

# How To Choose A Labour Party Leader

## and the vagaries of the democratic process

The question of how to choose a Labour party leader, or the criteria to be applied are issues that, as yet, have not been properly addressed. The process of selecting a few individuals and then defining them as occupying a place within the left/right spectrum, or more broadly, attempting to otherwise assess their popularity within the party or the nation as a whole, amount to vague generalities that are hardly helpful.

A more methodical approach is called for. Before turning to individuals and their personalities it is more important to look to the longer-term future of the Labour party and as to what might best contribute to its success. If, on the other hand, our attention is first given to a group of leading individuals jostling amongst themselves for power, the real or underlying political issues tend to get pushed aside, as the quirks and eccentricities of personality drown out more important matters calling for attention.

This touches on the most vital question in the approach to politics: what is more important, personalities or policy? If the latter, then it may be necessary for the good of the party to reject existing candidates for leadership in seeking others to take their place. The fact that “personality” has mistakenly become the “stuff of politics” is made evident to anyone browsing the bookstalls of any party conference (and not merely Labour) where biographies and other sensational political narratives far outnumber titles on political philosophy, the latter so very necessary in the evaluation and formulation of practical policy for the benefit of the community.

This is not to imply, of course, that individuals are of no importance as *only* individuals float and develop new ideas in the first instance. Whilst good ideas may be more fully developed through consensus in the collectivity of a group environment, they invariably originate through the thinking of the individual, even though several individuals may propose similar policies within a closely defined time limit. This is not to suggest that proponents of valuable new ideas are necessarily best fitted to hold political office, but only that their ideas should be empowered by the relevant representative political group.

There has always been a divide between the wisdom of theorists (or philosophers) and those who actually legislate and oversee the success of policy. This is because whilst theorists are only concerned with ideal or perfect action, the politician working in the real or everyday world needs to compromise in meeting the demands of practicality, i.e., in considering the needs of conflicting groups or unforeseen sociological or other factors.

Only the tyrant enjoys the luxury of attempting to enforce policies in the purity of their pristine ideal, irrespective of whether it be a Dionysius of Syracuse under the direct guidance of Plato in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, or a Stalin under the guidance of Marx and Lenin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both of whom spelt disaster for the welfare and lives of their peoples. Although politicians within mixed forms of government have in all ages at the time of their power, been condemned by majorities as devious and corrupt, they have been infinitely preferable to the rule of tyrants. It is an established truism that the careers of all long-lived politicians end in “failure” since none are able to satisfy the demands of all sectors of the population, and it is only in hindsight with the passing of time that history somehow reinstates them with a certain glamour and a more balanced appreciation of their qualities.

At the beginning, and the middle, and at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example, coffee house talk by supposedly informed people argued that the country was on the verge of financial ruin and “going to the dogs,” and that the “politicians” were to blame, and yet these were times when the country was going from strength to strength. It seems as if events are only seen in their correct perspective long after they have been experienced as urgent issues, but that does not absolve the actors of the present from deciding on the future to the best of their ability.

The relevance of the above to the future of the Labour party is this: the movement has reached a crossroads or crisis point to a degree that may decide its survival or extinction. It cannot continue as it is for events and the transformation of society have severed its ideological roots. Its instinctive temptation is to revert to the past, but that would amount to an act of suicide of Michael Foot proportions. Its aim should remain the achievement of a just, free, and egalitarian society, but the pursuit of these aims in view of social change can only be realised by ditching its collectivist and class-based attitudes in favour of an individualist philosophy embracing the entire population. All these requirements call for a quite exceptional person to lead the Labour party.

In the normal course of slow-moving change, a more relaxed course could more easily be taken in selecting the next Labour leader. It could be left to “Buggins” turn to take up the baton. In any event, a little gentle jostling amongst the top leadership might produce a suitable candidate without harming the party. An emollient person with a smooth charm and a winning smile would surely emerge to satisfy the majority of Parliamentary members, and then everything could continue as before. But these are far from normal times, and a quite exceptional approach needs to be taken in choosing the next Labour leader.

