# The Absolute State of the Labour Left

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The Labour left under Starmer is at a low ebb. But while it might be marginalised, its politics remain popular amongst the membership, and there are reasons for optimism – not least in emergent alliances with the soft left.

It has long been argued that the factional balance of power within the Labour Party operates on something like a natural cycle.[1] During periods in office, the various disappointments, compromises, mistakes, or outright disasters that any Labour government may encounter enables the party's left to grow in strength, or at least assertiveness. This has been historically demonstrated through rebellions in the Commons chamber, in key votes at party conference, or in elections to the National Executive Committee (NEC). In some instances, such as in the 1970s, this could reach such an extent that the government and the party's de facto ruling bodies were adopting diametrically opposed positions on fundamental issues. When possible, the left tries to use this newfound power to push the government in a more radical direction, but this is typically foiled or compromised, leaving the government to muddle on until defeat at the next election.

Once the party eventually leaves office, the left's power reaches a high point; with election defeat unleashing a wave of discontent from a radicalising activist and, on occasion, trade union base. This was seen with the 'Bevanite revolt' of the 1950s, again with the constitutional reform campaign headed by Tony Benn and the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) in the 1970s and 80s, and with the Corbyn phenomenon of the 2010s.[2] Yet these periods of left ascendance are also brief and divisive, plunging the party into civil war, gleefully chronicled by a hostile press, and often waged far more aggressively (and effectively), by the party's right-wing.[3] After a few years, exhaustion with factional warfare, and a

desperate desire for election victory among the party's grassroots, creates the conditions for a drift back to the right. When the party finally returns to power, typically over a decade later, and largely stripped of its earlier radicalism, the whole cycle begins again.

The party currently appears right in the middle of this factional cycle, one that is progressing at a far quicker rate than previously experienced, and with some unique factors at play. Like in 1997, Labour's return to office in 2024 was a landslide. But with low turnout, and its share of the vote dwarfed in comparison to previous victories (and even some defeats), the worry that the party had passively benefited from anti-Tory sentiment, rather than any popular enthusiasm, has been difficult to dismiss. In any case, while the left has insisted that this victory, however precarious its electoral foundations, could still be used as a mandate for radical change, the government's self-imposed commitment to rigid fiscal discipline has led instead to what has been seen as straightforward attacks on the most vulnerable. In response to inevitable backbench dissent, the leadership has also behaved with a level of intolerance without precedent, going well beyond even the worst excesses of Blair-era 'control freakery'. Indeed, while the early Blair governments included substantial figures from the party's soft, and even hard, left (Robin Cook, Peter Hain, and Tony Banks, for example) the few initially represented in Starmer's government have already dwindled in number, and enjoy little agenda-setting influence. This heavy-handed party management has also essentially backfired, galvanising critics and failing to even ensure the progress of the government's agenda. On winter fuel and welfare 'reform', public backlash and backbench pressure has already forced embarrassing government climbdowns. The recent budget saw similar concessions, most notably the scrapping of the two-child benefit cap. Elsewhere, the government's modest, but real, progressive achievements have been overshadowed, either due to poor messaging, or because of a deliberate, and mistaken, decision not to emphasise them at all.

Coupled with the most recent Mandelson scandal, Angela Rayner's resignation, ongoing revelations about Morgan McSweeney and the funding of Labour Together, and the briefing war against Wes Streeting, the government appears in the grips of a 'crisis of expectations', sparked by a collision between a failing government and a discontented voter, activist and trade union base, the kind that was frequently predicted, but ultimately unrealised, during the New Labour era.[4] And unlike the New Labour years, this government does not have either the comfort of sustained economic growth or consistent leads in the opinion polls. Instead, it presides over a stagnant economy and is currently facing down outright electoral oblivion.

After barely eighteen months in office, Labour's ongoing 'polycrisis' has therefore created the conditions for a potential left resurgence, albeit one

different to much of what has come before and facing both new obstacles and opportunities.

