

All-party pro-European Union group formed by UK Labour's Chuka Umunna

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Monday saw the announcement of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on European Union Relations in the UK.

Its figurehead is Blairite MP Chuka Umunna, who is leading efforts to prepare a possible split-off from the Labour Party—hopefully after an extended period of renewed internecine warfare against party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Others named as supporting the group include leading pro-European Union (EU) Tory Anna Soubry; deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats Jo Swinson; Stephen Gethins, Europe spokesperson for the Scottish National Party; Caroline Lucas, co-leader of the Green Party; and Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) MP Jonathan Plaid.

The parliamentary faction is supported by campaign groups including Best for Britain, led by Gina Miller, who successfully took the government to court to force a parliamentary vote before Prime Minister Theresa May could trigger Article 50—the official notice to quit the EU.

The move comes prior to today's initial moving of the Great Repeal Bill, which is set to reverse the 1972 European Communities Act passed when Britain became an EU member state and which adopted EU laws. The date marks the first anniversary of May becoming prime minister.

The beginning of this month was dominated by discussions on the possible formation of a new party, after Corbyn loyalist Ian Lavery suggested the deselection of right-wing MPs. Labour was “too broad a church,” he said, in response to earlier reports that the Blairites are speaking to donors to build up the funds necessary to split the party.

To avoid expulsion, the new group set three priorities that do not formally challenge Britain's leaving the EU: to ensure the UK does not exit the EU without a

formal deal; that all options are kept on the table; and to preserve the “closest possible” relations with the remaining 27 EU members after Brexit.

However, it is clear that the desired end-game is to reverse Brexit. The group's formation follows the June 21 revolt by 49 Labour MPs who tabled a motion against the Queen's Speech laying out the Conservative government's legislative agenda. The motion opposed any deal with the EU that does not commit the UK to remaining in the single market and customs union. A letter was also published in the *Guardian* signed by leading anti-Corbyn plotters including Liz Kendall, Ben Bradshaw and Wes Streeting defending the single market and insisting Labour should fight “unambiguously” for membership.

Corbyn instructed his MPs to abstain on the vote. Afterwards, he sacked Shadow Ministers Andy Slaughter, Ruth Cadbury and Catherine West, while Shadow Transport Minister Daniel Zeichner resigned. Shadow Ministers Rupa Huq and Gareth Thomas voted against the whip.

Umunna told *Sky News* that the new group had come together “in the national interest,” which no less than Tony Blair himself made clear means repudiating Brexit.

Blair was asked in yesterday's edition of *Irish World* whether Labour's official support for Article 50 was “facilitating Theresa May's government rather than holding it to account?”

He replied, “I think there is a majority in the Labour Party for staying in the Single Market. In fact, there's probably a majority in the Labour Party for staying in the European Union.”

He added, “The moment you decide leaving the single market is a bad idea therefore you want to stay then, frankly, it becomes very difficult to see what the

point was of leaving the European Union.”

The anti-Brexit Labourites are among just over 100 MPs openly opposed to exit, but backers of the new group calculate that more can be won to the position given the support for EU membership or at least a “soft Brexit” by the dominant sections of big business, its economic impact and shifting sentiment in the population.

On Sunday Vince Cable, the de facto leader of the Liberal Democrats following the resignation of Tim Farron, appeared on the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show*.

Marr asked, “Do you begin to see an alliance sufficiently deep into the Labour family, deep into the Tory family as well, of pro-EU politicians which is big enough to frustrate Theresa May’s ideas on Brexit?”

Cable replied, “Yes, I think a lot of people are keeping their heads down. We will see what happens in the autumn when people come back. I am beginning to think that Brexit may never happen. I think the problems are so enormous. The divisions within the two major parties are so enormous.”

Cable has previously said he wants to form a cross-party coalition to openly oppose Brexit—which is one step further than Umunna’s declared intent but places him as a de facto ally in the struggle against Corbyn. He told Marr that Labour MPs who disagreed with Corbyn’s position on Brexit were welcome in the Lib Dems, stating that Corbyn “managed to attract large numbers of people on the basis that he was leading opposition to Brexit. Actually he is very pro-Brexit, and hard Brexit, and I think when that becomes apparent, the divisions in the Labour Party will become more real and the opportunity for us to move into that space will be substantial.”

Cable added that there were was “a very strong disaffected group within the Conservative Party—they are keeping their heads down at the moment—but I think they are very worried about the way their party’s going.”

Corbyn, for his part, has been making a pitch for big business support, under conditions where the May government is hostage to its hard-Brexit wing and primarily concerned with preventing a political meltdown.

May preceded today’s debate with an appeal to all parties, including Labour, to share ideas and work with her to ensure a Brexit deal that meets the national

interest. Corbyn dismissed this during Prime Minister’s Question Time as a measure of her desperation. “If you would like it, I’m very happy to furnish you with a copy of our manifesto or better still, an early election so the people in this county can decide,” he said.

Corbyn spoke last week to the Chamber of Commerce and is to meet with EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier today for discussions in case of a snap election. The government could fall apart at any moment, he explained, ushering in a Labour government. The meeting would allow him to outline Labour’s “jobs-first Brexit” approach—centred on tariff free access to the single market. “It would be a partnership with Europe in the future but not membership of the European Union,” he said.

With the Tories in a state of factional warfare, most consider that May will face a leadership challenge at least by the autumn. But it is the (pro-hard-Brexit) Minister for Brexit David Davis who is spoken of as May’s likely successor. This leaves the small pro-EU faction of the party to engage in a rear-guard action supporting a Labour and Liberal Democrat-led “legislative war” against the Repeal Bill when it is finally debated in the autumn. This centres on opposing the “Henry VIII powers” contained in the bill allowing hundreds of laws to be rewritten without primary legislation.

Corbyn, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and their advisers calculate that this will lead big business to favourably consider a Labour government and its “soft Brexit” strategy. But Umunna’s move offers an alternative path—and a realignment that could shift politics more decisively in a pro-EU direction. Moreover it could do so by raising the possibility of various coalitions and governments of “national unity”—without the political risks associated with a majority Labour government that would be brought to power having exploited widespread anti-austerity sentiment and raising workers’ expectations of an end to the attacks on wages, working conditions and essential services.



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