

Yvette Cooper's speech to the Centre for European Reform

28/6/16

Britain is in a political crisis.

We are still coming to terms with the sheer enormity of the referendum decision.

And the country is divided.

Some people are delighted, some distressed, some in doubt.

Europhiles think we are weaker, poorer out. Eurosceptics think we've taken back control.

Teenagers think their future has been taken away from them. But many people think they have seized their destiny back.

We're in a new world. Only we don't really know what it is.

Our constitution, our international role, our United Kingdom.

Our economy, our borders, our sense of identity, all up in the air.

And there have been some serious immediate developments since the result. The pound has plummeted, shares have fallen and foreign investors are pulling out.

Hate crime reports to the police have shot up by over 50% since the result

Polish families getting messages through their letter box calling them vermin.

Muslim women told "We voted you out, why are you still here".

No one knows quite what lies ahead.

These are difficult and dangerous waters.

Yet there is no plan.

Not from the Leave campaigners.

Not from the Government.

Not from the Conservative Party.

Not from the Labour Party.

Only Nicola Sturgeon has a sort of plan – and that is unlikely to be one that pulls Britain together.

From the Prime Minister all we get is a unit of civil servants and the reassuring news that Oliver Letwin is in charge.

From my party, Jeremy Corbyn cannot even fill a Shadow Front Bench to respond. No alternative Government. No alternative plan.

And from Boris Johnson, the front-runner to be the next Prime Minister, each day a different flip, a different flop as he changes his message for a different audience.

There is a political vacuum just when political leadership is needed most.

At a time like this we need some maturity from our politics and our politicians and we are getting the opposite.

And it's about to get worse. The post referendum political process we are becoming trapped in is failing our country.

Right now we have big choices - hard choices - to make as a country.

Britain has made a decision to leave the European Union.

But we have made no decision at all about what kind of country we are going to be next.

It's time to roll up our sleeves and get on with it because there is so much at stake.

It isn't enough to keep re-running the arguments of the referendum – grieving on one side, or still dreaming on the other. Its real now.

The country has spoken and we have a responsibility to try to make this work.

That is in our hands. It is the most important thing our generation now must do and will have consequences for generations to come.

To forge a new relationship with Europe as we build a new consensus about the kind of country we are going to be.

First we have to reflect on why this happened.

The cities voted in. Industrial towns voted out. Digital growth areas like the M4 corridor or the University towns voted in. The Tory shires and the Labour coalfields voted out. Scotland voted in. England and Wales voted out. The young voted in. Older votes chose out. Graduates in. Working class communities out.

Those who saw globalisation as an opportunity voted in.

Those who felt globalisation was a threat and didn't trust "the system" to make it better voted out.

The woman on Thursday who told me she was voting out because "well they all deserve a kick".

The man on Friday who told me how pleased he was that Britain was finally standing up for itself again.

Communities who didn't believe the Remain campaigns arguments about risk because they didn't feel they had much more to lose.

People who said they didn't believe "experts", because too often experts have let them down.

Places that people too often feel no longer have a purpose. Because the jobs have gone to the cities and shops to out of town malls.

A Tory Prime Minister could not persuade them. Because a Tory government has let them down.

But Labour had nothing to say that could convince them either.

They weren't convinced by staying in Europe because they couldn't see how they benefited.

And yes, lots of people were really worried about immigration.

As for Boris Johnson's could claim yesterday he didn't believe people were driven by anxiety about immigration.

If he didn't believe it why did his campaign deliberately play on people's anxiety every single day.

The posters on Turkey. The daily press releases about foreign criminals or migrants using the NHS. The leaflets. The interviews.

David Cameron's approach was no better.

He refused to talk about it. For years he has ramped up the rhetoric. For years he has made promises. Then suddenly he refused to talk about it at all. No wonder people got crosser and crosser.

It's the most sensitive issue of all. Yet we've had screaming on one side, silence on the other.

We are here without a plan because politics has failed.

Because our political process just couldn't deal with the difficult issues so they got worse.

