

Lions Led by Donkey's

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. The phrase lions led by donkeys was used by British frontline soldiers in the First World War. They were the brave lions who were sent to their deaths by incompetent and often indifferent leaders. After years of austerity, raging inequality and now a mismanaged pandemic, could the British electorate claim that they, too, are led by a class of political donkeys?

Ross Joining me to discuss why we're led by donkeys is the former MP and one of the founders of the Festival of Resistance, Chris Williamson. Chris, welcome. When we look at Westminster, something that you've been in and around for a very long time, and then we look at the real world, man and woman on the street can't really articulate to themselves why there is such a disconnect between the abject lack of leadership, especially through the Corona crisis and what's going on in their lives? How do you start to explain the disconnect between what happens in the Westminster bubble and what happens on the streets of Derby, Liverpool, Newcastle?

Chris Williamson Well, there very much is a Westminster bubble mentality in the House of Commons and House of Lords. And I think, frankly, there is a crisis of representative democracy in this country.

Ross What does that mean?

Chris Williamson Well, you know, we champion representative democracy as if this is a best system of government that is known to humanity. But the truth is, the people that are our representatives are not really representing the people on the ground, on the street.

Ross Who are they representing?

Chris Williamson Well, my concern is that they seem to be more interested in representing the corporate world, the military industrial complex. Look, if representative democracy was working, was successful, we wouldn't have 14 million people in the fifth richest economy or the fifth biggest economy in the world living in poverty. We wouldn't have thousands of people sleeping on the streets. We wouldn't have millions of people in precarious employment. And what's very clear, and certainly over the last 40 years, is that the way in which the economy has been steered, it's been steered towards representing the interests of the elites in society. The corporate world has benefited from the economic decisions that successive governments have been implementing really since Margaret Thatcher came into office. And it really goes back even before that. I think the way was cleared for Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979 by the decision of Denis Healey to go to the International Monetary Fund on the false premise that Britain was running out of money, that we needed to borrow this additional revenue from the IMF. This was done in the teeth of opposition of the grassroots membership of the party. It basically tore up the alternative economic strategy that the party was committed to. And that 1974 general election manifesto that Labour went to the country on was quite a radical piece of work, actually. It promised a shift in the balance of wealth and power, an irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in the country.

And of course, when Healey made that decision, that made it impossible to implement, or continue with, the alternative economic strategy that the party was committed to.

Ross We have a favourite graph on this programme, and this is it. And if you look at this is private debt to GDP and here basically is where Margaret Thatcher came to power. And you can see this private debt growing and growing. This is the big bang, 1984/86. And then the Blair years between here and here where house prices were just shooting up. Turns out it's pretty easy to win elections when house prices are going in one direction isn't it?

Chris Williamson We had a one dimensional economic proposition, basically adopted this kind of monetarist approach and abdicated responsibility, I think, in terms of the role of the government. You know, the fiscal levers available to governments were just kind of ignored to a large extent. And everything was put on the market. The market was king. You know, the market has all the answers. Well, clearly it hasn't. And, you know, the upshot of all that has meant that we now see, as I've mentioned, the upshot at the outset that, you know, millions of people in poverty in this country. Traditional industries have been destroyed. Communities have been abandoned. And that was one of the main reasons, I think, why we're seeing turn out at elections going down and also why people felt so resentful in the referendum, the EU referendum in 2016 and voted the way in which they did.

Ross But if you talk about representative democracy in the UK, very few people can name any of the representatives at EU level.

Chris Williamson Oh, my goodness me. Absolutely.

Ross So when we're talking about democracy and the health of democracy, this is far from democracy.

Chris Williamson No democracy in the European Union anyway. I mean, and there are all sorts of pressures applied to member states, the state aid rules and things like this, you know, which make it difficult for governments to intervene in the economy, the presumption in favour of privatisation. And although I have to say I did campaign to remain, it was a remain and reform agenda, although I think reform in the European Union is peerless, no chance of that really in terms of that really coming to fruition. But being outside the European Union, you're then free from those fetters. That's not to say that you don't cooperate with, you don't collaborate with, European nations and indeed all the nations around the world. That's really important, I think. But being outside the European Union does give a government like the British government the opportunity really to maximise the potential of having your own sovereign currency, which we have in the fifth biggest economy in the world, free from the fetters on state aid, et cetera, to make the economy work for the vast majority of people. And I'm afraid, you know, it certainly hasn't been working in the interests of the majority for at least four decades and probably longer.

