

The Labour Party

Salvaging Jerusalem

How Britain's left got into its crisis—and how it can get out

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A victor's legacy

NESTLED between Birmingham and Leicester, Nuneaton is the humdrum English suburb from central casting. Neat flower beds full of petunias punctuate the lawn outside the bus station. On benches between the chain stores in the pedestrian precinct, old folk throw the crusts of their sandwiches to the pigeons. On the outskirts new, faux-bucolic housing estates sprawl between their pre-war forerunners.

Since 1983 this town has voted for the winning party in every general election but one. It was among the target seats the Labour Party recognised that it needed to win last year. The announcement, early on election night, that its Conservative MP had been re-elected with an increased majority was the point at which the party realised it had been trounced.

Nuneaton rejected Labour. Labour subsequently rejected Nuneaton and all that it represents. In September 2015 the party elevated Jeremy Corbyn, a stalwart of its far left, to its leadership. Voters in Middle England, doubtful about the party's competence and credibility even before its new leader took the reins, have been unimpressed by his tenure—as the burghers of Nuneaton willingly attest. Shoppers express cautious support for Theresa May, the new prime minister. They speak as one when it comes to the leader of the opposition: “A bit of joke”; “I don't think he knows what the world is actually like”; “Nah”.

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In opinion polls the Tories now consistently post double-digit leads over Labour. This, along with massive internal dissent and the effect of changes to constituency boundaries that were announced this week, leads pessimistic MPs to suggest the party could lose up to 100 of its 230 parliamentary seats at the next election.

The sound of someone losing the plot

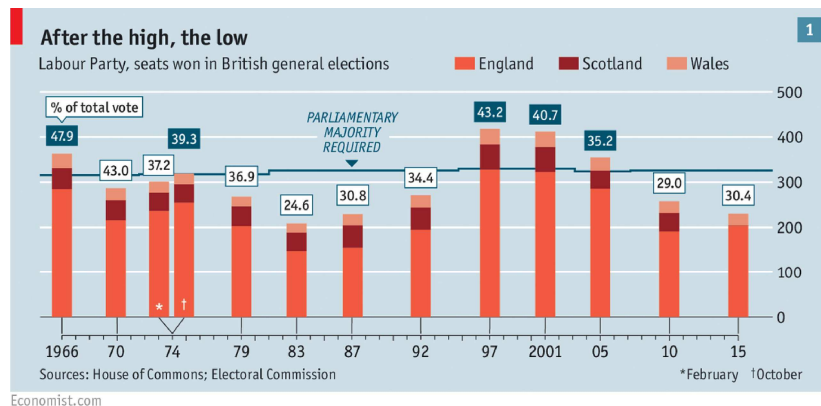
Mr Corbyn enjoyed little support in the parliamentary party even before he had proved such a threat to its members' jobs. He only got the 36 nominations from fellow MPs that allowed him to stand in last year's leadership election because some of them thought that his voice would serve to broaden the party's internal debate. After the Brexit referendum campaign, during which many thought that Mr Corbyn, for a long time a Eurosceptic, put the party's pro-EU case with insufficient vigour, most of his shadow cabinet resigned. In a subsequent confidence vote 40 Labour MPs voted for him and 172 against. It is hard to imagine any previous party leader so lacking in support choosing to continue; but Mr

Corbyn never wavered. Angela Eagle, one of the resigning shadow ministers, put herself forward for the leadership, thus triggering an election for the top job, before withdrawing from the race in favour of another colleague, Owen Smith.

On September 24th Mr Corbyn will almost certainly be announced the winner of this contest. Victory will give him a number of opportunities to consolidate his power, to force out some internal opponents (possibly including his deputy, Tom Watson), to use those changes to parliamentary boundaries to threaten pesky MPs, to further weaken the parliamentary party's role in leadership elections and to give the membership at large and online activists more say over policy.

