Looking for Starmerism

STEVEN FIELDING

Abstract
Most of those trying to assess what Keir Starmer stands for and how he plans to achieve his objectives are too impressed by an understanding of Thatcherism associated with Stuart Hall. That is one reason why they complain that Starmerism is little more than an empty space. But other less heroic ways of thinking about a leader’s ‘ism’ are available and using a more multidimensional approach, this article assesses the evolution of Starmerism through his successful campaign to be leader of a divided party and his first year as leader of the opposition. On that basis it suggests that Starmerism as currently articulated is close to a ‘Corbynism with the brakes on’, although if it is to resonate with the public, Starmer himself needs to adopt some of the rhetorical tools associated with Wilsonism at its peak.

Keywords: Corbyn, Labour, leadership, Starmer, Thatcherism

POLITICAL ANALYSTS almost take it for granted that every party leader should have the suffix ‘ism’ attached to their name. Certainly, those hoping to discover Keir Starmer’s ultimate purpose and the core ideas that underpin how he proposes to chart Labour’s path back to power, are currently searching, most with some frustration, for a ‘Starmerism’.

An increasing media focus on leaders as the defining protagonists of electoral competition has undoubtedly contributed to the perceived significance of the personalised ‘ism’. In response, parties now project themselves through their leader’s often-contrived persona to convey to mostly politically disengaged citizens what they are about in the kind of human terms they might appreciate. This has sometimes led observers to assign an unwarranted significance to personal traits and imbue hopeful words with bogus importance. But most leaders, including those few who become Prime Minister, usually possess a highly constrained agency. What price an ‘ism’ then? Certainly, that was Richard Rose’s view of Margaret Thatcher when in 1980 he predicted the new Prime Minister would remain trapped within the postwar policy consensus.¹

As we now know, Rose was wrong. While still just leader of the opposition, Thatcher’s hegemonic intention to overthrow collectivism and transform popular political thinking had been identified by Stuart Hall.² Few doubted that after a decade in office Thatcher had decisively acted on those intentions: according to the Daily Mail, reflecting on her death in 2013, Thatcher was, ‘The woman who saved Britain’. Seemingly, if any leader merited an ‘ism’ it was her. But despite being such an exceptional figure—regularly ranked as one of the country’s best Prime Ministers—Hall’s heroic conception of an ideologically coherent and fantastically determined Thatcherism has become the model against which subsequent ‘isms’ have been measured. That is certainly true of those looking for Starmerism; and given this template they have inevitably been disappointed, mostly finding an ‘ism’ defined by vacuity. Tom Kibasi’s assessment can stand for many, one he made close to Starmer’s first year as leader. A supporter of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership who had nonetheless backed Starmer’s campaign to replace him, Kibasi declared: ‘If Starmer were to depart as leader tomorrow, he would

¹R. Rose, Do Parties Make a Difference?, Chatham NJ, Chatham House, 1980.
²S. Hall, ‘The great moving right show’, Marxism Today, vol. 23, no. 1, January 1979, pp. 14–20.
not leave a trace of a meaningful political project in his wake.\(^3\)

And yet, according to a less regarded perspective, even Thatcherism might have failed the Kibasi test. For according to Peter Kerr, hers ‘was a complex and often contradictory project which defied easy definition. At times it was visionary and radical, whilst at others it was ad-hoc, short-termist and quite incoherent. It was every bit as pragmatic as it was ideological.\(^4\)

This is a very different take to the one propounded by Hall, one which places the Conservative leader’s agency closer to that of normal humans. Certainly, Ivor Crewe considered that Thatcher’s undoubted reshaping of Britain’s economic and social order lay in more structural sources, such as the electoral system (and, one might add, a divided Labour Party) over which she had little control, but which allowed the Conservatives to stay in office for so long. And, despite her hegemonic ambitions—the ones emphasised by Hall and his emulators—Crewe claimed Thatcher had failed to engineer her hoped-for revolution in popular attitudes.\(^5\)

