

## **Jeremy Corbyn: What I Learned From Salvador Allende's Chile**

**In 1969, the young socialist activist Jeremy Corbyn visited Chile to watch the progress of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity coalition, before its election victory the following year. Fifty years later, Corbyn spoke to *Jacobin* about what Chile meant to the international left.**



Jeremy Corbyn in London, 2019. (Jack Taylor / Getty Images)

This month marks fifty years since Popular Unity's Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile. From the outset, parts of the opposition and state apparatus refused to accept his government, centered on the Socialist and Communist Parties, and Allende faced a violent, CIA-backed campaign of subversion. This reached its tragic denouement on September 11, 1973, with General Augusto Pinochet's coup and Allende's death. As the dictatorship imposed its grip, thousands of socialists, communists, and trade unionists were murdered or forced to flee the country.

When we reflect today on the fragility of the Left's position, Chile serves as an object lesson. The collusion of the Right and business owners in sabotaging the economy; the way that procedural obstruction helped promote chaos and fascist violence on the streets; and the horror of seeing the bombing of the presidential

palace all showed how undemocratic forces could trump democratic politics. This was precisely what Allende sought to combat, defiantly declaring in his final speech to the workers, “History is ours, and it is made by the people.” One keen supporter of Allende’s presidency was Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of Britain’s Labour Party from 2015 to 2019. An enduring friend of the Latin-American left, he visited Chile in the buildup to the 1970 general election, and even years after the coup used his position in the British Parliament to speak up for the rights of under-attack Chileans.

Earlier this month, Tom Raeside spoke to Corbyn about his memories of Allende’s victory, the role of culture in political and social change, and what lessons we can draw from the Chilean struggle for today. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Tom Raeside

Can you tell me about the beginning of your time in Chile — what made you aware of Popular Unity?

Jeremy Corbyn

I was in Chile in 1969 when Popular Unity was formed. I was in the May Day March there, and it was all very tense because people weren’t sure if the left alliance was going to work. Allende had been a long-term senator, run for president before, and now he was the choice to be the presidential candidate. What was nice about it — and different — was the music and the diversity of the march.

Later in that same period, I went to a folk concert in Viña del Mar. This was an assertion of the urban left, but also of the involvement of indigenous people. This was the fault line of most Latin-American politics back then — the Left had been dominated by European Marxist and socialist ideals, and it hadn’t encompassed the traditions of indigenous communities. Most of the left parties were led by people of European dissent.

Then, the elections took place and we kept getting reports in various papers — the best reporter in all of this was Hugh O’Shaughnessy, of the *Observer* and the *Financial Times*, at that time. He had the best analysis of it. We were sort of thinking, “they can’t do it...”

I remember staying in a flat in Santiago during that same visit. There were a lot of young British and French people in this flat, most of whom were associated with the Socialist Workers’ Party here — International Socialists, as it was then — who were unenthusiastic about most of it, really! They were enthusiastic for social change, but wouldn’t believe that the Popular Unity — and, from their

point of view, the Communist Party — was a good thing. It was impossible to win without the Communist Party in Chile at that point, so the Communist Party and Socialist Party coming together was absolutely crucial.

Allende got the largest vote in the election. But in Chile it isn't a direct vote, it's an indication to the congress to elect the president on the basis of the popular vote — but they don't have to follow it. There was a suspicion that the congress, which did not at that time have a left majority, would have not voted for Allende — that they would not confirm the election result. I was never sure how much of this was paranoia amongst Allende supporters or whether this was real.

But he was confirmed as president, and his achievements were amazing, in the sense of giving hope and enthusiasm to people to really change their lives. That's the exciting thing about it — if you talk to any older Chilean person who was around at that time, they don't remember it as a time of particularly easy living. It wasn't — there were shortages, all inspired by the blockade. There were problems because of the pressure of the far right — but it was a time of hope.

It was a time of inclusion of people in a way that had never happened before. The poorest people got housing, the children got milk in school, schools were better resourced, and there was an attempt to start to at least treat the indigenous people decently. That hadn't happened before, as Chile was seen as the “Europe at the end of Latin America.”

Tom Raeside

Patricio Guzmán calls the conflict in Chile in the buildup to the 1973 coup, “the insurrection of the bourgeoisie” versus “the power of the people.” When did you become aware of the changing situation in Chile? What were the repercussions of those events for Latin America — and the democratic-socialist left across the world?

Jeremy Corbyn

I followed everything very closely that was happening in Chile from 1970 onwards. From 1971, I worked for the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers and we had all the newspapers — I was in the research department. I kept cuttings of the articles Hugh O'Shaughnessy wrote about Chile. There were discussions on the Left in London in support of Chile — there were some who said the project was unsustainable, and that the only way forward was outside Parliament, whilst others disagreed.

Then, things were obviously getting worse in Chile.

