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# “Corbynism light”? Europe’s Social Democrats look to London for inspiration

Friday 3 August 2018, by [O’LEARY Naomi](#) (Date first published: 29 July 2018).

**After electoral batterings across the Continent, the social democrats and left-wing parties are desperately seeking a path to revival.**

THE HAGUE — Traditional left-wing parties across Europe are searching for a savior.

Some believe his name is Jeremy Corbyn.

The British Labour leader’s relatively bright fortunes contrast with his peer parties’ electoral decline from Italy to the Czech Republic.

France’s once mighty Socialist Party came fifth in last year’s presidential election and was [forced to sell its historic Rue de Solferino headquarters](#) in Paris to cover its debts. The Dutch Labor Party suffered an even more precipitous political death slide last year, going from junior partner in government to seventh place.

Corbyn’s U.K. tactics are now attracting the attention of other center-left parties across Europe, with interest coming from the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and France, according to people with knowledge of the contacts.

The Labour leader’s push toward core left-wing ideals and policies, allied to the grassroots Momentum movement, has ignited the party’s base, doubling its ranks [to 552,000](#) since he stood for the leadership. The party won 40 percent of the vote in last year’s general election — its highest since 2001 — and came close to dislodging the Conservatives from power.

“We want to see why there’s a dynamic in the Labour Party with growing membership, the near result in 2017, and opinion polls” — *Paul Tang*

“It’s not up to me to tell parties who to elect or how to do it,” Corbyn told POLITICO on a trip to the Netherlands earlier this month, where he was invited to speak about his party’s experience. “My message is simply this: If the left as a whole across Europe stands up against austerity, fulfills its historic mission of the redistribution of wealth and power across society, then we are taking away the space that the far right are trying to invade at the moment.”

Nevertheless, it is unclear whether the “Jez we can” playbook will be replicable on the Continent. Britain’s first-past-the-post electoral system forces voters into stark left/right choices, forcing diverse political strands into broad parties. In many EU countries, voters have far greater choice, with many flavors of leftism already catered for across more politically splintered landscapes. Brexit has also uniquely transformed U.K. politics.

But the sight of enthused young people joining Labour in their tens of thousands is too good for European sister parties to ignore.

“We want to see why there’s a dynamic in the Labour Party with growing membership, the near result in 2017, and opinion polls. That’s interesting for the Labor Party in the Netherlands,” said Paul Tang, Dutch Labor’s leader in the European Parliament, who organized the event with Corbyn.

“You can’t just transpose one idea from one country to another, but still you can try to learn.”

## **The Dutch case**

The Dutch Labor Party (PvdA) won less than 6 percent of the vote in the 2017 election — a historic wipeout for a party that was long one of the dominant forces of Dutch politics and could once count on a solid third of the electorate for support. Whittled down to just nine seats out of 150 in the lower house, the party commissioned a soul-searching report on how they could rebuild.

Its conclusion: Corbynism light.

The report — “[On the Future](#)” — recommended democratizing party structures to give ordinary members more power and getting rid of its dominance by “professional politicians.” It argued that the PvdA should look less like a party and more like a movement, renewing old links with on-the-ground activism that had long since withered.

A key recommendation was to learn from “community-building experiences” of parties in other countries.

Enter Momentum. The grassroots activist group was key to electing Corbyn as leader by energizing a new, young and online base, and seeing off a challenge from centrist strands within his party.

Two figures that represent Labour’s internal revolution are 26-year-old activist Zeyn Mohammed and 21-year-old Beth Foster-Ogg. The latter plunged into politics as a teenage Momentum activist and now trains campaigners across the U.K. Mohammed splits his time between working in Corbyn’s London office and community organising in his native Scotland. This means listening to local people’s day-to-day concerns and bringing Labour activists into grassroots campaigns on micro-issues like rent disputes or asylum cases. Mohammed is building a network of organisers to do the same across the U.K.

“Corbyn, Momentum and the Labour Party is the successful example of Europe, how to renew a party and make good politics for ordinary people” — *Anton Fleig*

Together, they gave a campaigning masterclass to a packed audience of European activists in The Hague, coaching them on how to win over voters on the doorstep. Sharing a personal motivation — such as being driven to campaign because a friend could not access healthcare — is more effective on the doorstep than appeals based on policy, Foster-Ogg argued.

