

UK Prime Minister announces timetable for UK exit from European Union

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Prime Minister Theresa May confirmed Sunday that she will trigger Article 50 of the European Union's (EU) Lisbon Treaty by the end of March 2017. Once this is done, the UK enters a formal two-year period in which to negotiate a Brexit (British exit).

May made her announcement on the BBC's "Andrew Marr Show." It means that Britain would be out of the EU by March 2019—a year ahead of a scheduled 2020 General Election.

The decision follows months in which the government refused to set a date to enact Article 50, following the narrow June 23 referendum vote to leave the EU. The Tories were split down the middle, with up to half the parliamentary party in favour of a Leave vote despite then Prime Minister David Cameron urging a Remain vote.

May told the *Sunday Times* that there would also be "a Great Repeal Bill that will remove the European Communities Act from the statute book." The Act, passed by parliament in 1972, took the UK into the EU.

The Great Repeal Bill will be legislated after Article 50 has been triggered and will be introduced in the next year's Queen's Speech, which sets out the government's legislative programme for the coming year. The bill will convert all existing laws derived from the EU into domestic legislation. Enacted as law in 2017 or 2018, it will end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK. The court's decisions are binding on all EU member states. The Queen's Speech is expected to be held in April or May.

The announcements coincided with the opening of the four-day Tory Party conference in Birmingham, at which May, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Brexit Secretary David Davis gave further details on the government's plans.

May opened the conference with a short speech, in

which she ruled out any parliamentary debate on when to trigger Article 50. "It is not up to the House of Commons to invoke Article 50, and it is not up to the House of Lords," she said. "It is up to the government to trigger Article 50 and the government alone."

Since the referendum, pro-EU forces within the Labour, Liberal and Tory parties, backed by influential business figures, have called variously for a second EU membership referendum to be held, a vote in parliament on any agreement reached between the government and EU, or even calling a general election over the issue.

In her bellicose speech, May declared, "Even now, some politicians—democratically elected politicians—say that the referendum isn't valid, that we need to have a second vote. Others say they don't like the result, and they'll challenge any attempt to leave the European Union through the courts.

"The referendum result was clear. ... It was the biggest vote for change this country has ever known. Brexit means Brexit—and we're going to make a success of it."

The Leave vote was widely opposed by big business, which now wants to ensure that the UK retains access to the European Single Market as part of any Brexit deal. But May poured cold water on such prospects, making immigration controls central to her appeal to the Tories' overwhelmingly Brexit supporting membership.

"I know some people ask about the 'trade-off' between controlling immigration and trading with Europe," she said. "But that is the wrong way of looking at things. We have voted to leave the European Union and become a fully independent, sovereign country. We will do what independent, sovereign countries do. We will decide for ourselves how we

control immigration. And we will be free to pass our own laws.”

In an attack on the Scottish National Party government in Edinburgh, May declared her opposition to calls for a referendum on Scottish independence, and demands that Scotland remaining part of the EU after Brexit. In the June referendum, Scotland voted by a majority to remain in the EU. May stated, “Because we voted in the referendum as one United Kingdom, we will negotiate as one United Kingdom, and we will leave the European Union as one United Kingdom. There is no opt-out from Brexit. And I will never allow divisive nationalists to undermine the precious union between the four nations of our United Kingdom.”

The decisions outlined by May were heavily influenced by Davis, who last month attended a seminar at Oxford University that presented a scenario for a “hard Brexit.” The *Guardian* reported that “pro-Brexit MPs, legal and trade experts who broadly support a hard Brexit from the EU, and senior civil servants” were present. The newspaper, which supports the UK remaining in the EU, reported, “The group proposed the ‘great repeal bill’ set out on Sunday by Theresa May … as well as an early triggering of Article 50, the clause that starts the two-year timetable for the Brexit negotiations.”

The *Guardian* noted, “The discussions at the seminar have been condensed into a pamphlet published jointly by the Centre for Social Justice and Legatum Institute, two think tanks likely to be at the heart of setting out the Conservative case for a hard Brexit.”

The consolidation of the Tories as the party of Brexit will exacerbate the political crisis wracking the British ruling elite. Immediately following the referendum, the Parliamentary Labour Party, with the backing of forces within the UK and US intelligence complex, initiated an unprecedented coup attempt against party leader Jeremy Corbyn, insisting that Britain had to remain within the EU as a pivotal geostrategic necessity.

Sections of the ruling elite regard the Labour Party as the most effective vehicle for its efforts to reverse a Brexit, as the possible locus for a pro-EU political regroupment, provided that the party is placed under a reliable leadership.

The schism within the Tories over Europe resurfaced Sunday in response to May’s announcements.

Speaking to ITV, former Tory minister Anna Soubry,

now a spokeswoman for the cross-party pro-EU Open Britain campaign, said, “The idea that we hold the cards, and that the EU is going to come to us and give us pretty much what we want? We aren’t going to get anything like what we’ve got now, we’re going to get something worse, obviously we are, we don’t hold the cards, the EU does.”

Another pro-EU Tory, Kenneth Clarke, said EU withdrawal could take up to eight years. After a Brexit agreement was reached, “Then it will take you another five or six years with lots of boffins locked away thrashing out agreements.”

May would have to be prepared to end up being “one of the most hated people in the country” if she made compromises that angered ardent euro-sceptics, he warned. “Any agreement that is produced will eventually be denounced by the head-banging faction of the Brexiteers as a betrayal—anything short of a tribute in gold being presented to the Queen once a year by the EU. Then they would say she should have three.”

Labour Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry issued a press release stating, “A commitment on the timing of Article 50 is meaningless unless Theresa May can answer all the prior and more fundamental questions about what deal Britain is going to propose for our future relationship with the EU, what the plan is to secure that deal, and what we will do if it fails.”

Tim Farron, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, who are committed to a second referendum said, “We can’t start the process without any idea of where we’re going.”



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