

UK's May fends off demands to delay Brexit or rule out “no deal”

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30 January 2019

With less than two months to go before Britain's scheduled exit from the European Union (EU), Prime Minister Theresa May swung most of her hard Brexit wing and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) behind her with a promise to seek renegotiation of the Irish backstop.

This and divisions within the Labour Party over either delaying Brexit or seeking a second referendum, or both, gave the day to the Conservative government though this could prove to be a pyrrhic and very short-lived victory.

May suffered an initial cross-party rejection of the deal she negotiated with the EU by a record majority of 230 on January 15, as hard-Brexit Tories and the DUP's 10 MPs voted with the opposition because they disagreed with proposals for Northern Ireland to remain in a de facto customs union with the EU to prevent the return of a hard border with the Republic of Ireland.

May responded by promising to seek further concessions and assurances from the EU and scheduling yesterday's vote on any modified agreement. However, May was unable to secure any substantial change, leaving MPs to back a short technical motion that they had considered last week's statement. Attention therefore focused on seven amendments to the motion chosen to go forward to votes by House of Commons speaker John Bercow.

Labour's official amendment advancing its Brexit policy—seeking to avoid a “no deal” and maintain some form of customs union with the EU—was bound to fail as no Tory would vote for it.

This left the most important vote for Labour the one proposed by Blairite Labour MP Yvette Cooper calling for a mandatory extension of Article 50 if May failed to secure a deal by late February. Article 50 is the legislation authorising the UK's withdrawal from the

EU after two years of talks. The amendment initially specified until December 2019, but Labour whipped its MPs to vote for a shorter extension of three months. However, 14 Labour MPs from Brexit-supportive constituencies and two former Labour MPs, now independents, voted Tuesday with the government and provided May a majority of 23.

This meant that a potentially more damaging amendment, by former attorney general Dominic Grieve, allowing parliament to take control of the Brexit process rather than the government, was defeated by a smaller majority.

Cooper's amendment having failed, Labour and other opposition parties successfully backed an amendment by Tory MP Caroline Spelman stating that the UK would not leave the EU without a deal—with a majority of eight. However, unlike Cooper's this is advisory and has no legislative force.

The most important amendment for the government side was proposed by Graham Brady, chair of the Tory backbench 1922 Committee. His amendment was backed by the government as it called for the Northern Ireland backstop to be removed from the EU Withdrawal Agreement, and for it to be replaced with “alternative arrangements” to avoid a hard border during the transition period between Brexit and securing an all-encompassing UK-EU trade deal.

This compromise was embraced by May as a successful means of enlisting support from the Tories' hard Brexit wing and the DUP. It was accompanied by a Cabinet meeting to discuss a “Plan C” scenario named the “Malthouse compromise” after housing minister Kit Malthouse. According to pro-EU Tory Nicky Morgan, the plan “provides for exit from the EU on time with a new backstop, which would be acceptable indefinitely, but which incentivises us all to

reach a new future relationship. It ensures there is no need for a hard border with Ireland.”

During the debate, May described the Malthouse compromise as a “serious proposal” that she was approaching “sincerely and positively.” In a further move to win over the hard Brexiteers, she stated—after maintaining for weeks that her deal with the EU was the only deal on the table—that she would be demanding from the EU regarding the backstop a “significant and legally-binding change to the withdrawal agreement.” She was forced to concede that negotiating such “will involve re-opening the withdrawal agreement—a move for which I know there is limited appetite among our European partners.”

The Brady amendment passed by 317 votes to 301—a majority of 16—meaning an acceptance of May’s deal with the present backstop removed.

However, while she has appeased her hard-Brexit opponents, the passing of the Spelman amendment again confirms there is a majority in parliament against any “no deal” outcome. Yet this is what is threatened by her relying on winning some final concessions from the EU. She calculates that taking votes on Brexit down to the wire will force MPs into backing her renegotiated deal. Pro Remain MPs would be threatened with a no-deal Brexit, and Brexiteers with a possible delay or even reversal. May has promised MPs a vote on February 14, but said that a vote may even be required as late as March 14—just two weeks from the date March 29 date for the UK’s exit—if no deal could be reached with the EU.

But this is still highly likely to backfire. Brussels continues to pour cold water on any conception that the deal agreed is up for renegotiation. On Monday, EU deputy chief negotiator Sabine Weyand said, “There’s no negotiation between the UK and EU—that’s finished.” The EU’s chief Brexit negotiator Guy Verhofstadt told the pro-Remain *Independent* that the European Parliament would not consent to a “watered down” agreement and that the Irish backstop would not be abandoned.

Speaking in Cyprus as the debate in parliament concluded, French President Emmanuel Macron stressed that the deal “is the best accord possible. It is not re-negotiable.” He warned that a no-deal Brexit is something that “no one wants, but we should all prepare for.”

After a 3 percent rally in anticipation of the success of “no deal” amendments, the pound fell 0.75 percent against the euro and 0.72 per cent against the dollar yesterday, with the sharpest fall after Cooper’s amendment fell.

Labour’s own divisions on Brexit are becoming ever more apparent—one reason why Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has refused to simply back Blairite demands to commit to a second referendum. But as it has throughout the Brexit crisis, Labour continues to act as an advocate of the “national interest” of dominant sections of big business who are reliant on access to the EU Single Market and the customs union.

Closing Labour MPs contributions, Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer said, “This is one of the greatest national crises our country has faced in a generation,” adding that the extension of Article 50 was inevitable to avoid a no-deal Brexit that MPs had to act to ensure did not occur.

After the vote, May declared, “Tonight a majority of... members have said they would support a deal with changes to the backstop. Combined with measures to address concerns over parliament’s role in the negotiation of the future relationship and commitments on workers’ rights ... it is now clear there is a route that can secure a substantial and sustainable majority in this house for leaving the EU with a deal.”

This was, the prime minister insisted, the only way to prevent “no deal” before restating her offer to meet Corbyn. The Labour leader responded by saying the vote showed there was “no appetite” for “no deal,” which May had refused to rule out. But he then reversed himself once again, stating that he was now prepared to meet with her to discuss the way forward.



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