

Labour's approach to Brexit

Labour says it wants to be involved in Brexit. It is and will be. Next week if there is a vote on the government's Withdrawal Agreement Labour's votes against will matter given the divisions on this proposal within the Conservative party. Labour is understandably reluctant to set out a positive approach to Brexit given the wide range of views within the party, but will oppose most of what Mrs May produces as an opposition usually does. They have set out a wide range of reasons for being against the Withdrawal Agreement.

Mr Corbyn is treading a careful path against the background of trying to lead a party much more divided over Brexit than the Conservatives. The Conservative party in the Commons contains up to 12 MPs who cannot reconcile themselves to Brexit and who used a number of opportunities to try to derail or modify the Withdrawal Bill as it went through. There is now a slightly larger group who say they want to prevent leaving without an agreement. The rest of the Conservative Parliamentary party accepts Brexit, including more than 100 who were Leave campaigners and strongly believe in it. The Conservative membership is also strongly pro Brexit, and an increasing proportion of the Conservative vote in the last General Election came from Leave voters who saw the party as the best way to get Brexit implemented. It is easy to unite practically all the Conservative party on Brexit by ensuring it happens.

In contrast there is a much larger group of Labour MPs who cannot reconcile themselves to Brexit, who try various Parliamentary tactics to seek to derail or delay our exit from the EU. There is a small group of pro Brexit Labour MPs, and some who accept the verdict of the voters and who fear for Labour's future if it is seen to stop Brexit. There is a larger group of pro Jeremy Corbyn MPs who wish to use Brexit to try to secure a General election. The membership is heavily in favour of Remain, whilst the voters are split between some very pro Leave constituencies and some very pro Remain constituencies. There is no way the leadership can suit all their audiences. The Manifesto said it would want to implement the referendum result. The best course for the leader is to oppose much of what the government does, to unite his forces by concentrating on trying to force an early election, and hoping that in practice the Brexit issue gets settled by the Conservatives so he can move his party on to more unifying terrain.

Next week the question is a simple for or against the Withdrawal Agreement. It's not a difficult question. It is difficult to see why many would want to vote for it, given the way it guarantees another 21 to 45 months of Brexit rows and likely continuing political paralysis because of the continuing talks with the EU. That would make a deeper split in Labour that much more likely.

Labour seems to understand that adopting a second referendum as their policy as their pro Remain group want to do would be very damaging to their poll position. It would mean losing more of their Leave supporters who would feel insulted and let down by telling them they got it wrong the first time. The Lib Dems found backing a second referendum left them a poor third in the 2017

General election.