

Parliament rejects all alternatives as May's offer to resign fails to stem Brexit crisis

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Wednesday began with Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May informing her MPs that she will resign as party leader and prime minister if parliament passes the withdrawal deal she has agreed with the European Union (EU). It ended with a series of indicative votes on possible alternatives post-Brexit, none of which secured a majority.

May made her statement to the Tories' backbench 1922 Committee, as MPs were set to vote on eight different Brexit policies, with the aim of ascertaining whether there was any consensus that could secure a majority.

While May did not give a precise timetable for her departure, *Sky News* reported from a Downing Street source that if her EU deal was passed this week—triggering an EU exit date of May 22 instead of April 12—she would stand down at that point to set into motion a Tory leadership contest. During this election period, May would remain as prime minister, but would be gone for the beginning of the next stage of negotiations with the EU when the two parties thrash out a trade deal.

May's pledge to resign is her last card in the attempt to convince the Tories' hard-Brexit wing and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), upon whose 10 MPs she relies, to back the agreement. But by last night, only around 25 Brexiteers had come out openly in support of her deal.

They were led by the head of the party's European Research Group (ERG), Jacob Rees-Mogg, who penned an article in the *Daily Mail* stating that May's deal was not a good one and he would have voted against it if "No Deal remained the default legal option." However, "the Government and the Prime Minister have now ruled this out." The current agreement not passing could result in a "long delay," and given "the

opposition to Brexit, it could be revoked or put to a skewed second referendum."

Following Rees-Mogg, leading Brexiteer and former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said he would also come on board. However, a substantial number of some 30 ERG Tories, including the ERG deputy chairman, Steve Baker, are still not prepared to back the deal and May has failed to win the backing of the DUP. Late last night, the party's parliamentary leader, Nigel Dodds, rejected abstaining on May's deal, stating that the "DUP do not abstain on the [preservation of the UK] union."

To make things worse still for May, parliament's speaker, the Remain-supporting Tory John Bercow, reiterated that he would not allow May's vote to be put a third time, after being decisively rejected in votes previously, unless it was materially different, and he would not allow the government to attempt to get around his ruling by using parliamentary manoeuvres.

Sensing blood in the water, European Council President Donald Tusk sought to bolster the pro-Remain faction of the British ruling elite, telling the European Parliament that he opposed those who said that the UK's participation in forthcoming elections to the European Parliament, were the UK to seek a longer extension to Article 50 (governing the UK's EU departure), would be "harmful or inconvenient."

"Let me be clear, such thinking is unacceptable. ... You cannot betray the six million people who signed the petition to revoke Article 50, the one million people who marched for a people's vote, or the increasing majority of people who want to remain in the European Union."

The EU's Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, added that "Everything is possible," and that the UK "can stay" in the EU if it wants to.

In the event, however, May's travails did not translate into a majority for any alternative, and the hopes of the EU for a decisive shift failed to materialise.

Bercow selected eight indicative amendments to be voted on from 16 tabled, most supportive of some form of "soft Brexit," except one from Tory John Baron supporting a no-deal Brexit on April 12 and one from Scottish National Party MP Joanna Cherry to revoke Article 50 if the alternative is a no-deal Brexit. The most important for the Remain faction was that of Blairite Labour MP Margaret Beckett for a "confirmatory" second referendum on any Brexit deal agreed by parliament.

No deal was resoundingly rejected. But all the amendments calling for permutations of a soft Brexit, with four backed by Labour, including its own proposal, were also defeated—with the highest vote going to the simple and limited call by Tory Ken Clarke for the UK to sign up to the Customs Union with the EU.

The call for a confirmatory people's vote received the highest vote of all the defeated motions. It was backed by Labour but still lost by 295 to 268. The scale of the defeat would have been larger—possibly by another 20 plus votes—had May's cabinet not been whipped to abstain on all the indicative votes.

The sense of despair in ruling circles was summed up by the *Independent*'s headline, "MPs take back control of Brexit—only to find they have absolutely no idea what to do with it."

In the vote's aftermath, all sides continue frantic efforts to change the parliamentary arithmetic.

Media pundits continue to speculate on whether May could put her deal again and if she might still overcome Bercow's ruling and win over the DUP and more Tory Eurosceptics. Others note that the tide is shifting towards Remain, even if as yet not decisively, and express hopes that May will have no alternative than to seek a further extension from the EU, which pro-Remain forces can use to their advantage. Some suggest May could agree to the offer by some Remainers that they will back her deal in return for the government accepting a "confirmatory" referendum—pitching her deal against remaining in the EU.

The only thing that is certain is that the Brexit crisis

will continue to worsen, under conditions in which all ruling class factions involved are hostile to the essential interests of the working class.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn heads a party whose sole concern is to safeguard the global interests of British imperialism, either by securing a soft Brexit or, if possible, restoring membership of the EU trade bloc. He can barely make mention of a general election and the bringing down of the Tories because this is opposed by the Blairites in his own party. He poses no genuine socialist alternative to the pro-capitalist trade-war-based alternatives of "Leave" and "Remain"—both of which are predicated on a continued offensive against jobs, wages and essential social services.

It is thanks to Labour that an unprecedented crisis of rule for British imperialism continues to spiral out of control without workers being able to intervene politically in their own interests.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers and young people to reject support for any faction of Britain's ruling class and for its European counterparts such as Tusk, who are now masquerading as their friends. They must ally themselves with the European working class in a common struggle against the employers and their governments to replace a capitalist Europe of austerity, militarism and war with a United Socialist States of Europe based on production for social need and not private profit.



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