

Britain: Diane Abbott, John McDonnell and Emily Thornberry are correct on Brexit

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The Corbyn project is in crisis, writes Alan Davies. The EU elections results were a disaster for Labour, brought about by a major failure by the Corbyn leadership. It was an election that Labour could have won and within the terms of the policy agreed by conference last year, but this policy was repeatedly watered down by the front bench.

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Corbyn. Photo: Terry Conway

This is a crisis that is a direct threat to the most important development ever on the left in Britain in modern times; the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party, which has opened up a real prospect of a left anti-austerity government at a time when world politics is moving to the right. That prospect is still there but the Labour leadership's stance on Brexit, the issue that defines politics in Britain at the present time, is going to have to change.

Labour not only saw its vote collapse, but it managed to facilitate both the rise of Nigel Farage's Brexit Party and of the semi-dead Lib Dems – putting them centre-stage at a very dangerous period of time. Emily Thornberry was absolutely right when she said on BBC, immediately after the vote, that this was because Labour had refused to be clear on the one thing that people wanted them to be clear on in those elections: i.e. where Labour stood on Brexit.

Labour haemorrhaged votes to the Lib Dems and the Greens because those parties were unequivocally pro-remain and for a second referendum in order to achieve it and Labour was not – even after it had become clear that the Brexit that people were promised in 2016 was not on offer. The combined Lib Dems and Green Party share of the vote increased by more than 10 points. Many of these were disillusioned Labour remainers who defected to these parties in the knowledge that

they could let Farage in.

Had Labour placed itself at the head of the growing anti-Brexit movement the result could have been very different. Overall, the European election vote was pro-remain with pro-remain at 40.3%. and hard Brexit at 34.9%. The Brexit party result was no surprise. It is not a new party as Farage claims but UKIP mark 2. UKIP polled 28% in the last EU election and this transferred to Brexit with some additional votes mostly from the Tories.

Although Labour went on to win the Peterborough by-election – which was important in that it denied momentum to the Brexit Party at this point – it did so on a reduced vote and because the Brexit vote was split (equally according to John Curtice) between the Brexit party and the Tories and reflected the same underlying situation. The Labour candidate, Lisa Forbes, who beat the Brexit party by just 683 votes, argued that her campaign had been successful because it had ignored Brexit and concentrated on local issues. This is a seriously wrong analysis that has been widely accepted on the Labour left and in particular by Momentum.

Despite SR's long held opposition to the EU as a neoliberal, anti-working class project, it has been against Brexit since the referendum was announced by Cameron in 2016. This was because the Brexit on offer was, and still is, a project of the hard right shaped by racism, xenophobia, English nationalism, and nostalgia for Empire. A Brexit that would fuel racism and shift the political situation in Britain, and indeed beyond, sharply to the right. The recent election results have only reinforced that view.

Labour's position

Labour was right originally to respect the result of the referendum, but wrong to cling to this position when it became clear that was not deliverable without unacceptable damage to society and a hard border in Ireland between Britain and the EU. It then compounded the problem by advocating its own so-called soft Brexit when no such thing existed. The discussions with May went on even after it became clear that she had no intention of shifting an inch and was using them as a ploy to get a further extension.

The danger with this fence sitting is that it is based on avoiding crucial issues. On the one hand, the further away we get from what was already an undemocratic referendum – in that EU citizens and under 18's were denied a vote – and as material circumstances changed, the less legitimacy the 2016 result has. This has never been challenged by the Labour leadership. Even worse was the idea that it would be possible to leave the EU without reducing the living standards of the vast majority in the process, or that there could be a Brexit that protected jobs. Ironically those areas where the majority voted leave which may well suffer most if Brexit goes ahead.

There is another very important reason as well to have a second referendum, and actually the most important, that is because it has become a democratic right at this stage of the Brexit shambles to have another vote. A second vote is itself a democratic right as circumstances change. Democracy can't be a once off event that must be imposed despite the consequences and impact on peoples' lives. The government has failed to implement what was promised in the referendum and crashing out without a deal cannot be remotely seen as what people voted for then the natural process must be to go back to the voters.

Some change has happened

There have been some welcome changes since these election results – in Wales and Scotland for example.

In Wales, which voted Leave by 52.5%, and where Ford has announced the closure of the Bridgend plant with the loss of 1,700 jobs [Labour have come out clearly for a second referendum](#) – no doubt under pressure from Plaid who came second to the Brexit Party with Labour third. It is worth noting that this has happened under the leadership of the new pro-Corbyn leadership of Mark Drakeford which makes it harder for people to dismiss this as coming from the right.

