

# Richard Corbett MEP

Labour Member of the European Parliament  
for Yorkshire & Humber

**Final Report**

**31 January 2020**

## 1. Goodbye

I am sending out this final report on my last day as MEP for Yorkshire & Humber.

It has been an immense privilege to serve as your MEP for most of the past 21 years. And although Britain is leaving the European Union, I remain sceptical that the sunlit uplands and economic prosperity promised by Boris Johnson, both during the referendum and in his recent election campaign, will actually materialise, for the reasons I outline in section 2 below. We must also come to terms with our devastating defeat in the general election, and analyse the reasons for this, including its connections to the Brexit issue (section 3), while we also prepare to elect a new leader (section 4).

This final week in the European Parliament has been both heartbreaking and heartwarming. While it is immensely sad to be leaving, the warmth, sympathy and solidarity shown by our colleagues from other Member States has been quite amazing. It was not just British MEPs who were in tears.

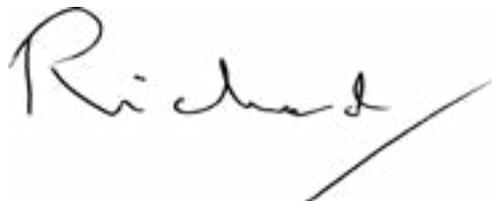
Of course, my leadership of the European Parliamentary Labour Party, my membership of the party's NEC, and my attendance

at Shadow Cabinet meetings, also come to an end. My constituency office is closed.

It has also been a privilege to work with wonderful Labour MEP colleagues. We come from every wing of the party, but worked together as a team in a harmonious way - an example that some others in the party would do well to emulate.

I would like to say thank you to all the people I have met along the way, those that have read and interacted with blogs and articles on [my website](#) (which will continue for a while in a slimmed down version) and on social media. Brexit - in particular - has been a very divisive issue and not everybody has agreed with me, but the level of trolling and abuse I have received has been a tiny proportion of my overall correspondence.

And finally, a thank you to all the members of my staff, who, have themselves faced uncertainty about their jobs and their futures, but who have supported me in the UK and in Brussels until the very end. I wish them all the best in their future endeavours.



## 2. Brexit: now the real problems start

In the immediate, nothing changes (other than losing British representation in the EU institutions) as all EU rights, obligations and legislation stay in place during a transitional period of one year during which replacement arrangements have to be negotiated.

The Johnson deal does not "Get Brexit done". It's simply the end of the first, easier, and less important part - the exit arrangements. Now come the negotiations on the future relationship, with more wrangling, arguments and division. In those negotiations, the government now has to make difficult choices.

### On the economy:

- EITHER we distance ourselves from the EU (our neighbours and main trading partners), causing huge damage to our

economy, losing thousands of jobs and hurting our public finances.

- OR we stay close to the EU, especially the customs union and the single market (both of which have non-EU countries participating), but then have to follow the rules without having a say on them anymore.

Neither is good for Britain, although the second is less economically damaging. The government currently says it wants the former.

### On security:

- EITHER we leave the joint police databases, the shared criminal records, the common efforts to find and catch cross-border gangs, traffickers and terrorists, etc.

- OR we ask the EU to let us stay in them anyway, but we'd not have a say anymore on how they're run or the rules and safeguards that apply.

It's the same choice again on the **EU technical agencies** where we currently pool resources to cut costs on things like the testing of medicines (European Medicines Agency), of chemicals (European Chemicals Agency) or of aircraft (European Air Safety Agency):

- EITHER we set up our own separate agencies, at great cost, recruiting the necessary expertise, duplicating work already done and having to get them recognised across the world.
- OR we ask if we can stay in the EU agencies anyway, but without a say anymore on how they're run or the standards they apply.

Not to mention **the tensions Brexit is creating** for the UK in:

- Northern Ireland, with the creation of a customs border causing immense practical and political difficulties.
- Scotland, where proceeding with Brexit will help the SNP to argue for secession.
- Gibraltar, whose status is legally safeguarded in the EU, but weakened outside it.

**Leaving the Customs Union** will not just damage trade with Europe (our main trading partners with many vital cross-border supply chains), but also damage our trade with the rest of the world:

We would drop out of all the trade deals with countries across the planet that we had previously negotiated jointly as members of the EU, with the clout and leverage of the world's largest market.

We would have to replace them with new agreements, in a hurry, negotiating just as Britain, without the clout of Europe behind us.

People are already afraid of what a trade deal with the USA would bring in terms of having to accept US food products with lower standards than ours, including chlorinated chicken etc, and conceding privileged access to the NHS for American pharmaceutical and health companies.

Government ministers repeat again and again that Brexit means we'll "take back control" of our borders, our laws and our money. In fact we'll have less control of all three:

**Borders:** we'll drop out of the EU's cross-border policing arrangements and shared data on criminals that help us police our borders.

**Laws:** as a sovereign country, we already adopt our own laws, it's just that we choose to adopt some laws jointly with our neighbours when we think that's useful, mostly the common rules for the common market. This comes to about one-tenth of our laws. Leaving the EU means we'll have no say on those common European laws, many of which will affect us anyway. We become a rule-taker, not a rule-maker.

**Money:** 98% of public spending is national. The 2% of public spending that we do jointly at EU level is often on items where doing things jointly saves money by avoiding duplication, such as on research programmes. In any case, the magnitude of this is far smaller than the costs of Brexit to our economy and our exchequer.

