

Jeremy Corbyn: The abortive rebranding of a “left muddlehead”

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“... the left muddleheads are incapable of power; but if through the turn of events it fell into their hands they would hasten to pass it over to their elder brothers on the right. They would do the same with the state as they are doing now in the party.” (Leon Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?*)

Nearly a century later, Trotsky’s warning retains its full force in relation to Jeremy Corbyn, the nominally “left” leader of the UK Labour Party.

Corbyn was elected by a landslide following Labour’s electoral wipeout in the 2015 general election. He had the enthusiastic backing of hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters on the basis of his pledge to oppose austerity and war. Following an attempted inner-party coup mounted by the right-wing Parliamentary Labour Party, he was reelected last September with an increased majority.

Time after time, he has betrayed his mandate by capitulating before Labour’s right wing. He named Blairite warmongers to his first cabinet, granted a free vote in support of bombing raids on Syria and the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme, and resigned his presidency of the Stop the War Coalition he had helped found. He instructed local Labour councils to abide by the law and impose austerity cuts demanded by the government, and then abandoned his lifelong opposition—based on a programme of economic nationalism—to the European Union.

Events on Tuesday leading up to his first speech of the New Year, delivered in the city of Peterborough, showed Corbyn once again in political free-fall. By the time he took the stage he had already backed down from the previously worked out script, following attacks from Labour MPs, the press and corporate figures.

The Peterborough speech was supposed to be the culmination of the efforts of Corbyn’s advisers to rebrand him as an anti-establishment “populist” figure, prepared to lead a party that would “stand up for people” and battle corporate interests.

To this end, Corbyn spoke of his concern over growing inequality, the onslaught on wages and conditions and destruction of public services. The welfare state was “failing to provide essential care,” he declared, the National Health Service was in “record deficit” and faced a “humanitarian crisis,” and workers were faced with “a sea of insecurity” while “fat cat” chief executives reaped the benefits.

This was all a rhetorical cover for Corbyn’s efforts to prove Labour’s political worth to a crisis-ridden ruling elite, torn asunder by the consequences of the Brexit referendum. The fate of the City of London and UK-based companies, half of whose shares are in foreign hands, lay in the balance.

Corbyn’s team chose Peterborough because it voted strongly in favour of leaving the European Union in last year’s referendum vote and has a large Eastern European migrant population. It was meant as a signal that Corbyn was prepared to make the political shifts demanded of him by the party’s right-wing by adopting an anti-immigration agenda.

A key part of the upcoming negotiations with the EU over the terms of the UK’s exit concerns the free movement of labour within the EU, which is opposed by many Labour MPs, led by right-wing figures such as Stephen Kinnock, Jon Cruddas, Rachel Reeves and Caroline Flint. This clique is demanding a new two-tier system of controls on EU migration. Tier one would include skilled professional workers and EU students with a place at British universities. Tier two would be made up of less skilled EU workers subject to quotas,

to be negotiated between government, industry and the trade unions.

The Fabian Society, led by prominent figures in the attempted removal of Corbyn as party leader, such as Tristram Hunt, has called for an embrace of patriotism that includes “listening” to concerns over migration.

Trade union leaders, including Len McCluskey of the Unite union, Corbyn’s major backer and a vocal proponent of “British jobs for British workers,” also oppose free movement.

Until now, Corbyn and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott have opposed limits and quotas. However, in the Peterborough speech this was unceremoniously ditched, with Corbyn declaring, “Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle.”

Having heeded the demand of his nominal opponents, Corbyn felt obliged to add a caveat, stating, “I don’t want that to be misinterpreted; nor do we rule it out.”

It was impossible to know for certain whether this was supposed to be a sop to the majority of his supporters, who voted to remain in the EU and support free movement, or to business concerns that do not want an end to free movement to prevent the UK maintaining access to the Single Market. However, the rest of Corbyn’s speech strongly indicated that the latter consideration was paramount.

“Labour supports fair rules and the reasonable management of migration as part of the post-Brexit relationship with the EU,” he said. His priority was to maintain “full access” to the European Union single market.

Corbyn tried to pragmatically combine a pledge to free trade, at least in Europe, with a promise to implement protectionist measures by repatriating “powers from Brussels for the British government to develop a genuine industrial strategy essential for the economy of the future...”

Referring to his earlier denunciation of the Conservatives for not implementing protectionist measures against Chinese steel “dumping,” he declared, “Tory governments have hidden behind EU state aid rules because they don’t want to intervene. They did so again last year when the steel industry was in trouble.”

To complete his appeal for Labour to be seen as the guardian of the nation’s economic future, Corbyn

declared Prime Minister Theresa May’s Conservative Party government “unfit to negotiate Brexit” for having “so recklessly put the country in such an exposed position without a plan.”

The one concrete measure trailed by Corbyn as proof that he would stand up to the “fat cats” on behalf of working people was his promise to back a “maximum wage” to prevent excessive CEO salaries. In morning media interviews, he urged “some kind of high earnings cap” and railed against the “ridiculous” wealth of the super-rich.

But by the time of the afternoon speech, Corbyn restricted himself to proposing nothing more than a pledge that a Labour government would not offer public contracts to private companies that paid executives more than 20 times the wage of their lowest-paid worker.

The fact is, his declaration that free movement is not a principle is entirely sufficient to judge Corbyn as a political figure.

His speech demonstrated yet again that he is bereft of principles. His sole concern is to preserve the “unity” of the Labour Party, i.e., unity with the right wing that enforces Labour’s pro-capitalist, pro-austerity and pro-war agenda, while employing empty “left” rhetoric in order to maintain the party’s deadly grip on the working class. As such, there is nothing of his professed anti-establishment rhetoric that he will not abandon if told to do so by his party and trade union overseers.



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