

UK Labour Party's civil war blows up in aftermath of European election debacle

Robert Stevens
1 June 2019

Labour's right-wing has intensified its efforts to assert undisputed control over the party after it registered a disastrous result in the European elections, coming third with 14 percent, behind the Brexit Party and the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn supported a Remain vote in the 2016 EU referendum in line with the demands of the dominant sections of British capital, but never succeeded in placating Labour's strongly pro-EU Blairite faction which is dominant within the parliamentary party.

After facing off a leadership challenge immediately following the referendum, Corbyn has been forced to face both ways on Brexit trying to keep his fractured party together. He adopted a position of "constructive ambiguity," stressing that Labour would "respect the referendum result," but by seeking a "soft Brexit" maintaining tariff free access to the Single European Market.

Failing this, party conference decided that Labour would either seek a general election or a second referendum on any deal proposed by Theresa May's Conservative government.

Above all Corbyn advanced his position as the best means of maintaining national unity while still eventually securing the outcome desired by the City of London. He spent six weeks prior to the EU elections in talks with May even as her premiership fell apart.

In the end she resigned just days after Corbyn reluctantly broke off talks.

In the absence of any genuine attempt to overcome the divisions sown in the working class by the 2016 referendum, the European elections became a de facto plebiscite on Brexit. As a result, the Tories were reduced to a nine percent vote, while Labour did little better against the overtly pro and anti-Brexit parties.

Polling by Lord Ashcroft showed that Labour lost nearly 50 percent of its 2017 general election vote to other parties in the European election. Of this total it lost 13 percent to the right-wing Brexit Party of Nigel Farage and significantly more to the Remain supporting Lib Dems (22 percent) and Greens (17 percent).

This was the cue for the Blairite right to insist that Corbyn could no longer just hold out the prospect of backing a future referendum. Labour had to become the main pro-Remain party in an emerging anti-Brexit alliance with the Lib Dems and Greens.

Tony Blair's former spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, announced that in the election he had voted Liberal Democrat, whose manifesto was emblazoned with the words, "Bollocks to Brexit."

Labour's constitution prohibits its members to campaign against or vote against a Labour candidate—and with many members demanding it—Campbell was expelled.

Other leading Blairites lined up to declare that they too had voted Lib-Dem.

Former Labour home secretary Charles Clarke, multimillionaire daughter of a property developer, Fiona MacTaggart, and former defence secretary Bob Ainsworth all declared they had voted for different parties in the election. MacTaggart declared preposterously that it was "time for all of us to declare 'I am Spartacus.'"

The hashtag #ExpelMeToo became widespread. The *Guardian* published an entire page of letters under the heading, "The expulsion of Alastair Campbell is a Spartacus moment for Labour members."

Labour's deputy leader, Tom Watson, who is leading the plot to remove Corbyn, as party leader described Campbell's expulsion as "spiteful."

Backed by the right-wing media, the Blairites have

attempted to destabilise Corbyn's leadership since he was elected with a campaign of lies and slander that Corbyn is an anti-Semite or that he facilitates "hatred" of Jews.

Within hours of Campbell's expulsion, the *Guardian* wrote, "That it happened on the very day that the Equality and Human Rights Commission began an investigation into that issue leaves a bad taste. It is hard to believe that the Campbell case is not being used as a diversionary tactic to deflect attention away from much more serious problems."

Blair himself told Sky News Tuesday evening that his message to Campbell was, "I understand why you did what you did. ... You wouldn't be the only person I know who had voted Labour all their lives that didn't vote Labour in this election."

The unindicted war criminal then declared his backing for unity among the pro-Remain parties, saying that Labour "should stop equivocating and come out to a clear position... That position in my view should be in favour of going back to the people [in a referendum].

Above all, the Blairites want to engineer this political shift without a general election being called and a Corbyn-led Labour Party coming to office.

With the government in meltdown and the Tories in the midst of a leadership contest with a dozen candidates, after May was forced to declare June 7 as the date for her departure, Blair said the Tories had to ensure they stayed in power.

Days after leadership contender Jeremy Hunt said that the Tory Party faced "annihilation" if a general election were called, Blair warned that they would be "certifiably insane to do a general election" before a Brexit deal was passed by Parliament.

The Blairites fear any break in the blockade they have elected preventing the interests of the working class finding political expression and impinging on the monopoly of power enjoyed by the financial oligarchy. This fear is heightened by the growth in social unrest and strike activity produced by worsening social inequality.

The Blairites rely above all on the fact that the Corbynite "left" agree with them on this issue 100 percent.

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Shadow Home Secretary Dianne Abbott both stated that the European election result meant that Labour had to

move to explicitly backing a second referendum.

Corbyn said in response that his aim remained one of negotiating a better Brexit deal than May's, but that a "public vote" on a Brexit deal "is some way off." He added, in a statement anathema to the Blairites, "Let the people decide the country's future, either in a general election or through a public vote on any deal agreed by parliament."

Guardian columnist Paul Mason, who has long advocated a "Progressive Alliance" comprising Labour, the Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats, and Greens, utilised the result to declare that Corbyn's strategy of "constructive ambiguity" had failed. While stating that he still supported Corbyn, he called for the ousting of virtually all the personnel in Corbyn's office: "the officials who designed this fiasco, and ignored all evidence that it would lead to disaster, must be removed from positions of influence." These included director of strategy Seumas Milne, Corbyn's chief of staff Karie Murphy, and party chair Ian Lavery MP.

Corbyn's faction will capitulate yet again. Even before the ink was dry on Campbell's expulsion, Shadow Attorney General Shami Chakrabarti said that it would be reviewed and declared, in opposition to Labour's rulebook, "Merely voting for another party is not in itself grounds for exclusion or expulsion."

In the nearly four years since he was elected leader, all claims that Corbyn would push Labour to the left have been discredited. Labour is a pro-capitalist party, hostile to the strategic interests of the working class.

The only way to overcome the dangerous fracturing of the working class produced by the Brexit referendum and reinforced by all the parties of the ruling elite is for workers to build their own party, the Socialist Equality Party, based on the fight for a workers government and the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact