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## Round Table: Starmer's New New Labour?

Accepted for publication in Labour history Review.

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<https://doi.org/10.3828/lhr.2025.3>

# Starmer's New New Labour?

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In the general election of 2017, I canvassed for Sandy Martin, who won a seat in Ipswich for the Labour Party. The reception I received on the doorstep was overwhelmingly positive and the experience personally very uplifting. Two years later things had changed dramatically. I have some good memories, certainly, but one image stands out in particular. It is of a middle-aged man restraining an angry Staffordshire bull terrier as he answered the door of his flat in a rundown estate, looking at my rosette and shouting at me, 'That Corbyn's a fucking Marxist'. I turned away, of course, muttering under my breath something about false consciousness, no doubt. The result of the 2019 general election came as little surprise.

'Corbynism' was a complex phenomenon, and the moment of socialist promise captured inadequately by that term was undoubtedly deeply problematic.<sup>1</sup> But it did inspire hope and desire politically in ways I had not felt for decades, feelings that may have been quite widespread. Corbyn's public meetings had an almost revivalist flavour at times, and I met many others of my generation when canvassing who had been drawn back to the cause, along with scores of young people organized by Momentum.<sup>2</sup> One of the most distinctive features of Corbynism was an emphasis on building the party from the ground up and mobilizing people in the constituencies. There was real success in this respect, with membership reaching a peak figure of over 560,000 in 2017, falling by the end of 2023 to just over 370,000.<sup>3</sup> Naive perhaps – and Lawrence Black's characterization of Corbynism as little more than a firework in his contribution to this round

- 1 Alternative perspectives can be found in Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts, *Corbynism: A Critical Approach* (Bingley, 2019); Lewis Bassett, 'Corbynism: social democracy in a New Left garb', *Political Quarterly*, 90 (2019), 777–84; Dimitri Batrouni, *The Battle of Ideas in the Labour Party: From Attlee to Corbyn and Brexit* (Bristol, 2020); Karl Pike and Patrick Diamond, 'Myth and meaning: "Corbynism" and the interpretation of political leadership', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 23 (2021), 663–79.
- 2 Sarah Pickard, 'Momentum and the Movementist "Corbynistas": young people regenerating the Labour Party in Britain', in Sarah Pickard and Judith Bessant (eds), *Young People Re-generating Politics in Times of Crises* (Cham, 2019), 115–37.
- 3 Daniel Green, 'Labour Party membership dips below 400,000 for the first time in almost a decade', *LabourList*, 23 August 2024, <https://labourlist.org/2024/08/labour-party-membership-400000-keir-starmer-jeremy-corbyn/> (accessed 22 January 2025).

table is probably correct – though I had hoped for something longer-lasting. While we should be wary of the tendency to over-romanticize, we ought not to forget the distinctive structure of feeling that marked this phase in the recent history of British socialism, a phase that now seems like a very long time ago indeed.

The record of Labour in power over the last six months stands out in vivid relief against such a backdrop. Since Keir Starmer's Labour won the general election last July we have been insistently advised to lower our expectations, in the short to medium term at least (and in the long run ...). In fact, one of the first things the leadership of the party did in office was to damp down what were considered to be unrealistic expectations. The cupboard was bare, and sacrifices needed to be made before we would feel any benefit. The first decisive action was the announcement in early September that winter fuel payments to 10 million pensioners would be axed, saving the Treasury around £1.5 billion, a highly symbolic as well as practical sign of the harsh line that the administration was prepared to adopt. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves proved herself perfectly suited to the necessary 'tough-guy' act, seeming almost to enjoy softening up the electorate for yet another dose of austerity. From the outset, however, the message was somewhat undercut by the whiff of corruption and the sense that, as always, some of us might have to suffer more than others. Starmer taking gifts of suits and spectacles to the tune of £32,000 from Lord Alli, as well as free tickets to Taylor Swift concerts, seemed to many as disgraceful and as ludicrous as Boris Johnson spending thousands of pounds of public money redecorating Number 10. What precisely had changed people might sensibly wonder?<sup>4</sup> After this scandal there was an entirely forgettable annual conference, then at the end of October Reeves's bombshell budget that hiked National Insurance by £25 billion, followed by the inevitable, desperate looking 'relaunch' or rebranding in December, complete with the familiar 'milestones' or targets. The impact of all this on Starmer's personal standing in the country has been disastrous, with the leader more unpopular than any other Prime Minister has been at this early stage of their premiership.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the landslide rhetoric, we need to remind ourselves that Labour won the 2024 general election in very fortuitous circumstances. The right

4 Simon Kuper, *Good Chaps: How Corrupt Politicians Broke Our Law and Institutions – And What We Can Do about It* (London, 2024).

