

May asks Brussels for Brexit extension amid worsening political crisis

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Prime Minister Theresa May will ask for an extension before Britain's exit from the European Union (EU) comes into effect. If this is rejected by Brussels at a summit on Thursday, Brexit is set for March 29, in just nine days.

No one knows exactly what May will ask for—a short extension (June 30 has been raised) or one extending beyond the summer that would require UK participation in the European elections. May has not ruled out asking for a combined short extension, with the back-up of a two-year delay if no parliamentary agreement on her EU deal is possible. It is far from certain that the EU will agree an extension. Its leaders have made clear they want May to provide sufficient reason for doing so, insisting it will come with a political and financial cost to the UK.

May met with her cabinet yesterday, after her plan to bring her Brexit deal back to parliament for a third “meaningful vote” was scuppered by the intervention of Parliamentary Speaker John Bercow. The pro-Remain Conservative ruled Tuesday that a parliamentary convention dating back to 1604 meant it was unacceptable for another vote on a deal rejected twice already—the second time by a majority of 149. MPs decided that May had not secured the necessary concessions on the UK's right to unilaterally leave the Northern Irish backstop customs arrangement already agreed with the EU.

Bercow ruled that any additional vote would demand “a new proposition that is neither the same nor substantially the same as that disposed of by the House on March 12...” He added that this ruling “should not be regarded as my last word on the subject,” suggesting a possible compromise. But Solicitor General Robert Buckland described his intervention as a “constitutional crisis” and May readily agreed.

The 90-minute Tory cabinet meeting was bitter and angry. One insider compared it to the “last days of Rome.”

May has the support of those of her MPs who fear a “hard Brexit” and loss of tariff-free access to the Single European Market. Her aim now is to force hard-Brexit Tory MPs and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—whose votes May relies on to rule as a minority government—to accept that the likely alternative to her “soft-Brexit” option is not a “no-deal Brexit”, but an extended period of continued EU membership. She also counts on their fear of a delay that might create the conditions for a second referendum to overturn the 2016 result or possibly even a general election.

May's closest allies gave out conflicting signals, with Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay suggesting that a third vote on her deal could still take place next week if enough Tory rebels and the 10 DUP MPs change their minds. Barclay warned, “Parliament is leaving no other option, other than to revoke [Article 50], if you take the deal off the table and no-deal off the table.”

An official party spokesperson reiterated May's earlier warning that rejecting her deal would provoke a national crisis, while other sources speculated that the queen might prorogue parliament—ending this session and then reopening parliament—so that Bercow's “no second vote” ruling was no longer valid.

Any extension before invoking Article 50 of the EU constitution would have to be agreed by all 27 member states. German Chancellor Angela Merkel pledged to “fight to the last hour of the deadline on 29 March for an orderly exit,” but her Europe minister, Michael Roth, spoke of the EU's patience “really being put to the test at the moment” and insisting on a “concrete proposal” about why the UK is “seeking an extension.”

Numbers are being frantically crunched to determine

whether there is a parliamentary majority for a second referendum, given that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has accepted that one should be held if May's renegotiated deal is still unacceptable and threatens a no-deal Brexit. Divisions in the Labour Party over Brexit are part of a toxic mix of factional conflicts in the Tory Party. There is a swathe of Labourites in pro-Leave constituencies whom May is trying to persuade to back her deal.

Meanwhile Corbyn has still not said he will support a Remain vote if a second referendum is held. He is meeting with the leaders of the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party—who are collectively urging him to back a Remain vote. But he is also discussing with MPs calling for a “Norway Plus” non-membership free trade arrangement with the EU. The group spans Nick Boles and Oliver Letwin of the Tory Party and Stephen Kinnock and Lucy Powell of Labour.

Corbyn is still suggesting that he wants to fight for his own Brexit strategy—including tariff-free EU access. On Sunday he suggested he might table another no-confidence motion in the government if May's proposals fail. “At that point we should say there has to be a general election so the people of this country can decide 'do they want a Labour government investing in people's communities, dealing with inequality, injustice and having a relationship with Europe that protects jobs and guarantees our trade for the future',” he said.

This only confirms that Corbyn is anathema to his Blairite opponents, who want an end to Brexit and are just as vehement in their opposition to a Labour government under his leadership. There is no real political division between the phalanx of Labour MPs who split to form the (pro-EU) The Independent Group (TIG) and the larger numbers who have set up an internal opposition, the Future Group, led by Deputy Labour Leader Tom Watson.

Even as May was fighting for her political future, “senior members” of Labour's shadow cabinet were briefing the *Evening Standard* that Corbyn was “tired and fed-up” and ready to quit as party leader. That same day the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM), a Zionist organisation that has played a central role in the Blairite campaign to remove Corbyn and drive out his supporters, announced that it would debate a no-confidence motion in Corbyn at its congress next

month.

The motion continues efforts to slander Corbyn as an anti-Semite. If passed, it would register the JLM's intention to end all campaigning for Labour candidates who are not “allies” in the fight against anti-Semitism, i.e. those backing Corbyn. The resolution states that “The blame for this crisis of anti-Semitism and the party's failure to deal with it lies with Jeremy Corbyn. He is therefore unfit to be Prime Minister and a Labour government led by him would not be in the interests of British Jews.”

Corbyn's refusal to fight the Blairite fifth column, even as they collude openly with the Tories and the media and carry out the expulsion of some of his key supporters, epitomises his political role in demobilising the working class.

The Tory government is in a state of meltdown. Britain is in the grip of a major constitutional crisis. Yet Corbyn and his pro-capitalist clique are preventing workers and youth from shifting political life decisively away from the faction fight ripping through the ruling elite onto an axis of the class struggle.

Brexit has provoked an internecine struggle between arch reactionaries whose differences over EU membership are entirely subordinate to their collective aim of imposing further savage attacks on working people and pursuing an aggressive militarist agenda in the domestic and global interests of the financial oligarchy. The fight for a progressive alternative depends upon the most far-sighted workers and young people drawing the necessary conclusions, breaking from Labour to the left and waging a genuine struggle for socialism in Britain and throughout Europe.



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