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# The 2017 Labour General Election Campaign: Ushering in a 'New Politics'?

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## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In many ways, the British General Election campaign of 2017 marked a return to “old politics” with the reaffirmation of a two-party system<sup>1</sup> and levels of voter turnout not seen in 25 years (68.7%). The Conservative Party, as in previous elections, relied to a considerable extent on negative campaigning, reportedly spending more than £1 million on Facebook campaign adverts attacking the Labour leader<sup>2</sup>. It also reverted to supporting traditional conservative policies such as grammar schools and blood sports, leading to accusations that the party was “*dwelling in the 1950s*”<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, the Labour Party was regarded by some as offering policies that would “*take Britain back to the 1970s*”<sup>4</sup>.



**JEREMY CORBYN**

**PHOTO: ALAN GIBBONS**

- 2 Yet, the campaign also appeared to herald a “new politics”, embodied by the style and policies of the Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. In place of the old top-down politics characterised by spin, party bureaucracy and parliamentarism, Labour under Corbyn promised to offer a more positive, horizontal form of politics capable of harnessing grassroots activism to revive democracy itself. Corbyn described these “new politics” in his first conference speech as party leader in September 2015. They should encourage “*engagement and involvement*”, enabling ordinary people to influence official policy<sup>5</sup>. Politics should return to the centre of local communities, ensuring that it is no longer detached from the concerns of these same communities. This would entail a new communication strategy whereby information is not fed down to people through “*the media commentariat*” but shared via digital media. The ultimate aim would be to foster “*a kind politics*”, based not on negative campaigning but on values, genuine engagement and dialogue.
- 3 The aim of this paper will be to analyse whether the 2017 Labour Party general election campaign can really be regarded as ushering in a “new politics” in terms of how politics is “done” and in terms of actual policy. I will endeavour to analyse to what extent the party under Corbyn has managed to reinvigorate democracy, moving away from traditional Labour parliamentarism, the statism of the post-war consensus and the authoritarianism of the New Labour-Conservative neoliberal consensus politics of the past 40 years. I will begin by briefly describing the limits of the “old politics” before moving on to discussing the “new”.

## The “old politics”

### The limits of parliamentarism

- 4 In 1961, Ralph Miliband identified one of the main problems of the British Labour Party when it came to advancing a radical new agenda as “*parliamentarism*” – the idea that the

party “*should not stray from the narrow path of parliamentary politics*” and should therefore reject “*any kind of political action (such as industrial action for political purposes) which fell, or which appeared to them to fall, outside the framework and conventions of the parliamentary system*”<sup>6</sup>. This is reflected in Clause I of the Labour Party constitution which promises “*to maintain in parliament and the country a political Labour Party*”<sup>7</sup>. In practice, as Hilary Wainwright notes, this meant that throughout its history the party has “*focused almost exclusively on electoral politics, [and has been] excessively deferential towards state power, and overly defensive about the party’s trade union links*”<sup>8</sup>. This attitude largely explains much of what Richard Seymour regards as blocking the road towards a “*new politics*”<sup>9</sup>. He identifies the party’s “*obsess[ion] with electoral outcomes to the near exclusion of other considerations*”<sup>10</sup>, the concentration of power at the top<sup>11</sup> and the exclusion of grassroots activists “*from effective decision-making*”<sup>12</sup>.

