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Political science, punditry, and the Corbyn problem

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Jeremy Corbyn's continued leadership of the Labour party, both the number and enthusiasm of his supporters, and Labour's better than predicted performance at the 2017 General Election, has been contrary to the expectations of many pundits and political scientists. This is not to say that political scientists *should* have 'called Corbyn' or necessarily be anything close to 100% accurate in predictions about future events – we shouldn't, and arguably prediction is an increasingly oversold role of the discipline. All the same, this contrast between expectations and reality has been made especially obvious owing to the very public way in which many pundits and political scientists declared that Corbyn would not last too long in his job and, while remaining in it, would perform catastrophically badly. Since 2015, a good many of us have made contributions to public debates that have then taken on new life as part of an ongoing narrative about Corbyn and his Labour party that continually plays out in print, broadcast, and social media.[i] This raises questions about the substantive content of these contributions and calls for some speculation as to their source or motivation.

My claim in this paper is that the manner in which Corbyn and his supporters were discussed by prominent political scientists and pundits was reflective of an underlying generally dismissive attitude towards the political dynamics that his candidacy and subsequent leadership represented and have set in motion. I contribute to ongoing discussion in this area (Dean 2016, 2017; Hayton 2018) by clarifying and discussing the form of the so-called 'Corbyn problem' present within the UK political punditry and political science community (Dean 2016).

Richard Hayton has observed that, 'the widespread failure to anticipate—or perhaps more importantly, adequately account for—the rise of Corbyn and Labour's unexpectedly strong performance in the 2017 general election reflects the fact that key tenets of British politics are being challenged on multiple fronts' (2018, p.9). Although we are not, as a discipline, quite at 'economics in 2008' levels of crisis (Earle et al. 2017), the current moment seems to call for some self-reflection.

In this paper, I do three things. First, I identify a group of intensely-politically involved individuals who collectively hold the power to shape shared political meanings and understandings and locate some mainstream British political scientists within it. Second, I outline five points of opposition that this group had to Corbyn, demonstrating that although their contributions often have the appearance of objectivity, they are normative in nature and largely conform to a dominant ideological standpoint seemingly shared among the group. Taken together, I claim that these are demonstrative of a kind of epistemic snobbery towards a political movement that this group found suspect in both content and form. Third, I reflect more explicitly on the role of British political science in this context. I argue that there are concerns around how our inculcation into this group, which seems likely to escalate, might be affecting our academic endeavours as well as how we present ourselves and our work to the wider public.

Identifying the intensely politically-involved

When I speak of the intensely politically-involved I have in mind a group of individuals who hold positions of social power that allow them to shape dominant conceptions of politics and political activity. These people make a lot of the proverbial political weather and are continually

asked to comment on it in some sort of professional capacity. They include prominent members of the news media, notable academics or other leading political professionals, and former or current politicians who are especially influential or highly thought-of within the two previous groups. Indeed, the chances are that if you are reading this paper, you are one of these people or have the potential (in terms of resources, education, connections, and so on) to become one of them. It's a category that is perhaps wider in scope than the oft-referred to 'political class', but more limited than 'the elite' or 'the establishment' (Jones 2015; Allen 2018).

The increasing role of this group in public political discussions can be seen as part of a wider pattern of professional specialisation in the political sphere: whereas once politics might have been the domain of jobbing amateurs aided by a relatively small supporting cast of assistants, political institutions and politics have, over time, professionalised and specialised (Cairney 2007; Allen and Cairney 2017). Broadly, this has led to a 'desynchronisation of political and quotidian experience' leaving many people in a situation where 'the temptation is to leave the formidable task of keeping up' with news and current events 'to others and particularly to the mass media' (Coleman 2018, p.165). As Aeron Davis notes, 'British-based elites' have over time transformed national institutions into 'organisations for dealing with other elites rather than catering to publics and society' (2018, p.23). In sum, politics has arguably become a distinct and specialised professional field in and of itself.

One indicator of this specialisation lies in the occupational backgrounds of national-level legislators prior to their election. Patterns in the UK Parliament are relatively clear, with a growing number of MPs having professional experience in politics prior to their election – this

has risen from under five per cent in 1983 to over fifteen per cent in 2015 (Criddle 2015). Although not a total domination of political assemblies by any stretch, the rise of the professional politician, forged through their experience of explicitly political labour prior to becoming an elected representative, is notable. Linked to legislative composition is a broader kind of labour specialization that has accelerated since the late 1980s when legislatures increased the scale of their staffing operations in order to cope with the volume and pace of the work they were expected to complete (Romzek and Utter 1997). Others have linked specialization to wider democratic decline, seeing the 'professionalisation of parties, in terms of increased full-time staff…as a consequence and part of this decline: a change towards more professionalised organizations in which grassroots activists are replaced by full-time employees' (Karlsen and Saglie 2017, p.3). The numbers of political staff employed by political parties, political institutions, and individual politicians has grown steadily since this time as have efforts to streamline their work once in post (Shogan 2006).