Because too many of our politicians couldn't work out how to solve problems so they made false promise or just walked away.

Because too many towns feel they have no future.

Because immigration seemed too hard to solve.

Because the EU seemed too hard to reform.

Because inequality is still rising and it seemed too hard to stop.

Because we weren't prepared to take action to sort out housing.

Because trust collapsed.

And with every layer of failure, politics just made it worse.

So we need some big changes in our politics.

Too many politicians have been promoting division, playing games with fear and anxiety rather than providing sensible answers instead – and that is dangerous.

They have set a climate in which extremists can exploit the result.

Teachers are reporting that pupils are spouting race hate in the classroom.

Social media abuse and racist death threats have gone up.

People in Britain in our tolerant and diverse Britain, are now feeling fearful for their safety because of their nationality or the colour of their skin.

We have to stop this now.

It is deeply dangerous.

This is not the kind of country we want to be.

It is also not what Britain voted for last week.

This is not what millions of Leave voters want.

The Prime Minister was right to condemn this and promise the police the resources they need to respond. But every one of us needs to speak out against this.

Campaigners like Nigel Farage who tried to poison the referendum debate with posters fuelling hatred towards refugees or Michael Gove with his lies on Turkey need now to search their souls and speak out loudly to condemn this violence and hatred.

Nor can we sustain a politics based on more false promises.

Before the referendum Nigel Farage said £55m a day for hospitals and schools. After he said it was ‘a mistake’.

Before the referendum they said £350 million a week extra for the NHS. Now Ian Duncan Smith says he never “said it”.

Yet it was on the side of their bus.

Week after week of promising more controls on immigration.

Now Daniel Hannan says free movement’s here to stay.

Before the referendum Boris Johnson promised big changes to free movement.

Now he says Brits will still have all the same freedoms to live, work and travel in Europe.

Boris Johnson and Michael Gove have already fought one vote on one set of false promises. For the referendum itself.

They are about to do the same again for another vote on another set of false promises. This time for the keys to Number 10.

And they may well then do it a third time in a General Election.

But all of it is fantasy. None of it is about the reality of the negotiations Britain now needs with the EU on what our relationship will be, or what kind of country we choose to be outside the EU.

None of it is about the real hard choices our country now needs to make about who we are.

That's not just dishonest it is dangerous.

But Labour needs to change too.

And at a time when the world has changed, when an election is looming, I am very concerned that Jeremy Corbyn has no plan to re-unite the Labour movement, no plan to respond to the deep and serious issues the referendum has thrown up, and no plan for a looming General Election.

We have a huge task to reunite Leave and Remain Labour voters and supporters in a progressive vision of Britain's future.

Just as the country is divided between city and town over the referendum, a gulf is growing between Labour's support in the cities and the Midlands and Northern industrial towns that have long been our heartlands.

Our party is in danger of becoming a party of the Cities and University towns.

Labour votes in the cities who voted in must not push away the Labour voters in the town who voted out. They are not right wing. And they are waiting for us to stand up for them.

I got to know Jeremy last year and I always found him a kind, friendly man. He won well and he has brought more people into the party. He did not lose the referendum – the Prime Minister lost the referendum he called. But Jeremy did not show he had any of the campaigning zeal our Party needs in a tough fight.

But he is losing us Labour support across the country – and particularly in the towns and coalfields that built the labour movement in the first place.

Jeremy would be letting down Labour voters and communities across the country who badly need a strong Labour voice right now, and who badly need a Labour government, if he drags this out any longer. I hope he does the right thing in the party and stands down swiftly because we cannot drift and leave Boris Johnson, Theresa May and Ian Duncan Smith to shape Britain's future.

We need our politicians and parties to get a grip.

Because there are big, hard choices about the kind of future we now build.

We need a proper plan and a process for what happens next.

And everyone needs a say – those who voted to leave and those who voted to stay – in what kind of country we become now.

The Prime Minister was right not to trigger Article 50 straight away. Move too fast and we will give the EU the upper negotiating hand.

