

Beyond Westminster

Social Democracy by the Back Door: Europe and the Labour Party

by **Tom Blackburn** (@malaiseforever) on March 9, 2020

Adrian Williamson

Europe and the Decline of Social Democracy in Britain: From Attlee to Brexit

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Having been the subject of bitter contestation for the preceding three-and-a-half years, Britain's departure from the European Union was finally settled by December's general election result. It was a three-word slogan – 'take back control' – that rallied pro-Brexit forces in the European referendum of 2016, while Boris Johnson's Conservatives rode to an 80-seat Commons majority on the back of another: 'get Brexit done'.

Though Britain has formally left the EU, Brexit isn't quite 'done' yet: negotiations for a post-Brexit UK-EU trade deal have scarcely begun, and the transitional period isn't scheduled to end until December 31st. But with an unassailable Tory parliamentary majority, and residual pro-EU opinion having been almost entirely eradicated from the party, there seems to be little else Remainers can do to shape the final outcome. Nor could the fragile electoral coalition assembled by Corbynism in 2017 survive the contradictory pressures pulling it apart over Brexit.

Now, nearly four years on from the referendum of 2016, the post-mortems can finally begin. Adrian Williamson's *Europe and the Decline of Social Democracy in Britain* provides useful and insightful context for this process. It draws a parallel between the breakdown of post-war social democracy in the UK and the rise of British Euroscepticism, arguing that the two are intimately related: for Williamson, "the UK was once a social democracy, and, therefore, it made perfect sense to join a Europe that marched to a social democratic beat", until the rise of Thatcherism marked a decisive turning point.

BUT WHAT WILLIAMSON'S HISTORY ALSO INDICATES IS THAT LABOUR'S PRO-EUROPEAN TURN WAS ONE BORN LESS OF INTERNATIONALIST PRINCIPLE OR ANY PHILOSOPHICAL CHANGE OF HEART BUT INSTEAD OF DECLINE AND DEFEAT; LABOURITES INCREASINGLY LOOKED TO EUROPE TO AMELIORATE THE IMPACT OF THE NEOLIBERAL COUNTER-REVOLUTION AS IT HACKED AWAY AT EARLIER GAINS. WITH THE REMNANTS OF EUROPE'S OWN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN TATTERS AFTER THE FINANCIAL CRISIS, WE CAN SEE HOW THIS ATTEMPT TO SALVAGE SOME SEMBLANCE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY FROM ABOVE, OR PERHAPS MORE PRECISELY VIA THE BACK DOOR, WAS DOOMED TO FAIL IN THE ABSENCE OF REAL POPULAR ENTHUSIASM.

Cracks in the Consensus

Williamson acknowledges the looseness of social democracy as a term, but offers a general definition of it as encompassing “full employment as a central goal of macro-economic strategy; egalitarian and redistributive approaches to taxation and public spending; strong trade unions, with a substantial role in both industrial and political affairs; a mixed economy, with utilities held in public ownership; comprehensive education; the welfare state; and a substantial rented public housing sector”. This was the broad framework which endured from the Attlee government of 1945 to the middle of the 1970s.

Although moderate Labourites were its most enthusiastic exponents, this social-democratic consensus, while it lasted, also incorporated ‘One Nation’ Conservatives and the bulk of the Liberal Party. It was a similar story on the continent: in many European countries, centre-right Christian Democrats (to whom many One Nation Tories looked for inspiration) were intimately involved in the expansion of the post-war welfare state. As well as marking the high tide of social-democratic welfarism, Williamson notes, this period also came to mark the point of Britain’s “most enthusiastic engagement with Europe”. However, in the immediate post-war years Labour leaders took little interest in schemes for European unity.¹

By the 1960s, serious fractures in the social-democratic edifice were starting to appear, and with this came a gradual reconsideration of Britain’s relationship with Europe. Barbara Castle’s highly controversial white paper of 1969, *In Place of Strife*, sought to curb trade union power as part of an effort to revive Britain’s flagging industrial base and restore economic dynamism. That same year, Charles de Gaulle – previously the main obstacle to Britain’s entry into the Common Market, having vetoed two applications – retired from the French presidency, paving the way for the UK to join the European Economic Community (EEC).

Labour opinion on the EEC was divided into four main factions: the left (hostile), the

“nationalist Right” including Hugh Gaitskell, Douglas Jay and Peter Shore (concerned about the loss of sovereignty involved and doubtful about some of the purported benefits of membership), more sceptical middle-of-the-roaders (including Harold Wilson, James Callaghan, Denis Healey and Anthony Crosland) who nevertheless were prepared to accept accession, and the fervently pro-European group of right-wing revisionists around Roy Jenkins, who “saw ‘Europe’ as the central issue in British politics, upon which they were prepared to split and, ultimately, leave Labour”.

The revisionists had been the dominant intellectual tendency in the Labour Party since the mid-1950s, when Gaitskell rose to the party leadership. With Crosland as their main doyen, the revisionists sought to redefine Labour doctrine for the changed conditions of the post-war era: emblematic of this was Gaitskell’s **failed attempt to scrap Sidney Webb’s Clause IV**, and its commitment to extending state ownership, in 1959–60. For the revisionists of this era, the fundamental economic questions had been settled, and the pre-war pathologies of capitalism resolved. The task now was to redistribute its surpluses more fairly.

All this was thrown into confusion by the developing crisis of social democracy as Britain entered the 1970s. This deepening economic malaise afflicting Britain put the revisionists on the back foot, as the old methods of benevolent Keynesian redistribution no longer seemed to apply. Andrew Thorpe has neatly encapsulated the dilemma: “Revisionism, already under pressure, lost credibility still further; if socialism was all about an egalitarian distribution of the surplus produced by a growing capitalism, how could it respond to a situation in which capitalism was manifestly in trouble?”²

Nor could the revisionists agree on the European question. Gaitskell broke with many of his erstwhile supporters in coming out vociferously against Common Market membership in 1962; he died the following year. As Thorpe notes, Crosland had written in his 1962 book *The Conservative Enemy* that EEC membership may be necessary to ensure the kind of robust economic growth that could then partially be redistributed into social programmes. The revisionists became increasingly certain of this as Britain’s economic outlook darkened, and they also saw a prices and incomes policy as essential to keep inflation under control. This would lead, in time, to the total breakdown of their relationship with trade union leaders.

But when it came to the crunch, Crosland shied away from the fight for Europe. In October 1971, with Edward Heath as Prime Minister, the House of Commons voted again on the issue of EEC membership; previous applications by Macmillan and Wilson having been blocked by de Gaulle. The government won the vote, but only because 69 Labour MPs defied a three-line whip (and the bulk of party opinion) to endorse Heath’s application to join the Common Market. Crosland was not one of them; worried about

Labour's ever-fragile unity, he had abstained on the vote, infuriating the Jenkinsites.

After this, the Jenkinsites, by now increasingly alienated from Labour and not only on the European question, "behaved like a party within a party". Crosland, the apostate, was one of those who incurred their wrath. But as Williamson points out, Jenkins, who had come to cut an isolated figure, wasn't just alienated from the more radical policies being put forward by the Labour left but even the middle-of-the-road Labourism as represented by the likes of Wilson and James Callaghan. It was this alienation which would lead him, and many of his parliamentary followers, out of the Labour Party altogether.

A Capitalist Club?

The main challenge to Common Market membership in these years came from the socialist left, which felt it would impose unacceptable constraints on domestic economic policy preventing the pursuit of, as Williamson puts it, "a much more full-blooded version of socialism". Powellites on the right also opposed the EEC, but on the grounds of "a fundamentalist form of free-market nationalism". The old patrician leadership of the Tory Party had however made its peace with post-war social democracy, and hence also with Europe. They also recognised, like the left, that the requirements of EEC membership had the advantage of effectively ruling out key planks of any socialist policy programme.

With Britain's economy entering into protracted crisis in the 1970s, the Labour left's response was to propose a raft of radical economic measures, aimed at resolving the crisis by channeling productive investment into Britain's outmoded industries.

Dismayed by the failure of the 1964-70 Wilson government and fearing that the gains made in the post-war years would be drastically rolled back, the left called for a much more interventionist programme imposing tougher controls on the movement of capital and imports; the standard Keynesian techniques of macroeconomic management, they argued, having been proven by events to be insufficient.

The Labour left came to recognise that implementing such measures would be compatible with EEC membership. Some of its number had vacillated on the question: Williamson notes that Richard Crossman initially indicated that he and Barbara Castle would be prepared to accept EEC entry on the right terms, albeit without specifying what these might be. Even Tony Benn, who became the most famous left Eurosceptic Britain has ever produced, initially spent some time querying whether the Common Market might be the vehicle through which the increasing power of the multinationals might be tamed. Nevertheless, the Labour left eventually settled on a position of tough capital and

import controls and an interventionist programme to revive British industry. The Common Market, it was felt, was a 'capitalist club'.

One area of common ground between the Labour left and Powellite right, therefore, was concern over British national sovereignty. As Williamson argues, sovereignty as an end in itself would be a fairly pointless issue on which to take a stand: what the Bennites and Powellites shared was a desire to move beyond the confines of post-war social democracy, albeit to pursue dramatically different ends. The Bennites wanted to build on the achievements of post-war reforms and move towards democratic socialism; the Powellites were relatively isolated in the Tory Party, which was quite comfortable with the idea of Europe restraining any future socialist government, but unlike the Tory leadership rejected social democracy wholesale and the European project with it.

Labour returned to government as a Commons minority in February 1974, and was re-elected with a tiny majority that October. The manifesto on which it was elected was in broad outline that of the Labour left. It not only encountered opposition from within the civil service but from the Labour leadership itself.³ Central aspects of it were watered down: the National Enterprise Board, intended as a leading vehicle for industrial intervention, was deprived of funds and planning agreements were only voluntary, rather than compulsory as originally intended. As well as testing their own party leadership, Benn and his allies knowingly pushed at the boundaries of what EEC membership would allow.

With Wilson and chancellor Denis Healey soon reverting to orthodoxy upon their return to government, the left pushed hard for the adoption of its Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), the key pillars of which it knew were incompatible with continued EEC membership. Benn's efforts to persuade the cabinet to adopt the AES were singularly unsuccessful, but the European question took on a new importance for the Labour left: as long as Britain remained in the Common Market, no Labour government could pursue the AES. Williamson points out that not everyone on the socialist left was anti-EEC; in 1972, *New Left Review* devoted a special issue to Tom Nairn's *The Left against Europe?*, an extended critique of left Euroscepticism. But such arguments, Williamson concedes, cut little ice with the bulk of the left outside intellectual circles.

Although many of Benn's cabinet colleagues resented his proposal to hold a referendum on the issue of the Common Market – the Jenkinsites were especially resentful as they feared losing it – more pragmatic opinion held sway. Callaghan, wily as ever, saw the idea as "a little rubber life-raft" which might ultimately spare the party further damaging ructions over Europe. Indeed, the 1975 European referendum took place (perhaps surprisingly) with a relative lack of rancour inside Labour: Wilson had effectively externalised the discussion so that Europe became more than a matter for

effectively externalised the discussion, so that Europe became more than a matter for warring factions within the party itself.⁴ A token renegotiation of the terms having been secured by Wilson, a clear majority in the cabinet opted to recommend a Yes vote.

The referendum thus resulted in a landslide win for the pro-Marketees, an apparent triumph for the revisionists which they were quick to exploit (having been told they were out of touch with Labour voters for years, they could now claim the opposite, and did). Just over two-thirds of participants – 67 per cent – voted Yes to Europe. The combination of government support, strong press support, backing from the Tory leadership and a well-financed Britain in Europe campaign combined to crush the anti-EEC campaign. Britain's membership of the Common Market already established, appeals to continuity over the prospect of a "leap in the dark" won out.

But Williamson suggests that this victory was less decisive than the margin involved made it appear. Public opinion on the European project had never previously been marked by any great enthusiasm. Polling on the matter tended to fluctuate, but it was only ever a leading preoccupation for a small minority (and even this was largely concentrated among the political elite). It is debatable just how much of the Yes vote in 1975 represented a positive endorsement of the European idea, and how much of it was simply a desperate grab for something that would resolve Britain's chronic economic problems. Certainly, many felt that unfettered access to the Common Market might provide a *deus ex machina* to revive the flagging UK economy.

