

LABOUR AFTER CORBYN

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FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG

AT A GLANCE

Keir Starmer was announced as Labour's new leader on 4 April 2020. A career human rights lawyer, his political strategy has been consistent since the 1980s: a socialism based on justice and wealth redistribution, a commitment to internationalism and a vision of the Labour Party as a vehicle for all oppressed and exploited sections of society. Starmer's pitch to Labour's estimated 580,000 active members is an end to factionalism: his base includes activists from the Corbyn camp, the ›soft left‹ and some veteran Tony Blair supporters. However, his policy commitments have been seen as unspecific, and much depends on what Labour's different factions and interest groups prioritise. If Labour are to win under Starmer, the long-term route back to power involves finding a narrative that can unite socially-conservative former industrial communities and the so-called ›new working class‹ around a single project.

WHO IS KEIR STARMER?

Starmer was born in 1962 to a skilled working class family in southern England. He joined the Labour Party while a teenager and was active on the left during his early years as a lawyer, giving free legal advice and aid to striking printworkers, seafarers and anti-Poll Tax rioters.

In the mid-1980s, Starmer was on the editorial collective of *Socialist Alternatives*, a magazine originating in the former Trotskyite current led by Michel Pablo, which had evolved towards a politics that would be described in the German context as ›red-green‹. In an interview with Labour's left-wing icon Tony Benn, Starmer argued for Labour to be refounded as a ›united party of the oppressed‹ rather than simply representing the old, industrial proletariat.¹

From 1987 to 2008 he pursued a successful legal career as a barrister in the human rights field, for example fighting against the death penalty in the Caribbean. In 2003, he published a high-profile legal opinion that the Iraq war was unlawful.²

In 2008 he was appointed by Gordon Brown as Director of Public Prosecutions (equivalent to Germany's *Generalbundesanwalt*). In this office he pursued a liberal and progressive agenda, and received a knighthood on his resignation in 2013 ›for services to law and criminal justice‹. At the 2015 election he became a Labour MP, winning the safe central London constituency of Holborn and St Pancras.

Starmer's position under Corbynism was as a critical and occasionally rebellious ally, but from a different political tradition. He represents a distinct political strand within the Labour left tradition focused on rights, justice and social liberalism. This tradition is strongly rooted in the multi-ethnic urban communities which have become Labour's new base.

He joined the anti-Corbyn ›coup‹ after the Brexit referendum in 2016, but after this failed he was quickly readmitted to Corbyn's front bench team, where he led Labour's policy on the Brexit negotiations until today.

STARMER'S EMERGENCE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO CORBYN

Starmer consistently demonstrated independence from Corbyn as a member of the shadow cabinet, though never breaking collective responsibility. During the anti-Semitism crisis (Spring 2018 onwards), Starmer publicly called for Corbyn to take a tougher stance against left anti-Semitism.³ Likewise on Corbyn's reputation-damaging response to the poisoning of

1 <https://britishpabloism.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/socialist-alternatives-v2-no1-april-may-1987.pdf>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/mar/17/foreignpolicy.iraq1>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/apr/26/keir-starmer-hits-back-at-mccluskey-labour-antisemitism-remarks>

Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in May 2018, Starmer took a tougher anti-Putin line, publicly at odds with that of the leadership.

At the September 2018 Labour Party conference, Starmer was given a standing ovation by the members for adding to his speech the unscripted and unauthorised pledge: ›*nobody is ruling out Remain as an option in any second referendum*‹.

By contrast, Corbyn, in alliance with the left trade union leaders, resisted demands for a second referendum and objected to the inclusion of Remain as an option. Starmer's move was interpreted as a victory for the largely pro-EU membership over Corbyn himself, and over those unions whose support for state aid/nationalisation made them strongly Eurosceptic.

At this point not only did Labour's membership effectively divide over Brexit, but so did Corbynism's base. Starmer became the figurehead of a pro-European, globalist left. Meanwhile, it seemed that the pro-Corbyn group – including the powerful union *Unite* and the *Communications Workers' Union* (CWU), senior Shadow Cabinet members from ex-mining communities, plus figures in Corbyn's advisory team – was pursuing a different project: to deliver Brexit, either through a deal with Theresa May or through tacitly allowing a ›rebellion‹ of pro-Brexit Labour MPs.

After the defeat in the national elections of December 2019, a large section of Labour's orthodox left blamed Starmer because (they claimed) his support for the second referendum/Remain had alienated socially conservative Labour voters in former industrial areas. This, in turn, polarised the divisions within the wider Corbynite movement, moving some pro-EU leftists towards Starmer once he declared his candidacy.

Starmer's leadership campaign was an alliance from the outset. It included figures from within Corbynism but is predominantly made up of MPs, activists and local councillors aligned with the so-called ›soft left‹, some of whom had been aligned with Blair.

For this reason Starmer's political project is likely to change over time as the disparate forces who support him respond to events. What unites them for now are:

- they believe that a party led by the orthodox left alone (that is, the political forces that were core to Corbynism) cannot win an election;
- they want a more focused left economic policy, more emphasis on wellbeing and sustainability, and a more traditional approach to foreign and security policy;
- they want the leadership operation to represent the whole party, not just a faction within it;
- socialism is to be defined around social, economic and climate justice, with policies prioritised if they meet these objectives.

