

A tale of two Islingtons

How Blair opened the door for Corbyn

Simon Matthews

Tom Bower doesn't write proper biographies. Over 35 years he has published studies – basically investigative journalism – of Klaus Barbie, Robert Maxwell, Tiny Rowland, Mohamed Al-Fayed, Geoffrey Robinson, Gordon Brown, Conrad Black, Bernie Ecclestone, Simon Cowell, Richard Branson, Tony Blair and Prince Charles. Working for the BBC from 1970, he reported for and then produced Panorama. He hit his stride in 1981 with *Blind Eye to Murder: Britain, America and the Purging of Nazi Germany*, an account of how, post-1945, various German war criminals were allowed to remain in situ and even flourish with the connivance of the UK and US authorities. After which he went from exposés of billionaire tycoons and major media figures to knocking copy on what were then the UK's main political players, Brown and Blair.

Bower was originally a barrister and his approach would be familiar to anyone who has attended court: slow careful questioning of the subjects' contemporaries (many of whom portray themselves as victims); a prior position being taken that he is fulfilling a duty to put something bad in the public domain; and an adversarial, one-sided approach that ignores complex factors like intentions, context and general comparisons with whatever other people may or may not have actually done in the same circumstances. Given his monstrous background, this worked with Klaus Barbie. But Simon Cowell?

Bower's books usually lack the footnotes, appendices, access to official documents and reports and wide-ranging interviews that characterize proper biographies. But they are readable. The antics of the ultra-rich in Monaco, Mayfair night clubs, City board rooms and opulent hotels; the hanging-out at international conferences, film premieres, Michelin-starred restaurants; the mistresses, drugs, car crashes, exotic hangers-on, sinister acquaintances . . . there's an abundant audience for all of this, as reality TV testifies. And, of course, there is the vicarious satisfaction for his readers of being proved right – that their lives are better (morally, if not financially) than the tawdry goings-on of these individuals, none of whom they ever really liked in the first place.

Dangerous Hero: Corbyn's Ruthless Plot for Power is Bower's latest offering and comes with an apologetic introduction in which the author reassures readers that this is no hatchet job, but a balanced account. Bower offers as evidence his spell at the LSE (1964-1967) during which, he asserts, he was a revolutionary socialist himself. Apparently, this makes him especially qualified to ruminate on the background of the current Labour Party leader. Even if this is so, early on it becomes clear that this book doesn't tell us anything that we didn't already know (or couldn't have guessed) about the subject and not much effort is made to provide a wider context. We get a bit of Corbyn's life, but not very much of his times. It opens with a functional discussion of Corbyn's family background: his parents were both Labour Party members from the late '30s and he has three older brothers. But there is no account of whether the views and attitudes of his parents might have influenced his own. Did they go to meetings? Did they canvass? Did they have political friends? If so, is there anyone we might have heard of? Likewise, there is no discussion of the lengthy career on the political fringes enjoyed by one of those elder brothers, Piers Corbyn. By the early '70s, for instance, both Corbyn brothers were embedded in the politics of what was then called 'the broad left' in London. Did they work together? Did Piers ever mentor Jeremy?¹

It was a posh middle-class family. Corbyn was brought up in a detached 17th century manor house previously owned by the Duke of Sutherland and went to prep school. After this he attended Adams Grammar School (founded 1656, now fee-paying, selective and with boarders) where, in an early display of non-conformity, he declined to participate in the Combined Cadet Force.² Disinterested in academic work (or just not very bright) he got two poor grade A Levels, insufficient to follow his brothers to university. Instead, in 1967 he went to Jamaica as a student teacher. His contract was for three years but he dropped out after two. Back in the UK, he returned to his parents and started dabbling in Labour Party activity. In 1972 he went to a Labour Party Young Socialists

¹ In which context note that Piers Corbyn stood (against the Labour Party) in the 1974 local elections as a Squatters and Tenants candidate in the City of Westminster. The GLC subsequently funded an Advisory Service for Squatters that for many years operated out of Jeremy Corbyn's constituency. Prior to emerging as a highly individualistic weather and climate change forecaster, Piers Corbyn sat 1986-1990 as a Labour councillor in Southwark, during which period he was Vice Chair of the Housing Committee.

² The Combined Cadet Force are based in the schools from which the armed forces traditionally draw their officer class and are separate from the Army Cadet Force, a 'national youth organization' that tends to attract and encourage 'other ranks'.

