

A Frighteningly Sincere Socialist

The election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the opposition Labour Party in Britain was conducted in a rather peculiar fashion. All one had to do to obtain a vote in it was to declare on-line that one supported the aims of the party and pay £3 (\$4.60). It was rumoured that a number of Conservatives had voted for Mr Corbyn in this fashion, in the belief that Mr Corby was so left-wing that he could never be elected, thus assuring a permanent Conservative government.

If any Conservative did in fact behave in this way, they were very foolish (though in the end it made no difference, Mr Corbyn was the choice of the overwhelming majority of Party members anyway). In politics, the whirligig of time always brings in his revenges and it would take only a few disasters, whether the Conservative government was responsible for them or not, for the electorate to conclude that anything, even Mr Corbyn, was better than it. No one in a modern democracy is intrinsically unelectable merely because of his opinions or proposed policies; for people tend to vote against rather than for someone. Whether they are for or against someone depends on circumstances.

In the meantime Mr Corbyn poses a problem for cartoonists because he is so much of a caricature already. He is a sandal-wearing, Palestinian-and-IRA-supporting, vegetarian, teetotal, socialist pacifist (except where foreign terrorists are concerned), who wants to abolish the British monarchy. He divorced his second wife, according to some reports because of disagreement over the schooling of their son. She, a Chilean refugee, wanted their son to attend a selective school because he would get a better education there. Mr Corbyn is against selective schools as a matter of principle and would not compromise, even in the case of his own son.

In the matter of his son's education, of course, his principles caused an insoluble public relations problem. If he had acceded to his then wife's wishes, he would have been accused of being a hypocrite: one standard for his own child, another for everyone else's children. But, by holding to his principles, he stood accused of putting politics before his own son's interests, in other words of being a ferocious and unfeeling ideologue.

Mr Corbyn, however, is not a man to worry about public relations, he is too honest for that. His scruffy appearance – he recently managed to get the collar of his shirt into a position in which I have rarely seen such a collar get into before, and which I think he will never be able to repeat – is that of a social worker in a down-at-heel industrial town circa 1972. However, this is not a pose on his part: his appearance and manner are definitely not the products of careful consideration by consultants but rather are those of the man himself. Of no one more than Jeremy Corbyn is it truer than that the apparel oft proclaims the man.

This is endearing or at least refreshing in a way, for many people are tired of the patently ersatz or carefully crafted presentation of most other prominent politicians, who seem not to be able to utter a word or appear in public for a moment without having first sought the opinion of focus groups. The next election haunts them like a doppelganger and mostly being of infirm principle or opinion, they live in a state of constant anxiety not to offend. Therefore, in order not to alienate anyone too deeply, they have to oscillate between smart and casual. Not so Mr Corbyn; he is sublimely unaware of or uninterested in the physical impression he is giving. Why should a man whose ruling passion is political self-righteousness (he started very young, at school in fact) adapt to others on so trivial a matter as dress, while there are still people going hungry in the Southern Sudan and unmet national aspirations on every continent?

As with his dress, so with his opinions. He is a stater of, rather than an arguer for, them: any contradiction of his views tends to bring forth a repetition rather than an attempt at persuasion or even explanation. As with his appearance, so with his opinions: and no one could accuse him of hiding them (I will not call them a light) under a bushel. If you dislike Hamas and Hezbollah, Mr Corbyn is not going to change his opinion or stance merely to canvass or capture your vote. He is sincere, terribly and frighteningly sincere. And he even sometimes gets things right, for example in the matter of the high-speed train to be constructed from London to the north of England. This is so patently an unnecessary, uneconomic, ecologically destructive, vastly expensive and, dare I say it, regressive a project (regressive in the taxation sense, a subsidy both to the companies that will build it and to the passengers who will use it, for it will never pay for itself), that almost everyone suspects large-scale corruption to be involved, and Mr Corbyn is one of the few prominent politicians to oppose it.

At the moment, he poses more of a problem for the Labour Party than for Mr Cameron. The parliamentary Labour Party, which has the right to nominate candidates for leader of the party but not to elect him, never wanted him, and he was nominated not in the expectation that he would win but only to show that the party still had some real left-wing credentials. Even those Members of Parliament who nominated him – and there had to be thirty of them for him to be on the list – did not want him to win. His subsequent landslide victory in the leadership election shows how little the political class knows even of its own parties' activist membership, let alone of the country as a whole. The parliamentary party can now only hope that Mr Corbyn, who never really sought the leadership before he was nominated, will grow tired of a position for which he is ill-suited and will resign, for he has great democratic legitimacy (at 60 per cent of the votes cast, winning half as many again as all the other candidates combined) and a palace coup by the

parliamentary party would tear apart the party as a whole.

Mr Cameron has little to fear from Mr Corbyn for now. But the resentment to which Mr Corbyn's socialism appeals, already quite widespread, could spread yet further if there were a deepening of Britain's economic problems, which is far from impossible. Complacency rather than Corbyn, the belief that they are home and dry, is the greatest threat to Cameron and the Conservatives. Who would have thought that a ridiculous little house painter could have become the leader of the best educated nation in Europe? Why, then, should an absurd, intellectually-limited, puritanical ideologue not become Prime Minister of one of the most ill-educated nations in Europe?