

Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party Leader

What does Jeremy Corbyn's success in the Labour leadership election tell us about increasing or decreasing the chances of a "leave" vote in the forthcoming referendum on our EU membership? The answer is potentially quite a lot but perhaps in some new and unexpected ways. Events in the Labour Party over the last few weeks, leading up to the stunning margin by which Jeremy Corbyn won the Labour leadership, show that the political firmament is unstable and rapidly changing,

The Corbyn team are clearly going to be pulled in two ways. On the one hand, we have already had Tom Watson, on the Andrew Marr show, and Hilary Benn elsewhere, telling us that the Corbyn opposition will be campaigning for the UK staying in the EU, whatever the outcome of the current renegotiation process. No doubt this reflects the very widespread view among the former Labour leadership about which way the vote should go. On the other hand, significant elements of the Corbyn programme could not be undertaken within EU constraints and there are substantial concerns among trade unionists in particular about TTIP and losing some of the key benefits from the Social Chapter as a result of the current Conservative-led negotiations.

The result is that the new Labour leadership is much more ambivalent about our EU membership than it would have been if either Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper or Liz Kendall had been elected. John MacDonnell, the new Shadow Chancellor, has said, for example, that Labour should wait to see what David Cameron and George Osborne bring back from their negotiations before making up its mind what line to take. This is an encouraging sign of flexibility and pragmatism at least on this issue.

Where is this likely to take us? Eurosceptics from different

parts of the political spectrum have always had varying reasons for wanting to achieve either radical changes to our EU terms of membership or for the UK to leave the EU altogether. One key outcome is that the advent of a strongly left of centre Labour leadership is likely to accentuate this tendency. As a result, there may be more difficulty in getting Eurosceptics all to campaign under the same banner once the forthcoming referendum campaign gets under way. Europhiles from different parties have always found it easier to co-operate than those who are more sceptical but this may not be a match for the enthusiasm which the wave of support for Jeremy Corbyn is potentially now capable of mobilising.

In particular, the result of the Labour leadership election clearly shows how disenchanted a significant proportion of the electorate is with conventional political views, and this may increasingly include scepticism about the establishment opinions on the merits of our EU membership. The new leadership of the Labour Party may, therefore, signify an anti-conventional Westminster politics view which may not be too difficult to mobilise into "leave" votes.

On balance, therefore, the election of Labour's new Leader looks like a potentially quite substantial plus for the "leave" campaign. It is early days and we will have to see how Labour policies shake down as events move ahead, but the result of Labour's leadership election does seem to give grounds for optimism on the Eurosceptic front.

Photo by David Holt London