The Welsh Brexit Minister Jeremy Miles puts it like this: “We sought to reconcile the result of the 2016 referendum with the least damaging kind of Brexit but that effort has now reached the end of the road. The European elections have shown that the electorate remains profoundly divided – and indeed the split has widened with many of those who voted for Brexit in the 2016 referendum now supporting no deal, and many, probably a majority wanting us to remain within the EU.... So, as a Government we will now campaign to remain in the EU.... Any deal will require a new mandate from the electorate: and leaving without a deal must require one also. And – of course – any referendum must include remaining in the EU as an option.”

[Scottish Labour's shift](#) is less surprising but again take place under the pro-Corbyn leadership of Richard Leonard.

There were also shifts within the Corbyn cabinet. Thornberry's statement is quoted earlier but there has also been more forthright positions supporting a second referendum and a campaign for Remain from both John McDonnell and Dianne Abbott.

Corbyn's response

What is most alarming, however, is that Corbyn himself has not changed his position – even after all this. In his Marr interview on the Sunday following EU vote his position was essentially the same. A second referendum, he said, remained on the table but in the end, it was not his priority. He would prefer a general election despite the fact that it was highly unlikely and the clear dangers involved if Labour entered a Brexit dominated election without a clear position on Brexit.

Brexit dominates politics in Britain and will do for a long time to come. Any form of Brexit of offer would be a further decent into the neo-liberal agenda with the Singapore model the Brexiteers have in mind. It would further de-industrialise Britain (in fact it is already doing so) and would further reinforce racism and xenophobia. These are all issues that fundamentally affect the lives of the working class and the future of the workers movement.

Jeremy Corbyn, however, who is the key to this situation, continues to equivocate. Worse than that, according to an article in [the Observer of June 9](#), the reason that Rebeca Long Bailey replaced Emily Thornberry at PMQs on June 5 was as a reprisal for her comments on the EU election results. Corbyn is also considering, the article claims, a shadow cabinet reshuffle and her replacement as shadow Foreign Secretary. This would be wrong. While Thornberry can be criticized for many things, the position she has but on a second referendum is completely in line with the decision of the last Labour Party conference and she should not be penalised for it.

Prevarication is being justified on the basis that Labour needs to protect its position in its Northern Brexit voting constituencies. But this does not make sense. As John Curtice points out 70% of Labour

voters and remainers and that for every vote that Labour loses to the Brexit party it loses three to the Lib Dems! As [Owen Jones says in the Guardian of June 8](#) "The danger is, by the time Labour unequivocally embraces its existing policy, it risks facing all the downsides without reaping any of the benefits: if it loses remain voters in leave seats, including working-class people who are young or BME, it will struggle to win a majority."

In fact, for the perception of Labour to change on this issue Corbyn would have to adopt a second referendum as a full-blooded position. He would have to call for a second referendum as a matter of democratic principle: no ifs, no buts, not deals and no negotiations. If he was prepared to do that then the remain votes would flow back from the Lib Dems to the Labour Party. As Owen Jones says in the Guardian of June 8, it is an issue that he is inevitably going to have to face.

Labour's crisis

Paul Mason [had an article in the Guardian of May 27](#), entitled 'Corbynism is now in crisis: the only way forward is to oppose Brexit'. I don't agree with everything he says in the article, on the Trident nuclear weapons system in particular, but on Brexit and the EU elections I think he gets it dead right.

He quotes a senior Labour Welsh politician as saying "Leave voters thought we were pro-remain; remain voters thought we were pro-leave and the membership were so fed up they refused to take part in the campaign." He points to a ConRes poll on 21 May which showed that, with a clear position of remain and reform and the call for a second referendum on any deal, Labour could have beaten Farage's Brexit party and cemented the electoral alliance that could put it (Labour) into power

He also points to the role of Corbyn's key advisers - all of whom have long standing Brexiteer positions.

Some of the responses to his article, from the left, however, have been disgraceful. A particularly nasty one came from Unite in the form of an article by Howard Beckett, assistant general secretary for politics and legal affairs for the union [in the New Statesman of May 29](#) which talks about "sneering traitors" and "flinching cowards". He claims that to attack Corbyn's aides is to attack Corbyn. But how can it be right to have such a one-sided set of advisers on the absolutely crucial issue of the day? Seumas Milne is Corbyn's personal advisor and director of strategy no less.

Beckett strongly defends the stance of the Corbyn leadership saying that: "In fact, the Corbyn (and Labour) position of appealing to voters on both sides of this new artificial divide into 'remainers' and 'leavers' is the only way to general election success, and to create a public base strong enough to sustain a progressive Labour government in the teeth of the challenges it will surely meet."

