



Dorey, Peter and Denham, Andrew (2016) 'The longest suicide vote in history': the Labour Party leadership election of 2015. *British Politics*, 11 (3). pp. 259-282. ISSN 1746-9198

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‘The Longest Suicide Vote in History’¹: The Labour Party Leadership Election of 2015

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Abstract: The Labour leadership contest of 2015 resulted in the election of the veteran Left-wing backbencher, Jeremy Corbyn, who clearly defeated the early favourite, Andy Burnham. Yet Corbyn enjoyed very little support among Labour MPs, and his victory plunged the PLP into turmoil, particularly as he was widely viewed as incapable of leading the Party to victory in the 2020 general election. Given that much of the established academic literature on Party leadership contests emphasises the ability to foster unity, and thereby render a party electable, as two of the key criteria for electing a new leader, coupled with overall competence, important questions are raised about how and why the Labour Party chose someone to lead them who clearly does not meet these criteria. We will argue that while these are the natural priorities of MPs when electing a new leader, in Corbyn's case, much of the extra-parliamentary Labour Party was more concerned about ideological conviction and purity of principles, regardless of how far these diverged from public opinion. This was especially true of those who signed-up to the Labour Party following the 2015 general election defeat. Indeed, many of these only did so after Corbyn had become a candidate. This clearly suggests a serious tension between maximising intra-party democracy and ensuring the electability of the parliamentary party itself.

Key words: Labour Party; party leadership elections; party members; Jeremy Corbyn; Electoral College; One Member One Vote; New Labour

¹ This was the front-page headline of *The Independent* on 23 July 2015.

The Labour Party has long been viewed by most of its members as a democratic socialist party, but this clearly has two meanings. The first is that the Party seeks to create a democratic socialist society, in which wealth and power are widely shared, and equality is a primary objective. The second meaning is that Labour is a democratic party in terms of the participatory role played by its members. However, this second definition immediately raises a problem when applied to the election of Labour Party leaders, namely whether they should be elected solely by the MPs who they will lead and work with on a daily basis in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), or by the extra-parliamentary Party, whose members often play such a vital role in constituencies and the workplace, and who also make a major collective contribution to the Party's funding.

Since the creation of an Electoral College in 1980, the Labour Party has opted to involve the extra-parliamentary membership in its leadership contests, but this has often revealed a tension between the preferences of Labour MPs, and those of the extra-parliamentary members in the constituency parties and affiliated trade unions. For example, in the second round of Labour's 1981 Deputy Leadership contest between Denis Healey and Tony Benn, the latter was supported by 81% of Constituency Labour Parties (who were much more Left-wing overall), but only 34% of Labour MPs: Healey won the contest by 50.4% to 49.6%. Much more recently, in 2010, Ed Miliband narrowly defeated his brother David, in the Labour leadership contest, largely due to the support he received from trade union members, even though David Miliband was much more popular among Labour MPs themselves, and would probably have proven rather more attractive or politically credible to the British electorate.

The disjuncture between the preferences of the PLP and the extra-parliamentary Labour Party was most recently (and vividly) illustrated during the summer of 2015, when Jeremy Corbyn was dramatically elected as leader of the Labour Party, in spite of enjoying very little support among Labour MPs themselves. Instead, he won the 2015 Labour leadership contest largely by virtue of the votes of individuals who had only registered as Labour Party members, affiliates or supporters (categories discussed below) following the Party's defeat in May 2015. Indeed, many of these new recruits only signed-up once Corbyn had declared his candidature. Moreover, many of these extra-parliamentary new recruits who supported Corbyn had not even voted for Labour in the 2015 general election. For the second time in five years, the PLP found itself being led by a Left-wing leader whose support originated almost entirely from outside the PLP.

The purpose of this article is thus to explain *how* Jeremy Corbyn was elected as Labour Party leader in September 2015, from *where* and *whom* his support emanated, and *why* he attracted this support. In so doing, we will highlight the divergence between the criteria usually adopted by Labour parliamentarians when electing a new leader, and the qualities sought by much of the extra-parliamentary membership. Whereas the established academic literature emphasises the importance of party unity, electability and policy competence as the three key criteria for leadership candidates, we argue that these are the attributes usually (and understandably) prioritised by MPs themselves.

By contrast, as Corbyn's election highlights, extra-parliamentary members, and particularly a party's rank-and-file activists, are much more likely to be motivated by other considerations in determining who would be a 'good' party leader, and consequently prioritise different criteria, most notably ideological stance and concomitant commitment to core principles and

policies. Of course, this runs the serious risk that they will vote for a leadership candidate who is neither supported by the Party's MPs, nor popular among voters in general, thus rendering the party virtually unelectable: ideologically pure, but politically impotent.

When Labour MPs chose their leader

Until 1980, the Labour leader was elected exclusively by the Party's MPs. Prospective leadership candidates had to declare themselves at the outset and a series of eliminative (and secret) ballots would then follow until one of them achieved an overall majority. The rationale for this system was twofold. First, it was simple and efficient, in that it would yield a decisive result in a short period of time. Second, it was seen as imperative that the leader should enjoy the confidence of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

The post of 'Chairman' of the PLP was held by a succession of MPs until 1922, when it evolved into that of 'Leader of the PLP' to reflect the change in the Party's parliamentary status. After the General Election of that year, Labour became the second largest party in the House of Commons and was consequently obliged to fill the office of Leader of the Opposition. Ramsay MacDonald was duly elected, having challenged and defeated the incumbent Chairman, John Clynes. In 1931, 1932 and 1935, a single candidate was 'elected' unopposed. In 1935, Clement Attlee was re-elected on the second ballot. In 1955, Hugh Gaitskell was elected on the first. In 1960 and 1961, Gaitskell was challenged by Harold Wilson and Anthony Greenwood respectively and was comfortably re-elected on each occasion.

The next three contests involved three or more candidates, but each was effectively a two-horse race between ‘left’ and ‘right’. Even discounting the challenges of 1960 and 1961 – both won with predictable ease by the incumbent – contests held under this system were not especially competitive, but by 1980 had become progressively more so, the winner’s vote share in the final ballot being lower in 1955, 1963, 1976 and 1980 than that of his predecessor.

