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A week is a long time in politics: the health implications of Jeremy Corbyn's UK Labour Party leadership victory

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Abstract

For over 30 years, socialism within the UK Labour Party – which was in government from 1997-2010 and is currently the main UK parliamentary opposition – has been in decline. Despite its origins as a party of and for the working class, Labour has become at best a social democratic party with strong neoliberal leanings.

However, in the recent leadership election which followed Labour's general election defeat in May 2015, the socialist Jeremy Corbyn confounded all expectations by winning Labour's leadership with a substantial majority. We describe the political context of Corbyn's controversial victory and discuss its potential short and medium term impact on England's troubled National Health Service and on the public health.

“A week is a long time in politics”

Harold Wilson, former UK prime minister (1).

The political context of Jeremy Corbyn’s victory

Since Michael Foot led the UK Labour Party to a resounding defeat at the hands of Margaret Thatcher in the 1983 general election (2), socialism within the Labour Party and UK politics has been in decline. Despite its early 20th century origins in trade unionism and the struggle for workers' rights, and its establishment of important welfare state institutions such as the National Health Service (NHS) in the period following World War 2, Labour has, for most of its century of existence, promoted the fairer distribution of the fruits of capitalism rather than its overthrow (3). Following the 1983 defeat – after which Labour’s unashamedly socialist manifesto was infamously derided as “the longest suicide note in history” (2) - the Labour Party has experienced a continuous struggle between left and right wing factions, with the right always dominant.

Although Neil Kinnock’s leadership between 1983 and 1992 gave Labour a more ‘moderate’ social democratic flavour, he still lost two elections to the Conservatives – to Thatcher in 1987 and Major in 1992. Eventually however, Labour returned to power and won three elections, in 1997, 2001 and 2005, under the leadership of its most right wing leader ever - Tony Blair. Following a brief period of ‘political pragmatism’ in 1997-9 (4) – exemplified by his assertion that “what counts is what works” – Blair enthusiastically adopted market neoliberalism, encouraged privatisation within the NHS and took the UK into the disastrous Iraq war (5, 6). Under his leadership, democracy within the Labour

Party was also significantly decreased, as ‘government by focus group’ increasingly became the norm (7).

Following the loss of successive elections in 2010 and 2015 under the leadership of Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband (both of whom were slightly more left-leaning than Blair), the prospects for socialism within the Labour Party seemed worse than ever. Even Miliband’s mild form of social democracy – scorned by left critics as ‘austerity lite’ – had resulted in the chiefly right wing UK media branding him as Red Ed, the dangerous Marxist (8)!

One lasting achievement of Miliband’s otherwise rather chaotic leadership was his reform of the voting rules for Labour’s leader. Historically, Labour had used an electoral college system, with one third of the votes allocated to Labour members of the UK and European parliaments (MPs and MEPs), even though these amounted to no more than 500 people; one third to Labour-affiliated union members via a block vote system; and one third to individual party members and affiliated societies (such as the Socialist Health Association). Extraordinarily, the system permitted an MP who was a union member and a party member to cast three separate votes.

The Miliband reforms introduced ‘one member, one vote’ for the first time (though this had been talked about since the early 1990s): the vote of an MP was now no more influential than that of any member. Trade union members now had to register as a Labour Supporter rather than get an automatic vote. The leadership reforms also

introduced a new system whereby anyone with an interest in the party could register as a Supporter, at a reduced rate of £3 (\$5) and get a leadership vote. These changes were intended to show that the Labour Party was not dominated by the unions and also to introduce democracy, whilst (supposedly) weakening the influence of the left.

So the fact and the scale of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour leadership victory on 12 September 2015 came as a massive shock wave to Labour. Corbyn had been fortunate even to become an election candidate, literally receiving the last of his required 35 nominations from fellow MPs seconds before the deadline (9, 10). Indeed, many of those nominations came from unsympathetic MPs, who rather patronisingly wanted to "broaden the debate" to give the election an appearance of representativeness (9, 10).

Until Corbyn entered the contest, the election of a centre-right or at most a centrist Labour leader had seemed inevitable. Indeed, as one of a tiny group of socialist members of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Corbyn had been reluctant to stand and only did so because it was 'his turn' – each of his socialist colleagues had put themselves forward in previous elections in recent years. But following his nomination, it was soon evident that an exciting new current was flowing within mainstream British politics.

Corbyn had become well known to his fellow parliamentarians as a 'serial rebel', having voted against the Labour whip on more than 500 occasions during his 32 years as an MP. The most that he and his colleagues expected to achieve in the Labour leadership

contest was not to finish last (10). But it rapidly became apparent once Corbyn entered the contest that there were a large number of 'silent socialists' amongst the Labour Party membership who were delighted at his participation. In addition, several major trade unions rapidly agreed to support his candidacy (10). And perhaps most importantly, Corbyn benefited from the new members and Supporters who, inspired by his anti-austerity platform, his rejection of personal criticism of his opponents, and his lack of 'spin', flocked to join the party.

