

## CROSSCURRENTS

### *Corbyn, Labour and the Brexit Crisis*

SINCE 2015, THE British Labour Party has stood apart from the wider picture of Europe's centre left. Under a leadership derided from the start as a fossilized remnant whose strategy was bound to result in calamity, Labour clawed its way back from electoral and organizational decline, during a period that saw its sister parties in France and Germany slump to unprecedented troughs; its dramatic increase in membership has made it the largest political party in Western Europe. The party's leader Jeremy Corbyn, a left-wing veteran who was on a path towards retirement when the 2015 leadership contest catapulted him to centre stage, is currently in contention to become the next British Prime Minister. The turn-around has been all the more remarkable given that, for a quarter of a century, Labour was the most hawkishly militarist and neoliberal centre-left party in the developed capitalist world.

Yet the Corbyn project faces a number of obstacles that may prove insurmountable. The Labour Party itself is far from being a reliable instrument in Corbyn's hands: while the leader and his allies have strengthened their position since the electoral breakthrough of 2017, they still face unremitting hostility from the party's right wing, to supplement that of their Tory opponents and the mainstream media. Labour's programme of social-democratic reform may be modest in historical perspective, but it represents enough of a departure from established orthodoxy to provoke fierce resistance from business and the state machine—especially if Corbyn also tries to recalibrate British foreign policy after taking office. Before it can reach that point, Labour has to navigate an issue—Britain's departure from the EU—that cuts through the heart of its electoral

coalition and has no precedent in post-war British experience. Brexit has thrown the whole political field into confusion, and Labour will struggle to achieve a majority in parliament after the next election, even if it emerges as the largest party. The conditions of its likely coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party, could include the extinction of any distinctive Corbyn project.

All factors seem to point towards ultimate defeat, except one: the fact that Corbynism has already survived against the odds to reach its current position. After nearly four years of a surprisingly tenacious political experiment, it should be possible to draw up a provisional balance-sheet. This article will examine the extent of Labour's internal transformation under Corbyn, as the necessary precondition for any wider success. What is the present state of play within the party? How has the Corbyn leadership coped with its treatment by the British media, and with the challenges of the Brexit process?

### *Actually existing labourism*

In contrast with the new left-wing movements that have come to the fore in Greece, Spain or France since the financial crisis, comparable energies in Britain have been channelled through a long-established party with a century's worth of organizational baggage to weigh it down. The British Labour Party was a late arrival: in the early 1900s, at a time when the German Social Democrats had already become the largest force in the Reichstag, Labour was just beginning to emerge from the shadow of the Liberal Party. The party adopted from the start a reverential attitude towards the Mother of Parliaments. A constitution drafted by Sidney Webb in 1918 codified its ideology and organizational form. Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) permitted individual membership for the first time, mirroring parliamentary boundaries rather than workplace or residential communities. A new constitution, its Clause Four nominally committing Labour to 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange', appealed to those radicalized by the temper of the times. But real power within the party lay with the trade-union leaders who supplied most of its funding, expressed through a block vote at Labour conferences and on the National Executive Committee (NEC), while deference to Westminster gave the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) full autonomy from the rank-and-file.

After two minority administrations—the second of which ended in catastrophe for Labour—and membership of national-coalition governments in both world wars, the party finally had the opportunity to govern from a position of strength after its landslide victory in 1945. Clement Attlee's government showed the limits of Labour's reforming ambitions, even at its high point. At a time of enormous popular desire for change, its agenda remained within strict limits. Nationalization of certain industries was never intended to be the first step towards a socialist economic system: Labour's goal was to preside over a 'mixed economy' where private ownership was predominant. Attlee's government also illustrated another perennial feature of Labourism, from Ramsay MacDonald to Tony Blair: its unflinching commitment to Britain's 'global role'. In the days of empire, that meant dogged support for the Great War and the Colonial Office; after 1945, all-round Cold War Atlanticism, fervent pursuit of the A-Bomb, and cuts to social spending to fund military operations in Korea and Malaya.

Labour possessed a left wing that took the ideas embodied in Clause Four seriously but was unable to challenge the leadership to any great effect. From the Socialist League of the 1930s to the Bevanites two decades later, socialist currents broke against two immovable rocks: the trade-union block vote and the autonomy of the PLP.<sup>1</sup> The most determined effort came after the election defeat of 1979, in an attempt to draw a line under the Callaghan government's IMF-mandated austerity budgets. The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy proposed constitutional reforms that would make all MPs subject to mandatory reselection by their CLPs and change the system for electing the party leader: from now on a tripartite electoral college, representing MPs, trade unions and party members, would make the choice, rather than the PLP alone. The left current grouped around Tony Benn hoped that these organizational remedies would create a parliamentary cadre sufficiently combative to implement a more radical programme.

However, the existing MPs had other ideas. A liberal-Atlanticist section of the Labour right broke away to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP), anathematizing their former colleagues and splitting the

---

<sup>1</sup> Simon Hannah, *A Party with Socialists in It: A History of the Labour Left*, London 2018.

anti-Conservative vote. Internal divisions, the SDP split, Michael Foot's ham-fisted leadership, and the 'Falklands factor' accruing to Margaret Thatcher after her South Atlantic triumph knocked Labour out of contention for the 1983 general election. A ceaseless vendetta against the Bennite left ensued, under the direction of Neil Kinnock. By the time Tony Blair became Prime Minister in 1997, Labour's programme stood well to the right of anything put forward by his most conservative predecessors. Blair and Gordon Brown, his Chancellor and eventual successor, upheld the main features of the post-Thatcher settlement, preserving her draconian anti-union laws and keeping privatized industries out of state hands. In some respects they went further than Thatcher had dared: imposing university tuition fees, making the Bank of England independent, and extending 'marketization' into the fields of education and health care. Brown also encouraged the worst proclivities of Britain's financial sector under the rubric of 'light-touch regulation'. On the international stage, Labour took on a belligerent role not seen since the last days of empire, serving as Washington's loyal attack-dog from the Balkans to Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

Radical opposition to Blair and Brown's policies mostly bypassed the Labour Party altogether, leaving its residual left faction becalmed. By 2010, when the Tories returned to office in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, MPs like Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell looked more like refugees from a Bennite Atlantis than the vanguard of a future left-wing revival.<sup>3</sup> On the very eve of Corbyn's accession to the Labour leadership, McDonnell described the current moment as 'the darkest hour that socialists in Britain have faced since the Attlee government fell in 1951', characterized by 'the overwhelming incorporation of so much of the Labour Party into the political and economic system that the Labour Party was founded to transform'.<sup>4</sup> In order to grasp the scale

---

<sup>2</sup> Tony Wood, 'Good Riddance to New Labour', NLR 62, March–April 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Andy Beckett, 'The Wilderness Years: How Labour's Left Survived to Conquer', *Guardian*, 3 November 2017.

<sup>4</sup> John McDonnell, 'What Now? Three Tasks for the Left', *Labour Briefing*, 27 May 2015. John McDonnell: born in Liverpool in 1951; elected to the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1981 and served as GLC finance chief under Ken Livingstone, but resigned in protest at Livingstone's refusal to defy the Thatcher government over rate-capping; became an MP in 1997 for an outer-London constituency; sought nominations to run for the Labour leadership in 2007 and 2010, falling short on both occasions.

of the challenge that Corbyn and his supporters have faced, it is vital to recognize that this analysis was in most respects quite accurate.

### *The outsider*

Nevertheless, by the summer of 2015, in the aftermath of a Tory election triumph, three factors were about to transform that situation. The first, hardest to quantify, was growing anger at the post-crisis austerity policies of David Cameron and George Osborne, especially among the economically vulnerable young; with this—catching the winds blowing from Greece and Spain, the ‘movement of the squares’ and Occupy—went a willingness to contemplate more radical and egalitarian solutions to the crisis. Secondly, when Brown’s successor Ed Miliband tried to reform the process by which a Labour leader was chosen, it proved to be a dramatic own-goal for the party elite.

The Unite trade union had been promoting the selection of sympathetic candidates as a mild corrective to years in which right-wing loyalists had been parachuted into safe Labour seats. Largely fictitious claims of organizational skullduggery by Unite officials in the Scottish constituency of Falkirk prompted Miliband to commission a report into the party–union link. The Collins Review urged a number of steps to weaken the power of the unions, including the withdrawal of their one-third vote share in the electoral college for the leadership election. The Unite general secretary Len McCluskey accepted this in return for a symmetrical move by Labour’s parliamentary representatives: Labour MPs could no longer serve as gatekeepers for the leadership, apart from the requirement that any candidate would have to be nominated by 15 per cent of the PLP.<sup>5</sup> For the first time, Labour leaders would be chosen on a one-member, one-vote basis. The Blairite faction added the suggestion that non-members be allowed to register as supporters for a £3 fee and cast a vote of their own—a move towards the American open-primary model.<sup>6</sup> Unsuspected at the time, the organizational preconditions for Jeremy Corbyn’s ascent were now in place.

