
BREXIT: THERESA MAY WARNED DOZENS OF TORIES COULD REBEL OVER NO-DEAL

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BBC (22 February 2019)

Dozens of normally loyal Conservative MPs could rebel against the government in a bid to prevent a "no-deal" Brexit, Downing Street has been warned.

Leaders of a group of MPs comprising Leavers and Remainers say they may back alternatives if Mrs May's reworked deal cannot command a Commons majority.

Co-chairman Andrew Percy told the BBC more than 30 may try to block no deal.

The government says "productive" talks in Brussels aimed at addressing MPs' concerns continue "urgently".

The UK remains on course to leave the European Union on 29 March.

But the government has repeatedly refused to rule out the possibility of the UK leaving without a formal deal, in the event that Mrs May cannot get MPs to approve the deal she negotiated with Brussels in time.

Many MPs fear that scenario would be damaging to business and cause chaos at ports.

Growing concerns over the prospect of a no-deal exit are set to come to a head next Wednesday when MPs debate Brexit again and, if the UK and EU haven't agreed a deal by then, will vote on future options.

The Brexit Delivery Group says "numerous" Tory MPs are prepared to back an amendment tabled by former minister Sir Oliver Letwin and Labour's Yvette Cooper to give Parliament the opportunity to delay Brexit and stop a no-deal exit if there is no agreement with the EU by the middle of March.

It has been reported that a handful of ministers, including potentially some in the cabinet, could also back the amendment, in what would be a direct challenge to the prime minister's authority.

The BBC's Newsnight political editor Nicholas Watt said a number "were saying in private they would be prepared to lose their jobs" to be able to support the amendment.

'Jeopardising Brexit'

Mr Percy told the BBC that members of his group were becoming "tired" of the rival European Research Group faction's refusal to back the prime minister.

The ERG of Brexiteers, led by Jacob Rees-Mogg and Steve Baker, insist the "no-deal" option must be preserved as negotiating leverage in Brussels and declined to back the PM in a non-binding vote on the issue recently.

In a letter to government whips, Mr Percy and his co-chairman Simon Hart write: "Not only does this risk damaging the national interest, but also... we are putting in jeopardy the very thing many colleagues have spent decades campaigning for; our exit from the European Union."

The group has previously remained "almost without exception" united behind voting for the deal, the letter points out.

They believe the main sticking point - MPs' demands for changes to the backstop, the "insurance policy" to prevent the return of customs checks on the Irish border - will be secured.

However, they fear it might not be enough to win over some Brexiteers.

Reaching out to Remainers

The BBC's Nick Watt said the prime minister was "taking no chances and is working hard to secure a revised deal with the EU by next Tuesday, the eve of the vote".

On Thursday, Mrs May held meetings with senior ministers who have expressed concerns about the impact of a no-deal scenario on business and also leading Remainers in her party, such as Justine Greening and Phillip Lee.

BBC Political Correspondent Alex Forsyth explains what we know so far about The Independent Group

The duo have been touted as potential defectors to the newly formed Independent Group of ex-Tory and Labour MPs, which is calling for another EU referendum in return for supporting the PM.

Mr Lee told the BBC that although he was staying in his party, there were "worrying" signs of a "populist" shift in direction and it was time for Mrs May to "face down" the ERG.

"There are elements of that group that do not reflect the Conservatism that I joined in 1992 and it's about time that we dealt with it," he told Radio 4's Today.

The government has described the latest talks in Brussels involving Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay, Attorney General Geoffrey Cox and EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier as "productive".

Mr Barclay and Mr Cox will meet Mr Barnier again early next week.