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U.K.: As Act III of Brexit begins, the time has come for Labour to back a second referendum

Friday 28 September 2018, by [MASON Paul](#) (Date first published: 13 September 2018).

By promising a Norway-style deal followed by a public vote, the party can unite the country and move on.

The European parliament's vote to begin Article 7 proceedings against Hungary, though welcome, is a reminder that, even if Britain does veer away from Brexit at the last moment, it will have to re-engage with a Europe whose fabric is damaged. Its electorates seem increasingly enamoured of authoritarian, ethnic nationalism; its institutions still contain ample space for the financial and social elite of our own country to play their old games, even if they give up on the fantasy of hard Brexit.

That's why, as we enter the last six months of the Brexit process, the British left has to calibrate its strategy with care. Arguing from principle, either for Lexit or an unconditional Remain strategy, was always unwise. Today, both because of Europe's own fragility and our own fractious domestic politics, tactics and statecraft have to be the order of the day.

Before surveying the options, I want to burst the bubble of enthusiasm that has been inflated by the MRP polling done by Best for Britain and Hope Not Hate. This shows that 112 constituencies, mainly Labour-held, have switched from having a majority for Leave to one for Remain. It also shows support for staying in Europe hardening among Labour voters, while support for leaving has hardened among Conservatives.

But in the Labour heartlands I've visited since the poll came out, both MPs and activists claim they can see very little of this change on the ground. And even among Labour members who themselves might support a second referendum, there is no enthusiasm for holding one. The reason for this has not been picked up in any poll, because the question the pollsters would have to ask is: do you think Tommy Robinson is right?

Robinson, together with a reviving Ukip more clearly oriented towards copying the AfD, looks entirely capable of launching a Pegida-style movement backed by money from the American alt-right. The 10,000-plus people who marched and rioted in Whitehall on 9 June did not simply melt into the background after his release.

Over the summer, all the same grassroots activists who warned me of Ukip's rise, and that Leave would win, began warning there will be social unrest if the 2016 result is seen to be stolen or negated by political establishment. If we get this wrong, the "elite theft of Brexit" could become the UK equivalent of the "stab in the back" myth that fuelled the far right in Germany in the 1920s. Whether Robinson himself is allowed into Ukip is secondary: the street level alliance, and the arguments on the closed Facebook groups in Leave-supporting towns, will be what matters. Many of

the Labour activists I've spoken to in these towns are, for this reason, pretty unenthusiastic about re-running the referendum.

None of this is a reason for ending our resistance to the Tory hard Brexit strategy. But it is an argument for tactical nous. One of the key findings of the BFB/HNH poll was that in many Leave voting constituencies, up to 75 per cent of voters now accept that Brexit is proving "more complicated and difficult than they expected". If so, that is a product of learning by experience – specifically, the experience of watching Theresa May try and fail to execute a hard Brexit and the non-emergence of a specific proposal from the Tory right.

It is likely that, in the chaos of the next six months, there will be days and weeks during which attitudes will shift even further. But it would be wrong to assume that witnessing the meltdown of May's government will make large numbers of people accept that the free market liberalism and elitism of the blue flag wavers was right all along.

How it ends will depend on whether Labour's frontbench can project clear and timely answers to three questions, and unite the PLP around them. They are: will you vote down the Chequers deal, or its successor; will you support or offer a second referendum to ratify the result of negotiations; and what is your positive vision for the end state of Brexit?

I've been frustrated by Labour's refusal to answer these questions unequivocally, but I understand the reasons why. What sounds like a good idea in Streatham can sound crazy to people trying to hold the line against rising xenophobia in places like Aberavon, Chesterfield and Corby – all of which still show clear majorities for Leave despite the softening of the national vote.

But as we approach the crunch point – now rescheduled to mid-November – the absence of a clear, positive proposal from the shadow cabinet is beginning to tell.

There are only two broad formats in which Britain could leave the EU with a deal: a Canadian-style free trade agreement or Norway-style membership of the single market. As the Chequers deal falls apart, May looks likely to revert to "Canada dry" under pressure from the ERG group, which looks ready to challenge her if she refuses.

