

# Concerted efforts to save May's government and the chance of a “soft Brexit”

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In a day filled with high-profile declarations of support for Prime Minister Theresa May and opposing any leadership challenge, perhaps the most significant statement was that of the European Union's chief negotiator Michel Barnier.

Speaking in New York while attending the Council on Foreign Relations, Barnier made clear the concern of the European powers that May's beheading by the eurosceptic wing of the Conservatives is to be avoided if possible.

After previously ridiculing the suggestion that the EU would accept any preferential “cherry-picking” arrangement for the UK, Barnier declared that “we have agreed on 80 percent of the negotiations” and that he was determined to agree on the remaining 20 percent.

“No deal is the worst solution for everybody. It would be a huge economic problem for the UK and also for the EU,” he added.

Barnier still stressed the EU's position that the “four freedoms of movement of people, goods, services and capital” were “indivisible” and that “at the end of this negotiation that the best situation, the best relationship with the EU, will be to remain a member.” But he insisted, “I will negotiate only with the British government... so our next negotiations will be next Monday with the British delegation appointed by Mrs. May.”

However, the EU clearly calculates that the possibility of reversing Brexit at this point comes second to preventing a hardening of the Tories' anti-Brexit stand in the aftermath of the resignation of Brexit Secretary David Davis, his minister Stephen Baker and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

Such concerns would have been highlighted by the resignation of two Conservative party vice-chairs, Ben

Bradley and Maria Caulfield, only minutes before May was to begin a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the EU Western Balkans Summit in London that was dominated by questions over Brexit.

It is a measure of May's crisis that she told Merkel not to answer questions from the British press, and to only take one question from a German reporter, which produced an expression of obvious surprise from the chancellor.

European fears will have been sharply focused by the comments of US President Donald Trump, made at the White House before flying to the NATO Summit and just two days before he arrives in the UK.

Trump has made no secret of his hostility to the EU and desire to weaken what he considers a rival trade bloc, including supporting Brexit and the more recent imposition of sanctions.

He said he expected to see a country in “turmoil” when he lands in the UK and viewed Johnson as a “friend of mine,” who had been “very nice” and “very supportive”.

“So I have NATO, I have the UK which is in somewhat turmoil, and I have [Russian President Vladimir] Putin. Frankly, Putin may be the easiest of them all,” he declared.

Asked if May should stay in power, Trump said, “That's up to the people, not up to me.”

Time after time, May's Tory allies, including figures and newspapers closely associated with the campaign to leave the EU, have centred their opposition to the Brexiteers on warnings that they will only hasten the election of a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Leading Brexiteer and former Tory Party leader Lord Michael Howard told BBC Radio 4's

Today programme, “I do think that it would be extremely foolish and extremely ill-advised for anyone to send in letters to mount a motion of no confidence in the prime minister.”

Referring directly to Johnson’s resignation letter, he added, “I do not believe the Brexit dream is dying.”

William Hague, another ex-leader and a Remainer who then declared for Leave following the referendum, wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, house organ of the Tory right, describing Johnson and Davis as “romantics” who risked scuttling Brexit.

Tory MPs “with their pens hovering over letters demanding a vote of no confidence” might end up with an even softer Brexit or no Brexit at all by undermining the government. “The chances that such resignations will lead to the sort of Brexit they desire are around zero, but the possibility that they will give fresh momentum to demands for a second referendum or further weaken the negotiating position of the UK is considerable,” he insisted.

In the *Daily Mail*, Stephen Glover warned of his fear that “this orgy of infighting means a nightmarish age of Corbyn may almost be upon us.”

This “nightmarish age,” he explained, would be “a disaster by the side of which the worst possible outcome over Brexit would virtually pale into insignificance. Mass nationalisation, confiscatory taxes, rocketing public expenditure, hard-Left trade union leaders dictating policy, the embrace of odious foreign regimes and the boorish rejection of dependable allies such as the United States: these are just a few of the nightmarish consequences that would almost inevitably follow a Corbyn victory.”

Yet the object of this campaign of fearmongering, Corbyn, has been muted in his own statements precisely because he has no intention of implementing mass nationalisations, taxes on the rich, or any other serious measures against capitalism. His aim is to convince Britain’s ruling elite that Labour is a safe pair of hands, not just regarding ameliorating the impact of Brexit, but in suitably “moderating”, i.e., neutering, demands for social and political change among workers and youth.

Above all he will do nothing that threatens unity with his party’s right wing. In this regard, the most telling statement of support for May’s government came from Labour’s deputy leader, Tom Watson.

A second referendum on Brexit might become necessary, he said, but only if an increasingly divided Tory Party cannot agree a viable Brexit plan.

“It is conceivable that there is no majority position for any deal in the current arrangements in parliament,” he said, raising the “highly, highly, highly unlikely” prospect of “a people’s vote” if “parliament just can’t make a decision on it...”

Tory splits, he added, “electorally might help my party.” However, “We want to work with the government for best deal.”

“It’s not a question of Labour trying to bring the government down, it’s actually a question of Labour trying to help the government get a good deal and try and stop the government bringing itself down.”



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