Such a person, in ensuring the survival of the party, needs to have a clear appreciation of the sociological implications of change in society and the world of work over the past 60 years, and the vision and courage to present new values for the future and to denounce the old. Moreover, such a person must have a realistic grasp of the mechanisms of the financial-industrial system, and be

prepared and competent to advocate constructive reforms before the City of London, or its political propagandists, are ready to counter-attack in promoting narrow interests only of benefit to themselves. Such policies of the Labour party would need to be strongly pro-business in appealing to the majority population irrespective of class, status, or occupation.

As the intellectual arguments for establishing such desirable policies have already been laid out in technical detail in numerous books by many authors, it should not be beyond the wit of leading parliamentarians to absorb this information before reformulating it into legislative proposals. Where there is the will there is the way, but if the will is lacking, one must turn to the culture of the parliamentary mindset for an explanation of this. Years of attrition by the financial establishment has led to the corruption of MPs of all parties, and the buying of favours has led to an apathy and comfort zone that is difficult to disturb.

There is, of course, an opposite point of view with regard to creating policy or appointing a new leader. There is the argument, especially in radical circles, that decisions should come from below rather than originating from and being imposed from above. Nowadays, this is most commonly expressed through the use of focus groups or opinion polls. This is true democracy in action. But in the first instance those in leadership need to identify and authorise the points for discussion and decision, and so when all is said and done, such decision-making does not really originate from below. The real value of focus groups and opinion polls is found in the general consensus they ensure, and this strengthens democracy and gives greater democratic authority to party or national leaders. In practice, in conjunction with referenda or plebiscites, this is perhaps as far as democratic government can hope to be extended successfully.

In view of the above, however, it needs to be noted that the idea that democracy or government should draw its authority from below evokes practical and philosophical questions of immense significance throughout the world at the present time. Firstly, if democracy is cited as a human right it cannot be denied in any circumstances where the demand is made. But just because it is a right does not mean it is workable or even desirable in all situations. And if this is so, it will be found, for example, that the ideology of post-War American foreign policy has often been wrong-footed and led to catastrophe. When newly emerging states in developing territories, or those that are released from military or religious dictatorships, are granted the outward trappings of democracy that quickly degenerate into tyrannies, then the idea of granting authority from below was clearly mistaken. The reason for such failure is either that peoples were culturally unprepared for democracy, or apathetic towards its concept, or were in outright enmity to the very concept.

Secondly, Marxist philosophy, or what is more correctly referred to as dialectical-materialism, argues that the proletariat should overthrow the social order. Although Marx and his theory of revolution may be repudiated and even forgotten today by parliamentary parties of the left throughout the developed

world, his idea that government should derive its authority from below rather than from above remains firmly in the consciousness. It should also be borne in mind that Marx's philosophy was exclusively based on the inevitability of revolution and the critique of capitalism as he found it. He made no attempt to draw a constructive picture of a socialist society the idea of which he even dismissed as an absurdity.

Again, the utopianism of his repudiation of the state together with the existence of capitalism in any form or guise has imprinted its damaging mark on parties of the left until the present day. This is not to suggest that left-leaning supporters repudiate the idea of the state, but they certainly disdain the idea of attempting to understand the financial-industrial system or to differentiate between its malign and benign characteristics or to utilise what may be salvaged in serving the majority.

Thirdly, a populism based on personality traits divorced from any clearly enunciated political beliefs or intent is often the worst and certainly the most deceptive form of democracy seeking to draw its authority from below. This is because it thrives on the ignorance of the electorate on the assumption that the latter is to be won over by a toothy grin or a handsome figure, rather than by issues of benefit to the public. In reality, such a style of politics (usually associated with the American way) entails a top down authority, as the real or ulterior purpose of action tends to be hidden behind a mask.

Such a mode of politics typically emerges in societies where all kinds of public positions are put up for election, e.g., the police, the judiciary, etc., as contrasted with internal promotion based on ability as decided within each profession. When democratic mechanisms are applied in inappropriate situations its purpose soon becomes self-destructive. This is because the general public cannot possibly be expected to have sufficient interest in or the necessary knowledge to assess the competence of competing professional specialists to positions of high office.

This is quite apart from the argument that the electoral addresses of such candidates for office are unlikely to match their ideal suitability for the posts to be filled. That is, the best professionals are not necessarily suited nor even willing to promote their case most effectively, either through lack of the right kind of extroverted personality, or through a natural modesty or tendency to self-effacement, or through disgust at the very idea of projecting themselves under such demeaning circumstances. Many of the lesser talented professionals, on the other hand, may be fully prepared to launch effectively a ruthless campaign in misleading the public as to their true ability, since their ambition may be more easily attained through the democratic process than through the considered and more objective judgement of their peers at an interviewing panel.

Electoral democracy is only workable when applied to issues of direct interest to voters, and competing judges, police or other public officials cannot present their qualifications in a comprehensible or workable format for a voting

system. Hence they are forced by necessity to fall back on the smarmy manner or a fine set of white teeth in winning popular approval. As such traits have no connection with the end purpose of the democratic process they lead to all kinds of corruption, most notably to the buying of favours by vested interest groups. The most notorious example of this are those judges who now find themselves in the employment of powerful mafia families.

There are clearly limits to the practicality of electoral politics that need to be recognised. There is also a distinct difference between objectively desirable ends and those that are actually authorised by the democratic process, and this is irrespective of considerations of practicality or conflicting interest bodies. The only answer to this conundrum is the need for the higher general education of majorities in conjunction with the development of a higher sense of social ethics, so that the objectively *best* policies always conjoin with *populist* policies. A glance at the world today demonstrates clearly that those countries with the highest standards of general education for their majorities enjoy the most stable and prosperous democracies – in addition to the happiest societies; and contrariwise, those countries with the lowest educational standards find that democracy in any real sense is unattainable.

Nonetheless, even in the best working democracies it is necessary to recognise the limits of its viability, and to guard against those situations when it is turned into a farce, or presented as something it is clearly not. In this respect technical efficiency should always be given priority over populist measures or the misuse of democratic mechanisms. After all, no person in their right mind would like his brain surgeon to be selected through the popular vote of his community. A few remarks on the existing status of the House of Lords might at this point usefully help to illustrate these principles as they apply to Britain.

There is no way in which maintaining the hereditary principle may be defended in a democratic society. However, there exists something worse than preserving this ancient tradition. A House of Lords packed with moneyed moguls who have gained their seats through financial contributions to different parliamentary groups may lead to the worst form of government and to widespread corruption. Such members are unaccountable to sound political principles and the ordinary elector is often unable to know what they really represent or even think on the issues of the day. All that is known is that the House of Commons is held in hock to their multifarious financial and business interests that may or may not be listed for public inspection. More accountable and trustworthy would be the restoration of a hereditary landed aristocracy with their disinterested and preferably non-party approach to issues. At least they would be expected to support home-based interests against the selling of British assets to foreign owners for exploitation beyond our means to reverse.

At present there are two alternatives for the future of the House of Lords. The first and better-known alternative is to introduce an elective system for all its members, but this would achieve little more than duplicating many of the

functions of the Commons and would merely fudge existing constitutional arrangements. A better alternative would be to reserve the Lords exclusively for the appointment of leading specialists in all kinds of occupational spheres from which expertise might be drawn by the Commons and Select Committees. Such a reformed House of Lords would fulfil a vital and much-needed function in view of the fact that today (in sharp contrast to the past) the majority of our elected representatives are purely politicians without professional experience in other areas of employment.

The above survey underlines the need that in selecting a new Labour party leader priority should be given to the qualities of such a candidate and such qualities should override any factors of populism or special appeal to vested interest groups associated with the party. The populist approach may be apt for the short term if the party is to follow in its existing tracks, but it would be quite inappropriate in the difficult task of rebuilding the party for the longer term.

A huge task confronts the party in merely ensuring its survival, and imaginative persons with a large knowledge base are essential for the task ahead. If old minds are incapable of adapting to change, then new blood (from all age groups) should be brought into the movement and formed into an elite cadre under the inspiration of a new leadership. The mould of politics must be broken by a new constructive vision for the future. It is unlikely that anything less ambitious may save the party from a lingering extinction.

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