

Speculation mounts over snap general election as UK Brexit crisis intensifies

Robert Stevens
5 November 2016

The political and constitutional crisis enveloping Britain's ruling class is intensifying, following Thursday's High Court ruling that only Parliament has the right to trigger Britain's exit from the European Union (EU).

Prime Minister Theresa May's government hopes to invoke Royal Prerogative powers in an attempt to begin Brexit (British exit from the EU) without a parliamentary vote. The government is to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court, which will rule on the case in December.

The crisis has prompted speculation that May, who campaigned for remaining in the EU but leads a party overwhelmingly committed to Brexit, may be forced to call a snap general election over the issue. The *Times* editorialised Friday, "The arguments for an early general election must look compelling in Downing Street this morning, despite the prime minister's assurances to the contrary."

On Friday, Nigel Farage, the interim leader of the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP), said, "The neatest, cleanest way to finish this off is for May to call a general election on the basis that Brexit means Brexit, to get a majority and to get on with it."

The government's crisis worsened Friday, with the resignation of Conservative MP Stephen Phillip, prompting a by-election in his seat of Sleaford and North Hykeham. Phillips, who voted for Brexit, admitted that he never believed the Leave vote would win. Since the consequences of it have become apparent—especially as regards access to the Single Market—and with May committed to Brexit, Phillips has been open in his opposition and worked in alliance with pro-Remain forces.

Up to three-quarters of MPs in Parliament are in favour of remaining in the EU, with many determined

to reverse the June 23 vote either via a second referendum, or a general election. Phillips applied unsuccessfully to Parliaments' Speaker John Bercow for a debate in the Commons on the issue of Parliament being able to vote on Article 50 (the EU legislation which begins formal EU exit). This followed an unsuccessful request on the same issue by former Labour leader Ed Miliband.

UKIP leadership candidate Suzanne Evans announced Friday she would contest the Sleaford and North Hykeham election.

May has a slim parliamentary majority of just 15. The Sleaford and North Hykeham contest follows another by-election in Richmond Park on December 1, prompted by the resignation of Tory MP Zac Goldsmith over the building of a third runway at Heathrow. The seat could be lost to the Liberal Democrats, who are being backed by the Greens as part of the pro-EU "progressive alliance."

The High Court ruling has spurred on deepening collaboration between pro-Remain forces. On Friday, the *Guardian* reported that "a cross-party group of Tory and Labour MPs" met immediately following the ruling to discuss how it "could be used to force May to reveal more about her broad negotiating aims."

The widely-despised former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair is leading this political realignment. Writing in the October 28 *New European* newspaper, set up by pro-Remain forces following the referendum vote, Blair stated, "We are the insurgents now... We have to build the capability to mobilise and to organise." The Remain camp had "to make the argument, and not to be whipped into line to support a decision we genuinely believe is a catastrophe for the country we love."

Speaking to the BBC Radio Four's *Today*, Blair said that nothing was off the table in terms of possible

moves to reverse Brexit. “If it becomes clear that this is either a deal that doesn’t make it worth our while leaving, or a deal that is so serious in its implications that people may decide they don’t want to go, there’s got to be some way, either through Parliament, through an election, possibly through a referendum, in which people express their view,” he said. “There is no reason why we should close off any options.”

Blair’s intervention came just days before the launch of the “centre-left” Tribune group of 70 Labour MPs, with a speech by *Guardian* journalist Will Hutton—part of which was republished in the *Guardian* Wednesday under the heading, “The Brexit war can still be won, but we must start fighting back.” Hutton wrote, “Britain must reaffirm EU membership, which is the bridge to international openness and fundamental to our prosperity ... These are the propositions around which the centre and left—and the best of the conservative tradition—can unite.”

Central to the aims of the pro-Remain forces is the moulding of Labour as the main pro-EU vehicle of the ruling elite. Immediately after the Brexit referendum, Labour’s Blairite wing launched a coup aimed at removing party leader Jeremy Corbyn on the basis that he was not sufficiently pro-EU and was a declared opponent of nuclear weapons and war. On Friday, the *Guardian* editorialised: “Parliament is back where it should be, at the heart of the debate. Now Labour must be in the thick of the contest, bold and principled in support of the national interest.”

The depth of the divisions within ruling circles is reflected in the language employed by their representatives and in the media. Right-wing pro-Brexit newspapers responded to the High Court ruling by denouncing the “treachery” and “betrayal” of the three judges who authored it. Utilising populist rhetoric to hail a battle for “freedom” and democracy”, articles and commentaries warned of “civil war”, “riots” and “rebellions” if the courts and Remain camp force the reversal of Brexit.

The *Daily Mail* front page consisted of a photo of the three “out of touch” judges “who defied 17.4 million Brexit voters” above a banner headline reading, “Enemies of the People.” The *Mail* made a derogatory reference, before it was pulled, to one of the judges being “openly gay.”

The *Daily Express* evoked World War Two,

editorialising, “Today, this country faces a crisis as grave as anything since the dark days when Churchill vowed we would fight them on the beaches ... Rise up people of Britain and fight, fight, fight.”

The *Independent* cited the comments of UKIP councillor Stephen Raven from the town of Boston where the highest vote for Brexit was recorded. Raven said, “If Brexit doesn’t go ahead, you are going to get civil uproar. It’s not a word I use lightly, but there is going to be a revolution.”

The invocations of the “sovereignty of Parliament” by May’s opponents is just as much cynical hyperbole as is the claim that her government and UKIP are genuinely concerned that the “will of the people” be honoured. If the judges’ decision is reversed by the Supreme Court, the same essential arguments will continue utilising different rhetorical flourishes. Two right-wing factions of the bourgeoisie are engaged in a bitter conflict over the best way to secure the interests of British imperialism against both its major rivals and the working class. Both are pro-big business, pro-austerity and pro-war.

The Socialist Equality Party has been vindicated in its decision to oppose support for either reactionary camp in the referendum campaign and in urging an active boycott. The programme advanced by the SEP, in opposition to British nationalism in both its “Little Englander” and pro-EU guises, was for the political mobilisation of the British and European working class for a socialist workers’ government and a United Socialist States of Europe. It is only on this basis that the lies being used to line workers up behind rival capitalist factions can be exposed and the working class take an independent stand in its own interests.

The author also recommends:

High Court verdict on EU Brexit plunges UK deeper into crisis

[4 November 2016]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact