



Brexit is breaking Britain's parties

Redflagonline Fri, 01/03/2019 - 12:11

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The impossibility of reconciling the interests of the dominant sectors of British capitalism with the vote to leave the EU has brought both the country's main political parties to the brink of an existential crisis.

While the membership of the Conservative Party, and many of its voters, remain committed to their traditional xenophobic prejudices and seem to believe that the UK, by which many of them mean England, can once again prosper as an independent actor on the world stage, the realities of profitable integration into the world's biggest and wealthiest economic bloc ensure that the major capitalists are opposed to Brexit. They, however, are relatively small in number and increasingly estranged from both the party and the general population. Behind Theresa May sit warring factions of MPs, Hard and Soft Brexiteers and Remainers. Indeed, some of her front bench are openly mutinous. The City and the big corporations can thus no longer rely on 'their party' to protect their interests at this historic conjuncture.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party too has been virtually paralysed by the stalemate between the majority of the PLP, who remain committed to the best interests of British capitalism and therefore oppose Brexit, the Corbyn leadership, committed to a parliamentary reformist strategy they believe requires them to leave the EU in order to be able to carry out limited nationalisations, and the overwhelming majority of the mass membership who oppose the chauvinism and implicit racism connected to ending free movement and fear the economic consequences of leaving the EU. However many of these also fear that to call both Brexit and ending free movement into question is impossible because of the supposed democratic legitimacy, conferred on them by the 2016 referendum result.

Faced with these conflicting forces, both leaders, Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, have resorted to the tactics of triangulation, appearing publicly to make concessions to both wings while actually pursuing their own policy - a negotiated deal with Brussels for May, almost any kind of Brexit but without his fingerprints on it, for Corbyn.

Ever since her Chequers speech, which outlined the main contours of her proposed 'deal' and was seen as a major concession to the less eurosceptic members of her party, she has used the prospect of leaving with No Deal as a sop to the ERG and DUP and a threat to the rest. Time and again, she has taken advantage of the constitutional weakness of the House of Commons, when faced with the power of the executive, to 'run down the clock' to the point where she could say, and mean, 'My Deal or No Deal?'. The latest move in this systematic snubbing of Parliament, coming after cancelled 'meaningful' votes, delayed debates and ignored defeats is her proposal to delay implementation of Article 50 for a couple of months if she cannot get a Commons majority for her deal by March 12. This despite her repeated insistence that the UK will leave the EU, with or without a deal, on March 29.

The constant delays and prevarications, of course, have only encouraged the likes of Rees-Mogg and his ERG to take forward their plans for a Right wing populist party, whether or not that necessitates a split in the Conservatives, by establishing their own finances, defining their own policies and imposing their own discipline. Aply assisted from across the Atlantic by those who relish the prospect of disrupting the EU while asset stripping what is left of the UK economy and welfare state, the ERG hopes to emulate the rise of the Right, ironically enough, across the EU.

As the fateful date of March 29 approaches, Jeremy Corbyn has also had to make what is presented as a major change of course by endorsing the proposal for a second referendum. Once again, however, all is not what it seems. The choice to be put to a 'people's vote' would be, reportedly, between Remain and a 'credible Leave deal?'. This is intended to keep alive the fiction that the alternative to Remain could be Labour's Brexit package, based on a customs union. The

trigger for such a referendum becoming Labour's policy would be the defeat of that package in the Commons. How exactly it could ever become the proposal in a referendum, which would have to be approved by the same Commons, is left to the imagination.

The more likely scenario, no doubt the one favoured by Keir Starmer and Emily Thornberry, but certainly not by Corbyn's own closest advisors, Andrew Murray and Seumas Milne, is that Labour would call for a second referendum on May's Deal if it were passed by the Commons, the so-called 'confirmatory' referendum. The problem would remain however, why the Commons would agree to a referendum on a Deal it had just accepted. It also stays silent on what Labour would campaign for in such a referendum.

The third possibility, a referendum if May's Deal is not accepted by the Commons, would at least ask the right question: No Deal or Remain, but would seem to be excluded by Corbyn's formula of a 'credible Leave deal'.

So, once again, there is a triangulation and what is presented as a major shift towards the wishes of the membership turns out to be just another justification for allowing May to run down the clock, maintaining the possibility that she will, in the end, force through her existing Deal – the only one on the table, after all.

Corbyn and his apologists have used the argument that Labour cannot simply oppose Brexit, including an end to free movement, because that would mean losing 'our people' in the north and the midlands and thus make a Corbyn victory and a left government impossible. Anyone who criticises this strategy is denounced as playing into the hands of the right. By this means, the hundreds of thousands of new members who joined Labour when it supported free movement and rejected Brexit, and who opinion polls show remain hostile to the entire Brexit project, have been prevented from having any real say on Labour's policy on this subject.

Thus, thanks to the behaviour of their leaders, either or both of the two main parties could be in for a split on a scale not seen since the nineteenth and early twentieth century – over free trade versus protectionism, and over Ireland's home rule or independence. Those Labour members who believe that could never happen should cast their eyes beyond the white cliffs of Dover or beyond the Alps, where huge traditional working class parties; the French Socialists and the Italian Communists, have virtually disappeared as serious electoral forces whilst far right populists, or chauvinist neoliberals, have taken over.

Tom Watson's declaration of intent to form a 'social-democratic' grouping, a deliberate evocation of the Gang of Four whose split in the Eighties ensured Thatcher's victory in the 1983 election, confirms that Corbyn still faces a rebellion by perhaps more than 100 MPs. This is further proof that the concessions Corbyn has made to the Right, from acceptance of the manifestly false accusations of widespread antisemitism within the party to failing to discipline shadow cabinet members who voted with the Tories, have only encouraged further attacks. The concessions, however, were not just a tactical miscalculation, they flowed directly from the strategy of seeking to hold the two wings of the party together in pursuit of a future parliamentary majority.

