop the War* coalition by being its elected Chair from 2011. He would, however stand down from the position following his eventual election as Labour leader.

In the years running up to the 2015 general election, Corbyn also voiced his opposition to austerity. To do this he sought to apply pressure on Miliband to be stronger in his condemnation of the coalition government’s fiscal policies and to be more vocal on issues related to social justice. Alongside this, he also argued that the railways should be returned to public ownership and that trade union rights should be strengthened (BBC, 2015c). These spoke to his longstanding commitments to a stronger role for the state in economic management with an emphasis on social justice. However, Miliband was less vocal than Corbyn would have preferred when emphasising Labour’s position.

As such Corbyn’s nomination for the party leadership in 2015 offered something different to Burnham, Cooper, and Kendall. Whilst his competitors for the leadership offered continuity with the same debates over economic management, Corbyn offered an entirely different approach to conceptualising political, social, and economic issues. His nomination for the leadership would do far more than simply broaden the debate beyond the centre-left. Rather, it would shatter the assumptions about what constitutes an effective candidate by commentators such as Stark (1996), whilst simultaneously galvanising the left beyond Labour thereby creating a new movement that revolved around his democratic socialist philosophy. As Crines et al., (2018) argue, ‘the Stark criteria appear to be invalidated by the election of Corbyn. As a habitual rebel across a range of policy issues over many decades, any attempt to demand loyalty to him from his parliamentary colleagues will look hypocritical, whilst his electability and competence have also been widely questioned’ (Crines et al, 2018).

**The 2015 Labour leadership election**

This was an unusual leadership election, although at the start there was little indication of the drama that was ahead. The nominations for the leadership election opened on June 9 and closed on June 15. In that short time, it appeared as through Corbyn would be unsuccessful in securing the required number to appear on the ballot. There was a concern amongst the social democrats that if a left-leaning voice was not on the ballot, then it would appear as though the process was too ideologically narrow and that this may harm the new leader (Wintour and Mason, 2015c). Moreover, there was also a need to once again ‘defeat’ the left wing candidate (regardless of who it was) in order to reaffirm Labour’s centrist values and ability to extend a hand to those with conservative leanings. Consequently, at the last moment, Corbyn was included in the process in order to ‘widen the debate’ (Hope, 2015). It is important to note that ‘their calculation was that it was cost free to allow a symbolic left wing candidate to proceed as it was inconceivable that Corbyn would win’ (Crines et al, 2018). Needless to say, the moderates had fundamentally misunderstood the impact that Collins’ rule changes would have on the process, or the danger in nominating a seasoned campaigner like Corbyn simply to ‘widen the debate’. Indeed, Frank Field later reflected that ‘I told Jeremy I would nominate him because I wanted the wider debate – we have not got that wider debate – but I also said I would not be voting for him. It is such a disappointment’ (Hope, 2015). Margaret Beckett later reflected that she ‘felt like a moron’ (BBC, 2015d) for nominating Corbyn for this reason given the assumption was that he would suffer the same fate as Abbott in 2010. By doing so, those who nominated Corbyn for this reason ‘created the split electoral mandate between the PLP and the extra-parliamentary party that has been so damaging’ (Crines et al, 2018). Despite the motivations for nominating Corbyn, his participation within the leadership election would shift the assumed narrative away from the social democrats.

This also challenges some of the assumptions Stark (1996) made about leadership selection, given it was highly unlikely that Corbyn would fit into his criteria. For example Stark (1996) identified key criteria for leadership selection – these being acceptability, electability, and competence. Corbyn failed each of these tests. Put simply, he was unacceptable to the majority of the PLP and a sizable portion of social democratic members. Given any leader needs the support of their parliamentary party, it is vital that s/he benefits from their support. As Dorey and Denham argue, failure to do so ‘runs the serious risk that [the membership] will vote for a leadership candidate who is neither supported by the Party’s MPs, nor popular among voters in general, thus rendering the party virtually unelectable: ideologically pure, but politically impotent’ (Dorey and Denham, 2016).

His ability to appeal electorally outside of his democratic socialist base was open to question, thereby challenging his electability. Indeed, despite holding the same seat since 1983, his ability to appeal outside of a narrowly defined electoral context had been untested. This raised questions about his broader appeal and his ability to either increase the number of Labour MPs or lead the party to victory in a general election. Indeed, this would become the basis of much of the anti-Corbyn opposition amongst the PLP after September 2015.

Finally his competence at the time of the leadership election was an untested quantity given he had not served in a (shadow) ministerial position since becoming an MP. As discussed above, Corbyn had not been called upon by any previous Labour leader to take on the mantel of ministerial office because he preferred instead to focus on causes outside of Westminster.

Despite these points, he was elected to the leadership. This represented a sea-change in the assumptions over the skills that a candidate needs to demonstrate in order to be elected as a leader. He did this by energising the hard left in such a way as to make it virtually impossible for Burnham, Cooper, or Kendall to represent an effective challenge. This is because Corbyn spoke to large crowds of disaffected former (and current) Labour voters who wanted to see a reinvigorated movement. Because of his techniques it can be concluded that the significance of the parliamentary party has been reduced further in the campaign process beyond simply being the ‘gatekeeper’.

Corbyn’s appeal can be attributed to his opposition to austerity, his style of presentation being vastly different to the more polished approach of Burnham, Cooper, and Kendall, and that he represented a very clear and distinctive break from the Conservatives. On each of these points, he presented a clear message and persona. His democratic socialism represented something fresh to an audience-base that was looking for an alternative approach to public spending cuts and a reduction in public services. This allowed him to connect with audiences through hustings, which grew in size dramatically over the course of the summer.