- 5 The party’s obsession with electoral outcomes has perhaps been most clearly demonstrated in recent years, particularly under the leadership of Tony Blair who was notoriously willing to shift his party’s ideological compass in response to perceived changes in the political climate. For him, for the party to be “*a party of government*”, it needs to shed its links with grassroots activism. In a *Guardian* article warning the party of possible annihilation if Corbyn became leader, he wrote, “*Governments can change a country. Protest movements simply agitate against those who govern*”<sup>13</sup>. This statement reflects the parliamentary party’s deep-held belief that it can only win elections and govern so long as it is seen as a bulwark against radicalism, mediating popular demands through the Westminster system. To the extent that Corbyn was thought to break out of this mould, on account of the significant support he received from outside the PLP and due to his own history as an activist, he was regarded as “*unelectable*”.
- 6 The concentration of power at the top is an inevitable consequence of the belief in parliamentarism. MPs and the PLP are regarded as having a rather special status as elected representatives of “the people”. For parliamentarists, their views are thus considered as being more legitimate than those of ordinary party members whose primary role is to provide passive support rather than actively participate in party politics. Indeed, as Gilbert reminds us, when the Labour Party was first created, there was no possibility of becoming an individual member – membership was only possible through one of its federated components<sup>14</sup>. As a result, “*there was a marked tension between the idea of the party as a vehicle for a democratic mass movement, and the understanding that its sole function was to create, maintain, service and serve the interests of the Parliamentary Labour Party*”<sup>15</sup>.
- 7 This attitude has led to a very particular view of party management which seeks to limit party democracy in the perceived interests of popular democracy. There is a fear that the extension of party democracy would empower party activists at the expense of labour supporters in the country at large who may be alienated by a more radical agenda put forward by the former<sup>16</sup>. Hence, the party’s long-standing resistance to demands from the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy<sup>17</sup> to strengthen the role of party members vis-à-vis the PLP. Whilst the recent abolition of the electoral college and the introduction of genuine OMOV (One Member One Vote) following the Collins Review<sup>18</sup> may have helped give ordinary members a voice, at least with regard to the choice of party leader, the party did not foresee that the reform could empower members to vote against the express wishes of the PLP<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, the PLP did all that it could to overturn the democratic election of Jeremy Corbyn, tabling a vote of no confidence in his leadership

following the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU in June 2016, thus triggering a second leadership contest (which he easily won).

- 8 Such top-down party management is not of course unique to the Labour Party but is deeply embedded in the "old politics" of the entire Westminster system. Only the Green Party appears to have long represented an exception, allowing its members a significant degree of influence over party policy.

## The controlling state

- 9 The "old politics" is also characterised by a high degree of statism, meaning a reliance on the central state to direct the economic and social affairs of the nation. It is closely associated with the post-war consensus although it has also marked the more recent neoliberal consensus, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary. The post-war period in Britain certainly saw the State take on considerably more power, even though this was in reality a gradual process that can be dated back to the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, belying the myth of *laissez-faire*<sup>20</sup>. Statism was perhaps most evident in the welfare state and the mixed economy which were "*tightly controlled by professionals and bureaucrats, with no element of popular participation*"<sup>21</sup>. The so-called Morrisonian approach to nationalisation<sup>22</sup>, for example, meant that state enterprises were run at arm's length from democratic control<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, in the new state industries "*there was no attempt to redistribute the balance of power*", nor was any effort made to guarantee union representation on their management boards or to allow any degree of workers' control<sup>24</sup>. As Thorpe has highlighted, "*If anything, workers actually lost control since negotiations were now still more likely to take place at the centre, remote from the daily life of the worker*"<sup>25</sup>. Statism thus meant a denial of democratic engagement with national institutions and services.
- 10 A commitment to statism also meant a commitment to the British state itself. Despite New Labour's significant constitutional reforms and its implementation of devolution across the United Kingdom, it failed to introduce electoral reform or to provide ordinary people with greater opportunities to participate in the political life of the nation. Instead, Blair made full use of the old prerogative powers of the British monarchy to concentrate power yet further at the centre, to such an extent that he was accused of having "presidentialised" the functions of the Prime Minister<sup>26</sup>. He thus succeeded in undermining the already fragile institutions of British democracy. Furthermore, the powers of the State were strengthened vis-à-vis the ordinary citizen, notably via the erosion of civil liberties and widespread criminalisation, as government became increasingly authoritarian<sup>27</sup>.
- 11 Whilst the Conservative Party may have criticised these trends and sought to usher in what it described as "a new politics" that would curb the power of the State<sup>28</sup>, in practice the State continued to exercise significant control over the lives of individuals, particularly welfare claimants and migrants<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, austerity policies ensured that local communities failed to be genuinely empowered, contrary to the discourse of the "*Big Society*"<sup>30</sup>. Instead, these policies led to the increased empowerment of the private sector, further undermining accountability and eroding democracy<sup>31</sup>.
- 12 To what extent is the Labour Party under Corbyn reversing these anti-democratic trends and practices and ushering in a genuinely new politics?

## “Doing” the “new politics”

- 13 How the new politics is actually done is of great importance: radical new policies cannot be genuinely empowering and democratic if ordinary people are not actively involved in shaping them. This entails the political mobilisation of people via cultural politics and digital media and the democratisation of the Labour Party machine. We shall deal with each of these methods in turn.