## Which Labour left?

When assessing the current state of the Labour left, the picture changes depending on where you look. Among the established organisations of Labour's 'hard left', the groups that formed the vanguard of Bennism and Corbynism in previous eras, the picture remains gloomy. Over half a decade of factional defeat and marginalisation at the hands of the party leadership has had a debilitating effect. While the party whip has finally been returned to John McDonnell and Apsana Begum, deselections, resignations and outright schisms have meant that the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) is probably the smallest it has ever been as a proportion of the Parliamentary Party. While Bell Rebeiro-Addy's short campaign for deputy leader was a brief change from the group's otherwise minimal public-facing activity in recent years, failure to qualify, or bag more than a handful of MPs' nominations beyond its own ranks, was not encouraging. At the activist level, the Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance (CLGA), first formed in the 1990s as a broad coalition unhappy with the trajectory of New Labour, holds just three seats on the NEC, down by one at the most recent elections. It failed to win any seats onto the Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC) this year.[5] Its ideological breadth has also narrowed since the 2010s, with many of its constituent organisations heavily diminished in size, and in some cases effectively defunct. CLPD, for example, once the architects of 'the most powerful movement for radical party reform ever to arise within western social democracy',[6] is probably at its lowest ebb, its current membership reportedly miniscule and its work limited to a handful of dedicated activists. While Momentum, the lasting organisational legacy of Corbynism within the party, remains more active, and relatively well-resourced, it has also been damaged by membership decline and internal divisions over the past five years.

The comprehensive factional victory of the Labour right since 2020, coupled with more recent disillusionment, and moral outrage, with the Starmer government, has therefore sapped the left's strength and size at the grassroots level. To some extent, this is not a new problem. The hard left has often had to fight bitterly to maintain morale during very difficult times. In the 1990s, it released pamphlets in defence of continued party membership, and in the 2000s launched the 'Save the Labour Party' campaign during a period of existential decline in party membership.[7] Indeed, at times it seemed that the hard left's key organisations had to spend just as much time convincing its supporters not to leave the party, to participate in internal elections, turn up to selection meetings and endure defeat, as it did battling its factional opponents. The election of 'eco-populist' Zack Polanski as leader of the Greens, and the emer-

gence of 'Your Party', however chaotic and riven by its own internal divisions,[8] has only made this task harder. The trusty adage that, whatever the Labour Party's faults, it remains the only viable instrument for socialist politics in Britain, is now seriously in doubt. For the foreseeable future, the hard left is going to have to contend with rivals which could easily appear far more attractive, fulfilling, and popular to thousands of burnt-out activists currently constrained within the Labour fold. A further exodus of members would deprive them of the essential voting base it would need if it ever wanted to wrestle control of the party from the right again. All this would raise major questions as to whether, despite the government's chronic unpopularity, the left simply no longer had the strength to benefit.

Yet if we look elsewhere, there are clear signs of left resilience, and even vitality. Despite a haemorrhage of at least 200,000 members since 2019,[8] surveys still suggest that the party's grassroots are well to the left of the leadership, both on policy and party management.[10] This has begun to gain expression within the party's internal life. On the NEC, an alliance between the CLGA and the unions has stalled further centralisations of power in the party's internal governance,[11] and on the conference floor, victories against the leadership have been won on issues like Gaza.[12] Finally, Lucy Powell's victory in the deputy leadership contest is a clear indicator that the party's grassroots, however diminished in comparison to the years of 'peak Corbyn', is not yet a husk of Starmerite loyalists.[13] As such, despite everything, some sort of left *does* still exist within the party, yet it is currently not operating through the traditional 'hard left' outlets. Instead, as *Renewal* readers will no doubt be pleased to hear, it has coalesced around newer groupings of the party's 'soft left.'

Among the PLP, this has been seen in new groups like the 'Living Standards' caucus, which for all the press fascination with the tiny Blue Labour caucus in Parliament, has been far more popular among the 2024 intake.[13] The Tribune Group has also recently undergone a third relaunch in its sixty-year history and reportedly aims to recruit as many as 100 MPs.[13] Ultimately however, it is the new group 'Mainstream' that has gained the most press attention, and has certainly been the most significant development in recent years.

