

# Why Jeremy Corbyn isn't meeting with Theresa May

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Following the Government's widely-predicted victory in Parliament's vote of confidence last night, Theresa May sought (at least rhetorically) to reach out to MPs in other parties, arguing that MPs have made very clear what they *don't* want and now need to make clear what they do. In light of this, we thought we'd consider the likely positions of each party and the political positions underlying some of the rhetoric, including that on the part of the Government. It is clear that, as things stand, the proposed Withdrawal Agreement has been strongly rejected and there is insufficient desire to force a change of government or General Election.

Theresa May has already help initial discussions with leaders of most opposition parties, as well as her partners the DUP. Crucially, however, this so far has not included the leader of the Official Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, who has refused to meet with the Prime Minister unless she explicitly rules out a "no deal" scenario. Whether one agrees with him or not, from a political perspective this is an extremely shrewd move.

Corbyn faces a challenge: he is notably more Eurosceptic than his party, both in terms of the membership and in terms of the parliamentary party. A majority of Labour members and politicians (especially MPs) are generally pro-European and are certainly vociferously anti-Brexit. Moreover, surveys suggest that a majority of present Labour voters are opposed to leaving the EU. However, a majority of Labour MPs represent constituencies in which a majority voted Leave in 2016 and a substantial minority of present and potential Labour voters believe that the UK should leave the EU (whatever disagreements may be had over the terms of this).

The Labour Party's official position is therefore that it "respects" the result of the 2016 referendum (and therefore supports leaving the EU), but wants a permanent customs union with the EU<sup>[1]</sup> and close alignment with the Single Market. At the same time, they anticipate

the end of Freedom of Movement and want the ability to derogate from the EU's state aid rules. Moreover, the UK would apparently be given a substantial voice over any future free trade deals struck by the EU. Suffice it to say that, in Brussels and elsewhere, this wish list is likely to look an awful lot like having and eating a deluxe gâteau with cherries on it.

Nevertheless, being out of government during the Article 50 negotiations means that this need not be a problem. It is, after all, quite legitimate to argue that Labour cannot know what concessions it would need to make in negotiations, or what alternative outcomes it might be able to engender were it in government instead of the Conservative Party. It is clear from the Labour Party conference that members (and most Labour MPs) would support a second referendum in preference to any of the other alternatives presently on offer, although an alternative such as membership of the Single Market and EU Customs Union might be acceptable.

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Taking part in talks (and certainly facilitating any concrete agreement) is therefore politically extremely risky for Corbyn. In a country so deeply divided, any Brexit outcome will bitterly disappoint a large number. Moreover, given Corbyn's comparative Euroscepticism, there is a distinct risk that his personal views clash with his party's and cause a public rift. Corbyn's present strategy neatly gets around all of these problems, whilst maximising his chances of winning the next election. If he were to refuse point-blank to negotiate with Theresa May, he would appear to be putting partisan interests above those he seeks to serve, coveting only the keys to 10 Downing Street. By placing an apparently legitimate pre-condition on talks, he avoids this. Given their feelings around Brexit, ruling out a 'no-deal' scenario outright appeals to both the Parliamentary Labour Party and the membership at large. It's also a position supported by a very large majority of Labour voters.

It is difficult to see how the Prime Minister, Theresa May, could accept this precondition. After all, the UK had little leverage in any negotiations with the EU to begin with. If 'no-deal' is ruled out *a priori* then the Prime Minister gives up any remaining leverage she might have had. If the other party in a negotiation knows that you are unable to walk away then you have little choice but to accept their

terms, whatever those might be. Similarly, ruling out 'no-deal' would be anathema to many Conservative MPs, and would cause concern amongst the DUP.

Corbyn thus avoids becoming 'tainted' by Brexit. Whatever deal is agreed, he need not be associated with it. Finally, in terms of winning power, the optimal political strategy is for the Conservative Party to fail to ratify a deal and thus deliver a 'no-deal' Brexit by default. The result would not only cause economic damage but would also have the added advantage of, at a minimum, causing high profile resignations from the Conservative Party and, potentially a debilitating split. By failing to engage with the Prime Minister, this outcome is rendered more likely. It is clear that the governing Conservative Party is too split to agree on ratifying any feasible withdrawal agreement without opposition support.

Only were Theresa May to pivot towards an extremely soft Brexit (what has been termed BINO, or Brexit in Name Only) might Corbyn come under pressure to accede to this. Were she to do so however, then in the words of one Eurosceptic Conservative MP "she's toast"<sup>[2]</sup>. In essence, therefore, Corbyn's manoeuvre has left Theresa May between a rock and a hard place. The danger for him is that individual Labour MPs become so concerned about the situation that they take the situation into their own hands and negotiate individually with the Government. A second danger is that Theresa May does, indeed, commit effective hara-kiri by pivoting abruptly towards a soft Brexit. A catastrophic loss of confidence on the part of some of her own MPs could then 'bounce' Corbyn into calling (and winning) a vote of no-confidence, and leave him in the unenviable position of holding the Brexit baby.

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The position of the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats with respect to Brexit are outwardly rather similar. Both profess to desire a second referendum on EU membership, although the former also supports a Single Market plus Customs Union solution. Both are likely to be very challenging on a personal level for Theresa May, who has interpreted the result of the referendum as a desire both to end freedom of movement of labour and to repatriate policymaking to Westminster. Such a volte-face would also be professionally difficult, and would not command the support of a substantial number of

Conservative MPs, rendering them difficult to get through the Commons.

Indeed, the primary long-term political objective for the SNP is in securing independence for Scotland and its Brexit policy must be seen through this lens (however heartfelt its Europhilia might be). Brexit is extremely unpopular within Scotland, and many would view a hard Brexit as being sufficient to warrant a second referendum on independence. Moreover, one of the arguments deployed by unionists – that Scotland would need to reapply for EU membership – would be gone, and Scotland would have adopted an extremely unpopular policy on the basis of votes elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Suffice it to say, whilst political considerations force the SNP to oppose a hard Brexit in public, they cannot be oblivious to the opportunities it would present them.

The above demonstrates just what a tangled web is weaved in British politics today. It is hardly a revelation that the British (and Irish!) public are bewildered and unimpressed by the Machiavellian manoeuvrings of our politicians. Nevertheless, these are the incentives that the political system has put in front of politicians. As such, one cannot be surprised that an overwhelming majority of the public want to see a root and branch reform of the political system<sup>[3]</sup>.

1. Starmer, K., *We need a new and credible approach to Brexit*. 2018: Speech at the EEF Technology Hub.
2. Barker, A. and J. Pickard, *Could the customs union help Theresa May break Brexit deadlock?*, in *Financial Times*. 2019: London.
3. ComRes. *Daily Express Voting Intention and Brexit Poll, January 2019*. 2019; Available from: <https://www.comresglobal.com/polls/daily-express-voting-intention-and-brexite-poll-january-2019/>.