

# LESSONS FROM CORBYNISM

**In conversation with Bea Campbell,  
Jeremy Gilbert, Laura Parker and  
Neal Lawson**

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### **About the speakers**

Bea Campbell is an writer and activist whose books include *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and politics in the Eighties* (1984) and *End of Equality* (2014).

Jeremy Gilbert is Professor of Cultural and Plitical Theory at the University of East London, and has been involved with both mainstream party politics and extra-parliamentary activism throughout his adult life. His most recent publications include *Twenty-First-Century Socialism* (2020), and he writes regularly for the British press.

Laura Parker is a Labour activist and was Momentum's national coordinator until 2019.

Neal Lawson is Executive Director of Compass.

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### **About Compass and this project**

Compass is platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call [45° Change](#). The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

**Neal Lawson (00:06)**

*Welcome to It's Bloody Complicated, the Compass Podcast. I'm Neal Lawson, your host, and Director of Compass. Joining me to help manage the questions is Grace Barnett from the Compass office. Hello Grace*

**Grace Barnett (00:17)**

*Hello.*

**Neal Lawson (00:18)**

*These are unprecedented times, and we need to rise to the new and enormous challenges we now face. Over the next few weeks, we'll be speaking with writers, thinkers, politicians, journalists, and public service workers about how we come out of this mess in much better shape than we went in. A Good Society after Covid-19. These conversations have live access for Compass members, who can put their own questions directly to our guests. If you'd like to participate in a live call, and help support all of our work, go to [compassonline.org.uk/podcast](https://compassonline.org.uk/podcast) to join Compass today. Otherwise, sit back, relax, and enjoy this week's podcast.*

**Neal Lawson (01:02)**

This week on the Compass podcast, It's BLoody Complicated, we're looking at what we can learn from the Corbyn era. To help us, we're joined by Laura Parker who was national coordinator for MOmentum and is now working on Progrssive campaigns in Italy. She might want to say more about that. Bea Campbell is an amazing writer and activist whose book, The End of Equality, I'm reading now. And then last but not least, Jeremy Gilbert, one of the brains behind Compass and author of another lovely little book called 21st Century Socialism. As ever, I'll ask a few questions and then hand it over to you Compass members on the call to ask the questions that you want to ask.

So, I've asked all three of you on, including Bea who's not with us quite yet, partly because you're all incredibly clever, bright, and lovely, but all three of you at least had some sympathy to Corbynism, particularly when it first arose as a thing. And I'm keen that we, kind of, dig that moment up again and re-examine it, because I fear that some of that early enthusiasm and excitement is being lost. I think we need to remind ourselves that it was an exciting moment, but in looking at those exciting moments can we detect the roots of the problems it later faced? For, after all, every political project carries the seeds of its own destruction. So, Jeremy and Laura first and, hopefully, as I say, Bea Campbell in a bit.

Firstly, Jeremy, if you just want to tell us, because we always do this, where are you and how are you?

**Jeremy Gilbert (02:27)**

I'm in Walthamstow, in North East London, I'm fine. I'm glad the summer's over now, basically. That's my main feeling about it.

**Neal Lawson (02:36)**

You're glad the summer's over?

**Jeremy Gilbert (02:39)**

Yes, well, you know, it was quite hard.

**Neal Lawson (02.44)**

I don't know if the autumn's going to be any easier. Laura Parker, where are you and how are you?

**Laura Parker (02.50)**

Yes, I'm in Florence, in Italy, where I'm working. I'm living in Northern Italy now, I have been since, sort of, March. Yes, I'm good. I'm sort of involved around the edges of the regional election campaigns here in Italy and, you know, ask me again in three week's time how I'm still feeling. There's some really critical elections coming up, it's pretty important that Salvini is beaten in these regional polls. So I personally am good. Italian politics, I'm not quite so sure.

**Neal Lawson (03.24)**

Well, that's one for another time. I think where it says "Judith Jones" that really means we've got Bea Campbell at least joining us by sound? Bea, do you want to just tell us, where are you and how are you?

**Bea Campbell (03.36)**

I'm exceedingly well. I'm in the South of France, near Montpellier.

**Neal Lawson (03.44)**

Fantastic, we'll go back to Jeremy, then Laura, then you on the first one. As I was saying, we want to dig back and remember that moment in 2015. So Jeremy, first, was it exciting for you? And why was it exciting?

**Jeremy Gilbert (03.59)**

Yes, sure, it was very exciting because I think it marked the end of a moment, a long moment, really, which had been going on, a period since the early '90s when you could say two things. One is that really any kind of recognisable socialist Left just had no real place in mainstream British politics, and secondly that there was an unbridgeable gap between any kind of activist-based movement politics and the electoral process. I mean, really, we're talking, sort of, 30 years, almost. I mean, certainly a full generation during which that had been the case, and it had been very frustrating. For those of us who'd sort of, spent that entire period saying that we needed to, sort of, bridge the gap between movement activism and electoral politics, and bring some sort of socialist discourse back into mainstream politics it was a huge relief just to see that possibility erupt. You know, it was very exciting for those reasons, I think.

**Neal Lawson (05.04)**

What particularly about Jeremy and his leadership was it do you think that, kind of, sparked that? I mean, no one saw it coming, did they?

**Jeremy Gilbert (05:14)**

No. Well, I mean, I think Jeremy, you know, if you're going to say, 'What was there specifically about Jeremy?', one answer is nothing really. It was going to happen pretty soon anyway with somebody, but it's not an accident that Jeremy, as with Bernie Sanders in the States, is a very specific kind of politician who some people could really look at and say, a, here is somebody who has proven themselves to be basically incorruptible and completely consistent in their political principles over a generation, and there is someone who didn't belong to a, sort of-, I mean, I would say there was maybe one generation, okay, maybe more than one generation actually, sort of, one of a half generations. Several cohorts of politicians from the, kind of, younger baby boomers through to the whole, sort of, you know, my generation, Generation X, who had just been so transparently, you know, had their minds programmed by the defeat of the Left in the 1980s and the hegemony of Neoliberal ideas from the 90s onwards, that they just seemed to be incapable of publicly making a, sort of, robust criticism of what had become political common sense.