A prominent section of the intensely-involved are political journalists, particularly political columnists, also known as the 'commentariat' or 'punditocracy' (Duff 2008). Opinion, rather than reporting, has come to claim a larger role in the British journalistic landscape in the past two decades (Blumler and Coleman 2010). In the British case, it is increasingly common for the columnists themselves to become part of the story, supplementing their published writings with frequent commentary on political events, but also their own lives, on Twitter. There is also a revolving door of sorts between explicitly political roles and more journalistic or commentary-focused roles. Take Nick Timothy, for example, the former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Theresa May. Prior to working in Downing Street, Timothy worked within the Conservative Party's Research Department, the Home Office (with May), an education charity

and has, following his resignation in 2017, been a columnist for the Daily Telegraph. Many other political commentators fit part or all of this same bill, working closely with, and constantly writing about, senior politicians of all parties. To put it another way, although these individuals may hold different positions, they exist firmly within the same world (Duff 2008; Davis 2018).

Alongside this, political parties are increasingly outsourcing work on campaigns and ongoing political work to professional consultants of various kinds. In doing so, the focus is on the perceived non-partisan political expertise of such individuals, not solely the strength or content of their political beliefs (e.g. Issenberg 2012). Supplementing core networks of partisan political staffers is a cottage industry of campaign consultants, policy consultants, and media liaisons. Many of these, notably Theo Bertram, Jo Green, Mark Pack, and Hopi Sen have gone on to offer ongoing political commentary online via Twitter, their own blogs, and the media.[ii] Also in such networks, one would expect to find think-tank employees, academics in the role of 'policy intellectuals', specific taskforces or focused units within government, and charity or other third-sector actors (Ball and Exley 2010, p.152).

A prominent and growing group of British political scientists now also exist firmly within the milieu of intensely-politically involved individuals described here. I admit that this group remains a minority of the discipline and there is a risk of exaggerating the role and importance of this group. I think there are, however, good reasons to take note of these activities nonetheless. First, the profile of British political science has almost certainly risen among other elements of the intensely politically-involved. Although it is hard to quantify this with any precision, it is increasingly common for members of the British political science community to write comment pieces for national newspapers, to appear on TV or radio discussing political

events, and to appear at Westminster-based events hosted by think-tanks or political parties.[iii] This is not to say that the activity of 'impact' is necessarily new (Pearce and Evans 2018), but the general standing and relevance of the discipline seems to have increased in these circles in recent years, and these activities have entered the mainstream of academic life. Second, this is happening owing to a growing number of incentives to participate in these activities. We are increasingly doing political science in public as a result of both the instrumental incentives offered by REF and the research councils of the UK (Flinders and John 2013), as well as a sense that public-facing activities are something we *should* be doing, normatively speaking (Flinders 2013). So-called 'impact activities' have been found to be perceived by academics as related to various measures of career success (Chubb and Reed 2018), something that suggests this pattern is likely to reproduce itself to some extent. Third, those political scientists who do achieve a larger than average profile among the intensely politically-involved become *de facto* ambassadors for the discipline within this group and those members of the public at large who are paying attention. Again, although a numerically small group, therefore, they will loom large in public perceptions of the discipline. Consequently, the discipline as a whole should, ideally, care about this. For better or worse, I argue that this leaves British political science as part of this group, albeit still a minor player in relative terms – we are in positions of power and influence, helping to shape collective meanings and understandings of politics. As a discipline (or at least parts of a discipline), our influence has reached a point where 'concerns have...been raised that British politics scholars...are, consciously or not, at risk of being co-opted into the 'Westminster bubble' which...might also compromise the impartiality of the researchers themselves, or at least circumscribe the questions they are willing to explore' (Hayton 2018, p.9). As I will discuss further later on, the way in which we use this power and influence, and how we present the discipline to the public, matters.

