

'Have cake and eat it': Brexit secret notes cause stir in UK, govt plays down leak

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London: A set of handwritten notes caught on camera in the hands of an aide to a Conservative Party leader outside Downing Street after a Brexit meeting created a stir in UK political circles today, forcing the British government to distance itself saying these were "individual notes".

British PM Theresa May plans to start formal divorce process by end March

The handwritten notes, carried by an aide to Conservative party MP Mark Field, the vice-chairman of the party, included phrases like "what's the model? Have your cake and eat it" and "unlikely" in reference to the European Union single market.

The sheet of paper was captured by a news photographer in Downing Street, home of the department's offices and the Prime Minister's residence.

The British government, led by Prime Minister Theresa May, denied that its strategy for exiting the European Union had been leaked through the memo.

The densely written notes also list anticipated problems with the upcoming negotiating process with EU governments, noting "we think it's unlikely we'll be offered Single Market."

Prime Minister Theresa May plans to start the formal divorce process by the end of March, triggering two years of discussions before Britain's EU exit.

The government has consistently refused to disclose details of what kind of deal it will seek with the EU after Brexit, saying that would weaken the U.K.'s negotiating hand.

EU leaders have filled the vacuum by heaping pressure on Britain, warning that the UK will have to leave the tariff-free single market if it seeks to limit immigration from EU countries, since free movement is a fundamental principle of the bloc.

The note also said the "French are likely to be most difficult" in reference to Britain's impending negotiations over the terms of its withdrawal from the 28-nation economic bloc after the country voted in favour of an exit from the EU in a referendum in June.

The document also says the triggering of Article 50, which formally starts Brexit negotiations, could be "difficult".

It reveals that the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, "wanted to see what the deal looks like first" but the government does not want to provide details.

It says Britain wanted to have a "Canada plus" trade deal rather than remaining a member of the European Economic Area (EEA) but negotiating over services, especially the financial sector, is likely to be "difficult".

The memo comes a day after pro-EU think tank British Influence said it was writing to Brexit Secretary David Davis to

seek clarification on the government's position regarding the UK's status in the wider EEA when it quits the EU.

A spokesperson for British Influence said, "It is likely there will be a legal action because, in our view, the government has taken a stance that leaving the EU means leaving the single market".

On Tuesday, Dutch Finance Minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem said Brexit is "going to be a tough ride" for Britain's economy, as investors rethink their investments" amid the uncertainty.

Dijsselbloem, who also heads the group of 19 countries who use the common euro currency, said London could not be allowed to remain the EU's financial capital after Britain leaves.

"We cannot allow the financial service center for Europe and the eurozone to be outside Europe and the eurozone and to go its own way in terms of rules and regulations," he told European lawmakers in Brussels.

Officials said the notes did not belong to a government official and do not reflect the government's position.

"I was interested and amused to see it because it doesn't reflect any of the conversations that I've been part of in Downing Street," said UK business secretary Greg Clark, forced to react to the media storm around the notes.

"I don't know what the provenance of that note is. All I can say is that it is going to be a negotiation which has to be serious, we have to get our negotiating mandate in place but this is being done soberly and meticulously. It would be nice to have (cake and eat it) but it's not the policy," he told BBC.

Downing Street said the notes, captured on a long-lens camera by photographer Steve Back, were not written by a government official and do not reflect its official position.

"These individual notes do not belong to a government official or a special adviser. They do not reflect the government's position in relation to Brexit negotiations," a spokesperson for 10, Downing Street said.

But opposition politicians said the snatched photo revealed the scale of the chaos in government ranks. Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron said it "shows the government doesn't have a plan or even a clue."

The latest memo, scribbles on an A4 sheet of paper, will come as an embarrassment for British Prime Minister Theresa May, who has repeatedly refused to give any details of her strategy, insisting she won't give a "running commentary" on the process of leaving the EU amid concerns that it would give away Britain's hand.

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