**Managing democracy in Corbyn’s Labour Party: faction-fighting or movement-building?**

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During the early years of Jeremy Corbyn’s tenure as Labour leader promises of wide sweeping party reform, in particular members-led democratisation, were central to fortifying his support within the extra-parliamentary party. However, by the time Corbyn’s leadership came to a close, very few reforms had been achieved. This article argues that whilst the Corbyn leadership were initially drawn towards a more grassroots vision of rank-and-file democracy, this came into tension with the demands facing the leadership in the context of intense intra-party factionalism. In a Brexit-dominated political landscape, both the normative and actual constraints facing internal party democracy meant that major party reforms were increasingly sidelined. Going forward, this has renewed important questions surrounding if, and how, a more direct vision of democracy is possible within a deeply institutionalised centre-left party.

**Keywords:** Internal party democracy, Labour Party, members-led democratisation, Corbyn

**Introduction**

Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour Party in September 2015 in part due to a promise to undertake the significant party reform which had been advocated by the Labour left since the peak of Bennism in the late 1970s and 1980s, namely, members-led democratisation (Panitch and Leys, 2020). On the campaign trail Corbyn (2015) consistently argued that the party should not ‘go on having policy made by the leader, shadow cabinet, or parliamentary Labour party. It’s got to go much wider. Party members need to be more enfranchised. Whoever is elected will have a mandate from a large membership’. Initially, both the leadership and the membership were united around the need for a radical redistribution of power away from the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), significantly boosting Corbyn’s popularity among the party grassroots. The Democracy Review was announced in this vein in September 2017 — promising to ‘open up policy and decision making, to create the mass movement that will carry us to power’ (Lavery, 2018). However, by the time Keir Starmer replaced Corbyn as leader in April 2020 the party had changed very little, potentially paving the way for the reversal of policy gains made over the preceding four years.

This article explores the evolution of members-led democratisation, aiming to understand why it evolved as it did, but also why it was sidelined. It is argued that the leadership were initially drawn to party reform because it suited both their normative and factional agenda. It represented continuity with the demands for greater party democracy which had formed the hallmark of Bennism, and provided a pathway towards strengthening the control of the leadership over a largely hostile PLP. However, as Brexit unfolded in a party with competing visions of internal party democracy (IPD) — a party in which Corbyn remained an ‘outsider’ to its mainstream traditions — members-led democratisation became increasingly untenable. The failure to achieve significant reform contributed to the rapid decline of the left following the 2019 election defeat, which saw ‘continuity Corbyn’ candidate Rebecca Long-Bailey defeated in the subsequent leadership contest, the replacement of pro-Corbyn Jennie Formby with David Evans as general secretary, a strengthening of the centre-left’s grip on the National Executive Committee (NEC), and a split within the grassroots Momentum.

The article proceeds in three stages. First, it outlines some of the debates surrounding more direct visions of party democracy, highlighting the longstanding dilemma between the representative basis of parliamentary democracy and participatory basis of grassroots democracy. It outlines three different normative and actual visions that have underpinned the development of Labour’s IPD — parliamentarism, the delegate based democracy of the trade union movement, and the individualised vision of members-led democratisation — exploring how this has constrained previous Labour leaders. Second, the article provides an overview of the rise and fall of members-led democratisation, highlighting how the tensions facing IPD came to the fore as Corbyn struggled to enact significant reform and maintain internal party control at the same time. The third section argues that, in an intensely factional party in which Corbyn remained an ‘outsider’ presenting a different vision of democracy to Labour’s mainstream traditions, major party reform became increasingly untenable, paving the way for the resurgence of the centre-left once Corbyn had resigned.

**The challenges facing internal party democracy**

The definition of IPD has long been a contentious feature of party politics. Few have disputed the utility of political parties, but there have been many disagreements around whether parties should be internally democratic, the optimal process for achieving internal democracy, and how it should relate to external democratic institutions (Scarrow, 2005). A question which sits at the core of these debates is: ‘should the party’s leadership determine its policies, or should its mass members or supporters?’ (Katz, 1997: 38). On the one hand, some advocate a model of intra-party democracy which emphasises that the preferences of party members should translate directly into the party’s decision-making (see Wolkenstein, 2016: 298-305). It is contended that transferring power to the party membership provides a linkage between the citizenry and their representatives, enabling a broader section of society to hold their leaders to account (Miliband, 1958; Scarrow, 2005). In this vein, Mair (2013) condemned the hollowing out of party democracy witnessed in recent decades, arguing that it had grave consequences for the functioning of Western democracy by propagating an ever widening gap between the electors and the elected. Without substantial IPD leaders of different parties converge around common positions, substantially undermining the democratic choice available to the electorate (Mair, 2013; Panitch and Leys, 2020: 13).