Taken together, we might consider the intensely politically-involved as bearing some characteristics of an epistemic community (Haas 1991) or thought collective (Fleck 1935), within which assumptions regarding what counts as a relevant domain-specific epistemic good are largely shared. Stephen Coleman, discussing the media specifically, writes

> Members of the 'commentariat', who earn their living by asserting the boundaries of descriptive and predictive political reality, can be insensitive to accounts of human experience that unsettle their normative assumptions…expert commentators tend to draw upon a narrow explanatory range which at its worst generates an impression of complacent knowingness (2018, p.164).

Within this group, discussion is often self-referential and takes the form of discipline-specific or technical language that Thomas Christiano refers to as 'esoteric': 'statements within the area of expertise whose truth value is very difficult if not impossible for someone outside the community of experts to ascertain' (2012, p.37). Historically, this might not have mattered so much as the kind of technical and esoteric discussion undertaken by this group would have been more likely to place almost exclusively in academic journals or through private interactions but increasingly such discussions take place in public, often on social media platform Twitter (Hayton 2018). Historically, it is also unlikely that any evaluation or comment would have been instantaneous; technology, mainly via the invention of social media and a changing media business model, has made any contributions along such lines more rapid.

This comes together in a political culture that is 'intense, insular and self-referencing...evolv[ing] rapidly through a plethora of exchanges and communication' (Davis 2018, p.69). The conversations have a distinct flavour: an interest in process over substance, a preference for certain kinds of knowledge, primarily statistics, and a mode of engagement that is at pains to assert its political objectivity. As a result, individuals who are able and willing to participate on these terms are best placed to do so, and to be heard. These are likely to be:

> Network of intellectual labourers that spans the universities, political parties, political staffers, interest group associations, and parts of the administration. These are experts in economics, sociology, law, political science, and the natural sciences. They influence the making and evaluation of policy. But they also monitor the processes and outcomes of policy-making and can broadcast their opinions on these matters (Christiano 2012, p.35).

There are also compositional concerns regarding this group. Given that these positions are socially powerful and that evidence suggests certain groups of society gain disproportionate access to these positions, the worry is that these individuals might not only think alike in certain ways, they may well *be* alike. Of course, these two facts are likely related. As Coleman puts it, 'the capacity to select, frame and prioritise events is unequally shared, with a few dominant voices blaring their messages with relentless intensity, while other atomised and marginalised voices are all but drowned out, even when they represent a widely shared perspective' (2018, p.164). Jeffrey Green refers to this legacy of inequality as the 'shadow of unfairness', 'the

plutocratic incursion of socioeconomic status into the spheres of educational and political opportunity' (2016, p.5).

A broad church of research has established the enormous scale of inequality in income, wealth, health, education, social capital, and political influence that persists around the world, including in Britain and other advanced democracies. These inequalities begin to influence individuals' lives even prior to their birth (see Barry 2005) and then prodigiously follow them to the grave. Income inequality increased markedly in the UK between the late 1970s and mid-1990s (Lindert 2000) and has remained relatively stable in the 20 or so years since. Inequality, specifically being at the sharp end of it, has since been linked to decreasing or low levels of political participation (Evans and Tilley 2017). In politics, we know that men, members of ethnic majorities, and the privately-educated, among others, are more likely to end up as Members of Parliament (MPs) than the average member of British society (Allen 2018). Considering the societal elite more generally, there is wide-ranging evidence that attending an elite private school can leave you up to '94 times more likely to take up an elite position than individuals attending other schools' (Reeves et al. 2017, p.1160). Similar findings exist even in cases where social mobility is in evidence, showing that higher status (and more powerful) occupations are less likely to be entered by those who gain access to them as a consequence of upward mobility (Friedman et al. 2015). Of particular relevance to the case I am making here, evidence has shown that journalism and academia are both industries dominated by those from middle-class backgrounds (Friedman et al. 2017).

These compositional distortions should be borne in mind while considering what follows. Without suggesting a deterministic link, these data should force us to think about the existence

of this group in terms of power; especially the preservation of longstanding accumulations of power, but also the desire to be close to such power, perhaps in the hope that some of (the benefits of) it might fall your way. Briefly, I would raise two specific concerns. First, these data suggest that those who find themselves in a position where they are able to shape and enforce dominant conceptions of politics are likely to be beneficiaries (broadly conceived) of the inequalities outlined above. Consequently, the kinds of activities and behaviours valued by those holding this power will also be disproportionately held by others who are similarly already socially-powerful. Second is the possibility that the expectations shaped and maintained by this group, reflecting longstanding unequal relations of power within society, are unlikely to grant too much epistemic authority to individuals holding views that offer any serious challenge to the status quo. There is the potential, therefore, that those advocating social change are going to struggle to be taken seriously by those who hold the power to shape dominant meanings and conceptions of valid political opinions and activities and who could potentially aid the political success of their ideas.

