

# Whoever wins, the Labour Party's 'entryism' panic will come back to bite it

[Charles Lees](#), [University of Bath](#)

Labour's acting leader Harriet Harman is [struggling to squash](#) claims that the party is "purging" supporters of Jeremy Corbyn, the surprise frontrunner in its leadership contest. The claims have poured fuel on a contest that had already reached an unexpected fever pitch, and the row over malicious and extreme joiners shows no sign of abating.

But far from being beyond the pale, the Labour Party might just have fallen victim to one of the oldest rules in modern political thinking.

Robert Michels's "[Iron Law of Oligarchy](#)", a century-old core concept in the study of political parties. Michels believed that the "technical and tactical necessities" of party politics made tight party organisation and limited internal democracy not only inevitable, but also desirable. As he put it,

... it is organisation which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organisation, says oligarchy.

In its pure form, this is debatable. Still, it's not hard to imagine what Michels would have made of the Labour Party's current difficulties with its new rules for electing the party's leader: he would surely have considered them overly idealistic in their conception, and borderline incompetent in their execution. And he would have been right.

## Aiming high

The party and its interim leader Harriet Harman have undeniably made a hash of the election process. but the real flaw was introduced when the party reformed its procedures after the chaos of an apparent selection-rigging attempt in [Falkirk](#). The old three-way electoral college was replaced with a new "one-person-one-vote" system in which leadership candidates are elected not just by party members, but also by registered and affiliated supporters.

These changes reflected a desire to revitalise internal party life and reach out to a whole generation of non-aligned but politically aware Britons who were turned off by formal party politics.

The notion of the party primary for candidate selection is [well-established in the US](#); it has also been used in European countries, among them Spain, where the left-populist Podemos recently [selected all of its candidates](#) via primaries. Even Britain's Conservative Party has been [experimenting with them](#).

But Labour's experiment has gone further, and faster. By extending the franchise beyond the party's membership, doing so without any qualification period, and allowing individuals to keep registering to vote up to two months after the candidate nominations closed, Labour has opened itself up to meddling from anyone who's unsympathetic to the party, or who's simply unhappy with the leadership contest.

The key complaint is that this left the party vulnerable to "entryism" by political opponents – particularly from wider and wilder leftist movements outside parliament.

## Here we go again

This isn't in itself a new problem. Labour has endured assorted periods of anxiety in the past about

entryism from the left before, both indirectly (via Stalinist and later Trotskyist penetration of trades unions) and directly (through local party organisations).

The most high-profile of these was the concerted attempt by supporters of the Militant newspaper – the so-called [Militant Tendency](#) – to take over local party organisations in the 1970s and 1980s. At the high point of Militant success in the early 1980s, the organisation controlled Liverpool City Council and had two MPs: [Terry Fields](#) in Liverpool Broadgreen, and [Dave Nellist](#) in Coventry South East.



Lest we forget. [via Wikimedia Commons](#)

Other Trotskyist groups, such as the Socialist Workers' Party, eschewed direct entryism but try to cultivate what Lenin would have called “useful idiots”: fellow travellers on the left at all levels of the party who can be influenced to take particular lines on key issues.

More than 30 years after the heyday of Militant, the phenomenal success of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership campaign has led some to accuse the left of entryism once again. So how credible are these charges?

Given the new rules, and the phenomenal increase in the size of the party electorate that these (and Corbyn's campaign) have generated, it is inevitable that some Trotskyists, Greens and others will have been able to slip through the net. But it seems implausible that they have done so in sufficient numbers to account for Corbyn's popularity, let alone to skew the result of the election.

This view is echoed by the veteran Labour activist [Luke Akehurst](#), who is no friend of the wider left but who has dismissed the current panic over entryism. In a July [post](#) on the Labour List site, he attributed Corbyn's unexpected support to around 80,000 young and idealistic full party members who have joined since April, as well as another 20,000 registered supporters who have paid their £3 fee for the right to vote.

Crucially, as Akehurst points out, most of the new full members joined before Corbyn managed to secure the requisite number of parliamentary nominations just before the deadline on June 15. Clearly, this is not evidence of entryism on a significant scale.

## Heavy hands

All of this makes the Labour Party's heavy-handed attempts to vet new members and supporters all the more futile and self-defeating. Not only is the party shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted, it has also undermined the legitimacy of its own process.

If Corbyn wins the election, the entryism myth will fester in some elements of the party's Blairite rump and their supporters in the right-wing media. If Corbyn loses, the left will cry “fix” and a whole generation of young idealists will feel that their candidate's victory was snatched away by the party machine and the forces that control it. All of this simply to purge a handful of Trotskyists, fellow travellers, and attention-seeking comedians.

As my Australian political scientist colleague Rodney Smith pointed out to me, if the other candidates really want to stop Corbyn, they would do better to co-operate to game the preferential voting system to maximise the chances of one of them beating him on second preferences. Yet even this level of co-

ordination seems beyond the party machine at present.

So how is this going to turn out for the Labour Party and in particular for the tight, centre-right, elite that have determined its direction of travel for the last quarter of a century? Returning to the Iron Law of Oligarchy, Michels was very clear that “historical evolution mocks all of the prophylactic measures that have been adopted for the prevention of oligarchy.”

It remains to be seen who will have the last laugh this time.

[Charles Lees](#), Professor of Politics, [University of Bath](#)

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