

Ten Years Hard Labour
Chris Williamson
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This is a revealing and powerful book by a Labour MP who vocally supported the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and paid the price by losing his career. It's an angry book because he says that this loyalty was not reciprocated when it mattered. In it Chris Williamson names many of those who contributed to his demise. His well-sourced description¹ of their double-dealing and weak-kneed feebleness is essential reading for any concerned with the future of progressive politics in the UK.

Much like Eddie Milne's *No Shining Armour*² published 46 years ago, this Labour stalwart's *Ten Years Hard Labour* shows how Labour can stigmatise an MP who speaks up for its principles in the face of deceit and wrongdoing. It has appeared in the dying days of the decadent Boris Johnson regime and has been little mentioned in the mainstream press that lauded Johnson while hounding the former Derby North MP.

It follows several books on the recent history of the Labour party, including one by Lee Garratt, a Williamson supporter. I repeat now for transparency's sake the declaration of personal acquaintance with Williamson I made in my review of Garratt's book. For brevity, I will not repeat here the details, links and comments appearing in these earlier reviews.³

When the author, a former bricklayer and hunt saboteur, was first

¹ *Ten Years Hard Labour* is well footnoted and spiced with QE codes linking the reader to copies of correspondence from Ed Miliband, Harriet Harman and senior party officials.

² *No Shining Armour* (London: John Calder, 1976)
On Milne see <<https://crispinflintoff.com/2020/02/06/eddie-milne-labour-hero/>>.

³ <<https://tinyurl.com/2u25jkpb>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/82/labour-the-anti-semitism-crisis-the-destroying-of-an-mp-by-lee-garratt/>>
<<https://tinyurl.com/28njbxt5>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/80/left-out-the-inside-story-of-labour-under-corbyn-and-this-land-the-story-of-a-movement/>>

elected to Parliament for his native Derby in 2010 and 'saw what goes on behind the scenes in the corridors of power the scales fell from my eyes. Were we, as Labour MPs, really the parliamentary representatives of the workers?' (p. 11)

This was not the naïve reaction to Westminster of a party ingénue. He had twice led Derby City Council in his 20 years as a councillor and knew from long experience how the political world worked. But what he saw in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) were the dilapidated remains of New Labour, the construct that had effected some positive change in its 13 years under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, but which had steadily lost members and electoral support before its 2010 defeat.⁴

Williamson had campaigned to make Ed Miliband leader and for a while was made a shadow spokesman. But, he writes:

The shadow of New Labourism continued to linger on in the Miliband years. It manifested itself through cruelty towards people reliant on social security, anti-trade unionist positions, and militarism. None of these Blairite tendencies was cured under Miliband. The failure to move on from New Labour would prove to be a fatal mistake. (p. 25)

So when it came to the 2015 general election he saw the Labour programme promoted by Miliband and his Shadow Cabinet as dull and uninspiring.

This shambolic shower were setting the party on a collision course with democratic devastation at the polls. The public were crying out for an alternative to austerity and were in no mood for a return to the New Labour prospectus. The fact that the party had lost almost five million voters between 1997 and 2010 didn't seem to register with the party's leadership and their advisers. (p. 26)

He cites many examples of Miliband's team – most with little personal experience of fighting tough elections – being frozen in the New Labour orthodoxies of the previous century: 'These Blairite cut-outs were living in their own world.' (p. 27)

Many of these New Labour MPs who had been parachuted into their safe seats by the party machine returned to Westminster after the 2015

⁴ This BBC documentary made at the time of the 2017 general election gives a flavour of the attitudes of leading figures in the Parliamentary Labour Party at the time. Several are now members of Starmer's Shadow Cabinet. <<https://tinyurl.com/59supemz>> or <https://archive.org/details/Labour_-_The_Summer_that_Changed_Everything_-_b09gtywy_signed>

election, but not Williamson. He lost to Conservative Amanda Solloway by 41 votes.

The election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, in which Williamson took a very active part, gave him a second bite at Derby North, despite his marginal constituency being denied the organisational and financial support of the Labour machine.⁵ What resources he lacked as a result of Labour HQ factionalism was more than made up for by the committed energy of hundreds of party activists from around the country who helped reclaim the seat for Labour in 2017.