Even somebody like Ed Milliband who many of us knew in private to be quite a, sort of, radical, intelligent guy, you know, publically just wasn't able to actually articulate a convincing critique of things that most people in the country knew were wrong with how things had been being done for the past few decades. So, there was something quite significant about the fact that it was a politician of an older generation, an older cohort, who had just never bought into that, who'd been around since the late 70s. I think it was necessary at that moment to have somebody who seemed, sort of, untainted by those processes.

I think Jeremy's personal qualities obviously were very significant in some way. It's also important to say, I mean, what enabled it to happen in mechanical terms was the change in Labour's electoral, you know, its system of electing the leader, which suddenly meant for the first time that a mass movement of members could get a figure elected, irrespective of the wishes of the Parliamentary party. I think under those circumstances it's very unlikely in retrospect that some figure wouldn't have arisen in that context, whether it was Jeremy or anybody else.

**Neal Lawson (07:36)**

Okay, so right person, right time, right mechanism. How did it feel for you, Laura?

**Laura Parker (07:42)**

Well, I agree with everything, actually, that Jeremy's just said. For me it was extremely exciting. I mean, I'm probably a similar-ish generation to Jeremy, and in a way we were sort of the odd people out, because the first thing for me was I was stuck by-, you had a group of young people who'd never heard what Corbyn articulated, or not on any big, sort of, stage before, coming up against, in a positive way, a lot of people who'd been waiting for 30, 35 years to hear it again. This created this massive energy, with really some quite unlikely characters coming together.

I was a volunteer in Corbyn's phonebank. So, that in itself was exciting and energizing. There was a sense of vision, and there was a sense of clarity about an overarching vision, and there was a big picture that Jeremy painted, actually, really very well. It was a very hopeful one, and it was about good stuff like equality. But it was also underpinned by a battle against the bad stuff, you know, inequality.

In a way, that combination of hope and a battle to fight, and of course Jeremy's a campaigner. You know, he's a real campaigner, this wasn't a guy in a suit, it wasn't boring. He was on a stage, he was in your local town hall, he was totally accessible, his campaigning style was totally accessible. That combination of hope and battle, I think, for me, was what did it. And just not being alone, you know, and it being okay.

I remember Jeremy talking in a speech early on about Love, and you just thought, 'Bimey. That's great.' I was president of my student's union many, many years before, and I remember us talking about students who were units of resource. And then we looked at councils, and cuts to services, which was about efficiencies, and all of this language which just stripped away people, and there was this guy who talked about love, you know, and caring for people. And just in a very simple way, that was really motivating.

I mean, I'm so glad you asked me on, and I'm so glad that's the first question, because I had forgotten a bit about this, and now I think about it again I remember, after he was elected, walking out of the pub where he'd come to, sort of, thank some of the volunteers, and trotting across Parliament Square, and some random guy with a microphone stopping us saying, 'How do you feel?' and I said, 'This is, like, even better than my wedding day!' And I'd forgotten about all that. I'm sure my husband hadn't, but I'd forgotten about all of that in the meantime, and yet it was so exciting. Yeah, we need to remember. We need to remember that, really, because one way or another we're going to have to get a bit of that back.

#### **Neal Lawson (10:36)**

Well, the person that reminded me of the excitement is the person that's going to answer the question next, Bea Campbell, because we had a little conversation the other week as a prelude to this. And you know, that sense of excitement, and engagement, and the people that came out. Talk us through that again, Bea, please.

#### **Bea Campbell (10:51)**

Well, after that conversation I've been remembering what it was like amongst, not just me, what I felt, but my friends and people in my family. And that was fascinating because my partner rejoined the Labour Party in order to participate in that election. Her kids, who are, you know, kind of Left of centre, one's a kind of geeky politics person but not an activist, is of a generation I think that was snared, really, by the aftermath of the Iraq war, and another son who is Progressive and unaligned, both of them joined the Labour Party. Friends of mine who have been in the Labour Party rejoined in order to participate in the election, and then

just felt fantastic. Old friends of mine who were long-time Labour people, were aghast. Aghast! Many of them were, I have to say, which I am yet to understand, I do not get it, women. They were just furious with Jeremy Corbyn. I don't know why.

Anyway, for myself, I remember thinking at the time what Laura and Jeremy have said. 'God, this is just astounding, this is astounding.' That a, kind of, social democratic programme, not yet developed particularly well, but advocated by somebody that sounded reasonable, radical, and entirely doable, was back on the agenda. And absolutely confirming a cleavage between the dominant language of politics, which had become financialism, and corporatism, you know, the language of neoliberalism. It was, as Laura said, possible to talk in a different language, as if you were actually a human being rather than a CEO, and as if you lived in a place where you're worried if you're walking down a path where somebody was sleeping on that path at night, that you cared about it. Somebody who lived in a very interesting, complicated constituency. I always thought myself that there was, I don't know, some odd, really weird brand of hatred that didn't get it, for example, that somebody who had an allotment might be popular. I mean, think about Gardner's Question Time. 2 million listeners every time it's on. We are a nation of gardeners. How come the fact that this man had an allotment and made jam was regarded as ridiculous?

So, I felt frightened, is what I'm trying to say. I felt huge excitement and relief, very pleased that there was something-, that you could fill a stadium. That people were turning out in their thousands, in their thousands, to go to something antique called a meeting, to listen to a fairly boring bloke, but who you believed was not a liar and a deceiver. So, that felt very important, really thrilling. I thought something might really happen, that the Labour Party might take care of what were palpable difficulties around this gardening person, who was clearly a nice person but was boring in terms of speaking. I thought they might just sort that out.

Anyway, so what scared me was, the instant, palpable, violent hatred, and the disgraceful, unforgivable resentment and sabotage by his colleagues in the House of Commons. So, it was thrilling-,

**Neal Lawson (15:01)**

Yeah, let's come onto that in a bit, but I'm really glad all three of you have kind of reminded us, and this is what I wanted to do, that it was exciting and thrilling, and there was something going on. It was unexplainable, you know, and we need to remember that and keep the taste of that in our mouths, I think. Because we want it again, but let's, kind of, move on a bit. So, back to Jeremy. What are the things out of that, Jeremy, out of that period, that was needed to hold onto? The real successes of the period as you see them.

