

Britain's Tory government offers concession to pro-EU MPs to advance Brexit bill

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The European Union Withdrawal Bill, facilitating Brexit, passed through its latest stage in parliament yesterday by a vote of 319 to 303.

MPs were voting on an amendment requiring parliament to hold a “meaningful vote” on the final Brexit deal negotiated between Prime Minister Theresa May’s Conservative government and the European Union (EU). The amendment required the government to allow MPs a vote on how to proceed in the event there is no deal agreed by January 21, 2019.

It was the second time that the amendment, tabled by Dominic Grieve, former attorney general and pro-Remain Tory MP, had come before parliament in five days. Last Thursday, May headed off a potential rebellion by around 15 pro-Remain Tory MPs after a supposed compromise on the issue.

That deal rapidly unravelled when the government tabled an amendment that would mean allowing MPs a vote only on a neutral motion at the end of UK/EU negotiations—effectively meaning they would have no power to halt a final Brexit deal. Grieve complained that the final draft as presented had been “inexplicably changed” and “cannot be accepted.”

With the government facing possible defeat, another last-minute compromise was cobbled together before Wednesday’s vote, which meant Grieve did not vote in favour of his own amendment.

To pacify pro-Remain Tory rebels, Brexit Secretary David Davis stated that if MPs had not approved the Brexit withdrawal deal by the deadline, the speaker of the house at the time could decide whether MPs can have a “meaningful vote.”

The agreement ended what had been expected to be a significant rebellion by pro-EU Tories, and a potentially fatal defeat for May. While Grieve voted with the government, six pro-Remain Tories—Heidi

Allen, Ken Clarke, Philip Lee, Antoinette Sandbach, Anna Soubry, and Sarah Wollaston—voted for the amendment.

On Monday evening, the Lords had upped the ante by voting 354 to 235 in favour of an amendment along Grieve’s line. Some 22 Conservative peers, including Tory former deputy prime minister Lord Heseltine and Conservative former ministers Lord Patten of Barnes, Lord Willetts and Baroness Warsi, rebelled against the government.

The Lords’ vote expressed the striving of the pro-Remain faction of the ruling elite to halt and even reverse Brexit. Significantly, a total of 588 peers voted in total—the fourth largest turnout in a single Lords vote on record.

That was a significantly bigger defeat for the government than the previous occasion that the vote was tabled, on a similarly worded amendment in the Lords—which was then overturned by MPs last week.

Former Tory MP and life peer Lord Hailsham had presented the Lords’ amendment, based on an agreement made by Grieve with the solicitor general, Robert Buckland, and on the understanding that this would avert a future government defeat over the Bill at the hands of pro-EU Tory rebels.

Wednesday’s agreement means that the Withdrawal bill has likely passed its final hurdle.

Grieve’s climbdown came amidst warnings of a constitutional crisis and the potential collapse of the May government. He had been attacked for suggesting that he could “collapse the government” and that he had wakened in a cold sweat thinking about it.

Writing in the pro-Brexit Tory house organ, the *Daily Telegraph*, May’s former adviser, Nick Timothy, wrote, “The Grieve amendment will make a bad deal—or no deal—more likely. And this will be used by

Remainers as an excuse to hold a second referendum, or stop Brexit altogether.”

He warned, “Ministers and rebels might yet come to terms. But regardless, the Hailsham and Grieve amendments are unacceptable for several reasons. The first is constitutional. It is the responsibility of the Government, not Parliament, to negotiate international treaties.”

Leading Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg, who has substantial support within the Tory’s ranks and is being groomed as a future party leader, commented that amendments over a “meaningful vote” were “nothing to do with parliamentary scrutiny; they are about stopping Brexit.”

Advocating the interests of the Remain wing of the ruling class, the *Financial Times* editorialised Tuesday ahead of the vote, “This outcome [no deal with the EU] could be disastrous for the country—prompting an economic shock, administrative calamity and sapping confidence in both the economy and the democratic process. If the no deal scenario becomes most likely, MPs need to have the powers to direct the government. ... Tory MPs should focus less on party unity and more on avoiding this worst-case scenario.”

The internecine warfare in the ruling elite over Brexit is being accelerated by the deepening conflicts between the US and the EU, and within the EU itself. With US President Donald Trump effectively jettisoning the transatlantic alliance, Germany and France in particular have hardened their position against concessions to the UK government for fear it will further fracture the bloc.

On Tuesday, the EU’s lead Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier attacked the May government for making unacceptable demands: “They want to maintain all the benefits of the current relationship, while leaving the EU regulatory, supervision and application framework. And they try to blame us for the consequences of their choice.” A major stumbling block is divergent positions on the issue of avoiding a hard border between the south and north of Ireland post-Brexit.

Barnier’s statement was made as draft conclusions ahead of next week’s summit of EU leaders all but declared that talks with Britain have reached an impasse. In a four-paragraph overview of the talks, the text warns that contingency planning for the UK to exit the EU with no agreement in place had to be fast-tracked. “The European Council renews its call upon

member states and all stakeholders to step up their work on preparedness at all levels and for all outcomes,” it states.

Under conditions of a minority May government, beholden to its pro-Brexit wing, moves are being stepped up to mould Labour as the political vehicle for preventing Britain’s exit from the EU.

This week, the Momentum group of supporters of Jeremy Corbyn began a petition aimed at pressuring the Labour leader to adopt a more anti-Brexit stance.

The petition calls on “Momentum’s National Coordinating Group to hold a vote of all our members this summer to decide whether to oppose Tory Brexit, and whether to campaign for Labour to hold a vote at Annual Conference in September on giving the people the final say on the Brexit deal.” Framed on the basis that a hard Brexit is the main threat to Corbyn’s “socialist programme,” it demands Labour must “stop this disaster, get into government—and transform the UK and Europe together!”

The petition was given prominence in the pro-Remain *Guardian* with columnist Zoe Williams writing under the headline, “Jeremy Corbyn, take note: leftwing remainers won’t stay silent on Brexit.”

Williams used the now-obligatory anti-Russia bogeyman to argue, “Plenty of us do not swallow this great taboo around respecting a referendum result when the campaign was built on naked lies (before you even consider Russian troll bots and what other rules were broken).”

The petition follows the launch of a “Left against Brexit” tour to be held this summer in a number of towns and cities. Among its backers are Labour MEP Julie Ward, former shadow minister Catherine West and Green party co-leader Caroline Lucas. It is also backed by Michael Chessum, a member of Momentum’s first steering committee, and Manuel Cortes, the general secretary of the TSSA transport union.



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