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Generational divide will split cult of Corbyn

The internal contradictions between the youthful idealists and cynical old Trots are becoming increasingly exposed

Rachael Sylvester

A graffiti artist is spray-painting a wall when I arrive at The World Transformed festival, organised by Jeremy Corbyn's supporters in Momentum. Inside, clay-modelling is under way in a creative workshop that is exploring "the symbiotic relationship between making and thinking". A "collaborative quilt" hangs in the "creative chaos corner" next to a specially commissioned artwork celebrating the NHS.

The young, mainly female volunteers who are staffing the event talk enthusiastically about doing politics in a different way and creating spaces where people can come together to discuss new ideas. It is impossible to ignore the slightly cult-like atmosphere: one member of the audience is wearing a T-shirt printed with the slogan "Corbyn til I die". But this four-day festival running alongside the official Labour Party conference in Brighton has far more energy and optimism than most political events. There have been two late-night raves, sessions on "acid Corbynism", and a hackathon, seeking to harness the power of the geeks to solve technological problems. With its own app, pinging real-time updates to followers throughout the day, and a glossy pastel-coloured brochure, the Momentum festival has an upbeat, modern feel.

As well as sunny optimism there is a darker, bullying side

Then I go to a packed session on "Radical Democracy and Twenty- First Century Socialism". Within minutes the speakers are talking about deselecting MPs and accusing moderates in the Labour Party of "entryism" and betrayal. Janine Booth, a trade unionist and member of the Trotskyist organisation Workers Liberty, calls for the abolition of the monarchy and declares that "breaking bad laws is a very important part of democracy". Another speaker, Jeremy Gilbert, professor of cultural and political theory at the University of East London, actually says "we should be going back to the 1970s", before proposing elections for the director-general of the BBC. Instead of the idealism of the younger generation, this is back to the bad old days of factionalism and fury on the hard left.

It is clear in Brighton that the Corbynisation of the Labour Party is complete. Yesterday there was a standing ovation for Dennis Skinner and rapturous applause for John McDonnell's pledge to renationalise "rail, water, energy and Royal Mail". Sadiq Khan's support for the ban on Uber in London shows that even a supposedly moderate mayor now feels the need to side with the vested interests over consumers. Although the World Transformed festival is officially separate from the Labour conference, politically the two events have all but merged. About 30 MPs are speaking at the Momentum fringe and Mr Corbyn received a rock star's welcome at its meeting on Sunday night. "The World Transformed feels like home," the MP Clive Lewis told an audience of 300

activists. “This is where the action is at this conference.”

I bumped into one Labour moderate on the seafront who said that for the first time in decades of attending conferences, he felt as if he was at another party’s event. “There’s been a hostile takeover,” he admitted. “The people who used to be outside the conference handing out their leaflets have now got control of the delegations and debates.” Left-wingers are equally clear that power has shifted fundamentally. Jon Lansman, the chairman of Momentum who was Tony Benn’s campaign manager in the 1980s, writes in his Twitter biography: “After decades in the Wilderness, the Promised Land is not far off”.

The momentum is with Momentum, and that means the internal contradictions within the Corbyn project will become increasingly exposed. On the walls of the World Transformed festival pictures of Gandhi, Malala Yousafzai and Martin Luther King hang next to posters with slogans such as: “Danger — gentrification in progress” and “The Revolution Starts Now”. There are nice and nasty sides to the left-wing surge.

I don’t want to belittle the good intentions of the thousands of well-meaning young people who have been drawn to politics by what they see as Mr Corbyn’s clarity and authenticity. There is undeniably a sunny optimism to aspects of this new political movement but there is also a darker, bullying and controlling side. Momentum campaigns for greater democracy in the Labour Party, but it used its influence to block a proper vote on Brexit policy at the conference this week in a shoddy, old-fashioned political fix. Many moderate MPs have had so much abuse from supporters of the Labour leader that they have installed panic alarms in their constituency offices. The BBC has felt the need to hire a security guard to protect its political editor Laura Kuenssberg in Brighton after threats from sexist online trolls.

Those searching for a new form of politics will be disappointed

The truth is the cult of Corbyn is an uneasy coalition between youthful idealists and hard-left cynics. There’s a generational divide between the students who chanted Mr Corbyn’s name at Glastonbury and the sixty-something class warriors who have spent decades trying to push the Labour Party to the left. Underlying that are cultural differences between those who learnt their politics from the Occupy protest movement, which rejects hierarchy, and those who came out of the trade unions and Labour committees system, who see organisation as the route to power. In policy terms, disagreements are emerging between a younger generation that supported Remain in the referendum and an older one that sees the EU as part of a capitalist neo-liberal plot. Although both groups are on the left of politics they are on opposite sides of the “open-closed” divide identified by Tony Blair and others as the defining split in politics. “Well-meaning middle-class people are being manipulated by the Trots,” says one former special adviser. “The original hard-left groups are still in there fighting it out and Momentum is the battleground.”

When the moderates were in charge of the Labour Party, unity was undermined by the rows between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Now Mr Corbyn is in the ascendancy and it is the internal tensions on the left that will threaten party cohesion. Already, Momentum is fracturing. A report about a “Momentum Grassroots” splinter group on the Labour Party Marxists website earlier this year stated that “There are, naturally, differences over with whom to split, to form what exactly and on what political basis.” It is impossible not to think of Monty Python’s clash between the People’s Front of Judea and the Judean People’s Front.

The Labour leader has attracted a new generation to his party, by advocating an uncompromising idealism, but his own approach has always been based on the factionalism of the hard left. Those searching for a new form of politics are bound to be disappointed because the Corbyn myth is at odds with the reality of the man.