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## JEREMY CORBYN AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSCENDENCE

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The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the British Labour Party in September 2015 ranks as one of the most unexpected political developments in modern British history. Following the heavy defeat inflicted on the party in the general election of 7 May, the leader, Ed Miliband, resigned the following day, thus opening up a contest not only for the leadership but also for the soul of the party. It has often been noted that the Labour Party is a crusade or it is nothing, but in the Tony Blair years the party had effectively become little more than an empty shell, gutted of its mass movement element. Its ties to traditional allies in the labour movement had weakened, and the party had been reduced to a technocratic appendage of the executive.

Corbyn struggled to gain the necessary 35 nominations to get on the ballot, and some 15 MPs who had no intention of voting for him lent their names so that a token candidate from the left would be able to stand in the contest. They hoped that he would draw off left-wing votes and allow the candidate that they actually wanted to win. In the event, the tactic was a spectacular own goal, and Corbyn won by a landslide. He gathered almost 60 per cent of the cumulative votes, far ahead of the other three candidates. Soon after he announced a 'new politics of engagement', and established a grassroots 'Momentum' movement of supporters while Labour Party membership surged. Corbyn's victory represents a minor earthquake in British politics, sharply polarising views on what it means.

## The Corbyn phenomenon

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The mainstream view argues that Corbyn's successful challenge for the Labour leadership represented a delayed response to the evisceration of the Labour Party in the Blair and Gordon Brown years. New Labour as a political practice was honed in the early 1990s, in response to a series of electoral defeats – 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992. The first three were inflicted by Margaret Thatcher and her peculiar combination of neoliberal economics and social conservatism in politics. The defeat at the hands of John Major in 1992 was particularly disappointing, since Labour had looked all set for victory. Since the early 1980s under Neil Kinnock the Party had 'modernised', above all by rethinking the party's relationship with the trade unions. With Blair's accession to the leadership in July 1994 the modernisation process accelerated, with a rewording in 1995 of Clause IV of the 1918 Labour Party Constitution, which had spoken of the 'common ownership of the means of production'. The reforms focused above all on making the Party electable. This included tight discipline in news management, notably the creation of a rapid rebuttal unit to counter attacks from the overwhelmingly pro-Conservative press. It also involved a charm offensive to temper the hostility of Rupert Murdoch, the owner of a large swathe of the British media with the claimed power to make or break political leaders and parties. Later this would become known as 'spin', and became the hallmark of the Blair/Brown years.

The result was the spectacular victory in the 1997 election. Labour swept to power, and governed as New Labour. There were some notable achievements in stopping the growth in inequality, in funding education and renewing school buildings, and in providing a more extensive range of welfare benefits and supporting pre-school opportunities. The Northern Ireland peace agreement finally allowed a power-sharing executive to emerge, while in Scotland and Wales devolved assemblies finally reversed several centuries of increasing centralisation of power in Westminster.

The government operated according to the Clintonian logic of triangulation between views, using focus groups and opinion polls to devise policy. The 'Third Way' ideology was the culmination of this process, presenting a watered-down version of meritocratic social democracy committed to an endless process of public sector 'reform', whose only constant was the 'deprofessionalisation' of the professions, who now had to endure constant reorganisations, onerous bureaucratic 'accountability' and monitoring mechanisms, and a resolute centralisation of administrative power in London. Belief and commitment gave way to technocratic management, gutting politics of passion and engagement. A new wave of machine politicians emerged, many of whom were inducted into politics as 'special advisors' to existing MPs. The Labour political class became increasingly inward-looking and metropolitan, while the grass roots of the party withered.

However, it was in foreign policy that the hubristic isolation from public opinion was exposed to its most devastating effect. Blair always had a messianic belief in his intuitive judgement, and he actively supported the NATO bombing campaign of Serbia in 1999. Intervention in Sierra Leone in May 2000 helped put an end to a grotesque civil conflict. Inspired by these relative successes, Blair was an active, and some would claim duplicitous, accomplice of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In September 2001, just days after the 9/11 attack and George W. Bush's declaration of the 'War on Terror', Corbyn revived the long anti-war tradition of the Labour Party by founding the 'Stop the War Coalition'. On 15 February 2003 nearly two million people, the biggest event of its kind in British history, demonstrated against plans to invade Iraq. The foundations of the Corbyn phenomenon were being laid.

