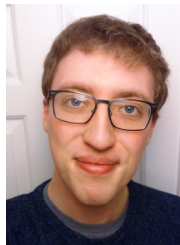


# Cross-party agreement on the Brexit process is a triumph for the British left



May's speech confirms cross-party agreement on process. **Richard Johnson** (*Lancaster University*) argues that the left should be declaring triumph: the Conservative prime minister affirmed her commitment to restoring democratic control to vast areas of our national economy.

Theresa May has provided final confirmation that Labour and the Conservatives agree on the Brexit process. The position which Theresa May set out in her speech in Florence differed little from the position put forward by the Labour leadership in the general election and clarified later this summer in interventions by [Jeremy Corbyn](#), [John McDonnell](#), [Barry Gardiner](#), and [Keir Starmer](#). While there may be some noises to the contrary from both front benches, their basic commitments are very much the same.

## Labour and the Conservatives agree on the Brexit process

In short, both parties are committed to leaving the single market but support a time-specified transition period during which existing commitments will remain in place before a new, bespoke partnership agreement is decided. This shared position is realistically the only workable arrangement which respects the referendum result fully while ensuring maximum mutual benefits for the United Kingdom and the European Union.

It makes electoral sense for both parties to maintain agreement on the overall process and to focus, instead, on the policy differences within the new arrangements. Indeed, the parties already did this during the general election in June when they pledged to implement the referendum result, for which there is wide agreement among the British public. [Only 21-22% of voters believe that the result should be ignored or another referendum held](#). A report from Nuffield College researchers Lindsay Richards and Anthony Heath found in a recent study that even [29% of Remain voters now favour something resembling a 'hard Brexit' deal](#).

Rather than argue over the Brexit decision, both parties in the election focused on austerity, education, and the costs of an aging society. They received a combined 82.3% of the vote, higher than any election since 1970.

One of the major reasons for this result was the remarkable decline in the salience of immigration as a political issue. The 2017 general election was the first since 2001 that immigration did not dominate among voters' most important issues (Carvalho, 2014, 78). In the 2010 and 2015 general elections respectively, 53% and 52% of voters cited immigration as [one of the top three issues](#) facing the country. In [June 2017](#), only 34% did. It is no coincidence that in June UKIP had their worst election night since 2001, while Labour secured its highest vote share since 2001.

## in the 2017 general election immigration did not dominate among voters' most important issues

Brexit has opened up the political space for the main parties to appeal to voters who have felt ignored by the political class. In spite of this, a number of Labour politicians continue to argue that their party should ignore British voters by seeking to maintain all the elements of EU membership without formally being members. Labour MPs Heidi Alexander and Allison McGovern spearheaded an effort to [pass a motion at Labour conference](#) this week to 'adopt a policy of remaining in the European Customs Union and Single Market through membership of the EEA'. Labour delegates [wisely voted not to bring the motion to debate](#). The group '[Labour for the Single Market](#)' has invested an enormous amount of time and energy devising ways to ignore the referendum decision.

## status quo ante is not on the table; the EU is moving towards further integration

Yet, the *status quo ante* is not on the table. The European Union is moving towards further integration. Last week, the [European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker](#) spoke in favour of a 'fully fledged European Defence Union', a common EU banking union, future enlargement into the Balkans, transnational MEPs, an EU finance minister, and a single president. Juncker also stated his belief in expanding the Eurozone across the EU: 'The euro is meant to be the single currency of the European Union as a whole'. It is difficult to see where Britain could fit within that picture.



London says [#Lexit](#),

(YouTube), Public Domain.

Theresa May made clear in [her Florence speech](#) that Britain's aim is not to thwart the EU's plans for integration. Indeed, Britain's exit from the EU makes integration all the more likely. She acknowledged, 'We don't want to stand in the way of that', but she affirmed the position was one of 'the UK and the EU side by side' not joined together in union.

Outside of the Single Market, new opportunities open for the British left. Labour will be able commit to expanding public ownership, lowering rates of VAT to assist low-income consumers, providing state aid to support key industries, and making fair trade agreements which support developing countries rather than impoverish them. Although Britain has historically low rates of unemployment, as long as it remains within a free labour market with substantially higher workless populations, the benefits of full employment cannot be felt.

### **the British left should be declaring triumph**

Since the referendum, firms such as [BMW](#), [Amazon](#), and [Google](#) have announced fresh (and large) investments in the UK. Foreign direct investment in Britain rose by [660%](#) in 2016, with levels [second only to the United States in the OECD](#). Boosted by a drop in the overvalued pound, our manufacturing sector is [growing at its fastest pace in two decades](#).

The British left should be declaring triumph. On Friday, the Conservative prime minister affirmed her commitment to restore democratic control to vast areas of our national economy. The focus for the Labour Party now should be arguing for the policies within that new political economy. It should not be trying to preserve British membership in an organisation which is rapidly moving in a different direction. Theresa May's speech and the vote by Labour conference delegates not to consider the Single Market motion ought to put the debate over process to rest. The debate is now about policy, and it is possible that Labour could seize the upper hand.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.*

***Richard Johnson*** is a Lecturer in Politics at Lancaster University.