UK House of Commons approves Brexit

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The UK House of Commons on Wednesday voted by a huge majority—494 to 122—in favour of Britain beginning the process of leaving the European Union (EU).

The Withdrawal from the European Union (Article 50) Bill 2016-17 now goes before the House of Lords and is expected to become law in time for the Conservative government to trigger EU withdrawal by the end of March.

Just 5 more rebel MPs and a total of 52 (22 percent) of the opposition Labour Party—which officially supports remaining in the EU—voted against the bill, in contrast to the 47 who opposed triggering Article 50 last week. The most significant of these was Clive Lewis, who then resigned as shadow business secretary. Lewis was forced to appear loyal until the last moment as he is positioning himself to be a leadership challenger who can eat into Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's core support.

Prior to the third and final reading, Corbyn ordered his MPs to support the government's bill whether his party's amendments were accepted or not.

With the vote, the Conservative government has easily overcome the setback it received last month, when the Supreme Court ruled that parliament had to have the final say on triggering Article 50 and not the prime minister via Royal Prerogative powers. Following what was described as the most serious constitutional crisis since the Second World War—with the majority of the ruling elite opposed to leaving the EU—the legislation sailed through without a hitch.

The parliamentary debate on the triggering of Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty lasted just three days this week and took on a farcical character, given that Labour, with 229 MPs—the vast majority of whom campaigned for remaining in the EU in last June's referendum—was pledged to support Article 50. The Tories were in the end universally in favour.

The Article 50 Bill is only 137 words long, stating merely that the government intends to begin the process of leaving the EU, but the list of clauses and amendments added to it ran to 146 pages. These clauses were added by Labour, Liberal Democrat and Scottish National Party MPs, who either supported the UK remaining in the EU—or demand that continued access to the EU's Single Market be maintained in any deal.

To debate them over three days, the amendments were put into groups with a "lead" clause. If the "lead" clause was defeated then the rest fell.

As the debate began, Mark Harper, the parliamentary secretary to the treasury, stated, "To agree to amendments would be to reveal our negotiating hand and make the Bill too specific and subject to loads of legal challenges."

On Monday, all four amendments were overwhelmingly lost, making a mockery of earlier claims by pro-EU Labourite Hilary Benn—who chairs the Commons Brexit committee—that MPs were growing more confident in their demands for a role in leaving the EU. "We [Parliament] are not going to sit on the sidelines" of Brexit talks, he said.

The main Monday resolution put forward by Labour was a plea for some sort of parliamentary scrutiny of the Brexit process by parliament. It called on Prime Minister Theresa May, before triggering Article 50, to "give an undertaking to lay before each House of Parliament periodic reports, at intervals of no more than two months on the progress of the negotiations."

That fell, along with 30 tacked-on clauses, with just one Tory MP voting for it. In the 333-284 vote, 4 pro-Brexit Labourites voted with the government.

On Tuesday, May headed off whatever "rebellion" remained among MPs by promising a vote on the final draft of any EU exit agreement. Keir Starmer, Labour's shadow Brexit minister, claimed this was a "huge" concession, but such claims rapidly went down in

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flames as the government made clear that MPs would have to “take or leave” the final deal reached. If parliament opposed a final deal, the UK would simply leave the EU with no deal at all and move to vastly worse World Trade Organisation tariff-based trade rules.

Nevertheless, Starmer withdrew Labour’s main official Tuesday amendment, requiring the government to seek the approval of Parliament of a *withdrawal agreement* before it is agreed with the EU. The amendment Labour put in its place required the government to seek approval of Parliament before a *new treaty* is made with the EU. This was defeated by 326 to 293. This time 7 Conservatives voted for the amendment, but this was evened out by 6 pro-Brexit Labour MPs voting against.

With the capitulation of Labour to the government’s agenda, the anti-Brexit Scottish National Party (54 MPs) and Liberal Democrats (9 MPs)—who are committed to holding a second referendum on Brexit—were unable to mount any serious challenge in parliament.

The vote reveals the scale of the crisis facing the ruling elite and its political institutions.

The Tories have in reality secured only a pyrrhic victory, given that the Remain camp within parliament have proved incapable of mounting an effective opposition. The pro-EU forces are seeking to maintain an orientation to Europe under conditions in which it is breaking apart. The move by then-Prime Minister David Cameron to call the referendum on EU membership, however it was conceived of as a clever manoeuvre, only came about due to the explosive national antagonisms between the European powers and the irreconcilable differences this had produced with the dominant pro-Brexit wing of the Tory party. In Brexit’s aftermath, these national tensions and the underlying economic crisis of the EU are such that not only Greece but even Italy can be forced to leave.

These tensions are indicated by upcoming elections to be held in the Netherlands (March 15) and France (April 23-May 7) where far-right, anti-EU candidates Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom and Marine Le Pen’s National Front are expected to score highly or even win outright.

As for the pro-Brexit Tories, they based their post-Brexit strategy on securing trade agreements with the US, China, India and other markets to compensate for any loss suffered in Europe. Moreover, following the election of Donald Trump to the White House, May has pinned her hopes not only on a US trade deal but on his support forcing the EU to strike a favourable deal, too.

This is a strategy just as bankrupt as that of their pro-EU opponents. Trump is actively committed to the break-up of the EU as an economic rival of the US, which is why he was so enthusiastic for Brexit. But his “America First” agenda finds its opposite in a growing assertion of European interests against the US that leaves May’s efforts to bridge the two markets unmoored. At the EU summit last week, May was treated as a pariah as Trump was denounced by leading figures.

The dilemma facing the May government was epitomised when Parliament’s Speaker—former Tory MP John Bercow—made an extraordinary intervention on behalf of the pro-Remain faction, in which he declared that he was “strongly opposed” to Donald Trump addressing the House of Commons during his scheduled State Visit later this year.

Far from the UK being poised to enter a new “golden age” based on a strategy of “out of Europe and into the world”, in the real world beyond Parliament, a rendezvous with disaster awaits.

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