

THOUGHTS ON THE 2019 ELECTION

by Peter Brooke, downloaded from www.labour-values.com

In the wake of Labour's defeat in the December 2019 election the Brecon and Radnorshire CLP asked for members' opinions to be submitted to the All Members Meeting held on 18th January 2020. This was my contribution. It was written of course before the election of Sir Keir Starmer as party leader. I make a brief comment on this at the end of the article.

1. Brexit

I was of the opinion that Labour lost the election when it prevented the passage of Theresa May's Withdrawal Act. Considered purely from the point of view of winning elections, leaving aside questions of 'right' or 'wrong', I think that might have been one of the worst decisions Labour ever made. Labour was not going to win if Remain was still on the table as a possible option. Party members were on the whole pro-Remain - this was a point on which 'New Labour' and Momentum were in agreement, and the new post-Corbyn membership (whatever about Corbyn himself) was broadly in agreement with the PLP. But the Leave vote was one of the rare occasions on which the old English and Welsh working class, demoralised after years of de-industrialisation, had been able to make its feelings known and to feel it had gained a victory. It was absolutely essential to the success of the Corbyn project to convince these people that the long years of neglect and contempt they had endured at the hands of the Labour Party had come to an end.

This created a contradiction at the heart of Labour politics that could not be resolved. But it could, to a large extent, have been evaded had May's deal gone through and Remain been taken off the table. Labour had already bitten the bullet in voting for the implementation of Article 50. The 2017 Manifesto committed us to respecting the result of the referendum. It would have been quite consistent with that commitment to have either supported the passage of the Withdrawal Act or at least to have abstained.

While opposing the act Labour never to my knowledge developed an argument against it (essentially it preserved the status quo with regard to Europe during the transition period creating a strong presumption that the final deal would be a soft brexit). So far as I could see, Labour's only quarrel was with the non-binding political declaration and not to anything that was in it (it was largely a list of things that would need to be negotiated) but because it didn't contain much in the way of firm policy commitments - probably just as well given that the government that would have made these commitments was a Tory government.

My own preference would have been that, once the referendum was lost (and I had campaigned quite vigorously on the Remain side) the party would have been able to see the possible advantages of Brexit in terms of re-establishing a national economy in accordance with the best slogan produced during Corbyn's leadership - not the dreary meaningless New Labour 'For the many not the few' but 'Rebuilding Britain'. But given the composition of both membership and PLP that may have been too much to ask.

2. Jeremy Corbyn and the charge of antisemitism

Painful as it is for those of us who like and support Jeremy we have to admit that he was 'toxic' on the doorstep, raising the question, why was he toxic in 2019 but not in 2017? It seems to me that just as Labour was in an impossible position with regard to Brexit, Jeremy was in an impossible position with regard to the Labour Party. His great strength - the reason for his popularity among new members, myself included - had been his consistent opposition to Labour Party policy at least since the 1990s - privatisation of public utilities, development of the 'internal market' in the NHS, maintenance of Tory anti-union legislation, 'light touch' regulation of the financial services industry, slavish foreign policy playing out the role of Tonto to the US's Lone Ranger. But in the domain of the hostile media all that could be represented as unpatriotic loony leftism.

Corbyn's chief priority as leader of the Labour Party was, rightly or wrongly, to maintain party unity, especially in Parliament. But he could not defend his past record without antagonising a large section of the PLP which had supported the earlier policies - as recently as 2015, 184 of them had failed to vote against the Tories' murderous Welfare Reform Bill. They included four of the current leadership contenders (Keir Starmer, Emily Thornberry, Jess Phillips and Lisa Nandy - though Lisa Nandy was on maternity leave at the time). Things might have been arranged with a modicum of good will on the part of the PLP (Corbyn for his part showed an abundance of good will in particular when choosing his first cabinet from all sections of the party only to have them knifing him in the back at the first opportunity). Sadly that goodwill was lacking.

Nowhere was this more obvious than with regard to the question of Israel. Traditionally the Labour Party had been highly supportive of Israel especially in the early days when it had a convincingly left wing image. Israel however is essentially a colony and colonies cannot survive and thrive, becoming nation states in their own right, without a rigorous suppression of the indigenous population. North America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia are examples of places where this was done. Algeria and South Africa (and, in a longer time frame, Ireland) are examples of places where it was not done. To function as a Jewish national state - as opposed to a 'state for all its citizens' - Israel has to suppress, ultimately to eradicate or ethnically cleanse, the Palestinian population.