Table 1: PLP leadership elections 1922-1980

Year	Number of candidates	Ballots required	Winner’s share of final vote (%)
1922	2	1	MacDonald 52.1
1931	1	-	Henderson -
1932	1	-	Lansbury -
1935	1	-	Attlee -
1935	3	2	Attlee 66.7
1955	3	1	Gaitskell 58.8
1960	2	1	Gaitskell 67.2
1961	2	1	Gaitskell 74.3
1963	3	2	Wilson 58.3
1976	6	3	Callaghan 56.2
1980	4	2	Foot 51.9

After 1935, Labour leaders held the position for long periods and were seldom forced to seek re-election. In 1976, Henry Drucker (1976, p. 378) noted that ‘Once Labour elects a Leader, it is noticeably reluctant to remove him’. This reluctance has been explained with reference to the Party’s ‘ethos’ (Drucker, 1979) and/or leader-eviction rules. High nomination barriers,

and the requirement to challenge an incumbent directly, have made Labour leaders, once elected, relatively secure (Quinn, 2005). When a vacancy did arise, the ‘favourite’ and early front-runner almost always went on to win (Drucker, 1976, 1981; Stark, 1996; Heppell, 2010a; Heppell *et al*, 2010; Heppell and Crines, 2011).

In 1968, Gunnar Sjoblom (1968) identified three strategic goals for parties operating in parliamentary systems: to remain united, win elections and implement policies. Adopting this framework, Stark (1996: 125) argues that, during a leadership contest, these goals are translated into criteria by which all candidates are assessed, a party’s principal aim being to choose a leader who will maintain (or restore) party unity. Hence, ‘acceptability’ to all major party factions is the first-order criterion, yet ‘only in extraordinary circumstances’ does the unity goal become an explicit consideration. One example of this, Stark argues, occurred in 1980, when the veteran left-winger, Michael Foot, defeated Denis Healey. That Foot was considered the candidate who could best unite the Party ‘spoke volumes’ about the situation in which Labour found itself at the time (Stark, 1996: 128. See also, Drucker, 1981; Heppell and Crines, 2011).

More often than not, however, candidates for the party leadership are judged by their perceived ability to win a General Election and lead a successful administration. Hence, ‘electability’ is the second-order criterion and ‘competence’ the third. In 1963, Wilson was seen as superior to his two opponents, Brown and Callaghan, on all three criteria. In 1976, Callaghan was chosen to succeed Wilson, again on all three counts (Stark, 1996; Drucker, 1976; Heppell, 2010a; Heppell *et al*, 2010).

The Electoral College

Between 1983 and 2010, Labour elected its Leader via a tripartite Electoral College, comprising the PLP, constituency Labour parties (CLPs) and affiliated organisations, principally trade unions. The new system represented the culmination of a long campaign to 'bring the Party elite under greater grass-roots control after the perceived failures of the Callaghan government' (Quinn, 2004: 333). After much debate, it was eventually agreed that 30 per cent of the votes would go to the PLP, 30 per cent to CLPs and 40 per cent to the trade unions and other affiliated bodies. As in the past, only MPs were entitled to stand. Any MP, CLP member or affiliate could nominate a candidate, who would then need the endorsement of 5 per cent of the PLP.

Of the five contests held between 1983 and 2010, three (1983, 1992 and 2010) followed the incumbent's resignation and one (1994) his death. Only one (1988) was a challenge to the incumbent; as in 1960 and 1961, it failed. The original nomination threshold for candidates was subsequently raised to 20 per cent of the PLP, for challenges and vacancies alike. This presented problems in 1992, when Bryan Gould struggled to win sufficient nominations, and the rule was changed again in 1993. The threshold for challenges remained at 20 per cent, but for contests arising from vacancies, candidates now required nominations from only 12.5 per cent of the PLP, making it easier (in theory) for more contestants to stand (Quinn, 2004: 338-39). The most controversial feature of the Electoral College as initially configured was the role of the trade unions, whose concentration of block votes could firmly establish a candidate as a 'front-runner'. The new system increased the power of union leaders and officials and led to claims that they were 'king-makers' (Quinn, 2004: 340). It also, of course, enabled Labour's political opponents and critics to claim that the Party's leaders were

beholden to the unions, and thus unable to govern in the national interest or take tough, but necessary, decisions which were not supported by their union supporters.

When the Labour Party lost the 1992 general election, its relationship with the unions was placed under close scrutiny, with many leading figures - particularly those who soon became associated with New Labour - arguing that Labour's close links with the trade unions had been a significant reason for Labour's defeat. Often citing responses from post-election focus groups, Labour's self-proclaimed 'modernisers' argued that the Party was widely viewed as beholden to a backward-looking, change-resistant, sectional interest, and out-of-touch with the ambitions and aspirations of many voters in a post-industrial society (Wring, 2007: 81-82. See also Minkin, 1992, 678. Weir, 1992).

The National Executive Committee (NEC) established a review into the operation of the Electoral College, and duly recommended a new procedure, whereby the PLP, CLPs and affiliated bodies would each receive an equal (one-third) share of the vote (Alderman and Carter, 1994; Webb, 1995). Block voting was abolished and replaced by a system of postal ballots, on the basis of one levy-payer, one vote (OLOV). CLP block voting was similarly abolished. Instead, individual Party members would now participate in a postal ballot – One Member, One Vote (OMOV). Voting procedures for the PLP section were unchanged, except that Labour Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) would now have equal voting rights to their Westminster counterparts.

In theory, these changes would significantly reduce the power of union leaders and officials. The need for candidates to secure the votes of individual Party members and union levy-payers meant that the media – especially television – would play an increasingly important

role. In a recalibration of the Electoral College’s initial configuration, the vote of an individual MP or MEP was now worth the same as that of several hundred CLP members or several thousand union levy-payers, thus returning primary importance in future contests to the PLP, in terms of its ‘gate-keeping’ powers over nominations and its ability to shape the contest as a whole. Despite this, a candidate who trailed another in respect of backing from the PLP ‘could still triumph’ once Party members’ and/or union levy-payers’ votes were aggregated and counted (Quinn, 2004, p. 345). As we explain below, this duly happened in the leadership contest of 2010.

