Article

Assessing the Performance of UK Opposition Leaders: Jeremy Corbyn's 'Straight Talking, Honest Politics'

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Abstract
This article contributes to a burgeoning literature on political leadership, offering an interim assessment of Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as leader of the UK Labour party. At the time of writing, the candidate of the party's Left had been leader for a mere seven months. Media commentators and pundits have been critical of Corbyn's platform and performance, gleefully predicting his imminent demise. On the other hand, the 'Corbynistas' who swelled Labour's ranks in the aftermath of the 2015 defeat have remained steadfast and committed supporters. Their hope is not only that Labour will win the next election, but that Corbyn can recast the landscape of British politics by challenging the economic and political establishment which has assented to the growth of inequality and austerity.

1. Introduction

Making predictions about what might happen in 2020 on the basis of Corbyn's leadership since September 2015 is a perilous task. His leadership style will inevitably evolve while Corbyn's strategy is likely to adapt in response to events. Nonetheless, empirical evidence indicates that 'leadership image' is defined early in a leader's tenure (Bale, 2015); leaders of the opposition have found it almost impossible to escape negative perceptions formed at the beginning of their period of office, as the Conservative party discovered under William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith, and Labour found under Ed Miliband (Richards, 2016). Examining Corbyn's position now cannot tell us with any certainty how events will unfold, but provides an interpretation of prospective political developments.

The concept of 'party leader image' is examined in the emerging scholarly literature on political leadership, particularly on Labour leaders and leaders of the opposition (Bale, 2015; Buller & James, 2015; Clarke & James, 2015; Heppell, 2012; Theakston, 2012). A set of criteria has been developed within American political science, analysing leadership through the investigation of behavioural and cognitive traits (Foley, 2008; Greenstein, 2009). However, these leadership attributes are not necessarily appropriate to the context of Britain and continental Europe, particularly when applied to non-presidential political systems.

Corbyn offers an intriguing case-study for understanding the performance of British opposition leaders. Firstly, his victory in the Labour leadership contest was unexpected: 'one of the most extraordinary political sagas in recent decades' (Richards, 2016, p. 17). At the outset, members of the Campaign Group in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) debated whether it was worth running a candidate; of 1200 party members surveyed in the summer of 2015, only two believed Corbyn would become leader; another demoralising defeat for the organised Left, on the defensive since

the demise of Tony Benn's influence in the 1980s, appeared inevitable (Bale & Webb, 2015). Corbyn told *The Guardian* in June 2015 that his chances were slim:

> "We had a discussion among a group of us on the Left about how we might influence future developments of the party. All of us felt the leadership contest was not a good idea—there should have been a policy debate first. There wasn't so we decided somebody should put their hat in the ring to promote that debate. And, unfortunately, it's my hat in the ring." (cited in Hattenstone, 2015)

Secondly, Corbyn arguably possesses few conventional attributes of a 'successful' political leader: he is inexperienced having never previously held high office either in a Labour government or within the party bureaucracy (Richards, 2016). Ross McKibbin (2015, p. 26) concludes Corbyn 'is probably unique in his lack of conventional qualifications for the job'. His experience of handling the national media and overseeing the party's organisational machinery was non-existent. Corbyn served as an official in a public sector union, but his experience of trade union politics was limited (Wintour & Watt, 2015). He was regarded as a maverick and serial rebel with few allies in the parliamentary party; he had long-standing ties to Irish republicanism (Fenton, 2015) while allegedly expressing sympathy with Hamas and Iran in the Middle-East (Finlay, 2015). It was precisely Corbyn's lack of conventional qualifications, his status as the heroic 'anti-candidate' that enabled him to win (McKibbin, 2015). According to his colleague, Clive Lewis:

> "Jeremy is Jeremy. He isn't a rock star politician, he doesn't have the looks, he doesn't wear slick clothes, but in a way he is an anti-hero. He's genuine, authentic and he just seems to have resonated with people." (cited in Wintour & Watt, 2015)

Thirdly, the circumstances of Corbyn's victory were unusual: the new leadership election procedure had been intended to strengthen democratic participation in the Labour party, as well as dealing with adverse publicity encountered by Labour over the parliamentary selection in the Scottish seat of Falkirk (Syal, 2014). The classical thesis of 'the cartel party' is that power within social democratic parties across Europe is shifting from the grassroots to the 'party in office' (Katz & Mair, 2009); yet the Corbyn phenomenon appears to refute Katz and Mair's thesis. Centre-left parties are experimenting with new methods of democratisation intended to revitalise their social base and political appeal (Faucher, 2015). Nonetheless, it is unclear whether democratisation makes opposition parties more electable; it may produce less predictable outcomes in leadership elections, as the Corbyn ascendency underlines.

