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Jeremy Corbyn in Historical Perspective

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Introduction

In the general election of 1983 the Labour Party, under the leadership of Michael Foot, suffered its worst defeat since 1918. Its manifesto that year – famously dubbed ‘the longest suicide note in history’ by the MP Gerald Kaufman – offered a programme of renationalisation, nuclear disarmament, and withdrawal from the European Community. In that election three future Labour Party leaders were first elected to parliament: Tony Blair for the Durham constituency of Sedgefield, Gordon Brown for the Scottish constituency of Dunfermline East, and Jeremy Corbyn for the London constituency of Islington North. Labour’s electoral defeat in 1983, and subsequent defeats in 1987 and 1992, were crucial in driving the party towards the centre in the 1980s and 90s. But the political failures and battles of the early 1980s also shaped the political identity and strategy of the left of the Labour Party, and would inform both its successes and its failures under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership between 2015 and 2019.

During and after Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, he and his supporters were frequently portrayed as taking Britain ‘back to the 1970s’ for their manifesto promises to renationalise rail and other services, raise taxes on business and higher earners, return more power to trade unions, and increase worker control over industry.² This account accused the Labour Party under Corbyn’s leadership of a nostalgic and dysfunctional politics not fit for the modern world, and

¹ I am grateful to Nick Garland for sharing his expertise on this topic and providing valuable advice for researching this chapter.

² Some easy to find examples include: ‘Labour leadership: better back to the 1970s with Jeremy Corbyn than 1870s with Tories’, *The Observer* (30 August 2015); David Wooding, ‘Corbyn will take us back to the 70s’, *The Sun* (12 September 2015); Joseph Carey, ‘Jeremy Corbyn stuck in 1970s TIME WARP he should be KILLING Theresa May, blasts Nick Clegg’, *The Express* (14 February 2018); Harry Yorke, ‘Jeremy Corbyn accused of ‘turning back clock’ to 1970s as he pledges huge power shift towards trade unions’, *The Telegraph* (10 September 2019); Frances Elliot and Steven Swinford, ‘Corbyn bid to launch 1970s-style cash spree’, *The Times* (8 November 2019); ‘Jeremy Corbyn tax plans trigger fears of return to 1970s’, *Financial Times* (21 November 2019); Andrew Brown, ‘Jeremy Corbyn’s Followers are Stuck in the 1970s’, *Foreign Policy* (17 December 2019).

invoked the industrial strife of the Wilson and Callaghan Labour governments. After the 2019 election another media narrative emerged: that of a Labour Party that had forgotten its working class roots and ‘Labour heartlands’ in the North of England, and become a party dominated by, as Home Secretary Priti Patel regrettably put it at the 2019 Conservative Party conference, a ‘North London metropolitan elite’. Corbynism was portrayed alternately as a movement of an outdated politics of nationalisation and labour militancy, and as a movement which appealed primarily to an out of touch urban elite. How, if at all, do we reconcile these visions?

During and after Jeremy Corbyn’s perennially controversial leadership, numerous attempts were made to document his biography and his political preoccupations – some friendly, and some much less so.³ While touching on and engaging with various accounts of Corbyn’s biography, this chapter does not attempt to provide a detailed reconstruction of the intellectual and political forces which have shaped Jeremy Corbyn, the man. Rather, it seeks to situate Corbyn and Corbynism in terms of recent historical re-understandings and re-assessments of left-wing politics and social movements of the 1970s and 80s, to argue that the politics and political context of the left in London and other urban centres during that time offer insights for understanding both the successes and failures of Corbynism between 2015 and 2019.

