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## **VULTURES CIRCLE OVER BRITISH PM IN EU TALKS**

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Brexit hardliners in British prime minister Theresa May's party have rebelled against plans for an EU 'customs partnership'.

The threat to her authority raises the risk of the UK exiting the EU without a deal, amid British parliament efforts to prevent that scenario.

The hardline European Research Group (ERG), a clique of 60 Conservative Party MPs led by Jacob Rees-Mogg, issued May its ultimatum in a report last week, which came to light on Tuesday (1 May).

The 30-page file, entitled "Memorandum - the New Customs Partnership", said plans for a deal in which the UK would mirror EU customs rules on Britain's borders and collect tariffs on behalf of the European Union, would make it "impossible" for the UK to have an independent trade policy.

ERG members have threatened to boycott votes in parliament if May goes ahead, questioning her ability to govern.

"I will not support the customs partnership and doubt many ERG members would either," Rees-Mogg told The Sun, Britain's top-selling tabloid on Tuesday.

"The customs partnership is incompatible with the Conservative party manifesto," he added in remarks to other media, calling it "completely cretinous, the silliest thing I could possibly think of".

Hardline members in May's cabinet - including David Davis, her Brexit minister, and Liam Fox, her trade secretary - have also threatened to resign if she goes ahead with the EU customs deal, posing further questions for her government.

"I don't think there is a customs union that could ever be acceptable \* If we are in a customs union of any sort we will have less ability to shape Britain's future than we have today. That is not what the public voted for," Fox told the BBC.

If the hard-Brexit foreign minister Boris Johnson and environment minister Michael Gove were to join the rebellion, May's days in office could be numbered.

The Conservative party's intestinal warfare will come to a head on Wednesday when May's 11-member Brexit sub-committee meets in Downing Street to discuss EU exit talks.

"We have been absolutely clear that we are leaving the customs union and won't be joining a customs union," the prime minister's official spokesman said ahead of the meeting.

Some form of customs accord is central to the final Brexit deal, not least because it would prevent the creation of a hard border in Ireland - a red line for Irish and EU negotiators.

The ERG wants a "streamlined customs arrangement" in which the UK imposes border checks, but uses high-tech electronic solutions to minimise disruption for people going back and forth.

But the EU, which does not believe the "streamlined" model would work, has insisted on a "backstop" plan in which Northern Ireland would remain a full member of the customs union if other arrangements failed.

The Tory warfare over the customs deal comes ahead of a looming deadline in October to finalise the Brexit withdrawal agreement.

But if the UK were to crash out of the EU with no deal in place, that would pose even broader questions over the Brexit process after a vote in the British parliament earlier on Tuesday.

Peers in the House of Lords backed an amendment to the European Union Withdrawal Bill by 335 votes to 244 to give MPs the right to vote on the final Brexit scenario.

"We are disappointed that the House of Lords has voted for this amendment in spite of the assurances we have provided," Brexit minister Lord Callanan said.

"What this amendment would do is weaken the UK's hand in our negotiations with the EU by giving parliament unprecedented powers to instruct the government to do anything with regard to the negotiations - including trying to keep the UK in the EU indefinitely," he said.

The opposition Labour Party's shadow Brexit secretary, Keir Starmer, welcomed the move.

There was "no majority in parliament for a no-deal Brexit", he said, adding: "Under no circumstances can the prime minister ... crash the UK out of the EU without a deal".

Lord Newby, the Liberal Democrat leader in the House of Lords, said the vote "puts parliament in the driving seat".

"Brexit is the most important decision facing the country for a generation and it is vital that parliament - not the government - decides whether or not any Brexit deal is acceptable," he said.