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Britain

Put Labour at the head of the anti-Brexit movement

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On 15 January, after two-and-a-half years of negotiations, British Prime Minister Theresa May presented her proposed withdrawal agreement from the European Union to a vote in the Westminster parliament. It was resoundingly defeated, as was inevitable given the balance of forces in the parliament - which has already shown itself to be for a "soft" Brexit if not "Remain". Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party, immediately tabled a motion of no confidence in the government. If a motion of no confidence wins a simple majority a new government has to be formed and win a confidence vote within fourteen days, if not a general election is automatically called.

May, unsurprisingly, survived the 16 January vote of no confidence moved by Labour, thanks to the solid support of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the European Research Group MPs despite suffering the biggest Parliamentary defeat in British political history on her exit agreement from the EU. [1] The defeat saw both those Tory MPs fighting to stop Brexit altogether and those who don't believe May's deal delivers "enough Brexit" celebrating together inside and outside parliament.

Labour was bound to call the confidence vote both because of its own conference decision and because, in the face of such a huge crisis, it would have been inexplicable not to follow it through to the next logical step. The government has been roundly defeated on the most significant political issue for 50 years, so the government should fall. The ruling Conservative party is deeply divided in that crisis so those tensions must be teased out.

But at the same time, the confidence vote predictably played into May's hands by diverting attention from the defeat itself and allowing her to claim it as a mandate to continue in office without an election. This was because, despite the current polls, the Tories are convinced that Labour would win in the event of an election taking place.

The reality remains, however, that on Tuesday 15 January she lost the vote on her deal by a massive 230 votes that included virtually all Labour, SNP and LibDem MPs as well as 118 Tory MPs – a number which includes most of those not employed by the government.

Dogmatic

Remarkably, May emerged from a defeat of this scale with the same sense of denial and dogmatic attitude to reality that led to that situation in the first place. She immediately announced that, in effect, nothing had changed. She would continue to implement her exit agreement despite the vote. Her agreement, she insisted, was the only option on the table and Britain will leave the EU on 30 March with or without an agreement. In other words, the same crash out, default position remains legally in place unless parliament changes it.

The only "concession" she made was that, before she puts all this formally to the House on Monday 21 January (as required), she will hold informal discussions with the DUP and "other senior parliamentarians", but not including the Labour front bench. By the time she rose to respond to the result of the no confidence vote the following day, however, her stance had been modified. Her consultations would now include the leaderships of the opposition parties – including Jeremy Corbyn. This was after she had just launched the most vitriolic personal attack on Corbyn for some time with charges of antisemitism top of the list.

Talks

Corbyn's response was that he would only be prepared to take part in such discussions if May would demonstrate that they would be meaningful, by ruling out a disorderly crash out of the EU on 30 March in advance. May refused but his stance is entirely justified. The Labour front bench is also right to suggest the government needs urgently to extend Article 50, something that May and her government are resolutely refusing to do. [2]

May had made it very clear that the purpose of her meetings with other MPs is to discuss not a change in position but how to get her deal through parliament and to 'implement the decision of the British people in the referendum'.

The SNP accepted the invitation to talks but insisted that the issues of the suspension of Article 50 and a second referendum would be on the table as well. The suspension of Article 50 is indeed very important and in fact likely to happen given how close we are to crashing out.

In Scotland itself, pressure is growing on the SNP to call a second Independence referendum. A poll for The Herald, published in Glasgow shows 56.5% of those polled calling for this if the British state crashes out of the EU. [3] The headline of 16 January's *National* was 'Independence is the only way out of this mess'. [4]

Inadequate

Whilst Corbyn's has been right not to engage in pointless discussions with May, his wider response remains entirely inadequate. It is right to call for a general election but, were it to happen, it would be seriously problematic. Even at this late stage Corbyn is unable to say whether Labour's stand would be pro-or anti Brexit. He sticks to the illusion that there is some kind of left wing or progressive Brexit possible in this situation when there is not, nor indeed a jobs friendly Brexit. It is a dangerous delusion.

When May presents her official 'plan B' on Monday it is likely to be 'plan A' dressed up in a slightly different way. The only viable answer to this is a second referendum, which remains the only chance of ending this whole process. The denunciation of this by Brexiteers as a betrayal of the 2016 referendum is politically illiterate as well as dangerous. Why is it a crime to allow people a second vote when parliament is deadlocked and the situation has changed? Asking the people becomes a betrayal of the people.

The *New York Times* has defended a second referendum by saying that a democracy that does not allow people to think again is not a democracy – which is a very good point. (May, of course, having denounced a second referendum as undemocratic, will bring her exit agreement back to parliament for a second vote as soon as possible, and maybe a third vote after that.)

In fact, it is worse than that if we take the concrete situation. If a referendum calls for a course of action which turns out to be impossible to implement without doing yourself serious damage, can you really say that giving people the chance to think again is a betrayal of democracy?

Meanwhile, support for a second referendum grows – even amongst Tory MPs. The problem is that Jeremy Corbyn is the key to it but continues to be vague. With his support it is now entirely possible, but without his support it will never happen. Without a referendum May will attempt to fritter away the remaining weeks before a crash out.

Recall Labour conference

In such a situation there is an urgent need for a Labour to involve its membership in policy making on this issue by calling a special conference on the way forward. Labour conference in October 2018 was right to adopt a motion that could be and was supported by all strands of opinion in the party, but now this is entirely inadequate.

The Labour leadership should be putting itself at the head of the anti-Brexit movement. Not to do so strengthens the hands of the right inside the party and, even worse, seriously undermines the possibility of a Corbyn government. And if Labour were to co-operate in seeing any Brexit, however soft, in the current political situation, either with the Tories or in its own name, it would be blamed for the disastrous consequences for generations to come.

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[1] The DUP is a sectarian, dogmatic party from the North of Ireland. Its ten MPs have been the support needed by Theresa May to give her government a majority since the 2017 general election. The European Research Group (ERG) is a research support group for the most hardline anti-EU Conservative Party MPs.

[2] Article 50 is the clause that triggers the departure from the EU of a member state within two years. The UK parliament adopted legislation implementing it in March 2017 thus setting the 29 March 2019 date for leaving. It is suggested that the other member states would agree to a request to postpone this date.

[3] *The Herald* 16 January 2019 "[Herald poll: Scotland should have independence referendum after Brexit](#)".

[4] *The National* on twitter 16 January 2019 "[Tomorrow's front page: One of the most useless governments in history –yet Corbyn can't even lay a glove on a Prime Minister with no Brexit plan who is propped up by the DUP. It's becoming increasingly clear that independence is the only way out of this mess.](#)".