

What Labour should be doing now

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I was asked this in an email yesterday; the sender knows who they are:

You've strongly criticised Corbyn's Labour for not acting, and I've supported your call for a Brexit policy/action plan from Labour, but now find myself bewildered, because I just don't know what Corbyn should/needs to do. I'm not talking about the "pick and mix" of eg Norway Plus or whatever, but what Labour should do to halt the slide into anarchy and potential civil war (with that evil Svengali Bannon clearly fomenting Nazi/Fascist style "March on Rome" politics across the EU, and encouraging Brexiteers in the UK to "fight" (and he clearly means literally)) Should Corbyn simply declare support for the Electoral Commission's quasi-judicial (if not effectively genuinely judicial) process that assigned criminal malfeasance to the "Leave" campaign, declare the result null and void, and call for the suspension of Article 50, pending the outcome of a new, properly supervised (e.g Facebook suspended for 3 weeks, during the campaign) Referendum, a move I would support?

I think the question a good one, and answering it a challenge. I have assumed when doing so that I might have become a member of Corbyn's advisory team, which is not a far-fetched assumption.

This does not make this an easy question to answer. What I can say is that in my opinion Corbyn's team have opted for the easy answer and in my opinion that is a mistake on their part. That easy answer has been to take the short-term political route. In effect they have ducked the issue. I know that in March 2016 they effectively chose not to campaign on Brexit because I was told so by somebody well able to know. The reason given was that this was a Tory issue that would tear the Tories apart and so it was decided to let them self-destruct. The consequence for the country of a Brexit vote was not considered: we have all paid the price for that ever since.

The policy does, however, appear to persist. I defy anyone to really be sure what Labour is actually promoting right now bar 'a' customs union which is not 'the' customs union; no single market, which means they have no Northern Ireland solution, and an end to the free movement of people, which is not an EU requirement in any case (because they demand the free movement of labour, which is something quite

different). The expediency does, then remain.

And in my opinion, as a matter of fact, I think that expediency inappropriate. There are three good reasons. It betrays democracy. It betrays the country. And it betrays those most vulnerable in the country. I will consider each in turn. I stress that when doing so I am arguing as if a member of Corbyn's team, which is not a wholly inappropriate possibility to consider. I think that is what the question posed demands of me. The answers may then sometimes appear inconsistent with other positions that I take: that's what party politics would demand.

Democracy

The idea that the country decided once and for all on Brexit in 2016 is anti-democratic. It is simply not true that a referendum decides an issue once and for all. If it was the 2016 referendum should not have been held, since the issue had already been resolved in that case in 1975.

Nor can it be true that the country can be bound by a referendum which it is now known was won by breaking the law, and where there was (and I am aware some deny this) a real chance of significant foreign interference.

I am not saying that the result should be ignored. That is, very obviously, impossible. I am saying that Labour has a duty to say three things. The first is that the law must be upheld if democracy is to be seen to be done. That requires a second referendum, appropriately run and carefully monitored and subject to significantly enhanced controls.

Second, the right to change one's mind when awareness of the facts changes has to be sacrosanct: this principle is at the very heart of good governance, good government and democracy itself.

Third, when so much has changed since June 2016 to suggest that the decision made then was informed is obviously wrong. It is to respect the voter and not to disrespect them that there is a need for a second referendum.

Democracy has to prevail here and only a second referendum will ensure that happens.

The country

What was not as clear in 2016 as it is now is the existential threat that Brexit poses to the UK.

The issue is not just of the divide in Northern Ireland, however vital that is.

Nor is it either the issue of keeping Scotland in the Union, which to Labour is fundamental (as it is to many in England, although not so, necessarily, elsewhere).

The issue is one of maintaining a viable and diverse state, from Labour's perspective. That requires not just that the Union be maintained, but that it also prosper.

I would argue that the Union cannot be maintained if we Brexit: the separation of Northern Ireland and Scotland from England and Wales will happen in that case. I am not saying that will be overnight: it will not be, of course. But it will happen. And this matters. A party set on governing the country as a whole has to protect the integrity of the state it wishes to govern. Right now Labour is failing to do that. A second referendum where this was made an issue is vital to Labour's integrity as a Unionist party, which it is.