The Miliband leadership following the electoral defeat of May 2010 distanced itself from some of the worst aspects of Blairism and condemned the war, but it was unable to articulate anything distinctive and progressive. Yet more Blairite managerial and alienating 'reforms' were hardly an attractive prospect, and the Labour Party went down to an even greater defeat in May 2015, triggering the political tsunami that brought Corbyn to the Labour leadership. From this perspective, Corbyn represents a hunger for political change. This was reflected in Corbyn's speech to the Labour Party conference, when he quoted the Nigerian writer Ben Okri: 'The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maeve Kennedy, 'Okri reciprocates Corbyn's praise by offering a paean to a better politics', *Guardian*, 13 October 2015, p. 3.

## From Gorby to Corby

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There is, however, a more radical view of what Corbyn's victory entails. Rather than simply representing a reaction to failure and a hankering for past certainties, this narrative suggests that Corbyn, for good or ill, represents a politics of transcendence, and thus joins a political tradition that was so spectacularly advanced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the last Soviet years. Gorbachev understood that the Cold War stand-off between the Soviet Union and the Western powers served to undermine the development of both. He signalled his commitment to serious domestic reform when he launched what he called 'perestroika', the 'restructuring' of the Soviet system, in 1986. This became a grand exercise in trying to create a 'humane, democratic socialism'. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the end of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, it seemed that a new era of peace was at hand, reinforced by the reunification of the European continent. Gorbachev envisaged that Russia would still be a great power, but now co-operatively working with the West.

At the heart of Gorbachev's vision of the new politics was geopolitical and ideological pluralism. Unfortunately, the opportunity for a common victory that Gorbachev presented was squandered. The conditions were created for NATO and EU enlargement that ultimately exploded in Ukraine in 2014. This was accompanied by a shift from the geopolitical pluralism that had characterised the post-war years to a unipolar security order in Europe accompanied by the delegitimation of systemic alternatives. Normative pluralism came to an end, and instead the virtues of the particular type of liberal capitalism were proclaimed as universal. It is these postulates that are challenged by Corbyn.

This is apparent in his long-held Euro-scepticism. He comes from the left tradition that had always viewed the EU as an American Cold War project and an instrument for capitalist hegemony. This approach was tempered in the 1980s when Jacques Delors articulated the vision of a 'social Europe' and by the belief in the 1990s that the EU would emerge as an independent political actor with the capacity to temper American militarism and global hegemony. In the event, both these re-articulations were disappointed, and instead the EU remains a subaltern element in the Atlantic power system. In this respect, the wheel has turned full circle, and Corbyn's traditional scepticism is now joined by a new generation disappointed by the EU's failure to stand by its declared goals of transcending the logic of conflict on the continent and reconciling former enemies. Instead, in the new Eastern Europe it has become an instrument for the perpetuation of conflict, although in the novel guise of a struggle of normative power. At the same time, Corbyn now sees the EU as an instrument to impose tougher regulations and new taxes on the City of London. Corbyn voted against EEC membership in the 1975 referendum and against the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, and although he now declares himself opposed to Brexit, his leadership makes it more likely.

Equally, Corbyn comes from the flank of the Labour Party that is hostile to post-war Atlanticism. Although the Labour Party has traditionally been deeply Atlanticist, there has also been an anti-war if not pacifist strand. Corbyn challenges elite views on security and defence, above all on military intervention, the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system, and the existence of NATO. Corbyn has a long track record of opposing the militarism of the Atlantic system, condemning not only the invasion of Iraq in 2003 but also the intervention in Libya in 2011, and the plan to attack Syria in 2013. His sentiments on these issues reflected widespread popular concerns.

