

Britain: Labour must take the lead on Brexit

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Since her transition from hard Brexit (no deal is better than a bad deal) to soft Brexit (any deal is better no deal), Theresa May has managed to satisfy no one, other than her own arch-loyalists, who are a fast vanishing breed, writes Alan Davies. This has taken the 50-year-old battle inside the Tory Party over Britain's place in the world - Europe or Empire - to whole new depths.

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As a result of this, Britain is now in free-fall towards a disastrous no deal crash-out of the EU, under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and Article 50, onto World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules. Meanwhile the Tory Party is falling apart and could disappear in its present form with some very nasty forces waiting in the wings. Large numbers of Tories see May's proposals not only as an unacceptable lash-up, but one that could result in an electoral defeat on the scale of 1997 once an election takes place. George Osborne, the architect of austerity has told the BBC that the Tories are facing a "prolonged period in opposition. [1]"

Although the European Research Group (ERG) fundamentalists failed to unseat May with their vote of no confidence - following her cancellation of the vote on her deal in Parliament - their preferred option of a no-deal crash-out is now the legally binding default position unless new legislation is enacted. All the ERG has to do is hold the May's regime together until March 30th (not an easy task, of course) and their free market Atlanticist mission will have been accomplished. That is why Gove and Fox have remained in the cabinet despite their bitter opposition to May's deal.

Meanwhile May continues to insist, without any evidence, that she will get her deal through Parliament, when it is eventually put to the vote in mid-January, when almost everyone else regards it as dead in the water. Her approach to this is to run down the clock in the hope that when faced with a choice between her deal and crashing-out - the unacceptable or the even worse - enough MPs will be so terrified by the cliff edge that they will her proposal to get it through. This is very unlikely to happen.

Backstop means backstop

Her appeal to the EU to reopen the Withdrawal Agreement she signed a month ago is equally delusional. When she rushed Brussels the day after the no-confidence vote she was told in no uncertain terms that the Withdrawal Agreement is a legally binding international treaty and will not

be reopened, changed, or modified in any way. Whilst some additional 'clarification' could be given on the Irish backstop, in the end backstop means backstop. It will have to remain in force until a future trading agreement renders it unnecessary. Until then, Britain would have to remain within its terms: i.e. in close regulatory alignment with the EU, overseen ultimately by the European Court of Justice (ECJ), and unable to conclude trading agreements with countries outside of the EU - which is what Brexit is all about. Her proposal has had no support outside a diminishing band of May loyalists.

Meanwhile her government is falling apart. According to the Times of December 15th, a majority of her own cabinet regard her deal as dead in the water, and some are openly discussing alternatives, including a second referendum. These include Amber Rudd, Philip Hammond, the Justice Secretary David Gauk, the Business Secretary Greg Clark, and most remarkably May's deputy PM David Lidington - the nodding head that sits next to her at PMQs.

The Sunday Times of December 16th went further claiming that two of Theresa May's most senior allies are lobbying for a second referendum behind her back. Lidington, not only favours a second referendum but has had a secret meeting with Labour MPs to explore the possibilities of bringing one about. These included Chris Bryant, Ben Bradshaw, Angela Smith, Chuka Umunna and Chris Leslie. It also claimed that Gavin Barwell, the No 10 chief of staff, told a cabinet minister last week that holding a second referendum was the 'only way forward' since May's proposal would never get through Parliament and that David Cameron had told friends that whilst May was opposed to a new referendum, she would accept the situation if Parliament voted for it.

The case for a second referendum

A second referendum now has the support not only of a majority of the electorate, but third of Labour supporters, an even bigger proportion of which would support staying in the EU if given the chance to express a view. It also has the support of the SNP, the Greens and the LibDems. It has been gathering strength since the 700,000 strong demonstration in October [2].

This reflects the reality that there must be an opportunity for people to think again on such an issue when radically different conditions arise after the vote, and the only thing that can convincingly reverse a referendum decision is another referendum - not a vote of MPs in Parliament which would not have the democratic legitimacy to withstand the challenges that would be thrown against it.

At the moment, there no Commons majority for a second vote but this could change as it becomes increasingly clear that there are only two realistic options on offer; a second referendum or a no-deal crash-out. It is the only way of confirming either the existing direction of travel towards Brexit, or bringing the whole process to an end scrapping Brexit and staying inside the EU at this stage on existing terms and conditions - which the EU has confirmed is an option by unilateral British decision.

