

# Brexit could be an opportunity for the Labour Party, not a tragedy

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*The Leave vote poses new opportunities for Labour. **Richard Johnson** argues that it gives the party the opportunity to look forward, set out a positive vision for the country, think creatively about its future, and excite people, especially its withering working-class base.*



From a policy perspective, Brexit opens a wealth of new opportunities for the British Left. Outside of the EU, the Labour Party can now achieve its pledges to re-nationalise the railways and the postal service; it can achieve its pledge to ban zero-hours contracts; it can use state aid to save the UK steel industry; the British state can use procurement to favour British businesses over EU competitors; it can embark on an industrial strategy which rebalances the economy from financial services to British manufacturing; the UK can have an immigration policy which is humane and fair, bringing in the best talent from around the world rather than always letting EU citizens jump to the front of the queue; companies must obey British labour laws when they operate in this country and can't hide behind anti-trade union rulings from the European Court of Justice.

But, above all, Brexit provides the Labour Party with a chance to remake its image in working-class communities because the party can finally shake itself from its liberal, progressive orthodoxy on open-border immigration. While a vote to Remain would have likely strengthened UKIP, a vote to Leave renders it at its most vulnerable. Having fulfilled its central purpose, UKIP is now a party without a cause.

The vote to leave the EU was an outcome which surprised most commentators, bookies, and even those who voted for the winning outcome. In the aftermath of the result, John Gray wrote that [‘voters inflicted the biggest shock on the establishment since Churchill was ousted in 1945’](#). It is hard to think that he is wrong.

The referendum [generated the highest turnout in a UK election in a quarter of a century](#). Turnout in the referendum was nearly the same as turnout in the 1945 general election and higher than in several other post-war elections. [Approximately 161 Labour-held constituencies voted to Leave the EU, while only 70 voted to Remain](#). The only social classes which voted majority Remain were ABs (affluent and middle-class voters), whereas [C1 C2 DE \(lower middle-class and working-class\) voters all delivered majorities for Leave](#).

[Immigration was at the forefront of Leave voters' concerns](#). Areas which experienced the greatest relative influx in migrant populations in the last fifteen years [were the most likely to deliver a strong vote for Leave](#).

[As I have written for this blog before](#), immigration is a class issue. Free movement across countries with vastly different wage regimes, labour regulations, and welfare provision poses a systematic threat to low-skilled, low-income workers in rich countries. In the context of the European Union, those who experienced wage depression and increased competition were the British working class, while those on the higher end of the labour force enjoyed palpable benefits from EU free movement.

New Labour's decision not to restrict immigration from the post-2004 EU member states (or, indeed, to accept expansion at all) was one of the government's biggest blunders. There was no attempt to make the case for the policy or even any thought that there would need to be. [There were five sentences on immigration in Labour's 2001 manifesto](#). None mentioned EU expansion or the costs of immigration.

As Geoff Evans and Jon Mellon have shown, [before 2004, people's views on the European Union and their concerns about immigration were not closely aligned, but since 2004 the relationship has strengthened markedly](#). In the 1975 EEC referendum, there was no statistically significant relationship between attitudes on immigration and

support for the Common Market. In fact, if anything the relationship was reversed. The founder of the British Union of Fascists, Oswald Mosley, backed 'Remain' in 1975 (Woodbridge, 2004: 133). By 2013, EU migration formed the largest component of immigration to the United Kingdom. It was probably the single biggest contributor to the Leave vote.



That the Labour Party could not admit the differential effect of immigration on working-class communities was [its single biggest obstacle to maintaining credibility with working class people](#), especially the self-employed and those working in the private sector.

Admittedly, some Labour MPs understood that a truly socialist political economy could not be achieved within the EU's free labour market. Dismissed as racists and cranks by perplexed middle-class Labour members, MPs such as Frank Field, John Mann, Gisela Stuart, Graham Stringer, and Kate Hoey arguably understood the *labour* element of the Labour Party far more than most.

To give him credit, Jeremy Corbyn appears sympathetic to this critique of the free labour market in Europe, as was his mentor Tony Benn. Corbyn promised after the referendum, '[If freedom of movement means freedom to exploit cheap labour in a race to the bottom, it will never be accepted in any future relationship with Europe.](#)' Ultimately, he may not be the most credible actor to articulate this message. Frank Field rightly observed that Corbyn is the one major UK Party leader to articulate many of the concerns of the losers of globalisation, but he packages with a load of '[serious claptrap](#)'.