Ructions over Europe and industrial policy continued to grip the Labour Party after 1975. The EEC itself was not the main issue at stake: in fact, Williamson says, it "was a sideshow to their [the left's] central aims of achieving a socialist Britain, but it was a sideshow that was liable to ruin the main event". *Labour's Programme 1976*, adopted the following year, "committed the party to the AES and an interventionist industrial policy, and proposed seeking derogations from the UK's EEC obligations to bring this about". The left knew well enough that these "derogations" would not be forthcoming. When the Callaghan government fell in 1979, the consequences were seismic: the experience plunged Labour into a fresh round of soul-searching, soon giving way to outright civil war.

Changing Perspectives, and the Consequences of Defeat

For the Labour left, the Wilson-Callaghan governments of the 1970s had laid bare the bankruptcy of traditional centrist Labourism. The left had spent years developing its policies, arguing for them in the constituency parties and trade unions, getting its

motions passed at conference, only for a Labour leadership which never believed in them to dismiss them out of hand. It became apparent that in the absence of a socialist leadership committed to socialist policies, there was no real chance of them ever being implemented.

The Labour left set about transforming the party's structures and constitution. The emblematic reforms secured during this period were the introduction of an electoral college (consisting of the Parliamentary Labour Party, constituency parties and trade unions) for leadership elections, and mandatory reselection for sitting Labour MPs. This proved to be a step too far for most of the remaining revisionist MPs in Labour, who decamped to form the Social Democratic Party in 1981. It just so happened, of course, that this also represented the main body of pro-European opinion in the PLP.

Callaghan timed his resignation in 1980 so that the following leadership election would take place under the old system, whereby only MPs could vote. But this had the result of bringing Michael Foot – a veteran, incorrigible left Eurosceptic – to the helm of the party, just as pro-Market MPs were preparing to defect (one of whom, Neville Sandelson, **claimed to have voted for Foot** over Healey to deliberately lumber Labour with the most unpalatable leader possible). Though obscured somewhat by subsequent events, Foot was elected leader as a unifier, respecting the Bennite left's policy gains of preceding years while also shielding sitting MPs from the full force of its push for a radicalised party democracy.

A card vote at the Labour conference of the same year had endorsed leaving the EEC by five million votes to two million, and the writing was clearly on the wall for Labour's pro-Market revisionists. But Williamson observes that those who broke away to the SDP demonstrated little appetite for genuinely new thinking or moving on from what they had previously done in government: "They were, in the main, unapologetic about the policies that they had pursued: not those that had been promised or attempted or considered, but those that had in fact been deployed." They were generally unapologetic about their record in government and Jenkins' entreaties to moderation "amounted to a plea to carry on with, rather than to rip up the post-war model".

Labour's devastating defeat in 1983, however, laid the groundwork for a shift back to the right. Its commitment to leave the Common Market in the manifesto of that year was one of the emblematic policies blamed for Labour's humiliation. In the following years, the party would, slowly but surely, become a more attractive proposition for pro-European social democrats once more. Before long, a wholesale reassessment of Britain's position in Europe, and of the prospects for securing social-democratic reforms via the EEC, was underway in the Labour Party.

Indeed, this reassessment went beyond the party. The trade unions also came to look at the EEC in a new light, having seen the Thatcher government triumph both at the ballot box and in the set-piece industrial disputes of the 1980s such as the steelworkers' strike of 1980, the miners' strike, and Wapping. The EEC appeared to offer a degree of social protection that neither the unions nor the Labour Party were able to win by themselves, and with the efficacy of collective bargaining on the wane, it became apparent to the union leaders that a new tack had to be taken. Union leaders exerted pressure on the Labour leadership under Neil Kinnock to adjust its own position on Europe.

Williamson marks the key turning point as coming in 1988, when Jacques Delors, then president of the European Commission, addressed the Trades Union Congress. Delors was no radical: as French finance minister, he had been among the leading advocates behind Francois Mitterrand's decision to abandon the left-Keynesian programme on which he had been elected in 1981. But he had also argued for a more robust set of social protections across Europe and, as Williamson observes, "became something of a hero to the demoralised British left", traumatised as it was by a succession of political and industrial defeats. Delors' reception from the TUC was therefore a "rapturous" one, delegates serenading the Frenchman with a rousing chorus of 'Frère Jacques'.