**Jeremy Gilbert (15:33)**

Yeah, well, I think-, this is just an extension of what I said earlier, but I



think, you know, keeping open the, kind of, lines of communication at least between people doing community activism, people doing different kinds of direct action, people coming from the environmental movement etc, and the mainstream of electoral politics I think is really crucial. You know, the risk of the end of Corbynism is people who are concerned with those issues are going to retreat back into, sort of, basically the theatrical politics, which is characterised by radical environmentalism, really from the 1980s through to most of what Extinction Rebellion has been doing. I mean, all that stuff has a value, but I think there's a real risk of that disconnect between that sort of mainstream politics and that kind of radicalism taking place again. And, you know, the people who Bea is talking about, the people who were very hostile to Corbynism and are delighted that it seems to be over, are very, very keen to bring it back. They want that cleavage back, and they want it reinforced, and they don't want anybody who actually has a systemic critique of contemporary forms of capitalism to be anywhere near BBC TV studios, or the mainstream institutions of the Labour movement or the Labour Party.

So, I think it's very important that we hang onto that. I think it's very important also that we, sort of, cultivate the spirit of experimental thinking and, you know, the need to engage with challenging ideas that Corbynism brought in its wake. I mean, one of the great achievements of the Corbyn moment which is still with us is things like The World Transformed festival, which is happening online from today, I think or from Wednesday, I can't remember, maybe it's from today, over the course of this month. It's really seen a real revivification of the, sort of, intellectual culture of the Left in this country, especially in England. Again, it's something which hasn't really taken place over the course of my adult life. So, I think I support that and encourage that.

Encouraging, I think, also, I mean, Corbynism also gave a lot of life in an animus to what was an already, kind of, emerging wave of Left media. Things like [Novara](#), which I think again it's really important that we continue to support. I would say, having been in the States for a few months earlier in this year, I don't think people on the English Left for the most really do understand the importance of, you know, the small donations, the active support for projects like that, which people regard as much more normal in the States. So, I just say that to say, you know, we need to keep those things going and it is, sort of, up to all of us to help them happen, rather than just to let other people do it. I think that the whole culture of radical media, radical thinking etc is something that we have to continue to develop out of that moment.

**Neal Lawson (18:46)**

Okay, Laura, maybe over to you, but make it a little focussed on Momentum, given that that was, you know, your thing. What's the legacy of that in particular?

**Laura Parker (18:57)**

Well, picking up from what Jeremy said, really, I think one of the most

positive things about the period of time in which Jeremy was leader was a political party that not only was willing to actually engage in politics, and try to bring them at least to some level into Parliament, but was also willing to look at politics beyond political parties. I mean, including, actually, the Trade Unions. I mean, Jeremy or Bea will know, but I think that when John McDonnell and Jeremy joined the Junior Doctors strike, relatively early on in their leadership, it was one of the first times that you'd seen Labour leaders on a picket line, despite the fact that public polling was indicating huge amounts of public support for Junior Doctors.

So, that was really important. And then beyond that the way in which they encouraged activism and didn't expect everybody to come to the Labour Party. If you look at [The World Transformed](#), which is a brilliant initiative, and really, I hope everyone on here this evening can support it in some way, you know, it very purposefully didn't just have a load of people from the Labour Party. If anything, it endeavours always to have a panel of people who represent, you know, different sorts of community organizing groups, intellectuals, human rights activists, writers, people from the media, people from outside the UK. And although I think, and we'll probably come onto this, the promise of that was never fulfilled with Jeremy in its entirety, a door has been opened which I still don't think has been completely reshut again, which sort of understands that politics isn't just party politics.

Jeremy's hinterland, I think, was very important to this. I mean, one of the reasons that he could win in the way that he did was because lots of us could find ourselves in him. You know, I was in CND. Everyone from CND voted for Corbyn. Obviously the whole anti-war movement, but there were people who voted for Corbyn because he knew where the Chagos islands were. There were people who voted for Corbyn because of his track record on anti racism in South Africa. There were people who voted for Corbyn because they knew he was a constituency MP who actually sat in his surgery every Friday for 33 years and talked about mental health provision in Islington. So, lots of people from outside party politics who were still very politically engaged could identify with this project.

And Momentum hasn't been able to fulfil, again, all of that promise for all sorts of reasons. This constant tension between delivering for the Left in the Parliamentary party, and looking beyond, and building a movement. But still, you know, with 40,000 to 45,000 members at its peak, and I think probably still now, and another 150,000 members sitting in its database, that's 200,000 people who were given the confidence to get active, and to organise in a way that made sense to them. People say to me, 'Oh, what did Momentum do?' and I would always say, 'Well, it depends where you were.' Because if you were in Manchester, what Momentum was doing was a social once a month with a disco, and if you were in Bristol what it was doing was holding a jamboree to which it invited all the local campaign groups, and if you were in Momentum in Sheffield maybe you were organising a food bank. And that, sort of, plurality of political expression was really important. Now, again, we needed to bottle more of

it, and we need to refind the bottle, but it's still in there somewhere in the party. We need to have a community organising unit which is about people, paid for by the Labour Party, not to go to Labour Party meetings, but to go to the meeting of the Local tenant's rights organisation in a housing estate in South London, and talk to people about how they are organising themselves. That's a massive, massive shift for a steam tanker of an organisation like the Labour Party, I mean, not fully made by any means.

Just to finish, I mean, I would also say we rediscovered how to campaign in an interesting way. You know, it was a devastating defeat, obviously, in December, but 2 days after the election we had over 4,000 people on a Zoom call with John McDonnell. Those same 4,000 people were sitting in WhatsApp groups, and in Slack groups, and in email groups, and they'd created their own campaign plans. They'd been able to use an app during the general election which gave them guidance about where to campaign, they'd been told not to just knock on doors and ask you for your voter ID, and which way did you vote, and then bugger off as quick as you'd arrived, but to engage people in conversations to try to persuade people. So, the campaigning legacy of both Momentum, but also Corbyn and John McDonnell. I mean, whilst the PLP thought it was amusing, I think, that Jeremy would bother standing on a platform somewhere, he understood the value of public expressions of solidarity. The very first thing he did was go to support the migrant's campaign that was taking place the day he was elected. So, all of that for me was really positive, and you know, we need to, sort of, reactivate a bit of it, but there is a legacy in terms of mobilisation, and activism, and campaigning which the Labour Party desperately needed, because actually it was starting to feel just like any other party.