Finally, Corbyn has claimed he would be different to previous leaders, in particular, Tony Blair. In style and disposition, Corbyn is the antithesis not merely of Blair, but of almost all previous post-war Labour leaders including Attlee, Wilson, Callaghan and Kinnock. There is a passing resemblance to Michael Foot given his commitment to anti-American unilateralism and pacifism; however, Foot attained high office in the 1974-79 Labour administration and was regarded as a conciliator in party terms. The most telling comparison is between Corbyn and George Lansbury (Fielding, 2016), leader from 1931 until 1935: to those who found Ramsay MacDonald's 'betrayal' in 1931 repugnant, Lansbury was a 'prophet' and 'poet', an inspirational figure who would have led Labour to a great election victory; to others his 'ritual martyrdom' and 'woolly-minded sentimentality' threatened the party's status as a serious contender for office leading to his defenestration at the hands of Ernest Bevin, who famously told Lansbury at the 1935 party conference, 'stop hawking your conscience around from body to body asking to be told what you ought to do with it' (cited in Reid & Pelling, 2005, p. 69; Fielding, 2016).

Corbyn rejects the moderate and pragmatic tradition of post-war leadership espoused in very different ways by Attlee, Wilson, Callaghan, Kinnock, Smith, Blair and Brown. In this sense, Corbyn's ascendency marks a watershed in the politics of the Labour party, and in the nature of British political leadership. The parallel with Lansbury is apposite: Corbyn and Lansbury became leader following an economic crisis in which moderate social democracy was discredited; their opponents, MacDonald and Blair, were both subject to a 'betrayal myth'; having attained high office they allegedly abandoned socialism and were often willing to collaborate with the Conservative party. MacDonald and Lansbury were reputably polar opposites in the 1930s; Corbyn is the reverse of Blair in the contemporary context (Fielding, 2016). In particular, Corbyn's victory has been interpreted as a repudiation of Blair's approach to 'managing' the Labour party, apparently centred on tactics of covert manipulation of party institutions that led eventually to the New Labour leader's downfall (Minkin, 2014).

Having clarified what makes Corbyn's leadership distinctive, this article will proceed in the following way. The first section will delineate the criteria by which the performance of opposition leaders has been assessed in the academic literature. The paper will incorporate yardsticks for evaluating political leadership developed by Stuart Ball (2005) and Tim Bale (2015). The second section addresses Corbyn's performance since his election in September 2015, drawing on academic commentaries, journalistic accounts and survey data. The final part of the paper will indicate what we might expect from Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader. While assessments of leadership traditionally focus on

the imperatives of winning elections and office-seeking, it is important that we do not adopt an overly restrictive understanding of politics: for Corbyn and his supporters, electability is not the sole purpose of the Labour party. They insist that policies should be pursued according to whether they are right in principle, irrespective of whether they enable Labour to win elections (Richards, 2016).

2. Judging the Performance of Party Leaders

Jim Buller and Toby James (2011, pp. 535-536) assess the performance of party leaders by focusing on five elements of 'statecraft': forging a winning electoral strategy; achieving a reputation for governing competence; efficient management of the party machine; winning the key arguments among opinion-formers and the political elite; and reforming the constitution to protect the party's electoral interests. They draw on Jim Bulpitt's seminal article on Thatcherism where political leadership is defined as the rational pursuit and maintenance of high office (Bulpitt, 1986). Buller and James insist the statecraft interpretation provides a useful heuristic: it focuses attention on leadership 'cliques' while taking account of the structural context in which leaders operate.

