

# UK: Remain and Leave factions line up for battle prior to next Brexit vote

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In the run-up to next week's vote on Prime Minister Theresa May's statement last week on her European Union (EU) exit deal, factional warfare has deepened both between and within the Remain and Leave camps of the ruling elite.

May is calculating that enough rebel Brexiteers in her ruling Conservative Party, who voted against her original deal, will support her to ensure no possibility of Brexit being overturned. To make sure of this, she is trying to win assurances from the EU on the "backstop" agreement that keeps Northern Ireland in the EU's Customs Union to maintain an open border with the Republic of Ireland during the transition period between Brexit and securing an all-encompassing UK-EU trade deal.

However substantial such assurances are, regarding its duration, etc., there are indications that hard-Brexit Tories could eventually back her deal. Backbench leader Jacob Rees-Mogg said that "things were going our way" and there had been "outbreaks of realism" on voting with May.

Nevertheless, her plans could yet be spiked, with reports that up to 40 pro-Remain Tory ministers may resign if May does not allow them a vote on an amendment blocking a no-trade-deal Brexit that would result in trade on World Trade Organisation (WTO) terms at the end of March.

The pro-Brexit *Daily Telegraph* reported Thursday that it has "learnt that an alliance of 18 Tory ministers, including five Cabinet members, has been holding secret meetings to discuss plans to stop a no-deal Brexit, with several prepared to quit over the issue."

Within the Labour Party, divisions are also hardening—with the pro-EU wing led by the Blairites demanding party leader Jeremy Corbyn declare his support for a second referendum to reverse the 2016

referendum result.

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell has said it was "highly likely" that Labour would support a pro-Remain cross-party amendment tabled by Blairite Yvette Cooper and Tory MP Nick Boles. The amendment, which is legally binding, states that if a no-deal Brexit becomes imminent on March 29, parliamentary conventions can be overridden to allow MPs to decide the order of business of Parliament, rather than the government—to allow MPs to be able to vote on a nine-month delay to Brexit.

Corbyn met Cooper Wednesday to discuss the amendment, with reports suggesting that an alternative of seeking an extension to Article 50 to June 30 is being proposed as a more viable alternative.

The amendment was signed by 25 Labourites, along with seven MPs from three other opposition parties, the Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. Work and Pensions Secretary Amber Rudd has defied May's instruction for Tory MPs to oppose the amendment and is demanding they be given a free vote on this and other amendments aimed at ruling out a no-deal Brexit.

The hard Brexiteers are determined to prevent their Remain opponents from being able to control future events in such a manner, with Rees-Mogg calling on May to prorogue (suspend) Parliament if the Cooper/Boles amendment passes. To do otherwise was "allowing the opposition to Brexit to win." Prorogation, he said, "normally lasts for three days but any law that is in the process before prorogation falls. And I think that would be the government's answer, that is the government's backstop."

Forced to accept at this stage that Corbyn is not backing outright a second referendum, the Remain faction have been forced to change tack and are relying

on the Cooper/Boles amendment and others to give the necessary time to thwart Brexit. On Thursday morning, MPs supporting the “People’s Vote” campaign withdrew an amendment in support of a second referendum they planned to table ahead of next week’s vote. The announcement was made in a press briefing outside Parliament given by Blairites Chuka Umunna and Luciana Berger and Tory Remainer Sarah Wollaston. They took the opportunity to denounce Corbyn for not endorsing their campaign, with Wollaston saying, “With great regret, we will not be laying [an amendment calling for a second referendum] because at this stage, and until we have the leader of the opposition’s backing, it would not pass.”

Berger, who has played a key role in the failed coups and plots to remove Corbyn as leader over the last three years, said, “Regrettably, the Labour leadership won’t commit to an achievable policy,” asserting that “the majority of Labour voters, supporters and members want a final say on any Brexit deal” and that “the leadership avoids answering that call.”

Commenting on Cooper’s amendment, the *Financial Times* commented Wednesday, “Jeremy Corbyn likes to think he is Britain’s leader of the opposition. But one could be forgiven these days for thinking that the job is really being done by Labour’s Yvette Cooper.”

However, the possibility that Corbyn will heed the demands of the Blairites and change his policy from support for a general election and a soft Brexit to open support for a second referendum has provoked threats of resignations from the shadow cabinet.

Further pressure was put on May to extend Article 50 and rule out a no-deal Brexit by a delegation of trade union leaders, who met her for talks yesterday in Downing Street. The main unions articulate the interests of the dominant sections of British capital, who fear the dire consequences of a hard break with the EU that accounts for 44 percent of UK trade.

At Number 10 were Len McCluskey and Dave Prentis of the two largest unions—Unite and Unison—Frances O’Grady, the head of the Trades Union Congress, and the GMB’s Tim Roache. For public consumption, they went through the motions of asking May if her pro-austerity government, which has forced through draconian anti-strike legislation with their acquiescence, would ensure labour laws in the UK would remain aligned with those of the EU. May gave

no such assurances.

The main concerns of the union bureaucracy are in reality the impact that a hard Brexit will have on the global competitiveness of British capitalism. McCluskey, who is advanced as a key ally of Corbyn, asked May to concede calls for a three-month delay in Article 50. Prentis said, “The prime minister should be looking to build consensus and putting the interests of the country first... with precious little time on the clock, an extension of Article 50 is essential to bring the country back from the brink and the calamity of a no-deal” and maintain “close links to its biggest trading partner.”

The EU poured cold water on moves to extend Article 50 without a final deal being offered by London, with chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier stating, “We need decisions [from the UK] more than we need time actually.”

As the Brexit date approaches, sections of big business are making dire warning about the devastating economic impact of a no-deal Brexit. Ford, which employs around a quarter of its 54,000-strong European workforce in the UK, said a no-deal Brexit would likely cost it \$800 million (£614 million) this year alone.

Tom Enders, the chairman of Airbus which employs 14,000 workers in Britain, with 110,000 associated jobs, warned, “If there is a no-deal Brexit, we at Airbus will have to make potentially very harmful decisions for the UK.” He threatened mass job cuts, saying, “Please don’t listen to the Brexiteers’ madness which asserts that, because we have huge plants here, we will not move and we will always be here. They are wrong.”

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