

# ‘Seven, or seven and a half out of 10’’: Jeremy Corbyn’s conspicuous absence from the referendum campaign

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/13/seven-or-seven-and-a-half-out-of-10-jeremy-corbyns-conspicuous-absence-from-the-referendum-campaign/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/13/seven-or-seven-and-a-half-out-of-10-jeremy-corbyns-conspicuous-absence-from-the-referendum-campaign/)

13/06/2016

Labour has been “almost invisible” during the referendum campaign, according to one study. **Isabelle Hertner** explains how Jeremy Corbyn’s abiding Euroscepticism has led him to call for EU reform rather than choose to highlight the Union’s achievements, despite pressure from colleagues in the party.



Political scientists have [found](#) that to some extent, party supporters take their ‘cues’ (such as voting instructions) from political élites. So the party leaders’ positions on the UK’s continued EU membership will be of utmost importance for the outcome of the referendum on 23 June. Over the past weeks, we have heard David Cameron’s position. He was grilled in a televised EU debate by TV presenter Faisal Islam and a rather angry audience. But where does Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn stand, and what are the cues he sends to Labour members, supporters, and the electorate?



In an [earlier piece](#) for LSE BrexitVote, I mentioned Corbyn’s Eurosceptic past. As we know, the MP for Islington North voted against the UK’s continued membership of the European Economic Community in the 1975 referendum. He then spoke out against the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 and [voted against the Lisbon Treaty in 2008](#). It therefore didn’t come as a surprise that during the Labour leadership race in the summer and autumn of 2015, he did not guarantee his support for the In campaign. Corbyn said he had mixed feelings about the EU, and that, if David Cameron traded away workers’ rights and environmental protection as part of his deal with Brussels, he would [not rule out](#) voting to leave. A few weeks into his party leadership, however, and after pressure from his party colleagues and the media, Corbyn came out in favour of the UK’s continued membership. Unsurprisingly, his EU positions are left of centre. For example, he [argued](#):

*‘When there’s a Labour government in 2020, we will be trying to ensure better workers’ protection across Europe, strong financial protections all across Europe, and a Europe that is based on social*

| *justice and good, rather than solely on free-market economics.'*

Thus, despite his support for the UK's continued EU membership, Corbyn stresses the EU's need to reform far more than he highlights the EU's achievements. To be sure, this line of argument isn't new. In a recently article, my colleague Daniel Keith and I argue that the Labour Party has been very reformist in its EU positions in recent years, and that strong Europhilia was not to be found in party manifestos or leaders' statements.

And yet, in the eyes of the more Europhile Labour supporters and politicians, Corbyn isn't doing enough to get the Remain message across. The most salient issue in the campaign has become immigration, and the Brexiteers have been very vocal in their EU critique. So it came as a bit of a surprise when Tim Roache, Corbyn supporter and leader of the GMB (which is the third largest Labour-affiliated trade union) [urged](#) Corbyn to be 'bolder and braver' in making the case for immigration in the UK if he wanted to win over Labour voters to the cause of remaining in the EU.

Indeed, much criticism has been directed at Corbyn, who, so far, has given little away about his EU positions and has left much of the campaigning to his more Europhile colleagues, such as campaign manager Alan Johnson. Whilst the Labour grassroots have been campaigning on the ground, the party leader seemed to be absent in TV debates and other high-profile events.

The latest [report](#) from Loughborough's Centre for Research in Communication and Culture finds "Labour's presence has flatlined in the press and faltered in TV coverage" in the past two weeks of the campaign. Professor James Stanyer described the party as "almost invisible".

"Labour voices are present in less than 4% of TV coverage and just 8% of print coverage of the referendum, and no Labour politicians are amongst the top 10 most frequently reported individuals," adds the CRCC.

The unease inside the party keeps growing, and on 3rd June a [letter](#) was published in The Guardian that was signed by all living former Labour leaders or acting leaders, including Neil Kinnock, Tony Blair, Margaret Beckett, Ed Miliband and Harriet Harman. The letter urged party supporters to cast their vote in order to avoid 'Brexit':

| *'If Labour stays at home, Britain leaves. And a vote to leave is a vote for a profound and permanent loss the whole country would feel, whether through lost jobs or lost generations. Only Labour can save Britain from Brexit.'*

The calls for Labour supporters to vote in the referendum are getting louder because they could hold the key to the outcome. Polls show they are much more likely than Conservative Party supporters to back Remain, but less likely to vote in the referendum. For example, a [recent ORB survey](#) found 52 per cent of Labour voters saying they were 'certain to vote', compared with 69 per cent of conservative and 71 per cent of Ukip supporters. So, if Labour supporters' votes are crucial for the Remain campaign, why isn't Corbyn making a 'bolder and braver' stance?

Selling the EU as a major socialist achievement, or future project, would be difficult for Corbyn in times like these. The Eurozone crisis-induced hardship for poor people living in Greece and Spain highlights the limits of fiscal austerity in the EU. With the EU heads of governments' failure to find a sustainable and human rights-based approach to the Mediterranean refugee crisis, solidarity is clearly wanting.

A positive case from the left for past EU achievements and future plans can, however, be made, as the example of Natalie Bennett, the leader of the UK Green Party, shows. Bennett even [joined](#) Cameron in refuting some of the claims made by the Brexiteers.

Why can Jeremy Corbyn not join this most unusual Remain alliance? As a man of principles, he probably finds it

impossible to make a complete u-turn from EU rejection to full-hearted endorsement. Corbyn is known to stand up for his long-held views and has built up a strong supporter base, the 'Corbynistas', some of whom share his EU reservations. That's all very well, but isn't it about time Corbyn took a stronger stance, presented a more detailed EU policy agenda, and explained why a Remain vote is in Labour's long-term interest? Or is the best we can hope for his [declaration](#) last weekend that he gives the EU "seven, or seven and a half" out of 10?

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.*

*Isabelle Hertner is Lecturer in German and European Politics and Society and Deputy Director of the Institute for German Studies at the University of Birmingham.*

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics