

The Guardian's Owen Jones: A political health warning

By Julie Hyland
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Those who come last to Jesus come hardest. Such is the case with *Guardian* columnist, Owen Jones.

Since last week's general election, which saw a revival of Labour support under Jeremy Corbyn that has left Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May heading a minority government, Jones has been offering up mea culpas.

Describing the election result as “one of the most sensational political upsets of our time,” Jones gave an “unreserved and heartfelt apology” to Corbyn, his supporters and advisers. This was in penance for the role he has played in efforts to get Corbyn to stand down, under the admonishment that unless he did so Labour was finished.

While Labour still lost the election, Corbyn's left rhetoric enabled it to recover from its catastrophic result in 2015. Not only did Labour's vote increase by 10 percent to 40 percent of those cast, it proved immensely attractive to young workers and students—gaining the support of two-thirds of those aged 18 to 25 years and more than half of those aged between 25 to 35 years.

More importantly, this increase came despite, or rather as a vote of hostility toward those within the Parliamentary Labour Party who effectively sided with the Tories to work for Corbyn's defeat—including supporting votes for other parties.

Jones refers only obliquely to his part in this campaign, noting in passing that it had led journalists to suggest, “I should be knighted by the Tory party for my efforts.”

He should not be so coy. He backed Corbyn in the first 2015 Labour leadership contest but only, as he admits, because he was expected to lose.

Jones has explained that Corbyn “stood not to win the leadership, but to shift the political agenda. When it was clear he was going to win—not the initial point of the campaign at all—he would be a transitional figure whose job would be to shift the party to the left and democratise it, until in 2017 or 2018 another candidate would take over to win an election.” (*Medium*, March 20, 2017)

Even so, “many felt anxious”, he wrote. “Winning the leadership, after all, had not been the point of the exercise.” (*Guardian*, March 1, 2017)

No one was more anxious than Jones, who had written to reassure Labour's right of his loyalty in the run-up to the contest. “[I]t's people like me who are the true holders of the Blairite flame,” he pledged. “[I]t is the left that is championing New Labour's legacy, trying desperately to save it from the Tories.” (

Guardian, July 22, 2015)

His anxiety increased following the shock Leave result in the June 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union. Labour's right-wing—with the support of the military and intelligence apparatus—immediately launched an attempted coup against Corbyn with a vote of no-confidence. Now the removal of anyone associated with the left became intertwined with efforts to refashion Labour as an instrument for overturning the Leave vote.

It was not the blatantly anti-democratic character of yet another putsch attempt—complete with denunciations of “Trots” and mass suspensions and expulsions—that energised Jones but “the nature and timing of this coup.... Why not wait two or three weeks and launch a stalking-horse challenge instead of shutting down the workings of the official opposition in the midst of Britain's greatest crisis since 1945?” he advised. (*Guardian*, July 14, 2016).

In the run-up to the second contest, Jones deliberately played down the vicious campaign by the Blairite right, insisting that Corbyn's supporters had “questions to answer too.”

Warning that “a snap election is entirely plausible,” he forecast that “thanks to the actions of all sides of the Labour party—Labour faces electoral oblivion.”

In the wake of Corbyn's re-election on an even larger mandate, Jones upped his game. Arguing that “socialism without power is slogans,” he spent much of the last year preparing for yet another leadership challenge—this time to be contested by his favoured candidate, Clive Lewis, serving up warmed-over Blairism that would be acceptable to the PLP.

Any fight against “the 172”—the number of Labour MPs who had voted no confidence in Corbyn—was a diversion from the anti-Tory battle. “Talk of mandatory reselections should be abandoned” and “[c]ommon ground should be emphasised,” he stressed. (*Guardian*, September 22, 2016)

While Jones preached “peace” with the right-wing, he went to war against Corbyn's supporters. This acquired particular urgency as May prepared to trigger Article 50, beginning the formal process of Britain exiting the EU. Jones, as with much of the Labour Party including Corbyn, supported Remain.

If Corbyn is “unable to confront the multiple existential crises enveloping Labour,” he wrote, “then an agreement should be struck where he can stand down in exchange for the guarantee of an MP from the new generation on the ballot paper who is committed to the policies that inspired Corbyn's supporters in the first place.” (*Guardian*, March 1, 2017)

No mention was made of the fact that it was the repeated attacks by Labour's right that accounted for these "existential crises."

