

EUROPE

# Ejected Conservatives Hold Sway Over Brexit Outcome

Government officials fear rebel group of 21 lawmakers could try to derail Boris Johnson's deal after most forced him Saturday to ask EU for a delay



Oliver Letwin in Whitehall, near the Houses of Parliament, on Saturday. PHOTO: WILL OLIVER/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

*By Max Colchester*

Oct. 20, 2019 2:26 pm ET

LONDON—The tumult of Brexit, has forged a new breed of British political radical: the establishment Conservative.

This weekend Sir Oliver Letwin, a silver-maned former Conservative stalwart, turned rogue lawmaker, launching a rebellion that forced the government to request a delay to Brexit.

Now the fate of Mr. Johnson's deal with the European Union sits in large part in the hands of a cluster of establishment lawmakers, like Mr. Letwin, who in many cases dedicated themselves to the Conservative Party for decades but were ejected from the party in September for blocking an abrupt "no deal" Brexit.

The Brexit divorce deal that Mr. Johnson negotiated with the EU last week faces yet another crucial week of votes in Britain's parliament. The government will try to pass legislation to turn it into British law. But lawmakers could stymie that effort or vote to amend the deal, adding, for instance, that it should be subject to another referendum.

Mr. Johnson's ministers say they are confident the deal will pass. "We now have the numbers to get it through," Dominic Raab, U.K. foreign secretary, said on Sunday.



Lawmakers listen as Mr. Letwin speaks during the Brexit debate in the House of Commons on Saturday. PHOTO: JESSICA TAYLOR/U.K. PARLIAMENT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

But with the vote on a knife edge, Mr. Johnson needs a group of 21 lawmakers whom he ejected from his own party. They were expelled for facilitating a September vote to force a delay to Brexit if a deal weren't approved by parliament by this past Saturday. They include one of Winston Churchill's grandsons, two former chancellors of the exchequer and Mr. Letwin, a former merchant banker.

Many of this crowd, known as "the 21," say they do want Brexit to happen, but in an orderly manner. Government officials, however, worry that they could yet try to derail the deal Mr. Johnson is presenting.

Their quest has left them in an unusual position. The 63-year-old Mr. Letwin, "is a very mild-mannered rebel indeed," said Dominic Grieve, a former Conservative lawmaker who also voted to delay approving the agreement. "He doesn't even really want to rebel. He wants to vote for a deal."

Mr. Letwin first worked in government in the 1980s and established himself as a fixer who helped former Prime Minister David Cameron forge a political coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010. During his career he also displayed a more eccentric side, once campaigning dressed in a toga and being caught throwing unopened letters from his constituents into a trash can in a park, an act for which he later apologized.



Former Conservative lawmaker Dominic Grieve, said Mr. Letwin doesn't want to rebel. PHOTO: TOM NICHOLSON/LONDON NEWS PICTURES/ZUMA PRESS

Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, Mr. Letwin has advocated for the U.K. to remain as close to the EU as possible after Brexit. On Saturday, however, he became the focus of government vitriol in Parliament. Several government officials privately described him in expletive-laden terms after he presented an amendment to Mr. Johnson's Brexit deal that forced the government to request a Brexit delay from the EU to allow lawmakers more time to scrutinize the agreement. Opposition lawmakers jumped on the opportunity to force Mr. Johnson to do something the prime minister vowed not to: ask for a Brexit delay beyond Oct. 31, the deadline for the U.K. to leave the EU.

Old colleagues were aghast. "He is a very dear friend, but he is completely wrong," Iain Duncan Smith, a prominent Euro-skeptic Conservative lawmaker, said of Mr. Letwin. Most of the 21 expelled Conservatives backed Mr. Letwin's move, though some voted with the government.

Mr. Letwin said that he will support Mr. Johnson's deal. His move on Saturday was aimed at ensuring that all the legislation to implement the deal was in place so that the U.K. didn't fall out of the trade bloc by accident come the end of October. "We will continue to vote for it and seek to ensure that it becomes law," he said. In a good sign for Mr. Johnson's deal, several of his fellow rebels have agreed.

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