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FEBRUARY 24 2019, 12:01AM, THE SUNDAY TIMES

# This is no SDP rerun, but a younger socialist could still take Labour to power

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**T**here is one overriding question that must be faced in the House of Commons and very soon. Will MPs on a cross-party basis vote to honour the referendum result and leave the EU? It is in this context that we need to consider the significance of nine Labour and three

Conservative MPs leaving their political parties.

Disowning the largest democratic vote in our history, and commitments made as recently as the 2017 general election to deliver in parliament the referendum result, is, to put it mildly, an odd basis for starting a new centre grouping intended to destroy the other two parties, as the Independent Group of MPs did last week.

A series of votes in the Commons has made it clear that only an EU-UK international withdrawal treaty has any chance of achieving a majority, unless Jeremy Corbyn, after his most recent visit to Brussels, tables an official opposition motion. That motion would be to exit the EU through becoming a non-EU contracting party to the European Economic Area agreement, and it would be much harder to reach a majority if it added a commitment to negotiating with the EU any form of customs union.

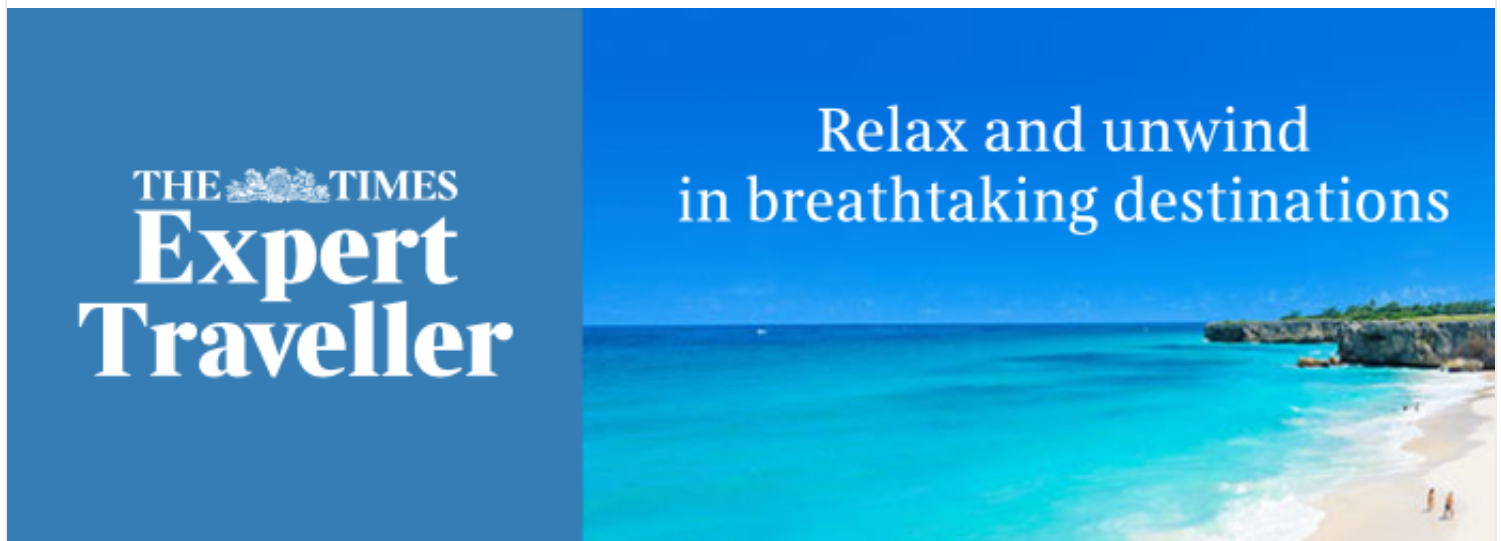


David Owen, far right, with Shirley Williams and David Steel at the SDP conference in 1985. Owen says the SDP tried not to present itself as a centre party

The one cabinet figure to emerge with some honour from this tortured withdrawal process is Geoffrey Cox, the attorney-general, who told first the cabinet and then MPs in a carefully considered legal opinion that the withdrawal agreement as then drafted would not allow Britain to leave the treaty at some future date. Despite that legal judgment, his own political view was that he could live with voting for the treaty.