This latter multidimensional take on the forces that can shape a leader’s ‘ism’ was in fact anticipated well before Thatcher won her first general election, for she was not the first politician to have an ‘ism’ attached to their name. In 1964 Harold Wilson—coincidentally Starmer’s favourite Labour leader—inspired the young Perry Anderson to delineate the character of Wilsonism. Rather than seeing Wilson as a singular figure imbued with heroic agency, Anderson’s assessment lent heavily on contingency, context and structure.\(^6\) On the one hand, he wrote, Wilson had made Labour into ‘the dynamic left-wing of European Social-Democracy’. Through his ‘white heat’ rhetoric he gave his party a new sense of purpose by redefining the role of the state to suit the needs of modern Britain. But Anderson also believed Wilsonism bore, ‘the ominous hallmarks of its lineage, traditional Labourism’, for Wilson attacked not capitalism as such, but only inefficient capitalism. However, writing just before Labour won the 1964 general election, Anderson saw Wilsonism as an open-ended phenomenon. It was, for a Labour left seeking a more socialist programme, ‘neither a barrier nor a tramplin … it is simply a political space in which it can work. … Anything can be read into it’.

Starmer has been Labour leader for over a year. In outlining the ideas and actions that define his leadership thus far, it is important to keep in mind that, like those ‘isms’ that have come before it, will likely be (i) an over-determined ideological compound refracted through (ii) the practicalities of the party context, bent into shape by (iii) the imperative to win power, and ultimately articulated through (iv) an idiosyncratic persona. All these elements exist together, each working on the other, but which is the most significant will likely depend on (v) the character of the times, or what might be more grandly called the historical conjuncture. That at least is the basis for this analysis—one which makes more than a nod to Maurice Cowling’s concept of the ‘the politics of continuous tension’—of what convention dictates we must call Starmerism.\(^7\)

A divided party

Starmer never pretended to be a Corbynite. But, in 1988 as a 25-year-old he helped organise Tony Benn’s ill-fated campaign to unseat Neil Kinnock as Labour leader, something which then placed him on the hardest shores of the Labour left. A lot happened to Starmer in the intervening decades and in 2015 as a newly elected MP, he supported not Benn’s presumptive heir, but Andy Burnham in that year’s leadership election.\(^5\) Even so, Starmer joined Corbyn’s front bench as a junior Home

---

\(^3\) T. Kibasi, ‘Keir Starmer’s leadership needs an urgent course correction’, The Guardian, 16 February 2021; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/16/keir-starmer-leadership-urgent-course-correction-labour (accessed 23 February 2021).

\(^4\) P. Kerr, ‘Thatcherism: A phrase coined here in Birmingham’, Perspectives, n.d.; https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/thatcher-peter-kerr-2.aspx (accessed 7 December 2020).

\(^5\) I. Crewe, ‘Values: the crusade that failed’, in D. Kavanagh and A. Seldon, eds., The Thatcher Effect. A Decade of Change, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

\(^6\) P. Anderson, ‘Critique of Wilsonism’, New Left Review, no. 27, 1964, pp. 3–27.

\(^7\) Outlined in S. Fielding, ‘High politics’, in D. Brown, G. Pentland and R. Crowcroft, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

\(^8\) G. Hinsliff, ‘Keir Starmer: who is he, really?’, Tortoise, 23 March 2021; https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2021/03/23/234053/ (accessed 9 April 2021).
Office minister although he resigned as part of the 2016 attempt to unseat him as leader. After Corbyn’s re-election, Starmer re-joined the Shadow Cabinet to hold the critical job of Shadow Brexit Secretary. In that post he had a number of disagreements with Corbyn, mostly owing to Starmer’s support for a more Remain-friendly Brexit position. This led him to being frozen out of the party’s 2019 national campaign.

Despite this fractious history, when seeking the votes of Labour members as a candidate for the leadership, Starmer held back from criticising Corbyn. In fact, he praised him for making Labour an ‘anti-austerity’ party. Starmer even underlined his own radicalism by issuing a video which emphasised the legal help he gave striking miners and poll tax protesters; it also reminded viewers of his opposition to the Iraq war. Later in the campaign Starmer issued ten carefully worded personal pledges which seemed to suggest that as leader he would consolidate Corbyn’s platform. He did all this because, while enjoying the support of most of Corbyn’s opponents, Starmer still needed the votes of a significant proportion of those who still supported Corbyn’s policies. In July 2019, after Labour had suffered unprecedented reverses in European parliamentary and local government elections, YouGov found that 82 per cent of members thought Corbyn still had the right policies for Britain. At the same time, 68 per cent considered Starmer the best person to succeed him, a groundswell largely based on his advocacy of a second Brexit referendum: while 74 per cent of Remain-inclined members wanted Starmer whatever they wanted, something reinforced by his refusal to say if he was politically closer to Blair or Corbyn. But it intentionally emphasised another of Starmer’s campaign themes: that he would end the factionalism that had characterised the Corbyn years.

