

# The Violent Views Of The Man Who Could Be Labour's Next Leader

A Report by Mainstream - The Campaign Against Extremism



# Introduction

*“Tony [Benn] always said how you can use a ballot box to change the world. But there’s [another] way too, which in the old days we called insurrection...”<sup>1</sup>*

These are the words of John McDonnell – Jeremy Corbyn’s right hand man, who is widely regarded as the most powerful person in the Labour Party and even tipped as the next Labour leader.

McDonnell has forged his career out of advocating political violence – from supporting the “freedom fighters”<sup>2</sup> of the IRA and cheering on rioters to joking about travelling back in time to assassinate Margaret Thatcher.

As politicians on all sides increasingly urge moderation in political discourse, this report catalogues McDonnell’s long history of using incendiary language to celebrate and advocate violence and incite others to take direct action.

McDonnell has twice challenged for the Labour leadership – once in 2007 when he failed to gather enough support to run against Gordon Brown and three years later when he ran against Ed Miliband.

Ill health forced him to concede to fellow left-wing firebrand Jeremy Corbyn in 2015.

Born in Liverpool to a docker who was a union branch secretary and a shop worker, McDonnell left school at 17 and worked in

factories before studying politics, sociology and history at London’s Brunel University.

His was always the politics of the hard-left, with early jobs in the National Union of Mineworkers and the TUC.

As a Labour frontbencher, McDonnell has outlined his plans to hike taxes, nationalise banks and raid the assets of Britain’s most successful entrepreneurs.

But while his policies remain uncompromising, McDonnell has sought an image makeover seemingly in his bid for power.

The Shadow Chancellor regularly tours the broadcast studios seeking to reinvent himself as the competent and moderate face of a party reeling from accusations of bullying and anti-Semitism left unchecked by Corbyn.

This report seeks to lay bare the truth behind McDonnell’s makeover. It catalogues a litany of abusive language against fellow Parliamentarians, incitement to violence during rallies of left-wing activists, and his celebration of the IRA’s campaign of bloody violence that claimed thousands of lives during The Troubles.

And it includes fresh evidence that McDonnell courted and championed IRA terrorists while threatening and verbally abusing elected MPs.

# Threatening Thatcher, Insulting Churchill

In June 2010, The Guardian reported that McDonnell told a Labour leadership hustling that he would like to go back to the 1980s to assassinate Margaret Thatcher.

Speaking at the GMB's annual conference in Southport, McDonnell told delegates he had once been asked in a warm-up question on the BBC's Any Questions what he would do if he found himself in an "Ashes to Ashes" situation - a reference to the BBC series that saw a modern policewoman waking up in the 1980s.

McDonnell drew applause when he said he would have liked to go back to that era and "assassinate Thatcher."<sup>3</sup>

Roundly condemned by Conservative and Labour MPs after the comments emerged, McDonnell tried to dismiss them as a joke. But in June 2016, fresh footage emerged of the left-winger defending the suggestion he made six years earlier.

The footage, from a conference in 2014, was shot on the day The Guardian published a controversial short story from Wolf Hall author Hilary Mantel, called The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher.

In the film, McDonnell jokes that he wants to sue the author for stealing his idea. And he recalls how he "once got into trouble" for making the comments but adds he got "the biggest applause I've had in my life" for his remark.<sup>4</sup>

He added: "I was on a phone-in and some colonel from Surrey phoned up and I thought

he was having a coronary. I said: 'Look, I'm really sorry if I've upset you in that way.' But there was massive support for actually assassinating Margaret Thatcher."<sup>5</sup>

Conservative MPs called for McDonnell to apologise. North West Leicestershire MP Andrew Bridgen branded McDonnell "unfit for opposition, let alone power".<sup>6</sup>

Baroness Thatcher was not the only historic leader McDonnell despised. Nicholas Soames, the grandson of Winston Churchill, branded McDonnell a "Poundland Lenin" when the Labour frontbencher insulted the war-time leader earlier this year.<sup>7</sup>

In February 2019, speaking at a Politico event, McDonnell was asked by the host, Playbook editor Jack Blanchard in a quick fire question round, whether he considered Churchill a hero or a villain.

McDonnell replied: "Tonypandy. Villain."<sup>8</sup>

The Shadow Chancellor's reference focused on Churchill's decision, as Home Secretary in 1910, to send in troops to support police in violent clashes with striking miners.

