

LABOUR EURO-SAFEGUARDS CAMPAIGN

BULLETIN

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON

THE GENERAL ELECTION AND BREXIT

1. What can we say about the likely outcome of the current general election?

We are now in the middle of a general election whose overall outcome is impossible to predict. Some things are clear, however, and are unlikely to change before 12th December 2019. The Brexit Party is unlikely to win more than a handful of seats – if any judging by UKIP’s record - but may cut into the Conservative vote, thus reducing the chances of the Conservatives securing an overall majority. The Conservatives are unlikely to be able to form a stable government unless they win an overall majority in the House of Commons, because no other parliamentary party – probably including the DUP – will be inclined to enter into a coalition with them. Some kind of alliance, however, seems more possible after the election among the non-Conservative parties which support Remain, including Labour, the SNP, and the Lib Dems, although there is little which unites them other than their wish to stay in the EU. Furthermore, it seems likely that not only will there be almost unanimous support for Remain among newly elected Labour, Lib Dems and SNP MPs, but probably perhaps one third of Conservatives elected in December 2019 will have Remain sympathies. Despite the Conservative manifesto commitments on Brexit, we are therefore likely to have a new Parliament with the same Remain majority as it has had over the past three and a half years, but still faced with the Leave outcome of the 2016 EU referendum.

2. What is Labour’s position?

Labour’s stance has shifted steadily further towards Remain, although the leadership clearly has reservations about this happening, driven no doubt partly by conviction but also by recognition that there is a large Labour Leave vote which Labour ignores

at its peril. In the election in 2017, two thirds of the seats won by Labour had Leave majorities, as did 35 of the 45 seats which Labour needs to win to achieve a majority. So do 15 out of the 20 seats held by Labour with the slimmest majorities. Labour's policy is thus to renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement brought back from Brussels by Boris Johnson and then to put to a second referendum a revised deal on the one hand and revoking Article 50 and staying in the EU on the other. If this referendum produces a Remain majority, which is far from certain, this would provide Labour with the democratic cover – conspicuously lacking currently in the case of the Lib Dems - for going full out in favour staying in the EU, which is what most Party members evidently want. Whether this would be the referendum outcome, however, depends very much on what the alternative option to Remain is, and whether this fairly represents Leave views on Brexit.

3. Will Labour's stance wash with the electorate?

While Labour's current policy on Brexit has the advantage of keeping options open, and thus avoiding offending key constituencies among both Leavers and Remainers – factors which no doubt persuaded the leadership to adopt it - clearly it has some complexities, which are problematic to explain away on the doorstep. Renegotiating a deal with EU may not be either an easy or a quick process. There will inevitably be a delay before the referendum can be held, during which uncertainty will continue and bitterness and divisions may rise, especially among those who oppose a second referendum on the democratic principle that the original result should be decisive. There are also issues round expense. The 2016 referendum cost just under £140m. Nevertheless, given the large Remain majority among MPs - if not among the electorate - which the current general election may produce and the certainty that, in these circumstances, Labour would play a dominant role, it seems likely that a second EU could well be the outcome.

4. What will be the options put forward in the second EU referendum?

If this happens, clearly one of the options would be full-blooded Remain, with the UK maintaining our current position in the EU., although there may be conditions attached to the EU accepting maintenance of the status quo. Would we lose some or all of our rebate? Would we be obliged to join the euro and Schengen free movement? We will need answers to these questions, but we will also need to resolve an even more fundamental issue which what the shape of an alternative option to Remain might be. There has been some suggestion that this would be a very soft Brexit, with the UK staying in the Customs Union and bound very closely to the EU in almost all the ways we are now. The view of many Leavers is that this would be the worst of all worlds, maintaining all the disadvantages of our current membership while depriving us of any say – let alone control - on the future directions the EU

takes. Instead, if we are going to have a re-run of the EU referendum, we need to have an alternative option which fairly represents the views of most Leavers. This is vital both because this is the only fair way ahead, making at least some effort to deal with the deep divisions in the country. It is also of critical importance in helping Labour to maintain the support of the large numbers of Leave orientated traditional Labour supports in marginal seats in Wales, the Midlands and the North of England, particularly during the current general election.

