

Britain & Brexit: Hold the referendum before an election

Wednesday 16 October 2019, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2019).

In the parallel universe that exists between today's fake Queens speech and the so-called 'special session' of Parliament on Saturday - that does not yet have anything to discuss - support for holding a second referendum before a general election has been gaining ground, writes Alan Thornett.

This is particularly strong amongst Labour MPs, including John McDonnell, Diane Abbott, Emily Thornbury, Keir Starmer and Rebecca Long-Bailey. I find it very convincing.

Yesterday, on Marr, Rebecca Long-Bailey, speaking for Labour, supported the idea of a referendum first, saying that she had been on a journey on the issue: 'I started off against a second referendum' but now, after so long, I have come to the conclusion that it is the only alternative'. Such a move by someone clearly on the left is extremely significant.

Keir Starmer said on Saturday: If Johnson does manage to negotiate a deal... then we will insist that it is put back to the people in a confirmatory vote. If he fails 'we will take whatever steps are necessary to prevent our country crashing out of the EU without a deal.'

In the meantime, Squawkbox has published a vicious attack on such views - and particularly on John McDonnell who it claims was behind the recent move of Karie Murphy from Corbyn's office. The article wrongly claims that in voting down Composite 13, Annual conference tied itself to a sequence of general election followed by referendum. In fact such an order is not laid out in Composite 14 that was agreed - or the contrary in 13. On a generous reading, the NEC statement could be said to imply General Election then referendum but is not explicit.

There is a very good reason for this. Dozens - maybe even hundreds - of things that have happened in relation to Brexit have been completely unpredictable - indeed unimaginable. This is another one. And the most significant thing about Labour Party conference 2019 was that was clear that there needed to be a referendum - that the people should decide.

The danger of a general election first is that it could be so dominated by Brexit that there would be no guarantee that Labour's radical manifesto would cut through as it did last time because Brexit would have an even higher profile. Anything could happen. It would be better to deal with Brexit first and then have an election on the wider issues.

Meanwhile, the possibility of Johnson getting his 'new' proposals agreed by the EU look vanishingly small. They are based on the proposals he had rejected at Chequers which was to have the island of Ireland in a different customs jurisdiction to the UK with a second border in the North Sea.

Unsurprisingly, Nigel Dodds, speaking for the DUP, support from which is crucial to any chance of this going through Parliament, has now rejected Johnson's compromise outright. 'Northern Ireland', he said, 'must stay in a full UK customs union, full stop.' Asked if it could be made to work he said:

'No, it cannot work because Northern Ireland has to remain fully part of the UK customs union. Meanwhile Owen Patterson said that the deal had all the hallmarks of 'Backstop Mark 2'.

The ERG is now in open disarray. Rees-Mogg appealed, in yesterday's Sunday Telegraph, to Brexiteers who are increasingly alarmed by Johnson's compromises to stick with him and give him a chance. We have to remember, he said, that Boris is a Brexiteer and in the end he won't betray us in the way that Remainers have done. Fat chance.

So, what will happen on super Saturday? Will Johnson have anything to offer? If so will it get through Parliament? If not, will Johnson comply with the Benn Bill and apply for an extension? Nobody knows. What is clear is that if Johnson leads an illegal Brexit, or commits the Tory Party to a no deal Brexit in an election the Tory party would suffer further splits and divisions. On the other hand, if he fails to do so his political project would be over.

What Labour and the opposition parties have to ensure is that whatever happens the final decision must be taken by the people in a second referendum – preferably in advance of an election.

Alan Thornett

P.S.

• Socialist Resistance, 14th October 2019:
<http://socialistresistance.org/hold-the-referendum-before-an-election/18298>