Nowhere are his views closer to popular opinion than over the war in Afghanistan, where his argument that British forces should have been withdrawn well before their actual retreat in 2014 was widely supported by British society. The estimated cost of the renewal of the Trident system over its lifetime is some £100bn, which at a time of austerity and deep budget cuts appears to an increasingly wide constituency as an unconscionable waste of scarce resources, especially since Britain cannot use the system without American approval. Britain's four strategic nuclear missiles add little to the West's strategic balance but are largely retained as the membership ticket to retain a seat on the UN Security Council and the country's place among the great powers. Even many British military leaders would prefer the money to be invested in conventional forces, which are being savagely cut by the Conservative government. As for NATO, the criticism concerned not just its ill-advised foreign interventions, but also entailed a fundamental questioning of its purpose in the post-Cold War world. Hostile to austerity and unrestricted free trade, it goes without saying that Corbyn is opposed to the creation of the 'economic NATO', the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). A Corbyn government would undoubtedly have a rocky relationship with the US.

Corbyn has exposed the growing gulf between Westminster elite views on these issues and those of a rising movement in revolt against the stale, incoherent and incompetent policies of the British ruling elite (of all main parties). As Ian Sinclair puts it in a perceptive analysis, 'a more nuanced and mature analysis would highlight the fact that the narrow spectrum of political and media debate in the UK has largely presented the general public with an equally narrow and limited understanding of foreign policy and possible policy options. ... Corbyn's election as Labour Party leader, if he is given a fair hearing, should significantly widen the debate on foreign policy, bringing long excluded voices, arguments and facts into the public debate'.<sup>2</sup>

## Can Corbyn win?

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The politics of transcendence on the Gorbachev or Corbyn models is all very fine, but for this mundane world its idealism and striving to reach beyond the given typically ends in disappointment. Gorbachev today is accused of pursuing incoherent and ill-thought out policies that in the end led not only to the dissolution of communist power but also to the destruction of effective governance in its entirety, precipitating the disintegration of the country. Equally, while Corbyn's idealism is clearly an inspiration to a generation who have been disappointed by New Labour managerialism and recklessness in foreign policy,

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Sinclair, 'A deviation from the mainstream? Jeremy Corbyn's foreign policy positions and public opinion', 13 October 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/ian-sinclair/deviation-from-mainstream-jeremy-corbyn%E2%80%99s-foreign-policy-positions-and-public-opinio>, accessed 27 October 2015.

as well as by the Conservative's complacent sense of entitlement as the natural party of government, his politics of renewal will have to be grounded in the intelligent management of day-to-day politics if it hopes to compete. It will also need to devise a programme that is forward-looking, coherent and appealing to the great mass of 'hard-working families', to use the condescending term so favoured by Brownite New Labour.

Corbyn's leadership from the first became the subject of intense criticism, much of it from his own MPs. Corbyn defied the party line on roughly 25 per cent of the votes in the House of Commons during the last Labour governments between 1997 and 2010. He is now at the receiving end of some of his own medicine. A number of leading figures refused to serve in his Cabinet, and his early days in office were marked by a number of presentational debacles. Corbyn became the subject of vitriolic personal attacks. A typical headline argued that 'Corbyn is too thick to be prime minister', noting that he had gained only 'two Es at A-level' and his 'lack of clear natural talent' disqualified him from the post. He also left early from his course on trade union studies at what was then the Polytechnic of North London (now London Metropolitan University).<sup>3</sup> The novelist Martin Amis joined in the hunt, condemning Corbyn as too 'under-educated, humourless and third-rate' to run the country.<sup>4</sup> The Oxbridge elite clearly felt insulted by Corbyn's rise, as well as fearing political marginalisation. Equally, Corbyn's avoidance of investiture into the 600-strong Privy Council, comprising all present and past members of the cabinet, some royalty, clergy, some British and Commonwealth judges, and many others, appointed for life, was probably unwise, and as a result he was stripped of the 'Right Honourable' title.

