

The Plot to Keep Jeremy Corbyn Out of Power

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In the latest of the interminable media “furores” about Jeremy Corbyn’s supposed unfitness to lead Britain’s Labour party – let alone become prime minister – it is easy to forget where we were shortly before he won the support of an overwhelming majority of Labour members to head the party.

In the preceding two years, it was hard to avoid on TV the figure of Russell Brand, a comedian and minor film star who had reinvented himself, after years of battling addiction, as a spiritual guru-cum-political revolutionary.

Brand’s fast-talking, plain-speaking criticism of the existing political order, calling it discredited, unaccountable and unrepresentative, was greeted with smirking condescension by the political and media establishment. Nonetheless, in an era before Donald Trump had become president of the United States, the British media were happy to indulge Brand for a while, seemingly believing he or his ideas might prove a ratings winner with younger audiences.

But Brand started to look rather more impressive than anyone could have imagined. He took on supposed media heavyweights like the BBC’s [Jeremy Paxman](#) and Channel 4’s [Jon Snow](#) and charmed and shamed them into submission – both with his compassion and his thoughtful radicalism. Even in the gladiatorial-style battle of wits so beloved of modern TV, he made these titans of the political interview look mediocre, shallow and out of touch. Videos of these head-to-heads went viral, and Brand won hundreds of thousands of new followers.

Then he overstepped the mark.

Democracy as charade

Instead of simply criticising the political system, Brand argued that it was in fact so rigged by the powerful, by corporate interests, that western democracy had become a charade. Elections were [pointless](#). Our votes were simply a fig-leaf, concealing the fact that our political leaders were there to represent not us but the interests of globe-spanning corporations. Political and media elites had been captured by unshored corporate money. Our voices had become irrelevant.

Brand didn’t just talk the talk. He started committing to direct action. He [shamed](#) our do-nothing politicians and corporate media – the devastating Grenfell Tower fire had yet to happen – by helping to gain attention for a group of poor tenants in London who were taking on the might of a corporation that had become their landlord and wanted to evict them to develop their homes for a much richer clientele. Brand’s revolutionary words had turned into revolutionary action.

But just as Brand's rejection of the old politics began to articulate a wider mood, it was stopped in its tracks. After Corbyn was unexpectedly elected Labour leader, offering for the first time in living memory a politics that listened to people before money, Brand's style of rejectionism looked a little too cynical, or at least premature.

While Corbyn's victory marked a sea-change, it is worth recalling, however, that it occurred only because of a mistake. Or perhaps two.

The Corbyn accident

First, a handful of Labour MPs agreed to nominate Corbyn for the leadership contest, scraping him past the threshold needed to get on the ballot paper. Most backed him only because they wanted to give the impression of an election that was fair and open. After his victory, some loudly [regretted](#) having assisted him. None had thought a representative of the tiny and besieged left wing of the parliamentary party stood a chance of winning – not after Tony Blair and his acolytes had spent more than two decades remaking Labour, using their own version of entryism to eradicate any vestiges of socialism in the party. These “New Labour” MPs were there, just as Brand had noted, to represent the interests of a corporate class, not ordinary people.

Corbyn had very different ideas from most of his colleagues. Over the years he had broken with the consensus of the dominant Blairite faction time and again in parliamentary votes, consistently taking a minority view that later proved to be on the [right side of history](#). He alone among the leadership contenders spoke unequivocally against austerity, regarding it as a way to leech away more public money to enrich the corporations and banks that had already pocketed vast sums from the public coffers – so much so that by 2008 they had nearly bankrupted the entire western economic system.

And second, Corbyn won because of a recent change in the party's rulebook – one now much regretted by party managers. A new internal balloting system gave more weight to the votes of ordinary members than the parliamentary party. The members, unlike the party machine, wanted Corbyn.

Corbyn's success didn't really prove Brand wrong. Even the best designed systems have flaws, especially when the maintenance of the system's image as benevolent is considered vitally important. It wasn't that Corbyn's election had shown Britain's political system was representative and accountable. It was simply evidence that corporate power had made itself vulnerable to a potential accident by preferring to work out of sight, in the shadows, to maintain the illusion of democracy. Corbyn was that accident.

