

# UK parliament passes Labour motion calling for government to publish “Brexit plan”

Robert Stevens  
8 December 2016

Westminster MPs voted 461 to 89 in favour of an amended opposition Labour Party motion Wednesday, calling on the Conservative government to publish its plans for leaving the European Union (EU) before beginning formal negotiations over the UK’s exit.

Voting against the motion were 23 Labour MPs, 5 Liberal Democrats, 51 from the Scottish National Party, Green Party leader Caroline Lucas and one Tory, Ken Clarke. Tory whips said that 56 Labour MPs abstained. Their opposition represents the most hard-line stand against leaving the EU.

The motion was signed by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer, deputy leader Tom Watson and Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry. It demanded the prime minister “commit to publishing the Government’s plan for leaving the EU before Article 50 is invoked,” while stating there “should be no disclosure of material that could be reasonably judged to damage the UK in any negotiations to depart from the European Union after Article 50 has been triggered.”

Prime Minister Theresa May originally opposed the motion but was forced to accept it as between 20 and 40 pro-EU Tory rebels were pledged to back Labour—threatened a deepening crisis and possible fall of her government.

May and senior cabinet ministers added their own amendment to Labour’s motion as a condition for supporting it. This stated that Labour and other opposition parties accept that Article 50 should be invoked by the end of March, that the result of the referendum should be accepted, and that the publication of the plan should not undermine the government’s stance in the negotiations.

The crisis in ruling circles over Europe being debated in Parliament was amplified by the fact that the

Supreme Court, located directly opposite the House of Commons, was meeting for the third of a four-day hearing on whether May can trigger Article 50 without allowing a vote in Parliament. This followed a High Court ruling last month, appealed by the government to the Supreme Court, which ruled that only Parliament could trigger Article 50.

In his speech, Starmer called for an end to the “uncertainty... on issues such as the single market, paying for access to the single market, the customs union and transitional arrangements...”

This was in reference to recent comments by Tory Brexit Secretary David Davis and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, who both stated that the government may consider paying the EU to maintain access to the Single Market. Johnson later backtracked, stating it was “pure speculation”, before contradicting himself yet again saying that any payments had to be “sensible... I see no reason why those payments should be large.”

Starmer stated that the government’s published plan had to “have enough detail to allow the relevant parliamentary bodies and Committees, including the Exiting the European Union Committee... to scrutinise the plan effectively...”

The parliamentary debate had an element of unreality, a sparring match prior to the main event. The majority of pro-EU MPs are keen, at this juncture, not to be seen to be openly challenging the June 23 vote to leave the EU. But the conflict in ruling circles is set to erupt in more open forms, as it did after the High Court verdict, when the Supreme Court hands down its verdict in January.

Virtually every MP who supported Britain remaining in the EU stated that they did not want to block Article 50 outright, only wanting Parliament to have its say. However, Starmer clarified that the debate would not

be the last word as MPs backing the Labour motion “are not voting to trigger article 50 or to give authority to the Prime Minister to do so. It is most certainly not a vote for article 50. Unless the Supreme Court overrules the High Court, only legislation can do that. Nor does today’s motion preclude Labour or any other party tabling amendments to the article 50 legislation and having them voted on.”

The pro-Brexit wing support leaving the EU based on British corporations being able to better exploit vast global markets, including India, China and the Middle East. They insist on ramping up the exploitation of the working class in order to “compete internationally.” The pro-EU wing are concerned that this will be economically disastrous. The price to be paid is losing access to the EU’s single market for UK banks and corporations.

Many Labour MPs accepted the Tory amendment only after stating that the referendum vote did not give a “mandate for a hard Brexit”—one including loss of access to the Single Market and Customs Union membership.

Labour MPs who joined those refusing to support the Labour motion stated that it empowered the Tories—if the Supreme Court backs their legal challenge—to trigger Article 50 by the end of March. Heidi Alexander spoke against the government amendment and motion for including “an arbitrary timetable set by the Government to placate their own Back Benchers.” She insisted, “Tariff-free trade with the EU has to be the priority” and declared her support “for a second referendum on the terms of leaving the EU.”

SNP Europe spokesman Steven Gethins said that Labour “risk backing a Tory amendment that will see the UK put through a hard right Tory plan to take us out of the EU that will damage jobs, livelihoods, businesses and the economy.”

Lib Dems leader Tim Farron said his party would not support the motion as it fails “to include any meaningful commitment from the Conservative Brexit government... on such fundamental questions as to whether it wants Britain to remain in the Single Market.”

The government’s crisis was summed up prior to the debate by May, who was forced to comment on discussion on a “black Brexit” in which the government left article 50 talks without a future deal

with the EU, a “white Brexit” within the UK seeking to remain in the single market and a “grey Brexit” involving leaving the single market with access to parts of the single market.

May offered an inane response, stating, “I’m interested in all these terms that have been identified—hard Brexit, soft Brexit, black Brexit, white Brexit, grey Brexit and actually what we should be looking for is a red, white and blue Brexit.”

The pro and anti-EU wings of the ruling elite are equally reactionary. Both put forward a nationalist, anti-working class agenda and are equally supportive of cuts in immigration and restrictions on the freedom of movement.

In his speech, former Labour leader Ed Miliband said he opposed comments made by May’s spokesman on Monday that those calling for the government’s plans to be scrutinised were not “backing the UK team.” Miliband replied, “We are not seeking proper scrutiny of the plans for Brexit because of our lack of patriotism; we are doing it out of patriotism, because we believe in the unity of the country.”

Labour MP Andy Burnham declared that “many lifelong Labour voters” voted [in the referendum] “for change on immigration.” He added, “I am clear about that, and it has to be our starting point in this debate. The status quo—full free movement—was defeated at the ballot box, so it is not an option. What is to be debated is the precise nature of the changes that replace it, so that we get the balance right between responding properly to the public’s legitimate concerns and minimising the impact on our economy.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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