

Party discipline, the referendum and the Manifesto

I have been careful not to criticise Conservative MPs personally who voted for Amendment 7, and am not going to change my stance in this article. I do wish, however, to explore why some MPs vote against the whip and ask is it reasonable to do so in certain circumstances? In the UK system an MP is there to exercise judgement and to hold the government to account, or to be part of the government. He or she should also be conscious that they were voted in because they belonged to a particular party, as well as for their own merits. It is important to look at the general Manifesto of their party when considering their later conduct.

It is true that Brexiteer MPs did often vote against new European laws, larger EU budgets and other increases in EU power under the Coalition. We did so because we took seriously the Conservative party Manifesto of 2010 which we had stood on. It said:

“There should be no further extension of the EU’s power over the UK without the British people’s consent... We will bring back key powers over legal rights, criminal justice and social and employment legislation to the UK”.
“The steady and unacceptable intrusion of the EU into almost every aspect of our lives has gone too far”

We took this to mean that we should resist the extra powers which successive new EU inspired laws and larger budgets brought to the EU. We understood the Lib Dems in government took a pro federalist line which was very different to the our party view in the Manifesto.

So what did the 2017 Manifesto say which might influence the conduct of Conservative MPs today? It said

“We are leaving the EU. In leaving the EU we have chosen a truly global role for Britain...No deal is better than a bad deal...We will no longer be members of the single market or customs union...the days of Britain making vast annual contributions to the EU will end”

Any individual MP may have stood on a personal Manifesto that modified some part of the national Manifesto. Ken Clarke, for example, has always made clear his opposition to the Referendum and its result. The rest of us did not disagree with the views I have quoted above. In 2010 I included in my personal platform a pledge to work for a referendum on the issue of membership of the EU, which we secured as a policy promise before 2015.

Those Labour Opposition MPs who are seeking to use Parliamentary tactics to delay or derail Brexit are opposing both the decision of UK voters in the referendum and the terms of their own Manifesto in 2017. To defy one expression of the public will is foolish To defy two may prove very damaging to them in a future election.