Looking to the 1970s and early 80s *can* help us understand Corbynism and the Labour Party’s electoral successes and failures between 2015 and 2019. But the vision of a 1970s left wedded to trade union power and tax-and-spend fiscal policies commonly invoked to attack Corbyn and his supporters is not the right one. The activists and intellectuals of the London Labour left in the 1970s and early 1980s, the environment in which Jeremy Corbyn’s early political career was forged, were motivated by a critique of labourism, or the Labour Party’s institutional ties and cultural association with the trade union movement, and sought to develop

³ Some examples include: Alex Nunns, *The Candidate: Jeremy Corbyn’s Improbable Path to Power* (New York and London: Or Books, 2018); Mark Perryman ed. *The Corbyn Effect* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2017); Tom Bower, *Dangerous Hero: Corbyn’s Ruthless Plot for Power* (Harper Collins, 2018); Rosa Prince, *Comrade Corbyn* (Biteback Publishing, 2016).

new networks and political coalitions for a renewed late-twentieth century socialism. For the Labour left of the 1980s, urban centres were spaces where political solidarities could be forged across groups previously overlooked by the parliamentary Labour Party, such as immigrant and ethnic minority communities, and gay, lesbian and feminist liberation movements. And the culturally and socio-economically diverse communities of 1980s London, including Jeremy Corbyn's constituency of Islington North, were central to this vision.

Modernization and the Left

In conventional accounts of Labour history 'modernization' has tended to be associated with the reforms of New Labour, often signified by Tony Blair's infamous overturning of Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution, which committed the Labour Party to the nationalisation of the means of production. Modernization provided a rhetorical strategy for New Labour to position itself against a tradition of state socialism which it portrayed as ill-equipped to tackle the political challenges and demographic realities of the late twentieth century. But the rhetoric of 'modernization' conventionally associated with New Labour has much deeper roots within the Labour Party and the British left - many of which can be located within the left, not the right, of the Labour tradition.⁴

A conventional historical narrative has tended to see the politics of the 1980s as characterised by a right wing, 'neoliberal' rejection of the political norms of the post-war settlement, including a redistributive state, progressive taxation, and co-operation between industry and organised labour towards common aims like full employment. But recent scholarship has stressed the continuities between Thatcherism and left social movements, and their common concerns with individual freedom, and frustrations with the welfare state.⁵

⁴ For an important recent re-evaluation of discourses of modernisation and the British left see Colm Murphy, 'Futures of socialism: 'modernisation' and 'modernity' on the British left, 1973-1997', Queen Mary, University of London PhD thesis, September 2020.

⁵ Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History* 28:2 (2017).

Important new research has stressed the continuities and interactions between left and right-wing discourses of ‘modernization’ within Labour circles of the 1980s and 90s, disrupting narrower accounts of New Labour ‘modernisation’ against left-wing resistance.⁶ And a wealth of recent scholarship on the intellectual left of the 1980s has explored the networks associated with the Communist Party of Great Britain journal *Marxism Today*, and the influence of the ideas of continental thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci in providing the ideological apparatus for a left politics which embraced civil society, urban spaces, and non-traditional constituencies, including new social movements oriented around racial equality, lesbian and gay rights, and feminism.⁷ These accounts have provided a rich portrait of the network of politicians, academics, writers and activists in 1970s and 1980s Britain who ‘sought to re-think socialism in light of the ideological fragmentation caused by the decline of Marxism as a philosophy of history, the intellectual opportunities opened up by the rise of new social movements, and the strategic possibilities offered by local politics.’⁸

A long tradition of left thought has emphasised the need for the Labour Party to respond to Britain’s changing demographics: in the 1950s and 60s numerous thinkers on the left pointed out that as the Labour Party’s traditional constituency the industrial working class acquired higher standards of living, and more and more people moved out of traditional industries and into the public sector or service sector, the party would face declining support.⁹ These arguments have tended to be associated with the Labour right and the ‘revisionist’ politics of figures like Anthony Crosland and Roy Jenkins, and are often interpreted as precursors to the Social Democratic Party, and New Labour. But the left of the Labour tradition has not been blind to

⁶ Murphy, ‘Futures of socialism’.

⁷ Max Shock, “‘To address ourselves “violently” towards the present as it is”’: Stuart Hall, *Marxism Today* and their reception of Antonio Gramsci in the long 1980s’, *Contemporary British History* 34:2 (2020), 251-272; Alexandre Campsie, “Socialism will never be the same again”: Re-imagining British left-wing ideas for the “New Times”’, *Contemporary British History* 31:2 (2017), 166-188.

⁸ Campsie, ‘Socialism will never be the same again’, 181.

