

Theresa May accepts her dream of a Brexit before the EU election is over

The new target is to win support for a Brexit by the end of June, avoiding the need for newly elected Euro-MPs to take their seats



British Prime Minister Theresa May at 10 Downing Street (Photo: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images)

In brief

- Theresa May wants cross-party talks with Labour wrapped up next week
- The key sticking point is Labour's demand for a permanent customs union

Downing Street has abandoned any lingering hope of rushing a Brexit plan through the Commons in time to avoid elections to the European Parliament taking place in Britain.

The contests are scheduled to take place on 23 May.

Theresa May has repeatedly maintained they would be cancelled if a withdrawal agreement could be agreed by MPs by the day before

New timetable

But one Whitehall official has now conceded: "Realistically we have passed that point."

He indicated that the government's revised target was to win support for a Brexit by the end of June, avoiding the requirement for newly elected Euro-MPs to take up their seats in the Strasbourg Parliament on 2 July.



Theresa May votes in local elections near her Thames Valley home (Photo: Andrew Matthews/PA Wire)

The new timetable emerged after Mrs May indicated she wanted cross-party talks between the Tories and Labour to be wrapped up next week.

On Monday the two sides met for a session described by both sides as “serious and constructive” and they are due to meet again next Tuesday.

The expectation is that a decision will be taken at this point on whether the Tory and Labour teams can reach agreement on a Brexit formula that they can sell to their parties – and command a Commons majority.

Sticking points

The key sticking-point is Labour’s demand that Britain signs up to a permanent customs union – a position that has been repeatedly ruled out by Mrs May and would be fiercely opposed by the majority of Tory MPs.

Mrs May is understood to be considering a formula under which Britain would adopt EU customs rules – but avoiding the term ‘customs union’ – as the price for Labour supporting her withdrawal agreement.

Julian Smith, the chief whip, David Lidington, the prime minister’s effective deputy, and Philip Hammond, the chancellor, are understood to support the plan.

Mrs May told MPs on Wednesday that both sides agreed on “some of the benefits of a customs union”.

The two front benches could probably muster an overall majority for that plan, but would risk huge opposition from Brexiteer Tories and Remain-supporting Labour MPs.

A further complication would be in persuading the European Union to endorse the proposal.

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