

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Brexit (UK) > **Labour Must Now Reject a Second Referendum and Pursue a Norway-Style Deal**

# Labour Must Now Reject a Second Referendum and Pursue a Norway-Style Deal

Monday 21 January 2019, by [BASTANI Aaron](#) (Date first published: 17 January 2019).

**The last 18 months have been among the worst for the Conservative party in a century.**

Since June 2017 it has suffered more defeats than the governments of John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron combined over the previous 25 years.

It is the first government to have lost a finance bill in four decades, and the first to have been found in contempt of parliament in history.

Alongside that, it has endured 32 resignations from government, with Britain now on its third secretary of state for leaving the EU in six months.

And yet despite all that, Tuesday's vote on its Brexit bill was the nadir. On the fundamental piece of legislation for this parliament, it was beaten by 230 votes.

The biggest parliamentary defeat in modern history for the most ineffective government is a fitting tribute. And still the shame didn't seem to show.

Last night the Conservatives came together, though, as the prime minister faced down a motion of no confidence from the other major parties. In normal times winning by a margin of 19 - May prevailed 325-306 - would be nothing to shout about. Only these aren't normal times.

Ironically, the manner in which the Tories unified in this vote reflects the fragility of the May government. All that ties them now is the dread that fills their hearts when they contemplate the words, 'Jeremy Corbyn enters number 10'. After the last few days, it's clear they have no greater purpose in government - not even Brexit - than holding tight and keeping Corbyn out.

Today you'll hear the Labour leadership is under pressure to accept a second referendum. This is not true. Whether there is even the time to hold such a vote is unlikely. The European Parliament's Brexit coordinator Guy Verhofstadt has said extending Article 50 beyond the forthcoming European elections is "unthinkable". If so, that would make such a vote impossible.

Then there are the political dynamics. Two-thirds of Labour MPs are in seats which voted 'leave'. The same figure applies to the party's top 50 target seats. On Wednesday 28% of the parliamentary party came out in favour of a second referendum, although only 36 showed up to the photoshoot. The demand for a 'people's vote' doesn't command a majority among Labour MPs, let alone anywhere else. Were it to happen, a third of the shadow cabinet would resign. Indeed it enjoys such little support among Labour's benches that around 100 Tories would be needed to make it possible. That's simply not happening.

The sense that a second referendum is somehow gaining momentum beyond Westminster is also

wrong. Polling last weekend revealed only 8% of the public actively support a second referendum. A plurality, 26%, wanted to remain in the EU. But even fusing those two figures together shows the public has little appetite for a re-run of 2016. Even if this were to happen, polling indicates it would be so close as to mirror the first vote. In the event of that, then what next – best of three?

My feeling is that many calling for a second referendum, particularly among Labour supporters, are only looking at the potential upside. They want to stay in the EU, keep things the same and get on with implementing the policies in the 2017 manifesto. But in assessing a decision of such magnitude you have to look at the downside too. A second win for leave would make a hard brexit inevitable while destroying a significant amount of political capital for Corbyn. In fact, in the event of a defeat, he would be finished.

In response to the argument that a second referendum shows solidarity with people of colour or Europeans already here – which conveniently forgets that cities like Birmingham voted leave – I would argue the opposite. It will fan two more years of toxic national conversation, empowering those adverse to multiculturalism and progressive values further still. Even if you thought ‘remain’ had a 60% chance of succeeding, that would still leave a 40% chance of it not. In which case things start to feel eerily similar to the months preceding the election of Donald Trump. 40% is still highly possible – as the Oval Office’s incumbent is all too happy to remind us.

So I urge such voices to take responsibility for what might happen if their intended course of action failed rather than succeeded. What do they propose we would do then? Is there a plan? Because the truth is, we don’t know where it ends.

For me this is the single greatest reason why I would never support a second referendum. Instead my priority would be to ensure certainties for people rather than point to years of further speculation and offering false hope. This is not an argument for ‘Lexit’, as some will no doubt say. I’m not even going that far. It’s an argument for rational calculation. We can stop this tide going further, and under a Labour government turn Britain’s migration policy, and sometimes xenophobic culture, around. Yet that is a project for decades, not months. A second defeat for remaining in the EU would be historic. Potentially on a par with the defeat of the miners’ strike were the Labour leadership to be a part of it.

Now, rather, is the time for Labour to instead commit to a Norway style-deal and outright reject another vote. There is a majority in parliament for the former and not the latter. For hardcore Brexiteers, it represents the first step to what they want – if they can form a government and go further then that is between them and the British electorate. For those that voted remain, it would mean a customs arrangement, similar immigration policies and a lack of disruption for workers and business alike.

In delivering this, however, and reaching out to leading Tories for consensus, Labour needs to be crystal clear: hardcore Brexiteers will not accept any form of actually-existing Brexit. That much is obvious since Tuesday’s vote. After waiting 45 years for their moment, a Westminster government tabled legislation that would mean leaving the single market, ending freedom of movement and Britain making its own trade policy.

And they voted against it. That’s because they don’t want Brexit – they want a fantasy.

If Labour’s membership got behind a Norway-style deal, and leading Tories were willing to work together, compromise would be possible. The same simply isn’t true for a second referendum. Time for all concerned to be honest about it.

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