Anton Fleig, a 19-year-old recent high school graduate from Germany, said he had been inspired by Foster-Ogg to get into politics. “Corbyn, Momentum and the Labour Party is the successful example of Europe, how to renew a party and make good politics for ordinary people,” Fleig said.

## **Idealism versus pragmatism**

The appeal of Corbynism is one side of a debate happening in left-leaning movements around the world, about whether to appeal to the political center, where elections are traditionally won, or whether to tack left and appeal to their base.

It's an argument reflected in the Hillary Clinton versus Bernie Sanders contest for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016. Corbyn learned from Sanders, copying his digitally savvy campaigning methods to enthuse an analogous base of urban young people excluded from wealth and security, for whom "socialism" doesn't sound like a dirty word.

Corbyn himself blames the collapse of left-wing parties across Europe on "managerial economics and politics."

"Government must be about more than just management," he told POLITICO. "What we're trying to achieve is a message of social justice and equality and particularly hope for young people, and challenging the racist agenda of the far right which is on the rise in many parts of Europe because, I think, of the space that has been left open because of managerial economics and politics, which I think has not inspired many people to come to the left in politics."

This poses a dilemma for the Dutch Labor Party and others around Europe. If its leadership is to accept this argument, it would mean falling on their swords. Lodewijk Asscher, the leader of Dutch Labor, who gave a joint press conference alongside Corbyn, was himself deputy prime minister in government with the centre-right Mark Rutte until 2017, helping to impose austerity to rescue the nation's accounts in the wake of the financial crisis. Rather than giving the party a responsible image as Asscher hoped, that decision destroyed his party's left-wing credibility — a story echoed from Ireland to Greece.

The party lost voters in all directions in the following election. The young, educated and pro-EU were lured away by the liberal D66 and the GreenLeft parties. Others went to the harder left and euro-critical Socialist Party; while still more fled to the right, drawn by the anti-immigration populism of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party and the Forum for Democracy.

It is questionable whether a Corbyn-esque leftwards shift would be credible if presented by the same faces that were part of Rutte's austerity government. And in any case, the political space to the left of Dutch Labor is far more crowded than in the U.K. The same is true for the Socialist Party in France and Italy's Democratic Party, which are faced with political insurgencies outside their ranks.

"It's what they have to learn, because otherwise they're going to die" — *Steve Hudson*

Corbyn's leadership, by contrast, was the product of an internal insurgency.

"There's a number of social democratic parties in continental Europe that have been hit very hard in recent elections: Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Austria. There's a real process of soul-searching taking place. They are looking to Jeremy Corbyn. To some, not to all but to some, he is the example," said Rem Korteweg of think tank Clingendael.

"I actually think [the Corbyn phenomenon] is replicable," he added, "It has to do with the fragmented nature of the political landscape. It's difficult to make a case for a broad-based, community-wide political party... in terms of political mechanics it makes sense to be more targeted."

Even in Britain, however, Corbynism has not yet proved itself a winning formula. The party failed to

win power in 2017 even against a weakened Conservative party with an uncharismatic leader and that was wracked with internal divisions over Brexit. And in spite of Prime Minister Theresa May coming under increasing pressure over her handling of Britain's EU departure, the Conservatives have still managed to maintain a polling lead for much of this year.

Brexit itself is a driver of Labour's upheaval. It acted as a political Big Bang, driving political engagement and turmoil in equal measure, and in the process fuelling the transformation in Labour in unpredictable and probably unique ways. The party remains awkwardly divided over Britain's EU exit, and the linked issue of immigration.

Nevertheless, left parties across the Channel are in such turmoil they may be prepared to try anything. Steve Hudson, a member of Momentum International, an offshoot of the U.K. group, and the Social Democratic Party of Germany, based in Cologne, said the parties of the Continent needed urgently to heed the lessons of U.K. Labour.

"It's what they have to learn, because otherwise they're going to die," Hudson said. "They're dying now. In Holland they're almost dead. In France they're dead. In Greece they're dead. In Poland they're dead. It's carnage everywhere."

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**P.S.**

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Original Title: Europe's left looks to Jeremy Corbyn