Between 1983 and 2010, there were six Labour Party leadership contests and successions. In 1988 and 1992, the former being a challenge to the incumbent, there were two candidates and in 2007, only one. On the other three occasions (1983, 1994 and 2010), there were three or more.

Table 2: Electoral College leadership elections 1983-2010

Year	Number of candidates	Rounds required	Winner’s share of final vote (%)	
1983	4	1	Kinnock	71.3
1988	2	1	Kinnock	88.6
1992	2	1	Smith	91.0
1994	3	1	Blair	57.0
2007	1	-	Brown	-
2010	5	4	E. Miliband	50.7

In 2007, Gordon Brown was ‘elected’ unopposed. On three other occasions, including Tony Benn’s challenge to Neil Kinnock in 1988, the winner’s vote share exceeded 70 per cent and, with the exception of Kinnock’s more modest (49.3 per cent) support among MPs in 1983, he also secured an equivalent (or greater) proportion in all three sections. In 1994, Tony Blair also achieved a majority of votes in all three sections, but his overall vote share was significantly lower than that of Kinnock in 1983 and John Smith in 1992, and similar to that of Gaitskell, Wilson and Callaghan, when the decision had rested with MPs alone.

By contrast, the leadership election of 2010 proved to be Labour’s most competitive to date. There were five candidates, but the contest was effectively a two-horse race between the ‘favourite’ and early front-runner, David Miliband, and his younger brother, Ed. After four months of campaigning, Ed Miliband won by the narrowest of margins. Throughout, David Miliband remained the first choice of the PLP and Party members, but Ed’s far superior support in the affiliates’ section, combined with the larger number of second preference votes he received in the PLP and CLP sections, proved decisive (Dorey and Denham, 2011; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011; Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013).

Prior to 2010, all four Electoral College contests were won decisively by the ‘favourite’ and early ‘front-runner’. In 1983, Kinnock’s ‘soft-left’ approach and refusal to serve in the Wilson and Callaghan governments made him far more ‘acceptable’ than his nearest rival, Roy Hattersley, to the Party as a whole. In 1988, Kinnock was seen as the strongest candidate on all three of Stark’s criteria (‘acceptability’, ‘electability’ and ‘competence’), as was Smith in 1992 and Blair in 1994 (Stark, 1996; Drucker, 1984; Alderman and Carter, 1993, 1995). In 2010, David Miliband was seen, according to the opinion polls, as the strongest candidate in terms of ‘electability’ and ‘competence’, but was clearly not ‘acceptable’ to the leaders of the

three largest trade unions (Dorey and Denham, 2011; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011; Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013). Of the two, Ed ultimately proved to be (marginally) more 'acceptable' to the Electoral College as a whole.

Constant controversy over Ed Miliband's election

From the moment his election as Labour Party leader was announced, Ed Miliband faced relentless criticism, and thus struggled both to establish his authority over the PLP and win the respect of the British public. Two of the most trenchant criticisms levelled against him concerned his decision to stand as a candidate in the first place, and the source of much of his support.

With regard to his decision to put himself forward as a candidate, and thereby compete against his brother David, Ed Miliband was variously accused of selfishly and ruthlessly placing his own leadership ambitions above those of his brother, and in so doing, grievously damaging the Labour Party's chances of electoral recovery: here at least, blood did not run thicker than water. Many such critics were convinced that David Miliband was the candidate most likely to 'reconnect' the Party with voters, and thereby restore its credibility and popularity before the 2015 general election. As such, Ed Miliband was subsequently condemned for effectively denying his brother the Labour leadership, and in so doing, deeply damaging the Party's chances of electoral recovery.

However, there was a second substantive criticism of Ed Miliband's victory, namely that it had largely accrued from the trade union votes in Labour's tripartite Electoral College,

particularly those unions representing public sector workers (Bagehot, 2010; Oakeshott, Woolf and Watts, 2010). While this provided a constant source of political ammunition for the Conservatives and their press allies to attack Miliband with throughout his leadership (see, for example: Martin, 2014; Martin, 2015; Ross, 2013), it also ensured that when he criticised the Coalition Government's public sector reforms and cutbacks, this was invariably cited as evidence that he was merely acting on behalf of his (public sector) trade union supporters and paymasters. This criticism also implied that in the highly unlikely that Ed Miliband became Prime Minister, his alleged subservience to public sector trade unions would prevent him from taking decisions in the national interest, especially when cuts in public expenditure were required

These two problems were compounded by the media's merciless mocking both of Ed Miliband's appearance - the cruel [Wallace and] Gromit comparisons - and his repeated failure to communicate effectively to voters via his speeches, some of which sounded as if they had been written by policy wonks, and which therefore reinforced a widespread public perception that Ed Miliband and his entourage were out-of-touch with ordinary people: part of an insular North London liberal elite. By contrast, although there was no great public love for the Conservatives, David Cameron did at least appear to be articulate, assured, and most important of all, 'Prime Ministerial'. He inspired a calm confidence and credibility which Ed Miliband could never remotely convey.

Reforming Labour's Electoral College

Sensitive to the repeated allegation that he had won the Party's leadership election by virtue of the trade union component of Labour's electoral college, and *inter alia* that the trade

unions continued to exercise too much influence in the Labour Party, both organisationally and financially, Miliband initiated a major review of the Party's internal processes and mechanisms for candidate (s)election, and the relationship between the Labour Party and various categories of membership. This unavoidably included careful consideration of the operation of the Electoral College used for Labour leadership contests, and the manner in which the votes of affiliated trade unions were counted.

