

UK: Stormy times ahead

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It seems inevitable that Keir Starmer will be the next Labour leader and Angela Rayner will be his deputy writes Andy Stowe.

At any other time, a Labour MP who'd been a successful lawyer whose work involved doing unsavoury things, was broadly centre left, had done a decent job around Brexit and reminded his electorate of his dalliance with the class struggle would be an utterly unremarkable candidate for the leadership. Corbyn was very much an accidental leader, elected in the wake of a largely unexpected defeat in 2015 and under a new system that dramatically enlarged the electorate. Starmer is much more in the traditional mould.

Rebecca Long-Bailey may have been Corbyn's preferred successor, but outside a relatively narrow group of members on the left of the party her campaign has failed to generate anything like the same levels of enthusiasm that Corbyn and McDonnell aroused.

Equally there doesn't appear to be anything that we could describe as Stormzymania. One observer said of his performance at a recent hustings:

"Keir Starmer says very little in terms of concrete policy in a more eloquent style than anyone I've come across. So eloquent that you don't realise at the time, but only later do you realise that you cannot remember anything he said."

What does this mean for the very large numbers of Corbyn supporters who still turn up to their wards and GCs? Anecdotal reports suggest that attendance at these routine meetings was larger than usual immediately after the election, the numbers boosted by people who were spurred to join the party by the defeat. They felt that they couldn't stay on the sidelines anymore.

Fragile and inexperienced

But we saw repeatedly during the Corbyn years that this left consistently failed to appreciate the ferocity of the ideological attack it was under and didn't have the experience gained through fights against union bureaucracies or an entrenched right to resist properly. It has been shell-shocked and demoralised by the scale of the 2019 defeat.

Jeremy Gilbert's description of it is [worth quoting](#) at length:

"a very new, fragile and inexperienced tendency that has a long way to go before emerging as a mature political formation. It brings together the more libertarian strands of the hard left, the more radical strands of the soft left, and a new generation of activists from outside the traditions of the Labour party."

It was this fragility, inexperience and lack of support among his MPs that caused Corbyn to rely excessively on the left of the union bureaucracy and appoint close advisors like Seumas Milne and Andrew Murray whose world view was that of British Stalinist nationalism.

However, it's obvious that the balance of power has shifted inside Labour. You see it in the right's new found confidence and level of organisation. For them the Corbyn era nightmare is coming to an end and they want to reassert their authority. They are helped by the stark fact that the party's left has no national focus around which to organise its resistance. Momentum was Jon Lansman's personal property and was never set up to provide the Corbyn left with an organising framework. It was expressly anti-democratic and non-participatory. Decisions were made into which the membership had no input and candidates were imposed as the result of backroom deals with union hacks.

One consequence of that is that the battle for open selection was lost by virtue of not being really fought. This means that only a tiny number of new MPs sympathetic to the radical left were elected in 2019, leaving the right overwhelmingly dominant in the parliamentary party. The situation is even worse among Labour councillors, of whom only a tiny fraction could reasonably be considered on the left.

Au revoir Lisa Nandy

The bright spot in the leadership campaign is that Lisa Nandy, the most right-wing of the candidates, is trailing badly. If Long-Bailey is continuity Corbyn, Nandy is continuity Blair. Her only chance of gaining the leadership is if the left is broken and driven out. We are not at that point yet.

Self-evidently there are problems with a Starmer leadership, but it's equally obvious that these are magnified by the contrast with what has gone immediately before.

Starmer has made the most of connection with the Corbyn leadership and has very deliberately avoided trashing it. It's hard for anyone outside his immediate circle to gauge how much this is opportunism and how much is what he really believes.

Nevertheless, he is fairly popular with members on the left who joined or re-joined the party in recent years. Mistrust of Starmer among elements of the radical left stems in part from his voting record, his discreet participation in the 'chicken coup' and among the better informed his membership of the Trilateral Commission. Others have reconciled themselves to him on the basis that he appears willing to accept many of the leftward policy moves, his remain stance and out of despair at the current mess.

Nandy would not hesitate to drive the left out. Starmer will move Labour to the right but will probably not instigate purges. The big risk is that the Corbyn intake will drift away or become inactive. An accumulation of tens of thousands of people deciding they've better things to do with their time than listen to their local councillor say there's nothing they can do about cuts or watch Progress stitch up a meeting is the more likely way the left will be broken.

An honest accounting

How do we respond to that? How do we stop people drifting out of politics in despair?

There needs to be an assessment of what went well and what went badly. Labour's right had very disciplined attack messages which were repeated endlessly. That demonstrated organisational and political cohesion the left lacked and Momentum stopped it developing.

Partly this has to be an ideological process with an honest accounting of the Corbyn years, not for the purpose of settling scores or attributing blame but to prepare for the next time. This involves running events at which time is made to allow different points of view to be heard and a shared understanding is developed about the Corbyn project and what we do next.

We also need to note that the internal elections have almost another month to run. Every vote for the candidates closest to Corbyn – Rebecca Long-Bailey for leader and Richard Burgon for Deputy needs to be fought for. And in the NEC election the greatest possible vote for Jo Bird. How close we run the victors will affect how quickly they feel confident to move the party to the right.

It's likely that we are going into a phase of defensive struggles. Local government leaders in London are saying in public that they expect a further 25% to be chopped off their budgets. The soft right response to this is a bit of hand wringing on Monday and to do what the Tories tell them on Tuesday. Labour wards and GCs are going to be where resistance can be organised and the left has a responsibility to start putting forward ideas on how to push back against the Tories where we live and where we work. It's through that process of struggle and discussion that we can keep large numbers of class struggle socialists in the Labour Party and preserve the radical that Corbyn's leadership represented.

They should also be the place where we reflect on and relate to how most effectively to organise against the Tories and turn to struggles such as those against climate change which have repeatedly brought tens of thousands onto the streets and will do so again in Glasgow in November during COP 26.

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Andy Stowe

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