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Not a done deal

The British Labour Party faces growing calls to support a public vote on the terms of Brexit

Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU are ongoing and currently based on proposals put forward by the UK Prime Minister Teresa May. However, time is running out before the UK leaves the EU in March 2019. Polling and public comments indicate that people and MPs in Britain are divided and it is increasingly unclear what will happen. There is growing talk of a 'no deal' or disorderly Brexit. Given the apparent deadlock in the UK parliament – i.e. with no clear parliamentary majority for May's proposals – could a public vote on a final Brexit deal be the last resort?

A key moment in the debate could well be the Labour Party's annual conference, which takes place from 23 to 26 September. The fear within Labour's leadership at the moment is that shifting its currently ambivalent position on Brexit may cost the party support from working class voters in Wales, the Midlands and the North.

As things stand, the Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is against having another public vote and said on the *BBC's Sunday Politics* show that 'if there is a bad deal for Britain, or worse, no deal at all [...] then we would vote against it and challenge it in parliament and hope to force a general election on that basis'. However, his Shadow Brexit Secretary, Keir Starmer, recently stated recently, on 23 August 2018, that 'all options', even a second referendum, are on the table should the Parliament reject a Brexit deal. So it seems like a space is opening up for Labour to support a vote.

Labour's travails

At the time of writing, motions for debates at the conference had not been decided and so it will be interesting to see if another public vote on Brexit is tabled. Whatever happens, there is growing pressure for Corbyn and the Labour Party to shift their position.

Of six Labour MPs contacted for an interview about their views on Brexit and a public vote, only two responded, indicating that they were unavailable for comment, perhaps an indication of how sensitive this subject is.

In this context, however, the *Financial Times* newspaper has reported that moves are afoot within Momentum, the grassroots political movement that played a major role in helping Corbyn become Labour leader. Several Momentum members are looking to force a vote among delegates on whether there should be a public vote on the final Brexit deal. Labour for a People's Vote, which is led by several former Momentum figures, and which has the support of more than 60 constituency Labour groups, is doing likewise.

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In addition, a petition of Momentum members calling for a second referendum has obtained over half of the 4,000 signatures that it needs to force a vote of all Momentum members. Alena Ivanova, the Momentum activist who launched the petition, said she hoped the initiative would be 'the beginning of the real Brexit debate' within Labour.

Britain and Ireland's biggest trade union Unite, the single most important Labour donor, is open to the possibility of a second vote though not a second referendum on whether Britain stays in or leaves the EU. Addressing a conference of Unite, General Secretary Len McCluskey, an ally of Corbyn, said: 'We are not, I repeat for my friends in the media, not, calling for a second referendum.....But we remain open to the possibility of a vote on any deal the Tories [Conservative Party] come back with.'

He went on to say: 'Theresa May has lost all authority, all capacity to make decisions, all power of initiative. She is held prisoner by the dogmatists and fantasists of the far right. These people see in Brexit the chance to turn Britain into the low-wage, deregulated, race-to-the-bottom society of their dreams. But Brexit is turning into a nightmare for the rest of us – a nightmare of uncertainty above all. The shadow of job losses is hanging over much of the British economy, including the jobs of tens of thousands of Unite members: Airbus, BMW, Honda, JLR and more.'

The People's Vote is gaining momentum

Apart from these pressures within the Labour Party, the cross-party campaign group The People's Vote is at the forefront of a drive to convince the British public as a whole of the need for a second vote. Launched in April 2018, with the support of more than 100 MPs out of a total of 650, the People's Vote is calling for a public vote on the final Brexit deal.

'Ideally, we want a public vote giving people the option of the Brexit deal negotiated by the government or to remain in the EU,' said Barney Scholes, Press Officer for the People's Vote movement, adding that it would be up to the UK parliament to decide the question on the ballot paper. He argued against a proposal for three options (i.e. deal on offer, stay in the EU or no deal) on a referendum ballot paper as 'no deal would be so catastrophic that it would be irresponsible for the government to put that on the ballot paper'.

