

May's overtures to European Union on Brexit terms falls flat

Robert Stevens
23 September 2017

UK Prime Minister Theresa May's speech in Florence yesterday was hyped as crucial to breaking the deadlock in negotiations with the European Union (EU) over the terms of Britain's withdrawal. But it did nothing to resolve growing tensions.

May chose to speak in Florence, Italy to prove that while the UK "may be leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe." Her tone was conciliatory, beginning with a paean to Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance, which had began "a period of history that inspired centuries of creativity and critical thought across our continent and which in many ways defined what it meant to be European."

But in her bid to placate her numerous critics domestically and internationally, May failed ultimately to satisfy anyone.

She heads a minority government, and a cabinet split over the terms of Brexit. Only last week, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, leader of the "hard" Brexit faction penned a 4,000-word manifesto widely seen as an undeclared leadership bid.

Britain's major banks and corporations want an arrangement with the EU that will enable them to keep access to the single market or customs union. However, the EU insists there can be no preferential treatment for the UK, and that it must settle its divorce bill—estimated at up to 100 million euros—before any discussions can take place on future trade relations.

With Britain due to withdraw by March 2019, it is not even clear that the EU will agree at its summit next month that the May government has done enough to pass the first hurdle.

So while the prime minister made constant references to the UK's European "partners" (nearly 40 mentions) and "friends", no EU leaders were present in the Santa Maria Novella church. Instead, the audience consisted entirely of members of her cabinet, including Johnson, journalists,

and a handful of Italian business leaders, diplomats and local dignitaries.

The Italian prime minister, Paolo Gentiloni, was nowhere to be seen, despite meeting with the EU commissioner in charge of Brexit talks, Michel Barnier, in Rome only the previous day. The EU has insisted that all negotiations on Brexit must pass through Barnier, to ensure that the UK does not try to exploit divisions within the 27-member states to its advantage.

In Rome, Barnier had said that no progress had been made in negotiations, leaving just 12 months to conclude a deal. In addition to the UK's disputed financial liabilities, the rights of three million EU nationals living in the UK and future arrangements regarding the status of the border between the Republic of Ireland—which is an EU member—and Northern Ireland are still outstanding.

As the *Financial Times* commented, "Gentiloni's huddle with Mr Barnier comes amid concern that Mrs May could try to sidestep Brussels and negotiate with national capitals to exploit any division between member states."

Still May's pitch, couched in the most diplomatic language, was that "it is up to [EU] leaders to set the tone". She said that the UK had issued 14 "position" papers on Brexit, stressing in particular that relating to Foreign policy, defence and development. This was a none too subtle warning that the EU's defence and security was heavily reliant on Britain's substantial defence and intelligence capabilities. May cited North Korea explicitly as an existential threat and, in a reference to Russia, argued that, "Here on our own continent, we see territorial aggression to the east; and from the South threats from instability and civil war; terrorism, crime and other challenges which respect no borders."

In the face of this, May said the UK would draw on the "full weight of our military, intelligence, diplomatic and development resources....," adding, "Our determination to

defend the stability, security and prosperity of our European neighbours and friends remains steadfast.”

But in turn the UK required an urgent agreement on trade. She warned, “At the moment, the negotiations are focused on the arrangements for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. But we need to move on to talk about our future relationship... And this should span both a new economic relationship and a new relationship on security.”

May proposed that the EU agree to a Brexit transition period of “around two years”, during which the UK would continue to have access to the single market. This has long been the demand of big business in the UK, with CBI director-general Carolyn Fairbairn commenting after that, “Firms will welcome the proposal of a ‘status quo’ transition period for business that averts a cliff-edge exit.”

On this basis, the UK would meet its financial obligations she said, although no sum was mentioned. In equally vague terms, May said the UK would also accept the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice until 2021 or beyond, and would give legal protection to EU citizens in the UK.

In return, she returned to her demand for the UK to have preferential trading terms. She ruled out a deal based on European Economic Area (EEA) membership [as with Norway], or the type of agreement adopted by the EU recently with Canada. EEA membership required the UK adopting “new EU rules,” (which is opposed by the hard Brexit faction) while the Canadian option “would represent such a restriction on our mutual market access that it would benefit neither of our economies.”

The EU’s response to the speech was guarded, with Barnier describing it as “constructive.” What had to be agreed, however, were the “concrete implications of this pledge.”

Manfred Weber, the head of the conservative European People’s Party group in the European Parliament, and a leader of German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s coalition partners, the Christian Social Union, was openly hostile saying the speech offered “no more clarity to London’s positions.” He added, “I am even more concerned now. The clock is ticking and time is running faster than the government believes in London.”

May’s speech was peppered with pious references to the UK being steadfast in defence of shared “values” with the EU. “We share a deep, historic belief in the same values—the values of peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law,” she proclaimed.

Just three days before, May and Johnson had sat silently

while US President Donald Trump delivered his fascistic rant before the United Nations in New York. Asserting his doctrine of unbridled US militarism and war, he threatened to “destroy” the 25 million-strong population of North Korea, and menaced Iran and Venezuela amongst others.

Trump’s “America First” policy, backed by threats of nuclear annihilation, is both an expression of, and significantly increases, tensions between the main imperialist powers and threatens world war.

While Germany’s Chancellor Merkel and France’s President Macron absented themselves from Trump’s speech, afterwards May went into talks with the US President, with whom she hopes to conclude a post-Brexit trade deal. Reports state that Trump criticised the UK for “not doing enough” to pressure Pyongyang, and called for it to adopt a “tougher stance.”

For a faction of the UK bourgeoisie, Brexit was meant to facilitate the development of global financial and trade relations as a counterweight to the EU. But such plans risk placing it at odds with its more powerful international ally.

At the UN, Trump described the agreement signed with Iran in 2015 by the US, China, Russia, the UK, Germany, France and the EU over its nuclear programme as the “worst deal ever,” and has threatened to scrap it.

In his talks with May, the US President refused to provide any information on his intentions. Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson said “Prime Minister May asked him if he would share it [his decision] with her and he said no.”

The UK moved rapidly to develop trade relations with Tehran after the agreement, with trade increasing by 42 percent from January to October in 2016 and 57 percent this year.

The day after Trump’s rant, a London-based firm, Quercus, announced a 500 million euro project to build one of the world’s largest solar power farms in Iran.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact