

Labour Party right lead demands for second Brexit referendum

By Julie Hyland
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Jeremy Corbyn was forced to sack Owen Smith on Friday after the Labour front bench minister called for a second referendum on British withdrawal from the European Union in the *Guardian*.

The op-ed by Smith, the shadow minister for Northern Ireland, put him publicly at odds with Labour's official opposition to a second referendum. His repudiation of party policy was occasioned by the deal struck between Prime Minister Theresa May and the EU earlier this month on the proposed Brexit transition period, between March next year and December 2020.

To arrive at a deal, May abandoned all of her so-called "red lines", including agreeing to abide by European Court of Justice (ECJ) rulings and to continue paying into the EU budget until 2064, as well as ensuring EU citizens full rights, including free movement, until 2027. The government also agreed that the UK will have no representation or say in the EU decisions taken during the transition.

Even so, the deal does not answer the issue of future British/EU relations regarding trade and military/intelligence collaboration, which will not be clarified until after withdrawal. An indication of the tensions emerging around this is underscored by the European Commission stating that the UK cannot automatically assume it will be part of the Galileo satellite navigation system begun in 2001 by the EU. The EC states that the encryption system for the project, which is to operate independently of the United States, would be "irretrievably compromised" if a state exiting the EU continued to have access to sensitive information.

May's deal angered both the pro and anti-Brexit wings of the British bourgeoisie. However, the opposition of May's hard-Brexit opponents was tempered by the fact that it has brought their preferred option closer.

Pro-Remainers have centred their hopes to arrest Brexit on encouraging sympathetic Tory MPs to rebel against

May when parliament votes on the end deal. This strategy now hangs like a Sword of Damocles over their heads as, in the event parliament votes down the deal, it will mean Britain crashes out of the EU without any agreement. The hard-Brexit option favoured by substantial sections of the Tory Party becomes an accomplished fact.

This has fuelled a renewed campaign by the Labour right, on whose behalf Smith headed up the failed leadership challenge to Corbyn in 2016. Labour, he wrote, "should ask if Brexit is the right decision, not just push for a softer version," and must ensure "that the country has a vote on whether to accept the terms, and true costs of that choice, once they are clear."

Speaking after his sacking, Smith accused Corbyn of taking a "Eurosceptic" position and complained that Labour could "sleep walk" to supporting a "soft Brexit."

"It's the first instance that I can think of in living memory of a government pursuing a policy that they know is going to make our economy smaller and reduce people's livelihoods and life chances," he said.

Coming from the political representative of Labour's neo-liberal right, which initiated the austerity measures following the 2008 crash that have catastrophically impacted on workers' living standards, Smith's criticisms reek of hypocrisy.

For the majority of the British bourgeoisie, which stood full-square in favour of a Remain vote in the 2016 referendum, the best political option for reversing the result lies in changing Labour's official policy to support a second referendum. But while Corbyn has gone a long way to assuage the Labour right—campaigning in favour of Remain and stating recently that he was in favour of "a customs union" with the EU—he has stopped short of endorsing membership of the Single European Market and a second referendum.

Smith was backed by high profile opponents of Corbyn, including Labour MP Chuka Umunna. He heads a

pro-Remain cross-party grouping, which includes senior Tories and business groups that are lobbying EU ministers and negotiators.

Writing in the *Independent*, Labour MP Ben Bradshaw echoed Smith, calling on “principled Conservatives to put the interests of their constituents and their country before the short term and narrow interests of their party for the deal to be rejected.”

Two scenarios flowed from this, he wrote. Either a new general election “which is the less likely option, as Conservative MPs don’t want one. Or the terms of the Government’s deal would have to be put to the people in a referendum.”

Bradshaw’s article made clear that this political initiative is part of a broader push to ensure that the “fight against Brexit is by no means over yet,” citing “investigations into the Leave Campaign, Cambridge Analytica and the Kremlin.”

Bogus charges that Cambridge Analytica and the Leave Campaign were part of a Russian operation to influence the Brexit referendum—including through illegal referendum funding—are being pursued as another means to annul the result.

On Monday, Labour’s Brexit spokesman Keir Starmer took up the baton, denouncing as “totally unacceptable” the assertion by government Brexit Minister [Lord] Martin Callanan that parliament’s rejection of a Brexit deal would be “an instruction to move ahead” without one.

Labour would now table amendments to the government’s EU withdrawal bill, ensuring that if the deal is voted down, MPs should be able to determine the next steps. Starmer said this should include instructing ministers to go “back to the negotiating table in Brussels.”

Starmer framed his speech as generally supportive of Corbyn. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair made no such pretensions. In his own remarks Monday in Westminster, Blair made a plea to Tories to recognise that the best means of preventing a Corbyn-led government was to defeat Brexit.

Calling for a second referendum, Blair said that the 2016 vote had not made clear the terms and conditions under which Britain would exit the EU. Yet Brexit would cause major damage to “Britain’s geo-political standing,” he said, especially under conditions in which “the world of geo-politics is undergoing a revolution.”

The US, Europe and Britain were challenged by the rise of competitors—most notably China and Russia. They can

secure their interests only by strengthening their alliances, or they would be left substantially weaker.

That is why the argument that there can be “no revisiting of the decision [to exit] irrespective of what it means for the national interest or the economy” was wrong, he insisted.

The May government could not be trusted to make the right call because its “primary interest” was keeping up the “façade” of Tory unity. But equally, Labour cannot be trusted because “its leadership believes—whether for reasons of opportunism or covert opposition to the EU—that they must commit to doing Brexit but pretend that they would secure a better Brexit deal.”

Reminiscing sympathetically about the history of the Tory Party as one of “pragmatism” and freedom from “ideology,” he said it was understandable that it should see delivering Brexit as “the will of the people” and the “best inoculation against a Corbyn Government.”

Making clear that he is just as bitterly opposed to such a Labour government, he cautioned that “in politics the difference between tactics and strategy is everything.”

“Brexit is not the route to escaping a Corbyn Government; it is the gateway to having one.”

To this end, the “sensible strategic course for the Tories is to share the responsibility” and “let the MPs have a free vote. Then let the people make the final judgement on whether the British people prefer the terms for leaving Europe to what we have now inside Europe.”

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