Six-month Brexit extension resolves nothing for UK

Robert Stevens
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Theresa May's Conservative government was granted a six-month Brexit extension by the European Union (EU), following late night talks Wednesday in Brussels.

With a previous extension set to expire at 11 p.m. on Friday, a new extension until October 31 was agreed. Seeking to pacify the "hard Brexit" wing of her ruling Conservatives, prior to the EU Council summit May called for a shorter extension to June 30—with the option of bringing this forward if her Withdrawal Agreement with the EU is ratified by the British parliament.

On Tuesday, May met separately with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, in an effort to win their backing for a shorter extension.

Paris insisted it would not permit a 12-month "flextension," as proposed by European Council President Donald Tusk prior to the summit.

Ahead of the meeting, Tusk stuck to his proposal stating, "[N]either side should be allowed to feel humiliated." The plea fell on deaf ears. May was permitted to make a statement for an hour outlining her position to the EU ministers, before leaving the room as the remaining 27 ministers discussed her proposals.

Well into the nearly nine-hour meeting, Macron was still refusing to allow the UK any extension beyond June 30. Reuters reported, "EU diplomats and officials said the mood in the room was in favour of a long extension before Macron took the floor and highlighted the risks he thought it posed to the bloc." One diplomat commented, "Macron just made a powerful statement. (He) said anything beyond June 30 would jeopardise the EU and we shouldn't go there."

With Germany and its backers concerned about a no-deal Brexit resulting in further economic, social and political turmoil, the *Financial Times* reported, "As midnight approached and prime ministers and presidents huddled around the apparently intransigent Mr. Macron, the exchanges became more pointed, with Mr Macron tartly reminding the others that 'you need unanimity' for an EU Council decision on Brexit."

France and the main EU powers had already agreed before the summit that any extension had to come with strict conditions so that Britain could not use its right of veto as a member to jeopardise the EU's immediate and long-term plans.

Macron eventually agreed to the October 31 extension with a June "review" of the situation, because it is the day before the new European Commission—the executive arm of the EU—takes office.

After the meeting concluded, Tusk issued a warning to the May government, "This extension is as flexible as I expected, and a little bit shorter than I expected, but it's still enough to find the best possible solution. Please do not waste this time."

"Maybe we can avoid the UK leaving the EU. … This is obviously not my role—but it's my personal, quiet dream," he added.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte put a more hard-line position, warning, "At the end of October we are six months down the road. It will be increasingly difficult to grant an extension. … Most likely by the end of October, it's signing of the withdrawal agreement or a no-deal."

With no alternative to accepting the EU's extension offer, May told the press that she would continue to insist that the UK parliament accept her deal: "I continue to believe we need to leave the EU, with a deal, as soon as possible. … Vitally, the EU have agreed the extension can be terminated when the Withdrawal Agreement has been ratified … The choices we now face

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are stark, and the timetable is clear. We must now press on at pace with our efforts to reach a consensus."

With the extension the UK is legally obliged to participate in May's EU elections, but May said she still planned to receive the backing of parliament for the EU deal by May 22—just one day before the date of the European Elections ballot in the UK—in order that the Britain does not participate and can leave the EU by June 1.

At best the EU have kicked the can down the road for another six months, with no guarantees of a resolution. But more likely it will be six months of continuing factional struggle in which events can precipitate a worsening crisis.

Britain's parliament is deeply divided, with the extension inflaming tensions even further within the Tories. Those most opposed to May in the hard-Brexit wing stepped up calls for her resignation. Referring to the pledge she made earlier this month to step down and trigger a leadership contest if MPs accepted her deal, David Davis said, "She said, and No 10 put the date of 22 May on it. When PMs put a date on their own departure, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. … The pressure on her to go will increase dramatically, I suspect now."

While a substantial section of the euro-sceptics want May gone, they are hamstrung by the fact that she won a vote of no-confidence last December. Under party rules this means that May cannot be challenged again for a year. But "Where there's a will," then possibly "there's a way."

The deal was also seized on by parliament's Remain faction as the opportunity to press forward their preferred option of a second referendum to reverse the 2016 leave decision.

Financial Time s columnist Philip Stephens wrote, "Britain can now change its mind about Brexit … MPs can and should agree to put any proposed settlement with the EU27 to a confirmatory referendum. The country could then be presented with the vote it was denied in 2016—a choice between Remain and the best deal that parliament considers available to Britain outside the union."

Making a statement to parliament Thursday, May said that MPs should use parliament's Easter recess to do their "national duty" and then return and pass the withdrawal deal "So that we can avoid having to hold those European parliamentary elections."

Her talks with the Labour Party to secure an acceptable alternative Brexit plan are proof that Jeremy Corbyn is more than ready to do his "national duty." His performance in parliament was a caricature of even his normal levels of obsequious fawning before the ruling class. After complaining that the extension was a "diplomatic failure," he said his talks with May were "serious, detailed and ongoing." No longer is there any talk of no-confidence votes, or general elections to put in place a government "of the many, not the few."

In the interests of "national unity," his sole appeal is that May accept a form of customs union with the EU and that access to its Single Market is appended to the Withdrawal Agreement's "Political Declaration," as sought by Britain's business leaders.

Corbyn was careful to placate the majority Blairite wing in his own party by adding that if no agreement could be secured with May, "We believe all options should remain on the table, including the option of a public vote."

Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer said the cross-party talks were being held "in good faith," with "the need for a customs union" remaining a sticking point. However, May was keen to assure Blairite Yvette Copper that on the issue of a customs union, there is "more agreement [between the Tories and Labour] than is often given credit for."

Further talks were held on Thursday afternoon, with a Labour Party spokesman commenting, "Both sides agreed to continue talks in an effort to make substantive progress towards finding a compromise plan."

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