Formed as an alliance between Open Labour and Compass, the latter now returning to Labour-based factionalism after a prolonged period of cross-party pluralism,[14] Mainstream is pitching itself as the 'home of Labour's radical realists', committed to a more radical social democratic programme, electoral reform, and a pluralist democratic culture within the party. Its list of backers, including Andy Burnham, former Tribune Group chair Clive Efford, alongside soft-Corbynistas like Clive Lewis, Dawn Butler and Jon Lansman, and former New Labour gurus like Geoff Mulgan, is certainly a striking illustration of its breadth.[15] Its launch has also been accompanied by an unofficial, but clearly aligned, essay

collection-cum-manifesto, *The Starmer Symptom*, which has outlined a fierce critique of Starmerism as, at best, an ineffective form of 'low-growth Labourism', and at worst, according to Jeremy Gilbert, a kind of 'non-politics', originating simply as a means by which the right could destroy Corbynism, one now totally incapable of, and uninterested in, transcending late-stage neoliberalism. While those around Mainstream may differ on the exact details, a common aim shared by its supporters, demonstrated elsewhere through interventions by Louise Haigh and Andy Burnham, is the breaking out of the government's current fiscal rigidity in pursuit of wealth redistribution and improving living standards.[16] The group's focus on the bare essentials of social democracy, as well as the emphasis on representing 'mainstream' party opinion, has a striking resemblance to the CLGA of the 1990s, which unified veteran Bennites, soft left-types and even elements of the old right on a similarly minimalist programme, and emphasised its commitment to core Labour 'values' in contrast to Blair's iconoclasm.

Yet while soft left groupings have come and gone (such as the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, Labour Reform or, indeed, Compass and Open Labour themselves) the emergence of Mainstream at this juncture puts the faction in a unique position. Historically, the soft left has performed as the swing-voters in the party's internal conflicts, forming a key part of Tony Benn's support base in the early 1980s, and Corbyn's in the 2010s, while also providing a supportive bloc to Neil Kinnock's major ideological and organisational changes from the mid-1980s, and even acting as a 'critical friend' to New Labour in the 1990s and 2000s. In so doing, it was always the junior partner in these shifting factional alliances, invariably to the detriment of its own aims and objectives. While mercifully there is no space here to relitigate the full history of the soft left's factionalism, a recent essay by Compass chair Neal Lawson, published in the *Starmer Symptom*, neatly captures this historic weakness:

> *... the soft left ... made itself vulnerable because it was less prepared to act in ways counter to its plural democratic instincts in order to win Labour's internal factional battles. While the soft left sought to reconcile means and ends, the hard left and the hard right in party were busy doing whatever it took to win.*[17]

Mainstream's launch, and the willingness of its supporters to publicly criticise the current government, is perhaps the clearest demonstration that some lessons have been learned from this historical experience. While it has not abandoned a commitment to pluralism, it has at least acknowledged that an emboldened and hard-nosed factional strategy against the party leadership may be necessary. It is a combination of this greater assertiveness, the uniquely alienating experience of the Starmer leadership, plus the lingering weakness of the hard left at an organisational level, that has, arguably for the first time, placed the soft left as a dominant, rather than supportive, force in the party's internal contests. If the long-held claim that the soft left represents majority opinion amongst the PLP, party activists, and

the more amorphous creature of the grassroots membership is true, it could be a final reversion to what should be the party's natural state of affairs.[18]

## Vision, Opportunity, Unity

Yet while Labour's soft left is reassembling and gaining confidence, there remain obstacles to further progress. On the most basic level, there is the question of what their ultimate aims are. Do they want to radicalise the Starmer government, or replace it? While the relaunch of the Tribune Group heavily implied that the soft left was gearing up for a future leadership contest, moderate elements have already opposed a more avert hostility to Starmer. [18] Meanwhile, despite Lawson's withering critiques of the party leadership in recent weeks, his essay in *The Starmer Symptom* still cautiously hopes that the Prime Minister's infamous ideological fluidity could make him receptive to Mainstream's influence. To be sure, some concessions have already been extracted from the government, like the minor U-turns on welfare and winter fuel, the end of the two-child benefit cap, and other more substantially tax-and-spend policies outlined in last month's budget. Elsewhere, Palestinian statehood has been recognised, the whip has been restored to previously-suspended backbenchers, and the government has adopted a more assertive line of attack against Reform. But while Starmer's conference speech got a warm reception from lobby journalists, and the recent budget may have bought both him and Rachel Reeves more time, both have likely done little to improve the government's profound unpopularity.

