

British PM May attacked from all sides ahead of parliament Brexit vote

Robert Stevens
28 November 2018

Theresa May's Conservative government faces days of brinkmanship and political infighting ahead of a vote in parliament on the agreement reached with the European Union (EU) over the terms of Britain's exit.

Parliament will vote December 11, following five days of debate beginning December 4, on the 585-page Brexit deal. It regulates the payment of £39 billion that London must make to the EU coffers after it leaves on March 29, 2019, a "backstop" procedure for resolving the border issue between the British province of Northern Ireland and EU member Republic of Ireland, the transitional period after Brexit and the future status of EU citizens in the UK and of British citizens in the EU.

As it stands, there is no parliamentary arithmetic under which May can get the deal through parliament, given that the main opposition Labour Party (257 MPs) are opposed, along with the Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and Green Party, who have 52 MPs combined. The Tories have 315 MPs and their coalition partners, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) have 10, allowing May to rule as a minority government. But 89 Tories are publicly opposed to the deal, according to a *Guardian* analysis, as well as the DUP, and only the size of the rebellion against the deal is now at issue.

May spoke to MPs on Monday in a question and answer session for more than two and a half hours, warning that rejecting the deal would mean going back to "square one" and further "significant uncertainty and division." Her appeal fell on deaf ears. Such are the divisions in the ruling party that it took more than an hour in the debate before a Tory MP spoke in favour of the deal.

Backing May was European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who told the BBC Sunday, "This

is the best deal possible, this is the only deal possible," adding, "I'm never changing my mind." If MPs voted down the deal, he warned, "we would have no deal."

Many are speculating that Juncker's intransigence will not survive a no vote. In dutifully selling her agreement with the EU, May could either assume or have been told that a likely defeat in a first parliamentary vote and a threatened no deal Brexit will allow her to seek further concessions from Europe—aimed at satisfying the DUP and her hard Brexit wing prior to a second vote.

Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Paul Waugh noted that January 21 is "the date in the EU Withdrawal Act, by which May has to come forward with a new statement to Parliament if her deal is voted down at first attempt. Brexiteers and Remainers alike are holding onto that deadline as giving them vital wriggle room to get an alternative."

The government has set up a new unit in the Cabinet Office dubbed "Project Vote," tasked with winning MPs over to May's deal. Yesterday, May met with MPs in Wales and then travelled to Belfast to meet DUP leaders, as well as the republican party, Sinn Féin. She will then meet MPs in Scotland and spend the following days speaking to MPs in England.

The DUP is opposed to any "backstop" arrangement that keeps Northern Ireland and the UK in an EU Customs Union for an indefinite period and wants a strict time limit placed on any such arrangement. DUP leader Arlene Foster denounced May's trip as a "waste of time."

The only way that May's deal can pass is if she convinces a large number of Labour MPs that her deal, or one with amendments amenable to them, is the only alternative to a chaotic no-deal Brexit. After addressing MPs Monday, May commissioned a separate meeting

with Labour MPs in parliament.

Sent to address them was her chief of staff Gavin Barwell, Minister for the Cabinet Office, David Lidington, described as the “de facto deputy Prime Minister,” and another leading Cabinet Office official. Barwell gave a 28-minute presentation to the Labourites and took questions for 30 minutes. *Politics Home* was leaked a tape of the meeting. It reported that a “significant chunk of the presentation was aimed at calming fears about the deal’s Northern Ireland backstop plan...”

Following the agreement between May and the EU, the Remain wing of the British ruling elite have largely shifted from outright calls to reverse Brexit to demands that the Article 50 legislative timetable, enabling Brexit to take place by March 29 next year, be extended. Speaking Monday to BBC’s *Radio 4*, Blairite Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer said that his priority was preventing a no-deal Brexit and winning agreement to extend Article 50. Starmer said that “stopping no deal is something that’s going to have to involve the whole of the EU, but I think there would be a very strong push by the majority in parliament against no deal.”

Starmer confirmed to the pro-EU *Observer* Sunday that Labour is planning to make amendments to government Brexit bills over the next weeks to prevent a no-deal Brexit. He said that some Tory MPs were prepared to back him in binding votes as they “will not countenance the UK crashing out of the EU without an agreement. There is a clear majority in parliament against no deal, and Labour will work across the Commons to prevent no deal.”

Labour is seeking to claim the mantle of the most responsible party at a time when British imperialism is entering uncharted waters. It is because he is seeking to minimise the crisis that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is opposed to the Blairite moves to rush to a second referendum “People’s Vote,” agreeing with May that to do so would reopen dangerous political divisions.

Corbyn’s statements are those of an imperialist statesman in waiting, to the effect that May’s deal represents an “unparalleled and unacceptable loss of sovereignty, which Labour will not accept on behalf of our country.” In Monday’s debate, Corbyn opposed May on the basis that it was not in the “national interest for the Prime Minister to plough on when it is clear that

this deal does not have the support of either side of this House or the country as a whole.” Rather, it was “an act of national self-harm,” and what was required was a deal “based on a comprehensive customs union and a strong single market” membership.

However, the crisis facing British imperialism cannot be so easily smoothed over given the extraordinary tensions between the major imperialist powers. US President Donald Trump has once again declared his open support for Brexit as a means of furthering his goal of breaking up the EU, which he previously denounced as a German-dominated cartel. The UK/EU deal “sounds like a great deal for the EU,” he declared, warning, “Right now if you look at the deal, [the UK] may not be able to trade with us. And that wouldn’t be a good thing... hopefully [May will] be able to do something about that.”

May tried to play down Trump’s damaging comments, stating, without foundation, “We will have the ability, outside the European Union, to make those decisions on trade policy for ourselves. It will no longer be a decision being taken by Brussels. As regards the United States, we’ve already been talking to them about the sort of agreement we could have with them in the future.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)