---

<sup>5</sup> Len McCluskey: born in Liverpool in 1950; employed by the city’s dock company before he became a full-time official for the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU); elected as general secretary in 2010 after the TGWU merged with Amicus to form Unite.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Nunns, *The Candidate: Jeremy Corbyn’s Improbable Path to Power*, London 2018, pp. 35–40.

Finally, the outcome of the 2015 leadership contest owed as much to the manifold weaknesses of the Labour establishment as it did to the discovery of unexpected strength among its left-wing critics. Following Miliband's resounding defeat in the 2015 election—232 seats, compared to Cameron's 330—members, supporters and unions alike asserted the need for a change of direction. Labour's calamitous performance in Scotland, where the SNP had trounced it after linking the cause of independence with opposition to austerity, offered an especially sharp lesson. Yet the mainstream candidates all proposed to tack right in response to Miliband's failure, leaving Corbyn as the only standard-bearer for a different approach.

Born in 1949, raised in a radical-bohemian family in rural Shropshire, Corbyn was a local anti-racist activist from his early teens. By his mid-20s, he was a hard-working stalwart of London's Labour left. Elected to the House of Commons in 1983 from an inner-London constituency, Islington North, that contains in miniature form many of the capital's polarities—between wealth and poverty, native-born and immigrant communities—he was known as a diligent constituency worker with a particular interest in international affairs. During the Blair years, he consistently voted against New Labour's economic agenda, from welfare cuts to the marketization of public services, and against its encroachments on civil liberties. Corbyn's public profile stemmed above all from his opposition to Blair's foreign adventures: he condemned NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia and steadfastly opposed the serial invasions and regime-change projects of the 'war on terror', endorsing the Stop the War Coalition and later serving as its chair. He took a keen interest in Latin American politics and shared the hopes of the 'pink tide'. The extraordinary vitriol that Corbyn inspires in his opponents, seemingly out of all proportion to the content of his programme, is mainly a reaction to his record of consistent heterodoxy on foreign-policy questions.

The format of the 2015 leadership election played to Corbyn's strengths. Never an especially rousing orator, he was nonetheless perfectly comfortable addressing large crowds, or taking questions from an audience of Labour supporters. His rivals had lost the ability to do so—if they ever possessed it in the first place—having trained themselves to speak in robotic sound-bites, with news anchors as their main sparring-partners. Corbyn's paucity of experience in television studios placed him on a steep

learning curve when he ascended to the leadership, but his unpolished demeanour was more of an asset than a liability during this opening phase. His campaign relied upon unorthodox methods, with mass public rallies and the use of social media to by-pass established outlets.<sup>7</sup> In the summer of 2015 the first opinion poll put Corbyn at the head of the field, an advantage that he never surrendered. The most popular candidate with full members (almost 50 per cent voted for Corbyn—more than the favourites Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper put together), he also won by a crushing margin among registered supporters. More unexpectedly, he received backing from some of the big trade unions, not least because Burnham, the erstwhile front-runner, had made a point of giving them the cold shoulder.<sup>8</sup>

Baffled by the scale of Corbyn's victory—59.5 per cent of the vote on the first round, 40 points clear of the nearest challenger—his Labour opponents soon fell back on comforting myths. The fault, they suggested, lay with Miliband's £3 supporters scheme and an influx of 'Trotskyite entryists' who had hijacked Labour's internal processes. It was laughable to suggest that the dwindling membership of Britain's Trotskyist groups could be numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Whatever else might happen, the fresh wave of political enthusiasm that now flooded into the Labour Party constituted a novel force on the British scene.

### *Baptism of fire*

The first phase of Corbyn's leadership ran from September 2015, when he first took the reins, to the 2017 election. During this period, Corbyn was seen as an illegitimate usurper by the national media, Labour's full-time bureaucracy and many of his own MPs. The initial decision to offer his opponents places in the shadow cabinet, a tactic born of weakness, merely compounded that frailty; in December 2015, Corbyn's position

---

<sup>7</sup>The most thorough account of the 2015 leadership election can be found in Nunns, *The Candidate*.

<sup>8</sup>The Unite executive, led by McCluskey, threw its weight behind Corbyn. Unison's support for Corbyn was more unexpected, and stemmed from a tactical manoeuvre by its leader Dave Prentis, who was facing re-election and did not want to antagonize the union's left-wing activists. Prentis ordered a consultation, and 9 of 11 regions wanted to support Corbyn: Nunns, *The Candidate*, pp. 152–7. Of the two main unions with right-wing leadership teams, Paul Kenny's GMB abstained while USDAW endorsed Andy Burnham. Several smaller unions representing food, transport, postal and fire-service workers also backed Corbyn.

was so weak that he felt obliged to concede a free vote to his front-bench team over air strikes in Syria.<sup>9</sup> Reporters delighted in the unrelenting stream of leaks against their new leader from front-bench MPs and senior party officials at Labour's headquarters in Victoria, known as Southside, headed by a right-wing union apparatchik, Iain McNicol. There was a huge imbalance between the resources available to Southside, with more than 200 employees, and the leadership office, tiny by comparison, though containing some very capable individuals. These incessant attacks greatly exacerbated the teething troubles of an inexperienced leadership team that had to improvise a campaigning platform in the face of intense media hostility.

One of the first major lines of attack also proved to be the most enduring. Pro-Israel campaigning groups and media outlets like the *Jewish Chronicle* had already denounced Ed Miliband for his reluctance to support the bombardment of Gaza in 2014.<sup>10</sup> Now, they redoubled their exertions to vilify a politician with a far more substantial record of supporting Palestinian rights. Naturally, those efforts did not focus on Corbyn's real opinions about Israel, which were likely to command broad public sympathy; instead they sought to taint him by association with anti-semitism. By the spring of 2016, a campaign to brand Corbyn's Labour Party as a 'cold house for Jews'—in the words of *Guardian* deputy editor Jonathan Freedland, an especially cynical player—was in full swing.<sup>11</sup> That

---

<sup>9</sup> With the exceptions of McDonnell (shadow chancellor) and Diane Abbott (international development), Corbyn's Labour opponents dominated his first shadow cabinet: Hilary Benn (shadow foreign secretary), Andy Burnham (shadow home secretary), Heidi Alexander (health), Charles Falconer (justice), Lucy Powell (education), Angela Eagle (business), Maria Eagle (defence), John Healey (housing).

<sup>10</sup> The *Chronicle's* editor, Stephen Pollard, is a right-wing zealot of the crudest stamp: by 2006, he had already branded 'most Labour MPs and members' as mortal enemies in 'the battle to preserve Western civilization'. The limited, ineffectual opposition to Blair's invasion of Iraq was for Pollard clear proof of this 'moral degeneracy'.

<sup>11</sup> For more detail on this campaign as it has unfolded since 2016, see Jamie Stern-Weiner, 'Jeremy Corbyn Hasn't Got an "Antisemitism Problem": His Opponents Do', *openDemocracy*, 27 April 2016; Richard Kuper, 'Crying Wolf?', *openDemocracy*, 24 October 2016; Daniel Finn, 'Corbyn Under Fire', *Jacobin*, 9 April 2018, and 'The Antisemitism Controversy', *Jacobin*, 16 September 2018; Antony Lerman, 'The Labour Party, "Institutional Antisemitism" and Irresponsible Politics', *openDemocracy*, 21 March 2019. Much of the work rebutting individual smears has been conducted on social media, but Stern-Weiner's blog is an excellent source of information on specific cases.

campaign synchronized perfectly with the needs of wider political forces: the Conservative Party, Labour's right-wing faction, and their supporters in the media. Every serious examination of the evidence showed that expressions of anti-Jewish prejudice in the Labour Party were marginal and unrepresentative of the wider membership.<sup>12</sup> The Labour leadership put a great deal of effort into revamping the party's disciplinary process to deal with the small number of genuine cases, for which it received no credit; meanwhile, right-wing officials at Southside did their best to slow down that process, knowing that Corbyn would get the blame for their negligence.<sup>13</sup> But the British media steadfastly refused to apply the most basic professional standards in its reporting of the controversy, with the *Guardian* and the BBC among the worst offenders.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of these handicaps, Labour was still within striking distance of the Conservatives in opinion polls during the run-up to the Brexit referendum of June 2016. During the referendum campaign, Corbyn steered Labour to adopt a 'critical Remain' position, resisting pressure to join the official campaign, Stronger In, led by David Cameron. Although it was flouted by some figures on the Labour right, Corbyn's refusal to support the government-led front was correct in principle, and also sensible politics, in the light of Labour's disastrous experience after campaigning with the Tories in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. There was a basic ambiguity in the 'Remain and Reform' slogan raised by Labour. On the one hand it could mean 'stay in the EU and work with other national governments to change its character', and indeed Corbyn argued for that approach in several of his campaign speeches, while criticizing the Union's actual record (especially its brutal despatch of Greek democracy the previous summer).<sup>15</sup> But Labour's slogan could also be read in a more limited sense, as an injunction to stay in the EU and carry out social-democratic reforms at the national level, testing the limits of European rules.