However, there was another more specific impetus for this review, namely an acrimonious and well-publicised dispute over the selection of Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate in Falkirk, in 2013. In this instance, it was alleged that the Unite trade union had sought to 'rig' the ballot to ensure that its preferred candidate was adopted, whereupon an argument ensued between Unite and senior Labour Party figures at national-level – which was naturally given prominence by pro-Conservative newspapers (Chapman, 2014; Patel 2013). Although an internal inquiry into the episode subsequently exonerated Unite of any malpractice, Miliband clearly felt that the well-publicised episode had reminded voters of the close links between the Labour Party and the trade unions, and the sometimes embarrassing role of the latter in the Party's candidate selection process, and ultimately, Labour's leadership contests. He thus announced an immediate review into Labour's candidate selection procedures, and in particular, the role played by - and *inter alia*, the Party's relationship with - the trade unions (Miliband, 2013).

Chaired by Lord (Ray) Collins, the review resulted in a radical report being published in February 2014, which recommended the abolition of Labour's Electoral College, with its three equally-weighted institutional components; Labour MPs and MEPs, Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs), and affiliated trade unions. Instead, it was proposed that this should

be superseded by a system based on the principle of One Member One Vote (OMOV), and that voting in future Labour leadership contests should be dependent on an individual belonging to one of three categories: fully-paid up members of the Party, affiliated supporters and registered supporters.

The 'affiliated supporters' would be those who belonged to organisations which were themselves affiliated to the Labour Party, such as trade unions, but rather than being automatically eligible to vote in Labour leadership contests by virtue of paying the political levy via their trade union, they would need to register – at no extra cost – to become 'affiliated supporters', whereupon they would acquire the right vote in Labour leadership contests (Collins, 2014: 23).

The third category, that of 'registered supporter', had been proposed in an earlier review – *Refounding Labour* – of the Party's extra-parliamentary organisational structure and *modus operandi*. In particular, this had examined ways in which the Labour Party could both give existing members a more constructive and meaningful role at local level, and how it could re-establish itself more extensively and firmly in local communities. One method for achieving the latter objective was to create a category of 'registered supporter' of the Labour Party, which would entail payment of a nominal fee, accompanied by a formal declaration that they fully supported the Party's values. It was envisaged that 'registered supporters' would often be 'people in their local community who back Labour, but are not members of the party' (Labour Party, 2011: 15). The Collins report subsequently recommended that these 'registered supporters' should also be entitled to vote in Labour leadership elections.

This new system for electing Labour Party leaders meant that neither the trade unions nor the Party's MPs retained their former influence or impact, whereby they had collectively constituted one-third each of the Electoral College, with Constituency Labour Parties comprising the other third. Instead, each participant would have one vote, regardless of their category of membership: MP, affiliated supporter or registered supporter. In this respect, each member or supporter of the Labour Party would be equal in terms of having one vote, but of course, it considerably increased the influence and proportional strength of the extra-parliamentary Party, because it ensured that potentially 100,000s of affiliated or registered supporters would each cast a vote, along with the Party's 232 MPs. On the other hand, the greatly reduced voting weight ascribed to Labour MPs was matched by the corresponding reduction in the trade unions' former role in the Electoral College.

Crucially, though, Labour MPs retained their role as the sole selectors - gate-keepers - of who the candidates would be in the first place, before the Party's extra-parliamentary electorate cast their votes. On this last point, the Collins Report recommended that MPs who wished to stand for election to the Labour leadership (and Deputy leadership) should secure the nominations of at least 15% of the Party's MPs (Collins, 2014: 27), a slight increase from the erstwhile 12.5% requirement, but somewhat less than the 20% initially favoured by Ed Miliband (Wintour, 2014).

There was no change, however, to the electoral system used for the leadership contest itself, namely the Alternative Vote. As such, Labour's full members, affiliated members and registered supporters would each be required to rank the candidates in order of preference. If any candidate received more than 50% of the first-preference votes, they would win outright, but if this target was not attained after the first preferences had been tallied, the candidate

who received the fewest first-preference votes would be eliminated, whereupon the second-preference declared by their supporters would be distributed to the remaining candidates: a method of election once derided by Winston Churchill as entailing 'the most worthless votes given for the most worthless candidates' (Hansard, 1931: Vol.253, col,106). This process would be repeated until one of the candidates had amassed more than 50% of the overall votes.

The candidates step forward – and occasionally back again

When leadership elections immediately follow a major electoral defeat, they are almost inevitably a *de facto* inquest into why the Party lost. After all, the policy platform which each candidate campaigns on will reflect their conclusions about why the policies recently offered were evidently unpopular, or lacked credibility, with the voters who had recently shunned the Party at the polls, and thus why a new tranche of policies was urgently needed. In Labour's 2010 leadership contest, the Party, its candidates and their supporters had clearly been divided in their interpretation of why that year's general election had been lost; some thought that it was because the New Labour 'project' had run its course, and could no longer solve Britain's economic and social problems, while others were convinced that Gordon Brown had not adhered sufficiently closely to the New Labour 'ethos', having diluted it when he succeeded Tony Blair as Prime Minister (see, for example: Abbot, 2010: 5-7; Balls, 2010; Blair, 2010; 680-61; Burnham, 2010; Mandelson, 2010; Miliband, D, 2010; Miliband, E, 2010).

In 2015, however, there was an apparent consensus among many of the initial leadership contenders that Labour's surprisingly heavy defeat was largely due to Ed Miliband having pulled the Party too far to the Left since 2010 (Pickard, 2015). This is not to deny that some individual policies and positions were quite popular (such as a proposed 'mansion tax' whose revenues could yield extra funds for the NHS, a higher minimum wage, and partial renationalisation of the railways - but there was also a concern (apparently shared by many voters) that Miliband's Labour Party lacked an overall vision or 'narrative' about what it stood for overall. Perhaps more damagingly, approval of these ostensibly Left-wing policies was countered by a widespread perception that Labour was hostile to big business and wealth creators, and had nothing to offer aspirational working-class and middle-class voters for whom the sundry speeches passionately denouncing inequality, poverty, predatory capitalism and zero-hours contracts failed to strike a chord (see, for example, Bond, 2015; Yvette Cooper, quoted in BBC, 2015a; Feeney, 2015). Labour was apparently on the side of those 'left behind' or struggling, rather than those who wanted to 'get ahead' or were prospering.

