

LABOUR'S POLITICAL CULTURE

Remember Scarborough!

Morgan Jones

Labour's internal political culture is characterised by deep factional animosity. Young Labour's 2016 conference was a baptism of fire for a new generation of Labour activists, and an emblematic moment in the party's recent history.

Internal political cultures are notoriously hard to write about; otherwise deft histories struggle to capture their textures. H.M. Drucker summed up the problem neatly; as a member of the Labour Party, he was aware of internal cultures and ways of doing things that never made it into writing – 'I had heard tunes which I could not, as an academic, transcribe'.¹ Internal politics have their own internal logics, and are full of acronyms and arcane bodies and assumptions and connections that are often impossible for the layperson to comprehend. The Labour Party is a foreign country; we do things differently here, and our histories are our own.

In some ways, it is quite easy to describe what happened in Scarborough. In February 2016, Labour held a youth conference in a small seaside town in the north of England. At this conference, in a closely contested election, Jasmine Beckett, the candidate of the Labour right, narrowly beat James Elliott, the left's candidate, in the race for NEC Youth Rep. This result meant that Beckett became a full voting member of the party's governing body, the only position of genuine political significance in the party's youth wing. Aside from the NEC race, there

were also several other elections. These included the ballot for chair of Labour Students (then a full time paid position), in which Kate Dearden, the right's candidate, beat Ollie Hill, the left's candidate; and for chair of Young Labour, which went to the left's Caroline Hill.

In reality, however, this list of results tells you very little about what happened at Scarborough, or what Scarborough has come to mean in the minds of a generation of young Labour activists.

Speaking from the party's right, former Labour Students elected officer Dominique, in discussing how Scarborough had been built up to be 'this terrible, awful weekend', commented: 'I feel that some events in Labour Party history weren't that terrible and weren't that awful. But this one actually was'. (Dominique is not her real name – all interviewees in this article are pseudonymised.)

This article, primarily drawn from interviews with attendees, is the first attempt at a history of that thoroughly uncomradely weekend and its afterlife. The people interviewed come from all sides of the party. For some, Scarborough was their first experience of the nastiness of student politics, and for others it very much wasn't. All have been active in Labour politics for some years now, with most having held some elected position in the youth wing or having been employed by the party or a trade union at one stage or another.

In advance

The election of Jeremy Corbyn in September 2015 had drawn a wave of fresh-faced activists into youth politics. By the time the Young Labour conference opened in Scarborough on 27 February 2016, a proto-Momentum slate had already swept the board at the Young Labour committee elections (held online with a One Member One Vote system). Susan, one of these victorious candidates, described the left as 'quite confident' about taking the bigger positions on offer at Scarborough. A full conference election with a delegate system is, however, a wholly different beast to the comparatively bloodless affair that is an online ballot; a mass of people who had previously only experienced the relatively comradely worlds of Young Labour groups and university Labour Clubs were about to be exposed to fully automated luxury factionalism for the first time. The NEC youth election was widely viewed as an early test of Corbynism itself; as Shannon, a Scarborough delegate and sometime university Labour Club chair, put it, 'I think we were very aware that we were playing out a smaller version of what was happening in the party'.

The story of Scarborough doesn't start in Scarborough itself, but in Oxford, where trouble had been brewing for some time. As Richard, at the time an active Oxford University Labour Club (OULC) member, recalls, in 'September or October [of 2015]

the atmosphere within the Oxford University Labour Club had been growing increasingly fraught in a number of ways. One of these ways was an increasing sense among some parts of the club that there was a problem with anti-Semitism’.