The group's activities include lobbying MPs, grassroots campaigning in communities and rallies throughout the summer in various cities – Bristol, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Cambridge and Cardiff – with more planned. Around 100,000 people marched in June in London, the largest Brexit-related march since the referendum. The People's Vote expect more in another march in London on 20 October. According to Amatey Doku, Vice President of the 7,000,000-strong National Union of Students, students from across Britain will attend because 'this Tory government, unfortunately assisted by the Labour Party, threaten to harm young people's futures'. The march is also backed by the *Independent* newspaper, which has gathered over 600,000 signatures for its #FinalSay petition.

What the polls say

But is there any appetite at all for a public vote on the final Brexit deal? Here, there's an interesting nuance to be observed. On the question of staying in or leaving the EU if there were another vote, the trend has been for polls to show a split of around 50-50, with perhaps a slight trend in favour of staying in the EU.

But there are interesting developments indicating a shift in public opinion in favour of holding a second vote. According to a Sky Data poll, only 10 per cent of respondents said that the government is doing a good job negotiating Brexit and 78 per cent said that it was doing a bad job. In the same poll, respondents were asked: Should there be a referendum asking between the deal the government suggests, no deal or staying in

the EU? The result: Yes: 50 per cent; No: 40 per cent.

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A result along similar lines emerged from the Survation poll for Good Morning Britain in June 2018 in which nearly half (48 per cent) of respondents supported a referendum on the final deal (compared to only 25 per cent opposed).

According to a YouGov survey based on polling in July 2018, a new vote would be backed by 42 per cent of the public, compared to 40 per cent who would oppose it. Even more interesting is the swing. When the question was asked back in April 2017 only 31 per cent of people supported a second referendum, compared to 48 per cent who wanted the 2016 vote to be the final say on the matter.

From these polls, it is clear that Brits are not happy with the Conservative government's handling of Brexit and it is clear that a large and growing number of Brits want a vote on the final Brexit deal.

Combine the pressure from Momentum, the polling data, the People's Vote movement and the potential backing of a major trade union, and this spells a compelling argument for the Labour opposition to at least consider a public vote on the final Brexit deal.

Time is running out

As per the rules under Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, Britain will leave the EU, whether it has a deal or not, on 29 March 2019. The deadline for the UK and the EU to reach a deal on a withdrawal agreement is therefore very tight given that both the UK parliament and European Parliament have to ratify any deal. The hope is that a deal can be reached in September or October 2017.

Marley Morris, a Research Fellow at the UK think tank called the Institute for Public Policy Research said that, if there is a second vote, it could be in the form of a referendum, but also sees a second vote as 'pretty unlikely given the tight time frame'. He added that for a second vote to happen, 'it would require a shift in the Conservative government's position or strong support in parliament for it. That seems pretty implausible in the next six months'. Matt Kilcoyne, an economist at the Adam Smith Institute, sees a second vote as unlikely for similar reasons.

If the analysts are right, that leaves an extension of the March 2019 deadline as the only real chance for a second vote. There have been indications from EU sources, says Barney Scholes, Press Officer for the People's Vote movement, that the EU would be willing to give the UK more time if, as part of the democratic process, it wanted to put the issue to the British public in the form of a vote.

For Marley Morris, 'it is still unlikely that there would be a second vote'. In his view, if the EU were to grant an extension, it would only do so for a limited period and the government would use that to complete negotiations.

He sees it as more plausible that the UK government will agree a fudge with the EU in the withdrawal agreement including a fudge on the Irish border backstop issue and a vague agreement on the future relationship. In his view, the most likely scenario is that, whilst the UK parliament may reject such a withdrawal agreement at first, the fear of a no deal is likely to mean that the agreement will probably just pass at the second go.If public pressure continues to mount for a second vote and the UK parliament cannot agree on a Brexit deal and to avoid a 'no deal' Brexit, then the Conservative and Labour leaders will face growing calls for a public vote and will lose a lot of credibility, especially but not only with young Brits whose future livelihoods are at stake.

In this context, the Labour Party conference at the end of September could be a game changer in terms of opening up the possibility of a public vote on the final Brexit deal. After all, my view of a healthy democracy is one in which people are entitled to have a say on a deal that will lead to considerable economic, political and cultural changes in their lives and those of their children for many years to come. When people voted to leave the EU by the slimmest of majorities in 2016, they were not given that opportunity. The referendum said Britain wanted to leave the EU but it did not say how.



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