

Stop trying to make Lexit happen

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There are many things I'm not proud of — shoplifting a Bourneville aged 6 (I don't even like dark chocolate), accidentally wearing a blouse the first time I went on *Question Time*, and coining the word 'Lexit', or 'a left exit from the EU'. That's my own contribution to the English language, right there, and I don't even believe in it, so that's annoying.

It was nearly a year before the EU referendum, and in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of Syriza's attempt to free Greece from the ruinous corset of austerity. I was pissed off, to put it bluntly, and wrote an article calling for the left to debate the case for leaving the EU: I didn't commit to backing Lexit, but rather felt that a discussion was needed over it. I listed my objections to the EU in its current form — from the enshrining of market ideology to the eurozone calamity — and worried about the nationalist, xenophobic right monopolising the case for Leave in the absence of left leadership. The 'Brexit' portmanteau had only been coined three years earlier, and didn't enter the mainstream until sometime after, and it was inspired by 'Grexit'.

Anyway, whilst maintaining my objections to the EU in its current form, I campaigned for Remain and Reform alongside Another Europe Is Possible in the referendum. There were three main reasons: firstly, leftists in Europe made a convincing and passionate case against Brexit; secondly, that the Leave case was unavoidably run by hard right nationalists, and that there would be an orgy of reaction if their side triumphed (spoiler: there was!); and thirdly, that the economic consequences would be suffered by working class communities. When we lost, I fell into the "well that sucks but it was a pretty narrow result so let's have a close relationship with the EU, try and unite the country and pivot back to the issues that actually matter" campaign, until that position ran out of road because, well, very few people agreed with it any more after the Tory Brexiteers wrecked any mood for compromise.

But 'Lexit' persists in certain quarters. The problem is it's a nonsense, and here's why.

Firstly, while 'Lexit' exists as a concept amongst certain intellectuals and activists — many of whom I admire — it doesn't have any meaningful political constituency in Britain. To put it bluntly, very few people support leaving the EU because they regard it as a neoliberal outfit. Immigration and freedom of movement, yes; and for others, a general sense that society was rigged against their interests, but their key objection here was over how Britain, rather than the EU was run.

Secondly, although Labour is led by passionate champions of migrant and refugee rights — Corbyn's first act as Labour leader was to attend a pro-refugee rally, for which he was denounced by Very Sensible People — the referendum result caused the leadership to abandon a consistent, passionate case for freedom of movement and immigration. This was an extremely depressing rightwing shift. It should be not forgotten, of course, that the result was accompanied by a surge in hate crimes.

Thirdly, Lexit isn't actually a practical option? Establishing some sort of genuine independence from the rules governing our biggest trading partner is not really a thing. If we have a close relationship, that means accepting rules we would no longer a meaningful say over. Labour were hoping to

negotiate away state aid rules, but even if they'd managed that, they wanted a customs union and close alignment to the single market, all of which would inevitably mean being bound by extensive rules and regulations. Sure, a hardcore Lexiteer could jump on the No Deal, WTO Brexit bandwagon — which would mean inviting terrible economic damage which would hit working class people hardest, before our chastened country went crawling back to the EU in an even weaker bargaining position.

Lexiteers often mock two positions — 'Remain and Reform', or unite with other progressive forces to try and change the EU from within; or 'Remain and Rebel', or implement an elected government's policies and tell the EU to do one if there was any attempt to block them. But how is their prospectus in any sense possible to implement?

For those of who proposed a soft Brexit, it was always damage limitation. Dealing with the *electoral* dilemma of Brexit is one thing — and it's a legitimate argument to fear that Labour will alienate some communities it needs to win to form a government if it adopts a full Remain position. I think this position has collapsed — the middle ground on Brexit has collapsed, Labour is losing far more Remainers than Leavers, most Leave voters now think that 'No Deal' is the only genuine Brexit and believe a soft Brexit is 'Brexit In Name Only'. But in any case, the ideological case for Lexit makes no sense.

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Author of 'The Establishment' and 'Chavs', Socialist, Guardian columnist. Losing my Northern accent. My views etc... <https://www.youtube.com/c/OwenJonesTalks>

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