What Richard termed the ‘atmosphere of suspicion’ finally boiled over in the first weeks of 2016, culminating in the resignation of then OULC co-chair Alex Chalmers. Chalmers’s resignation came in the form of a much-circulated Facebook status in which he alleged widespread anti-Semitism in OULC. By all accounts, the growing toxicity meant that Chalmers was a reluctant holder of his office. Matters had come to a head at a vote on a motion about supporting an Israeli Apartheid Week; as Chalmers later wrote in the *New Statesman*, ‘I am no stranger to bad-tempered meetings or sharp debate, but the sheer hatred people felt was visible in their eyes’; ‘I was denounced as a Zionist stooge and while I was counting the votes, someone stood over me suggesting that my Zionist sympathies meant that I might try to rig the ballot’.²

As indicated by the ease with which this affair fell into the pages of the *New Statesman*, a unique function of Oxford student politics is its proximity to the media, including national newspapers. Chalmers’s Facebook status fired the starting gun for an appreciably-sized press scandal, with reporting on OULC spreading from the *Times* and *Telegraph* to the Israeli press and the *New York Times*.³

With this beam of press attention turned on OULC, it emerged that James Elliott, an Oxford history student and sometime youth advisor on Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership campaign, who had, Richard said, been ‘prepping his NEC run for a very long time’, had written a number of controversial articles. Richard recalls: ‘An article was found, I think by the *Times*, that [Elliott] had written in the [*Oxford Student*] where he’d said “I don’t like being called anti-Semitic, but it doesn’t make me bleed” – I think that was the line’ (The line was actually: ‘I don’t like being smeared as anti-Semitic, but I don’t bleed from it either’).⁴

These events quickly became significant in the NEC race, when James Elliott ran for Youth Rep – or, as many on the left argue, these events were shunted into the race for the sake of factional advancement by the candidate of the party’s right, Liverpool University student Jasmin Beckett. It should here be noted that Elliott fervently denies all allegations of anti-Semitism, and Beckett denies any kind of smear campaign. (The Royall report, the party’s investigation into anti-Semitism at OULC, which did not name any students involved, found both evidence of anti-Semitism, and of false accusations thereof.)⁵

For Shannon, Beckett’s campaign against Elliott was the ‘beginning of using grown-up politics, attack methods’ in youth politics, with people ‘willing to destroy the other person, using actual newspapers to beef with people over a Young Labour election’: ‘I think it took a lot of people by surprise’. Richard is quick to nix the prevalent idea that there was any collaboration between Beckett and Elliott’s oppo-

nents in OULC, saying that it was 'as far from a conspiracy as you can get'; it was, he says, just a case of 'people's toxic views making each other miserable'.

Matthew, a university club delegate who stood for a position on the left slate at Scarborough, said that while he was 'aware of [the OULC scandal] in the weeks leading up' to the conference: 'it seemed to me like ... a stick to beat the left with. It just seemed like it was factional warfare and nothing more. I didn't think much of it, I just thought, these are slanderous accusations'. Reflecting on these positions, and his support of Elliott, when being interviewed for this piece, however, Matthew now gives credence to allegations of anti-Semitism, highlighting the 'don't bleed from it' comments Elliott had made in the *Oxford Student* as evidence. He concluded that 'when you take it in the context of the wider Labour anti-Semitism scandal, that really was the starting pistol on the whole thing ... but at the time I was on the left, and I just thought, it's a bloody Blairite conspiracy!'

While it's hard to imagine approaching an election under a longer shadow than that cast by the OULC anti-Semitism scandal, Beckett's candidacy was not baggage-free either. One issue was the widely-circulated leak of private group chats where Beckett allegedly encouraged her allies to 'smear' Elliott. (Richard noted that Beckett was widely considered to have attempted to 'make it a thing on Twitter to exacerbate things'.) Another issue, Dominique commented, was that some inside Beckett's own faction had concerns that she was 'too young and inexperienced'.⁶ This was a sentiment Matthew echoed, saying she seemed 'very young' and 'probably not perfect for the role', and that it seemed like she was 'just there because she had been put there'; 'whether or not this is true is completely under question, but that was the perception I had'.

It is hard to say what kind of impact the OULC anti-Semitism scandal had on the actual outcome of the race. However, it certainly ensured that the atmosphere of the conference was never going to be one of unbridled harmony.

At conference

The bulk of London Young Labour had travelled up to Scarborough on a coach, drinking and laughing through long traffic jams (and, in the case of one prominent activist, eating a Tupperware full of plain broccoli and being roundly mocked). As Susan regretfully noted, this was the highlight of the whole affair: fun-wise, it was all downhill from here.

