

Review of "The Candidate: Jeremy Corbyn's Improbable Rise to Power" by Alex Nunns

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Alex Nunns, *The Candidate: Jeremy Corbyn's Improbable Rise to Power*, OR Books, London and New York, 2018

Introduction

- 1 In these strange times, mid 2018, when a campaign against the leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, is defending the unlikely thesis that this lifelong antiracist activist has actually been a racist all along, it may be a good moment to look more in detail at who Jeremy Corbyn is and how he got to the position he is in now, with a fair chance of being the next British Prime Minister.
- 2 The first edition of the book under review here was published in November 2016 and it was fully updated after the 2017 election. It is written by Alex Nunns, an author broadly sympathetic to Corbyn's worldview and a connoisseur of British political life both at institutional and activist levels, able to draw a sophisticated picture of the effects of structural, conjunctural and accidental causes of political change. For the volume, he has been able to avail himself of very numerous interviews with key leaders and activists. The work is chirpily written, and filled with surprising anecdotes, explained with impeccable pedagogy: the Times Literary Supplement referred to his narrative as "very well-researched" and "oddly electrifying".
- 3 The main strength of the book is its deep understanding of the many and varied streams, currents and eddies of left political life in the UK. Not satisfied with describing the

surprising rise to mass popularity¹ of an old-fashioned, jam-making community activist and dissident backbench MP, Nunns develops a clear hypothesis on the deep roots of this rise.

- 4 So how did the politics of Jeremy Corbyn - against austerity, for the encouragement of trade union activity and the abolition of university tuition fees, in favour of the renationalization of the railways - get him to the leadership of the Labour Party? For long years, after all, most commentators had been in agreement that New Labour, which had left behind such ideas, represented the future: new, individualistic generations were never again, it was imagined, going to be interested in collectivism. At the same time a certain “Americanization” of the form of political campaigning, based on carefully targeted advertising, and professional image management, rather than doorstep campaigning and church hall meetings, was seen to be essential to the 21st century. The least one can say is that Corbyn did not fit this “modernist” mould.



A group of Labour activists in Liverpool
Photo : Alan Gibbons

Three battles

- 5 The book takes us through three battles - the Labour leadership campaign of 2015, the second leadership contest, of 2016, and the snap election called by Theresa May in 2017. In each case, the media were generally very hostile indeed to Jeremy Corbyn.² Dozens of smear campaigns followed one another, but a desperate search for scandal in Corbyn's past or present proved fruitless, and in each case Corbyn performed well, refusing, for his part, to make personal attacks on any of his opponents.
- 6 For the first Labour leadership campaign, in 2015, many left-wing Labour party activists considered the Left should not even stand a candidate, so as to avoid humiliation (p10). A surprise successful online petition for a left candidacy encouraged Corbyn (told by his friends “it's your turn” p78) to join the fray (p63), hoping to win influence for left ideas,

but with, initially, no thought of victory. But his team found themselves “at the reins of a runaway horse” (p110) as dozens of Do It Yourself initiatives to build support took off.

