

Britain: The strategic perplexity of the Left on Brexit

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What do we do about Brexit? May's deal is toast, so what now?

This is obviously not the Left's baby. We didn't bring it about: rather, Brexit occurred as a result of a struggle between factions of the Conservative Party in which the worst side won. It won, in no small part, because there was barely a left-wing argument heard in the referendum campaign, so that even the substratum of legitimate social anger that drove some of the Brexit vote was articulated with right-wing anti-immigration and sovereigntist politics. The Left was pinned to the status quo vote, with at most a nebulous commitment to 'reforming' the EU — and was hurt by that.

And this is the problem the Left faces now. There seems little doubt that Theresa May will lose tonight's vote on her Brexit deal. Had she won the June 2017 snap election more convincingly, she would probably have had a big enough majority to negotiate any deal she wanted. Corbyn's position would have been weak enough for large numbers of Labour MPs to defect. Indeed, that's probably one of the reasons why she called a snap election when Labour was so far behind in the polls, and the '[UKIP effect](#)' looked likely to turn a string of working class seats blue. But because Labour ran on an insurgent-left agenda, foregrounding class politics, the Tory majority was eliminated. Hence, May's dependence on Tory Right headbangers and the DUP. That's why there's no majority for May's deal.

But if there is no *parliamentary* majority for May's deal, there is also no *public* majority for any outcome. The most recent [polling](#) on Brexit shows a marked fragmentation of opinion. It really proves Bourdieu's adage that "[public opinion does not exist](#)". The state of opinion is a "system of forces and tensions" which cannot, at the best of times, be adequately represented by a magic percentage. Not every opinion is equal, in the intensity of its conviction or in its material consequences. And the practical importance of opinion depends on how it is harnessed by political leadership, and quite diverse tendencies fused into a single viable bloc.

The Tories are split along class lines: working-class Tories and the middle-class Right cleave mostly to hard-Brexit, while the bourgeois Right prefer the softest possible Brexit. What about the Left? Beyond a bottom line, bien-pensant Remainerism, the things that unite and animate the Left tend not to have to do with Brexit. And the difficulty facing the Left is that it can't simply defend the status quo, and it doesn't have a left-insurgent position available either. Left-Remain is a status quo position, while Lexit has never been given any convincing programmatic explanation. Brandishing "reform" as a slogan is not the same thing as knowing how to get it, and critique is not the same thing as a programme for transformation. Still less do slogans, critiques or even programmes, amount to the kinds of social forces capable of achieving these objectives. After all, whether we're reforming the EU, an institution even more deeply resistant to democratic change than its member-states, or reforming British capitalism while transitioning away from EU membership, it requires a fundamental renegotiation of the current, failing social compact. That needs organised communities everywhere, capable of arguing for it, and helping to build it.

As it stands, the left-most Brexit available seems to be a more-or-less humane, top-down transition, with economic dislocations limited as far as possible, some form of free movement preserved, and British capitalism still very much in the orbit of this rule-making behemoth, the EU. The other option, of a 'second vote', doesn't look like much of an option to me. Aditya Chakraborty makes a [thoughtful plea](#) for Corbyn to back this option, and for Labour to campaign militantly for Remain. But *how*? He admits that it comes with the significant risk of major social backlash and a split Labour Party. I'd say the problems go deeper than that. Even if the parliamentary majority for such a vote could be found, and a delay in Article 50 negotiated, and a referendum organised that wasn't skewed toward May's deal, how is Labour supposed to campaign from the Left? Chakraborty recommends a more emphatic re-run of the failed 2016 campaign, with Labour talking up the 'social' aspects of the European Union. But there's a reason why that wasn't enough to win the first time.

In fact, it could be worse than 2016. Chakraborty doesn't mention migration but, at least in the 'first referendum', the Labour leadership made a case for free movement, while Labour centrists either evaded it or demanded [tougher rhetoric](#) and [harder borders](#). Alan Johnson, leader of Labour's Remain campaign, offered the [anti-immigrant defence of free movement](#): the worst of all worlds. In 2019, after two years of not being 'wedded' to free movement as a principle — a big mistake in my opinion — it is hard to see how Labour could make a militant defence of it. The official People's Vote campaign is committed to claiming that, actually, the EU does allow states to restrict migration. And Alan Johnson, Tony Blair, and Ken Clarke, all want to run on the basis that the real problem is non-EU migrants, and EU security measures need to be improved. A campaign run on this basis would be an absolute, demoralising, racist disaster. It would turn off quite a lot of the most passionate Remain vote, split the Left, and the nationalist Right would be the most likely to benefit from it. And the result would either be a second win for Brexit, with Jacob Rees-Mogg being the major winner, or such a narrow Remain win (say 52-48) that nothing is fundamentally resolved. What then? Best of three?

There is no obviously 'winning' position. This is not, for the most part, a problem caused by the shortcomings of a specific leadership or political tendency. It is not a problem caused by a failure of political will and imagination. The Brexit vote was a manifestation of the stalemate of Britain's institutions, the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, and the long-term recrudescence of racist nationalism. The latter in particular has enabled the displacement of these crises through the dreamwork of nationalist restoration. Labour's strategy thus far has been to try to reverse this displacement, change the question, shift the terrain to one of class. But there is no quick and expedient way to undo this work, and reverse its effects, and doing so would require a far more combative politics on race and migration, willing to risk unpopularity.

There are long-term tendencies in British society pointing to the erosion of nationalist and racist solidarities, but it requires political leadership to take advantage of that and fundamentally change political alignments. And that would have to come from the organised membership, since many in the shadow cabinet and the trade union leaderships would outright oppose it.

Absent that work, we are where we are, with a series of bad choices dictated by different parts of the political Right.

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P.S.

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