

A Can a bearded vegetarian pacifist become the occupant of number 10 Downing Street?

B I beg your pardon?

A Of course I'm talking about Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of Her Majesty's opposition and a politician who's been having a bumpy ride. Last September he was elected leader of the Labour Party and he's been in the media spotlight ever since.

B Oh yes, but according to reports in the mainstream media, he seems to be unelectable in a general election.

A Aren't you making up your mind rather quickly about an important figure? After all the opposition is a bulwark of democracy, without it we'd be living in a one-party state.

B He's on the record as saying he's opposed to nuclear weapons. How can you be a prime minister and refuse to press the button in the event of a nuclear war? Even his own shadow foreign secretary Hilary Benn argued against his position on the intervention in Syria during a debate in the House of Commons.

A Corbyn allowed a free vote so party members could vote according to their conscience. Concerning the nuclear issue, isn't it the sort of hypothetical question that's designed as a trap for unwary politicians? It's hardly at the top of the list of voters' concerns, which are jobs, housing and healthcare.

B That may well be. He's also said that he doesn't believe that terrorists should be shot dead by the forces of law and order.

A I understand he's said that he supports the rule of law, which presumably means he believes terrorists should be arrested and charged with criminal offences. But isn't this the sort of highly emotive issue that's used as a smokescreen to divert attention away from more pressing concerns such as inequality and the spread of poverty in Britain?

B Well, I suppose you could argue that these are questions of character and judgement. The nuclear war scenario may be far-fetched, but sadly the reality of security threats from terrorists isn't likely to disappear from the political landscape in the near future.

A Corbyn signals a shift in style for the Labour Party. He was elected by the grassroots and he won a landslide victory with a popular campaign. He can thank Ed Milliband, his predecessor, for changing the rules. Ed Milliband introduced the new system so that people could become members of the party for just three pounds and then vote in the leadership election. Corbyn's been a Member of Parliament for over thirty years and he's an old-fashioned socialist who believes in fairness. He's got a reputation for honesty and integrity and sticking to his principles.

B He also has a penchant for hand-knitted woolly jumpers and he's voted against his own side in the House of Commons more than any other member.

A Yes, he's clearly his own man and a world away from the slick image-conscious politician who consults focus groups and spin doctors. That's why he appealed to a large contingent of new members. He was a breath of fresh air and a reaction to the Tony Blair years which saw the party embroiled in wars in the Middle-East which proved easier to enter into than to exit from. If politics is a pendulum it would seem to have swung the other way. B But hasn't it swung in favour of David Cameron and the Tories who comfortably won the 2015 election that was supposed to be a cliff-hanger? The Tories are now well ahead in the opinion polls. Tony Blair was an extremely successful politician in terms of winning elections. Jeremy's critics are convinced he cannot replicate that sort of electoral success.

A It's early days so maybe they should give him a chance. Who would have backed Barack Obama as president before a wave of popular support carried him into the White House? Margaret Thatcher was a very successful politician who didn't compromise, so if it can work for the right why not for the left? Politics is an unpredictable business as the general public can throw a spanner in the works and spring a surprise.

B I'm afraid I still remain unconvinced.

A That may well be - but shouldn't we base our judgement on reasoned debate and not biased opinion?

### **Outline**

Ed Milliband, the former Labour Party leader, introduced the system which enables people to become members of the party for just three pounds and then vote in the leadership election. Jeremy Corbyn is clearly his own man and a world away from the slick image-conscious politician who consults focus groups. He appealed to a large contingent of new party members and was elected leader of the Labour Party with a landslide victory last September. Jeremy Corbyn is a breath of fresh air and a reaction to the Tony Blair years, but according to mainstream media reports, he seems to be unelectable in a general election. Politics is an unpredictable business, however. Who would have backed Barack Obama as president before a wave of popular support carried him into the White House?

### **Questions**

- 1 Is there much of a difference between Jeremy Corbyn and Tony Blair ?
- 2 Do British politicians seem to be different from politicians in other European countries?
- 3 Can the way a politician dresses have an influence on voters? What other factors influence them?
- 4 Does politics in Britain seem to be very different from politics in your own country?