

British MPs vote to seize control of Brexit

Government defeat as ministers resign to join cross-party effort to find alternative to May's plan

Some 30 Tory MPs joined forces with Labour and other opposition parties to grab control of the Commons order paper from Theresa May © PA

George Parker, Jim Pickard and Laura Hughes in London YESTERDAY

Theresa May on Monday night risked losing control of Brexit after MPs voted by 329 to 302 to seize control of the House of Commons timetable and test support for alternatives to her withdrawal deal.

The UK prime minister was forced to abandon plans to hold a third vote on her unloved Brexit deal on Monday amid continuing resistance from Conservative Eurosceptics and Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist party.

With Mrs May's version of Brexit blocked by Brexiters, a predominantly pro-Remain parliament on Monday night took the initiative and backed a cross-party effort to develop a Plan B.

Some 30 Tory MPs joined forces with Labour and other opposition parties to grab control of the Commons order paper to make time for the Brexit votes. Alistair Burt, Foreign Office minister, stood down to join the rebellion

Richard Harrington, business minister, also quit to support the highly unusual constitutional move. In a resignation letter to Mrs May, he claimed the government was "playing roulette with the lives and livelihoods of the majority of people in this country". Steve Brine, a health minister, also stood down from the government.

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Sir Oliver Letwin

The Commons voted by a majority of 27 to begin a series of so-called indicative votes on Wednesday intended to establish whether there is a majority for a softer form of Brexit or a second referendum.

Mrs May ordered her ministers to oppose the move, claiming that it effectively turned

parliament into a parallel government. She said she would not give a “blank cheque” to MPs, nor promise to implement whatever is agreed.

Oliver Letwin, the former Tory minister who led Monday night’s initiative, said he hoped the move would give parliament a chance to find a cross-party way forward on Brexit, although it is far from clear there is a majority for any Plan B.

“This is just the beginning of a very difficult process as we struggle to find consensus across the House,” said Sir Oliver.

MPs are expected to vote on ideas such as “Norway-plus”, which combines membership of the EU customs union and single market, and a second referendum.

Mrs May said she would engage “constructively” with the process but stressed the government could not back any proposal that breached promises made in Tory manifesto at the 2017 election. That would exclude support for any of the “soft Brexit” alternatives being considered by MPs.

However, some backbenchers said that if the prime minister ignored the indicative votes they might seek to pass legislation forcing the government to act.

“We will be relying on the government to reflect parliament’s wishes . . . in the first instance but we won’t be relying on it for long,” Tory MP Nick Boles told BBC’s *Newsnight*. “If ultimately the government refuses to listen to what parliament has voted for, then we’ll look to bring forward a bill, pass an act of parliament, that will require the government to reflect parliament’s wishes.”

Several senior ministers including Liam Fox, international trade secretary, and Steve Barclay, Brexit secretary, said there was a growing possibility that a general election might be needed to end the Brexit stalemate.

Wednesday’s votes threaten to be a moment of high danger for Mrs May; many senior ministers including chancellor Philip Hammond and business secretary Greg Clark favour close economic ties with the EU. The prime minister has yet to say whether Tory MPs will be given a free vote.

Some Tory Eurosceptics — who met at Westminster on Monday night — fear their Brexit project may be starting to slip away from them.

One Eurosceptic MP said the meeting was “split 50-50” on whether to back Mrs May’s deal now, rather than risk a softer Brexit or no Brexit at all. The prime minister could bring back her deal to the Commons later in the week.

“Some of us are trying to make them see sense”, said one MP after the meeting. “If we don’t vote for Brexit now we won’t get it.”

Jacob Rees-Mogg, the head of the European Research Group of Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, told the meeting he would back the deal if the DUP did. Sammy Wilson, the DUP Brexit spokesman, told the same meeting there was no chance of that happening at the moment.

One Eurosceptic MP said: “I can’t see how this doesn’t end in a general election.”

Mrs May admitted Britain could be heading for a protracted “slow Brexit” unless there was a rapid resolution of the stand-off; if an extension to the Article 50 process were agreed by the EU, it could last many months and involve Britain taking part in European elections in May.

“Unless this House agrees to it, no-deal will not happen,” Mrs May told MPs. “No Brexit’ must not happen.” She said that a “slow Brexit”, involving a lengthy delay to the Article 50 exit process, would not “bring the British people together”.

Although reports of a “cabinet coup” did not materialise on Monday, Mrs May remained at loggerheads with the ERG, which reacted with fury as Mrs May appeared to rule out a no-deal exit.

Crispin Blunt, a senior MP, said Mrs May’s comments amounted to the biggest capitulation since the surrender of Singapore in 1942; last week Mrs May told MPs she could never accept any delay to Brexit beyond June 30.

On Monday Mrs May’s allies declined to repeat that statement, noting only that the prime minister thought a long extension to Article 50 — including British participation in European elections — was “the wrong thing to do”.

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The EU has said that if the deal is not passed by the Commons this week, the UK will be due to leave the bloc on April 12. On Monday the European Commission said that [a no-deal Brexit on that date was “increasingly likely”](#).

But she warned that the plan — designed to gauge support for alternative ways forward — would be an “unwelcome precedent” that would overturn various democratic institutions.

“I’m sceptical about such a process of indicative votes,” she told MPs. “When we’ve tried this kind of thing in the past it has produced contradictory outcomes or no outcome at all.”



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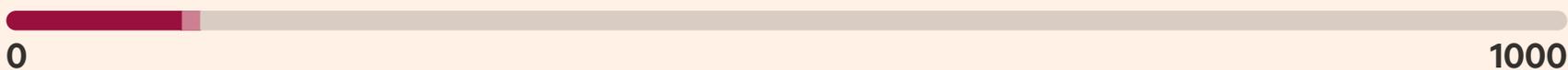
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