The typical criticism is that the new leader was idealistic but unelectable. The characteristics that propelled him to the leadership of the Labour Party were now considered handicaps when faced by the need to engage in real politics. He was caricatured as a throwback to an earlier age, when beards, unilateralism and tweed jackets were in fashion. Critics argue that Labour cannot win the next general election simply by mobilising disengaged left-wingers to supplement Labour's core supporters. Without a professional media communication machine Labour would be eaten up by the right-wing press. Corbyn's 'new politics' was condemned as amorphous and vacuous, and his pleas for a kinder and more civil public discourse are dismissed as naive and ineffectual. The various policy retreats and compromises add fuel to this critique. His earlier commitments to the abolition of university tuition fees, the nationalisation of public utilities and the energy companies were either abandoned or put out to 'consultation'.

Corbyn's supporters point to the extraordinary success of the Scottish National Party, crushing the Labour Party, which lost 40 of its 41 MPs, to win 56 out of the 59 Scottish Westminster seats in the May 2015 election. The SNP has become a genuine national movement, harnessing both the power of the left in condemning Trident renewal

<sup>3</sup> Angela Epstein, 'Jeremy Corbyn is too thick to be prime minister', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 October 2015, [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/Jeremy\\_Corbyn/11957216/Jeremy-Corbyn-is-too-thick-to-be-Prime-Minister.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/Jeremy_Corbyn/11957216/Jeremy-Corbyn-is-too-thick-to-be-Prime-Minister.html), accessed 27 October 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Amis, 'Amis on Corbyn: under-educated, humourless, third-rate', *Sunday Times*, 25 October 2015, <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/focus/article1624016.ece>, accessed 27 October 2015.

and Conservative welfare reforms, and the traditional power of the right in enunciating aspirations for an independent Scotland. What is often forgotten is that the SNP has also been able to forge a powerful and professional political machine accompanied by formidable party discipline under the direction of charismatic party leaders. Hopes that the Labour Party's tilt to the left would bring back disaffected Labour voters in Scotland were soon disappointed. If Corbyn could not muster the support of his own MPs, it was unlikely that he could make an immediate breakthrough against the SNP machine. As the former SNP leader and current Scottish finance minister, John Swinney, put it: 'They [the Scottish people] look at Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party and it's disorganised and chaotic. People who are looking for a movement that is organised, coherent and radical – that's us'.<sup>5</sup> Following its triumph in the 2015 election, SNP membership surged to 114,000, making it the third largest party in the UK.

There was little sign of a Corbyn-inspired surge in Labour support north of the border. In his early days at least, he was unable to articulate a better form of social democracy to what was on offer from the SNP, and he certainly could not match their promises when it came to the nationalist agenda. As Iain Macwhirter argues, 'Many of those who voted yes in the independence referendum last year weren't natural nationalists but natural Corbynites. They support anti-austerity economics, non-nuclear defence, public ownership, open borders and compassionate welfare policies'. There were also a host of social problems that the SNP had failed to redress during its eight years at the head of the Scottish executive, yet Corbyn's equivocations and retreats, according to Macwhirter, were unable to exploit the SNP's vulnerabilities: 'Instead of a radical agenda that exposes the skin-deep leftism of the Scottish government, there is a blank space where Corbyn's election manifesto used to lie'.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Corbyn was in danger of entering the sterile arena of symbolic and selective protestations against human rights abuses abroad, the left liberal course already charted by the Greens in Germany, which further narrows the scope for the patient diplomatic work required for a transcendent strategy of change through engagement. As Robin Cook, the former Labour foreign minister, was to learn so painfully, an 'ethical foreign policy' is either a contradiction in terms, or if pursued consistently, one with devastating effects on the practices of diplomacy.