Some looked on Starmer’s campaign cynically. Just like Wilson, John Rentoul claimed, Starmer, ‘is coming to the leadership by pretending to be more left-wing than he is’; under the cover of ‘unity’ Rentoul predicted he would nudge members in his desired direction.11 Some of Starmer’s Corbynite opponents even accused him of being a Blairite Trojan horse. Such left critics could point to the fact that Starmer enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Labour First and Progress, factions which had been Corbyn’s most implacable opponents. They certainly saw in Starmer a chance to end the Corbyn experiment and cooperated

Labour’s 2019 manifesto but also possessed ‘professionalism, prudential principle, resilience, communicative ability, and the ability to focus a team around a task’.10 Yet, as YouGov also found, in February 2020, while one third of Starmer supporters wanted, in effect, the ‘competent Corbynism’ Mason outlined, and so for Labour to keep going in the direction mapped out since 2015, two thirds believed a change of course was required.

Starmer’s success in bridging this divide meant his election was never in doubt. He won 56.2 per cent of votes, nearly double that of his nearest rival, the supposed ‘continuity Corbyn’ candidate Rebecca Long-Bailey. But this victory was based on a refusal to address a fundamental conflict within his own supporters. Instead, Starmer pointed both ways at once, appearing to do the impossible in Labour terms, by being positive about Corbyn and Tony Blair, coining the much-repeated mantra: ‘Don’t trash the last Labour government and don’t trash the last four years.’ This was a highly developed form of constructive ambiguity, one which allowed members to see in Starmer whatever they wanted, something reinforced by his refusal to say if he was politically closer to Blair or Corbyn. But it intentionally emphasised another of Starmer’s campaign themes: that he would end the factionalism that had characterised the Corbyn years.

10Quoted in G. Pogrund and P. Maguire, Left Out. The Inside Story of Labour Under Corbyn, London, Bodley Head, 2020, p. 347.
11J. Rentoul, ‘Pipe dream: Keir Starmer, the new Harold Wilson of the Labour Party’, The Independent, 19 March 2020; https://www.independent.co.uk/ independentpremium/long-reads/starmer-wilson-labour-leader-history-corbyn-blair-atlee-a9403401.html?r=545 (accessed 29 November 2020).

9YouGov opinion poll; https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/01/18/keir-starmer-beats-rebecca-long-bailey-63-37-secon?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=website article&utm_campaign=2nd_labor_members_survey (accessed 1 December 2020).

186 Steven Fielding

The Political Quarterly, Vol. 92, No. 2 © 2021 The Author. The Political Quarterly published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Political Quarterly Publishing Co (PQPC).
under the banner of Labour Together with some of their leading figures assuming critical roles in his campaign. There was, however, an ambiguity about Starmer’s ultimate direction even here: his team also included some who had previously worked for the departing leader.

On becoming leader, Starmer nonetheless remained true to his pledge to end factionalism. He removed some of Corbyn’s most partisan supporters from his front bench but retained others, notably Long-Bailey, and promoted less prominent members of the Socialist Campaign Group, like Sam Tarry, to junior positions. There was, however, a shift towards MPs who, like Starmer, could not be described as Corbynites or Blairites, most prominently Ed Miliband. In the following months, however, a number of Corbynites resigned or in the case of Long-Bailey were sacked from the front bench: Corbyn was even suspended from the parliamentary Labour Party.

