

British parliament to make “indicative votes” in an attempt to overcome Brexit impasse

Robert Stevens
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British MPs begin a series of “indicative votes” today to establish what form of Brexit, if any, can secure a majority in parliament.

This follows the vote Monday night in favour of a cross-party amendment put by Conservative Sir Oliver Letwin, and Labour’s Hilary Benn. Under its provisions, MPs can put forward a number of “soft Brexit” solutions to be voted on, including a “Norway” style plan, or revoke entirely the Article 50 legislation governing the UK leaving the European Union (EU).

With the position of Prime Minister Theresa May gravely threatened—the EU has allowed her only this week for parliament to pass the withdrawal deal she agreed—she instructed Tory MPs to oppose the amendment. But she suffered a defeat by 329 to 302 after 29 Conservatives voted with opposition parties. Her defeat would have been bigger, but eight Labour Party MPs from pro-Brexit constituencies supported the government.

The Letwin/Benn vote went ahead after May told parliament that she still did not have enough support for her deal to pass after two previous defeats.

Along with continued resistance from the Tories’ hard-Brexit faction, organised in the European Research Group (ERG), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), whose 10 MPs allow May to govern as a minority, remain opposed.

Sky News reported sources explaining that the DUP would rather see a year-long extension to Article 50 than back May’s deal. They are opposed to provisions—that the EU insist are nonnegotiable—keeping Northern Ireland in the EU Customs Union, post-Brexit.

Senior EU figures welcomed the vote. The European Parliament’s lead Brexit spokesman, Guy Verhofstadt, tweeted Tuesday, “Parliament takes control. An

opportunity to build a cross-party cooperation leading to an enhanced political declaration & a closer future relationship!”

This was also the stand taken by the mainly pro-Remain media in Britain, who hailed parliament’s seizing “control of Brexit.”

MPs may indeed have formally taken control of the next stage of the Brexit crisis, but any positions arrived at in today’s votes are not legally binding on the government. May warned MPs on Monday, “No government could give a blank cheque to commit to an outcome without knowing what it is. So I cannot commit the government to delivering the outcome of any votes held by this house.”

May stated that she would not accept any outcome contradicting the Tories 2016 election manifesto, pledging that the UK would leave the EU’s single market and the customs union.

In addition, the move for indicative votes deepens a constitutional crisis begun when Parliament’s Speaker, the Remain-supporting Tory John Bercow, intervened to insist that May cannot put her deal for a third time unless it is materially altered. Eurosceptic Bill Cash described the move as a “constitutional revolution,” with a prime minister unable to determine the course of preliminary debates for the first time in 100 years.

To ensure their contending factions are strengthened, given May’s weakened position, Tory MPs are demanding a free vote on any indicative votes. It remains unclear whether May will accede to the demand, but according to *Telegraph* reporter Steven Swinford, a “Cabinet source” warned “there will be ‘total carnage’ if Theresa May does not allow MPs free votes on indicative options. ‘There won’t be a junior Remain minister left in government.’”

If May’s vote is not passed this week, it is expected

that Remain MPs will attempt a further shoring up next Monday of the indicative votes that have the most support. Nick Boles, one of the 29 Tory rebels, stated that Remain MPs “will be relying on the government to reflect parliament’s wishes ... in the first instance ... but we won’t be relying on it for long. If ultimately the government refuses to listen to what parliament has voted for, then we’ll look to bring forward a bill, pass an act of parliament, that will require the government to reflect parliament’s wishes.”

An alternative scenario is possible, in which the indicative votes amendment backfires and forces hard-Brexit Tories to vote for May’s deal as an alternative to Brexit being derailed entirely. Steve Brine, who resigned as a health minister after breaking May’s whip, told BBC Radio’s *Today*, “What last night will do is focus some minds... Those on my side who don’t like the deal, maybe they will realise that the House of Commons is prepared to act. And, anything from here, as far as they are concerned, gets softer in terms of Brexit.”

Former Tory party leader William Hague, in an article in the pro-Brexit *Telegraph* yesterday headlined, “Brexiters will soon discover that all other deals are worse than Mrs May’s”, wrote, “The more you look at the alternatives, the more you go back to the deal on the table and think it’s not so bad after all.”

The political shift among sections of the hard-Brexit wing was evident in the comments Tuesday of the chairman of the ERG, Jacob Rees-Mogg, who said that he would now back May’s deal rather than risk there being “no Brexit at all.” Just weeks ago, Rees-Mogg was describing the deal as one in which the UK would remain “not so much a vassal state [of the EU] anymore as a slave state.”

However, only May’s removal and the possibility of a hard-Brexit Tory being able to take over, will satisfy a significant section of the Eurosceptics.

Tonight, May is set to meet the Tory backbench MPs 1922 Committee, where it is expected that she will come under renewed pressure to give a timetable for her standing down in exchange for reluctant MPs backing her deal. According to reports, this proposition was discussed at the prime minister’s country retreat, Chequers, where May met cabinet ministers and leading Brexiters, including Boris Johnson, at the weekend and which some predicted wrongly would end

with announcements of a leadership contest. The *Sun*, owned by billionaire pro-Brexit oligarch Rupert Murdoch, is demanding this outcome. In a front-page editorial Monday headlined, “Time’s Up Theresa,” it wrote, “Her deal has only one, slim chance of achieving a majority in the Commons.

“That is if she pledges immediately to resign and set in motion the election of her successor as Tory leader and PM after we leave the EU on the new deadline of May 22.”

Stating, “Her Brexit deal is not the worst imaginable,” the *Sun* insisted that if May stands down, “[T]ory Brexiters and the DUP must back the deal. Because if it fails again this week we are heading for a much softer Brexit—or none. That will be a catastrophe for the country, the Tories and Parliament.”

Nothing will be resolved by the indicative votes in terms of ending the intractable divisions within the ruling elite.

Aware of the precariousness of their own position, advocates for a People’s Vote second referendum as the means of reversing Brexit entirely insist that it must be treated as an option separate to any other.

Tory Remainer Justine Greening backed Owen Smith, the Blairite Labour MP and former challenger to the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in Monday’s debate, to insist, “There is a difference between the People’s Vote option and the others... The others relate to a substantive route forward on Brexit. A public vote is a way of ensuring...the public are behind whatever consensus this House may find favour with.”

Smith said, “We need to be absolutely clear that a People’s Vote... is entirely separate from any of the options that we might vote on.”

The author recommends:

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