THE STATE OF THE LABOUR PARTY

On 12 December 2019, Labour lost 2.5 million votes compared with its 2017 total. It lost 60 seats at the general election, including all but one in Scotland and many in the so-called ›Red Wall‹ areas: English former industrial towns with an ageing population, high numbers of low skilled jobs and few transport links, which had voted heavily for Brexit.

Pro-Brexit voices – on both the right and left of the party – blamed the defeat on the adoption of the Second Referendum/Remain position advocated by Starmer. However, a look at where the 2.5 million lost votes went shows there were three strategic problems.

First, according to the political analyst Dataprax, Labour indeed lost around 700–800,000 *pro-Brexit* voters to the Conservatives. These voters were profoundly hostile to the European Union, inward migration and Corbyn himself.⁴ Second, Labour lost another 300,000 *pro-EU* voters to the Conservatives. The motivation here seemed entirely due to mistrust of Corbyn and fear that his radical economic agenda would disrupt their already precarious lives. Third, Labour lost 1.1 million voters to the *pro-EU* centrist parties: the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and the Scottish National Party.

So, the problem is not just that ›socially conservative workers deserted Labour‹. Some socially liberal, young and urban voters also deserted Labour. As the party's own internal analysis concluded:

›Between 2017 and 2019, Labour lost support to all parties, in all types of constituencies and amongst voters of all demographic and socioeconomic groups. The total support lost to the Liberal Democrats equalled that lost to the Conservatives and Brexit Party combined.‹⁵

The party's analysis concludes that Labour's support is growing in big cities and suburban towns, but falling in small former industrial towns. It is growing among young and falling among older voters. Before the impact of coronavirus, analysts pointed to three basic routes to power for Labour in 2024:

1. The Progressive Alliance: through an electoral pact with the Liberal Democrats, Greens and progressive nationalist parties; moving further to the centre on economics while maintaining a socially liberal stance on migration, Europe and so on.
2. Abandon social liberalism: by rebuilding support among socially-conservative small-town workers, abandoning some of its socially liberal policies (for example, on migration, human rights), and at the same time moving to the centre economically.

⁴ <https://www.dataprax.is/tory-landslide-progressives-split>

⁵ General Election 2019 What happened? Initial Top-level Findings in Relation to Demography and Geography, Unpublished Labour NEC document, 27 January 2020.

3. Continuity Corbynism: maintaining the Corbyn line, combining left economics, anti-imperialism and social liberalism, in the hope that something changes in the mood of the electorate, or that new forms of grassroots activism can get the message across.

In the leadership election, three rival candidates emerged to embody these options: Clive Lewis for the first (he did not get enough support to be on the ballot paper), Lisa Nandy for the second and Rebecca Long-Bailey for the third.

Starmer's aim, however, is to avoid these in part mutually exclusive alternatives, effectively turning Labour into an electoral alliance that needs to win through hegemonizing progressive politics, in both the cities and the towns. He believes that, by projecting a trustworthy image, reconnecting to working class communities through activism, and putting the Brexit issue behind us, he can avoid choosing between the sharply different strategies listed above.

Meanwhile, since the defeat, the demographics of the party have already changed. Immediately after the election there was a surge in membership, with maybe 100,000 extra members joining to take part in the leadership battle, anecdotally most of them either to support Starmer or candidates to the right of him (Jess Phillips and Lisa Nandy).

STARMER'S DOMESTIC AGENDA

With the 2020 local and mayoral elections cancelled due to the coronavirus, and parliamentary business curtailed, Starmer will focus on giving critical support to the efforts of the Johnson government to combat the epidemic. If the UK situation becomes worse, once Corbyn is no longer leader, some predict the Conservatives will offer to form a National Government, as in May 1940. This possibility is one of the earliest challenges Starmer will face.

Starmer did not primarily fight the leadership election on concrete policies, but on the basis of a ›moral socialism‹ and the need for unity. His *10 Pledges* document was derided by opponents as lacking in content. However, it clearly signalled that Labour will continue to push for redistribution through the tax system, and a radical spending plan to combat climate change, financed through borrowing.⁶ He prefers to speak of ›common ownership‹ rather than nationalisation, pointing to the wide range of options established for a Labour government, including municipal companies and co-ops, under the former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell.

However, the bruising experience of members on the doorstep during the election has brought many up close to a difficult truth: just like Ed Miliband, in the end Corbyn believed that policy would convince people to vote Labour. Starmer told them you also need a trustworthy and competent leader, and a professionally crafted narrative.

Of course, because of the fiscal and monetary stimulus unleashed by the Conservatives, the battle lines will now be drawn differently: over redistribution, opposition to austerity after the crisis is over, and numerous ideologically driven mistakes made by the government in its anti-virus strategy.

Whereas Corbyn's agenda was influenced primarily by left trade unions and the so-called Alternative Economic Strategy of the left in the 1980s, Starmer listens more to economists focused on sustainability, redistribution and wellbeing. He is tangibly more engaged in the digitalisation agenda than Corbyn's team were.