5 'Dissatisfaction with Starmer reaches 61%, his highest as Labour leader', *Ipsos*, 16 December 2024, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/dissatisfaction-starmer-reaches-61-his-highest-labour-leader> (accessed 22 January 2025).

was deeply divided, with Farage's anti-immigration Reform Party taking large numbers of votes from the Conservatives in many parts of the country. And the electorate were sick of the Tories, without any clear idea of what an alternative might look like. It was not difficult for Labour strategists to correctly interpret the public mood and the vacuous slogan 'Change' that Labour adopted was a suitably meaningless category that voters could fill with whatever they wished, though it was also an acknowledgement of the party's woeful lack of policy. Starmer was ideologically vague himself, a relatively empty space awaiting a makeover. Labour's leadership worked hard to win support from business before the election and secured financial backing from individual capitalist donors like Lord Sainsbury, who alone stumped up £2.5 million towards their election campaign, with the party eventually attracting total donations of £9.5 million, more than all the other parties combined. Even the *Sun* newspaper came onside before the poll, declaring rather unimaginatively that 'it is time for a change.'<sup>6</sup> Support from such unlikely quarters surely reflects feelings of relief amongst groups for whom the prospect of a meaningful socialist transformation represented their worst nightmare. Even allowing for all this, Labour would not have achieved its vaunted landslide without Britain's profoundly undemocratic first-past-the-post system. In short, the conjuncture that Starmer's Labour benefited from was both highly distinctive and propitious.<sup>7</sup> It is one that is unlikely to be repeated, which makes drawing comparisons between this and earlier Labour victories problematic.

Not only was the conjuncture advantageous, but also the victory is undoubtedly very precarious; Labour under Starmer attracted both fewer voters and a smaller share of the national vote in 2024 than it did under Corbyn in 2017; 9,708,716 votes and 33.7 per cent against 12,877,918 votes and 40 per cent.<sup>8</sup> Many of the people who did vote for the party understandably had little conception of what they were voting for, which makes

6 Daniel Wainwright, 'Labour got more donations than other parties combined', *BBC News*, 15 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg3j131327yo> (accessed 22 January 2025); Daniel Green, "'Time for a new manager": the *Sun* backs Labour at general election', *LabourList*, 3 July 2024, <https://labourlist.org/2024/07/the-sun-general-election-2024-labour-party/> (accessed 22 January 2025).

7 Ross McKibbin, 'Reflections on the 2024 general election in Great Britain', *Political Quarterly*, (Early View) <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.uniessexlib.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.13468> (accessed 22 January 2025).

8 Carl Baker, Oliver Hawkins, Lukas Audickas, Alex Bate, Richard Cracknell, Vyara Apostolova, Noel Dempsey, Roderick McInnes, Tom Rutherford, and Elise Uberoi, *General Election 2017: Results and Analysis*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 29 January 2019; Richard Cracknell and Carl Baker, *General Election 2024: Results and Analysis*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 24 September 2024.

the situation necessarily volatile; and the right might not remain divided in the longer term. It is unlikely that business will remain warm either, as the Chancellor struggles to balance the growth agenda with a commitment to improving rapidly deteriorating public services, however residual or small-scale that commitment may be. The backlash against increases in National Insurance, the long-overdue reform of inheritance tax relief on agricultural land and property, and the imposition of VAT on public-school fees are indicative of the inevitable trouble that lies ahead.

