Ploughed under? Labour’s Grassroots post-Corbyn

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Abstract
This article uses a survey carried out by the ESRC-funded Party Members Project in the immediate aftermath of the 2019 election to paint a portrait of Labour’s post-Corbyn membership. They are overwhelmingly white, well-educated and largely middle class and middle-aged, with many of them living in southern England. They are also disproportionately likely to work, either currently or previously, in the public or charitable sector. They are left-wing but also very socially liberal, and they are very pro-European. This means they have a lot in common with Labour MPs but much less in common with many of the voters Labour desperately needs to win back. A significant number of members, perhaps especially those disinclined to regard antisemitism as a serious problem, could leave as a result of Corbyn being replaced (and possibly removed) by Starmer. Whether this will have much impact on Labour’s electoral prospects is debateable.

Keywords: Labour Party, party members, Keir Starmer, Jeremy Corbyn, grassroots

ACCORDING TO the Daily Telegraph’s Michael Deacon, writing at the end of November 2020:

What with all the rows over Jeremy Corbyn, it’s been a tough couple of weeks for Sir Keir Starmer. Thankfully for him, however, he has at least had one piece of good news.

Members are leaving his party in droves … [He] should be delighted. It’s a terrific boost for Labour’s prospects.

One of Mr Corbyn’s biggest mistakes as leader was promising to give members a greater say on policy. This was a grave error. By trying to please Labour members, he was almost bound to displease the wider public. And that’s not merely because Labour members are so Left-wing.

It’s because, more simply, they’re interested in politics. And people who are interested in politics — so interested, moreover, that they’ll willingly pay money out of their own pocket to join a political party — tend to be deeply odd. Fanatical, bitterly factional, and obsessed with obscure peripheral issues that hold zero interest for ordinary human beings.

So if the Labour leader wishes to appeal to the general public, and persuade voters that Labour is no longer out of touch with their concerns, the last thing he should do is listen to the tortured ravings of his own members.

Sadly for Sir Keir, Labour still has by far the largest membership of any political party, even after this year’s exodus. Fortunately, however, the next general election is a good four years away, so Sir Keir has plenty of time to drive the numbers down further.¹

Tongue-in-cheek is, of course, the stock-in-trade of the parliamentary sketch writer. But, as anyone who reads Deacon—or his peers John Crace (The Guardian), Tom Peck (The Independent) and Rob Hutton (The Critic)—knows, many a true word is spoken in jest. Could this be the case on this occasion, too?

¹M. Deacon, ‘Labour members quitting in droves? That’s the best news Keir Starmer’s had all year’, Daily Telegraph, 28 November 2020; https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/11/28/labour-members-quitting-droves-best-news-keir-starmers-had-year/ (accessed 17 March 2021).
Before we begin to answer that, a quick look at the baseline numbers. As Labour prepared in early 2020 to hold the contest to replace Jeremy Corbyn, the party sent out close to 553,000 ballots to individual members, as well as nearly 14,000 to registered supporters and almost 218,000 to affiliated members (most of them trade union members who had opted in to join as such). Getting on for 402,000 of those full members eventually voted, with 225,000 (or 56 per cent) of them plumping for the winner, Keir Starmer. Whether this meant Starmer’s glass was (just over) half full or (just under) half empty will doubtless depend on one’s ideological predilections. But two things are clear. First, Corbyn or no Corbyn, for the moment at least, the British Labour Party remains one of the biggest—indeed, almost certainly the biggest—political party in Europe. Second, although its new leader beat his two competitors fairly easily (Rebecca Long-Bailey attracting 29 per cent support, Lisa Nandy 15 per cent), plenty of Labour members remain to be convinced.

This article uses a survey carried out by the ESRC-funded Party Members Project in the immediate aftermath of the 2019 election—one that delivered the Conservatives a thumping majority and Labour one of its worst-ever defeats—to take a long hard look at the post-Corbyn membership. Who are they? What do they think? How active are they and how representative are they of the electorate—in particular of those voters Labour needs to win back? Will they stick around? And to what extent might the answers to those questions pose a problem for Keir Starmer in his attempts to make the party genuinely competitive at what we presume will be the 2024 general election?

