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EU officials: UK only 'pretending to negotiate' over Brexit impasse

Donald Tusk says EU27 are waiting for 'realistic' proposals from the UK to break the deadlock



The British government is “pretending to negotiate” with the European Union and has not presented any new proposals to break the Brexit deadlock, according to EU officials.

Theresa May’s de-facto deputy, David Lidington, and the Brexit secretary, Stephen Barclay, met senior EU officials and MEPs in Brussels and Strasbourg this week, but the talks yielded no obvious results.

The British side thinks a crucial process has begun and hopes progress will have been made by 27 February when MPs are expected to have another crunch Brexit vote.

However, on Wednesday night European council president Donald Tusk said the EU27 was still waiting for proposals. “No news is not always good news,” he tweeted, after meeting with the EU’s chief negotiator Michel Barnier. “EU27 still waiting for concrete, realistic proposals from London on how to break Brexit impasse,” Tusk said.

Barnier, has said current talks with the UK do not even qualify as negotiations. In a call on Tuesday morning with Guy Verhofstadt, chief Brexit representative for the European parliament, Barnier said there were “no negotiations” with the British.

“These are courtesy calls at best and we have nothing new to say,” Barnier was reported to have said, by a source familiar with the conversation.

Verhofstadt had asked the EU negotiator for an update, following Barnier’s meeting with Barclay over dinner at the British ambassador’s residence in Brussels, where they dined on North Sea sole, roast duck and British cheese, washed down with sancerre and saint-émilion wines.

“They are pretending to negotiate while they still don’t know what they want and how they want it,” the source said, who described this week’s meetings as “kicking up dust” and a series of “photo opportunities and pictures”. “We are willing to negotiate, but there is nothing on the table from the British side.”

Verhofstadt asked Lidington four times what the British proposal was and “four times didn’t get an answer”, according to the EU official, who described the encounter as “very surreal”.

With only 44 days until Brexit day and speculation about the PM’s plan swirling, the potential for muddled messages is high. Lidington sowed confusion among parliament officials and MEPs about the crunch date when he talked about a vote on “the 27th” without specifying which month. “The whole room thought it was February except [one official] who thought it was March,” the source said.

Questions over what Lidington really meant were magnified by Wednesday morning, as officials digested media reports of a late-night bar-room conversation where Brexit negotiator Olly Robbins appeared to suggest a showdown in late March.

Another EU source said a separate meeting with the British ministers in Strasbourg revealed “nothing really groundbreaking”.

An EU diplomat said May’s strategy was probably to run down the clock “sending her negotiators here and there” to buy time ahead of a European summit on 21-22 March. “They come forward with the same proposals and they get the same answers,” the diplomat said.

Numerous EU sources have insisted in public and private that there will be no re-opening of the Brexit withdrawal agreement, stressing that it is up to the British government to work out a plan that commands a stable majority in the House of Commons.

The EU is ready to discuss the non-binding political declaration, which sketches out a vision of the UK’s post Brexit ties with the EU. But officials say the UK has not engaged in any talks on re-writing the political declaration.

Roberto Gualtieri, a Socialist member of the European parliament’s Brexit steering committee, urged British ministers to look seriously at Jeremy Corbyn’s customs union plan. But they told him it was unlikely to command a majority in the Commons, according to an EU source.

Donald Tusk, the European council president, also suggested May should look at the Corbyn plan as a way to break the impasse when the pair met last week, but the prime minister did not respond.

The British hope the EU will agree to changes on the contested Irish backstop, which Tory Eurosceptics say they cannot accept in its current form. After his meetings in Strasbourg, Barclay told journalists that Westminster needed to see “legally binding change to the backstop”, saying this was the “the clear message” of the Graham Brady amendment MPs voted for last month.

The UK is pursuing three avenues for those changes: a time limit, an exit mechanism and “alternative arrangements” being examined by a Conservative MPs working group.

“Time limit, exit clause, magical solutions based on technology, these are all things we have heard before,” a senior EU official said. “We cannot start inventing solutions for the British.”

The EU remains reluctant to firm up previous reassurances on the temporary nature of the backstop by putting them into a different legal document. Tory backbenchers have floated the idea of a codicil, a format that has no formal status in EU

negotiations.

EU sources remain unconvinced such a legalistic move would change minds. “I don’t think she has shown to anyone she could muster a majority,” said one EU diplomat. “There is not much incentive to move.”

The senior EU official described the Brexit outlook as “not encouraging”, arguing that the prime minister’s decision to seek changes on the backstop had closed down options for a deal. “Theresa May chose to ally herself with the most radical Brexiteers. She did so to reunify her party and frankly I don’t think any deal is possible on that basis.”

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