In various constituencies, the alienation of some ethnic minorities will continue to erode Labour success. Starmer might be vague on most things, but his credentials regarding anti-Semitism are impeccable; indeed, his personal route to power was partly facilitated by his carefully crafted persona as a staunch critic of anti-Semitism within the party. Any dissent on the issue of Palestine was immediately quashed as soon as Starmer became leader, Rebecca Long-Bailey unceremoniously sacked from the shadow cabinet in the summer of 2020, for example, for retweeting an article that supposedly contained anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.<sup>9</sup> The effect of this hard line was most damaging in a number of constituencies during the general election, and it continues to be so, with local councillors resigning or being suspended from the party ever since.<sup>10</sup> What is now difficult to perceive as nothing less than a callous attitude to the unbelievable suffering and mass slaughter of innocent Palestinians in Gaza – including most recently the refusal to allow children injured there to be treated in British hospitals, which prompted a letter of protest on 17 December 2024 from more than fifty MPs and peers – is surely likely to redound badly on the moral standing of the leadership.<sup>11</sup>

While there are some obvious points of connection between Starmer's Labour and the Blair brand, these should not be pushed too far. The economic situation inherited by Blair was far rosier and New Labour did have ideological foundations, however nebulous, including an airy

9 'Labour's Rebecca Long-Bailey sacked in anti-Semitism row', *BBC News*, 25 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53183085> (accessed 22 January 2025).

10 'Labour loses Oxford City Council over Gaza', *Tribune*, 20 October 2023, <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2023/10/labour-just-lost-control-of-oxford-city-council-over-starmers-comments-on-gaza/> (accessed 22 January 2025); Ruby Lott-Lavigna, "'Utterly shameful": suspended Labour politician slams Starmer's Gaza stance', *openDemocracy*, 28 February 2024, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/labour-gaza-ceasefire-suspended-councillors-martin-abrams/> (accessed 22 January 2025).

11 Imran Mulla, 'Over 50 British MPs urge UK to evacuate injured children from Gaza', *Middle East Eye*, 17 December 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/over-50-british-mps-urge-uk-evacuate-injured-children-gaza> (accessed 22 January 2025).

communitarian rhetoric and sociologist Anthony Giddens's formulation of a 'Third Way' between capitalism and socialism, as well as, more significantly, a determination to roll out Thatcherism's neoliberal transformation of economy and society.<sup>12</sup> While Blair was no friend of the left, Starmer has been decidedly ruthless, expelling Corbyn from the party and very nearly depriving Diane Abbott of her seat in Hackney North and Stoke Newington at the general election, a constituency she has served honourably since 1987.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, although conveniently forgotten by the present party leadership, Blair took the country into a disastrous and costly war on the basis of a lie, a grievous error that we can only pray Starmer will not repeat.

Besides the undeniable differences, however, there are some important links between Starmer's Labour and the Blair years, not least a number of significant individuals. Labour's national campaign coordinator in 2024 was Pat McFadden, who had been an adviser to Blair, serving as his political secretary before being elected to Parliament in 2005. Regarded as a reliable frontman, McFadden clearly aspires to be a theoretician, vowing his intention in a press release in early December to make the state function 'more like a start-up' tech company.<sup>14</sup> Starmer's current head of political strategy, Morgan McSweeney, had strong ties with the Blairite era and played a key role in the centre-right counterattack against Corbynism in the typically misnomered group Labour Together. Starmer's recent appointment of Peter Mandelson as British ambassador to the United States – an appointment that could easily prove disastrous – illustrates the debt more than anything else does, perhaps.

However, what links Blair and Starmer's Labour is neither personnel nor ideology, but rather an obsession with control of the party, the suppression of dissent, and centralization of the party apparatus. Both men and the factions they represent conceive of the Labour Party not as an expression of an authentically popular movement made up of masses of enthusiastic supporters, but rather as a centralized machine dominated by media-savvy apparatchiks who have made politics their career of choice. First time tragedy, second time farce might spring to mind, if it were not for the fact

12 Bob Jessop, 'New Labour or the normalization of neo-liberalism', *British Politics*, 2 (2007), 282–8.

13 Tom Belger, 'Diane Abbott's future still in spotlight amid new row over Starmer "lies" post', *LabourList*, 3 June 2024, <https://labourlist.org/2024/06/labour-party-latest-news-uk-3/> (accessed 22 January 2025).

14 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pat-mcfadden-vows-to-make-the-state-more-like-a-start-up-as-he-deploys-reform-teams-across-country> (accessed 22 January 2025).

that pensioners going cold this winter can hardly be described as farcical. It is a sad reflection on the times that the BBC, which had helped vilify Corbyn but backed Starmer to the hilt before the 2024 election, banned the political song 'Freezing This Christmas' by Sir Keir Starmer and the Granny Harmers, though it proved extremely popular during the festive period nevertheless.<sup>15</sup>

### Notes on contributor

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15 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQrvmY5s2mo> (accessed 22 January 2025).