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## The long read: Why Corbyn's moral clarity could propel him to Number 10

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It is accepted wisdom that for a party to be elected in a first past the post two-party system it has to appeal to swing voters, particularly those in marginal seats. As a result the two main parties have vied for the centre-ground. Consequently, in recent decades a large section of the electorate came to see little to choose between them. People have also come to believe that you cannot trust politicians.

Distrust increases if politicians clearly behave in ways that are motivated to maximize votes, rather than appear driven by conviction. When politicians aim for the centre to maximize votes, it is obvious to voters that they are willing to be economical with the truth. This turns people away from voting for any political party or candidate.

Recently, Tariq Ali described the move to the “centre” by Labour as “unlearning social democracy”. In the pages of the [London Review of Books](#) he summed it up succinctly: “During the Blair/Brown period the Labour Party unlearned social democracy of the Crosland variety, no matter anything resembling the classical model of early socialism. Corbyn knows it’s vital that the party relearns social democracy. It once seemed a hopeless task. Now, amazingly, they have a chance.”

Tony Crosland was first elected a Labour MP in 1950. At that time voting was at its most popular in the UK, not least because mainstream politicians stood for something and the two main parties were so different in their make-up.

In [1950 UK wide turnout was 84 per cent](#). In 1997 it was 71 per cent but it fell to 59 per cent in 2001. It crept up to 66 per cent in 2015, but only 24 per cent of the electorate voted for the Conservatives, 20 per cent for Labour, 22 per cent for other parties and 34 per cent didn’t vote.

Some 7.5 million eligible adults [no longer bother to register to vote](#) and registration is being made harder as people more often have to rent privately, move rented home more frequently and have to register individually at every move. A growing number of people are not eligible to vote at Westminster elections because they were born elsewhere in Europe. The true proportions of adults living in the UK who voted for either Labour or Conservative in the general election of May 2015 will be far less than 40 per cent. It may be as low as a third when all those not allowed to vote are included.

In 1950 only 25 per cent of the electorate did not vote for either the Conservatives or Labour. Furthermore, almost everyone who could be registered to vote was registered. We still had identity cards. Now a majority, 56 per cent of the electorate, do not give the two main parties their vote, as do millions of others who are not registered to vote but could be. The majority of UK voters were dissatisfied with the *status quo* in May 2015. The UK electoral stage is now set for other possibilities.

Because they are now such a huge group, the best strategy for Labour to increase its share of the vote is to target people who, vote for minor parties and the much larger groups have given up voting or even registering to vote. This includes those who are disillusioned with the main parties and voted for another, and all the new potential voters turning 18 since 2015. Combined, this group constitute more than twice the number of all the people who voted Conservative in 2015.

Labour do not need to put so much of their efforts and angst into appealing to Conservative voters to switch to Labour. Clever Conservative politicians know and now fear this. Sadiq Kahn won the London Mayoral election in May 2016, along with the three other English Labour Mayors, while the local Labour vote rose across in England from a year ago because the wishes of the British people are changing, and because of the Corbyn effect. In Scotland where Labour has not yet changed, the party fared badly.

Labour could also be far more politically savvy when it comes to its nearest potential rivals and potential allies. It need not waste so much effort on pretending it would not work with others in coalition. That pretence puts off many of the people who sometimes vote Labour but also see good in the Greens, SNP, Plaid Cymru and even some of the Liberals. The pretence of no coalitions also increases distrust in politicians. If you deny something that clearly you might actually consider, why should voters trust you?

Labour could make it clear it would consider coalition government. Most importantly it should make clear how much it now has in common with the Green party. John McDonnell's call for proportional representation to be in the next Labour manifesto could be accompanied by the understanding of where the ten constituencies in England are where the Green's could do better than Labour and where it would be good if they focussed almost all of their efforts in a future general election.

The Conservatives and Liberals played this trick in Sheffield Hallam in May 2015, which is why Nick Clegg is still an MP. However, in the nearby city of Chester no green candidate stood and so Labour narrowly won what would have otherwise have been a Conservative seat. No Green stood because Labour and the Greens negotiated, locally. Were

this to occur nationally there could both be hundreds of Chesters in 2020 and a few more Green MPs in parliament.

Most of the people who don't vote Tory are unlikely to ever vote Tory, so there is no need to appease people with "only slightly different from Conservative New Labour middle of the road" politics. Most voters want a radically different politics to that. A huge number of members left the Labour party, not only over the Iraq war but also over Tony Blair pursuing policies that Margaret Thatcher would approve of. Clever Conservatives fear Corbyn because a Labour party lead by him or people like him would undo their what they have done. This is why Greens can trust Labour now.

