

British PM addresses EU summit as “no deal” Brexit threatened

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UK Prime Minister Theresa May will address this evening’s European Union (EU) summit knowing that Britain’s terms for the transitional period preparing the UK’s exit have been rejected.

EU leaders abandoned plans to issue a draft declaration on its future trading arrangements with the UK, prior to an extraordinary EU meeting scheduled for November 17 and 18 that was meant to finalise a deal, but which is now also in doubt.

The EU is demanding an indefinite “backstop” arrangement that would keep Northern Ireland within the sphere of EU regulations—a situation that the hardline pro-Brexit Conservatives and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) will not countenance.

With May hamstrung in seeking a “soft Brexit,” maintaining tariff-free access to the Single European Market, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has shown that he will make no move that does not have the seal of approval of his party’s right-wing. His agenda is shaped solely by the political and economic concerns of British imperialism.

May gave a statement to the House of Commons Monday, to placate her critics within the Tory party and its DUP allies, while still expressing a goal of a “soft” Brexit deal. Having given a wholly unconvincing account of the progress made in securing acceptance of her “Chequers” proposals outlined this July, she reassured the DUP, “We have been clear that we cannot agree to anything that threatens the integrity of our United Kingdom.”

Turning to the Tory Brexiteers, who see any backstop arrangement, without a time-limit as May had indicated last week, as a mechanism for maintaining British membership of the EU, she said, “I am clear we are not going to be trapped permanently in a single customs territory unable to do meaningful trade deals.”

May yesterday boasted she had secured cabinet unity prior to departing for Brussels, but the reaction in Parliament from several Tory MPs and the DUP’s first minister, Nigel Dodds, made clear this is purely a temporary ceasefire. Shortly after May’s speech, a meeting of eight Brexiteer ministers—Dominic Raab, Jeremy Hunt, Michael Gove, Andrea Leadsom, Chris Grayling, Geoffrey Cox, Liz Truss and Penny Mourdant—was held to discuss their own response. The DUP is still threatening to use its crucial votes to “paralyse” the Tories’ domestic agenda if Northern Ireland’s constitutional position within the UK is threatened and has said it believes a no-deal scenario is now “probably inevitable.”

With the government in turmoil and UK-based corporations becoming increasingly nervous as the deadline for a Brexit deal draws near, Labour is advancing itself as a responsible representative of Britain’s ruling elite. Responding to May’s statement in the House of Commons, Corbyn criticised her for “putting party before country” and put forward Labour’s plan for a “permanent customs union” with the EU that allows for the UK to strike its own trade deals. Corbyn spoke of advancing proposals that would have the support of the House of Commons, abandoning his call for a general election.

This comes after ex-party leader Tony Blair spoke openly of his supporters backing May in any no-confidence vote scenario in return for her promising a second referendum, as a means of avoiding the “truly damaging and challenging” possibility of a general election bringing Corbyn to power.

At a Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) meeting Monday evening, Corbyn teamed up with his pro-Remain Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer to secure unity with the Blairites who are divided as to how to

proceed. With some such as Caroline Flint and Lisa Nandy considering supporting any deal secured by May, Corbyn responded, “Part of the concern, which the government wants to talk up, is that there is only a no deal alternative. That is clearly not the case and it is clearly not what the majority of MPs want.”

The whole thrust of Labour’s Brexit policy is now directed towards securing a close relationship with the EU through a parliamentary vote, or possibly through a second referendum. This would see the overwhelming majority of Labour MPs side with the Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats and the most strongly pro-Remain Tories. Describing the PLP meeting on Monday, a Labour source outlined Corbyn and Starmer’s plan to the *Guardian*.

“If she [May] is unable to bring anything back, or brings back the kind of package currently on offer, that won’t be able to command support in the House of Commons. ... In those circumstances, Labour can put forward [its offer] which could command a majority in Parliament and does command majority support in the country.”

Corbyn even made a direct offer to May to come on board, saying in the parliamentary debate Monday, “The prime minister faces a simple and inescapable choice: be buffeted this way and that way by the chaos of her own party, or back a deal that can win the support of parliament and the people of this country.”

Some pro-Remain Tories guardedly indicated their support for this line. Former education secretary Nicky Morgan said that MPs would have to “step in” if the prime minister failed to secure a deal. The basis of such a deal, Corbyn has suggested, would be built around Starmer’s “six tests” that include measures that are a *de facto* repudiation of Brexit such as delivering the “exact same benefits” as membership of the single market and customs union.

The fraudulent nature of Labour’s reference to preventing a “race to the bottom” is made apparent by the emphasis on maintaining economic, security and border agreements with the EU, as demanded by business—combined with references to “fair management of migration” that is a sop to the xenophobic agenda of the pro-Brexit campaigners.

As if to underscore the extent of Corbyn’s political cowardice, it was left to a Blairite pro-Remainer to urge him to put a vote of no-confidence in May. Gareth

Snell spoke to the *Guardian* yesterday as the representative of a group of MPs, who claim to number 20, supportive of forcing a general election to change the direction of Brexit. “There seems to be no majority in the house for what the government is proposing—so why waste any more time and risk a no-deal Brexit?” Snell said. “The Labour frontbench needs to put down a vote of no confidence ASAP to ensure we can put a deal to parliament that has majority support.”

Posed as an anti-Brexit move, a successful motion of no confidence would need May to lose due to pro-Remain Tories deserting her.

May had hoped her plight would have secured a sympathetic response from the EU, but this did not materialise. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said instead, “We were actually pretty hopeful that we would manage to seal an exit agreement. ... [A]t the moment, it looks a bit more difficult again.” EU Council President Donald Tusk was less diplomatic, saying, “We must prepare the EU for a no-deal scenario, which is more likely than ever before.”

Some sources suggested that the planned EU summit could be delayed until December, but others spoke of holding the November meeting as a “No Deal Brexit” summit that would be a declaration that May has failed. In similar vein, the former president of the euro group, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, spoke of many more unscheduled months of negotiations that would nullify the plan to trigger Article 50 by March 31 next year. He linked this with the necessity of allowing “for new elections or a second referendum if the deal gets rejected in the medium term, which still seems pretty likely.”



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