



European Council President Donald Tusk | Aris Oikonomou/AFP via Getty Images

Tusk tells May that Corbyn's plan could break Brexit deadlock

Labour's plan receives a positive response in Brussels.

By **CHARLIE COOPER AND DAVID M. HERSZENHORN** | 2/7/19, 9:16 PM CET | Updated 2/7/19, 9:34 PM CET

LONDON — U.K. opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn could help Theresa May break the parliamentary deadlock over her Brexit plan, Donald Tusk told the U.K. prime minister.

The European Council president made the suggestion at a tense head-to-head in Brussels the day after he made waves by suggesting a "special place in hell" awaited Brexiteers who called for the U.K.'s exit without a clear plan.

Downing Street officials declined to comment on May's response, but did welcome a letter from Corbyn, sent the day before her trip to Brussels, which proposed major changes to the Political Declaration element of her Brexit deal, including a permanent

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customs union with the EU, as conditions for Labour's support for the agreement in parliament.

However, a senior No 10 official said "considerable points of difference" remained between May and Corbyn, with the prime minister still determined that the U.K. will not be in a customs union with the EU and will pursue an "independent trade policy" after Brexit.

In Brussels, where May also met European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and the European Parliament's president, Antonio Tajani, and Brexit co-ordinator, Guy Verhofstadt, officials voiced a familiar complaint that the U.K. prime minister had arrived with no new ideas.

"May did not offer any concrete proposals on the way forward," a senior EU official said.

Tusk opened the meeting by restating the position of the EU27 and their unwillingness to renegotiate the Withdrawal Treaty.

May is still seeking changes to the Irish backstop — the guarantee for avoiding a hard border on the island — that will satisfy Brexiteers in her own party, and the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party, who fiercely oppose the backstop in its current form.



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In the meeting, she again raised ideas previously rejected by the EU including a time limit on the backstop and a unilateral withdrawal mechanism. She reiterated the British call for the two sides to consider "alternative arrangements" to the current backstop.

Tusk suggested the Corbyn plan "might be a promising way out of the impasse," the senior EU official said. And the European Council president insisted that any new plan brought to Brussels come with a guarantee of majority support in the House of Commons.

When Tusk pressed May on timing and how long she expected it would take to work things out on the EU side, she had no response, the EU official said. "He did not get any answers," they added.

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Exiting the meeting, May told the BBC that she was seeking a "stable majority" in the House of Commons for her deal and that she would continue to seek legally binding changes to the backstop by reopening the Withdrawal Agreement — the key demand of Conservative Brexiteers and the DUP.

But while the backstop remains the U.K.'s priority, the senior Downing Street official did not rule out that talks in the coming days could consider other matters, including changes to the Political Declaration.

"Our focus is on the backstop and getting legally binding changes to the Withdrawal Agreement, but if other ideas also come forward in addition to that of course they will be discussed," the official said.

In a joint statement issued after the Juncker meeting, the U.K. and the European Commission committed to further talks. Downing Street later confirmed that Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay will on Monday meet EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier in either Brussels or Strasbourg.

May is due to visit Dublin on Friday, while U.K. Attorney General Geoffrey Cox is due to see his counterpart in Ireland, Séamus Woulfe, on Friday morning.

Juncker and May will meet again before the end of February, the joint statement said.

In the meeting, May also questioned Tusk's comment about a "special place in hell" for the prophets of Brexit. The Council president did not apologize.

"He stuck by his statement," the EU official said. "While the truth may be painful, it may be more useful."

May told the BBC that Tusk's comment had caused "widespread dismay" in the U.K. and was "not helpful."

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