One issue is what will happen to our **right to freedom of movement within the EU**. Brexiters often play the "immigration" card, claiming we can't control migration to Britain if we keep the EU rules on freedom of movement. In fact:

Most migration to Britain comes from outside the EU, entirely under our own national rules, so we can be as liberal or as restrictive as we want.

The EU's internal freedom of movement is a reciprocal right with nearly two million Brits in

other EU countries who now risk losing their rights and protections. Some of those have retired abroad, and if large numbers of them return to Britain, it will mean more pressure on social care and the NHS.

EU freedom of movement is subject to conditions such as finding work within a short period, or not being a burden on the exchequer. Britain chose not to fully enforce these conditions, but could if it wanted to, within EU rules.

EU citizens in the UK pay one-third more to Britain in taxes than they take out in services or as benefits. If many leave, it will COST us money.

Until we train enough nurses and doctors, we need EU citizens desperately in our NHS.

In short, the lies told by Johnson and the Leave campaign are about to come home to roost:

They said Brexit would be easy – it's throwing up all kinds of problems they never told us about.

They said it would save loads of money (which would all go to the NHS) – it's costing a fortune.

They said it would be good for the economy - the opposite is true.



### 3. Election Reflection

In attempting to explain why Labour did so badly in December's General Election, it is important to recognise that there are a number of factors and also some long term trends. Seizing on a single issue to blame is a way of seeking to avoid other factors being criticised. That is more photoshop than reflection; seeing what you want to see to fit your view, rather than looking in a mirror and accepting that there are wrinkles, spots and grey hairs, even if you'd rather there weren't.

Here, I want to look at how our Brexit stance affected the election. This was never going to be an easy issue for the Labour Party:

- We had a campaign to remain in the 2016 referendum (a unanimous decision at party conference), but lost
- Most Labour constituencies had voted Leave, but most Labour voters voted to Remain (even in Leave constituencies, bar a few exceptions)
- We had said that we would respect the result of the referendum but were confronted with a job-destroying, rights-threatening, costly, Tory Brexit deal
- We had expected public opinion to rally behind the result of the 2016 referendum but in practice it edged the

other way with almost every opinion poll over the last 2 years showing a majority would vote to remain in the event of a new referendum

- We held up May's deal, but a handful of Labour MPs voted with the Tories on several key votes
- We had managed to corner Johnson who could neither get his deal through Parliament nor call an early election – until the Lib Dems offered him one at the worst possible time.

Some people now claim that Labour should have supported the Tory Brexit and not have even offered to allow the public a say on the actual outcome. They are wrong. After all, 53% of the population voted for parties demanding a second referendum, so it was hardly an outlandish policy! It was also right on its merits: Brexit was so different from what was promised that it was right to go back to the people to endorse or reject, even if we had come to power and attenuated it.

Where we fell down, was:

- our delay in getting to that position, only fully backing it after our huge losses to the Greens and the Lib Dems in the European elections

- the complexity of how we would move in government to a second referendum (while logical, not easy to explain quickly on the doorstep)
- above all, our ambiguity as to how we would campaign in that referendum.

The ambiguity was a forlorn attempt to keep Leave voters inside. In fact it meant we lost a greater number of Remain voters. The Tories' vote share only went up by 1% in the election, while the other 'Remain' parties went up by a total of 5%. Of course, there was a problem in that this was not evenly distributed and many point to the seats we lost in the "Red Wall" of northern England. But even there, there were several seats that we lost by a smaller majority than the number of votes that we lost to the Liberal Democrats. And we should not forget the former "Red Block" – Scotland – that we have to regain and where we would have done far better with a clearer Remain position, as is also the case for dozens of seats in the south of England.

Ambiguity also dented our attack on Johnson's deal and his bogus, simplistic claim to "get Brexit done". Had we made the case more strongly, we would have lessened the ability of Johnson to appeal to the public on this issue.

The general election was lost for many reasons, with ambiguity in our Brexit position being just one of them, and not the most important one. But in any case, the result is that with just 43% of the vote (29% of the electorate) Johnson now has 100% of the power, having also eliminated his internal Tory critics. Yet his claiming a "mandate" for his Brexit deal on the back of that, is a tenuous claim indeed – especially as he is taking it further and claiming a mandate for a very hard Brexit.

There are now real risks of a geo-political and economic alignment with Trump's USA, an eventual breakup of the UK if Scotland goes for independence, and of conflict reappearing in Northern Ireland. The British people are looking at a trajectory of decline in public services, a weakening of workplace rights, and a damaged political system that rewards a populist leader telling blatant lies.

Millions of voters will be at the front line as jobs are lost and services suffer under this Tory Brexit. They needed a Labour Party, and government, that was prepared to vigorously and unambiguously make the case for remaining a member of the European Union.

We let them down.



## 4. Labour's Next Leadership Team

Having sat in the Shadow Cabinet for the last three years, and having closely observed some of the leading candidates (not just as regards their own portfolio), I decided to nominate (in the MP/MEP nomination process) Keir Starmer for Leader and Dr. Rosena Allin-Khan (who I worked with closely on the Rohingya refugee crisis).

I wrote an article about my [recommendation for Rosena for Labour List](#).

While there is a good range of candidates, I feel that Keir Starmer in particular is well placed to bring the party together as leader.

If you would like to get involved with either of their campaigns, or contact them to ask questions, you can contact them on the buttons below.



[www.richardcorbett.org.uk](http://www.richardcorbett.org.uk)



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