

# Britain: Debate in the Left - How to vote on the Brexit Bill going through Parliament for triggering Article 50

Thursday 16 February 2017, by [LEPLAT Fred](#), [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2017).

**Below we present two positions on what approach Labour should take to article 50 from Socialist Resistance supporters.**

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## No blocking and No hard Brexit - Abstain on Article 50

The vote for Brexit in last year's referendum and the election of Trump are part of the same shift to the right in politics. The left was divided on how to vote in the referendum. Now the argument has resurfaced on how to vote on the Bill going through Parliament for triggering Article 50, passing authority from House of Commons to Prime Minister to start negotiations to leave the EU. The Bill un-amended gives a free hand to May for a "hard" Brexit without MPs having a vote on the final withdrawal agreement.

Socialist Resistance argued for a vote to Remain in the referendum, not because we supported the EU (it is a thoroughly neoliberal institution), but because we believed that a vote to Leave would open the road to nationalism and racism. This is indeed what has happened.

We cannot now argue for another referendum to overturn the outcome of the one held last year. This would be seen as an affront to the voters, however close the result was. This is how it was felt in Ireland in 2008, when the Lisbon Treaty was rejected by 53% in a referendum. The Irish government then held another referendum a year later, through which it managed to overturn the outcome of the previous one.

A vote in Parliament now against the Bill triggering Article 50 would also be seen as an attempt to frustrate the outcome of the referendum. That is why it is wrong to do that.

Jeremy Corbyn and many other MPs have put forward amendments that would protect in the negotiations workers and environmental rights, EU nationals in Britain, and ensure that a "meaningful vote" is taken by Parliament on the final deal. The dilemma that now faces Jeremy Corbyn is that he has announced that Labour MPs must vote for the Bill triggering Article 50, even if all these amendments are defeated. Passing the Bill un-amended would give a free hand to Theresa

May, Boris Johnson and David Davis to pursue a “hard” Brexit. This would deepen and accelerate neoliberal attacks.

The tactic on voting on the Bill is now the subject of intense discussion on the left. Manuel Cortes, TSSA general secretary and a Corbyn supporter, argues in the the Guardian of the 7 February, that he “supported Labour’s vote in favour of article 50 last week, but the bill should not be allowed to pass un-amended,” and to defy the Labour whip if necessary.

Corbyn, as well as Labour, Green, SNP and Plaid Cymru MPs should not frustrate the outcome of the referendum, but they should also not give the Tories a free hand by voting for the Bill un-amended. Voting for would be seen as falling at the first hurdle of a two-year long process and failing to oppose May’s hard Brexit. That means that at the final reading, MPs should abstain on the Bill.

Abstention allows MPs to show that they neither endorse May’s hard Brexit, nor that they are frustrating the referendum. Abstention on May’s hard Brexit allows Corbyn to reach out to the new young movement, which has sprung up since Trump’s election and which understands that Brexit and Trump are part of the same process. Abstention would also allow Labour MPs that are Corbyn supporters in constituencies with a high “Remain” vote in the referendum not to go against their constituents, and to respect a whip.

Corbyn and McDonnell envisage a sort of parliamentary guerilla war against the Tories during the next two years. That has its merits as it can stimulate divisions amongst the Tories, and prepare for a closer working relationship with the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. This could be a step forward in preparing the way for a Corbyn-led anti-austerity government after the next general election.

Whatever voting tactic is eventually adopted by Corbyn on the Bill triggering Article 50, the key issue now is to mobilise to put pressure on MPs and government to ensure the content of the “withdrawal” agreement defends workers and environmental rights. The first milestone in the mobilisation is the demonstration on Saturday 4 March for the NHS. The NHS is the Tories weakest point, and the demonstration should be the biggest for years.

In preparation for the parliamentary guerrilla war and the mobilisations, Corbyn and McDonnell should develop some sort of “Charter of Citizens’ and Workers’ Rights” along with an “Economic and Social Plan for post-Brexit”. Obvious measures would include the end to austerity; the extension and investment in public services and industries; taxing wealth, high income and financial transactions; and the freedom of movement as currently exists. This could prepare the manifesto for the next general election which is likely to take place when the final “withdrawal” agreement is being reached. The campaign for the general election would then be framed as a rejection of the lies and xenophobia peddled for Brexit, against austerity and for the renewal of the welfare state and public services.

**Fred Leplat**

\* Socialist Resistance. February 7, 2017:

<http://socialistresistance.org/no-blocking-and-no-hard-brexit-abstain-on-article-50/9616>

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## **Labour's conundrum over article 50**

The difficult situation Labour finds itself in over article 50 is a gift for Corbyn's critics and to a media that reaches new heights of distortion and invective week on week. Whatever position he had taken on this they would batter him just the same. If he backs article 50 he is splitting the Labour Party, if he opposes it (or equivocates on it) he is refusing to recognise the referendum result.

The automatic reaction of anyone who voted remain is to oppose article 50, that is understandable. The problem is would it be right in terms of democratic principle and what would the political consequences be? Unfortunately, we, as the remain side, lost the referendum and it is that reality that determines the parameters of the situation we are now in.

The problem that Corbyn has is that whilst two thirds of Labour members voted remain, two thirds of Labour constituencies voted leave. There are, therefore, two very strong imperatives for Labour to vote for article 50. One is that it is the right thing to do, from the point of view of democracy, and the other is that Labour could pay a very high price at the polls—both in the upcoming by-elections in Stoke Central and Copeland and in the general election—if it refuses to do so or equivocates on the issue. Such a position would be cheered to the rafters by UKIP.

