

The failure of the left to grasp Brexit

*The Labour party was eventually persuaded to back a second referendum. This was a historic mistake which led to defeat in the General Election, says **Michael Wilkinson (LSE)**. Labour should have respected the vote to Leave and offered a platform for change based on a future outside of the European Union.*

Thursday's General Election was a bad day for the Labour party. It spelled the end of Remainism and signalled a historic defeat for the left. There needs to be serious reflection on all of this because the repercussions are severe and wide-ranging, and broader lessons must be learned, not just for the UK but elsewhere. It turned out, contrary to much expert assessment, that the 2016 referendum was, in fact, binding. The left failed to grasp this, and the underlying disconnect it signified.



A Labour rally in Glasgow in December 2019. Photo: [Jeremy Corbyn](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Two initial responses have been predominant, some blaming Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, others focusing on Brexit itself. The truth is that both are to blame – they cannot be disaggregated, since Corbyn ultimately has to take responsibility for capitulating to the promise of a second referendum. If any further evidence were needed in Labour heartlands that its leadership represented just another version of a metropolitan elite that has become so utterly distrusted, this was it. [John McDonnell's rapprochement with New Labour's Alastair Campbell](#) and his explicit embrace of Remain was a moment that will live long in the memory.

The disconnect between the Labour party and working class voters of course reflects a decline taking place not over months, or years, but decades. It has no easy fix. But the irony is that within the Labour party, Corbyn was almost uniquely placed to put his weight behind a '[Lexit](#)' agenda, his lifelong Euroscepticism giving him a credibility that was simply never utilised, undermined when he decided to campaign for Remain in 2016 and effectively abandoned through further concessions to the Remainers both inside and outside the party. The tragedy, in short, is that Corbyn, and many of those around him, have gone down fighting for a cause they didn't believe in.

The result was clearly bad for the Labour party, which, after doing unexpectedly well in 2017 – attaining 40% of the electorate on a socialist platform and with the promise to respect the outcome of the referendum – fell to around 32% of the vote, with a similar programme but revoking its Brexit promise. Although the scale of defeat has been grossly exaggerated (Labour got more votes than under Ed Miliband in 2015, Gordon Brown in 2010 and Tony Blair in 2005), it can only be described as a failure. If this spells the official end of Corbyn, in truth, 'Corbynism' was already over once Labour [capitulated to its Remain wing on Brexit](#), effectively giving Labour Leave voters little option but to defect to the Tories or the Brexit Party or to simply abstain. In the end, [Labour lost a quarter of its Leave voters to Conservatives](#) and [52 out of the 54 seats](#) it lost in England and Wales were in Leave-voting constituencies.

The concessions to Remain were presumably made in part due to internal pressures and in part on the basis of some electoral calculation, the fear of losing votes to the Liberal Democrats eclipsing concern over defection to the Tories or the Brexit Party. The apparent preponderance of Remainers in Labour and amongst Corbynistas themselves, along with the influence of groups such as Another Europe is Possible, meant Corbyn was essentially fighting with one hand tied behind his back. From this angle, Corbyn's position might have been justified as an attempt to perform an increasingly precarious balancing act.

But a balancing act was not what was required. The scales had already been weighed; Remain had lost in 2016. This is such a simple point it seems extraordinary that it could have been lost from sight. No doubt, the fear of losing seats to the Lib Dems was real. But the real shock from this election is the complete failure of Remain as an electoral strategy, not only for Labour but for the Lib Dems, who had turned themselves into a single-issue, 'stop Brexit' party but reaped scant reward.

If the decisive victory of Boris Johnson spells the end of Remainism, it does not, however, present an obvious path forward. Johnson's victory was not based on a surge of enthusiasm, the Tories achieving only one percentage point more than under Theresa May. The apparent success of Johnson's slogan of 'Get Brexit Done' is matched only by its emptiness. It is unclear that Johnson's Tory party has a plan of any political substance, which is not to doubt the substantial damage it may do. And if the path to leaving the EU is now open as a matter of parliamentary arithmetic, obstacles lie ahead, not least the issue of Scottish independence.

The historic defeat of the left is a more difficult proposition to outline because it requires a deeper excavation of the underlying materials. The first and most straightforward point is that there was a near-total failure of leadership on the left either to prepare for Brexit, or less excusably, after the referendum, to take advantage of the opportunity that it provided. By 2019, a left programme that took exit seriously had three years to mature – not on a speculative terrain, but on a terrain primed by the electorate against political and economic elites, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a rupture from the status quo. The failure is all the more extraordinary given that over the last decade since the financial crisis, across Europe, and further afield, the conjuncture has delivered up the slow-motion collapse of social democratic parties attached to EU-style centrism. It is astonishing that the same Left that witnessed the total capitulation and then defeat of Syriza could, [with some notable exceptions](#), have evaded this historic task.

The Labour Party has avoided [Pasokification](#), no doubt partly due to the UK's electoral system, but also due to the robust social movements that have grown inside it. But there is the temptation now by some on the left to double down on the disconnect from working class communities, dismissing the electorate as ignorant, stupid or simply racist. Apart from the folly of that position in terms of constructing a viable opposition moving forward, it overlooks the fact that this dismissal had *already* occurred, sealed with the promise of a second referendum, writing off half the electorate at a stroke – and possibly many more when adding in Remain voters who think the outcome of the first should have been respected.

There is a counter-argument, which points out that class is now more complex, and that a Lexit position would alienate a new core of the young, urban, cosmopolitan Labour support. There are a number of problems with this argument, even assuming it is based on accurate assumptions. Most concrete is the electoral arithmetic, which suggests that a position to respect the referendum could have cost some seats to the Lib Dems, but would have saved far more from the Tories. More fundamentally, this appeal to identity politics is a dead end for the left – not least with the problematic conflation of a Remain identity, however real that may be, with a simplistic desire to overturn a referendum. Most basic of all, however, is that remaining in the EU should be understood for what it is – [remaining in a neoliberal straitjacket](#), a regressive polity that not only suffers from all the defects of its various Member States but aggravates them through structural democratic deficits.

The condensed diagnosis of this conjuncture is that Labour appears to have forgotten the democratic part of democratic socialism. Not only in the trivial sense, of failing to respect a democratic mandate. But in the more complex sense of assuming that the electorate, and particularly the working class, understood in all its complexity, could simply be bought off by a top-down socialism rather than advancing through their own political empowerment.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE. It first appeared at [Verfassungsblog](#).