

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2023 – Jeremy Corbyn in conversation

'The London property market is the fundamental driver of inequality; it makes everything very difficult and it's getting worse.'

Jeremy Corbyn has been MP for Islington North since 1983. Helping his constituents is his favourite part of the job, and housing issues are the number one reason why people come to his surgeries. He's rather less keen on Parliament, saying (as Mhairi Black also said just 16 days ago in this very hall) that it's a toxic place, somewhere he only goes to work. He doesn't socialise there, and counts few MPs among his friends.

On Thursday Corbyn was at The Stand's New Town Theatre to talk with comedian and writer Phil Differ about all of that and poetry too. But first Differ has his own housing-related question to ask; when Corbyn is seen on TV leaving his house he seems to have to duck lower and lower;

'Is it not time you got that ivy cut?'

It's not ivy, replies Corbyn, it's wisteria and clematis and

he grows them because they're good for the bees. When he bought his 1960s house it had a concrete parking area; he dug it up and created a wildlife friendly garden. When his neighbour can't see out of his windows, he lends Corbyn a ladder so that he can do some pruning.

Corbyn and Differ make a very entertaining and witty duo, but turning to serious matters Corbyn is keen to talk more about housing and homelessness. He identifies three major issues around housing in Islington; the effects of the Right to Buy scheme, under which council tenants were able to buy their properties at large discounts and sell them just a few years later at huge profit; the lack of regulation of private sector landlords in England; and the failure of successive governments to support the building of more social/council housing.

He was recently consulted by a constituent who told him that he was renting one room in a 5 bed flat, bought from the council many years ago. Corbyn was familiar with the buildings and told the man he must be mistaken – those flats were only 3 bed;

'But it's amazing what you can do with a piece of plywood; that landlord was getting £50,000 a year from a flat bought with a huge discount. It's sheer greed. When I became Leader, the thing I most wanted to be able to say was "Homelessness is over." In the fifth richest country in the world we have more food banks than we have McDonalds, and thousands of 'hidden homeless' who are sofa surfing or in deeply insecure rented accommodation.'

He is outraged by the fact that Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, recently handed back £1.9 billion, intended to address the housing crisis, to the Treasury as his department 'couldn't find projects to spend it on.' According to *The Guardian's*

political correspondent Kiran Stacey* this included £255m meant to fund new affordable housing and £245m for the improvement of building safety.

And is it surprising, Corbyn adds, that children growing up in these situations underachieve in later life, when there is so much stress at home, and they are likely to have to change schools at the drop of a hat?

'We have to address this in every city, we need to invest in council housing and end Right to Buy forever, it is awful.'

He also advocates strict regulation of the rented sector; other countries (including parts of the USA) do it, so why can't we?

'Many loud people would complain, but many quieter people would say "at last someone has recognised the stress that we face."'

In Islington North he says it's very unusual for anyone under the age of 40 to have a council house; for them actually to own somewhere is exceptional. Corbyn has helped establish a branch of Acorn 'the union for the community' in his area, and is certain that this will bring change and new legislation to protect housing rights. Acorn has already had notable successes in other parts of the UK; residents affected by housing problems are encouraged to join.

Corbyn's firm belief is that protective legislation only happens when people outside Parliament push hard enough for it. Although he thinks it unlikely that new housing laws will be enacted under the current government 'even they are concerned about some of the worst private landlords'

'Keir Hardie, in his manifestos, campaigned more against landlordism than anyone else; Mary Barbour (the Glaswegian activist who led the South Govan Women's Housing Association

during the 1915 rent strikes in the city) also fought it.'

These days Corbyn, who was Leader of the Labour Party from 2015 to 2020, sits in Parliament as an independent, having had the Labour whip suspended from him in October 2020, at least partly over accusations of antisemitism. He's far from confident that any new Labour government would do much better than the Conservatives on this issue, saying that the current leadership

'is retreating away from the party's 2009 manifesto promises'

And that, he says, includes private sector landlord controls, which the party thinks would reduce the number of properties made available to rent. He's not convinced by that argument, but says if so, it's even more imperative that new council houses are built. His own council, with whom he has good relations, will manage to build 500 council houses this year; 'they're doing their best.'

And it's not just a question of building houses; it's vital, Corbyn explains, that the developments are properly managed, and that plans include schools, nurseries, community centres and libraries.

The arts, and more importantly access to the arts, are very important to him.

'We fail far too many children by only offering them music in nursery and the early years of primary school. Less than 20% of state schools have a music system or an orchestra. In the private sector that figure is 98%. Children in ALL schools should have their creativity encouraged.'

Children, he says, are not exposed to the idea that creativity is good

'There's a poet in all of us.'

He and Len McLuskey (General Secretary of Unite the Union until 2021, previously Secretary of the General Workers Trade Group of the Transport and General Workers' Union, and a close ally of Corbyn during his time as Leader of the Labour Party) are now writing a book about 'poetry for the many' for which they will choose their favourite poems and write about why they are important. They're inviting others, such as the writer and poet Michael Rosen, to join them. And Corbyn wants to do a second book of poems people send to him, 'people need to see their own poetry in print.'

Differ asks him for the poem that has touched him most; he says he's read too many to choose just one, but

'The greatest historical poet to me is Shelley'

(Though apparently not to the person who criticised Corbyn for putting what she thought was Corbyn's own poetry on social media, saying 'the whole poem is utterly dreadful and the scansion is totally broken, but that use of 'ye' is the most pretentious s**t imaginable', only to be told that the lines had in fact been penned not by the former Leader of the Opposition but by none other than Percy Bysshe himself. Corbyn enjoyed that one immensely.)

He loves the idea of the 'zany' life that Shelley and Byron led, and says there is 'incredible depth' to Shelley's poetry.

