

The Time Is Now: Labour Must Stop Brexit

12. September 2018 by [James Bartholomeusz](#)

Last year, shortly after the French elections delivered Emmanuel Macron the presidency and En Marche! a resounding majority in the National Assembly, a row broke out about flags. Macron had notably campaigned using both the national *tricolore* and the 12-starred European flag, symbolising his commitment to both the Fifth Republic and the EU. In response to this, the Left-wing Eurosceptic deputies of La France Insoumise began the new parliamentary session by calling for the Chamber's European flag to be replaced by that of the United Nations. France's commitment should not be to the neoliberal EU, the argument ran, but to oppressed people all around the world.

While this was a symbolic act of protest against the new centrist government – and was swiftly thrown out by the majority of deputies – it said a lot about the contemporary European Left. Faced with an EU that has enthusiastically embraced neoliberalism, more so than ever since the financial crash ten years ago, the Left has splintered as a political force. On one side stand social democrats whose commitment to the European ideal has led to them defending austerity, privatisation and rule by diktat as the price of maintaining the contiguity of the EU. On the other are radical socialists who, even before the treatment of southern Europe during the eurozone crisis, had long since abandoned the EU as an unsalvageable capitalist farce.

This division marks politics in all western and central European countries to a greater or lesser extent, but its sharpest edge can be seen in the UK. There, the stakes are highest. As things stand, relations on the British Left will decide whether the country actually leaves the EU.

The Conservative UK government – which held the referendum and is now responsible for enacting the result – is irrevocably divided. As I have [previously written](#), the party's centrist market liberals have nothing in common with their nationalist colleagues. Moreover, the Conservative parliamentary majority is so slim that Theresa May will never have the votes to force through the final deal she makes with EU negotiators. The former group will rebel against anything that harms the UK economy (and, in particular, that drives business activity overseas); the latter will rebel against anything that seems to sacrifice national sovereignty and betray the spirit of the referendum result. At that point of impasse, the prime minister's only choice would be to resign voluntarily or be pushed out by a leadership coup.

Faced with a paralysed legislature, a new and untested prime minister and yet another general election, this would seem the perfect moment for the opposition to campaign for the postponement or cancellation of Brexit. Any party promising to end national uncertainty could expect to command a sizable share of votes and seats. Nevertheless, no one should bet on the Labour leadership making such a tactical manoeuvre. For the reason, we need look no further than France's flag row.

The historical relationship between the British Labour Party and the EU has never been straightforward. While an early attempt by the post-war Labour government to mediate between the US and USSR was abandoned in favour of NATO and the Marshall Plan, for

decades the party remained split between enthusiasts for and sceptics of the nascent European project. While all recognised the value of an intergovernmental peace process, the Labour Left claimed that economic integration could act as a Trojan horse to push liberal reforms, threatening both nationalised industries and the power of trade unions. The culmination of this split was Britain's last referendum on Europe in 1975, which cut the party down the middle but delivered a decisive public majority in favour of European unification.

Since then, Labour has grown increasingly pro-European – both more socially liberal and multicultural in its outlook, and at times bizarrely enthusiastic about market-driven globalisation. For some, the EU even seemed a bulwark against the excesses of elected Conservative governments, constraining social and environmental policy within certain (albeit broad) boundaries. Yet ironically, just at the moment when a pro-European Labour opposition could make great gains against an enfeebled incumbent party, it is under the leadership of its most Eurosceptic faction.

Some millennial devotees of Jeremy Corbyn were apparently shocked when his lukewarm views on Europe emerged during the referendum campaign. In fact, Corbyn stands in a British political tradition not dissimilar to that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, who spearheaded the attempt to remove EU flags from the National Assembly. Corbyn's mentor was the greatest figure of the post-war Labour Left, Tony Benn, who campaigned to leave the European Economic Community in 1975. Like Mélenchon, Corbyn has spent decades steeped in far-Left movements and views the West's architecture of international governance with innate suspicion. While the spirit of cooperation is admirable, for Corbyn the EU is the classic case of a stitch-up by global capital.

It should perhaps not be surprising that Corbyn's leadership and Brexit have coincided; after all, the same anger at the political establishment delivered both results. Under pressure from colleagues Corbyn reluctantly agreed to campaign for Remain in the 2016 referendum, although his ambiguity over the EU was palpable to all. His failure to secure a Remain victory – and then to appear sufficiently bothered about it afterwards – was the pretext for a failed leadership coup that summer. Having surrounded himself with allies from the party's Left, Corbyn's faction now represents a small but crucial Eurosceptic peak atop a parliamentary mountain of Europhile MPs.

