

British PM agrees to £1 billion deal for Democratic Unionist Party's support

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British Prime Minister Theresa May stitched up a deal with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) just in time for a critical parliamentary vote on the Conservative government's legislative programme Thursday.

June's snap general election resulted in a hung parliament, leaving May eight seats short of an overall majority. The "confidence and supply" measure agreed with the DUP, which holds ten seats, produces a working majority of 13, as the combined vote of the opposition parties amounts to 313, taking into account the fact that the Irish republicans of Sinn Féin do not take their Westminster seats.

The deal goes beyond conventional confidence and supply measures since, in addition to supporting the government on its budget and in no confidence motions, the DUP has agreed to back it on legislation governing Britain's exit from the European Union and on national security.

This is critical. Brexit has been described as the single greatest foreign policy measure undertaken since Britain declared war on Germany in 1939.

Much of the government's programme over the next two years will be focused on the Great Repeal Bill—the incorporation, amendment or abandonment of existing EU legislation into British law.

May said the agreement enabled the two parties to work in the interests of the "whole United Kingdom." She added that it would "give us the certainty we require as we embark on our departure from the European Union and help us build a stronger and fairer society at home."

It does nothing of the sort. After ten years of draconian austerity, and only weeks after an election in which the Tories insisted there was no "magic money tree" to fund essential services, May has paid a headline figure of £1 billion for the deal—equivalent to £100 million for each DUP seat.

She has entered into an agreement with a party whose origins lie in the former Reverend Ian Paisley's fascistic Presbyterian movement, which had intimate ties with Loyalist paramilitaries.

In addition to opposing abortion and homosexual rights, the party's senior members include proponents of creationism. An arch purveyor of sectarianism in the North, the DUP was the only party to oppose the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which largely ended the armed conflict by enabling Sinn Féin to join the Stormont Assembly established under the power-sharing arrangements.

The DUP is now claiming a significant victory, with good reason. The party and its leader, Arlene Foster, had been in crisis after the Northern Ireland Assembly was brought down in January over a corruption scandal in which it was implicated.

The DUP has said the £1 billion will be spent on hospitals and schools in Northern Ireland, which suffers some of the worst levels of deprivation in the UK and, due to its reliance on state aid, has been especially impacted by austerity. An extra £500 million of already committed funds are also being made available.

But the funding is not tied to the restoration of Stormont. The DUP, Sinn Féin and other political parties have until Thursday to reach an agreement, after which Northern Ireland faces the possible imposition of direct rule by Westminster. It is not clear how the extra funds will be distributed and, if there is no agreement to restore Stormont, the monies will be allocated by a central Tory government dependent on the DUP.

Most significantly, the Tory/DUP deal commits the government to implement the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland, which states that "the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Armed Forces and their families," to be realised by fair compensation and safeguards for military personnel.

Though described as a covenant, it has no basis in UK law. Its purpose is wholly political—to legitimise the criminal adventures of British imperialism overseas and bolster the role of the armed forces domestically.

Unionist forces have long agitated on the most provocative basis for it to be enforced in Northern Ireland. Ian Paisley Jr. said it was necessary to repay the “debt owed to our Armed Forces for the protection they provided during the successful execution of Operation Banner.”

Operation Banner was the name for British operations in Northern Ireland between August 1969 and July 2007. Involving a total of 300,000 soldiers, it sought to enforce British rule through internment without trial, state infiltration of republican forces and bloody repression, including the Bloody Sunday murder of 14 unarmed protestors on January 30, 1972.

The DUP also claimed victory in that the Tories had to agree to drop plans to means-test winter fuel payments and undermine the state pension. But May had already been forced to abandon these measures temporarily because they were so unpopular.

Criticism of the deal within the Conservative Party and by the opposition parties has centred on the claim that it was not necessary for May to risk reopening the Northern Irish conflict when the DUP’s votes were virtually guaranteed anyway. Even before the deal, the DUP had stated that it would do nothing to weaken a fragile May government because it is so opposed to Labour taking power.

But the priority for May is to ensure that she is able to get the required Brexit legislation through parliament before the UK leaves the EU in March 2019. This is the demand of much of her party, which supports a “hard Brexit”—complete withdrawal from the EU Single Market and the customs union. It is also the favoured option of her backers among the most anti-EU sections of the financial oligarchy, including the likes of media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

That is why, although the Tory/DUP agreement is officially to last the five-year term of the current parliament, much of the spending commitments have a two-year lifespan, i.e., until after the close of Brexit.

The DUP campaigned for a Leave vote in the Brexit referendum, but it is committed to keeping the border between the North and the Republic of Ireland open.

There were hopes that on this basis it would help “soften” the Tories’ stance. Under the Tory deal, however, the government has agreed to “work” to

devolve control over corporation tax to Northern Ireland, so the tax can be cut to 12.5 percent, enabling Northern Ireland to compete with the Republic of Ireland. This sets off a race to the bottom not only within Ireland, but within all parts of the UK.

The extra funds and tax proposals led to complaints from the devolved Scottish and Welsh parliaments. Labour’s Welsh First Minister Carwyn Jones said it was “outrageous” and “unacceptable” and that it “all but kills the idea of fair funding for the nations and regions.”

Scotland’s first minister and Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Nicola Sturgeon threatened a formal dispute with the government. SNP Finance Minister Derek Mackay accused May of “ripping off Scotland” and undermining devolution. An SNP request for an emergency debate on the deal in parliament was rejected.

Negotiations between Britain and the EU opened last week. With May a lame duck prime minister, the Tories had to accept the EU’s timetable for divorce, in which the terms of separation must be agreed before negotiations on trade begin.

The first contentious issue concerns the rights of 3.2 million EU citizens in the UK and the 1.2 million Britons in the EU. On Monday, May said that EU citizens resident in the UK for more than five years by the Brexit cut-off date would qualify for “settled status,” with the same rights as British citizens to stay in the country and receive health care, education, welfare and pensions. Those in residence for a shorter period would be able to stay on until they had reached the five-year threshold.

May claimed this was a generous offer, but it amounts to what is already available to migrants settled in the UK for five years or more. It means EU citizens will no longer have the right to bring in a spouse or child over a certain age without meeting a minimum income threshold of £18,600. Those joining after Brexit will be subject to unspecified new immigration rules.

Most ominous, settled status is to be “enshrined” in an EU nationals’ residence document, which is described as an ID card. It is not yet clear if this is something people would have to carry on their person. ID cards have long been bitterly opposed in the UK as a fundamental assault on democratic rights.



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