

# The mortal threat to Labour

The party is losing touch with the working class, writes Jon Cruddas

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Supporters of Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour party, often compare him to the great radical interwar Labour leader George Lansbury. But this comparison does not help him today. When, on a collision course with his parliamentary party over intervention in Abyssinia, on a number of separate occasions Lansbury offered his resignation. Yet so loved was he by his parliamentary colleagues that they refused to let him go before eventually conceding to the inevitable. Unlike Mr Corbyn, Lansbury knew his pacifist beliefs would in the end prove irreconcilable with the task of leading the party and the need for support of Westminster representatives in a parliamentary democracy.

It has never before been the case that a Labour leader has dismissed a vote by his parliamentary party as of no “constitutional legitimacy”, as Mr Corbyn did after he lost a no-confidence motion on 28 June. Nor has it ever been the case that Labour in the House of Lords has announced its independence from the leader.

Labour is in uncharted waters, and as it faces a leadership election pitting Mr Corbyn against Owen Smith, the form of its future existence is uncertain. On the far right and far left of the party people are gaming out the split for their own interests; for them the very future of the party itself appears secondary. But for those of us who believe that a broad-based Labour party has been a blessing to our country, this is a time of great peril.

The closest historical parallel with this situation lies not in Westminster but in Berlin in 1918. Friedrich Ebert led the Social Democratic party (SPD) and the national government in the Reichstag, claiming legitimacy from the democratic vote of the people, whereas the Spartacists, including Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky, claimed theirs from the workers’ movement, the factory committees and works councils. Ebert ultimately unleashed the Freikorps against the leaders of the insurrection leading to the establishment of the German Communist party and a wider political polarisation across German society and the eventual victory of fascism.

What form might a domestic political realignment take in Britain today? The vote for Brexit in June’s referendum was primarily an English working-class insurrection. It challenged Labour on how it engages with a dispossessed, abandoned and often despised tribe that created the party in the first place. There has been a rupture of trust between working-class values and culture and the dominant cultural liberalism that holds sway on both sides of the Labour debate. It is telling that as the working class reasserted the primacy of parliament by voting to Leave, Mr Corbyn claimed that sovereignty resides with the membership and not the parliamentary party.

Corbynism is essentially a liberationist hard-left politics that recognises no borders, bolted on to a tech-savvy middle-class protest movement. In certain respects, it not too dissimilar to the remote liberalism of what today passes as Blairism. Both are heavily economic — as was the Remain campaign. Both disregard relationships and place, earning and belonging in favour of a kind of universalist proceduralism.

The former leader of the UK Independence party, Nigel Farage, knew this better than most. His extraordinary political project caught alight in January 2014 where he started to talk about there being “some things that matter more than money”. This was an echo of Robert F Kennedy’s line about how our emphasis on gross domestic product measures everything apart from what is important in life.

The biggest threat to Labour is the kind of post-Ukip workers’ party actively being considered by Arron Banks, the co-founder of the Leave. EU campaign, that operates in this space and attempts to define the terms of Britain’s post-referendum “culture war”. The Conservatives understand this, too. That is why the new prime minister Theresa May has focused Tory messaging on what political professionals call the “battlers” — struggling working-class families.

On the left, if Mr Corbyn holds on to the Labour leadership, we will hear talk from some of the defeated about a new liberal centre grouping that represents the 48 per cent who voted Remain in the referendum. And if he loses to Mr Smith, expect an anti-market party of the left to emerge. Both options would reinforce the cultural detachment of the left from its traditional class base. Can Labour as a political tradition withstand these fractures and rediscover its character and identity? Can it rebuild a relationship of trust with the estranged working class?

Recently, the American political philosopher Michael Sandel argued that for the mainstream left to survive it has to return to its foundations and offer a renewed civic patriotism rooted in a moral critique of the excesses of capitalism. Nowhere, he argues, is this happening.

The left surrendered interest in this type of project long ago. Both the labour left and right tend toward the abstract, global and remote whilst as expressed through Brexit the British people increasingly seek renewed national solutions. We have failed to build a public philosophy of the common good expressed in an optimistic and generous national story. Maybe Mr Smith will rise to that challenge. Someone had better.

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