We are told by Brexiteers opposed to a second vote that they would win again, possibly by a bigger majority. That may be true. If so, what are they afraid of? No one knows in reality. I tend to think not, but I don't know either. The current impasse, however, with a big debate based on anecdotal evidence is not politically or socially viable either, and the only authority that can sort it out once Parliament has failed is to go back to the original authority - which is the people themselves.

The current situation is the worst of all worlds and we have to know where the majority lies now. What people thought two and a half years ago is no longer good enough. We are in a completely new situation and the future has to be judged against that.

In any case it can hardly be a principle of democracy that the people can only express their views once, whatever takes place following the vote or whether or not the government has been able to carry out what was expected at the time of the vote.

If there really is a majority in the population who (as I would put it) are prepared to vote to make themselves poorer in the name of a Brexit future, that unfortunately, would be political reality and we have to know one way or the other. Endless speculation with claims and counterclaims would get us nowhere.

Brexit, racism and age

We are told that a second vote would be divisive. This is true; but anything that happens in this situation will be divisive. The divisions forged in the first referendum are still with us and are being reinforced every day and we can't wish them away by avoiding a second referendum. The current Government discourse around the negotiations with the EU are not only divisive but deeply xenophobic. I am no friend of the EU, but the current characterisation of it as out to do Britain down because they are refusing to change the principles on which they operate in order to accommodate Britain leaving makes no sense.

What you see in the ranks of the Tory Brexiteers is the arrogance of Empire. Alongside this is a refusal to accept that the Empire no longer exists and that they no longer rule the world. How come some upstart in Brussels refuses to change their rules in order that we can leave in the way we want, even if two and a half years on we can't even agree amongst ourselves the conditions under which we want to leave?

In fact, it has never been possible, in my view, to understand Brexit without understanding that it was driven, from the start, by racism and xenophobia. Not everyone who voted Brexit was a xenophobe of course, but large numbers were and remain so. It is one of the principal factors that explain the durability of the Brexit core vote. Many Brexiteers were driven by opposition to migration to the extent that they are prepared to accept a lower standard of living in order to reduce it. This comes through openly enough even in street interviews over Brexit. There are many other factors, of course not least austerity and poverty and neglect. All that is true. But there is also a dangerous underlying racism, which itself has its origins in Empire.

Brexit also opened up a remarkable intergenerational divide. If you are young, with the whole future in front of you, you are overwhelmingly likely to oppose Brexit. The older you are the more likely you are you support it. What we are witnessing is the older generation imposing on the younger generation a future to which they are strongly opposed.

Young people are more, internationalist, far less likely to be racist have no interest in Empire and more interested in the integration of peoples. This is why a second referendum must put right some of the injustices contained within the first referendum - in particular the scandalous treatment 16 and 17-year olds (i.e. those with the most to lose) who were excluded from the vote along with EU citizens resident in this country who could also pay a heavy price for all this. Why should young people and EU citizens have their futures held to ransom in this way without having even the right to express an opinion on it?

Free movement

The xenophobia of Brexit is precisely the reason May continues to play the race card for all it is worth to hold the project together. She knows bashing foreigners and the hostile environment I play well with her core supporters. This is why her number one target in defence of Brexit is always the free movement of people. This is her first message every time she speaks on Brexit: 'this deal may not be all you want but it will end free movement and take back control of our own borders'.

This is also the message from her new White Paper on immigration. This is that under Brexit not only will the free movement of people in Europe come to an end, but once we are out of the EU the British state will treat migrants from the EU in the same appalling way that it currently treats migrants from the rest of the world - and the poorest will face the highest levels of discrimination. The proposed £30,000 minimum salary requirement that is being proposed as a "measure of qualification" is nothing of the sort. Under it some of the most vital and skilled workers in the economy from care workers to agricultural workers would be excluded.

The British border in Ireland

The insistence by the Brexiteers that the border issue in Ireland is a plot invented by remainers to derail Brexit is also delusional. The reality has always been, though it is not clear that this was understood by Cameron and Osborne when they called the referendum, is that it was never possible for Britain to leave the EU and its internal market if the current open conditions of the border in Ireland under EU membership was a red line that could not be changed. It is an issue that would have to be settled in advance.

The reality is that once Britain leaves the EU and becomes a third party country, the border - best described as the border of the British state in Ireland - becomes a part of the external border of the EU itself. It becomes a link in the chain for fortress Europe itself. The free movement peoples within the EU, which is indeed desirable and progressive, is based on strong external borders against the rest of the world. There is no way that the EU is going to allow a gaping hole in this between the North and South of Ireland.

