

# Divisions in UK ruling elite widen over post-Brexit orientation to Trump

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UK Prime Minister Theresa May is to be the first foreign leader to meet US President Donald Trump in Washington DC, Friday.

With a Supreme Court ruling Tuesday expected to require her government to secure parliamentary approval for triggering the two-year process of the UK leaving the European Union (EU), the days leading up to the meeting will see escalating political conflict in ruling circles.

May has made Trump's election the cornerstone of her post-Brexit strategy, adapting to a yet more open embrace of Trump by the anti-EU right-wing of her party, as well as the UK Independence Party and the largely pro-Brexit press.

Last week May gave a speech at Lancaster House threatening the EU states with trade war measures that all concerned knew were underscored by a belief that the Trump administration stood behind her in supporting Brexit—as confirmed by Trump's earlier interview with the *Sunday Times* in which he said Brexit “is going to end up being a great thing” because the EU is “basically a vehicle for Germany.”

Even so, May hopes the threat of a “hard Brexit,” with the UK leaving the Single Market and Customs Union, will act as a bargaining chip ensuring that the UK is able to continue the favourable trade terms with Europe on which the UK economy relies. To this end, May used an interview with the *Financial Times* to explain that she did not share Trump's relish at the prospect of the break-up of the EU. “I want the EU to continue to be strong and I want to continue to have a close and strategic partnership with the EU,” she said. She was sure that Trump “recognises the importance and significance of NATO” and “will recognise the importance of the co-operation we have in Europe to ensure our collective defence and collective security.”

This is a mixture of wishful thinking and overt dissembling.

The impact of Trump on Europe and the UK's relations with the continent is indicated by the talks on a new trade deal conducted prior to May's visit by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson. *Bloomberg* reported that the January 8 talks had the specific aim of encouraging May “to be more aggressive in exiting the union.”

They were held between Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Trump's chief strategy adviser Steve Bannon, alongside separate talks with National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and UK defence and intelligence leaders.

An ecstatic article by Freddy Gray in the right-wing Tory magazine, the *Spectator*, described the fascistic Bannon as “a true Brexit believer and an EU hater. ... It is Bannon who brought [UKIP leader Nigel] Farage into Trump's orbit” and was thought to have “arranged for the Eurosceptic Marine Le Pen [of the fascist National Front] to visit Trump Tower last week.”

Gray boasts that German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the EU “can either fall in with Trump's new world order—or fall out with the world's greatest superpower.” The EU project, he continued, “has always been nurtured with American backing. ... America used trade and NATO to make the continent a bulwark against the East. That often meant sacrificing America's short-term economic gains in the interests of security and world peace. Trump has no time for that.”

These are the political and geostrategic calculations on which the Tory right bases itself—of an escalating conflict between the US and Europe that will force the European powers to once again “know their place” in the New World Order, while Britain can benefit from its alliance with the thuggish bully in the White House.

Hence the *Daily Telegraph* urging, “Mr. Trump is now the most powerful man in the world—and the UK has to work with him. If he offers the hand of friendship, we would be fools not to accept it.” And Rupert Murdoch’s the *Sun* claiming that Trump “could spell great things for UK too ... with apologies to JFK—ask not what Trump can do for his country, ask what he can do for ours.”

Even such positive comments are tinged with concern that Trump’s “America First” doctrine will militate against achieving a partnership that serves Britain’s interests. But outside these circles, the reaction to Trump’s inauguration speech, on the official right and left of politics, was one of barely concealed dread.

The *Financial Times* editorialised that his address “was perhaps the most xenophobic in US history. The rest of the world should be on notice. Mr. Trump intends to rip up the US-created global order. His address will go down as a turning point in America’s post-war role—and quite possibly its death knell.”

The *Observer*, Sunday sister paper of the politically liberal *Guardian*, stated baldly that “it is not too much to say Trump’s ranting scream of ‘America first, America first!’ carries an echo of the ‘Sieg Heil’ (hail victory) of another, not-forgotten era of brutish nationalist triumphalism.” US protectionism, it continued, would “plunge a blunt knife into Theresa May’s hopes of a post-Brexit sweetheart trade deal.”

The newspaper urged a European alliance against Trump, insisting, “If he is inclined to meddle, which is entirely possible, Europe’s members must be ready to repulse him.”

Efforts to consolidate such an alternative EU-based foreign policy for British imperialism are being stepped up. The *Guardian* Saturday reported that a “cross-party group of MPs is plotting to thwart Theresa May’s attempts to drive through a hard Brexit amid rising fears that UK businesses could soon have to pay huge export tariffs on goods they sell to the EU.”

Encompassing Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens and Tories, the move is accompanied by an open letter to May, signed by 43 Labour MPs as a public declaration of opposition to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn for being “soft on Brexit.” Led by Blairites such as Chuka Umunna, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall, the letter was used by the *Observer* to solicit comments by former Tory Chancellor Kenneth Clarke

that it is time for all pro-EU MPs to “abandon a bit of the tribalism in British politics.”

With Trump making clear that the US is set on confrontation with any country deemed to be a threat or challenge to its interests, Germany has made clear it intends to respond in kind. The reconsolidating of the UK’s relations with the EU is therefore only an alternative path towards trade and military war.

Corbyn’s own response to Trump has been typically flaccid moralising bordering on caricature. He noted that he previously gave Barack Obama a copy of “What Would Keir Hardie Say?”—a collection of essays on the founder of the Labour Party.

“I think the whole world needs to learn the lesson of Keir Hardie,” Corbyn said. “He came up from the most appalling poverty and circumstances and gave himself an education, filled his home with learning and books and filled his heart with love and humanity.”

“Let’s hope,” he went on, “that he reaches out to communities across the United States. Let’s hope he [Trump] is prepared to engage with people to maintain the Iran Nuclear Deal ... that he doesn’t go ahead with his proposal to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and that he promotes engagement, critical engagement but engagement with Russia and others.”

Let’s hope, as the old saw goes, for pie in the sky.



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