This perspective was trenchantly articulated, just a couple of days after the general election result, by one of the first Labour MPs to declare his candidature, Chuka Umunna. His analysis of Labour's crushing election defeat was that:

We spoke to our core voters but not to aspirational, middle-class ones. We talked about the bottom and top of society, about the minimum wage and zero-hour contracts, about mansions...But we had too little to say to the majority of people in the middle.

We allowed the impression to arise that we were not on the side of those who are doing well. We talked a lot – quite rightly – about the need to address

'irresponsible' capitalism, for more political will to tackle inequality, poverty and injustice ... But we talked too little about those creating wealth and doing the right thing.

(Umunna, 2015)

He subsequently argued that Labour had to 'move beyond its comfort zone and find new ways of realising its age-old goals of equality and freedom', not only because the scale and speed of economic and technological changes necessitated new thinking about how to create a fairer society, but because the scale of Labour's 2015 election defeat clearly showed that the electorate did not want the type of 'socialism' promoted by Ed Miliband (quoted in Wintour, 2015). Umunna also denounced the Left for responding to the catastrophic defeat by blaming the electorate for being wrong, rather than calmly and maturely listening to what the voters were saying, and learning the appropriate lessons. Umunna suggested that some on the Left were 'behaving like a petulant child who has been told you can't have the sweets in the sweetshop, you can't have power. And now we're running around stamping our feet, screaming at the electorate' (quoted in Dathan, 2015).

However, Umunna withdrew his candidature after just three days, for personal reasons, whereupon he declared his support for Liz Kendall, whose prognosis of Labour's electoral defeat seemed to mirror his, and was commonly characterised as an unequivocally New Labour' or Blairite perspective. Kendall was also endorsed by the Shadow Education Secretary, Tristram Hunt, who himself withdrew from the leadership contest, albeit because he failed to attract the requisite 35 nominations from his fellow Labour MPs. A further withdrawal from the contest due to lack of support among their parliamentary colleagues was Mary Creagh, and although she refrained from openly endorsing any of the other candidates,

she similarly insisted that the Labour Party had to become much more supportive of small businesses, entrepreneurs and wealth-creators, which was widely construed as a tacit endorsement of Kendall and her Blairite prognosis of Labour's recent defeat. Indeed, 28 of Kendall's 41 nominees had backed the 'Blairite' candidate, David Miliband, in Labour's 2010 leadership contest.

These withdrawals meant that when nominations closed on 15 June, there were four contestants, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: The four contenders

Candidate	Number of nominations	% of PLP
Andy Burnham	68	29.3
Yvette Cooper	59	25.4
Jeremy Corbyn	36	15.5
Liz Kendall	41	17.7

Ironically, Jeremy Corbyn had struggled to attract the requisite (35) nominations, to the extent that he narrowly exceeded this threshold just minutes before the deadline. To compound the irony, one of Corbyn's nominations was provided by Andy Burnham himself, in a spirit of comradeship intended to ensure that the leadership contest encompassed views from across the ideological spectrum of the parliamentary Party, and thus facilitating a full and frank debate about how Labour should respond to its crushing defeat. At this juncture, hardly anyone, inside the parliamentary Labour Party or beyond, viewed Corbyn as a credible contender, but merely a make-weight maverick to provide the Left with a symbolic candidate - or 'token leftie' as Bale and Webb (2015) described him - and facilitate a semblance of a

debate in which views from across the Party's ideological spectrum would be expressed. Other Labour MPs who backed Corbyn's candidature included Diane Abbott, Margaret Beckett, Ronnie Campbell, John Cruddas, Frank Field, John McDonnell, Michael Meacher and Dennis Skinner. However, under Labour's leadership contest rules, nominating a candidate does not obligate the nominee to vote for that MP in the final ballot, and as such, up to 14 MPs who formally nominated Corbyn subsequently voted for one of the other candidates. Indeed, Beckett later described herself as 'a moron' for having nominated Corbyn in the first place (Hope, 2015a).

Certainly, the initial front-runner was Andy Burnham, not just in terms of having attracted the most nominations among Labour MPs, but also because sundry opinion polls deemed him to be the most popular or credible candidate both among Labour voters and, crucially, the public (electorate) in general. This was illustrated by an Ipsos-MORI poll which was conducted immediately after the close of nominations, when the four contenders were finally declared, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Initial support for the four Labour leadership contenders (%)

	Burnham	Cooper	Corbyn	Kendall
Labour supporters	36.5	31.7	14.3	17.5
The public	33	31	11	25

Source: Ipsos-MORI, published in *The Evening Standard* 18 June 2015.

However, 37% of Labour supporters did not express a preference, suggesting either that they were not overly enthused by any of the four candidates, or that they intended to listen diligently to what the contenders said during the summer-long campaign, prior to making an informed decision. Meanwhile, among the general public – or, rather, the 45% who stated a preference – Burnham enjoyed only a two per cent lead over Cooper, while Corbyn’s public support barely made it into double digits. However, the most notable divergence between Labour Party supporters and the public was the latter’s stronger support for Liz Kendall. In effect, the electorate seemed rather *less* keen for the Party to herald a break with New Labour and Blairism than did Labour Party supporters. This, of course, was to render the final result of Labour's leadership contest even more remarkable, and potentially disastrous electorally.

To the extent that such ideological labels are still meaningful in the 21st Century, post-Blair Labour Party, Burnham was a centre-Left candidate, but genuflected to aspects of New Labour in an attempt to broaden his appeal to the Party. To this purpose, he simultaneously conceded that Labour had lost its 'emotional connection with millions of people', and in so doing, had not evinced sufficient interest in 'aspiration', nor acknowledged voters' concerns about issues such as immigration. However Burnham also argued that Labour had failed 'to explain and also defend our economic record. We didn't overspend through all our time in government' (Sky News, 9 June 2015), and insisted that Labour's 2015 manifesto was 'the best manifesto that I have stood on in four general elections.' As such, he sought to tread a fine line between acknowledging Labour's recent failings, while warning the Party 'not to distance ourselves from the last five years' (quoted in Bush, 2015).