On the other hand, some scholars have gone as far to reject the possibility of IPD. Michels (1962: 365), in his famous critique of social democratic parties, argued that ‘it is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy’. Others have argued that a members-led party is incompatible with the principles of representative democracy (McKenzie, 2010). According to this view, too much power amongst the party grassroots risks diluting the power of the leadership, and makes it difficult for them to reflect the preferences of the electorate to which they are accountable (Scarrow, 2005: 4). Members-led democratisation risks, moreover, exposing contradictory impulses within a party:

‘The fragmentation of decision-making obscures authority lines; interdependence continually transforms issues across organizational units weakening authoritative decision-making; pluralist practices makes the intra-party processes themselves latent issues in internal conflicts; and fluid memberships confounds any straightforward identification of the boundaries of the party and thus the demos at the heart of a regime of IPD’ (Carty, 2013: 25).

Moreover, the theoretical questions surrounding IPD are combined with the historical traditions, empirical constraints, and normative principles of a particular party. Since Labour adopted its constitution in 1918 it has always retained, to varying degrees, some degree of commitment to IPD, but what its purpose should be vis-a-vis the principle of parliamentary sovereignty and electoral politics has always been subject to dispute (see Duverger, 1964). Some have argued that the parliamentary party should have the last say over the policies they will have to defend in a general election, whereas others suggest that the parliamentary party is only an extension of the extra-parliamentary party and should therefore be answerable to the grassroots — two views which Pettitt (2018: 291) summarises as ‘parliamentary independence’ vs ‘grassroots control’.

Beneath this broad disagreement, three streams of thought can be identified. First, the dominant strain among most MPs and leaders of the party has been a commitment to the Westminster Model of parliamentary democracy first and foremost, particularly when in Government. To the frustration of many party members, particularly those on the left, this vision rejects ‘any kind of political action (such as industrial action for political purposes) which fell, or which appeared to them to fall, outside the framework and conventions of the parliamentary system’ (Miliband, 1972: 1). Generally speaking, elected MPs are free to act according to their interpretation of the national good, and are not accountable to the party (Marsh and Hall, 2007). Proponents of this vision point out that the formal authority ascribed to the party conference is incompatible with the principles of parliamentary sovereignty, and in particular the Westminster Model of Government (McKenzie, 2010). The parliamentary system, according to this view, is antithetical to the participative principles of members-led democratisation.

The second major vision of democracy comes from the trade union movement. As is well documented, Labour were originally formed to provide parliamentary representation to the unions, and union leaders have therefore expected party leaders to represent their interests in parliament (Minkin, 1991). As Minkin (1991: 31) explains, trade union democracy is predicated on the principle that ‘discussion took place prior to mandating, the conference vote registered the aggregate of predetermined local or regional decisions and union leaders were obliged to carry out the conference decisions’. On the party’s conception, the delegative vision of democracy was embedded in the party structure, in particular through the decision-making authority that is vested in the party conference. In this vein, the party programme has historically been based on motions passed by conference — which the trade unions typically dominated with the block vote — a system at odds with the Westminster Model of parliamentary democracy supported by most MPs (Pettitt, 2018). This has sometimes led to disagreements over how responsive MPs should be to trade union demands or to the supposedly binding decisions made at the conference (see Minkin, 1991). Minkin (1991) argues that subtle ‘rules’ around the role of trade unions within the party has ensured a degree of stability and limited their power. The unions are reluctant to overreach and infringe the autonomy of the PLP in the name of party unity, and have rarely sought to use constitutional rules to extend their power, although this has come under visible strain at times.