Why parties (still) bother with members

Before doing so, however, a brief word on why, in spite of all the talk of the ‘air war’ (and now the ‘web war’) rendering the ‘ground war’ redundant in election campaigns, parties continue to do their level best to recruit fully paid-up followers to their cause. This question is all the more important given the widespread tendency in the British media to assume (a) that members—particularly active members—are always and everywhere more extreme than party leaders, and (b) that, at least for a party seeking to move from the left or the right to the centre, members are therefore a liability rather than an asset.

The American political scientist Susan Scarrow points to a number of reasons why parties might still be very concerned to maintain and improve membership levels. In the first place, there are legitimacy benefits: even a party interested primarily in electoral success likes to boast of a vibrant appeal and a healthy level of internal activity in order to establish its basic legitimacy with the electorate. Secondly, there are direct electoral benefits: members provide a reliable core of loyal voters. More importantly, however, members ideally become ‘ambassadors’ or opinion leaders for the party in the local community, thereby multiplying its support—these we might term outreach benefits. Moreover, there are obviously labour benefits too: notwithstanding the changes in modern campaign communications, parties still rely upon local members to do a great deal of necessary voluntary work during an election campaign, especially the more ‘intensive’ things like canvassing and leafletting, which have not, incidentally, been replaced (yet anyway) by online efforts; furthermore, research suggests that local campaigns may have a greater impact on election results than is commonly assumed nowadays, especially in closely fought constituency contests.

Beyond the electoral benefits that parties might derive from their members, Scarrow argues that there are other attractions.

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2ESRC Party Members Project (PMP); https://esrcpartymembersproject.org/ (accessed 17 March 2021).

3S. Scarrow, ‘The paradox of enrolment: assessing the costs and benefits of party memberships’, European Journal of Political Research, vol. 25, no. 1, 1994, pp. 41–60. See also S. Scarrow, Parties and Their Members, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

4See, for example, J. Townsley, ‘Is it worth door-knocking? Evidence from a United Kingdom-based Get Out The Vote (GOTV) field experiment on the effect of party leaflets and canvass visits on voter turnout’, Political Science Research and Methods, 2018, pp. 1–15.
Particularly in parties like Labour, with pretensions to internal democracy, members could be a potentially valuable source of policy ideas (though this innovation benefit might also restrict leadership autonomy, of course, thus transforming itself into a ‘cost’). Relatedly, members can also act as a source of information about public concerns and so provide linkage benefits, although it should be remembered that modern, electorateologically motivated parties have come to rely heavily on professional opinion research in this respect. The membership, however, remains critically important as a source of party candidates for public office: these personnel benefits are crucial since the provision of public officials is a vital function of political parties and central to the way in which parties penetrate and control the state. Finally, members can be a source of financial benefit to parties: indeed, the financial significance of party memberships in the UK is of considerable significance, even for Labour, which continues to draw a lot of its funding from trade unions: in 2019, for example, the party’s annual accounts show that nearly 29 per cent of its £57 million central (as opposed to local) income came from its members.

Who are Labour’s members?

So who precisely are these people willing to give up their hard-earned cash (although, as we shall see, not always that much of their time) in return for a membership card, always assuming, of course, that they aren’t (yet at least) among the most disenchanted members who, in April 2020, chose to cut it up and post a photo of the two halves on social media in protest at Keir Starmer succeeding Jeremy Corbyn?

Before we answer that question, however, we should first remind ourselves that we are talking here about Labour members rather than about Labour activists—a distinction that is often forgotten in the media. Clearly, some of the former are also qualify as the latter, but by no means all of them count as such. Indeed, outside of the 2019 election campaign, some 44 per cent of members surveyed in its wake said they devoted no time at all to doing things for the party, with a further 30 per cent saying they did no more than five hours per month on average. And (although it may be worth bearing in mind that this contrasts favourably with the 57 per cent of Tory members who said the same) even during the election campaign, some 40 per cent of Labour members did nothing whatsoever to help the party out. Moreover, only a quarter of members claimed that they’d delivered leaflets and/or canvassed—‘claimed’ being an important qualifier, as anyone who has actually tried to interest people in helping with such activities will doubtless attest!

