

# Britain: May and EU staring down barrel of a Corbyn government

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**To say that last week was a remarkable week in politics does not do it justice, writes Alan Thornett.**

Theresa May travelled to Brussels at the start of the week to try to persuade Michel Barnier and the EU Commission to agree that 'sufficient progress' had now been made—regarding the financial settlement, EU citizens in Britain and the Irish border—to recommend to the forthcoming EU summit to move on to stage 2 of the Brexit negotiations, that is the trade deal itself.

She took a document offering various concessions to get to the next stage of negotiations at all costs. Opposition to a financial settlement was dropped, some concessions on EU citizens living in Britain were made and some continuing role for the European Court of Justice was accepted. It contained, however, no workable solution as far as the Irish border was concerned—the most intractable problem of all.

In the middle of the meeting with Barnier, however, Arlene Foster of the DUP, the party keeping the Tories in office—who remarkably had not been consulted on the document—rang May to say that they had now had sight of the proposals and they were totally unacceptable. The DUP, she said, were not prepared to support any proposal that would imply a border either between the North of Ireland and the Irish Republic or between the North of Ireland and Britain (i.e. in the North Sea). May was forced into a shambolic abandonment of the meeting and a humiliating return to London.

The Irish government pledged to veto any proposal that did not contain a guarantee that there would be no borders imposed on Ireland. It was total deadlock. When asked who they thought would blink first, the DUP said that it would not be them because we had already cut our eyelids off! The deadline for an agreement was now defined as Friday midnight.

By Wednesday, the gravity of the situation was staring all sides in the face. President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, said that his fear was that the May government could not survive an ongoing deadlock. The stark reality was that they were staring at the spectre of a Corbyn government - which they are all desperate to avoid at all costs. The name of the game now was keeping May in office —despite the shambles she presiding over. Whether Labour's rise in the opinion polls the previous weekend was a factor in this it is hard to say—but it must have driven the point home.

Thursday saw phone calls between May and Foster and May and Barnier and by 10.00pm that night, rumours emerged that May was to make a new offer to break the deadlock. She flew to Brussels in the early hours of Friday morning and by 6.00am was at a press conference with Barnier introducing a 'revised' proposal that he could not wait to accept. There was, he said, to massive relief all round, now 'sufficient agreement' to move on to the next stage of negotiations. Theresa May, he said, had

done an excellent job and had shown leadership when it had been necessary.

There was a problem, however. If the first draft had been contradictory in the extreme this one was even more so. It was an unashamed and shambolic pack of lies designed to avoid a disastrous deadlock leading to a Labour government.

The proposal had the intended effect in terms of garnering support. With Barnier's words everything changed. All sides now supported the new agreement, however vehemently they may have opposed the previous, more-or-less identical, draft. The EU supported it. The various strands of hard-line Tory Brexiteers supported it, as did the Irish Government and the DUP—just. Those looking for a soft Brexit also supported it because it could be read, should you choose to do so, as a big concession towards a soft Brexit.

It was in effect a massive fudge. A fudge so big and so blatant that everyone could support it knowing that it would never happen and normal service could be resumed. As Andrew Rawnsley, who I rarely agree with, said in the Observer: 'The more they say they are all happy, the more sceptical you should be'.

Like the original draft, it claimed that while Britain would still be leaving both the single market and the customs union it would stay in 'full alignment' with the EU, which would make any hard borders in Ireland unnecessary. On the basis of this, it gave a firm guarantee to the Irish Government that there would be no hard borders. The basis for this was that whereas the previous draft had said 'regulatory alignment' the new one said 'full alignment'. Much airtime was spent over the weekend trying explain the difference, completely without success as far as I can see.

In fact, the whole thing is very clear. Whether it is 'full alignment' or 'regulatory alignment' such an arrangement, whilst it might avoid the issue of an Irish border, would in effect stop Britain leaving the EU, or even the single market, since it would be impossible for Britain to negotiate trading relations with any other country whilst this was the situation.

May and the Tory hardliners, however, were rowing back within 24 hours of the agreement.

