

Why the Labour leadership campaign is important

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Someone said yesterday that this blog appeared to have become a discussion board on the Labour leadership. I would argue that is merely symptomatic. It so happens that what is happening in that debate is of some significance to my broader issues of concern. But the issue is not Labour per se but the broader consequences of the debate.

The Labour party leadership debate matters for at least three reasons. The first is because Labour is the current official opposition in the UK parliament. This means that its MPs have the primary task of holding the government to account for its actions. If what the government was doing was benign the role of the opposition is one to which little attention need be given. but when the government seems intent on actions that might be of harm to the groups in society whose interests most concern me then the opposition has a crucial role to play. I happen to think that the case at present.

I do not believe that the government is running sound economic policy. Partly deliberately and partly as a consequence of that policy we know we are suffering wage recession for many, a crisis of affordability of housing, rising debt burdens for far too many households and a destruction of the social safety net that has been a fundamental component of the UK's society for generations. Having a functioning parliamentary opposition is a pre-requisite to drawing attention to these plan and seeking to change them. [My contention of late](#) has been that this opposition has not been supplied under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and that this has been his fault.

The second reason for concern is that I think that the whole fabric on which successful change in the UK political environment has been built has been the democratic process. To put it bluntly nothing but political power secured through the ballot box has been able to challenge the power of capital. Those on the right who are open on this issue call this the tyranny of democracy. By this they mean that democracy has given a majority who own little capital the power to make claim on that capital through tax and regulation to make sure that some of it at least is used for social good. Capital has, of course, fought back, which is the whole tax haven story in essence. But the reality is that it has been unable to do so as long as democracy, and democracy alone, has a

popular legitimacy to constrain its power. If that legitimacy is threatened, [and I think it is](#), then the ability to constrain the power of capital will be foregone and with it nearly two centuries of struggle to bring it under some form of control.

Third, the phenomena of what is happening is in itself interesting. As a political economist I am interested in the interaction of ideas on the economy, politics, law, sociology, history and philosophy and how they explain what is happening in our society. I am not afraid of taking positions as a result. Nor am I worried about becoming a participant in the process of change: I see the relationship between the observer and the observed as active, fluid and not only necessary but essential. This is why I offer ideas that have been and are being used in the same process that I observe and comment upon. This does not make me neutral in the comments I make but in saying so I am only making explicit something that is always true: as a matter of fact there is no such thing as neutral comment.

What that means then is that if this blog appears to be comment on Labour leadership issues that happens to be because I think the issue is important.

It's important because this country needs a functioning opposition and it has not got one.

It is important because the struggle to control Labour is about something much more than the supposed claim that this is socialism against neoliberalism. The policy platform Owen Smith has put forward is objectively way to the left of anything Labour has presented for years and in many senses just as radical as those policies of Jeremy Corbyn's that can be identified. Labour's politics have, I think, shifted to the left for the time being at least, come what may. But if there is still a clear and passionate difference then there is more to the issue than mere left v right argument. As I have suggested, I think this is in a very real sense a power struggle with the structure of parliamentary democracy itself. This may appear reasonable: that democracy has, because of the hegemony of neoliberal thinking for more than three decades come to be seen as a mechanism for what many rightly see as an oppressive ideology that has created considerable social harm, but I would argue that the anger is misplaced.

And that issue important because there appears to be no plan to fill the void that the attempt to undermine the role of parliamentary opposition is creating and this, quite astonishingly and apparently mostly unnoticed to those partaking in the debate, is letting a government that should be held to account entirely off the hook.

In all this I have a strong feeling of déjà vu. I recall the heady days of Occupy only a few years ago and the hope that inspired and see some similarity with what is happening now. That was a movement without defined goals: indeed, that was much of the criticism made of it. When it eventually [adopted a list of demands](#) they were in many ways those of the tax justice movement. I, of course, welcomed that, but once that happened the question became how these could be delivered and for all sorts of

reasons the role of Occupy faded, but tax justice did not.

Putting that in the current context I am worried. It's been my experience as a campaigner who has, I think, enjoyed some success, that being opposed to something is not a sufficient condition for change to take place. Tax justice only worked because we were for something, and could always say how to deliver it. So we demanded accountability for multinational corporations, and offered country-by-country reporting as the way to do it. We demanded transparency for tax havens and automatic information exchange was the way to do it. And so on. We, in other words, defined a problem, created a solution, made a demand and have negotiated our way towards delivery.

I cannot see that pattern in what is happening in the movement around Corbyn. In fact I see anything but that. I see a rejection of the idea of specific demands. I see no policy solutions being presented. And so, right now, I see no way demands can be met. As a campaigner that looks to me like a disaster in the making.

Of course I share the view that neoliberalism needs to be challenged: I have done so relentlessly. Read *The Courageous State*.

Of course I also share the view that democracy needs to be changed: I want PR and broader account accountability. I wish Corbyn shared that view.

And of course I believe in a radical change in economic policy. That is what the Green New Deal has always been about.

And I believe in social justice. Read *the Joy of Tax*.

But this requires a plan, and a delivery mechanism and strong leadership.

I hoped Jeremy Corbyn might have provided that. No one is more disappointed than me to find he cannot, but the sad truth is that he can't, and nor can those around him: the necessary skills to combine vision with workable ideas that can be coherently presented in a way that will ensure detailed management can be delegated to a team who both understand what they are meant to do and what their role in both delivering and communicating it might be is not present.

And now when that has become obvious - because of the revolt of the PLP who needed that plan to do their work and did not get it - the backlash has been against the PLP and not against the person who failed to lead it, which was his primary task.

That does not mean the PLP is faultless: far from it, there are clearly those within it whose role in supporting a neoliberal agenda permits reasonable questions to be asked, as I have done, many times. But that does not mean that making the work of the PLP nigh on impossible, as seems to be the intention, is any solution. Nor is questioning whether democracy has a continuing role when there is no viable and in any way

potentially legitimate alternative being offered by those seeking to destroy the effectiveness of the opposition within the existing structure of government in any way reasonable, and yet I perceive very strongly that many in the Corbyn camp (for want of a better term) do now pose that question of democracy without having any suggestion as to an answer.

And this is what worries me, and why I have focussed on this issue. The structure of power that can deliver change has to be of interest to anyone who wants to effect change for social purposes. And all I can see right now is a process of destruction of the best and so far only effective mechanism for delivering alternatives in society on behalf of those without economic power that I know of.

So I opt for an explicitly parliamentary route to delivering the best available policy. I am sure I will not agree with all the policy Owen Smith will present. I suspect he won't either: leadership involves embracing views that are not your own.

And I opt to maintain parliamentary democracy in which MPs are representatives and not delegates.

I do so noting that I want parliamentary reform.

And I do so noting that there is in power a government that will do all it can to prevent that reform and that must be displaced from office in the existing system if reform is to take place.

I do not think undermining the Labour parliamentary process, as has happened, can in any way help that process of change.

I wish the Labour leadership we have had would have shown that it was aware of the compromises needed, on electoral reform, on cross party cooperation, and so much more that might have made viable change a possibility that people could have united around instead of promoting a populism that threatens its potential delivery. But it did not.

And I do so noting that to question democracy at this moment is to throw away the only way change can really be delivered.

Which is why I believe that on an evidence base those supporting Jeremy Corbyn are poor party politicians, poor democrats (at best), poor campaigners and poor defenders of those in whose interests they claim to act. And because some disagree this blog appears to be a Labour Party discussion board.

But I assure you, the issues are much bigger than that.