There are, however, problems with the statecraft approach in evaluating Corbyn's leadership. As Griffiths (2015) indicates, statecraft raises a number of methodological and epistemological issues for political scientists. Bulpitt construes politicians as 'office-seekers' intent on winning power: in ontological terms, this implies a limited and exclusive definition of politics which neglects other elements of political behaviour (Griffiths, 2015, p. 4). The criticism is appropriate when applied to Corbyn, who insists that upholding 'moral principles' outweighs attaining parliamentary power in the British state. In addition, the concept of statecraft is problematic as an epistemology: Bulpitt (1986) cannot demonstrate that office-seeking is 'the main bias' of politicians, even in the case of Margaret Thatcher; politicians tell us something about why they act and think as they do through biographies and retrospective accounts, but they are notoriously prone to *post hoc* rationalisation (Griffiths, 2015, p. 5). Moreover, Bulpitt focuses on the behaviour of the 'court' and insular 'clique' surrounding the leader, but in so doing ignores institutions and actors beyond the sphere of 'high politics' (Buller, 1999; Griffiths, 2015, p. 7). In the Labour party, these include the parliamentary party, the trade unions, the National Executive Committee (NEC), local government, and the party membership, all of whom are capable of constraining the leadership's room for manoeuvre.

Bulpitt's concept of statecraft eschews ideology emphasising the rational pursuit of power, a useful corrective to accounts of Thatcherism that focus on ideo-

logical motivations; yet an understanding of statecraft is inadequate when applied to Corbyn's leadership style. Corbyn is not a politician driven by the imperatives of the statecraft approach. He rejects the politics of 'valence' in favour of 'position' and principle, the claim that politicians should support policies and ethical causes beyond their impact on electoral performance and governing competence. As Buller (1999, p. 703) points out, even the Thatcher and Major administrations 'provide examples of the party leadership pursuing policy ideas with little or no respect for the Statecraft Strategy apparently underlying them'. Corbyn's leadership is rooted in 'position' rather than 'performance' (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2014). While Bulpitt treats ideology as significant only in so far as it enables politicians to win elections, Corbyn assigns primary importance to ideology and ethical beliefs.

Mark Bennister, Paul t'Hart and Ben Worthy (2015) adopt a markedly different approach, applying the concept of 'political capital' derived from Pierre Bourdieu to the study of leadership. They argue that political authority is a scarce resource that leaders must use wisely: they need the skills and capabilities to be an effective leader while leaders have to mobilise and motivate their own supporters; for that reason, political capital wherever possible has to be replenished (Bennister, t'Hart, & Worthy, 2015). These scholars draw attention to the 'dynamic interplay' between the leader's personal characteristics and the structural environment they confront: some leaders seek to overcome institutional constraints; others are content to accept the prevailing political context. Bennister, t'Hart and Worthy's 'leadership capital index' then emphasises four criteria of 'public communication', 'policy platform', 'party management', and 'emotional intelligence' to distinguish between distinctive types of political leader: depleted 'lame duck' leaders who are barely in office; 'low capital' leaders presiding over demoralised and divided parties; 'medium capital' leaders who are content to 'muddle through' and get by; 'high capital' leaders who gain momentum from legislative and electoral success; and 'exceptional capital' leaders who are in a position to 'make the weather' (Bennister, t'Hart, & Worthy, 2015).

The leadership capital index is an important conceptual tool in the study of political leadership; however, it is better suited to the study of leaders in government rather than opposition. In contrast, Ball (2005, pp. 4-5) and Bale (2015, pp. 61-62) have outlined five criteria by which to judge an effective opposition leader, drawing on their respective studies of the British Conservative party:

- First, 'fresh faces': does the leadership promote talent to signal a change of political generations and the renewal of the party in the wake of electoral defeat?

- Second, 'cohesion': are they able to maintain loyalty and discipline to project a unified image to the electorate; divided parties have rarely enjoyed sustained electoral success?
- Third, 'visibility': is the leader able to fashion a distinctive, eye-catching agenda which captures the imagination of the electorate, wins the confidence of opinion-formers to project governing credibility, and distances the party from a potentially 'toxic legacy'?
- Fourth, 'efficiency': has the leader been able to build a party machine that can take on the government of the day, the basis for election victory?
- Finally, 'adaptability': is the party leadership sufficiently pragmatic to respond to events, changing its strategy where necessary to win power?

