

Brexit: Labour must fight for a second referendum

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Theresa May suffered three shattering blows yesterday as her bid to get her exit proposals accepted by Parliament got off to a disastrous start. Her government was found to be in contempt of the House of Commons for withholding legal advice from MPs and instructed to make it available forthwith. An amendment was agreed that will strengthen the hand of MPs in proposing alternatives if and when her proposals are voted down at the end of the current debate.

When the legal advice was published around mid-day today it could hardly have been clearer why May had opposed doing this so bitterly. It blew apart the spin she had been putting on it for the past few weeks that the back-stop was not a permanent arrangement was a complete misrepresentation, and spelled out in great clarity that the back-stop was a permanent arrangement that would continue until the EU was prepared to agree otherwise. The effect of disclosure has been to harden opposition to the deal.

It has weakened Mays position and has sharply altered the dynamics of the Brexit battle. It has further weakened a government just hanging on by its finger tips and brought the prospect of a general election sharply up the agenda. If May loses the vote heavily on December 11th, survival will be difficult. She might find a way of delaying the issue by a second vote in a few weeks' time but that only delays the crisis.

All this confirms that Britain stands on the cusp of monumental developments that could shape the political situation for a very long time – for both the Tory Party and indeed the Labour Party. The country is in free-fall towards a disastrous Brexit crash-out that would take the country sharply to the right and create a ruthless race to the bottom under WTO rules in which the poorest would be hit the hardest. This will be the outcome, on March 30th next year, if May's proposals are defeated in Parliament on December 11th -- unless new legislation, that does not yet exist, is put in place to stop it.

With over 90 Tory MPs pledged to oppose her, and only half of that number needed to impose a hefty defeat, even the famously spineless nature of Tory MPs cannot be relied upon. In fact opposition has hardened as Tory MPs have realised that her version has been heavily spun and the reality is much worse. The DUP have not only pledged to vote against it but are questioning the arrangement they have made to keep the government afloat.

May's proposals

Since her transition from a hard Brexit (no deal is better than a bad deal) to a soft Brexit (a soft Brexit is better no deal), May has managed to end up with proposals that satisfy no one, other than her own loyalists (who are a vanishing breed). Even arch toadies like Michael Fallon have now abandoned ship. Remainers see it as a road to disaster whilst the Brexiteers see it as the ultimate

betrayal since it leaves Britain tied to the EU institutions but with far less influence than before.

Under her proposals, Britain would leave the EU on March 30th and begin a 20 month period of negotiations over a possible trading agreement for the future, during which the free movement of people would continue. This would take place under the framework of the back-stop agreement during which Britain would remain within the customs union and within regulatory alignment with the EU in order to avoid the requirement for additional border controls between the North of Ireland and the Irish Republic. Britain would be required to remain within the back-stop until a trade agreement is finalised that resolves the problem of the Irish border, and can only leave it by mutual agreement with the EU and ultimately the ECJ. The EU meanwhile have said don't come back for more because this is as good as it gets. This is what has sent the ERG apoplectic.

The reality has always been, though it is not clear when the British ruling elites understood it, that it is not possible for Britain to leave the EU if common regulations across the British state and the absence of an external border of the EU in Ireland is a condition of doing so.

Time running out

May has stomped the country to no effect. The governor of the Bank of England has said that, in the event of a disorderly exit from the EU, the British economy would contract by 8 per cent, house prices would decline by 30 per cent and interest rates would rise to combat inflation. The Brexiteers have predictably dismissed this as Project Fear, and that is clearly one side of it, but it is also entirely plausible. Any form of Brexit will clearly reduce the standard of living of the majority to one degree or another.

May has played the race card for all it is worth – which she knows will go down well with her core supporters. Her message every time she speaks is 'this deal may not be all you want but it will end free movement and keep the foreigners out. This will drum up some support amongst the core Brexit vote that remains racist. Many have little interest in whatever else happens around Brexit. Even a drop in the standard of living could be acceptable to them as long as free movement is stopped. But will this be enough?

