EUROPE 27.09.2018 | Christos Katsioulis

Decided not to decide

After long debates at its party conference, Labour keeps all options on the table when it comes to Brexit

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It was the climactic moment of the Labour party conference. The party leaves the door open to a second referendum, Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer declared to the delegates in Liverpool. And, as he added crucially, 'nobody is ruling out remain as an option.' While there had been already constant and loud applause, it now seemed to never end.

The delegates hailed Starmer with standing ovations. Some of his colleagues in the leadership team, however, remained seated with petrified faces. This contrast illustrates the rift within the party. Until now, Labour had remained deliberately vague on the Brexit issue. They hoped that this would help them to straddle the gap between their increasingly pro-European members and the large numbers of voters from Eurosceptic Labour constituencies.

The problem is that the debate around Brexit harbours risks for Labour when it comes to winning future elections. The gulf between the many new, more Europhile voters from the urban, well-educated middle classes and the classic Labour electorate from the working classes of northern and central England seemed insurmountable. As a result they avoided making any kind of commitment, so as not to alienate any of these groups. At the last party conference, still buzzing from the high of having almost won the 2017 election, no debate about their Brexit position was allowed. That also suited the party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who, although still bearing the whiff of a left-wing Eurosceptic, had hitherto been able to successfully dodge making any clear commitment.

A carefully nuanced position

However, it had already become apparent in the run-up to this year's party conference that manoeuvring would no longer be possible. Both the powerful trade unions and Momentum, the campaign movement

backing Jeremy Corbyn, had recommended clarifying Labour's position. More than 150 Labour constituents had agreed with them and submitted motions about Brexit – something that the party leader, who claims to be for grassroots democracy, could not easily evade. And also the argument of national political responsibility grew ever-louder. The Prime Minister Theresa May leads a governing party that is totally divided into ideological camps. The Tories are thereby giving the impression that they would rather severely damage Great Britain economically and politically than have any faction make compromises. Her Majesty's Opposition could not keep on dodging responsibility forever.

But the solidarity characterising this debate is temporary. Before the party conference, Labour was embroiled in an intense internal power struggle.

The probability that Labour would project a better image in comparison to the Tory shambles was high from the start. People expected the leadership to force a formulaic compromise that did not really bind anyone. At first sight, this is exactly how the agreement appears. But there's more to it. Through an intense democratic process, Labour has managed to transform the existing fissures into a compromise. All those involved in the debate, which lasted more than five hours, rave about the respectful, matter-of-fact and goal-oriented atmosphere that finally resulted in a carefully nuanced text. It is something that more pro-Brexit representatives can identify with as well as the many Europhile Remain-supporters that have turned to Labour in recent years.

The paper makes clear that Labour would reject virtually every Tory deal, including no deal or delaying tactics such as a blind deal. Instead, the party is demanding either new elections – their preferred option – or even a second referendum. Yet, in addition to this, Labour is also demanding continued democratisation of the EU and deeper European and international cooperation. The latter is hard to imagine in particular if Britain leaves the EU. This gives a first indication of how the Labour left could be reconciled with remaining within the EU.

Labour has to address deeper issues

But the solidarity characterising this debate is temporary. Before the party conference, Labour was embroiled in an intense internal power struggle. The Brexit issue was one of the fault lines along which the differences between Eurosceptic left-wingers and Europhile forces of the political centre had become apparent. This was not the case in Liverpool,

and astonishingly no one has yet distanced themselves from this agreement either. The deep rifts between Corbyn supporters and opponents have certainly not disappeared, but they are less visible at the moment. There are two reasons for this.

As long as the party finds no convincing answers to the deeper social and economic causes, neither will the party conference compromise result in them automatically winning a possible election or a potential second referendum.

First, since being elected in 2015, Corbyn has emerged strengthened from all confrontations, expanded and his position of power and consolidated his political stance. The clashes between Corbynistas and the so-called old guard have therefore been settled for the time being, and he would probably have to lose an election before becoming vulnerable again. Second, many of his opponents are currently focussing on what they see as the more urgent issue – avoiding a catastrophic Brexit. As a result they are going along with the compromise made at the party conference.

This is because the compromise includes all of the wish list items that the party can compile: it opens the door a little to Europe, Brexit can become a leg up for Labour to power and Corbyn proves himself to be statesmanlike in comparison to a chaotic government. For now, Labour can sit back, wait and see how the Tories tear each other apart at their party conference in the coming week.

However, this very tactical approach obscures deeper problems. Take off the Labour spectacles and things quickly do not look nearly as rosy. Even though the government around Theresa May almost collapsed this summer and made an abject fool of itself at the EU summit in Salzburg last week, Labour has not really been able to gain much ground on the Conservatives. In the polls both parties are more or less neck and neck. Labour also did not come off as well as expected in local elections in May. Instead, it has become clear yet again at its conference that the party has not sufficiently addressed the question of why so many people actually voted for Brexit. As long as the party finds no convincing answers to the deeper social and economic causes, neither will the party conference compromise result in them automatically winning a possible election or a potential second referendum.



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