Corbyn would also eschew the ‘dirty tricks’ approach to campaigning. He preferred to keep his arguments on issues of moral conviction rather than personal attacks on his opponents. This enabled him to present himself as a more conciliatory figure. Inversely, Corbyn also benefitted from the attacks of opponents such as Blair, who said those whose heart is with Corbyn should ‘get a transplant’ (Wintour and Watt, 2015). This helped Corbyn because it allowed him to distance himself further from New Labour and its supporters, whilst framing them as hostile to genuine change and himself as a compassionate democratic socialist who opposed the austere policies figures such as Kendall advocated.

An example of his effective campaign approach can be found when Corbyn addressed the crowd in Liverpool in early August 2015. At this event Corbyn addressed a crowd of over 2,000 in a room designed for less than half that number (Crines, 2015a). Moreover, the crowd was addressed by figures such as Tony Mulhearn who was a prominent member of the *Militant Tendency* and later the *Socialist Party*. This demonstrates Corbyn’s ability and keenness to appeal to left wing supporters outside of the confines of the Labour Party.

Mulhearn energised the audience before Corbyn spoke about the problems of massive inequalities in society that emerged from economic liberalism and the austere policies of the Cameron government. As well as criticising the coalition, he also set out his aspirations for a more socially just society which ensured the audience was highly receptive to his argument. Indeed, he contrasted this with the growth of inequality and poverty which he attributed to the policies that George Osborne had followed since becoming Chancellor. Corbyn also presented himself as an anti-establishment figure with the aim of challenging the so called Westminster elite.

He also framed this in contrast to the elite within the Labour Party that had dominated party thinking throughout the New Labour and Miliband period(s). This approach enabled him to cast Burnham and Cooper as part of the similar orthodox way of thinking because of their participation in those administrations whilst Kendall was cast as someone who believed those ideas need to be accelerated. By doing so, Corbyn was able to outline an alternative vision that chimed with his own democratic socialist ideas that are distinct from either social democracy or conservatism. Put simply, Corbyn’s opponents represented a single mind-set of failed ideas (as evidenced by the financial crash and Labour’s electoral defeats) whilst he presented a new vision that had hitherto been discarded as economically impractical and electorally hazardous by the modernisers since 1983. Given Corbyn’s ability to appeal to a support-base using techniques disregarded by Stark (1996), it is possible to conclude that his election represented a truly dramatic shift in the assumptions underscoring leadership election.

Media commentators used the term ‘Corbynmania’ to represent the extent to which his support-base was energised (Roe, 2017). He also benefitted from the use of social media platforms such as Twitter and a growing sense that the momentum favoured Corbyn’s campaign. Given the youthful nature of Corbyn’s supporters, social media played a significant role in disseminating his message beyond the venues where he was speaking. This ensured his message travelled to supportive audiences across the country. As discussed in the above example in Liverpool, social media images and videos showed large crowds of cheering supporters which galvanised supporters on social media across the UK. It also enabled supporters to co-ordinate their efforts across the country; to share discussions; to conduct Twitter ‘voodoo’ polls to create a narrative of support; and to share campaign tactics (Elgot, 2015). Put simply, this was a campaign which his opponents were ill-equipped to respond to. The appearance of spontaneity also gave it a sense of credibility that Corbyn had truly created a new left movement that would continue when he became leader.

Corbyn also benefitted from broader emergent narrative of support from six major unions. For example, given supplementary nominations remained open, UNISON and Unite both supported Corbyn’s leadership despite expectations that Burnham would be their chosen candidate (Sky News, 2015; BBC 2015e). Despite the abolition of the block vote, these endorsements from union leaders would encourage individual trade union members to support Corbyn in the ballot. Moreover, Corbyn also enjoyed the support of 152 CLPs (New Statesman, 2015c), which was the largest number of any other candidate. Finally, affiliated members would be able to vote in the campaign provided they signed up by 12 August (Quinn, 2016: 763). Each of these helped Corbyn construct his anti-establishment challenge for the leadership, thereby benefitting from a support-base that none of his competitors were able to speak to.

Ultimately, ballots would be sent out to 550,000 voters (BBC, 2015f). It would be facile to suggest that each of these would be supportive of Corbyn, but it would be equally disingenuous to argue that it did not represent a significant influx of left wing supporters who were energised by Corbyn’s campaign. It would also be facile to suggest that Corbyn only benefitted from the influx and/or affiliated members. Indeed, many longstanding Labour members who supported the party during the Blair/Brown/Miliband years also felt enthused by Corbyn, thereby lending him their support. Although as Dorey and Denham argue, it is important to remember that ‘many of these extra-parliamentary new recruits who supported Corbyn had not even voted for Labour in the 2015 general election’ (Dorey and Denham, 2016).

There were also questions over the motivations of those indicating support for the party. MPs questioned whether Corbyn’s support-base represented an entryist incursion of the hard left and the extent to which they truly supported Labour as a social democratic party. There was also the question of Conservative members becoming affiliate supporters in order to vote for Corbyn thereby, in their eyes, making Labour unelectable. The Conservatives viewed Corbyn as ‘an atavistic throwback to the Bennite Left of the 1980s’ which was a view ‘shared by many of his critics in the Labour Party itself, particularly the Blairites’ (Dorey and Denham, 2016). This view aimed to connect the sense of renewal offered by Corbyn with the defeats and divisions of the Foot period. It is important to note that given Labour had lost in 2010 and 2015 on platforms that accepted the Conservative narratives surrounding the global financial crisis, it was unlikely to prove effective in harming Corbyn’s leadership bid.

Fundamentally, however, the issues of possible incursion from unsympathetic quarters raised questions about the democratic legitimacy of the process. In response to these issues Labour began a process of screening those who registered in order to ensure the electorate was as legitimate as possible. Ultimately, 3,000 of those who registered were excluded from the process (Wintour and Watt, 2015).

