

# “No deal” Brexit threatened after May’s EU withdrawal agreement rejected for third time

By Robert Stevens  
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Needing the support of 318 MPs, British Prime Minister Theresa May secured just 286 votes on her proposed European Union withdrawal agreement on Friday.

With 344 MPs against, a majority of 58, the margin of defeat was narrower than the two previous defeats—230 votes in January and 149 earlier in March. But the defeat triggered an EU stipulation that moves forward the new exit date from May 22 to April 12.

With parliament’s speaker, the pro-Remain Tory John Bercow, ruling that May could not bring her deal back a third time unaltered, Friday’s vote was on whether to accept only the Withdrawal Agreement and not the Political Declaration that goes with it. The Political Declaration is a shorter, 26-page document setting out the UK’s aspirations for future relations with the EU.

The opposition Labour Party rejected this manoeuvre, with Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer telling BBC Radio’s “Today” program, “Take the political declaration off and it is completely blind—you have no idea what you are really voting for.”

May was able to win the support of 277 Tory MPs, including 41 additional “hard-Brexit” Tories. The latter were convinced that voting to set a date on a deal they opposed was better than risking a prolonged delay or even a possible overturn of the 2016 referendum decision.

However, 34 members of the European Research Group voted against, along with 10 Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MPs.

With Labour MPs whipped to oppose May’s deal, just five—Kevin Barron, Rosie Cooper, Jim Fitzpatrick, Caroline Flint and John Mann—and two Blairites who now sit as Independents—Ian Austin and Frank Field—backed May.

The vote was held on the day the UK had initially been scheduled to leave the EU. Although May reached agreement with the EU months ago, sections of the deal related to a proposed “backstop” that could keep

Northern Ireland in the European Union indefinitely are anathema to the DUP and dozens in the Conservatives’ hard-Brexit wing.

Earlier this week, May committed to resigning as Tory Party leader (and therefore as prime minister) and triggering a leadership contest if MPs in her deeply divided party agreed to pass the deal. By means of this pledge, she obtained the votes of Boris Johnson and his backer in any leadership battle, Jacob-Rees Mogg. But even this was not sufficient to pass the measure.

The BBC’s flagship current affairs programme “Newsnight” reported Thursday night that a cabinet minister, asked why May was still going ahead with a third vote on the same deal, replied, “F\*\*k knows, I am past caring. It’s like the living dead in here.”

Friday’s developments only deepened the crisis of British imperialism, with any number of scenarios now unfolding.

A chaotic “no deal” departure from the EU is a real possibility. In a statement immediately following the vote in parliament, the European Commission warned, “The EU has been preparing for this since December 2017 and is now fully prepared for a ‘no deal’ scenario at midnight on 12 April.”

EU Commission head Donald Tusk called an emergency summit to address the Brexit crisis for April 10, just two days before the new scheduled exit date. According to the *Guardian*, “Sources suggested Downing Street would need to advise Brussels of the way forward by 8 April to allow member states to prepare for the summit.”

The British military is preparing to deploy 50,000 soldiers on UK streets in the event of a “no deal” Brexit, anticipating a massive disruption of basic social functions and civil unrest. These preparations are directed squarely against the working class.

Also possible is a further extension of the Article 50

legislation governing Brexit, forcing the UK to participate in May's European elections.

Speaking to MPs after her deal fell, May declared, "I fear we are reaching the limits of this process in this House. This House has rejected no deal. It has rejected no Brexit. On Wednesday it rejected all the variations of the deal on the table. And today it has rejected approving the withdrawal agreement alone and continuing a process on the future."

An "alternative way forward" would have to be found, May said, threatening hard-Brexit MPs that anything other than her agreement reached with the EU was "almost certain" to involve British participation in the European elections.

May's oblique reference to the "limits of this process" is widely reported as a threat to her rebel MPs to take the "nuclear option"--triggering a second snap general election if her deal is rejected once again. Given the state of political relations in the Tory Party, that threat could become a political reality.

May is to hold further discussions with her cabinet over the weekend, amid reports that an immediate meeting held in Downing Street after the defeat was dominated by ministers insisting that May oppose a soft Brexit and prepare for a no-deal Brexit outcome.

One "hard Brexiteer" who supported May in Friday's vote said, "I had to swallow everything I believe in and vote. Now we've lost that vote, there's only one thing the prime minister can do. Get us out on the 12th of April. Get our country back and deliver what we promised. Because if we don't, God help us."

The next stage in the crisis will unfold on Monday, when MPs return to parliament for a second round of "indicative votes." Last Wednesday, MPs held indicative votes on eight separate Brexit policies, but none commanded majority support.

The speaker will reportedly select from the most popular options from last week so that MPs can whittle these down to a single policy, which would likely be for a Brexit based on retaining access to a form of customs union with the EU.

However, according to *Sky News*, May is prepared to bring her deal back for a fourth time next Wednesday for a run-off with whatever indicative vote comes out on top.

With the prime minister one of the walking dead identified by her anonymous cabinet member, Labour's nominally "left" leader Jeremy Corbyn is working assiduously to ensure that the gravest crisis facing British imperialism in its peacetime history is resolved through

the worm-eaten parliamentary system and its rotten parties, which represent warring pro- and anti-EU factions of the ruling elite, with the working class left as spectators.

In his contribution to Friday's debate, Corbyn told the House that it had to "compromise to get this resolved." Labour would work with MPs across party lines around a number of soft Brexit options, he said. He declared that Labour's favoured soft Brexit plan was "based around the certainty of a permanent customs union" with the EU, adding that "close alignment with the Single Market" provided the "best compromise" for a "deeply divided country and...deeply divided House."

Such an outcome "is backed in large part by major organisations in industry and business and by trade unions," he stressed.

To placate Labour's Blairite wing, he said he would not rule out backing a second referendum on EU membership, before concluding, "If we cannot do that [agree a deal in parliament] on Monday, then I ultimately see no alternative to a general election."

Corbyn raised this possibility knowing that most Labour MPs are resolutely opposed to him becoming prime minister. The Blairites fear that his election could fuel demands by workers and youth for him to make good on his rhetoric in opposition to austerity and war.

Eight of the Blairites, who split off in order to set up The Independent Group (TIG) with three ex-Tories last month, calculate that if events lead to a general election, a much larger split in the Labour Party could materialise over Brexit policy. TIG is essentially a holding operation in readiness for this scenario. Yesterday it applied to the Electoral Commission to become a political party, Change UK-The Independent Group, in time for participation in possible European elections and a possible UK general election.

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