Ross The four decades of financialization, neo liberalism, ultimately we see now where it's ended. A lot of people were warning about it for a long time. And you've now got inequality that's off a scale, the poverty that you touch on and also the corporate welfarism that goes with politics now. So when we look at the new look, New Labour Party. How do you brand Labour now? Are they new, new?

Chris Williamson It's old New Labour.

Ross Old New Labour with Sir Keir Starmer in charge. It's almost - I don't mean this in a derogatory way - but it's almost as if a bunch of estate agents lost their best people to a political party, and arguably not even their best people. Because all they're interested in is buoying the housing market, looking after corporates and not much else, really, just a load of technocratic fiddling around the edges instead of the more radical policy that Mr Corbyn had. That's to say, actually, this is the way we should reinvent, rethink this economy.

Chris Williamson I think that's absolutely right. You know, I think there is a real timidity to challenge the status quo. You know, people come in and it's really, you know, I think it's that kind of sense of managerialism that has kind of infected, you know, the sort of political culture in Westminster. Maybe it never was thus, perhaps, I don't know. But having worked at close quarters, it doesn't seem to be many, if any, conviction politicians in the House of Commons anymore. And I think that sense of, you know, connecting with, to use that overworked phrase, the wider general public, it's difficult. People just see these characters in there. And it seems that they're playing -, and I think that they are - actually playing games and they're not really relating to the lives of people on the sort of Clapham omnibus, as it were. And that's why I think we do need to challenge this notion of representative democracy and promote a concept of participatory democracy where we, you know, empower communities and we, you know, raise people's consciousness, political consciousness. I mean, you know, there's many reasons why Jeremy was attacked and the sort of policy propositions that he was putting forward really scared the establishment, you know, from reforming the media and democratising the media to, you know, giving workers the right to own their own companies and take over companies, etc. These were all things which, you know, were seen as an anathema to the establishment. But one of the other things, of course, was he talked about teaching people about the real truth about Britain's colonial past. I mean, many of us in this country see the British Empire as a wonderful, civilising influence around the world when we know that's absolutely the opposite of the truth. You look at some of the horrors, some of the incredible abuse, exploitation and murders and even worse, concentration camps and things like that were done in the name of the British Empire. I mean, Britain engaged in genocide. And yet people don't know this. And I think, you know, there were so many great ideas, you know, that Jeremy was promoting, as it were, that really kind of spoke to people and really enlivened and engaged and enthused people in a way I've never, ever seen. But, of course, you know, the haters got to work, seeking to undermine and it sort of diverted attention away from those really kind of positive policy ideas.

Ross So maybe we're not there yet as a country. Maybe, you know, there is a moment for the truth and reconciliation to happen and to really understand history. And, you know, we see now with Black Lives Matter. We see that movement in full flight. And people's consciousness is rising. But for the establishment, that must've been absolutely terrifying.

Chris Williamson Oh, I agree. And I mean, it is really encouraging. And look, you know, and I've spoken to people around the country and admittedly, it's only anecdotal evidence, but it was certainly borne out by my own experience. I went along to the Black Lives Matter rally in Derby, my home city. And it was my son that told me, actually. And he rang me and said, hey, are you at the rally? And I didn't even know about it, actually which tells you a story. It

