



LANCE PRICE
LETTER FROM LONDON

THE ACCIDENTAL REVOLUTIONARY

Jeremy Corbyn, the far-left rebel who is now the Labour leader, could be a passing phenomenon. Will he meet Narendra Modi when the Indian Prime Minister visits London in November?

He's a bearded, grey-haired man in his sixties. He's a vegetarian who doesn't drink alcohol. He's got a passionate following on social media that has just helped him to an election victory that surpassed everybody's expectations. He was once considered an unelectable extremist, but he has forced his critics to eat their words and look at him afresh. Sound familiar?

People are still rubbing their eyes in disbelief after an election campaign that went on for months. But no, this isn't New Delhi 2014, it's London 2015. And the man who has confounded all predictions isn't Prime Minister but merely the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition. Even so, Britain has just witnessed its own political tsunami sweep across the country, one that will have a profound effect on politics for years to come.

Jeremy Corbyn, the new leader of the Labour Party is no Narendra Modi and, indeed, he would be horrified by the comparison. If you were to sit the two men down in a room and ask them to find anything to agree about, they would quickly discover there's little if any common ground. But they have shared the experience of confounding their critics, both in their own parties and the media, and proving their popularity in spectacular fashion.

Corbyn has been a backbench member of the British House of Commons since 1983. He has never held office in government or been a party spokesman in opposition. Instead, he has been a long-term rebel, part of a small band of far-left MPs who have voted against their own party leadership time and time again without having any influence on policy. He's a veteran of

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Jeremy Corbyn after being elected the new leader of Britain's Labour party

thousands of protest marches and demonstrations, content to remain true to his socialist principles without ever getting his hands dirty in the messy business of turning ideals into practical policies.

A few months ago, nobody, not even Corbyn himself, thought he stood any chance of winning the leadership. The party rules state that even to get on the ballot, a candidate has to get the backing of 10 per cent of his colleagues in parliament, and Corbyn couldn't even manage that. In the end, he was 'lent' nominations by a number of MPs who had no intention of actually voting for him, because they thought it would broaden the debate about Labour's future. Some of them are now bitterly regretting their magnanimity. Once on the ballot, Corbyn then benefitted from a big change in the voting procedure which allowed anybody who paid £3 and declared themselves a supporter of the party to have an equal say in who should lead it.

Labour found itself with a big headache when it was revealed that members of other parties, including some ministers in David Cameron's Conservative government, had been signing up to vote for him because they thought he'd be the easiest can-

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didate for them to beat. There were fears of 'entryism' from members of far-left Marxist and Trotskyist parties who didn't have Labour's best interests at heart either. Extra staff were drafted to weed out the bogus supporters while efforts were made to reassure genuine party members, and the public, that the process was fair and not the farce it was starting to resemble.

In the end, it didn't make a lot of difference. Jeremy Corbyn won such a massive victory that nobody could call the result into question. He secured almost 60 per cent of the votes, with his nearest rival on less than 20 per cent. Warnings from Labour's elder statesmen, including former prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, that electing Corbyn would consign the party to certain defeat at a general election fell on deaf ears. If anything, their interventions seemed to make Corbyn's supporters even more determined to vote for him, not less.

So, as parliament re-assembles at Westminster, Labour is led by its most left-wing leader for decades. Many of the party's brightest stars, including former ministers and two of the three candidates who ran against him, have refused to

serve in his team. Labour is riven by an ideological divide that runs so deep that it threatens to tear the party apart. Corbyn's opponents say that won't happen, and I am sure they are right. They are too committed to the party to see it split. But they are biding their time, waiting for an opportunity to unseat him and bring Labour back to its senses and back to a position where it could realistically compete for power again.

They point to all the polling and psephological evidence from last May's general election which shows convincingly that Labour lost badly mainly because it wasn't trusted on the economy and on other key issues like border controls. Some people may have withheld their votes from Labour because it wasn't radical enough, or didn't oppose the anti-austerity policies of the Conservatives with enough vigour, but many more deserted Labour because the party seemed to have vacated the centre ground that Blair, and to a lesser extent Brown, had dominated with such success. The idea that Labour lost because it wasn't left-wing enough flies in the face of all the available facts. For the Labour Party to shift even more decisively to the left now is little short of suicidal.

In his first few days as leader, it seemed evident that Corbyn would be sticking to his guns, and not moderating his position in any way. His most crucial appointment, that of shadow chancellor in charge of economic policy, went to a man who is, if anything, even further left than he is. John McDonnell is not just anti-austerity, he is anti-capitalism. He believes in hefty rises in personal taxation and in tax bills for business and industry. He'd like to take major industries like the railways and energy companies back to public ownership. And while many people across the Labour Party and beyond would agree with him that the poor shouldn't be made to pay for the

mistakes of the bankers and the speculators during the global financial crisis, many of his proposed remedies seem to come from an old socialist textbook from the 1970s and 1980s.

