

Is Clive Lewis really saying Labour is looking at a rev...

Published: January 12, 2026, 9:13 pm

Clive Lewis [wrote an article supporting Jeremy Corbyn for leader of Labour yesterday](#). It was candid. And as I know and like Clive I read it with respect for his honesty.

One group of paragraphs stood out to me. They said this:

[There is] an existential crisis of Labour and social democracy happening the world over. To try to find the one leader who can somehow solve the crisis for us is to miss the point.

Twentieth-century social democracy was always about electing other people to do our bidding. [It's the parliamentary road to socialism we have heard about recently](#) (rather than the revolutionary road). And this is underpinned by the role MPs played in that process.

But that worked when MPs and the central state could make the political weather. Increasingly, we can't. Increasingly, power is both global and local, with corporations and citizens — not with MPs.

The link in the middle paragraph is to a speech by Neil Kinnock that was made a couple of weeks ago where he made a passionate case for a Labour leader who sees his primary role to be as leader of a parliamentary party. For anyone who has believed, as I do, that Westminster is the place where national politics play out it seemed like an eminently sensible demand: the whole balance of our constitution and our parliamentary democracy depends upon there being an official opposition that is willing to undertake the day to day detailed and often tedious programme of holding the government to account on its detailed legislative plans for the sake of the people of this country. If such an opposition does not exist a government can, bluntly, do what it likes.

Labour, right from the time of its creation, and within its constitution from 1918 onwards, has explicitly been committed to socialism through parliamentary democracy. The result has often, I admit, been mildly social democratic and not socialist, but that is what Labour chose. Clive's sentence construction is a little opaque, but implies what I

think he is really saying, which is the revolutionary path whether within or beyond one state was explicitly rejected by Labour.

What Clive then clearly suggests, without quite saying it, is that this binary choice of parliament or revolution was that of the last century. I think he is saying there is a third way now, as I read it. And this is something where he suggests that the parliamentary party is subservient to the greater party. He puts it like this:

Changes that are being enhanced by technological innovation (social media being a case in point) are happening at an increasing rate. The top-down, vertical power relationships of the past are being replaced by a more evenly distributed, bottom-up variety.

It could be reasonably argued the current fault line between the "membership" and the parliamentary Labour party (PLP) is in fact a symptom of this changing power relationship.

And what he concludes is:

So let me be clear — Corbyn is the best candidate because, in his own way, he understands some of the economic and moral challenges we face, and is the product of a deep desire for something new.

This is interesting because it seems clear that what Clive is saying is that actually there is simply an alternative and new revolution to hand now; he just does not name it as such. And he might imply it's a new way, but I doubt that; it's just a different revolutionary route.

The nature of that revolution as he sees it is profound and clear: it makes the MP not the servant of the electorate in their constituency but of their party, as I read it.

But that also means that the MP is not a representative agent as Burke would have put it, able to use their conscience as they saw fit and accountable for how they did so when due for re-election, but makes them instead a mandated servant of an interest group, which is the party membership.

Let's not pretend that if Clive really means what he says that this is not radical, revolutionary and a complete break from the past, because it is. And I think many who support Corbyn do think that this change is what they want. As one person on Twitter put it to me yesterday in response to my suggestion that Corbyn has failed to deliver policy:

@RichardJMurphy the 'movement' Corbyn finds himself heading is dynamic & not sure it concerns itself with policy/political detail, but need.

I strongly suspect the person who write that is as sincere as Clive, and I have long felt

her opinion to be honest, but three things stand out.

First, she thinks that this is a movement, not a political party. And if Corbyn is heading it then that's implied by the word 'finds' to be the result of some sort of chance: the opportunity has arisen in this way but it might have done in another.

Second, this movement will not concern itself with detail as political oppositions and governments do. It is instead driven by a different sentiment, which is to meet need.

Third, this is not essentially about Labour but something else altogether which is beyond it, as the 'buy a vote' option has permitted.

This, however, then loops back to Clive. In effect what the Twitter commentator and Clive are both saying is that we are seeing is very radical change that might represent a fundamental shift in Labour's perception of what democracy and parliamentary engagement might mean. A political party whose sole goal has been to secure democratic control at varying levels of government in the UK, and to be the opposition within those elected chambers when not in power itself, might now see itself as something quite different.

I accept that this new perception is fluid. But if I can tentatively draw conclusions, and given that I would rate Clive as being close to Corbyn I think that fair to do, then I would suggest there are five.

First, in this view of Labour the role of MPs is markedly downgraded.

Second, it is somewhat sidelining the electorate.

Third, it is treating the legislative process as secondary to a higher purpose.

Fourth, it is deciding that the higher purpose is determined by a movement to which some of its members belong.

Fifth if this is true it is not said as yet how the decision making process of this movement is to be manifested beyond its ability to elect a leader, who is accountable to that movement as a consequence, and not anyone else.

I stress, I think those are fair conclusions even if I have had to draw them out from what Clive and the Twitter commentator, whose comment in fairness seems representative of a very great many I have seen, seem to be saying. But if they are true then it is much more obvious, to me at least, why there is the 'struggle' that is going on.

That struggle is real. It is for power. It is for control. And it is fundamental.

On the one hand - and Owen Smith is the person who now represents this although the ideas clearly belong to a very long tradition and not his campaign - there is the role of

parliamentary democracy that is democratic because of accountability (albeit, I admit, flawed) to an electorate. In this tradition once elected the MP has multiple duties, including of representation of all constituents but also, and as much, to the democratic process of which they are a part.

On the other there is a movement that has taken control of Labour at present through the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn that seeks to make MPs representative agents of a movement to which the greatest loyalty is due in which obligations to parliament and an electorate are secondary and where democracy refers to the decisions taken by that movement and not in any wider context. The language and actions of so many, from Jeremy Corbyn downwards, only permit interpretation of this sort as far as I can see it.

I stress, I offer this for debate as I struggle to understand what is going on. I could apply some political theory to this, but I won't. I do not think it would help, at least as yet. And of course I may have got things wrong. In addition I am sure some of my interpretation may not be agreed, but Clive's language does certainly not permit me to think that anything like the traditional relationship between Labour, its MPs and parliament is expected to survive this process. And he sees that as inevitable, it seems. His conclusion is:

Ultimately we must use the campaign to seize the future and help Labour escape from its past — or it will die, whether Jeremy Corbyn is leader or not.

There is not a hint that the past in question is a reference to policy. Nor to ideologies. It is about power relationships, which is what I have referred to here. And if it is those that this leadership struggle is about then it is very clear that this is indeed a struggle between a parliamentary vision of delivery and one that is fundamentally different, and the two are simply not reconcilable. I am on the side of parliamentary democracy and I am happy to say so. This explains the choices I have made. I am also certain that this country's future is dependent upon the perpetuation of that parliamentary system, whilst also letting it reform as is necessary at a rate that the country as a whole can accept to be appropriate. I sincerely hope Labour realises that. But if it does not then I agree with Clive that I am sure Labour will die. But that's one of the few places where our logic coincides, and I really think it important to realise just how big the schism that is being looked at here really is. In which case no wonder the debate is hostile.