

Parliamentary debate on Brexit deal begins after three defeats for May government

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Theresa May's minority Conservative government lost three crucial procedural votes in parliament Tuesday, immediately ahead of five days of debate on her deal with the European Union (EU) on the UK's exit from the bloc.

A cross-party opposition motion found the government in contempt of parliament for failing to publish in full the legal advice on Brexit—the first time in history such a motion was passed. This followed Attorney General Geoffrey Cox publishing only a summary of the advice statement Monday, insisting that disclosing the full advice was not in the “national interest.” MPs rejected this by 311 to 293, with some Tory MPs voting against the government or abstaining. This forced the government to publish the full advice Wednesday.

Earlier MPs voted by 311 to 307 against a government amendment to the motion by leader of the House of Commons Andrea Leadsom, which attempted to refer the legal advice issue to an investigation by the Privileges Committee.

A still more serious defeat followed, when MPs voted by 321 to 299 to give parliament the power to amend any motion on a deal with the EU that May would have to put before the Commons within 21 days of her current proposal being rejected in the December 11 vote. The move to assert parliament's power over a Plan B was led by the pro-EU Tory and former attorney-general, Dominic Grieve, and backed by another 26 rebel Tories.

Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has propped up May's government for the last two years through a “confidence and supply” arrangement with its 10 MPs. In the vote over the publication of the legal opinion, the DUP sided with the five other opposition parties.

Labour has scheduled a vote of no-confidence on the May government immediately after the December 11 vote, and May's fate may be determined immediately by the position adopted by the DUP. The DUP was understood to be prepared to vote down May's EU deal, even before the publication of the legal advice that contains provisions anathema to the Unionists.

Wednesday's publication of the advice confirmed that Cox told May last month that the EU deal effectively classified the UK to a “third country” as far as Northern Ireland was concerned, requiring compliance checks on items crossing the UK/Northern Ireland border. The advice also states that the EU can decide in the future that the Withdrawal Agreement should no longer apply to Britain, leaving Northern Ireland under the so-called “backstop” arrangements indefinitely in a separate status within a customs union with the Republic and therefore with the EU.

The no-confidence vote takes precedence over any other business. If May loses it, a range of possible scenarios opens up. She could choose to step down, to give way to a Brexiteer, or a leadership contest could be triggered. Or she might stagger on and return to Brussels to extract any concession from the EU that could placate her opponents and try to win a second parliamentary vote.

Labour has called for the queen to recognise it as leader of a minority government, while Corbyn has said a general election should be called. This would require acceptance by the government, given the fixed term parliament act, and there is no enthusiasm for this in the Blairite wing of the party either. They are focused on demanding a second referendum over Brexit in order to break the deadlock. Labour's conference confirmed that a People's Vote would be on the table should there be no general election and that the option to remain in the

EU should be included.

Whatever happens, Britain is in the grip of a historic crisis of rule that threatens to unleash mass social upheavals. In a *Daily Telegraph* comment Wednesday, Philip Johnston noted, “The term ‘constitutional crisis’ is often bandied about in British politics but such an event is mercifully rare.” This one is rarer still, involving “a clash between the executive and Parliament,” of which “The most extreme example in our history was, of course, the English Civil War, where differences that could not be sorted out by political means were dealt with on the battlefield.”

Johnson pointed to the fuel tax protests in France as a warning as to what might develop in the UK. “Amid all the apocalyptic predictions for Brexit, civil unrest is considered unlikely and un-British. Yet we only have to look across the Channel at the gilet jaunes, or yellow vests, movement to see how a sense of grievance can quickly descend into mob violence.”

He warned, “There is a tradition of the mob, especially in London, that used to terrify the life out of the authorities in the 18th and early 19th centuries ... constitutional crises can be perilous because the normal processes of representative democracy have broken down.”

The repressive arms of the state are likewise gearing up for repression of the working class. Speaking to the LBC Radio, Cressida Dick, the commissioner of London’s Metropolitan Police, was asked by host Nick Ferrari, “Is there an aspect of civil unrest of some sort [in the Met’s planning]?” Dick replied, “There is certainly a potential for protests. We are in London. It is the protest capital of the world. We are preparing for all scenarios, and deal or no-deal the police will be here.”

Social tensions in Britain have reached fever pitch. In his report last month, after investigating “staggering” levels of “extreme poverty” in the UK, UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston also warned, “This could well lead to significant public discontent, further division and even instability.” It is in this context that discussions have been held between MI5 and MI6 and Corbyn, on the role a Labour government would have to play in suppressing social discontent.

Despite the constant invoking of the “will of the people” by both the pro-EU and anti-EU wings of the bourgeoisie, this is a debate deliberately confined to

ruling circles on how best to defend the interests of British imperialism. Whichever side wins, the working class will pay in a deeper assault on jobs, wages and conditions to make Britain competitive in the frenzied struggle for global markets and through the turn to domestic repression and global militarism.

As the Socialist Equality Party insists in its recently published congress resolution:

“The task facing working people is not to help resolve the crisis facing the bourgeoisie, as Corbyn and the Labour Party insist, but to secure its independent class interests in a common struggle with its class brothers and sisters throughout the European continent. The International Committee’s European sections, the SEP in Britain, the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES) in France and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) in Germany, together with our co-thinkers in Turkey, Ireland and throughout the world, seek to mobilise the working class against the nationalist splintering of the European continent and the growth of far-right movements, while rejecting any support for the EU and its constituent national governments. The rule of the financial oligarchy and its governments must be broken and replaced with government of, by and for the working class—a socialist Britain as part of the United Socialist States of Europe. The adoption of this perspective would bring the most powerful social force into action—the European working class.”



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