

The Europe Jeremy Corbyn wants is very different from the one David Cameron seeks

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As Labour's In campaign gets underway, **Isabelle Hertner** asks what we can expect from a leader who, despite voting to leave the EEC in 1975 and deploring the austerity demanded of Greece by fellow EU states, has backed a Remain vote.




During Labour's 2015 leadership campaign, Jeremy Corbyn was asked to clarify his position on the UK's membership of the EU. In particular, pro-European Labour activists, MPs and MEPs expressed some concern over the candidate's European vocation. After all, in a hustings during the early days of the leadership campaign, Corbyn stated that he would **not rule out** campaigning for a no vote in the UK's future EU membership referendum owing to David Cameron's position on workers' rights. What is more, Corbyn had **voted** for the UK to leave the then European Economic Community in the 1975 referendum.

Corbyn was elected with a huge majority of nearly 59.5 percent of first-preference votes and is now the Leader of the Opposition. With great power comes great responsibility (a quote that fans of the Spiderman film will remember). In particular, Corbyn was pressed by his colleagues to **reveal** his position on the UK's approaching referendum on EU membership.

Labour's 'Keep the UK in the EU' campaign was **launched** on 1 December 2015 by campaign manager and former Home Secretary, Alan Johnson. The campaign is currently **supported by 213** (out of 231) Labour MPs, **including Corbyn**. Thus, despite being Labour's most Eurosceptical leader in decades, Corbyn decided to back the 'in' campaign. He insisted in an interview that he was 'proud' to support Labour's campaign, **adding**:

'Labour has campaigned to make sure our place in Europe has led to better protection and rights in the workplace, and we will continue to fight for jobs and security for all the British people.'

Still, and in line with his predecessors, including Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and Ed Miliband, Corbyn stresses the need for EU reform. At this stage, he does not go into great detail. In a joint statement with Labour shadow foreign secretary Hilary Benn, Corbyn briefly **outlined** their reform plans, including the protection of the NHS from EU competition law, reform of the EU's state-aid rule, the introduction of a red-card system (which means that if sufficient member state parliaments object to a commission proposal then it doesn't go ahead), reform of the EU budget, increased flexibility on transitional controls, and protection of workers' rights.

A close-up portrait of Jeremy Corbyn, an older man with grey hair and a beard, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression.

"I want to see a Europe that does more for social protection, does do much more for environmental protection and not simply a Europe of the free market.

"But also a Europe that does not sign away a lot of public services across the whole continent through the *transatlantic trade and investment partnership* - which has been negotiated secretly between the European Union and the USA."

 Global

Jeremy Corbyn opposes the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Photo: [Global Justice Now](#) via a [Flickr Creative Commons licence](#).

The new Labour leader is also [very critical](#) of the EU and International Monetary Fund's management of the Greek debt crisis and opposes 'the current austerity ideology of the dominant European People's Party'. What is more, he seeks to address levels of corporate taxation across Europe. Unsurprisingly, Corbyn supports a more outspokenly left-wing agenda for the EU than his predecessors. What does this mean for Labour's EU referendum campaign?

Optimists might hope that Corbyn's election as Labour leader will lead to a much needed, more politicised EU debate in Britain. In the past, the EU debate between Britain's main parties tended to be dominated by the 'in or out' question. Due to Corbyn's more recognisably socialist EU agenda, future discussion could reveal the ideological divisions between the socialist, conservative, liberal, and green EU agendas of Britain's parties. A more politicised EU debate that offers clear alternative visions of the EU's future could, in turn, lead to a more engaged public. Such a development could be beneficial for the UK, where public levels of knowledge and interest in EU matters are very low.

We are still in the early days of Labour's EU referendum campaign, but on the basis of Johnson's statements, a moderate left-wing campaign seems most likely. At Labour's campaign launch in Birmingham, Johnson [argued](#) that 'the first duty of any government is to keep our country safe and I firmly believe that leaving the EU would fail that test.' He went on to [argue](#) that 'the lesson from Paris is clear – to tackle terrorism, we must stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies in Europe. (...) The security of Britain is inextricably linked to staying in Europe'. Thus, in the aftermath of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Johnson's case for EU membership rested heavily on the UK's security concerns.

Yet Johnson also [told activists](#) that Labour's campaign would be focused on 'defending the rights of British workers', suggesting that employees, businesses, consumers, students and scientists would all be 'damaged and diminished' by exiting the EU. Because Labour decided to run its own, separate referendum campaign (instead of joining the crossbench Britain Stronger in Europe campaign), it has the freedom to focus on social democratic policies that Labour supporters care about, such as workers rights and welfare. But how salient these themes will be during the campaign remains to be seen.

Pessimists, on the other hand, might point out that any notion of a common Remain campaign between Labour and the Conservatives will be impossible. After all, their positions on issues such as intra-EU immigration, refugees, and workers' rights are miles apart. The PM wants to restrict EU migrants' access to unemployment benefits, whilst Corbyn highlights the cultural, social and economic contributions migrants make to Britain. There is a saying in German that 'while two parties argue with each other, the third one wins'. In the context of the UK's EU referendum, due to the irreconcilable EU visions of the UK's two major parties, the winner may well be UKIP. Labour must brace itself for a very long campaign.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog or the LSE.

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