

Labour outlines pro-business “soft Brexit” policy for June 8 vote

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Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer delivered Labour’s first major policy statement in the snap General Election on June 8 to position it as the party of “soft Brexit,” a negotiation with the EU that seeks to preserve access for UK business and finance to the European Union (EU) Single Market.

Pressured by the sizable anti-EU constituency among Conservative MPs and in the wider party, Tory Prime Minister Theresa May is committed to a “hard Brexit” that includes Britain’s departure from the Single Market.

Starmer had previously outlined Labour’s six tests for assessing May’s negotiations on the terms of the UK’s exit from the EU. These include UK businesses retaining the “exact same benefits” as they “currently have as members of the Single Market and Customs Union.”

The aim of Starmer’s speech was to go as far as possible in declaring Labour’s support for this objective, while still abiding by its pledge not to challenge the “will of the people” as expressed in last year’s referendum vote to leave the EU.

Starmer said Labour, if elected, would repeal the whole of May’s Brexit strategy and “replace it with fresh negotiating priorities that reflect Labour values and our six tests.” He added, “Labour’s White Paper will have a strong emphasis on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union as we know that is vital to protecting jobs and the economy.”

Big business could not be hampered in any Brexit deal, warned Starmer: “That means we will seek continued tariff-free trade between the UK and the EU, no new non-tariff burdens for business, regulatory alignment and continued competitiveness for goods and services.”

Attacking the government’s strategy of beginning

trade missions to non-EU countries prior to Brexit, Starmer said, “rather than focusing on hypothetical new trade deals...Labour will focus above all else on securing strong trading arrangements with the EU.”

Labour would also replace the Conservatives’ proposed “great repeal” bill—in which all current EU law is to be repatriated/incorporated into British law, to be modified/removed by the UK parliament at a later date—with an EU rights and protections bill.

Labour’s agenda over Brexit is no less reactionary than that of the Tories. Its central preoccupation is satisfying the concerns expressed by the majority of Britain’s bourgeoisie, which supported Remain and whose interests are bound up with the EU. Some 44 percent of the UK’s exports go to the EU, while the City of London’s financial services are accessed across the continent.

In his speech Tuesday, Starmer also said Labour, if elected, would not make controlling immigration part of its negotiating position. But he added that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s shadow cabinet had “agreed that reasonable management of migration and moving away from freedom of movement has to be part of the referendum result.”

“We recognise that immigration rules will have to change as we exit the EU, but we do not believe that immigration should be the overarching priority,” Starmer said.

The *Guardian* claimed that Corbyn “had previously strongly defended free movement of citizens within the EU.” In reality, he stated in January that “Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle.”

The gyrations in Labour’s position reflect the requirements of business to be able to access a skilled European workforce, while at the same time the party

panders to the anti-immigrant sentiment whipped up during last year's referendum.

To this end, Starmer said that from "day one" a Labour government would "guarantee that all EU nationals currently living in the UK will see no change in their legal status as a result of Brexit, and we will seek reciprocal measures for UK citizens in the EU."

Borrowing from the "left populist" rhetoric of defeated French presidential challenger Jean-Luc Melenchon, Shadow International Trade Secretary Barry Gardiner said of Labour's approach, "The government has a nationalistic way of looking at Brexit rather than a patriotic one. ... Patriots believe you can love your own country and cooperate with others."

Starmer's pitch opens the door to a rejection of Brexit at the end of the two-year negotiating period, but still doesn't go far enough for the most determined Remain faction of the bourgeoisie—represented by former party leader Tony Blair, in alliance with the Liberal Democrats.

Indeed, the hardening of Labour's position reflects in large part the intense lobbying and continued influence of Blair in the party. This is reinforced by the fact that Blair not only speaks for powerful voices within ruling circles in Britain but also in the United States, where the Democrats and the US military backed Remain and have waged largely successful political warfare to reverse Donald Trump's support for Brexit, for the EU's break-up and his questioning of the NATO alliance.

May's own motives in calling a snap election are in part bound up with this. She hopes to strengthen her position in negotiations with the EU so that London is still able to play a role in defending US/UK shared interests on the continent, especially as regards breaking down trade restrictions and preserving NATO's monopoly against German-led plans for an independent European military capability.

Blair was provided with the opportunity to publish a major op-ed by the pro-EU *Guardian*, on the same day as Starmer's announcement. In it he stressed his credentials as "someone who led the party for 13 years and through three elections."

Outlining the strategy Labour must adopt, he rejected any attempt to stick to the "conventional election response of an opposition" such as urging, "vote Labour to keep the Tories out and return a Labour

government."

There could be no avoidance of opposing Brexit, which was "the dominant election issue". After claiming that he has "not urged tactical voting" against Labour, which could make him subject to disciplinary action, Blair went on to argue for precisely that.

"It is up to each voter to make up their mind on how they will vote. I only want people to make an informed choice," he declared, before stressing, "This is not the time to fight a conventional partisan election," but rather "rallying people to a more reasonable and open position on Brexit across the party divide."

In reality, Blair's calculations go beyond tactical voting and point to a broader project of securing a political realignment between the Labour right, the Liberal Democrats and some pro-Remain Tories. This would likely gather greater momentum after the general election, given that the Liberal Democrats are now centred on winning Tory voters and do not want an association with Labour, and the Tories are scenting blood as a result of Labour's crisis.

Indeed, Tory MPs Dominic Grieve, Anna Soubry and Nicky Morgan yesterday all quit the Open Britain pro-EU membership pressure group, in protest against its targeting of leading pro-Brexit, mainly Conservative MPs, in 20 seats. Had they not done so, May would have had no option but to expel them—something Corbyn will not countenance when it comes to Blair and his supporters when they call for a vote against Labour



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