The leadership election turnout was 76.3 per cent, with 81.3 per cent of those votes being cast online (BBC, 2015f). In total 422,871 votes were cast (BBC, 2015f). The alternative vote system meant whoever secured over fifty per cent first would become the new leader, with the candidate with the fewest votes being eliminated until the winner could be declared. The results of the vote were:

[Table 7.1. Near here]

Corbyn won the leadership on the first round with a resounding demonstration of support from each of the three components of the selectorate. Only party members gave him less than fifty per cent on the first round, however each of his opponents received no more than 22.7 per cent each in that category. The result indicates not only the depth of support for Corbyn, but also the broad rejection of Burnham and Cooper’s continuity with mainstream approaches to the economy and social policy, and a complete rejection of Kendall’s arguments that ‘third way revisionism’ of the New Labour era needed to be extended. Rather, the result can be seen as a reflection on Corbyn’s ‘ordinariness’ (Dorey and Denham, 2016). This enabled him to construct a persona that was different not only to his immediate opponents in the leadership race, but also to an orthodox way of thinking that had gripped Labour thinkers since 1983. Kinnock’s Policy Review, Smith’s reforms, Blair’s renewal of Clause Four, Brown’s acceptance of neoliberal economics, and even Miliband’s One Nation Labour had appeared to push collective ideals out of the mind-set of Labour’s elite. Corbyn rejected those modernisations, and by doing so was able to present an authentic character on a wide platform that reluctantly transformed him into a ‘celebrity’ (Dorey and Denham, 2016). As noted by Crines, ‘Corbyn’s victory represents an ideological break with the renewal strategies of Gaitskell, Wilson, Kinnock, Smith, Blair, Brown, and Miliband. Whilst the previous leaders had, to varying degrees, accepted the need to appeal to centrist ‘conservative’ voters, Corbyn’s leadership offers a more authentic re-embrace of a socialist analysis of the failures of capitalism’ (Crines, 2015b).

**A year of Jeremy Corbyn**

How Corbyn would lead the Labour Party was a matter of some speculation. Having set out his anti-establishment credentials throughout the course of his political career and during the leadership election, his transition to an office traditionally reserves for more experienced candidates was a matter of some anticipation. However, ‘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’ (Crines, 2017).

The first public test of his skills would be displayed at Prime Minister’s Questions. Here Corbyn had made clear his intention to move beyond so-called ‘Punch and Judy’ politics and instead put the concerns of Labour Party members directly to the Prime Minister (James and Bagley, 2015). He did this by soliciting questions which he would then read out at the opposition despatch box. Of the 40,000 suggested questions, he was able to ask six, thus ensuring those he selected reflected the points he wanted to make.

Moreover, as party leader, he also had to deliver a speech to the annual Labour Party conference. Traditionally this was an opportunity for the leader to articulate their renewal strategy and to project an image of leadership competence. This was the arena where Wilson had articulated Scientific Socialism, where Kinnock delivered his modernisation speech in 1985, where Smith had changed the leadership rules, where Blair pushed for reforms to Clause Four and the launch of New Labour, and where Miliband set out what he meant by One Nation Labour. Consequently, this would be a key moment for Corbyn in establishing himself not simply as the leader of his supporters, but rather the leader of the entire party and broader movement.

During his speech, he argued that he wanted to create a ‘kinder politics, a more caring society’ and that he wanted to ‘challenge austerity’ (BBC, 2015g). The speechwriter, Richard Heller later indicated that much of Corbyn’s speech had been based on a blog written in 2011 and that large sections of it had been cut from Miliband’s conference speeches (BBC, 2015g). Yet, it gave an insight into how Corbyn viewed the Labour Party and how he intended on reforming it.

Corbyn’s first shadow cabinet was a mixture of talents between those who supported him and from the social democratic wing of the party. It is interesting to note that Kendall was not offered a position despite this being an issue during the leadership election. This suggests that reaching out to ‘third way revisionist’ wing of the Labour Party was a step too far for Corbyn. Instead McDonnell became the shadow Chancellor, with Burnham as shadow Home Secretary, Benn as shadow Foreign Secretary, and Angela Eagle as shadow First Secretary of State. Diane Abbott, Heidi Alexander, and Lisa Nandy also joined the shadow cabinet thereby tilting the gender balance in favour of women. Despite this, however most senior roles were still occupied by men.

Yet the careful ideological balance was not to last. The delicate balance was broken following a series of events that followed the attacked on Paris by the so-called Islamic State in November 2015 (Wilkinson, 2015). Corbyn favoured seeking a political settlement with Islamic State, which the majority of opinion agreed would be impractical given their indiscriminate and violent nature. In contrast, Corbyn believed this could be achieved by ending the Syrian civil war whilst David Cameron favoured building a coalition for military intention against Islamic State (McTague, 2015). Ultimately, Corbyn argued that Labour would ‘consider the proposals the Government brings forward’ (McTague, 2015) before coming to a position on military action. Given Corbyn’s record, it was highly likely his position would remain unchanged. In the event, Cameron set out his proposals for intervention to parliament.

Benn was very sympathetic to the proposals the government outlined, saying they were ‘compelling’ (Watt and Wintour, 2015). As shadow Foreign Secretary, his opinion carried considerable weight in the debate. In contrast, Corbyn sent a letter to MPs saying he would not support action against Islamic State. In the letter he argued ‘I do not believe the current proposal for air strikes in Syria will protect our security and therefore cannot support it’ (BBC, 2015h). Corbyn also argued that how MPs voted would be a decision for him as leader to take, however he later reluctantly backed down by agreeing to a free vote (Wintour and Mason, 2015d).