These five yardsticks offer comprehensive if parsimonious criteria for assessing the performance of opposition leaders. Leonard Stark defined three attributes for successful opposition leaders: the ability to maintain 'party unity', to make the party 'electable', and to project an image of 'competence' – the capacity to deliver on policy commitments in office (Denham & Dorey, 2015). In contrast, Ball's criteria underline the enormous challenge party leaders out of government face: it is unsurprising that being Leader of the Opposition is viewed as a thankless task. Opposition leaders have limited resources; their access to the media is restricted; they are rarely able to shape events; and more time is spent reacting to initiatives launched by the governing party (Bale, 2015). In the following section of the article, Ball and Bale's framework is applied to evaluate Corbyn's brief tenure as leader.

3. Assessing Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Leader

Jeremy Corbyn was elected with 59.5 per cent of first preference votes giving him an unprecedented mandate: he almost won a simple majority in all sections of the Electoral College: 84 per cent of newly registered supporters who paid £3 to join the party after the May 2015 election voted for him, as did 57.6 per cent of the affiliated trade unions and 49.6 per cent of full members (Gamble, 2015; Mason, 2015a). However, only 15 out of 232 Labour MPs cast their first preference votes for Corbyn. In total, Labour now has 565,000 members and registered supporters, compared to 185,000 full members when Ed Miliband was elected in 2010; this is a significant development in the political and social composition of the party (Rutherford, 2015). Corbyn's supporters have been divided into three groups: the generation of 'baby-boomers' who grew increasingly disillusioned with New Labour as instinctive supporters of oppressed minorities; young people who have been

alienated by austerity, the sharp rise in university tuition fees, and the inaccessibility of the housing market; as well as white collar employees in the public sector who stand to lose most from the retrenchment of the state (Rutherford, 2015). More than two-thirds of Labour party members are middle-class (ABC1s); 56 per cent are university graduates and 44 per cent are employed in the public sector (Bale & Webb, 2015).

In this context Corbyn might be classified, like Tony Benn, as a 'post-bourgeois' politician:

> "'Post-bourgeois', a term of art in American political science, describes the politics of the post-industrial society in which acquisitiveness among the increasingly affluent and educated middle-classes supposedly gives way to less material values, such as participation or free speech." (Jenkins, 1981, p. 4)

Corbyn emphasises freedom, democracy, participation and openness in decision-making which supplanted the traditional materialist preoccupations of the labour movement in Britain since the 1960s and 1970s. Assembling a socially diverse coalition ostensibly opposed to austerity, inequality and western military hegemony has been a political triumph (Gamble, 2015); as the polling organisation *You Gov* has pointed out, however, Corbyn's supporters are 'not remotely representative of the country'. Detractors of Corbyn observe that the growth of party membership and the increased turnout for the party leader at political rallies appears to be in direct contradiction to the esteem in which he is held by citizens. This observation is consistent with Kenig's (2009) comparative survey which indicates that democratising political parties does not make them more electorally competitive or connected to voters; a wider membership may be no more representative of the country.

How well does Corbyn score on the criteria for opposition party leaders delineated by Ball (2005) and Bale (2015)? On the positive side of the balance-sheet, Corbyn has been assiduous in promoting 'fresh faces' in his front-bench team, taking advantage of the reform introduced by Ed Miliband that the leader should have the right to select their Shadow Cabinet rather than a vote in the PLP. The 2010 and 2015 intakes have featured heavily in Corbyn's Shadow Cabinet through the appointment of Heidi Alexander as Shadow Health Secretary and Owen Smith as Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary. The new Shadow Chancellor, John MacDonnell has never held ministerial office, while none of Labour's economic team has any previous association with the Blair-Brown era, giving the party the opportunity to move on from the 2008 financial crisis which severely eroded its reputation for economic competence (Wintour & Watt, 2015). It is anticipated that younger MPs on the Left from the 2015 intake such as Clive Lewis and Cat Smith will soon occupy

prominent Shadow Cabinet positions (Mason, 2015a). Many of the politicians from the pre-2010 era have either departed front-line politics or retired.

