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Only way for Theresa May to get a deal passed is by gaining the support of Brexiteers

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The Prime Minister, for now, appears to have learnt the correct lesson from the past fortnight.

Votes cast in the parliamentary no-confidence motion and subsequent MP manoeuvrings have convinced her that the only way to pass a withdrawal deal by March 29 – while delivering Brexit and maintaining her administration – is to harness the support of Brexiteers and the DUP.

This is a daunting prospect. The vast majority of the 118 Tory rebels and 10 DUP MPs would need to switch sides, without much attrition the other way. But with anti-Brexit forces focusing minds, there might, just might, be a route to a compromise that could squeeze the deal home.

The first step, and most important, is to convince the EU to time-limit the proposed “backstop” customs arrangements. This must be buttressed with tightening the legal text to make clear that Northern Ireland cannot be kept within such arrangements without the rest of Great Britain.

Brexiteers don't like the idea of any backstop and think its inclusion in the withdrawal deal unnecessary. But if it were a UK-wide customs arrangement, kicking in after transition for a maximum of three years in the absence of other agreed border solutions, many would live it with it. Such a framework could be renewed if both the EU and UK agree. The important point though is that a time limit would give the UK the right to unilaterally exit.

Yes, this would require an EU and Irish climbdown and amendments to the Withdrawal Agreement text. The scale of May's parliamentary defeat though appears to have convinced the EU that movement on this would not get the deal over the line anyway.

So it's crucial to get an indicative vote on a time limit through Parliament, with solid support from Conservative Brexiteers, the DUP and hopefully some open-minded Labour MPs. That result would show the backstop remains the single biggest near-term hindrance to passing the deal.

The EU has so far proven intransigent. But members of national governments, not least Poland, have said a time-limited default customs arrangement should be on the table. With the EU now flip-flopping on whether no deal would necessitate border checks in Ireland, their opposition to a time-limited alternative makes even less sense.

Commentators talk about the backstop as an insurance policy. But if you are supremely worried about the hard border you're insuring against, you wouldn't spurn insurance for a few years on the basis that you weren't guaranteed insurance forever.

The EU's current public position, given the rejection of the deal, is therefore not credible. It should recognise that no sovereign country could accept – as the UK is being asked – to bind itself to potentially permanent economic arrangements with no right of exit.

Indeed, the EU's unwillingness to negotiate on this taps into Brexiteer fears that the backstop is not so much about the border, but about shaping future trade arrangements (particularly for Northern Ireland). A time limit goes some way to allay these fears by removing that default.

Such a move is necessary but not sufficient to get other Brexiteers on board. Changes to the Withdrawal Agreement would have to be buttressed by changes to the political declaration, such that Brexiteers did not feel the UK was handing over £39bn of taxpayer funds only for the future trade agreement to be impossible.

Second, then, the Prime Minister should request removing language from that declaration that suggests the future partnership will build on the backstop customs arrangements set out. This is not merely symbolic. Most Brexiteers want Britain to control its own tariffs, to be able to conduct an independent global trade policy and to take a full role at the World Trade Organisation.

Yes, the PM would have to be careful here not to haemorrhage other support by overly specifying a Brexiteer-friendly free-trade agreement. But the “Conservatives for a customs union” cohort is relatively small.

Provided the political declaration is kept general enough to attract the support of those Conservatives favouring everything from a long-term Canada-style deal through to those who'd ideally prefer deeper relations but who will prioritise an orderly Brexit, this should add up to some more votes.

Finally, the Prime Minister must recognise on this point that she has personally lost the faith of her party and the DUP in negotiating that future relationship. The way she blindsided ministers in the Brexit department on the withdrawal deal, breached the trust of unionists, and wasted time pushing the deal despite absence of support, has undermined faith in her abilities.

The Conservative Party, and the country at large, now needs a full debate about the desired long-term future economic relationship between the EU and UK. That requires a leadership contest and a change of direction. As such, Theresa May should explicitly commit to resigning once a revised Withdrawal Agreement is passed by the Commons.

Now all this is a big ask. The EU must play ball. Theresa May would have to cede her premiership and her desired future EU-UK partnership. But large groups could come out with credit. Brexiteers and the DUP could argue they compromised on a withdrawal deal containing much they didn't like, but that they helped secure the Union, avoided the vassalage of the backstop and kept the Brexiteer free-trading vision alive.

The Prime Minister could rightly argue she ultimately delivered an orderly Brexit, resisting those who would have overturned the result. Labour moderates could have a crucial role too, knowing their votes on a revised deal could swing whether a no-deal Brexit is avoided for some, and giving cover to others in Leave-voting constituencies.

All sides could then participate in an open debate on the UK's future economic relationship going into the 2022 election, without the current backstop prejudicing these visions.

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