

Labour must stop the Tory Brexit dream

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The party must put its socialist vision for our relationship with the EU to the people

On 6 February the TSSA transport union sent a report it had produced to Momentum which showed what a lot of us, Labour party members and supporters, already sensed was true. Yes, the party is in a tricky position, bound to lose some votes whatever path it chooses, but nevertheless, the path that most closely aligns us with our principles right now would be that which leads to No Brexit.

After the abysmal general election of 2015, and Jeremy Corbyn's bid for Labour leader, I saw a wave of exasperation turn into a wave of hope quicker than I've ever seen before. I campaigned enthusiastically in both leadership challenges on the promise of much more than Corbyn's solid left-wing credentials.

I saw an opportunity to stem the rightward drift in the political discourse, to forever bury the immigration-control mugs, to never again chase after the electorate while allowing its views to be shaped by a more and more reactionary media culture. In short, I saw a party that had the rare chance to reinvent itself into a force of principled politics, policy-making from the ground up, participatory democracy and workplace organising.

On many issues of the day, our Labour party has managed to shift the debate quite far. Welfare reforms and austerity cuts are now widely recognised as political tools in the hands of Tory ideology, rather than necessary evils that the financial crisis visited upon us. Waves of attacks on Early Years services for example, usually administered by local authorities, are met with ever more robust opposition in local Labour parties across the country. Our sovereign conference, the annual occasion where members set policy, is growing in popularity and participation. The party seems to be slowly learning how to respond to the concerns and issues that its active members take to heart. And yet.

The trend feels completely reversed when it comes to the issue that currently dominates our political lives – Brexit. It is no exaggeration to say Labour party members who actively want to see Brexit happen are a small minority. When it comes to our voters, it is again true that Remainers heavily outnumber Leavers. Most crucially, even for people who support leaving the EU but tend to vote Labour, issues of housing, the NHS, and welfare precede Brexit on the list of priorities, as they should.

The path of constructive ambiguity has seen us attempt to be all things to all people, quietly reassuring to Remainers with key figures making positive remarks, while in parliament Labour attempts to expose the inadequacy of the government and demands an election.

But when even Momentum's Jon Lansman says a general election is currently looking unlikely, we Labour members know that one sure way of making it a much more realistic prospect is to continue defeating the Tories on the single issue that constitutes this government's To Do list. Yes, we are staring down the barrel of a gun but it is a Tory-wielded one. We cannot afford – neither morally nor politically – to be seen to facilitate a productive outcome for Theresa May. Jeremy's five-points letter serves well as a tool to split the Tories, but it may have the inadvertent effect of disillusioning

Labour supporters further who might interpret this as an offer to co-deliver what was always a Tory-driven project. The absence of freedom of movement seems an ominous sign as well.

Labour should stand firm on its commitment to vote down May's deal. All MPs should be effectively whipped to do so and this time, they need to know there will be consequences beyond a reprimanding chat. It is the only principled thing to do – it offers a chance to defeat the government, to get the general election we need now, not in 2022, and to then go back to the public, honestly stating that Labour never wanted or participated in the Tory Brexit dream, and that it has a different, positive, socialist vision for our relationship with the EU. Then, we let the voters decide.

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The Guardian

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