But as they watch the Prime Minister being torn apart, Labour politicians should understand the same process could be unleashed on them, should they come to power without a clearly defined objective.

It should be axiomatic by now that, to minimise the economic damage, a Norway-style deal is the only end state Labour could support. Corbyn has laid out the caveats that would turn this into Norway-plus: assurances that Labour could enact its programme on state aid, nationalisation, competition law and labour market regulation. This needs to be spelled out in a clear, alternative White Paper.

The first advantage is that, once you spell out what kind of Brexit you are aiming for, it mandates clarity, discipline and repetition inside the PLP as to voting down May's proposal. Instead of "let's see what survives of Chequers" you can simply say: anything short of our proposal will be voted down. A clear commitment to Norway-plus could also be a weapon for Labour in the one area of the UK where Corbynism is failing to revive it: Scotland.

Finally, we need clarity on a second referendum. The [constitution unit](#) at UCL has pointed out that there are only three points at which a ratification referendum could be added via the legislative process this winter: as an amendment to the "meaningful vote" on any deal; as an amendment to the Withdrawal Agreement; or by the government calling a referendum to break parliamentary deadlock

(presumably triggered by the Commons rejecting any deal done with Barnier).

The routes to a second vote within this parliament therefore lie either through a Tory leadership challenge, which installs a Europhile PM, or the Martians landing on College Green and ordering it to happen at laser-gunpoint.

So here's what Labour should start saying to its supporters in the contested areas where, even after two years of disillusion, support for Brexit remains high.

"We will attempt to do a Norway-style deal that takes Britain out of the EU. That leaves us as rule takers, but in all other formats - including Chequers - we are rule takers on some things anyway. It gives us sovereignty over at least 25 per cent of our laws, more if we can negotiate it, and it fulfils the mandate of the 2016 referendum: we will be out of the EU but have full access to the single market. That will assure certainty for the industries, farms, fisheries and service corporations whose futures are being called into question now.

"But since there is no guarantee a Labour government could achieve a Norway-style deal, we will put any deal done - for certain - to a second referendum. The question would be: do you approve the deal, yes or no? If no, Britain would seek to remain inside the European Union."

It would be a fairly brutal act of statecraft towards the xenophobic right, and may yet provoke unrest from the combination of golf club bores and bulletin board racists who make up grassroots of the ERG. But it would fulfil the mandate of 2016: you told us to negotiate Brexit - well here it is: yay or nay?

It would destroy the myth, propagated by the FBPE fanatics, that Labour supports hard Brexit, allowing those who want to mitigate the impact of leaving the EU to vote Labour in good conscience. And it would allow the British government to start doing what it has so far failed to do: use the negotiation process to cede sovereignty for access in a creative rather than destructive way.

Up to now, the argument for unclarity - both on the end state and the second vote - has been to avoid stirring up enmity among Leave voters in Labour heartlands. But its overhead cost is to foster the illusion among liberal centrist voters that, if we can just screw up the negotiating process, the will of 17 million people can be overridden with zero political consequences.

It may well be that, when presented with a Norway-style deal, support for Brexit in any form begins to crumble rapidly. But that will take another round of learning by doing. Until then, the left has to demonstrate in practice that it wants to live on the same island as the 17 million who voted Leave.

Anybody who thinks the anger that fed Brexit, combined with the anger that would arise if Brexit were summarily cancelled, would just evaporate simply hasn't sat in a small town pub or club or bus stop for long enough.

The nightmare would be a Pegida-style movement, led by Ukip 2.0, operating as a political tag team with a Tory party led by the hard Brexiteers. Between them, they would command both Fleet Street and the new breed of radio shows designed to propagate ignorance and the echo chamber would be the closed Facebook groups where racism and xenophobia fester.

If Act One was the referendum, Act Two the long agony of Theresa May, we need to make very sure that Act Three does not give star billing to Robinson and Rees-Mogg.

As the chaos surrounding May's administration intensifies, clarity on a Norway-style deal and on the offer of a second vote, have become indispensable for Labour to achieve what it says it wants to do:

to unite the country and move on.

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