

Jeremy is for turning: Labour's Liverpool conference marks a clear repositioning of the left on Brexit



*The recent Labour conference in Liverpool marked a clear repositioning of the party in the Brexit debate. There has been a clear shift in how the British left sees the UK's future relationship with Europe, writes **Angelos Angelou** (LSE). The left just created an opening for a second referendum that could potentially reverse the previous one. As it turns out, on Europe, Jeremy Corbyn is for turning, he argues.*

The recent Labour conference in Liverpool marked a clear repositioning of the party in the Brexit debate. The approved motion suggested that the party should support a “public vote” if the final deal is not favourable for the “many” and the government does not, then, call for a general election. The motion also included a commitment to keep Britain in the Single Market. One can read these decisions as general statements aiming to put Jeremy Corbyn in Downing Street. Yet, they have wider significance for the country. They demonstrate a clear shift of how the British left perceives the Brexit debate.

During the referendum campaign, one could identify two distinct economic narratives inside the Leave camp. From the one part, the Tory Leavers were suggesting that Britain would do far better outside the European straitjacket. Leaving the EU would liberate the country from burdensome European regulations, attracting investment via a favourable tax regime and a pro-business regulatory framework. At the same time, the country would be free to pursue its own trade policies, engaging potential trade partners without the prior agreement of other EU member-states and without the mediation of the European Commission. In effect, Britain would open up to unfettered trade by removing any barriers that previous EU policies have raised. Opposite to this libertarian narrative, but still in the Leave camp, one could find Labour and other Leftist campaigners backing a Leave vote on totally different grounds. For the “Lexiteers”, a vote to leave the EU would liberate Britain from what they saw as a “neoliberal” cage that would lead to further austerity and financial deregulation. According to the supporters of this line of thinking, the EU is simply unreformable and bound to move towards a more liberal direction. In that sense leaving the EU would give the opportunity to the British voters to finally vote in a government that might be able to follow policies towards the opposite direction, without having to worry about the reactions of its European partners.



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The political situation in post-referendum Britain suggested that these two camps would respectively dominate the Conservative and the Labour party. Indeed, for the Tories this was the case. Theresa May from a mild Remainer became a staunch Brexiteer, while Boris Johnson and David Davis both obtained central cabinet posts that would allow them to realize their libertarian version of Brexit. On the other hand, the Labour party proved to be much more of a riddle. Jeremy Corbyn provided only lukewarm support to the Remain campaign, while he kept exhibiting sympathetic signals to the Lexiteers that occupied the left wing of his party. The ambivalence over Labour's position vis-à-vis Brexit became even bigger during the post-referendum period. A number of activists and academics, that had openly supported Corbyn, were pushing for a hard Brexit that would allow the party to put forward an agenda of massive redistribution. This agenda would include protectionist measures and the renationalisation of major industries. At the same time, the ever-growing young membership of the party was nudging the leadership towards a more accommodative approach that would either attempt to avert Brexit altogether, via a second referendum, or, at the very least, keep Britain in the Single Market. The recent motion suggests that the latter camp won the argument.

The significance of this development is, I think, central for how Brexit will unfold. First of all, in case Theresa May decides to call an early election, in the face of intra and inter-party opposition against the final deal, the Labour platform on the issue will be far clearer and binding. The party would have to support Britain's participation in the Single Market, recognising that there are significant economic benefits of staying close to the EU. Even more importantly, the main party of the British left just created an opening for a second referendum that could potentially reverse the previous one. It was not just the wild round of applause that Keir Starmer, the shadow Brexit Secretary, received when he stated that "nobody is ruling out remain". It was the clear feeling that the most energetic and vibrant sections of party were actively lobbying in favour of a second referendum, While there was no clear commitment that a second vote would include a choice for Britain to stay in the Union, the fact that the opposition just brought forward a suggestion for a "public vote" signifies that such a referendum is now a very real possibility – given also the support of the Liberal Democrats.

All in all, the decisions taken in Liverpool should be seen as the first substantial step away from the Lexit camp. If Jeremy Corbyn was leaning in favour of the latter prior to the vote, his turn is now official and on paper. In fact, it was approved and rubberstamped by the very force that kept him in place when he was doubted: the flocks of young voters that have lived with the benefits of the EU and are now reluctant to see them gone.

This post represents the views of the author and neither those of the LSE Brexit blog nor of the LSE.

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