And so to demographics. As is the case with virtually all the UK’s political parties, Labour’s membership is not only overwhelmingly white, but has more male than female members. In fact, if anything, the gender imbalance is slightly greater than it has been in recent years, coming in at the end of 2019 at 57 per cent male and 43 per cent female. As for age, much as it is always fun to cite the average, it is more instructive to outline the age structure. Contrary to some of the visual images the party pumped out during the Corbyn era, young people make up only a relatively small proportion of its membership, with the 18–24 age group constituting just 6 per cent of Labour members; at the other end of the age range, some 18 per cent are aged sixty-five and over (a far lower proportion than is the case for the Conservatives, a whopping 39 per cent of whose members fall into that category). Some 33 per cent of Labour members are middle-aged (that is, aged 50–64), although the biggest group (constituting 43 per cent of the total membership) is made up of those aged 25–49.

As to where Labour members live, 5 per cent are based in Scotland, where the party has suffered severe electoral decline in recent years. Some 28 per cent live in the north of England and 19 per cent in Wales and the Midlands, the first two of which have traditionally provided Labour with some of its safest seats, while the third contains more marginal seats and therefore often proves decisive at general elections. As one might expect, given the city’s size and political complexion, a large proportion (some 21 per cent) of Labour’s members live in London. But what is striking is that 27 per cent live in the south of England—a largely arid region for the party at election time.

Equally striking is where Labour members work (or did work if they’re retired). They are far more likely than the general population to work outside the private sector, which employs easily the majority of British people. True, 42 per cent of Labour members work (or worked) in the private sector (13 per cent
self-employed and 29 per cent for a company) but that leaves 40 per cent of them working (or having worked) for the public sector, with 12 per cent working (or having worked) in the charity/voluntary sector.

Class is, of course, bound up with employment but is a much contested concept. If we simplify things by using the familiar National Readership Survey (NRS) marketing categorisation, we find that 74 per cent of Labour members fall into the ABC1 category, leaving 26 per cent in the C2DE category. This finding may be disappointing to those who believe Labour should be the party of, not only for, the working class—especially when one learns that it is not so very different to the 80 per cent figure for the Conservative Party. But it should come as no surprise for several reasons. First, most forms of political participation—including voting—tend to attract those with greater cultural capital, higher incomes, and more time spent in full-time education. Party membership is no different; indeed, some 60 per cent of Labour members are graduates compared to well under a third of the adult population. Second, it is worth recalling that 57 per cent of British adults fall into the ABC1 social grades and can therefore be considered (if only ‘objectively’ and certainly not subjectively) ‘middle class’. Third, for as long as academics have been surveying party members (that is, since the end of the 1980s), we have known that only around a quarter of Labour members are working class; in other words, any change in the class composition of the party’s membership, presuming it did shift from majority working to majority middle class, occurred a relatively long time ago and certainly not—as may well have been the case with its voter-base—as a result of anything said or done by the bogey-man of the left, Tony Blair.⁶

What do Labour’s members think?

Moving from who members are to what they think, one thing is immediately striking and helps to explain why a clearly reluctant Jeremy Corbyn (along with his equally reluctant trade union leader allies) eventually had to accept the idea of a second referendum on Brexit. Some 83 per cent of Labour members voted Remain in 2016. Whatever divides them ideologically, in other words, Europe is not it.

An approximate idea of where Labour members stand ideologically, at least with regard to each other, can be gleaned from their vote in the 2016 leadership contest: of those who voted in it, 76 per cent voted for Corbyn and only 24 per cent for Owen Smith. That said, we should not assume a vote for Corbyn makes someone a diehard Corbynista. Indeed, when we asked about internal party groups people belonged to, only 12 per cent said they belonged to Momentum, Corbyn’s Praetorian Guard-cum-cheerleader. In fact, although one cannot dismiss or discount the ideological divisions between Labour members, too much focus on them risks blinding us to the reality that the overwhelming majority of them are pretty left-wing and socially liberal. We can measure this using the two standard (if arguably a little dated) batteries of questions used by the British Election Study to measure people’s underlying economic and social values to create an index measure, running from +2 (right wing on economic matters and socially conservative on social issues) to -2 (very left-wing and socially liberal, respectively). Moreover, by asking the same questions to voters and MPs we can compare them with members, too.⁷

Using that measure, voters as a whole, for example, scored -0.7 on the economy and + 0.6 on social issues: in short, the British electorate in 2019 was just a little bit left of centre economically but also fairly socially

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⁵On the NRS, see M. Smith, ‘How well do ABC1 and C2DE correspond with our own class identity?, YouGov, 25 November 2019; https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/11/25/how-well-do-abc1-and-c2de-correspond-our-own-class (accessed 17 March 2021).

⁶See G. Evans and J. Tilley, The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. See also M. Sobolewska and R. Ford, Brexitland: Diversity, Immigration and the Rise of Identity Conflicts in British Politics, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

⁷See T. Bale, A. Cheung, P. Cowley, A. Menon and A. Wager, Mind the Values Gap: The Social and Economic Values of MPs, Voters and Party Members, London, UK in a Changing Europe; https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Mind-the-values-gap.pdf and for more on where Labour members stand on policy issues, see the YouGov tables; https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/f24qa8dwf1/InternalResults_200225_LabMembers.pdf (both accessed 17 March 2021).
conservative. But compare that to Labour members, who scored -1.4 and -0.6 respectively (or, if you like, to their Tory counterparts, who scored +0.3, so just to right of centre and +0.8, so pretty socially conservative). All this would seem to accord with previous surveys where we asked party members to rate where they stood on a scale running from zero (far left) to ten (far right): in 2015, the average score for Labour’s rank and file was 2.4, falling slightly to 2.1 (perhaps reflecting the influx of Corbyn supporters) in 2017. Those surveys also allowed us to do some cluster analysis, which showed that in 2017 two-thirds of Labour members fell into the socially liberal left cluster, with the rest divided fairly evenly between what might be termed the conventional centre and the socially conservative left—and none at all in the socially conservative right.8

How do Labour members compare with Labour MPs—and with (potential) Labour voters?

Keir Starmer, then, leads an essentially left-liberal extraparliamentary party, although it is vital to remember that this was the very same party that much preferred him to the left-liberal candidate when it voted in the 2020 leadership contest. But what about the parliamentary party—many of whom would have voted no-confidence in Corbyn in 2016? Does the Labour membership have little in common ideologically with those who represent it at Westminster?

The answer, perhaps surprisingly to some, is no. The parliamentary and extra-parliamentary party, it turns out, are more birds of a feather than they are chalk and cheese. If we return to the indexes: the membership scored -1.4 on economic values and -0.6 on social values (and the scores were all but identical, incidentally, whether they were more or less active); the MPs, of whom we asked the same questions (albeit with a far smaller and therefore less reliable sample), scored -1.1 and -0.7. If we look, just for example, at a couple of the questions from the economic battery, the similarities are striking: some 95 per cent of Labour members agree that ‘government should redistribute income from those who are better off to those who are less well off’ and so do 100 per cent of Labour MPs; meanwhile, 90 per cent and 91 per cent respectively agree that ‘ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’. The story is pretty much the same on social values, although, again, on a couple of the most indicative questions, Labour’s MPs are if anything a little more radical than its rank and file: some 59 per cent of the latter but 74 per cent of the former disagree that ‘young people don’t have enough respect for traditional British values’; meanwhile the proportions disagreeing that ‘people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences’ runs at 40 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.