wasn't organised by the usual suspects. The labour movement wasn't sort of at the forefront of it in any way, shape or form. And in fact, at the rally when I when I got there, there were no trade union banners, no Labour Party people in evidence. I'm sure there were labour activists there. But it's the biggest rally that I've ever seen in Derby. And I've talked to some friends down in Dorset in Weymouth. They had over a thousand people there. And so that's really encouraging. But it also brings with it challenges because, you know, Fred Hampton, the iconic leader of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s, summed up the importance of revolutionary education. You know he was saying revolution without that revolutionary education to underpin it, doesn't really take you very far. You know, you kind of replace white Imperialism with black Imperialism. These various examples of Papa Doc etc hasn't really benefited black people on the ground. So I think we really need to celebrate the fact that there is this consciousness-raising which is happening. There is this kind of the sort of political activism is coming about. But we need to kind of, you know, work with people to ensure that, you know, we can kind of raise expectations, raise political consciousness to kind of bring about a change that's desperately needed in this country. And we need to also be making sure the type of education. You know, where Blair talked about education, education, education, it's a nice soundbite, but what is the content of that education? And I think, this again, you know, going back to what Jeremy was saying about the importance of about teaching the truth, the reality of colonialism, the reality of the British Empire, I think, would have been incredibly powerful in actually helping to kind of raise that political consciousness, which is so important. Because, look, the establishment want people to be cynical about politics that, you know, nothing can change. They're all as bad as one another. But I think for me, politics should be an honourable activity, really, about trying to sort of change the world, really. But the problem is that people end up getting elected and then they become divorced from the people who they're supposed be representing. And sadly, many of the people who end up becoming candidates and then going on are already divorced from the kind of grass roots in that sense. So one of the things I'm working on with others at the moment is trying to build a new grassroots movement. One of the aims which we're hoping will come from this is we'll encourage and nurture new working class leaders to come through and put themselves up for elections so that we can get people into parliament who would generally have a connection with the people they're supposed to be representing. And that will, in my opinion, make for better policy.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more with the former MP and one of the founders of the Festival of Resistance, Chris Williamson, about why we're led by donkeys, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. Index. First up from Wilbur Mudd: 'The Labour Together report once again fails to ask the vital question, namely, what would have happened if the party machine and the PLP had publicly backed and legitimised Corbyn's leadership. But of course, centrists don't self reflect do they?'

Chris Williamson I mean the report really has missed some obvious points about why Labour did so badly in the election. And of course, one of the biggest reasons, in my opinion, was the purge, the witch hunt, the deliberate sabotage. The key figures in the bureaucracy and indeed the parliamentary Labour Party were engaging in for a sustained period of time even before Jeremy was elected as the leader.

Ross Next from Damian from Brighton: 'The public want to know what Labour would do differently to the Tories. What is Labour's vision and how would Labour deal with the rapidly approaching depression? Keir Starmer has failed to answer any of those questions. He has failed to meet the moment. He has failed to lead'. Which brings us back right to the beginning of the programme, which is this lack of leadership.

Chris Williamson No, indeed. And frankly, I think on the economy, there's been a timidity even under John McDonald's era as the shadow chancellor. We have our own sovereign currency in the UK. We are the currency issuer. The Bank of England is the currency issue. We're the fifth biggest economy in the world. I think that in those circumstances, therefore, you can use the flexibility that that provides to you to heavily invest in the economy. My argument in relation to the Brexit situation was that we should've gone into that campaign - or the Labour Party, I'm not a member anymore - saying that we'll get Brexit done, but we'll deliver a people's Brexit, not a bankers Brexit.

Ross Finally, we have a tweet from John D. Lewis: 'It's shameful that a Manchester United footballer should be able to show up the complete lack of leadership in the Labour Party. It's your job to raise this. You have a voice in parliament. Get off your arses and do something'. And that's a tweet in response to the MP Angela Rayner. Labour tried to piggy back Marcus Rashford's ability to get Boris Johnson to do a U-turn on free school meals.

Chris Williamson Well, good on Marcus. I mean, it was it was an excellent initiative. But in many ways that indicates really the irrelevance in many ways of parliament.

Ross Is that the case? Is it the case that that is a sort of real moment, a number 10 at Manchester United does more for social justice than Number 10 Downing Street?

Chris Williamson Well, I never expected 10 Downing Street with Boris Johnson as the incumbent there to ever do much for social justice in any event. But what I think that does indicate is that it is possible to influence policy outside of parliament. Yes, you know, you've got a big profile, well-known footballer, etc.. But my argument is that if we stand in solidarity and we can build a mass movement in that sense, then it is possible, I think, to make change happen. And the Gilets Jaunes are a huge inspiration just across the English Channel. Although to read the mainstream media would you would not be aware that much is happening over in France.

Ross Talk about politics and the lack of leadership in it, the cultural problems that Westminster has. I want to put something to you as a former MP. I don't think that real change comes through Westminster or through politics.