As his pleas fell on deaf ears, Jones became shrill: "My passionate and sincere view is Jeremy Corbyn should stand down as soon as possible in exchange for another left-wing MP being allowed to stand on for leadership in his place: all to stop both Labour and the left imploding, which is what is currently on the cards." (*Medium*, March 20, 2017)

On March 29, May triggered Article 50. Three weeks later, she called a snap poll, two years ahead of schedule. Her aim was to utilise Labour's crisis to push through even deeper austerity measures and attacks on the working class in line with her policy of a so-called "hard Brexit".

Jones reluctantly and forlornly called for a Labour vote. His suggestion that "Corbyn stand down" so as to "save his policies...from being buried in the rubble of a terrible election defeat" had been rejected, he wrote. Now it was necessary to unite and "do our very best to prevent a Tory landslide that would be calamitous for the country."

"This referendum is about Brexit above all else," he opined. (*Guardian*, April 18, 2017)

Jones now presents this cowardly track record as his being taken in by media propaganda. "I came to believe that... Labour was heading for a terrible defeat that would crush all the things I believed in," he writes. "Having one foot in the Labour movement and one in the mainstream media undoubtedly left me more susceptible to their groupthink." (*Guardian*, June 9, 2017)

Please! One year before, Jones responded to accusations that he was the victim of such media "groupthink" by denying that the "Guardian have gagged me, or I have spent so long there I have succumbed to 'Guardianitis': a liberal disdain for the radical left, essentially." (July 31, 2016)

In point of fact, there is no difference between the media village and his so-called "Labour movement". Jones has plied his trade with liberal references as to how his parents were members of the Militant (now Socialist Party) in the 1980s. This was at the time when leading members of the organisation were expelled from Labour as the path was cleared for New Labour and Blair. Having graduated from Cambridge University in 2005, he went straight into that section of Labour's parliamentary apparatus gathered around the Socialist Campaign Group. Working first for Corbyn's ally, John McDonnell, his associates include many from around the various factions of the Pabloites and Stalinists, including Corbyn himself, and his leading advisers, Andrew Fisher, Seamus Milne and Steve Howell. As Jones writes, "This isn't a milieu that I know well: it's a milieu I'm part of." (*Guardian*, July 31, 2016)

What permeates these pseudo-left circles, and what characterises all of Jones' writing, is agreement that there cannot be any revival of socialism, let alone revolutionary politics. As an example: "...when I was growing up, to even mention left-wing ideas was to inevitably invite derision: oh here we go, back to Michael Foot, Labour's 1983 electoral disaster". (*Guardian*, July 31, 2016)

"Blairism, New Labour... owed its hegemony to, frankly, despair: the idea that socialist policies were electoral poison, and offering them to the British people would invite only landslide Tory victories." (*Guardian*, June 13, 2017)

As for the working class, the only time it has been mentioned by these privileged petty bourgeois layers, it is invariably prefaced by "white" and depicted as conservative, racist and nationalist.

For years, Jones' constant theme has been that the failure to capture Labour for the left was proof that the programme of socialist revolution is pie in the sky.

Everything is viewed through the narrow, nationalist prism of British Labourism and its fortunes, and is completely divorced from the real conditions of life faced by workers and youth. Thus, Jones rationalises his previous opposition to Corbyn on the grounds that what mattered was that the "leadership would have to have a sophisticated strategy to reach beyond the tiny proportion of the population who are politicised left-wingers..." (*Guardian*, March 20, 2017)

To Jones' surprise, an anti-austerity and anti-war stance struck a chord with millions. That is why Corbyn and the Labour leadership are now busily rowing back, watering down their "left" message still further. If workers and youth will embrace socialistic phrases uttered by a party intent on suppressing them, how would they respond to the real deal?

Jones now insists, "Labour is now permanently transformed. Its policy programme is unchallengeable." (*Guardian*, June 9, 2017)

But his pronouncements to this end are just as worthless as his previous musings. This is a man who foresaw nothing, and whose advice should come with a political health warning. If he is now presenting himself as an ally of those millions of workers and youth who voted for Corbyn in the expectation that he would reverse neo-liberalism and take the fight to the Tories and Labour's right-wing, it is only so as to better help strangle that movement in the crib.

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