

Brexit crisis leaves fate of May government in balance

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The future of Prime Minister Theresa May's government is on a knife edge on the eve of this week's crucial talks on the terms of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU).

The dilemma in ruling circles is over whether the government can reach a deal with the EU, preserving access to the Single European Market, that does not precipitate a rebellion by the Conservatives' pro-Brexit wing and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which might force a general election bringing a Jeremy Corbyn Labour-led government to power.

EU officials led by Michel Barnier were in last-minute discussions with UK negotiators in Brussels yesterday, called for by Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab. On Tuesday, a meeting of EU ministers will take place, as well as a meeting of May's cabinet, ahead of a full EU summit Wednesday and Thursday.

Contending pro- and anti-EU factions are insisting that May accede to their demands, or they will reject any deal she reaches. Such is the factional acrimony that it is difficult to estimate the numbers involved or how far they are willing to go to achieve their ends.

The DUP have 10 MPs elected by constituents in Northern Ireland and prop up May's minority government. It is opposed to every aspect of May's Chequers Plan for a "soft Brexit" maintaining tariff-free single market access, agreed in cabinet in June. The plan proposed, at the EU's insistence, that there be a "backstop" in place—after the UK leaves the EU—aligning Northern Ireland in a customs arrangement with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member. This was to ensure there will be no "hard border" between the south and north.

An end date for the backstop had been provisionally set for December 2021, but this time limit is opposed by the EU. BBC's "Newsnight" reported Friday that

May intends to get around this by inserting a "review clause" for the backstop rather than an end-date. This has only inflamed the opposition of the DUP and the Tory Brexiteers.

On Saturday, DUP leader Arlene Foster reiterated that her party would be prepared to vote against the Tories' upcoming October 29 budget if May's proposals on the Irish border issue remained in place. Writing in the *Belfast Telegraph*, she said, "I fully appreciate the risks of a 'no deal' (Brexit) but the dangers of a bad deal are worse.

"This backstop arrangement [proposed by May] would not be temporary. It would be the permanent annexation of Northern Ireland away from the rest of the United Kingdom and forever leave us subject to rules made in a place where we have no say."

The pro-EU *Observer* reported emails between Foster and Barnier, "leaked from the highest levels of government," that the DUP was positioning itself for a "no deal Brexit." One email claimed, "AF [Arlene Foster] said the DUP were ready for a no deal scenario, which she now believed was the likeliest one."

The weekend witnessed a flurry of articles and comments against May by her former Brexit Secretary David Davis—who called for a Cabinet rebellion against May—former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees Mogg, the leader of the anti-EU European Research Group. The *Sunday Telegraph* led its front page with a report that 63 hard Brexit Tory MPs have written a letter to May attacking her Brexit forecasts.

The pro-Tory *Spectator* commented, "If the DUP voted against May's deal, getting it through the Commons would become very difficult. In these circumstances, even if the whips succeeded in reducing the Tory rebellion to 15 or so, which would be an impressive feat of party management, they would still

need 25 Labour MPs to back the deal. That would be a stretch.”

Under the UK’s fixed term Parliament legislation, governments now cannot formally make votes an issue of no confidence—and are unable to utilise the calculation that rebel MPs would not vote against a sitting prime minister as this would result in the fall of the government. The *Spectator* commented that “Mogg and co believe they can vote down her deal but still vote to keep the government in place.” But it suggested a way in which May could call their bluff by raising the stakes to the highest possible level:

“These Tory rebels, though, would face an acute dilemma if May, having lost a first vote, responded by announcing she was holding another one. If the Commons again rejected her plan, she would then go to the palace and advise the Queen to call Jeremy Corbyn and ask him to form a government. While this plan would be a high-risk move, it would put the Tory rebels on the spot.”

The intervention made by former Labour leader Tony Blair into the crisis was extraordinary, in that it was framed openly as a means of avoiding the election of a Labour government. Speaking to Reuters, he described the prospect of a Corbyn government as a “truly damaging and challenging situation.” He urged Labour MPs not to back any deal May came back with as a supposedly better option than a no-deal Brexit, even though voting down a deal would be “really difficult” and create more uncertainty. This would lay the basis for a second referendum on Brexit, with the possibility of reversing the 2016 vote. The Tories, he said, would be “suicidal” to hold a general election on the issue of Brexit, but the majority of Tory MPs could back a second referendum on Brexit.

Blair intervened amid claims being made by May’s aides that 25 to 30 Labour MPs were ready to rebel against a whip imposed by Corbyn and vote with her to pass a “soft-Brexit” deal. Such claims were denied by several leading Blairites who echoed his call for a second referendum. The Labour-supporting *New Statesman* commented that “a golden rule of any story about rebellions is that the word ‘up to’ is always a synonym for ‘less than’.”

With any Brexit deal on offer and a no deal all threatening major economic dislocation, big business is stepping up its preparations. Later this month, Jaguar

Land Rover (JLR), Britain’s biggest carmaker, will temporarily shut down one of its largest UK plants at Solihull, affecting 9,000 workers’ jobs. This follows JLR’s announcement last month that it would impose a three-day working week at its Castle Bromwich factory until Christmas. The company laid off 1,000 agency staff earlier this year.

JLR said its two-week shutdown was in response to a nearly 50 percent slump in Chinese demand for its luxury Range Rover vehicles, an overall year on year 12 percent decline in sales, and the ongoing move against diesel motors in Europe. However, a piece in the *Financial Times* Sunday revealed the extent to which a hard Brexit scenario is driving their response. It noted, “The company has already spent several million pounds on contingency planning, talking to every port in the UK and installing AI [artificial intelligence] systems that will help it automatically fill out some paperwork.”

The majority of JLR’s production is based in the UK but Hanno Kirner, the company’s strategy director, said a “hard Brexit” leading to tariffs being imposed “would drive us to reconsider our industrial footprint and it would, probably, necessitate building more cars where we sell them. ... That would be in Europe, most likely.”



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