



## Momentum: Jeremy Corbyn's movement

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\*Article published in Catalan at <http://www.finestradoportunitat.com>

A new grassroots political movement has been causing ripples throughout British politics and media. Instilling fear of deselection in moderate MPs, accused of far-left militant infiltration and bullying by the media, whilst also being painted as a vibrant new answer to the 'Labour Party problem', who are Momentum?

In October 2015, Momentum, a network of people and organisations committed to creating a mass movement for 'real transformative change', was launched as the successor to Jeremy Corbyn's successful Labour leadership campaign. The organisation has a broad set of objectives including: redistribution and class initiatives, opposition to privatisation, worker support, action on climate change and an end to discrimination. Momentum will not commit to more rigid policies since there is no ambition to become a political party. Their energies are instead focused on campaigning with the Labour Party in order to exact the transformative change they seek whilst driving a mass social movement similar to other community-based political groups witnessed in Europe.

The 2015 UK General Election was expected to result in a hung parliament similar to that of 2010. Although Britain's 'first-past-the-post' system arguably encourages stability to a greater extent than some other European states, it was still expected that the two main historical parties (the centre-right Conservative Party and centre-Left Labour Party) would struggle to gain a majority. However, on 7<sup>th</sup> May the Conservative Party won an unforeseen majority in Parliament and passed the 326 seat threshold needed to form an administration. They won on a platform of continuing austerity deficit reduction programmes and a commitment to an 'in/out' referendum on membership of the European Union.

The centrist Liberal Democrat Party was punished for an unpopular coalition pact retaining only 8 of 57 seats. The left-wing pro-independence Scottish National Party bagged all but 3 seats in Scotland, effectively kicking Labour out of the country. Labour lost 25 seats resulting in their worst election defeat since 1987, and leader Ed Miliband subsequently resigned. The right-wing press and Conservative Party rhetoric was triumphant; after five years in opposition, Labour was still not trusted with the economy. The Labour Party was in crisis and the leadership contest polarised. Prominent candidates such as ex-cabinet minister Yvette Cooper, argued that Labour needed to prove it was business-friendly, essentially lurch again to the right and re-embrace the social democrat New Labour project. Whereas underdog backbencher Jeremy Corbyn argued on an anti-austerity platform, and in September 2015 won in a landslide victory that dwarfed even the 1994 mandate won by Blair. A significant moment for left-wing politics in Europe as it's the first time a key political party in the U.K has rejected the austerity argument. The Labour membership has chosen to join the tide of movements and parties across Europe calling for an end to austerity and supporting more explicitly socialist policies than their social democratic predecessors.

'Corbyn fever' gripped the nation, and his followers, dubbed 'Corbynistas', swept him to victory. His leadership began with a speech to a refugee support rally in London where he addressed new party members saying: "Welcome to our party, welcome to our movement. And I say to those returning to the party, who were in it before and felt disillusioned and went away: welcome back, welcome home."**(1)**. Using 'movement' highlights a break from the traditional party process which would return

to closed bureaucratic decision-making structures. It instead signals the continuation of the mobilisation and the beginning of Momentum.

Momentum is a 'Labour focused organisation' and has a vision of Labour as one that is a more open, member-led party with explicitly socialist policies and the collective will to implement them in government. Momentum pledges to reach out to people who aren't currently members of political parties **(2)**. As a grass-roots movement, its structure is loose and each 'group' has independence to mobilise around their own issues that aren't in conflict with Momentum's objectives. Groups decide how to internally structure democratically, however to ensure inclusivity groups are required to appoint at least one woman to each position that has two posts. In February 2016 Momentum elected their first 14-strong National Steering Committee and passed an agenda of ambitions for 2016 including employing 8 full-time employees and introducing fee-paying membership. It is estimated that the organization has around 100 000 supporters and 120 groups across the UK.

Largely made up of two main groups, Momentum reflects the distinction acknowledged by Corbyn in his inaugural speech; lapsed members returning to the party who left over Iraq and other issues, and the young who are new to politics and chimed with his movement. The younger members, the 'millennials', are keener to build a social movement than internal Labour politics and have been inspired by similar movements in Europe. They are more likely to have been introduced to politics with the anti-austerity campaign group UKUncut and Occupy movements rather than traditional party politics, and a tension has been acknowledged between the two sides.