Annual Conference where he met Keith Veness, a close colleague of Ken Livingstone.³

After which things moved quickly. That autumn he moved to London and signed up for a course in Trade Union Studies at the Polytechnic of North London but dropped out after his first year.⁴ By 1973 he was working for the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers and had become a founder member of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy. In '74 he got elected to Haringey Council, and, shortly afterwards, Tony Banks – then Head of Research at the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AEUW) – employed him as a researcher.⁵ That employment, and his expenses as an elected member, probably no more than £2500 p.a., gave him a relatively low but liveable income. Attending every meeting that he could, his approach was to ingratiate himself with as many of the members as possible, particularly those who were middle-aged/elderly working class. He often gave the impression that he came from Telford New Town, while showing, or appearing to show, great interest in their views. Douglas Eden, a key figure on the Labour right at this time who also lived in Haringey noted, with irritation (and rather uncharitable, if accurate, language): 'In his carefully self-controlled way, [...] he presented himself to the lower orders of society, the vulnerable and inadequate people who felt indebted to him, as working-class. Once he got power, he dominated the branch and got their votes.'⁶

Early political life

³ See my 'The once and future king?' in *Lobster* 56 and my review of Ken Livingstone's memoir in *Lobster* 62 at <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster62/lob62-shameless.pdf> where this relationship is discussed in more detail.

⁴ I wonder if Corbyn had a Mature Students Grant that enabled this. If so, he would actually have been relatively well off at the time.

⁵ Banks was notably less sectarian than Livingstone and Corbyn and, after starting his political life in the Liberal Party circa 1960, had contested East Grinstead for Labour in the 1970 general election.

⁶ Douglas Eden and Stephen Haseler ran the Social Democratic Alliance, a group within the Labour Party from 1975. Outside the Labour Party from 1980 they ran candidates in the 1981 GLC elections, splitting the vote and ensuring that Ted Knight was defeated as Labour candidate in Norwood. Had he been elected, it had been agreed that Knight would become Chair of the Finance Committee, allowing him to take over Leadership of the GLC a year or two later when Livingstone quit to concentrate on his Parliamentary objectives.

On Haseler and the SDA see <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster67/lob67-atlantic-semantic.pdf>.

Bower notes, as have many others, that from the beginning of his political career 45 years ago, Corbyn has barely changed his views on anything and remains one of the most orthodox figures in the UK (specifically English) left. Bower also expends a great deal of his narrative (as have the mainstream media) on a detailed poking about in Corbyn's support for Palestine, antipathy towards Israel (as presently constituted, at any rate) and alleged difficulties with anti-semitism. This may be what sells books but, by default, it means that wider issues are overlooked.

The first such omission is that, while Corbyn can be shown to have been a somewhat impractical activist for many years, what isn't considered is whether his views and opinions – at that time – weren't thought to have had a serious prospect of success. After all, in the mid '70s (and for possibly up to a decade later) the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) contained a fairly large number of MPs whose views were considered to be 'left-wing', albeit they were usually in a minority on most issues. Tony Benn and others thought, therefore, that given some careful de-selections and selections the political balance of PLP could be tilted firmly leftwards allowing them to capture it. Looking now at a number of selections that were made in '76 and '77 (notably Ken Livingstone in Hampstead and Highgate and Ted Knight in Hornsey and Wood Green, the latter with Corbyn's help) one has to remember they were engineered on the assumption that Labour would win a general election if one were held in '78. Benn fully intended to challenge for the Labour Party leadership as soon as a sufficiently large grouping within the PLP could be rallied to his support. Importantly, this would also be as soon as the National Executive Committee (NEC) had agreed proposals for the selection and re-selection of Parliamentary candidates, as suggested by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy. Even after 1979, with Thatcher markedly unpopular, it was assumed (pre-Falklands War) that Labour would win any general election called in 1982-1983.⁷ Had Labour won a general election in 1978, then, the centre of gravity within the PLP may well have been further to the left. Thus, the idea of 'a coup from the left' was not an unreasonable deduction. Many considered it possible, including Corbyn's local colleagues Douglas Eden and Stephen Haseler from the other end of the Labour

⁷ Livingstone subsequently admitted that his initial contact with Brent East CLP (facilitated by Graham Bash of *Labour Briefing*) occurred in 1980, which does seem to suggest that his primary interest was in becoming an MP rather than Leader of the GLC. Ted Knight failed to get elected in Hornsey and Wood Green in 1979 and later failed circa 1985 to win the Labour nomination for Coventry North East. Valerie Veness, partner of Keith, stood unsuccessfully as Labour candidate in Hornsey and Wood Green (1983) and Nuneaton (1987).

spectrum. But as Bower doesn't do counter-factual debate, no analysis is made of how quixotic the antics of the broad left actually were in the '70s and '80s and at what point circumstances rendered their tactics pointless. Was it the Falklands victory? Or just earlier with the launch of the Social Democratic Party (SDP)?

Corbyn himself functioned mainly in the background in the '70s, making repeated attempts to deselect Andrew McIntosh, the GLC representative for Tottenham. In 1980 he had Kate Hoey (late of the International Marxist Group) lined up to replace McIntosh, only for Hoey to decide at the last moment that she wished to contest the Dulwich parliamentary seat instead.⁸ Bower doesn't draw any conclusions from the anti-McIntosh campaign. In particular there is no explanation of why ending his career was deemed essential by Corbyn, Livingstone, Knight and their allies. Was McIntosh right-wing? There was no evidence he was. Like his wife (Naomi Sargent), he had a background in market research where he had worked alongside the likes of Michael Young. He was a humanist, solidly pro-European and had a father-in-law who campaigned against miscarriages of justice.⁹ Certainly, by the standards of what came later (particularly Blair and his followers), McIntosh looks pretty left-wing in Labour terms. But, sadly, not as 'left-wing' as some people liked circa 1980. McIntosh initially survived due to the vacillations of Kate Hoey and the endorsement he received from Labour leader Michael Foot (which came in curiously weighted language). But he would eventually be politically decapitated by Livingstone immediately after the May '81 GLC elections, an action that Foot did not seek to reverse.

