

Article 50 extension looking likely as crunch UK Brexit vote looms

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News

As the furore surrounding Brexit reaches fever pitch, with British MPs widely expected to jettison Theresa May's deal, the question remains - what next?



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There is increasing speculation that the UK will ask for an extension to Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, putting the UK's exit from the EU on temporary hold.

Catherine Stihler, Labour MEP for Scotland, said, "It looks impossible for Theresa May to get her Brexit deal through the [UK House of] Commons, no matter what last-minute concessions she offers."

The veteran EU policymaker added, "It was reckless to trigger Article 50 when the Prime Minister did,

with no semblance of a plan, and that's why we now find ourselves in this chaos just weeks away from the deadline."

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"But the clock is ticking. It is increasingly possible that we won't leave on March 29. However, any extension to the process won't be to renegotiate Theresa May's bad deal - the EU has made that clear. I don't see how Article 50 could be extended beyond the European elections as there simply is nothing more to negotiate."

"So if there is an extension, and I hope there is, it will be a short period to allow for a General Election or a People's Vote," Stihler added.

Fellow British Labour MEP Julie Ward said that in the run-up to Tuesday's crucial vote, Parliament had "found its voice on Brexit."

"While the Conservative Government is in utter paralysis, proper debate, scrutiny and accountability is alive and well in the House of Commons on this defining issue," she added.

"If Parliament cannot decide on how we withdraw from the European Union, without pushing the country off a no-deal cliff edge, then Article 50 must be extended for the sake of all parties, and then the public must be given their chance to have a final say on the direction of our future relationship with the EU" **Julie Ward MEP**

Ward also agreed on the need to extend Article 50 and give the British public a chance to have a final say.

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'UNFORGIVABLE BREACH OF TRUST'

Over the weekend, Theresa May addressed the British people in the Sunday Express newspaper saying, "When you turned out to vote in the referendum, you did so because you wanted your voice to be heard. Some of you put your trust in the political process for the first time in decades. We cannot - and must not - let you down."

"Doing so would be a catastrophic and unforgivable breach of trust in our democracy. So my message to Parliament this weekend is simple: it is time to forget the games and do what is right for our

country."

However UK Labour MEP Seb Dance said on Monday, "May's case is flawed. She states there is a duty to honour the referendum but wants Parliament to vote for something that doesn't deliver what was promised. The referendum didn't happen in a vacuum - people voted on what they were sold and what they were sold was not May's Deal."

VOX POPULI

With May's Brexit deal likely to be rejected by MPs, talk is now focusing on either a general election or a so-called second referendum "People's Vote."

"If we can't get an election, we must move immediately to supporting a People's Vote, with the option of remaining in the EU. That could happen quickly, and would require a short extension of Article 50, before - I hope - it is revoked and we stay as a member state of the EU" **Catherine Stihler MEP**

Speaking of the possibility of a UK general election, Catherine Stihler said, "A general election will prove very difficult to get through Parliament, and I'm also concerned about what Labour would offer during any election campaign."

"To continue with Brexit would be a betrayal of our voters," she added.

Stihler went on to say, "If we can't get an election, we must move immediately to supporting a People's Vote, with the option of remaining in the EU. That could happen quickly, and would require a short extension of Article 50, before - I hope - it is revoked and we stay as a member state of the EU."

As things stand in Parliament, of a total 650 votes, around 110 are thought to be in favour of a no-deal Brexit; around 225 in favour of the Prime Minister's deal, while some 300 are thought to be plumping for a second Brexit referendum.

A DEAD DEAL

Denis MacShane, a former British Europe Minister, said, "The vast majority of MPs pro- and anti-Brexit, Conservative, Labour, Scottish Nationalists and Lib-Dems who examined [Theresa May's Brexit] deal in November and December decided they could not vote for it."

"So if her deal is dead what can happen? Any number of proposals have been floated: Labour wants a general election but there is no majority in the Commons to grant [Jeremy] Corbyn his wish. Others want a new referendum or People's Vote. But so far only nine Tory MPs and 60-70 Labour MPs in a Commons of 650 MPs back a new referendum."

"The people of Ireland north and south did not want Brexit and we will not be the collateral damage in this British exercise in self harm" **Martina Anderson MEP**

He went on, "Others suggest a simple revocation of the Article 50 letter announcing withdrawal. This is clean and surgical but means Mrs May and Mr Corbyn repudiating their constant refrain that the Brexit referendum result must be respected."

MacShane added, "Some hope for a three or six-month extension to delay a final departure due on 29

March. But it is unclear what such an extension or delay would achieve. Would Britain participate in the European Parliament elections in May? The 73 British MEP seats have already been redistributed.”

NORTHERN IRISH PERSPECTIVE

Sinn Féin MEP for Northern Ireland, Martina Anderson, pointed out that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) - hardline Brexiteers - do not represent the views of the people from the north of Ireland.

"The majority of the people here voted to remain and they see the backstop as the bottom line, the least worst option, as something that is absolutely necessary to have as a safety net against this Brexit mess brought us upon by a civil war in the Tory party," Anderson said.

"The backstop needs to be protected in this Withdrawal Agreement if we are to avoid a hard border in Ireland and to protect the Good Friday Agreement which is the bedrock of our peace process. The people of Ireland north and south did not want Brexit and we will not be the collateral damage in this British exercise in self harm," she added.

About the author

Lorna Hutchinson is a reporter and sub-editor at The Parliament Magazine

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