

Jeremy Corbyn: From thinly-veiled indifference to Europe basher

Written by Denis MacShane on 2 January 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's Bernie Sanders-type speeches denouncing austerity, cuts in the public realm and blasting Trump certainly go down well. But what about his view of - and vision for - Europe, asks Denis MacShane.



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Owing to the twists and turns of the totally confused politics of Brexit, the prospect - and, to some, the spectre - of a UK government led by Jeremy Corbyn has definitely moved into the realm of the possible.

However, the European left does not quite know what to make of Britain's Labour leader. And what about his vision for Europe?

In an age marked by the dual onslaught of China's fused communist-capitalist model and the 'America-first' nationalism and rabid protectionism of Trump, that is certainly a key question for voters on the left. Their hope is that Europe can somehow work as a bulwark to maintain proper social policy standards.

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At the recent conference in Lisbon of the Party of European Socialists to anoint Frans Timmermans as the left's candidate to be the next European Commission president, Corbyn's talk was therefore keenly awaited.

What message would Corbyn deliver? Would he finally move beyond his barely-disguised indifference to supporting an integrated, united Europe?

The expectations were quite high. After all, Corbyn himself regularly proclaims that, once he is the British Prime Minister, he can negotiate a better deal with Europe. To achieve that, he definitely needs to have a good rapport with the left-of-centre parties aligned with Labour in the EU.

Corbyn delivered his Brexit stump speech in Lisbon off two teleprompters to ensure that every word was measured. His staff watched nervously to make sure he said nothing that would imply he was taking any fresh steps in Britain's toxic Brexit debate.

“Corbyn's vision is still rooted in repudiating the EU's core values and principles, notably the so-called four indivisible freedoms of movement - of capital, goods, services and labour”

He repeated his mantra that the Brexit decision of June 2016 could not be challenged. He repeated his call for Theresa May to move aside and let Labour negotiate a better, fairer Brexit deal.

But Corbyn's vision is still rooted in repudiating the EU's core values and principles, notably the so-called four indivisible freedoms of movement - of capital, goods, services and labour.

Corbyn even went as far as attacking the EU as being responsible for Brexit, saying “EU support for austerity and failed neoliberal policies have caused serious hardship for working people across Europe.”

And he stated his conviction that the EU had “damaged the credibility of European social democratic parties and played a significant role in the vote for Brexit.”

EUROPE PERPLEXED

This view baffles most European leaders, including those on the left. To them, the Brexit vote is the result of a 15-year-long right-wing xenophobic campaign.

It was led by senior Tories, UKIP, Rupert Murdoch, Europhobe media like the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail, as well as crude quasi-racist anti-immigrant demagoguery.

"Corbyn's EU-bashing is so remarkable because it sounds so much like right-wing criticisms of Europe. Little surprise then that his speech featured no criticism of right-wing populism and identity politics"

Corbyn sounded off key, not least because he gave his speech in Portugal, whose government is run by the Portuguese Socialist Party. Portugal was also one of the countries hardest hit by the financial crisis.

But instead of adopting the flamboyant anti-EU rhetoric of Yanis Varoufakis in Greece, the Portuguese left worked seriously and professionally with EU officials to get the country's economy back on its feet. Unemployment is down to 6 percent and growth at the fastest rate in 17 years.

Corbyn's EU-bashing is so remarkable because it sounds so much like right-wing criticisms of Europe. Little surprise then that his speech featured no criticism of right-wing populism and identity politics.

There was also no criticism of Boris Johnson, Steve Bannon, Marine le Pen, Matteo Salvini, or any of the other new hard right politics like the AfD in Germany or VOX in Spain that got an immense boost from Brexit.

Instead Corbyn said: "If the European political establishment carries on with business as usual, the fake populists of the far right will fill the vacuum. European socialists have to fight for a different kind of Europe."

EUROPE IS THE PROBLEM, NOT THE ANSWER

This was a revealing reflection of the Labour leader's belief, which he has held since the 1970s, that Europe is the problem, not the answer. No surprise that Corbyn has voted against every EU Treaty since he was elected as an MP back in 1983.

Corbyn was also totally mum on the fact that Brexit is a major foreign policy win for President Trump, who calls the EU "a foe", and for President Putin, whose top-line foreign policy goal is to see Europe revert to disaggregated bickering nation states that Russia can deal with one by one.

Corbyn also had no word of praise for the much-admired contribution of British Members of the European Parliament.

The disappearance of 20 Labour MEPs from the European Parliament is a significant blow to the Party of European Socialists and thwarts any hopes that the Socialists and Democrats group can be reinforced in the European Parliament.

Long gone are the days when Robin Cook, Labour's progressive and innovative Foreign Secretary, was elected president of the Party of European Socialists 17 years ago.

And the days when Labour was a serious player on the European left seem a distant memory.

About the author

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