Corbyn's team also moved to promote party 'cohesion', emphasising unity in the wake of a divisive and fractious leadership contest. Corbyn adopted three distinct party management strategies: he accommodated a diversity of views within his Shadow Cabinet retaining prominent 'Blairites' such as Lord Falconer and (until recently) Pat McFadden as Shadow Europe minister; Corbyn sought to mobilise the party's activist base by allowing and even encouraging internal dissent and debate; and he fought to assert control over party policy especially in foreign affairs, notably on intervention in Syria and the renewal of Trident (Finlay, 2015). Corbyn's objective in undertaking the January 2016 reshuffle was to enhance his authority over foreign policy and defence, ensuring the opposition spoke with 'one voice' (Kettle, 2016). The reshuffle removed McFadden and the Shadow Culture Secretary, Michael Dugher while demoting Maria Eagle, Shadow Defence Secretary, and triggering the resignation of three junior Labour spokespeople (Stephen Doughty, Jonathan Reynolds, and Kevan Jones). Most so-called 'moderate' MPs have continued to serve on the front bench. Corbyn has been able to call on the instinct of loyalty firmly entrenched within the 'ethos' of the party (Drucker, 1978). At the same time, unity is enforced by reminding MPs of the strength of Corbyn's mandate, and the extent of grassroots support encapsulated in the Left's organisation, 'Momentum'. He may lack formal credentials and experience, but Corbyn secured a decisive mandate in September 2015: democratic leadership contests are 'rituals of legitimation' (Faucher, 2015, p. 812).

In relation to 'visibility', Corbyn has been able to call upon support from commentators on *The Guardian* and *The Morning Star* who advocate a radical alternative to 'austerity-lite' policies (Chakrabortty, 2015). Even Martin Wolf, *The Financial Times* commentator, argues that Corbyn is right to confront 'outworn shibboleths' and to develop policies that improve the rate of growth by forging an 'entrepreneurial' and 'strategic' state (Wolf, 2015). On issues such as withdrawal of tax credits, Labour has apparently put the government on the 'defensive', combining to force George Osborne to undertake a 'u-turn' in his autumn statement (Mason, 2015a). If the recovery in the British economy stagnates during 2016 because of a global slowdown and fear of an impending 'Brexit', Corbyn's 'radical' economic alternative may gain traction. And if Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) are a critical opportunity for the Leader of the Opposition to enhance his authority and credibility, Corbyn's performances have won some reasonable reviews; the tactics of using questions proposed by 'real voters' has occasionally unnerved the Prime Minister (Mason, 2015a).

Labour's leader sought to emphasise his economic credibility by appointing a group of internationally renowned economists to his panel of advisers, notably Joseph Stiglitz, Thomas Piketty, Simon Wren-Lewis, and David Blanchflower. Three notable policies have been proposed by Corbyn's team: a state investment bank to support public infrastructure through 'people's Quantitative Easing'; an extensive 'crackdown' on tax evasion and tax avoidance to reclaim more than £120 billion in lost revenue (Wintour & Watt, 2015); and the renationalisation of the railways bringing franchises back into public ownership (Mason, 2015b). Corbyn has moved to beef up Labour's communications capability, appointing Seamus Milne, a senior *Guardian* journalist, as Executive Director of Strategy and Communications. Particular emphasis has been given to the importance of social media in reaching beyond the mainstream press. This approach aims to capitalise on Corbyn's strategic advantage: his 'authenticity' and his distance from the tactical 'evasions' of the political class (McKibbin, 2015).

In promoting Labour's 'efficiency' as an opposition, Corbyn has defied pessimistic predictions, most notably in the December 2015 Oldham by-election in which Labour's share of the vote increased, although this was mainly due to a sharp reduction in support for the Conservative party since May 2015. Labour appears well placed to mount a serious challenge in the London mayoral contest (Mason, 2015c). The key to mobilisation is the growth of membership; it is hoped this will release new political energy enabling Labour to become an organisation akin to a social movement as well as an election-winning machine; members will contribute more than £8 million to the funding base of the party, making Labour less reliant on corporate donations (Gamble, 2015); however, the proposed reforms of trade union finance will require union members to 'opt in' to the political fund.

Finally, Corbyn has demonstrated a willingness to adapt pragmatically to circumstances. He has shifted position on UK membership of the European Union (EU) in response to pressure from the parliamentary party, and the wider membership; 85 per cent of members will vote for Britain to remain in the EU (Bale & Webb, 2015). On Syria, he eventually conceded a 'free vote', minimising resignations from his Shadow Cabinet. Despite his radical mandate, Corbyn has acted cautiously on economic policy; his Shadow Chancellor has struck a moderate tone, even signing up to Osborne's Charter of Fiscal Responsibility on the eve of the Labour conference (although the position was later reversed) (Watt, 2016). There is an awareness that Labour has suffered from the absence of economic credibility; the party needs to tread cautiously in making new commitments on tax and spending; few concrete policies have been forthcoming (Richards, 2016). This tactic indicates that Corbyn is prepared to act pragmatically where necessary.

