

Rhetoric and Revolution

“The Greek people didn’t want to elect us. They did not suddenly become left wing. We were a party of four per cent, and then we went to forty per cent. Why did that happen? Because the Greeks could see that nothing was working. The people of Greece are much wiser. . . . They chose us because what we said made sense, and there was no recovery.”

[Yanis Varoufakis, 5 May 2017 YouTube]

THE THIRTEEN MILLION PEOPLE who voted for Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party have not suddenly become left wing in any deep or committed sense. The four million votes, which were added to the Labour tally between 2015 and 2017 by Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell are the product of exhaustion with the dismal prospect offered by the Tories. People voted (me included), against endless cuts in public services and against falling household incomes, against the pay freeze imposed by the government, and against sluggish wage growth in the private sector. They voted against policies that have stranded a quarter of the population in dire circumstances – sixteen million men, women, and children, at any given moment living in poverty.

They voted for a government that they hoped would not merely put an end to the years of austerity, but one that offered a positive vision of the future in which the economy could be expanded by investment in public services and infrastructure, and in the hope that such initiatives would result in economic expansion and in deeper and more widely shared prosperity.

This is why Labour’s modest social democratic manifesto proved so popular at the election, and everywhere since, from inner city housing estates to university campuses, onwards and upwards to

Glastonbury. This wave of resistance to the economic policies pursued by the Tories for the last seven years has carried Corbyn and McDonnell from the relative obscurity of the backbenches to the forefront of the country's political life. In September 2015 during the party's leadership election nobody anticipated this, least of all Jeremy Corbyn or the right-wingers who nominated him. Astonishment, even disbelief, has accompanied Jeremy Corbyn's rise on all sides, and this continued up to the night of June 8th this year when 12,878,460 votes and thirty extra Labour seats proved otherwise. Although beaten by the Tory's 42.4 per cent of the vote against Labour's 40 per cent, the result was so far wide of expectations that there was an outbreak of euphoria on the left, and dismay, disorder, and startled alarm, on the right.

It is clear now that austerity can no longer be openly advocated or pursued by the Tories, and one slip or misstep on their part would result in a general election that Jeremy Corbyn would have every chance of winning. Even if the government doesn't fall it is clear that Labour's call for the pay review bodies to end the public service pay freeze has widespread support on the Tory backbenches, and will be government policy by the autumn.

Given this level of success, the defensiveness of many of the movers and shakers in Momentum is difficult to explain. A fortress mentality has arisen among the Labour left in which criticism or simply critical discussion of the party's programme for government results in immediate condemnation. The astonishing outburst of the usually level headed, Paul Mason, at a recent meeting of the right wing group, Progress, is a case in point. He told the audience in no uncertain terms that if they didn't like "Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party" they'd better leave and form their own political party. By way of explanation he said this:

Right now our leader is addressing a 200,000 strong crowd at Glastonbury who are singing his name. And the reason they are doing this is because they believe, unlike some of the

people on the platform, that we are totally serious when we say we're going to tear down the free market economy and replace it with one of social justice.

That's what that manifesto said and that's what I want us to do. Make no mistake, as long as Jeremy is leader, as long as people like me have a voice, this is what we will try to do.

Paul was getting carried away somewhat, because, of course, this is not what the manifesto says. It is not a revolutionary document. It does not propose tearing down the free market economy, or replacing capitalism with social justice. It does, however, suggest that renationalisation of the railways and some public utilities, higher taxes for the rich, and larger government borrowing, could be used strategically to expand the economy, and assist the government to improve welfare and strengthen the hand of the unions and their members in relation to their employers. It is in fact a perfectly reasonable and rather modest set of social democratic proposals, and people voted for it in order to put an end to Tory cuts, rather than overthrow capitalism.

Yet, Paul Mason is not alone in his revolutionary rhetoric; it is certainly encouraged by the tone of some of John McDonnell's pronouncements, and is fairly widespread in Momentum circles. Yet, this brazen approach is also accompanied by a contradictory coyness and ambiguity – perhaps a tactical deniability – about the real political objectives of those left wingers engaged in taking over the Labour Party's apparatus. I think this is why it is so important for John Lansman and his comrades to continue their struggle to ensure that the Trotskyists are squeezed out of Momentum as quickly as possible.

Because, of course, in their old fashioned and sectarian way 'the Trots' would have wanted to make their revolutionary propositions both detailed and specific, the subject of conference resolutions, and formal platforms and lists. This would not fit with the deployment of 'social justice' and 'egalitarianism' as a cover for the underlying revolutionary aspirations represented by John McDonnell and his more Stalinist

or neo-Stalinist wing of the party. The conundrum facing Labour's revolutionary wing is this, how to swing an enormous section of the general public behind their social programme without explicitly arguing for an anti-capitalist or communist future.

I am assuming that they hope that the multiple and mounting crises which would undoubtedly be provoked by their entry into power in Whitehall would enable them to push the general public inexorably in a revolutionary direction without ever actually spelling this out – *softly, softly, catch the monkey*.

Despite assertions to the contrary this is an anti-democratic strategy. At no stage does this revolutionary grouping inside the Labour Party want to level with the public; at no stage do they want to be explicit about their intentions. This is why they are unaccountably defensive and seriously antagonistic towards anyone that wants to question the feasibility of Jeremy Corbyn's policies or the depth or popularity of its socialist ambition. Of course, they want to argue as Paul Mason has, for a revolutionary future well beyond the modest social democracy of the manifesto, but feel perpetually constrained by the knowledge that their mass support is rooted in aspirations for justice, fairness, the abolition of tuition fees, the abolition of Work Capability Assessments, and for better welfare, *not* for the overthrow of the capitalist system.

This is why St Jeremy has almost spontaneously consolidated his position as a nice man during his startling rise to prominence. His niceness, his caring, and concern, is not a recent development; he pitched his tent on the moral high ground many decades ago. He cannot be accused of the cynical manipulation of his public persona. (Talk of his flirtation with Islamists and anti-Semites, of his friendship with Ken Livingstone and the leaders of the IRA, has little traction.) He really is a teetotal, non-smoking, allotment gardener, of modest habits, an enemy of war in all its forms, and a fast friend in all circumstances of peace. Is it any wonder when compared to the Tory front bench that millions of

people find in him an honest and much more attractive politician than anyone on the right?

However, if he actually did win a general election and found himself in the Cabinet Room, the honeymoon would not last long. As the capitalist class ducked and weaved with its tax returns, and private investment weakened, the government's reliance on the fiscal cooperation of the wealthy and upon the bond markets for the realisation of Corbyn's programme would be exposed to some sharp corrections. No doubt the revolutionaries would welcome this contest, but without a genuine revolutionary movement, primed and ready to challenge the capitalist class and the reign of private property, with a communistic programme, the mass support for Corbyn and social justice would break up.

Emily Thornberry and the Labour Party's less than 'progressive' policies on immigration would come to the fore as the party would again be rattled into its constituent parts – most of whom believe as they always have believed, in managing the capitalist economy on behalf of the working class rather than overthrowing the system in some cathartic upheaval.

I believe that it is these tensions and the prospect of these difficulties, which account for the refusal of Labour's revolutionary wing to engage in open discussion of their perspectives and prospects.