Meanwhile, Yvette Cooper is probably best classified as the centrist candidate, positioned between Burnham and Kendall, but whereas this ostensibly ought to have maximised her

appeal to median voters – à la Downs (1957) – among Labour's electorate, this perception merely obfuscated what she really stood for and believed in with regard to policies. For example, she simultaneously spoke of Labour's need to re-establish its credibility in the eyes of the business community, while urging the Party to be more vigorous in tackling child poverty and providing more child-care for working mothers. Cooper also spoke passionately of boosting the economy (and thus prosperity) through investment and innovation in science and technology. Ultimately, though, this quintessentially technocratic stance was hardly likely to enthuse and energise Party members and supporters, rather than encourage ennui.

Crucially, Jeremy Corbyn was associated neither with New Labour and Blairism nor 'Milibandism', and as such, could present himself as a candidate unsullied by the apparent betrayals, failures, and mistakes associated with Labour's previous leaders. More importantly, he was the only candidate who explicitly attacked austerity, and called instead for a growth strategy based on public investment, while also demanding a clamp-down on tax evasion. Corbyn also openly defended the welfare state, called for the abolition of [£9,000] student fees, opposed the renewal of Trident (Britain's nuclear submarines) and mooted the renationalisation of the railways, along with other forms of public ownership. It was an unashamedly Left-wing (at least when compared to 30 years of neo-liberalism) 'manifesto', and as such, an emphatic rebuttal of New Labour and 'Blairism'.

Concerns over the integrity of the leadership contest

Jeremy Corbyn's belated candidature, as the representative of Labour's Left, prompted a sudden surge in the number of people applying for 'registered supporter' status. Many of these

were doubtless individuals who were genuinely enthused by Corbyn and the ideological break with New Labour which he seemed to personify. Certainly, many of those who campaigned and canvassed for Corbyn, and attended his 'hustings' and other crowded public meetings and rallies at local level (Crines, 2015: 6), seemed to be former Labour Party members or supporters who had drifted away during Blair's leadership but now felt inspired to return, while a significant number of other Corbynites were new, often younger, 'registered supporters' who were similarly energised and enthused by his candidature, as we will discuss below when explaining the result.

However, alongside these enthusiastic Corbynites who swelled the Party's ranks over the summer of 2015, there were alleged to have been two other types of 'registered supporters' who were a cause of much more concern to those supervising the leadership ballot, namely individuals who were not Labour supporters, but who wanted to secure Corbyn's victory for their own political motives; namely Right-wing Conservatives and radical Leftists. Some Conservatives were suspected of registering as Labour supporters solely in order to vote for Corbyn, in the hope of increasing his chances of victory, and thereby rendering the Labour Party unelectable due to being far too Left-wing.

Concern about potential Conservative infiltration of Labour's leadership contest had initially been prompted by a campaign launched by *The Daily Telegraph* (15 July 2015), which encouraged its readers to: 'Sign up today to make sure the bearded socialist voter-repellent becomes the next Labour leader – and dooms the party forever', and which prompted a Twitter campaign '#ToriesForCorbyn'. One prominent Conservative commentator who heeded this advice was Toby Young, who confessed that he was motivated by a desire to 'consign Labour to electoral oblivion' (Young, 2015a; Young, 2015b).

However, the Conservatives' view of Corbyn as an atavistic throwback to the Bennite Left of the 1980s was shared by many of his critics in the Labour Party itself, particularly the Blairites. In their eyes, Corbyn was good at appealing to Left-wing activists and *bien pensants* always looking for an oppressed group or right-on cause to campaign for, but would pose absolutely no electoral threat to the Conservatives; indeed, would effectively guarantee the Conservatives' victory in the 2020 general election, and quite possibly consign the Labour Party to Opposition for a generation, if not in perpetuity (Blair, 2015a; Blair, 2015b; Johnson, 2015; Mandelson, 2015).

However, for some of Corbyn's opponents in the Labour Party, it was not so much Conservative infiltration which was a problem, but the likelihood of the hard-Left mobilising to vote for Corbyn. One (anonymous) Labour source alleged that not only was Corbyn 'sneaking in Green Party members by the back door', but that a mass influx of new Party members or professed supporters, whose sole objective was to secure Corbyn's victory, would be 'completely illegitimate and on a par [with], if not worse than, the Militant infiltration in the 80s' (quoted in Wintour and Perraudin, 2015).

In the context of such allegations and concerns, there were calls from some Labour MPs and Party allies for the leadership contest to be halted, in order to check how many of those who had recently 'joined' the Party as affiliated or registered supporters were genuine, rather than being members of rival parties or organisations hostile to Labour, and whose applications were thus mischievous or malicious (Hope, 2015b; Lyons, 2015; Walker, 2015; Whitaker, 2015). Such calls however, were firmly rejected, it being insisted that applications were already subject to robust checks, although it was not made clear precisely how such care and diligence was actually ensured.

Corbyn the conqueror (1): Where did Corbyn's support emanate from?

When the result was announced on 12 September, the scale of Corbyn's support was such that he won outright, without the need to distribute the second-preference votes of those who voted for Kendall, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: The result of Labour's 2015 leadership contest; who voted for who?

Candidate	Total votes	% of total votes	Votes of Party members	Votes of affiliated supporters	Votes of 'registered supporters'
Andy Burnham	80,462	19.0	55,698	18,604	6,160
Yvette Cooper	71,928	17.0	54,470	9,043	8,415
Jeremy Corbyn	251,417	59.5	121,751	41,217	88,449
Liz Kendall	18,857	4.5	13,601	2,682	2,574

Source: <http://labourlist.org>

Not only was Corbyn the clear winner on the basis of first preference votes, he also polled many more votes than the other three candidates combined both among 'affiliated' supporters and 'registered' supporters. Indeed, among the latter, Corbyn's 88,449 votes dwarfed the combined total of 17,149 received by the other three candidates. Meanwhile, his tally of votes among Labour Party members was more than double that which Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper each attained, and virtually nine times as many as Liz Kendall attracted, although his

share of the vote among Party members was fractionally less than half, at 49.58% (compared to the 84% share he enjoyed among ‘registered’ supporters).

