

All candidates in UK Tory leadership contest pledge to uphold Brexit

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Ahead of the first round of the British Conservative Party leadership contest Tuesday, support has firmed for the favoured candidate, Home Secretary Theresa May. Prime Minister David Cameron, who led the official Remain campaign that was defeated in the June 23 referendum on European Union membership, announced his resignation the next day pending the election of his successor. The leadership result, to be decided by some 150,000 Tory Party members, is to be announced on September 9, with the victor taking over as prime minister.

The leadership contest proceeds under conditions of a gathering economic crisis and rancorous divisions within the ruling elite over the referendum result and its implications. Although May officially supported the Remain campaign, she was quick to reassure the majority anti-EU constituency among Tory MPs and in the wider party that as prime minister, she would ensure a Brexit.

Launching her campaign last Thursday, May said, “Brexit means Brexit. The campaign was fought, the vote was held, turnout was high and the country gave their verdict. There must be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it through the back door and no second referendum.”

May advances herself as the candidate of stability and renewed party unity. She declared that there would be no snap general election in the autumn or spring and that the government would serve out its full five-year term. This position was repeated by the other four leadership contenders: Michael Gove, Andrea Leadsom, Liam Fox and Stephen Crabb. Gove, Leadsom and Fox campaigned for Leave in the referendum, while Crabb campaigned for Remain.

The *Financial Times* indicated its support for May, editorialising, “[S]he seems to have played the

shrewdest hand of all. Her support for Remain during the campaign, while hardly vocal, commends her to the pro-Europeans. Her tough stance on immigration over the past six years means she will be supported by many on the Leave side.”

Former London Mayor Boris Johnson had been widely seen as the likely replacement for Cameron as party leader and prime minister. He led the official Leave campaign alongside Gove. But Johnson was forced into a humiliating pullout after Gove stabbed him in the back by announcing his own candidacy and taking many of the former mayor’s backers with him.

Among the most eurosceptic wing of the party, Johnson was considered too unreliable to force through the terms on withdrawal from the EU demanded by the ruling class. He had been seen to backtrack on his former pledge to make strict immigration controls central to any deal reached with the EU. Gove, a cabinet member of long standing, is a far more hard-line eurosceptic.

The campaign to “Get Boris” was led by the right-wing *Daily Mail* and *Sun* tabloids, both ardent Leave supporters. The *Mail* is owned by the Rothermere family and the *Sun* by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch.

The “revolt” was prepared last Wednesday, when Sarah Vine, Michael Gove’s wife and a *Daily Mail* columnist, “accidentally” sent an email intended for her husband and two advisers to a member of the public, who then circulated it to the media. The email advised Gove not to give unconditional support to Johnson’s bid for leadership. It concluded with the devastating remark: “Crucially, the [Tory] membership will not have the necessary reassurance to back Boris, neither will Dacre/Murdoch, who instinctively dislike Boris but trust your ability enough to support a Boris/Gove

ticket.”

The side-lining of Johnson was carried out after Johnson, just one day before, wrote in his *Telegraph* column, “It is said that those who voted Leave were mainly driven by anxieties about immigration. I do not believe that is so.”

This infuriated Murdoch. He was quoted by Ed Conway, economics editor of Sky News, as saying of the Brexit vote at a *Times* CEO summit Tuesday, “I think it’s wonderful. ... We made a momentous decision last Thurs. ... It’s a bit like a prison break...”

“If [Boris] backtracks on serious things there’ll be another bloody revolt. It’s time for change. I just hope the right people give the right leadership.”

Another participant at the summit, Jenny Halpern Prince, the CEO of a public relations firm, quoted Murdoch as saying that if Gove became prime minister, he would “do a fine job of running the country.”

The Goves are friends of *Mail* proprietor Viscount Rothermere and have spent time at the billionaire’s homes in France and the West Country in England.

With Johnson dealt with, Murdoch’s *Sun* tabloid published a column last Friday by political editor Trevor Kavanagh outlining Murdoch’s position. Beginning, “Thank goodness Boris Johnson pulled out of the race—it’s best for Britain,” Kavanagh stated, “Four days ago, I thought only an ‘act of sabotage’ could stop Boris becoming our next PM. In his newspaper column that day he did the job himself by dismissing immigration as the driving force behind Brexit.”

Kavanagh backed Gove’s move, stating, “If the spoils of war go to the victor, Gove has the strongest claim.” He added, “His genuine contempt for the high-handed, undemocratic Brussels elite was formed then and has been confirmed ever since. Unlike Boris, the ultimate opportunist, he is a true believer.”

However, such is the febrile atmosphere within the ruling elite that by the weekend, Gove’s campaign appeared to be stalling. Paul Goodman, editor of the grassroots Tory web site ConservativeHome, said of Gove, “It is very difficult for him, as many Tory MPs—rightly or wrongly—see him as having lost the moral high ground.”

On Friday, the *Mail* declared its support for May, on the proviso that she agreed to give Gove, as a Brexit backer, a critical role in her government. It praised May

as “somewhat reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher,” with “her political experience honed in the furnace of the Home Office—which finished off many a lesser cabinet minister.” The newspaper added that “it is also hugely reassuring” that May “promises to put a campaigner for Out in charge of the negotiations for withdrawal. Which brings us to Michael Gove—surely the ideal candidate for the job.”

The contest is now shaping up to be between May and Leadsom. Some 30 MPs who had previously backed Johnson were said to be switching to Leadsom, who was a prominent speaker in favour of Leave.

Leadsom has insisted that the next Tory leader must be a Leave backer. In remarks directed against May, she said the next leader should not be someone “who is reluctantly following the wishes of the people.”

In a profile of Leadsom, the *Telegraph* said she had “prime Thatcherite credentials.” The newspaper added, “It is no surprise that Tory grandees this week spent hours on the phone persuading her to stand.” It noted, “Before she became an MP, she was a banker who worked closely with the Bank of England, and so can offer certainty and understanding of the financial markets.”

Leadsom has the backing of former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith. Another leading Tory “Brexiter,” Owen Paterson, also vouched for her, saying, “The next prime minister has a crystal-clear mandate to bring us fully out of the EU and back onto the world stage where we belong.”

Leadsom is also the popular choice amongst members of the UK Independence Party. One of her main backers is Aaron Banks, the multimillionaire co-chair of the Leave.eu group and bankroller of the UK Independence Party.



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