But so too is the integrity of the UK on the international stage in that case. Many in Labour will wish to see the UK move on from being a US poodle. And a majority in Labour would wish to see a change in its defence strategy. Many too would want it to set different priorities in foreign policy. And Labour is, if it is anything, an internationalist party that has always looked outward, appreciating that international cooperation is the basis for the achievement of its domestic agenda. And the simple fact is that this is not possible if the UK, or the rump that might be left of it, loses its international credibility for decades to come as it goes through a process of national reappraisal as to what it might be if the Union fails. If Labour believes Labour has international obligations it has to oppose Brexit now.

The vulnerable

Labour exists as a political party to protect the vulnerable in society. It does not ignore others, of course. But it accepts the mutuality of obligation to those who need support and protection within society as being at the heart of what defines its political role.

Brexit is challenging the vulnerable. Real wages are falling. The cost of living is rising. Jobs are at risk. Investment is declining, rapidly. The risk of substantial economic shock is high. The prospect of those with limited or no capital having the means to protect themselves against the consequences of such issues is very limited indeed.

Of course Labour could say it could do its best to protect those most at risk. But it is not able to do that at present. It is not in government. And the fact is that the risk is entirely self-imposed. Even if we were to leave the EU nothing required that we leave the Customs Union or Single Market. And nothing said we had to create an environment where, almost inevitably, the most vulnerable will carry the greatest burden for a situation not of their making, just as happened in 2008.

Labour could call this out. It could say it will oppose Brexit in the form proposed because it will harm those who cannot afford to suffer such harm.

It can demand a second choice in that case - in another referendum.

And it can also say that to minimise harm the government should promote soft Brexit, if it has to promote Brexit at all.

But at the same time it has to make clear it will not be constrained, now or if we stay in the EU or not, by interpretations of rules that cause harm.

Portugal has shown that governments can work within EU limits and not impose austerity.

Quantitative Easing has shown that a government can create the funding to deliver investment, and nothing says that this has to be in finance or increased mortgage loans, which is what that cash was used for.

The EU does not require unfettered freedom of movement of people, and much UK migration is, anyway, from outside the EU. We can use the EU's rules to protect UK jobs, but have simply chosen not to do so to date.

And we can buy British, as just about every other EU state has.

We can also nationalise our services, come to that, not least when no other viable option is available, as now appears to be the case for many of those that have been sold to the private sector at massive cost to us all.

Labour could, in other words, run a policy that is wholly consistent with Labour principles within EU law.

And by staying in the EU it could have backstop stop of knowing that an alternative government in the UK could not undo all that was good about what Labour might do, precisely because it might not be allowed to do so.

To put it simply, Labour has to argue, quite emphatically, that for all its faults the EU is good for the people of the UK. Which is why it can insist this government must have a soft Brexit policy whilst now opposing Brexit altogether if that option is available.

And when it comes to EU faults, such as a bias to markets on occasion, and the failure to support states like Greece, or the failure of the Common Agricultural Policy, then the issues are ones Labour will continue to be concerned about, come what may. And it has more chance of effecting change on them inside rather than outside the EU. The EU is not perfect. But that is precisely why Labour has to be in it, to change it for the better. Labour cannot be seen to be shirking its responsibilities to others. Who else can rely on it if that is what it does?

Practical interpretation

How should this pan out as policy? Like this:

- 1) Ask for an Article 50 extensions: stress that no one, the EU included, is ready for Brexit.
- 2) Demand a soft Brexit, on a Norway plus model, from this government.
- 3) Demand a second referendum.
- 4) Campaign for staying in on the basis of a Labour policy of reform when that second referendum comes.
- 5) Make clear what a Labour policy of reform is (along the lines noted above).
- 6) Put this plan to the membership for approval at the Party conference in September.

That's what I would do.

I am not living with much expectation. But I can have a little hope.