What was Corbyn's legacy in Haringey? His energies were expended on constantly attempting to change the council leadership and trying to replace McIntosh. Throughout his time on the authority he was also employed by National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) as the official responsible for the area. This ought to have led to multiple conflicts of interest once he started sitting on and even chairing committees that took decisions that affected NUPE members. (Bower make no comment on this). Corbyn was an astute campaigner, but doesn't appear to have had any overall effect in terms of Haringey bucking regional and national trends, notably in '82 when Labour nearly lost control of the council.

⁸ Hoey unsuccessfully contested Dulwich twice, in 1983 and 1987. In the first contest she failed to take the seat due to the intervention of Dick Taverne as SDP candidate. She was selected, in 1988, to replace Stuart Holland as Labour MP for Vauxhall.

⁹ Michael Young was Labour Party 'royalty' for many years, and founder of the Institute for Community Studies. On which see my 'Pissing in or pissing out? The "big tent" of Green Alliance' in *Lobster* 42.

Between 1980 and 1988 the authority had seven different leaders, two of whom, Toby Harris and Bernie Grant, became quite noted in certain circles. Grant – who began his political life in the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) – was his own man, and respected by many. But Harris was a colourless functionary, an expert trimmer who acquired a reputation as ‘a safe pair of hands’ while keeping in with the extensive local left caucus.

Becoming an MP

In late ‘81 Corbyn emerged as a surprise contender for the parliamentary nomination in the safe Labour seat of Islington North. The fact that he did so was due to a peculiar sequence of events locally that could not possibly have been foreseen. In short, in becoming an MP, Corbyn was amazingly lucky. In his second major oversight, Bower makes no comment this. Two of Corbyn’s three predecessors for the constituency had died young, precipitating bye-elections. Wilfred Fienburgh (MP 1951-1958) perished in a car crash and, had he not done so, he might have been in situ until 1987. Reckoned to be ‘one of the most talented of the younger MPs’ at the time of his death,¹⁰ he also had literary credentials. His novel *No Love for Johnnie* (a study of how a back-bench left-wing MP is enticed toward the political centre – and moral compromise – by the trappings of power) was published posthumously in ‘59 and subsequently filmed. His replacement, Gerry Reynolds (MP 1958-1969) died of stomach cancer. Had that not been so, Reynolds might have served much longer as an MP – possibly until 1997. Forgotten now, he has been described as having been ‘a rising star . . . a future labour leader’.¹¹ Would Corbyn have dislodged either of these had they lived? It must be doubtful.

In 1969 the choice of who replaced Reynolds came down to the Constituency Labour Party (CLP) secretary Michael O’Halloran or Keith Kyle, an Oxford-educated, very well-connected journalist/academic. O’Halloran, backed by many local Irish members, won. This caused a bit of a stink at the time, the notion still being held in certain quarters that a decent education ought to count for something. After all, hadn’t Dick Taverne MP proclaimed Kyle ‘possibly the most naturally talented speaker

¹⁰ See <<https://tinyurl.com/y448d3e3>> or <<https://www.islingtongazette.co.uk/news/heritage/this-week-60-years-ago-islington-north-mp-wilfred-fienburgh-dies-in-car-crash-1-5385020>>

¹¹ Rosa Prince, *Comrade Corbyn: A Very Unlikely Coup* (London: Biteback, 2016), chapter 6.

of his generation’?¹² But, with the 1970 election looming, O’Halloran remained in situ. Formerly a railway worker, and latterly a site foreman, he ran a tight ship. But by the mid `70s he was experiencing difficulties with Keith Veness (at that point, and for some time afterwards, a NUPE shop steward) who had moved into the constituency and begun to assemble an apparatus locally. Fighting back and stating ‘. . . I don’t oppose the government I was elected to support. Perhaps that is really what upsets Mr Veness’,¹³ O’Halloran initially prevailed and, in a rare example of someone out-heavying Veness, the Islington North CLP expelled Veness in `76, only for the National Executive Committee (NEC) to concede his inevitable appeal and reinstate him.¹⁴

There things might have rested, an uneasy truce between two organized groupings, had the failure of Prime Minister James Callaghan to hold an autumn `78 election not opened the way to a Conservative win in `79. After which the failure of Callaghan to immediately resign the leadership of the Labour Party led to the creation of the SDP, to which body O’Halloran eventually defected in `81. (As did Kyle and Taverne.) Had this sequence of events not occurred, O’Halloran might have remained Labour MP for Islington North until 2001. When a candidate was eventually chosen to replace O’Halloran,, many of Corbyn’s supporters – legend has it – were bussed to the meeting in vehicles owned by NUPE. As far as we know, Corbyn never considered standing anywhere else and clearly wouldn’t have got the seat without Veness (whose role in securing it, and `76 expulsion is ignored by Bower). The seat itself wouldn’t even have been available if two significant predecessors hadn’t died young, and Callaghan’s mishandling of essentially common-sense situations caused the SDP launch and the defection of O’Halloran.