Corbynistas insist, against all precedent, that the party can change the terms of British politics, and win power, by becoming a "movement". They point to leftist politicians in southern Europe (especially Syriza, now governing Greece) as a model. Most MPs, and most commentators, believe that in trying to do so they will transform the party's prospects of winning places like Nuneaton from remote to non-existent and make it electorally irrelevant.

This is remarkable for a party which 20 years ago was about to kick off its best-ever streak of electoral results (see chart 1). But under Tony Blair nearly everything the party did was calibrated to fit the interests and outlooks of voters in decisive Middle England seats; the former prime minister recalls his connection to such voters as a sort of love affair. In 1997 and 2001, this passion swept the party to power in landslides (56% and then 52% of the vote in Nuneaton). Even in 2005, after the Iraq war, Labour secured a solid win over the Tories (and 44% in Nuneaton).



After that third election, when David Cameron became their leader, the Conservatives began to push back against Mr Blair's domination of the centre ground. When Gordon Brown, his pushy chancellor of the exchequer, elbowed Mr Blair aside in 2007, he did so in part by flashing a little collectivist ankle to the grassroots, as well as by nobbling more centrist alternatives, allowing a shift to the left. The financial crisis persuaded many in the party that capitalism had failed sufficiently egregiously that such a shift could work. At the same time control of some of the largest of the trade unions that are affiliated to the party moved somewhat to the left.

After Labour's defeat in the 2010 general election showed that the crisis of capitalism had not been quite the conflagration the left had counted on, those union leaders supported Ed Miliband, one of Mr Brown's protégés, in his bid to become leader. During his tenure Mr Miliband nudged the party further leftward while failing to dislodge the Conservative narrative that the country's economic difficulties were all the fault of Mr Brown, a failure that doomed the party at the 2015 elections. He also changed the way future leaders would be chosen. In what initially seemed like a sensible response to union stitch-ups and declining membership his new rules obliged members of affiliated unions to opt in if they wanted to vote and extended the franchise to any member of the public willing to pay £3 (\$3.90).

In last year's post-Miliband leadership election none of the three mainstream candidates saw the potential for reshaping the party's electorate implicit in these rules. Mr Corbyn did. With the help of allies in the unions he encouraged supporters to sign up to vote, bringing in idealistic middle-class youngsters and the sort of socialist old-timers who had quit under Mr Blair. Over the course of the campaign the party's electorate more than doubled to some 550,000, much to his advantage.

For many party members, their second general-election defeat proved that Mr Miliband had not moved the party far enough to the left. The animosity many felt towards Mr Blair and all he stood for—which, in the 1990s and 2000s, had been assuaged, a bit, by his habit of winning—went unbridled in defeat. Swathes of the parliamentary party, particularly those who supported, or might have supported, the Iraq war that Mr Corbyn implacably opposed, were held in scorn. Coupled with the influx of support from outside, these feelings gave the campaign an unstoppable momentum (a term later taken as its name by a grassroots movement that grew out of Mr Corbyn's leadership campaign and now has local chapters in many constituencies). Mr Corbyn's inexperience—never a minister or a shadow minister—was perceived as innocence, his constant rebellion—487 votes against the governments of Mr Blair and Mr Brown—as righteousness. A large plurality of full members (49.6%) backed him; his majorities among union affiliates (57.6%) and the £3 "registered supporters" (83.8%) propelled him to overwhelming victory.

Tell me when the spaceship lands

Not all Mr Corbyn's policies and stances are unpalatable to the electorate: a majority supports his wish to take the railway system back into public ownership. But so much of what he does and stands for is unpopular both with the right wing of his own party and the centrists that Mr Blair wooed that he will never become prime minister. He did not join in the national anthem at a first-world-war commemoration; he opposes the renewal of Britain's nuclear weapons capability; he supports the restoration of many lost powers to trade unions, including secondary picketing, and the nationalisation of the energy industry. In a YouGov poll published on September 8th 61% of the public said he was doing badly as leader of the opposition; only 21% said he was doing well.