By the time of the election 100,000 new members and well over 100,000 new Supporters had joined (10). Both they and many long term party members were enthused by Corbyn's uncompromising stand against the Conservative government's austerity policies, by his support for reviving Britain's rapidly disappearing public services and by his rejection of militarism in all its forms. Rallies around the country were frequently attended by over 1000 people – unheard of for political meetings in the UK. And in the leadership election, he received a highly impressive vote of 59.5% – including 49.5% of full members. So despite much talk of plots and splits Jeremy Corbyn has a clear and strong democratic mandate to lead the parliamentary opposition into a period of participatory democracy, a fight against austerity and a defence of the welfare state, workers' rights, race and gender equality and a move away from conflict and war.

Corbyn's proposals

Corbyn has acknowledged that it is for the party membership to direct future policies (as

opposed to its MPs – a move away from the direction of recent Labour policy-making) and he intends to devolve power away from MPs and towards members and the annual party conference (as had been the case until the 1990s). Nonetheless, his personal views and values will clearly be influential. During the leadership campaign he described his approach to policy in the following terms (11).

- A new kind of politics: a fairer, kinder Britain based on innovation, decent jobs and decent public services;
- Growth, not austerity – with a national investment bank to help create tomorrow's jobs and reduce the deficit fairly. Fair taxes for all - let the broadest shoulders bear the biggest burden to balance the books;
- A lower welfare bill through investment and growth, not squeezing the least well-off, nor cutting child tax credits;
- Action on climate change - for the long-term interest of the planet rather than the short-term interests of corporate profits;
- Public ownership of railways and in the energy sector - privatisation has put profits before people;
- Decent homes for all in public and private sectors by 2025 through a big house building programme and controlling rents;
- No more illegal wars, a foreign policy that prioritises justice and assistance. Replacing Trident not with a new generation of nuclear weapons but with jobs that retain the communities' skills;
- A fully funded NHS, integrated with social care, with an end to privatisation in

health;

- Protection at work – no zero hours contracts, strong collective bargaining to stamp out workplace injustice;
- Equality for all – a society that accepts no barriers to everyone’s talents and contribution. An end to scapegoating of migrants;
- A life-long national education service for decent skills and opportunities throughout our lives: universal childcare, abolishing student fees and restoring grants, and funding adult skills training throughout our lives.

Corbyn has not said a lot about health or health care in the past. Probably the clearest indication of his views is that he was a signatory of the National Health Service Bill 2015-16, originally tabled in Parliament in November 2014 and again in July 2015 by Caroline Lucas, the UK Parliament’s only Green MP (12). In supporting this bill in 2014 Corbyn was rejecting the approach of his party, which at that time was to support an alternative, less radical private member’s bill. Lucas’s NHS Bill was drafted by public health professor Allyson Pollock and barrister Peter Roderick (13). Its aim is both to eliminate the commercial market in healthcare created by the Conservative government’s Health and Social Care Act 2012 (14) and in addition, to abolish the ‘internal market’ introduced in 1990 which established competition between NHS hospitals and services (13).

At the time of writing Labour Party health policy is still being developed, but it is significant that Heidi Alexander, the minister now leading the health team in Corbyn’s

shadow cabinet, was heavily involved in the campaign to save Lewisham hospital in south London from closure (15). In a further significant statement of intention Corbyn has for the first time created a ministerial post for mental health within his shadow cabinet.

Corbyn's likely impact on health in future

Corbyn's positions on welfare 'reform' (the term used by the Conservative government for its cuts to public benefits and services), austerity, privatisation, and participation are likely to have positive impacts on public health. There is strong evidence that welfare 'reforms' which reduce benefit levels or restrict access to benefits have negative effects on the health of vulnerable groups (16); that austerity policies increase mental ill-health and suicide (17); that privatisation of public services increases inequalities in access (18); and that participation is important for health both at work and in the community (19).

The next UK general election will be held in May 2020. That is the earliest date at which Jeremy Corbyn could lead the UK government. In the meantime the Conservative government will continue privatising NHS services in England and "reforming" welfare, to the detriment of public health. The UK government may also be a co-signatory to the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) which as currently drafted, could open the NHS budget to the US health insurance industry (20). In addition, it is predicted that public health will continue to decline as continuing and very substantial cuts are made in local government, with resulting impacts on many social

determinants of health (16). An in-out referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) is also planned for 2017; whilst the EU is currently the main source of workers' rights, it is also promoting austerity (exemplified by the treatment of Greece) and neoliberalism (as in the case of TTIP).

Corbyn also faces internal challenges from his parliamentary colleagues – so few of whom supported him in the leadership election. There are frequent rumours of attempts to oust him from the leadership by the right of the party – despite his overwhelming mandate from members. He is also facing unprecedented media abuse (even for a Labour leader) over such things as “not wearing a tie” at a World War I memorial service, not dressing smartly and over his pacifism. Indeed, the most pressing issues for Corbyn himself include the possible UK involvement in the war in Syria and the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme – both of which he opposes and both of which the so-called Labour Party ‘moderates’ in parliament support.

So in the short term, there is now a socialist led, anti-austerity, anti-neoliberal party in mainstream UK politics. In the medium-term, what can be hoped is that the mass participatory democracy championed by Corbyn will produce a radical reformulation of UK politics. This in turn could result in sufficiently loud and widespread public action and anger to slow or even halt England's continued steep slide into neoliberalism – with demonstrable benefits to the health and well-being of the people of England.

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