The soft left will likely conclude, if it hasn't already,[19] that a new Prime Minister will be necessary if the party is to radically change course and avert electoral disaster. Yet, as has already been established by numerous commentators in recent weeks, the obstacles to this are also formidable. Beyond the oft-cited culture of loyalty within the party (in stark contrast to the regicidal Conservatives) the current threshold for a change in leadership is very high. A contest would require the nominations of around eighty-one MPs, giving an effective veto on the party's democratic life to its parliamentarians. Past attempts to get around this, such as Blair-era resolutions calling for leadership elections at party conference, were easily ignored by party managers, and would likely be again. Though the taboo around leadership challenges may have been partially broken following Owen Smith's 2016 challenge to Corbyn, and now by the extremity of Labour's polling—which may force MPs to act out of sheer self-preservation—the soft left will likely be forced to instead focus on more indirect mechanisms for destabilising the leadership.

Making full use of these indirect mechanisms would require overcoming a third crucial obstacle to the Labour left's future success: its historic disunity. Recent weeks have already shown its damaging effects. While the sudden announce-

ment of a deputy leadership contest offered the opportunity for a re-assertive left to flex its muscles, its failure to unify behind a single candidate, either the SCG's Bell Ribeiro-Addy or Mainstream signatory Paula Barker, revealed a lack of tactical flexibility, good cross-factional relations or a sense of common purpose. This resulted in the messy and unsatisfying compromise in which the left had to throw its weight behind Lucy Powell's campaign, bagging her the muted endorsement of Mainstream, Momentum, and CLPD.[20] While her unlikely transformation from loyal cabinet minister to champion of the membership provided a relatively low-risk outlet for left discontent, extremely low turnout, down by two thirds since 2020, and a closer margin of victory than anticipated, muffled the full impact of the result. It's not hard to imagine that an alternative candidate, with clearer left credentials, could have inspired far greater grassroots enthusiasm. In fact, promoting Powell now may have unintentionally helped her own chances of taking the leadership herself, should a vacancy suddenly emerge before 2029, to the detriment of others.

It would be one thing if this disunity could be blamed on the personality clashes of a small group of parliamentarians. But there are also clear traces of it at the activist level. While Mainstream's list of supporters is indeed an eclectic mix, and Lawson has explicitly called for 'the ending of the historic but now unnecessary division between the soft and hard left', there still appear limits to this factional pluralism.[21] Rather tellingly, Lawson's envisaged 'strategic left', based on an alliance between Compass, the Tribune Group, Open Labour, and this very publication, does not include the SCG, or publications like *Tribune* among its potential allies.[22] Even Momentum, which has already collaborated with Open Labour and Compass in criticising the leadership's excessive party management,[23] and officially welcomed the formation of Mainstream,[24] is also excluded from this list. This could be a choice of optics, based on the calculation that such groups are simply too tarnished to publicly associate with. But if the aim is to unify the left, the decision not to pay even the slightest comradely acknowledgement to groupings that continue, whatever their current factional weakness, to represent a significant section of the party, is bold, and potentially highly complacent. It risks subscribing to the infamous Mandelson claim that the left has 'nowhere else to go' at the very moment not one but two other places have emerged. Establishing better relations with Labour's hard left would therefore not just be an act of magnanimity, though always welcome, but a necessary tactic to strengthen any opposition to the government and stem the tide of departures to left-wing alternatives outside of the Labour fold.