Despite this, Corbyn's leadership still has notable vulnerabilities reflected in recent opinion surveys. These weaknesses are less to do with ideological positioning on the Left-Right spectrum;[1] they stem from the fact that too few voters believe Corbyn is capable of being Prime Minister. A poll conducted within days of Corbyn's victory indicated 30 per cent of voters believed he would perform 'well' as leader, but 48 per cent feared he would do 'badly'; only 17 per cent thought it was likely Labour would win the next election (61 per cent believed Labour would lose) (You Gov, 2015). Just 23 per cent of voters thought Labour could be 'trusted' to run the economy, against 50 per cent who did not. The economy was a major weakness under Ed Miliband as the party's reputation for financial stewardship had been undermined following the 2008 crisis; but Labour's position has weakened further under Corbyn: 40 per cent of voters trust the Conservatives to 'take the right decisions' on the economy, against 23 per cent for Labour (Kellner, 2015b). Corbyn continues to rate highly among voters on attributes of 'honesty' (35 per cent) and 'principle' (43 per cent). At the same time, by November 2015, 52 per cent believed Corbyn was performing poorly, against 32 per cent who thought he was doing well; only 14 per cent felt Corbyn was likely to become Prime Minister, while 39 per cent wanted him to stand down immediately (Kellner, 2015a).

Examining Ball (2005) and Bale's (2015) criteria provides an indication of Corbyn's exposed position. Inept party management has been an important factor (Kettle, 2016). Corbyn came under criticism following his first round of Shadow Cabinet appointments, failing to appoint more women to senior positions and undermining his commitment to bring in more 'fresh faces'. The front bench reshuffle in January 2016 was attacked for being incompetently co-ordinated, lasting more than three days and exacerbating the perception that Labour was a divided party (Watt, 2016). The reshuffle was a reminder of the constraints under which Corbyn is operating: having initially briefed the press that the Shadow Foreign Secretary, Hilary Benn, and the Shadow Chief Whip, Rosie Winterton would be casualties, Corbyn's team were forced to retreat after an overwhelmingly hostile reaction from the PLP (Kettle, 2016).

The 'cohesion' of the party has been undermined by the structural problem that Corbyn's leadership confronts: his narrow base of PLP support. Having won the votes of only 15 MPs in the leadership contest (the other 20 MPs who nominated him did so to ensure the Left had a candidate), Corbyn has fought to maintain his legitimacy within the parliamentary party. As a 'se-

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[1] On a Left–Right scale from +100 (very right-wing) to -100 (very left-wing), the average voter places themselves close to zero; Corbyn is judged to be -76 (You Gov, 2015).

rial rebel' under previous leaders, he has struggled to play the loyalty card effectively. There is now a fault-line with the PLP on one side, and grassroots members on the other (Gamble, 2015). The handling of Trident and Syria indicates major party management problems; Corbyn's 'prevarication' about whether to allow a free vote on Syrian intervention in December 2015 signalled he has no convincing strategy to manage his parliamentary colleagues; the attempt to put pressure on MPs through directives from Momentum and the decision to conduct a last minute plebiscite among party members merely antagonised them (66 MPs then voted with the Government following a passionate speech by Hilary Benn in the final debate) (Richards, 2016). Corbyn's objective is to democratise the Labour party promoting greater participation and pluralism, but opponents insist he is intent on purging Labour of its residual Blairite elements (Dathan, 2016). We will return to this theme in the concluding section.

Corbyn has encountered additional problems in projecting 'visibility'. He had been written-off by most opinion formers and a hostile press even as his victory in the leadership contest was confirmed; controversy over the reshuffle led to open disagreement with the BBC over the coverage of a frontbenchers' resignation (Watt, 2016). While *The Guardian*/*Observer* have a combined audience of 5.3 million, the vociferously hostile *Sun* and *Sun (Sunday)* have 13.5 million readers (Hollander, 2013). There are doubts about the breadth of Corbyn's appeal given his cultural identity as a Left-wing metropolitan liberal representing the constituency of Islington North, allegedly 'a world away' from the concerns of most uncommitted Labour voters (a suspicion reinforced by the appointment of Emily Thornberry, Corbyn's Islington neighbour, as Shadow Secretary of State for Defence). It is claimed that a moderate version of Corbyn's views on the central policy issues relating to the economy, welfare, immigration and foreign affairs was decisively rejected by voters in the 2015 general election (Rutherford, 2015).