**Neal Lawson (24.44)**

Okay, we'll come back to the critique of that, but let's keep the good bit going for a while. Go on, Bea, what do you think of the good, positive legacy stuff as you see it?

**Bea Campbell (24.55)**

Well, I think Laura's account, and everything I've read and heard about the mobilisation of Momentum I think is absolutely, irreducibly important. Because one of the things that had happened to the Labour Party was that it absolutely depended on institutions, local authorities, governments for its existence. It was those institutions, it didn't really have a life outside those institutions. The idea that you campaign for something wasn't in its vocabulary, particularly, except at the level of, you know, an election campaign. So, the creation of a movement that was about organising, mobilising, I think was astounding, and the lessons it learned from the State about how you do that, how you raise money, how you gather resources, how you find out what people need as well as what they think they want. Very different from the, kind of, Mandelsonian New Labour, "We are a listening party". It was such an interesting, such an interesting experiment, and I really hope that is allowed to survive the the horror, really, of the last year, because I don't see the Labour Party recovering

without that kind of energy and without that absolutely rigorous, boned-up, fine-tuned capacity to organise and connect, and treat data, complicated data, with respect. It's terrific.

**Neal Lawson (26:42)**

Well, let's, kind of, flick the switch and talk about, potentially, some of the criticisms. So, I guess the, sort of, familiar critique of this is, I see the Corbyn thing as deeply tragic, because it has all the beauty that you three have described, and because it has all of the failures that stopped them capitalising on all the beauty that they had. Because, I mean, our early description of it was that we were very in favour of the wave, of all of this new, energetic, young people, new ideas, enthusiasm, but was the surfer capable professionally, in terms of pluralism, in terms of openness, in terms of connections, in terms of running the party effectively. Were they capable of mobilising that, you know, in the position, Jeremy, of a kind of accident, an accidental win, of someone who wasn't expecting to win, who hadn't skilled and taught himself to be the leader that he suddenly became. So, you had these two things coming together and wasn't it effectively a very parliamentary, very electorally focussed thing, and not a thing about a broad, plural moment? And just before I pass over, I always, kind of, remember Caroline Lucas' complete and utter, kind of, mind blown by the fact that someone that she could work with on CND, climate, peace etc would not talk to her about electoral politics. Wasn't there a fundamental Labourist problem going on there? Jeremy?

**Jeremy Gilbert (28:20)**

Sure, yes, I mean, the first thing I would say is, you know, whatever the strengths or limitations of the project, I think one has to be realistic about what could objectively be expected of a movement that had come more or less from nowhere in 2015, after 30 years of, as I said earlier, the Left, the political Left being in almost complete abeyance in the country. Outside a social crisis literally on the scale of a World War, there is no historic precedent anywhere in the world, ever for coming from that point to implement a programme which would have been, like, the most radical programme since the '40s. So, that was never going to happen. We were never actually going to get to an electoral win.

So, I think the understanding of Corbynism as a tragic failure or even as a defeat I think is just an ahistorical perspective. It did what it could. We got this weird, accidental moment of historical opportunity, but it was never the case that the balance of forces in the country was going to enable us actually to form a government at that stage. We did what we could do with it. What we could do with it was politicise several different social layers of people, especially young people who hadn't really been politicised that way before. We could make some progress in terms of challenging the, kind of, control of, you know, the close Blairite right over the Labour Party, and over the political imagination of the Country. I think we achieved, you know, pretty much as much as could've been achieved.

That's not to say he didn't have (? 29.52) like the ones you've referred to,

Neal. So I think, yes, it was ultimately like you say a Labourist project, in that they really couldn't get out of-, they couldn't break free from the idea that the way they were going to get this socialist programme was simply by electing a radical, you know, a Labour government with a Parliamentary majority, without working with a broad coalition, without having electoral reform. And as I never tire of pointing out to people, people I pointed this out to between 2015 and 2019 were surprised every time I pointed it out, there is no historical precedent. The Labour Party has never once done this. No, not once. No, not ever. In 1945 the Labour Party was not in opposition, it was part of the national wartime government, which had given it the opportunity to commission the Beveridge report and print up 300,000 copies of it which it had spent the past three years distributing.

Apart from that, the Labour Party has only ever won a convincing Parliamentary majority when parliament decided to call an election or, in the case of Tony Blair, when it had adopted a programme over which it had given Rupert Murdoch, and key institutions in the City of London, explicit veto. So, it has never, ever been done. Our General Electoral system and media ecology do not allow for the physical possibility that the Labour Party can stand on a genuinely radical platform and win a convincing Parliamentary majority from opposition. It has not been done in 120 years. You have to do something else.

No, they wouldn't really engage with that agenda, and also I would say, actually, in terms of the way the Corbyn leadership-, there are two things I would mention that really limited the success of the project. One was about in fact Jeremy and his own personality, and one was about their general attitude to the problem of the Labour Party and its relation to the movement. I mean, Jeremy's strengths, at least as an individual, as a person, were also his weaknesses. Because as much as Jeremy was able to inspire several different, sort of, groups of people, all of whom really wanted to hear this powerful, moral case being made in a way they haven't heard it being made for decades, what he wasn't good at, or really temperamentally cut-out for, is channeling the anger of many other groups of people. People whose objection to austerity, you know, liberal capitalism, wasn't just a moral one. It's based on the fact that for 30 years, we've seen the constant implementation of a political programme which has harmed them, which has hurt them, which has reduced their life chances, which has done so for the purposes of enriching a small, social and business elite.

I think Jeremy was never able to say-, the way I always used to say this to people was, "Look, if you want to motivate and mobilise voters in the North West, working class areas in the North West where I grew up, actually, you've got to be able to say to people, 'Look, these are the bastards who are screwing you, and this is what we are going to do to them.'" That wasn't Jeremy's approach. Jeremy's approach was to try to evoke a, kind of, moral critique of austerity and capitalism. He was just saying to people, "Isn't it horrible what the government has been doing to poor people, and shouldn't we do something nicer?" And that was just (?)