On the back-benches

After which . . . well not much happens. Corbyn stays a back-bench MP for 32 years, is diligent enough, but is never, absolutely never, not even

¹² <<https://tinyurl.com/y4qaozr4>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/feb/27/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries>>

¹³ ‘*London Letter*’ column, by John Torode, in *The Guardian* 20 January 1976 at <<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DqDrMOpWsAE6iVQ.jpg>>.

¹⁴ They weren’t doing too many expulsions in 1976 – as Reg Prentice, then facing similar events in Newham NE, could testify. John Ross stood as IMG (International Marxist Group) candidate against Prentice in Newham NE in February 1974 and subsequently became a founder member of Socialist Action, the Trotskyist group that supported and furthered the objectives of Ken Livingstone.

within the diminishing ranks of the left, a leader. Bower's problem is that, given his lack of context, from the moment Corbyn pitches up in the House of Commons much of this narrative is a really serious plod. All the meetings. All the emergency resolutions. All the campaigns. Virtually all of which fail completely. What is the point being made here? And what of the man? Seemingly he wears clothes from Oxfam shops, has no books in his home, no life outside politics, meetings and campaigning, knows very little about most things and either never debates or avoids situations where he has to debate. On the other hand, he is popular with women (three wives and several girl-friends feature in the account), is terribly polite (a good education does help, after all), supports an enormous array of progressive causes, rarely drinks, doesn't smoke, is vegetarian, has a dog and later a cat and is a pacifist. Is this about a socially inept, glib political activist, with a carrier-bag full of leaflets, stumbling through the political events of the UK in the late 20th and early 21st centuries until he becomes PM? A bit like *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, except the central character ends up running the country? Or *Being There*, with Corbyn as the simpleton who ascends to power? Bower thinks not; his sub-title is the give away. But if it were a 'ruthless plot for power' (shades here of Corbyn as Howard Kirk, the amoral sociology lecturer in Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*) did any of it matter until very late in the day?

Becoming leader

Given the circumstances of his rise, some consideration surely needs to be given to whether Corbyn's path to the top was unwittingly prepared by Blair, Brown and Miliband. After all, in 2000, when Ken Livingstone ran against the official Labour Party candidate Frank Dobson for Mayor of London, no action was taken against those Labour MPs (including John McDonnell, Corbyn and Diane Abbott) who openly supported Livingstone and even nominated him for the role. Even at the peak of his powers – this was pre-Iraq War – Blair thought it beneath him, and frankly unnecessary, to waste time (as he would have seen it) on a handful of London-based Trotskyists. Some at the time thought this a careless omission. Had the episode occurred, say, in a borough council Labour group (and such things do), the regional officials would have simply expelled the protagonists, and after an initial kerfuffle, things would have been forgotten. But no such action was taken, and Corbyn again had luck on his side. Even worse, in 2003 Blair re-admitted Livingstone to the Labour Party in a tactical move designed to prevent criticism of his

(already unravelling) Iraq adventure reaching a level that threatened to engulf the entire New Labour 'project'. This legitimized the stance Corbyn, McDonnell and Abbott had taken earlier re: Dobson. (And equally, their opposition to the Iraq War).

One might also point to the trend that Blair himself initiated – perhaps we should call it early retirement fetish – where you 'do' politics until you're about 50 then leave to make serious money elsewhere. Added to that, there's a sub-text that quitting early is OK if it turns out the game – democracy – isn't worth the candle. (i.e. none of it is really that important and there will always be sufficient 'sensible' people around to maintain the status quo). Where Blair and Brown led, David Cameron, Nick Clegg and the Miliband brothers followed. The exit of Ed Miliband as Labour leader in 2015 after a failure to win a general election was particularly egregious, given that nobody seriously considered it likely that Labour would emerge from that election with an overall majority in the House of Commons. In fact, Miliband did quite well in various marginals in England (winning Hove and Chester for instance) but failed to hold or take seats in Scotland. Unlike the immediate exit of Neil Kinnock in '92, and Brown in 2010, Miliband's seemed premature. Could he not have stayed, presided over a debate about the future policies of the party and then made way for a successor in 2016-2017? Miliband departed having agreed, in 2014, to a one member–one vote process for electing future Labour leaders. The expression 'member' here having being stretched to include 'registered supporters' and 'affiliated supporters' rather than solely individuals holding a Labour Party card.¹⁵ The implications of this new system – which was basically an Americanized attempt to boost grass roots' involvement – were not seen at the time. There was no expectation of the upset to come because the

