

A Labour Brexit: definitely, maybe

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The Labour Party's decision to call for a post Brexit 'transition period' during which the UK would remain a member of the Single Market and the Customs Union and subject to the ECJ has been presented as a clear headed alternative to the 'constructive ambiguity' of government policy. Keir Starmer, the shadow Brexit minister, described it as, 'a credible solution to one of the most important issues facing Britain's exit from the EU'.

It is certainly true that the Brexit negotiations have revealed the lack of any coherent planning on the part of the Brexiteers. It is also true that, if Labour's transitional arrangements were put in place, there would be no 'cliff edge' for the economy to tumble over on March 30, 2019. Such an arrangement would also maintain the free movement of people which, as a matter of principle, would be welcome. However, political principle has little to do with this latest version of Labour's policy.

Instead, it is the result of a quite shrewd estimation of the balance of political forces not only in Parliament but within the Labour Party itself. The immediate objective is, quite justifiably, to maximise the divisions within the Tory Party. Although David Davis, the 'minister for Brexit', has conceded the possibility of a transitional phase, the hard line Brexiteers see in that the beginnings of a 'soft' agreement or, perhaps, no Brexit at all. Yet they could only find 40 MPs to sign a letter opposing such a phase.

Starmer calculates, probably correctly, that with the majority of Tory MPs already in favour of a transition, many will see the practical advantages of remaining within the Single Market and the Customs Union as long as that lasts. The government position, however, is to leave both immediately. Given the fragility of Theresa May's Commons majority, there is clearly a possibility of a government defeat on the issue.

On the Labour side, the call for a transition period, retaining membership of the Single Market, the Customs Union and the jurisdiction of the ECJ, is not a change of policy but rather a development of the position set out in the election manifesto in June. That already said that, if necessary, a Labour government would 'negotiate transitional arrangements to avoid a 'cliff edge' for the economy'. It also said that the government's negotiating priorities would 'have a strong emphasis on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union' because these 'are essential for maintaining industries, jobs and businesses in Britain'.

Equally, the party's position still retains the central flaw in the manifesto: 'Labour accepts the referendum result'. Why? If leaving the EU was the wrong policy before the referendum why is it not the wrong policy afterwards? Of course, the party cannot ignore the result of the referendum, any more than it can ignore the result of the election. That is not a reason for a change of strategic policy any more than the election result means that we stop campaigning against the Tories.

The reality is that the new position, like the old, is a fudge between a minority of MPs and Labour voters who support Brexit and the majority of both who are against. That is why, even in the manifesto, every

phrase that appears to accept leaving the EU is more than counter-balanced by another which implies staying within. So, as well as accepting the referendum result, the party will also, 'always put jobs and the economy first', knowing that Brexit is a threat to both.

Similarly, a Labour government's negotiating priorities would, 'have a strong emphasis on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union'. Since retaining those benefits would mean accepting all the conditions of membership, but losing the right to participate in decision-making. Such a deal would make Brexit completely pointless.

To keep the pro-Brexit minority happy, Starmer assured them that the transitional phase would be 'time-limited', suggesting a maximum of 4 years, a very long time in politics, but immediately qualified that by adding that the phase would be, 'as short as possible but as long as necessary', like the proverbial piece of string.

Despite his claim that it is a 'credible solution', Starmer knows, and his rivals know, that his 'transition phase' could not possibly work. As he put it himself: 'It would not provide a durable or acceptable long-term settlement for Britain or the EU.' His hope, no doubt, is that his compromise formula can hold together long enough to force the Tories into defeat and an early election.

That, in itself, is what all socialists want to see but, to the extent that Labour is able to extend its recent advances, win an election and form a government, that compromise will begin to unravel.

The Labour leadership should face down the pro-Brexit minority and openly campaign against Brexit, not because it is bad for 'business' but because it is bad for the working class in Britain and in Europe. We need to persuade the minority of the working class and Labour voters who supported Leave that they were deceived: above all in blaming EU migrant workers for low wages, housing shortages and a failing National Health Service.

By offering socialist solutions to these problems, 'fully funded' by taxing the billionaires, Labour could undermine the hostility to foreigners, encouraged by the right-wing media, and unite working people to bring about real social change.

Labour should instead seek a democratic mandate to rescind the Article 50 proposal to leave the EU. It should raise the minimum wage to a real living wage and employ inspectors to enforce it and prevent employers from exploiting both British and foreign labour. And it should launch a campaign alongside the socialist movement across Europe against the EU's undemocratic structures, the European Central Bank's austerity policy and for a Socialist United States of Europe.

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