Conservative MP Mr Soames was sanguine about the comments, dismissing them as a "foolish and stupid thing to say".<sup>9</sup>

However the comment sparked a Twitter feud within the Labour Party as moderate Labour MPs hailed Churchill as a great leader while Corbyn-backing commentators rallied to McDonnell's view.

# “Lynch The Bastard”

McDonnell’s abusive language led to calls on former Labour leader Ed Miliband to remove the whip from the backbencher in November 2014, when it emerged he had called for a Conservative Minister to be “lynched”.

McDonnell was speaking at an ‘alternative’ Remembrance Sunday event, where left-wing politicians made jokes about killing the Royal Family.

The ‘anti-war’ event, attended by Corbyn and Diane Abbott, also saw McDonnell take to the stage.

In his speech, the Hayes and Harlington MP spoke about a visit to the Wirral West constituency of then Employment Minister Esther McVey.

He told the audience:

*“I was up in Liverpool a fortnight ago where Alec McFadden, one of our [union] organisers, launched the Sack Esther McVey Day on her birthday. I spoke at a packed public meeting... there was a whole group in the audience that completely kicked off, quite critical of the whole concept, because they were arguing ‘Why we are sacking her? Why aren’t we lynching the bastards?’”<sup>10</sup>*

Revelations about the comments caused outrage in the House of Commons. Then Defence Minister Anna Soubry said there was

no excuse for the language. “Ed Miliband must remove the whip from John McDonnell,” she added, “The Labour Party must not be a refuge to those who incite violence.”<sup>11</sup>

Then Conservative Party chairman Grant Shapps branded the event “sickening” and slammed McDonnell for “inciting hatred and violence against women”.

He added: “John McDonnell should be forced to withdraw his disgusting comments and apologise.”<sup>12</sup>

Asked about the event, Corbyn said it was a “great” night out and that he had “really enjoyed it”.<sup>13</sup>

The Labour leadership at the time distanced itself from the comment, putting out a tweet saying they did not represent the views of Labour.

McDonnell remains unrepentant, insisting he was simply repeating the views of someone else. But the controversy continues to dog him.

In October 2019, Labour List published this comment from McDonnell: “I get asked by the media whether I have Tory friends. No, I bloody well don’t. And they ask me to apologise to Esther McVey. Don’t even go there.”<sup>14</sup>

# “We Will Come For You”

McDonnell once joked about “garrotting” Liberal Democrat frontbencher Danny Alexander.

In 2015, The Guardian, reported how McDonnell dubbed this a “recurring dream” of his.<sup>15</sup>

For the first time, this report can reveal how McDonnell also used violent and threatening language against the former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg.

Speaking at a demonstration during an occupation of the University College London in November 2010, McDonnell spoke out about the Lib Dems support for tuition fees.

In opposition, the Lib Dems had promised to scrap the fees but supported the policy when they entered a coalition government.

McDonnell told protestors:

*“It is about the basic freedom of education. We fought over a generation, people like me, we fought for the right to free education, and these bastards are going to take it off us. And what this is all about is making sure that they don’t.”*

*“And I think that you’re having the effect. Whatever they say, whatever Clegg says. It’s very difficult not to use physical force on Clegg. I know, I try to restrain myself in the Chamber.”<sup>16</sup>*

This was not the first time McDonnell had used violent language aimed at Parliamentarians and in front of an impressionable young crowd.

In 2008, he told an audience at Birkbeck University: “I try and be non-violent as I possibly can, although it’s difficult at times in the House of Commons.”<sup>17</sup>

In May 2017, the Daily Mail reported a further two cases where McDonnell endorsed political violence.

Branding the Shadow Chancellor a “thug”, the paper revealed a video that showed McDonnell praising rioters for attacking Conservative Central Office.

A protest over tuition fees had erupted into violence as hundreds stormed the then Millbank headquarters of Conservative headquarters. Rioters had smashed windows and hurled missiles at police during an orgy of violence in central London.

In the video, shot in January 2012 at a Unite the Resistance event, McDonnell said:

*“It just needed the one small spark way back in November before last, of the students kicking the shit out of Millbank and then that spark lighting all the combustible material - that then brought people out in March, June and then November, and that’s the best of our movement and it’s still there, you know it’s still there.”<sup>18</sup>*

McDonnell even expressed his “solidarity” with Ed Woollard, who threw a fire extinguisher at police on the ground from the roof of Millbank tower.

