

Labour's decision to remain neutral on Brexit could destroy its election hopes

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The risk is that the party has not learned lessons from its disastrous European election performance



Against all the odds Labour, in the end, had a good conference. Amid the news that the Supreme Court had found the Prime Minister to have abused his power and broken the law, Jeremy Corbyn delivered his speech to a rapturous reception. Indeed, the speech had to be brought forward so the assembled MPs could return to Westminster. He declared emphatically and justifiably that the government had attempted to usurp democracy, and Labour would defend it.

But make no mistake. The Tories have had a shocking few days but that, on its own, cannot rescue Labour. Labour's own efforts this week to promote democracy could prove to be fatal in the forthcoming election.

I speak, of course, of the decision adopted on Monday night to remain neutral in a future Brexit referendum.

First, it is important to acknowledge how far Labour has come on this issue. At the time of the election in 2017, the party was not endorsing either a single market or customs union. Labour's only real difference from the Conservatives was a refusal to countenance no-deal. And now, two years on, the party is guaranteeing a people's vote, with a Remain option, in all circumstances.

It is also important to defend the basic principle behind Labour's thinking. Any referendum needs to have more than one option. It is reasonable for Labour to seek a new Brexit deal that accords with its own priorities and then put that to the people. In practice, this would constitute Theresa May's withdrawal agreement and an amended political declaration to take into account, for example, Labour's preference for a permanent customs union and additional workers' rights.

We can even defend Monday's decision on the grounds that it represents a fair compromise. The party still includes a cross-section of opinion on Brexit and there is a case for withholding an endorsement of either side until an election has been won and an agreement renegotiated.

The problem is that this stance makes an election victory much less likely. What was decided on Monday was not bad policy so much as bad politics.

The first reason is that the policy is extremely hard to explain. Not only is Labour suggesting it might negotiate something and then campaign against it, but it refuses to confirm what it thinks about the key issue of our time. On the doorsteps it could come across not as noble or conciliatory but evasive and absurd.

The second and more important reason is that Labour's destination is now all but locked in. It is a *de facto* Remain party. The vast majority of its MPs want to remain. So does the shadow cabinet. So do the party's members. So do its voters. Corbyn himself is of course not a natural Europhile, but he has promised to abide by members' wishes. When the referendum comes, the Labour Party will endorse Remain.

Eventually the party will have to admit that. The mistake was not to admit it now. Why didn't they? Put simply, it wants to convince voters that the party may eventually back Leave. It sounds dishonest, because it is.

Leavers are not stupid. They know that the party is not going to remain neutral when it comes to the vote, and they also know it is on a straight trajectory to Remain. They may develop more respect for Labour if the party simply comes out and says so.

But the party's stance would make no political sense even if it really was planning to endorse Brexit. Labour Leavers fall broadly into two camps: those who have already left the party for good, and those who will never leave it. The party does not need to worry about the latter group and has done nothing to appease the former. The people who deserted Labour over its customs union position are not going to return to the fold for a people's vote.

We now have a fundamental dividing line in British politics – Leave and Remain – along with mainstream parties to accommodate them. The Conservatives are explicitly Leave. The Liberal Democrats (and SNP, Plaid and Greens) are explicitly Remain. Many thousands of would-be Labour voters who value remaining over all else could now be driven away, leaving Labour to mop up the voters in the middle, who are either voting tactically to stop the Tories or who don't regard Brexit as the most important issue. That is asking a lot of millions of people, and represents a precarious position for any party to occupy.

It is in fact even worse, in that for its electoral survival the Labour Party now depends more or less entirely on Nigel Farage – a figure who has closely associated himself with the far right. Labour needs Farage to stand against Boris Johnson – almost certainly after the Prime Minister has broken his "do or die" pledge and secured a Brexit extension after 31 October – and split the Brexit vote. Such a split enabled Labour to win the Peterborough by-election in

June even though the Tories and the Brexit Party collectively polled at over 50 per cent. The hope must be that this pattern repeats itself in Leave seats across the country and allows Labour to squeeze through.

But if Farage wises up to this tactic and forms a pact with Johnson – even if the PM has extended Brexit and no longer seeks a no-deal outcome – then Labour could be clobbered. Again, it is a profoundly insecure launching point for any election campaign when your prospects depend entirely on the moves of your most bitter opponents.

The great fear is that Labour has faced an open goal and deliberately kicked the ball into the stands. Its “neutral for now” policy will confuse or alienate both Leavers and Remainers, who will fear the party is for the side that isn’t theirs and choose a more concrete alternative. It could gift hundreds of thousands of Remain votes to the Lib Dems and SNP without winning over any Leavers at all.

Britain is deeply polarised, and it is honourable and necessary to forge compromise and bridge divisions. But you do have to let your prospective voters know what you stand for, and in a two-option vote you eventually have to pick a side. We saw in the European elections what happens when you seek to ride all the horses at once. The risk is that Labour has not learnt its lesson, and will repeat the same disastrous result.

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