⁹ An example is Mark Abrams and Richard Rose’s study *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960); The Labour revisionist Anthony Crosland’s 1956 *The Future of Socialism* famously anticipated a more affluent and materially comfortable society, and urged the Labour Party to orient more explicitly toward quality of life, and away from traditional socialist commitments like public ownership.

Britain's changing demographics, and has certainly not been wedded to a left politics rooted in the representation of the manual working class.

The new left social movements of 1960s Britain were motivated by strong antagonism to both the Wilson government's foreign policy, which attempted to strike a conciliatory tone towards the United States while keeping Britain out of the war on Vietnam, and the more conservative political culture associated with male dominated and culturally homogenous trade unions. They also contained an important element of 'state critical' thinking, which sought to cultivate spaces of association, cooperation and solidarity in communities, workplaces and other sites of association not formally tied to the state.¹⁰ In the 1960s the Labour left was also influenced by an important critique of parliamentary democracy as a vehicle for socialism. The Labour Representation Committee, which became the Labour Party, was formed in 1900 to represent organised labour in parliament. But in his 1964 *Parliamentary Socialism* the Marxist sociologist Ralph Miliband challenged this premise, arguing that parliamentary politics could only ever support and reinforce rather than challenge capitalism. These various critiques of parliamentary and state socialism contributed to a widespread sense of disillusionment with the Labour Party, and as a result of this climate of discontent many radical socialists turned away from the formal institutional structures of the party in the 1970s, and embraced an alternative politics rooted in community activism, local politics and participatory democracy.

These frustrations with the traditional structures of the Labour Party were reinforced by an increasing concern that a party built on the representation of the manual working class through trade unions was, simply, doomed by demographics. In his famous 1978 essay, *The Forward March of Labour Halted*, Eric Hobsbawm pointed out that trade union membership was stagnating, that the decline of manual occupations and increased standards of living was causing fewer people to identify as working class, and that rising trade union membership in the public

¹⁰ Peter Ackers and Alastair Reid, *Alternatives to State Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

sector had resulted in an antagonistic relationship between unions and the public. At the same time, the wider left was shaped by an important feminist challenge to the Labour Party's traditional ties to the manual working class and trade union movement.

A key text in envisioning and articulating the need for socialist renewal around democratic, localist, and community-oriented organisation was a 1978 collection of essays by Hilary Wainwright, Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal entitled *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*. The essays in *Beyond the Fragments* reflected on the experience of developing a radical feminist politics out of the diverse movements spawned by the new left, questioned the utility of orienting around 'a single democratic centralist party' like the Labour Party, and pointed towards more communitarian and localist modes of political engagement.¹¹ At the heart of *Beyond the Fragments* vision of decentralised socialism was an embrace of local politics. Wainwright described how anti-racist campaigns in Hackney and Islington, organised by the Trotskyist International Socialists, had been central to her political development: community action provided a vital space for developing her politics beyond traditional, worker driven and formal political spaces. Segal's contribution to *Beyond the Fragments*, 'A local experience' described her involvement in establishing the Essex Road Women's Centre in 1974 as a space for feminist organising around principles of autonomy, personal relationships, the rejection of the idea of a revolutionary vanguard of workers.

In 1983, the writer John Gyford described this movement away from the formal institutional structures of the Labour Party, and towards community action and local politics, in an article in the popular social science journal *New Society* entitled the 'The new urban left: a local road to socialism'. Gyford described a new group of local politicians 'proclaiming nuclear free zones, discussing Northern Ireland, funding radical community groups, flying red flags, establishing women's committees, appointing political sympathisers to key positions,

¹¹ Sheila Rowbotham, *Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, (London: Islington Community Press, 1978), 2.

encouraging workers' cooperatives and municipal enterprise, and questioning the rights and duties of the police and the courts.¹² This group was, in Gyford's words, 'the decentralist wing of the extra-parliamentary left'. They wrote, he said, in journals like '*Labour Herald*, in *London Labour Briefing* and its provincial counterparts, in *Local Socialism*, in *Marxism Today* and in *Chartist*.' In response to the 'the inadequacy of traditional models of socialist politics' and the political conditions famously identified by Hobsbawm and others, the 'new urban left' sought to replace both revolutionary and parliamentary socialism 'with the socialist potential of local government'.¹³

