

# UK: Corbyn endorses second referendum after May stonewalls on her Brexit plan

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Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has backed an amendment calling for Parliament to be able to vote on whether to hold a second referendum on retaining membership of the European Union (EU). The move does not commit Corbyn to back a referendum were one to be held. It presents the “People’s Vote” demanded by his Blairite opponents as an alternative should Parliament not back Labour’s proposed alternative Brexit plan seeking tariff-free access to the Single European Market via a customs union—or some alternative deal that wins a parliamentary majority.

However, Corbyn has once again ceded to his party’s right wing even at the risk of alienating MPs sceptical of the impact of a second referendum on support for Labour—especially following polls suggesting up to a third of potential Labour voters oppose a second vote.

He is no longer speaking of demanding a general election, after last week’s defeat of a vote of no-confidence in Prime Minister Theresa May’s government—after her pro-hard-Brexit MPs and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) backed her after voting against her proposed deal.

Corbyn’s alternative Brexit plan will now come under ferocious attack for being unrealisable under EU rules from the advocates of Remain.

Labour’s amendments came after May’s presentation of her “Plan B” for Britain’s leaving the EU proved to be more or less a restatement of her “Plan A.” She was forced to return to the Commons to deliver a statement and take questions from over 100 MPs for over two hours after the rejection of her Withdrawal Agreement and failed vote of no-confidence necessitated negotiations with opposition parties that continued Monday morning.

These talks produced little more than a hint that extending Article 50 and delaying Brexit may be

possible. May insisted that her negotiated deal was the only alternative to a no-deal Brexit—leaving the EU without a trade agreement—and would oppose demands for a second referendum and would win a majority for doing so.

Rather than “returning to the British people for a Second Referendum … Our duty is to implement the decision of the first one,” May warned. To do otherwise “could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in our democracy,” when she did not “believe there is a majority for a Second Referendum,” even in Parliament.

May largely focused on placating the concerns of her hard-Brexit faction and the DUP on whose 10 MPs she depends for a majority. She would seek to ensure that the proposed “backstop” agreed with the EU on trade with the Republic of Ireland would prevent both “a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland” and “a border down the Irish Sea” between Northern Ireland and the UK “in a way that can command the greatest possible support in the House.”

There would also be “further precision” on future trading relations with the EU, including allowing MPs to help shape “our negotiating mandate.” Finally, as a sop to the Blairites to justify their talks with her government, she would agree to a proposed amendment by John Mann MP “that Parliament should be able to consider any changes made by the EU” to employment and environmental legislation.

May’s renegotiated deal would, however, not be subject to a vote on January 29. Negotiations would be ongoing, and she would merely lay a Written Ministerial Statement and “table a motion in neutral terms on this statement.”

Leading Tory Remainer George Osborne, the former chancellor, declared in his role as editor of the *Evening*

*Standard* that May “will never make the move needed to win over substantial cross-party support for a Brexit deal, because it would further rupture the Conservatives ... that means she would favour a no-deal Brexit before no Brexit.”

This underscored that Corbyn accepting a second referendum was key to the reversal of Brexit considered vital by Britain’s ruling elite, which depends on the EU for 40 percent of its trade and to attract speculative investment to the City of London.

Earlier in the debate, Corbyn looked set to disappoint the business figures he and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell have spent months wooing.

Replying to May, Corbyn called her cross-party talks—attended by Blairites Chris Leslie, Luciana Berger and Chuka Umunna—“a sham,” asked her to confirm that she would rule out a no-deal if Parliament passes an amendment and to “consider” the case for a second referendum.

Business figures were quoted expressing dismay at the impasse and the danger of the UK crashing out of the EU, facing trade tariffs, border checks and trading on World Trade Organisation terms. Confederation of British Industry Director General Carolyn Fairbairn complained, “Parliament remains in deadlock while the slope to a cliff edge steepens. The government should accept that no-deal in March 2019 must be off the table.”

In the *Financial Times*, Robert Shrimley wrote of Corbyn’s “day of judgment” and his “being found wanting. ... The Tories may own Brexit, but if Britain crashes out of the EU without a deal, the Labour leader who failed to stop it will also be widely blamed.”

Germany’s *Der Speigel* wrote that “those who hope Brexit can still be prevented” want to “wait until all of May’s attempts at forging compromise have reached a dead end before then making a push for a second referendum at the last minute. For that strategy to work, however, they need the support of the Labour Party, but the party’s leader, Jeremy Corbyn, has thus far opted for a much more destructive role”—based on his belief “that he has a chance at replacing her as prime minister.”

Within the party, Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer said on Sunday’s BBC “Andrew Marr Show” that it was “inevitable” that the exit date will be pushed back, but that Labour must swiftly move from the

failed demand for a general election to supporting “a public vote—it was the whole reason we moved our conference policy onto a public vote ... to deal with that situation.”

Referencing the ongoing plans of his Blairite allies led by Umunna, Labour MP David Lammy told Sky News that Corbyn was “moving the goalpost” by hedging on a second referendum. “Now is the time for leadership. ... There are a small group in our party who are so frustrated, who have so much grievance, the fear is they are going to go off and form another party.”

As with the formation of the Social Democratic Party, “the danger is, just like 1983, a new party built around a relationship with Europe keeps the Labour Party out of power for a generation.”

These last-minute broadsides and threats of a split served their purpose. With just 67 days before Brexit is scheduled to take place on March 29, Corbyn has once again folded his hand and united with his right-wing.

Corbyn has also given tacit support for amendments moved last night seeking to prevent a hard-Brexit in the shorter term—including one from Yvette Cooper giving time for a bill that would give Parliament the power to support an extension of Article 50. It would give May until February 26 to get her deal through Parliament, before allowing MPs the power to decide how long to delay Brexit. Fellow Blairite Hilary Benn also tabled an amendment, demanding a series of indicative votes “on a way forward.”



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