

ФЕДЕРАЛЬНОЕ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ БЮДЖЕТНОЕ УЧРЕЖДЕНИЕ НАУКИ

**ИНСТИТУТ ЕВРОПЫ
РОССИЙСКОЙ АКАДЕМИИ
НАУК**

125009, МОСКВА, МОХОВАЯ УЛ., 11-3
ТЕЛ.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
ФАКС: +7(495)629-92-96
WWW.INSTITUTEOFEUROPE.RU



**INSTITUTE OF EUROPE
RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF
SCIENCES**

125009, MOSCOW, MOKHOVAYA STR., 11-3
TEL.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
FAX: +7(495)629-92-96
WWW.IERAS.RU

Working Paper №11, 2015 (№11)

Britain's Labour Party: Principles or Power?

Elena Ananieva

Candidate of Philosophical Sciences, Head of Center for British Studies IE RAS

To understand the processes in the Labour Party today, we need to look back at the recent history of British politics.

Following Margaret Thatcher's victory in the 1979 elections, the Conservatives remained in power for 18 years until Tony Blair became Labour Party leader in 1994. He modernised the party, its Charter and programmes, but seriously discredited himself over the war in Iraq. The party moved to the centre of the political spectrum after offering a new vision of the country's future, removed left-wingers from the party's helm to preserve its unity and acquired a leader capable of becoming a national figure. In 1997, the Labour Party won a resounding victory in the parliamentary elections.

Following its defeat in the 1997 elections, the Conservative Party consistently elected leaders who reflected interests that were not just partisan, but openly right-wing, leaders who lacked charisma, while serious intraparty differences regarding its attitude to the EU prevented the party from putting together a clear programme. All of these factors were indicative of the crisis in the Tory camp. It was only after the election of David Cameron in December 2005 that the party was able to revive itself.

In the 2010 elections, neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party gained a majority of seats in parliament, but in 2015 the Conservatives were finally triumphant. The Tories declared themselves to be "a party for working people", while the Labour Party rebranded itself as "a party of fiscal responsibility", which is to say that they swapped colours.

After losing in the May 2015 elections, the Labourists elected a new leader on 12 September, Jeremy Corbyn, who represents the left wing of the party.

The election process adopted at the 2014 party conference allows anyone to take part in the Labour Party leadership elections – all they need to do is pay £3 and confirm their commitment to the Labour Party's goals and values to register as a party supporter. This status gives an equal right to vote for the party's leader alongside party members (full members) and members of a trade union affiliated to the Labour Party using the alternative voting system.

Tens of thousands of people with left-wing views registered as £3 party supporters or party members. In fact, the party has grown rapidly in size since May's parliamentary elections and 160,000 applications to vote were received in the final 24 hours of registration alone (the deadline was midday on 12 August)¹. The number of applications submitted through trade unions doubled and the number of party members also increased. By mid-August, the electorate was close to 611,000 people².

Jeremy Corbyn received 59.5 per cent of the votes: almost half of the votes of party members (49.5 per cent), more than 70 per cent of the votes of £3 party supporters and nearly 60 per cent of the votes of union members, i.e. primarily thanks to party supporters. Andy Burnham (his closest rival and a representative of the party's centre right), who was previously considered the favourite, received just 19 per cent of the votes³.

The new 66-year-old Labour Party leader, who has been a Member of Parliament since 1983 (and has voted against his party more than 500 times⁴), opposes cuts in government welfare spending and advocates workers' rights, the abolition of fees for higher education, the nationalisation of the railways and public utilities, the cancellation of the Trident nuclear system and the country's withdrawal from NATO. He believes that Britain will only be able to remain in the EU if there are changes to labour legislation in favour of workers.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Prime Minister David Cameron and Secretary of State for Defence Michael Fallon consider him to be "a threat to national security"⁵. Moreover, the Prime Minister will not negotiate new terms for the UK's membership of the EU regarding the easing of labour laws.

¹ Labour leadership contest: the final days. Labour leadership: Candidates chase final votes - BBC News. 09.09.2015. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34196290>.

² Labour leadership: Huge increase in party's electorate - BBC News. 12.08.2015. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-33892407>

³ Dominiczak P., Wilkinson M. Labour leadership election: How the party voted. URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/labour/11860439/Labour-leadership-election-How-the-party-voted.html>.

⁴ Jeremy Corbyn: Who is Labour's new leader? URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34218294>.

