

Brexit crisis deepens after Tory revolt on eve of EU summit

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Prime Minister Theresa May dined with the leaders of the 27 European Union member states last night, prior to today's discussions—held in her absence—at the EU Summit in Brussels.

May arrived after suffering a humiliating parliamentary defeat Wednesday due to a rebellion by 11 Conservative MPs.

Today's talks are to ratify the deal reached with European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker agreeing that discussions on Britain's exit from the EU have made "sufficient progress" to proceed to the next stage involving future trade relations.

But May's "hard Brexit" stance—threatening to walk away if a satisfactory agreement is not reached—united dissident Tory MPs with the Labour Party, Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party behind an amendment to the EU Withdrawal Bill guaranteeing parliamentary approval of any Brexit agreement.

May lost by four votes, 309 to 305, in her first defeat as prime minister, after Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn ordered his MPs to back Amendment Seven proposed by ex-Conservative attorney general, Dominic Grieve.

The 11 pro-Remain Conservatives voting with the opposition were Grieve, Heidi Allen, Ken Clarke, Jonathan Djanogly, Stephen Hammond, Sir Oliver Heald, Nicky Morgan, Bob Neill, Antoinette Sandbach, Anna Soubry and Sarah Wollaston. John Stevenson "actively abstained" by voting both for and against the amendment.

According to the fanatically pro-Brexit *Daily Mail*, another three Tory MPs are thought to have abstained—Ed Vaizey, who declared himself to be "hurt, bitter, thoroughly p****d off" by Brexit: George Freeman, who resigned from May's backbench policy

board, and Paul Masterton. Dover MP Charlie Elphicke, who has had the party whip withdrawn over unspecified allegations of sexual misconduct, also abstained.

Just two of 10 pro-Brexit Labour MPs—Frank Field and Kate Hoey—voted with the Conservatives and the 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs on whom May has so far depended for a majority.

The government previously made a vague promise of a "meaningful vote" for MPs on the final Brexit deal, but this would be on a "take it or leave it" basis with ministers retaining "Henry VIII" powers to enact any deal without Parliament's permission. This week Brexit Secretary David Davis wrote to MPs promising "a number of votes for Parliament on the final deal we strike with the EU" to no avail. The amendment means that the terms of any Brexit deal must be approved with a full Act of Parliament.

There are threats of a second rebellion against fixing March 29, 2019 as the day Article 50 beginning the Brexit process is enacted. Grieve said he was sure the government would be defeated again next Wednesday if the amendment went to a vote.

What Corbyn has described as a "humiliating loss of authority" for May was hailed by numerous commentators as proof of a parliamentary majority for "soft Brexit"—preserving at all costs full access to the Single European Market—and by some as the basis for overturning Brexit.

In the *Guardian*, Polly Toynbee made a pitch to dissident Tories, urging, "Let's hope others in their party are inspired by them to grow a backbone on future crucial votes." Fellow columnist Rafael Behr made his appeal to Labour, urging the party to abandon its "fuzzy position" and come out against Brexit to fulfil its "duty to the country."

Moulding Labour as a declared opponent of Brexit is becoming a serious consideration within ruling circles, given that divisions within the Tory party are tearing it apart. Scenes in Parliament during the vote and the reaction in its aftermath confirm how dysfunctional the Tories have become—raising again the possibility of a snap election.

Whips applied heavy pressure, with rebel Anna Soubry telling the *Evening Standard* she had found a woman MP “upset and shaken ... bullying, reducing colleagues to tears and making them shake is not acceptable. It has got to stop. We are the Conservative party, not [Labour’s pro-Corbyn pressure group] Momentum thugs.”

Reports suggest that Tory chief whip Julian Smith has threatened to sue anyone making such accusations.

Sir Desmond Swayne MP trumped Soubry’s reference to Momentum, describing rebels as those “who comrade Lenin would have properly referred to as useful idiots.”

In the final 15 minutes, Justice minister Dominic Raab offered last-minute verbal assurances that swayed at least two Tory rebels, Vicky Ford and Paul Masterton. But others shouted, “Too late!” Chancellor Phillip Hammond took Ford by the arm by and led her into the “no” lobby.

The Brexit rebel Stephen Hammond has now been sacked by May as a party vice chairman.

The *Daily Mail* published mugshots of the rebels on its front page under the headline: “Proud of yourselves?” Summing up the febrile atmosphere in ruling circles, the *Mail*’s overline stated that “11 self-consumed malcontents” had increased “the possibility of a Marxist in Number 10.”

Pro-Brexit MP Nadine Dorries accused the rebels of putting “a spring in Labours step. ... They should be deselected and never allowed to stand as a Tory MP, ever again.”

Grieve has said he has received death threats.

The government has all but spelled out that it will seek to undo the vote later in the legislative process. Answering questions in the Commons yesterday, Davis said, “We will have to decide how we respond to it.”

The rebellion has left May desperately stalling for time, according to the *Financial Times*. “We asked the European side to leave it open for now,” said one of Mrs. May’s allies. “We didn’t want them setting down

at this European Council what exactly the parameters of a deal might be.”

The EU has made clear that it will exploit May’s weakness. The European Parliament’s chief Brexit coordinator Guy Verhofstadt tweeted in response to Wednesday’s upset, “British Parliament takes back control. ... Interests of the citizens will prevail over narrow party politics. A good day for democracy.”

The EU is already demanding more detail from the government before starting talks on future relations, including trade. ITV reported that a leaked draft of the text to be considered by the EU27 leaders today “suggests that trade talks may not start until after a subsequent summit in March.”

Davis had already made things difficult for the government after remarking on the BBC’s “Andrew Marr Show” Sunday that the deal struck by May with Juncker to progress talks was only a “statement of intent” and had no legal status.

The EU’s chief negotiator Michel Barnier warned, “We will have a final agreement only if the final commitments taken by Theresa May and the British government ... are respected.”

He rejected Davis’s claim that a future trade treaty could be signed in March, immediately after the UK’s EU exit. Only a “political declaration” on the future relationship was possible, he said. “In technical, legal terms it simply is not possible to do anything else. And David Davis knows that full well.”

Manfred Weber, the German head of the centre-right bloc in the European Parliament, tweeted, “By downgrading this agreement to a statement of intent, the UK government is putting our trust at risk.”

Verhofstadt stated that Davis’s comments were “unacceptable” and would provoke a wider hardening of the EU’s positions.”

The wording under consideration today states that “negotiations in the second phase can only progress as long as all commitments undertaken during the first phase are respected in full and translated faithfully in legal terms as quickly as possible.”



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