'Brainwashing under freedom'

Corbyn's success also wasn't evidence that the power structure he challenged had weakened. The system was still in place and it still had a chokehold on the political and media establishments that exist to uphold its interests. Which is why it has been mobilising these forces endlessly to damage Corbyn and avert the risk of a further, even more disastrous “accident”, such as his becoming prime minister.

Listing the ways the state-corporate media have sought to undermine Corbyn would sound preposterous to anyone not deeply immersed in these media-constructed narratives. But almost all of us have been exposed to this kind of “[brainwashing under freedom](#)” since

birth.

The initial attacks on Corbyn were for being poorly dressed, sexist, unstatesmanlike, a national security threat, a Communist spy – relentless, unsubstantiated smears the like of which no other party leader had ever faced. But over time the allegations became even more outrageously propagandistic as the campaign to undermine him not only failed but backfired – not least, because Labour membership rocketed under Corbyn to make the party the largest in Europe.

As the establishment's need to keep him away from power has grown more urgent and desperate so has the nature of the attacks.

Redefining anti-semitism

Corbyn was extremely unusual in many ways as the leader of a western party within sight of power. Personally he was self-effacing and lived modestly. Ideologically he was resolutely against the thrust of four decades of a turbo-charged neoliberal capitalism unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan in the early 1980s; and he opposed foreign wars for empire, fashionable “humanitarian interventions” whose real goal was to attack other sovereign states either to control their resources, usually oil, or line the pockets of the military-industrial complex.

It was difficult to attack Corbyn directly for these positions. There was the danger that they might prove popular with voters. But Corbyn was seen to have an Achilles' heel. He was a life-long anti-racism activist and well known for his support for the rights of the long-suffering Palestinians. The political and media establishments quickly learnt that they could recharacterise his support for the Palestinians and criticism of Israel as anti-semitism. He was soon being presented as a leader happy to preside over an “institutionally” anti-semitic party.

Under pressure of these attacks, Labour was forced to adopt a new and highly controversial definition of anti-semitism – one [rejected](#) by leading jurists and later [repudiated](#) by the lawyer who devised it – that expressly conflates criticism of Israel, and anti-Zionism, with Jew hatred. One by one Corbyn's few ideological allies in the party – those outside the Blairite consensus – have been picked off as anti-semites. They have either fallen foul of this conflation or, as with Labour MP Chris Williamson, they have been tarred and feathered for trying to defend Labour's record against the accusations of a supposed endemic anti-semitism in its ranks.

The bad faith of the anti-semitism smears were particularly clear in relation to Williamson. The comment that plunged him into so much trouble – now leading twice to his suspension – was videoed. In it he can be heard calling anti-semitism a “scourge” that must be confronted. But also, in line with all [evidence](#), Williamson denied that Labour had any particular anti-semitism problem. In part he blamed the party for being too ready to concede unwarranted ground to critics, further stoking the attacks and smears. He noted that Labour had been “demonised as a racist, bigoted party”, adding: “Our party's response has been partly responsible for that because in my opinion ... we've backed off far too much, we have given too much ground, we've been too apologetic.”

The Guardian has been typical in mischaracterising Williamson's remarks not once but each time it has covered developments in his case. Every Guardian [report](#) has stated, against the

audible evidence, that Williamson said Labour was “too apologetic about anti-semitism”. In short, the Guardian and the rest of the media have insinuated that Williamson approves of anti-semitism. But what he actually said was that Labour was “too apologetic” when dealing with unfair or unreasonable allegations of anti-semitism, that it had too willingly accepted the unfounded premise of its critics that the party condoned racism.

Like the Salem witch-hunts

The McCarthyite nature of this process of misrepresentation and guilt by association was underscored when Jewish Voice for Labour, a group of Jewish party members who have defended Corbyn against the anti-semitism smears, voiced their support for Williamson. Jon Lansman, a founder of the Momentum group originally close to Corbyn, turned on the JVL [calling](#) them “part of the problem and not part of the solution to antisemitism in the Labour Party”. In an additional, ugly but increasingly normalised remark, he added: “Neither the vast majority of individual members of JVL nor the organisation itself can really be said to be part of the Jewish community.”

In this febrile atmosphere, Corbyn’s allies have been required to confess that the party is institutionally anti-semitic, to distance themselves from Corbyn and often to submit to anti-semitism training. To do otherwise, to deny the accusation is, as in the Salem witch-hunts, treated as proof of guilt.

