May’s Conservative government faces possible collapse over Brexit

Chris Marsden
11 November 2017

The European Union’s chief negotiator Michel Barnier gave Britain a two-week deadline yesterday to provide “vital” clarification on the financial commitments it is willing to honour as part of its Brexit divorce settlement.

During a press conference following discussions with UK Brexit Secretary David Davis, Barnier took a hard line, stressing that there would be no talks on post-EU trade before agreement on the final settlement—expected to be over £50 billion.

With further substantive talks not scheduled until December, the European powers clearly smell blood in the water. They calculate that the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May is too weak to make good on its threats to walk away from the EU with “no deal rather than a bad deal.”

EU officials let it be known to the *Times* of London that they are making contingency plans based on May or even her entire government not surviving beyond the end of this year.

May’s premiership has become a living nightmare for her. She heads a minority government after a narrow general election victory in June—a snap poll that she called in the aim of providing a larger majority to push Brexit through. Instead, not only did popular anti-austerity sentiment contribute to a large vote for Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, but the fissures within ruling circles over Brexit were widened.

Now, May is at the epicentre of a political storm. Within days, she has lost two of her cabinet to scandals. Sir Michael Fallon fell as Defence Secretary after being accused of sexually inappropriate behaviour. Of a far more serious character is the resignation of Priti Patel as International Development Secretary after it was revealed that she held 14 meetings with top Israeli officials—including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—while supposedly on a “family holiday.” During the trip she also visited the Golan Heights and, on her return, lobbied to divert part of the UK’s international aid budget to the Israel Defense Forces.

The position of the fallen ministers on Brexit soon played a part in the unfolding crisis. May was subject to angry broadsides when she replaced Fallon with her chief whip, Gavin Williamson. To placate her critics, May replaced Patel with the prominent Eurosceptic Penny Mordaunt—even as Patel herself told the media, via “friends” and “colleagues,” that she now felt liberated to campaign hard for Brexit from the backbenches.

May then announced her intention to put an amendment enshrining in law the date Britain leaves the EU—at 11pm, March 29, 2019. She wrote in the pro-Brexit *Telegraph* warning, “We will not tolerate attempts from any quarter to use the process of amendments to this Bill as a mechanism to try to block the democratic wishes of the British people by attempting to slow down or stop our departure from the European Union.”

Her threat is directed not only at the opposition, but at sections of her own party who are calling for a legally-binding vote on Brexit when the final settlement is agreed. But this only confirms the impotence of a government that is hostage to a hard-line anti-EU faction which is otherwise a distinct minority within ruling circles in Britain.

The majority position in business circles and the City of London prior to the shock result of the June 23, 2016 Brexit referendum was to support EU membership. In its aftermath, the central concern became preserving access to the Single European Market on which the UK economy relies. That May cannot even defend this goal is a source of anger and despair for the Remain camp.

© World Socialist Web Site

For their part, the party's pro-Brexit faction push May around remorselessly while contemplating her eventual removal. Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and others calculate that Britain can force the EU to accept a favourable trade deal because to do otherwise would be mutually damaging. But above all they rely on securing a close economic relationship with the Trump administration in the US as their main bargaining chip.

However, as trade and political tensions deepen between the US and Europe, Britain could find itself wholly excluded from key markets with nothing other than a promissory note from an administration whose watchword is "America First!"

On Thursday, Barnier directly challenged May over the recent visit to Britain by US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross for talks with UK Trade Secretary Liam Fox. Ross has denounced the EU as protectionist, as has President Donald Trump.

In Rome, Barnier said, "When I hear the US secretary of commerce, Wilbur Ross, call in London for the British to diverge with Europe to better converge towards others—towards less regulation, environmental, sanitary, food, probably also financial, fiscal and social—I'm wondering … The United Kingdom has chosen to leave the European Union. Will it also want to move away from the European model?"

Making clear that the EU's concern is Britain's dropping of what little financial regulations remain, intensifying competition for markets and investments, he warned, "There will be no close commercial relationship without a level playing field."

Commentators queued up to make their response to May's crisis. The consensus is that her days are numbered, because the longer she stays in office, the more damaging it is for the strategic interests of British imperialism.

"Brexit has broken British politics," writes Philip Stephens in the *Financial Times*. The Brexit "project is being steered, if that is the right word, by an administration drained of political authority by a misjudged election and by a Conservative party at war with itself."

Conservative Remain supporter Simon Jenkins wrote in the *Guardian* that May "says she will not 'tolerate' Brexit backsliding from rebel remainer MPs. What we actually want to know she's not tolerating is a much smaller group of flat-Earth rebels backsliding from a sensible Brexit."

In the *Daily Mail* , Piers Morgan declared, " Yes, if [May] resigns it will force another Conservative leadership contest, with the added risk of triggering another general election, but this current debacle cannot continue … The Prime Minister has to go, and she has to go now."

Morgan identifies a key area of dispute among anti-Brexit forces in the ruling class—whether or not Corbyn and Labour offer an alternative through which Brexit can be overturned.

Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell have made great efforts to reassure the City of London that Labour's proposed minimal reforms do not threaten big business but rather could be its political salvation.

This has not allayed fears among some that a government coming to power even formally committed to opposing austerity is too dangerous to contemplate. However, others are shifting.

On the BBC's Newsnight, Lord Michael Heseltine said he and other Tories might even consider voting for Corbyn in a general election to stop Brexit.

"I have friends who are certainly Conservative voters who are agonising over exactly that dilemma," he said. "If, as I think, the public opinion will move and the Labour Party moves there could be a situation where the only people left in favour of Brexit are the right-wing of the Conservative Party."

For his part, Gordon Brown, the co-architect of New Labour alongside Tony Blair, used the launch of his memoirs to urge Corbyn to support a second referendum on EU membership.

This could be a "game changing moment" when "Brexit reaches crisis point" next year, he said. All that was required for victory is for the EU to agree limitations on free movement to appease anti-immigrant sentiment, as it has already done for Switzerland where jobs registered at job centres are mainly reserved for local people.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site