

Proposed Trump state visit provokes crisis in British ruling circles

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20 February 2017

Today Parliament will debate whether US President Donald Trump's scheduled state visit to Britain, including his meeting with the queen, should be cancelled.

The debate was forced after a petition opposing plans for Trump to meet the queen was signed by more than 1.8 million people (around three percent of the UK population). Only 100,000 signatures are required for a petition to be considered for a debate in parliament.

Earlier in the week 250 legal academics wrote an open letter to May demanding the state visit be cancelled. One of those signing, Dr. Rose Parfitt, a lecturer at Kent Law School, said: "[W]e wanted to call attention to the dangers of UK support for an administration that treats the law as an inconvenient restriction on its power," adding, "... as people who spend every day thinking about law, we worry not only about what the law is but also about what it does. Many of Trump's policies are troubling because they violate or undermine the law, but others are troubling because they enforce or expand the law."

The government responded to the petition by recognising the "strong views" of those who supported it, but insisted Trump would be extended the "full courtesy of a state visit."

Shortly after dismissing the petition, a Downing Street spokesman confirmed that May had spoken to Trump Wednesday, "as part of their regular engagement." He added, "They discussed a range of issues, including trade and security and also discussed the President's upcoming state visit to the UK. The Prime Minister said she looks forward to welcoming him later this year."

The *Guardian* reported that government officials "are keen to limit the president's public exposure more generally during the visit, in order to reduce the

opportunities for protests and disorder on a state occasion. Hundreds of thousands of protesters could be expected in any large city, causing major headaches for the emergency and security services."

Such is the hostility to Trump and May that her government is reportedly considering plans for him to speak in Birmingham, at a ticket-only event, instead of London.

Trump's visit has become a battle ground for rival factions within ruling circles, especially in the aftermath of last year's vote to leave the European Union. May's post-Brexit strategy relies heavily on securing a US trade deal and on US backing to strengthen Britain's hand in negotiations over continued access to essential European markets. But pro-Remain factions of the ruling class calculate that Trump's "America First" agenda excludes the possibility of a significant agreement being reached and that his declared support for the break-up of the EU will backfire on the UK by almost guaranteeing its exclusion from the Single Market.

Even as the details of Trump's visit were being finalised, the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, took the extraordinary step of revealing his agreement with those opposing Trump. Bercow, a former Tory MP, said he was "very strongly" opposed to Trump addressing Parliament on his visit. "Our opposition to racism and to sexism and our support for equality before the law and an independent judiciary are hugely important considerations in the House of Commons," he claimed.

The leader of the Commons, David Lidington, another Tory, who is responsible for arranging government business in the House of Commons, is also opposed to Trump addressing Parliament.

Bercow's intervention, defying the convention of

speaker's neutrality, led to calls from pro-Brexit Tories that Bercow resign. Former foreign minister James Duddridge tabled a no-confidence motion, insisting "it is impossible for him to chair debates as speaker adjudicating on things he has expressed a view on... to be frank, I think there's a very real possibility that once the level of discontent is known and Speaker Bercow sees the writing is on the wall he will go of his own accord."

The government has pointedly refused to make any statement supportive of Bercow remaining Speaker. The pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph*, while noting the motion is unlikely to secure a parliamentary majority, claimed that up to 150 Conservative MPs support his ouster. "The result of the vote is not binding, but if enough MPs call on Mr. Bercow to quit he could be pressured into standing down," it wrote.

It later emerged that three days before his outburst against Trump, Bercow told a group of students at Reading University that he voted for the UK to remain in the EU during last year's referendum.

Faced with this turmoil, the government is reportedly planning a weekend visit for Trump at the end of August or in early September that will not involve him speaking to the Houses of Parliament or Lords. Parliament will be closed during the annual summer recess.

These events are a devastating blow to May's notional strategy of "out of Europe and into the world."

Trump declared his own presidential victory to be "Brexit Plus, Plus, Plus" and built a close relationship with Nigel Farage—the then leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) who spearheaded the "Leave" campaign in the Brexit referendum, promoting anti-immigrant xenophobia. Farage was invited to speak alongside Trump at an election campaign rally in Mississippi last August.

After he won the US presidential election in November, Trump feted Farage—along with the party's financial backer Aaron Banks—at his Trump Tower penthouse in New York. Trump said he favoured Farage becoming Britain's ambassador to Washington, an intrusion into British politics without precedent.

Trump's remarks sparked a crisis in British ruling circles, with the May government issuing a statement that Britain already had an ambassador in Washington. However, with her government totally reliant on a

deepening orientation to the US, May swiftly drew up plans for a post-inauguration visit to Washington that was characterised by an extraordinary level of fawning by the prime minister.

May delivered a series of eulogies to the "special relationship" between the US and UK. At a joint press conference in Washington she announced that Trump had accepted Britain's invitation of a State visit hosted by the queen. The red carpet was truly unfurled. The queen receives just one or two visiting heads of state each year and it is unusual for a US president to be offered one. Since coming to the throne in 1952, she has received just two US presidents. Trump's predecessor Barack Obama was granted a state visit to meet the queen in 2011—but more than two years after he first took office.

Things are made worse still because, within a month of Trump entering the White House, his administration is mired in scandals that could yet result in his impeachment. These exclusively on Trump's suggestion that he might reset US foreign policy, with his Democratic Party opponents speaking directly for the military-intelligence apparatus that is opposed to any retreat from a strategy of confronting Russia.



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