---

<sup>12</sup> A hostile parliamentary committee could find 'no reliable, empirical evidence to support the notion that there is a higher prevalence of antisemitic attitudes within the Labour Party than any other political party'—although it buried that finding deep in the body of its report: House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Antisemitism in the UK*, 16 October 2016, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Alex Wickham, 'Leaked Emails Reveal Labour's Compliance Unit Took Months to Act Over Its Most Serious Antisemitism Cases', *BuzzFeed News*, 11 May 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Justin Schlosberg and Laura Laker, *Labour, Antisemitism and the News: A disinformation paradigm*, Media Reform Coalition, September 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Corbyn, 'Don't Blame Migrants or the EU For Britain's Problems', *LabourList*, 16 June 2016.

The Labour leader struggled to cut through with this message for a number of reasons. Firstly, the TV news bulletins concentrated overwhelmingly on the rival Conservative factions led by Cameron and Boris Johnson, paying no heed to his speeches and interviews. The fact that a Remain vote was, functionally, one in favour of the status quo also prevented Corbyn from tapping into the same insurgent energy as Labour's election campaign the following year. But another key factor was the incessant briefing against him by his inner-party opponents. Expecting the Remain side to win comfortably, the Labour right thought it safe to use the referendum campaign as a factional weapon, telling sympathetic journalists that Corbyn's line was really an argument to leave the EU altogether.

### *Earthquake*

The referendum result revealed a fractured political landscape long concealed by the parliamentary fortifications of the Westminster system. Traditional Labour strongholds in the depressed post-industrial regions of the Midlands, Wales and northern England added their Leave votes to those of the Tory shires, south-coast retirement zones and East Anglia, outnumbering the Remain majorities in Greater London, Scotland and Northern Ireland by 52 to 48 per cent.<sup>16</sup> Instead of pausing to register this historic shock to Britain's political order—and with the Tories in complete disarray—Corbyn's enemies in the PLP launched an immediate leadership challenge against him, based on the claim that Corbyn had 'deliberately sabotaged' the referendum campaign. On closer inspection, the main charge was that Corbyn had refused to say that immigration was a bad thing: in other words, he was too internationalist for their liking.<sup>17</sup> There was no danger that such flagrant contradictions would be highlighted by a media that was cheering on the heave, and the idea of Corbyn as a 'closet Leaver' took on a life of its own.<sup>18</sup> Using tactics

---

<sup>16</sup> See the detailed regional analysis in Tom Hazeldine, 'Revolt of the Rustbelt', NLR 105, May–June 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Laura Kuenssberg, 'Corbyn Office "Sabotaged" EU Remain Campaign—Sources', *BBC News*, 26 June 2016.

<sup>18</sup> There seems no reason to doubt that Corbyn's personal view was the one he expressed to friends when Cameron pledged to hold a referendum on EU membership (long before there was any question that he might become the Labour leader): Corbyn argued that it would be a mistake to leave the EU under conditions determined by the Eurosceptic right, who would then be in a strong position to reshape Britain's internal and external relations.

honed by Tom Watson in his days as Brown's hatchet-man against Blair, dozens of shadow-cabinet members resigned in quick succession, and Labour MPs passed a vote of no confidence in Corbyn by a huge majority: 172 to 40.<sup>19</sup>

In the long run, these carefully orchestrated resignations proved to be a blessing, allowing Corbyn to reorganize his team and promote younger MPs who were more loyal (and often more capable) than the incumbents. But the short-term impact of the performance staged by the PLP right was extremely damaging. When Corbyn refused to step down, his opponents had no choice but to trigger a leadership contest, and failed in their attempt to keep Corbyn off the ballot paper after the majority of trade-union representatives on Labour's NEC gave him their support.<sup>20</sup> The result was to shift the struggle away from parliamentary terrain towards a membership that had increased sharply since the summer of 2015. The attempted leadership heave infuriated Corbyn's supporters, and there was never much doubt that his challenger Owen Smith would be comfortably dispatched: 62 to 38 per cent was the final outcome. However, the scorched-earth tactics employed by his opponents inflicted major harm upon Labour's public standing.

By the winter of 2016–17, with Labour's poll ratings in dreadful shape, Corbyn's inner-party opponents expected that his leadership would soon

---

<sup>19</sup> Tom Watson: born 1967 in Sheffield and brought up in the small Midlands carpet town of Kidderminster; his father was a delivery driver and his mother a secretary. Left school at 17. Wandering around London, he obtained a clerical job at Labour's HQ under Neil Kinnock. Pugnacious, intellectually curious, largely self-educated, he began a politics degree at Hull in the 90s but did not complete it, drawn into the bruising world of student politics, then back to Labour as a party operator, landing a job as political officer for the right-wing Amalgamated Engineering union; in 2001, Gordon Brown rewarded him with the safe Midlands seat of West Bromwich East. A hardline Brownite in New Labour's faction fights, engineering Blair's departure in 2007, Watson was later targeted by Blair's friends at the *Sun*, and got his revenge at the 2011 Leveson inquiry into phone-hacking by the Murdoch press. In 2013, deeply embroiled in the Falkirk scandal, he was forced to step down from Miliband's shadow cabinet, but positioned himself as deputy leader in 2015, expecting Andy Burnham to take the top job. Watson has been Corbyn's executioner-in-waiting since then: Kevin Maguire, "What's Tommy Up To?" How Tom Watson Became Labour's Other Leader', *Prospect*, 29 March 2019.

<sup>20</sup> David Kogan, *Protest and Power: The Battle for the Labour Party*, London 2019, p. 290. Unite and Unison both endorsed Corbyn's re-election campaign, along with the smaller unions represented on the executive; the GMB and USDAW supported his opponent Owen Smith.

be over. They framed their arguments accordingly, expecting to take responsibility for the party's Brexit policy in the near future. In November 2016, Tom Watson denounced the Liberal Democrats as 'Brexit deniers' who were 'desperately, openly, shamelessly trying to recover some sort of electoral relevance' by 'ignoring the clear decision the British people made back in June'. Labour, he insisted, would 'never ignore the democratic will of the British people'.<sup>21</sup> In February 2017, after voting to trigger Article 50, the first step towards Britain's departure from the EU, Chuka Umunna and Wes Streeting explained why they considered it a necessary step:

We believe as democrats that we must abide by the national result which is a clear choice to leave the EU. To stand against the decision of the country would be to deepen Labour and the country's divisions and undermine our ability to build a coalition uniting the cities with the towns and country, the young with the old, immigrant with settled communities, the north with the south. We have to build this coalition in order to win an election to form a Labour government.<sup>22</sup>

During this period, the Labour right repeatedly attacked Corbyn for his reluctance to embrace a so-called 'hard Brexit', requiring a clean break with the European single market: a necessary move for those who wanted to scrap free movement of labour from EU countries. The *Guardian's* Polly Toynbee summed up this line of attack when she accused the Labour leader of taking his party on a 'jaw-dropping kamikaze mission' by refusing to call for 'reasonable controls' on immigration.<sup>23</sup> Watson, Umunna, Hilary Benn, Yvette Cooper and Andy Burnham all weighed in to demand a change of policy. The pressure eventually told in the early months of 2017, at a moment of great political weakness for Corbyn, and he retreated from his previous stand against new restrictions. He still refused to say that immigration was too high, and left room to pivot towards maintaining the status quo, *de facto* if not *de jure*, if that was the best way to ensure a soft landing when Britain left the EU. But Corbyn's equivocal stance on the issue was demoralizing for many of his supporters: with honourable exceptions—notably the shadow home secretary

---

<sup>21</sup> 'Watson mocks Lib Dem "Brexit deniers" and vows Labour will not "disrespect" public by trying to overturn EU vote', *LabourList*, 25 November 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Chuka Umunna and Wes Streeting, 'Why We Labour Remainers Voted to Trigger Article 50', *iNews*, 1 February 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Polly Toynbee, 'The Best of Corbyn—and the Worst', in The Panel: 'Did Jeremy Corbyn's Conference Speech Win Over the Party?', *Guardian*, 28 September 2016.