Yet so completely has the make-up of the Labour Party changed that none of these facts about the electorate matter as far as its internal politics are concerned. Some 200,000 people—mostly Corbynistas—have joined as full members over the past year. A poll published by YouGov on August 31st gave Mr Corbyn a 62%-38% lead over Mr Smith among the party's electorate (see chart 2). He has been nominated by 285 Labour constituency parties, compared with 53 for Mr Smith.



Even if, completely against the run of play, Mr Smith were to stage an upset, rather little might change. His leadership campaign has been based on the idea that the party's electorate will not vote for a candidate who differs much from Mr Corbyn on policy: the party's new left-wing make-up, his aides argue, militates against a more centrist challenge. So his criticisms have focused more on his opponent's abilities as a media performer and team leader: process, rather than substance. If Mr Smith wins, he will have little mandate to reconcile the party to the sort of agenda and strategy that would win it Nuneaton. As one party insider supporting him observes: "As long as the left have the whip hand, they will crack the whip."

If Mr Corbyn wins he will surely face further leadership challenges: some MPs talk of a "war of attrition". It could be a war that both sides lose. There is no cast-iron law saying

Labour has to survive. Social democrats across Europe are struggling to combine distinctiveness and credibility in straitened times and to reconcile small-c conservative working-class voters whose economic interests they have championed with the agendas of their more liberal, middle-class supporters. As they do so they also have to compete with populists of left and right and fend off centre-right parties which have become increasingly deft at pilfering popular policies, such as minimum wages, that the left used to own. The struggle is not going well. Since the late 1990s support for social-democratic parties has fallen by about half in Germany, two-thirds in the Netherlands and over three-quarters in Poland.

British parties have disappeared before. The Liberal Party spent much of the 19th century switching in and out of power with the Tories; then in the first third of the 20th century an inability to adapt to political and economic shifts brought what a contemporary writer, George Dangerfield, memorably called the “strange death of Liberal England”. Perhaps the “strange death of Labour Britain” has arrived. The Scottish National Party has all-but wiped it out north of the border. In the north of England the right-populist, anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP) threatens to nab some of its working-class strongholds (though whether it can get its own act together enough to do so is an open question). In big cities and university towns the humbled pro-EU Liberal Democrats want to pinch Labour voters fed up with the party’s lacklustre pro-EU campaigning. And in the first two months of her premiership Mrs May has emphasised her commitment to things like vocational training, social mobility and industrial policy that once-Labour centrists tend to like.

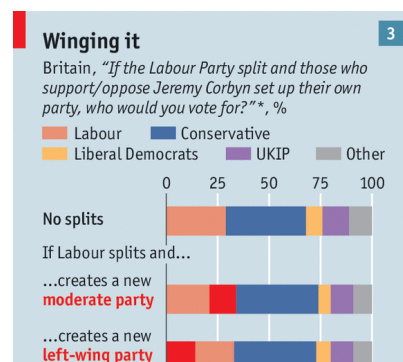
Such tactics could give the country years of Conservative dominance, with major arguments about the future taking place inside the sprawling governing party, much as they do in Japan, rather than between government and opposition. If Labour declines far enough, another principal opposition will rise to replace it: a first-past-the-post system like Britain’s does not easily allow for one big party and a bunch of small fry. The new number two could be UKIP, especially if arguments about what Brexit should look like come to dominate the country’s politics. Britain might thus be dominated by a right-populist party and a Christian Democrat one, rather as Poland is today. Alternatively some new grouping might rise from Labour’s moderate wing and/or the currently tiny and unloved Liberal Democrats to appeal to liberal, pro-EU voters. Then the country would look more like Canada.

You’ll never get it right

What can Mr Corbyn’s internal opponents do to avoid these outcomes? Their strategy so far has been to hope either that Mr Corbyn’s supporters will tire of him, or that he can be worn down by their war of attrition. Now, eyeing Mr Smith’s undistinguished campaign and likely failure, some concede that a new approach is needed. Two big, bold ideas are in the ether.