Such honesty is rare, and I believe if Cox comes back, as I expect him to, with changes in the wording agreed with the EU to the political declaration and concerning the withdrawal agreement, and asserts we will not in future be locked indefinitely into the treaty, then a cross-party majority in the House of Commons will accept the treaty. I do not believe it was ever the intention of a majority of the 27 heads of government to have a treaty drafted to last in perpetuity under article 50, whose very *raison d'être* is to allow an EU

member state to exit from the EU treaties.



Additionally it will be much easier, particularly for more Labour MPs, to accept an international withdrawal treaty warts and all now that the government is committed to new wording to safeguard hard-fought-for workers' rights and to provide immediate extra financial assistance for deprived areas.

Of course, in the Independent Group MPs leaving their parties, there are some similarities to the creation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981. Yet 38 years ago the debate in the Labour Party turned on two vital policy issues. Michael Foot had become the new leader and I had immediately resigned from the shadow cabinet. Having asked for a meeting with Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers and me on January 20, 1981, he

refused point blank to promise a referendum before withdrawal from the common market, and reiterated his commitment to full unilateral nuclear disarmament involving Nato.

In our Limehouse declaration four days later, there was a specific disavowal of any intention of creating a centre party. We pledged to take the Marxist/Trotskyist, authoritarian, trade union-dominated, block vote, policy-making Labour Party head-on in a bare-knuckle fight to replace or transform it.

We actually started by committing ourselves to apply to Socialist International. It was when Shirley Williams declined to stand in the Warrington by-election and Roy Jenkins did so instead (he went on to become party leader by beating me, not Shirley) that we became irretrievably linked with the Liberals as a centre party.

If this Independent Group of MPs now goes down that same centrist route, it may well, like Nick Clegg, form a coalition with the Conservatives, but not with Labour. It is clear how the Conservative Party will react to the Independent Group. Its already narrow majority has been reduced and risks being cut

even further in any by-elections in Conservative seats. Many more MPs will rally to the withdrawal treaty and they will soon start to prepare for an early election under a new, younger leader, relying on Labour to accept the challenge, as Corbyn did in 2017, and once again dump the concept of a fixed-term parliament.

Corbyn's achievement — and it is not an inconsiderable one — has been to attract the enthusiasm of many young socialists to the leadership's policies. New Labour's so-called reforms were rolled over because for many it had ceased to be seen as even a social democratic party. For example, it was seen to have done more harm to Aneurin Bevan's NHS in 2002 than any Conservative government — that is, until the Conservative-Liberal coalition in 2012.

Corbyn is no Clement Attlee, who was, deep down, trusted by the British people, nor even a Harold Wilson. Foot has been finally exposed in Ben Macintyre's new book, *The Spy and the Traitor*, which authoritatively details payments Foot received from the Soviet Union.

The problem faced by Corbyn and his shadow

chancellor, John McDonnell, is of a different kind from the 1980s. They are identified with Trotskyist hatred of Jews, seen as disciplined Marxists in the pursuit of state power and thought of as having had a close association with the IRA while UK citizens were being bombed. On top of that baggage they allowed Derek Hatton, a 1980s Liverpool extremist, to be considered suitable to rejoin the party — although he has been belatedly blocked.

All is not yet lost for the Labour Party if more of its MPs join the Independent Group. While Corbyn's determination should not be underestimated, he appears a modest man, perhaps aware of his electoral limitations. He has fought to keep the support of northern Labour voters who stand by their decision to leave the EU. Others may flirt with a second referendum but he sees its dangers.

It is imperative, however, that Corbyn agrees to step down as early as 2020, when he will be 71, for a younger leader not afraid of being called a socialist but able to present themselves as a modern prime minister not tarred by the past and ready to work with the Scottish National Party in government.

There is a traditional Labour agenda out there,

somewhat reminiscent of 1945's, ready to be grasped in modern form. It should include the scrapping of the marketisation of the English NHS; the introduction of a genuine social market economy and legislation for a national rail service; the creation of a new federal constitutional council perhaps along the lines of the German Bundesrat replacing the House of Lords; an increase in resources sent to the UN and to Nato's conventional forces once Britain is outside the EU. That should be Labour's goal.

*Lord Owen was Labour foreign secretary in 1977-79 and a founder member of the Social Democratic Party. He sits as an independent social democrat in the Lords*

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