

Candidates line up in UK Conservative leadership contest

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The UK Conservative leadership contest began yesterday and closes today, under expedited procedures drawn up by the backbench members 1922 Committee.

The contest is just one of the myriad consequences of last Thursday's referendum in favour of Britain quitting the European Union (EU) by just less than 52 percent. Prime Minister David Cameron, who had led the official Remain campaign, announced his resignation early Friday morning pending the election of his successor. The leadership result is expected to be announced on September 9, with the victor taking over as prime minister.

The referendum was the outcome of a faction fight between Cameron and the most Thatcherite sections of his party, in alliance with the xenophobic UK Independence Party. As a result, both the official Remain and Leave campaigns were headed by Tories—who are associated with more than six years of brutal austerity.

The vote to quit took the entire establishment by surprise. The Tory party is now divided with a lame duck prime minister, under conditions of a gathering economic crisis and rancorous divisions between the powers-that-be in the UK and the EU, and within the UK itself.

As well as trying to restore unity in the party, the main task of the successful candidate will be to lead the UK's negotiations with the EU over the terms of its exit. Cameron has refused to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, beginning two years of formal negotiations with the EU over the terms of Brexit, saying this is the responsibility of his successor.

Appearing at the first meeting of EU member states since the referendum on Tuesday, Cameron provocatively blamed the assembled leaders for the outcome, because they had not acceded to his demands

for greater restrictions to the freedom of movement.

In fact, the EU—which is implementing a vicious “Fortress Europe” policy against those fleeing the wars in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere—did agree to restrict benefits to EU migrants in the UK. Nonetheless, curbs on immigration and demands for the UK to “take control of its borders” were central to both the Remain and Leave campaign.

Cameron also asserted that the UK would not agree to a new trade deal with the EU without these harsher restrictions, drawing a hard-line response from the summit, Germany and France in particular.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and France's President Francois Hollande insist that there will be no negotiations with the UK prior to Article 50 being invoked. They fear this would encourage “contagion”, as nationalist and far right parties in Europe, emboldened by the UK vote, press for referenda on membership.

They specifically ruled out any deal with the UK that curbed free movement. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, said anyone wanting access to the EU's markets must adhere to the criteria “without exception.”

Merkel said, “Whoever wants to leave this family cannot expect to have no more obligations but to keep privileges.”

Xavier Bettel, Luxembourg prime minister, said the EU and the UK could be “married or divorced but not something in between. We are not on Facebook, with ‘It's complicated’ as a status,” he said.

Yesterday, for the first time in 40 years, the EU summit continued without a British representative present. A meeting of the 27 member states is scheduled for September 16, without UK participation.

These national tensions will take centre stage in the

Tory leadership contest, alongside a ratcheting up of anti-immigrant propaganda, so as to channel the deep social divisions expressed in the referendum in a right-wing direction.

As it seeks to deal with the cataclysmic implications of last Thursday's result, there is no agreement in the ruling elite as to the best means to preserve the interests of British imperialism. Discussions include trying to "roll back" the referendum result through a second referendum or a general election in which pro- or anti-EU membership is the main issue.

In parliament, the majority of MPs were overwhelmingly in favour of Remain, meaning that they could block a Brexit's passage into law or set conditions on its renegotiations. In addition, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted Remain, presenting a constitutional crisis. Regardless of their differences, however, it is the working class that will pay the price from an even greater onslaught against living standards and democratic rights.

Many economic commentators regard the least damaging possibility to be the "Norway option". Norway has full access to the EU single market through its membership of the European Economic Area. But as it pays EU contributions and is part of the Schengen border-free area, leading critics have denounced this as essentially EU membership without voting rights.

US President Barack Obama has suggested this option. Behind the scenes, US imperialism is active in trying to mediate the consequences of the Brexit vote to ensure that it does not diminish its influence over EU policy, or endanger the US-led NATO alliance, and its military provocations against Russia.

In a surprise move, former London Mayor Boris Johnson today quit the leadership race. Johnson was the most prominent figure in the Leave campaign and initially seen as the favourite to win the leadership race. However, it rapidly became clear that not only was he unacceptable to the Remain wing of the party, but he was considered unreliable by the euro-sceptics.

Earlier this week, he appeared to backslide on his insistence during the referendum campaign that immigration controls were central to EU negotiations. Johnson had also come out against holding a snap election if he won the contest, although he did not rule out a second referendum on any terms eventually agreed with the EU.

Johnson's candidacy was spiked by Michael Gove, the other main figure in the Leave campaign. A cabinet member of long standing, he is a far more hardline Brexiter than last-minute convert Johnson.

In a press conference, Gove damned Johnson, stating that he did not have what was needed to lead the country and that people "sent us a clear instruction that they want Britain to leave the European Union... They told us to restore democratic control of immigration policy... [and] They rejected politics as usual and government as usual."

For the Remain wing of the party, the favoured candidate is Home Secretary Theresa May. Originally trailed as the "anyone but Boris" option, May has said that she will see Brexit through—ruling out both a snap election and a second referendum—while uniting the country. She is backed by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who backed out of the contest Thursday morning.

Stephen Crabb, the work and pensions secretary, is running on a joint ticket with Sajid Javid, the business secretary. Both campaigned for Remain, but now state "We are all Brexiteers now." Pointing up their working class backgrounds, Crabb and Javid are presenting themselves as the "champions of blue-collar conservatism"—insisting that immigration controls are necessary to enable the party to "reconnect" with UK Independence Party voters and disillusioned Labour supporters.

Crabb, who voted against gay marriage, has links to a Christian group that campaigns for "cures" for homosexuality. He also ruled out a second referendum and an early general election, arguing that "the answer to the question of instability is not to create further uncertainty."

Former defence secretary Liam Fox, a leading Thatcherite and euro-sceptic, has also confirmed he will stand, as has energy minister Andrea Leadsom, who appeared in several TV broadcasts for the Leave camp.



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