Chris Williamson Well, I wouldn't say it doesn't come through politics. It doesn't necessarily come through Westminster, though, and I think that's always been true. Many of the icons of the labour movement have always said that, you know, that the concessions, if you like, that, that we've secured, the changes that we've brought about have never been handed down willingly by the establishment. We've had to fight for them from below.

Ross So power is always taken. It is never given?

Chris Williamson No, that's right.

Ross So if you're going to go about a programme social change, it's going to be very, very difficult to get that social change through the political realm. So let me put this to you. The arts, creativity, entrepreneurship, business, are seedbeds for people to understand the economy, understand themselves and express themselves. Why wouldn't you, as an MP or as opposed to going into politics, focus effort on changing those areas than trying to change policy?

Chris Williamson Well, I think both things are important. And one of the things that we're trying to do in this new movement that we're creating or hoping to create, is precisely that actually, to absolutely promote things like community arts and grassroots media, radio and things like that, promote the notion of worker cooperatives or a big worker cooperative, you know, looking at the Mondragon model in Spain, started in the height of Francoism and is now the sixth or seventh biggest corporation in Spain. One of the things I'm very keen to do, two things really with this movement, is to raise political consciousness and raise expectations. I think people are far too accepting, really, and don't demand enough, frankly. I mean, I think we should be demanding far, far more than we are doing. And it's like the living embodiment of Robert Tressell's Ragged- Trousered Philanthropists. And again, that goes back to, you know, education, raising political consciousness, et cetera, along the lines of, you know, the Mondragón experience. It's so important, I think, that, you know, you empower people in that way to demonstrate that, you know, change is possible, that you can bring about a positive change. You can change the status quo from the present, which isn't serving the interests of the many, it's serving the interests of the few. But you can you can flip that.

Ross You joined the Labour Party at 1976 and some of that rose tinted goggle approach must have fallen away since, because I know that When the Boat Comes In, the programme, inspired you to go and become politically active. It was one of the things.

Chris Williamson Yes.

Ross When you look back, do you think that that time's been wasted?

Chris Williamson I don't know, really. I mean, I was a counsellor for many years in Derby, and it was during the Blair years. And myself and many of us on the Labour group in Derby were not happy with the direction of travel of the party. But I consoled myself with the notion how we might be able to make a positive difference on the ground in Derby. And look, I actually spearheaded the first PFI scheme in Derby. I wasn't keen on the Private Finance Initiative but it was the only show in town. And, you know, I kind of coined a phrase when I was leader of the council in Derby referred to innovative pragmatism.

Ross Why, because that's what you've got to deal with?

Chris Williamson Well, I mean being in local government, you haven't got your hands on the levers, as it were, at national level. And, you know, unlike a currency issue in government where there's huge flexibility and they can run deficits, local authorities are not allowed to do that. You've got your hands on some levers, not the big levers, as it were, of central

government. But you could really make a difference at a local level. We kind of rolled out a neighbourhood agenda where, if you like, it was to participatory democracy in action, if you know what I mean, where I was able to persuade other public sector organisations to come on board with us and to shape some of their policy platforms to reflect what local people wanted at each individual neighbourhood in the city, for example. I was able to find ways of, for example, using the PFI scheme to tackle housing. We also partnered up with the Housing Association, and we used the Capital Receipts Research Initiative monies to build some council houses with garages and so on.

Ross And so you were effective, an effective operator?

Chris Williamson Yeah, yeah, but the thing is, though, being a political leader in that sense on the local authority, you are able to then carry some of those things through. So I do think the two things are necessary. If you've got, you know, a bunch of donkeys, if you know what I mean who are responsible for those political levers, they can be a bit deaf to some of these good ideas coming through.

Ross One of the big problems, thematically, here is culture. And a lot of people who are talented, resourceful and able to do things, good operators and efficient, see politics today and they think there's no way on God's earth I'm going to go anywhere near that. It's toxic. The media is toxic. And then they look at what happened to you and the witch hunt more broadly around Mr Corbyn cetera. And they think, you know what, I'm gonna go and have a nice life. I'm not going to get involved in all that because I don't want to drag my family through it. And I can go and earn a few quid somewhere else. That's a massive culture to change, isn't it?

