How Labour’s internal disputes threaten the functioning of our political system

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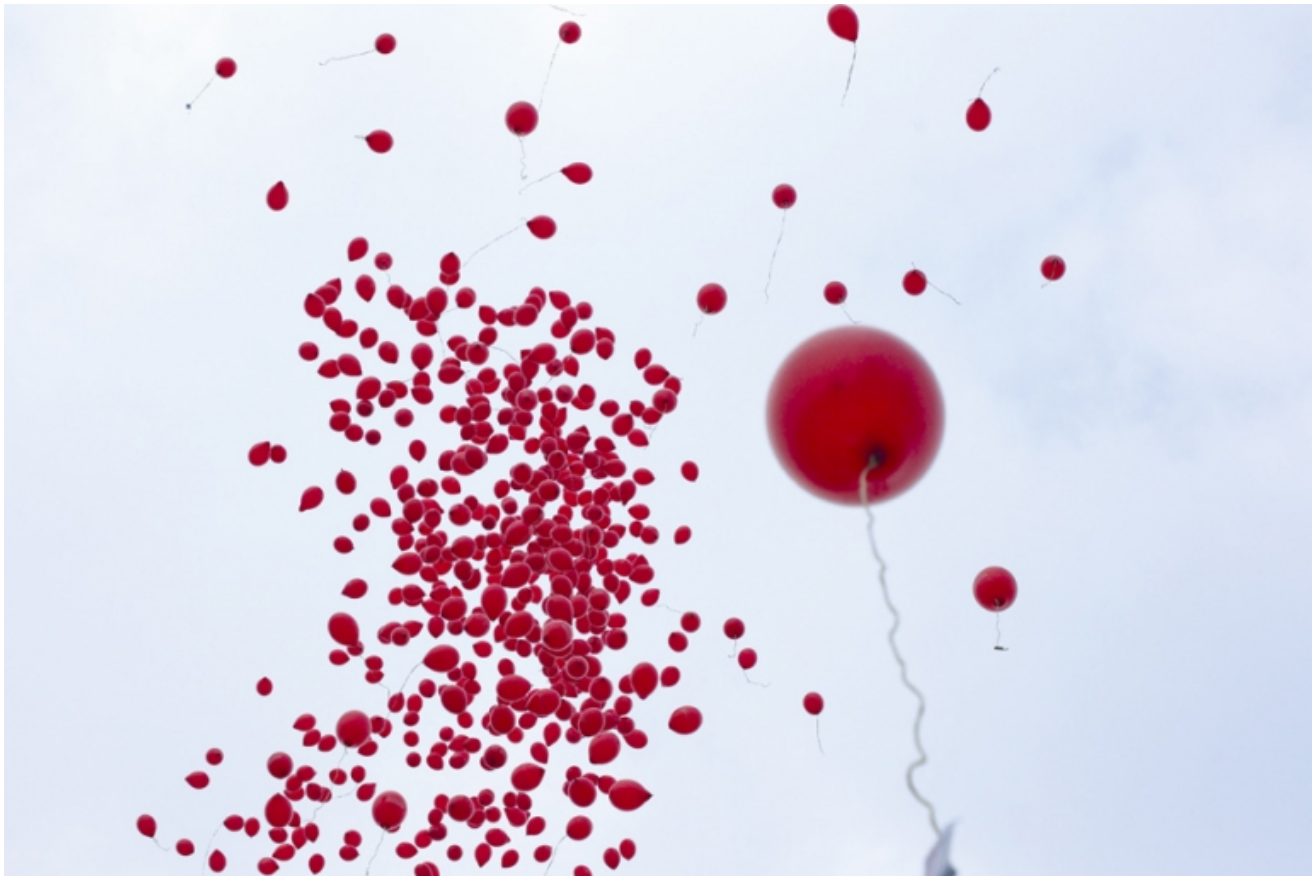
Labour’s infighting might be entertaining the party’s opponents and frustrating its supporters; but it poses a real threat to how Labour functions as a unit, and so to our political system. ***Andrew Blick*** *and* ***Sean Kippin*** *explain why it is important to appreciate the possible consequences of the actions of conflicting groups within Labour – regardless of what position one takes on current controversies.*

Political parties, together with entities such as Parliament, the courts, and the various offices of the executive government, are a crucial component of the UK constitution. Labour’s current difficulties have therefore wide implications that stretch beyond party politics and which could have potential consequences for the UK polity as a whole.