Woollard’s actions shocked fellow rioters, who were filmed at the time booing the dangerous action and urging him to stop.

However McDonnell tells the Unite the Resistance event:

*“First of all I think we need to always express our solidarity with those in struggle and those who at the moment who are suffering as a result of that struggle. I wanted to express my solidarity still and all of ours with Ed Woollard, who was arrested as you know*



*and then prosecuted and imprisoned as a result of the demonstrations last November.”<sup>19</sup>*

He added:

*“I think now we’ve seen how effective direct action can be. I think we should put the message out very straightforwardly. Any institution or any individual that attacks our class, we will come for you with direct action.”<sup>20</sup>*

Around the same time, additional footage was also revealed showing McDonnell telling a 2010 rally against civil service job cuts that he wanted to give coalition Ministers “a good slapping”.

He said:

*“I sat opposite that today and I tell you, sometimes you feel like physical force. You feel like giving them a good slapping. Because, the anger that you feel is because these people who tell us that we’re all in this together, will go back to their homes tonight, their mansions, they’ll count their shares, they’ll receive their bonuses and they’ll expect us to pay.”*

He added that protestors would “resist in every form possible”.

*“Where we will win will be on the streets and on the picket lines, in the demonstrations and*

*in the strikes and yes in the direct action that will be needed to prevent these cuts.”<sup>21</sup>*

At the time, a spokesman for McDonnell described the comments as “taken out of context”.<sup>22</sup>

Yet in 2012, McDonnell was filmed inciting activists to harass Conservative MPs who he branded “social criminals” who should be “put on trial”.

He said:

*“I want to be in a situation where no Tory MP, no Tory MP, no coalition Minister, can travel anywhere in the country, or show their face anywhere in public without being challenged, without direct action.” These Tories are “social criminals”, he added, who should be put on trial.”<sup>23</sup>*

At another meeting in 2012, he repeated the same call to direct action. He called on activists to ensure it was “fucking kicking off” no matter where MPs were.

“Do you know what I mean?” he asks, “They turn up, there’s someone protesting, there’s someone written a slogan on the wall, there’s someone occupying. I just want it happening all the time.”<sup>24</sup>



# McDonnell And The IRA

While McDonnell used abusive language against fellow MPs, he also celebrated and romanticised IRA terrorists who waged a campaign of murder and bombings in Northern Ireland and in Britain.

In November 2015, The Times reported on a 1986 Labour meeting where McDonnell shared the stage with a Sinn Fein councillor.

McDonnell called Lewisham Labour councillors who boycotted the gathering “gutless wimps”.

According to a report on the meeting in the Deptford & Peckham Mercury, McDonnell “joked that kneecapping might help change their minds”.<sup>25</sup> Kneecapping was a notorious torture technique used by the IRA.

The revelation in The Times forced a denial from his spokesman, who said McDonnell had “no recollection of making these remarks. The

quote is clearly taken out of context - John rejects all forms of violence and has done so all his political career.”

The Times reported the organiser of the 1986 meeting, Diarmuid Breatnach, saying: “I do recall him making some throwaway but unfortunate remark about knee-capping in the context of the rate-capping that the Conservative government was introducing at the time.”<sup>26</sup>

In 2003, McDonnell told a pro-Irish Republican gathering: “It’s about time we started honouring those people involved in the armed struggle. It was the bombs and bullets and sacrifice made by the likes of Bobby Sands that brought Britain to the negotiating table. The peace we have now is due to the action of the IRA.”<sup>27</sup>

Sands was a member of the Provisional IRA who died in 1981 after a hunger strike at HM Prison Maze where he was serving a sentence for firearms possession. He was considered a martyr by the IRA.