There are many reasons why the politics of a leader like Jeremy Corbyn might appeal to a far wider group of voters and potential voters than the so called swing-voters. A leader who can achieve this need not be Jeremy, but they need to hold views like his. Even more of the Labour party is now realising that it should be him, or someone like him that leads in future. That view is not just held by the majority of Labour party members who voted for him. Here are a few reasons to believe it is plausible that the Labour party will not perform badly at a future general election under such leadership.

1) **The future will be different.** The UK is slowly changing into a multi-party political system. The rise of UKIP is a sign of a more European style politics in England. UKIP may also do surprising well in parts of Wales. Politically, Scotland has already changed more in the last 5 years than the last 50. Northern Ireland only produces a tiny number of MPs although some would be willing to support the Conservative party in almost any circumstances if called upon. At some point proportional representation will be introduced and this is to the good, even if it does mean that UKIP will secure some seats at Westminster. The Labour party used to be ahead of the times. Some its old generals are still fighting the last war, but its younger members see that the battleground has changed. That is why they have a movement called Momentum.

2) **Fundraising through "Yes we can"**. Elections cannot be won without financial support and the trade unions can provide much less than they

used to. Corbyn has already achieved a large boost in membership, which is likely to increase further as he develops the skills needed as leader of the opposition – he is already surviving remarkably well considering he has never been a minister. Despite what you might think from the glum faces of some on the Opposition frontbench, he is leading a growing and increasingly enthused party. It is through receiving many very small donations that left wing parties are elected nowadays. Barak Obama showed how this was possible in the US. Bernie Sanders continued that trend and turned it into a new tradition.

3) **Campaigning.** You need active members to deliver leaflets and knock on doors in every constituency you have a chance in, not just blitzing “marginal” constituencies with the big guns. Huge increases in turnout are possible when people think it is worth voting, as they did in the 2014 Scottish referendum with 85 per cent turnout – the highest recorded for an election or referendum in the United Kingdom since the introduction of universal suffrage. Huge increases in the proportion who vote make huge swings possible, if not inevitable. You also need campaigning on the ground to organize voter registration drives and something different on offer politically to make it worth registering to vote.

4) **The honest man.** Politicians are the least trusted profession. Support for politicians being trustworthy has never exceeded more than a quarter of adults trusting them in the last 30 years. The proportion of the public who trusted politicians fell to a minimum of 13 per cent in 2009 after the expenses scandal. Politicians who are obviously honest are rare today. Chris Mullin may have been lauded for claiming only a black and white TV license, but why did he even claim that? If voters look him up on Wikipedia they will learn that “Corbyn was revealed to have submitted the smallest amount in expenses of any British MP. In 2010 he claimed the lowest sum of all 650 MPs”. He also over pays his taxes.

5) **The reluctant leader.** The rivalries between David and Ed Miliband, Tony Blair and George Brown, David Cameron and Boris Johnson have all revealed their thirst for power, putting their publicly stated priorities in doubt. Famously Jeremy Corbyn had to be persuaded to stand in the leadership election. His election may have ushered in a new era in

British politics where parties no longer look so keenly on the candidates who so obviously want the job and who initially appear most electable. The greatest Labour victories of the past were not secured by great leaders but under the watch of considerate politicians such as Clement Attlee and Harold Wilson, and around them they had a constellation of contributors from Aneurin Bevan to Barbara Castle. A single charismatic leader, such as Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair, is dangerous. They may win votes but they do not improve politics.

6) **Not in it for the money.** Tony Blair is reportedly worth £60m and earns as much as £200,000 for a single speaking engagement, it has been suggested. While he was Prime Minister there was a slight reduction in poverty, but economic inequality continued to increase. The MPs expenses scandal showed how unscrupulous many MPs were. Jeremy Corbyn does not appear motivated by money. Conservative voters may be impressed that so many of their leaders became millionaires. But for Labour voters and potential Labour voters this is not a great draw. Most people do not want to vote to be governed by cliques seeking to enrich themselves, although some masochists might.

7) **A listening man.** Corbyn appears prepared to listen to everyone's point of view, however much he disagrees with much of what they do or say. Evidence of this trait has often been used to attach him, but at the end of the day, you have to talk to your enemy. It is much better to start talking as soon as you can. You also have to listen to your friends and not just tell them what to do. Corbyn is someone who will listen to the shop workers, the teachers, the doctors and other health professionals. He appears prepared to listen to a wide range of experts and opinion rather than giving the air that he was born to rule, is all-knowing himself, and will tell us what is best for us.