¹⁵ The move to this arrangement began in 2012 when the selection process in Falkirk was deemed to have been engineered by the UNITE union in favour of one of their candidates (an accusation UNITE denied). In 2014 Baron Collins of Highbury, formerly Admin Manager of the TGWU, recommended a system Miliband adopted. Effectively this allowed affiliated unions to develop miniature 'block votes' of their affiliated or registered supporters of the party. Collins had helped create UNITE in 2007 via the merger of Amicus and the TGWU and had also bailed-out the Labour Party financially prior to writing his report. On the related issue of the funding of political parties, Blair established the Electoral Commission in 2000 – but that was all he did. This was despite official reports in 2006 and 2008 requesting: (i) caps on donations from either individuals or affiliated bodies, and (ii) greatly enhanced powers for the Electoral Commission itself. Had he or Brown followed through on these, the funding advantage of the Conservative Party would have been ended and the significant monies made available to those campaigning to leave the EU in 2016 would have been impermissible.

left had failed to run candidates in the leadership elections in 1994 and 2007, and had been trounced in 1992 and 2010 when they did.

Once again, Corbyn was extraordinarily lucky. He needed 35 nominations from MPs to take part in the 2015 leadership campaign and, given his low standing in their eyes, seemed unlikely to come anywhere near this figure. Happily, a precedent had been set to accommodate such eventualities. In 2010 Diane Abbott – who was quite widely disliked within the PLP – had been given nominations solely to enable her candidacy on the basis that it was useful to have someone who was black and female on the ballot paper, thus injecting legitimacy into a process that otherwise consisted solely of white men. But, surely, the tactic of nominating people that you seriously can't abide for important positions on the assumption that nobody will vote for them is both morally dubious and stupid. Particularly the latter, if you are trialling a new selection system. Corbyn benefitted, therefore, from the somewhat patronising attitude that had been test-driven with Abbott. Among those nominating him in 2015 were Michael Meacher (died 2015), Jo Cox (murdered during the 2016 referendum campaign), Huw Irranca-Davies (resigned as MP in 2016 to concentrate on a role in the Welsh Assembly), Andrew Smith (stood down as an MP in 2017, his signature was gained only ten seconds prior to the deadline), Margaret Beckett, Sadiq Khan, Clive Lewis, David Lammy, Chi Onwurah (who later backed Owen Smith's bid to oust Corbyn in 2016) and Catherine West. Corbyn's core support came from elderly anti-EU types (Ronnie Campbell, Frank Field, John McDonnell, Dennis Skinner, Grahame Morris) and a few trade union MP's. Others appeared to have voted for him either because they wanted a quiet life (at the hands of his supporters) or by miscalculating that he couldn't win anyway.

None of this is discussed by Bower. Nor is the result of the election considered in detail. True, Corbyn won a majority (59.5%) of all the votes cast. However, if the 'registered' and 'affiliated' supporters are set aside and only the votes cast by actual party members taken into account, he failed to obtain a majority, polling 49.6%. Had it been a true one member-one vote system, at that point the lowest candidate (Liz Kendall) would have dropped out and a run-off election would have taken place between Corbyn, Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper. Would Corbyn have still won? It's possible that had things reached that point, Kendall's votes would have switched to Cooper who would then have slightly overtaken Burnham causing Burnham to drop out at the next stage with the final ballot being between Corbyn and Cooper. Would Corbyn, a white man aged 66, have beaten a much younger candidate aiming to become the Labour Party's first ever woman leader? We will never know, because

history chose not to take this path and Corbyn's luck held once more. Since then he has beaten off an attempt in 2016 – by Owen Smith MP – to defenestrate him as Leader, and led Labour into the June 2017 general election, which saw it increase its popular vote by 10% and gain 30 seats.

Leave or remain?

On the great issue of the day – whether the UK should leave the EU and, if it does, on what terms – Corbyn has remained inscrutable. When elected Leader in 2015 he was congratulated by Greece's Syriza government who hoped he would be part of a 'pan-European front against austerity'. In the immediate aftermath of the June 2016 EU referendum, Yanis Varoufakis advised him that the UK needed to debate why people voted leave, address the causes of such views, and only trigger Article 50 (which Varoufakis was not in favour of) after deciding clearly what relationship it wanted with the EU. Corbyn ignored this and declared instead for an immediate serving of Article 50 on the EU the day after the referendum. Later (December 2018) he addressed the Congress of the Party of European Socialists, at Lisbon in a speech that proceeded from platitudes that few would contest via non-sequiturs and inaccuracies to Dave Spart-style denunciations.¹⁶ The latter included him claiming the EU created and implemented the austerity that led to the Brexit vote (it didn't: it was George Osborne); and that the EU are responsible for the growing use of food banks in the UK and has embraced the economic legacy of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (both claims are false). It's hard not to think that his audience, initially heartened by his appearance, would have concluded that he didn't really know much about the EU, isn't bothered about its positive work and would be ineffectual in his dealings with it in future years (if he was still around). In summary, a very typical English politician. His attempts to manage this perception, and demonstrate that he is proactively trying to negotiate a way forward have had varied results with *The Evening Standard* noting (26 March 2019) that Corbyn's office was stating 'he had held constructive talks on a deliverable Brexit with the EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier'. If so, that is not how EU governments and Brussels officials saw it with the *Standard* also reporting one of them as saying, 'We get no sense he wants to avert the crisis. He wants a no-deal Brexit that he can blame on the Tories. He's