Some on the left saw this as evidence of Starmer’s disingenuousness: despite his rhetoric he was no unifier, but a factionalist of the right. It might, however, be more accurately seen as a result of Starmer’s determination to ensure the party abided by the legally enforceable stipulations of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) investigation into Labour’s anti-semitism, which reported in October 2020. Long-Bailey was only sacked after she refused to delete her retweet of a tweet Starmer’s office claimed contained an anti-semitic conspiracy theory; Corbyn was suspended only because he refused to withdraw remarks which appeared to question the basis for the EHRC’s damning report. Given how staunchly Starmer staked his initial reputation on ridding Labour of anti-semitism and rebuilding relations with the Jewish community, it is hard to see how else he could have responded and remained credible. These exits and suspensions, which now include numerous constituency party members angry at Corbyn’s fate, betrays a genuine belief on the part of some that accusations of anti-semitism were used to undermine the late leader. But it is also part of the far left’s implacable resistance to anything they see as a retreat from the 2019 manifesto, which for them has now attained almost biblical significance. Instead of seeing possibilities in the new leader, the far left has been determined to turn him into their enemy. This strategy has seen Corbynites lose ground in the wider party, one illustrated by the marginalisation of Momentum. And while measured in terms of National Executive Committee contests, the far left retains some significant support amongst members, this has not prevented Starmer securing a majority on the party’s governing body and appointing his own choice as General Secretary.

**Mountain ranges to climb**

Starmer won the leadership in April 2020 through a disciplined constructive ambiguity that allowed him to win support across a divided party. From this point he faced the more challenging task of trying to become Prime Minister at the next election, which meant winning over a much bigger and very different kind of electorate, but one also at odds with itself. Ambiguity remained his favoured tool, but in the pursuit of votes, Starmer was also forced to make early choices. These revealed an ultimate purpose that did not quite tally with how he had presented himself to Labour members while seeking to be their leader, although it hardly revealed him to be a Blairite Trojan horse.

Starmer became leader after Labour’s fourth defeat in a row, an unhappy series for which there was no single explanation. In 2010 the party lost in the midst of an international financial crisis, the domestic impact of which many voters blamed on the spending of the New Labour governments. It marked the end of Labour’s thirteen years in office and its leadership’s keen embrace of the free market. But Ed Miliband’s cautious attempt to nudge the party back towards collectivism floundered in 2015 as voters stuck with David Cameron’s austerity. Many in the party believed this defeat marked the end of Labour as a moderate centre left and essentially parliamentary force, and that it was time to embrace the grass roots radicalism of the new social movements. The 2017 election saw Labour significantly improve its vote share, but how far that was thanks to Corbyn’s leadership or Theresa May’s disastrous campaign remains moot. And, in any case, Labour still lost. Moreover, two years later, whatever gains Corbyn made were wiped out by his team’s inability to understand the basis for the EHRC’s damning report. Given how staunchly Starmer staked his initial reputation on ridding Labour of anti-semitism and rebuilding relations with the Jewish community, it is hard to see how else he could have responded and remained credible. These exits and suspensions, which now include numerous constituency party members angry at Corbyn’s fate, betrays a genuine belief on the part of some that accusations of anti-semitism were used to undermine the late leader. But it is also part of the far left’s implacable resistance to anything they see as a retreat from the 2019 manifesto, which for them has now attained almost biblical significance. Instead of seeing possibilities in the
away thanks to his obscure Brexit policy, along with voters’ accumulated doubts about him and their belief that Boris Johnson was a different kind of Conservative. The 2019 election saw Labour’s tally of Commons seats fall to its lowest since 1935 and its vote share reduced to 32.1 per cent, 11.5 per cent behind the Conservatives. If Labour is to win a Commons majority at the next election, it not only has a mountain to climb, it has to traverse a whole series of mountain ranges.

When campaigning for the leadership, Starmer fought shy of outlining in any detail his own diagnosis of Labour’s 2019 defeat. When pushed to say why Labour had lost so badly, his response was carefully calibrated, saying, ‘Partly that was to do with the leadership, rightly or wrongly, partly it was to do with Brexit, anti-Semitism came up, and the overload of the manifesto.’ Few in the party could have disagreed with that—although some Corbynites undoubtedly bridled at his reference to anti-Semitism. Starmer did, however, make the important, if obvious point, that Labour’s troubles went deeper than its last campaign. Johnson’s capture of many red wall seats—postindustrial and largely poor manual working class constituencies, mostly situated in the English North and Midlands and traditionally associated with strong Labour support—had been a long time coming. Voters in such seats, especially those who were white, mature, male and with a basic education, favoured an interventionist economic role for government—one not offered during the New Labour period in office—but were also culturally conservative. The latter characteristic had become increasingly important thanks to Brexit, which they strongly supported. If this group had been moving away from Labour since before 2010, the combination of their support for Leave, dislike of Corbyn’s radical internationalism and Johnson’s promise of ‘levelling up’ contributed to Labour finally losing a worrying number of seats, and without which it could wave goodbye to any chance of ever regaining office.