His Shadow Cabinet is likely to differ from Corbyn's in two ways. First, it will be politically more diverse. Second, it will function more as a team. Under Corbyn, all policymaking had to be channelled through Corbyn's own office, leading to delays, vetoes and ultimately the atrophy of policymaking functions among other senior political teams inside the party.

Much depends on how the two distinct groups opposed to Starmer, and lined up behind rival leadership candidates, react. Momentum, which has supported Rebecca Long-Bailey for leader, may decide to become an organised left opposition to Starmer. Meanwhile, Lisa Nandy's campaign – though rooted in the Blue Labour tendency (a socially conservative and communitarian form of Labourism) – has also been heavily backed by former Blairites.

Paradoxically, what now unites Labour's orthodox left and socially conservative right is their acquiescence in Brexit (and their desire for it to ›go away‹ as an issue) plus their willingness to blame Starmer's metropolitan social-liberalism for the election defeat. One of his earliest tasks will be to give these groupings a stake in the project going forward.

CORONAVIRUS AND BREXIT

The Johnson government has made big, ideologically-driven mistakes in its initial strategy over coronavirus, leading to late and inadequate measures to suppress its spread. This is likely to become a scandal once the virus is defeated.

For some analysts, the depth of the coronavirus crisis means that Johnson's entire political project is imperilled. Robert Shrimley, a *Financial Times* commentator, writes:

›The Boris Johnson government we thought we knew is over. The rest of his premiership will be spent on this crisis and its aftermath. There will be little space for anything else. And that is assuming that he is still in place to oversee the aftermath.‹⁷

However, despite the disruption Johnson's primary obsession remains to deliver Brexit, even at the cost of a hard or no-deal

⁶ <https://keirstarmer.com/plans/10-pledges/>

⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/21672cd6-6ce4-11ea-9bca-bf503995cd6f>

Brexit in December 2020. Against this, Starmer's stated objective is a comprehensive trade deal which leaves Britain as closely aligned as possible to the single market and customs union. He has refused to rule out rejoining the EU but indicated this is not a realistic project in the medium term, and should not be reopened in the short term.⁸

Until the coronavirus struck, this was set to be the major point of friction between Starmer and Johnson: the Conservative message – amplified in the disinformation channels of the populist right – was to claim that Starmer wants to rejoin the EU and join the Eurozone.

According to this script, as Johnson pursued a strategy of brinkmanship and confrontation with the Commission, Starmer would be portrayed as the arch Remainer, a liberal lawyer from multi-ethnic north London, overriding the democratic wishes of the people.

However, this is all on hold: if Britain's health service is overwhelmed by coronavirus cases between now and June, it seems inevitable that the hard Brexit deadline will be extended beyond December 2020. Meanwhile the economic slump Johnson was prepared to endure as the price of no-deal Brexit in December pales into insignificance compared with the 15 per cent fall in GDP now predicted.

The real battle lies ahead: whether to return to harsh austerity, or to restructure the economy along more sustainable social-democratic and green priorities. Starmer seems well suited to fighting that battle, once the immediate crisis is over.

COLLABORATION WITH EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Starmer is enthusiastic about collaborating with the PES and its component parties. He has called specifically for the creation of a political education college for the Labour Party, which some have suggested could be modelled along the lines of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and SPD.

Under Corbyn, both Momentum and The World Transformed (TWT – a Labour-aligned political education charity) have been cooperating closely with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Labour has built closer links with parties of the European Left, such as *Die Linke* in Germany, *La France Insoumise* in France and *SYRIZA* in Greece.

Under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, many international connections were informally coordinated by the leader's office rather than by party HQ. Most expect Starmer's office and Labour's party HQ to become more clearly aligned on international work.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental dynamics of British politics remain as they were before the coronavirus: Scotland is on a long-term trajectory towards independence; Britain will leave the EU but on terms that are currently uncertain; the Conservatives have become an Atlanticist and economic nationalist party, with an increasingly right-wing populist membership.

The challenge for Labour is:

- to remedy the reputational damage inflicted during the final phase of Corbyn's leadership, above all with the Jewish community;
- to manage the impact of the Equality and Human Rights Commission investigation into allegations of institutional anti-Semitism;
- to establish a clear electoral strategy towards its progressive rivals and its conservative enemies; and
- to construct what it did not have in 2019, a coherent narrative capable of reaching out to the most crucial target audience: workers who voted Tories in 2017 and 2019.

The path to power, however, now lies through extraordinary circumstances. It could come through the reputational collapse of Johnson's government or swift changes in public mood. Alternatively, it could come via the route of a temporary National Government. Interestingly, none of the three contenders for the Labour leadership have ruled this out.

If, however there is a conventional ›peacetime‹ election in 2024, if Johnson has navigated the coronavirus and exited the EU without massive disruption, it will be hard for Labour to win back the seats already lost in its former heartlands. That, however, is the task the new Labour leader has to focus on.

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⁸ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1241680/Keir-Starmer-Brexit-news-UK-EU-rejoin-Labour-leadership-contest-latest-news>