

UK: May faces possible leadership contest after seeking concessions from EU on Brexit

By Robert Stevens
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Prime Minister Theresa May could be facing a vote of no confidence from Conservative MPs, with reports that the 48 letters required may have been sent to the backbench 1922 committee. If so, she will be informed after her regular appearance at prime minister's questions Wednesday lunchtime.

Rumours circulated after May began a lightening round of diplomacy Tuesday, visiting European Union leaders following her decision not to hold a vote in parliament on the proposed deal over the terms of Brexit.

May was desperately seeking concessions from Brussels that would satisfy UK MPs, but was met with a public rebuff from European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Speaking in Strasbourg, Juncker said that he could offer May "further clarification" around the most contentious issue of the Irish "backstop" but nothing else. This section of the agreement stipulates that Northern Ireland is kept in the EU Customs Union—absent a long-term trade agreement between the UK and EU—to prevent the return of a hard border with the Republic of Ireland after Brexit. He said bluntly, "The deal we achieved is the best deal possible, it is the only deal possible. There is no room whatsoever for renegotiation."

After meeting Netherlands Prime Minister Mark Rutte in The Hague and speaking on the phone to Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurtz, May met Merkel in Berlin and received the same response. "We said that there will be no further opening of the exit deal," said Merkel.

May travelled on to Brussels for talks with Juncker and European council president Donald Tusk, and again met with statements from Europe's capitals that

nothing of substance could be changed.

France's Europe minister Nathalie Loiseau said, "This withdrawal agreement is the only possible agreement." Loiseau warned that the EU was now finalising plans for the UK leaving the EU in a disorderly withdrawal. Ahead of a two-day European Council summit, she said, "Today we are not accountable for the British political situation. The heads of state and government will meet on Thursday and Friday and will discuss [the issue] between them. But our responsibility as leaders is also to prepare for a no deal because it is a hypothesis that is not unlikely."

While these preparations are underway, significant sections of the ruling elite in Europe are fearful of the economic, political and social turmoil that a hard-Brexit would unleash. The *Financial Times* cited the comments of Armin Laschet, Christian Democratic Union prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous and economically powerful state. Laschet said, "There is a real risk that a hard Brexit could tip the global economy into a crisis... It could be even more serious than the collapse of Lehman Brothers—if you look at the potential effect on trade. That's why it's smart to have a consensual form of Brexit."

Today, May is due to meet Ireland's Prime Minister Leo Varadkar in Dublin and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Arlene Foster in London.

It was always doubtful, even if May could secure some concessions around the issue of the Irish backstop, that this would satisfy the DUP or the Tory Brexiteers. In Parliament, the DUP's Gavin Robinson told Cabinet Office Minister David Lidington that mere "assurances" on the Brexit backstop "won't suffice" and that it would require a "fundamental alteration of the text" to win their backing in a parliamentary vote.

The DUP would also want to see the full legal advice presented to the government by the Attorney General regarding such changes to the agreement.

Even as May went cap-in-hand to Europe's leaders and her own MPs moved against her, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn insisted that he would not call a vote of no confidence. Instead, Labour took part in an emergency debate on a tame non-binding motion, registering the disagreement of MPs that May had refused to proceed with the final two days of a five-day debate and a meaningful vote on the Brexit deal.

Lidington played down May's move to scupper a vote she was set to lose heavily, saying the "remaining stages of this debate have not been cancelled, but have been deferred". May had until January 21 to present Parliament with a Brexit plan, according to the EU Withdrawal Act, he said, and was trying to secure a better deal before what was "a deadline" and not "a target".

Other opposition parties, led by Labour's Blairite faction, are demanding a second referendum "People's Vote" on May's deal or remaining in the EU. The Scottish National Party (SNP), Liberal Democrats and Green Party have tabled a vote of no confidence in May, but without the support of the main opposition party, Labour, it cannot be debated. Corbyn refused to meet the previous evening with SNP parliamentary leader, Ian Blackford, to discuss a vote of no confidence and did not attend a Tuesday morning press conference in central London, after being invited by the People's Vote campaign.

Labour's Shadow Chancellor and leading Corbyn ally John McDonnell would not commit to a date for a no-confidence vote, saying the matter was under review and whether to call "it will be a fine judgment each day." Labour later reprimanded a shadow Brexit minister, Jenny Chapman, who told the LBC radio station that a no-confidence motion is "going to happen" before Christmas.

The People's Vote press conference was attended by the SNP's Blackford, Liberal Democrat leader Sir Vince Cable, Green Party MP Caroline Lucas, Plaid Cymru Westminster Group Leader Liz Saville Roberts MP, former Blair government Foreign Secretary and Labour MP Margaret Beckett, and pro-Remain Conservative Anna Soubry.

In the parliamentary debate, Labourite Tanmanjeet

Singh Dhese pointed to speculation that the government had told top EU figures that the Brexit deal vote would be postponed 24 hours before cabinet ministers were informed.

Asked by the SNP's Pete Wishart why he would not join them in tabling a motion of no confidence, Corbyn replied, "We have no confidence in this government," before adding, "We need to do the appropriate thing at the appropriate time to have a motion of no confidence in order to get rid of this government."

Corbyn leads a party whose MPs, in their overwhelming majority, don't want a general election. But they are also convinced that Corbyn will not fight for one because this would mean a struggle to remove a significant section of his own Blairite MPs that he has consistently refused to carry out.

This has led to the bizarre situation where the Blairites feel free to champion a no-confidence motion, based on an assumption of failure that will open the way for a second referendum to reverse Brexit. They are working to safeguard the strategic interests of British imperialism, while either keeping the Tories in office or possibly forming a government of national unity. This has long been the preferred option of the Blairites.

Asked at the People's Vote press conference if their attempt to force Corbyn to call a no-confidence vote would weaken him because it was unlikely to be supported by the DUP, Blackford said it was necessary as a "lever" to force another referendum. Soubry said, "The biggest obstacle to a people's vote at the moment is Jeremy Corbyn. If not now, when Jeremy? He has got to start this process now."

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