

Labour Party Conference report: Is Labour becoming the 'Remain Party'?

Labour Leave's John Mills reports for CIB on the Labour Party Conference. Is the Labour Party in danger of becoming the 'Remain Party'?

Perhaps the most crucial issue for the Labour Party at the moment is its attitude to Brexit, as was evident at its recent Annual Conference.

The problem can be simply stated. Probably 90% of the delegates at the Conference were Remain supporters, most of whom, while cheering on Sir Kier Starmer, would like the UK to stay in the EU. Not far short of this percentage of Labour MPs are Remain orientated as well. This enthusiasm for the EU is not, however, reflected to anything like the same extent among Labour voters.

Of the 9.3m people who voted Labour in the 2015 general election, polls indicate that almost 3.5m voted Leave in 2016. This had a lot to do with the fact that almost 70% of the seats held at the time by Labour had Leave majorities.

The risks of Labour alienating these Labour leaning Leave voters were amply demonstrated again in the 2017 election. Although the vote for Labour rose by about 4m compared to 2015, increasing from 29% to 40% of the votes cast, Labour only gained four more seats while 130 Labour held constituencies had swings away from Labour to other parties. Remain votes piled up in London and other university cities, such as Canterbury, but drifted away in Wales, the Midlands and the North of England where Labour holds marginal seats crucial for the Party if it is ever to become the government again.

The key lesson for Labour to learn from these figures is that for it to become the Remain party is fraught with problems. This prospect may keep Conference delegates happy, but it risks Labour hemorrhaging votes in key areas of the country which it needs to win. This is why Labour Leave and others campaigned before and during the Conference for Labour not to commit itself to a Remain leaning second referendum.

We in Labour Leave are evidently not the only people who are aware of the dangers of Labour adopting too Europhile a stance. The Labour leadership is clearly conscious of the risks that this entails, which is why, in the end, the line was held. Labour is committed to keeping all options open, but not to campaigning for Remain.

Of course, no-one knows how events are going to pan out over the coming crucial months, running up to the end of March 2019, when we are due to leave the European Union. In the meantime, however, keeping the Labour Party aware of the dangers of committing itself to policies generally to do with the EU which may make look totally inappropriate when the time comes to implement them, must make sense. High on this list is committing the Party to supporting having a second referendum which the public do not want, which would be highly undemocratic, and which may turn out to be impractical for a variety of political, timing and administrative reasons, especially if it could not be held before the date when we leave the EU,

In the difficult months ahead, Labour needs to think a lot more strategically than just pandering to the Remain sentiments of the delegates who were at the Labour Party Conference.