Yet what could have been an opportunity for change was strangled by the 'Labour antisemitism' furore, Williamson being a prime target as the leading Corbyn supporter in Westminster. As a lifetime anti-racist campaigner, on good terms with many Jews in his constituency and in the wider Labour movement, he quickly realised what was behind the so-called 'crisis'.

He called it out for the political scam it largely was and so was subjected to ever more vilification by the Israel lobby and its political and media allies. This included death threats, the vandalisation of his constituency office and routine daily abuse by Labour MPs in Westminster. Meetings at which he was invited to speak had to be cancelled because hotels and other venues received threats to their premises and the safety of their staff. He recounts how the location for one meeting in Brighton had to be repeatedly shifted following similar menaces. It finally took place in the open air where local activists physically protected him from a threatening critic.

As targeted Labour activists – many of them Jews – were subjected to HQ discipline for alleged 'antisemitic' words and actions, Williamson took up their cause, assuming that Corbyn and his team would step in to help. They didn't, and, according to Williamson, therefore compounded the pressures both on those unfairly accused and on themselves. He writes: 'Corbyn obviously got a lot right, but his lack of prior leadership experience left him ill-prepared for the challenges that ended up confronting him.' (p. 261)

As well as standing by those the Labour machine and most of the PLP wanted kicked out, Williamson courageously investigated some of the

⁵ The leaked Labour report – <https://archive.org/details/200329labourreportfinal_202004> – and the recently published Forde Report – <<https://tinyurl.com/4mtatsf3>> or <<https://www.fordeinquiry.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The-Forde-Report.pdf>> – recount some of the story of how that denial of support came about.

inner workings of the British state.⁶ Again, this did little to commend him to the 'pathetic poltroons in Corbyn's office' who he blames for never getting on the front foot to positively challenge the onslaught they faced. He says Corbyn as leader foolishly treated friends as enemies and enemies as friends.

When the Derby North MP himself became subject to party disciplinary procedures, he says he often learned about them first from journalists. They had been briefed both by antagonistic party officials at Labour HQ and, towards the end of his tenure as MP, by those in Corbyn's office too.

The final chapters describing his treatment by those he had so strongly supported make sad reading. A man who in his youth had fought racial discrimination on building sites, found himself having to take High Court action against the party he had joined more than 40 years earlier. After he won judgements and damages there,⁷ the party erected yet more barriers to prevent him standing as Labour candidate in 2019. It defaulted instead to its practice of backing a 'favoured candidate', one who promptly lost the marginal seat to the Tory whom Williamson had beaten two years before.

Ten Years Hard Labour distressingly describes the author's experiences at the hands of enemies on all sides of the Westminster party divide and their media and lobbyist acolytes. Here was a principled Labour activist of wide experience (how many council housing chairs have worked on construction sites?) – and interests (Williamson worked closely in Parliament on animal welfare with murdered Conservative MP Sir David Amess) whose career was destroyed by the outrageous smears of unscrupulous enemies and the complicit silence of supposed allies.

Williamson is critical of his own actions at times, so this is not the admiring self-portrait of a political paragon. What he has produced in a tightly written and readable way offers a democratic public service. This is not only by naming names and detailing their intrigues and incompetence: he has provided many accessible sources to permit its verification. There are no unsourced words from unidentified 'senior party

⁶ <https://wikispooks.com/wiki/Institute_for_Statecraft>

⁷ Williamson writes (p. 286): 'After I won my High Court case against the Labour Party in October 2019, and I recovered my legal costs, I ploughed all that money into establishing the Left Legal Fighting Fund. The Fighting Fund is an embracement of a counter-lawfare strategy . . . Since I established the Fighting Fund, it has been used to successfully challenge the Labour Party, take on the EHRC [the Equality and Human Rights Commission] and defeat efforts to destroy people's livelihoods.'

insiders' or the rest of the unaccountable briefings and tittle-tattle that often passes for Westminster political coverage.

At a personal level the chances of a campaigning Socialist surviving the combined political and media onslaught of the Corbyn years were always small. The fact that Williamson has been proved right on nearly everything he stood for, especially in challenging the fraud that was the 'Labour antisemitism crisis', didn't count for anything at the time. To be smeared and abused with impunity by Israel-supporting figures in politics and the media is part and parcel of the corruption and decadence that increasingly disfigures what is left of our democracy.

