

## U.K.: Two souls of Corbynism: notes on #Lab18

Friday 28 September 2018, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2018).

**You keep waiting for it all to fall apart. It seems too tentative. How could this have come from nowhere, and yet be seemingly unstoppable? How many chicken coups, smears, dire summers of pitiful silly-season coverage, have we had? This summer felt like the worst in terms of the sheer unembarrassed filthiness of the attacks, and the panicked retreats and overreactions they provoked.**

Yet, this year's Labour conference was the best for the Left thus far. And Corbyn's best thus far. Momentum's event, *The World Transformed*, was packed, every single meeting. It has turned conference season into a thronging, buzzing, raucous affair. The quality of discussion is higher than it has been for years. I've been sceptical of the "social movement" ideology, but Corbynism increasingly has the feel of a movement at its inception. It's the start of something.

And it showed that, unnoticed by the media, the debate has moved on. The broadcasters keep stacking their interview slots with jaded figures from the Labour Right; the editors do likewise with their columnist slots. But the Labour Right were barely a factor at conference. Progress meetings were dull and emaciated, bleak affairs in contrast to the Momentum event. Labour Friends of Israel didn't even bother to set up shop. This year, the debate was between the two wings of Corbynism.

In fact, on big policy issues, there really wasn't much of a debate. On most matters, the leadership took a step to the further-left and the members voted for policies that were entirely congruent with where Corbyn aimed to go. On the [economy](#), the leadership took a [step](#) toward the traditional Bennite objective of industrial democracy, with workers ownership and representation on the boards of nationalised industries. On the housing crisis, Labour has reaffirmed its one million cheap homes policy, and wheeled out the idea of [tenants unions for renters](#), and taxing second home-owners to pay for ending homelessness.

On climate change, Labour made some welcome announcements. It is now [committed to zero net carbon emissions by 2050](#), with proposals for the ambitious expansion of renewables. Unfortunately, Labour remains committed to the nebulous language of "low carbon sources", which probably means relying on nuclear power to achieve its targets — a [big mistake](#). If as much energy was put into this as into Brexit, it might be possible for members to force a rectification on that issue. On Palestine, conference — [a sea of green, white, black and red flags fluttering](#) — voted to freeze arms sales to Israel, and Corbyn reiterated Labour's commitment to recognising Palestinian statehood on the first day of a Labour government. Both of these policies together would undercut decades of UK policy toward Palestine. If the IHRA crisis and the unconscionable shit flung at Labour during it was intended to make activists less pro-Palestine, it *singularly failed*.

On immigration, Labour is humanising the racial state, but not fundamentally weakening it. Diane Abbott has announced some decent policies, such as ending the "hostile environment" for migrants, refusing to set targets on immigration numbers, ending discrimination against Commonwealth

migrants (it's not clear yet how this will be materialised), and shutting down Yarls Wood. This much is welcome: I'll take humanising the system over Theresa May's agenda.

But that leaves in place most of the anti-migrant laws, and most of the detention centres. *Why?* Why should refugees be rounded up and locked in prisons? Abbott has talked about capping the maximum detention period. Why any detention period? Why treat them as "illegals"? And why play this stupid game of juggling with "toughness" rhetoric, promising to spend more on border guards? Labour has always played this game, and it never wins this game. Because it's not about spending, it's about sadism, and the people who want 'tougher' borders don't trust Labour to be brutal enough. This doesn't work, and the 2017 election showed that racist nationalism is not as powerful as we thought. It's a strategic mistake on the part of the Labour leadership to pander to it.

The media have been most interested in the arguments over Brexit. But this was the *least* consequential discussion. Labour has no say over Brexit negotiations and its position remains nebulous. Conference voted to keep a second referendum option open, but Labour has no means to make this happen, much less keep Remain on the table, as Kier Starmer asserted to big cheers. May might call a second referendum, but it will be for her own reasons. Assuming there was even time to do it, the question would be vetted by the Electoral Commission, and I don't see why they would allow one that is simply a re-run of the last referendum.

The vote reflects a number of factors. The TUC wants a second referendum on the agenda in case of a No Deal scenario. The only specifically 'left' group doing anything about Brexit is a hard Remain group, Another Europe is Possible (AEIP), which claims to have inspired the wording of most of the Brexit motions. Most of those who disagree with them aren't particularly enthused either by Brexit or Remain, and are not organising on that basis. Among the members, there is a diffuse, mostly reasonable, anti-Brexit sentiment, which should not be confused with the idiocy displayed by those who scampered about Liverpool in EU flags and facepaint. Fear of fresh austerity, an alliance with Trump, empowered racists, Jacob Rees-Mogg, all of that is perfectly rational.

Strikingly, though, most of the discussion is not really about the EU. Remainer propaganda on the centre is daffy, delirious, making flatly false claims about the globally powerful institution they want to Remain in. But at least they're *talking* about it. On the Left, nothing. AEIP barely deigns to allude to the EU in the propaganda video on its front page. So, this is a negative campaign, which hardly amounts to a strategic vision. That being the case, there is little to sustain the vote into coordinated political action, and thence into results. In the last analysis, the unions, the Labour leadership, and most of the members will accept some form of soft Brexit, and make the best of it. As, they should.

There was also, as I've written about elsewhere, a degree of [polarisation between constituency members and union delegates](#) on the issue of open selections. This is a schism, to some extent, between the left and right-wings of Corbynism. The pro-Corbyn unions have mostly been quite sectional and small-c conservative throughout Corbyn's leadership. Unite, the most loyal Corbyn-supporting union, played a dreadful role in the Heathrow third runway vote. It has supported Trident, the ridiculous nuclear energy boondoggle at [Hinkley Point C](#), and has tended to align with demands to [restrict immigration](#). That is why the Unite leadership, though loyal to Corbyn, would prefer that the balance of power in the party was somewhere to his right, and don't want to empower left-wing activists. No one wants this division to be leveraged by the Labour Right, the media, or the Tories. That is why it is platitudinous in Labour to say that this division "isn't healthy". In a way, it isn't. But it is not avoidable. Given the absence of a positive case against open selections, moreover, I would be surprised if this issue didn't come back.

So, the debate is now *within* Corbynism. It is among people who currently agree on the broad direction of Corbyn's policies, and fully expect Labour to be given a chance to implement them. It is

the sort of debate that comes with success, and anticipates more success.

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