

Prime Minister May accuses EU of meddling in UK election

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Ratcheting up tensions with the European Union (EU), Conservative UK Prime Minister Theresa May made an unannounced statement Wednesday outside 10 Downing Street.

After visiting the queen to formally declare the closure of parliament, she asserted that representatives of the EU were deliberately seeking to influence the outcome of the upcoming general election.

In her brief address to the media, May said that talks over the terms of Britain's exit from the EU have been "tough":

"The European commission's negotiating stance has hardened. Threats against Britain have been issued by European politicians and officials. All of these acts have been deliberately timed to affect the result of the general election that will take place on 8 June."

May portrayed her own position as the epitome of sweet reason, declaring that "in leaving the European Union, Britain means no harm to our friends and allies on the continent" and that she wanted to maintain "a deep and special partnership with the European Union." But "there are some in Brussels who do not want these talks to succeed: Who do not want Britain to prosper."

May's intervention plays to a domestic political audience and were shaped by electoral imperatives. Her allegations were followed by a repeat of her mantra that a vote for the Conservatives would deliver the "strong and stable" government needed to make Brexit "a success" that is "central to our national interest."

To choose Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party would mean "a hung parliament and a coalition of chaos" that would "let the bureaucrats of Brussels run over us. ..."

May's speech was denounced for placing party considerations over the national interest she claims to defend. Labour's shadow foreign secretary, Emily Thornberry, joined Corbyn, Liberal Democrat leader

Tim Farron and Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party in attacking May for making "such preposterous, paranoid and xenophobic claims" at "the first sign of difficulty in her talks with Brussels. ... Instead of alienating our European partners...she should be working to build effective relationships and make meaningful progress."

But for May to accuse the EU of interfering in the UK general election in language hitherto reserved for Russian President Vladimir Putin testifies to a real escalation of hostilities with Europe. Indeed, over the past days, much of Britain's media has been dominated by accusations that differ from May's only in that the Tory press has not shied away from naming Germany as the moving force in efforts to undermine the government for its "hard Brexit" stand.

May viewed the support of US President Donald Trump for Brexit, his hostility to Germany and promise of a trade deal with the UK as her ace in the hole in negotiations over Brexit that would help secure access to European markets. But she massively misjudged Berlin's preparedness to reject the UK's demands as a threat to Germany's domination of the EU.

On April 22, sources close to the White House reported that German Chancellor Angela Merkel leaked to the *Times* how, in March, she had in fact convinced Trump that a trade deal with the EU was far more important for the US than one with the UK post-Brexit.

In the German parliament last Thursday, Merkel then announced that no concessions would be made in negotiations with the UK and that her warning was necessary because "some in the UK still have illusions."

Saturday saw the 27 EU member states agree in a matter of minutes to a hardline framework for negotiations drawn up in Berlin. These included a

declaration that substantive negotiations on post-Brexit trade and economic relations would not even begin until the financial details of the withdrawal were clarified. This is opposed to May's insistence that separation payments would be agreed on at the end of the planned two-year interim talks.

It then emerged that Merkel's statement last Thursday followed a telephone call between her and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, regarding talks with May and her leadership team over dinner at Downing Street last week.

Merkel's people leaked the contents of the discussion to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, which published an account on Sunday. It reported Juncker's view that May was "in a different Galaxy", that Brexit Secretary David Davis should be removed and that Juncker was "10 times more sceptical" that a settlement could be arrived at after the Downing Street dinner.

On the morning of May's Downing Street declaration, the *Financial Times* added to her woes by estimating that the divorce settlement with the EU would likely amount to €100 billion "using the EU's negotiating guidelines, the more detailed draft mandate for the bloc's negotiator, Michel Barnier."

May's claim that forces in the EU are trying to engineer the election of Corbyn is far-fetched. But the same is not true of her charge that the past week of leaks has been "deliberately timed" so as to fire a shot across the government's bow.

Berlin's decision to make public its willingness to punish the UK has a broader political aim. Coming just days before Sunday's vote in the second round of the French presidential election, it serves as an implied threat to anyone reluctant to vote for Emmanuel Macron, an economic liberal advocate of austerity and closer ties with Germany.

Hostility to Macron is such that the once unthinkable prospect of a victory for Marine Le Pen of the far-right and anti-EU National Front is considered a serious possibility. Le Pen prepared for her televised debate against Macron last night by telling the French media that she is the best candidate to face the "new world" dominated by US President Donald Trump and Russia's Vladimir Putin and to "talk to the Britain of May."

The Conservatives are entering an election that, according to the polls, should be a walkover thanks to a

15-20 points lead over Labour. But May must win decisively to extend her wafer-thin majority and maintain control over a deeply divided party: one in which the pro-Brexit forces dominate and champion a "hard Brexit" involving quitting the Single European Market which is opposed by big business and the City of London.

May's brinksmanship is a measure not only of her own underlying political weakness, but that of British imperialism, which is still heavily dependent on EU trade and cannot rely on the US to step up and fill the void that would be left by the failure to secure an agreement.

Gary Gibbon of Channel Four News warned of growing fears that May "is pushing herself into a hardline position on the EU negotiations that could make a deal impossible. ... [T]here has been one school of thought that says Mrs. May is fighting for a big mandate in this election so she can make the concessions in the negotiations which she couldn't make if held to ransom by a small number of Brexit hardliners exploiting her small majority. Adherents of that view may be scratching their heads after that Prime Ministerial address wondering if they've quite called it right."

Whatever happens, the national tensions revealed in the bitter exchanges between London and Berlin will continue to escalate, not only placing a question mark over the fate of post-Brexit Britain but over the long-term survival of the EU itself.



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