

British prime minister tries to minimise cabinet rebellion against draft Brexit agreement

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The European Union (EU) and Prime Minister Theresa May's negotiating team announced a draft agreement yesterday on the text specifying terms for the UK's withdrawal from the 28-nation bloc.

The announcement of the 400-plus-page Withdrawal Agreement and Outline Political Declaration Tuesday afternoon saw key Cabinet ministers called into Downing Street by May for one-to-one discussions, ahead of this afternoon's Cabinet meeting. Other ministers were invited to a secure reading room in the Cabinet Office to study the agreement. Business groups will also be briefed on the agreed text today.

May's aim is to minimise the numbers supporting a rejection of her proposals, with the *Financial Times* declaring today's meeting to be the "most dangerous moment of her premiership."

Brussels refers to the agreement only as a "stable text." According to reports, the main contentious issue in negotiations continued to be the future status of the Irish border and what mechanism would be able to terminate any "backstop" put in place to keep Northern Ireland and the UK in a temporary post-Brexit Customs Union.

Only if May can secure agreement among her ministers and wider parliamentary party can an agreement be finalised between the EU and UK at a European Council summit later this month. That deal then requires the consent of MPs in the UK Parliament, with a vote set to be held in mid-December.

Even though a draft text is agreed, May's government faces an ongoing crisis that could possibly lead to her removal as party leader, a second referendum or a snap general election.

May has faced escalating opposition from both the hard-Brexit and Remain wings of her divided party. This week's events were trailed by last Friday's resignation of

pro-Remain Transport Minister Jo Johnson, who declared that the UK was "on the brink of the greatest crisis" since the Second World War and that the choice of May's plan or a no-deal Brexit was a "failure of British statecraft on a scale unseen since the Suez crisis."

Johnson came out in support of a second referendum "People's Vote" on EU membership. Speaking to BBC Radio 4, Johnson said other Tory MPs should follow his lead rather than "exit the EU on this extraordinarily hopeless basis."

The other main resignations from May's Cabinet have been among its hard Brexit wing, including Johnson's brother and former foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, and former Brexit Minister David Davis. It is suggested that up to four Remain-supporting ministers are also considering their position.

Jacob Rees-Mogg, the leader of the Tories' 60-strong European Research Group (ERG) hard Brexit faction, said the deal was a "failure to deliver on Brexit" that moved the UK "from being a vassal to being a slave" and he would vote against it.

In addition, the agreement was reached without May's coalition partners, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), signing off on it. May relies on the DUP's 10 MPs to prop up her minority government. The DUP may reject the agreement based on its declared "red lines"—including the duration of any backstop—with DUP deputy leader Nigel Dodds saying if the deal is "as we are hearing, then we couldn't possibly vote for it."

It is unclear what the agreement's provisions are regarding how any backstop agreement can be terminated. The EU reportedly rejected May's proposal that there be independent arbitration over ending the backstop, with the EU demanding the European Court of Justice (ECJ) make the decision. If this is the case, it could solidify support

for her hard Brexit wing and DUP.

May's argument for loyalty will be to warn Cabinet ministers and other potential rebels that agreeing her deal is the only way to avoid worse options—for Remainders this is a hard-Brexit, for Brexiteers a second referendum that could be lost, for both factions a snap general election and the election of a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Even as news of an agreement with the EU broke, the Labour Party put forward a motion demanding the publication of the government's legal advice over Brexit—a demand supported by the DUP and the ERG. May was forced to buckle after Labour refused to drop the motion, which then passed without a vote. The legal advice contains 5,000 documents, with Cabinet Office minister David Lidington telling Parliament that Attorney General Geoffrey Cox would make a statement to MPs on the advice and take questions ahead of the final parliamentary vote on any Brexit deal.

All the main opposition parties—Labour, Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru—are set to oppose the proposed deal. On Tuesday evening they sent a joint letter to May demanding a “meaningful vote” on the deal that allows amendments to be tabled. Corbyn said the agreement “is unlikely to be a good deal for the country” and if it didn't meet Labour's six tests—which include the UK having the “exact same benefits” as full membership of the Single Market and Customs Union—“then we will vote against it.”

Corbyn also faces the threat of internal rebellion by the Blairites, who are as opposed as the Tories to a snap general election and are insisting that Corbyn abide by his conference pledge to support a second referendum—if his preferred option of a “meaningful vote” on the Brexit deal precipitating a general election fails to materialise.

Asked by German news magazine *Der Spiegel* last weekend, “If you could stop Brexit, would you?” Corbyn replied, “We can't stop it. The referendum took place. Article 50 has been triggered. What we can do is recognize the reasons why people voted Leave.”

This unleashed a series of denunciations by leading Blairites for his retreat from the policy agreed at party conference.

Corbyn was immediately contradicted by his Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry and then by Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer, who told Sky News, “Brexit can be stopped. ... Decision one is on the deal; decision two is—if the deal goes down—should there be a general election? And decision three is—if there's no

general election—all options must be on the table, including the option of a public vote.”

So acute is the crisis facing May's government that sections of the ruling class and the state apparatus are factoring in the possibility that a general election might be unavoidable and that a Corbyn government is becoming a distinct possibility.

In an extraordinary development, Corbyn was called in for discussions last week with Alex Younger, the head of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, reportedly on the implications of a possible snap election in the event of the failure of Brexit negotiations. Corbyn was also reportedly recently briefed by Britain's domestic intelligence agency, MI5, on “the facts of life” regarding the struggle against “terrorism” and “extremism.” This is a major shift in attitude to Corbyn, who, although as opposition leader he is a member of the Privy Council that advises the queen, was initially denied access to critical intelligence briefings normally granted to those in his position.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported the meeting with Younger at MI6's London HQ as an “acquaintance session.” A Whitehall source said, “The feeling was that the time had come for Mr. Corbyn to become acquainted with the workings of the intelligence establishment.”

That these meetings were only divulged through media reports and not by Corbyn is the clearest warning of the class character of a government he would lead. Under conditions in which British imperialism is entering its most turbulent crisis in peacetime and amid reports of the armed forces preparing for the crisis resulting from a forced exit from the EU, Corbyn is demonstrating his political loyalties are to British imperialism and not to the working class who are being targeted for state conspiracies and repression.



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