33.27) a sufficiently large number of people. Fundamentally, Jeremy never did articulate a critique of the whole past 40 years of neoliberalism. He only ever articulated a critique of austerity, which means the economic programme implemented by the coalition government, and the Tories. One of the fundamental reasons they didn't do that was because they knew if they started articulating a critique of 40 years of neoliberalism they would have to include an explicit critique of the New Labour years, during which we lost all those votes in the North, and they weren't willing to do that because ultimately they didn't really know what to do about the hostility of the parliamentary Labour party and the, kind of, Blairites in the party, and in the general machine.

One reason, I think, they found Labour Party management very difficult, was because especially when they first came in, John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn, I remember very clearly a meeting that some of us had at your house, Neal, I think the day after Jeremy got elected leader. I don't think you'll mind me saying so at all. I mean, very presciently John Trickett was there, and John Trickett remarked that our biggest problem is going to be that John and Jeremy don't really trust anyone except each other.

That was true, and their response to that was initially the people they hired to work for them were mostly just mates of Tommy's from university. They were literally just people they knew. They were just friends of Corbyn's son. They didn't really know what they were doing, they didn't know how to run an office or write a manifesto, or develop a communications campaign, and so they ended up replacing them with a bunch of people they knew mostly from the Stop the War Campaign. Most of them had been in the Communist Party, very few of them actually had any historic experience of the Labour Party. They didn't bring in people like you, Neal, actually. They didn't bring in people from the Soft Left, for example, who were sympathetic but who actually had some experience of dealing with the Blairites and the, kind of, Labour Right in a more direct way who, in many cases, I think, would have told them earlier on that they were never going to tolerate them. That they were going to have to actually fight them more directly than they did.

So broadly, I would say, the fact that they didn't bring in people until quite late in the project, actually, they never brought in people to help them who actually knew the different sections of the Labour Party better than they really did. Because they only brought in people they knew from these external movements, they were never really able to get to grips with and formulate a strategy for dealing with that internal opposition.

#### **Neal Lawson (36:22)**

Okay, okay, I think that was super helpful in understanding the limitations of a non pluralist politics which, at Compass, we try and practice, and from all of that difference you can concoct something. Rock solid certainty of only talking to people you've been on the same side as for 50 years isn't good enough. Laura, over to you. What do you see as the real key strategic weaknesses of the project?



**Laura Parker (36:51)**

Well, you can only work with what you've got, and objectively speaking it's very difficult to be the boss of anything if you're at odds with all your middle management. So you have this mass membership, which of course is aligned with the leader they've just elected. Between us and him you've got a parliamentary Labour Party which has got about twelve people who he could rely on, and a party machine which had about five out of its several hundred. So, that would be a challenge for anybody, compounded I think, as Jeremy's referred to, by the fact that neither Jeremy or John (although John more, one would argue because of his LGC work), neither of them really had the skills or experience to take on dismantling this machine. I think of all the criticism of Keir, you've got to hand it to him that he's come in and changed his General Secretary. I mean, how Iain McNicol got through the first week is beyond me, really. Now, any experienced CEO, you know, if you're the head of Volvo and you come in and your commercial director is selling Ford, well your commercial director's not going to last very long. You know, rather simply put, Jeremy and Iain McNicol were selling very different vehicles.

So, I think they were really limited by their experience or lack of. I agree with Jeremy's point about not bringing in the right people. I think that because very quickly it was clear that a massive defensive gain was needed around the leadership, I repeatedly said that the activist base became this praetorian guard. We were the bodyguards of this project, but we never managed to transit out of that into being the avant garde. So we sort of protected this thing, which then protected itself further. I think there was a degree of capture by some of the bigger trade unions, and some of them talked a great Left game, but actually for my money, if you want to see real, radical politics in the Trade Union movement, you can look at some of the stuff that, say, Matt Rack would say from the FBU. Some of the stuff from the CWU, definitely people like the IWGB, but I mean, Unite, that's not its historic tradition and yet they become the paymaster. That was obviously something of a limitation for the project, although you've also got to recognise that when the chips were down they put their hands in the Unite pocket and very much helped in the second leadership campaign, but that was not all entirely positive.

I think that in the end, Jeremy couldn't help the Labour Party transcend itself. Its biggest weakness, I think-, I forgot to say, a big omission, but on the plus side challenging the dominant narrative about austerity was a massive, massive plus. That is shaping still the politics of the Labour Party. The other side of the coin, really about democratisation and the redistribution of power and not just wealth. I think we were weak, and I think that's because for all sorts of reasons that we've just discussed a bit, the leadership was looking in on itself and not really thinking about this mass resource of people out there who could have helped sure it up, and didn't really talk at all about this democratic agenda of constitutional reform, or electoral reform, or devolution, or federalism, or even just restoring dignity to Local Government. That all sort of got forgotten, and

it became very Westminster focussed. You've got to be very determined when you're in that building, particularly if you know you've only got twelve people who agree with you. You've got to be very determined to break out of that.

Then of course, and I'm sure we'll come onto it, but I'll let Bea speak, I mean, Brexit, you know? Brexit, whatever way you look at it, whatever way you voted for, Brexit (a) didn't help and (b) was badly, badly managed.

**Neal Lawson (41:16)**

Okay, Bea? Come on, what do you think? What do you regret that they didn't do, or that they did wrong?

**Bea Campbell (41:24)**

Right, I think Laura's absolutely right. The worst thing to do in the moment that he finds himself in, which is, "Bloody Hell, we've won. Who have we got? Almost nobody. What machine have we got? We don't know, and we're surrounded by enemies", the worst thing to do in that moment is to be defensive, and to close the iron doors. I have to say, some of the people who were brought in to be the Praetorian guard, I thought to myself, "Oh my god. I know some of these fellows from 30 years ago. No! No! Don't do it." Anyway, but he did, and I thought that was a very grave mistake, because what it did was shut the door to people within the Labour Party, and within the House of Commons, who were knocking on the door and who would have been helpful. It looked dour, and boysy for all the appearance of some, you know, fabulous women. It didn't feel like that. It didn't feel like this was a party that looked like the rest of us. That's one thing.