Mapping the 'Corbyn problem'

Having established the existence of this group, I identify five core elements in how the intensely-politically involved reacted to Corbyn, arguing that, taken together, these comprise a relatively unified ideologically-constructed opposition to him, his supporters, and his ideas. I resist defining 'Corbynism', primarily because such an exercise would be one of intellectual history that I could do not do justice to here. Additionally, comparing various accounts against a 'true' or 'authentic' one would be somewhat missing the point, as my target is those very accounts, accurate or otherwise.

Ideology

The first feature of the intensely politically-involved's opposition to Corbyn (and his supporters) is *explicitly* ideological in nature, whereby commentators railed against the hard-left and focused on the supposedly likely consequences of Corbyn taking power. These bear the obvious hallmarks of 'normal' political debate in the form of traditional ideological debate, whereby the standard in question is some kind of ideological congruence or acceptability, in broader terms. In some sense, therefore, this kind of ideological opposition from this group who favour centrist-style politics is perhaps to be expected in all cases involving reporting on, and discussion of, politicians who fall outside of a broadly-defined mainstream. However, studies have noted that 'Jeremy Corbyn was represented unfairly by the British press through a process of vilification that went well beyond the normal limits of fair debate and disagreement in a democracy' (Cammaerts et al. 2016, p.1). This ideological hostility in many ways underpins the other elements of the narrative surrounding Corbyn and his supporters, whereby this group are seen to lack the credentials necessary for the kinds of political involvement they undertake. I identify four further parts to this, focusing on intelligence, time, forms of political involvement, and credibility.

Intelligence

A common theme of the commentary on Corbyn is that he and his supporters are stupid. Toby Young leads this particular pack, writing 'Whether you measure a party's intelligence by the IQ of its leaders or its voters, Labour is now the least intelligent party'.[iv] Martin Amis, the novelist, describes Corbyn as 'undereducated',[v] while Angela Epstein writes that he is 'too thick to be Prime Minister' and lacks 'clear natural talent'.[vi] Alex Massie, in a similar vein, writes:

> The thing about Jeremy Corbyn's supporters is they'd be funny if they weren't so pathetic. Or is it the other way round? I can never remember…It is not so much that Corbyn and his supporters are wrong about (almost) everything (though they are) but that they are so thoroughly, irredeemably, head-in-hands, *stupid* about (almost) everything. They are even wrong for the wrong reasons.[vii]

This quote combines some straightforward *ad hominen* attacks with a more telling critique. What is especially interesting here is that Massie takes aim at the epistemic grounding of Corbyn supporters' views ('wrong for the wrong reasons'), not just their content. There is also a suggestion that those who have decided that they like Corbyn and his politics could not have reached this position soundly or without underhand persuasion. Bagehot, writing in *The Economist*, talks of how Corbyn 'continues to mesmerise his young supporters', the implication of youthful transfixion ringing clear.[viii] Perhaps the most notable example of this line of opposition was Janan Ganesh's promptly-deleted Twitter assertion that Corbyn supporters were 'thick as pigshit'.[ix] This sense that Corbyn's supporters lacked the kind of epistemic grounding for their political views that is traditionally seen as worthy of further examination also pervaded academic discussion of his popularity. Or, rather, the *lack* of discussion: as Jonathan Dean notes, 'Corbynism was, for many [academics], so self-evidently misguided that it barely merited any scholarly attention or analysis' (2016).

Time

A further element relates to time, specifically the valorising of time spent involved in politics. For example, the *Guardian* columnist Marina Hyde posted the following on Twitter: 'People Who Discovered Politics In 2015 are the new People Who Discovered Football In 1990'.[x] Not

especially subtly, the aim here seems to be to demarcate 'true supporters' or enthusiasts from Johnny-come-lately types who should be downgraded or disparaged in some sense.[xi] This seems to me to be an especially pernicious line to take. One cannot create time that has not existed, nor can one turn back time. Perversely, this credential is often invoked by those who are wont to bemoan the lack of political interest of millennials or the young or similar, but in doing this show themselves not to care about participation in politics as such, but rather about participation in *their* politics (or at least politics that they deem suitable).[xii] Janet Daley, writing in *The Telegraph*, offers an adjunct attack, arguing that Corbyn's supporters are 'fools' engaged in 'adolescent rebellion' and compares them to a different group, spoken of with approval, who, 'whatever their dissatisfactions with the present political arrangements…do not see the solution as being student union socialism'.[xiii] Similarly, Corbyn's supporters were regularly derided by established political figures as being a 'fan club' or 'socialism fans' rather than serious members of the Labour Party or Labour voters.[xiv]