In the debate, Benn spoke for Labour in the Commons in response to the case outlined for military intervention. When addressing the PLP, he instructed MPs to remember that

as a party we have always been defined by our internationalism. We believe we have a responsibility one to another. We never have and we never should walk by on the other side of the road. We are faced by fascists—not just their calculated brutality, but their belief that they are superior to every single one of us in this Chamber tonight and all the people we represent. They hold us in contempt. They hold our values in contempt. They hold our belief in tolerance and decency in contempt. They hold our democracy—the means by which we will make our decision tonight—in contempt. What we know about fascists is that they need to be defeated. It is why, as we have heard tonight, socialists, trade unionists and others joined the International Brigade in the 1930s to fight against Franco. It is why this entire House stood up against Hitler and Mussolini. It is why our party has always stood up against the denial of human rights and for justice. My view is that we must now confront this evil. It is now time for us to do our bit in Syria (Hansard, 2015).

This was a strong message to remember that Labour’s history is one of fighting fascism, rather than seeking a settlement. Ultimately, sixty six Labour MPs agreed with Benn and voted to support military intervention (which included Tom Watson and Benn), whilst the remainder of the PLP either backed Corbyn or abstained (BBC, 2015h). Benn’s speech was not a challenge to Corbyn’s leadership, but it was a challenge for the leader’s authority. Such was the impact of the speech that speculation began to emerge about how Corbyn would respond to it. Given parliament was set to break for the Christmas holiday, it would not be until January when the response came. This took the form of a shadow cabinet reshuffle. Michael Dugher, Pat McFadden, Jonathan Reynolds, Stephen Doughty, and Kevan Jones left Corbyn’s cabinet.

Benn, however remained as shadow Foreign Secretary. It was to be a short-term reprieve given he was later dismissed in June 2016 when he argued ‘there is no confidence in our ability to win the next election, which may come much sooner than expected, if Jeremy continues as leader’ (O’Neil, 2016). Benn’s dismissal led to the subsequent resignations of a further eight shadow cabinet members including Angela Eagle, Maria Eagle, Chris Bryant, Owen Smith, John Healey, and Charles Falconer. This represented a key moment of growing discontent towards Corbyn’s leadership style and his ability to manage the party. Indeed, ‘this evidence of division has led pundits and commentators to argue that Labour is fatally divided, and that such divisions risk splintering the Party’ (Crines, 2015b). It did not, however hamper his popularity amongst his core supporters within the Momentum group. It did, however alienate him further from the parliamentary party. But the main test of his leadership would be the fallout from the vote on whether the UK should remain within the European Union.

As is well documented, the UK held a referendum on its membership of the European Union on 6 June 2016. Corbyn had been a longstanding opponent of UK membership of the Common Market (and its subsequent incarnations) since the UK joined under the Heath administration. As Hickson and Miles note, Corbyn ‘was closely associated with the Alternative Economic Strategy and the Labour Left’s Eurosceptic position more generally’ (Hickson and Miles, 2018). Corbyn opposed the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, the Lisbon Treaty in 2008, and supported the proposal for UK withdrawal in 2011 (Stone, 2015b; PublicWhip, 2008). He was also a longstanding critic of the EU, especially over the handling of the Greek financial crisis in 2015 which he described as ‘brutal’ (Wilson, 2016). In July 2015 when justifying his case for potentially campaigning for the UK to leave the EU, he argued that ‘the EU … knowingly, deliberately maintains a number of tax havens and tax evasion posts around the continent - Luxembourg, Monaco and a number of others - and has this strange relationship with Switzerland which allows a lot of European companies to outsource their profits to Switzerland where tax rates are very low’ (Corbyn, 2015).

However, he ultimately reversed these positions to campaign for the UK to remain in the EU. Despite this he remained sceptical about the UK remaining in the EU during the referendum campaign saying he was ‘seven, or seven and a half’ in favour of the EU (BBC, 2016c). Corbyn’s hesitation to campaign fully was also criticised after the result of the referendum was known. The Chair of the *Labour In For Britain* campaign, Phil Watson argued that ‘he decided to go on holiday in the middle of the campaign. [He] did not visit the Labour heartlands of the north-east and raised esoteric issues such as TTIP which had no resonance on the doorstep’ (Asthana, 2016). Alan Johnson also argued it felt as though Corbyn’s office was ‘working against the rest of the party and had conflicting objectives’ (Hughes, 2016). These are damning criticisms of Corbyn’s performance and actions during the campaign.

Despite this, John Curtice voices a note of caution by arguing that the result of the referendum was due to factors outside of Corbyn’s control. He suggests that ‘in truth, there is little evidence that Mr Corbyn’s campaigning efforts – or those of any other Labour politician – made much difference either way to the willingness of Labour supporters to vote for remain’ (Curtice, 2016a). This reduces Corbyn’s level of significance in the outcome of the referendum. Indeed, Curtice also notes that ‘it is also open to doubt whether many of the working-class “left behind” voters that formed the core of leave support would have responded to such efforts’ and that ‘if the finger of blame for Remain’s defeat is to be pointed anywhere it is better directed at the prime minister rather than Corbyn. David Cameron failed to bring his party with him at all, and in the event that simply proved too much of a handicap for the pro-EU camp to overcome’ (Curtice, 2016a). For Curtice, the failure of the remain campaign can be attributed more to Cameron’s inability to appeal to Conservative remainers, who instead may have found the arguments of Boris Johnson and Michael Gove more appealing.

However, the assumption that Corbyn’s campaign was responsible for the outcome of the referendum was too strong for his opponents to resist and by the end of June 2016, over thirty shadow cabinet members had resigned in solidarity with Benn’s attempts to compel Corbyn to stand down. This led to a major reshuffle that saw Corbyn bring in his core supporters to senior positions. These included Abbott who became shadow Health Secretary and Emily Thornberry who moved to shadow the Foreign Secretary. Pat Glass, Clive Lewis, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Kate Osamor, and Cat Smith also joined the shadow cabinet, amongst others. Yet this would not halt the sense of anger that was directed towards Corbyn for his apparent ineffective contributions to the remain campaign. Margaret Hodge and Ann Coffey tabled a ‘vote of no confidence’ because the EU referendum ‘has been a tumultuous referendum which has been a test of leadership ... Jeremy has failed that test’ (Anushka and Syal, 2016). The ‘vote of no confidence’ was held on 28 June, which he lost 172 votes to forty (BBC, 2016d).

