

UK government to trigger Brexit amid calls for second Scottish independence vote

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Prime Minister Theresa May cleared the final hurdle to triggering Article 50 beginning Britain's exit from the European Union (EU) Monday. But she did so amid the crisis generated by Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Nicola Sturgeon demanding a second referendum on Scotland's independence from the UK.

The intervention by Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, was the most dramatic expression of broader divisions within ruling circles over Brexit and focused on the primary issue that unites the nationalists with the City of London—continued access to the European Single Market.

Monday evening's debate had to deal with two amendments proposed by Britain's unelected House of Lords. The government's EU Withdrawal Bill was passed after the government had comfortably won votes on two Lords' amendments. MPs voted by 335 votes to 287 to overturn the Lords amendment on inserting a guarantee of the status of EU citizens resident in the UK, with six hard-line pro-Brexit Labour MPs joining with the Conservatives. A second amendment on holding a final "meaningful vote" on any deal after the conclusion of Brexit talks was voted down by 331 to 286 with only two Tories rebelling. Labour MPs were then whipped by party leader Jeremy Corbyn to vote in favour of the Brexit bill.

Peers later accepted the decision on EU citizens by 274 to 135 and voted by 274 votes to 118 not to challenge the Commons again over a parliamentary veto on the deal struck on Brexit. On the rights of EU citizens to live and work in the UK, just 25 Labour peers sided with the Liberal Democrats, with Labour's spokeswoman Baroness Hayter attacking the Lib Dems for "falsely raising" people's hopes.

The government's two-line bill stating that ministers will trigger article 50 and start the formal Brexit

process now goes forward for Royal Assent to become law.

There was speculation that May would announce the beginning of Brexit yesterday, in order to pre-empt today's general election in the Netherlands and the EU celebrations March 25-28 on the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which established the EU's forerunner, the European Economic Community (EEC). The intention was to avoid further inflaming opposition, in Europe and domestically, especially given that the election in the Netherlands is dominated by efforts to limit the impact of the anti-EU position of Geert Wilders' Party For Freedom.

The government has denied that this was ever May's intention, but if it was, then Sturgeon's demand for a second independence referendum blew such plans out of the water. In September 2014, the SNP "Yes" to independence campaign was defeated by a 55 percent vote. But polls now suggest a 50-50 split on the issue, largely because Scotland favoured remaining in the UK but also within the EU. In last June's Brexit referendum, Scotland voted by 62 percent to remain in the EU.

The SNP intends to capitalise on this sentiment to push its separatist agenda.

Sturgeon announced that she intends to hold a second referendum between autumn 2018 and spring 2019, at a time when Brexit negotiations are expected to be reaching a conclusion. This plan will be put to the Scottish parliament today. But the Brexit process is set to take at least two years from when May invokes Article 50 and could take much longer.

In a speech Monday, Sturgeon stressed that a vote for independence before the end of March 2019 would make it easier for Scotland to remain in the EU—even though the UK would still be a member and the EU has

made clear that an independent Scotland would have to negotiate entry. “If the UK leaves the EU without Scotland indicating beforehand—or at least within a short time after it—that we want a different relationship with Europe, we could face a lengthy period outside not just the EU but also the single market,” she declared.

There is little possibility of May accepting a second referendum at such a point in time, even if she is forced to concede one after Brexit is completed. The *Times* has reported, “The Scottish National Party needs Westminster’s approval for a legally binding vote and last night Mrs May’s allies made clear that she would not allow a referendum during exit negotiations with the EU.

A government source explained, “The prime minister has said this would mean a vote while she was negotiating Brexit and I think that can be taken pretty clearly as a message that this timing is completely unacceptable.”

The broader implications of Sturgeon’s move are underscored by events in Northern Ireland, which voted 56 percent to 44 percent to Remain and where the pro-Remain Irish nationalists of Sinn Fein came within a hair’s breadth of supplanting the Democratic Unionist Party as the largest party in the Assembly in the May 2 elections. The Republic of Ireland’s Taoiseach, Enda Kenny of Fine Gael, has demanded that any Brexit deal includes an explicit clause that allows Northern Ireland to rejoin the EU as part of a future united Ireland. The main opposition Fianna Fáil is to bring forward a white paper on a united Ireland.

Under these dangerous circumstances of rising national tensions, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn offers no alternative to working people. Having first abandoned his past opposition to the EU and backed a Remain vote, he now dutifully whips his party behind the Brexit agenda of the Tories.

He utilises “left” phrases to justify alternative but essentially pro-capitalist positions—First, the “little Englander” nationalism of the Labour “left” and the Stalinists, with which he has long been allied, then a capitulation to the pro-EU line of the City of London as demanded by the Blairites within the Labour Party, and finally, acquiescence before the nationalist agenda that dictates Brexit. His essential concerns were made apparent by yesterday’s reply to May that the UK “must have tariff-free access to the Single Market.”

His loyalty to the requirements of business is barely concealed by his pledge that “Labour, at every stage, will challenge the government’s plans for a bargain-basement Brexit with Labour’s alternative of a Brexit that puts jobs, living standards and rights first.”

The crisis confronting Britain’s ruling class is acute. Indeed, the Tory MPs who “triumphed” in forcing through their Brexit plans did so under a Union flag that could soon be as defunct as that of the EU’s that presently flies alongside it over Westminster.

The Socialist Equality Party in its statement on the Brexit referendum urged an active boycott, explaining that a Remain vote meant endorsing the reactionary institutions of the EU, which is a mechanism for the subjugation of the continent to the dictates of the financial markets and imposing an agenda of austerity, militarism and war. We warned that a Leave vote led by arch-Tories and the xenophobes of the UK Independence Party would be seized on as an endorsement of British nationalism and give strength to far right tendencies across Europe.

In this context we explained, “The biggest political danger in this situation is the mixing of class banners on the basis of the espousal of a supposedly ‘left nationalism’. It was on the basis of opposition to such a policy that the SEP rejected support for Scottish separatism in the 2014 referendum, characterising it as a retrograde step that cut across the unity of the working class in England and Scotland.”

This warning has been amply confirmed, as has our fundamental insistence that “Against the national chauvinism and xenophobia promoted by both sides in the referendum campaign, the working class must advance its own internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.”



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