

Theresa May's Conservative Government has successfully opposed the motion of no confidence tabled by Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn by 325 votes to 306. May immediately offered to hold talks with opposition party leaders and held talks with the SNP, Liberal Democrats, Greens and Plaid Cymru yesterday evening. She then proceeded to make a short statement outside Downing Street at 10pm in an attempt to reassure the nation and to challenge Jeremy Corbyn who has refused to meet the Prime Minister unless the Government rules out no deal.

Most see the talks as a successful tactical ploy by May. By waiting to make the offer until after winning the confidence vote, she avoided any significant backlash from her own MPs and has temporarily put the focus on Corbyn. He is now under increasing pressure to either engage in talks or back a second referendum – the latter of which he was encouraged to support in a joint letter from other opposition party leaders.

Despite last night's developments, May is not safe from future confidence votes. The margin of her victory shows that she would have lost if it had not been for DUP support. This suggests that if a Brexit deal could be found which commanded majority support in parliament but not that of the DUP, Theresa May would be at the mercy of Labour. If the DUP chose to respond by tabling their own no confidence motion, the question for Labour MPs would then be whether to back a deal or begin the 14 day process before a general election is triggered.

Away from the confidence vote, yesterday saw two important themes developing which shed some light on the likely next steps.

First, further details have emerged on the backbench Bill, tabled by Nick Boles, which the Chancellor suggested to business leaders would take no deal off the table. First, there are numerous reports of Cabinet splits regarding whether the Government should give the Bill their support. It is difficult to see how the Bill could pass without at least tacit support. Second, the Bill's present drafting does not suggest that no deal will automatically be taken off the table if parliament cannot reach an agreement. Instead the drafting suggests that the Bill would merely compel the Government to extend Article 50 in the absence of an agreed Brexit deal. However, the EU have continued to indicate that they will not grant an extension of Article 50 without a clear route forward. Third, Select Committee Chairs, who under the present drafting of the Bill would be given the power propose an alternative route forward were parliament to fail to agree one, have reportedly met and agreed to oppose this element of the Bill.

These developments continue to show that it is difficult for parliament itself to stop a no deal outcome. Although there is a clear parliamentary majority against no deal, it is still unclear how MPs will be able to force the Government's hand to stop the UK automatically leaving the EU on the 29th of March. Backbenchers reportedly have a range of alternative plans in place, however, as it presently stands the Boles Bill will need amending if it is to achieve the objective of stopping a no deal. Furthermore, No 10 continue to see leaving no deal on the table as key if they are to win over more MPs to a deal or if they are to further renegotiate with the EU 27.

Second, a consensus is starting to build that if May is to get any deal through, changes will have to be focussed on the non-binding political declaration which sets out the negotiated

ambitions for the UK's future relationship with the EU. No 10 continue to indicate that they do not think there is scope or time to substantially change the legally binding Withdrawal Agreement which sets out the terms of exit. Most commentators are suggesting that the most likely route forward is movement on customs arrangements. Any movement is likely to cause a significant debate in the Cabinet and may further alienate hardline Brexiteers. Throughout yesterday, Cabinet Ministers made contradictory statements to the media as to whether they would support closer or prolonged customs alignment with the EU. This clearly indicates that Cabinet remains split as to how to proceed.

Interestingly, two years ago to the day, May told MPs at Lancaster House that *"I do want us to have a customs agreement with EU. Whether that means... a completely new customs agreement, become an associate member of the Customs Union in some way, or remain a signatory to some elements of it, I hold no preconceived position"*. The imprecision in her language might give her some scope to forge a route forward but it is far from certain that any changes will deliver the parliamentary majority for a deal.

Talks are likely to continue over the coming days both within Cabinet and between Government and other MPs. However, the next significant parliamentary event is expected to take place on Monday when the Government will table a motion setting out their next steps. This motion will be amendable and a number of opposition and Conservative MPs have already confirmed that they will be attempting to table amendments which would see parliament vote on their own preferred outcomes. An amendment to the business of the House (the running order of Parliament) which would allow the Boles Bill to begin its parliamentary process is also expected to be voted on. At the moment, it is still unclear if any plan or amendment will be able to command a majority in the House of Commons.

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