Steven, then a sixth-former looking to make connections and publicise his area's new YL group, had had to get a permission form signed by his parents to go: 'I expected to be your classic young person at a conference, who just takes pictures with people, doesn't really understand what the conference is for'. He was on the

left, but at this point only vaguely – ‘the left is good because Jeremy, etc, all of the classic sixteen-year-old on Twitter opinions’; ‘I think most of my deeper politics came after Scarborough and that’s why it was so defining for me’. Shannon, who had joined the party to support Corbyn, said: ‘it was not the big events that made Scarborough – it was just the relentless toxic atmosphere. You knew that the people on the other side were not your comrades; they would, if you slipped up, get you’.

Although she had begun to be active on the left of the party and knew who she planned to vote for, Scarborough was Shannon’s first conference and she didn’t consider herself particularly factional. ‘The first couple of days were a massive eye-opener, not just to the right but to the culture of these conferences. My broad experience was that you are drunk and tired and angry the entire time you are there. You’re just absolutely fucked’. Matthew also highlighted the generally boozy nature of the conference, saying ‘I got smashed every night’. Shannon was also surprised to note that there were ‘almost no friendships’ across factional lines. ‘I found that surprising at the time – now it’s not surprising’.

Newcomers on the party’s right were not having a better time of it. Robert, a youth delegate, said the atmosphere upon arrival was ‘subdued’; by the time the candidate hustings had kicked off, ‘the mood was fucking horrible’. Robert had been impressed by Beckett and other moderate candidates, who he felt had ‘made an effort to reach out to people, build those relationships – which has lately been characterised by some as hacking or whatever but at the time it felt more like these people were committed to the labour movement, had made such an effort to meet people. It was impressive that as young people they were working so professionally to fight to win elections’. The left, to Robert’s view, was monolithic and unwelcoming, and ‘largely men’:

You felt like they had quite an old-fashioned, orthodox Marxist, statist conception of what activism and organising was. It felt like they saw themselves as the intellectual antecedents of the people who had caused all the trouble in the 1980s – they revelled in their ability to cause trouble, and because this change had happened at the top, they were the ones who were flexing their muscles. It felt very masculine, a bit scary and intimidating ... very much, are you voting the right way, are you in our club, or are you not part of the way the party’s moving ... get on the train now, or you’re part of this other group that disqualifies you from having a say.

Both the left and the right had rigid slates of candidates, decided in advance of the conference. Matthew gives an inside view into how he, ‘a soft-left Burnham voter’, ended up on the left slate; ‘[My friend] invited me to the pub and said, Matthew! How do you fancy running for a position. I said, fuck it, why not. The left slate were looking for someone to fill that position, they asked [my friend], who said he didn’t fancy it ... but he said, I know a guy who’d be up for it. And I was up for it!’. Pausing,

Matthew concluded, 'This was probably one of the most embarrassing times of my entire life'. Nonetheless, he does feel that his presence on the slate indicated that this was still a time when 'factional lines had not been dug in', although he expressed regret at not having been a better candidate for the left.

The results

The result of the NEC election was always going to be the subject of high emotion. Everyone remembers the announcement of the results as being fraught. Susan recalls seeing the candidates just after they'd been privately told the results: 'Jasmin was crying, and Jelliott [as James Elliott was colloquially known] was just standing there looking sombre. So I'd thought that she'd lost, and I remember I looked at Jelliott, smiled at him, like, "yes! you won". And he just looked at me, shook his head slightly.' Elliott had not won.

When, Shannon remembers, the results were announced: 'one side of the room went absolutely mad, jumping and cheering and stuff like that, the other side of the room was dead silent. At things that are less high-stakes, you might get polite clapping. Absolutely not. People just went still'. Steven recalls a similarly dour scene: 'I remember just like, a collective disappointment [pause] ... I think we booed? Whether there was a collective sigh or whether that was just in my head I'm not sure'. Matthew remembers 'half the room cheered, fantastic cheers ... half the room, booing'.