Political activities

This brings us to a related preoccupation with the validity of certain modes of political action. Sky News, for example, refer to Corbyn as a 'professional protestor turned leader', contrasting the former and the latter.[xv] Similarly, the American political advisor Arnie Graf describes Corbynite politics in the following way:

> It feels more like a, well I'm free to speak now, I don't work for the party. In the 1960s, at our universities, in the anti-Vietnam war movement, this surge feels like that to me. It feels, I don't want to be overly harsh, but part of it feels like student politics to me. It doesn't feel like people who are trying to become the government…There's

excitement, I can appreciate that, but I don't see, it's not the kind of politics that I would be interested in.[xvi]

What (just about) remains unspoken here is Graf's view that legitimate political action looks and feels a certain way, and whatever activity is going on in Corbyn's case is definitely not it. The disparaging reference to 'student politics' is presumably a suggestion of an immaturity or underdevelopment of their political ideas, something that links back to the previous issue of time.

One hallmark of Corbyn's campaign preceding the 2017 general election was the holding of relatively large rallies in various parts of the country. Often, these would attract significant numbers of attendees, generally a mix of Labour Party members, activists, and other members of the public. Such rallies, although planned, seemed to have an element of spontaneity and unpredictability to them. This was in sharp contrast to the well-oiled and closely-managed events engineered by other political leaders over the previous 20 years or so (Pettitt 2006). Indeed, the entire ethos of Corbyn's rallies seemed to be aimed at being less like these stage-managed events and more like a slightly chaotic trade union event or even, perhaps, a music festival.[xvii] It is fair to say that these rallies were unpopular with many, the charge against them being that the number of attendees was still minute in comparison to the scale of the electorate at large (even in a given constituency) and that people who attended were unrepresentative of this absent group. *The Economist* wrote that 'Furthermore, most Corbyn rallies take place in solid Labour seats, where the leader preaches to the converted. There is little evidence of the campaign attempting to persuade Conservative voters to change sides'.[xviii] On this reading, the rallies don't serve any obvious electoral purpose. At worst, they are a kind

of comfort blanket, insulating Corbyn from the harsh reality that opinion polling presented him with. Corbyn clearly picked up on this narrative himself, giving an account of it at one such rally:

> There are cynics who calculate these things in politics who say "well, Labour said this, Tories said that…Now, what did all that mean? Well, it means this: you have to understand that we down here really fully understand this whole system and all those people out there, turning up at Labour rallies, they don't really understand it". Well, I tell you this, we absolutely do understand it![xix]

Credibility

A final, but perhaps unifying, feature of much of the narrative surrounding Corbyn and his supporters is the notion of credibility seen (by those invoking it) as something existing beyond ideology and fixed, beyond the reach agency in the form of political change. Although widely invoked in journalistic discussion, credibility is notable for being a concept also used by political scientists when discussing Corbyn in public. For example, one British political scientist wrote in May 2017:

> Jeremy Corbyn has to go. He is demonstrably unfit to be leader of the Opposition or to be Prime Minister. He lacks the personal skills needed, the temperament, or the ability to balance an argument between competing perspectives. He is also holding Labour back from being a credible party of government. Indeed, it is unclear if Labour is even a credible party of opposition.[xx]

Similarly, another wrote in September 2015:

> Like the Tories during their wilderness years, Labour looks as if it's about to strand itself outside the so-called "zone of acceptability"—a policy range stretching from centre-right to centre-left, not too conservative but not too liberal. Without being located there or thereabouts a party is unlikely to be given the benefit of the doubt by sufficient voters to win a majority.[xxi]

Narratives of this kind are rooted in a view of politics as triangulation, growing out of theories initially proposed by Anthony Downs (1957) and then Anthony Giddens (2011), and enacted by both Tony Blair and, to a lesser extent, David Cameron.[xxii] The Downsian flavour gives pronouncements of this kind the air of a scientific absolute and are, therefore, useful fodder for media coverage. However, it is also clear that such a move has the effect of side-lining anything that isn't deemed credible *right now*, something that is true of political ideas and policies that have, in time, gone on to become part of the furniture. Using credibility as a touchstone, especially in a way that considers it to be fixed, non-ideological, and context-resistant, is not only setting commentators up for a fall but is itself a normative move. Credibility is also used in reference to spending plans, with Labour accused of 'being unable to present credible costs' for its policy proposals if elected.[xxiii] Again, however, such a notion can only operate within a wider but distinct set of ideological markers that remain hidden in plain sight.

