

# UK: Blairites spearhead campaign to commit Labour to remaining in the European Union

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The campaign for a second referendum on Britain's exit from the European Union (EU) is now in full-swing, after the failure of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's motion of no confidence in the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May.

Mounting pressure is being placed on Corbyn to champion a so-called "People's Vote." Earlier this week, giving a speech at an Another Europe is Possible event, Shadow Treasury Minister Clive Lewis said, "A public vote is something that the Labour Party should be getting behind and I am here to talk about the preparations we need to start thinking about to make that happen."

On Wednesday, on the morning of the no-confidence vote, 71 Labour MPs, claiming the support of a further 26, published an open letter calling on the Labour leadership to back a People's Vote.

Leading Blairite Remainer Chuka Umunna said Tuesday, "We need to move to the next stage in the Labour Party's confidence motion, and that is to without delay commit to a people's vote as the way out of this, and to do that by the end of this week."

Anti-Corbyn coup plotter Luciana Berger attacked Corbyn for allegedly ignoring party policy, after a speech he made Thursday morning which suggested more no confidence votes might precede any move to supporting a new referendum. Corbyn added that Labour would also seek parliamentary agreement on its own Brexit negotiating position of seeking a customs union and Single European Market access and would not take part in discussions with May unless she ruled out a no-deal Brexit.

More pressure was added by announcements from Nicola Sturgeon (Scottish National Party), Vince Cable (Liberal Democrats), Caroline Lucas (Greens) and Adam Price (Plaid Cymru) that their parties will not

support Labour no confidence votes in the Tories in future, unless Corbyn backs a second referendum.

A letter published in the *Times* Thursday, calling on Parliament to organise a second referendum, was signed by 170 business leaders. UK business overwhelmingly favours a close relationship with the EU, on which much of its trade depends, and fears the instability of a hard or no deal break. The Remain campaign, stripped of its cynical posturing over "democracy" and "European values," is a vehicle for these concerns.

Corbyn has likewise repeatedly stated his commitment to the interests of British capitalism. However, he and his leadership team hope to be able to pursue them from government. They fear that to give full support to a second referendum would be to forego any chance of getting Labour elected.

The Blairites are opposed to a general election and aim to block Brexit without letting what is nominally their own party under Corbyn anywhere near power. Corbyn agreeing to support a second referendum will allow them to deepen their collusion with Tory Remainers, the SNP and Liberal Democrats to secure Britain's relationship with the EU.

Hence the collective anger which met Corbyn's refusal to discuss Brexit options with Theresa May, unless a "no deal" outcome was taken off the table. Tony Blair led the chorus of denunciations, saying, "If, in a moment of national crisis, the Prime Minister asks the Leader of the Opposition to come and talk, of course he should."

Labour MP Chris Leslie tweeted in support, "Every opportunity to influence Brexit policy ought to be taken ..."

Fellow right-wing backbencher Mike Gapes took this as an opportunity to reprise one of the many Blairite

and media hit campaigns against the Labour leader, tweeting, “Apparently Corbyn is prepared to hold talks with Hamas, Hezbollah, Assad and Iran without preconditions. But not with the UK Prime Minister. Why?”

Regardless of what Corbyn chooses to do or not do, a cross-party regroupment of Remain MPs is taking shape. On Wednesday, Conservative MP Dominic Grieve brought forward plans for new legislation that would provide for a second referendum. A Conservative campaigning group, The Right to Vote, has been established.

Labour MPs Hilary Benn and Yvette Cooper, both ardent Blairites, went to the Cabinet office on Thursday to hold talks with Conservative ministers, making a mockery of Corbyn’s impotent request that Labour MPs not participate in May’s Brexit discussions. Stephen Kinnock and Lucy Powell are to follow suit.

By the evening May was declaring that she would not accept Corbyn’s conditions for talks of ruling out a no-deal Brexit.

According to the *Independent*, strongly pro-Remain Labour MPs are preparing to make their move early next week, when the government’s new EU exit motion is put up for amendment. An anonymous senior backbencher said, “Labour won’t get a People’s Vote unless we make one. If we just wait for Jeremy Corbyn we are never going to do it.”

EU officials have endorsed this realignment. Member of the European Parliament and former Belgium prime minister, Guy Verhofstadt, was most explicit, stating, “There is a need for cross-party cooperation so that we know what Britain wants and that there’s a majority in the House of Commons backing that proposal. And if that proposal goes in the direction of a deeper relationship with the EU then we are ready to do so. We are not against this. On the contrary.”

European Commission President Donald Tusk and chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier suggested that the EU was open to cancelling the Brexit process, or renegotiating a much closer post-Brexit relationship. Tusk tweeted, “If a deal is impossible, and no-one wants no deal, then who will finally have the courage to say what the only positive solution is?”

Barnier stated, “If the UK chooses to shift its red lines in the future ... and go beyond a simple free trade agreement ... then the European Union will be

immediately ready to go hand in hand with that development and to give a favourable response.”

Summing up the role Labour, and Corbyn, would be expected to play, Greek MEP Giorgos Kyrtsos explained, “We all know that the Tory party is traditionally divided, which is why those of us who feel it is of great strategic importance to the EU that the UK remains are now looking to the Labour Party.”

The issue to be decided is whether this role is compatible with Corbyn’s continued leadership, or whether moves will be made once again to remove or bypass him. This depends upon his agreeing once again to do as he is told by his right wing, using his support among workers and the younger generation to sell EU membership as a way of overcoming austerity. Should he accede to these demands, whether in or out of government, he would be charged politically with excluding the working class from any independent intervention in this crisis by suppressing the class struggle in alliance with the trade unions and insisting on the absolute sovereignty over decision making in the den of thieves that is Britain’s parliament.

However, it is not so clear cut as the Blairites maintain whether Corbyn’s caution does not more accurately express the interests of the ruling class in trying to manage the fallout from any reversal of the 2016 referendum in a country that remains deeply divided over the issue.

The staunchly pro-EU *Guardian* reported yesterday that it had contacted “several senior shadow ministers from constituencies that voted to leave the EU who say they would consider their positions if Corbyn conceded to pressure to back a second referendum.” It cited “backbench MPs who have been canvassing opinion,” claiming that there are just as many Labour MPs opposed to a second referendum as supporting it and named Labour chair, Ian Lavery, Shadow Justice Secretary Richard Burgon and Len McCluskey, general secretary of the Unite trade union, as sceptical or opposed to a “People’s Vote.”



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