It is worth noting, by the way, that the only reason that this comes up at all is because Cameron was so convinced that the referendum would go his way that there was no enabling clause built into the Act to authorise the government to trigger the process. It was framed as an advisory referendum under conditions where in reality there would be no alternative than to treat it as binding.

One of the reasons support for Brexit has held up so strong, amongst Brexit voters, is because they have been outraged by the perception that sections of the political class and the establishment have been, and are, seeking ways to overturn the referendum in what would be a repeat performance of the EU elites overturning the referendum in Ireland when the electorate voted the 'wrong' way. They were forced to vote for a second time on a slightly changed proposition.

This made it difficult to argue for a remain vote from a progressive standpoint, during the referendum—on the basis that leave would push the political situation in Britain dramatically to the right with European and global consequences—because when the leave camp said that the EU was a totally undemocratic institution they were right.

The Greens and the Lib Dems, along with some Labour MPs, are openly calling for another referendum by arguing (*a la* the EU elites) that this would not be a second referendum but a new referendum on the basis that it would be a vote on the final deal and therefore different—though they are careful to start by saying that they respect the referendum decision, because the political consequences of saying otherwise are too great.

This does not, and will not, wash, however, since however it is packaged, this would be a second referendum under another name—and be seen strongly as such by Brexit voters. We have to accept that short of a dramatic change in the political situation, that cannot at the moment be predicted, the Brexit decision is here to stay—though in today's volatile politics it cannot be ruled out.

There also seems to be a very dangerous assumption being made, by those advocating a second vote, that it would come up with a different result. This is a very big assumption indeed. In fact, given the experience of the first vote, which resulted in a big increase in racism and a big swing to the right, it could well result into a bigger vote for exit than before with even more dire consequences.

Labour's amendments are important, particularly the one on the rights of EU citizens in this country

but their fate—which does not look good since one has already been lost—should not determine Labour’s vote on article 50 which simply authorises the opening negotiations. To say, as some do, that a vote for article 50 is a vote for May’s agenda does not make sense: it is a vote to trigger negotiations—after which the main battle over Brexit starts.

There are (rightly) two main objectives behind Labour’s amendments. One is to try and ensure that Parliament (and therefore Labour) is fully involved in the process—hence Corbyn’s demand for a ‘meaningful’ vote in Parliament before a final decision is taken. The other is to set out Labour’s stall for the coming debate in terms of its alternative to hard Brexit—opposition to Britain as an off-shore tax haven tied to Donald Trump’s USA and the defence of EU citizens living in the country.

It should also be said that the position is completely different in Scotland where the majority voted remain in the EU referendum and the SNP are fully entitled to vote against article 50.

### **The debate within Labour**

It is not surprising that there is a sharp debate going on amongst Labour Party members and voters on this, or that it plays very differently in the constituencies that voted remain, where the tendency to oppose article 50 is strong and the two thirds of Labour constituencies that voted leave, where support for Corbyn’s approach is much stronger. Last Sunday’s Observer researched Corbyn’s own constituency in Islington North on this, that voted strongly for remain, and opinions were unsurprisingly evenly divided. Many pro-remain Labour supporters find the issue of the triggering of article 50 very difficult to swallow.

In the end the only way to send a clear signal that Labour recognises, unequivocally, the outcome of the Referendum is to support article 50. It should also be remembered that Corbyn was elected Labour leader (in the second contest) on the basis that he would honour the outcome of the referendum, despite the fact that it had gone the wrong way. He was asked this repeatedly and that was always his answer. Owen Smith stood on the basis of calling for a second referendum and got roundly defeated.

There is another strand to this debate as well, which is that Labour should have abstained on article 50 and only supported it if some of its amendments were accepted. This might seem a solution to the conundrum, but in my view it is not. Apart from the issue of which amendments and how many, which seems difficult resolve, if no amendments go through it is back to square one. Do you positively support Article 50 or not? And for Labour to embark on this debate, over the next several years, from an ambiguous position would be a very big mistake. It would colour the whole debate and alienate Labour voters in two-thirds of Labour constituencies.

It is also argued that Corbyn was wrong in imposing a three-line whip on the vote on Article 50. In my view it was the right thing to do if the relationship of forces between his leadership and the PLP allowed him to do so and that is difficult to tell from the outside. The advantage he had on this occasion was that the division amongst Labour MPs over Article 50 was not a left-right divide. Some who normally oppose him have supported him on this—including over the three-line whip. Had he not imposed it he would have been challenged repeatedly by the media as to how strong he actually was in upholding the referendum decision.

This is just the opening shot in a long battle that, in my view, Labour should not enter on the basis of ambiguity or lack of clarity on upholding referendum result. This will be followed by a long debate around the so-called Great Repeal Act and further debates will follow as events unfold and negotiations open up and the EU elites reveal their position on all this. And if anyone thinks that this is likely to go smoothly for the Tories, despite their relative unity at the moment, they should think

again.

The job of Labour is to oppose the hard Brexit model and seek the least damaging outcome for Brexit in the form of full access to the Single Market on the basis of the free movement of people. But to have undertaken this task from a position of having rejected the outcome of the referendum would mean that the project was deeply flawed from the start.

As John McDonnell said (on the Today programme last week) once the negotiations with the EU open up it will be the Tories that will have the greatest divisions. It is not true that hard Brexit is now a done-deal. The task for Labour will be to open up these divisions, impose political defeats on them, and force a change to the hard Brexit proposals. All remains to be played for.

**Alan Thornett**

\* Socialist Resistance. February 7, 2017:

<http://socialistresistance.org/labours-conundrum-over-article-50/9612>

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**P.S.**

\* Socialist Resistance. February 7, 2017:

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