### Cultural politics and youth engagement

- 14 As noted above, one aspect of the “new politics” highlighted by Corbyn himself is the creation of a genuine connection between the Labour Party and the lived experience of communities. Many of the artists involved in the British Grime music scene believe that the Party is now echoing their long-standing criticism of social inequalities and addressing their concerns through its support for public services and its anti-austerity stance. As Charles points out, “Corbyn is viewed as someone who promotes the issues that young people see as improving their life chances”<sup>32</sup>. Stormzy, Akala and AJ Tracey amongst others have consequently lent their public support to Corbyn and encouraged their followers to vote Labour, most notably via the hashtag #Grime4Corbyn.
- 15 Such “cultural politics”, connecting popular culture with politics, is not entirely new<sup>33</sup>. In the 1980s, the music collective Red Wedge sought to mobilise young people to get involved in left-wing politics, yet it never had the success that can be claimed for #Grime4Corbyn which, somewhat accidentally, “generat[ed] the kind of connection between Labour as an institution and young voters that Red Wedgers could only dream of in the 1980s”<sup>34</sup>. For Charles, this success can be explained by the fact that Corbyn does not seek to use the popular music scene as a conduit between parliamentary politics and local communities – instead he is directly and personally involved with these communities and their campaigns, as was so clearly demonstrated by his reaction to the Grenfell Tower disaster<sup>35</sup>.
- 16 It is of course impossible to accurately measure the impact of a particular campaign on voter mobilisation but it would seem that #Grime4Corbyn may have had some impact on encouraging the young people who are most likely to feel politically disenfranchised to vote in the last election. Indeed, voter turnout increased most significantly in ethnically-diverse areas with high numbers of young people which were less likely to vote two years ago – and these groups of voters were most likely to vote Labour<sup>36</sup>.

### Grassroots activism and digital media

- 17 The youth vote might also have been mobilised via digital media which, used in a particular way, enabled a very successful grassroots Labour campaign. Of course, there is nothing necessarily novel about the use of digital media in political campaigning but, whereas the “old politics” was more likely to use it in a top-down way, much like the traditional media, the “new politics” used it in a horizontal manner which allowed people to actively get involved in a political movement. If the “old politics” can be identified with spin and obsessive media management, the “new” seems to be marked more by spontaneity and pluralism. Indeed, Ben Sellers, one of the key organisers of Corbyn’s

social media team, specifically rejected centralised control of digital media. According to Nunns,

- 18 The aim was to create a sense of shared ownership over a campaign that was being built from the ground up, rather than to use digital platforms to simply broadcast messages from on high. This, it was hoped, would unleash the democratic potential of social media<sup>37</sup>.
- 19 Nunns here is referring to the Corbyn leadership campaign of 2015 but the same can be said of the 2017 general election campaign.
- 20 There were several ways that digital media allowed people to actively participate in the campaign. Firstly, it enabled them to share and access information about politics that was not available to them via the mainstream media. The latter failed spectacularly to provide balanced coverage of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party and its policies<sup>38</sup>. In many ways, this represented a failure of democracy which can only function properly when the public has access to all the information available to enable them to make informed decisions. Digital media helped to fill this gap, thus giving people the necessary tools to get involved in political debate. Organisations such as Red Labour and Momentum, whilst not presenting an unbiased view of the Corbyn leadership, at least managed to balance out the almost uniformly negative coverage of the Labour leader in the mainstream press and broadcast media.
- 21 Digital media also allowed people to get involved in the political campaign in more practical ways. During the leadership campaign of 2015, for example, a canvassing app was made available which allowed volunteers to make calls to potential supporters from home – the data they collected was automatically fed back into the central campaign database<sup>39</sup>. Prior to the 2017 general election, Momentum's online tool *My Nearest Marginal* allowed volunteers to link up with other campaigners and organise canvassing in marginal seats. Via such methods grassroots activists were able to get involved in an “unofficial”, “parallel” election campaign, going on the offensive rather than simply trying to uphold existing support<sup>40</sup>.
- 22 For Doran, “Technology now gave members, through its potential for self-organisation, unprecedented power”<sup>41</sup>. Yet, such power is meaningless unless it can be used to influence policy. As Perryman highlights, “if [Labour supporters] are restricted to the kind of role that ... Clause One socialists want to ascribe to [them] – passive supporters to be switched on and off when a canvassing session is required, extras rather than actors – how many will choose to stick around?”<sup>42</sup> The real test of the “new politics” is therefore whether it can really give grassroots supporters and activists a voice in the policy-making process. Digital media has made this possible. For example, Rustin suggests it could be used to organise what he calls “public hearings in which areas of programme development could be debated and reported”<sup>43</sup>. Yet, no matter how great the democratic potential of such initiatives might be, they will make little difference unless the profoundly undemocratic culture of the Labour Party can be changed.

## Democratising the Labour Party: Creating a movement out of a machine

- 23 The challenge before the Labour Party in this regard is significant. As highlighted above, parliamentarism places undue weight on the voice of the PLP, yet the party is becoming a

party of mass membership – with over half a million members, it is now the largest political party in western Europe. With the decline of deference to political elites, Labour will ignore the voice of its members – and that of the social movements that support it – at its peril. The new politics demands that the party becomes a movement rather than an electoral machine, allowing all members to make their voice heard. Yet, existing party structures do not allow that to happen.

- 24 Traditionally, the party conference was the sovereign policy-making body, yet it was always very difficult for conference delegates to impose their will on the PLP<sup>44</sup>. Even so, in an attempt to neutralise left-wing influence on the policy-making process, Neil Kinnock set about further strengthening the role of the latter to the extent that by the end of the 1980s, “*the PLP leadership had almost completely taken over policy-making*”<sup>45</sup>. The sovereignty of the party conference was diluted as policy was often decided in advance of conference by newly-created policy review groups. These groups, made up of members drawn from the NEC (the Labour Party’s governing body) and the shadow cabinet, drew up policy reports which were subject to minimal democratic scrutiny at conference but instead presented as *faits accomplis*<sup>46</sup>. Such trends were exacerbated under Blair’s leadership with the conference effectively side-lined as a policy-making body in favour of the National Policy Forum, the main body responsible for overseeing policy development in the party, made up of representatives from constituency parties and regions, affiliated trade unions and socialist societies. The declared intention of this reform was to establish a direct relationship between the leadership and party members and to bring about a more “*consensual approach*” to decision-making<sup>47</sup>. The party leadership believed that such processes would more accurately reflect the views of voters which they thought were at odds with the more radical views of the trade unions and the Constituency Labour Parties<sup>48</sup>. Side-lining the latter was thus regarded as a means of empowering the former. Yet, rather than democratising decision-making processes, the effect was merely to reinforce power at the centre by neutralising opposition and debate in what Lewis Minkin has described as a “*rolling coup*”<sup>49</sup>. Indeed, rather than putting forward concrete policy suggestions, the role of the Policy Forum was reduced to providing vague aspirations regarding the direction of policy whilst concrete policy proposals were decided by the leadership.
- 25 Today, the party continues to have no real means of granting a voice to ordinary members in the policy-making process. The Policy Forum is still in place. It invites on-line submissions, allowing anyone to provide policy suggestions or comments on policy proposals. Yet, there is no guarantee that these will be acted upon. Proposals from the forum must be voted at conference but only about one tenth of delegates have the right to vote. Furthermore, some of the party’s newer members are excluded from voting as delegates must prove they have had 12 months’ continuous party membership at the time of registration for the conference<sup>50</sup>. Reforming these processes is difficult: as party rules currently stand, any reform would have to be deemed necessary by the Conference Arrangements Committee (the internal committee responsible for setting the conference agenda) which would then schedule a vote at conference. Improving party democracy is likely to be a long and slow process. Yet, there are some signs that the “*new politics*” are making some headway within the party.
- 26 Firstly, following the Collins Review on Labour Party reform<sup>51</sup> and the granting of the right to vote in the Labour leadership election to “*registered supporters*”, control of the future direction of the party has to some extent been opened up to the general public.

Perryman is particularly optimistic, suggesting that “*the registered supporter scheme has the potential to entirely reinvent what a political party looks like*” by encouraging ordinary people to sign up and get involved<sup>52</sup>. Certainly, anyone can now, for a small fee, vote for the leader they believe will best represent their interests. The passing of the so-called McDonnell Amendment at the most recent party conference (2017) has also lowered the threshold of PLP support (MPs and MEPs) needed for a candidate to be placed on the leadership ballot – from 15 to 10% (instead of the 5% proposed by McDonnell) – diminishing to some extent the power of the PLP.

