

British prime minister suffers second defeat at hands of pro-European Union MPs

Robert Stevens
10 January 2019

On Wednesday, British MPs voted 308 to 297 for an amendment put forward by pro-European MPs—led by pro-Remain Conservative Dominic Grieve—giving UK Prime Minister Theresa May just three sitting days to present a “Plan B” if parliament votes against her proposed Brexit deal with the European Union.

It is expected that MPs will vote by a significant margin against May’s deal next Tuesday evening.

Wednesday’s vote means that May will have less than a week to produce an alternative plan—until Monday, January 21—for a vote by MPs. With the UK set to exit the UK in less than 80 days, legislation passed previously allowed her three weeks to come up with another Brexit plan. She was relying on taking any debate and subsequent vote in Parliament right down to the wire—leaving recalcitrant MPs with a choice of backing her deal or facing a chaotic “no-deal Brexit”—as the Brexit timetable expired.

May had already postponed a vote on her EU deal by over a month, cancelling a vote scheduled for December 11 at the last minute. She was expected to lose that vote by a massive majority.

Wednesday’s vote was the second defeat of the government in less than 24 hours, as a result of pro-Remain Tories blocking with the opposition parties. On Tuesday evening, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn whipped his MPs to support a backbench amendment to the finance bill tabled by leading Blairite Yvette Cooper. The amendment, restricting the government’s tax powers unless a no-deal Brexit is taken off the table, resulted in a 303 to 296 government defeat, with 20 pro-EU Tory MPs backing it.

The amendment put forward Wednesday by Grieve was supported by former Tory ministers Sir Oliver Letwin, Jo Johnson (the brother of hard Brexiteer and former Foreign Minister Boris Johnson) Guto Bebb and

Sam Gyimah. Crucially for the Remainers, an amendment to the EU (Withdrawal) Act passed before the Christmas recess—also authored by Grieve—allows MPs to amend any government statement following a Brexit defeat. This allows amendments to be put by the Remain wing demanding that the UK stay in the EU Single Market and Customs Union post-Brexit, as well as other amendments seeking to delay the process.

The pro-Remain *Financial Times* described the passage of Cooper’s amendment on Tuesday as marking “the start of a parliamentary war of attrition against a no-deal Brexit.”

That vote took place amid extraordinary scenes, as MPs supporting May’s position and hard Brexiteers took turns denouncing the House of Commons speaker, John Bercow, for allowing the amendment to be heard. May had been working on the assumption that Bercow would discard the amendment for procedural reasons, as was his prerogative.

Despite party affiliation or political beliefs, the speaker is duty bound to remain impartial and is not permitted to vote. But such is the crisis of the British bourgeoisie engendered by Brexit that Bercow, a Remain supporter whose wife had a “Bollocks to Brexit” sticker in her car, deemed it necessary to come forward and give the Remain camp a shot in the arm.

Hard Brexiteer Tory Peter Bone told Parliament he had checked with parliamentary officials the previous evening and was informed that putting forward an amendment to a parliamentary business motion would be “totally out of order.” Andrea Leadsom, the leader of the House of Commons, said Bercow should publish the advice he received from the Commons clerk, Sir David Natzler.

BBC parliamentary correspondent Mark D’Arcy commented that Bercow’s decision “drove a coach and

horses through accepted normal practice, and will have huge implications for the course of Brexit.” The Commons will now “have a chance to vote on alternative policies. Everything from a ‘managed no-deal’ to a further referendum, via a ‘Norway option,’ or a reheated version of the current deal could be on the table.”

May came to office after her predecessor, David Cameron, resigned, having called the June 2016 referendum and led the failed Remain campaign. May then called a general election in 2017, in which she lost her majority and was forced to rely on the 10 MPs of the hard-Brexit-supporting Democratic Unionist Party to rule as a minority government. She has been able to stagger on, while the Remain and Brexit wings of the ruling class fight out their contending strategies on behalf of British imperialism, only because of the role of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters.

In recent weeks, Corbyn has repeatedly stated his preference for bringing about May’s downfall via a general election. But calling a vote of no-confidence in the government is the only means for the main opposition party to bring about a general election.

Despite the unprecedented crisis facing May, Corbyn has steadfastly refused to do this. He and his main ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, have said that a no-confidence vote would take place at a time when it would do maximum damage to May. Most commentators had expected one to be moved following the vote on May’s deal next week.

Labour front bencher Barry Gardiner told the BBC *Today* programme yesterday morning that “it is expected that the government next Tuesday will be defeated on the most important piece of legislation that has come before Parliament in 50 or more years... Obviously, the next thing to do immediately after that is for there to be a vote of confidence in the government.”

However, Corbyn’s office said a no-confidence motion would not “necessarily” be immediately lodged. His spokesman dismissed Gardiner’s comments as “speculation.”

A Labour spokesman later told the *New Statesman* that there should be a general election, but refused to sanction the only action that could allow one. He said, “If the government is defeated next week, it will clearly have lost the confidence of Parliament and there should

be a general election. We have always said that it’s a matter of *when*, not *if* we table a motion of no-confidence, and we’ll judge the timing day by day.”

Corbyn heads a party whose MPs do not want to come to office, but rather seek to ensure a change in orientation under the Tories. These are the forces he allows to dictate events thanks to his refusal to mobilise the massive opposition to the Labour right wing and his non-stop efforts to convince the ruling class that he can be trusted with the fate of British capitalism.

Labour’s pro-Remain Blairites are in favour of a no-confidence motion being moved, anticipating that it will fail and thereby clear the decks for delaying Brexit and eventually securing a second referendum, in which they hope to overturn the 2016 Leave vote.

Speaking to *Sky News* Wednesday, Chuka Umunna said, “The two big problems we have to solve are... how to break the deadlock and... how to prevent us leaving the European Union without a deal.” This meant getting “that vote of no-confidence out of the way so that we can move on to resolving the impasse.”

With 79 days until exit day, “if you take out the weekends and Fridays when Parliament doesn’t sit, that is about 40 days to resolve this mess,” he added. “I’m not sure that quite frankly a general election is going to resolve this issue... ultimately we are going to have to refer this back to the people.”



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