The relief among Corbyn's team following Labour's victory in the Oldham by-election underlines that he is not in a position to ignore or discount electability (Pidd, 2015). It might be argued that any leader would have a formidable task in restoring Labour's 'efficiency' as an opposition party. Labour has not won a major election for a decade while the party has suffered a sharp erosion of support due to the unpopularity of its previous leaders and its inability to manage the immigration question (Clarke et al., 2014; Evans & Chzhen, 2013). The 2015 election underlined the fracturing of Labour's electoral base, particularly in Scotland where the party's vote haemorrhaged. Labour faces testing Scottish parliamentary elections in May 2016 and may lose its majority in the Welsh Assembly where a recent poll indicated the party would decline to 27 seats (three short of a majority) (*BBC*, 2016); it has not won a Lon-

don mayoral election since 2004. In the North of England, Labour's traditional strongholds have been under attack from the UK Independence Party (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). The social base of the labour movement, notably trade union membership, has suffered a marked decline since the 1980s, particularly in the private sector (Richards, 2016). Labour's travails cannot be attributed solely to Corbyn's leadership performance, but as Curtice points out: 'it can often be difficult to disentangle cause and effect in the relationship between a party's overall standing and the rating of its leader' (cited in Bale, 2015, p. 59).

Finally, there are limits to Corbyn's 'adaptability' which might undermine his success. He largely rejects the hard-headed instincts of previous leaders, while his commitment to Labour as a party of government is ambiguous. Corbyn's supporters are less motivated by the imperative of winning elections; they want to articulate their values and reject the New Labour legacy of Iraq and inequality (Rutherford, 2015). 71 per cent of those who voted for Corbyn in the leadership contest believed parties should put forward policies 'irrespective of whether they help to win elections' (Kellner, 2015a). This rejection of orthodoxy was underlined by Corbyn's refusal to sing the national anthem at a Remembrance Day service, and his equivocation about whether to become a member of the Privy Council (Mason, 2015c). In rejecting New Labour, Corbyn is emphasising his reluctance to play the game of 'valence' politics, despite the fact 'valence' remains the best predictor of electoral outcomes in Western European democracies (Clarke et. al., 2014). For McKibbin (2015), the danger for Corbyn is that he is compelled to compromise too far, disillusioning his own supporters. This disposition makes future 'adaptability' and pragmatism less likely.

4. The Verdict: A Different Type of Leader?

Assessing Corbyn's performance ostensibly indicates a mixed picture. Applying the criteria offered by Ball (2005) and Bale (2015), Corbyn's leadership cannot be portrayed as an outright failure after seven months in office. In promoting new talent, partially maintaining unity and discipline, and achieving 'visibility' and 'efficiency' in relation to the party machinery, Corbyn can point to achievements. There is a disjuncture between his portrayal as 'unfit' to be Prime Minister and his performance as opposition leader. While Corbyn's ratings appear negative, this does not mean he is an incompetent Leader of the Opposition, or that his party cannot win a general election (Bale, 2015, p. 71). It is not only 'party leader images' that are decisive, but partisan identification and how far the party is trusted to manage the economy (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2011). Corbyn rejects the emphasis given to electoral success as a measure of leadership performance;

'statecraft' approaches encourage an ontologically narrow view of politics (Griffiths, 2015). If Corbyn struggles to make progress on the criteria of electability and prime ministerial credibility, he has energised thousands of supporters while striving to alter the dominant discourse with his commitment to 'straight talking, honest politics'. Even if we adopt a fundamentally pluralistic view of leadership attributes, however, Corbyn still faces major impediments to success while his performance so far has been problematic.

Firstly, Corbyn is a leader operating in a parliamentary system in which he does not have the support of the majority of his MPs: 'At this moment of great triumph, he suddenly finds himself more trapped as a politician than he has ever been' (Richards, 2016, p. 12). The decision to downgrade the role of MPs in the leadership selection process creates a structural division in the party. Leaders had been elected by the PLP for three quarters of a century since 1906 (Denham, 2013). This system had the advantage that MPs themselves had a mandate from their own electors, and an understanding of what was necessary for the party to win elections; the marginalisation of the PLP and the abolition of the previous Electoral College are likely to prove destabilising (McKibbin, 2015).

