

History hinges on extraordinary individuals and moments

By Robert Barwick

UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has shaken up British and world politics. He has smashed the neoliberal consensus of the past four decades, proving it to be a lie that was only held by the elites, while the public always hated such policies. Given a chance to vote against privatisation and deregulation, they seized it, and opinion polls show that Corbyn's anti-neoliberal policies of "taking back" privatised assets and a national investment bank are overwhelmingly popular. This is sending ripples around the world, including to Australia, where the Australian Labor Party is coming under grass-roots pressure to also dump neoliberalism and return to its "old" Labor roots. On 26 October Corbyn ally and the chairman of the UK Labour Party, Ian Lavery, urged the South Coast Labour Council in Wollongong to "buy back Australia".

Corbyn's priority is his policies, not his personal ambition, which he has never had. Like the great Australian Labor Party leader and wartime Prime Minister John Curtin, he is a reluctant leader. Paradoxically, however, Corbyn's personality has been key to his success, not the usual traits associated with a successful politician of charisma, aggression, and a thick skin, but his authenticity and passion for economic and social justice. Corbyn's policies cut through because he speaks to them directly and answers questions honestly, leaving his opponents looking like automatons from the same public relations factory. Consequently the public knows he is not lying for their votes, but really intends to deliver the change they are so desperate for.

Corbyn's earth-shaking political impact therefore is all the more remarkable given how very close it came to not happening at all. It was matter of seconds—literally.

Corbyn had long been on the fringes of his party, unwilling to trade his principles for promotion. In a 1996 interview with Joe Murphy of the *Mail on Sunday*, Tony Blair had sneered: "You really don't have to worry about Jeremy Corbyn suddenly taking over." Every time there was a contest for party leader, Corbyn and a small coterie of like-minded MPs, including the late Michael Meacher, John McDonnell and Diane Abbott, took turns contesting the leadership with no prospects of winning, but in the hope of generating a debate on their "old" Labour principles. Following Labour's disastrous defeat in the May 2015 general election, and the subsequent resignation of leader Ed Miliband, Corbyn agreed to nominate for the leadership contest to "broaden debate". As he matter-of-factly explained to the *Guardian*, "Well, Diane and John have done it before, so it was my turn."

To qualify to contest the leadership, each candidate had to have a minimum of 35 endorsements from sitting Labour MPs. This rule was intended to keep Corbyn-style candidates out of the contest. The deadline for the nominations was 12:00 noon on Monday, 15 June 2015. By the end of the previous week, Corbyn had 18 backers, and needed 17 more. By 11:00 AM on the Monday he had secured eight more, bringing his total to 26. At 11:15 AM party veteran and leading Blairite Margaret Beckett unexpectedly appeared at the Labour Party's Westminster office to nominate Corbyn, not out of support but in the



Jeremy Corbyn and Henry A. Wallace (addressing the 1944 Democratic Party Convention). Mere seconds sealed the political fate of both men, and the world. Photos: Wikimedia; Screenshot

interest of "debate". She later said: "I probably regard it as one of the biggest political mistakes I've ever made."

With 20 minutes to go Corbyn was up to 30 nominations. John McDonnell was in the party office coordinating nominations, while Corbyn was outside in his cycling gear, having just ridden his bike to Westminster, encouraging members to support debate. With 10 minutes to go, three MPs who'd initially backed a candidate who'd withdrawn switched their support, and then with minutes to go another MP relented. Corbyn only needed one more nomination, but somehow his team had miscounted and thought he was only on 33 and needed two. The miscount caused a serious problem as a number of MPs had pledged they would be the final nomination, in the interest of debate, but assuming he needed two more they stood around while the clock ticked down. With just seconds to go John McDonnell literally got down on his knees to those MPs and begged their support. "Whether you support Jeremy or not, this is in the interests of democracy", he remembers telling them, warning that members would "not understand or forgive if Jeremy was excluded by just two votes". McDonnell recalls that two of the MPs "cracked" with just 10 seconds to go, and Corbyn had the nomination. It is important to note that none of those MPs who reluctantly backed Corbyn's nomination thought he had a chance; if they had, they would never have done it. But the rest is history.

There is a contrasting story to Corbyn's, just as momentous to history, but with a tragic outcome. It is the story of Henry A. Wallace, whom Franklin Roosevelt picked to be his Vice President for his unprecedented third term as President of the United States. Wallace was Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture, who had been central to the success of the New Deal recovery from the Great Depression. Wallace had introduced subsidies for farmers, food stamps and school lunches for the urban poor, and instituted scientific land planning and soil conservation programs. He was also the leading anti-fascist besides Roosevelt in the administration. Consequently, Wall Street hated him, and Democratic Party bosses initially blocked his nomination at the 1940 Democratic Party convention. They only relented when Roosevelt threatened to reject his own nomination for president, stating in a letter to party bosses: "The Democratic Party has failed when it has fallen to the control of those who think in terms of dollars instead of human values."

Four years later, in 1944, Roosevelt nominated to run for president again, and a Gallup poll showed 65 per cent

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of Americans favoured Wallace to continue as Vice President. The only alternatives to Wallace, Senators James Byrne and Harry Truman, had 3 per cent and 2 per cent support respectively. This would be a choice for president, as Roosevelt would die in April 1945. In his documentary series *Untold History of the United States*, Oliver Stone recounts how the dramatic events played out.