The Tory Party is falling apart and could disappear in its present form, maybe to re-emerge as something more right-wing and populist along with other hard-right forces. Large numbers of Tories see May's proposals as a worst of all worlds lash-up that could trigger an electoral defeat on the scale of 1997 and become an albatross around Tory necks for years to come.

Jo Johnson, the former Transport Minister who recently resigned argues exactly this. He has joined with David Willetts and Justine Greening to point out that the Tory party could face an existential crisis with its brand being irredeemably trashed by the fallout from Brexit. Johnson has described May's package as a 'botched deal' that would put British firms at a competitive disadvantage and fail the services sector, which he said had been 'scandalously' neglected during negotiations on Brexit.

Labour and a general election

Labour on the other hand faces an historic opportunity in the event of a general election – providing it gets its stance on Brexit right.

If May loses the vote, Labour is (rightly) saying that it will appeal for a general election and if that fails it will move a motion of no-confidence in the government. If that fails –as it no doubt would because Tory MPs will not vote for it – all options are on the table including an in-out referendum.

But Labour's response needs to be far more robust. Whilst there is not a majority in Parliament at

the moment for a second vote, support is growing amongst MPs and there could well be by the time of the vote. A strong demand for a referendum at that point would not only garner Labour wide support but it would be very difficult for May to resist and survive in office. The pressure for a second referendum is mounting by the day, from multiple strands of the debate.

The other possibility is that May falls in the course of all this and we face a general election. Whilst we should fully welcome such a development, this is where tactics get tricky since the issue of a referendum to put an end to the Brexit fiasco does not go away.

The need for a second referendum

The Labour leadership has been understandably reluctant to come out clearly for a referendum given the split in Labour's base on the issue, but the time for equivocation is over. John McDonnell was right recently to up the stakes by saying that if a deadlock in Parliament did not result in a general election Labour's support for a second referendum would become inevitable. This was another step in the right direction but it is still not enough. It is time for Labour to take the leadership of the anti-Brexit movement, declare clearly for a second referendum, and fight for it – in line with the decisions of conference.

Ninety per cent of Labour party members oppose Brexit as do the vast majority of Labour voters. Labour leave voters are the group most likely to have moved from leave to remain as they have seen that Brexit is not in their interest.

There was a question on Question Time last Thursday night 'is it not time for Labour to take the leadership of the anti-Brexit movement' which received strong applause from the audience but no response from Labour's Rebecca Long-Bailey. In all public debating forums the biggest support comes for a second referendum.

Mike Buckley from Labour for a Peoples Vote claimed (in the Guardian Nov 29th) that Labour would gain more than a million voters and dozens of seats if it fully backed a new vote. 'More important than the numbers is the direction of travel. Polls consistently show a growth in the number of people saying that the Tories are doing a bad job in the negotiations, that Brexit is going to work out badly for them and their communities, and that a second vote should be held. The will of the people is now to keep the deal we have as members of the EU.'

He claims that 'despite May's overtures, Labour voters are unwilling to abandon the party over concerns about its economic programme. In fact, the exact opposite is true. There is growing support for a radical programme to fix our evident problems in housing, inequality and the economy. A campaign for a second referendum would give Labour the opportunity to set out our vision of a fairer Britain, and to contrast this with a Tory party divided over Europe and committed to inevitable continuing austerity as Brexit impacts took hold.'

Buckley goes on to say that 'Brexit is the only issue that, if we get it wrong, has the power to cost Labour votes and the chance to gain power. Forty-seven per cent of Labour remain voters, about a third of our total voters, say that they would abandon Labour to stop Brexit. These voters are the only possible hope for a new centrist party; if the Labour leadership wants to kill off talk of a new party, fully opposing Brexit is essential.'

