

British government secures vote to proceed with Brexit

Chris Marsden
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The Conservative government of Theresa May has cleared all House of Commons hurdles to triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, beginning the British departure from the European Union (EU). Debate on the White Paper on Brexit, to be published today, will also be confined to three days, enabling May to meet her plan to initiate the two-year process in March.

After a two-day debate, MPs first voted on a “reasoned amendment” tabled by the Scottish National Party (SNP) that would have denied the bill a second reading and prevented Brexit. The amendment, which stated that the government “has left unanswered” questions over “the full implications of withdrawal from the single market,” was backed by 33 Labour MPs, 50 SNP, seven of nine Liberal Democrats and Kenneth Clarke of the Conservatives.

In the main vote, to give the Article 50 bill a second reading, May secured 498 votes to 114—a majority of 384. A procedural motion on the three-day timetable saw the opposition vote fall by two to 112.

After the three days of debate in the Commons, the issue will then be debated by the House of Lords.

The government was always going to succeed, given that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn had pledged to “respect” last year’s referendum vote, which the pro-Brexit faction of the ruling class won by 52 to 48 percent in a result that sent shock waves through the dominant sections of the bourgeoisie who supported Remain.

Given the concern over the impact of exclusion from the European Single Market on UK business, and the public outcry over May’s embrace of President Donald Trump, the hopes of pro-Remain forces were for a sizeable rebellion that would give a firm basis for trench warfare over the coming months and a possible repudiation of the deal eventually struck by May with the EU.

With almost two million people signing a petition opposing a planned state visit for Trump, the pro-Remain

forces in the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and Greens sought to exploit the demonstrations Monday against Trump to stiffen the resolve of Labour MPs to defy Corbyn’s three-line whip. There was a measure of success, as Shadow Cabinet members Rachael Maskell and Dawn Butler joined Jo Stevens, who quit earlier, in resigning from the front bench shortly before the vote.

The overall number of Labour rebels rose to 47—over a fifth of the parliamentary party—helping to boost the overall opposition vote from a predicted 90.

Corbyn made placatory remarks regarding the latest rebellion—involving many of the forces involved in last September’s attempted coup to remove him—while his shadow Foreign Secretary, Emily Thornberry, pledged to fight for amendments to the Brexit bill to guarantee “the fullest possible access to the single market, unimpeded by tariffs and red tape.”

However, in reality a lack of support from pro-Remain Conservatives means that none are likely to pass.

Already by Tuesday, it was apparent that no rebellion was going to materialise within the Tory Party. The veteran MP Clarke was alone in denouncing Brexit, so that he was hailed as a hero by pro-Remain newspapers. He declared that even Enoch Powell, who in 1968 predicted “Rivers of Blood” would be produced by immigration, “would probably find it amazing to believe that his party had become Eurosceptic and rather mildly anti-immigrant...”

He spoke sarcastically of pro-Brexit forces believing in a “wonderland where suddenly countries around the world are queuing up to give us trading advantages and access to their markets that previously we had never been able to achieve as part of the European Union. Nice men like President Trump and President Erdogan are just impatient to abandon their normal protectionism and give us access.”

Articulating the essential concerns of much of big

business, he concluded, “Our membership of the European Union restored to us our national self-confidence, gave us politically a role in the world as a leading member of the union which made us more valuable to our allies like the US and made our rivals like the Russians take us more seriously because of our role of leadership in the EU and it helped to reinforce our own values as well. And our economy benefited enormously and continued to benefit even more as the market developed.”

Given the gravity of the crisis facing British capitalism post-Brexit, there was a sigh of relief and joy within the mostly pro-Brexit media—and a cry of near despair in the editorial offices of the *Guardian* at the convincing majority won by the government.

The *Guardian* has played the leading propaganda role in support of both remaining in the EU and seeking Corbyn’s removal on the basis of accusing him of being responsible for losing the referendum. In the days leading up to the vote, it ran articles calling for a Tory rebellion, as well as one by Polly Toynbee insisting, “Labour MPs owe a duty to the country—not Corbyn’s absurd three-line whip.”

In another article she described Clarke as “magnificent,” but only “the lone refuser.” She wailed, “How did it come to this act of collective cowardice?”

Toynbee described the US as “the global authoriser of racism, torture and climate-change denial,” insisting that, “Our safest haven is the European Union. This is no time to make ourselves the vulnerable vassals of Trump’s every whim.”

Yet Brexit proceeds apace, despite such pleadings—and the more consequential and serious concerns within Britain’s boardrooms as to its impact, both economic and political. This is not because of a newly discovered commitment to the “popular will” among the corrupt political classes, but above all because the referendum vote has served to exacerbate divisions and tensions that were already apparent between British imperialism and its continental rivals, above all Germany and France.

It cannot be excluded that the UK strikes some new deal with the EU, as is hoped for by the Lib Dems, SNP and Labour’s Blairite wing. But even May, who supported Remain, unlike the pro-Brexit forces to which she is now beholden, calculates that this would involve a humiliating and costly retreat. Hence she must now cling ever more firmly to the possibility of an alliance with Trump in the hope that this will force concessions from the EU, while compensating for the loss of European trade.

That is why May’s response to the attacks on her relations with Trump earlier during Prime Minister’s Questions was so hard-line—despite the damage it is doing to her government. When Corbyn asked her “What happened?” to her promise to speak frankly to Trump and whether she knew of his plan to bar migrants from seven Muslim countries, May retorted, “He can lead a protest, I’m leading a country ... The Right Honourable Gentleman’s foreign policy is to object to and insult the democratically elected head of state of our most important ally.”

It is impossible to predict how deep the schism within Britain’s ruling class will become in the next period—If this will end in a political realignment between pro-and-anti EU tendencies that many, including the leading lights among the 47 Labour rebels, are working for—let alone which wing will finally win out.

What is certain is that the UK is entering a period of intense political crisis. Bitter conflicts lie ahead over whether Trump will give Britain anything worth having, given his protectionist “America First” agenda, or whether the UK must seek a place in a European block against the US.

All sides will continue to poison the political environment with their opposing programmes for trade war, protectionism and appeals to safeguard the “national interest.” And the working class will be made to pay, amid calls for yet greater sacrifice of wages, working conditions and essential services in order to ensure that Britain remains competitive in an ever-more cut-throat world that only pits them against their brothers and sisters in the US and Europe alike.



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