But if there is far less difference between Labour’s MPs and its grassroots members than is often imagined, what about the differences between the party’s rank and file and those who it needs to vote for it? We have already shown in previously published research that there are various demographic differences—as one might expect from the foregoing.9 And some of these differences are significant: Labour members are more middle class, better educated, more male and far more likely to work in the public or charity sector, than the electorate as a whole. Others are less significant: for example, age or where in the country they are based. But when it comes to underlying values, it rather depends on which voters you are looking at. People who supported Labour at the 2019 election? The electorate as a whole? Or people who switched in 2019 from Labour to Conservative?

Using the same indexes we used above to compare Labour members and MPs, it is clear that the party’s members are a little more left-wing than the party’s 2019 voters and significantly more so than voters as a whole (the scores are -1.4, -1.1, and -0.7, respectively). But members are far more socially liberal, the similarities are striking: some 95 per cent of Labour members agree that ‘government should redistribute income from those who are better off to those who are less well off’ and so do 100 per cent of Labour MPs; meanwhile, 90 per cent and 91 per cent respectively agree that ‘ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’. The story is pretty much the same on social values, although, again, on a couple of the most indicative questions, Labour’s MPs are if anything a little more radical than its rank and file: some 59 per cent of the latter but 74 per cent of the former disagree that ‘young people don’t have enough respect for traditional British values’; meanwhile the proportions disagreeing that ‘people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences’ runs at 40 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.

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8T. Bale, P. Webb and M. Poletti, Footsoldiers: Political Party Members in the 21st Century, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, p. 62.

9See for example, T. Bale, M. Poletti and P. Webb, ‘Not exactly a mirror image: British parties’ members and voters compared’, in K. Heidar and B. Wauters, eds., Do Parties Still Represent? An Analysis of the Representativeness of Political Parties in Western Democracies, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, pp. 31–46.
scoring -0.6 whereas voters as a whole score + 0.6 and 2019 Labour voters score + 1.1. Interestingly, the gap between Labour members and voters who switched to the Conservatives in 2019 on economic values is not that great (-1.4 vs -0.9). However, it is much bigger (-0.6 vs +1.0) on social values.

That gap—one of the reasons why some Conservatives see some electoral benefit in pursuing some kind of ‘culture war’—becomes all the more apparent on some of the individual questions in the batteries used to construct the index.10 For instance, only 17 per cent of Labour members agree that ‘young people don’t have enough respect for traditional British values’, but this view was held by 88 per cent of Labour-to-Conservative switchers in 2019. The idea that ‘schools should teach children to obey authority’ was also supported by 81 per cent of this group, against just 29 per cent of members. Stiffer sentences were supported by 85 per cent of these voters, significantly more than the 25 per cent of Labour members.

Inasmuch as the latter form the salesforce of the party—be it ‘on the doorstep’ or just in their day to day family and working lives—then this is a potential problem for Labour’s new leadership: it might try to produce policies and project an image more in keeping with the views of the voters it needs to win back, but that effort may be severely compromised by those it will be relying on to communicate it on the ground.11 The same incidentally may also be true of Starmer’s attempt to move on from Brexit should Labour’s overwhelmingly Remain (and second referendum) supporting membership find it difficult to do the same.

10See, for example, B. Bradley, ‘I will not be undertaking unconscious bias training—and call on my colleagues to take the same stand’, ConservativeHome, 15 October 2020; https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2020/09/ben-bradley-i-will-not-be-undertaking-unconscious-bias-training-and-call-on-my-colleagues-to-take-the-same-stand.html (accessed 17 March 2021).

11On how keen liberals aren’t necessarily the best canvassers, see R. D. Enos and E. D. Hersh, ‘Party activists as campaign advertisers: the ground campaign as a principal-agent problem’, American Political Science Review, May 2015, pp. 252-278.

How big a problem is antisemitism at the grassroots?

The most immediate problem facing Starmer with regard to the membership, however, is his decision not to re-admit Jeremy Corbyn to the parliamentary Labour Party in the wake of an National Executive Committee (NEC) panel ending the suspension imposed on him in the wake of remarks he made upon the publication of the (Equality and Human Rights Commission) EHRC report on antisemitism. This has caused considerable anger among some at the grassroots—and membership surveys, albeit conducted back in 2016 make it clear why.