Just as the labour movement was finally falling for Europe, the Thatcherites were turning against it. Thatcher's own reaction to Delors' 1988 address to the TUC, under her own nose, was one of great fury. In a speech delivered to the Bruges Group that September, she thundered: "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels." Her fear that sneaky socialists would reinstate what the British electorate had already rejected was overheated, but not without a kernel of truth: a rudderless centre-left, for lack of any better ideas, was looking to eke out some defensive concessions by taking the European route.

In any case, Thatcher's own support for the European project had only ever been qualified. Williamson remarks that her role in the referendum campaign was the subject of considerable criticism at the time, amid complaints that she had failed to pull her weight. New to the party leadership in 1975 and having to campaign alongside Heath, the man she had recently deposed – and whom she had asked to lead the Tory campaign, only for him to turn it down – Thatcher played only a modest role during the referendum and there was always some suspicion as to her enthusiasm for Europe. Events of the late 1980s would prove this suspicion to have been a solidly-grounded one, and would also see Thatcher's domination of the Tory Party slip rapidly away.

The Thatcherites thus undertook a reassessment of Europe themselves. They came to view the new social dimension of the European project (though in reality its

infringements on the prerogatives of employers were very modest) as a threat to their own, shackling the apparently newly-dynamic British economy to the indulgent welfarism of continental ‘socialists’. They had backed the Single European Act of 1987, behind which Delors had been the driving force and which brought the Treaty of Rome of 30 years earlier to its logical conclusion of a European single market. However, Thatcher’s hostility to the prospect of European monetary union prompted the resignation of deputy prime minister of Geoffrey Howe in November 1990 and a leadership challenge led by Michael Heseltine. Thatcher won the first ballot but failed to secure the 15 per cent majority she needed to win outright and, mortally wounded, was forced to step down.

Although Thatcher’s sharp anti-European turn cost her both the premiership and the leadership of the Conservative Party, she did succeed in taking the right-wing press with her. Delors himself became a hate figure in the Tory tabloids, and papers which had backed a Yes vote in 1975 – including the Daily Mail, the Telegraph, the Express and the Sun – did an about-turn; they would be among the most fervently pro-Leave voices in 2016. This populist Thatcherite Euroscepticism took time to gain a mass following but it didn’t take long to become a persistent presence in mainstream political discourse, as well as disciplining and chastening pro-European politicians frightened of incurring its wrath.

On the Way Out

By the mid-1990s, Eurosceptic right-populism was pronounced in the Tory papers. Williamson’s account of the period serves as a useful reminder that Tony Blair and New Labour weren’t above pandering to it, and Blair was reluctant to be seen to wrap himself in the EU flag for fear of inciting such sentiment against himself. In any case, Labour’s support for Europe was settled and for most voters it remained a marginal issue. As a result, Labour devoted relatively little energy to it, in keeping with a general early New Labour preference for vague but high-flown rhetoric over concrete detail.

New Labour’s attitudes towards the ‘social Europe’ agenda and the euro “were cautious, if not hostile”, Williamson notes, although Tony Blair was personally supportive of the latter. It was fully signed up to the deregulation agenda sweeping through the global economy at the time, and so it hedged its bets on the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty, from which John Major’s government had secured an opt-out. New Labour tried to have it both ways: it opted “to support the chapter (unlike the Conservatives), but reassure sceptical business leaders that it meant very little (unlike Delors)”. Blair lacked any instinctive sympathy for the more generous social protections on offer in some

other EU member states, which he regarded as borderline sclerotic and which were at odds with the deregulatory thrust of New Labour's economic policy.

Gordon Brown, after replacing Blair as prime minister, signed the Lisbon Treaty – a watered-down replacement for the failed Constitution Treaty of 2004 – in 2007, but made sure to do so behind closed doors, avoiding the televised ceremony at which the other 26 EU leaders put their names to it. Fearing a backlash in the Eurosceptic press, Brown thought it wisest to give it only quiet support. But this approach “neither endeared him to his European colleagues nor satisfied the Eurosceptic press”. Lisbon remained an abstract issue that generally passed the public by, but it did come at a time when worries about immigration were rising up the political agenda, and fostered Eurosceptic grievances. Britain's odd-man-out status in Europe was becoming ever more obvious, and unsustainable.