Corbyn's Labour Party was certainly challenged to combine both organisation and radicalism. Its first months were characterised by vacillations over policy and bitter internecine warfare. Above all, the challenge was to devise a progressive forward-looking agenda that could move beyond the comfort zones of the past to give voice and power to a diverse and internationalised community. The context had also changed, with the Conservatives under David Cameron trying to articulate a more progressive and socially-inclusive 'one-nation' conservatism. The first iteration of this was packaged as the 'Big Society', although this term was soon dropped.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the Conservative administration

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Freedland, 'The SNP: masters of the old politics as well as the new', *Guardian*, 17 October 2015, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Iain Macwhirter, 'Corbyn has blown his chance to revive Labour in Scotland', *Guardian*, 13 October 2015, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> The most coherent development of the idea, including the notion of a 'new politics', came from Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics* (Buckingham, University of Buckingham Press, 2010).

from 2015 sought a return to the one-nation Toryism in the Disraeli tradition. This is a theme stressed by Cameron as well as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne. This includes granting financial and other powers to enlarged municipal associations governed by elected mayors, starting with devolution to the combined authority of Greater Manchester.

On the other side, the successive Labour defeats provoked a range of responses. Notable among them is the Blue Labour tendency, which urges the party to examine more profoundly the root causes of its failure to engage a wider electorate and to generate ideas that could challenge the stale elite hegemony. Blue Labour has stimulated debate about the sources of renewal of the movement. Blue Labour has no fixed agenda but has successfully raised some fundamental questions. As Adrian Pabst, the co-editor of a recent collection of Blue Labour thinking, puts it, 'To win again and govern better, Labour needs to recapture its place in the life of the country. Where New Labour defended the old politics of global finance backed by the managerial state, Blue Labour forges new coalitions around mutual interests such as devolving power to people and sharing wealth more widely through civic and community institutions'.<sup>8</sup> Blue Labour criticises the excessive individualism and anomie brought on by neoliberal economics, and the alienation and isolation engendered by liberalism's focus on entitlements and rights. Instead, the focus is on developing a new type of mutualism, drawing on the co-operative traditions of the labour movement while rejecting the sterility of traditional class politics in favour of a new 'politics of virtue', a revival of Burkean traditions of group solidarity, and mutual responsibility.

In the context where New Labour was largely indistinguishable from the Conservatives, apart from a more highly developed sense of responsibility towards the welfare state, it falls to the Corbynites to shape an agenda that moves beyond the vacuous centrism of the Blair/Brown years. Indeed, Corbyn's successful insurgency owed much to the collapse of centrism as a political project, even as it became hegemonic in ideological terms – what Tariq Ali calls 'the extreme centre'.<sup>9</sup> Ross McKibbin captures well the despair that politics since Thatcher took power has engendered. Many see this as 'a story of the remorseless corruption of the country's elites. I don't mean a story of paper bags filled with money – though money is central to the story – but of a fundamental corruption of the spirit and a degradation of the idea of democratic citizenship: the story of a country put up for sale'. New Labour did not create the system but 'it was complicit with it at almost every level'.<sup>10</sup> New Labour strived to be part of a winning coalition, whereas Corbyn put himself at the head of those who perceived themselves to be losers – not necessarily in purely financial terms but as a result of the endless reshaping of instruments of the welfare state and the lumpenisation of the professional classes through the imposition of ideologically-driven 'accountability' mechanisms. These practices destroyed the autonomy of the middle class in favour of some amorphous London-based globalised managerial vision of a neoliberal utopia.

The Blairite view that Labour was defeated in May 2015 because it was unable to articulate the needs of the 'aspirational classes' is self-serving and largely meaningless.

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Pabst, 'Preface to the New Edition: Why Labour Lost and How it can Win Again', in Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst (eds), *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, 2nd edition (London, I. B. Tauris, 2015), p. xxi.

<sup>9</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Extreme Centre: A Warning* (London, Verso Books, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Ross McKibbin, 'The Anti-Candidate', *London Review of Books*, 8 October 2015, p. 26.

