

## Magazine

# Jeremy Corbyn's speech, deconstructed

By Jon Kelly

BBC News Magazine

15 September 2015 | [Magazine](#)



### **Jeremy Corbyn has made his first major speech as Labour leader. What did it reveal about him?**

The leader of the opposition's address to the TUC conference in Brighton represented a major platform for the left-wing MP.

He spoke of his "vision of a better society", adding that a "more equal" Britain was "not a dream". Corbyn also accused David Cameron of being a "poverty denier" and said austerity was a political choice.

What do experts have to say about the speech?



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## Rhetoric and language

Corbyn's speech stressed transformation. "Let's do things differently and do them together," he told delegates. Labour would win in 2020 with a "vision of a better society".

The speech itself was a departure from those typically made by party leaders, says barrister and public speaking expert Graham Davis. Corbyn's choice of words was unusually low-key. "It's almost as though he decided not to use so many of the rhetorical devices that work so well," Davies adds.

This is very much in keeping with Corbyn's unflashy style which has endeared him to Labour supporters in the leadership ballot. Indeed, during the TUC speech Corbyn's focus appeared to be on the delegates in the hall rather than the journalists or TV cameras following him.

Extracts of the speech circulated by Labour before it was delivered showed Mr Corbyn had intended to use a phrase deployed by Baroness Thatcher during the miners strike in 1984.

"For the Tories, you are still the enemy within. They think they will put me and Labour on the back foot by highlighting our support for trade unionism," he was expected to say. Except he didn't.

One phrase he did use that has already been much discussed is "poverty deniers" a badge for Conservatives who have dismissed him as a "deficit denier". "Poverty deniers" is a term that has been used by a handful of writers in the US but will now no doubt crop up more often.

Some parts of what Corbyn said were distinctively "traditional Labour", such as referring to the role of unions in guaranteeing "the right of a working class to have a voice in society as a whole".

But Corbyn also talked about core values of "solidarity, compassion, social justice, fighting for the underprivileged".

With the possible exception of solidarity these are terms used by politicians across the

spectrum. Indeed David Cameron in his 2014 leader's speech to conference, said: "The real party of compassion and social justice today is here in this hall - the Conservative Party."

Tony Blair's 2004 leader's speech to party conference referred to "fairness, justice, solidarity, opportunity for all".

## Body language and delivery

Corbyn may have been on the political fringes for most of his life. But after 30 years in national politics, Corbyn is an accomplished public speaker, says Harry Witchel, a public speaking expert.

"He's very comfortable up there," he says. "He's learned his craft, but he doesn't come across as studied or fake."

Unlike other politicians, he doesn't hide behind the podium or use it as a form of protection. Instead he grips it firmly "as a way of getting more oomph".

He tends to start each point off calmly, often with a question. This builds until "he's giving a fulsome emotional response", often using head nods to emphasise his conclusion.

Witchel says Corbyn regularly uses a technique known as "hand batoning" - that is, using his hands to hit the beat as he makes a point. It's a gesture he shares with one of his predecessors: "Tony Blair was the last great hand batoner in Labour."



But there are clear indications that Corbyn has spent much of his political career addressing noisy halls and outdoor rallies rather than formal conference halls, says Witchel.

His eyes look at the audience, not at the cameras. "He's not used to people just ceding the floor for him. He's used to having to fight to get people's attention," Witchel adds.

This means his voice is raised and he "does speak at a canter" - a number of people have commented on the speed of his delivery. Witchel says that to some this will be seen as a sign of

how passionate and quick-thinking he is - to others it may come over as strident.

## Political message

The address saw Corbyn, a former trade union official, very much on home turf.

"It couldn't have been a better forum for Jeremy Corbyn to make his first major speech," says Jon Tonge, professor of politics at Liverpool University. Many of those in the crowd will have given him their backing.

As such he spent much of his speech condemning the government's trade union bill, which would impose a 50% threshold for participation in strike ballots and a 40% threshold for stoppages involving essential public services.

The contrast could not have been greater with Corbyn's predecessors. "With Blairites the link with the trade unions was a financial necessity," says Tonge. Corbyn, by contrast, saw it as a matter of pride. He warmly spoke of his own days as a union official.

But there were omissions, too. In the 15-minute speech he did not address the issue of Europe, amid concerns by senior Labour MPs that he has not ruled out campaigning for exit in the forthcoming referendum.

And nor did it have much to say to those who did not already consider themselves part of the Labour movement, believes Tonge: "There was no indication of how he was going to win back the 11.3m people who voted Conservative."



## Style and fashion

Corbyn doesn't dress like a typical politician.

Many people might be annoyed at any politician's dress sense being the subject of discussion - rather than their policies - but it is unarguable that it has always been a **talking point** from Michael Foot's coat at a Remembrance service to Margaret Thatcher's handbags.

The second most popular comment on a Daily Mail story about Corbyn's appearance at a Battle of Britain memorial service read: "Couldn't even summon enough respect to do up his top button." The comment had been upvoted by more than 3,500 readers.

Other Labour leaders have been very deliberate in their dress. Tony Blair was noted for favouring Savile Row suits, although he was sure to appear casual at the right moment. His taste for **open-necked blue shirts** was often commented on - it was what he was wearing as he emerged from Downing St to talk to the press after the birth of his son Leo. David Cameron has been referred to as the **"blue polo shirt PM"** for the consistency of his holiday wardrobe.

Whereas Cameron is typically "quite groomed" and Blair was invariably "groomed to within an inch of his life", Corbyn is clearly "not groomed in any way, shape or form", says life and style consultant **Ceril Campbell**, author of Discover The New You.



For those who regard Corbyn as a man of the people who sticks up for the less fortunate, it's a look that will go down well, she adds. It signals a man whose mind is on higher matters.

Traditionally, leaders eschewed beards because it was felt that they looked as if they were hiding something, Campbell says. Corbyn clearly has no such worries: "It's not even a tidy, clipped beard."

At the TUC he appeared to have a pen in his shirt pocket and a mobile phone attached to his belt, Campbell says - not the kind of accessories a prime-minister-in-waiting typically sports.

"Either he's lost lots of weight or he's got on a suit that's too big for him," she says. Corbyn had discarded a tie he wore earlier to the Battle of Britain memorial service.

Like Kenneth Clarke, known for his cigars and Hush Puppies, or Nigel Farage with his hats and distinctive overcoats, unconventional clothes can quickly become part of a politician's brand,

says Campbell. Much has already been made of Corbyn's **fondness for vests**.

Nonetheless, she doesn't believe there's anything cynical about Corbyn couture.

"I don't think he did it in a considered way," Campbell says. "I think he did it because that's how he dresses."

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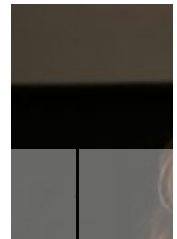


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