

UK MEPs in Brexit deadline plea

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News

Scottish MEP Alyn Smith has joined with other deputies to write an open letter to all MEPs, calling for more time to thrash out Brexit negotiations.



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Senior Scottish Nationalist MEP Alyn Smith is spearheading fresh calls for an extension of the Article 50 timetable in the ongoing Brexit talks.

He and other deputies have written an open letter to MEPs belonging to all political groups, calling for them to lend their support to the demand for more time in the talks to avoid a No Deal or what he calls a “Blind Brexit.”

They say this is vital in order to avoid an “unsustainable short-term fudge” emerging from the protracted Brexit negotiations.

The demand on Wednesday comes against a backdrop of mounting speculation in Westminster that a Withdrawal Agreement could, more than two years after the EU Referendum, finally be signed off by the UK government, possibly as soon as the end of this week.

The letter, seen by this website, says that an extension to Article 50 will "leave the door open for cooler heads, and warmer hearts, in the UK to prevail."

It reads, "Despite our political differences, as UK MEPs we are united around one fact: if you wish to allow the UK to remain within our EU family, then it will necessitate an extension of the Article 50 timetable."

"Where the parliament will, of course, not have a direct say in any such decision, as MEPs you have influence in your national capitals and on others in these discussions, and a duty to our citizens to find a durable solution. Our concern is that despite the best efforts of the EU's negotiators we will be presented instead with an unsustainable short-term fudge."

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"The EU cannot avert a No-Deal Brexit if the UK chooses to pursue it. The EU can, however, be ready to assist in avoiding it by leaving the door open for cooler heads, and warmer hearts, in the UK to prevail."

BOTHERSOME BACKSTOP

Theresa May said last week that 95 percent of the Brexit deal had already been agreed, with just the thorny Northern Irish border issue holding up a final agreement.

Both sides have agreed to put in place an Irish backstop, also referred to as an insurance policy, that would only be triggered if a future trade deal is not in place by the end of 2020 - or if this final deal does not ensure a frictionless border.

This is because there have been warnings that a return of visible border checks could undermine the peace process in Northern Ireland as well as damaging businesses operating on both sides.

If a deal is reached with the EU, UK MPs will be asked to approve it in a crucial House of Commons vote before Brexit day on 29 March.

UK government Cabinet ministers met at Downing Street on Tuesday where they agreed they wanted to reach a deal with the EU by the end of the month. The EU says it will only schedule a special summit to agree on a deal if enough progress has been made in the negotiations. There are provisional plans in place for a Brexit summit later this month or in December.

TIME PLEASE, GENTLEMEN (AND WOMEN)

However, Smith and some of his fellow MEPs say more time is still likely to be needed to allow the UK and EU to thrash out a satisfactory agreement.

"Even if a vague Withdrawal Agreement is concluded and approved by the UK and European parliaments, there is no guarantee it would be honoured - the opposite is, sadly, a considerable risk"

"Extending the timetable is not, we are well aware, presently the official policy of the UK government. Nevertheless, a change of Prime Minister, collapse of government, or the negotiations, or all three, is quite possible. Even if a vague Withdrawal Agreement is concluded and approved by the UK and European parliaments, there is no guarantee it would be honoured - the opposite is, sadly, a considerable risk," the letter says.

It goes on, "In our view, there are significant elements within and around the UK Conservative Party that fully intend to force either a 'No-Deal Brexit' or a 'No-Detail-Blind-Brexit', with the express intention of undermining it afterwards. Either scenario will have disastrous consequences for all our citizens and for harmony on our continent and the talks on the future relationship."

"All of the ways to avoid a No-Deal Brexit will require an extension to the Article 50 negotiating period."

As well as Smith, who is an ardent 'remainer', the letter is signed by the following MEPs: Catherine Bearder (ALDE); Seb Dance (S&D); Jill Evans (Greens/EFA); John Howarth (S&D); Wajid Khan (S&D); Jude Kirton-Darling (S&D); Jean Lambert (Greens/EFA); Clare Moody (S&D); Molly Scott-Cato (Greens/EFA); Catherine Stihler (S&D); Charles Tannock (ECR); Derek Vaughan (S&D) and Julie Ward (S&D).

Meanwhile, the UK-based think tank Open Europe published a new report, "Resetting the backstop," on Wednesday.

The paper examines how the UK and EU arrived at the current impasse over the Irish backstop issue and considers possible compromise solutions to reach an agreement and successfully conclude the withdrawal phase of the Brexit negotiations.

Open Europe's Policy Analyst, David Shiels, said, "The future of the Irish border was always going to be one of the most difficult aspects of the Brexit negotiations. The reason for having a backstop is understandable, but the EU's insistence on a Northern Ireland-only backstop has the potential to lead to No Deal, damaging UK-Ireland relations in the process."

"There is still a path to a deal, and it is reassuring that all sides acknowledge the special circumstances of Northern Ireland. However, the Government must be clear about the legal and political implications of the final version of the backstop," he added.

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at the Parliament Magazine

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