

Time for Labour to get behind Brexit

*CIB affiliated organisation the **Labour Euro Safeguards Campaign (LESC)** looks at the strategic choices now facing the Labour Party on Brexit. This article is taken from LESC's latest bulletin, the full version of which can be downloaded at the end of the article.*

The UK's departure from the EU – three and a half long years after the 2016 referendum – leaves the Labour Party with two large (and interrelated) strategic choices.

The first is the attitude which, as the largest opposition party, it takes to the negotiations on the future relationship which lie ahead, some of which will be difficult.

An opposition's job is to oppose, so Labour should be expected to be critical at times. But there is a lot of difference between taking this sort of attitude in a constructive way, and being as deliberately obstructive as possible.

There will undoubtedly be pressure from the membership to adopt the latter approach, but the Party needs to realise that this is not where the electorate now is. Even a substantial number of those who voted Remain now recognise that prevaricating about leaving has done us little good over the last three and a half years. The democratic decision made in 2016 needs to be implemented, and the best outcome for the UK needs to be fought for in this new post-Brexit era.

The second big issue for Labour is whether it will allow itself to become the party which most forcefully advocates re-joining the EU.

It is not difficult to see how this might happen. If the line taken by the Party during the renegotiations and subsequently is that the UK ought to stay in both the Single Market and the Customs Union, it will be advocating a position which most people think is the worst of all worlds.

We would still be subject to all the disadvantages which led to the vote to leave in the first place. At the same time, because we would be outside the EU's political structures, we would have no say on how the EU develops, including in ways which would still have a major impact on us. From this position, it would be an easy step for those inclined in this direction to advocate that the solution is for the UK to apply for renewed membership.

The Labour Party, however, needs to think very carefully about allowing a strategy of this sort to develop. It will inevitably involve the Party taking up a negative stance on the way our relationship is likely to develop over the next few years outside the EU. It may well entail the Party advocating a policy which has little general support, especially as re-joining would likely entail accepting even worse terms than the UK has had up to now.

For example, we would almost certainly lose our current budget rebate. New member states are also obliged to join the euro and the Schengen free movement zone. Re-joining would also inevitably involve another upheaval which businesses and public opinion would not welcome.

It seems likely that a substantial majority of public opinion over the next few years will be in favour of the UK making the best possible job of being outside the EU – and equally resistant to a policy of re-joining the EU.

Clearly, there is a great deal to be done to make sure that our exit from the EU works well for both the UK and the EU. Achieving this objective, however, will entail taking a

positive approach to the negotiations to come to make them successful.

Labour must avoid the temptation to carp at every difficulty in the hope that negotiating problems and inevitable compromises will make the electorate change its mind about membership in future. Such a London-centric view of the years to come is exactly what the Labour Party needs to avoid if it is to rebuild the trust of its erstwhile electoral heartlands, especially in the Midlands, the North of England and in Wales.

Attitudes to the European Union and Brexit were by no means the only factors which lost Labour the recent general election, but they were an important part of the explanation. Labour needs to bear this in mind for the future if it is ever again to form a majority government.

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