- 27 The democratic legitimacy conferred on the party leader via the new system may lead to a corresponding rise in the power of the leader, especially whilst party structures remain largely unreformed. Yet, despite “Corbynmania” and accusations of populism, Corbyn has so far shown no signs of demagoguery. On the contrary, he appears to be genuinely responsive to popular demands. In this sense, he is an outsider, refusing to adopt the tactics of spin and managerialism associated with the political elites. This “*outsider vibe*”<sup>53</sup> contributed to a significant extent to his popularity<sup>54</sup>. He comes across as “*relaxed, approachable, open and honest*”<sup>55</sup>. This is not just his demeanour but is also linked to his politics, which makes him seem genuinely authentic. As Glaser has noted:
- 28 When he is at his best, the appeal of Corbyn is his authenticity; but an authenticity of ideological substance, not hick anti-Westminster style. He says what he thinks, not in the Trumpian manner of raising hell at a Washington fundraiser, but in the sense of being explicit about his beliefs and his analysis of what is wrong with Britain. Corbyn found his mojo when he turned away from populism and towards the combination of rhetorical sincerity and co-ordinated grassroots campaigning that were the hallmarks of the Sanders campaign<sup>56</sup>.
- 29 Corbyn can therefore act as a conduit for genuinely popular demands but the people are still not *directly* empowered. The extent to which the “old” representative Westminster system remains unchallenged is reflected in the fact that local Labour members have currently no right to reselect candidates for office. Once they select an MP, s/he automatically has the right to stand for re-election, effectively allowing her/him a job for life in a “safe” labour seat. Due to the emergency circumstances of the last general election, the NEC and regional boards were given control over the selection of candidates to replace 10 MPs who were standing down, although it was confirmed in July 2017 that power will be returned to local labour members when it comes to selecting candidates for key marginals.
- 30 There are promising moves within the party to introduce more direct democracy. At the last conference in Brighton, the NEC agreed to introduce three more seats for CLP (Constituency Labour Party) members on its board and to allow a review into party democracy to be carried out by Labour MP Katy Clark, Corbyn’s political secretary. The review will be completed in time for proposed changes to be put to the 2018 party conference. Such changes may include the mandatory reselection of the party’s candidates at each general election and an amendment to allow party members and trade unions, rather than just MPs, to nominate leadership candidates<sup>57</sup>. If such proposals are made, it is likely they will reach conference since the Conference Arrangements Committee is now made up of a majority of Corbyn supporters who are in favour of changes to party democracy.
- 31 Attempts to introduce more direct democracy in the Labour Party are not of course new. Mandatory reselection of MPs for example was introduced at the behest of the Campaign

for Labour Party Democracy in 1979-80 and remained official practice until 1990. Yet, whereas the CLPD usually found itself up against the party leadership (especially under Neil Kinnock and then Blair), today the party leader is a member of the grouping. Furthermore, having won two popular leadership victories and led the party to relative electoral success in the last general election, Corbyn is in a strong position to carry out these reforms, despite opposition from significant sections of the PLP. It seems appropriate that the man who came to power largely as a result of an unprecedented groundswell of popular support should use that power to distribute it more evenly amongst the party's grassroots. The latter need to be empowered not only to formulate policy but also by the policies that are introduced if the momentum for change is to be pushed forward.

## "New politics", new policies?

- 32 In many ways, the policies proposed in the Labour Party's most recent election manifesto do not seem particularly new. Many commentators have suggested that it was very classically social democratic. For Seymour, "*the excitable talk about a 'new politics' may obscure the extent to which Corbyn's project is in most respects a traditional electoral one, subject to the same logic and limitations of any such project*"<sup>58</sup>. Gilbert notes, "*there was nothing in the June 2017 manifesto that a twenty-first century socialist should object to, but there wasn't much to get excited about either*"<sup>59</sup>. Gamble concurs, asserting that this was "*a social democratic manifesto and not a socialist one*"<sup>60</sup>. Can it thus be said that Corbyn's Labour Party is incapable of introducing genuinely new policies? To answer this question, we will examine economic policy, social policy and post-Brexit policy in turn.