Corbyn's route to success is to operate as a 'Bonapartist' figure, mobilising the mass ranks of the party membership. This conflicts with the Left's traditional view of party democracy, however, which has emphasised the importance of holding the leader in check by dispersing authority and power across a plurality of institutions, namely the PLP, the NEC, the trade unions, and the party conference; it was conference in particular that was believed to be the party's 'sovereign body' (Faucher, 2015). The Left felt uncomfortable with 'hero-worshipping' leaders, insisting leadership was a collective endeavour; since MacDonald, it feared Labour's leaders would betray socialism, mesmerised by the 'aristocratic embrace' of the political establishment (Cronin, 2004; Faucher, 2015). In the 1970s, it was believed that Labour governments had refused to implement party policy, fuelling demands for democratisation reasserting the authority of conference (Cronin, 2004, p. 217). The 'Bennite' Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) was focused on how to ensure the leadership remained loyal to the programme agreed at the annual conference. Corbyn in 2016 would like different rules to apply, using his support among members to control the PLP; however, the trade unions, as well as the parliamentary party, are reluctant to allow the leader to act unilaterally, particularly on the touchstone issue of Trident renewal (Watt, 2016).

Secondly, Corbyn is self-evidently a 'position' politician in an era of valence and 'performance' politics. Since the 1980s, British politics has become increasingly focused on performance, mediated through party leaders and their ability to deliver competent, efficient

government (Clarke et. al., 2014). Arguably, his intention is not merely to win the general election, but to permanently transform both the Labour party and the terms of debate in British politics (Gamble, 2015). Corbyn's supporters are motivated by 'his manifest opposition to the dominant ideology of modern Britain, to the 'system' and its disreputable character' (McKibbin, 2015, p. 26). This point underlines the inadequacy of statecraft approaches: Corbyn's 'main bias' is not office-seeking but ideological transformation (Gamble, 2015). Corbyn perceives the role of ideology as more than an instrument for attaining power. In 2005, a group of Labour voters defected because they objected to the position adopted by Blair on Iraq: they believed the war had been catastrophically handled as no Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) were discovered; the escalation of the conflict appeared to encourage the growth of Al Qaida in the Middle-East (Clarke et. al., 2014). As Clarke et al. (2014, p. 6) indicate, there are two predominant models of voter choice: the 'valence' model which emphasises competence, leadership and credibility, and the 'positional' model which infers 'people vote for the party that is closest to them on the issue or set of issues that matters most'. In so far as elections matter, Corbyn's leadership is predicated on a positional view of voter behaviour influenced by voters' disquiet over the Iraq war; over the last forty years, valence has nevertheless provided 'more powerful statistical explanations of voting'. It is the capacity of valence to trump positional strategies that casts doubt on Corbyn's approach.

The crisis confronting the Labour party is that it appears divided between diametrically opposing political traditions: the pragmatic, 'office-seeking' tradition of Wilson and Blair which is still heavily represented within the PLP; and the 'politics of conscience' practised by Lansbury and Corbyn now embodied in the grassroots of the party (Fielding, 2016). One strategy is to attempt to reconcile these traditions, narrowing the gap between principle and power (Gamble, 2015). Nonetheless, events underline Corbyn's reluctance to embrace ideological and organisational appeasement as a party management strategy. Instead, Corbyn's supporters will strive to transform the character of the PLP; representatives of the Momentum organisation are urging mandatory reselection as they did in the early 1980s, while reasserting control over party conference; constituency boundary changes under current party rules make it possible to apply further pressure to sitting Labour MPs (Gamble, 2015).

In his approach, Corbyn is striving to 'make the weather' as leader rather than accepting the structural context he inherited. This strategy is comprehensible in its own terms; the Left has an unprecedented opportunity to refashion the Labour party in its image, a position it will be reluctant to forfeit after decades in the wilderness. The risk for Corbyn, however, is that efforts to reshape or even 'purge' the PLP will recreate the historical schism that nearly destroyed Labour in the early 1980s. Major question-marks over the viability of Corbyn's leadership of the party in the long-term are likely to remain.

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Conflict of Interests

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