British MPs again fail to reach agreement on alternative Brexit motions

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None of the four non-binding "indicative votes" on an alternative to Prime Minister Theresa May's negotiated withdrawal agreement for Brexit secured a majority vote by MPs Monday night.

The motion put forward by pro-European Union (EU) Conservative Ken Clarke, calling for an EU withdrawal agreement to have as a minimum a new customs union with the bloc, came closest to winning, with 273 votes for and 276 against.

Just 37 Tory MPs backed Clarke's amendment and only 33 voted for a motion "Common Market 2.0" tabled by Tory Remainer Nick Boles. This proposes that the UK remain within the EU's single market, have a customs union with the bloc and become a member of the European Free Trade Association alongside the small economies of Norway, Iceland, Lichtenstein and Switzerland.

Given how small the pro-EU faction of the Tory party is, Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May is highly unlikely to make a concession to secure a soft-Brexit compromise. It is more probable that she will bring her current deal with the EU back for a fourth "meaningful vote" this week.

Today, May will hold a five-hour Cabinet meeting to finalise her next moves. She may decide to put up her deal in a run-off against parliament's most favoured option. On its last vote, May's EU Withdrawal Agreement lost by a majority of 58.

While viewed as a compromise that could mobilise cross-party support, Boles refused to accede to demands that a "people's vote" be attached to his solution. His motion was defeated with a majority of 21. He immediately resigned from the Tory party, which he condemned for refusing to compromise, and will sit as an independent.

Boles's motion won Labour and SNP backing, but the 11 Liberal Democrat MPs and the pro-Remain The Independent Group's 11 MPs both refused to back what was described as the "softest Brexit" motion on the basis that they do not support any plan to leave the EU.

Motion G called for a revocation of the Article 50 legislation governing the UK's withdrawal if a deal is not agreed with the EU. Tabled by the Scottish National Party's Joanna Cherry, it secured 191 votes with 292 against after Labour refused to whip in its favour.

Motion E, tabled by Labour MP Peter Kyle, called for a version of a second referendum by preventing any withdrawal agreement from being ratified without a "confirmatory" public vote. It received 280 votes, but lost narrowly by a majority of 12, with 15 Labour MPs abstaining.

Cabinet ministers were once again instructed to abstain on all indicative votes. But the strength of the pro-Brexit Tory faction was made evident by the small number of soft-Brexit votes by Tory MPs and a letter signed by 174 MPs and ministers, handed to May on Sunday, opposing any form of soft Brexit and insisting she pursue a no-deal departure from the EU if her deal is rejected.

Parliamentary Speaker John Bercow did not select the indicative option Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn tabled last week, calling for a soft Brexit with access to a customs union, and the Labour Party backed the two soft-Brexit proposals. In a letter to Labour MPs Monday afternoon, Corbyn stated that the party "seeks a permanent customs union, close alignment with the single market and dynamic alignment on rights and protections." He again refused to endorse outright a "people's vote," on either May's deal or a deal that Labour could negotiate if it took office.

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With May staggering on in office and her government mired in crisis, Corbyn was on message to the ruling class in his response to the votes. Adopting his pose as a “safe pair of hands” and guardian of the “national interest,” he refused to call for a general election or to pledge a vote of no-confidence in the government, supporting instead the plan for parliament to meet again on Wednesday in another attempt to secure a compromise around a soft Brexit. Given the narrow three-vote defeat yesterday, Clarke’s lowest common denominator proposal for a customs union is the most likely to pass. But pro-Remain MPs expressed optimism that they could secure backing for a second referendum to ratify or reject any deal.

As they did ahead of last week’s Brexit votes, leading EU officials sought to put pressure on MPs to back an outcome resulting in the least damage to the bloc. The message from Europe was that if MPs backed an agreement including a customs union, this would be welcomed by Brussels and an overall deal could be finalised in as little as 48 hours.

The EU’s Brexit coordinator, Guy Verhofstadt, said it would be “really the best thing that could happen,” On this basis, a “new political statement can then be approved at a European summit on 10 April and then we will give the British the opportunity to formalise it in English legislation by 22 May.”

However, with just 10 days to go before the EU’s deadline for reaching an agreement passes, and the real possibility of a no-deal outcome, Germany’s EU minister, Michael Roth, said on Sunday, “Brexit is a big shitshow, I say that now very undiplomatically.”

May’s impossible position means that a snap general election cannot be ruled out.

Reflecting opposition to a general election within ruling circles is the pro-Brexit *Sun*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch. The *Sun* editorialised Sunday that the Tory’s hard-Brexit wing “must now swing behind Mrs May and push her deal over the line.”

An editorial Monday warned a general election could lead to a Labour victory under Corbyn et al who want to “force their Marxist agenda down our throats.”

It warned, “It’s all very well for the Tories to simply assume that Jeremy Corbyn *et al* will never get near Downing Street—but it would be criminally complacent.

“We’ve more or less given up on the Brexiteers who refuse to vote for the PM’s deal, even though their preferred ‘no deal’ is essentially impossible.

“But those who are tempted to plump for a permanent customs union in today’s ridiculous indicative vote process must also realise that they could very well trigger an election, with unknowable consequences.”

The depiction of Corbyn’s minimal reformist policies in revolutionary terms exposes how fearful Britain’s ruling elite are of a movement by millions of workers and youth being unleashed, demanding an end to austerity, militarism and war, which Labour would be unable to stem.

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