

Labour's second referendum

*CIB affiliated organisation the **Labour Euro Safeguards Campaign (LESC)** has published its latest bulletin, which focuses on the upcoming general election and Labour's manifesto promise to hold a second referendum. We reproduce here part of the bulletin, which asks what kind of 'Leave' referendum option would be acceptable to Brexiteers, for whom the mere holding of a second referendum would represent a betrayal of democracy. The full bulletin can be downloaded at the end of this article.*

Labour's manifesto for the current general election has now been published. The section entitled 'The Final Say on Brexit' sets out the Party's current policy on Brexit. It would renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement brought back from Brussels by Boris Johnson, and put to a second referendum a revised deal on the one hand, and revoking Article 50 and staying in the EU on the other.

If such a referendum produced a Remain majority (which is far from certain), this would provide Labour with the democratic cover – conspicuously lacking currently in the case of the Lib Dems – for staying in the EU, which is what most Party members evidently want. Whether this would be the referendum outcome, however, depends very much on what the alternative option to Remain is, and whether this fairly represents Leave views on Brexit.

The manifesto keeps some options open, which is very welcome. While ruling out a no-deal outcome, it leaves the party's approach to the Customs Union and the Single Market substantially undefined.

The problem which may still materialise, however, is that even if Labour was willing to have a genuine Leave choice, the EU,

especially with pressure from no-deal ruled out, may be unwilling to agree to an acceptable Leave option for a referendum. This would leave Labour in the position of offering a full Remain option on the one hand, plus another option so poor that few people would think it was worth supporting. While this might well generate a pro-Remain result in a second referendum, it would be regarded by not only Leave supporters but by many other people as being a travesty of genuine democratic process.

In the event of a Labour election victory, clearly one of the referendum options would be full-blooded Remain, with the UK maintaining our current position in the EU. But there may be conditions attached to the EU accepting maintenance of the status quo. Would we lose some or all of our rebate? Would we be obliged to join the euro and Schengen free movement?

We will need answers to these questions. But we will also need to resolve an even more fundamental issue: what the shape of an alternative option to Remain might be. There has been some suggestion that this would be a very soft Brexit, with the UK staying in the Customs Union and bound very closely to the EU in almost all the ways we are now.

The view of many Leavers is that this would be the worst of all worlds, maintaining all the disadvantages of our current membership while depriving us of any say – let alone control – on the future directions the EU takes.

Instead, if we are going to have a re-run of the EU referendum, we need to have an alternative option which fairly represents the views of most Leavers. This is vital: firstly, because this is the only fair way ahead, making at least some effort to deal with the deep divisions in the country. But secondly, it is also of critical importance in helping Labour to retain the support of the large numbers of Leave orientated traditional Labour voters in marginal seats in Wales, the Midlands and the North of England.

What would an alternative option to Remain acceptable to Leavers look like and would it be achievable? Because of shortage of time, the starting point has to be what has already been agreed between the UK government and the EU, probably with the following enhancements and endorsements to the proposals which Parliament has most recently been considering:

- There should be assurances that UK standards would not fall below those of the EU on workers' rights, consumer protection and environmental requirements.
- The position of EU residents in the UK should be made secure without delay.
- With provision for a reasonable length transition period, before implementation, the UK should exit both the Customs Union and the Single Market, with our trading relationship with the EU being replaced by a Free Trade Agreement, broadly on the lines of the recent CETA treaty between the EU and Canada.
- We should aim to make the border between the North and South in Ireland as invisible as possible using electronic means, but in the meantime we should follow the arrangements negotiated recently which keep Northern Ireland in both the UK and EU Customs Unions.
- We should leave both the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy, replacing both of them with support regimes better suited to the UK than those currently in place.
- Allowing for derogations during a transitional period, UK law should become supreme over EU law.

Given that a second referendum, if it took place, would violate democratic norms against repeat referendums, it seems likely that proposals along these lines would at least be

regarded by most Leavers as providing a fair summary of what they think Leave should mean. It would provide us with control of our money, our borders and our trade. Our current very substantial net payments to the EU budget would be phased out. We could negotiate trade deals with whomever we wanted. We should aim to implement an immigration policy which would achieve broad consent while securing the position of existing EU migrants. With the right kind of free trade deal, we could achieve near frictionless trade in goods with the EU, to be supplemented with agreements on services. We would remove constraints on the implementation of Labour manifesto policies which might otherwise fall foul of EU restrictions. We would be out of the CAP and CFP, both of which have little support in the UK.

The UK would then be able to forge its own destiny outside the centralising pressures pushing the EU towards political unity.

To download the LESC November 2019 bulletin click here: [LESC Bulletin Nov19](#)