

Ming Vase Politics: UK Labour and Purging the Corbynistas

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By any reckoning, this was the move of a fool. A fool, it should be said, motivated by spite larded with caution. Evidently playing safe, adopting what has been [called](#) a "Ming Vase strategy" (hold it with scrupulous care; avoid danger), the British Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer is already laying its own boobytraps to step onto. This is some feat, given that Labour currently leads the incumbent Tories by such a margin it is [projected to win](#) a majority of 194 seats, giving them 422 in all.

With the election campaign still salad green, Starmer has made it clear that a number of the progressive faithful will no longer be expected to keep him company on his way into government – assuming he doesn't cock matters up before July 4. A cull is being made of the old Labour guard, and they are not going away quietly.

One is a former leader of the party, an unabashed progressive who has been hugging the left side of politics since he was a callow teenager. Jeremy Corbyn, a member for London's Islington North for over four decades and party leader for five years, is running as an independent. In March, the National Executive Committee (NEC) voted by 22 to 12 to [approve a motion](#) proposed by Starmer insisting that it was "not in the best interests of the Labour Party for it to endorse Mr Corbyn as a Labour Party candidate at the next general election."

The [response](#) from Corbyn was resoundingly biting. The move was a "shameful attack on the party of democracy", showing "contempt" for those who had voted for the party at the 2017 and 2019 elections.

"If you start shutting down dissent and preventing people from speaking out, it's not a sign of strength, it's a sign of weakness. A sign of strength is when you can absorb and

listen to the other person's arguments," [says](#) Corbyn on the YouTube outlet, Double Down News.

Things were also further muddled by the near juvenile incompetence regarding the future of the MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, Dianne Abbott, a figure who has been an enduring feature of Labour politics for decades. She was the first black woman to be elected to Parliament, reliably Left, admirably innumerate and always reliable in having a moment of indiscretion. (She had been suspended over [comments](#) made in a letter to *The Observer* claiming that Jews, the Irish and Travellers suffered "prejudice" rather than the "racism" suffered by blacks.) The question here was whether her readmission to the party would qualify her to run again or enable her to journey into a veteran politician's sunset.

Here was a moment of genuine danger for Labour. Confusion, always fatal for any party seeking government, ignited. Was Abbott banned by her party from running at the next election because of her recently spotty record? Some Labour functionaries thought not, but felt that the NEC should have the last say. Whispers and rumours suggested the opposite.

Laura Kuenssberg of the BBC [bored her readers](#) senseless with a slew of anonymous sources that did little to clear things up. "She was looking for a way to stand down with dignity when it was blown all up," one source claimed. Another is quoted as a "senior ally" of Starmer, suggesting that things had come to a pass. "Everyone was aware of the symbolism. We had to draw the line, it couldn't just go on and on."

A strategy is certainly afoot to stay, remove or frustrate candidates of a certain left leaning disposition who fail to fit Starmer's ultra cautious strategy. They are memory's heavy burden, a reminder of the roistering, scuffling legacy of the party. Distilled to its essence, it is a crude and clumsy effort to purge the Corbynistas. As Katy Balls of *The Spectator* appropriately [describes](#) it, the Labour leader has been selecting "candidates they trust to have a low risk of scandal or rebellion".

Economist Faiza Shaheen, for instance, has found herself blocked for taking issue with her party's Middle East policy, though, as [she put it](#), it entailed "14 tweets over 10 years, including me liking a colleague's tweet saying she was running as a Green councillor, and a retweet containing a list of companies to boycott to support Palestine, both from 2014."

In an [article](#) for *The Guardian*, Shaheen describes how she was "removed, via email, from being a Labour parliamentary candidate from Chingford and Woodford Green." She faced the dreaded NEC regarding her deselection. "More than four years' work thrown in the bin. Any connection to my community brushed aside."

Shaheen proceeds to make a fundamental, if obvious political point. "The irony is that taking me off the ballot and replacing me with someone no one in my community knows will jeopardise Labour's ability to win this seat and finally unseat the Tory grandee Iain Duncan Smith."

These instances may not be enough to derail the Labour train that is destined, at this point, of storming into the House of Commons and Number 10 with tearing effect. But Starmer's culling program is already taking the shine off the effort. Abbott has a loyal following. Those of Corbyn's are the stuff of legend. Riling, obstructing and barring such figures serves to cloud the message, impairing an electoral effort that may, ironically enough, see the Ming Vase slip out of Starmer's desperate hands.

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