Momentum's first campaign was Democracy SOS, a mass voter registration drive to lessen the impact of government changes which saw one million people drop off the electoral register. It has also provided glimpses of its potential in December 2015 when it sent volunteers to a local election in Manchester. Labour had been predicted to do badly but instead managed to hold the seat and even increase its share of the vote as a direct result of Momentum's involvement. The organisation plans to mobilise in support of Labour candidates in the May 2016 local and London Mayoral elections where Labour is again predicted to do badly. It could prove critical in swing constituencies with low voter turnout where results can hang on a handful of votes.

Critics of Momentum can be broadly grouped into two camps; one within the Labour party and its supportive press, and the other in right wing media. Within Labour, criticism includes dubbing the movement unnecessary, likely to generate factionalism and a duplicate of groups already active **(3)**. There is also fear from MPs that its support may be used against them in seat selection contests resulting in their deselection. Accusations of bullying have been reported, with MPs saying they have been targeted for voting with the Conservatives on airstrikes in Syria. Prominent figures within the party have also negatively described the group as a 'rabble' and claimed the movement could destroy the Labour Party by acting as a separate party within without real loyalty to it **(4)**. Momentum has worked to respond to these criticisms by banning members of other parties to counter entryism from far-left socialist groups who have traditionally been hostile to the moderate politics of the Labour Party. They have also introduced a *Code of Ethics* to tackle bullying, and insisted they oppose calls for the deselection of certain MPs.

Criticism from Labour MPs comes from a chronic misunderstanding of the aforementioned new political environment their party is operating within where social democracy is in turmoil, coupled with a denial of the direction the members, by electing Jeremy Corbyn, have asked it to go in. Michael Dugher, an ex-shadow cabinet minister, couldn't see 'what the point of them [Momentum] is' highlighting this misunderstanding **(5)**. A common refrain from Momentum is that the party machine is too bureaucratic and conservative and that Labour has become stagnant. If MPs cannot recognise the new vibrant grassroots support for their party than this assessment seems valid. Local politics benefits from grassroots movements and the current climate of insecurity in Europe is producing different expressions of politics to the traditional models. Labour MPs should welcome this within their party for it to evolve and not become irrelevant like many of the other main social democratic parties of Europe, e.g PASOK in Greece. Furthermore calls as recent as March 2016 from within the Labour Party for Corbyn to step down and Momentum to be disbanded, highlights that some seem unable to accept the democratic will of the membership.**(6)**

Moderate left commentators sympathetic to Labour believe that Corbyn is unelectable and shifting further left is derided as regressive. However, as discussed here this is actually an opportunity for Labour at a time when the traditional parties

are in crisis. By relinquishing the apologetic tone that has characterised the party since 2010 and electing an anti-austerity outsider with a grass-roots movement foundation, Momentum and Corbyn can capitalise on the anti-establishment sentiment rife in Europe. If seen as real opposition rather than continuation of the same, they could preserve Labour.

Right-wing responses, on the one hand, have used mocking condescension to brand Momentum a joke comprised of disobedient kids and on the other hand, they have characterised Momentum as an irrational and violent mob, packed with far-left extremists. Beyond the former accusation being patronising it is also misguided as Momentum is not a youth movement. Furthermore, it is strategically sound to target young people as an untapped part of the electorate. The combined forces of the current 'Millennials' who will grow with Momentum and the prospective voting population of under-18s could be significant in 2020. The tone used in the latter aims to prey on British disinclination for overtly passionate and radical positions, however, with all this vilification in the press ordinary people's thoughts on Momentum is hidden. Recent polls put Labour ahead of Conservatives by one percent **(7)**. Although Momentum isn't featured in the polls, if we were to believe right wing media and moderate Labour MPs about the damage that Momentum will cause Labour's election chances, then these results wouldn't be expected. One thing to take from the level of vitriol directed at Momentum from Right and moderate Left is that Momentum could be onto something more than a mere 'moment'.

Post the calamitous March 2016 Conservative budget, where they had to U-turn on disability benefits, George Osborne's image and his leadership bid is damaged. Couple this with splits in the Conservatives over Brexit, and combined with Corbyn's straightforward 'school-masterly' manner, Labour and Momentum could be in a strong position to export a message of difference and change. This could draw disillusioned voters back and reach new voters at a time when new left-wing movements and parties have been gaining ground in Europe e.g. Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. For once, we could see a serious Left opposition in the UK.