UK: May fends off challenge by hard-Brexiteers

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UK Prime Minister Theresa May met with backbench Conservative MPs Wednesday evening, gathered by the influential 1922 Committee.

The days leading up to the meeting had a febrile atmosphere, with rumours that May faced an imminent leadership challenge led by hard-Brexit MPs. Sources suggested that the chair of the 1922 Committee, Graham Brady, had already received the required 48 letters from MPs to declare a leadership challenge.

The weekend papers noted the incendiary language being used by some hardline Brexiteers, with the *Sunday Times* speculating May had possibly just 72 hours left in Downing Street. One unnamed MP said that May was entering the "killing zone," with another saying that the knife "would be stuck in her front and twisted. She'll be dead soon."

Instead, May not only survived the Wednesday's meeting, but accounts also said that she was warmly greeted and met with what the *Financial Times* called "thunderous applause" as MPs accepted her "heartfelt" plea that they back her soft-Brexit plan to exit the European Union (EU). Michael Fabricant MP described the meeting as a "love-in. ... It wasn't Daniella in the lions' den, it was a petting zoo."

"She lives to fight possibly until the next election [set for 2022]," the pro-Brexit MP added.

According to the *Guardian*, May only faced "a handful of awkward questions from Brexiters including Nadine Dorries, Sir Edward Leigh and Philip Davies, but loyalists said she won over the room. ..."

That May, who supported Remain in the 2016 referendum and who has been constantly forced to make concessions to her pro-Brexit wing for the last two years, was able to seize the day in this way reflects a pronounced shift in ruling circles, who cannot countenance a hard Brexit.

With just over five months until the UK is formally set to exit the EU, the well-funded Remain campaign organised a show of force in London last Saturday, with a rally supported by hundreds of thousands. This was accompanied by warnings that investment levels have fallen for four in five businesses in fear of the consequences of a hard-Brexit. Jaguar Land Rover temporarily closed operations in Solihull for several weeks affecting 9,000 workers' jobs. CEO Ralf Speth warned that major job losses were inevitable if firms lost access to the EU Single Market and Customs Union. The most exposed industries would have "no way to survive a hard Brexit."

The financial sector and services industries also face devastation. Around 40 percent of UK exports to the EU are accounted for in trade in services, including financial services and the legal profession. London's economy is 92 percent based on service industries.

The import of this was recognised even by ardent Brexiteer columnist Christopher Booker, who commented in the *Daily Telegraph* this week that at the outset of Brexit, politicians "were simply unaware of how much of our national activity had become so closely intermeshed with that of the EU and thus legally dependent on its rules. The consequences for many of our most successful industries may thus be devastating: from chemicals, pharmaceuticals, financial services, aviation and our ports to Formula One motor racing: even our ability to move racehorses freely between Britain, Ireland and France."

May told the 1922 Committee meeting that the Brexit deal was near completion, with two main issues outstanding.

The most important is the post-Brexit border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which will remain an EU member. May is demanding the EU

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drop its proposal for a Northern Ireland-only "backstop" keeping it in a customs arrangement with the EU indefinitely if a future trade deal between the EU and UK cannot be finalised. May's alternative, based on pressure from the Democratic Unionist Party whose 10 MPs give her a majority in Parliament, is for a time-limited UK-wide customs backstop. The other issue is on extending the transition period in which Britain stays within the single market and the customs union beyond the end of 2020, as is currently planned.

Negotiations with the EU continue based on a deal being finalised by December at the latest, so the EU's national governments can sanction it. On Wednesday, European Council President Donald Tusk told MEPs, "Since Prime Minister May mentioned the idea of extending the transition period, let me repeat that if the UK decided that such an extension would be helpful to reach a deal, I am sure that the leaders would be ready to consider it positively."

A striking confirmation of the determination in ruling circles to clear all obstacles to a soft-Brexit is provided by the previously vociferously pro-Brexit *Daily Mail*. Following the departure of its editor Paul Dacre, the *Mail* has steadily moved towards support for May's positions. Just 18 months ago, the *Mail* denounced judges who ruled that Parliament had to have a final say on any Brexit deal and advised May to "crush" any "saboteur" MPs who opposed a hard-Brexit. However, on Tuesday, it published a leader describing Tory MPs who were undermining May as "Saboteurs endangering our nation." The *Mail* was "well aware of the shortcomings of the Chequers plan. But the truth is that it's the only plan on the table—and Mrs May is the only person who can drive it forward."

As well as keeping May in place, getting a deal negotiated by May through Parliament requires a shift in line in the Labour Party under leader Jeremy Corbyn. On Monday, the *Times*, owned by the Brexit-supporting Rupert Murdoch, published an editorial titled "Labour's obfuscation over Brexit adds to the sense of national crisis."

It noted that Corbyn's absence from the Remain march, "one of the biggest demonstrations in recent times was symptomatic of Labour's absence from the broader Brexit debate."

It noted that Labour's setting of "six tests by which it will judge any deal that the prime minister brings back from Brussels" are "based upon various statements made by Mrs. May and her ministers before they triggered Article 50 [starting the process to leave the EU], chosen in the certain knowledge that they cannot be met."

"In ordinary times, Labour's policy of deliberate obfuscation would be politically understandable for the main opposition party. But these are not ordinary times," the newspaper warned Corbyn. "If his efforts to derive party advantage from a moment of national crisis contribute to a terrible Brexit outcome, it won't be only the 700,000 marchers who will hold Labour partly responsible."

All the Blairites within the Labour party are opposed to Corbyn's stated aim of urging May to call a general election if her deal is rejected. Some have been holding out for a second referendum. But the *Times* is backing a faction said to number between 20 and 45 who are urging support for May's deal as the only alternative to a no-deal Brexit. This would allow for the extension period of continued regulatory alignment to be used to campaign for a shift to remain.

Among their main concerns is how to achieve their aims without precipitating the election of a Labour government, under conditions in which many workers and youth are seeking fundamental change and supported Corbyn on the basis of his professed opposition to austerity and war.

Tory Brexiteer Andrea Jenkyns stated that some in the hard-Brexit wing backed off from issuing letters of no confidence in May because of "fear of another election and a Corbyn government."

In its editorial condemning Tory MPs seeking May's removal, the *Mail* warned that "if they continue with their wrecking tactics, they could force an election that no one wants and may well usher an unreconstructed Marxist into No. 10, with all the ruinous consequences that would wreak on the nation."

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