The vote was a damning indictment of his leadership, however Corbyn responded saying that ‘I was democratically elected leader of our party for a new kind of politics by 60 per cent of Labour members and supporters, and I will not betray them by resigning. Today’s vote by MPs has no constitutional legitimacy. We are a democratic party, with a clear constitution. Our people need Labour Party members, trade unionists and MPs to unite behind my leadership at a critical time for our country’ (Corbyn, 2016a). Despite this, discussions amongst high profile members of the PLP continued about how best to proceed. Those discussions would ultimately lead to a challenge and another leadership election. Indeed, his opponents within the PLP remained convinced that Corbyn could be removed if the right candidate was found. This was yet another tactical error which would distract the party at a time when the Conservatives were recoiling from their own post-EU referendum fall out.

**A challenge for the leadership**

The 2016 leadership challenge should be viewed as an end result to growing discontent within the PLP towards Corbyn over the first year of his leadership. His leadership style had been a disruptive factor within Labour’s claims to unity, whilst simultaneously appearing disinterested in the normal conventions of fostering an effective statecraft strategy. This was evident through his management of the shadow cabinet, the response to the Syria vote, the January reshuffle, and his inability to weigh the ideological imbalances across the PLP and beyond. Put simply, Corbyn’s management of the shadow cabinet, balance of competing interests, and the perception that he was an unwilling voice in the remain campaign. Each had created a situation where MPs were considering launching their second leadership challenge in Labour’s history (the first being by Benn against Kinnock in 1988).

Needless to say following on from the ‘vote of no confidence’, Corbyn continued to refuse to stand down. Indeed, for Corbyn this became a matter of principle given he saw himself as the selected candidate of party members rather than simply the PLP. This meant he was able to claim a support-base outside of parliament which gifted him an authentic democratic socialist voice as the representative of left wing perspectives.

Furthermore, given the vote was simply a consultancy ballot, it held no compulsion for the leader to act on the outcome, despite the size of the opposition to him continuing as leader. Indeed, this meant that the vote was largely a symbolic act of defiance against Corbyn, which he interpreted as a minority view of party members towards his leadership. Rather, Corbyn views himself as the leader of the movement rather than simply the PLP. Despite this, the PLP does have the authority to set in motion a process that can seek to replace the leader should s/he prove ineffective in that role. Given Corbyn’s performance over the previous year, doubts about his electoral salience, and the voices within the party blaming him for failing to galvanise Labour’s remain supporters, it was felt that he had proven an ineffective leader and that he should be replaced.

As such, the process by which Corbyn would be challenged for the leadership was put into action. In order to launch such a challenge, the support of twenty per cent of the PLP is required, thereby activating the candidate selection process. The first MP to reach the required number to launch such a challenge was Angela Eagle (BBC, 2016e). She had become critical of Corbyn’s leadership following her departure from the shadow cabinet. Despite this, Eagle hesitated launching her bid because following the EU referendum she believed ‘Jeremy Corbyn still has time to do the right thing’ (BBC, 2016f) and resign the leadership on his own accord. The expectation that Corbyn would willingly resign the leadership fails to take into consideration his view that he is the representative and leader of a broader movement.

Corbyn also faced continuing pressure from Alan Johnson, who argued the situation was the result of Corbyn’s ‘inability to take responsibility, demonstrate leadership or give the slightest indication that he is capable of moving beyond meaningless platitudes’ (BBC, 2016f). This sought to cast Corbyn as a leader who could not respond to events in a way consistent with a party leader, nor that he could construct a renewal strategy that could unite the party.

It is also interesting to note that the deputy leader, Tom Watson blamed McDonnell for Corbyn refusing to resign, saying ‘he has obviously been told to stay by his close ally John McDonnell. They are a team and they have decided they are going to tough this out. So it looks like the Labour Party is heading for some kind of contested election’ (BBC, 2016f). In response to these claims, McDonnell responded by describing those seeking to trigger a leadership election as being ‘like a lynch mob without the rope’ (BBC, 2016f). This is an allusion to the lack of a single credible candidate who could challenge Corbyn, nor a broader strategy to galvanise the movement against the party leader. Needless to say, however this was a dire situation for Corbyn and the Labour Party to be in.

As the narrative continued to shift towards a challenge being inevitable, those seeking to replace Corbyn found themselves at an impasse. This was because whilst they agreed a single candidate should go forward to challenge Corbyn, there was uncertainty about who that should be. Owen Smith had also begun sounding out the prospects of launching a bid for the leadership, however he had been told to ‘back off’ by Eagle’s supporters (BBC, 2016f). As a demonstration of her intentions, she subsequently launched her bid for the leadership on 11 July 2016, saying ‘Jeremy Corbyn is unable to provide the leadership this huge task needs’ (Vullimy, 2016).

Despite this, Smith also put his name forward for the leadership. He argued this was because Corbyn was ‘not a leader who can lead us into an election and win for Labour’ (Mason, 2016). For Smith, this was a reflection partly on Corbyn’s performance during the EU referendum, and the manner by which he managed the party. Moreover, he reflected that ‘on July 27 I asked [Jeremy Corbyn] if he was prepared to see our party split and worse, wanted it to. He offered no answer’ (Smith, 2016a). He also suggested that when McDonnell was asked the same question, he ‘shrugged his shoulders and said “if that’s what it takes”’ (Smith, 2016). For Smith, this was indicative of a general disregard for the health and survival of the party and its aims to continue representing the interests of the many. Consequently, he joined Eagle in standing for the leadership, thereby potentially splitting the anti-Corbyn vote.

