

# Sorry Jezza – the EU Parliament elections are about “Europe”

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So Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn has made an appeal for voters – now that we will definitely be voting in the EU Parliament elections on May 23rd – to move beyond the division of “Remain” versus “Leave” and vote for Labour on the premise of its social justice policies instead.

In one sense, this is not surprising, as Labour have prevaricated in stating a concise approach to Brexit since the 2017 election. Indeed, their “policy” has been one of deliberate ambiguity in trying to appeal to Labour Leave and Remain voters alike. Suspicions continue that the Labour leader is pro-Brexit but he has to manage a party membership and caucus that is overwhelmingly pro-Remain.

Critics of this approach (that is, the bulk of its MPs and membership and wider liberal commentariat) have long stated that this approach is costing Labour support and that continuing to try and appease Leave voters has not and will not deliver any electoral dividends.

There was evidence of this in the recent local government elections in England, where Labour lost 84 council seats, whilst the strongly pro-Remain Liberal Democrats picked up over 700 seats. The Greens and independent candidates also performed well.

It hardly goes without saying that a party in opposition in Westminster amidst widespread dissatisfaction with the Tories should have made a net gain in local government elections but the inability to do this has only fuelled increased criticism of Jeremy Corbyn and his inner circle.

For the Conservatives it is even worse, with the party having been trounced in the English local elections, and now Farage’s Brexit Party providing a ready alternative for the majority of Conservative voters (and the overwhelming majority of their aged membership) who are Leave-minded.

Add to this Conservative Remainers defecting to Change UK or the Lib Dems and the real risk for the Tories is that they are heading for a Euro-electoral meltdown, with the Politico analysis putting them currently at 14% of the vote across the UK. This would barely be enough to guarantee them an MEP in each regional constituency. Other polls have them at an even lower predicted vote share.

Reports today suggest that the Tories are in “denial”, with the Guardian commenting that the “fears of a dismal performance have been stoked by the fact that the party plans to spend no money on candidate campaigning, will not publish a manifesto and is refusing to hold a launch”.<sup>[1]</sup>

Given these predictions, reports suggest that the PM will make another attempt to get a version of her withdrawal agreement through Parliament (“Meaningless Vote 4.0”) in the next couple of weeks, with talks with Labour on a compromise seemingly heading nowhere. If this is not feasible then we return to the scenario of giving MPs yet another round of votes on different Brexit options.<sup>[2]</sup>

None of this, of course, mitigates our taking part in the EU Parliament elections. And so enters Nigel Farage’s latest bandwagon, in the form of the “Brexit Party”. Farage has not wasted time in stating that “victory” for his party in the EU Parliamentary elections would be an endorsement for leaving the EU with a hard Brexit and reverting to World Trade Organisation (WTO) strictures on trade access for countries that don’t have a trade agreement with the EU.

In other words, leaving the EU with no deal. The economic difficulties this would cause for UK businesses with the sudden loss of access to the Single Market and exclusion from a customs union cannot be overstated.

Indeed, resorting to WTO terms is fraught with difficulties, with the world trade body only providing a base common platform for “trade rules” and excluding most of the regulations that surround trade in services (banking and insurance, digital services such as Netflix, mobile phone data roaming charges etc.), environmental standards and so on.

As the current dispute between the US and China shows, large powerful countries can subvert the WTO's rulings, or seek to by-pass it altogether, as the proposed resolution procedure by the US and China to their current trade dispute would indicate.<sup>[3]</sup>

As such, Farage's party has no manifesto or policies, beyond campaigning for a 'no deal' Brexit, to articulate what a post-Brexit landscape would look like (and indeed, this was a feature of the Leave campaign to begin with), only emphasising that he is campaigning for "democracy". Suffice to say, only about a quarter of the UK public support a "no deal" scenario.

For Farage and his followers, Brexit is simply a revolution that has been frustrated, or indeed "betrayed" by a "Remainer Parliament" and now must be completed if the Promised Land of Brexit Utopia is to be reached. However, revolutions tend to have a nasty habit of eating their own children.

No surprise then that the Politico composite "poll of polls" only has the Brexit Party at a projected 26% of the vote share.<sup>[4]</sup> Similarly, analysis in the Financial Times suggests that Labour will still end up with the most seats in England (25), followed by the Brexit Party (20).<sup>[5]</sup>

Despite how such a performance might be portrayed in large sections of the media ("largest party" and all that), contra Farage, this would hardly constitute a mandate for Brexit on WTO third country status terms.

Nevertheless Farage's new party is having an effect on the political landscape, with the Conservatives tanking, and UKIP now a busted flush. Polls consistently have them at 5% of projected vote share, which will not be enough to get them an MEP in any region. UKIP's open flirting with Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka "Tommy Robinson") will not have helped them either.

In contrast, the Politico poll puts combined share for "pro-Remain" parties (Lib Dems/Greens/Change UK plus the Scottish National Party/SNP and Plaid Cymru) at 29%. This is bigger than the Brexit Party. Taken together with the predicted Brexit Party vote share this suggests a bifurcation of the electorate to "in" or "out" and complete

dissatisfaction with current Brexit stalemate in Conservative Party and prevarication by Labour.

So whilst the Tories are suffering from having failed to “deliver” Brexit for their core voters, Labour is suffering from lack of a clear pro-Remain stance and needs to “come off the fence” as it were. Appealing to Leave voters doesn’t appear to be working for it and meanwhile Remain-minded voters continue to drift away from it.

As such, in considering my own vote (yes you will not be surprised to find that I will be voting in these elections), I considered that I want my own vote to count to a definitive stance on Brexit. I had considered Labour’s concerns over social justice but ultimately these policies are determined at Westminster, where the bulk of tax-and-spend decisions continue to be made.

So, sorry Jezza, the EU Parliamentary elections are about our future with Europe and I’ll be voting for a party that has a clear stance on Brexit.

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/09/tories-fear-dismal-results-in-european-elections-meps-say>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/09/tories-fear-dismal-results-in-european-elections-meps-say>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/08/the-guardian-view-on-hard-brexite-trade-making-britain-vulnerable>

[4] <https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/united-kingdom/>

[5] <https://ig.ft.com/european-parliament-election-polls/>