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Britain

The Brexit Crunch

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Since the EU elites rejected May's Chequers proposals on the basis that they breach the fundamental principles of the EU; i.e. the internal market and free movement, the likelihood of a disorderly (no deal) exit from the EU has increased along with support for a second referendum on the issue. In Scotland, it has resulted not only in a surge of support for the SNP and for Scottish independence (with some polls showing a majority for the first time) but also for a second referendum on independence which could well become unstoppable – which was reflected in the huge pro-independence demonstration in Edinburgh on 6 October.

May's response to all this has been (once again) to play the racist card – which she knows will go down well with most Brexit supporters. That is why her message from the Tory Party conference was: stick with me on Brexit and I will impose a harsh immigration regime and keep foreigners out.

And she is right; this will shore up support, at least in England. The core support for a hard Brexit remains rabidly racist, put Britain first kind of people. Many of them have little interest in whatever else happens around Brexit. Even if involves a drop in the standard of living this will be acceptable as long as the government that drives it through has an English nationalist, look back to the empire, keep the migrants out, position.

Will it be enough though? Probably not, because May's Brexit shambles is shot through with gigantic contradictions. When pressed she will still say that no deal (i.e. crashing out of the EU on WTO terms) is better than a bad deal. She will also readily say, when asked, that her reddest of redlines is that there will be no physical border either between the North and South of Ireland or between the North of Ireland and Britain. The DUP, that props her up, is also saying in even stronger terms – redder, redder, redder, lines – that they would find any such border totally unacceptable. But here's the thing. Crashing out of the EU onto WTO rules is the quickest and most effective way to ensure the full implementation of a physical border between the Irish republic and Britain. WTO rules would require it as would the rules of the EU, since it would become an external border of the EU.

So how does she explain such a glaring contradiction? Her response, when BBC presenter Andrew Marr asked her this question four times in a row a couple of weeks ago, was to completely ignore it. All she would say was that she intended to get an agreement so it would not apply. But this goes to the heart of the whole thing. She says that no deal is better than a bad deal to appease the ERG but to implement it would breach her reddest of red lines.

One answer to this conundrum could be in the speculation in recent days that she will go for any deal she can get even if it breaches Chequers – i.e. involves remaining within the internal market and the customs union – and challenges the ERG (European Research Group) to see her voted down in Parliament on it, which could open the door to a Corbyn government. [1] She would also hope to win some Labour votes in such a situation. At the moment, there is no vote in Parliament either for anything May is likely to bring back or for a no-deal solution. It is unlikely that this could change but maybe not inconceivable.

Meanwhile an escalating string of big companies – both financial and manufacturing – protest about the looming consequences of a hard Brexit and a disorderly Brexit and prepare to relocate. Car manufacturers want to know what is going to happen to their just-in-time production set-ups – on which their profits depend – as border checks increase.

The left needs to be clear that crashing out of the EU with no deal (or indeed a hard Brexit) would be a disaster in the current situation. It is not just that it would be on WTO terms, which would involve a big cut in the standard of living

but it would be in the framework of a right-wing/racist project and in an international political situation that is moving to the right. Under such conditions the left must be not only oppose to crashing out on a hard Brexit but should be in favour of ending the whole Brexit process and staying in the EU until different very political circumstances prevail.

The Lexiteers

The EU is a reactionary neo-liberal entity as Socialist Resistance 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 made a big mistake in Greece in ruling such an exit out.

There was nothing progressive, however, about a vote for Brexit in the British referendum two years ago. *Socialist Worker* (18 June 2018) says that “the SWP backed a Leave vote because we oppose the neoliberal, racist EU ... which is a mechanism to protect one group of bosses’ interests against others.” Indeed it is. But the political content of the referendum, far from challenging that in any way, reinforced it. It was based on racism and anti-immigrant sentiment and on a right-wing English nationalist agenda. The only practical outcome of the Brexit vote was to strengthen such forces along with the right-wing of the Tory Party.

Those on the left who voted Brexit under those conditions, and who sit back today and make a general comment on the process, and *abstractly* correct criticism of the EU – whilst refusing to make a class characterisation of the referendum – and seek to push Labour towards a hard Brexit, are making a big mistake. Brexit is a project of the Tory hard right and is being shaped by the politics of the Tory hard right, and it has become even more dangerous since the impact of Trump, who sees himself as a Brexiteer, on the level of the world order.