⁵ Stone J. David Cameron claims Jeremy Corbyn is a 'threat to national security' // The Independent. 13 September 2015. URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-claims-jeremy-corbyn-is-a-threat-to-national-security-10498651.html>

The reasons for Jeremy Corbyn's victory can be explained by the social composition of the electorate – young people with a university education (too young to remember the party's 18 years in opposition or even the party in power). In comparison with the other candidates' voters, Corbyn's voters are politically active people with uncompromising left-wing views. They are against airstrikes on Syria and feel negatively towards the institution of the monarchy. They include fewer people with a higher than average income (26 per cent) and a high social status (36 per cent).

They are also almost twice as likely to have voted for the Liberal Democrats in 2010 (18 per cent), i.e. against the Labour Party led by the unpopular Gordon Brown and for the promising Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. Most of them consider the US to be "the greatest single threat to world peace" (51 per cent). The idealists among them are also in the majority (67 per cent aligned themselves with the words of John Lennon: "You may say that I'm a dreamer")⁶. The hard-line left-wingers among them make up the majority (74 per cent), while only accounting for 14 per cent of the UK electorate (left of centre – 19 per cent, centre – 17 per cent, right of centre – 19 per cent, and right-wing – 8 per cent).

Thus Corbyn's supporters are a coalition of old left-wingers and young protesters, non-conformists, and people who are inspired rather than people of reason and logic. Rejecting pragmatism, they want an ideological alternative, albeit without counting on changes in the country.

And so Jeremy Corbyn beat the other candidates, despite the fact that the respondents of a survey among the Labour Party and its supporters noted a much higher level of competence from the other candidates and their ability to lead the party to victory in the next elections (although the latter quality did not exceed 25 per cent). Corbyn won on moral qualities – honest, principled and courageous⁷.

The most significant outcome of the survey is the lack of faith among the Labour Party members themselves that any of the leadership candidates would be able to lead the party to power in 2020.

As a consequence, the Labour Party will favour emotionally-charged protest (and extra-parliamentary at that) and the search for a new political physiognomy, not the practical, but impossible, task of winning power. Corbyn has filled the ideological vacuum that was created after New Labour ran its course. Ed Miliband's attempts to develop a new concept failed: "responsible capitalism", "Blue Labour", "One Nation Labour" – they were all so eclectic and derivative that they superseded one another, disappearing without a trace.

⁶ Sayers F. "You may say that I'm a dreamer": inside the mindset of Jeremy Corbyn's supporters. URL: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/08/27/you-may-say-im-dreamer-inside-mindset-jeremy-corby/>

⁷ Kellner P. Why Jeremy Corbyn's supporters don't care about winning // Prospect magazine. August 12, 2015. URL: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blogs/peter-kellner/why-jeremy-corbyns-supporters-dont-care-about-winning>

The desire to preserve its traditional social base (now a numerically small working class and public sector workers), but also appeal to the middle class, resulted in an ideological inconsistency and an unclear programme that was not that different in theory from the programmes of its main political rivals. The latter, incidentally, inherited much from New Labour. In this regard, the Labour Party is repeating the fate of mainstream European social democracy – a victim of its own success.

Is the Labour Party going to become a protest party along the lines of Podemos or Syriza? The intraparty differences are intensifying. They are unlikely to lead to a split, however: the party still remembers the fate of the Gang of Four all too well. Corbyn's opponents will prefer to wait until he has been removed from his post. Already, there are debates about whether Jeremy Corbyn – the “Donald Trump of the Labour Party” – will be able to hold his ground as a leader for the next two years or whether Corbyn's £3 supporters will call it a night, enabling the right-wingers (moderate and ‘responsible’ Labour Party members) to claim the party for themselves.

Others are also pointing out that sooner or later, the Labour Party will once again be faced with the task of winning an election: otherwise the country will not change⁸. It is possible that the party will attract considerable voter support in local elections, regional elections, by-elections, and European Parliament elections (as the UK Independence Party demonstrated). However, general parliamentary elections have nothing to do with local issues or problems that are far removed from the everyday needs of the electorate. They concern the fate of the country. As long as British voters as a whole hold centrist views, the Labour Party will have to return to the centre ground.

Date of release: September 16, 2015.

This publication can be downloaded at: <http://ieras.ru/newspub.htm>

Originally published at: <http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2015/09/17/britains-labour-party-principles-or-power.html>

⁸ URL: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blogs/prospector-blog/big-question-is-labour-heading-for-a-split-join-labour>