

Anti-Corbyn plotters make second Brexit vote centre of UK Labour leadership contest

Laura Tiernan
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Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has ruled out any challenge to the June 23 referendum vote to leave the European Union.

In an interview published over the weekend, Corbyn rejected calls for either a second referendum or a general election to re-decide the issue. Asked whether he thought calls by leadership contender Owen Smith for a second referendum were anti-democratic, he replied, “I think we’ve had a referendum, a decision has been made, you have to respect the decision people made.”

Corbyn’s statements against a referendum re-run are his most emphatic yet. They follow last Thursday night’s leadership debate where Smith made repeated calls for a second referendum. “The country was lied to by the Brexiteers,” he said, describing the Brexit vote as a “cataclysmic mistake for our country.”

“Let me be blunt. I don’t want a Brexit plan under Labour... Under me we would be fighting to stay in the European Union. Under me we’d be saying ‘let’s negotiate’ and then let’s put it again to the country in a second referendum or a general election.”

Smith condemned Corbyn for not fighting hard enough for a Remain vote. “For 30 years you didn’t believe in the European Union,” he said. He also attacked Corbyn’s June 24 statement that “Article 50 [of the Lisbon treaty] has to be invoked now so that we can negotiate an exit with the European Union.”

“We should still be fighting for what we believe in,” Smith responded, “which is remaining part of the European Union.”

Smith’s pledge to overturn the referendum vote points to the central motivations of the regime-change operation against Corbyn. The mass resignation of Labour MPs on June 26, and subsequent vote of no-confidence by 172 Labour MPs just two days later, was

a direct response to the Brexit vote. Smith speaks for the dominant faction of the British ruling class which regards exit from the EU as a threat to the economic and geo-strategic interests of British imperialism.

Following last Thursday’s televised debate, the campaign against Corbyn has intensified, with Lord Peter Mandelson, a leading ally of former Prime Minister Tony Blair and founder of New Labour, accusing Corbyn of sabotaging the Remain campaign.

“We were greatly damaged by Jeremy Corbyn’s stance,” said Mandelson. “No doubt at all about that. Not only was he most of the time absent from the battle, but he was holding back the efforts of Alan Johnson and the Labour In campaign. I mean they felt undermined, at times they felt actually their efforts were being sabotaged by Jeremy Corbyn and the people around him.”

Mandelson’s comments were made in a BBC2 documentary, *Brexit: the Battle for Britain*, airing Monday night. The program includes accusations by Will Straw, executive director of Britain Stronger In Europe, that Corbyn’s campaign was “lukewarm”.

While Smith, Mandelson and other leading Blairites have attacked Corbyn for delivering a Leave vote, an aggregate of leading polls published on the eve of the referendum show the largest pro-Brexit swings occurred among Conservative voters. On the eve of the referendum, 72 percent of Labour voters supported Remain, while among Conservative voters support for Remain had dropped from 51 percent in May, to 44 percent.

No comparable backlash by the political establishment against Corbyn has been launched against the Conservatives. While the overwhelming majority of the PLP backed the Remain camp, the Tories were, and still are, split down the middle. The

ruling class thus regards the Labour Party as potentially the most effective vehicle for its attempts to reverse a Brexit provided that the party is placed under what they consider to be a reliable leadership.

The *Guardian* is at the centre of these efforts. In a comment published Friday, columnist Jonathan Freedland explained what is at stake in the ongoing efforts by the Blairites to regain control of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The dispute with Corbyn was “over whether the centre-left advances its goals through parliament or some other means,” he claimed. “For the Corbynites,” he complained, “strength and competence in parliament would be nice, but it’s not essential” as their goal was not simply the winning of elections, but “the building of a social movement.

“In ordinary times, you can see why some left idealists might find this appealing. But these are not ordinary times. The European referendum has changed everything. For we are in a critical hiatus, during which the meaning of that 23 June verdict will be determined.”

Freedland concluded that with Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May “under pressure from the Brexiteers in her own cabinet,” there “needs to be countervailing pressure on May to push her in the other direction... What’s needed is a serious, coherent, functioning opposition”—one that “salvages something from the referendum wreckage.”

The anti-democratic content of Freedland’s prescriptions is clear: the PLP must be wrested from the influence of the overwhelming majority of the party membership in order to overturn the referendum vote, or at the very least, help the Tories negotiate the best possible terms for Brexit.

The authoritarian arguments of Freedland and the Blairites do not lend a progressive, let alone socialist content to the political positions of Jeremy Corbyn—whether regarding his support for a Remain vote or his more recent rejection of a second referendum.

It was not just the Brexiteers who lied during the referendum campaign. Their claims that living standards would be improved by leaving the EU and curbing immigration, thereby freeing resources to the National Health Service and other social services, was matched by the brazen lies of the Remain camp. Corbyn duly parroted their claims to offer a progressive

alternative to xenophobia and nationalism, portraying the EU as the guarantor of social, environmental and workplace protections. Under conditions where the EU is imposing austerity, repression, and war, millions of workers rejected such lies.

Corbyn is well aware of the alienation and anger of millions of workers and young people and has tacked left in an attempt to contain and channel it within the confines of the Labour Party and the parliamentary system. But the truth is that his positions post-Brexit are not dissimilar to those of May, who has also declared that “Brexit means Brexit”.

“It has happened: the Remain campaign didn’t get the majority, the Leave campaign did so we’ve got to work our way round that,” Corbyn told *Huffington Post*. “And that means crucially speeding up the negotiations for future market access for manufacturing industries particularly in Britain and if we don’t speed up that discussion to give some degree of certainty for future market access, then I’d get very worried about industries in Britain that cannot easily switch to another market. And also what kind of trade structure we are going to have in the future.”

Corbyn offers only an alternative perspective to safeguard the interests of British capitalism, under conditions where there are growing tendencies towards the break-up of the EU under the impact of growing national antagonisms between the imperialist powers, the emergence of separatist tendencies in Scotland, Catalonia and elsewhere and, above all, the growth of class antagonisms due to the imposition of savage austerity measures by the EU and its member states.

A genuine socialist perspective is one that seeks to unite the European working class to establish workers’ governments throughout Europe in a struggle against all sections of the capitalist class. This, the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe, offers the only means of unifying the continent and ending the growing threat of austerity, militarism and war.



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