

# An attempted coup against the members

**A**t the time of writing Angela Eagle has very generously paused her leadership campaign to give Jeremy Corbyn more time to resign. The real reason, however, is that Corbyn's opponents are so well organised that they can't yet agree on a single candidate to stand against him. It appears Owen Smith has collected sufficient nominations to stand. Some MPs are reportedly concerned that Smith would have a better chance of beating Corbyn than Eagle as he is 'further to the left than her'. With the Chilcott report due out soon she will not be covered in glory. She, of course, voted for the war on Iraq.

Speaking on Radio 4 the Vice Chair of Angela Eagle's Wallasey constituency party said that if the MPs wanted to remove Corbyn they could have simply raised the 51 nominations for a challenger. It says much of the approach of her and other PLP members that they didn't bother consulting their local parties. Indeed Wallasey CLP asked her to vote against the no-confidence motion. Never mind they are the just the people who do the work.

The coordinated resignations were directed at forcing Corbyn to resign. We can call this an attempted coup because instead of issuing a leadership challenge the majority of the PLP has sought to deny the membership a say in whether Corbyn should stay or go. The dishonesty of much of the PLP, and the coup organisers, was reflected in an interview by Lucy Powell, one of the resigners. She said that 'the last straw' for her was the sacking of Benn. Imagine that, Corbyn had the audacity to sack a member of his Shadow Cabinet who was not only asking him to resign but was organising to get his opponents on the Shadow Cabinet to do likewise, walk away and leave him with hardly anybody left in it. Tom Watson was 'disappointed' at the sacking, but not seemingly disappointed that Benn was organising to throw out Corbyn. He has played a duplicitous role ever since he was elected. It appears that the transparently cynical Eagle had actually set up her leadership bid website two days before her crocodile tears and her 'reluctant' resignation.

Preparations had been under way at least since early May. A report in the Telegraph said that Margaret Hodge would be a stalking horse candidate to open the way for a real candidate to step forward. One of the Labour MPs involved discussed their plans with that great friend of Labour, the Telegraph. They changed their tactics, Hodge was one of the signatories for the motion of no confidence in Corbyn instead of a stalking horse candidate.

## Collaborating with the enemy

Since Corbyn was elected members of the PLP, including some in the Shadow Cabinet have been collaborating with the Tory media to undermine Corbyn and open the way for his removal. I wrote about this last September in [Labour's Shadow Cabinet: collaborating with the enemy](http://martinwicks.wordpress.com/2015/09/22/labours-shadow-cabinet-collaborating-with-the-enemy/).<sup>1</sup>

"It has been said that Jeremy has a strong mandate given his near 60% vote and just under 50% amongst members. Whilst that may be true the fact is that the apparatus of the Labour Party as 'Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition', especially the Parliamentary Party,

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1 <http://martinwicks.wordpress.com/2015/09/22/labours-shadow-cabinet-collaborating-with-the-enemy/>

remains *an entrenched obstacle to any break with the past*. This apparatus is attempting to neutralise Corbyn and McDonnell to prevent them from fundamentally shifting the Party's policies, which still rest on New Labour ground.”

As the Wallasey Vice Chair said, they have been stabbing him in the back from the start. The referendum result provided the opportunity for the plotters to do, what for them, was only a question of timing.

The weakness of Corbyn's position was reflected in the composition of the Shadow Cabinet. Because of the balance of forces within the PLP, and because of his conciliatory instincts, he included a majority of people who were not only political opponents but some very hostile towards him. It was therefore no surprise that literally from the start of his tenure people in the shadow cabinet were leaking information and opinions to the media. Indeed some of them were openly attacking him for various misdemeanour's such as failing to sing along to the Establishment's tune (the national anthem) and refusing to act like a 'statesman' and contemplate mass murder (pressing the nuclear button). Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell attempted compromise with those who were scheming against them but the majority of the PLP was never reconciled with the decision of the members.

Whilst there was some shift away from the politics of New Labour (e.g. the recognition of the need for a council house building programme) the majority of the Shadow Cabinet was opposed to deepening the break. That was reflected in the refusal of Labour to support the NHS Reinstatement Bill which both Corbyn and McDonnell had signed before the leadership election. It was opposed by the Shadow Health Minister on the grounds of opposing another reorganisation. What this meant was to support the market and the whole commissioning process under which the private sector could compete for contracts.