8) **Learning from mistakes.** Labour now has a leader who appears to be prepared to look at how to ameliorate past political initiatives that in retrospect have turned out to be a mistake – whoever instigated them. Corbyn has shown that he can be critical of his own party and its past record, even of himself, when, in retrospect, his party or he himself was clearly misguided. Most voters may not see this as a weakness in future.

Voters are better educated than they were in the past. The majority of voters under 25 will have been to university by 2020, almost all with student-debts coming out of their pay packets. By then their parents may also agree with them that this is unfair.

9) **Not in awe of the US.** Corbyn appears to know that the US is not the only country in the world to visit to look for new ideas and often bad choices. Gordon Brown did not appear to realise this. The Liberals and Conservatives have brought ideas ranging from benefit sanctions, through to academy schools (and the corruption they invite) all from the US. We now have US style food banks. Many people of my age can remember when we needed no food banks. Unlike New Labour, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party looks to all the countries of mainland Europe that are less economically unequal as compared to the UK, that have more solidarity, better housing, health and education, where productivity is higher than in the US and innovation does not mean monopoly control by a few giant corporations.

10) **Forming alliances:** You cannot win elections simply by being nice, especially under the first-past-the-post system following a possible boundary review. To reiterate, in May 2015 the Labour Party won the city of Chester constituency because the Greens did not put up a candidate after negotiating with the Labour Party. Nick Clegg won Sheffield Hallam only because the Conservatives deliberately did not campaign at all strongly there. Today political parties have to work with their allies. The Green Party needs more seats to campaign in where they have a chance and to waste less of their efforts spread out across the country. Only Labour can help them do that and they could help Labour greatly in return. Labour could also work far better than it currently does with Plaid Cymru, the Liberals and the SNP. The consequences of not doing so are far too dire for petty party squabbles to matter.

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So many people have written off 2020 as a Conservative victory without even looking at the possibilities that a general election before then is possible. This will happen if events result in a lack of confidence in the current government with its ever so small majority. Even if the election is

not held until 2020, there is president for dramatic change. But it happens rarely. In the UK 1945 and 1997 were the last two unusual general elections with unpredicted swing results. In the US the equivalent were the elections of 1948 and 2008. However, since 2008 there have been many unprecedented electoral shocks across Europe. The idea that the future is predictable is for the past.

Given all this, why is part of the Parliamentary Labour Party opposing Corbyn. An Old Labour advisor put it succinctly: “If their strategy is so obviously misguided, why do the anti-Corbynistas persist? One reason may be human nature: they hate Corbyn, and [find it difficult to bite their tongue](#).” The clever Conservatives have to hope that the anti-Corbyn minority win. What they need is a Labour party that gains office once every ten or fifteen years but does not upset their project. A Labour Party heading in the direction that Corbyn and the mass-membership is taking it is their worst nightmare. The Conservatives want all other opposition parties to fight among themselves, not a Labour party that might even consider openly showing more tolerance to the Greens, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and some of the Liberals. That would be truly frightening for them.

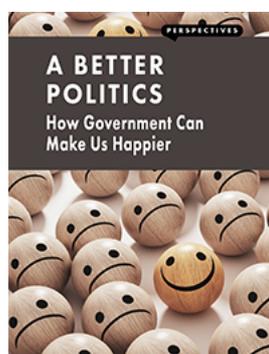
The Conservatives need the Parliamentary Labour Party to believe that Corbyn is unelectable. The Conservatives need the Labour party to morph back into New Labour. That is what they wish for most of all. An opinion piece [in the New Yorker](#) recently summed up Corbyn’s wider appeal by describing how he answered a question about refugees: “Corbyn didn’t need to think. ‘They are all human beings, just like you and me,’ he said. ‘In a different set of circumstances, we could all be in those refugee camps.’ When he speaks simply and off the cuff, Corbyn can have the moral clarity of a priest. The room broke into loud applause.”

Jeremy Corbyn can take on the zealots and bigots who use migration to stir up fear and hatred. His popular appeal is not based on stoking up current prejudices. It is based on conviction, love and compassion. Just how cynical do you have to be not to see the hope and possibility in that?

It is not the man that matters – it is the change he stands for – the change in a party and a country that could be coming. A thousand people could take his places were he to fall, because what Corbyn really represents is a set of beliefs whose time has finally come. If it had not been him it would have been someone like him and they too would have been the unlikeliest of leaders.

When changes truly happens it at first strikes seasoned commentators as impossible, then undesirable, then possible, until it finally happens and they change their memories to believe they believed in the change as desirable all along, that they somehow saw it coming and so, too, were on the side of history. Then we can all forget that just a few years before they had so vehemently opposed, so scornful and so wrong.

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