The reality is that in the end the only thing that can credibly stop Brexit is a second popular vote – not a vote in Parliament by an incoming Labour government. In the event of a general election, Labour should put a referendum on Brexit in its manifesto making it clear that the vote would include an option to stay in the EU. This is the only way to clearly take the leadership of the anti-

Brexit movement. And any second referendum must put right some of the injustices contained within the first – in particular 16 and 17-year olds (i.e. those with the most to win or lose) should be given the vote along with EU citizens resident in this country.

If Labour is seen as bringing about a crashing out Brexit about by default (for example by failing to back a second vote early enough), it could pay a heavy price amongst its base. On the other hand if Labour championed a second vote with an in-out option it would take the leadership of a still growing mass movement and could win a big majority. If on the other hand it equivocates, for example in favour of reopening negotiations with the EU, Labour could lose the election.

Following a victory in a general election arising from the Brexit crisis, Labour must not fall into the trap of taking over the negotiations with the prospect of getting a better exit deal than May could have got. It should, instead, move decisively to end the whole Brexit exercise via a new referendum with a recommendation to vote to reverse the previous decision. There is no Brexit deal available in the current situation that would be equal staying in the EU at this stage.

In such a deadlock a second vote is a basic democratic right. That is why the demand for it has been gathering strength since the 700,000 strong demonstration a few weeks ago. There must be an opportunity for people to think again on such an issue when radically different conditions arise, and the only thing that can convincingly reverse a referendum decision is another referendum – not a vote of MPs in Parliament.

Those such as the Lexiteers and the ERG who denounce a second referendum (after two and a half years and massive confusion) as an assault on democracy need to explain how going back to the whole of the people who took the decision in the first place is wrong. What are they afraid of?

It was clear from Gove's interview with Marr on Sunday that the thing the ERG fear a second vote more than anything else – precisely because they know it is the only thing that could reverse Brexit. That is why he and Fox have stayed in the Cabinet to try to make sure that it never happens.

Shifting opinion

It is true that there is no guarantee that the outcome of a second referendum would be different from the first. But at the moment we have the bizarre situation that we are heading towards the most damaging form of Brexit that pleases absolutely no-one. Even the Brexiteers are against it! Why should we be dragged into a Brexit we don't want when even its supporters don't support it?

There has been some shift, however. The YouGov poll on November 20 asking 'In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the EU?' shows 47% saying right, and 53% wrong. John Curtice's comments on relatively few switchers: the good old grim reaper carries off old Brexiteers, replaced with passionate young remain voters. Some 600,000 Britons die each year, while 700,000 reach voting age. YouGov's Peter Kellner points out that, due to demographics alone, by 19 January, just before the leave date, the leave majority will have vanished without a single switcher. The dead, not the living, he says, will drag us out of the EU. He also says that voters now want a second vote by 59% to 41%, and 75% say the Brexit on offer is 'nothing like that which was promised two years ago'.

Let's be clear. The EU is a reactionary neo-liberal entity – as SR has always argued. It is a bosses club that offers nothing to the working class in terms of a road to socialism. Socialists should be ready to leave it in order to defend or advance a progressive agenda. Syriza in Greece made a big mistake in ruling such an exit out.

Those on the left who voted Brexit under current conditions, and who today combine abstractly

correct criticism of the EU with a refusal to make a class characterisation of the referendum or its outcome, and seek to push Labour towards supporting a hard Brexit, are making a big mistake. Brexit is a project of the Tory hard right and is being shaped by their politics. It has become even more dangerous since the impact of Trump, who sees himself as a Brexiteer, internationally.

Today the Lexiteers critique the Tories and their crisis and blame the EU for being the EU but have nothing to say about what should be done. They are against a second referendum and against staying in the single market – which is a hard Brexit position. They call for a ‘peoples Brexit’. ‘one based on creating jobs, building infrastructure and widespread nationalisation’. Don’t we all! The problem is that such a Brexit is not on offer. The choice is between a neoliberal race to the bottom and a slightly different neoliberal race to the bottom—designed and delivered by the Tory hard right.

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