He goes on to deny political reality by claiming that the political situation has not changed since the 2016 referendum: "The tallied votes for pro-Brexit and pro-Brussels parties show very little shift in opinion. It does not make sense for Labour to set as the limit of its aspirations trying to corral as much as possible of the 48 per cent who voted remain three years ago."

If this is the advice Jeremy Corbyn is getting from those around him, some of whom are closely connected to Unite, no wonder there is a problem. It is not only the EU election results but also the opinion polls that now show a consistent majority for remain. If you add to that the one million demonstration calling for a second referendum and the six million petition calling for the same as an indication of mood and the three million extra young people that will come onto the electoral

register next time and that three million EU nationals were not allowed to vote last time it could hardly be clearer what the result would be for a second referendum.

Some of the things Paul Mason has argued, however, emerged at the meeting of the parliamentary Labour party (PLP) meeting on Monday night (June 10), which was described by some of Corbyn's supporters as the worst such meeting since he has been leader.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle, a key Corbyn supporter intervened to insist that MPs should be allowed to criticise senior staff by name if they were influential in policymaking". His comments were a direct counter to Corbyn, who had earlier called for MPs not to publicly attack his staff or the shadow cabinet. (Guardian June 11)

The radical left

One of the problems in fighting opposing Brexit and fighting for a second referendum is that the radical left is deeply divided.

Inside the Labour Party the left have mostly supported the Corbyn position or are opposed to a second referendum. Briefing is divided on it and carries material arguing a range of views. Socialist Appeal strongly support the leadership. They argue that the Peterborough campaign had rightly concentrated on the 'class issues' rather than Brexit. This is a seriously flawed analysis.

Most of far left organisations have offered no analysis of the class nature of the Brexit project: i.e. far right, racist, English nationalist and nostalgia for lost empire, but have hid behind commentary on the Tory crisis and giving general support for the Brexiteers in the LP. They have also argued that Brexit is not the 'real issue' which is the struggle against austerity and Tory policies when in fact these issues will be determined most importantly by the outcome of Brexit. They are what Brexit in end is about.

The radical left outside of the Labour Party mostly support a hard-line Brexit. They include not just the CPB but also the Socialist Party the SWP and Counterfire - who are most vocal on the issue. In their current broadsheet they describe a second referendum a poisonous and divisive right-wing project. They also launch a remarkable attack on Paul Mason and defence of Seamus Milne. The threat of a second referendum comes they say "less from increasingly discredited figures like Tom Watson and those who support him in this argument such as former revolutionary socialist Paul Mason who now calls for the sacking Seamus Milne Corbyn's trusted head of communications and strategy".

The threat now comes, they go on to say, "from members of the shadow cabinet, who although they were no part of the original Corbynite left, and although they share little of Corbyn's radicalism, have been seen as loyal to Corbyn because they have observed the discipline as shadow cabinet members. That veneer was cast aside by Emily Thornberry in the most public way possible on election night when she used a platform on the BBC to break with Labour Party policy and call openly for a second referendum. That call was then taken up by Dianne Abbott and John McDonnell."

Particularly inside Labour, but to some extent more widely, there are a number of reasons for these positions. There is a sense that what counts above all is loyalty to Corbyn and Corbynism without considering what impelled the left to win the leadership in the first place. One of the promises of the Corbyn leadership campaign was 'doing politics differently', offering vibrant political discussion.

In reality in most places the structures of the Labour Party have not

adapted to that challenge to change, meaning that many of the young people who flocked to join remain mainly keyboard warriors rather than core activists, Momentum, which sold itself as the voice of this new wave, has not at all lived up to its pledge but has become a bureaucratic shell centrally and in many localities of its earlier promise.

The loyalty impulse leads to them ignoring the fact that while it's true that some of Corbyn's opponents may support a second referendum as yet another stick amongst many to beat him with, those on the left such as Clive Lewis are either ignored or treated as potentially disloyal. At the same time and partly for the same reasons the argument that a supposedly 'soft Brexit' which would protect jobs and living standards, is widely accepted despite the fact that it stares political and economic reality in the face. The reality remains that in the current political situation any form of Brexit will increase poverty, unemployment, casualisation and racism - and increase the gap between the rich and the poor.

And if Labour is seen as in any way the handmaiden of any form of Brexit the real danger is that the chance of an anti-austerity left government will be dashed not only for the next few months but potentially for generations.

