

UK and EU leaders in danger of misunderstanding each other

Both sides want orderly Brexit but May's job – and Boris's future one – may depend on it.



Former foreign secretary Boris Johnson leaves the Cabinet office in London on Tuesday. Photograph: Jack Taylor/Getty

As Theresa May prepares to ask EU leaders to delay Brexit at a summit in Brussels on Thursday, the two sides are in danger of misunderstanding one another's intentions.

Michel Barnier's warning on Tuesday that a long extension of Britain's EU membership "needs to be linked to . . . a new event" was widely understood to refer to a general election or a second referendum.

But in Britain, a long extension is perceived as an EU demand designed to cancel Brexit by means of an election or a referendum.

If the prime minister requests a long extension of up to two years, she could lose a number of Brexiteer cabinet ministers. But although Britain and the EU want an

orderly Brexit as soon as possible, a long extension could be the best way of securing it.

Impatient with May and distrustful of her, EU leaders may be tempted to limit any extension to three months unless she promises to seek a fresh consensus around a softer Brexit or to hold a second referendum.

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But she is unable to make such a commitment and a short, one-off extension will be viewed by hardline Brexiteers as a cliff edge deferred, with the option of a no-deal Brexit still open.

Only the threat of a lengthy delay, perhaps of up to two years, will concentrate minds sufficiently to give May a fighting chance of persuading enough hardliners that her deal is the only way they can be sure that Britain will leave the EU at all.

Will the PM be gone by summer?

The DUP's Nigel Dodds gave little away on Tuesday about the progress of his party's negotiations with the government.

But even if the DUP backs May's deal and a few dozen Conservative Brexiteers follow suit, the prime minister may need to offer a further inducement to her own MPs.

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