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The British Labour Party after Brexit

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UGUR TEKINER, MAY 31 2020

Though the world has become focused on tackling the coronavirus pandemic, it was not long ago that Brexit dominated the headlines. On the night of 31 January, it was finally 'official' that the UK left the EU after 47 years of membership. More importantly, this happened after three years of exhausting negotiations that followed the 2016 referendum. Although the governing Conservative Party (often referred to as the 'Tories') remain at the centre of public attention, there is another important political force that deserves analysis: the Labour Party. The post-2010 political journey of the Labour Party can be defined as anything but stable. After all, the party has lost four consecutive elections, the last one being Labour's worst defeat since 1935. In April, the party elected a new leader, Sir Keir Starmer, who succeeded Jeremy Corbyn.

In this new era for Labour, three key challenges are ahead. First, the post-Brexit EU-UK relations stand as a tricky area for Labour. It is not realistic to expect that Britain's official departure from the EU will bring the European question to an exact close, at least for a foreseeable future. The tense talks between the EU and the UK over a post-Brexit trade deal have already proved it. Faced with deep divergences on many key issues on the table, the EU is accusing the UK of being obsessed with national sovereignty, whereas the UK is blaming the EU for not treating Britain as a sovereign equal. However, Labour has shown little interest in the talks until now. In one of the rare instances, Starmer was content to say that the UK may consider prolonging the talks beyond December if necessary.

Labour's rather hesitant and ambiguous stance on Brexit is still recalled as a low point for the party. Before and after the referendum, Corbyn-led Labour was publicly regarded to lack a clear Brexit policy, due to its appeals to both the Remain and Leave sides. At the time the Labour Party committed itself to holding a new referendum on Brexit, without backing a Leave or Remain position. This was widely seen as the apogee of Labour's indecisiveness over Brexit. Therefore, whilst working hard to make up for its hitherto ambiguity over Brexit, the content and potential consequences of the talks themselves are too important to ignore. On the one hand, a formal trade deal with the EU will influence many key areas, including workers' rights, social protection, public subsidies and environmental policies, all of which are traditional areas of concern for Labour. On the other hand, Britain may have to trade with the EU countries based on the World Trade Organization rules if a deal is not struck with the EU. This will, in turn, have many profound implications, such as higher prices for goods to be imported from the European single market. This will disproportionately affect low-income households, which constitute the main support base of Labour.

The second primary challenge for the post-Brexit Labour Party is the changing nature of political competition with Brexit. The Brexit process has changed the way politics operates in the UK. As such, traces of 'Brexit politics' are often found in each political issue. Even though Brexit has now occurred, post-Brexit polls reveal ongoing deep differences between Leave and Remain sides on many key issues. In a sense, the Remain-Leave division has emerged as a new form of political cleavage that has affected domestic politics more than expected. Faced with this reality, the Labour Party, like other political parties, is trying to come to terms with that. As of now, fresh from its leadership contest, it remains to be seen whether Labour will keep appealing to both sides or choose one over another. However, recalling that Starmer served as the last Shadow Brexit Secretary for Labour, and was in favour of Remain, may signal his preferences.

Added to the changing nature of domestic politics with Brexit is the challenge posed by the coronavirus crisis. Across the world, governments have typically seen surges in their popularity. As 'pandemic politics' allows, the Johnson

government has tightened its grip both on governmental affairs and the political arena. This makes it important for Labour to find new ways to engage the public, without losing the initiative. To this end, Starmer announced that Labour would work constructively with the government in a display of unity amidst crisis. Yet, this approach was accompanied by a range of critiques over the handling of the pandemic, such as calling on the government for new workplace safety standards, higher transparency in terms of its overall strategy and finally a higher collaboration between four nations of the UK.

The third and final key challenge for Labour is the long-running issue of 'renewal' in the post-Brexit period. As it stands, the reform agenda comprises three interrelated, and at times clashing, priorities for the party: unity, ideological modernisation and political relevance. Since elected as leader, Starmer has put party unity as his top priority – around the pledge to end factional infighting. This preference manifested itself in the formation of his shadow cabinet. Bringing to the front benches seasoned politicians, such as the ex-party leader Ed Miliband, as well as fresh faces, the new leader sought a balance between different ideological wings within the party. At first glance, this unity-oriented rhetoric may seem promising. Nevertheless, for a party still wavering between Corbyn's 'democratic socialism' and Blair's 'New Labour', reaching unity based on inter-factional compromise may risk giving the impression that Labour has nothing new to offer, other than relying on variants or blends of previously tried formulas.

There is no doubt that post-Corbyn, Labour needs a new direction. As a reflection of this, the party has already been overwhelmed with debates centring on its future ideological course. With reference to the party's recent past, whereby a similar transformation was underway, the frequently asked question is whether Labour needs a new Kinnock or Blair. These debates themselves reveal that Labour is still in the process of ideological soul-searching in the aftermath of the messy Brexit process. Beyond vaguely pronouncing his belief in what he called 'moral socialism', though, Starmer has not so far given enough clues on what ideological direction the party will take under his leadership.

In sum, after losing four general elections in a row, Labour is in desperate need for political relevance and winning the next general election stands as a serious test for this. Whilst establishing authority over the party and dealing with existing problems, such as Labour's anti-Semitism issues, Starmer will need to establish himself as a credible leader in domestic politics in the time ahead of the next election. Faced with those challenges, Labour is at a crossroads again. Only time will tell if the party will cope with the post-Brexit, post-Corbyn, challenges or spiral into a downward trend akin to other European centre-left parties such as the German SPD.

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