

British ambassador to EU resigns ahead of crucial Brexit negotiations

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London: Only months before the negotiations of Britain's exit from the European Union are due to start, London's ambassador to the EU Sir Ivan Rogers on Tuesday unexpectedly resigned from the post.

Ivan Rogers resigned as UK envoy to the EU

Rogers, who recently courted controversy by saying that a UK-EU trade deal might take 10 years to finalise, was named to the Brussels post of permanent representative in 2013 and was due to stay until November and help oversee the critical first half year of negotiations.

Ivan Rogers decided to leave now so that a successor could be in place ahead of the official triggering of the exit talks set for the end of March, the British government said. The UK Foreign Office confirmed the resignation today but declined to give any reasons behind the move at this stage.

The senior diplomat had been expected to lead the UK's Brexit negotiations with the 28-member EU but was in the eye of a storm following the leak of an internal memo in which he claimed leaving the EU could take up to a decade.

Labour MP Hilary Benn, who chairs the UK Parliament's Brexit Select Committee, said the resignation had come at a "crucial" time. "It couldn't be a more difficult time to organise a handover," he said.

Rogers occupied the post of the United Kingdom Permanent Representation to the European Union (UKRep), which represents the UK in negotiations that take place in the EU.

UKRep is one of the busiest posts, with a team sourced from over 20 UK government departments working to ensure that UK policies are explained to other EU member states, the European Commission and members of the European Parliament.

Rogers, a veteran civil servant, was due to leave his post in November 2017 but is stepping down early.

Last month, the BBC revealed he had privately told ministers a UK-EU trade deal might take 10 years to finalise.

Rogers came under pressure last month following the leak of his suggestion to the Prime Minister Theresa May that it could take up to a decade to have a trade deal with the EU in the wake of the so-called Brexit. Politicians backing an exit called him overly negative.

The leak of the private memo is believed to have caused him a lot of embarrassment and strained relations with Downing Street.

Prime Minister Theresa May has announced her intention to invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to trigger official talks for Britain's exit from the EU by the end of March.

Rogers was expected to play a central role in those deliberations. However, now the government will need to put a replacement in place.

Leave EU, a pro-Brexit campaign group, tweeted: "Pessimist Rogers - who warned Brexit would take 10 years - is to

leave his post as UK Ambassador to the EU. Good - time for some optimism!"

Charles Grant, director of the Centre for European Reform, said Rogers was one of the very few people at the top of the government "who understand EU." His departure, Grant said, "makes a good deal on Brexit less likely."

A Foreign Office spokesperson said: "Sir Ivan Rogers has resigned a few months early as UK Permanent Representative to the European Union.

"Sir Ivan has taken this decision now to enable a successor to be appointed before the UK invokes Article 50 by the end of March. We are grateful for his work and commitment over the last three years".

Rogers was awarded a knighthood in 2016 for services including to European policy and his expertise on complicated issues from trade to fisheries to foreign policy was considered a major asset.

British preparations for its divorce from the bloc after the June referendum have been anything but smooth and the sudden departure of the top diplomat is set to add to that.

The UK Independence Party immediately latched on to the news, with MEP Gerard Batten calling Rogers a "Europhile" and saying Prime Minister Theresa May should "have removed him long before."

May has repeatedly said that she will officially trigger the divorce negotiations before the end of March.

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