

Tory faction fight over Brexit escalates as leadership challenge to May threatened

By Robert Stevens
15 September 2018

Speculation has been rife for weeks of an imminent leadership challenge to Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May. The Tory “hard-Brexit” faction had indicated that the resumption of Parliament this month and the forthcoming Conservative conference would signal a contest, centred on a rebellion by MPs against May’s plan for a “soft Brexit” agreed by her Cabinet at her Chequers country residence.

According to reporters, up to 100 Tory MPs were prepared to vote against May and precipitate a contest in which former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was the leading challenger.

Johnson resigned in protest at the Chequers plan, along with Brexit Secretary David Davis. But his poll position was guaranteed by the open endorsement of US President Donald Trump during his July visit to the UK, after which Johnson began his leadership campaign in earnest with an anti-Muslim diatribe against women wearing the burqa.

Johnson continued the same theme last Sunday in the *Daily Mail*, declaring of May’s proposals for a deal with the EU to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, “We have wrapped a suicide vest around the British constitution—and handed the detonator to [European Union (EU) Brexit negotiator] Michel Barnier.”

Tuesday saw a private meeting of a reported 50 MPs—more than the 48 needed to trigger a no confidence motion—to discuss likely challengers. However, the calculated “show of strength” was soon to come into question—especially as Johnson and leading backbench Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg stayed away and Davis at least publicly reiterated his loyalty to May.

The hard-Brexiteers are widely assumed to have the numbers to force a contest, but not to win it. Their

plans are facing a backlash due to concerns in business circles at the economic consequences of not reaching a deal with the EU and the UK crashing out of the Single Market.

Despite broad-based scepticism in the Chequers plan, dominant sections of the City of London and major corporations are backing May as the lesser evil—faced with a Tory opposition that includes forces happy to contemplate the loss of access to critical EU markets.

Johnson and Davis calculate that the support of Trump and the US will enable them to force the EU into a deal including opening up its markets, but others such as John Redwood and Ian Bone reportedly will not countenance any continued relationship with Europe.

These concerns found dramatic expression in the reversal of the editorial line of the *Daily Mail* from backing a hard Brexit to backing May. Following the replacement of former editor Paul Dacre with Geordie Greig, Thursday saw the *Mail*’s editorial attack those seeking May’s removal for the lack of an alternative plan and for strengthening the EU in the ongoing negotiations.

An op-ed piece in the same edition by Andrew Pierce described the meeting held Tuesday as an occasion whereby “One by one, traitors put the knife into Theresa.”

The hard Brexit wing in the European Research Group (ERG) have produced a 140-page document focusing on the eventuality of a “no deal” Brexit, which reportedly focuses on a trade deal comparable to that cut between the EU and Canada and threatens no payments to the EU of outstanding debts in the event of no deal. It is described as having a Thatcherite agenda of cutting income, capital gains and business taxes “to remodel the British economy after leaving the EU,”

according to the *Financial Times*.

However, Mogg announced that the document had been pulled, seemingly due to fears of the reaction to plans for an escalation of militarism that includes proposals for a British space-based nuclear missile shield and a new rapid response force capable of protecting the Falklands Islands—over which Britain fought a war with Argentina nearly 40 years ago.

Exclusive focus on such disagreements within the British media conceals more than it reveals. Their concerns over the fate of May's soft-Brexit position is generally presented as the voice of pragmatism and reason, when measured by the yardstick of defending the interests of British imperialism under conditions of a threatened trade war and a second economic crash worse than 2008.

But from the standpoint of the interests of the working class, despite the warnings of the impact by pro-Remain forces of a hard-Brexit on living standards, May and her opponents are both advocates of endless austerity and savage cuts to ensure that the UK remains competitive against its rivals.

The hard Brexit wing of the Tory Party is developing into a nakedly far-right movement, along the same fascistic lines as Trump's administration in the US. The first UK politician Trump met after his coming to office was the UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage, who was accompanied by his party's major financial backer Arron Banks.

Banks has spent the period since the 2016 referendum working out scenarios for a new far-right formation and recently founded the Blue Wave movement, which Rupert Murdoch's *Sky News* described as "dedicated to recruiting former UKIP members—and others who wish to secure the hardest of hard Brexits—into the Conservatives."

Banks has formally applied to join the Tory party to ensure the removal of May and was rejected by Conservative central office. But according to a Guido Fawkes blog posting, Banks has been appointed Treasurer of the influential Conservative Way Forward group which has the support of 100 Tory MPs—around a third of the party—including eight sitting Cabinet Ministers.

The group "was founded in 1991 to defend and build upon the achievements of our founding President Lady Margaret Thatcher, and to adapt her values to British

life today."

As is the case in bourgeois politics globally, the role of such far-right outliers is to set the pace that the main parties of the ruling elite quickly adopt. It was to try to prevent a haemorrhaging of a large section of the Tories base to UKIP that May's predecessor as prime minister, David Cameron, agreed a referendum on EU membership.

Whatever becomes of May, her faction of the party will again march in lockstep with the far-right agenda of Johnson, Rees-Mogg, Banks, et al, on all fundamental issues concerning the living standards and democratic rights of the working class.

This week Tory Members of the European Parliament voted en bloc to back the rightist government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and to oppose measures paving the way for EU sanctions. During his eight years in office, Orbán has rigged the Hungarian constitution to suit the government, abolished press freedoms, silenced oppositional media, waged a blatantly anti-Semitic campaign, and advocated the expulsion of refugees that he described as "Muslim invaders."

These far-right forces, whatever position they take on Brexit, can only execute their agenda from a governmental position due to the deliberate political suppression of the working class by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The Blairite wing of the Labour Party does so in barely concealed alliance with the Tories. But their scheming is only made possible by the refusal of party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his allies to fight the right wing and their insistence that Labour's "broad church" must remain open to those presently witch-hunting his supporters as "anti-Semites" and, in the words of arch-Blairite Chuka Umunna, "dogs" that Corbyn must bring to heel.

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