

Britain & Brexit - Contradictions of a right wing project

Thursday 4 February 2021, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2021).

Dave Kellaway writes on the latest frictionless encounters with Europe.

Boris Johnson boasted during his successful Brexit campaign that the British people would be able to 'have their cake and eat it'. Just the other day a lorry driver coming into Holland had his ham sandwich confiscated as it contravened border regulations. He asked if he could keep the bread at least and was refused. No ham, no bread and certainly no cake.

Many British people abroad found out last week (including myself) that the TV streaming services they enjoyed were no longer available post-Brexit. Mastercard, the credit card company, is imposing extra fees on people making purchases from the EU. Many small companies - which were often pro-Brexit - are finding the extra non-tariff costs increasing their costs and creating delays. VAT and some import duties have to be paid now. Extra forms have to be filled in for health and safety regulations and alignment of standards. The full impact is still not clear since many businesses stockpiled parts and materials before the deal. It was reported that when such companies asked the relevant ministry what to do they were advised to set up warehouses or branches of their business inside the EU. So much for taking control and reclaiming illusory British sovereignty!

A sector of the economy that is more important than manufacturing - finance and services - is not even included in the free trade deal. Hard negotiating will have to continue, Brexit is not done as Johnson claims. Most mainstream economists think this 'thin' deal will reduce GDP by 4 to 5%.

Brexit is not done as Johnson claims

Such a decline in the economy will hit workers hardest. Hardly had the ink dried on the deal when a 'consultation' was set up in the business ministry to look into ways labour law and regulations could be relaxed. The maximum 48 hour week, holiday rights and statutory work breaks and company obligations to log working hours were all put on the table for review. Such was the outcry that the minister has since dropped the consultation. It will certainly return in another form. Brexit for Johnson's conservative party was about building a 'Singapore' island off the coast of Europe. A low tax, low wage economy that, with global investment from the US and China, would give Britain a competitive advantage over the EU.

Ending free movement of workers in the EU was the biggest defeat for workers and at the same time amplified racist, anti-migrant attitudes in society. The government has continued to exploit these dog-whistle politics with a £2000 a-head scheme to 'incentivise' the repatriation of EU workers who fail to secure 'settled status' by June 2021. For all sorts of reasons, there will be tens of thousands of EU migrants who have worked here for many years who fail to make this deadline. Already Brexit and the Covid crisis has meant nearly a million people have left London.

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The Labour opposition, now led by 'Mr. anti-Corbyn', Keir Starmer, has called it a thin deal but the leadership has decided the battle is all over and decided to vote for the deal in Parliament. The deal meets none of the criteria laid down by Starmer when he led on Brexit under Corbyn (the famous 6 tests). But he is fixated on winning back the so-called 'red wall' voters - ex-Labour supporters who switched to the Tories in the last election mainly in the Midlands and the North. Instead of winning them back with socialist policies and internationalism, he thinks that Labour should just cave in and accept Brexit.

A minority of the radical left argued for a people's Brexit (Lexit) and saw the vote to leave as an opportunity for the left since they said it showed working people had kicked back against an establishment that was for remain. This part of the left underestimated or ignored the racist element to the leave vote. They were ultraleft about any gains that EU law or regulations have established for working people. None of these forces has been able to organise any campaign or demonstrations mobilising a Lexit current. Today they steer clear of the discussion or content themselves with what if explanations, imagining there was actually an alternative to a right-wing Brexit.

A coalition of some Corbynista MPs, Labour activists, trade unionists and left groups have continued to campaign for an internationalist response to Brexit through Another Europe is Possible. They held a recent online conference which you can view here [1].

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Finally, Brexit has been a major factor, along with the appalling way the Johnson government has handled the Covid pandemic, in the developing constitutional crisis in the British state. The Scottish nationalists are likely to win a landslide in the Scottish Parliament elections in May and already polls show majorities for both calling a referendum and for independence. In Wales, there is also increased support for more independence. The North of Ireland is essentially now within the customs union with the 26 counties of the South which will also objectively help create support for a vote on a United Ireland.

Brexit was already a nightmare for the British imperialist state since the dominant sectors of capital were never keen on it. The added contradictions of the Covid pandemic and the crisis of the union could lead them to look for alternatives to the Johnson team within the Tory party or even switching to a moderate, pro-business Starmer-led Labour party.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

• Anticapitalist Resistance. 1 February 2021. Updated 2 February:
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/brexit-contradictions-of-a-right-wing-project>

• Dave Kellaway, Anti-Capitalist Resistance and Socialist Resistance supporter.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/another-europe-is-possible-conference-final-plenary-video>