The $64m question for Jeremy Corbyn and his rapidly-changing Labour Party

Paul Benneworth on how the lessons of a gloves-off political fight in America 40 years ago resonate in Britain today

If you asked me to name my favourite political author, then I’d reply Hunter S Thompson. That might surprise you, given his link with drug-crazed pieces relating America’s rotten cultural heart such as Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.

Following the ‘dark side of the American dream’ took him from undercover work inside the Los Angeles Hells’ Angels to the rapacious Neverland of the Las Vegas’ strip. And as he dug further under the surface, he found politicians never far away.
The high point of his oeuvre arguably came with his account of the 1972 American Democratic Primaries in 1972. Despite having the seemingly easy task of choosing a candidate to stand against an increasingly unpopular Richard Nixon, a procedural voting fiasco led to electoral wipe-out.

The 1972 primaries climaxed in a close-up and dirty scrap between political heavyweights and an exciting insurgent. All candidates’ political fixing machines pulled every trick out of the hat to cajole, strong-arm, wheedle or blackmail delegates to back their man.

The Convention ultimately chose George McGovern, who chose a running mate later revealed to have suffered from several mental health problems and was dogged by rumours of alcoholism. With Nixon portraying the Democrats as dangerous radicals threatening “acid, abortions and amnesty” of Vietnam draft-dodgers, electoral wipeout followed.

Nixon’s second term collapsed into ignominy with the Watergate Scandal and defeat in Vietnam. American entered a two-decade funk that persisted to Communism’s 1990s collapse.

Thompson’s most memorable political aphorism is that politics is the art of controlling your environment. The Democrats in 1972 slumped to deep defeat because although McGovern won, the Democrats lost their capacity to exert control, its most powerful supporters deserting the party in droves.

You should never stretch an analogy, but the parallels with Jeremy Corbyn’s recent election as Labour leader seem evident. David Cameron welcomed Labour’s democratic choice as a threat to national security and economic wellbeing.

He’s clearly said things in the past and stood on platforms with unsavoury characters that could unsympathetically be used to stoke up public hysteria, akin to McGovern’s “acid, abortions and amnesty”. So have Labour fallen for an upstart leading the party back to the electoral wilderness?

Corbyn’s problem is that he lacks the fundamentals of Thompson’s political capacity, namely taking control of your environment. He’s been swept in as leader on a wave of popular support, but the experience with both SDP and Referendum party shows that’s no basis for making a serious Prime Ministerial claim come 2020.

But are people too quick to dismiss his experiences in championing causes often subject to right-wing derision, such as the Guildford Four, the Birmingham Six, and the Anti-Apartheid movement? These campaigns found him on the right sight of both decency and history, reveal him as a man with a real moral compass.

Currently, too many British people feel the Tory reforms are taking away control over their own lives, in the workplace, in their homes, on the streets. Continually pestered, frustrated and persecuted by state agencies supposed to be on our side, voters all too easily fall for the empty promises peddled by UKIP and the BNP.

The $64m question for Labour is whether Corbyn can translate his enthusiastic activist campaigners into a mass popular mutual self-help movement. The Labour Party roots lie in a range of movements rooted in ordinary people taking back control. These range from the unions, co-operatives, the workers education association, to the bars of the Club & Institute Union.

If Corbyn’s Labour are to stand a chance in 2020, they need to reconnect with electors’ lives and find ways to mobilise citizens to work together to build back up locally what the Tories are vandalising nationally.

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