

# Momentum: a new kind of politics

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Momentum's three national organisers set out their vision for Momentum: organisation building, movement politics, and changing society.

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**M**omentum builds on the energy and enthusiasm from the Jeremy Corbyn for Labour Leader campaign. Our goal is to increase participatory democracy, solidarity, and grassroots power and to help Labour become the transformative governing party of the twenty-first century.

Ours is a highly ambitious project. It develops directly out of the argument put forward in the *Jeremy for Leader* campaign that we need a Labour government – but not just any Labour government, one that will shift wealth and power out of the hands of a small elite and into those of the overwhelming majority. To do so, we need more than Corbyn as leader. We need to build grassroots power now: the ability for ordinary people to influence and change the world in their interests, through their own institutions. One of the cornerstones of our strategy is to enhance participatory democracy. This means developing processes of collective organising that are directed and controlled by those directly affected by decisions. We must maximise people's participation, agency, and empowerment in systems affecting their lives. We also need to build solidarity: the principle of mutual aid, empathy, and collective action.

This process offers Labour the possibility of not only being a transformative government but also radically reshaping the political terrain around it, like Attlee's 1945 government or Thatcher's 1979 government did. That's no small task. To accomplish it, we are developing and supporting a grassroots network to unite people in their Labour Parties, communities and workplaces to win victories on the issues that matter to them. We aim to link this network with other movements and campaigns

to build a diverse, united, mass movement for political change. This is a bottom-up process, using the experiences and creativity of ordinary people and building their capabilities to make politics and power more accessible to more people.

We want, in particular, to encourage a diverse range of people to join the Labour Party and help it become a genuinely mass party once again that is more open and member-led, and organises more effectively in communities. And we want to help Labour to be the political voice of this movement, win elections and have the capacity, socialist policies, and collective will to transform society in the interests of the overwhelming majority when in government.

## The Corbyn coalition

When Jeremy Corbyn won the Labour leadership election last summer, the organizational strength of left, progressive and democratic forces in Britain was at a historic low after forty years of neoliberalism. While trade union support was significant, pre-existing left organisation alone did not cause Corbyn's victory. Rather, it was the product of a feeling of dissatisfaction across the general population that happened to find expression through a Labour Party leadership election.

Momentum reflects the diverse coalition of people who supported Jeremy for leader. Within this group, we can pick out four main tendencies, with the caveat that these overlap and are not comprehensive:

1. Extra-parliamentary, social movement activism – particularly post-financial crisis movements along the lines of UK Uncut and Occupy.
2. More traditional left-wing protest coalitions, such as the People's Assembly and Stop the War Coalition.
3. The existing Labour left – its remaining MPs, its organisations such as the Labour Representation Committee, and others who 'kept the flame alive' in the party.
4. The left of the trade union movement, including both unions that have been affiliated to Labour all along, and those such as the Fire Brigades Union that are now re-affiliating.

While the latter three groups are pretty mutually intelligible, the first group mentioned brings a new perspective and experience. This activism is more diffuse, horizontal, and decentralised by nature. In some ways, Momentum is trying to give organisational form to this type of activism, giving it a home in the labour move-

ment and the Labour Party, while connecting the Labour Party and labour movement to new forms of activism and political cultures.

Many Corbyn supporters had been inspired by this new wave of activism; many were not involved in organised politics previously; some did not see Labour as a space for their political expression. But then a candidate arrived who not only championed the causes they identified with, but who was also trustworthy. Vitaly, Corbyn was not tainted by the expenses scandal. He was not discernibly motivated by self-interest. He articulated a set of ideas distinct from, and critical of, orthodoxy. Corbyn put forward a new politics of bottom-up, participatory democracy, a new economics of shared prosperity, and a new relationship with the world based on solidarity and peace. These positions struck a chord with Labour members tired of a top down, neoliberal politics, and still angry about or ashamed by the Iraq War. Many felt that Corbyn, personally and politically, represented something different.

