

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON LABOUR

AND THE EU REFERENDUM

1. **How is the Labour Party's current highly Europhile stance playing with Labour voters?**

As the Leave and Remain campaigns for the EU referendum get under way, it is increasingly clear that the highly Europhile stance taken by the Parliamentary Labour Party, albeit reflecting the resolution passed in some haste by Conference in 2015, resonates strongly with many Labour Party activists. It is also very evident that it plays much less successfully with the large number of traditional Labour voters who feel that the Party does not really understand their concerns on the EU, that it does not share their world view or their aspirations for the future of the UK, and who are therefore now inclined both to vote for the UK leaving the EU and very probably to be less likely to continue to support Labour in future. Is Labour's current stance therefore really one that is either wise or one that the Party can afford to take?

2. **What do these traditional Labour voters think which Party policy does not reflect?**

There is a long list of concerns that traditional Labour voters have about our membership of the EU, which current Party policy does not reflect. Well off metropolitan elites may well shrug off the huge cost to the UK of our EU membership but this is not the way that a lot of Labour-leaning working class people see it. At a time when large parts of the welfare state are under unprecedented financial strain, they are very unhappy to see the UK contributions to the EU on an ever-rising trend, while domestically the scene on public sector expenditure is one of unending cuts and austerity. Again, those on high incomes, with good jobs, may well benefit from a large number of people coming to the UK to work for low wages but this is not the way it looks to those who find their job security and their wages under constant downward pressure as a result of what they regard as very unfair competition for employment in the job market. It is against this background that many people who are suffering from these

sorts of disadvantages of our EU membership regard with great resentment the fact that they have so little control over their lives and their futures. They do not see why so many decisions should be taken by remote elites whom they cannot vote out of office and over whom they therefore have no control. Nor are they happy to see the UK getting more and more closely integrated with other countries in the only continent in the world with no economic growth and massive levels of unemployment. They sense – with ample justification – that the UK is part of an organisation whose leaders’ objective is to be the United States of Europe, which is not a goal that they share.

3. **What would they like to see Labour doing?**

The vast majority of people who have concerns such as these about our relationship with the EU are not against friendship with our continental neighbours. They are happy for us to have strong and liberal trading arrangements with them. They recognise that we have a very wide range of common interests on everything from climate change to fighting terrorism. They like travelling abroad. They recognise that the EU has had important achievements to its credit, particularly encouraging liberal democracy across the whole of the European continent and promoting social legislation, from which many working people have benefited. They are, however, concerned that the EU has lost its way in a number of important respects. They are appalled by the high levels of unemployment and austerity foisted on some of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the EU as a result of the Single Currency. They do not believe that free movement of labour works satisfactorily along the very steep economic gradient there is between Western and Eastern Europe. They are alarmed by the rise of racist and xenophobic parties in some EU countries. They do not, therefore, believe that the Labour Party is justified in taking its current uncritical stance on the issues on which they think that both the EU itself and our terms of EU membership have gone wrong.

4. **What do Labour’s lost supporters think the Labour Party’s stance on the EU should be?**

If Labour’s lost supporters do not think that blanket endorsement of our existing terms of membership is the right stance for the Labour Party to take, what do they think should be the Party’s attitude in its place? They are surprised at the mute opposition by Labour to the minimal changes in our terms of membership achieved during the current round of negotiations and puzzled as to why the Labour Party appears to have no reform programme for the EU of its own. The Party talks about supporting a “reformed EU” but does not tell us what this might be or how we are going to get there. Instead, well before anyone knew what the outcome of the present round of renegotiation was going to be, the Party announced that it would support continued membership whatever the outcome. In fact, it is not difficult to describe what the vast majority of the UK population would like to see as our relationship with the EU, including a large majority of Labour supporters. They would like us to have free trade with the remaining EU members combined with co-operation on all the issues on which working together make sense, but on an inter-governmental basis rather than as part of a continent-wide political project,

and without the current huge costs. The problem is that the Labour Party has no agenda at the moment that is designed to get us anywhere near this state of affairs. How has the Labour Party managed to get itself into a position where its policy and strategic stance on the EU is so out of kilter with so large a number of the potential supporters whom it badly needs to bring back into the fold? Part has to do with history and part with the way the Party is now made up.