I think it also allowed people to think, "Actually, this is a Stalinist organisation" because too many of the people who were brought in were, and that's a disaster. Then I think you need to, kind of, turn to, what was going on in this extraordinary moment that, oh god, it was like a tornado, wasn't it? The fact is, let me just focus in a bit on what I think was confronting them. So, he's leading a party. He's an anti-leader leader. He's not a leader. This is I think where it's not his fault, what happened. I think the Labour Party, the parliamentary Labour Party is culpable for the defeat, this extraordinary moment, in ways, before as I said, that are absolutely unforgivable.

As I said to Neal the other week, the thing that was so interesting about the Greater London Council in the era of Livingstone, in that moment of the flowering of radical municipalism, the thing that was extraordinary about it was that it was led by Red Ken, but it wasn't a red Labour group. The genius of the Livingstone-McDonnell regime, well it wasn't actually a Livingstone-McDonnell regime at the time, but the genius of it was that they knew they were a group that was hugely diverse, that included some very right-wing oldtimers, who signed up to it. Why? We need to find out why they did. They became popular even though the London media was very hostile, but in the end was very cleverly engaged. Now, that didn't



happen this time around, and maybe it couldn't happen, but the lesson of the GLC, I think, for once, was that for once the Left successfully led a not-Left community of councillors in London.

That's really interesting, it's really often the other way around. It's terribly important, because the situation that Labour finds itself in, like any political party, they're complicated organisations. People's investments in them are ever more complicated, they're generationally complicated, they're gender complicated, they're priorities complicated, they're education complicated. It's all complicated. So, you have to, as a leader, I think, feel that you have to take the risk of trusting people who will help you manage complications that you don't get.

Let me take us to another complication that I think is absolutely central here. The London, and indeed English, Labour movement doesn't get, number one, the nature of England, and number two, the nature of the United Kingdom. Scotland will be the doing or undoing of social democracy in Britain, and if you don't have a relationship to the Scottish National Party, you are done for forever. Labour is never going to win, ever again, without Scotland. It just isn't. The events in Northern Ireland are very interesting, the unionist bloc is now no longer the majority in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Something is afoot in Northern Ireland. Really, really interesting. Something is afoot, actually, in the whole of Ireland that I don't think England gets, it's not interested in. It's a long way away, it's padded. The Labour Party has been horribly prejudiced and disconnected from politics beyond the borders of England. It's going to have to wise up and find out why it is that the democratic deficit in Scotland works differently from the way the democratic deficit works in England. Completely differently.

So, it manifests itself, I think, in England, and Jeremy's written about this, and I think there's lots of really interesting interrogations to be conducted, but why is it that impoverished Labour towns are still so pacified. Why their experience of Labour is not that they are, as it were, represented, but they're managed. They're becalmed, because Labour is having to manage a horrible situation, a very, very centralised form of government in England. So, Jeremy's right. He goes on, and on, and on about it, and he's right. There's got to be electoral reform. Why wasn't that almost instantly part of the programme? Why wasn't it almost instantly part of the way that this new Labour formation engaged with Scotland, Northern Ireland, green politics and probably, I hate to say it, the Liberal Democrats, who are quite an unmanageable lot, really, but that's what we're stuck with.

So, those are some of the weaknesses of the project. The difficulty they were also faced with was, I think, probably, an unexpected miasma that just showered them. Westminster people, journalists who never move out of the bloody House of Commons, you know, with their contempt. The joys of contempt is one of the stories of the Corbyn era. The pleasures of disrespect and skepticism that became our national, political discourse. It

wasn't confronted, and it couldn't be confronted by the people who were around, I'm afraid, in Corbyn's office. It could have been confronted, and it could have been joyfully confronted, but it just wasn't. It just wasn't.

**Laura Parker (48:47)**

Yes. Am I allowed to interrupt?

**Neal Lawson (48:49)**

Only briefly, but only because it's you.

**Laura Parker (48:52)**

Okay, that's very kind of you, but I do agree with you, and I think that's back to experience. I mean, if you're the CEO of a company and you go to your board meeting, and the profits are down because inflation's up, your board will forgive you for the first quarter and maybe the second, and maybe the third. If after a year and a half you're still saying, 'Profits are down because inflation's up' someone's going to point out that inflation might not be your job, but managing the business is. Constantly and rightly, of course, complaining about the press, complaining about the PLP, complaining about the state of things beyond your control, in the end it is your job to manage those things. That's the job of leading a party. It became too easy, for those of us outside as well, to blame it all on the Daily Mail. The Daily Mail is the Daily Mail, find a way of managing it.

**Neal Lawson (49:41)**

Laura, that just speaks to that politics on that bit of the Left which is all about betrayal. It can't be our fault, because we're right, so therefore it must be someone else's fault stopping us. My worry is that too many people from that politics are just going to slip back into that again. You know, "We lost because they cheated on us, the media" as you say.

**Laura Parker (50:02)**

Jeremy mentioned "new media". Now, we have the makings of another way of finding our way around the Daily Mail, and as it is Novara Media is paid for by folk like us giving them £2 a month. Now we've had five years to decide-, I mean, I'm not suggesting the Labour Party sets up a newspaper, but it was too Labourist and too parliamentary, and therefore not creative enough to find mitigating strategies for dealing with the world as it is.

[Membership promotion 50.36-51.40]

**Neal Lawson (51:40)**

We've rattled on, I've rattled on too much. Grace, do you want to get a couple of people into this, and it looks like we are going to run over for ten minutes, because there's so much in this, and it's so rich and so good. So pick a couple of people, and let's get some other voices into this.

**Grace Barnett (51:52)**

Sure, yes, lots of really good questions. First up, Julia Lagoutte, you had a question?

**Julia Lagout (51:58)**

Hi there. Thank you so much, everyone. I just found that so, so interesting and thought provoking. My question was, how good was Corbyn at-, I mean, you kind of answered this once I'd already asked it, but I'd like to hear more about alliance building, working with other parties. How could that be done better, and is there any hope for that in the future?

