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UK: Labour lost because of a fudge in which we all participated

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Two years on from the crucial moment for Labour's Brexit policy - here's what we got wrong

Almost exactly two years ago, in the early hours of the morning, I was scampering round hotels in central Liverpool, briefing delegates and negotiating the wording of a motion with trade union officials. The following day, around two hundred delegates at Labour's 2018 conference would hammer out a text on Brexit to be voted on by the full conference. The outcome of this process defined Labour's Brexit policy. It was passed by conference unanimously and hailed at the time by many Remainers as a step in the right direction. Looking back, I think the moment encapsulates what went wrong.

In the run up to the conference, Another Europe is Possible and a coalition of other groups had organised an unprecedented campaign to get Brexit onto the agenda of the conference. After 2017, when the Leader's office and Momentum organised to block discussion of motions on free movement and single market membership, we were taking no chances. In the end, more than a hundred constituency parties submitted pro-second referendum text, the largest number of motions on any subject in the party's history. Run primarily by left wing activists, this was a campaign that comprehensively debunked the idea that the demand for a second referendum was the preserve of sour Blairites. Polling showed that 78% of members [by this point supported one](#), as did a [majority of Labour voters](#) in every constituency, and we arrived at conference confident that we could decisively shift the party's position forwards from the existing fudge.

The decisive shift was not to be. With the outline of a motion broadly agreed with sympathetic unions and over a hundred delegates intensively briefed ahead of the compositing meeting that would produce the final text, the coalition fell apart literally as the meeting opened. UNISON, whose bloc vote would have been essential to seeing the motion passed, pulled the plug - presumably as the result of some horse trade - and the GMB, not wanting to find themselves isolated among the big unions, followed suit. The result was that, despite having the overwhelming majority of delegates in the room and having spent days briefing them en masse, our operation fell apart and had to be reassembled over the course of six hours.

Hunched over a laptop outside the room, I had access to the West Midlands Labour dinner buffet. The delegates inside had no such luck. The compositing process is designed to wear you down: the chair cannot be challenged, they talk about nothing at length, and votes are taken by acclamation - literally by shouting. As the evening wore on, I walked over to the old Blairite staff member who had come to observe for People's Vote. "You can see why we invented this process, can't you", he said. All I could do from outside the room was broadcast messages to delegates over a WhatsApp group as they reported being ground down. On my phone, I drafted a tweet attacking the outcome of the meeting as a grubby stitch up by the unions and party managers, sent it, and then swiftly deleted it.

The motion that emerged was an exercise in ambiguity. It committed Labour to keeping “all options on the table” if no general election took place that autumn, and did not even make it clear that Remain would be on the ballot of any future referendum. Another Europe and its allies had resolved in advance of the compositing meeting that we did not want to risk proposing a separate, clearer motion to the conference because we thought we would lose the substantive vote. And when the text emerged from the meeting, we had resolved to spin it and claim it as a win, using all kinds of semantic tricks and tea-leaf reading to convince ourselves that it was something other than a messy compromise which fell well short of what we had hoped for.

Having barely slept in three days, and having spent most of that time running between fraught meetings and energetic leafleting sessions, I felt like the undead. But politically, I was a zombie too. As delegates streamed out of the meeting and I leaned into the Today Programme’s microphone, it felt like someone else was speaking the words: “The outcome of tonight’s meeting is a clear step forward for...”

The crucial error

The mistakes that Left Remainers made were not the positions we campaigned for. We were the only people who prioritised the fight for free movement and migrants’ rights in the context of Brexit, and of that we can be proud. We began the post-referendum period campaigning for a Norway-style deal. When this became a dead end as the Labour leadership rejected it and the electorate moved on, we switched to campaigning for a second referendum and an explicitly pro-Remain stance. Either of these positions could have been the basis for a Labour victory in a general election.

