

Corbyn and May, a curious alliance; is this really the beginning of the end?

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One dubious pleasure of writing about Brexit is its ability to create surprise and turn conventional wisdom upside down. The latest development, Theresa May seeking assistance from Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, would, until very recently, have seemed inconceivable. Many believe that if May had been willing to seek consensus earlier, the current impasse in Parliament might have been avoided and the UK would not be in a semi-permanent stasis. Like a wildfire that burns out of control, Brexit has consumed vast amounts of energy and time with little or nothing to show for May's unstinting dedication to the task of reaching agreement on withdrawing from the EU.

As *volte faces* go, Teresa May requesting that Corbyn should collaborate in developing a solution to the current crisis ranks with the best of them. Previously, watching her spar with him at Prime Minister's Questions, suggested very little respect between them. Their political hinterlands could not be more different. However, as has become increasingly clear, when it comes to Brexit there is more to bind them together than might be assumed.

May's support for remain, the official Government position under PM David Cameron during the 2016 referendum, was lukewarm. Allegedly, May was referred to by other members of the Cabinet during the run-up to the referendum as 'the submarine' due to her apparent unwillingness in surfacing to lend her support to the UK remaining part of the EU.

Some speculate that May's experience as Home Secretary May chastened her. It is beyond doubt that she believes the European Court of Justice should not have supremacy over British law; in 2014, she notified the European Commission that she was effectively 'cheery-picking' aspects of European law she agreed with and those she didn't.

May's ambivalence to the EU suggested that she was a reluctant remainder. Saying as little as she could was considered astute. As she may have calculated, correctly as it turned out, if the outcome of the referendum was to leave, Cameron would have to go. May wanted to be able to position herself in any succession to Cameron such that she could not be criticised by Eurosceptics as being an enthusiastic supporter of remain. As it turned out the leading candidates fell away and she effectively became leader by 'coronation'.

Jeremy Corbyn's stance on EU membership was, until becoming leader of the Labour Party a matter of little interest. However, following his landslide win by of votes cast by members in 2015 following the party's defeat that year under Ed Miliband, Corbyn's stance on Europe became a matter of significant importance.

Corbyn, the archetypal outsider and rebel against anything he considered to be part of the capitalist system ensuring, as he saw it, inequality that cursed working classes to perpetual servitude, was part of the 1970s generation of socialists who perceived the EU as being part of the problem rather than a solution.

Corbyn's stunning victory was regarded as resulting from Tony Blair's adoption of avowedly pro-capital principles enshrined in 'New Labour' manifestos. Getting rich was seen as perfectly acceptable as long as you paid your taxes as uber-Svengali, Peter Mandelson, once famously asserted. Those carrying the 'old Labour flag', such as Corbyn, eschewed what they saw as the party leaders sucking up to those who turned a blind eye to exploitation and employed expensive lawyers to circumnavigate rules.

That a large rump of Labour's hierarchy under Blair, and to a lesser extent his successors Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband, were enthusiastic supporters of the EU undoubtedly gave succour to a view among left-wingers that it was, at best, a suspect institution interested in propagating the interests of business and global capitalism. Economic catastrophe caused by the Global Financial Crisis in 2007-8 was felt across Europe and begat austerity that made the lot of workers worse.

Corbyn has never been a fan of being a member of the EEC/EU. And similar to May, he too was less than fulsome in support for remaining

part of the EU during the 2016 referendum though recognised that many of those who'd voted for him were. However, Labour was experiencing pressure from voters in its traditional heartlands in Northern constituencies, affected by long-term decline caused by the closure of traditional industries, who were being seduced by anti-EU arguments from UKIP (UK Independence Party).

As such, the threat to Labour from UKIP in its anti-EU, anti-immigration arguments, was symmetrical to that being experienced by the Conservative Party. The latter was experiencing loss of support from its traditional 'blue-rinse' voters wooed by the contention that the UK's sovereignty was being emasculated.

Since the referendum both May and Corby have, for different reasons, struggled to appeal to traditional voters who may be ardent leavers or remainers, and probably in the same constituencies. In the party-political game winning elections is the number one priority. Brexit, though, has created strange alliances and fault-lines within the two major parties. Facing both ways at the same time brings inevitable tensions that, occasionally, can bubble to the surface and, ideally, should be dealt with lest they provide the conditions for conflict.

The expression 'constructive ambiguity' has been used in relation to the Labour Party's position on withdrawal from Europe. Constructive ambiguity is based on creating workable and effective solutions to disputes and conflicts that appear intractable. If a solution is to be found, the negotiation process must attempt to utilise deliberately ambiguous language that will be interpreted by opposing factions to mean whatever they wish it to mean. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The key objective is akin to an entertainer spinning plates. If you relax from the frenetic rush to keep the plates spinning, they crash to the ground and break. The process is over.