The third main vision comes in the form of members-led democracy. Before Corbyn became leader, the Bennites had long supported deepening and extending grassroots democracy, which included both the trade unions and the membership, arguing that it would reorganise the relationship between ‘state and party, and between party and people’ (Panitch and Leys, 2020: 8). According to this view, the party programme should be a plan of action dictated by the extra-parliamentary party which holds the PLP and by extension a Labour government to account (see Pettitt, 2018). This vision is governed by the ideals of participatory democracy, and has generally shared the view that democratic-socialism requires a more responsive and accountable PLP (Miliband, 1958; Panitch and Leys, 2020). Generally this has not involved support for membership plebiscites because the left has found it easier to influence party conference and the NEC, despite the historic role that the unions have played as a ‘political ballast’ for a generally centre-left parliamentary leadership (Minkin, 1991) Instead, OMOV was generally supported by successive leaders from Kinnock onwards as a way of consolidating parliamentary power by undermining the unions and more radical members, and to shift Labour from a collective, class-based party to one ‘whose look to the individual deepened’ (Watts, 2017: 12; Gauja, 2015). However, as we will see, following the events which surrounded Corbyn’s victory in 2015 the left increasingly came to support OMOV as an opportunity to redistribute power away from the PLP and towards Labour’s new and overwhelmingly pro-Corbyn mass membership, a transition which created friction not only with the PLP but also sometimes with the trade union leadership.

Within this context, the leadership have generally been divided between the need to secure internal party hegemony — particularly over the PLP — and the need to provide some space for accountability to the trade unions and to party members. These two objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and there are occasions when leaders have successfully navigated through party democracy whilst strengthening the leadership’s control. Blair’s ‘managed democratisation’ — which involved ending the trade union sponsorship of MPs and reducing their block vote at party conference, whilst balloting individual members asking them whether they supported Labour’s ‘pre-manifesto programme’ — is one notable example (Minkin, 2014; Panitch and Leys, 2020). However, there is a fine balance between the two aims. Excessive redistribution of power towards the membership risks imposing unnecessary constraints on the leadership and its ability to command the PLP, whereas sidelining the extra-parliamentary party can lead to an intra-party crisis of consent. If we consider Blair’s ‘managed democratisation’ for example — he successfully insulated the leadership from party pressure for a period of time, but resentment grew following consecutive decisions which contradicted the wishes of the party membership, particularly over the Iraq War and austerity, contributing to the discontent which underpinned Corbyn’s victory in 2015 (Nuuns, 2018).

**The rise and fall of members-led democratisation**

When Corbyn won the leadership contest in September 2015 he faced the unenviable situation of leading a parliamentary party without the support of its MPs. What he did have, however, was a predominantly pro-Corbyn membership who had voted him into power and which had since soared to over 500 000, making it the biggest political party in Western Europe (see Whiteley et al, 2018). In this context, members-led democratisation was consistent with the normative principle of party democratisation which Corbyn adhered to as a longstanding member of the Bennite left, promising a ‘radical populist movement party’ (Avril, 2018) that could transform the membership into a ‘social movement of people all around the country’ (BBC, 2016). It could connect the leadership to the democratic-socialist tradition which still orbited the Labour Party, as well as the mass of anti-austerity activists who had been drawn into the party by Corbyn’s popular-democratic and radical credentials (see Gerbaudo, 2017). It also brought the added factional benefit of shifting power away from Corbyn’s opponents in the PLP, a benefit which was most clearly expressed following the PLPs motion of no confidence in June 2016. The eventual challenger, Owen Smith, was overwhelmingly defeated as Corbyn hung on to power on the back of his support amongst Labour’s membership.

To build on this support, a number of minor party reforms were introduced. Three new seats were promptly added to the constituency section of the NEC at the 2017 party conference, to be voted for directly via OMOV. The left were then able to strengthen their control on the NEC in September 2018 through circulating agreed-upon nominees for the nine constituency representatives among the membership. This then filtered into the party apparatus through the selection of the new left-wing general secretary Jennie Formby (Seyd, 2020: 13). Meanwhile, the ‘McDonnell Amendment’ reduced the number of nominations required to get on the ballot for the leadership election from 15% to 10% of the PLP, and retained the ‘registered supporters’ scheme, which meant every registered supporter had an equal right as any party member to choose the party leader, and the counterbalance to this (the role of MPs as gatekeepers) was reduced (Quinn, 2018).

However, the two prospective reforms which generated the most excitement amongst pro-Corbyn members — ‘open selection’ and the Democracy Review (Labour Party, 2018) — ultimately never materialised during Corbyn’s time as leader. The first, open selection, was a rebranded version of ‘mandatory reselection’ (see Seyd, 1987: 103-116) — calling for full selection procedures whereby between each General election there would be an OMOV ballot of all members within a CLP to decide who would represent them at the next election. This had widespread support among the membership: a survey conducted by Momentum in 2018 had demonstrated that 72% of delegates supported the proposals (Elgot, 2018a). After a grassroots campaign had sought to bring it to the 2018 conference floor, a meeting of the NEC controversially made the unanimous agreement only to propose a compromised ‘trigger ballot’, ensuring that open selection would not be debated at the conference. This proposal, which was eventually passed, promised to lower the threshold required to activate selections for sitting MPs from 50% to 33% of party branches *or* affiliate branches (Labour Party, 2019: 32). In the build-up to the 2019 election only six MPs were contested through the new threshold, two of which reselected by their local CLP, and three were reinstated by the NEC. There was a sense of unease at the visibility and conflictual nature of the process — particularly because those who faced a selection contest were disproportionately BAME and female (see Syal and Stewart, 2019).

