

# EU leaders reject May's idea to salvage her Brexit deal

Juncker tells PM to tell Europe what she wants in 'nebulous and imprecise' debate.

EU leaders delivered a devastating knockback to Theresa May after she appealed to them to hold "nothing in reserve" and work with her to salvage her Brexit deal by putting a 12-month limit on the unpopular Irish backstop.

The embattled prime minister had pinned her hopes on a last-ditch effort to persuade the European Union to work with her in devising a legal guarantee, known as a "joint interpretative instrument", that she believes could get her Brexit deal through parliament.

The idea of the EU having the target of terminating the Northern Ireland backstop no more than a year after it was put in force had been supported by Germany's Angela Merkel and Austria's Sebastian Kurz.

But it was opposed by Ireland, France, Sweden, Spain and Belgium, who voiced doubts that the prime minister would be able to sell the technical concession to hostile MPs in Westminster.

Following an address by May before a dinner, and subsequent discussions among the 27 member states, the European commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, suggested it was difficult to imagine any deal getting through parliament at the moment, and that it was not up to the EU to satisfy the demands of rebellious MPs.

Juncker said: "Our UK friends need to say what they want, rather than asking what we want. We would like in a few weeks for our UK friends to set out their expectations because this debate is sometimes nebulous and imprecise and I would like clarifications."

Deliberately avoiding the confrontational approach demanded by her hard Brexit critics, May had appealed to her EU counterparts to work with her in revising the Brexit deal. "We must get this right," she said. "Let's hold nothing in reserve,

let's work intensively to get this over the line."

The prime minister told the summit that "we have to change the perception that the backstop is a trap" - clearly signalling that it had to be time-limited - and insisted that with revisions her deal was "the only deal capable of getting through parliament" to bring EU leaders on side.

But Juncker said that he could not understand the mindset of British MPs, and indicated an unwillingness to bend to the Commons, setting up a nervous few weeks for Downing Street.

He said: "I am still of the opinion that Mrs May is fighting hard and bravely but we have not seen results."

Some EU sources said there would be no further "reassurances" for the UK other than the short statement agreed over dinner on Thursday in Brussels, dashing hopes of more complicated legal wheezes, such as treaties deposited at the UN.

"This is it, as I understand it," said an EU source, pointing out the European summit conclusions were binding on members. A second EU diplomat said the "door was still open", but complained that May had not explained what she was seeking in enough detail in her address to the leaders.

May had billed her appeal as the last opportunity to save her unpopular deal and get it through parliament in time for the 29 March deadline, although it was unclear that the move would persuade a sceptical Democratic Unionist party and hard Brexit Conservatives that the UK cannot be stuck in the backstop.

The prime minister still hopes to begin a short, intense period of final negotiations with EU officials following the Brussels summit, leading to an additional guarantee that No 10 insists must have legal weight.

But a final version of the summit communique published by the EU leaders late on Thursday was less generous to May than earlier drafts.

Irish objections led the removal of a phrase that the EU "stands ready to examine whether any further assurance can be provided" on the backstop. Wording that the the backstop would not be "a desirable outcome" was also cut from the text.

The UK had hoped to set a year as a target for getting out of the backstop by

negotiating a free trade deal or an alternative arrangement for avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. It is still hoped that further talks can run on through Christmas on such a document.

With little prospect of a quick breakthrough though Downing Street conceded that the delayed meaningful vote on what is likely to be a revised Brexit deal would not take place until the new year. It would go ahead “as soon as possible in January” having previously said it would take place before 21 January.

May’s reputation rests on resolving the impasse, after an intensely difficult week, in which she was forced to pull the vote on the original Brexit deal on Tuesday because she had no chance of getting it through the House of Commons.

That prompted hostile Conservative MPs to table a motion of no confidence in her as party leadership, which she saw off on Wednesday by 200 to 117.

In Brussels on Thursday, May was forced to publicly repeat a promise she had made to Conservative MPs, when pleading for her job before the party’s 1922 Committee the day before, that she would not lead the party into the next general election.

The prime minister acknowledged that she “would love to be able to lead the Conservative party into the next general election”, which she said would be as scheduled in 2022, but conceded “I think it is right that the party feels it would prefer to go into that election with a new leader.”

In Brussels, a bilateral meeting between May and Leo Varadkar, the Irish taoiseach, underscored the diplomatic difficulties ahead of May. Varadkar said his British counterpart had made a range of suggestions to break the deadlock, some of which “made sense, others I thought were difficult”.

A backstop is deemed necessary by the EU to ensure that there will be no return to a hard border in Ireland in the event that the UK and the EU cannot sign a long-term free trade deal. If it comes into force, the UK would remain in a customs union with the EU.

José Manuel Barroso(@JMDBarroso)

In the future there will be no relation more important for the #uk than the one with the #EU . And for the #eu also there will be no third country more important than

the #uk. It's crucial to avoid resentment in the way the withdrawal is made. I hope the #eucouncil understands it

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Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/13/may-urges-eu-leaders-to-work-with-her-to-salvage-brexit-deal>

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