

# UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and the national anthem row

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Commentary in the political establishment and the media in the days following Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour leader has centred on one issue above all others: his failure to sing the national anthem.

The furore began on Monday after the veteran Labour "left" participated in the official Battle of Britain memorial service, commemorating the Second World War air battles between the Luftwaffe and the Royal Air Force from July to September 1940.

As those assembled in St Paul's Cathedral sang "God save the Queen", Corbyn stood, hands clasped, in silence.

A slew of indignant headlines followed, along the lines of Corbyn "snubs Queen and country". The new leader was criticised by members of his own shadow cabinet, while some Labour MPs attacked his actions as "dishonourable."

Corbyn—a declared republican and pacifist—responded that he had stood in "respectful silence", both to mark "the heroism of the Royal Air Force" and to "ensure future generations are spared the horrors of war."

Corbyn's defenders in the media and the Labour Party have been few and far between. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Alex Marshall, stated that Corbyn was right not to have sung because *God Save the Queen* is "the world's most irrelevant national anthem—the only one that says literally nothing about the country it's meant to represent... If it has any role to play today, it's simply to remind forgetful tourists that they should stop by Buckingham Palace before getting the flight home."

For Corbyn's campaign team, the row is "tittle tattle"; a distraction from more pressing considerations, including that parliament voted on Monday to cut welfare benefits by 325 votes to 290.

Many workers and youth will no doubt agree. The cut to tax credits, state subsidies for low paid workers, will see over three million families lose an average of £1,000 per year. Against the backdrop of deepening austerity, to sing

the national anthem, or not, will strike many as petty politicking.

To dismiss the row as a mere diversion, however, would be a serious error. More properly, it provides an object lesson in the nature of the political set-up in Britain and, flowing from that, the perspective that must inform all those genuinely seeking an end to social inequality and war.

Corbyn claims that through "discussion" and "persuasion", he can convince Labour of the need to spearhead a "grassroots" movement for "social solidarity" that can build such pressure on the powers-that-be, it will have to mend its ways, or at least submit to "democratic" opinion.

In line with this perspective, he told the *New Statesman* during the leadership contest that, while "at heart" he was "a republican... it's not the fight I'm going to fight: it's not the fight I'm interested in. I'm much more interested in rebalancing our society, dealing with problems, protecting the environment."

But the monarchy is not to be treated as a disinterested bystander as Corbyn suggests. It is the living embodiment of social relations rooted in class exploitation and the capitalist nation state system, based on private ownership of the means of production and production for profit.

As such, the monarchy stands at the very apex of the constitutional mechanisms—from parliament to the secret service and the army—through which the bourgeoisie maintains and defends its interests.

That is why the media have moved on to demand that if, having been invited as Leader of the Opposition to join the Privy Council, Corbyn will observe protocol, kneel before the queen and swear an oath of allegiance.

The Privy Council is entrusted with state secrets and members are obliged to "not know or understand of any manner of thing to be attempted, done or spoken against Her Majesty's Person, Honour, Crown or Dignity Royal,"

without informing the Council and to “keep secret all matters committed and revealed unto you...”

As Anne Perkins explained in the *Guardian*, upon becoming Labour leader and a privy counsellor, Corbyn must accept that “bowing gracefully to the formalities of high office is a necessary precondition to being able to use the power it brings to do the things he wants”. Having “captured the commanding heights” of state office, he “can do all he can to quietly avoid these moments of conspicuous compromise, but sometimes he just has to do it.”

Nowhere is the demand for “conspicuous compromise” more vocal than from the Labour Party itself, which is a vital political component of these same state institutions. Corbyn’s subsequent clarification that he intends to “take part fully” in all future official occasions, was followed by a Labour spokesman stressing that what “he meant was that ‘taking part fully’ would include singing the anthem.”

Trotsky wrote scathingly in the 1920s of the labour movement in Britain being polluted by “radicals, intellectuals, drawing-room and church socialists and Owenites who reject the class struggle and advocate the principle of social solidarity, preach collaboration with the bourgeoisie, bridle, enfeeble and politically debase the proletariat.” [*Writings on Britain*, Volume 2, New Park, London 1974, p. 48]

The last decades have witnessed the rotten end product of this in a Labour Party that is another Conservative Party in all but name. The possibility of converting this right-wing husk into a vehicle for “social justice” and “peace” is just as bankrupt as the illusion that the financial oligarchy can be peacefully persuaded to agree to a fairer redistribution of wealth.

Internationally, the ruling elites confront a deepening economic crisis and a growing leftward movement of the working class. Under these conditions, they are testing out various ways in which they hope to contain, dissipate and disarm this movement, so as to gain the time, and forces necessary to impose their reactionary agenda.

The bourgeoisie have Corbyn’s political measure. Not only is his own history steeped in opportunist petty-bourgeois politics; his coterie of pseudo-left advisers are drawn from the same social milieu as Syriza in Greece, whose hostility to the working class has been laid bare in its abject capitulation to the European bourgeoisie and its demands for even more savage austerity.

By making a song and dance over his “silence” on the national anthem, they are seeking reassurances that he,

and the party he leads, can be relied upon. Corbyn may be permitted to vote against certain bills, read letters from “ordinary” people at Prime Minister’s Question Time and even preach the virtues of a republic in private. But what must not be done, under any circumstances, is to challenge the authority of the state apparatus that Labour will be called on to defend.

“How can they assault bourgeois property if they dare not refuse pocket money to the Prince of Wales?”, Trotsky asked pointedly. As if to confirm his prescience, only a few days into his new post, Corbyn has already begun to retreat on a number of his key “principles”.

After threatening that further “anti-worker” policies on the part of the European Union could lead to Labour supporting British withdrawal in the 2017 referendum, he now says that he cannot see a situation where that would be likely.

Corbyn also told Channel 4 News that whereas he wanted the party to oppose the government’s benefits cap of £20,000 a year outside London, he accepted that welfare spending would have to be kept within the limits set by the Conservative government. “The policy is that we work within the total budget of £120 billion,” he said. If Labour rejected his proposal to oppose the benefit cap, then he would have to “live with it... I am a democrat.”

As for his commitment to scrapping Trident, Britain’s nuclear weapons system, he has stated that he hopes “the party will come to a position of wanting us to become a nation that does not renew nuclear weapons, but we’re not going to divide and ruin ourselves as a party over this.”



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