Elliott losing to Beckett was in many ways not the worst of it: Dominique remembers that it was when they 'announced the breakdown – that's where things went bad. People started screaming at each other'.

Elliott hadn't just lost – he had lost by a single vote. As Susan put it, 'all hell broke loose'; Steven remembers 'being with a friend and him getting really angry at a Beckett supporter, and me being, like, leave it mate – there I was as a seventeen-year-old being that person who's, like, he's not worth it mate!'

The right started singing – 'my instinct is some kind of Blairite song', says Susan; 'they knew this was the one important thing to win'. Dominique confirms: 'We had a big ol' party in the Scarborough ballroom, Jasmin was up on somebody's shoulders, we all got in a ring and sang – maybe "Things can only get better". Yes, it was "Things can only get better". Meanwhile, the left had retired to do some singing of their own: having exited the conference centre en masse, 'we went on a walk, and we all sang the red flag', remembers Steven. Matthew remembers chants of 'the left, the left, you'll never get rid of the left'.

Loss by a single vote would never be a particularly easy pill to swallow, and the Labour right does not have a reputation for sporting good conduct in internal

elections.⁷ This lineage can be traced down through the likes of John Golding's *Hammer of the Left*, which details the author's molten, at-all-expenses-battles with the party's left through the 1980s – a battle with just the kind of people who Robert fingered as having 'caused all that trouble'. Latterly, the branch of the party which seems to have been reading *Hammer of the Left* most thoroughly is its student wing, Labour Students (often referred to by its previous name, NOLS – National Organisation of Labour Students); a 'Nolsie' or a Labour Student being not just a category definition but a factional one.

The left's first reaction to the results, singing aside, was to call for a recount. Steven lays out the case: 'if someone wins by such a small margin, and it's a physical ballot, obviously it's just correct protocol in any instance to issue a recount. There's no reason not to, unless you and the person counting aren't impartial'; but from the right's perspective, Dominique claims that the lack of recount was not political: 'it was so late and so acrimonious, a recount should have happened but it just wasn't going to happen'.

As frantic sums were done, spreadsheets checked and tallies re-tallied, a theory of the case emerged: that one of the Unite delegates, mandated by his union to vote for Elliott, had in fact cast his union ballot for Beckett. No one I spoke to from either side contested that this was probably the case, but the details given in the accounts of the left and right vary wildly. A union delegate has two ballots, personal and union, with a union rep being within their rights to check that a delegate has filled out the latter in accordance with the mandate.

The right alleged that Unite representatives had demanded to see both ballots, and the delegate in question had refused, inviting suspicion. When the vote was lost by a margin of one, the blame landed on this person, who was then, according to the right, kicked out of his union-funded accommodation with nowhere to go. The official Unite statement from the time claims there is 'not a shred of truth' in these allegations.⁸

The left allege that reps had asked only to see the organisational ballot, and that no one was kicked out of anywhere; the delegate simply realised what was about to happen and quietly packed up and drove home.

The truth of the matter is likely to be somewhere in between, and it wasn't uncovered in any particularly definitive way in the writing of this piece; competing claims break down along factional lines. Everyone from the Labour left who I have ever spoken to is convinced that the ballot was rigged, or at the very least suspect. Susan, by her own admission probably about as willing as anyone on the left to give 'the benefit of the doubt', did not think it was straight-down-the-line issue:

I didn't think it was rigged. I think Jasmin won, [the delegate] broke his union mandate, that was why we lost – I think in the internal young trade union movement that was obviously problematic in its own way, you don't do that,

but I don't think it was rigged. But on the other hand – I know that these people [on the right] didn't have our best interests in mind, nor the interests of a fair contest in mind. That's just true. Not just the [Labour Leaks] report that's come out but also the experiences I had on that [Young Labour] committee, working with people at Labour HQ – I know that if they could do anything to make things harder for people on the left, they'd do it.

The right was no less assured of their own position. Dominique said: 'I personally know that it was a clean election. As in, in my heart, I believe it was a clean election'.