The patriotic turn

For understandable reasons, therefore, Starmer made rebuilding ‘trust’ with this lost group one of his first main priorities as leader, something confirmed by his appointment of Claire Ainsley as his Director of Policy. It was largely for their benefit that Starmer asserted Labour had changed thanks to his ‘new leadership’, and for their ears that in his first leader’s conference speech he stressed ‘family’ as ‘a fundamental value’. In this key address Starmer principally highlighted ‘patriotism’, given that ‘The reason we [in the Labour Party] go out knocking on doors is because we believe in the country. We’ve been a bit shy of that in recent years. We’ve not said it. A movement that wants this to be the best country it can possibly be. It is a very patriotic left-wing tradition’. Starmer also said he wanted to make Britain a country defined by ‘Security for our nation, our families and for all of our communities’. At about this time his team commissioned a strategy document which built on these relatively conservative tropes. It recommended the party’s ‘use of the flag, veterans, dressing smartly at the war memorial etc’ to show those now—significantly—referred to as living in ‘foundation seats’ that Labour was aligned with their own cultural values.

Starmer’s patriotic turn was designed to address the damage done by the widespread perception that Corbyn had held other kinds of loyalties, misgivings which came to a head when he appeared to side with Putin’s Russia over the Salisbury poisonings. There was a sense across the party that this had to be rectified, and quickly. In January 2020 YouGov discovered that 50 per cent of Labour members believed it important their next leader be ‘patriotic’, which made it the second most sought-for quality after enjoying the support of the trade unions. At the same time YouGov

12‘Labour leadership: don’t just blame 2019 campaign, Starmer warns’, BBC News, 16 January 2020; https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-51139619 (accessed 27 February 2021).
13‘Full text of Keir Starmer’s speech at Labour Connected’, Labour Party, 22 September 2020; https://labour.org.uk/press/full-text-of-keir-starmers-speech-at-labour-connected/ (accessed 5 November 2020).
14A. Chakrabortty and J. Elgot, ‘Leak reveals Labour plan to focus on flag and patriotism to win back voters’, The Guardian, 3 February 2021; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/03/labour-red-wall-voters-patriotism-keir-starmer (accessed 28 February 2021).
discovered that 55 per cent of members believed it possible to have a ‘progressive patriotism’—although 25 per cent did not. Long-Bailey had coined this term when campaigning to be leader in order to show she recognised Labour’s problem with red wall voters. She linked Britain’s ‘long history of patriotism rooted in working life, built on unity and pride in the common interests and shared life of everyone’ to a generous internationalism. Even so, some Corbynites criticised her very reference to patriotism, progressive or otherwise: Starmer’s promotion of it—without any obvious qualification—as a central value made some others very uncomfortable. For the MP Clive Lewis, his leader’s apparently uncritical embrace of an open-ended patriotism meant Starmer was verging on appeasing racism, something Labour leaders have done in the past. The issue was, for a significant minority of members, those who had welcomed Corbyn’s 2019 pledge to make teaching the unjust nature of the British Empire part of the national curriculum, an existential one. This controversy raised wider questions about how a Starmerism defined in terms of family and patriotism, so as to attract voters in ‘foundation seats’, might alienate its existing metropolitan middle class and ethnic minority supporters for whom such a framing might be problematic. For if it wanted to win a Commons majority, demographic change means Labour has to appeal to both groups, described by Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford as ‘identity conservatives’ and ‘identity liberals’. This task had proved beyond both the Miliband and Corbyn leaderships. In contrast, as the beneficiary of this new electoral cleavage, one accentuated by Brexit, the Conservatives gleefully promoted a ‘culture war’ hoping to keep Britons pitted against each other.

