

Conservative Party implodes over Brexit crisis as May agrees to stand down next month

By Robert Stevens
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UK Prime Minister Theresa May is set to stand down as Tory party leader and prime minister after her European Union Withdrawal Agreement Bill goes before Parliament in the first week of June. Since May reached a deal with the EU in November, she has been unable to secure agreement from a deeply divided parliament.

After weeks of speculation about May's final departure date, on Thursday she agreed a timetable after pressure from her party's main backbench 1922 Committee. Her announcement followed six weeks of Brexit negotiations with Labour that have failed to reach an agreement. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn entered the Brexit talks offered by May at the start of April, accepting her calls for "national unity" in an effort to agree on a modified version of her deal.

May standing down will trigger a Tory leadership contest to be held over the summer, with the victor replacing her as prime minister. A field of up to 20 Tory MPs is expected to stand, a stark expression of the fracturing of the oldest political party of the British ruling elite.

Among the first to declare was former foreign secretary and hard Brexiteer Boris Johnson. He is favourite to win and would command support among many Eurosceptic Tory MPs and the party's wider membership. Tory rules stipulate several rounds of voting held over several weeks with candidates whittled down to the final two, and a party membership vote to select the new leader.

Other Tories who have declared they will stand include Esther McVey and International Development Secretary Rory Stewart, with other Cabinet ministers Jeremy Hunt, Amber Rudd, Andrea Leadsom, Michael Gove, Sajid Javid, and arch-Thatcherites Dominic Raab and Liz Truss expected to stand.

May has been a lame duck for months. Last December,

she survived a vote of no confidence from Tory MPs, but had to agree to stand down before the next general election in 2022. After failing to pass her EU deal in Parliament on three occasions, May pledged she would step down after her deal finally passed.

This only fuelled moves against her by the party's hard-Brexit wing, with local Tory associations agreeing to hold a non-binding vote of confidence in her leadership on June 15.

On Thursday evening, with Tory MPs baying for her blood, 1922 chairman Sir Graham Brady threatened May in a 90-minute discussion that unless she firmed up her departure plans, another vote of confidence would be permitted by his Committee. After meeting May, Brady told reporters, "We have agreed to meet to decide the timetable for the election of a new leader of the Conservative Party as soon the second reading has occurred and that will take place regardless of what the vote is on the second reading, whether it passes or whether it fails to pass."

With some speculation that May could attempt to stay on, the Tory rule book could even be altered to prevent it. The *Guardian* reported a 1922 committee member warning, "If she cannot get the withdrawal bill through ... supposing she still doesn't resign then, that is the point there is likely to be a rule change or even the rules set aside. It would be unsustainable. And she understands that."

The moves by the Conservative Party to replace May prompted a letter from Corbyn to May on Friday morning. Corbyn wrote, "I believe the talks between us about finding a compromise agreement on leaving the European Union have now gone as far as they can ... The increasing weakness and instability of your government means there cannot be confidence in securing whatever

might be agreed between us.”

Corbyn assumed his now familiar mantle of an elder statesman preserving parliamentary stability and order: “As you have been setting out your decision to stand down and cabinet ministers are competing to succeed you, the position of the government has become ever more unstable and its authority eroded. Not infrequently, proposals by your negotiating team have been publicly contradicted by statements from other members of the cabinet.”

Corbyn personally met May for talks on Tuesday evening, with his letter reiterating Labour’s “growing concern in both the shadow cabinet and parliamentary Labour Party about the government’s ability to deliver on any compromise agreement.” The intransigence of the Tories’ hard-Brexit wing has effectively torpedoed the central demand of dominant sections of big business: that a Customs Union with the EU be part of any final Withdrawal Deal. Corbyn complained, “In recent days we have heard senior cabinet ministers reject any form of customs union, regardless of proposals made by government negotiators.”

Corbyn accepted May’s move to put her deal before Parliament again, and while saying Labour would continue to vote against it, “we will carefully consider any proposals the government wishes to bring forward to break the Brexit deadlock.”

While the imminent collapse of May’s government forced the end of talks, a leaked memo shown to London’s *Evening Standard* reveals that Corbyn did everything possible to push a version of May’s deal through and keep her in office.

The *Standard* reported that the memo—summing up where agreement existed between the government and Labour over May’s Brexit deal—was sent from Whitehall to Labour negotiators following Corbyn’s talks with May. The newspaper noted that a “Whitehall source” said “that the document appeared to show areas where the two sides had reached agreement in the talks” including “agreement to leave with a deal rather than on no-deal terms; to leave on July 31; to have as close as possible, frictionless trade; to end free movement; to seek the fullest participation in EU agencies covering medicines and other critical areas.”

According to the document, May could hold a series of free indicative votes in Parliament as early as next week, where MPs “would rank in order of preference five different forms of customs arrangements with the EU, ranging from a full permanent trade pact to a looser or

temporary arrangement. The aim is to force the Commons, which has rejected every option shown so far, to a decision.”

There could also be a “free vote on making any deal subject to a second referendum, which appears designed to block the campaign backed by 150 Labour MPs for a confirmatory ballot attached to any deal.”

The Tories’ new leader is scheduled to be in place by the party’s annual conference at the end of September. By that time, Corbyn will have served four years as Labour leader. That May, who has staggered from one crisis to the next after losing her majority in the 2017 general election, was able to remain in office is entirely down to Corbyn. Despite taking the Labour leadership with the backing of hundreds of thousands of party members and supporters, on a mandate to oppose austerity, militarism and war, Corbyn has capitulated to his defeated Blairite opponents again and again.

With Labour ahead of the Conservatives in the polls, the Blairites insisted that Corbyn accept May’s invitation to Brexit talks and ditch any moves to force a general election to bring down a widely despised government; instructions he carried out to the letter.

The crisis of rule in Britain and the meltdown of the Tories will be exacerbated by the expected victory of the newly formed Brexit Party in next week’s European elections. A victory for the Brexit Party, set up by former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage, will further polarise divisions within the main parties. The vast majority of Farage’s support comes from disillusioned Tory voters and is particularly strong among older generations.

According to opinion polls, the Brexit Party is set to win by taking anything up to 34 percent of the vote and could possibly score higher than both the Tories and Labour combined. There are even estimates that the Tories may only poll in single figures and finish sixth overall—which would be the worst national election result in their history.

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