The GLC and the new urban left

The most famous site of municipal socialism and the 'new urban left' in 1980s Britain was the Greater London Council (GLC). London had had a long history of left-wing municipal government prior to the GLC.¹⁴ Before the late nineteenth century the capital had been governed by a largely decentralised network of parishes and boroughs, but in 1888 the London Government Act created the London County Council (LCC). The council's seat, County Hall, was opened in 1922 across from the Palace of Westminster. While originally Conservative-dominated, the LCC would be controlled by Labour and led by Herbert Morrison in the 1930s, a decade when (like the 1980s) the parliamentary Labour Party was in the political wilderness. Following the London Government Act of 1963, introduced by the Conservative government of Harold MacMillan, the London County Council was replaced by the Greater London Council in 1965. The legislation introducing the GLC expanded the boundaries of London government to include more suburban areas. Though Conservative lawmakers had intended the GLCs expanded constituency to integrate a broader swath of more affluent suburban voters, who

¹² John Gyford, 'The new urban left: a local road to socialism?', *New Society* (April 21, 1983), 9-3, 91.

¹³ Gyford, 'The new urban left', 91-92.

¹⁴ Owen Hatherley, *Red Metropolis: Socialism and the Government of London* (London: Repeater Books, 2020).

tended to vote Conservative, the Greater London Council became a site of ideological and political revival for the left in the 1970s and 80s.

In 1981 Ken Livingstone achieved control of the Greater London Council on a left slate. Under Livingstone's leadership the GLC consciously sought to reach out to the counterculture and to liberation movements, to create a political base and build new political solidarities between more traditional Labour activists, community groups, immigrant communities, and liberation movements.¹⁵ Under Livingstone's leadership the GLC pursued a strategy of using rates (or property taxes) paid by wealthy London suburb-dwellers and the City to aggressively fund community organisations, women's centres, immigrant groups, community childcare, and subsidized tube and bus fare through the Fare's Fare policy.¹⁶ It also sought to develop a more open style of administration, seeking to directly engage members of the public in its campaigns and policies: committees such as the Women's Committee, Ethnic Minorities Committee and Planning Committee sought to move beyond both formal representative government, and the formal structures of the Labour Party itself, and to engage London residents in an activist led-programme of radical community engagement.

Livingstone presented his political project as an explicit response to changes in British capitalism and London's economy. Livingstone saw Thatcher's monetarist policies, and the economic crisis which they had produced, as particularly damaging to London. Unlike the economic crisis of the 1930s, which had hit industrial areas in the north of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland hardest, London's manufacturing industries suffered severely in the recession of the early 1980s: in 1983 Livingstone noted that while unemployment in the country as a whole had increased by 157% since early 1980, it had risen by nearly 200% in London, due to both the loss of manufacturing jobs and cuts to the public sector.¹⁷ The contraction of

¹⁵ Diarmaid Kelliher, 'Solidarity and Sexuality: lesbians and gays support the miners, 1984-5', *History Workshop Journal* 77; 1, 24—262; Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain: How the Personal Got Political* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 139-146.

¹⁶ Hilary Wainwright, *Labour: A Tale of Two Parties* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), 97.

¹⁷ Ken Livingstone, 'Monetarism in London', *New Left Review* (1983), 70-72.

manufacturing and the changes to London's economy meant that the Labour Party had to organise differently than it had done in the past. In a 1984 interview Livingstone reflected that:

A Labour Party based in the industrial trades unions was credible in the 1940s and 50s, but the contraction of the industrial base means that the Labour Party is going to have to be based on service unions, many of them white collar, which isn't an adequate base on its own.

