

Corbyn and Labour backtrack on Brexit

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Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer has called for a post-Brexit arrangement committing the UK to do whatever is required to maintain membership of the Single European Market and Customs Union for up to four years.

Writing in the *Observer* on Sunday, Starmer said that Labour's proposed transitional period would avoid a "cliff edge" for the UK economy. Labour would "abide by the common rules" of the SEM and Customs Union. This means accepting the free movement of goods, services, capital and European labour at the expected end of negotiations in March 2019.

His pledge is equivalent to continued EU membership until at least 2023—with the sole difference that the UK would have no say on EU policy. Starmer added that any new relationship with the EU after this transition would also "retain the benefits of the customs union and the single market."

This is tantamount to membership of the EU in all but name. He does not say so openly due to concern over the electoral impact of moving too hastily to reverse the referendum vote. Pro-Brexit commentators have stressed that seven out of 10 Labour constituencies voted leave in the referendum. But Starmer anticipates that this majority is already being eroded by the economic impact of the falling pound and will be reversed later down the line. He therefore made clear that even a four-year transition was a fudge, writing that "for all its merits" it would "be imperfect and prove unsustainable beyond a limited period. It would not provide a durable or acceptable long-term settlement for Britain or the EU."

The next day, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn lent his support to Starmer's position, stating that "it's the [Conservative] Government that has confusion. It restarts the negotiations tomorrow [Tuesday], and it seems to me they're in danger of wandering into a 'cliff edge Brexit'. Ours is to protect jobs and protect

working conditions in the transition."

Corbyn's shift to a long-term embrace of single market membership was bemoaned by his pseudo-left supporters in the Socialist Workers Party. The decision would "please some of left wing leader Jeremy Corbyn's most bitter enemies," it wrote, citing "right wing Labour MPs... Alison McGovern and Heidi Alexander."

The SWP was left to pathetically urge "The left in Labour" to "put forward a left-wing vision for Brexit" that "has to involve extending freedom of movement, ending austerity and privatisation—and opposing the single market."

Which is political nonsense: With no democratic mandate or even discussion with party members or the wider electorate, Labour and Corbyn are in the process of overturning the Brexit referendum result. And contrary to the SWP's appeals, the only aspect of the referendum the party still genuflects towards is the demand for an end to free movement. Starmer says that a final deal must address the "need for more effective management of migration..."

EU negotiator Michel Barnier has no reason to accept any conditions placed by the UK, because he knows that Labour's position is determined by the dominant sections of big business and the City of London that view the Brexit vote as a disaster.

The latest of many U-turns by Corbyn demonstrates that there are no principled differences between left and right within Labour or between Labour and the pro-EU wing of the Tory Party.

Having opposed EU membership for decades while on Labour's backbenches, as party leader Corbyn campaigned in the referendum for continued EU membership. His switch was dictated by the demands of both big business and the trade union bureaucracy, which acts as Labour's paymaster and is just as concerned as the City of London with the impact of exit

on the profit margins of the banks and major corporations. Starmer stated bluntly that Labour's position "is a view shared widely by businesses and trade unions," while Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O'Grady joined the likes of leading Blairite, Chukka Ummuna and the architect of New Labour, Peter Mandelson, in praising the shift.

Even David Owen, one of the "Gang of Four" who broke with Labour in the 1980s to form the Social Democratic Party, wrote to the *Guardian*, "As a Labour supporter not yet ready to renew my membership... it is good to see Keir Starmer's position agreed with Jeremy Corbyn."

The Blairites and the rest of the Parliamentary Labour Party moved their motion of no-confidence in Corbyn last year, after denouncing his "lukewarm" efforts in the Brexit referendum campaign. Removing him as leader was bound up with efforts to refashion Labour as the pro-austerity, anti-Brexit party needed by the ruling class, given that the Conservative Party has proved incapable of standing against its anti-EU right-wing.

Once again, as on every major issue, Corbyn has done all in his power to convince the PLP that he will toe the line and can be trusted to lead the party. His occasional "leftist" rhetoric is deployed only to sell Labour to all those who are bitterly hostile to the right-wing agenda it truly stands for. He is seeking to put Labour in power by capitalising on the popular support he enjoys. But once in office, Labour will do the bidding of the ruling elite just as surely as the Tories.

Corbyn has now been given a pat on the head by some of his erstwhile opponents. But this is only in preparation for the next stage in Labour's political refashioning for a role in government.

Peter Mandelson, one of the prime movers, along with Tony Blair, in the fashioning of New Labour writes, "Labour has done parliament and the public a big favour in starting what will be a complicated debate," but must now establish "the clear principle that Britain should not decide to leave the EU and its single market until it knows just where it is leaving to."

Labour MP Heidi Alexander who had called for Corbyn's removal after the EU referendum result, told *ITV News*, "I think that if there isn't a better offer on the table then staying in the single market and customs union permanently would be the right thing for the country."

Stewart Wood, a former adviser to Ed Miliband and Gordon Brown, commented, "I think if I was a Brexiter I'd be worried that over the next three or four years if a transition deal lasts that long that other circumstances will change and the will to move on from transition stage to full Brexit might be less present than it is now."

The *Financial Times* welcomed Labour's position. But it views this as an opportunity to help stiffen Prime Minister Theresa May's resolve to defy the Brexiteers in her own party, rather than as a reason to embrace Labour—given the risks posed by Corbyn's appeal to popular anti-austerity sentiment.

The Tories too have called for a two-year transition period post Brexit. To maintain party unity, however, Chancellor Philip Hammond was forced to state that the UK would be "outside the single market and outside the customs union" and therefore free to negotiate trade deals with non-EU states.

The *FT* predicts that such conditions will now be abandoned. It described Starmer's announcement as "the best news to come out of British politics in a long time" for having renounced "unrealistic hopes for a quick and easy divorce or a bespoke transition deal."

It continued, "It is paradoxical that this outbreak of Burkean common sense should have come from an opposition led by a revolutionary throwback such as Jeremy Corbyn... That said, whatever the motivation, the Labour shift puts it firmly on the side of business and challenges the government to go still further along the road to pragmatism."

If not "the consequences could be severe... a Corbyn government, which could have painful consequences for business and the economy that reach far beyond Brexit."



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