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Labour's lost love

48% of Brits voted to stay in the EU. Neither major UK party is willing to represent them.

As Theresa May lines up to trigger article 50 and steamroller the UK out of the EU, the Labour Party is at loggerheads on how to respond. At a critical moment in British history, when the country is in desperate need of a credible opposition, the Labour Party is divided and viewed by many as irrelevant. Despite two-thirds of Labour supporters voting to remain, Jeremy Corbyn has decided not to oppose the government's intention of seeking a 'hard Brexit'.

It is not the first time that the Labour Party has struggled to agree on the EU. Before the first British application in 1961, the then Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell, famously remarked that joining the EU would mean 'the end of a thousand years of British history.' In 1975 the Labour PM, Harold Wilson, a lukewarm europhile, called a referendum to confirm the UK decision in 1973 to join the EU but his real motive, like David Cameron 41 years later, was to avoid a split in the party.

The referendum was an overwhelming yes, but that did not stop the Labour in-fighting. Within a few years the 'Gang of Four' led by Roy Jenkins (a future Commission President) left to form the Social Democrats (later merging with the Liberals), while the Labour Party fought the 1983 election on a platform that included leaving the EU, a manifesto famously described as 'the longest suicide note in history.' This helped the Tories win three successive general elections.

New love for Europe

As Margaret Thatcher moved the Tory party to a strongly eurosceptic stance in the 1980s, the Labour Party became a staunch pro-EU party under John Smith, Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair. This was partly due to the trade unions recognising that the social benefits agreed in Brussels were the best way to protect workers' rights in Britain, and that the European market was not a free for all, but a market with rules to protect consumers, workers and the environment.
Blair was probably the most pro-EU prime minister in British history,

but even he could not persuade his Labour colleagues to join the euro or Schengen. Interestingly his pro-Europe speeches were usually held outside the UK. His premiership, however, was seriously blighted by the Iraq war. Blair became toxic, and those who had supported him suffered too. David Miliband narrowly lost to his brother Ed in the leadership election in 2010 because he was deemed too close to Blair.

Ed Miliband was pro-European but he did not consider it a burning issue and rarely discussed the EU in speeches. By then the drumbeat of euroscepticism was rising in the right-wing media. Ukip was on the march, led by Nigel Farage, its talented and manipulative leader who used the European Parliament as a platform to boost his cause. In May 2014 Ukip caused a political earthquake by beating Labour and the Tories in the European elections. The Tory party was especially scared at the sudden increase in support for Ukip and started to shift to a much more hostile stance on Europe.

Labouring under illusions

The conventional wisdom, shared by Labour, was that Ukip would do more damage to the Conservatives than Labour. But Labour was losing touch with its traditional base. In Scotland, the SNP was taking votes from disaffected Labour supporters and Labour ended up winning just one Scottish seat in the 2015 general election. This was a fatal blow to Labour as, without the traditional 50 plus MPs from Scotland, the party could never hope to win a majority of Westminster seats. In England the party was increasingly split between a big city and university towns, liberal, intellectual elite and its more traditional working class voters in smaller towns and traditional industrial areas who were finding it difficult coping with the de-industrialisation of their communities.

It was in this febrile atmosphere that Labour held its leadership election in 2015 following Ed Miliband's loss to David Cameron. Miliband's abrupt resignation and his amendment to the party's rules paved the way for the surprise victory of the left-wing, but eurosceptic, rebel, Jeremy Corbyn. He had voted against the EU in 1975, claiming it was a capitalist plot. His views hardly changed over the years, although he reluctantly recognised that the EU had improved social and environmental conditions including the working time directive.

David Cameron's unexpected election victory in 2015 meant he was under enormous pressure to hold a referendum. Though reluctant to do so, he finally agreed to hold the momentous vote on 23 June 2016. Like many political leaders, Cameron suffered from hubris. He was supremely confident in his ability to persuade voters as he believed he had done in

the 2014 Scottish referendum. But he was up against two other populists, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, and his fear campaign about the economy was dogged by his inability to say how he would limit immigration, the main issue for many voters.

7/10 for the EU, 1/10 for effort

Corbyn meanwhile was acting as if he hoped the referendum campaign would go away. He refused to line up with politicians from other parties and overall appeared lacklustre and uninterested in the most momentous vote in modern British history. He gave the EU 7 out of 10 when asked and made no attempt to hammer home the benefits of the EU to Labour voters or to make them understand the consequences of leaving the EU. The pro-European members of the shadow cabinet found it very frustrating and it was not surprising that many Labour voters could not say whether the party was for Remain or Leave.

The results, especially in England, showed a significant number of Labour voters had voted to Leave. At the same time, a clear majority of Labour supporters voted Remain. The parliamentary party was 90% in favour of Remain but Corbyn argued that the party 'should respect the wishes of the British people', despite it being an advisory referendum, won by a narrow majority on the basis of a pack of lies and with a questionable franchise. His approach to the EU was one reason why he was challenged last year by Owen Smith who favoured a second referendum. But Smith lost heavily and the Labour Party seems stuck with Corbyn for the foreseeable future, despite the loss of by-elections and the worst polling figures ever.

Since the referendum the Labour party has lost further support and faces a bleak future. If Theresa May were to call an early election it is quite possible that the Labour Party could be reduced to an insignificant rump.

Kiss and make up

Whether or not Labour ditches Corbyn, it needs to restore its credibility with its Remain voters and offer a narrative to those who voted Leave, but not the Leave-at-any-cost favoured by the Tories. Labour cannot be complicit in a costly Brexit that decimates the economy, destroys jobs and removes rights and protections for workers and consumers. Yet that is precisely where the Tories are taking the country.

The party conference committed Labour to holding another referendum after the negotiations, but Corbyn seems to have forgotten this and has

allowed the far smaller Liberal Democrat Party to make the running on this issue. Corbyn has agreed to the government's 'hard Brexit' strategy without any real protest. Labour MPs, regardless of whether their constituency voted Leave or Remain, must make the case that leaving the EU would hit working class families hardest. Although the economy has been performing better than predicted, it is largely due to the 15% devaluation of sterling after the June referendum, extra government borrowing and quantative easing by the Bank of England. With a hard Brexit it is inevitable that investment (and jobs) will move out of the UK, with serious consequences for employment.

Labour also has to make the positive case for immigration, that it enriches Britain and is not a burden on the UK. It can be managed within existing EU rules, which offer safeguards never used by the government (and anyway, most migrants to Britain have come from outside the EU, under British, not EU, rules). It is also regrettable that Labour has not fought harder to protect the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. The government make no pretence that they are viewed just as a bargaining chip in the negotiations.

The Brexit negotiations are going to be extremely difficult and the Conservative government appears to have little understanding of the magnitude or the complexity of the issues. This is exactly the moment when Britain needs a strong and credible opposition challenging the government and stressing the benefits of the closest possible ties with the EU. Sadly the Labour Party has abdicated its responsibilities, seems uninterested in deepening ties with fraternal parties in Europe, and is slipping ever further behind the Tories in the polls. It could take a generation for Labour to recover or it could lead to a realignment of British politics. Unless it changes course, we could have witnessed 'the last Labour government.'



Fraser Cameron
Brussels

Fraser Cameron is a former EU official and senior advisor with the

European Policy Centre. He was Chairman of Cambridge in Europe during the 1975 referendum campaign.