

# Briefing

THE VOICE OF THE INDEPENDENT LABOUR LEFT • MARCH 2021 • £1 WAGED

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The editorial board of *Labour Briefing* are:  
Lizzy Ali  
Ruth Appleton  
Stephen Beckett  
Richard Price  
Christine Shawcroft  
John Stewart  
Keith Veness

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Contact us:  
07771-638 329  
07903-434 662  
www.labourbriefingcooperative.net

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# From pink to blue

As we approach the anniversary of the first lockdown, the Covid statistics are damning: 120,000 UK deaths, the third highest per capita rate in the world, and significantly worse than the United States, which now has substantially more fatalities than it suffered in the whole of the Second World War. Meanwhile, Labour's steady advance in the polls, which saw it draw level with the Tories in late October, has stalled and gone backwards, giving the Tories an average lead of 5% by late February. This is all the more remarkable when you consider that second wave deaths peaked during that four-month period.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. "Under new management" was supposed to indicate not only that Starmer isn't Corbyn, but that Labour now had a steely professionalism. Steady. Competent. Journalists chorused that Starmer's performance at PMQs was "forensic" like a flock of demented parrots. Opposition was to be calibrated like a microwave. During the early disasters a year ago – shoddy pandemic planning, failure to lock down early enough, superspreader events on the eve of lockdown, drastic shortages of PPE, failure to protect BAME staff – the dial remained on defrost. It wasn't until the end of the summer, when Labour supported a SAGE proposal for a two-week circuit breaker, that it moved up a notch. But Starmer's main focus was to get schools fully open. Ignoring education unions' demands that schools must be safe, the result was a further spike in infections.

Starmer's team was terrified of being seen to break ranks with the government in a national emergency. Abstaining became a favoured method of expressing very mild disagreement. And yet what is the point of the Labour Party if it is not to represent all those worst affected by the pandemic – public-facing workers, BAME communities, the elderly, people with disabilities? But if parliamentary opposition to the Tories was muted, the war on internal opposition was ratcheted up. The pledge to keep Labour's radical policies of 2017 and 2019 was binned, to be replaced by centrist policies made up on the hoof without reference to Conference or the National Policy Forum. For six months, constituencies and party branches were prevented from meeting. NEC elections were gerrymandered. Labour officials with any sympathy for the left were sacked. CLP officers up and down the country were suspended, with Jewish socialists among those targeted.

Starmer promised zero tolerance for anti-semitism, and after he became Leader sure enough it largely disap-

peared from view. Depending on your viewpoint, this was either (a) a triumph for the new management or (b) a reflection of the fact that it was never widespread in the first place.

Meanwhile, the treatment of other ethnic minorities was contemptuous. "Whistleblowers" who had racially abused black MPs in private WhatsApp groups were rewarded with fat pay-offs and surreptitiously restored to membership. Despite evidence that 29% of Muslim members and supporters had experienced islamophobia, nothing was done. Black Lives Matter was dismissed as a mere "moment", and, as if to mock the movement, Starmer set up an all-white diversity panel. The party's diverse community organising team was sacked in its entirety last month.

Having failed to land a punch during months in which Starmer endlessly repeated "we support the government", the Tories are unsurprisingly enjoying a "vaccine bounce". Members' morale is at rock bottom. Where Labour gained over 300,000 members under Jeremy Corbyn, it had haemorrhaged 57,000 by November last year, and that figure is substantially higher now. Party officials are managing down expectations for May's local elections, arguing that the 2017 results (under Corbyn!) set a high bar. Reports suggest industrial-scale cheating has returned to local government selections. Focus groups report that they have no idea what Labour stands for.

To fill the policy void, Labour's strategy appears to be to turn its back on modern urban Britain and young people to go full-on Blue Labour – more use of the union flag, veterans and dressing smartly. Without a change of course, this is clearly and self-evidently going to end in tears.

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