Another hangover from that period is the support offered by Corbyn and McDonnell to organisations that many would regard as terrorists. They insist, with some justification, that they wanted to engage these groups in dialogue in the interests of peace and reconciliation. Nevertheless, the two men have shared platforms and welcomed as 'friends' representatives of Hezbollah, Hamas, and, crucially in the British context, the Irish Republican Army (IRA). McDonnell even went so far as to call for the gunmen of the IRA to be honoured for their part in the armed struggle against Britain in Northern Ireland. Corbyn and McDonnell are no doubt sincere when they say they deplore any loss of civilian life, but to suggest, as they have done, that there is some moral equivalence between the murderers of the IRA and the British army, or between the American forces in Iraq or Afghanistan and the insurgents, is repugnant. And their claims to be seekers of peace would be

more credible if they had reached out at the same time to all extremists groups, be they Israeli or the terrorists on the other side of Northern Ireland's religious divide.

For British Indians, Corbyn's attitude towards Kashmir raises similar concerns. His repeated criticism of India for what he claims have been human rights abuses in Kashmir appears to cast successive governments in New Delhi as the bad guys. And when it comes to the Gujarat riots of 2002, Corbyn is clear whom he holds responsible. In 2004, he visited India and spoke of hearing "the surviving victims of the killings and mayhem in Gujarat tell what it is like to be the victims of the hordes goaded on by right-wing xenophobic politicians."

You see what I mean when I said putting Corbyn and Modi in a room together might not prove terribly productive. It will be a test of Corbyn's leadership skills to see if he is willing to meet Modi when the Prime Minister visits the UK in November. Always assuming, of course, that Modi believes such a meeting would be worthwhile.

There are many good reasons why Corbyn should want the meeting to happen. Quite apart from proving his credentials as a man who genuinely pursues dialogue to address past grievances, it would be a slap in the face of the British Indian community if he were to refuse. Labour has been losing support in almost all voting groups, from the White working class to the ever-expanding middle classes of all racial backgrounds. They once had an overwhelming advantage over the Conservatives with voters from Black and Asian families, but not any more.

Recent polling suggests 49 per cent of British Hindu and Sikh voters backed the Conservatives in the UK's general election, against 41 per cent for Labour. Although Labour continues to perform better in multi-ethnic urban areas than elsewhere, the party has been taking that advantage for granted for many years.

According to Manoj Ladwa, a close friend of Narendra Modi, and the founder of Indians for Labour in the UK, "Indian voters have been feeling neglected by the party for some time." In the wake of Jeremy Corbyn's victory, he told me Labour needed to reach out, "and reconnect at a grass-roots level with millions of Indians who need to be convinced that the party still represents their values."

For many British Indians, it has little to do with their heritage and much more to do with the perception that Labour no longer speaks up for what political observers call 'aspirational voters'. Small entrepreneurs, those running businesses of all shapes and sizes, and families who just want the best for their kids and a prosperous economy where those who work hard can succeed.

Even before Labour's lurch to the left under Corbyn, the party was seen to regard 'profit' as a dirty word and want to penalise

wealth creators rather than encourage them. In fact, Labour had a lot of policies to encourage small and medium sized businesses but the rhetoric from the top was all about the need for 'responsible capitalism' and the iniquities of greed in the boardroom. The 'anti-business' label stuck and did it great electoral damage. The new man in charge of Labour's economic policy, John McDonnell, lists among his pastimes in *Who's Who* 'generally fermenting the overthrow of capitalism'. He brushes it off as a joke, but Labour has to be deadly serious in its commitment to expanding Britain's economy and making the UK a good place in which to do business if it is to rebuild its electoral base.

If and when Corbyn and Modi meet face to face, they might do well to stick to areas where, despite their very different political hues, they share a common experience. I'm sure Corbyn would love to hear more about how the Modi campaign used social media so effectively and brought so many young people into politics for the first time. He did the same, but on a much smaller scale, in his leadership campaign. And they might find room for agreement in the contempt they both feel for a common enemy, namely the media.

Both men believe the media are intrinsically hostile to them and both have been reluctant to grant interviews to television, radio and most newspaper journalists. But Modi and his team have been far more successful in finding other ways of communicating with the country. Corbyn has a far more critical media to contend with, but has shown none of the same skill in circumventing it.

Jeremy Corbyn's first few days as Labour leader have provided ample evidence for what many of his critics, including those in his own party, feared. Namely, that after a career

as a backbench rebel and leader of street protests and demonstrations, he simply doesn't have the skill set required to lead a major political party. He can learn on the job, and perhaps he will. The public are certainly tired of professional politicians who don't seem to believe what they say and Corbyn will be seen by some as a breath of fresh air. I would even go so far to predict a 'Corbyn bounce' in the opinion polls.

It won't last, however, and the Corbyn revolution will fail, probably sooner rather than later. Britain is not a nation crying out for socialism, and his attempts to persuade people otherwise are doomed from the start. I hope he does meet Modi. He would do well to ask him what it's like to be Prime Minister. Because Jeremy Corbyn, Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, will never know. ■

Lance Price was a special adviser to Tony Blair and the Labour Party's director of communications from 2000 to 2001. He is the author of The Modi Effect: Inside Narendra Modi's Campaign to Transform India (Hachette India)