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Leaders of the Conservative Government are edging towards an ever tougher tone with regard to Britain's exit from the European Union. This is despite the fact that most Conservative MPs – and most members of the Cabinet – were in favour of Britain remaining. The zealous Eurosceptic crusaders in the Government seem to have overwhelmed the misgivings of their less robust colleagues in the moderate centre. Most of those who believe that Britain would be more secure and more prosperous inside the EU have given up the fight even for such relatively moderate concessions as retaining membership of the EU customs union and the single market. Given how close the 2016 referendum vote was – 52 per cent to 48 per cent – such a compromise would be a fair reflection of the national mood. The Government announced this week that it will seek temporary single-market membership. That would merely postpone a hard Brexit. It will not avoid it.

Prime Minister Theresa May ruled out seeking the obvious compromise solution by her idiosyncratic interpretation of the referendum as being, above all, a rejection of the principle of free movement of people within the EU. She has treated the 52 per cent vote to leave the EU as a 100 per cent vote against uncontrolled immigration, and as expressing the irrevocable “will of the people” that they should in no circumstances be allowed to reconsider. Given that the EU regards free movement as fundamental to the single market, this has effectively eliminated the possibility of Britain remaining within it once an uncertain transition period has ended.

British businesses are increasingly alarmed that they will be shut out of markets they rely on. Many on both sides of the political divide see that it will damage the economy and lead to the loss of jobs. So why have they not organised to say so, with all the zeal displayed by their opponents? This should be ideal political territory for an official Opposition. Yet the best Labour has come up with so far is that the single-market option should remain “on the table” in the Brexit negotiations. Jeremy Corbyn and those around the Labour leader seem to share Mrs May's conviction that the referendum result was primarily a protest about immigration.

Those in favour of a soft Brexit and pro-EU politicians need to ask: which type of immigration is it that causes such resistance? The numbers arriving from outside the EU are just as large as those from within it. If the referendum vote really was a protest at the presence of the 3.3 million EU citizens living in the UK, why have all the major parties, with manifest public approval, promised to guarantee their right to remain? It is widely acknowledged that those 3.3 million fellow Europeans are making a welcome – and in areas like healthcare, a decisive – contribution to British society.

Labour should campaign vigorously to promote EU immigration as a benefit, not a burden, and invite like-minded politicians from all sides to join them. That would transform the political landscape. Anti-EU hardliners in Government and media would at last face the stiff resistance they deserve. As things stand, the anti-EU zealots are winning by default.

Editor - The Tablet