Chris Williamson It is. But we've got to try, I think, because I think it's essential that we work to try and build a powerful social movement, mass movement, outside parliament. Extra parliamentary activity is absolutely key. But I think we also need people on the inside who are gonna be receptive. Because in the end, where it's legislative change that we're demanding, we need people on the inside who kind of understand and empathise and will pursue and follow through on the demands which should be made outside, as it were.

Ross So what are you going to do now because I doubt that you're going to go quietly off and, you know, retire, because I can still see there's a lot of drive and fervour in their? You want to do things?

Chris Williamson Yeah, I mean, look, you know, I got into politics, joined the Labour Party in the first instance, I suppose, because I wanted to try and change the world, as it were. And I mean, the most exciting and rewarding role I've ever had in politics, if you like, was when I was leader of the council because we were able to shape and affect things, I think, far more, frankly, than a backbench MP. Certainly a backbench MP or even a front bench MP for that matter, in opposition, you can really make a difference. So, look, my focus is going to be on working with others to try and hopefully stimulate a burgeoning, as it is now, a grassroots movement. You know, we're looking to create local chapters around the country and we are aiming to have a conference, a festival of resistance. But we don't want to just hold a really exciting conference and interesting conference. We want it to inspire people to go back into their local areas, to start activities in their own localities. And what I aim or I hope anyway,

that this movement will be is an inspiration, if you like, and a networking facility to put different groups in touch with one another because at the moment, as I say, a lot of good work is happening. But it's very often done in isolation where people don't know what is going on elsewhere. And if we can act as that clearing house to bring people together in that way, I think that could be incredibly powerful. And then I think it can really snowball and be an unstoppable force I hope.

Ross As a conviction MP, and you were very much, you know. A lot of MPs now have got principles, but if you don't like them they'll change them. You're a conviction MP and you do incredible work, whether it be an animal rights, fighting fascism, standing up for minorities, whatever it might be. But one of the things that you did, which I thought was incredible, was calling out the Integrity Initiative and also the Institute for Statecraft.

Video clip (Chris Williamson) I'm outside the Institute of State Craft's office in central London on Temple Place. This is a state funded charity that's been undermining British democracy. This is an organisation that was established to allegedly counter Russian disinformation. I've been trying to get answers to why is it this organisation has been smearing the leader of the opposition. They've got premises registered up in Scotland. And I went to visit those just before Christmas, only to find that they're located in a semi derelict mill at the end of a dirt track. I've been getting unsatisfactory responses from government ministers to what this organisation is been up to. So I've come here today to see if I can get answers directly from the organisation itself. Are you Dan? I'm Chris Williamson. I'm a member of Parliament for Derby North. I'm trying to ask some questions about why is it you've been smearing Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party and interfering in the internal affairs of fellow European democracies?

Chris Williamson It was brought to my attention and I thought it merited further examination because, look, this is kind of subverting our democratic process in this country. I mean, we've got a body their, a shady organisation that was receiving public money and using it to undermine and smear the leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, and other key figures in the movement. And I just felt that was beyond the pale and totally unacceptable. And therefore, the shining a light on that was was something which, in my opinion, had to be done. I exposed the government as well. And so I put forward a range of parliamentary questions and discovered through that process, actually, that they were receiving literally millions pounds from the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence to name but two and there may be others. Many other questions I was asking about further detail they would then refuse. They clammed up, wouldn't say on the interest of national security, et cetera, they wouldn't provide any further information. But that was very illuminating in its own right. And it was you know, to me, it had all the hallmarks of the Operation Mockingbird that the CIA was utilising and came to light in the Church Commission in the States in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, where, you know, the CIA was placing stories in the media. And this is what sort of the Integrity Initiative is doing, influencing and infiltrating the student movements and the civil rights movement back then. And this is what this organisation is doing, working with young people, cetera. And I just felt that it was, you know, really important. I mean, you know, publicity is a great disinfectant, isn't it? And I just think that when you have a platform, you know, you have an obligation to use it, to expose things like that and to stand up for your principles, stand for what you believe is right.



Ross Chris, thank you very much for your time. That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail, studio@renegadeinc.com or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.