**Grace Barnett (52:19)**

Thanks Julia. I'm going to jump to Colin Miller.

**Colin Miller (53.22)**

Okay, my question is, how might the huge numbers of really angry and unreconciled Corbyn supporters be brought back into some kind of positive project, rather than the pointless anger and rage that you see so much of. One of the things that really struck me was how brilliant some of the Momentum stuff, at conference and so on, could happen. How might they be brought back into a positive conversation, I guess, was my question.

**Bea Campbell (52:54)**

Can I have a go at Julia's question? Now, I think probably it was the case that Corbyn and, you know, if only, the leader of the Labour Party was Caroline Lucas, I have to say, I think they probably were able to have genial, useful, creative conversations. Their problem was, was Labour going to go for electoral reform? Was it going to go for electoral alliances? The failure to take that on was-, well, it was a failure, and it was a catastrophic failure. What it did, I think, in lots and lots of places where there are vigorous greens, was to fail to make connections with communities of activists who would have lent their support to Labour, not just as the level of voting, but at the level of energy, activism, making issues come alive in the places that they lived. That goes back to Jeremy's issue about the distinctions between movements, parties, political movements, social movements. They're not all the same thing. They need not be all the same thing. They need to be different, but our electoral system-, Labour has to confront this, and Julia's question coming from the Green end of things, Labour has to be a beneficiary of Green intelligence, it really does. Greens are activists, they're very good at it. You can't work without them, and you're going to have to come to some arrangement, for goodness sake, in the moment of elections. Greens, again, they're very experienced at that, and they will get more so, I'm absolutely sure. So, I think that was a failure, and it was a failure of imagination about this real, profound, crisis in British politics and our awful electoral system.

**Jeremy Gilbert (55:07)**

Okay, well, on alliances, the answer to the question is simply that Jeremy Corbyn was not interested in that and was actively hostile to any suggestion of working with other parties at any level, on any scale. Despite the fact that some people around him like McDonnell were very sympathetic to it, and could see the argument for it. I think part

of what was going on at that moment, to be honest, I mean, one way of understanding a lot of the decisions that Jeremy made in particular, I think, was as we've said before, nobody expected Jeremy to become leader of the Labour Party. It was completely out of the blue. Nobody saw it coming, and so nobody really knew what it meant. One of the easiest ways of understanding what it meant, which was the wrong way, but became the dominant way, really, among the leadership and the membership, is that Jeremy's election as Labour leader was the historical vindication of Bennism. It was proof that in fact Jeremy's mentor, Tony Benn, had been right about everything all along.

One of the things that Tony Benn himself was committed to was that the Labour Party was the only progressive party, that we shouldn't have proportional representation, that the House of Commons had a historic, almost spiritual mission to become the instantiation of working class and socialist democracy in Britain. It was very naive and it was quite contrary, even to the Marxist tradition informing the thinking of people like McDonnell, but Jeremy Corbyn himself was quite attached to it. Also for other contingent and historical reasons, the Communist Party of Britain are attached to it as an idea. Between them they just nixed any suggestion of engaging in a more creative strategy.

On the question of how to bring the angry Corbynites in, I think we do need a broad, strategic conversation across the movement. We need a broad conversation about the movement, about how we relate to a situation in which we have made some significant advances, but we didn't get as far as we would have liked and we no longer have the leadership of the party. I do think there's a very striking difference in the attitude of people who were already members of the party before Jeremy was leader, and people who joined afterwards. I think people on the Left, who actively supported Jeremy, who were already in the party before Jeremy was leader, understand that the Labour party is a very complex machine, a very complex territory, and you can't expect always to have a leader who says exactly what you or your dad would say in any given situation, just as a matter of right. It's not a god-given right. I think a lot of the people, I have to say, who joined after that find that emotionally very difficult. They joined the party to be represented by Jeremy, and the fact that the leader of the party no longer represents them, they find emotionally very difficult.

To be fair, that's also the case with all those people who hated Jeremy. They hated Jeremy, because they also think that they, as members of the liberal managerial elite, have a god-given right for the leader of the Labour party to be someone who looks like them, talks like them, and represents them. They were filled with abject fury for five years about the fact that Corbyn didn't. So, to be fair, I think what's needed to some extent is a general, mature understanding that the Labour Party is a complex mechanism, and sometimes the leader isn't going to look exactly like you or talk like you. I think we need a broad, strategic conversation across the movement. How do we relate to it, how do we want to relate to it? Is there

a way we can still exercise some leverage without simply spending all our time attacking the current leadership? Can we hold the current leadership to account? Also, will the Right of the party and the current leadership let go of their historical reflex of just seeing attacking the Left as being the primary way they signal to the press, and to the electorate, and the wider country, that they are fit to govern? I'm not sure they are willing to let go of that. If they're not, well they're just going to keep dividing the Left, and keep allowing the Tories to remain in government. I think we need a broad conversation.

**Neal Lawson (59:03)**

Good. That's what we always agree with in Compass. I'm going to go over to Laura, and we're going to finish this round of questions. You can come in on any of those bits you want, Laura, but maybe the Momentum bit a bit more, but how do we segue effectively between Corbynism and Keir Starmerism, whatever that is. I don't believe for a minute that Keir Starmer wakes up every morning and thinks, "How can I crush the Left?" I don't believe that's part of his politics, but some on the Left, again with their betrayal theory, want that to happen. They want to paint that picture that the Right are after them again, and there's only a choice between hardline Corbynism and hardline Blairism. Have we got a moment where we can have a conversation across the Labour Party, and then obviously into other parties as well because we're Compass? Across the Labour Party that has a mature debate, that learns from Blairism, from Corbynism, that moulds them into something new and different that can both be radical and can win, which is clearly what we want. There's your test, last question, all of you. Laura first.