Diane Abbott, herself the target of unrelenting racist and sexist abuse—Labour did not use much of its political capital to challenge prejudice against immigrants head-on.

### *A watershed election*

In April 2017, when Theresa May called a snap general election, the average polling lead for the Conservatives was 18.5 per cent, boosted by former UKIP voters. *Guardian* columnists from Polly Toynbee to Zoe Williams and Owen Jones had urged Corbyn to step down. By every precedent, Labour was facing an electoral disaster to surpass that of 1983. The eventual result left the country's political commentators flummoxed, and it was some time before they could piece together an explanation that denied Corbyn and the left any credit for the outcome. Labour's vote jumped from 30 to 40 per cent—the biggest increase for either of the two main parties since 1945—and the party gained thirty seats, depriving May of her parliamentary majority. The story the pundits settled upon held May solely responsible for the fiasco. A further twist was soon added, whereby Corbyn was at fault for not securing outright victory against such a weak opponent.

May's personal inadequacies had not been so obvious in the early months of 2017, when her treatment in the liberal press verged on hagiography.<sup>24</sup> The Conservative leader certainly proved to be a brittle performer on the campaign trail, and her party made several unforced errors (notably the so-called 'dementia tax'). But the main story of the election was a Labour surge, not a Conservative meltdown. May's 42 per cent vote share was still the best performance for her party since 1987, and under normal circumstances would have given the Tories a comfortable majority. Instead, she lost thirteen MPs and had to rely on Northern Ireland's hard-right Democratic Unionists to stay in power.

The campaign spearheaded by Corbyn used the novel techniques of the 2015 leadership contest on a much wider scale, with intensive canvassing, public rallies and a highly effective social-media strategy.<sup>25</sup> Its centrepiece was a manifesto of social-democratic policies, 'For the Many, Not the Few', that struck a popular chord after years of austerity and

---

<sup>24</sup> Jason Cowley, 'The May Doctrine', *New Statesman*, 8 February 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Dan Hancox, "'There Is No Unwinnable Seat Now'—How Labour Revolutionized Its Doorstep Game", *Guardian*, 13 June 2017.

social regression. The manifesto tried to shift the political focus away from Britain's relationship with the EU: it accepted the result of the referendum, and tilted strongly towards a 'soft Brexit'.<sup>26</sup> The foreign-policy section, drafted by a PLP committee, upheld Atlanticist orthodoxy on NATO and Trident. But Corbyn's response to a terrorist bombing in Manchester during the campaign proved to be a crucial turning-point. Tory party-political broadcasts had already been portraying him as a sinister accomplice of terrorists. Conventional wisdom dictated that Corbyn would line up meekly behind May following the Manchester attack, like the Democrats after 9/11. Instead, the Labour leader's inner circle decided to launch a direct challenge to the 'war on terror' with a major speech, arguing that regime-change wars had not only failed on their own terms but also made the world a more dangerous place. The speech resonated with public opinion and widened the space for critical discussion of Britain's destructive role in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup>

Predictions that Labour's traditional heartlands in northern England would fall to a Brexit-powered Tory Party proved to be wide of the mark.<sup>28</sup> Labour even made gains in northern English constituencies, while also picking up seats in London, Scotland, Wales and southern England, especially in areas with high student concentrations. There was a dramatic polarization along age lines. Labour led the Conservatives in every demographic layer below the age of 50: by 66 to 19 per cent among first-time voters and by 55 to 29 per cent among those in their 30s. The Tories relied upon an equally staggering lead among older voters to prop them up.<sup>29</sup> To some extent age had become a proxy for factors such as home ownership or employment status that have a marked impact on a person's economic prospects. Labour's performances in 2010 and 2015 had been so poor that a direct return to government was effectively beyond its grasp: it would take at least two rounds of the electoral cycle to bring

---

<sup>26</sup> *For The Many Not The Few: The Labour Party Manifesto 2017*, pp. 23–32. The manifesto pledged to 'prioritize jobs and living standards' and negotiate with 'a strong emphasis on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union'. It stated that 'freedom of movement will end' after the country's departure from the EU, without saying what would take its place.

<sup>27</sup> 'Jeremy Corbyn's Speech on the Manchester Attack and British Foreign Policy in Full', *iNews*, 26 May 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Hazeldine, 'Revolt of the Rustbelt', pp. 74–6.

<sup>29</sup> Chris Curtis, 'How Britain Voted at the 2017 General Election', *YouGov*, 13 June 2017. This polarization was a very recent development: in 2010, the two parties were neck and neck among 18–24 year-olds, and the Tories led by five points with the 24–34 year-old age bracket: Ipsos MORI, 'How Britain Voted in 2010', 21 May 2010.

the party back into contention for power.<sup>30</sup> The 2017 result completed the first step of this process.

### *Consolidation*

Corbyn's electoral achievement opened up a new phase of consolidation that lasted until the early months of 2019. After the multiple resignations of 2016's 'chicken coup', his shadow cabinet now formed a more coherent and supportive team. In a reversal of the usual pattern, Labour's front-line MPs are well to the left of its backbenchers. Even so, the shadow cabinet is by no means uniformly 'Corbynite': only 7 of its 31 current members belong to the Campaign Group, Labour's historic left caucus.<sup>31</sup> Two key posts, foreign affairs and defence, are occupied by politicians—Emily Thornberry and Nia Griffith—whose tactical support for Corbyn should not be mistaken for any deep commitment to his agenda.<sup>32</sup>

Labour's parliamentary cohort has been substantially renovated since Brown's defeat in 2010. A tranche of Blairites removed themselves at that point, some decamping to the House of Lords, and the loss of dozens of Scottish seats in 2015 took out many staunch Brownites. Of the 246 MPs who currently take the Labour whip at Westminster, 152 have entered parliament since 2010. The PLP is now much younger, with MPs more likely to come from a trade-union or local-government background, rather than the think-tanks or media outfits that contributed so many New Labour candidates. Any shift in its political character has been far more limited. 19 MPs now belong to the Campaign Group—less than 8 per cent of the PLP. Of the 92 first elected in 2015 or 2017, just 10 have joined the left caucus.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Bush, 'Basking in a Surprise Success, Corbyn's Team is Preparing for Victory Next Time', *New Statesman*, 15 June 2017.

<sup>31</sup> This figure excludes Corbyn himself, who stepped down from his position in the Campaign Group on becoming leader.

<sup>32</sup> For evidence of Thornberry's worldview, see her speech to Labour Friends of Israel on the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, in which she praised Israel as a beacon of liberty and denounced the BDS campaign as 'bigotry against the Israeli nation'. Griffith, who previously voted against the renewal of Britain's nuclear arsenal, has become a faithful mouthpiece for the Ministry of Defence since her appointment to the shadow defence role, and even applauded a Tory scheme to grant British soldiers immunity from prosecution.

<sup>33</sup> Of the new Campaign Group members—Rebecca Long-Bailey, Richard Burgon, Kate Osamor, Emma Dent Coad, Imran Hussain, Karen Lee, Laura Pidcock, Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Laura Smith, Dan Carden—a majority were born after 1980.

The Labour right has several organizational vehicles to coordinate its factional manoeuvres, from Progress, a privately registered company steered by Peter Mandelson from the House of Lords, to the largely Brownite Tribune group. Tom Watson, still ensconced in his position as deputy leader, threw down a gauntlet in March 2019 by launching the Future Britain Group—a ‘coming together of previous factions’, in the words of its convenor Darren Jones.<sup>34</sup> Watson soon recruited 80 MPs—a third of the PLP—and 70 peers for his project, which united former disciples of Blair and Brown against a common enemy. However, the majority of Labour MPs are perhaps best described, to borrow a metaphor from Tony Benn, as weathervanes, not signposts: turning with the prevailing winds, their support for Corbyn’s project is at most half-hearted and conditional on success at the ballot box.

Labour activists revived the traditional demand for constituency parties to be allowed to reselect their parliamentary candidates, giving it a new brand-name, ‘open selection’. But the 2018 Labour conference shied away from that step, opting instead for a compromise brokered by the trade unions and the NEC. There was a stark divide between membership and union delegates over the issue, and Unite’s Len McCluskey engaged in a public row with the left-wing MP Chris Williamson, a supporter of open selection.<sup>35</sup> The watered-down amendment made it easier to mount a challenge to sitting MPs, but still obliged constituency parties to run a negative campaign against the incumbent.<sup>36</sup> If party activists are not willing to endure the convulsions sure to follow when the first trigger ballot is announced, the current political coloration of the PLP may prove to be largely self-perpetuating.<sup>37</sup>

In contrast, Corbyn and his allies have made steady advances within the NEC and party machine, with the help of the trade unions. The 39-member NEC is a patchwork of different institutional players, with four places assigned to the Labour shadow cabinet, two each for the

---

<sup>34</sup> Joe Watts, ‘Future Britain Group: More Than 150 Labour Figures Join New Group “To Save the Party” Following Resignations Over Jeremy Corbyn’s Leadership’, *Independent*, 11 March 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Unite officials have worked assiduously to secure the nomination of their favoured candidates in Labour’s target seats: Eleni Courea, ‘Unite and Momentum Candidates Dominate Labour’s Selection Races’, *Observer*, 5 January 2019.

