



FEPS Fabian Society New year Conference “Brexit and Beyond” – 19th January 2019 Keir Starmer MP’s speech

I want to start by welcoming everyone to my constituency of Holborn and St Pancras....

And by thanking Ivana, Andrew and all Fabians staff for today’s conference

To put it mildly, it’s well timed...

We often say that nobody can foresee how and when crunch moments will come in the Brexit process.....

But given the Fabians chose today to hold a conference called “Brexit and Beyond”they must know something the rest of us don’t.

I was delighted to write the foreword to the Brexit and Beyond pamphlet....

As I said in that piece, the debate on Brexit has too often been narrow and process-driven....

Endless discussion about parliamentary process and the institutions of the EU...

But little on how we tackle the *causes* of the referendum result...

...the need to tackle inequality, low pay, a broken housing market and the growing dislocation between our political system and the people who elect us.

But it seems the more Parliament has talked about Brexit in the last two years, the less it has cut through to the public.

That’s why last week Jeremy hit the nail on the head when he spoke of the common ground and common grievances between the Leave voter from Mansfield and the Remain voter from Tottenham....

On opposite sides of the Brexit divide...

....but united by being shut out of a system that isn’t working for them.

That’s the wider task Labour have to confront – rebuilding Britain as well as finding a Brexit deal that protects jobs and the economy.

This has been, even by recent standards, an extraordinary week.

It was the week that proved this Government is incapable of delivering a Brexit deal that can unite the country, Parliament or even the Conservative Party.



The Prime Minister suffered the largest defeat of any government in history and did so on the defining issue of this Parliament.

In normal times, that would mean a new Prime Minister and a new Government.

But these aren't normal times.

We have a government that can't govern.

A Brexit deal that has no chance of getting through Parliament.

And a Prime Minister who stubbornly refuses to drop the red lines that have led to this crisis.

People often praise the Prime Minister for her resilience.

But, what the Prime Minister is doing right now is not resilience.

It's reckless.

Ploughing on without a plan while the country lurches from one crisis to another.

And reducing time for credible alternatives to emerge.

When the result was read out on Tuesday, MPs across the house were stunned.

A government losing by 230 votes is unprecedented....and almost inconceivable.

But I wasn't surprised that the deal was rejected....

And that the Prime Minister now finds herself in this situation.....

Because the seeds of Tuesday's vote were sown over the course of the last two years.

It started with the red lines the Prime Minister laid out in her 2016 conference speech:

Outside the Customs Union.

Outside the Single Market.

No role for the ECJ.

"If you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere".

Make no mistake: these were political choices.

Not necessities.



They were the Prime Minister's choices.

Not ours.

They set the Government on this path....so it is no surprise this is where they have ended.

As Michel Barnier said just this week:

"we have always said that if the UK chooses to shift its red lines in the future....then the EU will be immediately ready to go hand in hand.....and to give a favourable response."

But at no point in the last two years has the Prime Minister sought to bring Parliament into the process and to shape the deal it will be asked to approve.

The Prime Minister chose to set out her Brexit policy through speeches.....

Lancaster House. Mansion House. Florence.

But before Tuesday Parliament had never been asked its view on the basics of the deal. There was...

- No vote on the Gvt's negotiating objectives before A50 was triggered
- No vote on the Chequers plan....
- No vote on any Government White Paper or draft text....

I've lost count of the number of reasonable and carefully crafted amendments Labour tabled to improve Brexit Bills, but were flatly rejected by the government

The Prime Minister fought to deny Parliament economic impact assessments – we had to pass an Humble Address to get hold of those....

And it wasn't until the Government had been found in contempt of Parliament – the first government in history to do so – that the Attorney General's legal advice was published.

Of course we only had a vote on the triggering of Article 50 because of a Supreme Court ruling....

And Tuesday's meaningful vote was only possible because of the pressure from Labour and MPs across the house.

My point is this:

Having pushed parliament away at every stage....

Having never been willing to listen to or reflect the concerns of Labour or Opposition MPs....



It is hardly surprising that when finally presented with a deal Parliament had no say in shaping....it was flatly rejected.

We are now at a critical juncture.

There are just 69 days until the 29 March deadline.

I understand – and share – the growing concern and frustration across the country at the current impasse.....

The failure – after two years of negotiations – of this government to find anything close to a satisfactory deal.....

Or to deal with any of the deep-rooted causes of the Brexit vote

The Prime Minister still refuses to take no deal off the table, even though it would be the worst of all possible outcomes.

Make no mistake: responsibility for this lies squarely with the Tories.

But [as Andrew \[Harrop\] pointed out in labourlist](#) last weekend:

“In this moment of national crisis, [Labour] has a responsibility not just to oppose but to offer a constructive path forward”

I agree.

It's now time for an open and frank debate about how we break the deadlock.

In less than two weeks' time, Parliament will once again be asked to consider the options available in this process.