Tory leadership race

Meanwhile the Tory leadership election process is dominating the media. All of the leading candidates are completely delusional both about their own abilities and the complexity of the process pledging themselves in ever more strident terms that they will take Britain out of the EU on October 31 come what may. This is pushing the Tory Party (and potentially British politics) ever further to the right and ever deeper into the hands of Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and Donald Trump - who intervened strongly into the process during his state visit and who is, as Sadiq Khan rightly pointed out, the poster boy of the far-right and proto-fascists globally. This is the framework in which Brexit takes place, and a framework to which Brexit has itself contributed substantially in developing.

It is ironic that a dispute that started in the Tory Party and resulted in Cameron calling a referendum on EU membership without the slightest idea, let alone agreement, as to the consequences or the alternative, is now back inside the Tory Party and tearing it apart. The whole thing has now turned the full circle. Both sides in the Tory battle lines are predicting the destruction of the Tory party. One side, the ERG, that it would be destroyed if it failed to leave on October 31 and the other if it did leave on that day. Both sides could well be right.

Remarkably, the debate so far amongst candidates has been even more bizarre than the debate of the past 3 years. We still have the same inane arguments that you have to be prepared to crash out if you want a good deal; which Caroline Lucas interprets as: if you don't do what I say I will blow my brains out. You have to be a hard line Brexiteer to stand a chance of winning

The reality is that it will be no easier to crash out in October as it was in March. Many of the candidates had equivocated even before nominations closed. Most insisted that what they really want is a deal and that they have the formula (stamping their foot even harder) to get one. The problems of the British border in Ireland will evaporate and the EU will be falling over itself to sign up when they see the new negotiating team.

Meanwhile EU leaders made it clear, over and over again, that the deal they negotiated with May is the only one on the table.

The battle in Parliament

Following May's resignation, after concluding that it would be impossible to get her deal through Parliament, the issue of a no deal Brexit is back on the agenda at least as the legally required option if there is no deal by October 31.

There is, however, going to be a fight to the finish over this and we should not assume that it cannot be stopped since a majority of both MPs and the general public are strongly opposed to it. It is argued that Parliamentary mechanisms precedents will not allow the deadline to be overturned. In the end, however, Parliament is sovereign, and Bercow, who has decided to stay on until the end of the process, has shown that he is prepared to defy precedent if necessary.

Meanwhile the Tory leadership candidates are falling over each other to pledge their troth to crash out with no deal on October 31. Rabb has caused a furore by saying that he would be prepared close Parliament down in order to prevent it frustrating the deadline. It remains a very difficult thing to do, however, since it would destroy the Tory Party in the process.

If it was easy to do May would have done it. It would also be a legacy that would be difficult to live down. To put it another way: It might be easy in the Brexit filled room of an ERG meeting, but hard reality might be a different thing. Never-the-less a new Tory leader intoxicated with the powers of office might do it, and it is a serious danger.

Parliament's intervention in such circumstance would likely be to suspend article 50, the application for a lengthy extension, followed by either a second referendum and a general election, though there might be other ways yet be devised.

The next general election

It is true that the EU vote will not be directly reflected in a general election where the turnout will be higher and Labour will have the advantage of the FPTP system. It is also true that Labour has a trump card, which is a radical manifesto, probably more radical than the last one. Important as this is, however, it would be rash indeed to bank on this putting Labour into government in an election polarised around Brexit.

If the next general election takes place before Brexit is concluded, in other words before a referendum or a crash out, it will be defined by the Brexit debate with other issues submerged. On the face of it Labour should stand a good chance - particularly if it had a second referendum and a commitment to campaign for remain in its manifesto since the Brexit vote would be split between the Brexit party and the Tories, as happened in Peterborough, and Labour get through the middle.

The question arises, however, as to whether an electoral alliance between the Brexit party and the Tories could take place under their newly elected leader in order to unify the Brexit vote. This would certainly split the Tory party wide open but whether this would rule it out is another matter. The crisis of the Tory party is already so profound that this might be seen as a price worth paying in order to avoid a Corbyn led Labour government. This would depend, however, on whether if Labour was prepared to get off of the fence and clearly back a second referendum on its own terms and campaign for a remain vote.

In this context, if a change of direction does not come from the Labour leadership very quickly it is time to go back to the LP membership to seek a new mandate and then implement their decision. The current policy has collapsed and needs to be replaced. There needs to be a proper framework for

consultation, either a membership ballot or a special conference to re-discus the whole issue.

Alan Davies

P.S.

- Posted on 12th June 2019:

<http://socialistresistance.org/diane-abbott-john-mcdonnell-and-emily-thornberry-are-correct-on-brexit/17195>