

# THE RISE OF JEREMY CORBYN: WHY IT HAPPENED?

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Nobody saw it coming – not his supporters, not his opponents, and, for that matter, not the man himself. Jeremy Corbyn's victory in the 2015 Labour leadership election must rate as one of the most startlingly unexpected events in modern politics. Corbyn was, after all, a veteran of Labour's hard left; he had never held ministerial or shadow ministerial office; and he had frequently been at odds with the Labour leadership. Indeed, he represented a wing of the party that had been in virtual internal exile since the rise of New Labour in the 1990s. What is more, few outside Labour circles had even heard of him just a few months earlier. Yet, on the morning of 12 September 2015, it was Corbyn who took the stage at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in Westminster to give his victory speech, having won on the first ballot with a convincing 60 per cent of the vote. How did this happen? But first, why was it so unexpected?

Events may be unexpected for a number of reasons. One is that deeply established but possibly flawed assumptions go unchallenged. In the case of Corbyn's leadership bid, this certainly applied in the case of the assumptions that parties (1) typically choose leaders primarily on the basis of their ability to deliver electoral success, and (2) generally respond to electoral defeat by drawing closer to the ideas and policies of the winning party, rather than moving in the opposite direction. In this light, the idea that Corbyn may become the Labour leader seemed, quite simply, to defy logic. A further reason why events may take us by surprise is that people had been looking in the wrong place, and so failed to take account of factors that later proved to be significant. Four such factors affected the 2015 Labour leadership election, if to different degrees:

- The leadership election process
- The backlash against austerity
- The impact of anti-politics
- The failings of New Labour.

### **The leadership election process**

Once nominations were in and the leadership campaign got underway, the perception steadily grew that the peculiarities of the election process itself may affect the outcome, possibly decisively. Introduced in 2014 by Ed Miliband, the process replaced a system in which there were three, equally weighted, electoral colleges with one based on OMOV, or one-member-one-vote. However, the new process was controversial because, in addition to party members, it allocated votes to 'affiliated supporters' and 'registered supporters'. The former were members of an affiliated trade union who were registered as Labour supporters, while the latter were people who wished, for a fee of £3, to vote in the leadership election without being members of the party or an affiliated body. Concern over affiliated supporters focused on the claim that trade union leaders could exert disproportionate influence by signing up their members as affiliated supporters of the party and then encourage them to support the union's preferred candidate. Greater concerns were nevertheless expressed about the involvement of registered supporters. Here, Labour seemed to have opened the door to the influence, on the one hand, of members of radical or even revolutionary groups, who wished to shift Labour decisively to the left (a practice called 'entryism'), and, on the other, of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, who wanted to damage Labour by backing its the least electable leadership candidate. With the inclusion of both affiliated and registered supporters, Labour seemed to have crafted a leadership election process that, in 2015, was highly favourable to Jeremy Corbyn, as clearly the most pro-union and left-wing candidate on the ballot.

As anticipated, when the votes were cast, Corbyn was the overwhelming choice of both affiliated and registered supporters, gaining 66 per cent of the vote and 84 per cent, respectively. However, the allegation that Corbyn's victory was a product of union manipulation, entryism or the impact of other 'dark' forces is difficult to sustain. The simple fact is that had affiliated and registered supporters not been entitled to vote in the election, Corbyn would still have won. Not only did individual party members account for just over 58 per cent of all those who voted, but 49.6 per cent of them backed Corbyn, his nearest rival, Andy Burnham, gaining just 22.7 per cent of the vote. In other words, had the Labour Party leadership election been run on the same basis as the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and other leadership elections – that is, with an electorate consisting solely of party members – the only

difference would have been that Corbyn would have won on the second ballot not the first. The key to explaining Corbyn's victory therefore lies not with the peculiarities of the electoral process but, rather, with profound changes that have taken place within the Labour Party itself.

## **The backlash against austerity**

One of the major developments in UK politics since 2010 has been the emergence of an anti-austerity movement, composed of people who feel, in various ways, disenfranchised by the Cameron governments' deficit reduction programme. This development nevertheless went largely unheralded, being concealed by, among other things, the 2015 general election, which saw the Conservative Party, the chief exponent of austerity in the UK, escape from the shackles of coalition and gain its first Commons majority since 1992. The UK, it seemed, had moved to the right during five years of coalition government, and, as a result, the Conservatives had been given a mandate to carry out further, and more radical, spending cuts. This was by no means the whole picture, however. In addition to the success of the Conservatives, some 2.8 million people in May 2015 voted for parties that embraced explicitly anti-austerity economic policies, namely the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Greens and Plaid Cymru. This represented nearly a tripling of support for these parties since 2010.

The rise in anti-austerity sentiments, which has occurred, to a greater or lesser extent, across Europe, could not but have an impact on Labour. However, UK experience was distinctive in that, instead of the backlash against austerity being expressed through the emergence of a radical leftist movement (such as Syriza in Greece, Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) in Portugal and Podemos in Spain), which, seemingly, had come from nowhere to challenge a mainstream social-democratic party, the key changes happened within the social-democratic party itself. The changes that occurred in the Labour Party were brought about through a substantial expansion in membership, and the recruitment, in particular, of members with more radical views. Between the 2015 general election defeat and the leadership election, Labour's membership grew by 105,000, adding to the 187,000 new members who had joined before the general election. An estimated 70 per cent of party members who voted in Labour's 2015 leadership election had not been members of the party

in 2010 when Miliband had been elected leader. The increased radicalism of these new members is reflected in the fact that, whereas Diane Abbott, the leading left-winger in the 2010 leadership election, was backed by 7.4 per cent of party members and received no constituency party nominations, Corbyn in 2015 won almost half the votes of party members and gained 152 constituency party nominations, more than any other candidate.