**Laura Parker (01:00:07)**

Yes, we have to decide that that's the moment we're in because we haven't got any choice, because we cannot have another ten years of Tories, so we have to win the next election, which means we have to build alliances. The Left cannot eat itself. I think magnanimity in victory is incumbent upon the leadership now, in fact, to reach out to the disgruntled, wherever they may be within Labour and, as we've discussed, beyond. Most of us, of course, joined because of politics. So the first way out of this is for us to have a political discussion. I want to be supportive of the leadership of the party, because I want a Progressive government. Actually, I don't really care that much whose Progressive government it is. The Labour Party is our best bet at the moment. I'd be very happy with a very radical, internationalist, green (? 01.01.03) another creation winning, but that doesn't look likely. So, I think Keir and the leadership of the party now have to articulate perhaps more clearly than they have since he was elected, and indeed during his campaign, what their vision of the country is so that we can engage in a debate about that, rather than everyone filling in the gaps themselves on their own. Part of the, sort of, niggly tension around the edges is derived from the fact that people haven't really got all the clarity they'd like about what Keir stands for.

Now, I want to be optimistic because his ten pledges are not a complete

rollback from where Corbyn was. Of course they don't extend in some areas as much as, certainly, I would like, and I'm guessing also Bea and Jeremy, but he hasn't brought back all the policy. I mean, he's probably not said enough about policy. The political project that we're all part of isn't probably that clear to people, and that is a recipe for, sort of, ill-at-easeness, but we haven't got a choice. We haven't got a choice about electoral reform, we haven't got a choice about pluralism either. I mean, if you just look at the numbers in the last election, I think over 50% of people didn't vote for the Tories or UKIP, but the Tories got 42% and Labour got 32%. There's just no way around this. So the response has got to be pluralism, and a proper political debate around strategy, and I really think that using this moment-

I mean, it's interesting. I supported Keir in the leadership, and got lots of brickbats for it. There were all sorts of reasons why I made that decision, but it's interesting now to observe that somebody who's, sort of, said he quite admires Wilson is forgetting one of Wilson's main contributions to at least quote books, which is to never waste a crisis. I mean, we are coming out of this Covid crisis, or maybe we're not coming out of it, but there's a massive opportunity now for reset in terms of how we think about the economy. I would like to hear more about that from the Labour Party. I mean, if we'd had the National Care Service, which Labour promoted in 2017 and 2019, Covid would not have hit in the way it has. It is the disintegration of care services, they're almost all privatised, the lack of integration with the health service. I mean, everybody's got a granny, or a colleague, or a friend, or a neighbour, who's been hit by Covid. Every single one of those people can be persuaded to support a National Care Service and, unless I've just missed it because I'm too busy enjoying the Florence sunshine, we've not said anything about a National Care Service during the whole of Covid.

So, we're missing tricks, and the way to get the disgruntled Left back again is to talk about substantive political issues, and do what Jeremy didn't, which is give a green light to critical friends. You know, I'm afraid not so much for Corbyn, necessarily, but many of those near him, you could either be critical, you could be a friend, but you couldn't be both. Keir needs to signal an intent to have a proper strategic discussion with us, without whom he cannot win and to broaden, I think, probably his own pool of advisors, probably his shadow cabinet, let Clive Lewis run at it with the programme for democratic reform, and get Caroline Lucas in the shadow cabinet. I mean, it's not rocket science, but it does require courage.

**Neal Lawson (01:04:49)**

Good, good. Bea Campbell, you've got the last world.

**Bea Campbell (01:04:54)**

Amazing. Well, I agree with all of that. I think everybody who is shattered, and upset, and disappointed, I'm saying this as much to myself, we need to get over it. Get over it. This is now, we're in a new moment. What is this moment? The horrors of Covid and Brexit happening within about



two seconds. Total, total crisis in these islands. We've never been in this situation before. We are going to have to really, really think and get moving, and find every friend that we can, every friend that we can, and actually take responsibility for the situation that we're in. We are going to have to, you know, I am now of an age where I'm thinking, I've got a terrible. I don't want to end my life like the last 35 years. You know, my personal life is lovely, but god, it's a terrible, terrible narrative. This is going to hit us before this year is out.

**Neal Lawson (01:06:07)**

Well, we're going to do it for you, Bea. We're going to sort this out. Look, and the great thing-, thank you, the three of you. That was a beautiful conversation. It was so rich, and I could go on all night listening to the three of you. I'm sorry I didn't get more of you, our members, in but I just didn't want to interrupt those thoughts, and that analysis, which I thought was great. I would just say in parting that we have four years, right? We have four years to get this right, and if we can't get it right then it's more fool us, frankly. Let's embrace that pluralism and that complexity, and that radicalism, but pragmatism too in all of that. Pragmatism in its proper sense of knowing where we want to get to, and how we get there. I think that the elements, the intellectual, cultural, organisational elements are all around us. If we have the wisdom and the determination to fashion them into something and learn from Corbynism, but learn from other strings as well, and open ourselves up and out in the way that Compass always does in working with others, I think we can produce helpfully maybe a Keir Starmer premiership with Caroline Lucas in that cabinet, and Ed Davey, and Layla Moran, and work out a relationship with the SNP that holds in a way that gives us a chance to fashion something different.

Thank you the three of you. You're absolutely amazingly brilliant. I'm so glad to have you on. Next week it's slightly different on the podcast, It's Bloody Complicated. We'll be joined by Matthew Taylor, who'll add a different perspective. He's the CEO of the RSA and worked at Downing Street, but he's really bright, and really interesting, and his podcast is fantastic, so I'm really glad that Matthew's joining us. He was one of the cabal of four who, with me, started Compass in 2003. So Matthew can tell us something about that story, and tell us about the RSA, so I'm really looking forward to that. Until then everyone, in particular Bea, Laura, and Jeremy, thanks so much. Everyone keep safe, keep well, and keep hopeful. We'll keep talking. Take care, good night.

*[Outro]*

**Neal Lawson (01:08:09)**

*So, if you like what you've heard today and want to be part of a much more equal, democratic, and sustainable future - the Good Society - then visit us at [Compassonline.org.uk/podcast](https://Compassonline.org.uk/podcast) and you'll be able to join us live on future calls just like this one. You can tweet me ([@Neal\\_Compas](https://twitter.com/Neal_Compas)) or Compass ([@CompassOffice](https://twitter.com/CompassOffice)). If you've enjoyed this week's episode, please give us a rating. It'll help us reach new listeners in the future, and it's only*

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