Our contemporary democracy, as presently configured, also rests on certain assumptions, that may or may not be seen as desirable. One is the existence of multiple, distinct parties contesting elections to various governmental tiers. Each party selects individuals who run both under their own names and that of their party, presenting a common party programme to the electorate. A further assumption is that, once elected, individuals from a given party will operate as a broadly cohesive unit in the institution they are in.

Within these elected institutions, parties generally seek to take common positions in votes and debates. These approaches are set ultimately by the party leadership within that institution, though consultation with the party group of elected members takes place. Typically, the wider party membership may have an influence on these activities, but do not directly determine them. Consequently, the leaders of each party within the institution deal with each other on a basis that they – to some extent – speak for and command the loyalty of the party representatives within that institution.



But while party is critical, the functioning of the political system also requires that it does not become all-encompassing. Public office holders have wider responsibilities that extend beyond their particular party, and are also able to exercise a degree of personal discretion. Westminster MPs, for instance, represent their entire constituencies, not only those who voted for them. Similarly, if a party forms a government or takes part in a coalition, it does not do so wholly for that party, but governs on behalf of the entire polity.

Various rules exist to enforce this principle, placing such requirements as objectivity and impartiality upon ministers or officials who work for them. The use of public resources for partisan purposes, moreover, is carefully regulated. Other limits on the pervasiveness of party involve limits on cohesion behind particular policies. There may be 'free' votes on subjects deemed to be matters of conscience; or representatives may rebel against party instructions. In extreme circumstances, even collective Cabinet responsibility may be suspended, as it was during the EU referendum campaign.

A rough equilibrium is therefore needed between the influence of party and other forces. The current position in the Labour Party – centring on a dispute over the Jeremy Corbyn leadership – could threaten this stability in multiple ways. Whatever position one takes on current controversies, it is important to appreciate the possible consequence of the combined impact of the actions of the conflicting groups within Labour. They might lead to what is presently the main UK opposition party ceasing to fulfil functions that are – as set out above – crucial to the constitution, thereby undermining the effectiveness of the political system itself.

One possible challenge to the constitutional functionality of Labour is the view of the proper nature of the Party as presented by Corbyn and some of his supporters. During his 2015 leadership campaign, Corbyn said that Labour 'must become a social movement again'. Since Corbyn's victory in 2015, the ranks of the Labour membership have swelled to the extent that Labour is now reportedly the largest political party in Europe.

'Building a social movement to work for a more democratic, equal and decent society' is now a stated aim of Momentum. Momentum described its strategy for achieving this goal as a 'mass mobilisation for a more democratic,

equal and decent society'; encouraging people to get involved with the Labour Party and ensuring Labour members' voices are heard; and supporting other 'organisations that can make concrete improvements to people's lives'. Momentum can thus be seen as the driver of the social movement that Corbyn seeks to build, organising within the party to win internal elections and selections, and to gradually facilitate the rebuilding of Labour in Corbyn's image.

The origins of organised Labour could also be seen as being those of a social movement. It grew up outside of Parliament out of the trade unions and a number of organisations. But it eventually opted, as Neil Kinnock recently described, to take the 'parliamentary route to socialism' rather than the 'revolutionary' route. It became a 'Mass Party' (and then later arguably a 'Catch-All Party'), seeking power and forming governments.