He's also keen on Coleridge, and is interested in the theory that *The Ancient Mariner's* albatross was in fact Wordsworth, with whom Coleridge fell out in 1810. In modern poetry he admires Hannah Lavery ('*Scotland You're No Mine*')

He's not musical himself, and although he loves music, he isn't bothered that he's the only leader of the Opposition never to have been invited onto Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*.

At home he listens to the radio and CDs all the time; his tastes are wide, ranging from classical music to pop, folk and jazz, and especially Victor Jara (a folk singer murdered by the Pinochet regime in 1973) 'because I have a great affection for Chile.' He also likes Lila Downs, a Mexican singer. (Corbyn's wife is from Mexico)

'Music makes us alive to other parts of the world.'

He listens to the Proms on Radio 3 and tries to attend one every year.

And of course there was that famous appearance at Glastonbury (his was invited by Michael Eavis himself) in 2017, when the crowds broke into a rendition of 'Oh Jeremy Corbyn.'

Did he ever, asks Differ, think he might be a rock star instead?

No, but he did find the occasion very moving. Everyone in his office wanted to write his speech and come down to Worthy Farm with him. Someone did write it, but on the train Corbyn decided he didn't like it (he doesn't like prepared speeches in general) so he rewrote it in five minutes backstage;

'It was what I wanted to say, what I believe in. I'll never forget that day.'

Differ takes him back to his views on Parliament. MPs, Corbyn says, can be very arrogant, their alliances and friendships are short-term only;

'The herd instinct takes them into a place of self-importance and away from the people they are there to represent....When I became Leader of the Opposition, MPs could not get over the idea that I'd been selected by the party members. I was representing the democratic need for change.'

Does he have any politician friends that would surprise us? Well there's David Davis (Conservative MP for Haltemprice and Howden); Corbyn says they quite often agree about things, and travelled to Washington together in an attempt to have Guantanamo Bay closed down. They're also at one about the editor, publisher and activist Julian Assange

'he's a journalist who told us a lot of uncomfortable truths. The treatment he has received is utterly disgusting, as was the treatment of Daniel Ellsberg (who leaked the 'Pentagon Papers' and was tried under the US Espionage Act 1917, but later exonerated.) If Assange is tried in the US and found guilty of treason this will deter journalists all over the world from investigating wars, big business, mineral grabs in African countries...we should all support Julian Assange and get him freed.'

So if David Davis is (broadly) OK, which politicians can Corbyn really not stand?

'I don't do the personal because it gets too big. I don't care enormously for Jacob Rees-Mogg, but he does at least remind us of what the 18th century was like. He has a function in that way.'

He will, however, say that he feels he's been very badly treated by the Labour Party (*huge applause from the audience*), and that he wishes it would fight the next election on the pledges of the 2009 manifesto, of which

'Equality and redistribution of wealth were the fundamentals'



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He'd like to see power decentralised, preferably to powerful and accountable local authorities rather than to mayors,

although he acknowledges that Andy Burnham deserves praise for the great things he's done for Manchester

'The right of a city to develop its own paths is very important.'

He'll be very happy to continue to represent the people of Islington North if they want him to; it's constituency work that he loves. And he believes that, despite the falling membership of most parties, people do support campaigns in other ways

'There is a cooperative group of people who do support change in our society, but that's not reflected in party politics...it's up to those who are serious about bringing about change to do so, and that's what I spend my time doing...there's a horrible undertone of negativity in politics but among younger people there is an appetite for change.'

An audience member comments that the current government is waging a huge culture war, demonising BAME and trans people in particular. Is it going to get worse?

Corbyn replies that he hopes not but it might. People need to understand that the rights of LGBT+, BAME and all people are human rights; there is no difference

'We need to show recognition of and respect for all people's lives.'

Corbyn recalls the The Sexual Offences Act 1967, which at last started to decriminalise homosexual activity between men.

'It was a huge change, even though it was limited in scope and still only passed ten years after Alan Turing was destroyed by anti-gay rhetoric. That rhetoric hasn't gone away, it's a bit better but we need to recognise the right of

everyone to be who they want to be....I don't want to 'tolerate' someone, I want to respect them. There's a very big difference.'

Inevitably, Corbyn is asked by an audience member about the Labour party's 'appalling' treatment of Scotland

'You support the concept of a united Ireland, would you now come out and support Scottish independence?'

Corbyn replies that if the Scottish people want a referendum they should have one, and the UK government should not have the power of veto over that. He doesn't know if Labour will support this, but he sees it as a country's democratic right to decide its own future.

'We said when we went into government that we would accept a referendum and I stand by that. The radical spirit and strength in Scotland has brought real social change ahead of England...Scotland embraces a globalist international view much more than England does...The whole political system in Scotland is to be praised and lauded.'

If there's one subject that's guaranteed to cause arguments in Scotland though, it's the Beautiful Game. Differ brings it up anyway. Corbyn is an avid Arsenal supporter; is he happy with the performance of his team?

'The point of being a football follower is never to be happy. It's a creative tension we set up for ourselves (unless your team's Manchester City)'

He's appalled, though, at the amount of money thrown around in football, much of it 'dodgy', and feels teams should think more about fan ownership.

But Differ's not finished yet – if he lived in Edinburgh, he

asks Corbyn, which team would enjoy his support here?

'Probably Hibs'

And in Glasgow?

'Partick Thistle.'

He's not a politician for nothing.

Jeremy Corbyn was In Conversation with Phil Differ at The Stand New Town Theatre, George Street.

Phil Differ will be appearing in stand-up at No 57 Pub Company in Dundee at 7pm on Friday 17 November 2023. Tickets are available via eventbrite.

*12 July 2023: 'Gove's department hands back £1.9bn meant to tackle England's housing crisis'