The first and worse is a split. If Mr Corbyn wins, MPs could form a separate caucus in Parliament, create their own alternative shadow cabinet and perhaps eventually form a new, Nuneaton-friendly party. If this group is larger than the parliamentary rump loyal to Mr Corbyn it should, with the speaker’s blessing, become the official opposition.

This option is endlessly discussed by Westminster conspiracy-mongers but also widely seen as a non-starter. The experience of the 28 MPs who left Labour in 1981 to form the Social Democratic Party provides a cautionary tale; never successful enough to break through under first-past-the-post they ended up merging with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats, who currently have just eight MPs. In any case, moderate MPs add indignantly, why should



social democrats be forced out of their own political family? “I have no intention of walking away from our party which, like no

Source: YouGov

*4,927 British adults
July 27th-August 1st 2016

Economist.com

other, was founded to deliver progressive values in government under our albeit flawed first-past-the-post electoral system” asserts Chuka Umunna, Labour’s former shadow business secretary. Despite Mr Corbyn’s best efforts plenty of voters remain tribally loyal to Labour: polling published by YouGov on August 2nd showed that if Labour’s right (or left) split from the party, only a minority of its voters would follow them (see chart 3).

That leaves the second option: beating Mr Corbyn at his own game. Shortly before the current contest began many on the right of the party threw their efforts into creating mechanisms for recruiting new, moderate members to rival the Corbynite surge. The result was Saving Labour, an initiative begun by, among others, Reg Race, once a left-wing MP and later a successful entrepreneur. It has been endorsed by plenty of Labour MPs and Labour-supporting public figures (the novelist Robert Harris among them). Yet as one major supporter concedes: “it was too little too late”. The group claims it has signed up 120,000 people; even if this is true, Mr Corbyn’s commanding poll lead suggests that it is not nearly enough.

But proponents of this strikingly top-down bottom-up strategy think they can get a second bite at the cherry, and that a couple of things can be done to assure success next time. One is to put in place a much larger, more established recruitment network. That means setting up local and workplace branches to connect with the sort of centrist and centre-left folk who, as members, union affiliates or registered supporters, might re-anchor the party in election-winning ground. As Luke Akehurst, leader of the anti-Corbyn group Labour First, puts it: “We need to...playMomentum at its own game.”

The second is to come up with a better candidate. Campaigns like that of Barack Obama against Hillary Clinton in 2008, Matteo Renzi’s lightning rise to Italy’s premiership in 2013 (supported by 1.9m in an open primary) and Donald Trump’s victory in this year’s Republican primaries show that a charismatic and dynamic figurehead can draw a lot of “ordinary” voters into an internal party contest. Mr Smith—decent but untested, gaffe-prone and rather unremarkable—is not that sort of candidate. Mr Umunna, Rachel Reeves, a former Bank of England economist, Dan Jarvis, a former soldier, Yvette Cooper, one of the candidates who stood against Mr Corbyn last time, and Sir Keir Starmer, once Britain’s director for public prosecutions, are among those often mentioned as at least slightly more stirring possible leaders for the next push. Their challenge will be not to gather support in Westminster tea rooms, but to show that they can recruit members *en masse*; only after that has been demonstrated will it be worth choosing the one or two who excel to stand in another leadership battle.

Mr Corbyn and his surrogates will cry betrayal and disloyalty at such open manoeuvring. So be it. Labour’s MPs have little to lose. Some face deselection, others are near-guaranteed defeat at the next election (which is not due until 2020—but Mrs May can read polls). Plenty are already routinely and roundly abused by their leader’s online supporters and local cheerleaders. They should find liberation in all this, feeling free to organise, agitate and throw whatever reserves of piss and vinegar they have left into saving their party from its spiral of decline. They are tribal, defensive and desperate. But that, too, can be a form of strength.