

Tony Blair heads new pro-European Union movement

Chris Marsden
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The outlines of a post-Brexit referendum political realignment in Britain are becoming clearer, centred on efforts to forge a cross-party alliance of pro-European Union (EU) forces.

The efforts of its leading proponents to advance themselves as a “progressive” alternative to the pro-Brexit forces, dominated by the right wing of the Conservative Party, are exposed to devastating effect by the leading role being played by former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Last weekend, the *Sunday Times* reported that Blair was “positioning himself to play a pivotal role in shaping Britain’s Brexit deal” and had described Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn as “a nutter” and Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May as “a lightweight.” On Monday, Blair confirmed that he was forming a new organisation dedicated to opposing “resurgent populism” and returning politics to the “centre-ground.”

A spokesperson told the *Guardian*, “Blair’s allies say he is not seeking to become involved in Labour Party politics and that the question of a new political party remains unknowable.”

Despite such denials, Blair is continuing to actively intervene in the Labour Party, while leading efforts to reach out to the Tories and Liberal Democrats. Whether or not such a cross-party alliance leads to something more permanent is the only thing that is “unknowable.” Blair is reported to have held discussions with former Conservative Party Chancellor George Osborne, pro-European Labour backbench MPs and the former Liberal Democrats leader, Nick Clegg.

His invocation of the “centre-ground” involves making an amalgam between “the far left and far right,” which he asserts are converging. “The right attacks immigrants while the left rails at bankers,” he

said, speaking as if these two targets are comparable, on the supposed basis that “the spirit of insurgency, the venting of anger at those in power and the addiction to simple, demagogic answers to complex problems are the same for both extremes.”

The reaction to the public declaration of a political return by the most hated man in Britain was almost uniformly hostile, so that suggestions were made that a more viable vehicle for opposing Brexit might be led by Alan Milburn—a top Blairite whose political journey began as a member of the Pabloite International Marxist Group and includes his acting as an adviser to the previous Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition. Milburn publicly heads a group part-funded by Richard Branson’s Virgin Group and other business concerns seeking to reverse the referendum result.

Tuesday’s edition of the *Independent* reported a leaked email showing that “the campaign has been months in the planning ... has heavy financial, political and corporate backing and is receiving advice and support from a host of high-level business and communications organisations.”

It is backed by Sir Clive Cowdery, the insurance millionaire who funds the Resolution Foundation think tank, and Stephen Dorrell, a former Conservative Health Secretary, along with several leading Labour MPs. The newspaper “understands” that £1 million in funding has already been pledged to the campaign.

The *Independent* stressed that Blair “is not directly involved in the new organisation.” However, it soon became apparent that the organisational dichotomy is largely a convenient fiction so that Blair’s de facto allies can take their formal distance from the politically toxic war criminal.

In an extensive interview with the *New Statesman*, Blair stressed that he had “no intention of going back

to the front line of politics.’ ... He tilts forward. His voice quickens even as his body language betrays frustration. ‘I *can’t* come into front-line politics. There’s just too much hostility, and also there are elements of the media who would literally move to destroy me if I tried to do that’ ...”

Brexit, stressed Blair, “can be stopped if the British people decide that, having seen what it means, the pain-gain, cost-benefit analysis doesn’t stack up.” He is clearly also the moving spirit behind the Milburn group, which is dominated by his New Labour co-thinkers.

The *Guardian*, which played such a leading role in the campaign to remove Corbyn as Labour leader following the June 23 referendum vote to leave the EU, has already run a number of articles using Blair’s pronouncements to popularise the possibility of a second referendum. It reported the *New Statesman* interview under the heading, “Tony Blair: Brexit could be stopped if Britons change their minds.”

Accompanying the report was a subsidiary comment by Rowena Mason, asking, “Can Brexit really be stopped?” to which she replied, “Theoretically, yes. ... At the moment, it is verging on political heresy to say the UK should not proceed with leaving the EU, because that was the democratic outcome of the referendum. However, there was nothing binding about the vote and no legal obligation for the government to pursue Brexit.”

The newspaper has also launched a survey canvassing its readers on the question, “Have you changed your mind about your EU referendum vote?” and whether anyone is “having second thoughts ...”

A second referendum at this point has only minority support in Parliament, but cuts across existing party divisions. Liberal Democrats leader Tim Farron said his party would oppose invoking Article 50—which begins the formal leaving process—unless there was a promise of a second referendum on the deal eventually struck with EU leaders. The *Telegraph* cites a total of 84 MPs being willing to vote against, including 20 Labour MPs, the Scottish National Party’s 54 MPs and Northern Ireland’s Social Democratic Labour Party’s three MPs.

The figure of 20 Labourites could easily grow as the economic and political crisis following Brexit escalates. Monday saw the publication in the *Guardian* of a letter signed by 90 Labour MPs and Members of the

European Parliament opposing a “hard Brexit”—involving leaving the Single Market and the Customs Union—as “a disaster for working people” that would mean “fewer jobs and less business investment, and would leave the British people poorer. This is not what they voted for in June.”

The list is a veritable Who’s Who of the Labour Party right wing and anti-Corbyn coup plotters, including the likes of Ruth Smeeth, Jess Phillips, Stephen Kinnock, Wes Streeting, John Woodcock, Chuka Umunna, Liz Kendall, Margaret Hodge and Tristram Hunt. But signatories also include Corbyn’s appointed Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer, Shadow Business Secretary Clive Lewis, Shadow Foreign Minister Liz McInnes and Shadow Wales Secretary Jo Stevens.

Former Tory Prime Minister Sir John Major made his own intervention, using a speech to mark the 100th anniversary of David Lloyd George becoming prime minister to state that there was a “perfectly credible” case for a second referendum. The 48 percent of British people who voted to remain should not be subject to the “tyranny of the majority” by being forced to leave “the richest market mankind has ever seen.”

Sensing the political shift underway, and confirming their lack of confidence in May’s premiership, 60 Tory MPs have insisted that Brexit means “hard Brexit” and leaving the Single Market and the customs union.

The European Research Group faction is led by John Whittingdale, Iain Duncan Smith, Michael Gove, Peter Lilley and John Redwood. Its strident demands forced May’s chancellor Philip Hammond onto the defensive. He told ITV’s “Peston on Sunday” that the group was wrong to pose the issue as being “in” or “out” of the customs union, with no decision to be made before triggering Article 50 next March.

“We don’t think the best way to approach this is to assume there are fixed existing structures—the single market, the customs union, and all you have is a binary choice in relation to those,” said Hammond.



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