If he surrenders, for example, by allowing the purging of leftist activists on trumped up charges of antisemitism, he will find himself under the thumb of the right for the rest of his tenure, which might, in any case, not be so long if he continues to treat his supporters as a stage army: one moreover that is never allowed to fight the right or even defend themselves against the scurrilous antisemitism smears. The departure of the right wing MPs would by no means be the worst damage they could do to the party. If they stay and maintain their majority in the PLP, they could later on pull the same trick to sabotage any really radical measures a Corbyn government tried to carry out. Thus, good riddance is not just an emotional spasm but a correct judgement. With these people stuffing Labour's benches, treachery is guaranteed.

Corbyn is the victim of his own, and his politically badly chosen advisors', parliamentary cretinism; that is, the belief that winning a majority in the House of Commons is the idol to which anything and everything can be sacrificed. Instead of empowering the membership immediately after his first election as leader and allowing them to reselect as candidates for the next election those who supported policies agreed by conference after democratic discussion in the branches and constituencies, he decided to simply use the enormous powers inherited from Tony Blair and Ed

Miliband's reforms and leave the PLP and the councillors in the Town Halls alone.

In fact, it was only May's unforeseen and foolish snap election that gave the membership any respite from the PLP-right spreading the vilest slanders and attacks via the billionaire media. The other side of the coin of Corbyn's highly successful general election campaign, however, was that the membership were so busy that most did not notice the major abandonment of principle in the manifesto; the sentence conceding 'there will be no free movement after Brexit'. This mealy-mouthed acceptance of the anti-immigrant line, which fuelled the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum, is a continuation of the same shortsighted and unprincipled policy. Even it does keep a few seats safe for the more nationalist and nativist Labour MPs, it will, sooner or later, lead to a mass exodus by the younger and more internationalist membership.

The important role played by Corbyn's advisors from the Morning Star stable, who believe it is necessary to get out of the EU under any conditions in order to carry out socialist policies and who advocate 'controlled immigration', implicitly blaming migrants for lowering wages and undermining unions, has largely been hidden from the members' view. Outside the party, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, while not pandering to racism, have contributed to the paralysis of the Left by refusing to recognise the inherently reactionary nature of the whole Brexit project and instead trying to present it as some kind of plebeian anti-capitalism. Together they have weakened the left and helped hand the leadership of the justified internationalist opposition to Brexit and support of EU workers against racism, to the Greens, the Liberals and the Labour right wing!

Last, but not least, is the nefarious role played by the bulk of the Momentum leadership, who have not only thwarted all attempts to clarify Labour's line on Brexit but every initiative to build an independent left force within Labour. Despite the fact that 80 per cent of constituency delegates to the Liverpool conference supported resolutions from their parties for a referendum and/or supported retaining free movement, Momentum contributed to the adoption of a compromise which allowed the leadership to avoid any commitment to a 'people's vote' by merely agreeing to, 'keep it on the table'.

Momentum has also kept the issue of reselection off the left agenda and generally pursued a, 'support Corbyn whatever he does' line. National Momentum, with no conference, no agreed political platform and no democratic control, is worse than useless, it is now a positively harmful body. Lansman's latest statement, agreeing that Labour has an antisemitic problem, is just the latest proof that left groups and local momentums should break free from his control and call a conference of delegates of the left which decides on policy on the whole range of issues as well as Brexit and on a list of democratic reforms which will put the MPs and councillors under the control of party members.

With regard to Brexit, it now seems that the options are:

A majority of MPs, Labour and Tory, capitulate to May's blackmail at the very last minute and her deal is passed. Corbyn's motion to call a second referendum on that deal is defeated in the Commons. The extreme Right, aided by the ERG, launches a campaign, perhaps a new party, insisting that 'Brexit has been stolen'.

May's Deal is rejected and she tries to delay Brexit for a few months, Labour, unable to gain a majority for a second referendum, continues to prevaricate. The extreme Right, aided by the ERG, launches a campaign, perhaps a new party, insisting that 'Brexit is about to be stolen'.

May's Deal is defeated in the Commons but no extension of Article 50 is agreed so Britain crashes out, either on March 29 or sometime in June. The UK and EU wage economic war on one another whilst the extreme Right, aided by the ERG blame 'the Europeans' for the inevitable economic dislocation that Brexit causes. The 'social democratic' faction of the Labour party launches a campaign to remove Corbyn from the leadership by next September's party conference.

How can we, the left wing, internationalist, members of the Labour Party, try to stop this and curb the utter irresponsibility of our own leadership as well the nationalist policies of the Tories.

First and foremost, Labour must decide whether to support or oppose Brexit and, in particular, free movement. Obviously, we favour Labour's pre-2017 internationalist line ? and want Labour to campaign for it, not just in a referendum or general election and not mainly in parliament but on the streets, starting with unequivocal and official Labour support for the Put it to the People demonstration on 23 March. The trade unions, too, should call on their branches to mobilise on it with banners flying.

We must fight in the unions and the party to force the NEC to call an emergency conference to decide democratically what the party's line is and oblige all elected representatives to stick to it or resign their posts.

Last, but not least, any proven examples of antisemitic abuse or argument by Labour party members should be met with expulsion. Equally, false or unevicenced claims of antisemitism, either against individuals or the party as a whole, such as Watson, Hodge, Berger and Co have spread all over the Tory media in recent months, should also result in expulsion.

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