The point here is not to say that normative statements should be off-limits for political scientists. On the contrary, the point should rather be to acknowledge that politics goes all the

way down in these cases - indeed, the decision to comment at all is itself a normative decision, as is whether to comment via one medium or news source over another. More specifically, it is notable in this debate that those political scientists who have expressed a more sympathetic view of Corbyn, such as Jonathan Dean (2016), *have* acknowledged that they are not offering a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986), Dean writing 'I am, however, rather more pro-Corbyn than most of my political science colleagues'. Although I admit it might be tedious to have to lay out our normative cards and commitments each time we speak in public - and I'm not sure that expecting people to do this is a useful or feasible response – we at least need to practically acknowledge the reality that normativity will be distributed more or less evenly across all parts of the debate even if the normativity inherent in the dominant stance goes unnoticed compared to alternative stances.

There are two main reasons to be suspicious of the sheen of objectivity in political matters. First, the specific case. This is relatively simple: the criteria discussed above are clearly rooted in a form of politics, both in terms of content and presentation, broadly synonymous with that seen in both New Labour in the 1990s and 2000s and in David Cameron's Conservative party that followed (Lees-Marshment 2001; Davis and Seymour 2010). The likelihood that these quite specific criteria align with some objective ones existing in a broader sense seems low.

Second, and in a more general sense, one can make the case that it isn't clear which kinds of epistemic goods will be relevant to politics. To establish agreement on such credentials, we would require a procedure-independent standard against which political acumen could be gauged – that is, an agreed-upon way of assessing political outcomes that didn't make reference to the process by which the decision that led to them was made. It is uncertain that

this is a plausible assumption to make. In terms of political theory, what have been termed as 'realist' thinkers see disagreement as 'permanent and ineradicable' (Sleat 2016, p.31; Stears 2007). On this view, the fact that such ineradicable conflict exists is the reason that politics exists. Without conflict, there would be no need for politics. As Matt Sleat writes, 'politics takes place in conditions of ineradicable conflict and is hence a site of perpetual struggle for power and dominance' (2016, p.31). On this view, one will never be able to place oneself outside of politics, or claim that political goals are, for the most part or in certain policy domains, settled. However, I don't think one even need necessarily accept the idea that disagreement is permanently ineradicable to acknowledge that conflict is the driving force of politics right now and for the foreseeable future in advanced democracies (Finlayson 2015).

Combined, I think that what we see here is a kind of epistemic snobbery 'whereby people who do not meet the above criteria of political inclusion are not seen as worthy participants or contributors in political discussions, or whereby their political opinions are devalued in some way' (Allen 2018, p.11). This relies on the ideological construction of an ideal type of political participation undertaken by an ideal political participant, divergence from which is considered suspicious in some sense. This person has extensive experience in formal electoral politics, focuses attention almost exclusively on electoral politics and associated political institutions, and espouses views that can be considered 'credible', this seen as a non-ideological category derived in part from a calculation of the location of the median voter.

Alongside this, there is an additional element here that is worth reflecting on. On the one hand, individuals who *do* seek to engage in politics but do so not in this ideal type way (i.e. many Corbyn supporters) are considered with the suspicion and derision shown above. Conversely,

individuals who don't appear to display much interest at all but do engage in formal politics on rare occasions in the form of voting at elections are more readily accepted. Such a view is embodied in the kind of truism that 'most people don't think about politics for more than a few minutes a week', or similar, that one often hears in political discussions among the intensely-politically involved.[xxiv] I suspect that the willing acceptance of this idea, and resistance to the possibility that one *could* be engaged in politics in a different form, stems from the fact that this disinterested model of engagement essentially validates the existence of a smaller group of intensely-involved individuals who then take on a kind of caretaker or gatekeeper role, looking after politics while everyone else is busy with their lives. With a hint of the (willing) martyr, they watch over democracy while others go about their business. I here echo the thoughts of Peter Mair (2009, p.29), who suspected that much discussion of democratic reform might actually be 'not intended to open up or reinvigorate the practice as such, but rather to redefine democracy in such a way that does not require any substantial emphasis on popular sovereignty, so that it can cope more easily with the decline of popular involvement'. To put it another way, the current situation *suits* this group; if things were different, or if the possibility of something different becoming the norm were to be acknowledged, their status within it might come under threat.