A survey of Labour members in May 2016 found that only 10 per cent of Labour members agreed that ‘Labour has a problem with antisemitism and it is right that the media report on it’—in contrast to 35 per cent who agreed that ‘Labour has a problem with antisemitism but it is being used by the press and Jeremy Corbyn’s opponents to attack him’, and 49 per cent who claimed ‘Labour does not have a problem with antisemitism and it has been created by the press and Jeremy Corbyn’s opponents to attack him’. Another survey we conducted slightly later the same month focussed on those members and registered supporters who joined the party after the 2015 general election. We found that that only 9 per cent thought antisemitism was ‘a serious and genuine problem that the party leadership needs to take urgent action to address’. Meanwhile, 32 per cent considered it ‘a genuine problem’ but thought ‘its extent is being deliberately exaggerated to damage Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle criticism of Israel’, and 55 per cent reckoned that it was ‘not a serious problem at all, and is being hyped up to undermine Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel’. Taken together, and irrespective of whether they considered it a genuine problem, nearly nine out of ten of Labour’s post-2015 members thought antisemitism had been exploited either by the party’s (and/or the party leadership’s) opponents and/or by those wishing to stifle criticism of Israel.

Looking more closely at the results, it is clear that those who joined the party (and/or upgraded their registration as supporters to full membership) during or after the 2015
leadership contest—those, in other words, who were most likely to be fans of Mr Corbyn and the direction in which he was taking the party—are significantly less likely to see antisemitism as a problem and significantly more likely to see it as a problem whipped up by his (and Labour’s) enemies and by supporters of Israel. Among those who converted their £3 registration to membership, nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) believed ‘antisemitism is not a serious problem at all, and is being hyped up to undermine Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel’. The figures for those who joined during the leadership contest and those who joined after it were 61 and 67 per cent respectively.

The other very marked difference revolved around age. Interestingly, when we broke down the answers to the first question according to whether or not members and £3 supporters said they’d vote for Jeremy Corbyn if there were another leadership contest (which hadn’t yet been mooted or taken place at that stage), we see that the problem might have had its roots in factional politics. More than two-thirds (69 per cent) of those who said they would vote for Corbyn thought antisemitism was not a serious problem at all, whereas two-thirds (67 per cent) of those who would vote for whoever stood against Jeremy Corbyn thought antisemitism was a serious and genuine problem. Those who would make up their mind depending on who the other candidates were in this putative leadership contest were split down the middle.

Of course, that was then and this is now. Times have changed: Corbyn is no longer the man who led Labour to two consecutive election defeats and failed to stop Brexit; moreover the left’s anointed successor was effectively trounced in the 2020 leadership contest suggesting a degree of what centrists would doubtless call realism. That said, the majority of the party’s membership—unless of course all of those who have thought or talked about resigning in protest at what Starmer has done to ‘Jeremy’ actually do so—is likely to be made up of substantially the same people as it was four or five years ago.

Moreover, recent polling by Survation of those signed up to the LabourList website suggested that 48 per cent believed Starmer was wrong not to restore the Labour whip to Corbyn following his reinstatement as a party member, even if 46 per cent thought it was right. And, although when asked whether the Labour Party was currently moving in the right direction or the wrong direction, 55 per cent replied ‘right’, 40 per cent still said ‘wrong’, with that proportion increasing to 53 per cent among those who joined the party in 2015 or later, 67 per cent among those who’d voted for Corbyn in the 2016 leadership contest and an overwhelming 95 per cent of those who had voted for Rebecca Long-Bailey in 2020.12 So, as the number of constituency Labour parties (CLPs) that insisted on passing motions on the EHRC report and Corbyn’s reaction to it (in spite of a warning not to) also suggests, Starmer does indeed have a fight on his hands—albeit one he clearly has to win if he is to retain the support of the Jewish community and, very probably, the respect of many of the voters Labour needs to switch from blue to red in 2024.

Will they stay or will they go now?