Cross-factional left unity would also be an essential prerequisite for an effective post-Starmer government. While Ed Miliband was able to win the party leadership in 2010 on a post-New Labour soft leftish platform, the lack of an organized faction left him throughout his tenure without sufficient allies in the PLP or the party's bureaucracy. To avoid a similar fate, a soft-left government would require

both an organised presence in Parliament, in the cabinet, and a unified bloc of supporters on the party's NEC. This will require the very difficult but necessary work of Mainstream and Campaign Group MPs alike finding common ground, activist groupings piecing together joint slates for internal elections, and ordinary party members finding the ability to forgive and forget previous factional struggles in the name of saving their party from right-wing drift and electoral calamity. The fact that both Labour's soft and hard left are speaking on very similar terms, advocating a fairly minimalist, but still radical, redistributive programme, a pluralist party culture, and a return to 'traditional Labour values' hints at where these divisions could be overcome. More promisingly, recent articles by Jeremy Gilbert and John McDonnell in *Tribune* suggest that some of this has been recognised, with Gilbert floating the idea of joint Mainstream-Momentum slates for the NEC, and McDonnell calling for the 'bringing together of new alliances'. [24]

## Looking Ahead

In British politics, predicting anything is a mug's game. When this article was first written, it ended with the conclusion that Angela Rayner remained the most likely successor to Starmer and would be the left's best hope for growing its influence, bringing some pluralism back into the party's internal life, shifting the government in a more radical direction, and even averting disaster at the next election. While her recent resignation speech in the Commons was a clear pitch for a future leadership bid, her succession is now far from the near certainty it once was. Yet curiously, in the time since Rayner's departure, the chances of Starmer being displaced, and a more left-wing leader taking over, have, if anything, increased.

Unless there is a very sudden change, the muted result of the deputy leadership contest, plus progressive elements of the November budget, means that Starmer will likely lead the party into the local and devolved elections. Current polling spells disaster, with heartland wards across the major cities likely to be eaten up by Reform, the Greens, and Your Party. Labour looks likely to go backwards *again* in Scotland, despite nearly two decades of SNP rule, and likely to lose Wales for the first time in a century. After such a drubbing, Starmer's position could become untenable. The Labour right has likely already found its candidate for any future leadership election in Wes Streeting, but the left is less certain.

In the ensuing post-Rayner vacuum, and amid some clearly-timed public interventions,[25] Andy Burnham has re-emerged as the great soft-left hope. Yet as is well established, his route back to Parliament, let alone Number 10, is extremely narrow, requiring a well-timed vacancy in a now-rare safe Labour seat. While Powell's election has provided an extra pro-Burnham seat on the NEC, where

decisions on selection shortlists are made, Burnham's inclusion would still require the unlikely acquiescence of the party leadership. Without Burnham as an option, this could result in a less well-known candidate, like Louise Haigh, emerging as a more plausible prospect. Without a candidate commanding Burnham's level of cross-party appeal and name recognition, the mobilisation of a unified and reconstituted Labour left would become even more essential. Among key decision-makers, this has been potentially recognised, with rumours now suggesting a possible deal between the soft and hard left, with the SCG throwing its support behind a member of the Tribune Group in a future leadership contest.[25] This must surely now be the highest priority for any Labour member committed to the party pursuing a radical social democratic programme.

History shows that the left cannot content itself with seizing power from the comfort of opposition, even if a complete electoral rout is miraculously avoided. Fundamentally, for a reconstituted left to break the cycle of Labour's factional history would require it to take power while still in office. There would be immense risks with this. The press would monster it in such a scenario, as it always does, the bond markets could get spooked, and the Labour right would likely wage war internally. But the left, however soft, would finally have power. It would have a rare opportunity to use the levers of the state to enact its programme, to take more industries and services back into public ownership, to provide, in Burnham's words, 'the basics of life' to ordinary people all over the country. [26] Crucially, it would also have time for these policies to take effect and, hopefully, materially improve people's lives, or give them the mechanisms, via employment legislation or local government devolution, to improve them themselves. The topsy-turvy chaos of Britain's multi-party system also offers both disaster and opportunity. On its current trajectory, Labour is on a collision course with existential defeat, but in that same environment, even a modest consolidation of the party's core supporters could secure re-election in 2029. Led by a more pluralist soft-left figure, a 'Stop Reform' pitch, which currently smacks of electoral blackmail from the incumbent leadership, could be far more appealing to the average progressive voter tempted by left-wing alternatives, but fearful of aiding Nigel Farage. After that, everything would be to play for, including the chance to actually renew the country. That is what is currently on offer to a reconstituted 'strategic left', if it takes the chance.

Failure to act as soon as possible would not be a selfless demonstration of party unity: it would be a dereliction of duty.

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## Notes

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