

Debate begins in British parliament over May's Brexit deal with EU

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British MPs begin several days of debate today ahead of a vote next week on Prime Minister Theresa May's withdrawal deal with the European Union (EU). The "meaningful vote" is slated to be held on January 15.

May's deal is opposed by all opposition parties and a large swathe of her own Conservative MPs. She was forced to hold this debate and the vote after she called off a vote on the agreement last month at the last minute. May knew she was set to lose heavily, threatening her position as prime minister.

The crisis facing May has only deepened in the interim, with the "hard Brexit"-supporting Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), whose 10 MPs the Tories rely on to rule as a minority government, still pledged to oppose the deal. They are opposed to Northern Ireland remaining in an indefinite "backstop" Customs Union agreement with the EU until a free trade agreement can be reached between the UK and EU, which could be years down the line. On Sunday, Deputy DUP leader Nigel Dodds said the "fundamental problems which make this a bad deal appear not to have changed." He added, "The backstop remains the poison which makes any vote for the Withdrawal Agreement so toxic."

The EU has insisted since early December—when May's deal was announced—that negotiations are now over on a text that took two years to complete. Despite this, May continually claims that the UK is still in negotiations with Brussels ahead of next week's vote. On Sunday, May told the BBC's "Andrew Marr Show" that she hoped to secure "changes" to the document and was "still working" with the EU to secure legally binding assurances over the backstop arrangements. Before the vote, May is to outline the government's proposals over the Northern Ireland border and offer a greater role for MPs in negotiations on the next stage of future UK-EU relations.

In public the EU is maintaining its position that negotiations are over. Last Thursday, the European Commission's Mina Andreeva insisted, "We are not renegotiating what is on the table." On Monday, Nathalie Loiseau, the French Europe minister, said that some assurances could be offered to May but, "These are political assurances ... there is nothing more we can do."

May is seeking to use the growing possibility of a "no-deal" Brexit at the end of March, with unforetold economic and social consequences, to pressure Brussels for more and to force MPs to back her deal. She told "Marr," "If the deal is not voted on at this vote that's coming up, then actually we're going to be in uncharted territory," with the danger "we actually end up with no deal at all." A crisis would ensue as "I don't think anybody can say exactly what will happen in terms of the reaction we will see in Parliament."

The MPs who oppose the deal because they are pro-EU and who support a second referendum on EU membership, as well as the hard Brexit wing within her own party and the DUP, must all "realise the risks they are running with our democracy and the livelihoods of our constituents," she said.

The *Daily Mail* reported that up to 200 MPs from all parties are uniting to prevent a no-deal Brexit. Representatives of the group, led by Tory Cabinet minister Dame Caroline Spelman and Labour frontbencher Jack Dromey, were due to meet May for talks this week. The group includes Tories Sir Oliver Letwin, Nicky Morgan and Dominic Grieve, and Labourites Harriet Harman, Yvette Cooper, Ben Bradshaw and Liam Byrne, as well as the former Liberal Democrat energy secretary Sir Ed Davey. Among their reported big business backers are auto manufacturers and engineering firms Jaguar Land

Rover, Ford, Rolls-Royce, Airbus and employers' representatives including the Confederation of British Industry, the Engineering Employers' Federation and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders.

Amid a growing crisis for governments across the continent, including mass protest against austerity such as the Yellow Vest movement in France, the threat of economic turmoil and trade war, and the rise of rightist anti-EU parties, Brussels is caught between a rock and a hard place. It doesn't want to worsen things via a chaotic no-deal Brexit outcome, but fears that concessions to Britain would undermine the unity of the EU and fuel demands from other states for concessions.

On Monday, Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said the EU was primed to offer May "written guarantees, explanations and assurances" to quell opposition to her deal by UK MPs. The *Financial Times* noted that although "[M]ay is expected to lose the [January 15] vote ... She is pinning her hopes on firmer EU undertakings ahead of a second vote—possibly in late January or early February—speculation is rising that the prime minister will have to delay the UK's departure from the bloc, scheduled for March 29."

A delay in implementing Article 50—the legislation authorising the UK to leave the EU—is seen as essential to the Remain wing of the ruling class if they are to be successful in reversing Brexit. The Labour Party right-wing, in alliance with the Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrats, are frantically seeking to shift Labour's position to overt support for a second referendum in opposition to the current position of party leader Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn favours forcing a general election via a vote of no confidence to remove the Tories and negotiating a Brexit deal more favourable to the dominant sections of business.

Opinion polls are issued regularly, including one commissioned by the Blairite-led People's Vote campaign, claiming that the majority of Labour members and voters are in favour of a second referendum. The same People's Vote survey found that—when "don't knows" were subtracted—54 percent of Britons as a whole would vote to remain in the EU, compared to 46 percent for Leave. This is a significant shift towards Remain, but still shows deep divisions.

Polls showed a similar margin of victory for Remain before the 2016 referendum, which ended in a 52-48

percent victory for Leave. Moreover, a YouGov survey showing a wide margin in favour of a second referendum also saw Labour members backing Corbyn's policy of seeking to force a general election to remove the Tories to negotiate a better Brexit deal—47 percent in favour of Corbyn's position, with 29 percent against, and 19 percent undecided.

Writing in the pro-EU *Observer*, Andrew Rawnsley said, "The conclusion for Labour supporters ought to be clear. If they want another referendum, they will have to learn from their leader and rebel against him." This is a continuation of the efforts begun in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, when 172 right-wing Labour MPs carried out a failed coup against Corbyn with the main charge levelled against him that he was only lukewarm in supporting the Remain campaign.

So far Corbyn has formally maintained his position, while refusing to indicate when he will move a no-confidence motion in the government—even telling the *Guardian* that he would demand May go back to Brussels if her deal is rejected. But Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell has made clear that Labour backing a second referendum was "inevitable" if a no-confidence motion was unsuccessful in removing the Tories. Corbyn this week described preparations for a "no-deal Brexit" as the government's "Project Fear" because of the parliamentary majority he insisted would prevent such an outcome.

Last night, Labour whipped its MPs to support a backbench amendment to the finance bill tabled by leading Blairite Yvette Cooper restricting the government's tax powers unless a no-deal Brexit is taken off the table.

The vote saw the government defeated by 303 to 296, with 20 Tory MPs backing the amendment.

The defeat is largely symbolic, but indicative of Corbyn's readiness to seek alliances with pro-Remain Tories that would be essential in any campaign for a new referendum.



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