There are no easy routes out of the mess this Government has got us into.

Difficult decisions are going to have to be made.

For too long the Prime Minister has offered the country false hope and false promises.

She has failed to be straight with the public about the consequences of the choices she has taken.

Now is the time for an honest debate.

And for credible solutions to emerge.

So today I want to set out the paths I believe are now available to avoid no deal.



It won't surprise you to hear me say that this process starts from the conference motion we agreed in September.

...It took weeks of work and five or six long hours locked in a conference room, but we got there in the end!

And it set out a clear sequence of events.

Phase one: vote down a deal if it doesn't meet our tests and doesn't protect jobs, rights and the economy.

On Tuesday, that's what we did.

Phase two: seek a general election to sweep away this failed Government.

On Wednesday, the Prime Minister clung onto power, even though 117 of her own party voted no confidence in her before Christmas... 118 Tory MPs voted on Tuesday against her Brexit deal.....and the DUP are no longer supporting Government legislation.

Wednesday's no confidence vote was just the beginning of Labour's efforts to secure a general election – not the end...

Securing a general election is – and always will be –our priority as it's the only way to deliver the radical change this country needs

...but we are now at the third phase of our policy.

Our conference motion states that:

"If we cannot get a general election Labour must support all options remaining on the table, including campaigning for a public vote"

That is a very important commitment. It's a commitment to you, our members and our movement. And it is one we will keep.

But before we go any further, let us clear the decks and rule out options that cannot be supported.

First, the Prime Minister's deal – or any tweaked version of it that may materialise.

The deal is so flawed, it is so far from meeting our tests...and the Parliamentary opposition to it is so great that this can no longer be considered a credible option.

A majority of 230 speaks for itself.

Second, no deal simply is not acceptable to us – it never has been.



The damaging impact of no deal to people across the country is so profound that no one should be casual about it.

Third, a free-trade deal along the lines of CETA – the so-called Canada model – is not acceptable.

A CETA-style deal would weaken workers' rights, consumer and environmental standards.

It wouldn't protect supply chains which are vital for our manufacturing industry.

And it wouldn't prevent a hard border in Northern Ireland.

...which takes me to the fourth point:

Labour won't accept any deal that leads to a hard border in Northern Ireland.

I feel very strongly about this, having worked for five years in Northern Ireland implementing aspects of the Good Friday Agreement with the Policing Board of Northern Ireland.

So where does that leave us?

There are, in reality, just two remaining options -

1) Instructing the Government to negotiate a close economic relationship with the EU.

This could take the form of the proposals we have put forward including:

- a comprehensive customs union to protect jobs and the economy...
- a strong single market deal
- robust protections on rights and standards
- far more ambition and clarity about our role in common EU agencies.

This is a credible solution to avoid no deal.

It would protect jobs, the economy and rights.

And from my conversations over the last two years I know the EU would have considered it if the UK Government proposed it.

But be in no doubt this approach involves trade-offs and compromises.

It is far from perfect.

2) Secondly, as our conference motion sets out, the option of a public vote.

I know there is significant support for this in our membership.....



In many trade unions. Among a number of Labour MPs.....

... in this city and – most likely – in this hall.

As I set out in Liverpool, this has to be an option for Labour.

After all, deeply embedded in our values are internationalism, collaboration and cooperation with our European partners.

Of course each of these options has their advocates...

And there will be impassioned debate in the coming weeks about the parliamentary tactics, strategy and timing we should adopt.

We also need to recognise that – whichever of these options we pursue – the 29th March deadline looks increasingly unlikely to be met.

Even if the Prime Minister's deal had been passed on Tuesday, there is a huge raft of legislation the Government would still need to pass.

- A complex Implementation Bill
- An Immigration Bill
- Agriculture and Fisheries Bills
- The Trade Bill
- A Healthcare Bill
- A Financial Services Bill

Plus around 700 SI's that still need to be passed.

The Prime Minister can pretend all this could be forced through with emergency legislation....

But given she has no Commons majority....

Cannot rely on the support of the DUP for any of this legislation

And there will be just 59 days left when the House next votes on the Prime Minister's plan B.....

...It seems inevitable to me that the Government will have to apply for an extension of Article 50....

And of course neither of the alternative options I have set out today could realistically be completed by March 29.

So, it's time for us inject some honesty into this debate, and to identify the credible solutions that remain.

We also have to recognise that nobody – whether you voted leave or remain – wanted to be in this position.



With no acceptable deal in sight, an increasingly divided country and a broken government.

Having had this job for more than two years – there've been three Brexit secretaries in that time, by the way – I can honestly say it pains me to see the mess this Government has made of these negotiations

...And that two years of talks have led to a deal that has now been overwhelmingly rejected by the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly

Two years have been wasted.

But in the coming weeks Parliament will have the chance to take control.

That starts by being open about the dilemmas we face, and the credible choices that are still available.