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# The left is not dead. Britain is still crying out for a radical alternative

Saturday 26 September 2020, by [CHAKRABORTTY Aditya](#) (Date first published: 3 September 2020).

**This country is riven with injustice - and that is one of the most effective drivers of progressive political reform the world over**

Everybody loves an obituary, don't they? The juicier the better. And what succulence the newspapers have in store. I speak, of course, of the memorials to the British left. You know: the force that, as of the 2019 election, is apparently no more. To quote the disgruntled parrot owner, it has expired and gone to meet its maker. It is an ex-force.

Or so they would have you believe. As Westminster lurches towards party-conference season, you can expect plenty of juicy morsels about Jeremy Corbyn and the debacle of last December. You've already read about the former Labour leader's refusal to enter his own campaign bus (because it was diesel), and a mystifying [saga over oatcakes](#). Brace yourself for many more gossipy valedictions, served with a hefty dollop of relief that Keir Starmer means Labour is under new, and newly professional, management.

At last, the politico-media classes can agree: after half a decade the hurricane has blown over, and grownups rule the Labour roost again. No more unruly rallies or sententious guff about social movements. Back to politics-as-usual. Back to match commentary on prime minister's questions, to blithely quoting opinion polls as gospel truth, and to sounding off about the "political centre ground", as though it can be found on Google Maps. Back, in other words, to an entire country's politics being carried out in one central London postcode. Seal the tomb on those barbarians!

There's only one problem. They're not dead yet.

The Corbyn era certainly has been buried. It was never going to survive its complacency over Boris Johnson, its failure to treat allegations of antisemitism with any urgency, or its years spent umm-ing and ahh-ing over Brexit. As one [Labour](#) adviser texted me: "It's astonishing how little there is of any Corbyn legacy ... it has simply dissolved away." Barely any of the frontbenchers from a few months ago are left in the shadow cabinet, the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs is toothless, and almost all of Corbyn's senior officials in the party bureaucracy have gone.

All that is stolid has melted into air - which is the polar opposite of what many commentators predicted. The standard rap on Team Corbyn was that they were a cabal of ideologues who had seized total control of a 115-year-old party but had zero reach into the country. The reality is that they had only the feeblest grasp on Labour's machinery, but their arguments could sometimes have far greater reach than they dared hope, especially in a democracy unsure of its footing.

This is the country that chanted "Oh, Jeremy Corbyn!" in 2017, then voted for his humiliation in 2019. This is the nation state that in last year's European elections handed 30% of the vote to a limited company called the [Brexit party](#) and its de facto CEO, Nigel Farage, yet where you'd be

brave indeed to bet against Scotland holding another referendum on independence.

This is also a society sinking into the worst depression in centuries, with unemployment shooting towards [4 million by Christmas](#) – and where, during the pandemic, and almost unremarked in the press, [trade union membership is surging](#). In May alone, more than [23,000 workers joined Unison](#), while between March and July more than 32,000 signed up with the National Education Union. The idea that the flux of the past few years has suddenly yielded to a new era of smooth-cheeked technocracy is for the birds. Our volatile politics is the direct product of an increasingly unstable economy and exhausted democracy.

An acute guide to our chaos is a new book by Jonathan Hopkin, a political scientist at the London School of Economics. In [Anti-System Politics: The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies](#), he compares and contrasts the rise of insurgent politics across the west – both right and left, from Donald Trump to [Alexis Tsipras](#). During the 1990s and 2000s, their politics could be dismissed as fringe by the suits who ran things. But then came the banking crash of 2008, and it became clear that those suits didn't know how to run things – that their economic successes were built on debt and their focus on messaging had masked how little they had to say.

"The political and economic 'system' failed and anti-system movements are a predictable, and in many ways welcome, response to that failure," writes Hopkin. Note his use of "welcome" and bear in mind that the professor is neither a Corbynista nor a Faragist. Looking across western Europe and the US, he finds that the biggest post-crash political crises shook those countries with the greatest gap between rich and poor: Portugal, Greece, Italy, Spain – and, out front for inequality, Trump's America and Brexit Britain.

You didn't need to be Corbyn to see that link. After the EU referendum, even the likes of Theresa May were acknowledging the "quiet revolution" that had swept Britain in response to its ["burning injustices"](#). Yet her government did nothing about them. The UK remains one of the most unfair societies in the developed world. As the economists [Mark Blyth and Eric Loneragan observe](#), from 1980 to 2017 the UK's GDP rose 100%. Over the same period the number of food banks in the UK leapt 1,000%.

The logic of Hopkin's analysis is that for as long as the British economic and political system fails so many, it will remain badly exposed to powerful challenges. Corbyn's Labour was just one challenge from the left, but there will be more. The centrist boors will write off Corbynism as nothing more than an electoral flop – and in these straitened times I enjoy a cheap shot as much as the next man – but they should bear in mind that by that metric the most successful British politician of the past decade is neither David Cameron nor Nick Clegg, but [Nigel Farage](#). He got the airtime, he won his Brexit, and it is in his image that the Tory party is being reshaped.

To put Farage against Corbyn is to see two divergent paths for British politics. On the one hand, the culture-baiting, migrant-bashing, gifting after victimhood that now characterises the radical right; on the other, an attempt to craft a social-democratic economics that appeals to the class interests of both the precariously employed graduate and the Uber driver. The first is clearly winning, but only the second is compatible with a pluralist democracy.

Some of the anti-system left will leave the Labour party, while others will work half-in, half-out. But I'd wager they'll be back with a fresh challenge. Next time round, there may be fewer sessions at [The World Transformed](#) festival dedicated to ["decolonising yoga"](#). There may be less policy and more politics – creating institutions that provide welfare and workplace advice, and which fight for tenants' rights (something Momentum is only now just getting round to doing). And ultimately they'll be animated by the same question that propelled Corbyn to the Labour leadership: this country isn't

working - what's the alternative?

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**P.S.**

The Guardian. 2020/sep/03:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/03/left-britain-radical-alternative-injustice-progressive-reform>

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