Partly as a result, since June 2016 Labour's position on Brexit has been a master class in the power of ambiguity. While the vast majority of MPs (along with grassroots members) backed Remain and despair at the result, over half of them represent constituencies which voted to Leave. Generally, those in metropolitan areas can afford to take a hard line against Brexit in the knowledge that voters will only reward them for it, while those outside major cities risk running against the views of their constituents and being punished for it at the next election. So far, the lack of pro-European party leadership has just about maintained the balance. The strategy is to let the government, which caused this problem in the first place, try and fumble its way out and hopefully humiliate itself in the process.

That strategy has, to some extent, worked. May called a surprise election last summer hoping to win a crushing majority off the back of the Brexit vote and give herself a five-year period to manage the process. Instead, Corbyn successfully reoriented the debate to

confront the government's seven-year record in office, in particular the immense damage caused by austerity. The Conservatives ultimately lost their parliamentary majority and had to strike an agreement with a fringe Northern Irish party to stay in government, leaving them in a worse position than before to deliver a popular Brexit deal. Labour's refusal to allow the election to be about Brexit greatly strengthened its prospects for winning power.

Whether they like it or not, pro-European Labour backbenchers have benefited from an alliance of convenience with the ideologically Eurosceptic leadership. That alliance, however, is nearing its expiry date. Now, the most pressing question in British politics is how long Labour can continue to have no clear position on Brexit.

The fundamental problem, of course, is that Brexit itself is a fantasy. Contrary to the promises of the Leave campaign, there is no conceivable deal that returns formal sovereignty to Westminster without causing the UK major economic harm. The EU will simply (and rightly) reject any arrangement which allows Britain to enjoy the benefits of membership without bearing any of the responsibilities. For Labour MPs representing majority-Leave seats, this amounts to a choice between acting in what they believe are their constituents' best interests and following the instruction given to them in the 2016 referendum.

Despite the hopes of some Remainers, there has not been a significant shift in public attitudes since the referendum. Clear polling evidence to suggest falling support for Leave might have provided Labour with good cause for calling a second referendum, or even unilaterally retracting the Article 50 notice once in government. As it stands, the party is still open to charges of betraying the 2016 vote if it campaigns on a platform of cancelling Brexit. Nevertheless, that is precisely what it should do.

As already noted, there are clear tactical reasons for this. The Conservatives have always been keen to 'own' Brexit as an issue, hoping to win support by association with a grand project of national liberation. As it increasingly looks to be a looming disaster, many Eurosceptics are frantically distancing themselves from the government line (including, in Boris Johnson's case, resigning as foreign minister to better attack May from the safety of newspaper columns). According to this logic, Labour should foist Brexit on its opponents and come out solidly as the party of Remain, promising to avoid and undo the damage caused by two years of prevarication.

If it was only a matter of tactics then it would be best for Labour to delay declaring for Remain until after Brexit Day on 29 March 2019. At that point the full magnitude of EU departure would already be felt – and no government can last long in office while being reasonably accused of causing food and medicine shortages, transport deadlock, mass capital flight and a currency crash. And yet, precisely because of this, Labour would be guilty of a great moral fault if it allowed Brexit to unfold. Inaction by the opposition party would amount to punishing Leave and Remain voters alike in an attempt to make them see the error of their ways.

This is not just tactical; it is a point of principle. Whether they supported Leave or Remain, whether or not they agreed with the majority of their constituents, Labour MPs must ask

themselves to whom they owe their responsibility. Given the evidence now available about what Brexit would do to the country and its people – both those eligible to vote in 2016 and future generations – can they in good faith stand by while it happens? My guess is that they cannot, in which case the decision is already made. They must do everything they can before 29 March to stop Brexit happening.

If this is Labour's moral responsibility, then it falls to the Eurosceptics in the leadership as much as to pro-European backbench MPs and ordinary members. If Corbyn and his allies are serious about social and economic justice then the first thing they can do is to prevent Brexit. Two years ago, the Leave campaign was won by the Right. Now, as Brexit Day approaches, it is time for the Left to rescue the country from this disaster.