

Labour leadership contest: where each of the five candidates sits on the political spectrum

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Thornberry and Starmer: both hoping to succeed Corbyn. PA/Gareth Fuller

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Received wisdom amongst political scientists is that a major electoral defeat is the main propellant of change in a party's leadership, programme and strategy. Underpinning this argument is the presumption that the self-evident, rational way to restore a party's fortunes is to move to the middle ground.

But such a view takes far too little account of the irreducible elements of uncertainty, unpredictability and non-rational behaviour in political life. It is never easy to judge precisely what will resonate with voters.

The absence of any obvious way of reviving the party's electoral fortunes renders Labour's election contest more open – and more difficult to call. All the candidates occupy somewhat different political positions, though in some cases the differences are not great.

A line up of five candidates has passed the first hurdle in the race by securing the nominations of 10% of Labour parliamentarians. Here's the essential information on each.

Keir Starmer

Formerly Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer was only elected to parliament in 2015. During much of the time since, he has occupied frontbench positions (most notably shadow Brexit secretary). This has constrained his ability to comment freely so we don't have much detailed information on what his real position is on many Labour policies.

That said, of course, he clearly does not belong to the Corbynista wing of the party. While he sought consensus on Brexit, he has been open about being a Remainer and wanting a second referendum.

Starmer has stressed his commitment to the policies contained in Labour's 2019 manifesto, though he plainly has an eye to wooing Labour's predominantly left-wing membership. His natural position, one can surmise, lies on the soft left of the party.

A man with an impressive intellect and a sharp mind, and possessing formidable debating skills, in a number of respects Starmer resembles Labour's tragically short-lived leader, John Smith. As leader one can anticipate that cool reason, intellectual rigour and pragmatism will be his watchwords.

Rebecca Long-Bailey

Shadow Business Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey was a protégé of Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, who lauded her as a "brilliant leader" in waiting. As part of the inner Corbyn circle she has inevitably been dubbed the "continuity candidate".

She has portrayed herself as a leader who can be "trusted with our socialist agenda" and is "totally committed" to the manifesto's policies.



Long-Bailey: The continuity candidate?

Long-Bailey has recently sought to etch a more independent profile for herself and has conceded that, under Jeremy Corbyn, Labour didn't act quickly or robustly enough on antisemitism. But her record was one of unflinching and unquestioning support for Corbyn and she must be aware that her appeal to outside of the radical left would be minimal.

Intriguingly not all the Corbynistas appear to be enthusiastic about her candidature with both Ian Lavery and Barry Gardner being (abortively) floated as rival candidates from the left. Long-Bailey will be able to rely upon the organising flair, experience and energy and of the pro-Corbyn Momentum faction but it's unclear whether that will suffice to overcome her reputation as a somewhat wooden and uninspiring communicator.

Lisa Nandy

Lisa Nandy has been an MP since 2010. She is the daughter of the well-known academic Dipak Nandy and the granddaughter of the Liberal politician, Frank Byers. Her ideological position (along with that of Long-Bailey) is the most easily defined of all the candidates. She is a prominent member of Labour's soft left and has worked closely with the soft-left pressure group, Compass.

Nandy has also been associated with the “Blue Labour” tendency, which was most influential during the leadership of Ed Miliband. This school of thought was critical of both New Labour’s market-oriented stances and of centralist and statist approaches to government. It stressed the importance of community, co-operation and social solidarity, very much in the old traditions of ethical socialism.

Nandy has called for the party to give a much higher priority to tackling the problems of urban neglect and decay in towns such as the one she represents, Wigan, not least through a process of empowerment. She has also warned the party against allowing patriotism “to become the exclusive property of the right in British politics”. If Starmer comes across as the weightiest and more authoritative of the candidates, Nandy is the most intellectually innovative.

Jess Phillips

Jess Phillips, first elected to parliament in 2015, has been a vocal and vehement critic of the Corbyn leadership. She has dispensed with the conventional ambiguities and equivocations of politics and has impressed some by her outspokenness.



Lisa Nandy: innovative thinker. PA/Danny Lawson



Jess Phillips: openly critical of Corbyn. PA/Dominic Lipinski

Though she disavows allegiance to any wing of the party it would not be unfair to place her on the party’s centre-right – indeed it is with the “centrists” or “the moderates” that much of her support lies. It seems reasonable to assume that, in the unlikely eventuality of her being elected, she would abandon or dilute most of the more radical policies adopted under Corbyn.

Emily Thornberry

Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry narrowly squeaked through the first stage of Labour's nominating procedure. She is, nevertheless, nominally the most senior of the competitors. Elected in 2005, she is politically the most experienced having served in a series of frontbench positions under Ed Miliband and Corbyn.

Though emphatically not of the radical left, Thornberry proved willing to work with Corbyn though she sometimes struggled to conceal her private reservations. Since the election, she has been candid and forthright in her criticisms of the current leader. Not unduly weighed down by ideological baggage she has shown herself to be a politician of considerable acumen, tenacity and drive, but is not universally trusted. If she reaches the final stage of the contest, her appeal will primarily be to the soft left and to the centrists. Her problem will be that in neither group will she be the most favoured candidate.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this election for Labour's future. Corbyn's election in 2015 fundamentally reshaped the parameters of Labour's politics over the following four or so years. If Starmer (or Phillips or Nandy) were to win the leadership, the era of the radical left's ascendancy in the party will rapidly be brought to a close. The stakes are high.

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