I stayed up all night on the night of the coup, as I had a friend who worked as a copy clerk at Reuters and he was getting the cable in every two minutes from

Chile. He was phoning me up and reading them to me. It was horrible, absolutely horrific. We felt this sense of anger and powerlessness at what was going on.

That afternoon, word went around on what was happening, so we decided to have a demonstration outside of the Chilean embassy on Devonshire Street. A whole lot of us turned up and stood there, made slogans and all of that sort of stuff. But then, somebody appeared on the roof of the embassy and we thought — “what is going on?” Then, this person on the roof of the embassy looked at us all and raised his fist in solidarity. It was Álvaro Bunster, the Chilean ambassador. He had come to express his solidarity with us.

I met Álvaro years later in Mexico, where he went to live. I just told him what a moving occasion that had been for all of us. He said he was overwhelmed that people had come out in support.

A lot of Chilean exiles came here, and a Chile Solidarity Campaign was founded. One of their heroes was Judith Hart, who was a minister in the Labour government. She helped to ensure settlement of quite a lot of Chilean refugees. I was a councillor in Haringey at the time, we got some Chilean refugees housed — the GLC [Greater London Council] housed some in Thamesmead and other places — so there was the growth of a Chilean community. The ones who got to Britain tended to be the most articulate left activists who managed to get out, either via the Mexican embassy or the Cuban embassy. Others went on to Sweden and Cuba.

After the Cambio de Mano, [“Handover” back to a form of democracy] in 1990, the new ambassador from Chile invited me to come to the embassy to see him. I was walking down Devonshire Street and I suddenly found myself standing in the exact same spot I stood at in 1973 — the same drain cover was still there. I was looking at the embassy and thought — “actually I’m supposed to go in this time.” I had never been inside the embassy before.

Tom Raeside

As an MP whilst Pinochet was in power how did you use your position to stand up for the victims of his brutal military regime?

Jeremy Corbyn

I became an MP in 1983 and for this work it was a sort of perfect arrangement as my office was at the Red Rose center on Seven Sisters Road, and downstairs was the office of the Chilean Solidarity Campaign, in what was then Co-op Hall. So, I had literal day-to-day contact with them. To their credit, they never abused that. They didn’t put excessive demands on me and recognized I had some other things to do as well. They were very responsible and very good about it.

Chile Solidarity was downstairs, I was upstairs, and I would do parliamentary questions, parliamentary motions, and so forth. I often spoke at meetings of all the Chilean left groups, as well as a growing exile group called Chile Democrático. It was a good model: Chile Solidarity was there in solidarity, whilst Chile Democrático was the expression of the Chilean people in exile. There was also Chile Committee for Human Rights, which specifically worked on individual cases and would support people in Santiago.

We would send support and advice if and when we could. When possible, we would send delegations — that was extremely difficult, for obvious reasons. We would also challenge arms sales, and trade with Chile, and do all of the acts of solidarity we could muster. I spoke at various human rights events, including in Italy. The Chilean community was then very effective and well connected around Europe — in Sweden, in France, Germany (both East and West), and Britain.

I remember in Italy, traveling on a train when I had been at a Chilean solidarity event somewhere. The train either broke down or there was a problem with the line, so we were stranded in Bologna at, like, midnight. The railway people said that there were no trains until tomorrow.

I was with a couple of Chilean people and within thirty minutes the Chilean community of Bologna had been mobilized — we were met, taken to their home, given food. They heard we were on a train; they didn't know we were coming through Bologna, and they couldn't have possibly known the train was going to break down. But they heard we were there — just two phone calls and we were well looked after — “Mr. Jeremy, we've got a house for you!”

We also did a lot of solidarity for people who were in prison in Chile, or cases we could take up — trying to persuade the British embassy to intervene when there was any British connection. I remember one man called Pedro Fernández Lambach who was in prison and I think his partner, or him, had the right to residence in Britain — they weren't British nationals. So, with great difficulty I managed to persuade the British embassy to visit this guy in prison and they did — and the torture and so on stopped. That was the sort of minor points of contact we managed to make. The Chile Committee for Human Rights was extremely efficient and effective at that sort of thing.

Then later on, after the Cambio de Mano, I went to Chile in 1990 with them to witness the handover of office. It was a change of hand — not a change of power.

Tom Raeside

Could you expand on an incident that occurred on Parliament's Social Security Select Committee, after a decision was taken in 1996 to invite José Piñera (one

of the “Chicago Boys” and Pinochet’s minister of labor and social security) as a witness on the Chilean private pension system?

Jeremy Corbyn

He came as a witness because the Tories on the committee were very keen on privatizing everything — the height of madness. I was a member of the committee and we’d go ’round, with each member always given time to ask questions. The Tories would ask “How quickly can you privatize?” and that sort of thing, “How does it work and which international companies are interested?” — cringeworthy stuff.