But he was wrong not to set out a proper process for debate and decisions to be made.

The Letwin unit is laughably inadequate.

Our negotiating strategy is going to end up being determined by an arms race of pledges in the Tory leadership race.

That's not on.

This is far too important for that.

The Prime Minister should establish a cross party joint committee of both houses of Parliament to oversee the options and negotiating strategy that is drawn up. It should include those who supported Leave and those who supported Remain.

And there needs to be direct access for the Opposition to civil servants now too. The leading Tory party contender has said he is considering an General Election. The Prime Minister has accepted there may be a case for an early General Election, that may be only 4 months away.

I am therefore writing to Jeremy Heywood the Cabinet Secretary to ask him to trigger the process for access talks for opposition parties.

And we need to start debating now some of the serious issues that need to be resolved.

On trade.

On immigration.

On contributions.

On security.

On foreign policy.

We've heard different right wing visions from the right of what Britain outside Europe looks like.

Libertarians who see this as a way to roll back all state involvement. Free marketeers who see it as a way to cut employment protection. Reactionary conservatives who want to cut themselves off from the rest of the world.

But none of those right wing visions will work for Britain.

Labour should be opposing the libertarianism of campaigners like Dominic Raab who would keep us out of things like the European Arrest Warrant or Europol. In or out of the EU, we badly need that security cooperation that keeps us safe.

Labour must campaign strongly against the calls by Tories like Priti Patel who want a bonfire of workers rights. Labour should be pressing now for the rights that are based on European legislation to be swiftly embedded in UK law.

The leaders of the campaign to leave may be right wingers who made false promises.

Most of those who voted to leave in good faith really are not.

We may no longer be in the EU, but they are still our closest friends and neighbours, our biggest and nearest customers. And they should still be our partners on the world stage.

We need to build a progressive, outward-looking Labour vision of Britain's future alongside the EU – a new "special relationship" with our European partners underpinned by Labour values – social solidarity, equality, social justice and human rights.

That means we also have to do the best deal we can for jobs and economic growth, and we know the real challenge is getting a deal on trade and free movement.

And here's where it gets really hard. Access to the single market is vital for so many jobs.

We want no tariffs on our car industry.

Access to the single market for our service sector.

Passporting rights for our financial services.

We want it all, but it's going to be a tough diplomatic challenge to get it.

And most sensitive of all, we need a plan for immigration.

I argued for reform of free movement if we stayed in the EU. And while access to the single market is vital, there is no doubt that Britain outside the EU will not support full free movement of unskilled workers.

But here's the problem. We know there is strong support for immigration reform. But there is no consensus on what the new framework should be.

And our community cohesion cannot cope with more games on this. No more false promises. No more ramping up the rhetoric. No more sheepish silence. No more Boris flip flops. No more Farage inflaming things.

This will need careful diplomacy and negotiations in Europe.

But alongside here at home, we need a National Commission on Immigration charged with building a consensus across the country – drawing together faith leaders, community leaders, trades unions, employers, the voice of the small towns and the big cities. We have to face this. Britain has benefited for Centuries from people coming here from abroad. We need international talent and ideas. But we also need a system that is fair and has public consent. Or the divisions will grow and extremists will be able to exploit them.

We need a comprehensive plan on immigration – from border controls to employment rules, to community cohesion. It needs to be transparent and it needs public consent. Or whatever happens over Europe and the negotiations we will have serious problems for decades to come.

We have a choice.

Whether Britain outside the EU chooses to be a fair, outward looking country, tolerant, diverse, narrowing inequalities, standing up for social justice, that works with our partners and trades with the world.

Or whether we turn inwards and rightwards. Turning on each other. Legitimising extremism. Sneering at each other. Cutting back the social solidarity or shared faith in our common humanity, where inequalities widen and those with least are hardest hit.

It's in our hands and it is urgent.

Politics has to rise to the challenge.

And Labour has to rise to the challenge too.

Thank you