Alongside this were discussions on the NEC about how the election should be conducted and whether Corbyn would need to secure the nominations required, or whether he would be automatically on the ballot. This was a significant debate given he would be unlikely to secure the required number of nominations from the PLP given he had lost the vote of no confidence. The decision would be decided by a secret ballot of NEC members, which subsequently concluded that he should be automatically allowed on the ballot, with eighteen in favour and fourteen against (Crick, 2016).

Moreover, the NEC also concluded that only those who had been in the Labour Party for at least six months or more should be allowed to participate in the vote, thereby discounting the 130,000 members that joined the party within that time. This was later challenged in the courts, however the decision of the NEC ultimately stood. Moreover, ‘registered supporters’ would again be able to vote provided they registered within a two day period and paid £25. Constituency parties would also not be permitted from holding meetings over the course of the election period, however groups such as Momentum and Progress continued to do so (Peston, 2016; Mortimer, 2016).

That there were two candidates seeking to challenge Corbyn for the leadership was deeply problematic. This was because the split risked making the oppositional forces appear divided and uncertain. Consequently, there was growing pressure on both Eagle and Smith to rally behind a single candidate in order to galvanise supporters. To decide who it should be, both candidates agreed that the challenger with the fewest nominations on 19 July would withdraw. Ultimately, this favoured Smith given Eagle had secured twenty fewer nominations. After withdrawing from the campaign, she pledged support to Smith. She was also commended by Kinnock, who said her decision to challenge Corbyn was ‘a real leadership decision showing her courage, mature judgement and dedication to the party’ (Grice, 2016). By withdrawing in this manner, it was also possible that in the event of a Smith victory, she may see a return to the shadow cabinet in a senior position.

After becoming the sole challenger, Smith remarked that ‘Jeremy is owed a debt of gratitude for helping Labour rediscover its radical roots, but we do need a new generation of Labour men and women to take this party forward, to get us ready for government once more’ (Grice, 2016). This argument strove not to condemn Corbyn for his approach to Labour politics, but rather to argue it was necessary in order to get some distance from the recent past, renew around traditional values, and to move forward by becoming a party of government. Corbyn took an alternative view insomuch as he believed those ‘values’ were capable of winning an election and that the voters can be convinced of their value. Corbyn also sought to frame the challenge as an opportunity to engage in a debate with the party, in a similar manner to which he was initially included on the ballot in 2015. Indeed, Smith’s challenge enabled Corbyn to ‘widen the debate’ to include those opposed to his leadership thereby affording him with an opportunity to again subject himself to the vote. In a similar strategy to Kinnock in 1988, this would enable him to broaden his mandate and claim further legitimacy in the event that he was successful.

Over the course of the campaign, both candidates participated in a series of debates where they would take questions from a studio audience and each other. However, Corbyn’s campaign refused to participate in debates organised by the *Mirror, New Statesman, The Guardian,* or *Channel Four* as it believed they were taking ‘partisan positions against Jeremy’s leadership or campaign’ (Peck, 2016). Instead Corbyn limited himself to debates organised by the Labour Party itself, the *BBC*, and *Sky News*.

Smith sought to frame these debates about the future ideological trajectory of the party, and the extent to which Corbyn’s ideological perspectives would prove electorally convincing. To do this, Smith endeavoured to project an image of leadership competence in the face of division and potential defeats. This was predicated upon the assumption that hard left policies lacked electoral salience, whilst his own moderate social democratic approach has traditionally proven more convincing. Despite this strategy, Corbyn benefitted from substantial audience support which was frequently manifested in favour of Corbyn’s arguments and similarly in opposition to Smith’s perspectives.

As with the 2015 leadership context, the winner would be the candidate who secured over fifty per cent of the vote first. As there were only two candidates, this would be known on the first round. As with the challenge in 1988, there was an assumption that the incumbent would win and that his hold over the party would be strengthened as a result. This assumption proved to be accurate.

[Table 7.2. Near here]

On a turnout of 77.6 per cent, Corbyn increased the mandate he secured in 2015 (Pope, 2016). He was able to claim that the party supported his continued leadership in each of the components of the selectorate. As a consequence, Smith’s arguments had failed to resonate whilst Corbyn was able to claim a renewed vote of confidence that over-rode the concerns of the PLP. As a consequence of the leadership election, calls for Corbyn to resign fell silent. It is also important to note the importance of Corbyn’s renewed mandate in terms of Labour’s broader ideological trajectory. It could be argued that in 2015 Corbyn’s election was the result of a unique set of circumstances that resulted from an inadequate selection process. However, his re-election in 2016 suggests that his leadership is an intentional shift in ideological direction which the majority of the party membership and supporters wished to support. Also ‘the membership came to view the PLP as “rebels”, who were attempting to subvert internal party democracy in their attempts to force Corbyn to resign, through coordinated resignations from the frontbench and via the confidence motion, and by trying to prevent Corbyn from being on the leadership ballot by arguing that he needed the support of 20 per cent of the PLP before being allowed to participate’ (Crines et al, 2018). This would prove decisive in how Labour continued to develop as a party.

Despite this, concerns raised by Smith remained very much in the minds of the defeated moderates. Corbyn’s electoral salience remained untested in a general election, and his party management skills remained unchanged. The leadership election changed few minds about Corbyn’s prospects as a successful leader – however, the process had de-legitimised those concerns in the minds of hard left Labour activists and supporters, thereby triggering a prolonged period of silence within the PLP which assumed electoral annihilation at the next general election. In that event, it was hoped Corbyn’s resignation would most likely follow, thereby enabling moderates to retake control of the party.

