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By Chris Marsden

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Corbyn holds pro-Remain party discussions over leading “caretaker” administration or stepping aside to allow “government of national unity”

Labour’s Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell yesterday publicly opposed plans for a “government of national unity” and insisted on Jeremy Corbyn’s right to head a “caretaker government” to prevent a no-deal Brexit.

McDonnell did so after talks between the opposition parties failed to agree to anything other than not moving a motion of no confidence in Boris Johnson’s Conservative government before ensuring that the prime minister would not be able to carry through his threat to exit the European Union (EU) without a trade and customs arrangement.

Corbyn met with the leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Westminster, Ian Blackford; Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson; Plaid Cymru Westminster leader Liz Saville Roberts; Caroline Lucas of the Greens; and Independent Group for Change leader (IGC) Anna Soubry, in his parliamentary office Monday.

Afterwards, McDonnell said Labour was “unlikely” to table a no confidence vote until after the October 17 EU summit, after which Johnson must present any new agreement reached to parliament. If this is rejected, the Benn Act passed last month instructs him to seek an extension of the October 31 Brexit deadline until at least January next year.

Corbyn has offered to head a temporary caretaker government until an extension is secured, before then calling a general election. He has agreed that an incoming Labour government would commit to holding a second referendum, but only after Labour has

negotiated a new proposed Brexit agreement guaranteeing access to the Single European Market that could be pitted against remaining in the EU.

Monday's talks confirmed that this convoluted manoeuvre is unacceptable to most of the political forces to which Corbyn is appealing. Swinson restated that her party's 18 MPs would never put Corbyn into power, even on a temporary basis. "I have been crystal clear but I will do so again—Jeremy Corbyn is not going into Number 10 on the basis of Liberal Democrats' votes," she told *Sky News*.

She stressed that she was speaking for others—including the 21 expelled pro-Remain Tory MPs and the five members of the Independent Group for Change [ICG], remnants of an abortive stitch-up between Blairite ex-Labour MPs and hardline pro-Remain Tories. This meant that Corbyn "simply does not have the numbers" to secure a majority in the Commons. Tory Remainer Dominic Grieve said his fellow rebels would only back a temporary government to oversee a Brexit extension and a second referendum if Labour agreed to a caretaker prime minister "who is not associated with such a radical policy view." The former Tory IGC leader Anna Soubry said Corbyn "won't be in Number 10 with the support" of the IGC. Blairite IGC MP Chris Leslie told the *Sun*, "I have a policy of never allowing Marxists into Number 10."

Swinson did not openly identify the broader layer of Blairite MPs still in the Labour Party with whom she is in discussion and who are just as hostile to Corbyn becoming prime minister. Led by Deputy Labour leader Tom Watson, they tried unsuccessfully at last week's party conference to commit Labour to an explicitly pro-Remain position and to holding a referendum prior to any general election. Swinson says openly what they have agreed to privately—that a caretaker government must be led by "a figure who is well respected and above the everyday party politics"—and that this government would also preside over a referendum prior to a general election.

This is seen as preparation for a more long-term government of national unity—anticipating that Labour will not secure a majority if a general election is held, that Corbyn will be forced to go and that a new leader will agree to more permanent political collaboration.

The list of potential candidates to head such a formation is growing, including two Tories—the veteran Ken Clarke, who had the party whip removed for supporting the Benn Act, and former Home Secretary Amber Rudd.

The other favourite is the Blairite Margaret Beckett, who has indicated she is prepared to do so. Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer has let it be known privately that he too is in contention.

McDonnell is hoping to leverage the support of the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the solitary Green MP, Lucas, together with the desperate crisis over Brexit to secure a climbdown by the Lib Dems et al. He said of Swinson, "I'm a great believer in the powers of conversion." The Tory rebels would "obviously" want to see what deal Johnson gets at the EU summit before deciding whether to back a no confidence motion, he added. However, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon stressed that she is not wedded to the idea of Corbyn as caretaker prime minister, stating that she was "open minded" about who takes on the role.

More importantly, any "hardline" pose by the Corbynites carries no weight after their constant capitulations to the dictates of the Blairites. Prior to Monday's meeting, the *Sunday Times* cited Labour sources asserting that "Jeremy Corbyn could step aside for another caretaker PM to avoid no-deal... A Labour source said that Mr Corbyn had not '100 per cent' ruled out the option 'but we are leaning heavily against.'"

After the meeting Corbyn told the press that there were "huge political differences" between the parties, "but we have come behind this point to stop a no-deal Brexit."

Corbyn's refusal to take any position that is not acceptable to Britain's ruling elite, his absolute hostility towards mobilising the working class in opposition to the Tories and their Blairite allies, is what keeps Johnson in power today. Above all it has allowed the working class to be divided and corralled into supporting one of two rival right-wing factions of the ruling class in the Brexit crisis.

As a result, after Corbyn has twice been elected by a massive majority based on his promises to oppose austerity and militarism, the right-wing continue to dictate events while the working class is excluded from political life.

The *Sunday Times* was leaked a revealing internal survey, conducted by Labour's trade union backers, predicting that the party will in fact lose 100 seats in any general election. The poll, it reports, "suggests that up to a third of those who voted Labour at the last election could desert the party and support the Liberal Democrats. A further 10% are expected to switch to the Brexit Party..."

The *Times* claims there are frantic efforts to secure a "left" heir if Corbyn quits, while McDonnell, who is clearly pro-Remain, is reported as "preparing to launch a power grab

from Corbyn's [pro-Brexit] Stalinist aides, including Seumas Milne, his director of strategy and communications, by putting himself in daily charge of the Labour operation as they move onto a general election footing."

Rupert Murdoch's flagship publication predicts that a "left" succession is far from certain, given that the Blairites remain firmly ensconced in the party thanks to Corbyn: "Up to 100 Labour MPs, including members of the shadow cabinet, indicated that they were prepared to leave the Labour Party" with Deputy Labour Leader Tom Watson to form a new breakaway group if necessary and that "Sir Keir Starmer, Emily Thornberry and even backbencher Jess Phillips are also expected to enter the race as they mount a charge to reclaim their party and move it back towards the centre ground."

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