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## THE CONVERSATION

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Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has been suspended from the party, now led by Keir Starmer.

# Inside the politics of Keir Starmer's decision to suspend Jeremy Corbyn from the Labour party

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Why was Jeremy Corbyn suspended from the Labour party? There has been some confusion over this point since the announcement that the whip had been removed from the party's former leader on October 29.

The decision was made because of the way Corbyn responded to a damning report published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission into the problem of antisemitism in Labour.

He said: "One antisemite is one too many, but the scale of the problem was also dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents inside and outside the party, as well as by much of the media."

On the same day, current leader Keir Starmer warned that he would not tolerate anyone seeking to downplay the problem. He added that the Labour Party would not "tolerate the argument that denies or minimises antisemitism on the basis that it's been exaggerated".

### Author



**Eric Shaw**

Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Stirling

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The problem with this is that while people may be misguided and wrong-headed in claiming that the scale of antisemitism had been grossly exaggerated, nowhere in Labour's rule book is this a sanctionable offence. As a very eminent barrister Starmer will be aware of this.

So far the nature of the offences for which Corbyn will be investigated and for which he may be expelled if found guilty have yet to be spelt out. But it would be naive to believe that this is simply about rule-breaking.

In full: Keir Starmer responds to Labour anti-Semi...



Starmer's statement on the EHRC report.

Plainly, the whole issue of antisemitism in the Labour party is, for Starmer, a deeply moral one. And he clearly feels strongly about it. Antisemitism, he has insisted, is a cancerous growth which Corbyn failed to surgically remove, instead allowing it to fester.

Equally, Starmer has signalled that he feels let down by his predecessor. He believes he had received assurances from Corbyn that he would respond to the report in a calm, measured and contrite way. It may even be that he regards his predecessor's adamant and even provocative response to the report as a challenge to his own authority.

This is where the politics comes in. Following the precedents of Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair, Starmer may well have calculated that by suspending Corbyn he could project himself to the wider public as a tough, resolute and courageous leader capable of taking difficult and unpopular decisions. From this perspective the suspension was a useful way of reiterating and reinforcing the message that Labour

was now “under new leadership” and that the Corbynite left was now a spent force, relegated to the party’s margins.

But suspension is a risky move. It threatens to re-ignite the fratricidal conflict in the party which proved so damaging in the Corbyn years. A key issue is how the Corbynite left (the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs, Momentum and the various hard left websites) react.

The Corbyn left is less monolithic and homogenous than is often supposed. Evidence from recent inside accounts indicate a persistent divide between the more pragmatic (John McDonnell, Rebecca Long-Bailey) and the more obdurate (such as Corbyn’s former chief of staff, Karie Murphy, his senior adviser, Seumas Milne and the Unite union leader, Len McCluskey).

There is certainly a vocal and vociferous group that favours an adversarial strategy and which senses betrayal in Starmer. They will mobilise rank and file opposition to the decision to suspend Corbyn. But there are others who favour a strategy of constructive engagement.

### **What do the grassroots say?**

A key issue is how the membership will respond. The leadership election suggests that between 25% and 30% – those who voted for Rebecca Long-Bailey – are adherents of the Corbynite left. One can anticipate that many among this group will be angry at the suspension. Those on the right of the party, also a minority, will be delighted.

This leaves those we can loosely call the soft left – those who voted for Corbyn in 2015 and 2016 and for Starmer in 2020. Many will feel a residual affection for Corbyn and resent his harsh treatment. On the other hand they will be averse to any steps that might undermine Starmer and destabilise the party. Much will depend how the two considerations balance out. My guess is that Starmer will be able to exploit the instinctive loyalty of much of Labour’s rank and file and their disapproval of anyone who rocks the boat.



Corbyn leaves home on the day of the report's release. PA/Aaron Chown

Voters like displays of strong leadership and Starmer's standing in the polls will probably receive a significant boost by the disciplining of Corbyn. But the danger is an upsurge of conflict in the party, and the polarising tendencies which have been so disruptive in recent years.

The new leader will have to tread carefully, avoid further moves that might offend party opinion (such as abandoning too many radical policies) and perhaps reach out the hand of friendship to those on the Corbyn left who are prepared to cooperate. The full expulsion of Corbyn, if that occurs, will not help.

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**Jonathan Este**  
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