

# Labour's Brexit dilemma

Before the EU referendum, many people thought that the outcome, whatever it might be going to be, was going to cause far more problems for the Conservative than the Labour Party. At least up to now, this is far from what has happened. Only one Tory MP, Kenneth Clark voted against Article 50 on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2017 while 47 Labour MPs voted that way, showing how deep the divisions within the Labour Party over Brexit are at the moment.

A number of key statistics tell the story. Of the 230 odd constituencies held by Labour at the time of the EU referendum, 70% had Leave majorities. If London and a small number of university cities are excluded, the ratio rises to about 90%. Some of these Leave majorities were very substantial. In Stoke on Trent, where one of the recent bye-elections was held, the Leave majority was close to 70%. Among Parliamentary Labour Party members, however, the picture is very different. There is still only a comparatively small minority of committed Leave supporters, and most of the seats with the largest Remain majorities had Labour MPs.

This is what has caused the Labour Party such huge difficulties. Clearly there was a democratic vote in favour of leaving the EU on 23rd June 2017 which needs to be respected. Many Labour MPs who were both personally strongly for Remain and who had substantial majority support for this position among their constituency electorates, however, thought that they had good reasons, in their judgement, for voting against Article 50.

The danger then is that the Party as a whole loses out heavily in the country at large because of its ambivalent stance on Brexit – and more polling evidence emphasises the scale of this risk. On the one hand, of the 9.3m people who voted Labour in the 2015 general election, just short of 3.5m voted

Leave in the EU referendum and half of these people, about 1.7m of them, say that they do not intend to vote Labour again at least partly because they are unhappy with Labour's policies towards the EU. At the other end of the spectrum, fervent Labour-leaning Remain voters are concerned enough about Labour supporting Article 50 to desert the Party and to vote for the Lib Dems, which is clearly what happened in the recent Richmond by-election at the beginning of December 2016, where Labour finished up with only 4% of the vote.

Labour is thus threatened with losing large numbers of votes both among its industrial heartland blue collar erstwhile supporters, because it is not Eurosceptic enough, as well as from metropolitan middle class people, many of whom do not want to leave the EU at all. Of course, issues to do with Brexit are not the only reason why the Party is in difficulties, but Brexit is currently dominating political discussion in the UK at the moment, and Labour cannot afford to call this issue wrongly. So what can it do?

The by-elections held on 23rd February 2017 provide some guidelines. In both Copeland and Stoke Central Labour's share of the vote fell. Obviously, other factors were in play apart from Brexit but both the loss of the seat by Labour in Copeland and the low turnout in Stoke suggest that many Labour-leaning voters away from London and university cities are upset by the Labour Party's lack of enthusiasm for Brexit.

Furthermore, even though there was some good news from a Labour perspective, this needs to be treated with caution. The threat from UKIP turned out to be much weaker than might have been expected, no doubt mainly because the Conservatives have promised to do much of what UKIP supporters want. Nor did either the Lib Dems or the Greens do well. The problem Labour faces, however, is that, as the main opposition party, it has to win support back from the government and this is not what is currently happening. Instead, it seems that the Conservatives have been much more successful on Brexit in

positioning themselves where the country wants to be.

What, in these circumstances can Labour do? Really, there is only one way ahead on Brexit which has any realistic chance of helping it to recover the electoral support it needs to become an effective opposition, let alone the party of government. It cannot afford to disregard the result of the EU referendum both for democratic reasons and because the Party stands to lose much more support from those alienated by Labour backing off supporting Brexit than it is likely to lose by failing to obstruct the Brexit negotiations, which has to be Lib Dem and not Labour territory.

What Labour needs to do, therefore, is to recognise that it has to accept the referendum result and then to play as constructive a role as it can on the Brexit negotiations. This will not be secured by tactical manoeuvring against the government. It will be achieved by supporting the government wherever it is acting in the national interest, while no doubt carving out a distinctive Labour position where there is genuine difference of view, for example of social legislation.

Brexit is all too likely to dominate the political horizon for all the period running up to the next general election in 2020. Labour needs to use this period to rebuild the electorate's trust in the Party on the EU – as well as much else.

Photo by DavidMartynHunt 