¹⁶ Corbyn's speech in Portugal can be read in full at <<https://tinyurl.com/yynwv67d>> or <<https://labourlist.org/2018/12/lets-build-a-real-social-europe-for-the-many-not-the-few-corbyns-speech-to-the-party-of-european-socialists/>>.

as bad if not worse than Mrs May.¹⁷

Many find the lurch of UK politics since 2015 into a Corbyn-May contest unfathomable. They wonder how the wave of support that propelled Blair into office in '97 and the immense optimism that was visible during 2012 London Olympics could have dissipated so rapidly and so comprehensively. For those looking back to the 2012 games as the last national celebration of anything positive in the UK, the Memorial Service for Tessa Jowell (Minister for the Olympics 2005-2010) which took place at Southwark Cathedral on 18 October 2018 would have seemed a rather sad finale.¹⁸ Tributes were led by Michael Sinclair and Tony Blair.¹⁹ Among those attending could be found Baroness Jay, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Sadiq Khan, Andy Burnham, Amber Rudd, Jack Straw, Harriet Harman, Lord Puttnam, Lord Garel-Jones, Lord Palumbo, Lord Sainsbury, Alastair Campbell and Rebekah Brooks. A Labour councillor in Camden from '71 and MP for Dulwich 1992-2015, Jowell served as a minor government minister under Blair and Brown. She was appointed to co-ordinate the efforts to stage the Olympic games in 2005, after the bid had been successful. (Though, as is the case with many projects of this type, the idea that the event might be staged in the Lee Valley stretched back to the mid '90s, predating both her and New Labour). Despite the usual British grumbling about money, she managed to get it organized on time and it was a success. People felt a degree of affection for her. So much has the political landscape changed in such a short space of time, the gathering to celebrate her passing looks now like a sort of final gathering of 'the old gang', a who's who of those ousted by the populism of right and left – a populism which all of them, in their own way, failed to address. The presence of former *Sun* editor Rebekah Brooks, whose newspaper developed the caustic tone that was later 'normalized' and sprayed around during the Brexit debate, is particularly notable. By embracing her, they embraced what would sweep them from power.

Blair's failures

As to what they might have done to prevent this, several notable failings

¹⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/y6xdevyg>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/londoners-diary/who-made-the-date-for-the-big-march-a4101266.html>>

¹⁸ For full details of those present see *The Times* 19 October 2018.

¹⁹ Michael Sinclair is Executive Director of the Harvard Ministerial Leadership Programme, and was previously Vice President of the Henry J Kaiser Foundation.

come to mind, for none of which hindsight is a requirement. Leading the way is the lack of action to establish a written constitution for the UK. A demand for this (the UK is unique in nation states in lacking one) had long been advocated by Charter 88 and latterly, from 1995 by the Constitution Unit.²⁰ Despite both having impeccably centrist credentials, no legislation was brought forward, and the Constitution Unit was largely ignored or given minor advisory roles. Because of this, the PM of the UK continues to wield the Royal Prerogative in a way that would land them in contempt of the legislature (and quite possibly imprisonment) in any other country. Such largesse is a privilege zealously guarded by all PMs and the recent use of these powers by Theresa May (and by implication, Corbyn, should he become PM) has renewed calls for the UK to upgrade its constitutional arrangements. Blair and Brown are culpable for failing to address this, as they are for the failure to establish a comprehensive regional government structure across the UK of the type commonplace elsewhere, notably the US (usually their preferred exemplar). What was eventually agreed, in Scotland, Wales and London, had less statutory and financial power than the Metropolitan Counties introduced by Heath in '72 and abolished by Thatcher in '86. The new bodies did not enjoy the right – statutory in many other countries – to be consulted and their agreement gained prior to the enactment of any major change that could endanger their autonomy. Remarkably, given how uncontroversial the proposals and the lack of any precedent for doing so, Blair (and Brown) insisted on referenda being held in 1997-1998 before even these arrangements were agreed. What emerged in London was an election for a City Mayor – a process copied from the US – which directly encouraged the candidacies of media-savvy populists like Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson. Would Johnson, now regarded as the man who tipped the EU referendum from a narrow remain to a narrow leave vote, have bothered being London Mayor if it had entailed working as leader of a substantial political group and being accountable to them? Blair proclaimed, in 1997, that 'the era of big centralized government is over' but then conspicuously failed to achieve any such transformation. Nor is there any sign that Corbyn, as PM, would surrender power to regional authorities.