Impressive though such a vote share undoubtedly was in a contest with four candidates, it does suggest that support for Corbyn was slightly more cautious or qualified among fully-paid-up Labour Party members than the other two categories of members or supporters. Indeed, closer examination of the votes cast by Labour’s ‘full’ members – extrapolated from polling undertaken for *The Times* by YouGov – reveals interesting variations in the degree of support attracted by Corbyn, according to duration of Party membership. As Figure 2 clearly shows, support for Corbyn was lowest among longer-serving (pre-2010) Labour Party members, and highest among those who only became full members after the catastrophic defeat on 7 May.

Figure 2: Support for Corbyn among full Labour Party members by length of membership (%)

Member pre-May 2010	Joined under Ed Miliband	Joined after 2015 general election
44	49	62

Source: YouGov/The Times, 15 September (<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/09/15/anatomy-corbyns-victory/>).

However, as Corbyn did not officially become a leadership candidate until 15 June, it is apparent that not all of these new members joined primarily in order to vote for Corbyn (although many probably did support him subsequently). Instead, some of those who joined Labour in the aftermath of the general election doubtless did so because of a sense of shock

or outrage that the Conservatives had secured a surprise victory, following a slump in Labour's (exacerbated by a surge in support for the SNP), leaving the Party with 98 fewer parliamentary seats/MPs than the Conservative Party. This apparent desire to launch an immediate fight-back against the victorious Conservatives saw more than 20,000 people join the Labour Party in the first four days after the election defeat (taking total membership to just over 221,000), although other parties also enjoyed a post-election membership surge, including the decimated Liberal Democrats. By mid-August (the cut-off for applying for one of the three types of membership, prior to the start of the actual leadership ballot), Labour's 'full' members totalled 300,000, alongside 140,000 affiliated supporters and 120,000 registered supporters.

Among those who joined the Labour Party as full members in the aftermath of the 2015 electoral disaster, over 60 per cent voted for Corbyn, compared to the 44% who did so among the pre-2010 cohort of fully paid-up members. Meanwhile, although there were 20,000 more affiliated supporters than registered supporters, turnout was much higher in the latter category than the former - 93% to 48.5% - and it was among the latter that support for Corbyn was strongest: almost 84% of them voted for him, compared to just under 58% of affiliated supporters and fractionally fewer than half of full members (BBC, 2015b).

Meanwhile, the YouGov survey also revealed that support for Corbyn was somewhat higher among the younger members of Labour's 2015 electorate, as shown in Figure 3. Whereas 64 and 67 per cent of the 18-24 and 25-39 age cohorts respectively supported Corbyn, barely half of the 60+ cohort did so.

Figure 3: Support for the candidates among Labour’s electorate, by age and gender (%).

	Age				Gender	
	18-24	25-39	40-59	60+	Men	Women
Burnham	15	14	17	27	19	19
Cooper	14	14	18	18	18	16
Corbyn	64	67	60	51	57	63
Kendall	6	4	5	3	6	2

Source: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/h4c7aqabu7/LabourSelectorate_TopLine_W.pdf

It can also be seen that Corbyn was slightly more popular among women who were eligible to vote in the Labour leadership contest, by 63 per cent to 57. By contrast, only two per cent of women in Labour’s electorate voted for Liz Kendall, compared to six per cent of men.

One other notable finding from this YouGov survey concerned the way that Labour’s affiliated and registered supporters had voted in the recent general election. As Figure 4 shows, ‘only’ 60 per cent of the latter had actually voted Labour, whereas almost a quarter had opted for the Green Party, and five per cent of them had supported the Liberal Democrats.

Figure 4: How Labour’s affiliated members and registered supporters voted in the 2015 general election (%)

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Green	UKIP	Other
Affiliated Members	76	2	4	12	2	3
Registered supporters	60	2	5	24	2	5

Source: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/h4c7aqabu7/LabourSelectorate_TopLine_W.pdf

A further two per cent each had voted for the Conservatives and UKIP respectively, and while these Conservative voters might well have paid their £3 fee solely in order to vote for Corbyn for mischievous reasons (namely to render Labour unelectable), it is conceivable that some of the UKIP voters were former Labour supporters who had been alienated by New Labour, and who genuinely hoped that a Corbyn-led Labour Party would prove more sympathetic and responsive to some of the concerns of the Party's erstwhile working-class supporters. After all, as Ford and Goodwin's seminal study notes, whilst it is commonly assumed 'that UKIP's voters are middle-class Tories ... their base is more working-class than that of any of the main parties', with many of these supporters being those who feel 'left behind' in an era of rapid socio-economic change and globalisation (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 153, 154).

Corbyn the conqueror (2): Why did Corbyn receive so much support?

It seemed rather ironic that a candidate who could not be described as flamboyant or a particularly notable orator – he often seemed quietly-spoken and rather unassuming – nonetheless attracted such adulation from many people, particularly among the young, who had previously become (or had already been) disillusioned with mainstream party politics, and always 'on-message' identikit party leaders. Yet for his supporters, in an age of vacuous celebrities and obsession with image, Corbyn's apparent 'ordinariness' was actually a large part of his appeal; they viewed it as 'authenticity', and thus evidence that he was not part of the 'Westminster bubble' which was itself contributing significantly to the public's increasing

loss of faith or trust in established (and 'Establishment') political elites. Of course, there was a certain irony in the fact that the enthusiasm which Corbyn inspired among many of his supporters, and the high turn-out at his public meetings, transformed him into something of a celebrity himself, albeit a reluctant one.

Yet Corbyn's election as Labour leader seems incongruous in the context of Stark's three criteria for electing party leaders which we outlined earlier, particularly the importance of fostering party unity as a pre-requisite of rendering a party electorally credible, and *inter alia* promoting an image of leadership competence. This disjuncture is evident in Figure 5, which illustrates the personal qualities or political strengths which each candidate's supporters attributed to them.