### Economic policy: from statism to cooperativism

- 33 There is some continuity in economic policy. Indeed, the party manifesto committed to "*balancing the books*" by "*eliminating the current deficit*", even if it rejects austerity as the best means to do so<sup>61</sup>. It also promised to adopt a Fiscal Credibility Rule according to which government would not borrow for day-to-day spending<sup>62</sup>. This seems very similar to Gordon Brown's famous "Golden Rule" applied when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Yet, there are crucial differences: the rule can be suspended in times of crisis and it is to be used to allow spending on "*real growth*", not on what Mason describes as "*financial froth*"<sup>63</sup>. This means the development of a new industrial strategy with investment in infrastructure, research and development and the creation of highly-skilled jobs and industries that rely on "*zero carbon or renewable sources*"<sup>64</sup>. Given the central direction of such a policy, it is rather top-down, statist and, in the words of *The Guardian's* Larry Elliott, "*more Keynesian than Marxist*"<sup>65</sup>.
- 34 It might also be said that the party's desire to control the financial sector is harking back to past times. Indeed, Cameron claimed to have "*introduced the biggest reforms to the banking sector in a generation*"<sup>66</sup> although these reforms had little practical effect<sup>67</sup>. Whilst recognising the importance of Britain's international financial industry, the Labour Party aims to ensure that the banking system is "*socially useful*" by extending taxation on financial system profits, securely ring-fencing investment and retail banking and establishing a National Investment Bank to support the lending and investment needed for the new industrial strategy<sup>68</sup>. Such initiatives may empower small businesses and local

communities by providing them with necessary financial support, but we should not assume that wresting power from the financial elites will automatically give more power to ordinary people. Yet, a future Labour government promises to do so by “*widening ownership of the economy*”<sup>69</sup>. It seeks to realise this objective via nationalisation and the creation of a cooperative economy.

- 35 Labour’s commitment to nationalisation does not at first sight seem particularly new, nor does it seem particularly radical. Rail companies, energy and water supply networks and Royal Mail are to be brought under public ownership. Yet, the plans would not take effect the second a Labour government takes power: Royal Mail would only be renationalised ‘at the earliest opportunity’ and rail companies will be brought under public control once existing franchises expire<sup>70</sup>. More significantly, whilst such measures are intended to improve democratic *accountability*, the manifesto sets out no plans for democratic *control*. For Gamble, these “*few nationalisation measures barely scratch the surface of structural economic power*”<sup>71</sup>. In many ways, Labour’s approach as set out in the manifesto resembles the old Morrisonian approach to nationalisation highlighted above. Yet, Corbyn himself suggested that public *ownership* should mean public *control* whereby “*passengers, rail workers and government too, cooperatively run [...] the railways... in our interests and not for private profit*”<sup>72</sup>. A Labour Party policy document, *Alternative Models of Ownership*<sup>73</sup>, expressly criticised the party’s previous approach to nationalisation and mooted several alternatives. These include, for the railways, a national corporation with “*a board structure that provides representation for both employee and passenger groups while also having managerial and government appointees with sector experience*”<sup>74</sup>. This would facilitate popular participation and control. The report also suggested that “*local, regional and commuting services could have more decentralized ownership structures that devolved power to the devolved parliaments and local government*”<sup>75</sup>. This would help to weaken the grip of the central state. Similarly, in the energy sector, it was suggested that state ownership could be combined with “*local, regional and community ownership*” and that consumers and employee representatives could be present on board along with representatives of state, regional and local government<sup>76</sup>.
- 36 Such proposals, if implemented, would be a far cry from the old Morrisonian approach and have the potential to be genuinely “new” and to empower ordinary people and communities. Yet, the details for such proposals didn’t make it into the manifesto (even if reference was made to supporting the creation of co-operative energy companies). It is possible that the party was wary of proposing a very radical manifesto given the widespread predictions of its defeat. Post-election, senior figures in the party seem committed to a more radical approach to nationalisation and perhaps will not be so timid about promoting such an approach in a future general election. In her speech to the last party conference, Lisa Nandy, current shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, spoke clearly not just about the need to nationalise energy but to *democratise it*, through “*community-based energy companies and cooperatives*”<sup>77</sup>.
- 37 The idea of cooperative ownership is not entirely new, especially within the Labour Party. The cooperative movement, focussed mainly on the provision of affordable food to its members, dates back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. The Cooperative Party, originally established in 1917, has been in a pact with the Labour Party since 1927 and, following the 2017 general election, now has 38 MPs sitting as members of the PLP. Labour’s *Alternative Models of Ownership* report makes specific reference to British cooperative tradition and cites the significant financial support provided to cooperative

