

UK Conservative divisions over Brexit go public once again

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Divisions that were temporarily patched over within the UK Conservative government over plans for Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) following the Brexit referendum resurfaced after the G20 summit in China.

At a press conference at the summit, Prime Minister Theresa May rejected an Australian-style points-based system for controlling EU migration, which was one of the key promises of the Leave campaign during its successful campaign in the June referendum on EU membership.

May stated, "What the British people voted for on 23 June was to bring some control into the movement of people from the European Union to the UK. A points-based system does not give you that control."

The prime minister added that in her previous post as home secretary a points-based system existed for visas for students, "[B]ecause they [students] met the criteria, they were automatically let in. That's the problem with a points-based system. I want a system where the government is able to decide who comes into the country."

"There is no single silver bullet that is the answer in terms of dealing with immigration," she added. This placed May and her wing of the party into opposition to five cabinet ministers—Boris Johnson, Liam Fox, Priti Patel, Chris Grayling and Andrea Leadsom—who openly endorsed the policy during the referendum campaign.

The points based system—long the policy of the anti-immigrant UK Independence Party (UKIP)—was adopted by Johnson, Patel and another leading Tory Brexiter, Michael Gove, amid loud boasts of victory from then UKIP leader Nigel Farage.

A dog whistle policy, its adoption was designed to whip up anti-immigrant xenophobia under conditions in

which polls were showing, at that stage, a close victory for the Remain camp. The *Times* reported Monday, "Some senior figures from the campaign have admitted privately that they focused on the points system because focus groups suggested that it sounded tough to voters."

Following the surprise vote by the population to leave the EU, Johnson stated, "The government will be able to take back democratic control of immigration policy, with a balanced and humane points based system to suit the needs of business and industry."

In the referendum, May supported a Remain vote in line with the dominant position within ruling circles.

Since becoming PM, after the resignation of her predecessor David Cameron, she has stressed that "Brexit means Brexit" in order to placate the Eurosceptic wing that dominates her party outside Parliament. But she is anxious that this process is managed and does not end in a complete breach with Europe—especially under conditions where she was subjected to public rebuke over Brexit's impact on British trade relations and its global standing by US President Barack Obama at the G20.

With May in China, it was left to leading Brexit figure David Davis, the designated "Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union," to give a statement on "Exiting the European Union" to Parliament Monday on its return from the summer recess.

Asked by Labour MP and fellow Eurosceptic Kate Hoey if he agreed that it was not necessary to be a member of the Single European Market to have access to it, Davis replied, "There are many, many countries, many countries outside the European Union, that do a better job, frankly, of exporting to the single market than we do, even without a trade arrangement. So of course we want to have access to the single market. We

don't need to be a member of it to do it. Indeed, being a member of it has caused some of the problems of sovereignty that this referendum was driven by."

Davis later confirmed, in reply to a question from Anna Soubry, a leading Conservative figure in the pro-Remain Open Britain campaign, that his position was to accept withdrawal from the single market. He stated, "What I'm saying is that this government is looking at every option. But the simple truth is that if a requirement of membership is giving up control of our borders, I think that makes it very improbable."

Within 24 hours, Davis's comments were repudiated by a spokesman for May who stated that he was giving "his opinion" and not government policy. May's spokesman said she "has set out that we are going to need to be able to address people's concerns about migration with the EU and get the best possible deal in trade and services and now work is underway. ... She is approaching that with an open mind, with a view that we shouldn't be taking a model off the shelf."

May's statement on arriving at the G20 that Britain was "open for business" and that restrictions on the freedom of movement for EU citizens were a "red line" in negotiations with the EU had been publicly welcomed by Eurosceptic Tory MPs. However, Davis's comments were a swipe at May and an attempt to ensure the "hard" Brexit desired by the anti-EU faction of the party.

The *Daily Telegraph* noted of May's statement: "The rebuke is a stark sign of the disagreement at the heart of the Cabinet surrounding Britain's exit from the European Union," and represented "a warning to Mr. Davis, who as a member of the Government is expected not to state his own opinions in the House of Commons."

May's mantra that "Brexit means Brexit" can no longer conceal the air of crisis and paralysis surrounding the government. The intractable political conflicts within the ruling elite evidenced in the referendum campaign not only remain unresolved. They have been exacerbated by the Leave vote.

At last week's cabinet meeting, May ruled out a second referendum or an early general election on the issue of Brexit. She did so to pre-empt the debate held later in the day in Westminster Hall—following Davies statement in Parliament—made necessary by a 4 million-strong petition demanding a second referendum on the

UK's EU membership.

Calls by the pro-Remain Labour MP David Lammy and Green Party leader Caroline Lucas for another referendum or a vote in Parliament on whatever deal is reached as a result of Brexit negotiations were rejected by former Conservative minister John Penrose, who declared, "We have been given our marching orders. Brexit must mean Brexit. It is up to every red-blooded democrat to accept the verdict ... and pull together to deliver it."

In China, May not only faced a dressing down from the US but was presented with a 15-page document from Japan warning that the UK could see an exodus by major corporations unless it maintained access to the EU Single Market. Editorialising Monday, the *Times* noted, "British officials were said to be astonished by Japan's long list of worries," and described May's first international summit as a "reality check for Brexit."

The pro-Remain *Financial Times* warned Tuesday: "Japan's 'requests' to the UK and EU, which amount to a plea to maintain the fullest market access possible, may be little more than a wishlist. But the questions it has raised are as pressing for UK businesses as they are for foreign investors; and they will require answers."

Political and geostrategic divisions over Brexit are set to intensify in the lead up to the September 16 meeting of EU leaders in Bratislava. Last week, Germany'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."

This hard line was re-affirmed last Thursday by European Council President Donald Tusk, who will chair the Bratislava summit. Tusk said: "We need to protect the interests of the members of the EU that want to stay together, not the one which decides to leave. It sounds brutal but it must be obvious for all of us that we are in this process to protect our own European interests, it means interests of 27."



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