UK: Brexit is back – and Labour's dilemma has not changed

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Keir Starmer has been praised for 'sidestepping' the Brexit trap, but this was always the only option

The latest Tory ruse on Brexit is tediously straightforward. By talking up no deal and expressing a willingness to flout international law, the Conservatives intend to bounce Brussels into a favourable agreement while torturing their Labour opponents. It is the Tories who have relitigated Britain's rupture with the EU – despite coasting to victory with a commitment to "Get Brexit done".

They know that if the airwaves are flooded with Labour's angry reactions, their opponents can be easily portrayed, once again, as blocking Brexit altogether. They believe that their electoral coalition has little interest in international law. They want to toxify Keir Starmer in so-called red wall seats by portraying him as an aloof, establishment, metropolitan, remainer lawyer.

Starmer's team has noted the trap and sidestepped it. "Get on, negotiate, get the deal that was promised," declares the Labour leader, while his team blames Boris Johnson for reopening the supposedly done Brexit. This seems like sound politics: Labour knows that while most of its voters are remainers, any path to victory includes winning over leave supporters in English and Welsh towns.

Careful observers will note that this is the same dilemma faced by Starmer's predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, whose efforts to "sidestep" the issue of Brexit, on the basis that the referendum had been lost, were greeted with rather less charity. The two leaders may be very different, but the problem is the same – and looking at it again may help us understand how the present catastrophe has enveloped this country.

Labour's obliteration last December was partly down to mistakes made by the party's leadership – but responsibility must be shared with the most ardent opponents of Brexit, who loudly refused to brook any compromise in pursuit of their doomed effortto reverse the referendum defeat. They bet the house on winning everything: in the end, they lost the house, the garage, the cars and the kids.

The resurrection of this Tory gambit should allow for a reconsideration of recent history. Labour's position of accepting the referendum result and negotiating a closer relationship than that offered by the Conservatives was broadly uncontroversial until the early months of 2018. Underpinning the party's strategy were some incontrovertible facts: 41 of the top 54 Tory-held target seats Labour needed to win voted for leave. Despite the triumphalism following the loss of the Tory majority in the 2017 general election, there were swings against Labour in dozens of leave-voting seats: indeed, it lost six of them, foreshadowing the avalanche of 2019.

But the hung parliament had charted a course for catastrophe. The longer the deadlock went on, the more leading remainers became convinced they did not have to settle for a soft Brexit. They began

to believe it really was possible to reverse the referendum. Leavers, on the other hand, increasingly believed the referendum result was imperilled, and recognised that they could use the impasse to block any deal, paving the way for the hardest possible rupture.

Both factions fed off each other, unleashing a culture war that was not about our relationship to a trading bloc, but about crude remain and leave identities, which divided families, communities and social classes. The primary strategy of the People's Vote campaign and its allies was to radicalise "remainers" by convincing them they must not accept any outcome short of a second referendum.

Such a culture war was poisonous for a leftwing political project founded on an understanding that the real division in society was between the majority and the elite: "for the many, not the few", as Labour's ingeniously simple 2017 slogan put it. Corbyn's team did try to pivot back. In one speech in Wakefield at the beginning of 2019, Starmer's predecessor highlighted that more united remain and leave voters than divided them: "You're up against it, but you're not against each other." It proved futile: we were all remainers or leavers now.

While many remainers acted in good faith, believing Brexit to be a self-inflicted national disaster fuelled by xenophobia, others realised that they had finally discovered the perfect means to drive a wedge between the Corbyn leadership and its base of supporters. The various remain movements never found a strategy to win over leave voters; their only success was making remainers even angrier about Brexit. The [Labour](#) leadership was increasingly induced to accommodate them, forcing it to zigzag and perform dizzying U-turns.

As party discipline broke down, leading Labour figures said different and contradictory things depending on how leave or remain their constituencies were. As a party, Labour looked incoherent, while Corbyn's primary advantage in the 2017 election – appearing as a man of principle who said what he meant and meant what he said – was incinerated, [cratering his personal ratings](#). For those who saw Brexit as a means to fracture Corbynism, nothing Labour did was ever enough: every time the leadership shifted to their position, they simply shifted theirs further, mirroring the tactics deployed by Eurosceptics against David Cameron.

The hung parliament allowed the opposition to defeat the government: every time [Theresa May](#) and Johnson were trounced in the Commons, Labour aides cheered. But to the country, these looked like incomprehensible and increasingly wearisome parliamentary games; for leavers, simply attempts to nullify their longstanding democratic vote.

In the end, the remainers won the battle. As the 2019 European elections approached, Corbyn privately declared that the party had pushed the membership's patience too far and would have to concede. (His chief of staff, Karie Murphy, decried it as a betrayal of the working class.) But the party's grassroots [overwhelmingly wanted a new referendum](#), and Corbyn had been elected as their tribune. The leadership faced being defeated at the 2019 conference if it continued to resist. Combined with the rise of the Liberal Democrats and Greens at Labour's expense, Corbyn's closest parliamentary allies – John McDonnell and Diane Abbott – strongly believed Labour had no choice. By then, all of the party's options were dire.

That doesn't absolve the leadership of its own mistakes, such as not settling on a clearly defined soft Brexit earlier, using the political capital of its 2017 gains to make a passionate and principled case. The conflict-averse Corbyn left a vacuum and the stop Brexit movement filled it. But as Brexit returns to the headlines and there is consensus in the commentariat that the opposition is cleverly sidestepping Johnson's trap, let us conclude that that should have been everyone's approach from the very beginning.

We could have accepted the referendum, negotiated a close relationship, and pivoted back to the domestic issues that really matter. Instead, we have a hard-right Tory government with an unassailable majority that bungled the pandemic and has set Britain on course for the hardest Brexit possible.

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