Given this logic, the possible arrival in power of a British Prime Minister who has supported the Palestine Solidarity Movement with its policy of 'Boycott, Divest, Sanctions' against Israel was deeply alarming. The 'Campaign against Antisemitism' had been established in 2014 in the context of the Israeli 'Protective Edge' mass bombing of Gaza in which, according to UN figures, 1,462 Palestinian civilians (plus some 700 judged not to be civilians), together with 6 Israeli civilians and 67 Israeli soldiers, were killed. The Campaign pursued a policy of representing opposition to Israeli policy as antisemitism. It is no coincidence that the accusations of antisemitism directed against Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters took off during the Summer of 2018 when the Israeli army was using live ammunition (killing hundreds, wounding thousands) to suppress unarmed demonstrations on the Gaza border.

Actual expressions of hatred towards Jews, as towards Muslims or other people defined by religion, skin colour, sexual preferences etc, are, under British law, a crime. They should

be treated as essentially a matter for the police. It is perfectly proper that members who are accused in this manner would have their membership suspended while their case is under consideration by the courts. There can however be little doubt that the issue within the Labour Party turned not on hatred of Jews as such but on the ways in which hostility was being expressed towards Israeli policy, a matter that aroused strong feelings on either side of the debate. As such it could be compared to feelings aroused by hostility to US policy, or Russian policy or, to take a matter close to my heart (I am, in terms of my national identity, an Ulster Protestant), to Northern Ireland policy, especially in the 1970s.

The charge of antisemitism - always managing to evade the core of the question, policy with regard to Israel - became the most fruitful argument for those still opposed to Jeremy's leadership. It was the gift that kept giving. And again Jeremy seems to have believed, rightly or wrongly, that he could not defend himself without exacerbating the situation. The result of his inability to respond properly to the charges brought against him and some of his close associates was that he looked weak and shifty, and the party presented an image of self-lacerating incompetence. It is almost impossible to overestimate the damage that this did.

3. Conduct of the election

On top of all that the election campaign was unconvincing. The actual manifesto was a strong document, both in its vision of the future and in the criticisms it made of the Conservative government's record in office. It should be retained as a statement of basic Labour Party policy.

But the campaign itself consisted of a succession of extravagant spending promises, almost playing out the right wing caricature of Labour as a party always promising much more than it can realistically hope to deliver. One of the great disappointments of the Corbyn Labour Party was its failure to work out a coherent economic policy, equivalent to the Keynesian principles that underpinned the original Welfare State. When John McDonnell first became Shadow Chancellor, he announced the formation of a high powered team to address the problem. But it seemed to fall apart very quickly and I have seen no convincing account of what happened. The policy of paying for public services by taxing the obscenely rich is all very well but it implies a commitment to keeping the obscenely rich in existence. The viability of the public services depends on them. When government borrows from the financial markets it becomes dependent on the financial markets. Somehow government has to seize control of the levers of financial power. That was the question that needed to be addressed (for myself I regard Modern Monetary Theory as the most promising overall policy framework but there are others in the general family of post-Keynesian - as opposed to Neo-Keynesian - economists).

But leaving aside that large question, the campaign could with advantage have concentrated on one or two key issues in the Manifesto. The 'Green Industrial Revolution' would have been my choice, with the emphasis placed on the 'industrial revolution' aspect and the opportunities it would provide for the development of new skills and new jobs in manufacturing. A national project that could have engaged the working class patriotism so

successfully exploited by the campaigners for Brexit. The working class as an active participant in building the economy and not just a passive receiver of handouts.

4. Where now?

The basic problem of the Labour Party remains unresolved. The membership and PLP are two rival and antagonistic centres of power. The chances are that the next leader will either have the support of the PLP but not the membership or vice versa. But the antagonism is largely a matter of instinct rather than well thought out ideas. A vague notion of 'Socialism' versus an equally vague notion of 'realism' (within the existing economic framework). Is it possible to produce an inspiring and realisable ideal that both sides could share so that the argument would turn on the practical means for achieving it? Could that ideal be the 'Green Industrial Revolution'?

Postscript

The election of Sir Keir Starmer as leader of the Labour Party has put an end to the hopes vested in Jeremy Corbyn. But so far it has not marked a great change in the behaviour of the Labour Party in Parliament. While Jeremy was leader the PLP simply ignored him. It needs to be recognised that the Labour Party IS essentially the PLP, the corporation of men and women with the remarkable and perhaps unusual ambition to make parliamentary politics their profession. They cannot be forced - either from below through pressure from the membership or from above with a principled social democrat as leader - to do things they don't want to do. The task of those who think they have good ideas which can only be implemented at the level of the sovereign government is to win them over or to join their ranks in greater numbers (that is where 'grassroots organisation' may have a role to play) or to make an impact on the wider civil society. There is little point in engaging in a war if you know in advance you're going to lose.