Clearly, there has been an ongoing tension within Labour and the wider Labour movement over the extent to which it should be driven from below (whatever, precisely, 'below' meant) or from above. Nonetheless, leaders who originated from different wings of the party, from Harold Wilson to Kinnock to John Smith to Tony Blair, have generally been committed to fulfilling the systemic requirements of parties set out above: focused to a significant extent on the parliamentary party and playing the elite level game within Parliament. However, some of the views associated with the Corbyn leadership could imply if not an outright rejection of this role, at least a substantial downgrading of it, and even a blurring of the distinction between Labour and other groups who come within the fold of the 'social movement'.

Corbyn and his advocates promote mixed messages on this point. For instance, they promote the idea that he is a future Prime Minister, suggestive of some conformity to the idea of Labour as a party focused on the requirements of high politics. But, in a twitter exchange with McTernan, Momentum founder Jon Lansman wrote that 'Democracy gives power to people, "Winning" is the small bit that matters to political elites who want to keep power themselves'.

It could be construed from this statement that the reconfiguration of Labour as a social movement – as envisaged by Lansman at least – might call into question Labour's effective commitment to ensuring that the political system offers voters a choice between genuinely competitive groups. This outlook also implies a reduction in the importance of those within the party who have been elected to public institutions – especially the PLP. Within this model, participants in the movement and the leader they elect appear as the dominant group. The potential for such an arrangement to emerge was inherent in the changed Labour leadership election rules introduced by Ed Miliband – including not only regular members, but also those who registered as supporters. In so doing, Miliband inadvertently made more possible a scenario in which equilibrium between the different branches of Labour became upset.

Conflict within Labour connected to the 'social movement' concept leads on to a second set of problems threatening the ability of Labour to perform its systemic role. The open resistance of many Labour MPs to the policy stances of Corbyn, their public criticism of his leadership, and their refusal to serve in his shadow cabinet, has seriously undermined the cohesion of the PLP.

An elite split between leader and representatives in the legislature is particularly problematic under the UK constitutional system. The leader of a major UK party is normally the most senior person within the mass party organisation, the head of the party grouping in the legislature, and in effect the candidate for the office of Prime Minister. There is only limited scope for open divergence between senior figures in the party and the leader, without major problems developing, as are manifesting themselves lately in Labour.

The future of Labour may bring more challenges still. One possible outcome, whichever candidate wins the present leadership election, is a more serious split in the party, possibly leading to the appearance of two separate parties. Perhaps the different groupings that emerged from such an event would be internally more unified. But they would not help with the issue that the public might not be presented with a realistic alternative to the Conservative Party at the next General Election; a problem that is exacerbated by the First-Past-the-Post voting system and the forthcoming changes to parliamentary boundaries.

A further possibility is one of party activists seeking to impose their will on parliamentary representatives. If, following a Corbyn victory, many within the PLP refused to reconcile themselves to his leadership, it may be that there will be attempts to displace them as candidates at the next General Election. The looming constituency changes may make a large-scale purge more plausible.

This scenario, unlike some of those described above, would not be an instance of a *lack* of party solidity. Rather it would entail an attempt to impose unity to an extent that might be difficult to reconcile with settled understandings of the way in which the political system functions. Members of the PLP will have refused to cooperate with a leader, but that leader will have had the necessary backing from a wider group that determines who holds his or her office. If some of those same supporters then seek to force MPs to abide by the decision, or remove them if they do not, difficult questions then arise about the nature of representative democracy itself.

The leadership may, it seems, seek to respond to its split with the PLP by introducing direct elections by the wider party for members of the Shadow Cabinet (a counter-proposal is for the PLP to elect them). Whether this move would resolve tensions discussed here is questionable. One possible consequence could be the tightening of the grip of the electorate that supported the leader. Another could be the election of candidates with competing and mutually contradictory programmes, for which they could claim mandates, and who would be difficult to remove from their posts. The first would point towards an excess of party unity; the latter an absence. Both might manifest themselves simultaneously. Both would be equally problematic in their own way.

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About the Authors

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