5. What would an alternative option to Remain acceptable to Leavers look like and would it be achievable?

What should an alternative option look like? Because of shortage of time, the starting point has to be what has already been agreed between the UK government and the EU, probably with the following enhancements and endorsements to the proposals which Parliament has most recently been considering:

There should be assurances that UK standards would not fall below those in the EU on workers' rights, consumer protection and environmental requirements.

The position of EU residents in the UK should be made secure without delay.

With provision for a reasonable length transition period, before implementation, the UK should exit both the Customs Union and the Single Market, with our trading relationship with the EU being replaced by a Free Trade Agreement, broadly on the lines of the recent CETA treaty between the EU and Canada.

We should aim to make the border between the North and South in Ireland as invisible as possible using electronic means but in the mean time we should follow the arrangements negotiated recently which keep Northern Ireland in both the UK and EU Customs Unions.

We should leave both the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy, replacing both of them with support regimes better suited to the UK than those currently in place.

Allowing for derogations during a transitional period, UK law should become supreme over EU law.

6. What would be the appeal of a programme of this sort?

Given that a second referendum is going to take place at all in the light of all the democratic arguments against this happening, it seems likely that proposals along these lines would be regarded by most Leavers as providing a fair summary of what they think Leave should mean. It would provide us with control of our money, our borders and our trade. Our current very substantial net payments to the EU budget would be phased out. We could negotiate trade deals with whomever we want. We should aim to implement an immigration policy

which would achieve broad consent while securing the position of existing EU migrants. With the right kind of free trade deal, we could achieve near frictionless trade in goods with the EU, to be supplemented with agreements on services. We would remove constraints on the implementation of Labour manifesto policies which might otherwise fall foul of EU restrictions. We would be out of the CAP and CFP, both of which have little support in the UK. The UK would then be able to forge its own destiny outside the centralising pressures pushing the EU towards political unity.

7. What does the Labour manifesto say?

Labour's manifesto for the current general election has now been published and the section entitled "The Final Say on Brexit" sets out the Party's current position on its Brexit policy. It keeps some options open, which is very welcome. While ruling out a No Deal outcome, it leaves the Party's approach to the Customs Union and the Single Market substantially undefined. The problem which may still materialise, however, is that even if Labour was willing to have a genuine Leave choice, the EU, especially with pressure from No Deal ruled out, may be unwilling to agree to an acceptable Leave referendum offer, thus presenting Labour with the choice of offering a full Remain option on the one hand plus another option which is so poor that few people would think it was worth supporting. This might generate a pro-Remain result to a second referendum, but it would be one which would be regarded by not only Leave supporters but by many other people as being the result of a travesty of a genuine democratic process.

8. What needs to be done to help to bind up the nation's wounds on Brexit?

Surely as important as finding a resolution to the Brexit crisis is establishing a way ahead which is not going to leave half the nation feeling it has been short-changed and tricked into voting Remain by having a referendum with a Leave option which does not have Leave support. The manifesto approach, which does not close off the possibility of a genuine Leave option if there is a second EU referendum, certainly may help Labour during the current general election. If the result is a Parliament with Labour as the largest Remain party and with the Conservatives with no overall majority, however, the next test will be to ensure that, if a second EU referendum, then goes ahead, it is seen to be fair. There is a lot of Leave support among traditional Labour voters, especially outside London and other university conurbations, who may be won over to supporting Labour on 12th December 2019 rather than drifting off to the Brexit Party or the Conservatives if they think that Labour will eventually offer them a genuine and fair choice. It is vital that all these people are not disappointed by what eventually happens.

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