An article currently on the Jacobin site [“Why the Left Should Embrace Brexit”](#) by Thomas Fazi and William Mitchell argues that Brexit is a once in a lifetime opportunity for the left. That is why it says: “Corbyn must resist the pressure from all quarters – first and foremost within his own party – to back a –soft Brexit.’ He must instead find a way of weaving a radically progressive and emancipatory Brexit narrative. A once-in-a-lifetime window of opportunity has opened for the British left – and the European left more in general – to show that a radical break with neoliberalism, and with the institutions that support it, is possible. But it won’t stay open forever.”

In other words, Corbyn as leader of the opposition, with his base split on Brexit, should “find a way” of transforming a deeply reactionary Brexit process into an agenda for a radical break with neoliberalism. It is not surprising that they advise Corbyn to “find a way” rather than outlining one themselves. Corbyn has to win an election before he can do anything and he won’t (and certainly shouldn’t) do that by backing a hard Brexit.

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.

They are in denial that the referendum strengthened racism in Britain and have nothing to say about the impact it has had (and what impact a hard Brexit would have) on EU citizens living in the country. They refuse to accept the damage that has been done to British society by the Brexit campaign and the Brexit vote – not least in terms of racism and xenophobia – and argue that the Brexit vote has opened up opportunities for the left. A dangerous approach indeed.

Referendum

The key to this is a second referendum. It is not about the general principles of referenda. It was a referendum that has determined the situation we are in – and only another referendum can convincingly reverse that. In any case given the nature of the first referendum and the different circumstances that prevail today there is a democratic right of a second vote. The fact that it has been a *cause célèbre* of the Blairites is irrelevant. There is no guarantee that the original decision would be reversed, of course, although the signs are encouraging. But the alternative of sitting back and waiting for the inevitable political disaster is unacceptable as well.

The key to an eventual referendum rests with the Corbyn leadership of the LP. Whilst they have been reluctant to come out clearly for a referendum because of the split in Labour's base on the issue, there has been a clear direction of travel in the direction of a referendum alongside the position that they would only support a deal proposed by May providing it met Labour's criteria. These are that it ensures a strong and collaborative future relationship with the EU; delivers the "exact same benefits" as we currently have as members of the Single Market and Customs Union; ensures the fair management of migration in the interests of the economy and communities; defends the rights and protections and prevent a race to the bottom; protects national security and our capacity to tackle cross-border crime; and delivers for all regions and nations of the UK.

From this point of view there is virtually no chance of Labour supporting any deal that May could conceivably bring back from the EU in the next few weeks. Nor would Labour support a proposal to crash out with no deal and would impose a whip on the issue. Since this position is held by the SNP, Green party, the Lib Dems and a significant number of Tory MPs we can say that at the moment there is no majority for either proposition.

The most significant advance made at LP conference was to strengthen the position on a second referendum, which was elevated to a position of 'on the table'. This remains vague but it is important given the momentum that is now behind the proposal and the lack of other rational proposals which might exist when the crunch (or car crash) comes.

The Labour leadership is still saying that their first choice would be for a general election. The problem with this is that whilst it would be extremely welcome it would not settle the issue of Brexit since it would not have the authority to trump a referendum vote. Nor could it avoid the issue of a referendum which would never go away. In fact, the denial of a referendum – or the proposal to trump it with a vote in Parliament – would give the right an ideal platform on which to defend the original decision and discredit Labour. Labour, therefore, in the event of a general election, should put a referendum on Brexit in its manifesto making it clear that the vote would include an option to stay in the EU.

Crucially, Labour following a victory in a general election arising from the Brexit crisis, should not fall into the trap of taking over the Brexit negotiations with the prospect of getting a better exit deal than May. It should move to end the whole exercise with 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 equal staying in the EU at this stage.

The most likely road to a referendum is via Parliament after the rejection of both May's proposals (whatever they might be) and a no-deal exist – which would probably involve a general election as well. Such conditions (which would be intolerable and could not exist for long) could well produce a parliamentary majority for a second referendum (particularly with the SNP saying that they would vote for it) but even if it failed to get a majority at that stage it would strengthen Labour's appeal and probably its vote since anyone proposing a rational and democratic way out would gain respect.

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[1] "The European Research Group (ERG) is a part publicly funded, single issue (hard Brexit) research support group for the United Kingdom's Conservative Party." [Wikipedia](#).