Starmer’s aim was not unlike that of his two immediate predecessors. His approach also echoed recommendations contained in the cross-party Labour Together report into how the party might transcend the divide. Starmer, therefore, sought to ‘decontest’ this cultural conflict and turn conservative and liberal identifiers towards material issues that, thanks to austerity and now Covid, might unite them. That meant, amongst other things, promising significantly better public services and policies designed to reduce inequality, in other words more traditional Labour ground. Starmer’s culture war pacifism was exemplified during the 2020 Black Lives Matters protests when a crowd tore down the statue of Bristol slave trader Edward Colston, something which became a matter of national debate. The Labour leader coolly condemned the crowd’s actions but suggested the statue should already have been disposed of, albeit in a consensual manner. This not only prevented the Labour leader being dragged into a divisive issue; it was also a view shared by most Britons.

More substantively, Starmer sought to neutralise the deeply divisive Brexit issue in December 2020 by ordering his MPs to vote for the Johnson government’s deeply flawed deal with the EU and, some claim, to subsequently discourage them from criticising its damaging consequences. Starmer had been a leading advocate of a second referendum and owed his leadership to that position. Yet, if his turnabout disturbed Labour’s overwhelmingly Remain MPs and members, it nonetheless stymied Conservative attacks on the party. How much damage this has done to Labour’s existing support amongst once strongly Remain liberal identifiers is not yet known, although a Talk/together survey suggests affiliations based on Leave and Remain are on the wane now Johnson has finally ‘Got Brexit Done’. Even so, some fear Starmer’s approach to Brexit, as well as the family and patriotism, took identity liberals for granted

16Chakrabortty and Elgot, ‘Leak reveals Labour plan’.
17M. Sobolewska and R. Ford, Brexiland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.
and that they might turn to parties more keenly attuned to their cultural preferences.

**Corbynism with the brakes on**

Starmer’s initial focus on changing perceptions of the party amongst those whose votes Labour most urgently needs to win back has been meat and drink to left critics like Owen Jones who claim Starmerism ‘lacks a political soul’.19 Jones—like most commentators across the political spectrum—holds to the heroic view of Thatcherism and, as did many Labour members, praised Corbyn for emulating the late Conservative leader’s hegemonic ambition, even though it led to two election defeats.

Within such an imaginary, Starmerism can only look pathetic. For it overlooks the party context Starmer had to negotiate simply to become leader, and underestimates the dire electoral inheritance bequeathed to him by previous leaderships. Both structural realities have inevitably shaped Starmerism, as they would any ‘ism’. But that does not mean it is, as the likes of Jones claim, simply a function of focus groups. For those with eyes to see, Starmerism is in fact characterised by a definite ideological purpose, one the Labour leader has consistently, if insufficiently, used to try to shape popular perceptions of the Covid crisis and to justify Labour’s response to its appalling economic impact.

The international pandemic would have created difficulties for any new leader of the opposition given that the usual inclination of voters in a crisis is to rally round the government. Like Clement Attlee before Labour entered the wartime coalition in 1940, Starmer acted as a parliamentary gadfly, supporting Johnson’s aim of containing the virus, while highlighting areas where the government’s response was lacking. This allowed Starmer to display his ability to grasp complex detail, a quality the Prime Minister sadly lacked, and so expose the government’s often lackadaisical reaction to the crisis. Voters appeared to notice Starmer’s superior grip and he soon bested Johnson in YouGov’s Best Prime Minister surveys.

If Covid allowed Starmer to demonstrate his personal qualities, he also argued that Labour had the right approach to deal with its consequences and to ensure that Britain was better able to deal with any similar future crises. In his very first statement as leader, Starmer imposed his own meaning on the crisis, to invest it with a significance derived from a view of society very different to that of the Conservatives, and consistent with established Labour concerns. The Covid crisis, he said, meant, ‘we cannot go back to business as usual. This virus has exposed the fragility of our society. It’s lifted a curtain’ and made the case for ‘good government, a government that saves lives and protects our country’.

That Covid had transformed the basis for politics has been a consistent theme during Starmer’s first year as leader, although it has usually taken a backseat to demonstrations of his competence at Prime Minister’s questions. However, in a major speech delivered as the government’s vaccination programme brought hope that the pandemic was now under control, the Labour leader finally called on Britons to embrace ‘a future that looks utterly unlike the past’, one devoid of the inequality and insecurity which marked the previous decade, and which had left the country unprepared for Covid and ill-equipped to address its economic legacy.20 This was a moment for decisive change, he argued, with Labour looking forward and aiming to build on the solidarity generated by the crisis, while the Conservatives only looked backwards. Starmer claimed this historic moment—which he compared to that of 1945—required an active government willing to work with the trade unions and socially responsible businesses to build a more equal and, therefore, a more dynamic economy.