²⁰ Charter 88 began at a time when many left intellectuals were drawing parallels between the Thatcher government in the UK and the state oppression suffered by intellectuals in eastern Europe. Its key members were Stuart Weir, Hilary Wainwright, and David Marquand. The last named was later active in the Constitution Unit, with Meg Russell, and moved from being an advocate of New Labour (he was previously a close colleague of Roy Jenkins, and like Jenkins was prominent in the SDP) to being strongly critical of Blair.

Close behind the lack of a written constitution would come electoral reform. Prior to '97 Blair had entertained the idea of adopting this in the UK – it was a specific recommendation of the Constitution Unit – only for what emerged to be very different. PR (proportional representation) was introduced for elections to the European Parliament (an EU requirement) which in turn produced a noisy quota of UKIP and BNP MEPs. Introduction of it for elections to the Scottish Parliament led to a big wedge of SNP representatives, while its effect within the shrivelled London Assembly was merely to strengthen the celebrity element of the Mayor's role. Many of those who currently despair of both May and Corbyn do so because they see the 'main' parties as having been captured by their fringe elements. This also reflects the reality that UK elections usually produce a legislature that has little connection, in terms of votes cast, with the views of the majority of the public.

Again, Blair is largely culpable for this. Between becoming Labour leader in '94 and being PM in '97, Blair initially expected he might only become PM in a 'hung' Parliament. He thus made plans – not very serious plans, as it turned out – that he would come to power by forming a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. After the landslide in '97, however, he had a huge Parliamentary majority that would not have been happy to change the voting system. He then belatedly established the Independent Commission on the Voting System under Roy Jenkins. This reported in '98 that Westminster elections should be conducted on the same basis as European and regional assembly elections and noted that, as those were both now conducted under PR, such a change would no longer be as significant as it would have been in the past and should not require a referendum prior to it being introduced. Blair and Brown made no effort to implement this. In 2010 the Liberal Democrats extracted a promise from David Cameron, as the price of entering government, that a referendum would be held on changing the Westminster voting system. As with the referenda held by Blair on Scotland, Wales and London, this offered a simple Yes/No binary choice and required no threshold for its implementation. In any event, the vote was lost (32% – 68%) and the UK was left, largely due to Blair's inaction, with the worst of all possible worlds: a parliamentary electoral system that does not reflect how people vote and a small number of regional assemblies with limited powers that can be overridden.

Having failed to reform the voting system, failed to introduce a written constitution, failed to construct a proper regional government framework, failed to take action against those who backed Livingstone when he ran for Mayor of London in 2000, Blair had one final act of

neglect. Despite his assertions that the UK would henceforth 'be at the heart of Europe', he failed to engage fully with the EU. In office Blair did not align himself with EU foreign policy over Iraq in 2002-2003; the UK did not join the Euro; the City of London remained the world centre for money laundering and tax evasion; and the UK continued to maintain a global network of tax havens. Many commentators taking stock of where the UK finds itself in 2019, may agree with the comments of *Times* journalist Simon Nixon who noted that 'the British state and political class have proved alarmingly ill-equipped'²¹ to deal with significant economic and political challenges.

Not that these are matters that Blair usually discusses in public. Since the outcome of the 2016 referendum, he has re-appeared in UK political life arguing forcefully for a reversal of the referendum result (which was conducted on the same simplistic basis as the referenda he oversaw). Blair now advocates a second referendum following a wide-ranging public debate about the consequences of leaving the EU after 46 years membership. Most recently²² he admitted that many 'leave' voters were swayed by a desire to cut immigration and that the thing to do now was acknowledge this, remain in the EU and 'reform' its rules on freedom of movement. This is misleading. The UK is already outside the Schengen area and when free movement issues arose with the 2004 enlargement of Europe, the UK opted voluntarily to have few restrictions on these. Only Sweden and Ireland did likewise. Every other member of the EU imposed constraints, which all were entitled to do. The UK could also have done so, and this would not have constituted 'reforming' the organization.

A conclusion?

To return to Bower's book: a final failure must be the lack of any explanation of why Corbyn's economic policies have the appeal they do for so many, and why they appear remarkable. Aside from his generally oppositionist stance, in which most things boil down to a criticism of whatever government he is arguing against, Corbyn espouses full employment, high wages and high benefits, accessible education, health, housing and legal rights. He would want higher taxes on the wealthy, an industrial strategy, public ownership and economic planning for the long term. For anyone born in the UK after, say 1975, this appears to be an amazing alternative. So comprehensively has the discourse on the

²¹ *The Times*, 14 November 2018

²² BBC Newsnight, 19 March 2019 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0741dhw>>.

economy under Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron disregarded and avoided this terminology, few now remember such language as being solidly mainstream and commonplace under Wilson and Heath. Nor do many realize that such views remain standard across the EU. Corbyn's economic policies are not, of course, based on the consensus that prevailed in the UK between 1945 and 1979. They are a modification of those propounded in the 1970s by Tony Benn, which is why – as a long-term disciple of Benn – Corbyn's speeches on the economy have barely changed in 45 years. As to whether the UK could implement a Benn Strategy outside the EU (Corbyn's preferred destination) with its manufacturing base and taxation base much smaller than they were in the '70s, few economists or serious commentators think this likely.²³ But the resonance of his proposals to a younger generation that has little to offer from any other quarter is very telling. The lack of any appreciation of this by Bower is significant, and the intellectual void into which Corbyn and McDonnell (and others) have been allowed to step by Blair and Brown is immense. The historians of the future may well conclude that Blair left an open goal for Corbyn, and Blair's legacy may thus be judged by them to be destruction of the UK political centre via a decade of inertia, neglect and complacency.