Even putting the NEC ballot aside, a whole melee of incidents, accidents, hints and allegations contributed to Scarborough's atmosphere of intense distrust. In all their unverified glory, these ranged from left delegates allegedly being turned away from the conference hall for arriving late, despite producing medical notes; someone supposedly punching a DJ in the face; the resignation, mid-conference, of the co-chair of Manchester Labour Students, who wrote that 'youth politics has destroyed my mental health';⁹ allegations about a safeguarding officer running a mental health awareness session tweeting abuse about someone who was in the room at the time, participating in the session; right-wing delegates filming themselves tearing up left-wing leaflets and posting the videos online; a scandal about Unite selectively funding accommodation; and possibly some minor arson.

Most notably, a Labour Students election ran whilst the BAME caucus was still out of the room. 'Obviously', commented one caucus member, 'this made us very angry'. Several people interviewed recalled Huda Elmi, now a member of the NEC herself, giving an impassioned speech condemning this. Shannon says, 'in retrospect I don't think they did it on purpose, but it was just indicative of some deeper problems. Partly just organisational problems. Labour students is nefarious. But also incompetent.'

By the time conference closed on 28 February, the two sides could quite literally not bear to look at one another. Going from the hotel to the station, Shannon recalled the two camps walking 'entirely different routes from the same building to the same building'. To this day, she is unsure which route was actually quicker: 'I remember the left had to climb a really horrible hill, and I think [the right] might have taken a slightly more sloping path – I dunno if that's indicative of anything'.

The aftermath

For many, Scarborough was the moment when opposing tendencies became sworn enemies. As Shannon says, 'it completely changed how I viewed factionalism':

Before, I had a defined ideological position, I knew I was a socialist. But what I thought at that point was that the right of the party wanted the same thing,

we all want Labour to win an election, we all want the world to be more equal. I thought we had similar ideas of what we want from the world, we all ideally want socialism, but we thought that you went about it in different ways. We attain it differently. But that fucking conference completely changed how I viewed factionalism. I realised that these people were not ideologically the same as me, just with slightly different ideas. They wanted something completely different. It was the point where I realised that liberalism and socialism are not ideologies that can be brought together with a bit of conversation and work. No; we want fundamentally different things from the world.

For Robert, it shored up his understanding of what the Labour right was, and was for: 'We stand for an established tradition within the party and we're proud of it ... a reformist, modern, pragmatic conception of what the Labour Party was for'; and this tradition was 'very committed to continuing to play a role in the party' following the election of Jeremy Corbyn.

Steven said simply, 'It politicised me': 'I understood what factional fighting was and what the reasoning behind it was ... and why it was necessary'.

For Dominique, 'it was the start of the obliteration of the [other] factions in the Labour Party – you were either Momentum, or you weren't ... it was either victory for Corbyn, or victory for everyone else'. Both sides were intensely sanguine about the necessity for ruthlessness. For the right, as Dominique put it, 'James winning would have tipped the balance of power. He was an anti-Semite'; it follows that his election may well have served to 'unleash more anti-Semitism', along with problems around 'the symbolism of electing an anti-Semite to the NEC'. What had happened at OULC was, Robert said, 'a horrific set of circumstances being allowed to unfold seemingly without people having the necessary courage to sort it out'. But if this is what you believe, surely you have a moral obligation to do everything in your power to stop it – to sort it out?

In Susan's view, the Labour right 'wasn't interested in structural change'; and many interviewees felt that the Labour right was intellectually running on empty, free from ideas but possessed of what Steven termed an 'authoritarian, disciplined culture' born in the Blair years. Matthew termed this version of the Labour right 'neo-Blairites' – 'they didn't have any politics, they actively resent the membership, yeah, I'd probably say that'.

The Labour right thinks the Labour left are bullies and anti-Semites with no understanding of how to win in the UK electoral system. The Labour left thinks the Labour right are hypocritical, dirty-tricks-pulling bullies with no desire to change the status quo. They both believe that their side controlling the party is a matter of life and death. At Scarborough, Shannon says, 'Everyone was there to make sure their people won. At any length.' Afterwards, as then-NUS VP Shelly Asquith tweeted

upon leaving the conference, 'The lines in the sand have been drawn ...'.