The second significant package of reforms, the Democracy Review, was commissioned in 2017 and took over 11, 000 submissions, with wide anticipation that it would involve the most sweeping transformation of the party in a number of decades, going ‘some way to institutionalising the Corbyn surge and opening up the party to control by its members’ (Chessum, 2018). However, when the report was published in 2018, the contents were criticised from either end of Labour’s broad-church, and did not involve the wholesale redistribution of power that some had expected (Akehurst, 2018; Bassett, 2020). Moreover, at the 2018 conference, when it was expected that the reforms would be debated, most of the recommendations were postponed by the NEC, and have not since returned. Local Government remained untouched, Labour’s policy-making structures remained in place, changes to disabled and BAME sections were diluted, and proposals to Young Labour were delayed (see Elmi, 2018). As a Momentum spokesperson explained after the conference, they ‘fall [well short of what the members want](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/03/momentum-calls-for-more-open-labour-selection-process) with many key proposals being watered down or blocked’ (Press Association, 2018).

Why such few party reforms were ultimately passed, despite Corbyn’s historic commitment to rank-and-file party democracy, remains subject to debate. The trigger ballot compromise described above was in part a response to trade union concerns that automatic open selection would reduce their role as affiliated branches in CLPs. When the party conference voted on whether to proceed with the Conference Arrangement Committee’s (CAC) order of business — which included the trigger ballot and excluded open selection — over 90% of CLP delegates voted against proceeding whereas over 90% of trade union delegates voted in favour (Elgot and Syal, 2018). Whilst at face value this appears to suggest that the unions were responsible for the compromise, Len MCluskey (2020) later claimed that the leadership were behind the trigger ballot, who then tasked McCluskey with gathering trade union support at the party conference. Whatever the case, the NEC unanimously agreed on the trigger ballot which suggests that both the unions and the leadership had agreed to the compromise, just as the NEC only allowed conference to vote on a package of minor reforms they drew up, rather than the content of the Democracy Review itself.

Moreover, in the build-up to the 2018 conference — which is where both the Democracy Review and open selection came to their conclusion — senior members of Corbyn’s inner-circle, including Rebecca Long-Bailey, voiced their concern over open selection, calling for a balanced approach which reflected MPs' focus on Westminster politics (see Elgot, 2018a). The party was increasingly divided over Brexit, with an overwhelmingly pro-remain membership and PLP on the one hand, and the leadership on the other. Early 2018 had already seen the resignation of seven MPs who subsequently formed Change UK, some of whom were facing open selection contests after losing confidence motions in their constituency party (BBC, 2018b). It can be reasonably assumed that further splits might have followed if the leadership continued to pursue significant party reform, something that they were eager to avoid considering the likelihood of an early general election. The leadership evidently had to choose between maintaining internal party control in a deeply factional party — particularly with regards to the PLP and the trade union leadership — and members-led democratisation. Under pressure in a party in which they were already considered ‘outsiders’ to its mainstream traditions, it seems that the leadership ultimately opted for the former.

**Analysis**

The election of a leader who supported members-led democratisation represented a historic opportunity to fulfill the vision of party democracy supported by the Labour New left since the 1970s (see Panitch and Leys, 2020). Moreover, it potentially paved the way for a significant redistribution of power away from a generally unsupportive PLP and towards a pro-Corbyn membership, which could have strengthened the leadership’s control over the party machinery, at least in the short-term. However, despite the potential actual and normative merits from the perspective of the left, there were major barriers to members-led democratisation which proved insurmountable during the short window of opportunity that was presented.