The Corbyn problem and British political science

The patterns described above have implications not only for the relatively small group of political scientists who played some part in them, but for all of us who study British politics. Many of these apply to the entirety of the intensely politically-involved group identified above but the various incentives and pressures that affect the behaviour of professional journalists, for example, differ massively from those affecting academics. Additionally, and unlike among

journalists, the question of what the public role of British political scientists should be still feels like something that is up for grabs. The rules of engagement are fuzzy to non-existent, a consequence of this being that there remains a chance for the discipline to engage in a debate about the norms that we want to govern behaviour in this realm.

As discussed earlier, there is a general contention to be made that the predominant way in which British political science has come to exist in public is rooted firmly in a traditional Westminster Model focus on national-level electoral politics and that, 'within the field of British politics, the main figures to achieve media prominence have been a relatively small band of political scientists primarily concerned with the study of parties, elections and voting' (Hayton 2018, p.10).[xxv] As Richard Hayton notes,

> Faced with demands for instant reactions to, and explanations for, unexpected political twists and turns, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholars have reached for what might be seen as conventional norms (or 'rules') of British politics – the Westminster view (2018, p.9).

Indeed, many of the most prominent political scientists on Twitter regularly share opinion polls and other data on public opinion from a range of sources on an almost daily basis. During the 2017 election campaign proper, this regularity appeared to increase even further. Studies have shown that British election media coverage has come to be dominated by the so-called 'horserace' of who is likely to win and vice versa (Blumler and Coleman 2010), raising the question of what the role of British politics academics is in this process. As Hayton writes, 'while academics can do little to affect media coverage, as scholars of British politics we do have a

responsibility to avoid being corralled into media-driven narratives' (2018, p.10). I am perhaps less sanguine on this point and would argue that we probably have more ability to affect narratives than we think, certainly in the longer run; given increasing pressures on media outlets to generate content at relatively low cost, academics are likely to look like a budget-friendly option whenever a talking head is required in the newsroom.

The proliferation of opinion polls, and the willingness of political scientists to provide the media with expert validation and discussion of them, has led to something of a clash of epistemic perspectives, specifically regarding the role of individual experience in assessing the course of an election campaign. In particular, we have witnessed the opposition of two perspectives: that of what the polls seem to be telling us versus what individuals are seeing 'on the doorstep' or in their day-to-day lives. Polling clearly has its merits, offering far greater scientific purchase over the question of large-scale shifts in public opinion, and it performs consistently over time according to the best current evidence (Jennings and Wlezien 2018). Despite this, it isn't clear that this should obviate other kinds of political discussion from media coverage. As Coleman, quoting Porter (1996, p.viii), notes "quantification 'remakes the world' through 'strategies of communication' that can never provide a 'complete and accurate description of the external world' but serve nonetheless to close down counter-interpretations by denying critics an authorised language of interrogation or explanation' (2018, p.160). I think this applies to polling. As any social scientist trained in survey research knows, polling is in no way completely authoritative – indeed, high profile British academics have achieved significant impact by making this point (Sturgis et al. 2016) – and yet opinion polls have come to dominate election coverage nonetheless, bolstered by the apparent support for, and interest in, them by political

scientists. There are different ways of learning and knowing things about the world. Right now, the public face of the discipline does not reflect this.

Part of this focus on the numbers, so to speak, is somewhat inevitable given the posture with which political science has been inserted into popular discussion of politics. For example, the then Vice-Chair of the Political Studies Association (PSA) referred in 2017 to PSA members as 'experts' who 'can and should be put centre-stage' so as to provide 'reliable evidence for politicians and voters'.[xxvi] As shown here, when invoked or introduced to public debate, political scientists and political science research tends to be framed as ideologically-neutral expertise, speaking from somewhere above and outside of the political fray. In other words, political scientists appear to be placed into these debates as obelisks of objectivity and, to a great extent, certainty. On this billing, the political scientist as public expert needs to present a concrete and coherent account to the audience in order to live up to expectations. Given this, is it any wonder that there is a temptation to reach for a pre-existing tried and tested explanation that is waiting to be plucked off the shelf? The entire model of doing political science in public that we have established around British politics seems to encourage us to return to the same ways of thinking that we always have and, almost systematically, precludes the more difficult activity of thinking in the kinds of fresh and unexpected ways that recent political events would seem to require of us. In the words of the PSA Vice-Chair, it becomes about providing 'evidence' to support or refute some existing assertion instead of offering deeper, more considered, reflections on core issues. Effectively, it becomes about giving an answer, not interrogating or reframing the question.