Constructive ambiguity was crucial to success in negotiation of the Belfast Agreement (Good Friday Agreement) or 1998. As is understood only too well now, but ignored or seen as unimportant during the EU referendum, Brexit has demonstrated capacity to undo the Belfast Agreement which explicitly evolved from a "fudge" in that all sides recognised that using creative interpretation allowed them to claim, if not victory, certainly not defeat.

Allowing those engaged in negotiation to emerge with their integrity intact is regarded as a key objective if possible. After all, admitting defeat is hard to accept and, in Northern Ireland, would be unpalatable and impossible political representatives to sell to their communities; most especially those intent on continuing to engage in conflict.

As Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn are discovering with Brexit, continual fudging – the expression ‘kicking the can down the road’ has become a cliché – can only last so long. There comes a stage in negotiation when constructive ambiguity meets reality. ‘Sitting on the fence’ or being ‘in the middle of the road’ will no longer suffice. Something concrete must be agreed. However, plumping for particular solutions will inevitably mean that whilst you gain support from some, others will be diametrically opposed.

Theresa May has tried every which way to elicit support for the withdrawal deal that her government has painstakingly negotiated with the EU. This agreement includes the infamous ‘backstop’ so hated by members of the misnamed European Research Group (no one has ever discovered any research!) and Democratic Unionist Party with which the Conservatives have a ‘supply and confidence arrangement’.

With, once again, the deadline to leaving the EU with ‘no-deal’ fast approaching, and being fully aware of the potential economic and social consequences that would flow from this, not to mention undermining stability in Northern Ireland and facilitating a break-up of the union, May decided to embark on something previously she’d considered unthinkable. By reaching out to Jeremy Corbyn to attempt to achieve a withdrawal agreement that has consensus among as many MPs as possible to ensure it is agreed by Parliament, she has created curious alliance.

Whilst the threat of crashing out of the EU appears to be receding as a result of the ‘Cooper bill’, nothing can be taken for granted. Though there is no guarantee that the EU will agree to an extension, it’s odds on that they do not want this outcome. Nobody wants to be blamed for the nightmare scenario for a ‘no deal’ outcome.

In the marathon cabinet meeting held on Tuesday, it is rumoured that the repercussions of what crashing out were considered, especially the possibility of having to reimpose 'direct rule' in Northern Ireland.

In agreeing to meet both May and Corbyn know the stakes are high and there is much to be gained. However, both will be fully aware that their willingness to engage in the search for a solution to the current impasse could seriously backfire on them and create enemies in their own parties who will accuse them of betrayal.

May's dilemma in agreeing to meet Corbyn is in knowing that among Eurosceptics, such as members of the ERG, her room for manoeuvre is almost zero. For the ERG and many other Conservative MPs, anything less than a 'hard' Brexit will be regarded as a sell-out. This, they argue, is not what those who voted to leave in the 2016 referendum wanted.

Constructive ambiguity is no longer possible and May's quest to ensure continued support of both leavers and remainers in her party will be dashed. As she will know, contemplating any of Corbyn's demands such as a customs union (see blogs *passim*), will probably create a schism in her party that may be extremely difficult to recover from. Any demand for a further referendum vote on whatever deal emerges, would be as welcome among many MPs as a dead rat sandwich!

Corbyn's conundrum is not less stark. Labour MPs, particularly those with narrow majorities in constituencies in which the result of the referendum was to leave, are acutely sensitive to the party being seen as not respecting their wishes. Corbyn's ability to negotiate is constrained by what was agreed at the Labour Party conference in Liverpool last year and includes conditions such as continued protection of workers' rights. These will come as no surprise to May as Corbyn stated them in a letter he wrote to her in February.

An equally problematic issue is the need for a referendum. The fact that shadow foreign secretary, Emily Thornberry, has sent a letter to every Labour MP insisting that any deal agreed as part of the talks must be subject to a confirmatory vote by the population, only adds to the sense of internal tension among leading members of the party. Like May, Corbyn has been warned that for some MPs such a vote is

unacceptable and could potentially result in resignations and even a spilt in the party.

The Brexit crisis continues to create tensions for all concerned. Undoubtedly a deal between May and Corbyn that could be agreed by a majority of MPs as well as being acceptable to the EU is the 'holy grail' that will, for the time being at least, end the impasse. However, whether the cross-party talks can achieve this objective is, for all the reasons described above, not going to be easy, to say the least.

Failure by May and Corbyn in reaching an accommodation of their respective demands that achieves sufficient support by MPs to ensure a majority in any vote in Parliament, is entirely possible. Indeed, according to the BBC's Political Editor Laura Kuenssberg, these talks will probably still be ongoing when May goes to Brussels next week to, it must be presumed, beg for further time. As such the impasse continues and the UK will enter another week ending with a potential 'cliff edge'.

If the UK is to avoid crashing out of the EU it may be necessary for even more radical thinking by the Prime Minister and her government, including agreeing to a very long extension and holding elections to the European Parliament. As Brexit and Theresa May's decision this week have shown, nothing is impossible.