**The consolidation of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership**

The 2016 leadership election outcome provided Corbyn with an increased mandate to remain as leader and to lead Labour into the next general election, which was assumed to be in 2020. In his victory speech, Corbyn called for unity across the party and that members needed to stop discussing the leadership question in order to ‘wipe that slate clean from today and get on with the work we’ve got to do as a party’ (Corbyn, 2016b). The work of the party would be about ensuring Labour was a potential government in waiting that would be ready to replace the Conservatives. Indeed, Corbyn continued by arguing that ‘together, arguing for the real change this country needs, I have no doubt this party can win the next election whenever the Prime Minister decides to call it and form the next government’ (Corbyn, 2016b).

Yet here Curtice voiced a note of concern, saying that ‘there is evidently a section of the British public, to be found particularly among younger voters, for whom the Labour leader does have an appeal; it just does not look like a section that is big enough, on its own at least, to enable Labour to win a general election’ (Curtice, 2016b). Here Curtice is arguing that Corbyn’s support base is enough for him to secure and maintain a strong grip over the Labour leadership, however it unlikely to be sufficient enough to win Labour an overall majority in a UK-wide general election. This could be problematic for Labour’s electoral appeal if Corbyn is able to solicit enough support to remain as leader, but not enough to convince the voters of his prime ministerial credentials. This is a similar issue that Kinnock faced which, despite modernising the party and shaking off Benn’s challenge for the leadership (whilst the party enjoyed considerable leads in the opinion polls), he was still unable to convince the voters that he would be a suitable replacement for either Thatcher or Major.

In terms of party management, the PLP were far more subdued following the second leadership election. Only when Corbyn used the three line whip to compel Labour MPs to support the passage of Article 50 on UK withdrawal from the European Union did he face a significant issue when two of his own whips chose to vote against the bill whilst Tulip Saddiq and Jo Stevens resigned in protest. Ultimately, forty eight Labour MPs defied the whip and voted against, yet this did not have a significant impact upon Corbyn’s position or argument (ITV News, 2017).

With regards to electoral appeal, Labour appeared to be on a course for annihilation at the polls. This seemed to be confirmed during the May 2017 local elections when the party lost over 380 councillors on a swing of four per cent against Labour. The party also lost control of seven councils. This was contrasted against the Conservatives securing over 560 new Councillors and a swing in favour of eight per cent. The Conservatives also gained control of eleven councils. The Liberal Democrats lost forty two councillors, but enjoyed a swing of three per cent towards them (BBC, 2017a). Moreover, of the six mayoral elections taking place, Labour lost to the Conservatives in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Tees Valley, the West of England, and the West Midlands. Labour won only in assumed heartlands of Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region (BBC, 2017b). Consequently, it contributed towards the assumed narrative that Labour would perform poorly if Corbyn remained as leader. Despite this, given his support-base and renewed mandate, there were few options available to the party other than allow the narrative to continue and to prepare for presumed scale of defeat.

The Conservatives were also reflecting on the local election results. Given the Conservatives performed well during the 2015 general election by securing their first overall majority since 1992, under Theresa May’s leadership they were emboldened by the results of the local elections and the divisions that continued within the Labour Party. May had ruled out an early election, however on 18 April 2017, she announced that she would call for an early election in order to facilitate a smoother Brexit process in the Commons (Boyle and Maidment, 2017). Put simply, she argued the current composition of the chamber was hindering her attempts to show strength to the EU and that a renewed mandate and an enhanced majority would enable her to apply pressure upon the Brussels negotiators. Given the Fixed Term Parliament Act, May needed the support of the Commons before being able to proceed. Corbyn was joined by Tim Farron in supporting the vote, thereby Parliament was dissolved for a general election on 8 June 2017 (Parliament.uk, 2017a).

During the election campaign, Corbyn galvanised supporters in a similar manner to his leadership bids in large set-piece arenas. As Crines suggests, ‘Corbyn will need to convince voters that he stands for a fairer economy and a secure role for the state in providing vital public services. To do that he must retain his authenticity by setting out his beliefs in a convincing manner’ (Crines, 2015b). To do that he spoke to an audience of over 20,000 at the Wirral Live Festival; he appeared measured and well researched during television debates; and his appearance was more prime ministerial in his attire (Demianyk, 2017). This is contrasted to May’s hesitation to participate in the debates, who addressed smaller audiences, and in some cases appeared to be pictured in a way to make them look larger than they turned out to be. May’s core message of ‘strong and stable’ was also ridiculed when she appeared uncertain and unconvincing during the televised debates. She was also accused of ‘running away from the debate’ when Amber Rudd stood in for her during a seven-way televised debate (BBC, 2017c). As such, the Conservative leader failed to perform to expectations during the campaign.

Despite this failure, Corbyn had entered the election with the lowest opinion polls of any previous Labour leader. Opinion polls were also suggesting that May’s calculation of securing a substantially increased majority may be valid given Labour appeared to be on course for a substantial defeat (Fisher, Kenny, Shorrocks, 2017). This raised questions about Corbyn’s future prospects as the leader in the event Labour secured fewer seats than Miliband in 2015. It also gave some comfort to Conservatives who were concerned about May’s style of presentation and campaigning. However these positions were to shift dramatically over the course of the campaign.

The Conservative Party manifesto was launched in Halifax where May pledged that she would lead a ‘mainstream government that would deliver for mainstream Britain’ (Parker and Pickard, 2017). The manifesto sought to balance the budget by 2025; remove the ban on grammar schools; introduce a means-test for the winter fuel allowance; and transform the pension ‘triple lock’ into a ‘double lock’ (Conservatives, 2017). The manifesto also dropped the 2015 pledge not to raise income tax or national insurance, however it did pledge not to raise VAT. The manifesto alienated core conservatives because of the promises of intervention in industry and the lack of a pledge to cut taxes, whilst it also alienated progressives for removing the ban on grammar schools and the possibility of a more relaxed approach to fox hunting. The manifesto was attacked by George Osborne for the so-called ‘u-turn’ on social care spending, and also by Labour for the so-called ‘dementia tax’ (Kentish, 2017). The launch of the Conservative manifesto represented a shift in the trajectory of their campaign, whilst the assumption that the Conservatives would secure a landslide victory began to dissipate.