The anti-semitism claims have been regurgitated almost daily across the narrow corporate media “spectrum”, even though they are unsupported by any [actual evidence](#) of an anti-semitism problem in Labour beyond a marginal one representative of wider British society. The allegations have reached such fever-pitch, stoked into a hysteria by the media, that the party is now under [investigation](#) by the Equality and Human Rights Commission – the only party apart from the neo-Nazi British National Party ever to face such an investigation.

These attacks have transformed the whole discursive landscape on Israel, the Palestinians, Zionism and anti-semitism in ways unimaginable 20 years ago, when I first started reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Then the claim that anti-Zionism – opposition to Israel as a state privileging Jews over non-Jews – was the same as anti-semitism sounded patently ridiculous. It was an idea promoted only by the most unhinged apologists for Israel.

Now, however, we have leading liberal commentators such as the Guardian’s Jonathan Freedland [claiming](#) not only that Israel is integral to their Jewish identity but that they speak for all other Jews in making such an identification. To criticise Israel is to attack them as Jews, and by implication to attack all Jews. And therefore any Jew dissenting from this consensus, any Jew identifying as anti-Zionist, any Jew in Labour who supports Corbyn – and there are many, even if they are largely ignored – are denounced, in line with Lansman, as the “wrong kind of Jews”. It may be absurd logic, but such ideas are now so commonplace as to be unremarkable.

In fact, the weaponisation of anti-semitism against Corbyn has become so normal that, even while I was writing this post, a new nadir was reached. Jeremy Hunt, the foreign secretary who hopes to defeat Boris Johnson in the upcoming Tory leadership race, as good as [accused](#) Corbyn of being a new Hitler, a man who as prime minister might allow Jews to be exterminated, just as occurred in the Nazi death camps.

Too ‘frail’ to be PM

Although anti-semitism has become the favoured stick with which to beat Corbyn, other forms of attack regularly surface. The latest are comments by unnamed “senior civil servants” reported in the Times [alleging](#) that Corbyn is too physically frail and mentally ill-equipped to grasp the details necessary to serve as prime minister. It barely matters whether the comment was actually made by a senior official or simply concocted by the Times. It is yet further evidence of the political and media establishments’ anti-democratic efforts to discredit Corbyn as a general election looms.

One of the ironies is that media critics of Corbyn regularly accuse him of failing to make any political capital from the shambolic disarray of the ruling Conservative party, which is eating itself alive over the terms of Brexit, Britain’s imminent departure from the European Union. But it is the corporate media – which serves both as society’s main forum of debate and as a supposed watchdog on power – that is starkly failing to hold the Tories to account. While the media obsess about Corbyn’s supposed mental deficiencies, they have smoothed the path of Boris Johnson, a man who personifies the word “buffoon” like no one else in political life, to become the new leader of the Conservative party and therefore by default – and without an election – the next prime minister.

An indication of how the relentless character assassination of Corbyn is being coordinated was hinted at early on, months after his election as Labour leader in 2015. A British military general [told the Times](#), again anonymously, that there would be “direct action” – what he also termed a “mutiny” – by the armed forces should Corbyn ever get in sight of power. The generals, he said, regarded Corbyn as a national security threat and would use any means, “fair or foul”, to prevent him implementing his political programme.

Running the gauntlet

But this campaign of domestic attacks on Corbyn needs to be understood in a still wider framework, which relates to Britain’s abiding Transatlantic “special relationship”, one that in reality means that the UK serves as Robin to the United States’ Batman, or as a very junior partner to the global hegemon.

Last month a private conversation concerning Corbyn between the US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, and the heads of a handful of rightwing American Jewish organisations was leaked. Contrary to the refrain of the UK corporate media that Corbyn is so absurd a figure that he could never win an election, the fear expressed on both sides of that Washington conversation was that the Labour leader might soon become Britain’s prime minister.

Framing Corbyn yet again as an anti-semite, a US Jewish leader could be heard asking Pompeo if he would be “willing to work with us to take on actions if life becomes very difficult for Jews in the UK”. Pompeo [responded](#) that it was possible “Mr Corbyn manages to run the gauntlet and get elected” – a telling phrase that attracted remarkably little attention, as did the story itself, given that it revealed one of the most senior Trump administration officials explicitly talking about meddling directly in the outcome of a UK election.

Here is the dictionary definition of “run the gauntlet”: to take part in a form of corporal punishment in which the party judged guilty is forced to run between two rows of soldiers, who strike out and attack him.

