

Invest in experts. Donate now and help share their message with a global audience.

[Donate now](#)

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Corbyn's nightmare and why Labour must allow a free vote on Syria intervention

November 27, 2015 4.59pm GMT



All is not well in the Labour camp. PA

Author



Eric Shaw

Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Stirling

It is Jeremy Corbyn's misfortune that he has had to confront an issue as divisive as **intervention in Syria** so early in his leadership. His dilemma is how to persuade the parliamentary party to endorse his view that airstrikes are morally and politically wrong while preventing the party from tearing itself apart.

There is widespread consensus among Labour parliamentarians about the need to address the threat of Islamic State and end the Syrian civil war. But there is also a genuine and wholly legitimate disagreement over whether extending UK airstrikes to Syria will, in any substantive way, contribute to those goals.

Reports suggest a majority of shadow cabinet members are likely to vote in favour of airstrikes. They include shadow lord chancellor Charles Falconer, deputy leader Tom Watson and, most significantly of all, shadow foreign secretary, Hilary Benn. Indeed a somewhat embarrassing public rift has opened

between Corbyn and Benn, with the latter expressing himself “convinced of the case for effective action.”

Corbyn’s response to his shadow cabinet rebuff was to appeal to the parliamentary party as a whole. He wrote a letter to all Labour MPs contending that David Cameron had not explained how additional UK bombing would improve the situation in Syria when he presented his latest plan to parliament on November 26.

This was not a surprising stance for Corbyn to take, but the fact that he had written to the MPs over the heads of his shadow cabinet, was widely seen in the Parliamentary Labour Party as unusual, unwise and undiplomatic.

The fact that he took this step reflects the unique position he finds himself in. Corbyn probably has less front-bench support than any previous Labour leader. And despite being incredibly popular among the wider Labour membership, he also has very little backing within the PLP – only 10% voted for him. Nor is there any sign of him making any progress in expanding his parliamentary power base.

Indeed never in the party’s history has the authority, power and standing of a Labour leader been lower than it is today (though according to a recent YouGov poll Corbyn remains very popular among members).

Dissent in the ranks

Usually on an issue as important as Syria, the PLP would reach a collective decision and expect all its members to comply with it. But here we enter a grey area. Who has the right to decide the party’s position and set a **three-line whip**: the PLP, the shadow cabinet or the leader?

Normally this is not a problem. It is very rare for the three bodies to disagree on a major question. (In one instance where they did, over Harold Wilson’s industrial relations proposals the PM was forced to back down due to resistance both in the cabinet and on the backbenches).



The shadow cabinet, in more harmonious times. PA/Sean Dempsey

It is difficult to imagine on what constitutional authority Corbyn could impose a three-line whip to make his MPs vote against intervention in Syria (though reports initially suggested this is what he had in mind). If he took this rash step, front-bench resignations would follow, which would be highly destabilising. Equally, if the majority of the shadow cabinet sought to defy Corbyn by enforcing a three-line whip to make MPs vote for intervention in Syria, public ridicule would ensue.

In either case the outcome would be mass defiance of the whip and a further intensification of already rancorous internal strife within the party.

Because of all this, there seems little realistic option but to agree to a free vote (which the leader's chief ally, the shadow chancellor John McDonnell, favours anyway). There is a growing expectation that this is what Corbyn and his colleagues will choose.

How will they vote?

This leaves the question of how, precisely, Labour MPs will vote. A free vote will leave them vulnerable to criticism from the grassroots because they won't be able to blame their vote on being whipped into line.

MPs are already deeply worried (perhaps excessively so) about the activities of **Momentum** – the group established to organise and institutionalise support for Corbyn among those who voted for him. They fear the threat of deselection will be wielded over them to keep them in line.

Corbyn's camp is hoping grassroots pressure will persuade Labour MPs to vote against Syrian military intervention. But that pressure will only serve to further strain relations between the leader and the bulk of MPs.

A free vote will, the media will claim, demonstrate and publicise divisions within the PLP. And indeed it will. It will also offer the spectacle of MPs voting according to their conscience on the basis of reasoned deliberation over the merits of the case on an issue of fundamental importance to the nation. How odd.



[Parliament](#) [Syria](#) [UK politics](#) [Labour Party](#) [Jeremy Corbyn](#)

Before you go...

The rancorous EU referendum campaign and Brexit negotiations have been marked by lies and half-truths from politicians happy to obscure the facts. Please support The Conversation to ensure our academic experts can continue applying cool analysis to the most heated of arguments.

[Donate now](#)

Laura Hood

Politics Editor

