

It is Labour's duty to oppose Article 50 given what we ...

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There are moments when I think the only way to decide on what I think an appropriate course of action might be is to put myself in the position of the person having to make the decision. It is not then some indication of delusions of grandeur that I, on occasion, wonder what I might do if I was to stand at the Despatch Box, whether for the government or opposition. It is simply a mechanism I use to imagine the constraints on the decision I might make if in the same position as those who actually are in those places. This was the device I used to imagine what I might do if I was to stand as Leader of the Opposition having to challenge the government on a vote on exercising Article 50. Would I be proposing a vote for or against exercising that option, and why?

First, I would recall the duty that my job imposed upon me. The clue is in the title. If I was Leader of the Opposition then my primary job is to oppose. This is not a negative task. The job that has to be undertaken is essential in a UK style democracy. Opposition in this context requires that those challenging the government hold it to account for what it is doing. This necessarily entails both probing what it is actually suggesting should be done and showing that there are viable alternative courses of action to whatever it is suggesting. The intention is quite clearly to improve outcomes: by suggesting there is a better course of action the intention is to improve that actually adopted.

Second, the job is to explain. By exposing what the government is doing the intention should be to make clear what the implications of that action are. This does, of course, require that the Opposition actually understand this. It also requires that they can articulate it. And that they have the ability to reach out to the media and get them to explain just what the difficulties in the government's proposed course of action that they would rather gloss over might really be.

Third, of course it is the job of the Opposition to make clear that they could do the job better than the government. The whole edifice of democracy is dependent upon this confidence, whether well placed or not.

How would these three requirements influence my behaviour if required to oppose on

Article 50? First, I think it would require that Labour vote against the exercise of that option. There are several good reasons for doing so, all of which would have to be explained to achieve the second objective.

Those explanations would require that Labour suggest that exercising Article 59 now is reckless because we do not know if it is revocable or not. If it is, so be it. We can then explore leaving Europe as people have indicated they wish, but with the option of staying if it turns out leaving is a worse option. But if its irrevocable then the UK is throwing away its current position without knowing the alternatives. That's reckless. The government has a duty to find out the consequences of exercising Article 50 before acting.

Next, Labour would need to explain that exercising Article 50 must take place on the basis of a viable and costed alternative plan. It cannot be the case that exercising this option on the basis that nothing will change unless to the advantage of the UK, as the government is implying, is realistic when it is glaringly obvious that the EU will extract a price for our departure. Labour has find out what that price is before it can vote for Article 50. In that case each option, from leaving the EU, to leaving the single market, to leaving the customs union, has to be priced so we can be sure what the choices might be. But this has not happened. The alternatives, including the hoped for gains, also need to be spelt out. The people of the UK need to know that this is not some grand folly. It is the Opposition's job to find that out.

Then Labour has to establish how long this process will take. The EU and all international precedents say that two years is quite unrealistic. In that case how long might it take, and why, and what happens between the expiry of the Article 50 notice period and a deal? It would be reckless to exercise Article 50 without knowing this.

And last of these high level objections, the direct cost of leaving has very obviously to be established. We know there is one and that figures of up to £60 billion have been mentioned. Some candour on what that sum might really be, how it will be paid, and when that might be necessary is required from the government and on that there has been no hint of a suggestion to date.

For all these reasons Labour has a duty to oppose the government. Not because it is ignoring the referendum result but precisely because it is its job to make sure that the government is properly fulfilling it. The suggestion has to be made that unless these issues are addressed then that is not the case. The government is not fulfilling its duty right now: it is instead acting recklessly and that is irresponsible.

By default, of course, this then implies that Labour would be acting responsibly by seeking to determine the answers to these questions before acting. It would not be saying it will not trigger Article 50. What it would be saying is it would do so when the best basis for deciding the consequences of that action have been established precisely so that people can know what might happen and hold the government to account for it.

That is, I think, Labour's duty.

But it is instead suggesting its MPs must vote for Article 50 come what may. In my opinion that is reckless, a failure on its part to do its job and a failure in its part to seek answers that reasonable people might have at present.

And it is more than that. Blindly voting for Article 50 now gives it no basis for opposition later if things do not work out well. And that's Labour failing to support the democratic necessity of supplying an alternative government.

For all these reasons if I was at the Opposition Despatch Box I would be pursuing a very different course of action to that which Jermey Corbyn is following. And I think we would all be better off as a result.