5. **What happened at the 1988 TUC Conference?**

Labour lost the general elections in both 1983 and 1987, leaving the country at the mercy of the Thatcher government. Jacques Delors visited the TUC Conference that year and promised the trade union movement a welcome in Brussels, which by then it sadly lacked in Downing Street. The result was the UK trade union movement swung round from being broadly Eurosceptic to being generally Europhile, and the Labour Party followed the same path during the next few years. Over the same period, the Conservative Party, which had been very largely in favour of our remaining in what was then the Common Market at the time of 1975 referendum, became increasingly Eurosceptic, reinforcing the Labour Party's changed view that if the Tories were against the EU, Labour should be in favour of it. This newfound Labour support for our EU membership was not, however, universally reflected especially among working people, leading to the rise of UKIP and the loss of a vitally important block of electoral support to Labour which was very evident in the 2015 election.

6. **How has the Labour Party changed?**

It is not, however, just that political pressures were seen to push the Labour Party to being more Europhile. It is also changes within the Party itself that have had a lot to do with the Party's current attitudes to our EU membership. The Labour Party is now much more middle class than it used to be, more comfortably well-off, more orientated to public sector employment, with its support drifting towards metropolitan areas and away from the UK's industrial heartlands. The result is the widening difference in perception referred to above about the pros and cons of our EU membership between the supporters Labour has recently recruited and those traditional Labour voters who have strayed off to other parties. Labour's newer members, because they are relatively affluent, are more inclined to take a tolerant view of the very large sums paid by the UK to the EU every year - £11.4bn in 2014 after all rebates and EU expenditure in the UK, whereas working class people are more inclined to resent this money being sent overseas. There is a similar split in views about immigration, which is much more widely welcomed by well-off people than those who have to compete with immigrant labour at the less well-rewarded end of the job market. The worldview of Labour's newer members tends to be internationalist whereas that of Labour's traditional voters tends to be more patriotic, with charity starting at home rather than elsewhere. There is also a marked variation in the degree with which many people who have turned away from voting Labour perceive the political system and its responsiveness to their concerns and the extent to which they think that their culture and traditions are respected and understood. They do not believe

that they are appreciated as much as they should be or that their concerns are being addressed as sympathetically as ought to be the case.

7. **What are the dangers to Labour of too much uncritical support of our EU membership?**

The result of all these trends is that the Labour Party's membership – and nearly all the people it has chosen in recent years to be elected to the House of Commons - are now markedly more in favour of our EU membership than much of the electorate on which Labour depends if it is going to have any chance of being elected again to form a government. It is these disjunctions between the attitudes reflected in current Labour Party, not least on the EU, which explains to a significant extent why Labour has haemorrhaged support in many parts of the UK to UKIP and to other parties too, not least the Conservatives and the Greens. Opinion polls indicate that at least 40% or more of those potentially inclined to vote Labour are likely to vote for Leave rather than Remain. There is thus a painfully large gap between the highly Europhile stance taken by the Parliamentary Labour Party, supported by the majority of Labour activists, and the attitudes and perceptions of many of the Labour voters which the Party desperately needs to attract back to the fold.

8. **What should Labour do?**

Surely, what Labour should have done – and may have the opportunity to achieve over the coming period - is to develop a much more constructively critical attitude to our EU membership than it actually has done. If on 23rd June 2016 we vote to Remain in the EU, large numbers of people are not going to be content with the unreformed EU with which we are then likely to be confronted. What does Labour think should then be done to remedy matters, if this is possible? Alternatively, if we vote to Leave, what is Labour policy then going to be towards the critically important negotiations which are then going to have to take place, as the UK's position in the world, and particular with the EU, is redefined? Endorsing the EU and all it stands for, which is broadly where the Labour Party now stands, is not going to be a viable policy stance. The Party is going to have to start thinking much harder than it has done up to now about how it believes the future of our relationship with the other Member States ought to be shaped. As it goes through this process it needs to bear in mind not only the views of its current members and leadership but those of the millions of potential supporters it could have who currently feel alienated by the Party's uncritical EU stance and who feel that – whether we are in or out of the EU - their views need to be taken into account and respected.