Rather, the mistake was one of emphasis and strategy. With limited resources, and unable to change the world on our own, we focussed everything on shifting Labour and other organisations which might have the capacity to take up our demands and ideas. In the pressured days of the Brexit crisis, we found ourselves swept up in the news cycle which demanded more and more comment about Labour’s latest statement or parliamentary chess move. The result was a relentless focus on Labour’s formal position. We argued consistently that Labour’s route to victory was to shift its position sooner rather than later and then turn outwards to campaign for it in the country. And yet, when the moment came to force the issue, we failed to do so. We prized the policy position above all else, and inching it closer towards us was better than risking defeat – even if that meant the party lacked the clarity it would need to campaign.

The 2018 conference policy on Brexit is the document that encapsulates Labour’s doomed strategy of fudge and muddle, and we all played our part in it. The leadership prized room for manoeuvre over allowing the policy to be clarified in a democratic way. Its cheerleaders seemed to regard “constructive ambiguity” on Brexit as an act of tactical genius after the 2017 general election. Much of the Labour left demanded strict loyalty to the Leader’s office rather than advocating a clear position of its own. The unions engaged in backroom deals at the eleventh hour which scuppered the plan to shift the policy. The Labour right wanted to chalk up a spinnable win. For our part, we decided not to push the policy to a vote at the crucial moment, confident that we could shift things later. And sitting at the centre of it all was the man who led the compositing meeting on the night, the architect of “all options on the table”: Keir Starmer.

A strange kind of symmetry

The crucial task between 2016 and 2019 was to win an argument not just about Brexit, but about the ideas it represented. The whole of the left needed to be on doorsteps and high streets fighting to convince people that, no, it wasn’t their Bulgarian neighbour who was to blame for their lives getting worse, and that we could offer a vision of transformation that promised the future rather than a

fictional imperial past. The Labour leadership needed to be campaigning, dynamic and willing partners of this strategy. A resurgent class politics needed to become the active, deliberate antithesis of right wing nationalist ideas. Instead, Labour remained stuck in a debate about its formal policy position. Jeremy Corbyn, whose entire appeal was based on his reputation for authenticity, was seen to pursue a strategy of triangulation and evasion.

A year later, Another Europe had learnt its lesson. We approached conference 2019 determined to force a vote on whether Labour should go all-out and back Remain. We were defeated, but by putting our motion to a vote and rejecting any notion of a fudge, we pushed the debate further on a number of issues - not least on free movement, which passed overwhelmingly - and forced our opponents to define their position. For the first time, Labour's Brexit policy could be clearly laid out, the party could unite around it, and the real task of winning an argument in society could begin. But it was obviously too late: ahead of what we knew was an impending general election, Labour had lost millions of Remain and Leave voters, and many would never return.

On one level, our strategy was quite different to that of the Leader's office. They tried to avoid Brexit, and were not keen on letting Labour's overwhelmingly anti-Brexit membership set the policy. We attempted to clarify, to mobilise members, and to push the issue up the agenda. They, the unlikely converts to a politics of electoral calculation, viewed Brexit as a purely tactical issue on which they could triangulate. We prioritised what we saw as red lines on migrants' rights and internationalism and believed, because we had to, that the concerns of Leave voters could be overcome with a mixture of persuasion and radical economic policy. But on a deeper level, there was a kind of symmetry to the mistakes we made. As the Brexit juggernaut rolled on, the Labour right plotted and parliament faced a series of tight votes, we both viewed Labour's Brexit debate primarily in terms of the formal position rather than in terms of the bigger task of convincing voters of it. This focus on the formal policy drove us both to be cautious, and to accept ambiguity where clarity was needed.

Throughout Labour's Brexit debate, everyone argued that only by adopting their preferred policy could Labour save itself electorally. The truth is that there were probably multiple positions which could have won, if the party had picked them early and fought for them in the country. What we needed was a proper democratic process and a decisive outcome - and what we got was a mealy mouthed fudge. It is sobering to reflect that, in the end, it was a fudge in which we all participated.

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