

Divisions grow over British withdrawal from the European Union

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30 August 2016

British Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May has called a Wednesday Cabinet meeting at her country residence, Chequers, to hold crisis talks over Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU).

This comes amid reports that May has ruled out a parliamentary vote on "Brexit"—the majority Leave vote recorded in June's referendum on British membership of the European Union (EU)—before formally triggering withdrawal from the bloc. Heads of government departments are to submit plans to "make Brexit work" at the Cabinet meeting.

The decision has reignited divisions with the ruling elite over the economic and political implications of triggering Article 50, the clause that officially begins the process of negotiations on withdrawal.

Remaining within the EU was the favoured position of the majority of the bourgeoisie and the majority of big business. Upwards of 480 MPs of the 650 in Parliament are opposed to EU withdrawal, while the House of Lords also favour EU membership by an overwhelming majority. A parliamentary vote could block or at least stall the start of negotiations.

The issue of Brexit is at the centre of the ongoing coup against Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn by his right-wing Blairite opponents. The main aim of the coup plotters, working in conjunction with the UK and US intelligence services, is to refashion the Labour Party as an opponent of Brexit.

Owen Smith, the right's challenger to Corbyn for the Labour leadership, has said he will do everything he can to prevent a Brexit, including holding a second referendum. Corbyn ruled out a further ballot, saying only that he will fight for the best possible terms for British withdrawal.

On Saturday, Lord O'Donnell, head of the Civil Service between 2005 and 2011, stated his opposition

to "rushing" into Article 50 and said Brexit was not inevitable. Much depended on "what happens to public opinion and whether the EU changes," he said. "It might be that the broader, more loosely aligned group is something that the UK is happy being a member of."

His remarks were condemned by Steve Baker, the Tory MP who chaired the pro-Brexit Conservatives for Britain group before the referendum. "Any official working to oppose our exit from the EU should be summarily fired," he insisted. "If necessary, emergency legislation should be passed to make it possible."

A Downing Street source told the *Daily Telegraph* that May "has been absolutely clear that the British public have voted and now she will get on with delivering Brexit." The article noted, "May consulted Government lawyers who have told the Prime Minister she has the executive power to invoke Article 50 on her own."

This elicited an equally furious response from pro-Remain figures. Barry Gardiner, Labour's shadow secretary of state for international trade, Europe, energy and climate change, said May's move to trigger article 50 "without first setting out to parliament the terms and basis upon which her government seeks to negotiate ... would be to diminish parliament and assume the arrogant powers of a Tudor monarch."

A pro-EU, cross-party alliance of former ministers issued a call on May to secure the "best possible relationship" with the EU after Brexit. The new Open Britain movement, which is to launch on Friday, is the continuation of the official Remain campaign in the referendum, and includes Tory MP Anna Soubry and Labour's Pat McFadden. It has stated that while it will not argue for a second referendum, it wants to make the "positive and patriotic case" for a close alliance with the EU.

It is reported that a number of ministers, including Chancellor Philip Hammond, are also seeking to ensure that the UK retains access to the European Single Market for the financial sector and car industry in any Brexit deal.

The *Sunday Times* reported, “Hammond has privately insisted that ‘everything is on the table’ and Treasury officials believe access to the single market for the financial services industry should be the top priority. But senior government sources say [David] Davis, [Liam] Fox [the ministers appointed to lead Brexit planning] and May’s closest adviser, Nick Timothy, believe Britain will have to leave the single market to fulfil her pledge to impose border controls.”

Davis and Fox are both in favour of May triggering Article 50 in early January.

The Tory eurosceptic wing is stepping up demands for May to set red lines on immigration controls. Andrew Bridgen, who was the first Conservative MP to demand the resignation of May’s predecessor, David Cameron, told the *Sunday Times*, “The prime minister is going to have to say something to her backbenchers. She’s got to elaborate on what she means by ‘Brexit means Brexit.’ We need some red meat.”

Leading Tory Brexit campaigner Iain Duncan Smith called on the government to impose a US-style “Green Card” scheme for those seeking to work in the UK, which he said would “guarantee British jobs for British workers.”

He highlighted the Universal Job Match scheme that he had introduced as work and pensions secretary. This matches details of those unemployed in a particular location and their skill level with existing jobs. The focus should be on “lower-skilled” employment, he suggested. By making the unemployed take up such jobs, the government would be able to restrict migration from the EU.

Following the Cabinet meeting, May will travel to China to attend the G20 meeting of world leaders. A spokesperson said she would use the chance “to highlight the wealth of opportunities that will arise from Brexit” and allow them to discuss “mutually beneficial trade relationships in the future.”

The content of these “wealth of opportunities” for the global corporations was mapped out by the *Sun*, owned by the pro-Brexit media oligarch Rupert Murdoch.

Its editorial denounced calls by EU leaders for closer integration in the wake of the UK referendum result, stating: “It is crucial Chancellor Philip Hammond now secures our medium and long-term fortunes.” Hammond’s upcoming Autumn Statement must “slash corporation tax” and other taxes, it demanded.

But divisions within the British bourgeoisie over Brexit are developing against the backdrop of increasingly febrile relations within the EU itself.

The *Sunday Times* reported: “German chancellor, Angela Merkel, and other leaders privately agreed last week that Britain would have to leave the single market if it wants any restrictions on free movement. May is understood to have made it clear to Merkel during a recent visit to Berlin that she would not be able to accept free movement.”

The Brexit vote was a manifestation of the fracturing of the EU along national lines and deepens the crisis of the ruling elite continent wide. Last week, Merkel toured European capitals, meeting with 15 of the EU’s 27 national leaders. This was in preparation for the first meeting of EU heads since Brexit, which will take place without British participation, on September 16 in Bratislava.

Speaking in Warsaw, Merkel warned ominously, “Brexit is not just any event. It is a deep break in the EU’s history of integration, and so it is important to find a careful answer. We must face the consequences [of Brexit] and consider the future of the EU.”

On Sunday, Merkel’s vice-chancellor and Social Democratic Party chair, Sigmar Gabriel, warned that negotiations on withdrawal must be made as tough as possible for the UK to discourage other countries from following its lead and stop the EU going “down the drain.”

“If we organise Brexit in the wrong way, then we’ll be in deep trouble,” he said, “so now we need to make sure that we don’t allow Britain to keep the nice things, so to speak, related to Europe while taking no responsibility.”



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