There is some merit to the opposing view that Labour lost because it alienated its core working class vote, who deserted in favour of UKIP. Labour under Miliband was unable to express the concerns of those worried about the effects of mass immigration on access to housing and services, and the party retained its top-down Blairite ethos. The equal and opposite danger for Corbyn is to become a representative of public sector workers, rearguard peacenik leftists, and welfare state dependants. These are important constituencies, but this needs organically to integrate the concerns of the vast middle class, not in Blairite 'aspirational' terms but as part of a programme to restore dignity to the political process and autonomy to those at all levels of society who seek to combine achievement with a social conscience.

In this Corbyn may have more going for him than appears at first sight. Despite the attempts by the Tory propaganda machine and Labour MPs to destroy him, fuelled by the bitterness of the Blairite elite at having been so comprehensively trounced in the leadership contest, Corbyn represents a new politics of authenticity that is attractive to a generation scarred by the neoliberal historicist determinism of the Thatcherite project, in both its Conservative and New Labour manifestations. This explains his leadership victory. As one commentator puts it, Corbyn is 'Labour's last resort. If the general election proved anything, it is that even an unpopular Conservative Party, led by a highly disputed Prime minister, can rack up a landslide victory against a Socialist Party that has long forgotten what its core values and priorities ought to be'.<sup>11</sup> Thatcher had famously crowed that Tony Blair and New Labour were her greatest achievements, and both Blair and Brown implicitly acknowledged that they were her creatures by ensuring that their first act as prime minister was to invite her to 10 Downing Street.

There are enormous obstacles on the path to Corbyn winning the 2020 general election. Not least of these is opposition within the Opposition, including those front bench ministers who resigned on his assuming the leadership of the Labour Party, who no doubt await his fall to resume their positions. A second factor is whether Corbyn is able to navigate a path between the necessary compromises that are part of devising coherent and attractive policies (the policy contortions over his declared plans to renationalise the railways and abolish student fees are cases in point) while remaining true to his transcendent vision of a renewed politics. The appointment in October 2015 of Seamus Milne as the executive director of strategy and communications (while on leave from *The Guardian*) is a welcome step towards improving the coherence of policy development and presentation. By the same token, his appointment alienated other wings of the party. The call by one of Corbyn's advisers, Andrew Fisher, for Blair to face trial for the Iraq war, and in general his abusive responses to Corbyn's critics, was reminiscent of the worst days of Labour Party infighting in the early 1980s.<sup>12</sup> Corbyn's team firmly rejects the idea of mandatory re-selection procedures for Labour MPs, a practice that would open the way for purges and endless conflict, but the fact that the idea has been mooted is a cause for concern.

<sup>11</sup> Max Tholl, 'Jeremy Corbyn: Rebel with a Cause', *Open Democracy*, 23 September 2015, <https://www.open-democracy.net/can-europe-make-it/max-tholl/jeremy-corbyn-rebel-with-cause>, accessed 28 October 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Andy McSmith, 'Andrew Fisher: Jeremy Corbyn adviser called for Tony Blair to face trial for Iraq war', *The Independent*, 26 October 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/andrew-fisher-jeremy-corbyn-adviser-called-for-tony-blair-to-face-trial-for-iraq-war-a6709886.html>, accessed 29 October 2015.

It is impossible to predict how the Corbyn phenomenon will fare, but it is clear that it already represents a major shock to the British political system. The only way for what so far is little more than a narrow insurgency to become a genuine movement for the transcendence of sterile, incoherent and self-defeating policies at home and abroad is to generate a powerful progressive message of responsibility and transformation. Few care about the tired battles of the past, but all those inspired by Corbyn's victory wish to see policies based on environmental sustainability, a vibrant, inclusive and competitive economy, the ethics of virtue, and the patient engagement with foreign interlocutors to move beyond the endlessly reheated narratives of the Cold War and work towards something closer to international justice and inclusive and equal global governance.

There is no middle way. The whole venture could end in catastrophe and recriminations that will scar a generation; but it is entirely feasible that Corbyn will be able to galvanise the system out of its torpor and complacency. He may well mobilise a new generation of idealists, activists, associations, professionals, workers and people's collectives, and lead this rejuvenated British political nation to triumph in the polls in 2020, and thus to a new politics of transcendence in domestic and international affairs.

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