This prompts a final question. How likely is it that Labour will, before the next general election, shed tens, possibly even hundreds of thousands of members? If, what we might call the Corbynite hard core supporters, cannot in the end get whatever it is they want from Starmer through exercising voice, how likely are they to choose exit rather than loyalty?13 The answer is: very likely.

By no means all of them will quit: after all, although it may come as a surprise to some, most people who join a political party—especially a major political party—do so because they not only identify with its values and its policies but also want see those values realised in government. This means winning elections, which in turn, they realise, will probably entail at least a few compromises along the way. Indeed, when asked by YouGov in January 2020, some 83 per cent of members

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12LabourList/Survation full tables; https://labourlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SurvationLabourListNovember2020.xlsx (accessed 17 March 2021).
13For more on this perennial trilemma, see A. Hirschman, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1970.
said they were prepared to see their party leader ‘make compromises on some Labour values’ if they made it more electable.\textsuperscript{14} Why else would a reasonably significant proportion of members who backed Jeremy Corbyn, and who even joined the party because of him, have turned to Keir Starmer in early 2020?\textsuperscript{15}

However, research conducted on why people leave political parties—something that happens quite a lot but is often hidden underneath the churn created by others joining as they themselves quit—strongly suggests that many of Corbyn’s most devoted followers will eventually give up on the party if they haven’t already done so. Party members tend to quit when they become less closely aligned with their parties, disillusioned with them, or disappointed in them. Indeed, our survey data shows that (a) ideological disagreement is the main reason members (particularly, in fact, Labour members) volunteer for quitting and that (b) disillusionment with the party leader is a key driver of exit.\textsuperscript{16} It was bad enough for some of Labour’s rank and file that Starmer was elected to succeed Corbyn in the first place, but to have turned on him as he supposedly has will be seen by them as absolutely unforgivable.

As a result, a trickle could become a torrent—especially perhaps if Labour under Starmer distances itself from Corbyn and the Corbyn era, yet looks as if it is failing to reap any electoral rewards for so doing. In the April 2020 leadership election, 553,000 members were deemed eligible to vote. In elections for the NEC held later in the year, which resulted, on a 27 per cent turnout, in a win for the left (albeit on points rather than the knock-outs that had characterised its victories in recent years), that figure had fallen to 496,000.\textsuperscript{17} It may well fall a lot further, although it is worth noting that the NEC was informed at the controversial meeting held on 24 November 2020 (the one at which thirteen left-wingers staged a virtual walk-out after it became clear their pick for chair would not get the nod) that it currently stood at 540,000, albeit including members up to six months in arrears.\textsuperscript{18}

**What of the future?**

Whether, of course, any appreciable (and surely likely) fall from those figures over the coming months and years will have the egregious effect that some predict—especially,

\textsuperscript{14}See M. Smith, ‘Five more things we discovered about Labour members’, YouGov, 21 January 2020; https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/01/21/five-more-things-we-discovered-about-labour-member (accessed 17 March 2021). This should come as no surprise: see W. Stone and A. Abramowitz, ‘Winning may not be everything, but it’s more than we thought: presidential party activists in 1980’, American Political Science Review, December 1983, pp. 945–956.

\textsuperscript{15}The November 2018 LabourList/Survation poll suggests that a mere 18 per cent of those who voted for Corbyn in 2016 voted for Starmer in 2020 which, intuitively, seems a little low. Even if it is the case that, of the approximately 120,000 people who joined Labour during and after the 2019 election, somewhere between seven and nine out of ten of them voted for Starmer (see the YouGov poll of members; https://d2sdc2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/0iwr4ut5hg/SkyResults_200225_LabMembers_ww.pdf) that would still mean a fair proportion of the 430,000 who were members before the election was called must have done so as well. Based on the same polling, that would have been somewhere between five and seven out of ten who were members before Corbyn and between four and five out of those who joined the party in the Corbyn era itself. This would explain why, when YouGov presented members with a hypothetical race which also included Corbyn, Starmer beat him by 40 to 28 percentage points: see M. Smith, ‘8 more things we’ve found out about Labour members’, YouGov, 28 February 2020; https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/02/28/8-more-things-weve-found-out-about-labour-members (both accessed 17 March 2021).

