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29th August – Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington South and Finsbury

A number of my local party members have been contacting me about the Labour leadership contest. Below is a copy of the response that I am sending out to clarify my thoughts on the matter.

Dear Friends,

I hope you are all enjoying a good Bank Holiday weekend.

Since returning from holiday, I have been catching up with many of your messages asking me how I am planning to vote in the current Labour leadership election, and giving me your views.

I thought I should write to the membership of Islington South and Finsbury and explain my thinking.

As many of you know, it is my view that our response to the Brexit vote should not have been to turn in on ourselves. At a time of grave constitutional and economic challenge for our country, it was incumbent on us to rise to this threat and ensure that the Labour party should defend the interests of our communities and not allow the Tories a free hand.

I believed that this was a time for people to unite and think of the country, not to turn inwards and indulge in a coup attempt against a leader elected with an overwhelming mandate less than a year ago.

It will therefore come as no surprise to my local party to learn that, having remained totally loyal to the democratically-elected leader of our party since his election, I will stay loyal to Jeremy during the contest that has arisen from that coup, and he will have my vote in this election.

I have not agreed with everything Jeremy has said and done since becoming the Labour leader last year, but where I have had disagreements with him, I have always found him and his team willing to get around a table, listen, reflect and discuss a way forward. And as long as that is possible, I would never consider walking away from that table.

But for those members who may disagree with that decision, and the way I will be voting in this election, let me explain my more fundamental reasons for doing so.

When I first started campaigning to become your MP in 2004, we were suffering as a party because our hierarchy and leadership were totally detached from the party's membership. This not only meant that members across the country felt alienated, demoralised and ignored, but more importantly their collective understanding of what people's fears and aspirations were, learnt from listening to the public and knocking on doors, was being deliberately overlooked.

What had begun as the necessary modernisation of the Labour party in 1994, showing how a belief in a dynamic market economy could be combined with the drive for social justice and the transformation of public services, had become distorted into an agenda where the test of every new policy from the leadership was how much it would antagonise the Labour party's core membership.

Tuition fees, the attempt to marketise the NHS, the careless disregard of long cherished civil liberties and the drive to war in Iraq were being imposed by a leadership who convinced themselves that, if the members hated it, they were doing something right.

When I walked through the voting lobbies against the attempt to impose 90 days' detention without charge in 2005, Tom Watson –then one of Tony Blair's whips – growled at me that I was a 'traitor'. But a traitor to who?

Not to the country, when this was a draconian measure designed to look tough on terrorism, but one that would undermine the cohesion of communities like ours, alienate people and actually undermine our security. My members knew this and I remember when Compass polled party members – at my instigation – it was clear this was the national view as well.

So who exactly was I betraying? Just a party hierarchy and a party leadership who were trying to shore up their relationship with the right-wing press by 'taking on' their members, and trying to out-flank the Tories on security.

When Jeremy stood for the leadership after the disaster of the 2015 election, the difference was palpable. Here finally was a candidate interested in listening to the party's members, reflecting their views, and promising to represent them. As a result, hundreds of thousands more joined, including huge numbers who had left because of Iraq, tuition fees, and other issues.

Here we are now, less than a year after Jeremy's overwhelming victory, and the party hierarchy – through decisions of the National Executive Committee - is attempting to overturn that result, quash Jeremy's mandate, and put the party's members back in their box. And they are doing so in the most naked way.

I was disgusted to see the attempts to try to stop Jeremy from getting on the ballot. And then, if that wasn't bad enough, hundreds of thousands of fully paid-up Labour party members were excluded from taking part in the election, having been told the opposite when they joined. Third, your membership fees were spent on securing that decision through the courts. And then lastly, registered supporters, who had been told they could be involved in the Leadership election, were then told that they must increase their donation to £25 within two days to remain eligible for a vote.

Indeed, you should probably know that even to put on the social events we have held for local members in the last two months – occasions that have been really important to welcome in our new members – we have been forced to seek permission for each event from the party hierarchy.

In short, some people have done their level best to deny the party's full membership a fair and equal vote in this contest, or even the chance to make their voices heard. Instead of welcoming the enthusiasm of our new members, instead of celebrating the strength of our mass membership, they have been behaving as if it is something to be afraid of.

As someone who spent nearly 30 years as a grass roots activist before becoming your MP, I cannot accept this.

But even more important, as someone who believes our party and our country are best served when our elected representatives and the party membership work together, I fundamentally disagree with this attempt to take us back to the years when our members were deliberately antagonised, alienated and ignored by the people who they helped to put in power.

Islington South and Finsbury Labour Party has a proud reputation for being one of the great campaigning local parties and our election results in the past 11 years have shown what can be done when the membership and its elected representatives work together with respect.

We now have the potential to replicate this success across the country, creating a national activist base that could be unlike anything else in modern British politics, taking our message into the street and onto the doorstep, and turning the activism of thousands into the support of millions.

I do not understand why anyone in the Labour party would want to turn their back on that membership, in the way that the party hierarchy have tried to do this summer.

Instead, it is time to unite as a party – the membership and the elected representatives alike – and together take our fight into the only contest that matters: getting this dreadful Tory government out of office, and punishing them for the mess into which they have plunged our country.

That is what we should have spent our summer doing – uniting, facing outwards, taking on the Tories, and energising the public to our cause – and that is again why I regret so much the chaos and distraction that this attempted coup against Jeremy has caused.

So my plea to all members, and one I will make to my fellow MPs, is this: whatever the outcome of this leadership election, we should stop the internal division, unite as a party, and take the fight to the Tories together.

And I would like my local party to know that I will remain totally loyal to the leader of our party, whoever he shall be.

In the meantime, you all know that I have a very full in-tray with constituency business, and with representing the party on Brexit, foreign affairs, and – together with Clive Lewis – our future defence policies.

I will be concentrating on this vital work in the run up to 24 September, rather than this unnecessary and divisive leadership contest. And when that is over, I hope we can all start focusing on those bigger issues on which Britain needs an effective, united opposition.

I know that not everyone will agree with the conclusions I have reached, but I am completely confident that in Islington South and Finsbury, we will continue to debate this and other issues in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect.

Best wishes, and please as ever, let me know your views. Looking forward to seeing you on a doorstep with me soon!

Emily