The question is often rhetorically asked by Brexiteers as to who will build it since no one is volunteering? It is not very complicated. Once Britain becomes a third country there will be two authorities insisting on its construction: the EU on the one hand and the WTO on the other. Countries who want to be members of either and are party to the border will have to construct it.

Labour must stop equivocating

The advantage we have in Britain, not just with Brexit but across the political spectrum, is the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party, which is uniquely out of step with the general drift to the right which is taking place globally and could hardly be more important. The task of the left, therefore, is to get a Corbyn government in office as soon as possible - which is entirely achievable - depending, however, on the role that Labour chooses to play in terms of Brexit.

In other words, whilst the Tories are foundering Labour has an historic opportunity to win new levels of popular support if it gets the Brexit issue right. This means, in my view, taking the leadership of the anti-Brexit movement, backing a second referendum, fighting to win it, and saving Britain from the looming Brexit nightmare staring us in the face. This could deal a huge blow to the

right, finish off the Tory Party in its present form, give Labour a working majority in the event of an election, and strong credibility for the future.

If Labour gets Brexit wrong, however, it could do itself very serious damage, not least with the most important gain it has made, which is the new generation that has flocked to its ranks.

Labour has been understandably reluctant to come out clearly for a referendum given the split in its base on the issue, but the time for equivocation is over. Labour's elevation of a general election over a second referendum is a mistake. In fact, it is dangerous. Unfortunately, the Corbyn leadership has stalled on a second referendum since its autumn conference decided to adopt it as a clear option.

If May loses the vote in January, Labour is saying that it will appeal for a general election and if that fails it will move a motion of no-confidence in the government. If that fails -as it no doubt will because Tory MPs will not vote for it - all options are on the table including an in-out referendum.

At one level it is natural for the opposition party to call for a general election when the government is in trouble - that is not the problem. The problem is that a general election does not resolve the problem of Brexit. It simply transfers Brexit and a second referendum to the election campaign and the election itself - which would be inevitably dominated by Brexit. How could it not be? If Labour fails to put an unequivocal commitment to an in-out referendum on its manifesto, with a recommendation to vote in, it is far from clear that it could win. Some polls are predicting a resurgence of the LibDems in such a situation.

At the moment Labour is not only holding a second referendum at arms-length but it is talking about, in the event of winning an election, negotiating a better Brexit deal than May has managed [3]!

This in my view would be disastrous. Being against Brexit means being against the reopening of negotiations on Brexit. Brexit cannot be turned into "left exit" or Lexit because there is no Lexit possible in the present situation. Brexit has its origins and dynamic as a right-wing project and it will remain a right-wing project.

The negotiation by Labour of a slightly less bad deal than May that would inevitably be inferior to the current membership conditions of the EU itself would be seen as a betrayal by very large sections of Labour's base, not least young people.

Labour must have a clear anti-Brexit stance. It should put a referendum on Brexit in its manifesto making it clear that the vote would include an option to stay in the EU. This is the only way to clearly take the leadership of the anti-Brexit movement. The reality today is that only a second popular vote can credibly stop Brexit and not a general election - which continues to be the Labour leadership's priority - unlikely as it is to happen between now and the Brexit date.

Brexit is on the ropes and can be beaten. A second referendum is now an achievable demand, but only if the Labour fully backs it and makes it happen.

The left should take this situation extremely seriously. A crash-out Brexit would take the country sharply to the right and create a ruthless race to the bottom in which the poorest would be hit the hardest. If Labour is seen as bringing this about even by default (for example by failing to back a second vote early enough), it could pay a heavy price amongst its base. On the other hand, if Labour championed a second vote with an in-out option it would take the leadership of a still growing mass movement and could win a big majority.

We have to have a way forward at this stage that does not have its origins in racism and xenophobia

if we are to get out of the situation that Cameron and Osborne plunged us when they chose the first referendum to settle scores in the Tory Party.

When the vote comes in Parliament, therefore, Labour must not only vote down May's deal and oppose a no-deal crash out by default. It must also back the suspension of Article 50 in order to create the space for a second referendum with the option of staying in the EU. This is not because we have any illusions in the EU or think that it can be reformed from within. It is because the present course set by Brexit, or any credible variants, is set to provide a big victory for the right, the impoverishment of large numbers of people and threaten the future of an anti-austerity government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Alan Davies

P.S.

• Socialist Resistance, December 22, 2018:
<http://socialistresistance.org/labour-must-take-the-lead-on-brexit/14680>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-46655969>

[2] <http://socialistresistance.org/massive-demonstration-against-tory-brexit/13381>

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/21/jeremy-corbyn-labour-policy-leaving-eu?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other