Getting rid of Corbyn is not the obvious solution for the Labour Party's travails, however. Corbyn's opponents on the Right of the party may lack some of Corbyn's trappings which are offensive to most British people, especially [his sympathy for Irish terrorists](#), but the liberal centre-left and liberal right of the Party are equally – and perhaps even more – out of touch on this key issue than Corbyn. [While 90 percent of Labour members and 95 percent of Labour MPs voted to stay in the EU, only 63 percent of Labour voters voted Remain](#), disproportionately concentrated in London.

Blame has been meted out [to Jeremy Corbyn for 'losing' the referendum](#), but if we are honest, would Ed Miliband have done any better? [Miliband's Doncaster North constituency was the tenth most Eurosceptic in the country](#), according to Chris Hanretty, with seven in ten of his constituents voting to Leave. Alan Johnson, who led Labour's campaign, couldn't even persuade his own Hull West constituency to stay in the EU, with [roughly 65 percent of his electorate voting to Leave](#).

If Labour were sensible, it would use a leadership election to project the message that the party accepts that the EU referendum has changed everything. Unfortunately, the Labour Party membership is ill-equipped to promote this argument, made up of people who are intensely relaxed with globalisation. As Jon Cruddas wrote in [Labour's review](#)

of why it lost the 2015 general election, 'a large majority' of the Labour Party membership is made up of a group of voters called the 'socially liberal Pioneers'. They are 'at home in metropolitan modernity and its universalist values. As the name suggests they value openness, creativity, self-fulfilment, and self-determination. They are more likely to vote according to their personal ideals and principles such as caring and justice. They tend to be better off and to have been to university'.

What is worse is that these voters cannot comprehend how 'good people' could vote to Leave. They socialise with other principled people who also value openness and universalist values. As a doctoral researcher in Oxford, I am keenly aware of this phenomenon. I was told multiple times during the referendum that I was the only 'Leave' voter my friends knew. Revealingly, a week before the referendum, I went to the working men's club in my mum's village in Bedfordshire to watch the England-Wales football match. 'I don't know anyone who's planning to vote Remain', I was told. We are two nations. Labour's historic mission is to represent the latter, but its membership and politicians are composed overwhelmingly of the former.

If Labour decides 'listening to voters' means simply repeating the facts that migration is overall a net positive for the economy and [that on average immigrants pay more into the welfare state than they take out](#), then the party should think again. Such economic arguments lack resonance. What Vote Remain failed to understand was [a central insight which Nigel Farage articulated before the European Parliamentary Elections](#) in 2014. Many people in Britain are willing to accept a smaller Gross Domestic Product if the payoff is greater control over our own decisions.

The Labour Party has the historical resources to engage with this aversion to untrammelled 'progress'. A key insight from Britain's Christian socialist movement was the notion that 'man cannot live by bread alone'. As Maurice Glasman has written, [the 'paradox' of British socialism is that it has been motivated by resistance to change as much as support for it](#). British socialism is both traditionalist and radical. It recognises that change has costs, and those costs must not be ignored blithely. The whole concept of solidarity depends on some degree of fixity, familiarity, and regularity. Bad change can erode communal bonds, render places unrecognisable, and remove control which people previously exercised over their lives. Good change demands democratic consent, and David Miller (2016) has powerfully argued that for immigration to work to the benefit of all, such consent is vital.

The Leave vote poses new opportunities for Labour. Historically Labour communities who voted Leave are now looking for leadership in a post-Brexit UK. The whole country is. The Leave vote gives Labour the opportunity to look forward, set out a positive vision for the country, think creatively about our future, and excite people, including its withering working-class base.

The worst thing Labour can do is complain about the result. Moaning that it wasn't democratic or that people were stupid is not going to do Labour any favours. Calling for a second referendum shows contempt for the British people. 'We must dissolve the people and elect another' is not a good slogan for a political party. Regrettably, it may be precisely what Labour members feel.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of BrexitVote, nor of the London School of Economics. Image [credit](#).*

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