## Systemic crisis

There is an increasing sense, even – or perhaps especially – among people who are not overtly political, that the entire establishment is corrupt, immoral or even criminal, and unaccountable.<sup>1</sup> From the financial fiddling in the economic crash to MPs' expenses, phone hacking and the Panama Papers, outpourings of public anger over these scandals continually take this establishment by surprise. Underlying distrust of MPs, and elites in general, is a systemic crisis which has followed in the wake of the financial crisis. More and more people are intensely frustrated with a system that appears stacked against them: living standards are squeezed, opportunities seem out of reach. Nothing is inevitable, but this widespread feeling provides the spark that can start some unexpected fires. As Paul Mason writes 'in Cairo, Athens and beyond, it's economic disruption – joblessness, price rises, austerity – that has driven the unrest'.<sup>2</sup>

This crisis is a key factor in the rise of Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, the National Front in France, the SNP in Scotland and UKIP in England. (Distrust in elites does not always express itself in a progressive direction.) This interlocking set of crises and scandals has impacted on Labour in part in a damaging way, with anger directed towards the party rather than flowing through it – as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and James Stafford write in the previous issue of *Renewal*, 'the financial crisis, and a subsequent decade of stagnation and austerity, has proved also to be a crisis of European social democracy'.<sup>3</sup>

But this groundswell of anger has also led to two positive developments. First, Labour's difficulties over how to approach austerity have resolved themselves into

an anti-austerity position. Second, on that basis, the party is seeing the kind of mass recruitment of members that until recently was thought to belong to a bygone age: membership now stands at 400,000, up from 180,000 at the time of the General Election. This combination of a clear anti-austerity position and a mass membership provides Labour with the opportunity to govern not only more efficiently and equitably than the Conservatives but also to transform the system fundamentally. Momentum, as part of a broad range of unions, social movements, civil society actors and the Labour Party, wants to help organise a counter-hegemonic project of social blocs into a majority that can build a new social settlement in the interests of the overwhelming majority.

## Back to the future

Labour's members bring enthusiasm and energy: motivated by a vision of Labour's historic role as a vehicle for transformative change, they want to campaign, organise and debate, and to modify the culture of the party and politics as a whole. This membership growth offers Labour the opportunity to return to its radical heritage and become a social movement *as well as* a campaigning machine again – dual aims Momentum seeks to encourage. To build this movement, branches and constituency parties should be engaging more actively in communities, supporting grassroots organising and building networks for popular education. Such ambitious projects would have been difficult to sustain with membership at levels seen over the past decade. The surge in membership changes this. New members, and many long-standing members, are inspired by such political work. Never again do we want to hear the doorstep complaint that 'the only time we see you is election time'. Empowering members to organise in their communities all year round would embed the party more firmly in communities, create a more active membership, and invigorate election campaigning.

At the moment, the party is squandering this opportunity. Far too few of Labour's 400,000 members are actively engaged in the party. The cause is in part structural – many of Labour's new members are new to party politics, and the world of motions, councillors' reports and minutes – though necessary for the functioning of a successful political party – can seem alien and disempowering. And it is in part because significant established sections of the Party have not been sufficiently welcoming. Calls for modernisation of party culture and organisation should not just be read as left demands, but rational responses to technological and social changes. Understandably, some defensiveness stems from the fact that the call for change seems, of course, to carry an implicit critique of the way things were done previously, often by stalwarts doing a vital and thankless task in their ward or

constituency for years on end. But we believe that for Labour to become a mass party once again, build a movement and get into government, it must embrace these changes.

Empowering and trusting activists to play leadership roles – or Big Organising – is at the cutting edge of politics.<sup>4</sup> It was the principle that ran through the Corbyn campaign's remarkable 17,000 strong volunteer operation. The volunteer operation, led by Kat Fletcher, built a large and dispersed base of volunteers and skilled them up so it could trust them with complex tasks that might have been reserved for staffers in other political campaigns. This hugely increased the campaign's capacity. We see this Big Organising on a much bigger scale in the Bernie Sanders campaign. With over seven million individual donations, half a million volunteers, a capacity to call three million people in one state in one weekend, and possibly 'the largest capacity for voter contact in history', this is a model Labour must emulate.<sup>5</sup>

Momentum can help the party do so: by applying the principles of Big Organising ourselves, engaging in these sort of activities, and keeping new members involved with the Party. We encourage our members and supporters to play an active role in the party. However, Momentum can also provide a less traditional, less formal, more action-focused forum and as such, we hope Momentum can be a helpful addition to the Labour ecosystem. We hope that over time suspicion will be replaced by more cooperation; and that Momentum's supporters recognise the hard yards and knowledge accumulated by Labour's longstanding activists.

There is a further aspect to this, however: a deliberate misunderstanding from parts of the media and elements of the right within the Parliamentary Labour Party, who portray Momentum as a conspiracy, seeing it through the prism of the factional battles of the 1980s (battles that pre-date the authors of this article). Reading the present entirely through the factional past is a failure of analysis. Huge structural changes to the British and world economy, alongside the political assault of the Thatcher government, have taken place since then. Momentum is an organisation of its time, rooted in the past, but firmly facing the future. This reality goes mostly unexamined in mainstream commentary. Momentum is not a small faction but a broad and diverse coalition.

