

UK: May unable to stem Tory crisis over Brexit, but still propped up by Corbyn

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UK Prime Minister Theresa May has headed off a potential leadership challenge once again but faces demands from Conservative backbench MPs that she set a date for her departure.

May's premiership has been one of escalating crisis since she took office after the resignation of former prime minister David Cameron, who called the June 2016 referendum on EU membership. Cameron, who backed Remain, stood down following the victory of the Leave campaign. May, a Remainer, was charged with implementing Brexit while keeping her deeply divided party together. The effort to do so becomes more herculean with each passing day.

May has already pledged that she would depart as Tory leader and prime minister once Parliament passed the withdrawal deal she agreed with the European Union (EU) last December—which she has failed to do on three occasions.

Parliament resumed from its spring recess Tuesday, with pro-Brexit MPs ratcheting up demands that she go and give way to a firmly anti-EU leadership challenger ready to at least threaten a no-deal exit.

On Tuesday and Wednesday the executive of the 1922 Committee, the influential Tory backbench group, met to discuss demands by MPs that the party's rules are changed to remove the 12-month period of grace during which a second confidence vote in a party leader cannot be held. Some MPs wanted this changed to six months, allowing another confidence vote in May to be held in June. In December, 117 Tory MPs voted without success to remove May.

However, the 1922 Committee did not agree to the rule change. Even so, further pressure was exerted on May, with 1922 chairman Sir Graham Brady stating Wednesday that he would “communicate to the Prime Minister our request for a clear timetable to be set for

her departure” whether her Brexit deal is passed or not.

Asked by the media if May was free to tell MPs that she now intends to stay on until December, Brady responded, “I think that would be a surprising response.”

May staggers on because her departure is dreaded by the pro-Remain faction of her party and the calculation by enough pro-Brexit MPs that her departure risks precipitating a general election which the Tories would lose to Labour under Jeremy Corbyn.

The 1922 vote and statements to the media by senior party figures reveal that only the most hard-core pro-Brexit MPs are prepared to contemplate anything other than a managed leadership transition, possibly scheduled around autumn's Tory party conference, coinciding with the EU's latest deadline for the UK Parliament to pass her deal.

In an article headlined, “Conservative grandees warn Theresa May her time is almost up,” the *Financial Times* cited a Leave supporting minister who warned that removing May at this stage could precipitate a Labour general election victory.

May's most likely replacement would be Boris Johnson, the minister said, who would seek to renegotiate Brexit with Brussels but would be forced to accept defeat. This would see Johnson forced to hold a general election to secure a mandate for a no-deal Brexit. “I wouldn't be comfortable with that. ... These things sound like a good idea until you end up confronting the voters with it,” he said.

A 1922 executive member told *The Sun*, “Colleagues have been consulted widely, and they're just not ready for Boris. ... Getting rid of Theresa before Brexit is done means getting Boris, Boris would mean no deal, and no deal would mean a general election. And that would be the end of Brexit altogether.”

May nevertheless faces a further challenge coming from the party's lower ranks, with a no-confidence vote on her likely to be carried at a National Conservative Convention emergency general meeting (EGM) in the next few weeks. So unpopular is May that over 70 local conservative association leaders (65 are required) voted for a petition stating, "We no longer feel that Mrs. May is the right person to continue as prime minister to lead us forward in the [Brexit] negotiations. ... We therefore ... ask that she considers her position and resigns, to allow the Conservative Party to choose another leader, and the country to move forward and negotiate our exit from the EU."

While any vote taken at the EGM is non-binding, a demand for another no-confidence vote will heap further pressure on May.

This pressure appears to have convinced May to abandon plans to put her EU deal before Parliament next week.

Meanwhile the government is continuing talks with the opposition Labour Party, supposedly to reach a solution to the Brexit impasse, despite demands from the Brexiteers that they are called off. The talks are clearly being conducted by May in bad faith. They began over three weeks ago, with no substantial shift by the government let alone signs of an agreement being reached. This week no talks have been held directly between May and Labour leader Corbyn.

Yet the most significant example of bad faith comes from Corbyn. May is seeking to cover her exposed political rear, while Corbyn is providing the necessary fig leaf—and betraying all those workers and youth who looked to him to wage a struggle against the Tories.

For Corbyn's faction, the political function of these talks is to side-line a discussion on the political crisis facing the government that could precipitate a general election. He has dropped all talk of a general election and forcing the downfall of a government that he acknowledges is "collapsing" because his own party's MPs are opposed to the downfall of the Tories and want a second EU referendum instead. The rotten clique of pro-austerity warmongers would rather see the Labour Party destroyed than for it to win a general election under conditions where Corbyn would have to fend off demands for him to honour his pledges to end austerity, militarism and war.

The crisis of rule in the UK will be exacerbated if

May is unable to pass her deal and European Elections go ahead in the UK next month. Recent polls show that the newly-formed Brexit Party, headed by former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage, is set to win them at the expense of the Tories and Labour.

Farage announced Thursday that the party would also contest seats in any future general election, stating, "MPs will realise that if they carry on trying to stop Brexit, they'll lose their seats at the next General Election."

The Brexit Party is being heavily promoted by nominally left former Labour MP George Galloway, who shares Farage's nationalist agenda, with claims that he is forging a "left-right" alliance to secure Brexit. But his is an endorsement of an anti-working-class agenda of ending all regulations on big business and the financial parasites of the City of London, building closer alliances with the US and striking free trade deals with rising markets in China, India and elsewhere.

Among its prospective MEPs [Members of European Parliament] are arch Tory reactionary Ann Widdecombe and Annunziata Rees-Mogg, the sister of Jacob Rees-Mogg, who leads the Tories' hard-Brexit European Research Group.

Other prominent backers following in Galloway's wake are two former members of the now defunct Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), Dr. Alka Sehgal Cuthbert and Claire Fox. The RCP gave birth to the libertarian Institute of Ideas, which is the moving force behind the website *Spiked*—notorious for taking the position of the political right on every major issue, including its leading role in the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.



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