

UK: Corbyn, Brexit and the so-called progressive alliance

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In Glasgow last week, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn ruled out an alliance with the Scottish National Party (SNP). While welcoming support for Labour policies “from any other political groups or parties”, Corbyn wrote in the *Daily Record* that “Labour and the SNP come from different traditions and have different goals.”

His statements met with dismay among a number of his nominal allies, for whom a pact with the SNP is part of the development of a “progressive alliance” around Labour. Caroline Lucas, Green Party leader, questioned Corbyn’s statement, saying that feelers put out by her party to Labour had “indicated it could be open to talks about a cross-party alliance.”

Immediately following the Leave vote in the June 23 referendum on UK membership of the European Union, the pro-EU Greens wrote an Open Letter to Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru, calling for the formation of an anti-Brexit alliance.

Lucas, who favours a second referendum on the final terms negotiated with the EU for British withdrawal, is co-author with Labour MP Lisa Nandy of a new book on cross-party cooperation based around support for the EU and UK electoral reform.

Lucas suggested that Corbyn’s statement in Glasgow was forced on him by the constraints of the leadership contest, initiated by Labour’s right wing. His challenger, Owen Smith, has also ruled out an alliance. Supporters of Corbyn, including shadow chancellor John McDonnell, had responded positively to her approaches, Lucas said.

Neal Lawson, head of the Labour-aligned Compass think tank, was more direct. Rejecting cross-party alliances was “ridiculous”, Lawson said. “The idea that any one party alone can govern the UK now, with all the threats, challenges and opportunities the country now faces, is absurd.”

A central aim of the putsch attempt against Corbyn is to refashion Labour as the political vehicle for overturning the referendum result. Labour’s right wing, working in collusion with the highest echelons of the state, regard the

Leave outcome as jeopardising the interests of both British and American imperialist interests on the continent, especially as regards NATO’s military aggression against Russia and China.

But a significant section of Corbyn’s backers also want to see Labour take prime position in opposing Brexit. They differ over how this can be achieved.

Labour’s shadow defence spokesperson Clive Lewis participated in the cross-party “post-Brexit” alliance-building meeting called by Compass a fortnight after the referendum. A former infantry officer graduate from the elite Sandhurst Military Academy, Lewis is one of the few shadow cabinet members that did not resign in the right-wing initiated putsch. While supporting Corbyn in the current leadership bid, he has called for a second referendum on Brexit and abstained on the vote for the renewal of the Trident nuclear missile system during the recent parliamentary debate.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Lewis argued that the Brexit result proved the traditional Tory/Labour electoral set-up had broken down and that, if Labour is to have any hope of regaining power, it must be part of a progressive alliance based on proportional representation. Corbyn’s re-election, he wrote, while necessary, was “far from sufficient”, without a “whole set of other meaningful relationships and ideas” being “put in place.”

Lewis has been touted as a potential Labour leader by author and journalist Owen Jones amongst others: someone able to appeal to the so-called “centre left” in the Parliamentary Labour Party who have backed the Blairites in their attempted coup.

Another prominent advocate of overturning or limiting Brexit is the author and journalist, Paul Mason. In a comment titled, “Labour: The Way ahead,” Mason argued that the Blairite coup plotters failed to understand that their neo-liberal agenda is “busted” and could never be the basis for renewing Labour. Instead, its continuation threatened “global stagnation,” was “generating acute geopolitical fragmentation and—at home—the fragmentation of two-party

politics,” Mason wrote.

In addition, the vote in favour of what he called “Brexit without a plan” meant the “UK has put itself at the mercy” of the remaining 27 members of the EU, who will “force Britain to eat so much dirt to retain a trading relationship with the EU single market that a deal may be impossible.”

It is to counter this, that Mason et al. advocate a “progressive alliance” around Labour.

For the party to achieve power requires the development of a “distinct, new radical Labour identity”, Mason argues, that is able to build a coalition between what he describes as the mainly young, “urban salariat” who voted to Remain, and the “impoverished small-town working class,” blamed for supporting Leave.

Mason is vague on what exactly should constitute this new “identity,” other than the promotion of cultural “values”—anti-racism and support for identity politics based on race, sex and sexuality—and support for “economic stimulus.” The point, he stresses, is that this alliance must be comfortable enough for those who “support nuclear deterrent” or want “restrictions on free movement post Brexit.” While this may appear “fragmented,” he argues, the point is to “concentrate the efforts of everybody around one thing, be it an election, or an iconic protest, or a big, memetic idea,” even if only temporarily.

Clive Lewis, Owen Jones, Paul Mason and Neal Lawson were all supporters of Another Europe is Possible—the pro-EU grouping led by Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister in Greece’s Syriza government—and campaigned for a Remain vote in the referendum along with John McDonnell.

After the referendum, Another Europe is Possible organised demonstrations in support of a second referendum. A key role in these was played by the Pabloite Left Unity group, headed by film director Ken Loach.

All the above (with the exception of Varoufakis) are featured speakers at next month’s four-day “fringe” meeting, called by Momentum, the “network” formed within the Labour Party to support Corbyn. The event will run parallel with Labour’s special conference at which the result of the leadership contest will be announced.

The models for this initiative, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, are Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Both are bourgeois organisations formed as the result of manoeuvres between the Stalinists and the pseudo-left. The result has been a disaster for the working class.

In Greece Syriza, in alliance with the right-wing Independent Greeks, is imposing draconian austerity measures and anti-refugee policies on behalf of the EU. In Spain, following December’s inconclusive general election, Podemos had attempted to form a supposedly left coalition

with the hated Socialist Party (PSOE). In the second inconclusive general election on June 26, Podemos’ vote fell by 1.2 million votes and the PSOE returned its worst electoral result since 1977, enabling the right-wing Popular Party to launch its own attempt to form a government.

This is a matter of indifference to the affluent middle class that make up the pseudo-left and its periphery in academic and journalistic circles. Mason cautions that a potential danger to Labour’s intended “progressive alliance” is that those enthused by Corbyn’s campaign will try to win election by “using the classic, old left rhetoric that parties like Podemos and Syriza represent a break from.”

The sole concern of these layers is to effect a fairer redistribution of wealth amongst the top 10 percent of society, to which they belong. This in turn requires defending the access of British capital to the European Single Market and upholding its position as a military power. That is why all references to socialism, the working class, imperialism and revolution must be expunged.

Mason’s op-ed in the *Guardian* Wednesday was written as words of advice to Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May. Complaining that “Europe is out to shaft Brexit Britain,” he urged her to remain strong against the Brexit hard-liners in her party. “[I]f necessary”, he urged, Corbyn, May and SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon should stand “shoulder to shoulder somewhere symbolic” to say that “Britain’s aim is to remain in the single market.”

If May refused to play ball, the opposition parties “should state, simply, that they will seek a vote in parliament to veto any Brexit strategy that tries to remove Britain from the single market.”



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