If, particularly in the UK and US, we are living through a collapse of the political centre, rather than simply a couple of temporary electoral reverses, just how accidental is all of this? Of course, given the circumstances described above, much of Corbyn's rise appears fortuitous. Bower relies on interviews with Keith Veness, whom he describes as 'salt of the Earth', and previous Livingstone biographers Andrew Hosken and John Carvel did likewise. Bower doesn't appear to have sought out any counter views (particularly within Islington North CLP) and Veness's style is to explain away how much the left were organized; maintain they were never really sure how significant their actions might be; present their actions as hesitant and semi-accidental; and to suggest that he, and other factions, didn't even get on with Corbyn at various times. Some might think this dissembling; and if it is, Bower doesn't seem to realize he is being 'played'. The evidence is and always has been that the left factions that support Corbyn are a very tightly organized caucus sharing a

²³ There are many differences between the UK economies of 1975 and 2019, not least that the manufacturing base has shrunk by 20% during that period with the standard rate of taxation being cut by 35%. Benn envisaged boosting investment with a Sovereign Wealth Fund derived from oil revenues (as in Saudi Arabia and Norway). With fossil fuels no longer desirable, due to concerns about global warming, Corbyn (and McDonnell) may find it difficult to implement ideas formulated over 40 years ago.

common hatred of centrist (especially centre-left) politicians.²⁴ A similar case is made by David Kogan in *Protest and Power: The Battle for the Labour Party* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), an amazingly intricate account of the ebbing and flowing of the left within the Labour Party over the last 40-50 years. He concludes that Jon Lansman is the single most influential figure in the rise of Corbyn and thus, by inference, is someone of great power inside the Labour Party and even, potentially, within the government, should Corbyn become PM.²⁵ Given Lansman's role with Momentum, he may be right. One way of looking at this is to note that UK commentators are now beginning to study the people in the shadows who rarely hold public office, but who operate nevertheless as major players in how events unfold. By contrast, much more material exists in the US about the machinations of Steve Bannon and the 'alt-right', with any number of scholarly studies of obscure non-mainstream figures of both the left and the right. Are we now catching up with this? Will Veness, Lansman and others be considered by the historians of the future to have wielded immense and significant influence?²⁶

In such circumstances, writing accounts of Corbyn's life (if not life and times) with events changing every few hours is a risky business. There will inevitably be many loose ends, and Bower will surely be revising his book in the years to come. No one knows when or how this will conclude. Will Corbyn win a general election? Will he – somehow, by design or default – become Prime Minister? Will the UK leave the EU? Or remain? Or end up in some kind of semi-detached relationship with the bloc? Will Corbyn or May (or their successors) be attempting to negotiate with the EU from outside for decades to come? Would Corbyn, if PM, transform the UK in the way his supporters hope? Or will he be shown to

²⁴ Carvel, Hosken and Bower are all journalists, not historians, a hopefully more rigorous profession. Corbyn also displays similar traits in seeking to minimize the extent of his involvement in certain issues – a trait typical of many politicians – notably on the wreath laying episode in Tunisia ('I was present but not involved') and on his close involvement with *Labour Briefing* ('I wrote for the magazine, but was not a member of the Editorial Board'). One wonders, given this type of response to routine questioning, what type of PM he might actually be.

²⁵ Kogan published an earlier edition of his book, written with his uncle Maurice Kogan, in 1981. Lansman, whose father Bernard I knew as a Conservative councillor in Hackney from 1982 to 1990, sat as a Labour councillor in Lewisham 1986-1990. The idea that we may be living in 'the Jon Lansman era' is odd, to say the least, to anyone who knew him, or knew of him at that time.

²⁶ The massive German historiography of the period 1919-1933 may be another parallel here, containing as it does a huge amount of detailed work on figures usually overlooked in more popular studies.

be an ineffectual man of straw? Will the UK break up? Will there be civil unrest under any of these circumstances? Or will it turn out to have been a semi-comic aberration, *A Tale of Two Islington*?²⁷ On the one hand we have Blair conferring and doing deals in smart restaurants in Upper Street in the '90s while Corbyn patiently digs his allotment in dungarees and cloth cap, until, one day

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²⁷ If one includes Mr and Mrs Veness, Dame Margaret Hodge (currently jousting with Corbyn on anti-semitic issues), Baron Collins of Highbury and Lord Simon of Highbury (an oil mogul ennobled by Blair), an awful lot of this seems to come out of a very small part of the UK.