

After election setback, UK Conservatives close to agreement with Democratic Unionist Party

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14 June 2017

Prime Minister Theresa May and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Arlene Foster met yesterday in London, discussing the terms for the DUP's 10 MPs propping up a crisis-ridden Tory government.

After several hours, the negotiations were forced to move to the House of Commons where May had to speak following the resumption of Parliament—dissolved two months ago after May called the June 8 snap general election.

The BBC reported that an agreement between May and the DUP was close as there were “no outstanding issues” blocking a deal. Foster was due to have returned to Belfast Monday evening, but stayed in London overnight.

May flew immediately from Parliament to Paris to hold scheduled talks with newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron on security, terrorism, and proposals to censor the internet and gain access to encrypted content.

May called the election with the declared aim of increasing her slender majority to strengthen her hand in talks with the European Union (EU) over the terms of the UK's exit and to enforce the Tories' anti-working class agenda of austerity and attacks on democratic rights. Instead, May has been left as nothing more than a caretaker prime minister after losing 13 seats and being left as a minority government.

On Monday evening, May was forced to appear before the 1922 Committee of backbench Tory MPs. With May offering what was described as a “contrite” approach telling MPs, “I got us into this mess and I'm going to get us out of it,” she was allowed to continue as party leader—for now. Recognising this May added, “It's my fault and I take responsibility. I'll stay as long as you want me to.”

Such is the scale of the crisis facing the ruling elite that the Queen's Speech—in which the government of the day unveils its upcoming legislative programme during the

formal state opening of the new Parliament—is expected to be delayed for a full week to June 26.

May is in fact acting as a shield behind which the conflicting factions of the Tories prepare a future leadership challenge and argue over strategy. She remains in place largely because jumping the gun and removing her at this stage would cause further political instability, prompting a general election which they would almost certainly lose. From being up to 20 points behind going into the general election, Labour won 30 extra seats and is now polling a six-point lead over the Tories.

The Sun, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, editorialised Tuesday that there could be no retreat from the attacks successive governments have imposed on the working class, with even the watery reforms proposed in Corbyn's manifesto unacceptable. It stated, “keeping Jeremy Corbyn out of Downing Street” was “a priority,” and “even dwarfs Brexit... The wreckage from Corbyn's decades-old, decayed leftie ideas would be off the scale by comparison.”

However, others within ruling circles are not so quick to dismiss the significance of Brexit, especially with the EU talks set to begin in just five days.

Since the election, the *Financial Times*, speaking for the majority faction of the pro-EU bourgeoisie that wants to at least maintain access to the EU Single Market and Customs Union, has urged a “patriotic” approach to avoid a “hard Brexit” in the “national interest.”

This call has been taken up across the political spectrum.

Yvette Cooper, a challenger from the pro-EU Blair/Brown wing of the Labour Party in the 2015 leadership election that saw Corbyn emerge as victor, called for a “cross-party commission to conduct the negotiations, and have a clear and transparent process to build consensus behind the final deal.” This was followed by a similar appeal from Lord Adonis, a former head of

the Policy Unit in the 1997 Blair Labour government. Also backing calls for a commission is Scottish National Party leader and First Minister of the Scottish Parliament Nicola Sturgeon.

Senior Tories are intimately involved in these discussions aimed at reaching a consensus to force May into abandoning a “hard Brexit”—including John Major, the former Tory prime minister.

On Tuesday, the leading voice of the pro-Brexiteers, the *Daily Telegraph*, reported, “Senior Cabinet ministers are engaged in secret talks with Labour MPs to secure cross-party backing for a soft Brexit... Some of the most senior members of Theresa May’s team have been discussing how to force the Prime Minister to make concessions on immigration, the customs union and the single market.”

The same newspaper published a column Tuesday by former Tory leader William Hague in which he called not for a coalition government, but for a coalition approach to the Brexit negotiations. Hague, who supported Remain in the EU campaign during last year’s referendum, warned that May and her ministers “face nearly insurmountable constraints and dangers.”

He called for a joint meeting of the “CBI [Confederation of British Industry], the Institute of Directors, the British Chambers of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses, the TUC [Trades Union Congress], the first ministers of the devolved governments, and the leaders of all the opposition parties,” to establish how to “conduct a transitional period and how to help the economy through Brexit as a priority...”

The difficulty facing the proponents of such a political shift is that May is more in thrall to the Brexit wing of her party than ever—exemplified by her bringing Michael Gove in from the cold as environment secretary and Steve Baker as under-secretary of state at the Department for Exiting the EU. The *Telegraph* calculates that although the number of MPs supporting remaining in the EU or a “soft Brexit” (342) still outnumbers those supporting a “hard Brexit” (297), the margin is far slimmer since the triggering three months ago of the Article 50 legislation to begin the EU negotiations.

This crisis will be exacerbated for a DUP-backed May government, given that the main party of the Northern Irish Unionist bourgeoisie are committed to a “soft Brexit”. They also oppose any “hard border” being re-established between the north—which remains part of the UK—and the Republic of Ireland, which is an EU member—as a result of the EU talks.

Underlying this is the contradiction between their staunch Unionism and the economic imperatives of maintaining cross border trade with the Republic of Ireland and the EU as a whole. The central agenda pursued by both the DUP and their coalition allies Sinn Fein is to transform the six counties of the north into a competitor of the Republic, which combines EU membership giving access to the Single Market and low corporation taxes that are for the most part not collected anyway.

Whatever deal may be concocted between May and the DUP, there will be no strength or stability in such a government—which is why the right wing of the Labour Party is running up a flag for cross-party cooperation.

For his part, Corbyn is stressing that his aim is to form a minority government should May’s collapse and prepare for a possible second election. A Labour victory would provide the ruling class with the basis for implementing the “soft Brexit” option that is the party’s official position, as against what Corbyn mockingly referred to in Parliament yesterday as the “coalition of chaos” between the Tories and the DUP. It could even lay the groundwork for reversing Brexit altogether.

In his press conference with May yesterday evening, Macron piled on the pressure by stating that the EU “door remains open, always open” to the UK, “until the Brexit negotiations come to an end... But let us be clear... once the negotiations have started we should be well aware that it’ll be more difficult to move backwards.”



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