In contrast to the Conservatives, Labour ruled out increases to VAT or income tax and national insurance for those earning less than £80,000 per year. The party also pledged to ban junk food advertising, to abolish car parking charges at NHS hospitals, £7.4bn in additional annual NHS investment, renationalise the water industry, impose a levy on companies earning over £330,000 per year, and re-introduce the 50p rate of tax for those earning over £123,000 per year. Furthermore, McDonnell promised to raise corporation tax from nineteen per cent to twenty six per cent in order to fund an extra £4.8bn investment in education. More broadly, Labour sought to build one million new homes by reversing cuts to capital gains tax, and to re-nationalise the National Grid, the railways, the water industry, and Royal Mail alongside abolition of university tuition fees, and a ban on fracking (BBC, 2017d; BBC, 2017e; Kuenssberg, 2017; Anushka and Carrell, 2017). The Labour Party galvanised many of the party’s core support base around a radical programme for a socialised economy. However, they did later state that the freeze on social welfare would remain in place (Merrick, 2017). Labour’s opinion polls continued to show a sharp increase, whilst the Conservatives began to sharply decline. As the momentum shifted away from the Conservatives and more towards Labour, it was no longer certain that Corbyn would be leading the party to certain annihilation.

The shift in narrative towards Labour continued, however this was not reflected in the polls. Indeed, on polling day, *Election Calculus, Lord Ashcroft Polling, Elections Etc, the New Statesman,* and *Britain Elects* each gave the Conservatives a projected majority of between twenty four and eighty two seats (Baxter, 2017; Ashcroft, 2017; Fisher, Kenny, Shorrocks, 2017; New Statesman, 2017; Britain Elects, 2017). The assumption was that Labour would lose a significant number of seats, and that Corbyn would resign shortly afterwards. However, only *YouGov* predicted a hung parliament with the Conservatives short by twenty four seats (YouGov, 2017). As events unfolded on election night, *YouGov’s* prediction turned out to be more accurate than not.

[Table 7.3. Near here]

In the event, the Conservatives were short by twelve. This result surprised commentators (and Labour moderates) alike because it entirely subverted the assumed narrative that would emerge under both Corbyn and May’s respective leadership. It was assumed that on Corbyn’s policy platform, the voters would recoil. Inversely, May’s confidence of an increased majority was proved not to be the case. This can partly be explained by the style of campaign each party sought to pursue.

Firstly, Corbyn is a seasoned campaigner. He successfully fought two leadership campaigns in the preceding years. Secondly, he has also spent much of his political career campaigning for issues that are close to his heart. Thirdly, May’s record of campaigning is less than effective. During the EU referendum she left much of the attempts to convince Conservative activists to support remain to Cameron, which he failed to do. She also did not campaign to secure her own position as leader given the leadership election was restricted to parliamentarians as the other candidates withdrew.

Moreover, Corbyn benefitted from a grassroots movement through groups such as Momentum and also within the party itself. Furthermore, during the general election campaign, Corbyn was a visible presence whilst May would only be seen at set-piece events with little reach. As such, Corbyn’s natural skills enabled him to successfully lead a campaign that increased the number of Labour MPs.

Consequently, the assumption that Corbyn would resign following a general election proved not to be accurate. Indeed, Corbyn’s position has been strengthened by the election outcome in a similar manner to the leadership challenge in 2016. It is important to note however that the true test of leadership is the ability to maintain a united party outside of the campaign period. Given Corbyn has put Labour onto a permanent campaign footing, it remains to be seen if he is capable of demonstrating the leadership skills needed to implement his programme should the voters afford him with an opportunity to do so.

A central caveat must be placed here, however given Corbyn’s near diabolical performance as party leader since 2017. Under Corbyn Labour became consumed in unresolved scandals relating to sexism, antisemitism, and bullying. Given these serious problems it would be highly unlikely for Labour to secure victory in a general election. It was only Theresa May’s poor performance as Prime Minister over Brexit and other issues which appeared to give Corbyn a realistic prospect of becoming Prime Minister. *If* Boris Johnson is able to revitalise the Conservative Party as an effective governing force and the Liberal Democrats are able to pose significant challenges to Labour and the Conservatives electorally then it is likely that Labour may not be able to extend its appeal beyond the narrow gap of supporters it currently has. At the time of writing, however these remain hostages to fortune.

**Conclusion**

Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party has, thus far, been characterised by division and hostility towards his leadership. His supporters have also demonstrated hostility towards his opponents. This represents a clear split in the party, which has come to characterise Corbyn’s period as leader.

Following his election to the leadership, Corbyn has sought to circumnavigate the authority of the PLP in order to promote his views, whilst the PLP have sought to challenge his authority as leader of the Labour Party. This was evident in the fallout from his election as leader, on issues such as the Syria vote, his role in the vote to leave the European Union, Owen Smith’s challenge for the leadership, and the assumption that Corbyn would lead Labour into certain defeat in a general election.

Yet despite these issues, Corbyn remains highly popular with his support-base. Given the rules to select the leader remain as they were in 2015 and 2016, any immediate future leadership challenge would likely gift Corbyn another renewed mandate. Should Corbyn stand down, then the candidate he endorses in the subsequent leadership election would likely benefit from the votes of his support base. As such in the event Corbyn remains as leader, the divisions created by his substantive support base are unlikely to end.

These divisions, however do not appear to impede Labour’s broader electoral performance. As seen in 2017, under Corbyn’s leadership, the party was able to grow its number of MPs. However, this was achieved in the face of a hesitant campaign from the Conservatives and a prime minister who appeared detached from key platforms such as the televised debates.