## Part of an ecosystem

Jeremy Gilbert points out 'nobody actually voted for neoliberalism'.<sup>6</sup> That is, no political party has fought and won an election explicitly on this economic system – it was a transition forced upon us. That has led to the erosion of democracy and the

chronic disempowerment of people. Any organisation that wants to change that needs to be highly democratic, to work from below, as an act of transformative resistance.

When a massive section of the population worked in factories (around forty per cent of the workforce in the 1950s), a particular form of organising was needed: centralised forces of authority fighting for workers in a socialism-from-above tradition. Now capital has changed, and so too has organisation to match it. In particular, new technologies make communication and distributed networks much easier. Momentum is a network in itself, and also part of a wider ecosystem of organisations, groups and social forces working towards social change.

Momentum is also an example of the more horizontal way organisations can come together in the twenty-first century: it was essentially formed in reverse order. The founding of Momentum in October 2015 saw groups organically springing up all over the country, with local volunteers setting up Facebook pages and organising meetings, running ahead of the then-incipient central coordination. Within a day it was a big organisation. Some form of governance structure had to be added on later, to ensure accountability, develop formal processes for deciding things like geographical boundaries, and develop and ensure everyone abides by Momentum's code of ethics. This has been a process of working towards a structure that is coherent but also inclusive.

So far Momentum has run several national campaigns, including the 'Democracy SOS' voter registration campaign, which began with a national day of action on 24 October, as well as being part of the movement against George Osborne's tax credit cuts (the 'work penalty'), supporting the junior doctors' strikes in defence of the NHS, and mobilising our supporters to campaign for Labour in local elections and in the Oldham by-election last year. After May's elections, we will launch a new national campaign as well as rolling out participatory political education and community organising projects.

Our governance structure is still developing. However, a rough outline exists as follows. Momentum's basis remains its local groups – currently around 130 with new ones in formation all the time – and it is at the local level that the vast majority of participation, activity and democracy takes place. As of February 2016, our interim structure has a gender-balanced fifty-two-member national committee made up of twenty-six grassroots activists from local groups elected at regional network meetings, plus six reserved spaces for trade unions, twelve for Labour left organisations and eight additional representatives from liberation strands such as disability or Black, Asian, and ethnic minority groups. It thus brings together a range of

different perspectives and persuasions. The National Committee takes key strategic decisions. The first National Committee will only be in place for six months and will be replaced this summer by another, more democratic Committee, whose purview is currently being debated and decided upon within Momentum.

While Momentum has a National Committee and regional coordination between groups, the real power still lies at the grassroots level. This currently happens directly and indirectly and should soon be codified further, with the development of our membership structure and debates at the next National Committee meeting on 21 May. For example, our post-May elections national campaign priority was decided by a poll of our supporters about their priorities. We also are introducing online participatory decision making platforms for local groups, regions, interest groups, skill groups, and liberation strands to self-organise and make their views known.

Local groups decide which national priorities to emphasise, how to apply them and what local campaigns and activities to undertake. Groups can also, both directly and through Regional Networks of groups, submit proposals and papers to the National Committee. This process is still in development but the dynamics are towards greater, not less, group and member co-creation of strategies and policies. Our newly launched membership structure should assist in this process of being an accountable and member-led organisation.

## Shifting the balance of forces

Momentum wants the Labour Party to win the next general election. We agree with John McDonnell that Labour should 'bring together a coalition of social movements that have changed the political climate in this country and, as a result of that, changed the electoral potential of the Labour Party'.<sup>7</sup> We also believe that electoral victory alone will not be sufficient to fundamentally transfer wealth and power to the overwhelming majority. We also need to build up a social base that can support a Labour government's transformative changes. In particular, we need to build organisations of popular power. For example, imagine Labour wants to go into the election with a pledge in its manifesto for a living rent. For that to be seen as plausible, and to be successfully implemented in government, would require a huge level of organising around housing, most effectively in the form of a mass tenants' union.

