



## THE CHALLENGE OF BRITAIN'S JEREMY CORBYN

By Jeremy Black



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To be congratulated by Hamas, Russia and Syriza on your election may not be what most of us would want, nor to celebrate by singing the Red Flag and making clear one would not bomb ISIS militants in Syria. It is not surprising, however, if you are pro-Russia, pro-Hamas, pro-Hizbullah and pro-IRA. The election of a new head for the Labour Party in Britain, however, raises major questions about the future not only of that party but also of British politics and foreign policy and thus of Britain's relations with the remainder of the European Union, with the United States, and more generally.

The tone of British politics has also radically changed. The Prime Minister's comment that Jeremy Corbyn posed a clear threat to Britain's security reflected the hard-left, indeed Marxisant, character of the new Labour leader. The chairman of the Stop the War Coalition has made a range of comments over the years indicating a degree of hostility to the United States and to Britain's defense profile that are deeply troubling. They are also totally out of line with the tradition of the Labour Party. Not only did it join a coalition government during World War Two, but Labour governments also negotiated the establishment of NATO and the development of the British atom bomb. Corbyn, instead, is in the tradition of George Lansbury, a pacifist Labour leader who, in 1939, as a former leader, regretted the decision to stand up against Hitler.

During the campaign, Corbyn's extraordinary links in the Middle East also came to the fore, notably his friendship toward Hizbullah. The issue of whether this noted critic of Israel was also anti-Semitic was also aired. Those who have scrutinized the matter have more than one view, but, at the very least, Corbyn's position is questionable, and not least because of the understandable importance of Israel in relations with the United States.

Moreover, there is the basic question of instincts. In the last election, the majority of the electorate did not support the Labour Party in part because they did not trust the instincts of its leader, Ed Miliband. He is responsible for the baleful system under which the election of his successor was swamped with 600,000 new members, able to join to vote for only £3 (\$5). With no real control, this led to large-scale entryism by the hard-left, ensuring that the only one of the four candidates without significant experience, other than as a persistent rebel, was elected on the first ballot with 59.5% of the votes cast. With reason, Miliband was suspected by the electorate of being sympathetic to Marxism. There is scant reason to doubt that that is the preference of his successor.

The vote itself is in part a protest vote, one that stems directly from the result of the last election. The failure of Labour in it and the totally unexpected ability of the Conservatives to increase their vote and win an absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons was greeted on the Left with shock and anger. It led not only to disturbances in London but also to a widespread sense that in some way the electorate was suffering from what the Marxists term false consciousness -- in other words, the electorate had been led astray. Instead of addressing the electorate, Labour has turned back.

Does this matter? Does this mean obsolescence and oblivion for the party, indeed does it drive home the lesson that parties have a natural life?

Would that the conclusion was that easy. In practice, the Corbyn victory has troubling short-term consequences and might also have unfortunate affects in the next general election, which is due in 2020. As far as the short-term consequences are concerned, the problem is that Britain may become less governable as an alliance between Labour and the unions causes problems. One of Corbyn's first acts was to be embraced by Len McCluskey, boss of the Unite union and a master of Labour's politics – the majority of Labour MPs are in some way beholden to the unions and notably to Unite. The BBC has been less than conscientious on focusing on this corruption of British politics as it is so much easier to go for Rupert Murdoch, but there is something deeply troubling about both situation and prospect.

So does it all matter as far as the next election is concerned. Well yes. Labour won 30% of the vote in the latest general election despite having a dire leader and unimpressive policies, and actually benefited from a swing in England, notably winning four additional seats in London. 30% was not enough, but there is a larger left-wing once the Greens, who did well in percentage terms, and the Scottish Nationalists, who did well in terms of seats, are counted. Indeed, the electorate is in effect divided into two larger camps. There are powerful elements of volatility due to a lack of clarity about the impact of economic change, about the consequences of the referendum on continual membership of the European Union, about the possible consequences of the next leadership contest for the Conservative Party (which is due before the general election), and concerning who the new generation of voters will vote for. In the last election, 12.5% of the votes were cast for UKIP, the anti-EU party, and the Conservatives have to hope that they lose no more support to it and, instead, regain votes. The anti-austerity populist naivety of Corbyn may well be seductive for an electorate much of which is weaned on entitlements and envy.

For the EU, the problem is that the election result encourages the left. It is no surprise that Syriza in Greece praises it, nor that Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Spain's Podemos party saw it as "a step forward towards a change in Europe for the benefit of the people." The possibility of persuading the EU to adopt more sensible policies will be affected by the prospect that the left will be vastly encouraged by Corbyn's success.

This is a matter not simply of finances but also of foreign policy. Corbyn's election was welcomed in Russia where he is regarded as a supporter, notably because of his hostility to the United States and NATO and his attitude to the Ukraine question. Indeed, the possibility that he might come to power would represent a powerful motive for destabilizing Britain and thus NATO. Combined with the last German election and the extent to which much of the German elite is unwilling to confront Russia while German military expenditure is low, and with instability in France, Italy and Spain, the situation in Europe is far from encouraging.

This is a major challenge for American policymakers in the run-up to the next presidential election. Defining a workable US foreign policy is difficult given global volatility. It has become more difficult with developments in Britain.