For Livingstone the contraction of Britain's industrial base required Labour, both locally and nationally, to rethink its political identity as the parliamentary arm of the trade union movement, and to develop new electoral coalitions. Livingstone argued that the activist networks and ethnic minority organisations which had emerged in urban centres since the 1960s should be formally affiliated to the Labour Party like the trade unions, saying:

the Labour Party has to change its own structure so that women's organisations, community organisations have a direct input rather than via the trade unions. Black political organisations should be affiliated to the Labour Party, as should various feminist groups. What we should aim for is to build a labour movement that represents not just the trades unions, but also these other sections of society which have been neglected by the labour movement in the past and whose demands have not been articulated.¹⁸

Livingstone viewed the Labour Party's historic concentration on the 'employed male white working class' as its weakness, and called for a politics oriented instead around a coalition of 'skilled and unskilled workers, unemployed, women, and black people as well as the sexually oppressed minorities.'¹⁹

Livingstone's vision of a restructured left coalition oriented around activists and ethnic minority groups rather than trade unions was linked to his anti-imperialist foreign policy commitments. He saw increasing Tory support among the skilled white working class as rooted in 'national chauvinism' and deep-rooted imperialist attitudes.²⁰ In a 1983 interview with Tariq Ali in the *New Left Review* he noted that during the Falklands War the Labour vote in 'more traditional, settled, white working class' areas 'collapsed by up to half', but that there had been a

¹⁸ Ken Livingstone interviewed by Martin Boddy and Colin Fudge, in Boddy and Fudge eds. *Local Socialism: Labour Councils and New Left Alternatives*, 269-271.

¹⁹ Ken Livingstone interviewed by Tariq Ali, 'Why Labour Lost', *New Left Review* (1983), 37-8.

²⁰ Ken Livingstone interviewed by Boddy and Fudge, 270-271.

swing to Labour in wards with a 'substantial Irish, black or unskilled working class community'.²¹ As *London Labour Briefing* reported after the GLC elections in 1981, London's black and ethnic minority voters had turned out in consistently higher numbers than white voters and produced swings to Labour in Hornsey and Brent South.²²

The GLC took a notoriously antagonistic approach to the Thatcher government: located directly across the Thames from the Palace of Westminster at County Hall, it famously emblazoned London's unemployment figures on its façade in a conspicuous visual protest against the Conservative government across the river in Westminster. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the GLC, and other local authorities across the UK, were key targets for the Thatcher government, which was driven by deep political hostility to the actions of activist councils: as Thatcher put it in 1988, 'we cannot allow anti-enterprise, spendthrift, irrelevant local government to condemn urban areas to deprivation for which the Government is then blamed. The attachment of some local authorities to high rates, gay rights, Nicaragua and nuclear free zones does not offer much hope to their residents.'²³

In the early 1980s the GLC, along with other left-dominated councils across Britain, began to face a sustained media attack and existential threats from the Conservative government in Westminster.²⁴ In 1981 Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment, proposed to reform local government financing to put cash limits on local authority spending, shift the balance of rate-paying from industrial and commercial sources towards domestic rate-payers, subject councils to referenda on taxation which exceeded government's limit, and ultimately increase government oversight over local authority spending.²⁵ Between 1979 and 1986 the

²¹ Ken Livingstone interviewed by Tariq Ali, 'Why Labour Lost', *New Left Review* (1983), 27.

²² 'Black Voters Deliver Victory', *London Labour Briefing* 11 (June 1981), 2; Merle Amory, 'Black/Left Alliance Strengthened in Brent', *London Labour Briefing* 11 (June 1981), 2-3; Bernie Grant, 'Getting the blacks in...', *London Labour Briefing* 12 (July 1981), 18.

²³ Margaret Thatcher, 'Inner cities launch – presentation', 6 March, 1988, TNA, PREM 19/2465, cited in Otto Saumarez Smith, 'Action for Cities: the Thatcher government and inner-city policy', *Urban History* 47:2 (2020), 287.

²⁴ Valerie Wise, 'As media onslaught mounts: DEFEND THE GLC!', *London Labour Briefing* 14 (October 1981), 1.

²⁵ Ted Knight, 'Our Greatest Challenge', *London Labour Briefing* 16 (November 1981), 1-2.