So, it comes to my turn, and I said, “How does it feel to be representing an oppressive fascist regime that murdered people? And you have the temerity to be coming here and telling us that we should be privatizing our social security system? Can you please explain who benefits from the privatization of your social security system?”

So, he says in reply, “I’m not prepared to answer questions from communists on this committee who have no interests in the democracy and the respect of my country. So, I am not prepared to take questions from Mr. Corbyn.” To his credit the chair, Frank Field, said, “you are our witness and you are required to answer questions from everyone on the committee, including Mr. Corbyn — please answer his question.”

Tom Raeside

Was Piñera aware of your activism in Chile?

Jeremy Corbyn

Oh, he was well-prepared, he’s got notes about me. He had his bits of paper there beside him. He had been well briefed by those at the embassy!

Tom Raeside

Turning to the situation facing us today, for me a summary of where the focus must be going forward as socialists in the Labour Party is following up Laura Pidcock’s line of “occupying every space with our politics ... this is how we will find our greatest strength and chances of steering the ship...”

Jeremy Corbyn

Yes — you occupy every space, but above all you seek to give people hope. So, you don’t go around preaching doom and despair. Seek to do things that are forward- looking. Socialism isn’t about saying to everybody, “go off and read this or that history book or theory.” But it’s about saying, “in your everyday life, you’re a socialist.” You look after your neighbor, you share things, support the National Health Service, and make socialism a part of your life.

Tom Raeside

When I think of what we achieved over the last five years here in the UK,

whether it was through the work of Grime for Corbyn or the films of Simon Baker, I believe one of our biggest strengths was the cultural and artistic awakening that underpinned our campaigns.

And in Chile, the *Canción Nueva* cultural movement behind Allende was fundamental to the Left's success in 1970. Through their work, poets and songwriters such as Víctor Jara, Pablo Neruda, and the late Violeta Parra channeled a revolutionary introspection of self, reflecting on the beauty of nature and fragility of life in Latin America. Symbolic of Víctor Jara's work was the imagery of peasant struggle — often expressed through the work of “The Plough” and his hands. And as you said before, such culture combined with the Latin American revolutionary spirit and Chile's “Western” nature to pave the way for the Popular Unity's victory.

Looking at your leadership of the Labour Party, and looking back at your time in Chile, what role do you think culture, music, and art plays in political and social change?

Jeremy Corbyn

You can't have political and social change without culture, music, and art. It's impossible — it can't ever just be a transactional relationship with the cold figures of the economy. It's got to be about human spirit and people. Socialism is about everyday life — it is about people, it is about the ability to share experiences and be inspired.

What I always try to do is work with poets, artistic, musical communities as a way of bringing people together in a language they can share. I was very pleased that I persuaded the Labour Party to adopt a policy of arts funding for all children in schools — the pupil arts premium, which came out of the leadership campaign of 2015. I was very pleased at the way in which artistic development within the Labour movement has grown at a pace, understanding what art is about and the joy of expression.

On the wider cultural scene — we have a complete imbalance of arts funding in Britain and a complete imbalance of esteem for it. So, a disproportionate number of major stage and film actors are privately educated. I'm not blaming them for that — they are brilliant people and actors. But it says something about the lack of funding of culture and theater in the state system, that fewer actors come out of the state system, and ditto for artists, whether they're painting or another type of artist.

Again, it shows a lack of public support and public esteem for it. So, I'm keen to change that, but also, it's about disproportionate spending across the whole country. A wholly disproportionate amount of arts council spending goes to elite art in London, compared to the rest of the country. I think the flowering of

culture is key to the development of socialist ideas.

Talking about Chile — the role that Víctor Jara played was far bigger than anything he probably realized at the time. As far as he was concerned, he was a guy with a guitar, he would go around on demonstrations and strikes — sing for the people and sing for the movement. He didn't realize what he was doing was unleashing, and giving space to, music for everybody else.

I remember going to Nicaragua in 1983 — it was the heart of the war. It was pretty difficult, there were shortages *everywhere* and of *everything*. In the schools, the children were learning the violin. Also, on music in Latin America, think about the [Simón] Bolívar orchestra in Venezuela — it's amazing what they have achieved, but also the quality of their music. The idea that the Bolívar orchestra could play at the [BBC] Proms is amazing.

Tom Raeside

Do you think the cultural movement was the absolute strength of Allende's movement?

Jeremy Corbyn

Yes, it sustained it — it also had some very good architects and development people and so on, who did a lot of very good stuff in building — design, education, and all of that. But it was that principle, that you need to have a cultural explosion to succeed.

Tom Raeside

What are the lessons we can take now from the struggle in Chile, fifty years on from the election of Salvador Allende?

Jeremy Corbyn

Understand that the power of international capital and global corporations is enormous and huge. It will be used against any progressive government. The only way forward is to have strong labor movements, and a strong cultural movement goes with it. That unites people in the understanding of hope and an expectation that we don't have to live in a world of global inequality.