\textsuperscript{16}M. Barnfield and T. Bale, “Leaving the red Tories”: ideology, leaders, and why party members quit’, Party Politics, September 2020; https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1354068820962035 (accessed 17 March 2021).

\textsuperscript{17}See C. Mansell, ‘Everything we can learn about the Labour Party from 2020 NEC results’, LabourList, 20 November 2020; https://labourlist.org/2020/11/everything-we-can-learn-about-the-labour-party-from-2020-nec-results/ (accessed 17 March 2021) which notes, among other things, that superior organisation and messaging on who to vote for helped the left’s ‘Grassroots Voice’ slate win 55 per cent of seats for 37 per cent of the votes under the STV system.

\textsuperscript{18}See the report of the NEC meeting on 24 November 2020 by NEC member Ann Black; https://www.an blackmail.co.uk/nc-report-24-november-2020/ (accessed 17 March 2021).
but not exclusively, on Labour’s revenue position and electoral prospects—only time will tell. And in any case, the impact of any precipitous drop in membership must, especially in the wake of the 2019 general election, be a moot point. Returning to the benefits that party members may bring that we outlined at the outset, while there can be little doubt as to the contribution members made to the financing of Labour’s doomed campaign, the result of the election casts considerable doubt on the value of the legitimacy, labour and outreach benefits discussed. And given what a damp squib the party’s ‘Father Christmas’ manifesto turned out to be in December 2019, one would have to question (assuming, for the sake of argument, that members really did have much more input into it than they had in previous contests) any enhanced innovation and linkage benefits that supposedly come with a large membership. As for personnel benefits, how much, as some have alleged, the selection by those members of particular candidates in particular marginal constituencies may have made a difference to Labour winning or losing those seats, we will never know.19

Headline writers, especially in Tory-supporting newspapers, absolutely adore the idea of a civil war inside the Labour Party—and if they can throw in the word ‘internecine’ and the phrase ‘battle for the soul’, even better. Whether or not any of those terms accurately describe what is currently going on, the atmosphere is certainly febrile and looks set to stay that way for some time. Yet, one could plausibly as well as profitably chuck in another cliché—plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. We have been here before—many, many times. Indeed, there isn’t a decade in the post-war period (with the signal, albeit partial, exception perhaps of the 1990s) which hasn’t witnessed Labour’s members trying (and most often failing) to constrain Labour’s leadership, then getting angry and leaving—often in their tens (even hundreds) of thousands—as a result, some temporarily, some never to return. Likewise, hints from trade union leaders that they may reduce or pull the plug on their funding if they don’t get what they want.20 All of which will doubtless prompt debates about whether Labour really has a future and whether we are about to see the proverbial end of the party as we know it.

Me? I’ll believe it when I see it. But, really, we should end where we began—namely with the observation that, as Shakespeare puts it in King Lear, ‘Jesters do oft prove prophets’. Michael Deacon (understandably for someone employing artistic licence) is perhaps a little harsh on Labour’s grassroots members: their decision to join a political party may make them unusual, but only a minority of them are quite as ‘deeply odd’ and ‘obsessed with obscure peripheral issues’ as the pervasive stereotypes would have us believe. However, they are—especially perhaps those who believe that ‘Jeremy’ can do no wrong and dismiss his successor as little more than a Tory in disguise—fairly unrepresentative of the voters Labour needs to win over to its cause before 2024. As a result, giving those members what they want would indeed be risky. Moreover, as Labour discovered to its cost in 2019, a large membership doesn’t necessarily help you much at election time. That doesn’t, however, mean that less is necessarily more and that the party’s grassroots members are always and everywhere a liability. Indeed, the capacity to realise their potential as an asset is surely one of the marks of effective leadership.

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19For an example of where it may (but only may) have made a difference, see A. Norfolk, ‘Electio

20D. Wooding, ‘OH DEAR, KEIR. Labour risks los-

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