Thatcher government actually increased spending on the Urban Programme, a programme to help tackle the causes of social deprivation in urban and often immigrant rich areas set up by the Wilson Labour government in 1968. But it did so while also significantly defunding local authorities: between 1980 and 1984, cuts to local authority housing schemes amounted to 75 per cent of the government's overall reductions in spending.²⁶ And in an act of political retaliation against the oppositional left politics of municipal governments across the UK the Conservative government passed Local Government Act in 1986, which abolished the Greater London Council, as well as a number of other municipal councils, and privatized County Hall. That same year, 1986, the Thatcher government deregulated the City of London through the 'Big Bang', and subsequently introduced an 'enterprise zone' with reduced taxes and regulations in the former industrial area of the London docklands. Thatcher's hostility to local councils set the stage for the policy which would lead to her political downfall, the 'community charge' or 'poll tax' to fund local authority spending.

Jeremy Corbyn and London politics in the 1980s

Jeremy Corbyn first joined the Labour Party in 1966, optimistic, at the time, about Harold Wilson's leadership, but he soon became disillusioned by the Prime Minister's accommodationist stance to the United States' war in Vietnam.²⁷ He moved to London in 1973 for a course in Trade Union Studies at the Polytechnic of North London, and swiftly joined the Hornsey CLP, becoming chair of its Young Socialists, a key organiser for the local Labour Party, and, from 1978, a Haringey councillor. He became a research assistant for the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers, which represented the tailors in London's East End, then a trade

²⁶ Saumarez Smith, 282-286, citing A. Davies, 'Right to Buy': The development of a conservative housing policy, 1945-1980', *Contemporary British History* 27 (2013), 421-44.

²⁷ British Library C818/10 Hilary Wainwright Labour Party Tapes, Jeremy Corbyn and Liz Philipson interviewed by Hilary Wainwright (1987), 2-3.

in decline, and in 1975 he became an organiser for the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), representing the employees of the Inner London Education Authority.²⁸

During his work with the NUPE during the ‘Winter of Discontent’ in 1978 and 1979 Corbyn became acquainted with Tony Benn. He supported Benn’s campaign for Deputy Leader of the Labour Party in 1981, though NUPE’s votes went to Benn’s opponent Denis Healey.²⁹ Corbyn became a key ally to Ken Livingstone in his seizure of the GLC leadership in 1981, and a contributor to *London Labour Briefing*, a left-wing newspaper derided by Margaret Thatcher for ‘encouraging anarchy’, which championed Livingstone’s GLC, Labour councils, and Tony Benn’s Alternative Economic Strategy and deputy leadership campaign.³⁰

In 1983 Corbyn was selected as the Labour candidate for Islington North. Corbyn’s selection in Islington North, and subsequent election to Parliament, was the result of a power vacuum created by the defection of several prominent Islington politicians for the Social Democratic Party. The constituency had been represented by the Irish Catholic Labour MP Michael O’Halloran since 1969. O’Halloran, a Catholic and social conservative, spoke infrequently in Parliament and was unpopular with local activists. Both O’Halloran and John Grant, the MP for Islington Central, defected to the SDP before the 1983 election – but when Islington Central was abolished as a result of boundary changes and Grant was selected as the SDP candidate for Islington North, O’Halloran was forced to run as an independent. In a four-way race against Grant, who was supported by the president of the Trades Union Council Frank Chapple, O’Halloran, Corbyn, the Labour candidate, won by a majority of 5607.³¹

While Islington, today, has become almost a pejorative shorthand for the London metropolitan elite, it was a predominantly working class and ethnically diverse area in 1983, with

²⁸ Jeremy Corbyn and Liz Philipson interviewed by Hilary Wainwright, 2.

²⁹ Prince, *Comrade Corbyn* [source is an e-book so need to find hard copy page numbers].

³⁰ Graham Bash, ‘A Reply to Thatcher’, *London Labour Briefing* 12 (July 1981), 6.