### **Keep Corbyn off the ballot?**

The coup organisers were aiming to either force Corbyn to resign or to keep him off the ballot by forcing an election in which he would be unable to raise sufficient nominations. However, removing an incumbent is different to a contest after a leader has resigned. There are competing legal opinions on whether or not he would need to raise the number of signatures he did in the previous contest. I suspect that Eagle and her supporters will probably recognise that any attempt to stop Corbyn running would blow up in their faces. The decision will rest with the National Executive Committee. If Corbyn is kept off the ballot there would be a mass exodus of members.

### **What are the prospects?**

Some on the left of the Party appear to believe that his election is guaranteed. I think they are making a big mistake. Without a single candidate against him Corbyn probably would win. If they do manage to agree on one then Corbyn's re-election *will be no foregone conclusion*. There will be a ferocious media campaign along the lines of 'electing Corbyn will mean the end of the Labour Party'. Half the party members didn't vote for him last time. Some Labour Party members may be wavering or shifting their vote because they believe, especially since he is opposed by the majority of the PLP, that Corbyn “cannot win a

general election". I have had some discussion with members on Facebook for whom Corbyn has to go because he is 'unpopular on the doorstep'.

On social media, left Labour members who are justifiably angry at this organised coup attempt are banging on about driving out the MPs who have moved against Corbyn. This is inept. They should concentrate on the fundamental issue at stake which is that if Corbyn is removed then the Labour Party will be taken back to some half-way house which combines some of the politics of Blairism and New Labour, and the domination of the PLP will be entrenched.

There may well be a battle to be had in some of the unions. Although the statement signed by 10 of 14 affiliates condemned the action of the PLP it stopped short of calling for his re-election. There will be much 'realism' thrown about to try and justify a retreat from supporting him.

### **A split?**

If Corbyn *is* re-elected then the question arises of what will the majority of the PLP do? Will they form a separate parliamentary group, a pre-cursor to a new political party? There has already been talk of forming one. Indeed it was reported that more than 100 MPs approached the Speaker of the House of Commons, who declined to agree that they could do so. Some are already examining whether or not they could appropriate the name of the Labour Party and talking to the media about it.

Supporters of Corbyn should not be cavalier about this because the consequences, as in the days of the SDP break-away, will most likely be to deliver a parliamentary majority to the Tories. Those people who are demanding they clear off are forgetting this danger. Of course, they might do this anyway, if Corbyn wins again, but a split would ease the re-election of the Tories, an event which could open the way to the loss of what remains of the post-war gains of the working class.

### **Accepting the verdict of the members?**

Whoever stands against Corbyn, he should seek a joint statement with them, *accepting the verdict of the members and supporters and opposing any split*. It may not make any difference, but it would show that these people who profess to 'save Labour' are not prepared to accept the democratic opinion of the membership.

An anti-Corbyn 'unity' candidate will actually be the candidate for *domination of the PLP over the membership*. Even now they are trying to avoid a contest with Corbyn by pressuring him to resign. His refusal to do so is not a matter of ego. Given the composition of the PLP if he were to resign there would be little chance of another left wing candidate getting on the ballot paper and the aspirations of all those people who supported him would turn to dust.

The defeat of Corbyn would be a victory for all those who want to make sure Labour is 'Her Majesty's loyal opposition'. That's why tens of thousands of people are joining as members or will probably become registered supporters once the election is open. 'Save Labour' is

attempting a counter-mobilisation of people who want to vote out Corbyn.

Fundamentally, this struggle is about the political direction of the Labour Party. Undoubtedly some will oppose Corbyn because they think he is not up to the job and is “unelectable”. Yet the coup was primarily directed at stopping Labour moving leftwards and completing a break from the politics of New Labour. It remains to be seen whether an anti-Corbyn opponent can cobble together a coherent programme. The reason why Corbyn won such an overwhelming victory was that they failed miserably to do so in the leadership campaign. The global crisis which irrupted in 2008 was the very thing which gave the lie to the perspectives of Blair and Brown and all the supporters of globalisation and 'free market' economics. The majority of the PLP are trying to breathe new life into the corpse of New Labour. It is a job that cannot be done.

Martin Wicks

July<sup>1st</sup> 2016