

Labour's political calculations: explaining the party's muddled policy on Brexit

Why is Jeremy Corbyn ignoring calls for a second referendum, despite these being backed by a substantial part of his party's membership, as well as by non-members? Eric Shaw explains the factors affecting Labour's inability to agree on a clear and feasible Brexit policy, and warns that inevitably divisive decisions will have to be taken.



John McDonnell. Picture: [Steve Eason](#), via a [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#) licence

The Labour Party's stance on Brexit, Nick Cohen recently mused in the Observer, 'is grounded in old-style Leninist fantasy.' It is an imaginative if fanciful way of explaining Labour's muddled policy, but the real reasons are more mundane, less to do with ideology than the force of circumstance. But he is right in arguing that Labour's policy is a muddle.

The official line is that Labour will only accept a Brexit deal which passes its 'six tests', the most important of which is that it secures 'the exact same benefits as we currently have as members of the single market and the customs union.' Hence it is urging continued membership of the (or, alternatively, 'a') customs union and a 'strong relationship' with the single market which together can guarantee frictionless trade, whilst reserving for Britain the right to set its own immigration and industrial policies. This is close to demanding the advantages of EU membership without the responsibilities, an approach which is a non-starter, as the EU has made very clear.

All this – and the mantra call for a general election – is camouflage barely concealing Labour's inability to agree on a clear, coherent, and feasible Brexit policy. Labour's leadership may be vacillating and evasive but in truth it is mired in a predicament from which there is no obvious or easy escape. Labour, no less than the Tories, is a victim of a conjuncture of forces and pressures which both parties are finding extremely difficult to manage – all arising from Cameron's extraordinarily foolish and short-sighted decision to call a referendum on EU membership. Here we briefly review the most important of these.

Party divisions

The question of Europe has been the bane of both parties for half-a-century or more. Historically within the Labour party, disagreements over the EU (and its predecessors) have more or less corresponded the left-right cleavage: this was how the battle lines were drawn during the first referendum in 1975. Matters are now more complex since positions over Brexit cut across normal factional alignments, rendering the task of building a consensus much more taxing.

Historically, the party's left has been thoroughly Eurosceptical, viewing the EU's economic arrangements as institutionally averse to state intervention, governed by the rules and principles of the free market and embodying fiscal orthodoxy. This is a view inherited by Corbyn's most senior and trusted advisors, Seamus Milne and Karie Murphy who, convinced that EU membership will trammel a future government's capacity to pursue radical economic policies, are sanguine about Brexit. (The position taken by the powerful Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, is more ambiguous and seems more open-minded, so he may yet play a decisive role in setting the party's future course.)

Hostility towards a so-called 'people's vote' and, indeed, the whole European enterprise is reinforced by more plainly political calculation. Many of the most vocal and energetic Labour Remainers and proponents of the 'people's vote' are 'right-wing' critics of Corbyn and so objects of intense distrust by the leadership. For many Corbynista insiders the campaign for the 'people's vote' is little more than a cover for a drive to undermine Corbyn and even the first steps in the preparation for a new party.

But this is where the picture becomes more complicated. Corbyn's power base lies in the much-expanded and strongly left-wing party membership but, as the 2018 annual conference showed, they disagree with his stance on Brexit, solidly favouring remaining in the EU and the holding of a second referendum. The main reason for this is that for much of Labour's rank and file, the issue is at least as much a matter of culture and identity as of economics. Simplifying somewhat: they construe the conflict over the UK's relations with the EU as one between the advocates of equality, tolerance, opportunity and international co-operation on the one hand, and those imbued with the spirit of insularity, narrow nationalism, intolerance and prejudice on the other.

The Parliamentary Party's centre and right are also fractured over Brexit. In the past they have been (for the most part) strongly Europhile and, indeed, the left's policy of leaving the EU which was briefly adopted by the party was one reason for the formation of the Social Democratic party in 1981. Pro-Europeans probably still constitute the majority of Labour MPs on the centre and right but there is also a vocal and not insignificant group of Eurosceptics. A small number are 'Brexiters by conviction' but these are greatly outnumbered by 'Brexiters by calculation': MPs who voted Remain in 2016 sit for Leave constituencies and are fearful of the consequences if the party is seen to disregard the views of the one-third of its voters who opted for Brexit. They exhibit relatively little interest in the economic consequences (not least for their constituents) of a departure from the EU: what matters most for them is the politics.

The electoral aspect

Corbyn has been criticised for ignoring public opinion, but on this issue he and his advisers certainly have not. They are deeply worried that a shift to a more overt pro-Remain stance and, in particular, espousal of a second referendum, will alienate many, mainly working class, Leave voters in the North and Midlands. They fear that it would play into the populist narrative of the radical right: that a second referendum reflects elite disregard of the clearly-enunciated 'will of the people'. Added to this, the party is well aware of the widespread impatience, exasperation, and resentment over Brexit, with many voters, uninterested in the complexities of the negotiating process, demanding to know why Britain just does not simply quit. If the party adopts an unambiguous Remain stance huge numbers of voters may, they fear, desert the party, scuppering its chances of winning the next election. In addition, they are apprehensive that a second referendum would pour fuel onto the populist fire ensuring that the campaign would be venomous and extremely divisive. Not least, if the Remainers won, many Brexiters might not accept the legitimacy of the result.

The very intensity and vehemence of the Brexit divide suggests that it reflects something more profound, and indeed evidence suggests that is, *inter alia*, a manifestation of a deepening and increasingly politically obtrusive cleavage between the socially liberal and the socially conservative. The former tend to be better educated, younger, employed in middle class occupations and with reasonably marketable skills; the latter are less well-educated, older, employed in working class and lower middle-class occupations, and often economically struggling.

This split poses further dilemmas for Labour for, during the 2017 election, it performed well amongst middle class liberal whilst lagging behind in its appeal to working class social conservatives. The party knows that if an electoral victory is to be within its grasp it has to attract more votes from the latter group. The corollary, for the leadership, is to steer clear of any policy that will seriously offend them – such as a firmly pro-Remain stance.

The party's problems are exacerbated by the recent run of opinion polls. With the Tories in complete disarray, the economy stagnant, the health service and the social care system both in crisis and so forth, Labour should, at this point in the electoral cycle, be well ahead if it is to have any chance of winning the next election. Instead, the two big parties are neck and neck. Until recently many Corbynistas have reassured themselves that once a new election campaign was underway, Labour would galvanise the electorate, as it did in 2017. Now they are not so sure and confidence is beginning to drain: another reason for caution and circumspection over Brexit.

The way ahead is uncertain. The fact that Corbyn is not really engaged with the issue and lacks any mastery of the details, as reports have suggested, does not help. Labour has reached the position where 'constructive ambiguity' will no longer suffice. Difficult and inevitably divisive decisions will have to be taken sooner or later, but they will not be easy, for there are no obvious solutions. The one consolation for Labour is that, however difficult its predicament, it is much less so than for Mrs May and her government.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [LSE's British Politics and Policy blog](#).

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