³¹ John Carvel, ‘Dividing Labour loyalties by five adds up to confusion for voters’, *The Guardian* (June 1 1983), 2; Prince, *Comrade Corbyn* [source is an e-book so need to find hard copy page numbers].

only about 20 per cent owner occupation.³² It had also been an important battleground for the municipal left in London: Corbyn's election as MP for Islington North in 1983 followed a gradual increase in strength for the left of the Labour Group in Islington Council. The Islington Council was briefly the only council in Britain controlled by the Social Democratic Party, until SDP candidates were annihilated in the local elections of 1982, and 51 out of 52 seats were won by Labour councillors.³³ In North Islington in the early 1980s the council recruited new members on a platform which included 'a radical line on Ireland', and opposition to cuts to council services. The election of Livingstone ally Steve Bundred as GLC councillor for Islington North had caused 16 more establishment Labour candidates to defect to the SDP, and allow the Labour Left to consolidate their position within the local council.³⁴ The council, which was led by Margaret Hodge (who would subsequently become one of Corbyn's fiercest critics over antisemitism), was vilified in the press for flying the Red Flag and the CND's Ban the Bomb flag over Islington Town Hall, establishing a watchdog group to monitor discrimination against gays and lesbians, and telling the mayor of Islington to swap his luxury car for a taxi.³⁵ Portrayed as the apex of the 'loony left', the radicalism of the Islington Council would be a key target in Conservative candidates attempts to discredit Labour in the 1983 election.

Jeremy Corbyn's politics in the 1980s were forged not only in battles between moderates and reformers within the Labour Party, but in reaction to the Thatcher government's hostile attack on left-wing local authorities and the GLC. Corbyn's maiden speech to the House of Commons was a strident defence of the local authority in his own constituency against attacks by the media and the government's cuts to local authority spending. 'Islington North is only a few miles from the House by tube or bus', Corbyn said, but Westminster seemed '[a million miles

³² Carvel, 'Dividing Labour Loyalties', 2

³³ 'The massacre of Islington', *Daily Mail* (May 8, 1982).

³⁴ Nadine Finch, 'The left grows up in Islington', *London Labour Briefing* 13 (August 1981), 3; Valerie Veness, 'SDP Score Own Goal', *London Labour Briefing* 14 (October 1981), 2.

³⁵ 'SDP fury as Labour starts a 'revolution' under the red flag', *Daily Mail* (May 15, 1982); 'Left Flies more flags', *Daily Mail* (August 28, 1982), 13; 'Gays get watchdog on the rates', *Daily Mail* (October 12, 1982), 26; Labour Mayor is told to cut out the frills', *Daily Mail*, (December 18, 1982), 3.

away' from the constituency's 'massive unemployment and massive cuts imposed by the Government on the local authorities.' He cited a decline in rate support for the borough from £55 to £32 million, high unemployment (he estimated the cumulative unemployment rate between Hackney, Waltham Forest and Enfield to be 20 per cent), and thoughtless urban planning decisions which had resulted in motorway traffic cutting through swathes of the borough enroute to the Channel ports which had gradually replaced the London docks since the 1960s. He berated the government for huge cuts to the health service in his constituency, resulting in the closure of multiple hospitals. Corbyn's speech was also, importantly, a defence of the Greater London Council itself, which was already facing threats of abolition from the Thatcher government: 'It is clear', Corbyn said, 'that the Government are determined to take away all democratic rights of local government in London. They tried to destroy our borough councils. Now they seek to destroy the GLC.'³⁶

Corbyn's sense of his purpose as an MP was informed by his political formation in the Haringey CLP and his close links to the GLC. And he shared the same concern about de-industrialization, and the need for the Labour Party to adapt as a political movement in the face of it, that informed Livingstone's political project. In an interview with Hilary Wainwright in 1987 he reflected on the Labour Party's historical role as the political arm of the trade union movement, and the inadequacy of that model for contemporary politics, reflecting that if the party were recreated for the 1980s it wouldn't be 'made up of local branches, the Fabian Society, co-ops and the trade unions'. Corbyn didn't propose abandoning those institutional pillars of the party - 'we'd certainly include those', he said – but he suggested that the party's institutional base should reach 'far, far wider', reach out to ethnic organisations in particular.³⁷ Corbyn also reflected on how the work of being an MP required an awareness of the limitations of what could be achieved either through parliament or through representation in the workplace: he