Could Corbyn and those around him have gone to Williamson's aid in the face of that maltreatment? Could they have prevented party officials hounding him all the way to the High Court? Could they have supported his continued membership of Parliament as the hard-working Labour representative of his marginal Derby North constituency? Of course they could, but explaining why they conspicuously failed to do so would take more many words than a book review. So, for now, here are some brief observations.

Williamson cites Corbyn's lack of previous leadership experience as a major problem. That needn't be a fatal condition if the leader has a good team of capable advisers around him or her. Not for the first time in recent Labour history this was lacking in the Corbyn operation. Williamson refers to them as being preoccupied with the 'optics' of politics – how things were perceived by those in the Westminster bubble. This is a little unfair as public perception clearly matters and managing that in the world largely created by Rupert Murdoch and Viscount Rothermere and followed by much of the broadcast media is not easy.

But as Mick Lynch and other trade union leaders are currently demonstrating, it can be done very effectively by advancing a clear policy line in 'words that people can understand and enjoy'. (That memorable phrase came from the late Barbara Castle when we worked together at a by-election.)

Williamson says that on many issues – that of 'Labour antisemitism' above all – Corbyn and his team failed to do that, constantly adjusting responses in the face of criticism, especially from the Israel lobby and its many friends. These were people inside and outside Parliament who could never be appeased. They are a network even Conservative former Foreign Office minister and Williamson critic Sir Alan Duncan sees as a threat to

parliamentary democracy.⁸

While much of this orchestrated, toxic campaign against Corbyn was based on lies, distortion and misrepresentation, Williamson believes a bolder, more principled and assertive strategy could have proved more effective. He is certainly not alone in drawing that conclusion, one sadly reached after 2017 by many initially excited by Corbyn's election and early popularity.

Williamson finally resigned from the party after being denied the whip and with it the chance to stand as Labour candidate in the 2019 general election. Corbyn, who did so little to defend Williamson, now finds himself in the same situation after his successor, Sir Keir Starmer,⁹ cynically used the unbalanced report of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission as ammunition.¹⁰

So where does that leave Labour as sewage from privatised utilities floods our rivers and seas, and the demented Tory believers in Thatcher's privatisation myths favour someone as hare-brained as Liz Truss to occupy No 10?¹¹ Not, according to Williamson, as a trusted party capable of leading serious change. He sees the Labour Party now so deformed under Starmer and with its membership and income so reduced, it could never challenge the status quo in declining and increasingly poverty-stricken Britain.¹²

The false dichotomy often presented by those who criticise the likes of Williamson is that one has to decide in Labour politics between the pragmatists and the idealists. The former have often found comfort in recent years in the dubious wisdom of focus groups. Starmer actually appointed a woman enriched by their use from New Labour days as his director of strategy.

⁸ See <<https://tinyurl.com/m6az8f56>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/82/in-the-thick-of-it-the-private-diaries-of-a-minister-alan-duncan/>>.

⁹ <<https://tinyurl.com/yckzzx95>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/84/the-starmer-project-a-journey-to-the-right-by-oliver-eagleton/>>

¹⁰ See <<https://tinyurl.com/ytdk5s85>> or <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/geoffrey-bindman-on-labours-antisemitism-scandal-there-has-been-political-manipulation/>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/ycknbn5x>> or <<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/statement/statements-and-articles-on-the-ehrc-report/>>.

¹¹ The language in this spoof Liz Truss column could easily be mistaken for her own. <<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-herald-1130/20220827/282132115252254>>

¹² <<https://tinyurl.com/2tn4fvhc>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/aug/17/labour-48m-in-deficit-after-losing-91000-members>>

Williamson, whose commitment to pragmatism was learned in the hard school of local government and in the tough business of opposing racism in the workplace, also represented the best of Labour's idealistic tradition – the party as a 'moral crusade' in Harold Wilson's words.

Like many sensible seafarers, the author had early in his life apparently heeded the wise words attributed to General Omar Bradley: 'Set your course by the stars, not by the lights of each passing ship.' *Ten Years Hard Labour* details the dim and fading lights of many ships who passed by Chris Williamson and, in so doing, left the British people in the grubby hands of Boris Johnson and his rich and decadent supporters.

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