Figure 5: Political attributes ascribed to each leadership candidate by those who supported them (%)

S/he...	Burnham	Cooper	Corbyn	Kendall
Will provide the best opposition to the Conservatives	52	70	43	59
Has the best policies for Britain	29	35	70	36
Has best chance of winning in 2020	49	58	5	73
Is a break from New Labour/Blair	12	7	65	8
Is a break from Ed Miliband's Labour	5	4	8	31
Will unite the Labour Party	48	34	5	10

Source: YouGov/*The Times*, Labour Leadership (Day Two)
https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/94enqtd1fz/LabourLeadership_150721_day_two_W.pdf.

For example, 48% of Andy Burnham's supporters envisaged him uniting the Labour Party, and 49% of them judged him likely to lead Labour to victory in the 2020 general election, while 58% of Yvette Cooper's supporters envisaged her leading Labour to victory in 2020.

In sharp contrast, only 5% of Corbyn's supporters expected him to unify the Labour Party, and the same nugatory number deemed him to have the best chance of securing Labour's victory in 2020, yet 70% of his supporters deemed him to have the best policies for Britain. In other words, his own supporters acknowledged that Corbyn's 'correct' policies would neither unite the Labour Party nor pave the way to electoral victory in 2020, and yet he still secured a remarkable victory.

Clearly, Corbyn's election as Labour Party leader represented the triumph of idealism and over more practical and pragmatic criteria for (s)electing Party leaders. Many of those who supported Corbyn would rather that the Labour Party adopted a much more 'principled' stance against the Conservatives and their continued neo-liberal policies, even if this consigned the Party to Opposition, than concede some ground to the Conservatives by accepting the need for austerity-driven policies such as welfare cuts for the poor and tax cuts for the rich. Indeed, for many Corbyn supporters, maintaining ideological purity in Opposition was infinitely preferable to what they perceived to be the 'betrayals' and 'sell-outs' symbolised by New Labour and the Blair Governments. Indeed, as Figure 5 also shows, heralding a decisive break with, and departure from, New Labour was another of Corbyn's key attributes according to many of those voting for him.

Yet even before Corbyn's supporters had finished celebrating, ominous mutterings were emanating from figures associated with New Labour, about how long Corbyn would be

permitted to remain Party leader before he was replaced. Although this might have been construed as a legitimate but speculative question, it was widely interpreted as a warning that Corbyn would face a direct challenge within a matter of months; in effect, a coup by disaffected and outraged Blairites to regain control of ‘their’ Party. As such, perhaps the most common question asked about Corbyn’s leadership has not been whether he can lead the Labour Party to victory in the 2020 general election, but for how long he will serve as Party leader before himself being challenged by MPs simultaneously aghast at his particular brand of full-blooded Socialism - ‘Most Labour MPs think Corbyn’s politics are bonkers’ (Kellner, 2015: 39) - and alarmed at the Party’s consistently poll ratings, and its continued lack of economic or political credibility among voters (Helm, 2015; Helm, 2016; Kellner/YouGov, 2015; Rawnsley, 2016; Savage, 2015; Wilkinson and Hughes, 2016).

Conclusion

It was ironic that the 2014 abolition of Labour’s Electoral College, primarily to reduce the formal, but often controversial, role of the trade unions in the Party’s leadership contests, entailed creating new categories of voters, most notably that of ‘registered supporter’. While this constituted an understandable attempt at boosting Labour’s mass membership, and ‘connecting’ with people who had not previously involved themselves with the Party, it also meant that these members would be able to play a major role in choosing the next Labour leader, even if they had only been registered for a few weeks, or even just a few days. There was no stipulated minimum length of membership or registered support before they became eligible to vote, and as such, Jeremy Corbyn attracted much of his support both from Labour supporters who had only registered since the general election defeat (albeit in some cases,

before Corbyn's candidature had been confirmed), and 'full' members who had similarly joined the Party only after the crushing May defeat.

Labour MPs were naturally aghast that a perennially rebellious Left-wing, CND-supporting, backbench rebel, with no Ministerial experience in his 32 years as an MP, and who was as likely to be found joining, or even addressing, a public rally or protest, as he was sitting on the green benches in the Commons, was elected as Labour leader, largely as a consequence of votes cast by 10,000s of individuals who had not even been members or registered supporters of the Party for more than a few weeks. Indeed, some of them had voted for other parties in the May 2015 election, most notably the Greens and the Liberal Democrats.

From the outset, therefore, Corbyn struggled to establish his authority and legitimacy as Party leader, for the overwhelming majority of Labour MPs had never wanted him as leader, or even considered him to be a credible contender in the first place, and strongly disagreed with his radical Left-wing views. Even some of those Labour MPs who nominated Corbyn and initially welcomed his election subsequently confessed that 'we have come to regret that decision' (Cox and Coyle, 2016).

Had the electorate for Labour's 2015 leadership contest been confined to the Party's parliamentarians and pre-May 2015 extra-parliamentary members, then Corbyn would probably not have been elected, for Stark's criteria of 'acceptability/unity', 'electability' and 'competence' would almost certainly have prevailed, and thus yielded a victory for either Andy Burnham or Yvette Cooper. However, the unforeseen influx of new members, in tandem with registered and affiliated supporters following the May 2015 general election defeat, significantly altered the political character and composition of the extra-parliamentary

party, with many of these new supporters proving to be motivated by other criteria when voting for Corbyn, most notably his ideological stance, purity of principles and policies. This was in spite of readily acknowledging that these characteristics would be highly unlikely to unify the Labour Party or deliver victory in the 2020 general election.

More generally, this clearly highlights a perennial dilemma accruing from the extension of intra-party democracy and the associated commitment to increasing Party membership: the extra-parliamentary members and rank-and-file activists might well adopt a different definition of who or what constitutes a 'good' leader, and thus vote for someone who is neither supported nor respected by the Party's parliamentarians - or the country's electorate.

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