

Beat: News

May defeats rebellion in parliament over Brexit plans

World News

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USPA NEWS - Prime Minister Theresa May defeated a rebellion in parliament over her Brexit plans on Tuesday, but not without having to compromise and hand MPs more control over Britain's departure from the European Union.

After winning Tuesday's vote on changes to a future "meaningful vote" on a final agreement with Brussels in her EU withdrawal bill, May's plans to end more than 40 years of membership in the bloc were still on track.

But her concession to parliament means that MPs now have more power if she fails to secure a Brexit deal, which may lead to a softer approach to Britain's divorce. Although, as things stand, they will not be able to send the government back into negotiations if they reject an agreement with the EU.

MPs backed a government plan, ending a rebellion that would have challenged May's authority at a time when she is increasingly under pressure to move ahead with all-but stalled Brexit talks in Brussels by offering a more detailed plan.

The pound strengthened 0.3 percent against the dollar to \$1.3424 after the vote and hit a two-day high versus the euro of 87.78 pence.

Earlier, Brexit minister David Davis told parliament a government defeat would undermine negotiations with Brussels and warned MPs the government would never allow them to "reverse Brexit".

"The government cannot demonstrate the flexibility necessary for a successful deal if its hands are tied midway through that process."

The government victory was the first major win in two days of debates on the government's EU withdrawal bill, which will sever ties with the EU, after the upper house of parliament, the House of Lords, introduced 15 changes.

It followed a strained parliamentary session, where the deep divisions opened up by Britain's vote to leave the EU in 2016 were on display, with MPs who oppose the government saying they had received death threats or been called traitors.

One, Chuka Ummuna of the opposition Labour Party, brandished a copy of the Daily Express newspaper, which ran a headline saying: "Ignore the will of the people at your peril".

TENSE ATMOSPHERE

In the tense atmosphere where it was not clear which way the vote would go, the government secured its victory only after offering concessions to one of the leaders of a group of Conservative MPs who were threatening to vote against May.

An hour before the vote, the government's solicitor general, Robert Buckland, offered lawmaker Dominic Grieve the promise of increasing the powers of parliament if May was unable to reach agreement in Brussels. The two then hammered out a deal in whispers as other MPs made speeches around them.

Buckland indicated the government would discuss the possibility of adopting Grieve's push for ministers to secure parliamentary approval for their Brexit plans if they fail to negotiate a deal with the EU.

It paid off. "I've just voted with the government following the assurances we got from the prime minister in a meeting this afternoon that our concerns ... will be addressed," Grieve told Sky News. "I'm quite satisfied that we are going to get a meaningful vote on both

“deal’ and “no deal’.”^[2]

But the concessions were the latest manoeuvre by a minority government that has been forced to compromise with parliament or to simply put votes off until a later date because of its inability to force through the policies it backs.

KICKING DOWN THE ROAD

Earlier, May appeared to have also stemmed a rebellion over her commitment to leaving the EU’s customs union which will transform Britain’s trading relationships for decades to come.

MPs will vote on Wednesday on whether the government’s move to dismiss a House of Lords amendment requiring ministers to report what efforts they had made in negotiations to secure a customs union by the end of October.

Instead, the government has proposed reporting its efforts to secure a customs arrangement.

But the parliamentary problems will not stop there. Rebels have said they will challenge May’s plans to leave the customs union during votes on other bills, on trade and customs, which will be brought back to the house some time before July 24.

There is little May can do. After losing her party’s majority in parliament at an ill-judged election last year, she now relies on the support of a small Northern Irish party and the distance between victory and defeat is narrow.

Often she simply puts off votes that could end in embarrassing defeats.

But as time ticks by, she can no longer kick decisions down the road, increasingly under pressure from EU negotiators to come up with detailed positions not only on customs, but also on the wider trade agreement and governance.

The EU is expecting her to have made progress by a summit in June and both sides want to reach a deal by October.

In a day of drama, May’s position seemed suddenly weaker when junior justice minister Phillip Lee, who has long been critical of the government’s Brexit strategy, resigned and said he would vote against the government.

But it has secured victory on all the other votes so far on Tuesday, including a challenge to the government’s plan to put March 29, 2019, or “Brexit Day’.

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