<sup>36</sup> The process for deselection of Conservative MPs is much more straightforward: local party executives can demand at any time that a sitting MP reapply to be an official candidate, and put their application to a secret ballot.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Blackburn, ‘The Trigger Battle’, *Tribune*, 10 July 2019.

Scottish and Welsh parties, one for its MEPS, etc. Constituency parties have nine representatives (raised from six in 2018). In September 2018, a slate of pro-Corbyn candidates took all nine directly elected NEC positions, securing a majority of 21 out of 39 for the left. With thirteen seats in total, Labour's affiliated trade unions constitute the largest single group on the NEC, and also control 50 per cent of party conference delegates.<sup>38</sup> Unite in particular plays a pivotal role: if the union's leadership declines to back a motion, it tends to run into the sand. Without its support, there is little chance that Corbyn would have survived in his post as long as he has, and its political orientation will remain crucial in the years to come. The United Left faction dominates Unite's ruling executive, and McCluskey's position as general secretary appears secure.<sup>39</sup> At Southside, Jennie Formby of Unite replaced Iain McNicol as Labour's general secretary in April 2018. A batch of senior figures handed in their notice to coincide with McNicol's departure.<sup>40</sup> For the first time, the Labour Party headquarters could be relied upon to provide basic support for Corbyn's leadership team, rather than sabotage.

### *Party as movement?*

Labour's membership rose dramatically under its new leadership, from under 200,000 to over half a million, leaving the party in good financial health. The most important vehicle for Corbyn supporters is Momentum, established by the veteran Bennite Jon Lansman on the back of the 2015 leadership campaign.<sup>41</sup> Momentum now claims

---

<sup>38</sup> The big four unions—Unison (1.4 million), Unite (1.3 million members), the GMB (620,000) and USDAW (430,000)—have two seats each on the executive; five smaller unions have one apiece.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Watson backed his opponent, Gerard Coyne, in Unite's 2017 leadership election. McCluskey's margin of victory was close (4 per cent) although a left challenger also took 13 per cent. Since then, the Unite leadership has moved against Coyne's base, especially in the West Midlands, a stronghold of old-right machine politics.

<sup>40</sup> Iain McNicol: born in Dundee in 1969; worked as a Labour student organizer, then employed by the GMB union from 1998 until 2011, when he became Labour's general secretary, a position chosen by the NEC; deeply complicit in moves to oust Corbyn in the summer of 2016. Jennie Formby: born in London in 1960; TGWU shop steward, subsequently a union official; became Unite's political director after the merger with Amicus, and represented the union on Labour's NEC.

<sup>41</sup> Jon Lansman: born in London in 1957; active in the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy during the heyday of Bennism, he ran Benn's campaign for the Labour deputy leadership in 1981; elected to Labour's NEC as part of the left-wing slate in 2018, and briefly threw his hat in the ring for the general-secretary position after Iain McNicol's resignation.

a membership of over 40,000, far in excess of traditional Labour-left vehicles such as the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, the Labour Representation Committee or Red Labour.<sup>42</sup> In its early days, Lansman and other Momentum leaders such as James Schneider debated whether the new organization should operate primarily as an inner-party faction, or aspire to be something closer to a social movement. The upshot has been a mixture of the two.<sup>43</sup> Momentum has emerged as a highly professional campaigning machine, successfully canvassing seats for the 2017 election that had been written off by officials at Southside, and making creative use of social media to spread Labour's message. It has also been effective in mobilizing support for left slates in inner-party elections, although the process by which those slates are drawn up has generated a good deal of controversy.

At the same time, since 2016 Momentum has instituted a 'festival of ideas' known as The World Transformed to coincide with Labour Party conferences, with several days of political discussion featuring speakers from the British and international left—clearly answering a need that Labour's traditional culture does not satisfy. Regional off-shoots have been organized in towns like Derby, Bristol and Southampton. Online, Momentum is flanked by an array of Corbynite media. Websites like *The Canary* imitate the style of tabloid newspapers, while the multi-media *Novara*, *New Socialist* and the newly relaunched *Tribune* magazine take a more analytical approach. To some extent Twitter has become the space where Corbyn supporters argue out their differences, with sometimes bewildering results: tendencies crystallize, divide and recombine without acquiring any tangible form. Individual Twitter users can acquire a following that exceeds the readership of any traditional left-wing newspaper, but the nature of the medium encourages one-dimensional sloganeering rather than careful analysis.

In Scotland and Wales, two pre-existing left-wing networks, the Campaign for Socialism and Welsh Labour Grassroots, have signed up to Momentum as regional franchises, while retaining much of

---

<sup>42</sup> For an insider's perspective on these networks, see Ben Sellers, 'The Labour Left Divide Is a Two-Way Street', *LabourList*, 22 March 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Seymour, *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics*, London and New York 2017, pp. 58–63. For a critical view of the group's trajectory, see Angus Satow, 'Corbynism at a Crossroads', *New Socialist*, 14 March 2019.

their established profile. Overall, Corbyn's leadership has had a much weaker impact on the Scottish political scene. Labour had initially dominated the devolved parliament set up under Blair in the late 90s, but lost that position to the SNP in 2007. This shift did not manifest itself at Westminster until 2015, when Labour lost all but one of its Scottish seats. The shock result helped catalyse the rise of Corbynism in the months that followed, but then became a source of weakness for Corbyn himself. Scottish Labour's existential crisis had taken years to gestate, and would take just as long to overcome, if the job could be done at all. There was no membership surge after 2015 comparable to that experienced south of the border: many of the people who would have been Corbyn's natural supporters had already joined the SNP or the left-wing pro-independence campaign after the 2014 referendum. The Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale was bitterly hostile to Corbyn. Under her stewardship, Labour slumped to third place in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election behind the newly resurgent Conservatives. The Brexit referendum then compounded the party's woes: Scotland voted to stay in the EU by a margin of 24 per cent, but Labour as a British organization had to accept the Leave vote, leaving the SNP free to campaign as the pro-Remain standard-bearer.

The SNP's response to Corbyn revealed much about its true political character. The party's ascent relied upon deft positioning, usually a few steps to the left of New Labour. Much of the impetus behind the pro-independence campaign in 2014 came from a sense that Scotland could be a social-democratic refuge from Tory austerity if it broke with the UK.<sup>44</sup> There were always clear signs that the SNP would be willing to tack rightwards if it proved expedient: the party's veteran leader Alex Salmond referred to Ireland as a low-tax, business-friendly model to follow, and championed the Scottish banking sector before its 2008 meltdown. Salmond's successor Nicola Sturgeon was quite happy to oppose Corbyn from the right, accusing him of 'incompetence' when Labour MPs revolted against a policy agenda the SNP claimed to support. Her party then took advantage of Brexit to recalibrate its message for independence, offering continuity rather than change. Nuclear weapons are the main issue on which the SNP still presents itself as standing to the left of Labour: of course, by failing to adopt a policy of scrapping Trident, Labour has made it much easier for them to do so.

---

<sup>44</sup> Neil Davidson, 'A Scottish Watershed', *NLR* 89, Sep–Oct 2014.