So Pompeo was suggesting that there already is a gauntlet – systematic and organised

blows and strikes against Corbyn – that he is being made to run through. In fact, “running the gauntlet” precisely describes the experience Corbyn has faced since he was elected Labour leader – from the corporate media, from the dominant Blairite faction of his own party, from rightwing, pro-Israel Jewish organisations like the Board of Deputies, and from anonymous generals and senior civil servants.

‘We cheated, we stole’

Pompeo continued: “You should know, we won’t wait for him to do those things to begin to push back. We will do our level best. It’s too risky and too important and too hard once it’s already happened.”

So, Washington’s view is that action must be taken *before* Corbyn reaches a position of power. To avoid any danger he might become the UK’s next prime minister, the US will do its “level best” to “push back”. Assuming that this hasn’t suddenly become the US administration’s priority, how much time does the US think it has before Corbyn might win power? How close is a UK election?

As everyone in Washington is only too keenly aware, a UK election has been a distinct possibility since the Conservatives set up a minority government two years ago with the help of fickle, hardline Ulster loyalists. Elections have been looming ever since, as the UK ruling party has torn itself apart over Brexit, its MPs regularly defeating their own leader, prime minister Theresa May, in parliamentary votes.

So if Pompeo is saying, as he appears to be, that the US will do whatever it can to make sure Corbyn doesn’t win an election well before that election takes place, it means the US is already deeply mired in anti-Corbyn activity. Pompeo is not only saying that the US is ready to meddle in the UK’s election, which is bad enough; he is hinting that it is already meddling in UK politics to make sure the will of the British people does not bring to power the wrong leader.

Remember that Pompeo, a former CIA director, once effectively America’s spy chief, was unusually frank about what his agency got up to when he was in charge. He [observed](#): “I was the CIA director. We lied, we cheated, we stole. It’s – it was like – we had entire training courses.”

One would have to be remarkably naive to think that Pompeo changed the CIA’s culture during his short tenure. He simply became the figurehead of the world’s most powerful spying outfit, one that had spent decades developing the principles of US exceptionalism, that had lied its way to recent wars in Iraq and Libya, as it had done earlier in Vietnam and in justifying the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, and much more. Black ops and psyops were not invented by Pompeo. They have long been a mainstay of US foreign policy.

An eroding consensus

It takes a determined refusal to join the dots not to see a clear pattern here.

Brand was right that the system is rigged, that our political and media elites are captured, and that the power structure of our societies will defend itself by all means possible, “fair or foul”. Corbyn is far from alone in this treatment. The system is similarly rigged to stop a democratic socialist like Bernie Sanders – though not a rich businessman like Donald Trump – winning the nomination for the US presidential race. It is also rigged to silence real

journalists like Julian Assange who are trying to overturn the access journalism prized by the corporate media – with its reliance on official sources and insiders for stories – to divulge the secrets of the national security states we live in.

There is a conspiracy at work here, though it is not of the kind lampooned by critics: a small cabal of the rich secretly pulling the strings of our societies. The conspiracy operates at an institutional level, one that has evolved over time to create structures and refine and entrench values that keep power and wealth in the hands of the few. In that sense we are all part of the conspiracy. It is a conspiracy that embraces us every time we unquestioningly accept the “consensual” narratives laid out for us by our education systems, politicians and media. Our minds have been occupied with myths, fears and narratives that turned us into the turkeys that keep voting for Christmas.

That system is not impregnable, however. The consensus so carefully constructed over many decades is rapidly breaking down as the power structure that underpins it is forced to grapple with real-world problems it is entirely unsuited to resolve, such as the gradual collapse of western economies premised on infinite growth and a climate that is fighting back against our insatiable appetite for the planet’s resources.

As long as we colluded in the manufactured consensus of western societies, the system operated without challenge or meaningful dissent. A deeply ideological system destroying the planet was treated as if it was natural, immutable, the summit of human progress, the end of history. Those times are over. Accidents like Corbyn will happen more frequently, as will extreme climate events and economic crises. The power structures in place to prevent such accidents will by necessity grow more ham-fisted, more belligerent, less concealed to get their way. And we might finally understand that a system designed to pacify us while a few grow rich at the expense of our children’s future and our own does not have to continue. That we can raise our voices and loudly say: “No!”

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