

# UK Labour Party split threatened over Brexit

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The second reading today of the government's Article 50 bill, which will trigger the two-year process of Britain leaving the European Union (EU), has raised again the prospect of a split in the Labour Party.

Even if this does not happen, it confirms that Labour remains mired in a bitter civil war despite party leader Jeremy Corbyn's constant efforts to placate his Blairite opponents.

Last Thursday, Corbyn declared that there would be a three-line whip to ensure Labour MPs voted in support of triggering Article 50. This was the signal for a resumption of operations by the coup plotters, who made the Brexit vote in favour of the UK quitting the European Union last June the centrepiece of their efforts to remove Corbyn as party leader. They blamed his late and unconvincing conversion to the Remain campaign in the referendum on Brexit and staged a wave of resignations from the shadow cabinet and a no-confidence motion signed by 172 members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

The coup attempt failed. However, the Blairite's hopes have been resuscitated by last week's ruling by the Supreme Court that the Brexit process could not begin without parliamentary approval. Its judgement allows pro-Remain MPs to make amendments to any legislation proposed by the Conservative government and to change or block any agreement it reaches with the EU.

On one level, there is a unity of concerns between Corbyn and his opponents as both have made clear that the UK must maintain access to European markets. But Corbyn has effectively endorsed the position of Theresa May's Conservative government that this can be secured through effective negotiations with the EU. Urging party unity, he said, "we will frame that relationship with Europe in the future, outside Europe but in concert with friends, whether those countries are in the EU or outside the EU."

The Blairites insist that no such deal is possible, warning that the government's pledge to end free movement of EU labour and its antagonising of the major European powers will end in the UK's economic exclusion.

These divisions have been brought to the peak of intensity by May's efforts to cultivate relations with the US administration of Donald Trump as a means of strengthening the UK's hand against Germany and France. A leading political ally of Tony Blair, *Guardian* columnist Martin Kettle, warned, "A trade deal with the US is top of the leavers' wish list, but this too is a potentially treacherous prospect. It owes more to the wishful thinking of UK Atlanticists than to hard economic reason, which still points firmly to Europe."

His colleague, Jonathan Freedland, added, "One study, released on Friday, estimated that leaving the single market would bring a loss in UK trade of up to 30 percent—while a new deal with the US might boost it by a meagre 2 percent. It was a reminder that while the US might be a bigger market for British exports than any other single country, it is dwarfed by the European continent on our doorstep."

The *Independent's* deputy business editor James Moore outlined the underlying considerations as, "[T]he Conservative Party is morphing into the hard Brexit party, Jeremy 'not wedded to freedom of movement' Corbyn is following it down that road ... Labour needs to split ... The two party system is collapsing anyway, and the fundamental schism in Britain is not so much about right and left as it is about in or out."

There is no chance of blocking the Article 50 bill, but the Blairites are using the opportunity to stake out their leading role in a strategic realignment of bourgeois politics that will only gather pace in the coming months. Whether this takes the form of another extended period of trench warfare or a possible split to

form a new political alliance or party is yet to be decided.

Following Corbyn's announcement of the three-line whip, Tulip Siddiq resigned as a shadow education minister, citing the fact that her London constituency voted to remain. On Friday, the shadow secretary for Wales, Jo Stevens, quit. Stevens was followed by Labour MP Owen Smith, Corbyn's leadership challenger last year, who said he would vote against Article 50 and that up to 50 Labour MPs could also defy the whip. "For my money, I think we should be seeking to get another referendum, a confirmatory referendum at the end of the process," he added, lining himself up with the Liberal Democrats who also advocate a second referendum.

Shadow business secretary Clive Lewis, mooted by *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones as a possible replacement for Corbyn, said he would vote for the bill at the second reading but not for the third and final reading if Labour's amendments were not accepted. These would ensure the UK commits to having "the closest relationship to Europe and the single market as is possible," he declared.

Two whips, Bristol MP Thangam Debbonaire and Manchester MP Jeff Smith, who are supposed to ensure voting discipline, announced they too would defy the whip.

A Commons motion, or "reasoned amendment", to throw out the government's bill entirely has been tabled by the former shadow health secretary, Heidi Alexander, supported by 18 fellow backbenchers. The amendment says the government has failed to "safeguard British interests in the single market" or given guarantees on whether parliament or voters should decide on any deal.

Deputy Leader Tom Watson, a key opponent of Corbyn, insisted that Labour had to take a "sensible" approach to the Blairite rebellion. "I understand this is very unique circumstances and we are going to deal with this issue very sensitively," he said—declaring that Labour frontbenchers who had quit should be back in their jobs within months.

Divisions are also emerging, and being encouraged, within Corbyn's own constituency. The *Observer*, Sunday sister paper of the *Guardian*, published an open letter signed by Labour "activists" critical of Corbyn's position on the Article 50 bill. It claimed, "the

intervention appears to indicate a significant disillusionment among part of Mr Corbyn's core support, with around half of the signatories understood to have previously backed him for leader."

The *Guardian* has also hyped a march being organised for March 25 through the Unite for Europe Facebook page, which declares, "Brexit can be stopped."

The declared aim of the march is to "embolden our elected representatives." The hitherto unknown movement, fronted by "professional singer" and former male model Peter French, complains, "The vast majority of our MPs support our membership of the European Union, but are being railroaded into a catastrophe by reckless and incompetent leadership. With our vocal support, they can stop Brexit."

The *Guardian* is set on fishing in troubled waters regarding the Labour Party, but they are playing to a real constituency. The *Canary*, the pro-Corbyn news site, published an editorial Friday complaining, "Corbyn has chosen to back the government without guaranteeing that the most vulnerable people, and the most valued principles of our participation in the EU project, will be protected post-Brexit. ... It is a decision that could sink his leadership of the party, and kill off any chance of a bona fide left-wing alternative among the national Westminster parties. This is a colossal mistake."

A substantial section of the pro-Corbyn left is in favour of an alternative "progressive alliance" with the SNP, the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru, the Greens and possibly the Liberal Democrats—oriented to the same pro-Remain sentiment as the Blairites, but also making a pitch to the social disaffection that animated the working class Brexit vote.



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