In theory, Richard Leonard, a Corbyn supporter who replaced Dugdale as Labour's Scottish leader in November 2017, should have been better placed to expose the SNP's contradictions. But his impact has been limited: Labour still trails behind the Scottish Conservatives in most opinion polls and is nowhere near challenging the SNP. Leonard's performance as leader has been underwhelming, but his failure to signal a clear break with the discredited traditions of Scottish Labour, in the way that Corbyn did for the party as a whole, was a much greater problem. With the entangled issues of Brexit and independence still dominating the agenda, Labour's constitutional conservatism is another liability.<sup>45</sup> Labour in Wales occupies a much stronger position, having taken nearly 50 per cent of the vote in the 2017 election. The unfolding of its internal struggle mirrors that of the Scottish party, with an anti-Corbyn leader, Carwyn Jones, giving way at the end of 2018 to a more left-wing figure, Mark Drakeford. But two decades in charge of the Welsh regional government have fostered the same bad habits that proved so damaging for Labour in Scotland. The Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru has shifted right with its new leader, Adam Price, an effective media performer who is less hostile to the Conservatives than his socialist predecessor Leanne Wood. Drakeford's party is in clear need of full-scale renovation, without which it risks being ambushed by Price.<sup>46</sup>

In local government, Labour has often found itself in a contradictory position, opposing public-spending cuts at a national level that are implemented on the ground by its own councillors. In the 1980s, the Labour left had an agenda of 'municipal socialism' that brought it into direct confrontation with the Thatcher government, and became a key target for Neil Kinnock's witch-hunt. This time around, the dynamic between local and national leaderships has been reversed, with the latter trying to minimize the damage to Labour's standing inflicted by councillors who defer to private companies at the expense of their constituents.<sup>47</sup> John

---

<sup>45</sup> Rory Scothorne, 'How Scottish Labour Is Moving Towards Constitutional Radicalism', *New Statesman*, 10 July 2019 discusses recent moves to address this shortcoming by Leonard and his allies.

<sup>46</sup> For more detail, see the excellent coverage of Welsh politics in *New Socialist*: Gareth Leaman, 'Detoxifying Welsh Labour', 31 March 2018; Meic Birtwistle, 'Clear Red Water?', 31 July 2018; Dan Evans, 'Neither Red Nor Green: Labour's Dilemmas in Wales', 13 October 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Aditya Chakraborty, 'A Labour Council Attacking Its Own People? This Is Regeneration Gone Bad', *Guardian*, 25 October 2017, and 'In Haringey the People Have Taken Over, Not the Hard Left', *Guardian*, 1 February 2018.

McDonnell has cited Preston, a northern English town where the Labour council has tried to foster an alternative economic model, as a source of inspiration for the party in local government.<sup>48</sup> But such municipal experiments remain the exception in an otherwise barren landscape.

### *Vortex*

With its position in the party still only half-secured, the Corbyn leadership has faced the challenge of navigating the ongoing Brexit crisis. The tactical expedients that Labour has adopted in response to that crisis have changed from one month (or one week) to another. But there is an underlying set of factors and principles that have shaped those manoeuvres. An accurate description of Labour's Brexit strategy is a vital step towards understanding how the British political system has arrived at its current state. Corbyn's position was a notable success in the 2017 election, not merely holding the party's electoral coalition together, but chiming with a widely held view. Labour supporters often defended the party's policy on pragmatic grounds. Although Labour's voting base split roughly two-to-one between Remain and Leave, Labour-held *constituencies* voted Leave in much the same proportions, the most painstaking calculation reckoning that 149 Labour-held seats opted for Leave, against 83 for Remain.<sup>49</sup> But there was also a principled case for accepting the outcome of a referendum that all the major parties (with the exception of the SNP) had agreed to hold. In a poll conducted during the election campaign, the majority of Remain voters agreed that the referendum result should be respected: combined with the Leave electorate, this meant there was 68 per cent support, however tepid, for Britain's departure from the EU.<sup>50</sup> Just 8 per cent of Labour voters ranked Brexit as the

---

<sup>48</sup> George Eaton, 'How Preston—the UK's "Most Improved City"—Became a Success Story For Corbynomics', *New Statesman*, 1 November 2018.

<sup>49</sup> See Chris Hanretty, 'Areal Interpolation and the UK's Referendum on EU Membership', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2017. Referendum votes were not counted on the basis of parliamentary boundaries, and mapping them onto electoral statistics is tricky. Due to population shifts, northern seats often have smaller electorates than those in London and the Home Counties. The two-to-one breakdown between Remain and Leave voters was carried over into Labour's much larger electoral base in 2017.

<sup>50</sup> 23 per cent agreed with the proposition 'I did not support Britain leaving the EU, but now the British people have voted to leave, the government has a duty to carry out their wishes', while 22 per cent believed that 'the government should ignore the result of the referendum or seek to overturn it': Chris Curtis and Marcus Roberts, 'Forget 52%: The Rise of the "Re-Leavers" Means the Pro-Brexit Electorate is 68%', *YouGov*, 12 May 2017.

most important factor in determining their choice, giving the lie to subsequent claims that Remainers had merely ‘lent their vote’ to Labour in the hope of stopping Britain’s departure from the EU.<sup>51</sup>

‘Hard Remainers’ insisted that Brexit was bound to be so calamitous that it had to be fought against at all costs, even if that meant swimming against the tide of public opinion. But the idea of leaving the EU was, in itself, politically indeterminate; the outcome would depend on the manner of its implementation. The pro-Brexit voting alliance of 2016 was composed of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ elements, with those committed to a right-wing nationalist agenda flanked by others whose motivation was less clearly defined.<sup>52</sup> Driving a wedge between hard and soft Leavers made for good strategy, and not just in electoral terms: the end result could be a status roughly similar to that enjoyed by Norway, which would respect the choice of the electorate by taking Britain out of the EU, while reducing disruption of everyday life to an insignificant level. A deal along those lines would also resolve the question of the Irish border. If Labour was able to neutralize the issue in this manner, it would free up space to concentrate on its domestic political agenda. As an objective, it was certainly more desirable than a repeat referendum to overturn the first vote, which would prolong the destructive polarization between Leavers and Remainers, and might well result in a second triumph for the Leave camp.

While the 2017 election greatly strengthened Corbyn’s authority within his party, Labour’s advances also set the scene for a parliamentary

---

<sup>51</sup> ‘How Did This Result Happen? My Post-Vote Survey’, *Lord Ashcroft Polls*, 9 June 2017. In the same poll, a majority of Labour voters were either ‘enthusiastic about Brexit’ (33 per cent) or ‘accepting of Brexit’ (24 per cent), with 43 per cent declaring themselves ‘resistant to Brexit’.

<sup>52</sup> In the 2016 referendum, 65 per cent of the Leave vote came from 2015 Tory and UKIP voters. 37 per cent of Labour voters and 36 per cent of SNP voters gave their support to the Leave camp, along with smaller groups of Green and Liberal Democrat Leavers. Overlapping with these figures, a minority of black, Asian and Muslim voters (27, 33 and 30 per cent respectively) opted for Leave. These figures may not correspond precisely to the divide between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Brexit constituencies—more fine-grained polling would be necessary for that—but they are highly suggestive: ‘How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday . . . and Why’, *Lord Ashcroft Polls*, 24 June 2016.

quagmire that would ultimately bog down his political momentum. May had gambled everything on the snap poll, expecting to win a crushing majority that would allow her to negotiate a Brexit agreement on her desired terms. By stripping the Conservatives of their parliamentary majority, Labour denied her that opportunity: now, any deal could be voted down by Tory rebels who thought it was either too soft or too hard. May's reliance on the Democratic Unionist Party added another layer of uncertainty. The DUP had campaigned for Leave, but its overriding priority was to prevent any divergence between Northern Ireland and Britain that could jeopardize the Union.

Under those circumstances, the most realistic course for May would have been to lower her sights and reach out to the main opposition party. But she pressed on regardless, playing to the Tory right and making a rod for her own back by legitimizing the slogan 'no deal is better than a bad deal'. The greatest flaw in Labour's Brexit platform may have been a tacit assumption that big capital would step in to impose some discipline on its traditional party. However, Britain's capitalist class proved unable or unwilling to put its thumb on the scales for a more pragmatic approach. May tried to unite her party around the so-called Chequers deal in the summer of 2018, but the hard-line European Research Group (ERG) derided her proposed terms as an unacceptable infringement of UK sovereignty, and Boris Johnson resigned from the cabinet in protest. The ERG threatened to mobilize at least a hundred MPs to vote down any such agreement. In any case, EU leaders rejected the Chequers blueprint when May put it before them.

