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It's Owen or Angela or oblivion for Labour; There is only one way for the party to survive intact and that is for a centre-left candidate to oust the disastrous Corbyn

By David Aaronvitch

The Tories are already on their second woman prime minister and it seems that the best Labour, the party of equality, can hope for is its second male leader called Smith. Owen Smith. Earlier in the week I exchanged despondencies with a high-profile person who was very supportive of Jeremy Corbyn last year. She wrote to me: "I'm in a pit of total despair. I know what the horrible stakes are and I'm trying my best but a bit lost and defeated." Her hopes of a Whole New World have turned into a vision of splits and endless Conservative government.

She sees what many of her friends won't and she admits she can't bring herself to tell them. Her optimism resided in what Jeremy Corbyn "represented" (ie, whatever she wanted him to) and is smashed by what he actually is. On the very day that Theresa May was, in effect, transfigured into prime minister, Corbyn was at a meeting of the Cuba Solidarity Committee, recommitting to the dynastic dictatorship of the Castros, just as he has been doing these 40 years.

That's just one reason why all but Andy Burnham (who is frying other electoral fish with ambitions to be Greater Manchester mayor) have found it impossible to discover a modus vivendi with Mr C. There were genuinely some Labour MPs who thought that Corbyn might mellow in the job, become collegiate and then, some time before the next election, go away. Not any more.

As of today you either understand that Corbyn is the most disastrous Labour leader of all time, or you are already a plot-holder on Bonkers Island. His net negative poll rating of minus 41 is a record-breaker for a leader of the opposition. In all those millions of houses and flats that the inconvenient masses inhabit, the talk is not of how much they look forward to a Corbyn government - and it never will be.

And yet the organisation is said to be awash with keen joiners who are in it for Jeremy. Labour, it seems, has more excited new members than a YMCA pool party. Yet which party is in government and ahead in the polls? Why, the one with a third of the members of the party that is 8 per cent behind.

There was an agricultural wisdom in previous arrangements within Labour. Essentially it was understood that the activist bias of the members was held in check by the electoral bias of the MPs. When this understanding broke down in the early 1980s it was the brutal realism of the trade unions that helped to save the party. New Labour's success attracted more centrists and realists into the party and by the time Gordon Brown was elected leader unopposed it was imagined that Labour activists were on the same electoral page as the MPs. This was true even if some (grizzled but effective Labour councillors, for example) had to hold their noses.

There are several doctoral theses being written, I daresay, on why - apart from the agonies of office - all that changed. My own money is on money. I think the crash of 2008 destroyed the centre left's confidence in itself, and it only belatedly remembered what it was for when it woke up on June 24, defeated and coming out of Europe.

An appeal to reason always seems pallid these days. I recall that the Association of University Teachers once campaigned for a pay rise under the slogan of "Rectify the anomaly". Centre leftists are embarrassed by slogans. They don't picket, they argue with their own placards. They once tried

to leave a comment under an online newspaper article but were put off by the certainties of others. They tend to be primary school governors. How are they expected to compete with hashtag warriors, with cybernats, Brexiteers and Momentumites?

So when the Labour MPs raise their banner of rebellion against Corbyn, they get timid but grateful emails of support on the one hand and face yelling demonstrations of people calling them traitors on the other. For most of them it would be easier by far to keep their heads down, tend their constituencies, accommodate their Momentumites and hope that they at least survive crushing defeat at the next election.

It is to their credit that they have not. At the very least Corbyn - the first Labour leader not to be required even to enjoy a minimal level of parliamentary support - will be challenged by the courageous Angela Eagle and Owen Smith, a doubtless talented man who has come up like a Leadsom balloon. Smith has declared late enough not to be associated with the deepest of the plotting, has somehow avoided the now ubiquitous tag "Blairite", and only recalls being opposed to the Iraq war (in any case he wasn't around to vote for it). He sits for Pontypridd, not Latte East, and he's not a woman so even the trade unions could theoretically support him. My despairing Corbynite likes him; he could garner northern votes. Maybe he could do it.

I gave up making polling predictions after the Tories elected Iain Duncan Smith as leader. I've met many people who voted for Corbyn who now regret it; but then I would, wouldn't I? And who knows what candidacy will suddenly be terminated by a wannabe leader who is discovered to have sent sexually explicit messages to a media-savvy software engineer called Jess? It's a mug's game.

It isn't easy to start again under a disproportional electoral system, but if a political formation (Labour 2020, New Democrats, whatever) can get to 25 per cent plus of the electorate it can suddenly become very powerful

If Angela or Owen win, then Labour can gradually haul itself back up to the Miliband heights and hope for a Tory implosion. If not, then, in the words yesterday of one Corbynite writer, "they will find themselves at increased risk of deselection, as the organisations of the Labour left regrettably find it impossible to hold back hot-headed young activists who are unconstrained by the settlement that has hitherto prevailed". You can taste the relish.

There is talk that if Corbyn wins, but by a reduced majority, then the MPs can stay and still work towards a succession. Nah. They'll be endlessly embattled, neutered, deselected and will watch their successors get pulverised by a generation of surprised young Tories.