development by the Greater London Council before it was abolished in 1985<sup>78</sup>. In order to revive the cooperative tradition, the report recommends that reforms be put in place to ensure that cooperatives can obtain proper financing and procurement from government<sup>79</sup>. Following the report's recommendation, the manifesto also promised to introduce a "right to own", "making employees the buyer of first refusal when the company they work for is up for sale"<sup>80</sup>. Corbyn, in his last speech to the Cooperative Party, spoke of the need to move away from "top-down" towards "horizontalist" models of organisation, "whether in politics, the media or in business" and consequently supported the development of democratically-controlled cooperatives<sup>81</sup>. For him, the emergence of digital platforms offers an opportunity to empower workers and "to co-operate on a scale not possible before", although government has an important role to play to ensure that new technology is not used in an exploitative way<sup>82</sup>. So, although the cooperative idea itself is far from new, the harnessing of new technologies and the application of the model across politics and society has the potential to bring about significant democratic change. This could lead to the development of a genuine "big society" in which people are empowered as workers and citizens. Unlike David Cameron's "big society"<sup>83</sup>, the State would play an important role as a facilitator, setting up the appropriate institutional framework and providing necessary funding to ensure that cooperatives can compete on a level playing field with the private sector.

### Social policy: empowering the people?

- 38 Logically, Corbyn's desire to introduce a more horizontal organisation of society ought to extend to social policy. At the last party conference, he promised to give local people a greater say in regeneration projects that affect them, notably promising that councils planning redevelopment will have to seek the agreement of existing tenants and leaseholders via a ballot<sup>84</sup>. Furthermore, the manifesto committed the party to giving local councils the freedom to build new homes<sup>85</sup>. Yet, the principal focus of the manifesto and the National Policy Forum Report<sup>86</sup> was on top-down solutions to social problems: Labour promises to build more, better-quality homes (but no detail is given on *who* exactly will do the building); to increase social security payments; to reverse the privatisation of the NHS; and to develop a free National Education Service for all. Whilst these measures will undoubtedly empower people by improving their social security and accountability structures (notoriously obscure in the private sector), there are no plans to give them greater *ownership* and *control* of social services. For example, no mention was made of cooperative housing schemes that have been innovatively developed in the past in the UK or today in other countries such as Spain<sup>87</sup>. Labour has more work to do if it is to develop genuinely new, democratically empowering social policies.

### Brexit: an opportunity for the new politics

- 39 Many people who voted for Brexit undoubtedly did so in order to reclaim democratic control faced with what they perceived as a 'democratic deficit' at the level of the EU. Indeed, Lord Ashcroft's polling on the day of the vote revealed that the number one reason given by people voting Leave was that "*decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK*"<sup>88</sup>. But people were not just demanding that power be returned to Westminster. It seems that those who voted in favour of Brexit also expected popular sovereignty to be respected, as indicated by the public uproar which followed the High Court's ruling that

Parliament should be allowed to vote on the triggering of article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. The fear of popular disapproval should the referendum result be questioned goes a long way to explaining the decision of both Labour and the Conservatives to go ahead with Brexit. This desire for more democratic control over politics could be an opportunity for Labour to bring about democratic reform at home. Indeed, Labour did recognise the need “to address the growing democratic deficit across Britain”<sup>89</sup>. It thus committed itself to establishing a Constitutional Convention “to examine and advise on reforming the way Britain works at a fundamental level”, notably looking at how democracy might be extended<sup>90</sup>. This will entail further devolution, reform of the House of Lords, and the extension of the Freedom of Information Act to make private companies more accountable<sup>91</sup>. However, it is rather surprising not to see any proposals to reform the current electoral system which permits the country to be led by a government without a popular mandate. The manifesto is scant on detail, so it is at present rather hard to evaluate whether proposed reforms will really bring about democratic empowerment. Certainly, the focus on extending democracy will need to look beyond representative democracy to examine how direct, participatory democratic principles may be applied. This is what Labour will need to do if it is serious about developing a more horizontal notion of democracy and about giving people back real control in post-Brexit Britain.

- 40 Labour will also need to ensure that communities are united if they are to work effectively together in such a political model. The victory of the ‘Leave’ vote unleashed a tide of anti-immigration sentiment which has been brewing in Britain for some time, symbolised by the rise in hate crimes in the months following the referendum<sup>92</sup>. Labour will have to challenge such sentiment. Corbyn has certainly adopted a very different discourse on immigration from that used by the Conservatives or even by the Labour Party in recent years. Highly symbolically, his first act as leader of the Labour Party was to address a pro-refugee demonstration. In his recent conference speech, he criticised the scapegoating of migrants for society’s ills and promised to never “follow the Tories into the gutter” in this debate<sup>93</sup>. Yet, in terms of policy, there appears to be a continued acceptance that immigration is a problem, with the manifesto promising to introduce “new migration management systems” and to “institute a new system which is based on our economic needs”<sup>94</sup>. It promises to ‘end indefinite detentions’ for migrants but doesn’t seem to see a problem with immigration detention *per se*. Furthermore, whilst it promises to abolish income thresholds, it will introduce “a prohibition on recourse to public funds”<sup>95</sup>. This latter promise accepts the fallacious argument that immigration is a drain on public funds<sup>96</sup>. Goodfellow thus declares that “for all the promise, Labour hasn’t fully delivered on the bold declarations he made about migration in those heady days of summer 2015”<sup>97</sup>. Labour is likely afraid of taking a radical stance on the issue for fear of alienating voters, yet the success of any new horizontal politics depends on being able to shift the boundaries of debate in this area.