Meanwhile, the anti-Brexit camp stepped up its effort to push for another referendum. While rational fears of what Brexit could mean under Tory leadership fuelled the wider Remain constituency, it was Blairite holdovers like Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell who dominated the leadership of the People's Vote (PV) campaign, skewing its political orientation. As one insider complained: 'Because the campaign is full of ex-Labour spinners it is trying too hard to change the Labour Party, rather than trying to change politics.'<sup>53</sup> This warped sense of priorities drove the PV leadership to adopt a cynical maximalist line, precisely because they

---

<sup>53</sup> Adam Bienkov and Adam Payne, 'The People's Vote Campaign Approaches Judgement Day in Battle to Secure a New Brexit Referendum', *Business Insider*, 25 January 2019.

knew it would be virtually impossible for Labour to embrace it.<sup>54</sup> They promoted the false idea that Corbyn alone had imposed a ‘pro-Brexit’ line on the PLP, whose members would otherwise rush to support the demand for a second referendum. The openly stated goal of the PV campaign was to knock all compromise options off the table, so that the only alternative to staying in the EU would be a drastic, no-deal rupture.<sup>55</sup>

Within this polarizing dynamic, Corbyn’s inner-party opponents like Tom Watson and Chuka Umunna took up the hard-Remain cause as the best way to undermine his leadership, consigning their previous arguments for accepting the referendum result to the historical shredder. Genuine political disagreements within the PLP over Brexit might be reconciled with a skilful approach, but there was never any chance of winning over such opportunists. The *Guardian*’s leading columnists followed suit: after years of presenting electoral pragmatism as the supreme political virtue, figures like Toynbee and Freedland appeared to derive a psychic thrill from denouncing the Labour leadership for its lack of ideological purity. The Labour conference in September 2018 passed a compromise motion that tried to balance the different factional perspectives, keeping ‘all options’ on the table, including the idea of ‘campaigning for a public vote’ if Labour was unable to force a general election after May’s deal was voted down.

### *Shipwreck*

In November 2018, the European Council endorsed the Withdrawal Agreement that May had concluded with the Commission’s negotiator, Michel Barnier. May’s final package was even less digestible for the ERG than her Chequers plan, with a continuing role for the European Court of Justice during a transitional period of uncertain length, and no room for unilateral exit from the ‘backstop’ designed to prevent a hard border on Irish soil. It soon became obvious that the Tory leader did not have enough support to get it through the House of Commons. She delayed the vote until the New Year, which merely postponed the humiliation.

---

<sup>54</sup> In private, Mandelson’s business-consultancy firm assured its clients that Brexit was inevitable: Solomon Hughes, ‘Peter Mandelson Calls For a “People’s Vote” While Telling Potential Clients Brexit Can’t Be Stopped’, *Vice*, 19 December 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Alex Wickham, ‘The Campaign for a People’s Vote on Brexit Has Descended into Infighting and Splits’, *Buzzfeed News*, 22 January 2019.

In January 2019, Tory MPs at both ends of the party spectrum joined with the DUP and the opposition parties to inflict an unprecedented defeat: 202 votes to 432. Corbyn then moved a no-confidence motion to trigger a general election, but the Unionists rallied to May's side and it was defeated.

In early February, the Labour leadership put forward a more concrete and achievable set of demands to replace its previous 'six tests'. It called for 'close alignment with the single market', a 'permanent and comprehensive UK-wide customs union' with the EU, and 'dynamic alignment on rights and protections so that UK standards keep pace with evolving standards across Europe as a minimum'.<sup>56</sup> EU officials indicated that they could work with Corbyn's plan.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, however, the Labour leadership came under intense pressure to campaign for Brexit to be stopped altogether. Chuka Umunna led eight right-wing MPs out of the PLP in February 2019. Their ill-fated splinter-group made a second referendum one of its key demands, but succeeded only in diverting attention from May at a crucial moment. A more persistent hard-Remain challenge came from the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. Internal rumblings within the PLP and the shadow cabinet grew stronger in response to this external threat. Corbyn felt obliged to keep open the idea of a second vote as a last resort, although he clearly had little enthusiasm for it. This blurred the clear outlines of Labour's soft-Brexit advocacy, which was being rolled out at the same time.

On 29 March 2019, May's third and final attempt to push through her deal fell once again, by 286 votes to 344.<sup>58</sup> MPs commandeered parliamentary business to take a series of 'indicative votes' on different options. Corbyn whipped Labour MPs to vote in favour of three options—a 'confirmatory public vote' on any deal approved by parliament; a customs union with the EU; and a single market/customs union deal (referred to as 'Norway Plus')—but to abstain on a motion that mandated the government to revoke Article 50 altogether, if necessary to prevent a no-deal

---

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Bush, 'Jeremy Corbyn Throws His Weight Behind a Soft Brexit in Surprise Letter to Theresa May', *New Statesman*, 6 February 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Jon Stone, 'EU Parliament Chiefs Welcome Jeremy Corbyn's New Brexit Plans', *Independent*, 7 February 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Three Labour MPs defied the party whip to vote in favour of May's deal on the first two occasions, five on the third.

exit. None of these proposals could secure a majority in parliament: MPs were prepared to vote against no deal as an abstract proposition, but not to support any concrete alternative.<sup>59</sup> Having run down the clock, May had no choice but to request an extension for the Brexit process. Divided over whether to go long, as Merkel wanted, or short—Macron’s line—the European Council compromised on a new Brexit deadline of 31 October 2019, which meant the UK would be taking part in the European parliament elections on 23 May.

Facing a government whose authority was visibly draining away, Labour nevertheless found itself tightly constrained in its bid to take advantage. The unrelenting focus on Brexit drained attention from the domestic reform programme that was the centrepiece of the Corbyn project. It also put the complexities of parliamentary procedure at the top of the political agenda, when Corbyn’s team would have preferred to engage in campaigning work outside Westminster. Labour was in the uncomfortable position of offering a compromise over Brexit—several compromises at once, in fact—that few people would consider remotely inspiring. ‘Norway Plus’ might be preferable to May’s agreement, but the strongest arguments in its favour stressed how little it would change the status quo. Meanwhile, the incessant internal attacks on Corbyn’s policy were damaging in their own right.

These pressures told against Labour in the Euro elections. Those who took part—only 37 per cent of eligible voters—mainly seized the opportunity to express their views on Brexit. The election itself symbolized

---

<sup>59</sup> The customs-union motion fell by just three votes, after 37 Conservative MPs elected to support it, while 10 Labour MPs broke the whip to vote against; ‘Norway Plus’ fell by 21 votes, with 33 Conservatives and 15 Labour MPs crossing the floor. Most Labour rebels either supported Brexit in principle (Kate Hoey, John Mann) or represented Leave-voting constituencies. However, they included Corbyn’s 2016 challenger Owen Smith, who followed the People’s Vote line of polarizing the choice between a no-deal Brexit and Remain. Umunna’s breakaway faction took the same approach. The 35 SNP MPs abstained on the customs union but supported ‘Norway Plus’, while the 11 Lib Dems managed to split their votes three ways on both motions. Just 15 Conservative MPs were willing to back the second-referendum motion, which fell by 12 votes, with 24 Labour MPs breaking the whip. The revocation of Article 50 went down to a heavy defeat without official Labour support, although 121 Labour MPs voted in favour of the motion anyway, with 104 abstaining and 18 voting against.

May's failure to deliver, and Tory voters deserted her in droves, with the Conservatives dropping below 9 per cent. Leave supporters gravitated to Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party, which topped the poll with 30.5 per cent. Remain voters lurched in the opposite direction, backing the Liberal Democrats (almost 20 per cent) and the Greens (a little under 12). Corbyn's soft-Brexit pitch, and his attempt to shift the debate towards domestic political concerns, gained no traction with the electorate: Labour finished in third place, with 13.6 per cent. The following day, May announced her resignation.

Calls for Labour to support a second referendum intensified following the election setback.<sup>60</sup> Watson hardened his position, demanding that Labour not only campaign for a second referendum but vigorously support Remain in all circumstances. But Corbyn allies like John McDonnell and Diane Abbott favoured a change of strategy as well, along with some of the younger left MPs (Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Kate Osamor). Divisions over Brexit cut across the left/right cleavage in the PLP: Labour front-benchers such as the party chair Ian Lavery were strongly opposed to a second referendum, and McCluskey argued against a sudden shift towards the hard-Remain camp, but a group of MPs that included staunch opponents of Corbyn like Stephen Kinnock and Ruth Smeeth also composed an open letter, denouncing the 'toxic' idea of a second referendum as a gift to the nationalist right.<sup>61</sup>

Even on tactical grounds, the fact that one option—soft Brexit—seems impractical does not mean that a second referendum will be any easier to achieve. For both courses of action, the main obstacles are the

---

<sup>60</sup> Labour's victory in the Peterborough by-election two weeks later won some breathing space for Corbyn. The contest should have been tailor-made for the Brexit Party: a Leave-supporting constituency, won by Labour with a tiny majority in 2017, where the incumbent refused to step down after being convicted of perjury, forcing her constituents to organize a recall petition. But Labour held off the challenge from Farage's candidate. The significance of Peterborough could be measured by observing the unconcealed fury of the PLP right, who had been doing everything they could to sabotage their party's campaign.

<sup>61</sup> 'Brexit: Labour MPs Urge Corbyn Not to Go "Full Remain"', *BBC News*, 19 June 2019. Most of the MPs who signed the letter represent northern English constituencies, as does Ian Lavery; Osamor, Russell-Moyle and the other left advocates for a pro-Remain policy have their electoral base in cities like London and Brighton, where anti-Brexit sentiment is strong.

