

Brexit

Deadlocked Theresa May postpones key Brexit votes

PM's allies play down any short-term breakthrough on customs options



UK Prime Minister Theresa May and the EU's budget commissioner Günther Oettinger © FT Montage/Getty George Parker and Laura Hughes in London, Arthur Beesley in Dublin MAY 10, 2018

Theresa May postponed key [Brexit](#) legislation while allies on Thursday played down the prospect of any imminent agreement over future customs policy, deepening the paralysis over Britain's strategy on leaving the EU.

The prime minister's allies believe there is unlikely to be a breakthrough over customs arrangements and the Irish border at next Tuesday's meeting of the inner Brexit committee, even though she wants the issues settled before next month's EU summit.

Meanwhile, senior Tories admitted they did not dare bring back two key Brexit bills to the House of Commons — on [trade and customs](#) — until the autumn because of fears Mrs May could be defeated.

“Madame May is weak and Boris Johnson has the same hair-do as Trump. That says everything,” said the EU's budget commissioner, Günther Oettinger, on Wednesday.

“We can only hope that sensible citizens will put Madame May on the path to a clever Brexit,” Mr Oettinger told students at a European school in Karlsruhe, according to remarks carried by national news agency DPA.

Mr Johnson is leading cabinet resistance to Mrs May's preferred plan for a hybrid “[new customs partnership](#)” with the EU, which Eurocentric sees as a backdoor attempt to keep Britain in the

EU's customs union.

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Mrs May's officials are trying to find a way through the impasse, which has immobilised the government. "It's looking sticky," said one.

To try to resolve the deadlock on Brexit, the prime minister has set up two working groups looking at possible improvements to the government's two customs options.

Liam Fox, trade secretary, and Michael Gove, environment secretary, will study Mrs May's hybrid customs partnership — which they oppose — along with David Lidington, Cabinet Office minister, who backs it.

Greg Clark, business secretary, and Karen Bradley, Northern Ireland secretary, will study the "maximum facilitation" plan for streamlined borders — which they oppose — along with David Davis, Brexit secretary, who supports it.

The aim is for the cabinet's rival camps to resolve their differences but no breakthrough is expected before next Tuesday's Brexit committee. Foreign secretary Boris Johnson and chancellor Philip Hammond, who are seen as divisive figures in the debate, are not on either working group.

Officials are exasperated by the lack of progress on the customs and trade bills, which have been frozen for months and are not now expected to return to the Commons until the autumn.

Mrs May has also abandoned plans to complete work on the government's flagship EU withdrawal bill before the Whitsun recess at the end of May, after fears of further defeats. The House of Lords has amended the bill 14 times.

Instead next week's [House of Commons business](#) includes bills on haulage permits and council tax reforms — and a debate about plastic coffee cups.

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In an attempt to find a solution, some leading Tories said they would be willing for Britain to seek an extended stay in the EU customs union, while new technological solutions for the border were found.

Nick Boles, who voted Remain but who ran the leadership campaign of Brexiter cabinet minister Michael Gove, has suggested a [temporary customs union](#) running until the end of March 2022, just before the scheduled date of the next election.

This week the Irish prime minister Leo Varadkar gave guarded support to Mrs May's preferred option of a "customs partnership" where Britain would apply EU customs arrangements at its

borders and collect tariffs on behalf of Brussels.

Mr Varadkar said it was “perhaps something we could make workable”, but Dublin has dismissed claims that the Irish government was warming to the idea.

Simon Coveney, deputy prime minister and foreign minister, visited London on Thursday for “robust” talks with UK ministers including chancellor Philip Hammond. Rather than a pivot in favour of Mrs May’s plan, Mr Varadkar’s remarks were seen in Dublin as an effort to prompt her to come forward with new proposals that would avoid a hard border.

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