Steven says: 'What both sides took away from it, correctly or incorrectly, is that – if you're working against something that's stitching things up, the only way you can counter it is by doing the same thing. And I know that's not particularly honourable, but it's also fairly true'. He concludes, 'politics aren't won by being perfectionist'. For Matthew, 'looking back, that is kind of where it all started – "anti-Semitism is a smear, no it isn't, it's a serious issue" – [Scarborough] is where it all began'. Susan echoes this sentiment: 'I think ... a lot of the problems that we have now, the way people talk about anti-Semitism, started at that event. I think it's the root of all of it, the way that people are so suspicious ... about anti-Semitism, that's it'.

Richard commented that he thinks that while Scarborough's 'short-term repercussions were bad, in that a lot of people were very nasty to each other and formed into hardened factions', its 'long-term repercussions' were perhaps good – in that a lot of people concluded 'that was bad, maybe we should all be nice'. He is now a member of Open Labour.¹⁰ Asked about Open Labour, Shannon comments simply: 'I don't believe in opening up the Labour Party. I believe in my side being in control because the other side are bastards'.

There has been more than one enormously acrimonious Labour conference held in Scarborough. It was there, in 1960, that Hugh Gaitskell declared that he would 'fight, fight and fight again' to save the Labour Party.

Fight, fight and fight again; Labour's 2016 sojourn in Scarborough is nothing if not in keeping with historical tradition. It is also, looking on the splits without end in Momentum and the destructive factionalism of the Labour Leaks document, far from faded into irrelevance. An awful lot of people do remember Scarborough; those who don't are moving, knowingly or otherwise, through the wake of a political culture that was distilled in a weekend of pure and unadulterated acrimony.

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Notes

1. H.M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party*, London 1979, pvii.
2. Alex Chalmers, 'Anti Semitism, Anti Zionism, Oxford University, and Me': <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2016/03/anti-semitism-anti-zionism-oxford-university-and-me>, 14 March 2016.
3. See Camilla Turner, 'Momentum activists investigated over alleged anti-Semitism at Oxford University': <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/12169450/Momentum-activists-investig-ated-over-alleged-anti-Semitism-at-Oxford-University.html>, 23 February 2016; Roger Cohen, 'An

- Anti-Semitism of the Left': <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/08/opinion/an-anti-semitism-of-the-left.html>, 7 March 2016; Sue Surkes, 'Probe into Oxford U's Labour club reveals "poisonous" anti-Semitism': <https://www.timesofisrael.com/probe-into-oxford-us-labour-club-reveals-poisonous-anti-semitism/>, 7 March 2016.
4. James Elliott, 'Israel's Defendants Have Questions to Answer': <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2014/01/24/israels-defendants-have-questions-to-answer/>, 24 January 2014.
 5. Baroness Jan Royall, 'Allegations of anti-Semitism Oxford University Labour Club: The full text of Baroness Royall's report from August 2016': <https://www.thejc.com/allegations-of-anti-semitism-oxford-university-labour-club-1.430910>, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 9 January 2017.
 6. 'Labour youth report taken over after "smear" allegations': <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/a-1714-smear-report-shelved-over-girlfriends-media-antics-1>, 29 February 2016.
 7. See, Phillip Freeman, 'Labour Students is unfit for purpose': <https://www.tribunemag.co.uk/2019/03/labour-students-is-unfit-for-purpose>, 26 March 2019.
 8. Jamie Ross, 'Young Labour Conference Marred by Bullying Accusations': <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jamieross/young-labour-conference-marred-by-bullying-accusations>, 28 February 2016.
 9. Further details here: <https://mancunion.com/2016/02/27/manchester-labour-students-co-chair-quits-amid-institutional-racism-and-leak-allegations/>.
 10. <https://twitter.com/ShellyAsquith/status/703991654638821376>.
 11. For a fuller verdict on the weekend from an Open Labour perspective, you can read Jade Azim's piece here: <https://openlabour.org/something-new/>.