When asked about his statement by The Sun, McDonnell said:

*“The deaths of innocent civilians in IRA attacks is a real tragedy but it was as a result of British occupation of Ireland. Because of the bravery of the IRA and people like Bobby Sands we now have a peace process.”*<sup>28</sup>

Challenged about this speech on BBC’s Question Time in 2015, McDonnell explained:

*“What I tried to do for both sides is to give them a way out with some form of dignity otherwise they wouldn’t lay their arms down... And can I just say this, because this has been raised with me time and time again - I accept it was a mistake to use those words, but actually if it contributed towards saving one life, or preventing someone else being maimed it was worth doing, because we did hold on to the peace process.”*<sup>29</sup>

He also said:

*“I went out and argued for the peace process. And I made this speech to a group of republicans, because one of the problems that we had is if there was a feeling that they were defeated or humiliated, and this was on both sides, they would not stand down. So, I made this speech and I urged them, I urged them to put their weapons away and to participate in the peace process.”*<sup>30</sup>

McDonnell had actually opposed setting up the power sharing assembly which became the Good Friday Agreement because he argued an “assembly is not what people have laid down their lives for over thirty years ....the settlement must be for a united Ireland”.

And McDonnell’s Question Time claim to be pursuing peace is further contradicted by new findings.

It can be revealed that the 2003 gathering was advertised in advance as a “rally for United Ireland”, and that Jeremy Corbyn was part of the delegation that marched past Downing Street to Conway Hall.<sup>31</sup>

A sympathetic article covering the event in the hard-left Morning Star has also been unearthed. It quotes McDonnell saying:

*“People like Bobby Sands brought England to its knees and to the negotiating table.”*<sup>32</sup>

So great was McDonnell’s admiration for Sands that he was once threatened with expulsion from the Labour Party for honouring the convicted terrorist at the annual ‘Bobby Sands commemoration’. This event was hosted by the Wolfe Tone Society - a republican group that campaigned for a united Ireland.

Wolfe Tone events were also frequently attended by current Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who hit the headlines for observing a minute’s silence in ‘honour’ of dead IRA terrorists at one event.<sup>33</sup>

McDonnell was a regular speaker at Wolfe Tone Society commemorations throughout the 1980s and in 2004 was given a Hunger Strike Memorial Plaque by convicted terrorist Gerry Kelly, who was sentenced to life for his part in a 1973 bombing campaign. Kelly praised the “vital” support McDonnell had offered to imprisoned IRA terrorists.<sup>34</sup>

The idea that the Harlington and Hayes MP was aiming to reconcile both sides is further undermined by the revelation that McDonnell offered to share his offices in Parliament with Sinn Fein MPs.

In 2002, it was reported that Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Michelle Gildernew and Pat Doherty would be allowed full access to



Westminster despite their refusal to swear an oath of allegiance.

Their new offices were in the final stages of refurbishment and John McDonnell offered to share his until the work was completed.<sup>35</sup>

At the time this offer was remarkable, not least because Adams, McGuinness and Doherty were named as members of the army council of the Provisional IRA under parliamentary privilege by David Burnside MP.<sup>36</sup> And Pat Doherty is the brother of Hugh Doherty, infamous for his role in the Provisional IRA Balcombe Street gang, which was responsible for bombings and killings in London in the 1970s.<sup>37</sup>

It can also be revealed that at the height of the Troubles in 1986, John McDonnell told a meeting he looked forward to a campaign to free IRA terrorists for “actions they carried out in the fight to achieve the self determination of the Irish people”. He likened the IRA terrorists to “the freedom fighters of Nicaragua and South Africa.”<sup>38</sup>

A report from July 1986 in the Workers Press newspaper describes a meeting called by the Free the Guildford Four Campaign at which John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn also spoke.

It states:

*“John McDonnell, former deputy leader of the now abolished GLC, pledged support for the campaign. He said he was also looking forward to a campaign to free the people who are in prison for actions they carried out in the fight to achieve the self determination of the Irish people. He said the right to fight for self-determination is something which ‘the British Labour party and other politicians in this country are willing to give to the freedom fighters of Nicaragua and South Africa but not to Ireland.’”*

This statement was not out of the ordinary for McDonnell at the time.

A separate article, this time from the Workers Press in March 1987, notes that McDonnell welcomed support for both the wrongfully convicted and genuine IRA terrorists.

It states: “McDonnell said he also welcomes discussion in a campaign for two other categories of Irish prisoners languishing in British jails: those framed on the evidence of bribed supergrasses, and those imprisoned as a result of their involvement in the armed struggle to free Ireland, the Republican PoWs.”<sup>39</sup>

# Endnotes

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# Mainstream

## THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST EXTREMISM

***Mainstream is a new campaign – led by a group of people from different political backgrounds – designed to encourage a return to respectable and responsible politics, and to banish extremism from British politics once and for all.***

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