## Conclusion

- 41 In many ways, then, Labour under Corbyn shows some signs of offering a genuinely new way of both doing and implementing politics. The old tradition of parliamentarism is being challenged as extra-parliamentary social, cultural and political movements provide the momentum necessary to rebuild the party from the bottom up, harnessing the power of digital media to help them do so. Whilst extra-parliamentary activity has always been complementary to Labour, now it is becoming an integral part of the activity of the PLP,

helping to shape the direction of policy. There are also signs that Labour is moving beyond the statism of the past by promising to improve not just democratic accountability but to also provide genuine ownership and control over the economy following the cooperative model.

- 42 Yet, if Labour hopes to turn its back on the old politics and offer a truly participative democracy, it must fundamentally change both the culture of the party and of the Westminster system. The promised review of party democracy may go some way to addressing the rather closed, hierarchical nature of the party, enabling ordinary members to actively shape policy. But Labour has so far given little indication of how it might go about overhauling the Westminster system itself which does not even live up to its promise of representative democracy and certainly does little to facilitate direct democracy. This timidity is perhaps understandable given the scale of the challenge. Yet, Corbyn's Labour has so far shown that it can change the parameters of the debate by effectively challenging the need for neoliberal austerity. A genuinely new politics must show it is also capable of changing the parameters of the debate concerning the nature of British democracy itself, by looking beyond the State and Parliament to facilitate popular democratic empowerment.

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## ABSTRACTS

In many ways, the British General Election campaign of 2017 marked a return to 'old politics' with the reaffirmation of a two-party system and levels of voter turnout not seen in 25 years. The Conservative Party, as in previous elections, relied to a considerable extent on negative campaigning and pledged to implement traditional conservative policies supporting grammar schools and blood sports. Yet, the campaign also appeared to be characterised by a 'new politics', embodied by the style and policies of the Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. This was a politics that largely relied on positive campaigning and mobilised grassroots activism to an extent rarely seen before, ensuring that it inspired new voters.

This article focuses on the role of the 'new politics' in the election campaign before moving on to discuss the future of such politics under Labour in opposition and perhaps in power. It will be asked to what extent ordinary people can help shape Labour Party policy, questioning whether Labour can manage to liberate itself from its own internal party machinery and from its traditional reliance on the State in order to move durably beyond the 'old politics' towards a democratised 'new politics'.

À bien des égards, la campagne électorale de 2017 a marqué un retour vers l'ancien modèle politique au Royaume-Uni par la réaffirmation du système bipartite et le taux de participation le plus élevé en 25 ans. Comme dans les élections précédentes, le Parti conservateur a mené une campagne de dénigrement contre ses adversaires politiques et il s'est engagé à instaurer des politiques traditionnellement conservatrices telles le retour des *grammar schools* ou la légalisation des sports de sang. Or, la campagne a également été marquée par une nouvelle façon de faire de la politique, incarnée par le style et les politiques de Jeremy Corbyn, leader du Parti travailliste. Cette « nouvelle politique » a été marquée par une campagne électorale positive qui a mobilisé la participation populaire, attirant de nouveaux électeurs.

Cet article se penche sur le rôle joué par la nouvelle politique dans la campagne électorale avant d'analyser l'avenir d'une telle politique sous les Travaillistes dans l'opposition et éventuellement au pouvoir. Le citoyen ordinaire peut-il réellement influencer la politique du parti ? Les membres individuels pourraient-ils passer outre le haut fonctionnement du parti et sa dépendance à l'État afin de s'emparer d'une nouvelle politique démocratisée ?

## INDEX

**Keywords:** UK Labour Party, cultural politics, parliamentarism, cooperativism, Jeremy Corbyn, party democracy

**Mots-clés:** Parti travailliste britannique, politique culturelle, parlementarisme, coopérativisme, Jeremy Corbyn

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