

UK political crisis deepens over Brexit

Robert Stevens
10 September 2016

On Thursday, European Council President Donald Tusk met British Prime Minister Theresa May at Downing Street for private talks.

The meeting was billed as one to discuss preparations for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and plans for a European Council summit in October. A summit of the leaders of all EU countries, with the exception of the UK, will be held in Bratislava next week. The September 16 summit, to discuss the post-Brexit future of the EU, is listed as "informal", as the UK has not yet left the EU. The UK's prime minister is not invited.

Tusk is to chair the Bratislava summit. He declared, prior to meeting May, that he was supportive of a hard line being taken in negotiations between the UK government and Brussels over the terms of Britain's exit. 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, the interests of 27 countries."

Tusk is demanding that the UK swiftly triggers Article 50, beginning the two-year process for its formal exit. Before he met May, there was a hostile tone to a Tweet of his reading, "Ball in UK court to start negotiations. In everybody's best interest to start asap."

May, who supported the referendum campaign to remain in the EU, and whose Conservative Party is split down the middle on the issue of leaving, reiterated to Tusk her position that Article 50 would not be triggered this year. A Downing Street spokesperson said, "The Prime Minister said it would be important to work together to make sure the process is as smooth as possible."

The UK "would take time to prepare for the negotiations," with May, "reiterating that Article 50

will not be triggered before the end of the year."

May's position is at odds with many Tory MPs and the wider party, with intractable divisions over Europe surfacing this week. With May in China at the G20, where her mantra of "Brexit means Brexit", was opposed by both the US and Japanese administrations, leading Brexit figure David Davis gave a statement to open Parliament. He told MPs that Britain would leave the EU and that it was "improbable" that the UK would remain a member of Europe's Single Market if "a requirement of membership is giving up control of our borders."

Davis was appointed Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union in May's first Cabinet, after she succeeded David Cameron, who resigned following the referendum vote. But he came under immediate attack not only from the pro-Remain opposition Labour Party, but also from sections of his own party opposed to losing full access to the Single Market.

Davis was sharply rebuked within 24 hours by a spokesman for May who stated that Davis was giving "his opinion" and not government policy. However, speaking in parliament Wednesday, she refused to provide a direct answer to MPs who asked her to confirm if the UK would remain a member of the Single Market. "We will not reveal our hand prematurely and we will not provide a running commentary on every twist and turn of the negotiation," she said.

There is no indication that any compromise with Britain will be forthcoming from the EU. The vote for Brexit is only one manifestation of the fracturing of the entire EU project.

Europe's leading power, Germany, is taking a hard line against the UK—with Chancellor Angela Merkel declaring at the outset that Germany's interests will be placed at the forefront of Brexit negotiations with the UK. Sigmar Gabriel, leader of her Social Democrat

coalition partners, and the economy minister, warned recently that if other states followed the UK in exiting, the EU would go “down the drain.” He called for a punitive stance to be taken against Britain, asserting, “If we organise Brexit in the wrong way, then we’ll be in deep trouble, 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.”

This week, Guy Verhofstadt revealed that he will represent the European Parliament, along with negotiators from the EU, in Brexit talks with the UK. In July, Verhofstadt rehearsed the EU’s fundamental opposition to allowing the UK access to the Single Market while the UK restricted the free movement of people in order to cut immigration levels (a central demand of the anti-EU wing of the Tories). Verhofstadt warned, “The European Parliament will never agree to a deal that de facto ends the free movement of people for a decade while giving away an extra rebate in exchange for all the advantages of the internal market. What would stop other countries from asking the same exceptional status?”

He added, “The only new relationship between Britain and the European Union can be one in which the UK has an associated status with less obligations but equally less rights. And if this is not feasible, the fall-back position will be an ordinary trade agreement between Britain and the EU.”

The vote to leave the EU took place in opposition to the strategic interests of the majority of Britain’s ruling elite. Its representatives are now loudly voicing their concerns that the government is bereft of any strategy following the Brexit vote.

On Thursday, *Financial Times* columnist Philip Stephens wrote, “The Brexiters now trumpeting a bright independent future see departure from the EU as an event. In truth it will be a long, tortuous process—a slow burn, if you like, with costs, economic and political, that will reach well into coming decades.”

Stephens was scathing of May, writing, “When she tells the House of Commons that she has no intention of prematurely showing her negotiating hand, what she really means is that she does not yet have such a hand.” He added, “The media fanfare surrounding a lengthy cabinet discussion about Brexit ... belied the absence of any substantive convergence towards strategic objectives.”

Economist wrote Friday, 77 days

Brexit vote, “May’s mantra, ‘Brexit means Brexit’, has become a tired cliché.”

It stated, “The case for staying in the single market is simple: economists say this will minimise the economic damage from Brexit. A ‘hard’ Brexit that involves leaving the single market without comprehensive free-trade deals with the EU and third countries would mean a bigger drop in investment and output.”

Central to the efforts of Labour’s right-wing coup plotters to remove Jeremy Corbyn as leader is the aim of refashioning the party as the political tool to reverse the referendum result.

Given that the Tory party is bitterly and irrevocably riven over Europe, the plotters, with the backing of the UK and American intelligence apparatus, see Labour as the most effective means to establish a pro-EU, pro-NATO vehicle representing the strategic interests of British imperialism.

Britain’s access to the Single Market was at the centre of the most vocal attacks yet made on Corbyn by Owen Smith, his challenger for the leadership, in a debate hosted by the BBC Thursday. Smith stated that if elected Labour leader, he would campaign for a second referendum. Asked by the moderator if he would “ignore the Brexit vote”, Smith replied, “Well, exactly.”



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)