Unwell, Roosevelt was unable to attend the Convention and fight for Wallace, but this time Wallace seemed a certainty. The unions had sent delegations in force to back his nomination, and on the first day his support from the floor was so overwhelming that convention proceedings were delayed by the constant standing ovations and cheering. Florida Senator Claude Pepper realised that if Wallace's name was moved in nomination that first night, he would be carried unanimously, and so Pepper began to move through the throng of exuberant members towards the podium. The corrupt party bosses, however, again intervened, and demanded Session Chair Samuel Jackson adjourn the convention until the next day. Just as Pepper reached the first stair leading to the podium, no more than nine seconds away from the microphone and nominating Wallace, Jackson moved a motion to adjourn the convention. Only a handful of "ayes" were drowned out by a chorus of "nays", but Jackson ruled the meeting adjourned anyway. According to Pepper, Jackson apologised to him the next day, and revealed that he was under orders from the party bosses to ensure Wallace's name wasn't put into nomination on the first day.

Over night, the party bosses went to work, twisting arms,

making bribes, and bullying delegations to switch their support from Wallace to Harry Truman, a creature of the corrupt party boss of his home state of Missouri, Tom Pendergast, who'd boasted of picking Truman: "I wanted to demonstrate that a well-oiled machine could send an office boy to the Senate." By the next day Wallace, although still in front, had lost ground to Truman, and continued to do so in ballot after ballot, until Truman had secured the nomination.

Those nine seconds proved fateful for world history. When Roosevelt died just months before the end of WWII, instead of being replaced by a strong leader in Wallace who'd been in his administration from the beginning and who shared his values, his opposition to Wall Street, his hatred of European and especially British colonialism, and his desire to cooperate with wartime ally Russia, his successor was Truman, a weak stooge of corrupt party bosses and Wall Street whom Winston Churchill was able to manipulate into dropping the atomic bomb, launching the Cold War and escalating a hostile nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. It is no exaggeration to say that those nine seconds set in train the destructive Cold War, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the rise of the CIA and "deep state" and their black ops assassinations and coups etc., and the restoration of Wall Street and the City of London to the reins of the post-war Anglo-American empire—the legacy of which still defines the world to this day.

As Senator Pepper wrote in his autobiography: "What I understood is that for better or worse history was turned topsy-turvy that night in Chicago." By the same token, the 10 seconds in 2015 that enabled Jeremy Corbyn to qualify to contest his party's leadership has now turned history for the better.

A President Henry Wallace would have averted the Cold War

On 27 March 1947, Henry A. Wallace delivered the following speech on the "Truman Doctrine".

12 March 1947, marked a turning point in American history. It is not a Greek crisis that we face, it is an American crisis. It is a crisis in the American spirit....

President Truman, in the name of democracy and humanitarianism, proposed ... in effect, that America police Russia's every border. There is no regime too reactionary for us provided it stands in Russia's expansionist path. There is no country too remote to serve as the scene of a contest which may widen until it becomes a world war.

President Truman calls for action to combat a crisis. What is this crisis that necessitates Truman going to Capitol Hill as though a Pearl Harbor has suddenly hit us? ...

One year ago at Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill called for a diplomatic offensive against Soviet Russia. By sanctioning that speech, Truman committed us to a policy of combating Russia with British sources. That policy proved to be so bankrupt that Britain can no longer maintain it. Now President Truman proposes we take over Britain's hopeless task. ...

I say that this policy is utterly futile. No people can be bought. America cannot afford to spend billions and billions of dollars for unproductive purposes. The world is hungry and insecure, and the peoples of all lands demand change. President Truman cannot prevent change in the world any more than he can prevent the tide from coming in or the sun from setting. But once America stands for opposition to change, we are lost. America will become the most hated nation in the world.

Russia may be poor and unprepared for war, but she

knows very well how to reply to Truman's declaration of economic and financial pressure. ... I certainly don't want to see communism spread. I predict that Truman's policy will spread communism in Europe and Asia. ... In proposing this reckless adventure, Truman is betraying the great tradition of America and the leadership of the great American who preceded him....

When President Truman proclaims the world-wide conflict between East and West, he is telling the Soviet leaders that we are preparing for eventual war. They will reply by measures to strengthen their position in the event of war. Then the task of keeping the world at peace will pass beyond the power of the common people everywhere who want peace. Certainly it will not be freedom that will be victorious in this struggle. ...

This is the time for an all-out worldwide reconstruction program for peace. This is America's opportunity. The peoples of all lands say to America: Send us plows for our fields instead of tanks and guns to be used against us.... The dollars that are spent will be spent for the production of goods and will come back to us in a thousand different ways. Our programs will be based on service instead of the outworn ideas of imperialism and power politics. It is a fundamental law of life that a strong idea is merely strengthened by persecution. The way to handle communism is by what William James called the replacing power of the higher affection. In other words, we give the common man all over the world something better than communism. I believe we have something better than communism here in America. But President Truman has not spoken for the American ideal. It is now the turn of the American people to speak.