Starmer presented his case as sensible and moral: inequality he said was not only wrong in itself but also economically inefficient. Given that he wanted to make a general argument for Labour’s case, one that would

---

19 O. Jones, ‘On tax as on so much else, Keir Starmer’s team is fighting yesterday’s battles’, *The Guardian*, 26 February 2021; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/26/keir-starmer-tax-pandemic (accessed 1 March 2021).

20 ‘Full text of Keir Starmer speech on A New Chapter for Britain’, Labour Party, 18 February 2021; https://labour.org.uk/press/full-text-of-keir-starmer-speech-on-a-new-chapter-for-britain/ (accessed 20 February 2021).
transcend any post-Brexit culture war, it was a speech inevitably short on precise policies. But Starmer did suggest that a government led by him would ‘ensure people don’t have to leave their home-town to have a chance of getting a good job’, which suggested significantly new levels of planning. If that implied a new policy designed to appeal to lost foundation seat voters, Starmer also guaranteed a Labour government would stop students graduating from university with ‘crippling debt’, reiterating Corbyn’s promise to abolish tuition fees, an important factor in Labour’s 2017 appeal to liberal identifiers.

Together with Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds’ Mais Lecture, delivered just a few weeks before, the speech set out the key elements of a developing Starmerism. For Dodds echoed Starmer’s case that the economic consequences of Covid required a clean break with the policies of the past, stretching back to the dawn of Thatcherism. She confirmed Labour would transform the economy to make it more resilient and competitive through transparent and ‘responsible’ long-term decision making that would guarantee value for money. All this was of course designed to reassure the City and that majority of voters who have habitually doubted Labour’s ability to manage the economy. But the framework Dodds sketched out also included, ‘a rebalancing of power in the workplace, such that employees have a more concrete set of rights and a greater sense of control’ and reverse the damaging impact of low pay, precarious work and, consequently, of inequality on the economy. She did not mention the investment banks and employee ownership schemes advanced in Labour’s 2019 manifesto, but still outlined an agenda that would have made most Blairites blench.

While seeking the Labour leadership Starmer positioned himself between Blair and Corbyn, but refused to say to whom he was closest. It is now clear Starmer is—despite accusations of being a Blairite Trojan horse and his embrace of patriotism—much closer in policy terms to his immediate predecessor, a point Eunice Goes also makes in this special issue. But Starmer is even closer to the leader who preceded Corbyn: Ed Miliband. His attempt to ‘move on from New Labour’ after 2010 by having a more positive attitude to the state floundered in the face of opposition from his own MPs. He was also rejected by the voters in 2015, many of whom still blamed the supposed overspending of the previous Labour government for austerity and saw Miliband as ‘anti-business’. Yet, in the very different circumstances of the 2017 election, Corbyn had presented a manifesto to the country characterised by Stephen Bush as ‘turbo-charged Milibandism’ and did much better in the polls, forcing even some parliamentary critics to see merit in his platform. If such analogies are at all helpful, and from what we can currently tell, it is likely that, regarding domestic social and economic policy at least, Starmerism will prove to be Corbynsim with the brakes on.

The means through which Starmer proposes to deliver his agenda will, however, undoubtedly see a move back to a more traditional pre-Corbynite Labourism. It will be defined by a relatively uncritical attitude to the British state, one indicated by his support for the so-called ‘Spycops Bill’ which allows undercover agents to commit crimes while infiltrating criminal gangs. Labour also now has a ‘non-negotiable’ support for Britain’s nuclear deterrent and for NATO, matters Corbyn had put under a question mark. Similarly, the parliamentary Labour Party is back in charge: there will be no further moves towards giving members a greater role in selecting candidates. And, if only to ensure Labour does not fall foul of the need to address the EHRC’s recommendations to rid it of the taint of anti-semitism, party management has now returned to its