Back in Britain, when asked whether the deal was binding, May told Parliament that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed' and that it was just a mechanism to move on to stage 2—which in effect junks the whole thing. Other Tory hardliners were claiming that 'full alignment' was not legally enforceable. Leading Brexiteer Bernard Jenkins, when asked whether he accepted the concept of 'full alignment' said no, he accepted the concept of 'full autonomy'. Others insisted that it is not an agreement at all but just a statement of intent.

All this scandalised the Irish Government and no wonder. The reality is that they are likely to be the big loser out of all this. They have been taken for a monumental ride.

The reality is that there is no possibility of avoiding a hard border in Ireland if Britain leaves the EU. It impossible. The idea that with Britain out of the EU it would be possible to travel to Dublin on an EU passport and travel to the North and over to mainland Britain without a passport check is not going to happen. The same with customs and excise. The EU would not accept it and nor would Britain.

When it comes to the crunch the concept of a hard border will be redefined and the Irish Government will be forced to accept it—whatever the effects on trade with the North and its agricultural sector.

Whether all this will save the May administration, however, is another matter. As Donald Tusk said

just after the deal was done 'this was the easy bit'. Whether it will give the May government any significant breathing space is far from clear. What is clear is the to negotiate a trade deal in less than a year is extremely difficult in any event. To do it led by the disastrous David Davis – who has been forced to admit that no risk assessments of industry or of society in terms of the impact of Brexit have been undertaken – means that it is going to be a very bumpy road with the process lurching from crisis to crisis.

## **Labour**

This situation has implications for Labour as well. Overall all the deal is a setback for a hard Brexit and plays to Labour's position which has been to increasingly take the leadership of the anti-hard Brexit wing of politics but without being specific in terms of the end of the process—partly because it has been constrained by the strong Brexit support amongst some Labour voters.

All this, however, is changing. According to a Survation poll, popular support for Brexit is starting to wane; 69% are now against a hard Brexit and a slim majority now support a second referendum. Survation also puts Labour 8 points ahead in the polls and saw Labour overtake the Tories in Scotland after Corbyn supporter Richard Leonard was elected as Scottish Labour leader.

Labour has started to firm up its position in terms of staying in the in the single market and the customs union. For some time Labour has been advocating that Britain should stay in during any transitional period— which is now inevitable for at least two years. The detail remains ambiguous but the direction of travel is clear.

When pressed by Marr on Sunday whether Labour was prepared to advocate staying in these institutions on an ongoing basis, Keir Starmer was noncommittal but did not rule it out. The same happened when it came to a second referendum, he (rightly) refused to rule that out either.

When asked by Marr whether staying in the single market would mean maintaining the principle of free movement. Starmer said that it would not be the same because free movement in its present form is a part of EU rules, and another formula would have to be negotiated. If it was not free movement he said, however, it would be 'easy movement'. Easy movement should mean no change to the current freedom of movement of all current EU, including British, citizens

The battle continues in Parliament over the Exit Bill and Labour is rightly demanding a meaningful vote at the end of the process along with Tory rebels like Dominic Grieve. This is not enough, however. It is time for Labour to clarify its position on all this—and take a much clearer and bolder stance. The ambiguity over free movement needs to come to an end. We are in a situation where a general election could come at any time, and clarity over all this will be essential in the campaign.

A hard Brexit is still a matter of principle for the Tory right and they will contemplate nothing less. And a hard Brexit remains a right wing Tory project with right wing Tory consequences—whether it is by agreement or by crashing out with no agreement. Labour should advocate staying within the single market and the customs union and to recognise unequivocally that that means the continuation of free movement.

The SNP is offering a common approach along these lines in Parliament and Labour should agree to that. If the negotiations crash, and there is a general election, Labour should call for an end to the whole process and pledge a second referendum in order to allow the people to decide in what is now very different political circumstances than when the original referendum took place.

Socialists should also vote to stay in in such a referendum—on the same political basis as in the first referendum. That is to say, whilst we regard the EU as a reactionary and un-reformable institution,

exit from it at this time under these conditions would strengthen the right wing, anti-migrant and racist forces and set the workers movement back for many years. We are now already seeing this with a much tougher stance on migration with individuals from the “Windrush” generation, settled for half a century in Britain, being threatened with deportation.

**Alan Thornett**, 13.12.17

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\* <http://socialistresistance.org/may-and-eu-staring-down-barrel-of-a-corbyn-government/11242>