

UK/EU: Take it or leave it – why May stays on for now

The current flurry of cabinet resignations puts Prime Minister Theresa May under heavy pressure. However, in the (increasingly probable) event of a Tory-internal confidence vote, she remains likely to narrowly manage to stay on.

The backlash against the Brexit deal was to be expected. The UK debate remains entirely disconnected from the realities of EU politics, law and economics. The result is massive frustration now that the necessarily humiliating nature of the only available deal is on display. Signing off on the deal is a massive ask for a political system that is still organized along left-right lines, while Brexit divisions cut through both parties. So far, British politicians have evaded serious trade-offs and outsourced responsibility to voters in the referendum. Political tensions are necessarily running high now that uncomfortable decisions are finally required.

The resignation of Brexit secretary Dominic Raab is a serious blow to May, other departures are less troubling. Among the ministers to watch now are:

- Michael Gove: if he takes over as Brexit secretary, this would be a major win for May;
- Liam Fox: if he continues to serve as trade secretary, this would also be positive;
- Sajid Javid: if he steps down as Home secretary, this would be the highest-profile resignation so far, further increasing the pressure.

The Brexiters are facing difficult strategic decisions. Raab is betting on a clear-cut Leave profile, trying to avoid any association with a deal he has helped to negotiate; Gove has instead played for the center so far, endorsing the deal in cabinet despite his Leave convictions.

In the traditional world of British politics, the PM might have resigned last night, given the deep divisions on her cabinet and in her party. Instead, May went ahead endorsing the deal, and displaying an undefiant stance on 15 November. In its precariousness, her position in between the two rivalling Brexit tribes remains relatively stable – and without clear alternatives.

Brexiters who feel they cannot support May have hence started to resign today; those who want her out would have to find a majority to defeat her in a confidence vote first, as she is not resigning; and those who want to stop the deal must reject it in parliament. The mere indication that an utterly heterogenous majority of MPs – from hardcore Brexiters via convinced Remainers to Scottish nationalists – is unhappy with it, might have derailed a PM in the old world of British politics. In deeply polarized Brexit land, it seems not enough to stop the PM, who is caught in the middle, from pushing ahead with the only deal on offer.

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It has therefore become even more likely that the 25 November special European Council will see a standoff; even a delay until December should not yet be ruled out. The Europeans, interested in May seeing the deal through, will play along and might even offer her some additional rhetorical wins.

Yet the substance of the deal will remain unchanged. If it gets rejected in Westminster at first, it is highly dubious whether there would be a majority for anything else (second referendum, new elections, Norway), and the Europeans will not move. As the clock is ticking down to Brexit day, MPs will eventually face a Eurozone-like take-it-or-leave-it offer.

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