Brexit crisis prompts calls for national unity government

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Following parliamentary votes on customs and trade legislation so close as to threaten Theresa May's premiership, calls have been made from pro-European Union (EU) sections of the Conservative Party for a national unity government to break the deadlock over Brexit.

Divisions over Brexit cut across all existing party lines. Around 10 Labourites have consistently voted with the Tories' hard-Brexit wing, while a more substantial section of the party's MPs are united with the soft-Brexit/pro-Remain wing of the Tories—not just in seeking to preserve UK access to the EU's customs union and single market, but also ensuring that the crisis facing May's government doesn't precipitate a general election and a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

The votes in Parliament Monday and Tuesday were on amendments authored by the Tories hard-Brexit wing to quash the soft-Brexit agreement nominally reached by May with her cabinet just days earlier. More than 10 pro-EU Tory MPs voted against the government, leaving May reliant on four pro-Brexit Labour MPs and another former Labour MP who votes as an Independent for a majority.

Speaking to BBC Radio Four's "Today" programme Wednesday, pro-EU Tory rebel Anna Soubry called for a cross-party "government of national unity." She denounced the threats by party whips that failure to get the legislation through would result in a no confidence vote in May that would open the way for a Corbyn government.

Soubry told the BBC she would support May in a vote of no confidence but, "Problem is, I don't think that she's in charge any more. I've no doubt [leader of the hard-Brexit faction and leadership contender Jacob Rees-Mogg] is running our country."

Also endorsing moves towards a national unity government are leading Tories such as Dominic Grieve and Nicholas Soames.

Soubry's call is directed first to Labour's right-wing, which last summer sought Corbyn's removal as leader on the basis that he had not fought hard enough for the party's pro-Remain position in the Brexit referendum. But she also counts on an attempt to either ameliorate the impact of Brexit or overturn the referendum result by winning the support of the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru—the Party of Wales.

She was obliged, however, to address widespread fears within ruling circles that May's downfall would end with Corbyn in Number 10. Despite Corbyn's constant retreats in face of his right-wing and the "charm offensive" conducted by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell in the City of London, dominant sections of big business still fear that such a change in government would become a focus for opposition to austerity among workers and youth that Corbyn would be unable to control.

Labour has the "old Trotskyists in charge," Soubry declared, so "I personally would abandon the Labour frontbench and I would reach beyond it, and I would encompass Plaid Cymru, the SNP [Scottish National Party] and other sensible, pragmatic people who believe in putting this country's interests first and foremost."

Soubry has established intimate relations with the Blairites. In March, she co-authored an article with Chukka Umunna as co-chairs of the All Party Parliamentary Group on EU Relations in the London *Evening Standard*, stating, "We reside in different political parties and rarely inhabit the same voting lobby in the House of Commons but on Brexit we are as one. An issue that continues to divide our country

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also forges new alliances and a determination to put the interests of the country over and beyond traditional tribal politics and party loyalty."

A month later, both attended the launch event of the "People's Vote," a campaign calling for a second referendum on any final Brexit deal between the UK and EU.

The campaign for a People's Vote is seen by its initiators as a mechanism for avoiding a Corbyn government. At its launch, Umunna made an appeal to the Tories saying, "We need more Conservative members of Parliament to be as brave as Anna and many others who defied the whip and put their country before their party."

The Liberal Democrats—who explicitly call for Brexit to be stopped—signalled that they would be onboard in any national unity government. Speaking to the *Business Insider* web site, party leader Vince Cable said he was preparing for a "radical" shift in British politics, as "[t]here are large numbers of Labour MPs and quite a lot of Tories who are just bitterly alienated by their own people. I can't see the present system can be kept going. In the New Year, new groups may emerge … my instincts are that if they're aligned with us on basic values, we can work with them."

Jonathan Edwards, of Plaid Cymru, said of "maintaining our place in the single market and the customs union … if making it happen requires entering into an all-party government, so be it."

The *Times* noted that Ian Blackford, the SNP's Westminster leader, "did not rule out taking part."

Several leading figures in the pro-Corbyn pressure group Momentum are campaigning to change Labour's position on Brexit to back a "People's Vote"/second referendum on EU membership if Parliament rejects whatever is agreed between May and the EU next year. A petition to secure a discussion on the issue has almost reached the required 4,000 signatures. They have been afforded friendly coverage by the *Financial Times*.

The FT produced a video citing the comments of Alison McGovern, described as a "leading Remain Labour MP on the right of the party," that a "lot of parts of the Labour Party, Momentum included, are now thinking that they should have a say on the Brexit deal, and the British public should have a say. … I think people are wondering if the House of Commons can't sort it out because it's a hung parliament, maybe we need to go back to the British public."

With Labour now five points clear of the Tories in a YouGov poll, Corbyn is preparing for a snap election. He has called a shadow cabinet meeting for next week to outline a draft election manifesto and draft a Queen's Speech containing up to 35 bills.

To counter this, the Blairites are doing everything to destabilise his leadership—relaunching their bogus campaign alleging that Corbyn and his supporters are anti-Semitic. This week, leading Blairite Margaret Hodge cornered Corbyn behind the Speaker's chair in Parliament and screamed in his face, "You're a fucking anti-Semite and a racist."

Hodge carried out her attack just minutes after Tuesday evening's Brexit vote. The following morning, Blairite warmonger John Woodcock resigned as a Labour MP to stand as an independent. He had become an MP, his resignation later declared, "[T]o promote a credible alternative government … through strong defence and national security. I now believe more strongly than ever that you [Corbyn] have made the Labour Party unfit to deliver those promises and would pose a clear risk to UK national security as prime minister."

May remains in office, but this is a pyrrhic victory, with the ruling party split asunder and under siege.

May has pinned her hopes on a set of proposals for a "soft Brexit" that have already been undermined by her compromises with the Brexiteers. The EU's Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier complained that parts "contradict the guidelines of the EU council, the heads of government and state, namely the indivisibility of the four freedoms and the integrity of the single market."

He warned, "There is not a lot of justification for the EU running the risk of weakening the single market."

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