There are a number of arguments which could be put forward as to why this was the case. Michels ‘Iron Law’ assumes that oligarchy is inevitable in any political party, and proponents of such a view would argue that the popular-democratic appeals of members-led democratisation are little short of an illusion. More substantially than this, party reform risked obscuring ‘authority lines’ (ibid), in particular undermining the PLP, who are ultimately accountable to their constituents and the ‘national interest’ in Westminster’s much more elitist model of democracy (see Marsh and Hall, 2007). This was indeed the concern that many MPs raised — the minor party reforms which were made during Corbyn’s leadership were part of the reason for the exodus of MPs in early 2019 (Pogrund and Maguire, 2020: 170). Watts and Bale (2019: 110) convey this parliamentarist vision, arguing that the ‘populist’ members-led democratisation neglects ‘the representative value of parliamentarians connecting themselves with and acting on behalf of the wider constituencies upon which their representative role in parliament is based’. Corbyn’s response to the concerns highlights the much more popular-democratic vision which he drew from the Bennite tradition: they ‘have no need to worry, because it's all about democracy. We are all democratically accountable to our party and to our constituents’ (BBC, 2016b). If Corbyn was to form a government he constitutionally had to command the House of Commons, and members-led democratisation potentially put this at risk. Corbyn unexpectedly became the leader of a deeply factional and predominantly centre-left party, and members-led democratisation risked further antagonising a PLP that had already put forward a motion of no confidence against him in mid-2016.

A second risk, from the other end of the spectrum, is that Labour’s rank-and-file might cease their support for the leadership on key issues. As Avril (2018: 267) stated, members-led democratisation risked imposing ‘too much influence over the strategic choices of the leadership. The bottom-up features which result from “movementisation”, which places limitations on the autonomy of the leadership, may... prove detrimental to the party’s electoral fortunes’. This was a new dilemma for the left, considering Labour’s past leaders have generally been drawn from the right of the party. Corbyn relied on the members as a main source of internal party support, but the dilemma which Avril identifies started to come to the fore over Brexit, having considerable consequences at the 2019 general election. Research in 2018 demonstrated that the membership and the leadership had contrasting views on whether a second referendum should be held on the final deal (Bale et al, 2018). More than 75% of Labour members wanted a second referendum and 88% would have voted to remain if there was another, something that the leadership squarely rejected at the time (Bale et al, 2018: 20). This was further complicated by the PLP’s changing position — despite their general acceptance of the Brexit vote before and during the 2017 general election they had come to pressure the leadership to commit to a second referendum by the summer of 2018 (see Panitch and Leys, 2020: 239/240). The unions, meanwhile, were also divided on the issue, with some edging closer towards supporting a second referendum, whereas other key players, such as Unite, argued that another vote threatened to ‘reopen the wounds of Brexit’ (BBC, 2018).

At the 2018 conference a series of CLPs forwarded motions to change Labour’s Brexit policy (Elgot, 2018). After intense negotiation over the final motion, Labour took a step towards supporting a second referendum but only if they were unable to force a General Election (see Panitch and Leys, 2020: 239/240). At the next year's conference, following poor results at the 2019 European Parliament elections, Corbyn conceded to increased pressure to agree to what became official party policy for the December general election: if Labour won they would negotiate a new deal with the EU and then put it back to the people in another referendum, with a special conference to decide which side Labour would back. The party had been pulled in multiple different directions over Brexit, and the resulting ambiguous policy was the primary reason for Labour’s poor election performance: 52 out of the 60 seats Labour lost voted to leave in the 2016 referendum (Uberoi et al, 2020: 50/51).

Moreover, the third main constraint facing members-led democratisation — both normative and actual — came from the trade unions. Minkin (1991) sheds light on the role union leaders have played as a ‘Praetorian Guard’ protecting the leadership in internal proceedings. In the Corbyn period this political ballast role remained, albeit with the unusual situation where a left-wing party leader was supported by left-wing union leaders, most notably Unite’s Len McCluskey. Despite the membership’s pro-Corbyn stance, intervention by union leaders was not always welcomed when it came to issues of IPD. One example of this tension was the process behind Jennie Formby’s employment as general secretary in March 2018. Formby had worked as regional secretary at Unite, and it was strongly suspected that she had been hired at the behest of Unite and party leadership. This led Momentum’s Jon Lansman to put himself forward for the role before dropping out of contention — arguing that Formby’s appointment demonstrated that the party had not really changed despite the pretense of members-led democratisation (Kogan, 2019: 328/329). The tension could again be seen in the development of the 2030 net zero emissions target in the Green New Deal, which despite being voted through at party conference was softened for the 2019 manifesto following resistance by some of the trade unions, particularly GMB, whose general secretary argued ‘this will mean a decade of people’s petrol cars being confiscated. This will mean families can only take one flight every five years. Net zero carbon emissions by 2030 is utterly unachievable’ (Mason et al, 2019). In terms of party reform, particularly open selection and the Democracy Review, it was in the complex negotiations on the NEC — where the trade unions still have considerable influence — that it increasingly came undone. The unions were unlikely to support the radical redistribution of power towards the membership if it impeded their influence, and the leadership were unlikely to force through a demand which risked antagonising one of their key bases of support.

With the multiple overlapping tensions facing significant IPD, Corbyn was unable to follow through with the early promise of members-led democratisation. The pro-Corbyn Momentum were also not able to make significant inroads, despite the hyperbolic claims from some corners that they represented a ‘party within a party’. They have certainly had a considerable impact: gaining widespread appraisal for their innovative campaigning methods, outreach on social media, and influence over internal selections (see Bassett, 2019; Dommett and Temple. 2018). However, they remain only one relatively minor current within a broad-church party dominated by competing factions. In their attempt to change these structures, they became gradually absorbed into the party machine — primarily defending and extending the power of the leadership but not making the inroads into IPD that many of the pro-Corbyn grassroots demanded (Bassett, 2019).

From one perspective, the evolution of members-led democratisation perhaps highlights the contradictory impulses that more direct forms of democracy expose in an established centre-left party. The Labour Party’s commitment to parliamentary democracy is no reason in-and-of itself to negate IPD, but it provides a powerful incentive for MPs to ignore demands emanating from the extra-parliamentary party. Faced with a mass membership, the trade union and parliamentary elite are more likely to impose their sovereignty than they are to concede to the demands for party democracy. This is no ‘iron law’, but it does illustrate the significant resistance that party reform is likely to face in a fast-moving political context. In the end, in the absence of party reform Corbyn remained an ‘outsider’, and the left remained in a more vulnerable position than they often appeared. On Keir Starmer’s ascent, their weakness was exposed as the centre-left gradually reasserted its control over the apparatus of the party, squeezing the left out of the NEC and the party bureaucracy.

**Conclusion**

Whilst many will focus on the sobering defeat of 2019 as evidence for Corbyn’s failure, it is important to remember that in the period between the 2015 leadership contest and the 2017 General Election the left defied all odds to take control of the leadership and performed ‘one of the biggest shocks in British electoral history’ by increasing Labour’s share of the vote by 9.6%, the largest increase since 1945 (Dorey, 2017: 308). Shortly before Corbyn came to prominence Peter Mair (2013: 1) argued that ‘the age of party democracy has passed…they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its current form’. The initial impulse of Corbynism had the potential to reverse this decline and strengthen the party’s role as a linkage between the citizenry and their parliamentary representatives. Rather than go through the ‘Pasokification’ that other centre-left parties suffered from, Labour’s membership ballooned to over 500, 000, making it the biggest social-democratic party in Europe. For its advocates, Corbynism's strength lay in its promise to create a more participative and democratic party which challenged the Labour ‘establishment’ and reached out beyond the confines of parliamentary politics.

Nevertheless, whilst the leadership were nominally committed to greater IPD, the actual and normative barriers facing members-led democratisation ultimately proved too steep to overcome. The proposed reforms reopened the longstanding debate between those who advocate that power should be vested in party members, and those who argue that Labour’s parliamentary elite are sovereign (see Katz, 1997; Pettitt, 2018). It also opened up questions surrounding the relationship between the two primary wings of Labour’s grassroots: the party membership and the trade union leadership. Divided between the need to maintain internal party hegemony and its commitment to IPD, the ‘outsider’ leadership were unable to transform the party when faced with intense intra-party factionalism.

In the absence of significant party reform, the left were overly dependent on the individual leader, meaning that on Corbyn’s resignation latent intra-left tensions once again reemerged. In the following leadership contest pro-Corbyn members were divided between ‘continuity Corbyn’ Rebecca Long-Bailey and Keir Starmer; Momentum saw an internal contest between competing slates; and ‘Don’t Leave, Organise’ — a left network of grassroots organisations — were set-up to preserve the gains made by Corbyn in the preceding years. The centre-left have been able to reassert their control over key institutions of the party, and the chance of another parliamentary-led resurgence for the left appears slim following the controversial dismissal of Rebecca Long-Bailey from the Shadow Cabinet and the suspension of Jeremy Corbyn. It seems that, despite four years of Corbyn, the left’s endeavour to transform the party must once again take the long march through the institutions.

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