## **Anti-politics comes to the Labour Party**

The excitement that Corbyn's leadership bid generated can, nevertheless, not be explained simply in terms of the ideological shift that has occurred among party members. Rather, it was also fuelled by the phenomenon of 'anti-politics' and a thirst for a new and more 'authentic' style of politics. In this, 'Corbynmania', which affected all elements within the Labour leadership process but especially registered supporters, had much in common with the popularity of other 'anti-political' figures such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, despite their very different ideological leanings. For example, anti-political politicians typically cultivate a distinctive, even idiosyncratic, public image, setting them apart from conventional politicians who, increasingly, seem to look the same and sound the same. By being different, they are advertising that they are, quite simply, themselves, people who have substance and who voters can relate to, rather than the 'manufactured' politicians who otherwise seem to dominate the political scene. Thus, while Farage revels in his image as 'the man in the pub', and Johnson trades in practised buffoonery, Corbyn relied on his slightly ruffled trademark vest and shirt combination, and did little to counter the image that he was an archetypal 'bearded leftie'.

Anti-political politicians are, moreover, usually perceived as political 'outsiders', people who can be trusted because they have not been corrupted by the experience of holding senior public office and the compromises which that entails. In an era of anti-politics, Corbyn's inexperience, the fact that he had spent his entire, then, 32-year Westminster career on the backbenches, may have been more an advantage to him than a disadvantage. By contrast, Corbyn's three leadership rivals – Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall – were, arguably, 'tainted' by their membership of Miliband's shadow cabinet and, in the case of the first two, by their membership of Brown's cabinet, 2007-10. In addition, anti-political politicians are

distinguished by their policy or ideological boldness, giving the impression that they believe in something other than advancing their own careers or achieving power for its own sake. They therefore appear to be principled, even idealistic. In this light, people who warned against the choice of Corbyn as Labour leader on the grounds that it would lead to electoral disaster were perhaps missing the point: many of those who were excited about Corbyn's candidacy were inspired precisely by the fact that it seemed to represent a new style of politics, one that was more about values and vision than crude electoral calculations.

### **Key terms**

**Anti-politics** – A rejection of, and/or alienation from, conventional politicians and political processes, especially mainstream political parties and established representative mechanisms. Anti-politics may be reflected in either a decline in civic engagement or support for new and more 'authentic' forms of politics.

**Austerity** – Broadly, a condition characterized by sternness, severity or the reduced availability of luxuries or consumer goods. As an economic strategy, austerity refers to cuts in the level of public spending designed to reduce a budget deficit, underpinned by faith in the natural vigour of the market.

**Entryism** – The infiltration of one party by members of another party or political group. In its classical sense, entryism was a tactic employed by revolutionary socialist, and usually Trotskyite, groups to manipulate social-democratic parties; entryism typically involves subterfuge.

**New Labour** – A term, coined in the 1990s, through which Blairites sought to re-brand the Labour Party by emphasising its changed policy and ideological orientation. New Labour is associated with a shift away from Keynesian or 'traditional' social democracy and an accommodation with free market or neoliberal thinking.

### **The failings of New Labour**

Finally, Corbyn's victory can be understood in the light of developments that were set in motion by the rise of New Labour. For example, Labour's susceptibility to the kind

of populist upsurge that Corbyn's leadership bid sparked was linked to a 'hollowing out' of the party's membership and activist base that occurred during the New Labour years. This happened because the revolution in the Labour Party's policy and strategic thinking that New Labour represented was very much a revolution 'from above', masterminded by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and close networks of advisers and supporters that formed around each. As New Labour took shape, many constituency activists and individual members were therefore left feeling marginalised or disengaged, and this had a dramatic impact. Within seven years of Blair becoming prime minister in 1997, party membership had halved, falling from in excess of 400,000 to just 208,000 in 2004. By 2009, membership had fallen further, to around 166,000. Although not recognised at the time, New Labour had thus prepared the ground for the radicalisation of the party that occurred after 2010.

A further link between the rise of New Labour and Corbyn's victory is that, over time, the former had created a thirst within the party for a return to the politics of moral engagement and principled belief. One of the chief flaws of New Labour was its failure to develop a justification for its shift from state- to market-orientated policies that was ideologically coherent and somehow related to the party's traditional principles. Not only had Labour seemingly broken with socialism, but it also appeared to have abandoned ideology altogether, giving the impression that the party had lost any sense of purpose or direction beyond getting elected. Tainted by unprincipled electoralism, the New Labour brand thus became increasingly unfashionable in the party, especially once Brown replaced Blair in 2007. In this context, one of the key advantages that Corbyn enjoyed in the 2015 leadership election was that he was the only candidate who offered a thoroughgoing alternative to New Labour. Indeed, Corbyn won the leadership perhaps precisely because he represented the antidote to New Labour.