

Ursula von der Leyen 'does not see any problems' with Brexit extension after 31 October

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News

The new President designate of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, “does not see any problems” with the UK being granted another Brexit extension after 31 October, it has emerged.



Ursula von der Leyen | *Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

Her apparent take on Brexit flies in the face of the publicly-stated position adopted by some other senior EU figures who have insisted the UK cannot expect another extension after it is due to finally leave the EU in the autumn.

Earlier this year, the EU agreed an extension for the UK's exit until Halloween, forcing the UK to participate in May's European elections.

However, the EU's lead Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, has said that the EU wants to hear exactly what type of a future relationship the UK wishes to have with the bloc before considering another Brexit extension.

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The continuing political uncertainty in the UK has cast doubt on whether the UK will be ready to exit on 31 October or if it will again seek a further extension.

Three years have passed since the June 2016 referendum when Britons shocked much of the world and voted to leave the EU, but it is still unclear how, when, or even if it will ever quit the club it joined in 1973.

Denis MacShane, the UK's former Minister of Europe, said that he spoke to the new Commission chief recently when the issue of Brexit cropped up in their conversation.

He said, "When we spoke last month I told her Boris Johnson would be Prime Minister but the Commons was unlikely to vote for a No Deal, or vote for [Theresa] May's unworkable deal and that MPs of all parties were hostile to a new election."

"I argued that once the dust settles on the UK's Prime Minister leadership election, the impossibility of a crash out of Europe on 31 October would become self-evident. She [Ursula von der Leyen] did not see any problems with an extension after 31 October"

Denis MacShane, UK former Minister of Europe

MacShane, who served under Prime Minister Tony Blair, added, "Therefore, I argued, that once the dust settles on the UK's Prime Minister leadership election, the impossibility of a crash out of Europe on 31st October would become self-evident."

"She did not see any problems with an extension after 31 October."

MacShane also welcomed the appointment of von der Leyen, whose nomination still has to be backed by Parliament, saying she is "the epitome of modern German Euro-Atlanticism."

He added, "Talking to her recently about Europe's future I sensed a woman as firmly committed to the German vision of a Europe of shared sovereignty and partnership as any German leader from Adenauer to Merkel."

"She and her doctor husband, now a medical industry CEO, incarnate the modern Euro-German

tradition of state service, culture - she loves music, she visits London privately for concerts - and family. She has close friends in London and knows British politics.”

He added, “What she privately thinks of the UK choosing as Prime Minister a serial liar, a chronically unfaithful purveyor of populist fake news demagoguery against fellow Europeans might be imagined but has not been said.”

MacShane also said that, in their conversation recently, von der Leyen had “expressed concern about the rise of AfD in Germany especially in former DDR and the loss of authority for traditional parties.”

“She is no friend of, and will make no concessions to, the anti-EU populists of Salvini, Orban, Le Pen, the Tory ERG group or Baudet in the Netherlands.”

In a telling insight into the Commission’s first ever female President, he noted, “She was and is very moderate in her comments and says nothing memorable - which is the hallmark of a professional senior minister in Europe.”

“She is a youthful 60-year-old. She calls for more EU integration and has used the term a "European Army" while of course being ultra-protectionist of the German arms industry and keeping German defence spending low.”

MacShane noted that the European socialists had kept the foreign policy slot, the High Representative role, with the nomination of Josep Borrell, a veteran of Spanish socialist politics.

He said, “Borrell is a French-speaking Catalan, he defended strongly the integrity of Spain and is a vigorous opponent of nationalist separatism which might concern [SNP leader] Nicola Sturgeon.”

“He has called Donald Trump a cowboy over his behaviour in Venezuela and calls for an EU-brokered negotiation in the country between Juan Guaido and Nicolas Maduro.

MacShane, a respected observer of EU politics, gave his verdict on the jobs package recently agreed by EU leaders at a three-day summit in Brussels.

He said, “This new EU team is very much one that conforms to Emmanuel Macron’s idea of a progressive, not a nationalist Europe. In British terms it is almost Blairite and figures like Peter Mandelson have long promoted Christine Lagarde as a future major player in Europe.”

“The Liberal ALDE group get the presidency of the Council but there is nothing for new European Member States and the big boys - Germany, France, Spain are running the show.”

About the author

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