

The Corbyn Factor: The Transformation of Labour and British Politics

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Whatever happens on 12 September, the cork is out the bottle, the candle is burning bright, the ideas are shining and there is a change in the air. Jeremy Corbyn, The Independent, Aug 9, 2015

Skittled at the last elections, Britain's rattled Labour Party has been on the search for options. This has not taken the usual, management form, where committees prevail over individuals and individuals comply. The satirical magazine, Private Eye, decided to weigh in with a front cover featuring how "Loony Lefty sweeps to Power." Hence the fixation with Jeremy Corbyn, member of Islington North since 1983, and a figure who is revisiting some of the old, abandoned ground of traditional Labour in an attempt to win the party's leadership.

On the weekend, Corbyn told *The Independent* that he was considering "restoring clause IV as it was originally written" – in other words, a return to the public ownership idea deemed crippling and rank by Tony Blair and his gang of Thatcherite modernisers: "I think we should talk about what the objectives of the party are, whether that's restoring the clause IV as it was originally written or it's a different one, but I think we shouldn't shy away from public participation, public investment in industry and public control of the railways." [1] A spokesman for Corbyn subsequently came out to dampen the issue, suggesting that the front runner for the Labour leadership did not want "a big 'moment' such as that". [2] A mixed approach to public ownership needed to be placed on the table, rather than a rule of unnerving dogmatism. May such spokesmen be few and far between in suggesting such "moments".

The original article stems from the 1918 text of the UK Labour party's written constitution which ostensibly enshrined its official socialist identity. The Manchester Guardian went so far as to deem this "the birth of a socialist party" an article of identifiable faith. It has been the brainchild of the co-founder of the London School of Economics and Fabian, Sidney Webb:

To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.

The terms of reference to common ownership has tended to be the sticking point in the cultural and economic battles that have afflicted Britain, and more broadly the Left, for decades. Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell thought of amending the clause after Labour lost the 1959 general election, and failed. The Labour party continued to weather storms and

suggestions that the clause be altered till 1995, when Blair won the vote as part of his New Labour project. "Let no one say that radical politics is dead. Today a new Labour party is being born."

What New Labour entailed was technocratic mania, the commitment to a "dynamic economy" – and the acceptance that the only true radical politics had to incorporate the sting of neo-conservatism. "Labour will work in pursuit of these aims, with trade unions, co-operative societies and other affiliated organisations and also with voluntary organisations, consumer groups and other representative bodies." The Tories, at least in the market sense, had insinuated themselves into the Labour temple. The gobbledygook of the "Third Way", with its mystical centrism, was born.

Corbyn's sentiment is far from remarkable, which is exactly why he is being deemed loony and radical. He is raising a host of unspeakable things: opening up a discussion on crumbling infrastructure, debating the issue of privatisation, long accepted as part of the ideological consensus. The British are famed for lamenting how the trains do not run on time – and Thatcher's privatisation program simply affirmed the rule, at even higher costs.

The Corbyn drive will send the usual jitters down Blairite spines. Corbyn's rival Liz Kendall has suggested that Corbyn's stance is cryogenic, showing "there is nothing new about [his] politics. It is just a throwback to the past, not the change we need for our party or our country." Such is the babble when management speak pollutes vision. The Corbyn challenge is a necessary move prompted by what amounts to an emergency in British politics. The Liberal Democrats, with whatever wet policies they might have had, have been well and truly defanged, while Labour comprehensively lost Scotland in what amounted to a northern bloodbath. The Tories, by the usual run of stumbling luck, are running the show with a majority. If Corbyn does nothing else, he will at least push Labour into winning back traditional territory and restoring shredded values. Being electable for Britain will be another issue.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-to-bring-back-clause-four-contender-pl-edges-to-bury-new-labour-with-commitment-to-public-ownership-of-industry-10446982.html>

[2]

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/09/clause-iv-of-labour-party-constitution-what-is-all-the-fuss-about-reinstating-it>

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