- 7 The leadership campaign was complicated by some perhaps unexpected variables. Jeremy Corbyn refused to phone MPs personally to ask for their endorsements (and he is not a man to be bullied into something he does not wish to do). Several MPs, accustomed to being buttered up in these circumstances, withheld their support. But Corbyn scraped through the hurdle of getting sufficient MP endorsements (much helped by thousands of emails to MPs from their constituents), got large numbers of declarations of support from local Labour party branches and some from key trade unions, had hundreds of activists staffing the phone banks, and went on to a landslide victory (210 000 votes, 59.5% of the vote: the runner-up got 19%). The very day of his victory, he spoke at a refugee rights demonstration, signalling clearly he was not about to “moderate” all his positions in a hope of keeping the “centre” on board.
- 8 The Corbyn leadership, says Nunns, gave a rising but fragmented Left, which had mostly been based in various single-issue campaigns, a chance to come together (p 126). Labour recruitment soared; fifteen thousand new people joined the Labour Party the day after the leadership election alone (p256).
- 9 Once in leadership, Corbyn was faced with the task of building and stabilizing a shadow cabinet from an overwhelmingly hostile group of Labour MPs reared on the old dispensation. He managed to do so, despite a number of critical and carefully-timed resignations. A second leadership campaign was forced on him in 2016. Insurgent Labour Members of Parliament opposed to Corbyn’s politics attempted to stop his name even going on the ballot paper, some spoke of challenging a Corbyn victory in the courts, and then the party increased the cost of joining as a registered supporter from £3 to £25. In the event, Corbyn won easily anyway, increasing his vote to 62% (253 000 votes in all).
- 10 In the third battle, the 2017 elections, the Corbyn campaign was in large part run independently of the Labour Party Headquarters, an institution which was characterized at best by a half-hearted approach and at worst by a determination to block Corbyn’s continued rise in influence. In the final week, Corbyn’s Facebook videos notched up 22 million views, while such unlikely organizations as “Grime for Corbyn”³ were opening up new channels to connect with younger voters, and Corbyn got on the front page of the New Musical Express.
- 11 The election was always going to be difficult for Labour: the collapse of hard-right UKIP was giving large numbers of votes to the Conservatives. Theresa May’s refusal to debate against Corbyn on television may have been the turning point which boosted Corbyn’s campaign. One more time, his team was able to pull a rabbit out of a hat and push Theresa May back to a minority government, obliged to search for a coalition partner in hard right Democratic Unionist Party.

Underlying causes

- 12 Nunns outlines the main factors involved in these successes: firstly a slow swing since 2008 in left and trade union opinion against austerity (by 2015 over 90% of Labour members felt cuts had gone too far p22). Secondly there was a party rulebook which had been drawn up by Blair supporters convinced that giving more votes in a leadership election to sympathizers and members would make sure left activists were always

outnumbered; Blair seemed unable to imagine that there could be hundreds of thousands of sympathizers moving left, and hundreds of thousands of new members who would join when the left dynamic was clear. Nunns guides us through the different changes in the party rulebook in the last twenty years, making the political stakes clear at each stage.

- 13 He also takes us on a tour of all the processes involved – fundraising, the recruitment of thousands of volunteer canvassers, the discovery of the power of the social media in certain circumstances, how to persuade abstentionists to vote, and so on. In every case, detailed mechanisms are skilfully explained. Rather than generalizations about the opportunities and dangers of social media, Nunns shows how, in particular situations, it was possible to use memes and other techniques to produce observable results in the opening-up of public debate and the mobilizing of new sympathizers. He also debunks the myth of a powerful Trotskyist infiltration: tens of thousands of Trotskyists – cunning or otherwise – simply do not exist in the UK (p45).
- 14 The rest is history. Corbyn’s meetings were bigger than anything seen in Britain since the second world war, people queued for several hours, overflow meetings were routinely necessary. Nunns sums up his own opinion: “Corbyn is different. Every time he opens his mouth there is a dangerous possibility that he will say something interesting.” (p 107). For the Daily Mail, in contrast, Corbyn’s supporters are “a fractious irrelevant rabble” (p 175).
- 15 This insightful book is a useful aid to an organic understanding of UK politics today, and will be useful to all students of British society, whether or not they share the author’s sympathies. The future of the UK Labour party, now counting 550 000 members, is likely to be massively influential on every area of British society. Whether Corbyn can win a fourth battle and enter number ten, only time will tell, but Nunns’s book is a valuable contribution to debate.

NOTES

1. This spontaneous outbreak at a music festival in Cornwall in August 2018 is not untypical, and, in British political history, is probably unprecedented. <https://evolvepolitics.com/watch-18k-cornwall-festival-goers-in-spontaneous-deafening-show-of-support-for-jeremy-corbyn-video/>
2. The media campaign was studied by a team of academics from the London School of Economics. See Bart Cammaerts, Brooks DeCillia, João Magalhães and César Jimenez-Martínez, *Journalistic Representations of Jeremy Corbyn in the British Press: From Watchdog to Attack dog*, London School of Economics, 2016. Available online at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67211/1/Cammaerts_Journalistic%20representations%20of%20Jeremy%20Corbyn_Author_2016.pdf
3. *The Guardian*, 17 May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/17/grime4corbyn-why-british-mcs-are-uniting-behind-the-labour-leader>

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