³⁶ Jeremy Corbyn speech to House of Commons (July 1 1983) <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/jeremy-corbyn-1983- maiden-speech-in-the-house-of-commons/> [need Hansard reference]

³⁷ Jeremy Corbyn and Liz Philipson interviewed by Hilary Wainwright, 5.

described how as an MP he sought to represent ‘the issues of the community as a whole’, including the unemployed, social security claimants, and ethnic minority groups, whose concerns were less directly represented by trade unions.³⁸ Corbyn imagined the role of Labour Party MPs and of constituency organisers as ‘activators’ rather than ‘reactors’, organising around the needs of the community rather than acting as ‘an election machine’.³⁹

For Jeremy Corbyn in 1987, the traditional role of Labour Party, as the voice of a left-wing coalition of social reformers, socialists, and the labour movement in parliament, failed to reflect or represent the rapidly changing demographics of post-industrial Britain. Corbyn’s politics have always been highly motivated by his foreign policy commitments, including the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, opposition to apartheid in South Africa, and support for the republican movement in Ireland and liberation movement in South America and Palestine. But the focus of Corbyn’s activism during his many years as a backbench MP was on representing, organising and mobilising different interest groups in his community and constituency in North London, inspired by and committed to the same vision of a renewed urban socialism rooted in a coalition of activists, minority groups, and public sector unions which inspired the GLC and the ‘new urban left’ of the 1970s and 80s.

Conclusion

Jeremy Corbyn, and the faction of the Labour Party that he has represented in Parliament since 1983, should be understood not just as representing the left of the party, but the ‘urban left’ of the party. His politics were forged not only in battles between moderates and reformers within the Labour Party, but in reaction to the Thatcher government’s hostile attack on left-wing local authorities and the GLC in the early 1980s, and inspired by a vision of socialist renewal in urban centres.

³⁸ Jeremy Corbyn and Liz Philipson interviewed by Hilary Wainwright, 4.

³⁹ Jeremy Corbyn and Liz Philipson interviewed by Hilary Wainwright, 5.

Importantly, Livingstone and his allies' idealistic vision of a modern urban socialist coalition rooted in the metropolitan, racially diverse communities of places like London and Sheffield did not prevail. In the late 1980s the Labour Party increasingly turned towards political methodologies based on polling and focus groups, which revealed high rates of distrust for the 'loony left' and moved the party towards recapturing 'lost skilled working class voters in the South and the Midlands'.⁴⁰ And as Gyford himself acknowledged in 1983, an urban socialist coalition was not an easy recipe for electoral success: Gyford noted that when American presidential candidate George McGovern had tried to using the Democratic Party's reformed constitution to build a political coalition of 'the young, the black and the poor' in 1972 it had led to 'the defection of blue collar and trade union voters, alienated by the style as much as by the substance of the new politics'.⁴¹ Indeed, the results of recent UK elections suggest the Labour Party cannot hope to win political power without building a broad coalition across metropolitan and non-metropolitan voters.

But in light of the representations of Corbynism that have become familiar to us it is important to acknowledge that the municipal socialism of the 1970s and 80s represented not a regressive force, but a genuine attempt to build new coalitions, and integrate a broad range of social movements and interest groups into a coherent socialist project. The left in the 1970s and 80s held an idealistic vision of cities as a place where new political coalitions and solidarities could be forged which would free the Labour Party, and the left more generally, from the stultifying domination of trade unions and the limitations of parliamentary democracy. Taking account of the centrality of local politics to the left of the 1980s supports an important challenge in modern British history to the dominant account of the decade as characterised by a political contest between a Thatcherite embrace of individualism and a left committed to corporatism, state control and trade union representation. The conflicts which we continue to see in the

⁴⁰ Colm Murphy, 'The Rainbow Alliance or the Focus Group: Sexuality and Race in the Labour Party's Electoral Strategy, 1985-7', *Twentieth Century British History* 31:3 (2020).

⁴¹ Gyford, 'The new urban left', 92.

Labour Party today – between ‘Labour heartlands’ and ‘metropolitan elites’, have origins in competing visions of the future of British socialism in the 1970s and 80s.