With the onset of the financial crisis in 2007-8, a decade of fairly serene economic growth was brought unceremoniously to an end and with it New Labour's “luck ran out”. This was New Labour's own Black Wednesday – a Labour government was left holding the bag as financial crisis struck – and its economic credibility evaporated. Another result of the crisis was that right-Euroscepticism, previously a fringe preoccupation, grew markedly in political salience in tandem with fears over immigration: UKIP consistently failed to make a major breakthrough in terms of parliamentary seats (at least in Britain) but won large numbers of votes. The drift of the Ed Miliband years, with the party unable to clarify its position as being either for or against austerity (merely reduced to carping about cuts going “too far, too fast”) compounded Labour's woes.

For Williamson, “the financial crisis, and the measures to deal with it, exposed the hollowed-out nature of what was left of British social democracy, a fragility that had been concealed before the boom turned to bust”. Miliband recognised that the financial crisis signified the end of the New Labour era, and the discrediting of old assumptions. But while he had some of the right instincts, he lacked organised support for them either in Parliament or at the base of the party. Labour found itself gripped by an identity crisis: it “struggled to decide whether it was a social democratic party or not, before concluding that it was, after all, a socialist party”. In the absence of the earlier social-democratic compact, “the pro-European case simply lacked sufficient robustness to fight off the nationalist forces ranged against it”.

By an unlikely turn of events, the Labour leadership then fell to backbench awkward squad veteran Jeremy Corbyn. While withering about New Labour, Williamson is ambivalent about Corbyn, noting that: “Corbyn was on the hard Left, a Eurosceptic of long standing, and *plus Benniste que le Benn*. Labour therefore appeared to have changed

overnight from being a hesitantly social democratic party to an outright socialist one.” But this misinterprets the appeal of Corbyn: by 2015, it was only the old Bennite left that was offering full-throated social democracy, Miliband having lacked the courage of his better convictions. Untainted by collaboration with New Labour as they were, the small band of surviving Bennites could therefore seize on the rank-and-file discontent towards its legacy.

Jeremy Corbyn was therefore tasked with leading the party into the 2016 European referendum, called by David Cameron as a last-minute gambit at the previous year’s general election to win back UKIP votes for the Tories. The 2016 referendum campaign effectively took on the appearance of a proxy war between contending factions of the Tory Party: the battle ongoing within it (over Europe and, in the case of Boris Johnson, for self-advancement) was “rancorous in the extreme”. Hostility towards immigration – which had barely featured in the 1975 referendum campaign – predominated, driven by negative media coverage and scapegoating. Remain’s media support was largely confined to the Guardian and Financial Times, with the result that “the voices featured in the debate were overwhelmingly on the Right”. Labour meanwhile “struggled to make itself heard”.

Corbyn’s Euroscepticism was used as a stick to beat him with after the Leave vote. For Williamson, it “was both a symptom and the cause of a major problem for the Remain Campaign”. Haunted by the Better Together fiasco which annihilated Labour in Scotland, Corbyn kept a distance from Stronger In, refusing to campaign alongside Blair and Cameron. Williamson argues that he also “kept Labour Remain campaigners at arm’s length”, but the fact that the Labour In campaign was headed by veteran Blairite Alan Johnson suggests this was not a one-way thing. For example, though Momentum hadn’t yet earned its spurs as a campaigning organisation, Johnson **indicated during the referendum campaign** that he would not reach out to it. Williamson asserts that “many Labour voters did not know what their own party’s attitude to the EU was”, but **nearly two-thirds of them voted to stay in it** nonetheless – a near-identical proportion to the SNP.

In fact, **as Susan Watkins has pointed out**, “the only UK party leader to attempt to make a Europeanist, as opposed to a British-nationalist case” for staying in the European Union was Jeremy Corbyn. Whatever Corbyn’s personal sympathies and his doubts about the prospects for democratising the EU, he tried in vain to shift the focus of the referendum campaign back to economic issues and tackle at least some of the prevailing myths about migration. Corbyn had the temerity to criticise aspects of the EU – in particular, Watkins mentions his opposition to its support for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) – earning him further animosity from the official Remain campaign,

but these criticisms were made as part of a left-social democratic case against a Leave vote. As Watkins summarises it:

“ Problems like insecurity, the lack of decent jobs, the high cost of living, uneven regional development, the deregulation of the banking system and the labour market were the fault of UK governments, Corbyn contended, not of migrant workers or the EU. It was in Britain that zero-hour contracts flourished and the share of wealth going to workers had collapsed. Migrants weren't driving down wages; unscrupulous employers were, because the government allowed them to.

