

# May weakness shown up as she is forced to back abortion law

PM capitulates quickly as Labour MP Creasy pushes amendment to support Northern Ireland women

By Christopher Hope, Laura Hughes and Gordon Rayner

THERESA MAY'S fragile grip on power was exposed yesterday as she was forced to agree to demands from a backbench Labour MP for a change in abortion laws to head off a historic defeat in the House of Commons.

The Prime Minister's concession followed mounting pressure from MPs and a proposed amendment to the Queen's Speech calling for the Government to pay for women from Northern Ireland who are forced to travel to England to have an abortion.

MPs said the Government's rapid capitulation was a sign of things to come with ministers set to agree deals to avoid damaging Commons defeats because of their reliance on support from the Democratic Unionist Party. The last time an amendment was passed after an MPs' division was in 1924.

It emerged that Labour whips have refused to allow their MPs to "pair up" with Conservative MPs.

MPs from the governing party traditionally "pair" with someone from the opposition benches so that if one has to miss a vote, the other will withdraw from voting so that the result is not affected. It allows MPs to avoid the necessity of attending every single vote.

One Tory MP was forced to miss the funeral of his wife's mother on Wednesday to vote with the Government on the Queen's Speech.

Furious Conservative MPs said they were determined to win this "war of attrition" with the Labour whips and ensure the Government's policies were passed through Parliament.

It also emerged Mrs May was forced to send her chief of staff Gavin Barwell to meetings with Tory MPs to stave off a rebellion over the 1 per cent cap on public sector pay rises. George Freeman, the chairman of Mrs May's policy unit, revealed on Twitter that 40 Tory

MPs had "signalled we need a different approach" to the pay cap.

Abortion is illegal in Northern Ireland except where a mother's health is in danger. However, ministers acted after Labour MP Stella Creasy tabled an amendment to force the NHS in England to offer abortions to pregnant women from Northern Ireland.

The measure, backed by scores of Labour MPs and Tory MP Peter Bottomley, was accepted by the Government less than three hours after it was put forward.

In a letter to MPs, the equalities minister Justine Greening said it was an "injustice" that women from Northern Ireland had to spend £1,400 on coming to the mainland to have an abortion.

She said: "We will ensure these payments will be funded through the Gov-

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ernment Equalities Office with additional funding."

Chris Bryant, a former Labour Leader of the House of Commons, said the quick response was a sign of things to come from the minority Tory Government. He told *The Daily Telegraph*: "If this Government wants to survive it is going to have to cave in on an almost weekly basis. When the Government does not have a majority it has got to dance to other people's tune."

◆ Angela Merkel set the stage for a showdown with Donald Trump when she announced that next week's G20 summit in Hamburg would focus on climate change. Mrs Merkel made it clear that as host Germany intends to use the summit to defend the Paris climate agreement, which the US President pulled out of earlier this month. Mr Trump will meet his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, at the summit, the White House confirmed yesterday.

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