

# Theresa May loses Brexit vote in landslide



AFP/GETTY IMAGES - The British Parliament voted against a Brexit plan supported by Prime Minister Theresa May.

LONDON — Prime Minister Theresa May on Tuesday suffered a humiliating defeat over her plan to withdraw Britain from the European Union, thrusting the country further into political chaos with only 10 weeks to go until it is scheduled to leave the bloc.

The 432-202 vote to reject her plan was one of the biggest defeats in the House of Commons for a prime minister in recent British history, and it underscores how under May, the prime minister's office has lost ground in shaping important policy. Now factions in Parliament will seek to seize the initiative, an unpredictable new stage in the process of withdrawing from Europe, known as Brexit.

Before the vote, lawmakers in both the Conservative and Labour parties were being urged to put country before party to resolve the stalemate. Yet the problem remains that, even if they did, there is no clear path forward that can command a majority in the Commons.

In her final appeal in Parliament, May impressed on the lawmakers the importance of the vote facing them. "The responsibility on each and every one of us at this moment is profound," she said, "for this is a historic decision that will set the future of our country for generations."

Like most others, though, the prime minister has no easy answers about the way forward. She has signaled that she will appeal to the European Union in Brussels for concessions and try again to win parliamentary approval, but the bloc is unlikely to grant her any.

Some Cabinet members are pressing for a different course, calling for nonbinding "indicative votes," in which members of Parliament can freely express their preferences for the various Brexit plans being bandied about.

The hope is that May's plan might emerge from that process with the highest level of support.

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the opposition Labour Party, is widely expected to table a vote of no confidence, which if successful could trigger a general election. But few analysts believe that he can muster the numbers to win.

Negotiating the withdrawal from the European Union has been May's singular focus since she became prime minister, displacing social problems like housing and health care.

But her failure to build consensus behind a single vision of Britain's future outside the 28-nation bloc has allowed painful divides in the country to deepen.

With no consensus behind any one pathway, and a vanishing window for further negotiation, more radical solutions are rising to the fore.

One group of lawmakers is campaigning for a repeat referendum, which could overturn the mandate to leave, and another favors leaving the European Union on March 29 without a withdrawal agreement, a move that experts warn could lead to shortages of some foods and an economic downturn.

"This is probably the most important piece of legislation for decades, and the executive can't get it through," said Tim Stanley, a columnist for The Daily Telegraph. "It's a very dramatic moment."

May expected to lose the vote, having lost the support of many of her own lawmakers. But her surrogates scrambled, as late as Tuesday, to rally lawmakers to her side, in hopes of keeping the margin narrow enough to try again for parliamentary approval.

Earlier in the day, the attorney general, Geoffrey Cox, raked his eyes over the back benches of the House of Commons and rebuked Parliament, in a booming voice, for contemplating a sudden and unregulated end to 45 years of integration with Europe.

Beseeching his fellow Tories to get behind May's plan, Cox asked: "What are you playing at? What are you doing? You are not children in the playground. You are legislators, and it is your job. We are playing with people's lives."

He continued, rolling his Rs in theatrical fashion, "Do we opt for order? Or do we choose chaos?" The environment secretary, Michael Gove, was equally dramatic in a morning radio interview, warning lawmakers that "if we don't vote for this deal tonight, in the words of Jon Snow, winter is coming," a reference to "Game of Thrones."

But critics of the deal were equally adamant, saying that May had emerged from two years of negotiations with an agreement that satisfied no one. Dominic Raab, who stepped down as May's Brexit secretary in November, described her agreement as "wracked with self-doubt, defeatism and fear."

"This deal before us can't end the grinding process — it can only prolong it," Raab said. "It would torment us and our European neighbors for the foreseeable future."

Under normal circumstances, a British prime minister would be expected to resign after losing a vote on their flagship policy, but the Brexit process has so unsettled political conventions that May could survive to make revisions and pitch her deal again.

In December, May survived a leadership challenge from within her own Conservative Party and, under its rules, is safe from another until the end of the year.

"We have been in extraordinary circumstances," said Nikki da Costa, a former

director of legal affairs at 10 Downing Street. “Things that in normal times would not be considered survivable have become normalized. What the government would be looking for is a pathway through this.”

Da Costa predicted that “we will be doing this again in a couple of weeks’ time.”

Nevertheless, Tuesday’s vote represented a clear rejection of May’s handling of Brexit and a failure of her gamble that Parliament would ultimately accept her deal for fear of something worse.

Philip Cowley, a professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London, said he was struggling to identify a comparable defeat in the history of British politics.

“When you ask me for a historical benchmark, I can’t find any example. I don’t think anything like it has come along,” Cowley said. “It’s an issue which has caused the parties to have split on an almost theological level.”

May will now face pressure to allow Parliament to vote on options other than her Brexit plan, a fuzzy middle way that keeps different economic possibilities open for the future but also restores the power to control immigration within the European Union.

Alternatives include proposals to adhere more closely to the European Union’s economic rule book, by remaining in a customs union with the bloc, or going further and staying within its single market. But that would involve obeying more European rules, abandoning the idea of conducting an independent trade policy, and possibly allowing the free movement of European workers.

Most members of Parliament oppose the prospect of leaving the union without a deal on March 29, a disorderly and chaotic rupture that would do significant economic damage, so they may press for an extension of the negotiating period. European officials will be reluctant to grant that without any clear new strategy from the government, but they, too, want to avoid a “no deal” Brexit.

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Source: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2019/01/15/teresa-may-loses-brexit-vote-landslide-faces-confidence-vote/j5S8RoLnvOBFXpIW6lxJkJ/story.html>

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