British PM May to reveal “Plan B” as Brexit infighting continues

Robert Stevens
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Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May has been unable to secure any substantial concessions from the European Union on the transition arrangement for Britain leaving the bloc.

May is to give a statement to MPs today on how she intends to proceed after Parliament rejected her proposed Brexit deal with the EU and she survived a vote of no confidence in her crisis-ridden government. May has held phone discussions with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, but the EU is still saying the existing deal is not up for renegotiation.

In recent days, May has met with senior figures from her cabinet and from opposition parties, as well as leaders of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Since the 2017 general election, the DUP’s 10 MPs have kept the Tories in power via a confidence and supply arrangement.

Speculation has mounted that May will present only a “holding statement” to parliament, which could be amended by MPs.

There have been no discussions between May and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who has insisted that May rule out a “no-deal Brexit” before any talks. The government has refused this condition, stating that it has no further plans to discuss with party leaders.

This did not stop Labour’s pro-EU Blairites from meeting cabinet office officials, despite Corbyn sending all MPs a letter calling for no talks with May. Yvette Cooper, who chairs the Home Affairs Select Committee, and Hilary Benn, who chairs the Brexit Select Committee, both defied Corbyn, as did John Mann and Stephen Kinnock, the son of former Labour leader Neil Kinnock.

Liberal Democrats leader Sir Vince Cable, whose party has just 11 MPs, is demanding a “People’s Vote,” i.e., a second referendum, hoping thereby to overturn the result of the 2016 referendum. Cable released a letter to the *Observer* that he had sent to Cabinet Minister David Lidington in which he estimated that “even without complete consensus across the house, legislation could be passed in six weeks and a referendum could be brought about within 16 weeks.”

May has consistently ruled out a second referendum and warned against efforts to overturn the Brexit vote.

With no breakthrough in the political stalemate, government officials are stepping up planning for a no-deal Brexit. On Sunday, Cabinet Minister Liam Fox warned in the *Daily Telegraph* that MPs seeking to rule out a no-deal Brexit—targeting former Tory minister Dominic Grieve—were in danger of unleashing a “political tsunami” from voters who support Leave.

With just over two months before the March 29 scheduled Brexit date, May is seeking to wind down the clock and force MPs to vote for her amended deal. In doing so, she is threatening both sides of the Brexit divide—Remain MPs, with a no-deal Brexit in which the UK would be forced to trade on World Trade Organization terms, and the Tories’ hard-Brexit wing, with the possibility of a second referendum and the failure of Brexit.

Although MPs voted for an amendment calling for May to come back to Parliament with a statement that could be voted on this week, the vote was not binding and May has moved the vote to January 29.

Today, Yvette Cooper is expected to move an amendment to the European Union Withdrawal Bill in an attempt to postpone Brexit.

John Rentoul wrote in the pro-Remain *Independent*, “The importance of Cooper’s bill is that it changes the default setting in law. At the moment, if Parliament

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fails to act, the UK will leave the EU on 29 March. Cooper's bill says that, if a deal has not been approved by 7 March, the government would be required to seek an extension of the Article 50 deadline. That would mean asking the EU to postpone the UK's departure until the end of this year—and EU leaders have said they would agree to an extension if it were to hold another referendum."

This manoeuvre has the potential to backfire badly. Having taken what pro-Brexit MPs want "off the table," Rentoul notes, "They would then have to choose between the prime minister's deal and putting off Brexit for at least nine months." This may have the effect of forcing Tory MPs who voted with the opposition last week to vote for May's deal and give her the majority she needs.

The Blairites have stepped up pressure on Corbyn to commit Labour to support a second referendum on EU membership. Corbyn has maintained that he favours removing May through a general election. Only then, he says, would a second referendum be an option.

The pro-Remain Labour right and their cross-party allies have been warned, even in the pro-Remain press, that they may have substantially misread the national mood in believing that a "People's Vote" is a magic bullet for overcoming the Brexit impasse.

On Saturday, the *Guardian* released the findings of an unpublished survey commissioned by the pro-EU Best for Britain group. It found that if Labour committed to stopping Brexit, almost a third of those likely to vote for the party would not do so. Just 25 percent of those likely to support Labour would do so if it committed to preventing Brexit. The poll, conducted by Populus, asked 2,000 people their views just before May's deal was voted down last week.

Another poll by Survation found that if Labour backed a second referendum it was likely to lose votes at a general election.

A further poll published at the end of last week found that people in the UK oppose a new referendum by a margin of nearly two to one. In every region of the country with the exception of London, and there only by a few percentage points, the poll found more support for respecting the vote of the 2016 referendum. This was the case even in Scotland, which voted to remain in the EU in 2016.

Labour MP and Shadow Home Secretary Dianne Abbott warned again on BBC's "Question Time" programme, "The thing about a second referendum is people should be careful what they wish for. My view, and I voted Remain, is that if we had a 'People's Vote' tomorrow, Leave would win again. You'd just have a lot of angry Leave voters."

The escalation of the crisis of class rule in Britain prompted fresh speculation regarding the possibility of a snap general election. However, for the Tories this carries the real risk of losing office and is therefore generally considered anathema. May suffered the collapse of her majority in the snap election she called in 2017.

The Blairites follow the Tories in their fear that an election could bring a Corbyn-led government to power that would be unable to control a resurgent movement of the working class, pressing the demand that Corbyn make good on his professed anti-austerity and anti-militarist polices.

The various options being debated—hard or soft Brexit, the Blairites' "People's Vote" or Corbyn's call for a general election—are all concerned solely with securing the strategic interests of British imperialism as it enters a period of enormous political and social instability. The exclusive focus on Brexit conceals what is the central division in the UK as in every country—the yawning gulf between what Corbyn describes as "the many" and "the few"—or, more accurately, between the working class and the super-rich oligarchy.

Despite such rhetoric, Corbyn's main role, in partnership with the unions, is to block an independent struggle by workers and young people against the class war being waged by the capitalists. This offensive continued last week even as MPs were preparing for the vote on May's deal, with the government slipping through an announcement that starting on May 15, under a provision of the Universal Credit welfare system, thousands of the poorest pensioners will lose to up £7,000 annually.

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