The links between community organising and electoral victories are perhaps better understood in the US, where Saul Alinsky's theory and practice is relatively well known.<sup>8</sup> It was given major mainstream attention following the success of the Obama campaign in 2008. The US President was strongly influenced by Alinsky

and adapted some of his techniques to his stunningly successful electoral campaign. This approach can be electorally beneficial in the UK as well. Take John McDonnell's seat, Hayes and Harlington: it was won from the Tories in 1997 and is now a very safe Labour seat, with a majority of nearly 16,000 (larger than in 1997). That is in part because McDonnell has helped organise his community with, for example, unionisation drives and environmental campaigns. He has helped to change the social forces in his constituency.

Canvassing and attending demonstrations are important, but can be largely passive experiences. In addition to these, we need participatory, interactive development of leaders and organisers within communities: people coming up with their own viable alternatives. Popular education is also vital: Momentum has co-hosted a series of 'Corbynomics' and 'People's PPE' events, where people come together in diverse groups to discuss economics and politics and come up with their own ideas. Over the summer, we will train trainers in our groups to deliver public, participatory, political education courses, work to make sure members' voices are heard, develop a progressive policy platform at Conference, where we are planning a series of imaginative and exciting fringe events, and roll out a new national campaign as a focus for our summer's activism.

We have to be realistic about the obstacles that a government elected on a radical platform would face: the level of mobilisation needed for the election would need to continue afterwards in support of the new government. (Demobilising his campaign was Obama's great mistake, effectively neutering the most transformative elements of the platform he was elected on.) It's not just a question of policy on, for example, the NHS, but organising people to drive it forward if and when we have Jeremy Corbyn in 10 Downing Street. Parties too often focus just on winning the election; we also need to think about what comes after.

It's not just a question of rallies either: it has to be more participatory than that. Organising around the NHS must mean democratising healthcare – both from above (by a Labour government) and from below (through organising). Hilary Wainwright, writing in *Jacobin*, hopes Corbyn can 'reverse the traditional logic of electoral politics, whereby the people cede their power to their political representatives'. 'Corbyn's "new politics" is about political representatives using the platform of the state to empower popular forces.'<sup>9</sup> As McDonnell has put it, Labour should 'work alongside [social movements], give them a parliamentary voice, give them a voice in government but, more importantly, assist them in the work that they do within the wide community'.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, it's about nurturing organisations that can help to democratise each strand of life – building social blocs into a majority that can support a Labour government to empower them.



The question we need to ask is: what would a hegemonic social democratic party look like in the twenty-first century? This could be the moment when the political common sense and balance of forces shifts dramatically – as it did when Labour created the hard-fought-for social democratic consensus (and when Thatcher drove through the shift to a neoliberal consensus). We must ensure this shift is in a progressive direction, emulating, updating, and improving on our post-1945 successes. We believe Momentum can be part of the answer.

**Adam Klug, Emma Rees and James Schneider** are the National Organisers for Momentum.

## Notes

1. The 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer (measuring trust in institutions in 28 countries) finds faith in elites at its lowest level since the 2008 financial crisis, with a 17% gap in Britain between the ‘wealthy and educated’ and the rest of society in their trust of elite institutions. Only the United States, at 20%, had a higher trust gap.
2. P.Mason, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere*, Verso, London 2011.
3. F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and J. Stafford, ‘Reorienting the Left’ *Renewal*, 24, 2016.
4. M.Sifry, ‘How the Sanders campaign is reinventing the use of tech in politics’, *The Nation*, 14 March, 2016. <http://www.thenation.com/article/how-the-sanders-campaign-is-reinventing-the-use-of-tech-in-politics/>.
5. Kenneth Pennington, Sanders’ digital director, qu. S.Issenberg, ‘The meticulously engineered grassroots network behind the Sanders campaign’, *Bloomberg*, 24.2.16, <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/features/2016-02-24/behind-bernie-sanders-revolution-lies-a-meticulously-engineered-grassroots-network>.
6. J.Gilbert, ‘Disaffected consent: that post-democratic feeling’, *Soundings*, 60, 2015.
7. J.Schneider, ‘Jeremy Corbyn has transformed Labour from resisting social movements to supporting them’, *New Statesman*, The Staggers, 13.10.15, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2015/10/jeremy-corbyn-has-transformed-labour-resisting-social-movements-supporting>.
8. See S.Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, Random House, London 1971.
9. H.Wainwright, ‘The making of Jeremy Corbyn’, *Jacobin* <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/tony-benn-corbyn-thatcher-labour-leadership/>.
10. J.Schneider, ‘Jeremy Corbyn has transformed Labour from resisting social movements to supporting them’, *New Statesman*, The Staggers, 13.10.15, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2015/10/jeremy-corbyn-has-transformed-labour-resisting-social-movements-supporting>.