On this point, there is a broader question here about what we are doing: if we as academics should even be indulging in a mode of public political discussion that encourages fast-paced judgements and that simply uses us as commentators on fleeting events or controversies. Should we rather not instead aim to engage in a critical way – thinking slowly, reflectively, more academically? As Hayton observes (2018, pp.9-10):

> Through the medium of Twitter in particular, some scholars are now involved in a degree of public dialogue and ongoing commentary on the state of British politics that is unprecedented, and which is perhaps at odds with the more reflective nature of academic inquiry as it was more traditionally understood. There is a balance to be struck between the more measured approach that distinguishes academic commentary from journalism, and a nimbler scholarship that is better placed to contribute to a public educative mission that goes beyond the precincts of our campuses and is in tune with twenty-first century society.

I agree with him on this general point, although I would also go further – it is not just the *form* of the public scholarship we undertake that matters, but also the kinds of things we talk about. Nick Clarke and his colleagues distinguish between the political weather and political climate, the former being short-term events and fluctuations in comparison to the latter, which focuses on longer-term trends and change (2018, p.xiii). As a discipline, perhaps we would be better served by caring less about the weather and more about the climate, not in the hope of improving the accuracy of our predictions, but rather to permit us to offer greater clarity and precision when we attempt to diagnose our current political ills.

Conclusion

The schadenfreude that comes with watching the previously confident meekly eating their words aside, there are serious lessons to learn from this. For the intensely-politically involved, the fact that it was felt Corbyn *couldn't* be understood using the usual tools appeared to ultimately be elided into an assumption that therefore he *shouldn't* be. However, for all the hand-wringing in the immediate aftermath of events like Trump, Brexit, and the 2017 general election, has much of their approach actually changed?

Far from challenging the status quo, the apparent failings of those who thrive within it seems to have instead strengthened their existing hand. The rise of Corbyn and related events like Brexit saw many commentators bemoaning that they no longer knew anything or couldn't explain anything.[xxvii] However, this inability has not only done nothing to affect their privileged status within the structures of power that shape collective meaning around British politics, it has become a component part of it. In fact, many began to incorporate lengthy justifications or mea culpas into their ongoing commentary, gaining credit from other commentators for their commitment to approach their work in a different way from now on.[xxviii] Uncertainty about their previous approach lasted only a matter of hours as new paths forward were planned. As Philip Cowley put it just one day after the 2017 General Election, 'Given how few people saw this coming, it's amazing how certain some of them are about what it all means'.[xxix]

This matters because it seems likely that there will be another Corbyn in the not too distant future; not Corbyn himself, of course, but another unexpected figure or movement, perhaps on the left, maybe on the right. Wherever, whoever, or whatever this might be, it is crucial that intensely-politically involved, especially political scientists, avoid merely becoming what Robert

Goodin has referred to as 'handmaidens to power' (2009, p.5). This is echoed by Hayton who aptly notes, 'As students of political power, we cannot afford to lose sight of its exercise over our own behaviour' (2018, p.11). Crucially, in all of these cases, we need to consider who benefits from us lending not only our attention but whatever legitimacy we have to dispense to their political activity. In short, when deciding how to conduct our academic duties, we need to be aware not only of the power of those who we choose to study, but also the power we ourselves hold in the form of our societal status and voice. In an academic age filled with the pressures of various assessment frameworks and other structural constraints, this is not easy. Sometimes, it will be professionally opportune for us to make bold predictions, befriend the powerful, or make curtailed but controversial statements in lieu of longer considered ones. I understand this, and appreciate that this is not just a simple question of individual agency but instead a complicated one of networked structures of power and incentives. Taking intellectual risks means embracing uncertainty; the model of engagement we are currently encouraged to participate in systematically constrains our ability (and willingness) to do this. All the same, though, we need to think about the long-term health and fruitfulness of the study of British politics. Right now, I fear we are putting that health at risk through circumspection when considering what that subject matter might consist of (Dean 2017), something that limits the potential power and utility of our explanations of political events. There is no easy fix available to us, and I certainly do not feel able to offer up a silver bullet here. The elusiveness of a response should not, however, stop us thinking more carefully about the question.

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xxv If we examine the winners of various PSA Awards relating to communication and public understanding of politics, it is notable that the winners are primarily drawn from sections of the discipline focusing on elections to, the workings of, and opinion about formal political institutions. Full lists of winners are available at https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSA%20Awards%20Winners%20by%20Category%20up%20to%202016.pdf [last accessed 02-06-2018].

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