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## Why Corbyn's moral clarity could have propelled him to Number 10

by **Danny Dorling**

**13th November 2019**

The extract below from *Peak Inequality*, published in 2018, sums up the conclusion to that book and remains pertinent today. Jeremy Corbyn, like all of us, may have many faults, but he also epitomises both something that is fundamentally decent and the possibility for change.

It is significant that elections are held in December in Britain only when inequality is at a peak. The last time the United Kingdom was at a peak of income and wealth inequality was a century ago in 1918.

The 1918 election was held on 14 December. A secret coalition had formed in the run up to the election between the two most right-wing parties of the time – the Conservatives and ‘Coalition Liberals’ – and they did not stand against each other. Today, in half of the constituencies of the UK, the far-right Brexit party is not standing against the Conservatives in seats the latter holds, again following secret negotiations.

The nascent Labour party won 57 seats in 1918, a rise of almost a third in its representation after gaining almost four times as many votes as it had won at the previous general election in 1910, which was also held in December. The last December election was held in 1923 and Labour did even better again.

**From *Peak Inequality*:**

### **7.11 Why Corbyn’s moral clarity could propel him to Number 10**

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 in recent decades, and hence a large section of the electorate came to see little to choose between them. People have also come to believe that they cannot trust politicians.

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

Recently[1], 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[2].’

There are many reasons why the politics of a leader like Jeremy Corbyn might appeal to a far broader 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 surprisingly well in parts of Wales. Politically, Scotland has already changed more in the last 5 years than in 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 of 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% 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 organise 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[3]. No more than a quarter of adults have said they trust them over the last 30 years[4]. The proportion of the public who trusted politicians fell to a minimum of 13% in 2009 after the expenses scandal[5]. Politicians who are obviously honest are rare today. Chris Mullin may have been lauded for claiming only a black and white TV licence, 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’[6]. He also overpays his taxes.

### **5) The reluctant leader**

The rivalries between David and Ed Miliband, Tony Blair and Gordon 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, in which 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 £60 million and earns as much as £200,000 for a single speaking engagement, it has been suggested[7]. 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 attack him, but it is important 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 will have 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 Liberal Democrats 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 pleasant, 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 Liberal Democrats and the SNP. The consequences of not doing so are far too dire for petty party squabbles to matter.

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'[8]. 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 amongst themselves, not a Labour party that might even consider openly showing more tolerance to the Greens, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and some of the Liberal Democrats. 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.

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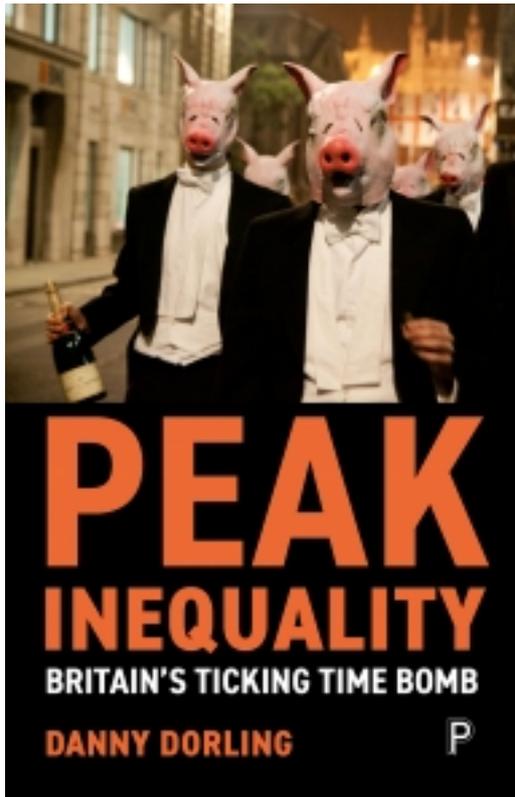
An [opinion piece in The New Yorker](#) recently summed up Corbyn's wider appeal by describing how he answered a question about refugees: 'Corbyn didn't need to think. "They are all human beings, just like you and me," he said. "In a different set of circumstances, we could all be in those refugee camps." When he speaks simply and off the cuff, Corbyn can have the moral clarity of a priest. The room broke into loud applause'[9].

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 place 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 change truly happens it at first strikes seasoned commentators as frankly impossible – a pipe-dream; then undesirable and full of negative consequences; then 'just about possible' once the clamour for change becomes overwhelming.

Finally change happens and their memories change with it. They will say that they believed in the change as desirable all along; they somehow saw it coming and so, too, were on the right side of history. Then we can all forget that just a few years ago they had so vehemently opposed the change, had justified the status quo, were so very scornful, and ultimately wrong. That matters little. It is just history. What matters is ensuring that we are now at the peak and starting on our way down. It's a long way down.



[Peak Inequality](#) by Danny Dorling is available on the Bristol University Press website. Order [here](#) for £10.39.

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#### *Notes:*

- 1. This article was originally published in Labour List, May 28th 2016.*
- 2. Ali, T., Corbyn's Progress, London Review of Books, 38, 5, 21-23, March 3rd 2016.*
- 3. Ipsos Mori, Veracity Index 2015, January 2016. (Doctors and teachers are the most trusted, estate agents and politicians the least.)*
- 4. Ipsos Mori, Public trust in doctors remains high, January 26th 1999.*
- 5. Editor's Pick, British public being sold down the river in democracy deception, True Publica, February 13th 2016.*
- 6. Hussein, M., Islington North MP Jeremy Corbyn is the country's lowest expenses claimer, Islington Gazette, December 8th 2010*
- 7. Heighton, L., Revealed: Tony Blair worth a staggering £60m, The Telegraph, June 12th 2015.*
- 8. Wren-Lewis, S., Labour's new militant tendency, Mainly Macro Blog, February 27th 2016.*
- 9. Knight, S., Enter Left: Will a fervent socialist reshape British politics or lead his party to irrelevance?, The New Yorker, May 23rd 2016.*