

The strange case of who chooses the next Labour prime minister

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The Labour Party first widened the franchise for its leadership elections beyond just MPs in the 1980s. But if a challenge to Sir Keir Starmer initiates a contest any time soon, it will have been nearly half a century before Labour Party members got to vote directly to determine who is prime minister. Long periods in opposition and one unopposed contest in 2007 got in the way in the intervening years.

When Conservative Party members first faced a similar decision in 2019, the demographics of their grassroots — average age around 57, mostly middle class, disproportionately male and white — produced complaints that the UK premier was being chosen by an unrepresentative, rightwing cabal. Similar noises were heard in 2022, when Liz Truss won. Given the near-identical demographics of the Labour membership, it's tempting to remark that the big difference is that this is an unaccountable, elderly cabal but on the left.

Of course, many of those who complained then are now silent. It is one of the accepted hypocrisies of modern British politics that when your side changes PM midterm, it is part of our distinguished constitutional heritage as a parliamentary democracy. When the other lot do it, it is an outrage.

But actually there are much greater differences in the nature of the wider Labour electorate in any contest, as it is not confined solely to party members. Affiliated supporters also have a say — mostly trade union members who have opted to pay a political levy for their union to engage in political activity.

When Labour held a deputy leadership election last year — with a similar franchise — the total electorate numbered over 970,000. We don't have a reliable published figure for the size of Labour's membership, but it is often assumed to be around 250,000 (though that may be generous); so around threequarters of those who can vote are not members of the party.

Those who oppose party members choosing a leader argue that it can create a situation — as with Truss or Jeremy Corbyn — where a parliamentary party gets lumbered with a leader in whom it has no confidence. In the Conservative Party, it is true, the membership can impose a leader on MPs. But it is the particular genius of the Labour Party to have created a contest that could produce a Labour prime minister whom neither members nor MPs want.

The normal assumption is that the affiliated voters turn out in such low numbers that they probably don't affect the result (last year the total turnout was under 17 per cent, widely assumed to be a result of low union voting). If they do vote, they probably move as one with party members.

But not always. Under a system slightly different from today's, it was the affiliated members who tipped the balance for Ed Miliband in 2010 — MPs and party members preferred his brother. And while their turnout has usually been low, they have never before had the chance to directly choose a prime minister.

Now they do. And if I were a trade union I would be putting a lot of effort into making sure they voted. We know very little about these people. Most polling either ignores them or surveys them in derisory numbers. Because of data protection issues, their details cannot be provided to candidates and no direct communication between the candidate and the affiliated supporters is allowed.

This still may not affect who becomes PM. Should Andy Burnham emerge victorious in the Makerfield by-election — the nearest thing British politics has created to the medieval trial by combat — he will descend on Westminster like a conquering hero. The PM stands down; the pressure on others to avoid a contest proves overwhelming; we get Burnham by acclaim. But if things play out differently, a leadership tussle will involve the largest party franchise ever directly to elect a British prime minister.