

UK: May government in meltdown over Brexit

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For the second successive evening Tuesday, Theresa May's Conservative government barely survived, as vital votes were held in parliament on Brexit legislation.

On Tuesday, the government averted defeat in passing the Customs Bill by only 6 votes (307 to 301), after 12 pro-European Union (EU) Tory MPs rebelled to back an amendment.

The amendment from former minister Stephen Hammond would have forced the UK to default to membership of the EU's customs union if it proved unable to negotiate a better agreement by January 21 of next year. The vote saw three Labour MPs and a former Labour MP—who now votes as an Independent—vote with the government.

On Monday evening, a vote on another amendment was even closer, with the government winning by just 3 votes (305 votes to 302). The vote was on an amendment to the legislation forced on May by the party's "hard Brexit" wing preventing the UK from collecting taxes on behalf of the EU unless the rest of the EU reciprocated. Had two other pro-Remain MPs been present to vote, the Tories would have won the vote with a majority of just one MP. Fourteen soft-Brexit Tories rebelled to support Labour and the Liberal Democrats' opposition.

Another hard-Brexit amendment—to ensure the UK would not be part of the EU's VAT regime post-Brexit—was backed by 303 to 300, with a Tory rebellion of 11. In both votes, Brexit-supporting Labour MPs backed the government.

The Customs Bill was later approved by parliament with a clearer majority of 318 to 285 and goes to its next stage in the House of Lords.

The votes imperilled May's government, as she was forced to accept four amendments to the Bill from the

hard-Brexit faction—which effectively wrecked the agreement on a soft-Brexit she had finally reached with her Cabinet just a week earlier. This deal was reached only under intense pressure from broad sections of business who demand continued access to the European Single market—the UK's largest trading partner.

To wreck the Chequers agreement, around 20 Tories in the hard-Brexit European Research Group faction, led by backbencher and potential leadership challenger Jacob Rees-Mogg, threatened to vote against the government if their amendments to the bill were not accepted. The most divisive of the four Monday amendments overturned the complex UK/EU tariff proposals contained in the agreement reached at May's country residence, Chequers, under which the UK would collect tariffs on goods on behalf of the EU.

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, the party's "Eurosceptics have set up a 'party within a party' with a highly organised whipping operation among Tory Eurosceptic MPs to try to frustrate Theresa May's Brexit plans."

It detailed how "[m]ore than 100 Eurosceptic Tory MPs are now on a WhatsApp group co-ordinated by former Brexit minister Steve Baker who is giving them voting instructions."

Leading soft-Brexit Tory Dominic Grieve said his party's pro-Brexit rebels appeared "willing to plunge the country into a serious crisis to achieve the purity of their objective."

Following the 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU, Prime Minister David Cameron resigned to be replaced by May—who was a supporter of Remain but pledged to implement Brexit. This compromise has blown up, not simply due to events in Britain but because these events have been shaped by the extraordinary antagonisms between the United States and European powers

following the election of US President Donald Trump.

During the Brexit referendum campaign, President Barack Obama visited the UK and threatened that, in the event of a Leave vote, Britain would “go to the back of the queue” in terms of securing a trade deal with the US. Britain’s EU membership was critical to US interests, with the policy underpinning the agenda of all UK governments since Britain entered the EU in 1975. This was epitomised above all by the Blair Labour government, which described Britain as the bridge between the US and EU and the pillar of the “transatlantic alliance.”

Trump has jettisoned this policy, describing the EU as a “foe” to be opposed alongside the rest of America’s global competitors. Prior to his visit to the UK, Trump attacked the EU and Germany at the NATO Summit in Brussels before doubling down on his support for Brexit when he arrived in Britain last week.

He denounced the Chequers deal, which even before he arrived had already led to the resignations from cabinet of Brexit Secretary David Davis and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson. In an interview published in the pro-Brexit *Sun*, Trump said May’s soft-Brexit strategy threatened any future US/UK trade deal. If May’s deal was accepted, “we would be dealing with the European Union instead of dealing with the UK,” he said. “We are cracking down right now on the European Union because they have not treated the United States fairly on trading.”

Trump openly touted Johnson to replace May, telling the *Sun* that he would make a “great prime minister.”

This was a rallying cry for the Tory’s hard-Brexit wing ahead of this week’s Brexit legislation votes.

The votes demonstrate the extent to which the Tory party is irreconcilably split over the issue of Brexit, with May’s days numbered amid constant talk of a leadership challenge ahead.

In a tweet posted after Tuesday night’s vote, BBC *Newsnight*’s Nicholas Watt reported that Conservative Chief Whip Julian Smith had told his MPs that if May had lost the vote on the Customs Bill, he would have called a vote of confidence in the government on Wednesday. This was confirmed to *Sky News* by Tory Brexiteer Andrew Bridgen. Smith threatened Tory MPs that if the vote was lost, the outcome would be a general election, with the prospect of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government.

Labour is seeking to capitalise on the Tories’ crisis and is positioning itself as the party opposed to a hard Brexit and speaking for dominant sections of big business. Labour has previously abstained on some Brexit legislation votes, but ahead of Monday’s vote on the EU tariffs amendment changed its vote to one of opposing the hard-Brexit amendment.

There is not the remotest progressive element in the programmes of the competing right-wing factions of the ruling elite. If this struggle—which cuts across traditional party lines and nominal political denominations of “left” and “right”—has an incendiary character, it is because it is over how to conduct trade war and escalate militarist policies, as imperialist rivalries over markets and geostrategic interests sharpen, and how best to ramp up the exploitation of the working class.

These developments confirm the insistence by the Socialist Equality Party that the working class must oppose all factions of the ruling class and fight for the only perspective that reflects its interests—a united offensive of European workers against the capitalist oligarchy and for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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