Alan Johnson's Labour In campaign, however, failed to distinguish itself from the main Stronger In campaign. Writing from an ardently anti-Brexit perspective, Anthony Barnett has strongly criticised both: neither wing of the Remain campaign offered any programme for the democratic reform of European institutions, instead arguing on the grounds of “narrow, transactional advantage” that continued EU membership. This was, Barnett adds, “a visionless perspective even if true”.⁵ Without a constructive alternative for democratic reform, the Remain campaign appeared merely as the self-serving, elitist defender of an unpopular status quo. As such it inspired little enthusiasm; the fact that a mass movement against Brexit only emerged after the 2016 referendum had been lost tells its own story.

In Williamson's view, the crucial difference between pro-European victory in 1975 and defeat in 2016 was the intervening collapse of the social-democratic centre. The latter was “prepared to implement policies that ensured that we were, indeed, all in it together” but, he laments, the neoliberal centre of four decades later was a different beast. The New Labour era had expunged the old social democrats, before the Bennite left belatedly inherited the party. Orange Book Liberal Democrats had hegemonised their own party, the revisionist SDP heritage all but dead. The Tory Party, meanwhile, was almost completely Thatcherite, with the ‘wets’ of earlier decades reduced to irrelevance. The one exception was Scotland, where the SNP had moved to claim the mantle of social democracy for itself, and which saw its pro-European vote increase (from 58 per cent to 62 per cent) between 1975 and 2016.

At least as damaging, though, has been the failure of European institutions to develop a popular transnational *demos*. The European project has, as Barnett has argued, facilitated vastly expanded cultural and social (as well as economic) exchange across the continent.⁶ Costas Lapavistas is right to insist that it has not, however, provided “an arena for ideological political contestation reflecting social interests, as happens in national elections”; the European Parliament hardly suffices for the purpose.⁷ But the

balance of class forces in Europe is such that working-class movements are unable either to break with existing European institutions or threaten to reshape them in any meaningful way. The failure of European social democracy is continent-wide and, regrettably, Gerassimos Moschonas' verdict of nearly 20 years ago remains pertinent:

“Victims, accomplices and instruments of the globalisation and neoliberalisation of economic priorities, the social democrats suffer from a deficit of alternatives. It is a deficit that neither the trade unions, traditional partners of the social democrats, nor the new and old protest poles have the power or ideas to make good. In the wrestling match that has opposed the logic of the market and the logic of solidarity for at least three ‘half-centuries’, the former is prevailing today – comfortably. A specifically social-democratic logic – not rhetoric – is virtually absent from the European political and social scene at present.”⁸

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1. Andrew Thorpe (in *A History of the British Labour Party* (4th ed.), Red Globe Press 2015, p133) describes Labour's view of Europe in the years shortly after the war as “equivocal”. Britain remained largely aloof from European developments into the 1950s, as did Labour; the tendency in the party was to cling to the US rather than involving itself more actively in European affairs. However, as the decline of Britain's international standing became apparent, Labour leaders started to take more interest in Europe. ↩
 2. Thorpe 2015, p186. ↩
 3. See Tony Benn, *Against the Tide: Diaries 1973-76*, Arrow 1991, and John Medhurst, *That Option No Longer Exists: Britain 1974-76*, Zero Books 2014. ↩
 4. Kevin Jeffreys, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, Macmillan Education 1993, p90-1. ↩
 5. Anthony Barnett, *The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit & America's Trump*, Unbound 2017, p70. ↩
 6. Barnett 2017, p269-70. ↩
 7. Costas Lapavistas, *The Left Case Against the EU*, Polity Press 2018, p114-15. ↩
 8. Gerassimos Moschonas, *In the Name of Social Democracy: The Great Transformation, 1945 to the Present*, Verso 2002, p269-70. ↩
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