Conservative Party and the balance of forces at Westminster. Without removing those obstacles, Labour is in no more position to call a referendum than it is to push through a soft-Brexit deal.<sup>62</sup> In any case, securing a referendum is one thing, winning it is quite another.<sup>63</sup> The Labour leadership is being urged by friend and foe alike to adopt a goal that is neither more desirable nor even more achievable than its previous stance, in the name of avoiding electoral meltdown.

Corbyn's latest move fell some way short of the unqualified pro-Remain commitment his opponents were seeking. In July 2019, he announced that Labour would campaign to stay in the EU if that was the only alternative to no deal or 'a Tory deal that does not protect the economy and jobs'; on the other hand, if Labour formed a government before the Brexit deadline and had time to negotiate its own package, it would put that agreement to a popular vote, with Remain as the alternative choice.<sup>64</sup> The new line could be made to work—but whether Corbyn's inner-party opponents will allow that to happen is a very different question.

### *Futures*

The British governing class has long boasted of its unwritten constitution. But in the absence of a coherent and codified framework, the Brexit crisis has produced a national-political impasse, with the government defeated on its key legislation, yet able to avoid a new election which such a defeat would otherwise have brought, thanks to the Fixed-Term

---

<sup>62</sup> A poll carried out in mid-June 2019 indicated that soft Brexit remains the most popular—or least unpopular—outcome, when voters are asked to rank the various options in order of preference. 66 per cent gave a single market/customs union deal as their first or second preference; staying in the EU was the highest first-preference choice (43 per cent, compared with 16 per cent for soft Brexit), rising to 50 per cent once second preferences were added. May's agreement ranked third by the same benchmark (45 per cent), with 'no deal' last (39 per cent): YouGov/*The Times* survey results, 17–18 June 2019.

<sup>63</sup> An additional factor must be added to the inherent problems facing the Remain cause: if a second referendum takes place with Corbyn as Labour leader, his nominal Remain allies will unquestionably use it as a platform to damage the left. There will be no tactical truce for the duration of the campaign, and any criticism of the EU from Labour politicians will prompt howls of performative outrage.

<sup>64</sup> Sienna Rodgers, 'Corbyn Tells Members: Labour Backs Remain Against No Deal or Tory Deal', *LabourList*, 9 July 2019.

Parliaments Act agreed by Cameron and Nick Clegg to shore up their coalition in 2010. In the face of this blockage, decision-making devolved to the Conservative rank-and-file: an ageing, dwindling and ever-more reactionary cohort, with a single-minded focus on Brexit that is difficult to explain in strictly rational terms. They chose Boris Johnson, one of the main architects of their party's current tribulations, as the UK's next Prime Minister.

The new Tory leader could opt for an early election in the autumn polarized around Brexit, aiming to cut a seat-sharing deal with Farage and clean up at the expense of a divided opposition. Another option would be to try and secure a few tweaks to May's package from Brussels, brandishing the threat of no deal, and rely on his party's instinct for power to get it through parliament. In that case, passage of Brexit legislation would require an extension of perhaps six months past 31 October, with a transition period stretching several years beyond that. But Johnson might hope to deliver the formal achievement of Brexit by spring 2020, and power to victory in an election later that year.

Many factors might derail this agenda: knife-edge parliamentary arithmetic, Irish politics, incompetent execution by the Prime Minister himself. It is also possible that Johnson will follow through on his no-deal rhetoric to the point of bringing it to a Westminster vote, in the hope and expectation that Tory dissidents will join forces with the opposition on a no-confidence motion, paving the way for a hard-Brexit alliance in a snap election by a more indirect route. With four or even five competitive parties in the electoral mix, plus the nationalists in Scotland and Wales, the first-past-the-post system would be at best capricious, at worst chaotic in reflecting the popular will. If Johnson's gamble doesn't pay off in the form of a clear majority, Watson's public mutterings about a national-coalition government might come into play. It's hardly thinkable that Corbyn would play the role of Ramsay MacDonald in 1931—though there may well be other candidates for the parts of Philip Snowden or Jimmy Thomas.

If Labour cannot form a government under Corbyn's leadership, the pressure for ideological retreat will be strong, though more likely decked out in soft-left colours than antediluvian Blairism. The inner-party coalition assembled behind Corbyn—unions, membership, MPs—may start

to break up rather quickly under the weight of that pressure. However, if Corbyn does succeed in becoming Britain's Prime Minister, there are a number of possible outcomes. It is little use at this point speculating about the balance of parliamentary forces at Westminster, other than to note the obvious: the bigger the majority Labour can muster, the less vulnerable to sabotage it will be, whether from truculent coalition partners or the PLP's intransigent right.

In the first scenario, the Corbyn leadership is forced into headlong retreat by conservative resistance, not least from its own MPs, and finds itself in much the same position as Syriza in Greece, implementing policies it was elected to overturn and burning through hard-won reserves of political capital as it does so. There is ample precedent for that in recent decades. A more hopeful prediction would be that Labour in government proves to be that rare bird in modern times, a reformist party that actually carries out reforms: repeal of anti-union laws, expansion of public ownership, a more progressive tax system. Much of Corbyn's base will be satisfied if he can translate the 2017 manifesto into reality: after a generation of right-wing hegemony, from Thatcher and Blair to Cameron, May and Johnson, a revived version of social democracy, however cramped it might prove to be, looks more inviting than it did in the Keynesian heyday.

A third scenario would involve a return to the ideas that animated left-wing forces in the 1960s and 70s when they recognized the limitations of social-democratic rule, even in its most successful Nordic incarnations. This strategy, associated with thinkers like Ralph Miliband, André Gorz and Nicos Poulantzas, carried the ambiguous name of 'revolutionary reformism': the reforms it envisaged were to go much further than the post-war social-democratic governments, striking real blows at the roots of capitalist power, provoking a crisis within the state machine, and relying upon mass mobilization to overcome resistance from the conservative bloc, whose leaders would show no respect for electoral majorities when their fundamental interests were at stake.<sup>65</sup> Such thinking strongly influenced the Bennite left from which Corbyn and

---

<sup>65</sup> André Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution', *Socialist Register* 1969; Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman, 'Beyond Social Democracy', *Socialist Register* 1985/86; Nicos Poulantzas, 'The State and the Transition to Socialism', in James Martin, ed., *The Poulantzas Reader*, London and New York 2008.

McDonnell emerged, although the current Labour programme is far less ambitious.<sup>66</sup> But in present circumstances, this is by far the least likely of the three.

To realize the second of these scenarios, let alone the third, will require Labour to confront all of the barriers to change embedded in the British state and its permanent government: the Treasury and the Bank of England, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence—not to mention MI5. Corbyn and his inner circle have demonstrated a more lucid understanding of those barriers than any previous Labour leadership, but that is no guarantee they will be able to overcome them.<sup>67</sup> A Corbyn administration will need a countervailing force of its own to avoid defeat: if that force does not materialize, the hopes invested in this political moment may be quickly dashed. With scattered exceptions, the unions have been cowed for a generation, the incubus of Labourism as a political culture lingers on, and the surge in activism behind Corbyn has yet to spill over into society as a whole. In effect, barring a major shift, the movement will be relying upon a left government to put wind in its sails, not the other way round. If Corbyn succeeds in taking power after the next election, he will have made his way past many formidable obstacles, but his greatest challenges will still lie ahead.

---

<sup>66</sup> André Gorz in particular has become a reference-point for some leading Corbynites. For Gorz, however, ‘non-reformist reforms’ were not simply measures that consolidated support for a left-wing movement by delivering tangible gains: ‘Their function is to educate and unite the actually or potentially anti-capitalist social forces by the struggle for undeniable social and economic objectives—above all, for a new direction for social and economic development—by adopting initially the method of peaceful and democratic reforms. But this method must be adopted *not because it is viable or intrinsically preferable, but on the contrary because the resistance, the limits and the possibilities which it will inevitably come up against after a short while are suitable simply for the demonstration of the necessity of socialist transformation to social forces not yet ready for it.* Obviously, such a strategy cannot be realized in the framework of a summit-alliance with neo-capitalist formations, i.e. social democrats and centrists, who would immediately set out to limit reforming action to measures acceptable to the bourgeoisie.’ Gorz, ‘Reform and Revolution’, pp. 118–9 (italics in original).

<sup>67</sup> Corbyn’s director of communications, Seumas Milne, wrote perhaps the single most important exposé of Britain’s secret state and its role in shaping political life, *The Enemy Within* (1995). The dirty tricks Milne documented in Thatcher’s struggle against the miners’ union will be comfortably surpassed if a left-wing government sets about its work with real determination.