21 Anneliese Dodds—Mais Lecture to the Business School at City University London’, Labour Party, 13 January 2021; https://labour.org.uk/press/anneliese-dodds-mais-lecture-to-the-business-school-at-city-university-london/ (accessed 1 March 2021).
22 D. Corry, ‘What can we learn from the first major statement of Labour’s economic policy under Keir Starmer?’, The Political Quarterly, vol. 92, no. 1, 2021, pp 113–18.
23 S. Bush, ‘Jeremy Corbyn’s policies aren’t that different from Ed Miliband’s or even New Labour. So why is he being attacked?’, New Statesman, 11 April 2017; https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/welfare/2017/04/jeremy-corbyns-policies-arent-different-ed-milibands-or-even-new-labour-so (accessed 4 March 2021).
pre-Corbynite pattern (see also Eric Shaw in this issue).

Conclusion

Starmerism is currently defined by a radical economic and social agenda, with equality at its heart, one that bears the marks of the Miliband and Corbyn leaderships, albeit framed by relatively conservative cultural tropes. How it develops in the midst of economic circumstances, the likes of which few have experienced before, is hard to predict. But how far Boris Johnson returns to ‘business as usual’ once the pandemic has been contained and whether his government pursues a meaningful ‘levelling up’ agenda that benefits former red wall constituencies will inevitably leave their mark—as will matters in the Labour party itself. Corbyn’s position as a party member who is nonetheless suspended from the parliamentary Labour Party cannot be sustained. With 70 per cent of members endorsing those comments that led to his suspension, much still hangs on his final fate. And as the next general election comes closer, Starmer will be obliged to announce specific policies to clarify the broad direction he has already set out, and so, plenty of conference votes to be negotiated. How a divided electorate responds to these policies will also further shape Starmerism. After making up much ground during 2020, since the start of the government’s vaccination programme Labour’s position in the polls has become more precarious. We will have to see how long identity liberals will allow Starmer to focus on the concerns of their conservative counterparts: there are likely to be plenty of by-elections to give both groups a chance to make their views known.

Faced by one of the most rascally of politicians to occupy Number Ten, Starmer’s success—never likely given the 2019 result—is hardly guaranteed. Certainly, in comparison with Johnson, the consummate campaigner, he is ill-at-ease on the stump. Given the importance of a leader’s persona to their party’s ability to cut through to disengaged voters and to give a face and a voice to their ‘ism’, Starmer’s reluctance to talk about himself and his working class family background is an impediment. How the son of a nurse and tool maker rose to become Director of Public Prosecutions could be used to illustrate any number of helpful themes. Instead, there is virtual silence, leading some to see ‘Sir Keir’ as an aloof and patriarchal figure. And anybody listening to radio phone-ins will hear the Labour leader regularly described as boring, although in less polite terms. Many voters are, as a result, still not sure what it is for which Starmer stands and they remain to be convinced that Covid has changed things as much as the Labour leader contends. If the media are not as hostile as they were when Corbyn was leader, they are unlikely to do Starmer many favours. Yet, as one of the Labour leader’s colleagues from his time as a QC recalled, ‘I’ve never seen him make a rabble-rousing speech, I don’t think that would be in his nature’. Even so, to help Starmerism gain popular traction—to make it live in voters’ minds—Starmer himself desperately needs the memorable phrases and sassy delivery that defined Wilsonism at its peak.

Keir Starmer has now been Labour leader for over a year: if he was Margaret Thatcher, this would be 1976. How many spoke of Thatcherism then? Had Jim Callaghan called an election in the autumn of 1978, or not provoked the winter of discontent, she might never have become Prime Minister. And once in Number Ten, Thatcher was fortunate to face a split Labour Party, a miscalculating Argentinian dictator and a strategically inept miners’ leader. Starmer could do with some of that luck.

Steven Fielding is Professor of Political History at the University of Nottingham.

---

24J. Wallis Simons, ‘EXCLUSIVE: 70% of Labour members still think the party has no problem with Jew hate and don’t want Corbyn expelled’, Jewish Chronicle, 30 March 2021; https://www.thecjc.com/news/uk/true-views-of-labour-membership-revealed-in-new-poll-1.513656 (accessed 9 April 2020).

25Quoted in Hinsliff, ‘Keir Starmer: who is he, really?’. 