

Should Labour do a deal with Mrs May?

The two main parties in Parliament who commanded 82.5% of the vote in the summer of 2017 managed to get just 56% in the local elections. Both have to think about this amazing fall from grace and what they are going to do about it.

Some of it was brought about by voters who blame the two big parties for failing to sort out Brexit. Leave voters are scandalised that 3 years on the wishes of the people have still not been implemented. Most Leave voters now just want to leave without the Agreement. Some Remain voters see the Agreement as obviously worse than staying in, and want a second referendum or simple cancellation of our notice to quit. Mrs May's dreadful Agreement with the EU has united most Leave and most Remain voters against it, though of course the two sides want a different outcome without the Agreement.

The Labour party is unable to reach friendly unity on what to make its new EU policy. The Leader is understandably reluctant to commit himself to a second referendum. The many Labour MPs representing heavily pro Leave areas in the Midlands and North would find such a policy particularly difficult to support. Meanwhile pro Remain London is urging the party to do all it can to undermine the Brexit vote and to retreat back to some kind of surrogate membership of much of the current EU. The noisy minority who want a second vote still have to say what the question is, or want to ask a pro Remain question, offering two different ways of staying in.

The Conservative party says it wants us to leave as soon as possible, and clearly does not want a second referendum. So far, however, it refuses to just leave and has created the conditions where European elections seem likely. It struggles to explain why the delay was needed and how soon we can get out, and on what terms. Just saying we will leave having signed the Withdrawal Agreement requires an answer to the question why will the Agreement go through after the elections when it didn't go through before them? How does the PM answer the criticism that the Agreement is an Agreement for delay or to stay in the customs union and many other features of the current EU? If all the Eurosceptic Conservatives voted for the Agreement in a fourth vote – which they are not going to do -it would still be defeated without a deal with Labour. The Irish backstop means it continues to weaken the DUP confidence and supply arrangement. The DUP cannot vote for the Agreement as drafted, and the government and EU refuse to renegotiate the Agreement.

So far Labour has shown willing to talk to the government, but is unwilling to simply sign up to the Withdrawal Agreement, understanding how toxic it is with the voters. They have played around with the details of the Political declaration where the EU has said there is some more flexibility. They have not yet come to a view of changes from a possible EU negotiations that Mrs May can accept. The negotiations to get out of the EU with an agreement only start once the Withdrawal Agreement lock in is signed, and would require an agreed common position on all the main issues between Mrs May and Mr Corbyn

with a formal pledge that Mr Corbyn will place a 3 line whip on Labour MPs to push through the necessary legislation.

The big danger for Labour is that Mrs May, now desperate to secure the Agreement, will offer staying in the customs union and keeping the UK under single markets rules and laws as a negotiating aim for the next talks. Were Labour to accept, Labour too becomes responsible for the Withdrawal Agreement. If and when Parliament is shown the legislation to implement that in UK law it will discover how long, complex and binding the provisions of the Agreement are, extending the EU's tentacles back into so many features of UK life and government. It will remind all Labour's Leave voters that it is not in any sense leaving. It will stir up their Remain voters who will stress the superiority of current EU Treaty arrangements over the new arrangements in the new Treaty where we would have no vote or voice over all the laws and regulations the EU will enact for us.

The continent has a tradition now of so called grand coalitions between the main centre left and centre right parties as they no longer have the support to form a government individually. They usually depress the popularity of the junior party still further without adding to the support of the major partner. Quite often they presage a collapse in support for one or both such parties, ushering in new political forces to government at the next election. Labour should study the tragic history of the collapse of the SPD in Germany as the grand coalition partner to Mrs Merkel. They now languish on 16% of the vote.

Signing the Agreement would be part of a joint Conservative/Labour wish to be more European. It might well succeed in making the UK more European with more parties and much lower support for the traditional parties that bend their knee to Brussels.