

MPs debate Trump state visit to Britain as tens of thousands protest

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Donald Trump's state visit is in Britain's national interest but it is not yet decided if the US president will address parliament. Such is the government line as set down by Sir Alan Duncan, foreign office minister, during yesterday's debate on a petition calling for Trump to be denied an official state visit to the UK.

The official invitation to the US president was meant to be a coup for the Conservative government of Theresa May. Committed to a "hard exit" from the European Union—including withdrawal from the European single market—the hope was that the visit would prove that the "special relationship" between the US and the UK would enable Britain to thrive outside the EU. The backing of the US president, who has been openly hostile to the EU, was also to be employed to extract better terms for the UK in negotiations with its former European partners.

Instead, the visit is becoming a public relations disaster. Some 1.85 million people signed the petition urging the government not to make Trump's visit an official state affair. An alternative petition, in support of an official state visit, had just 310,000 names.

Before a date has even been announced, the government had indicated it was considering severely restricting any public engagements, including making sure that Trump visits during the parliamentary recess, so he cannot address the House of Commons.

Duncan described the state visit—complete with royal paraphernalia—as "our most important diplomatic tool" and expressed his hope that Trump would receive a "polite and generous" welcome. But as the debate unfolded, thousands gathered outside parliament in support of the anti-Trump petition, and smaller demonstrations took place across the country.

The protests are indicative of widespread hostility to Trump's extreme-right, anti-immigrant, big business policies, which have sparked nearly daily demonstrations within the US. Only the day before, it was announced that

the Trump administration had ordered the rounding up of hundreds of thousands of migrants and the construction of new prisons to detain them.

The London protest drew in many young workers and students. Earlier in the day thousands of migrants, who make up nearly 11 percent of the UK workforce, staged a rally in Parliament Square along with their families and supporters. Also participating were EU citizens angered by the government's refusal to safeguard their right to continue working and living in the UK after Brexit.

These concerns found no genuine expression in the debate. The petitions were heard in Westminster Hall, not the Commons chamber itself. Lasting just three hours, the debate was non-binding and no vote was taken. Before it started, the government made clear it would not retreat. While saying that it recognised the "strong views" of those supporting the petition, it insisted Trump will be extended the "full courtesy of a state visit."

Even as it dismissed public opposition, however, the government faces real problems with its invite. Despite Trump's warmongering statements against China, North Korea and Iran, a significant section of the US ruling elite have denounced him for being "soft" on Russia. The intelligence agencies, with the support of the corporate-controlled media, the Democratic Party and a section of the Republicans will not countenance any let-up in the campaign of sanctions and military buildup conducted under the Obama administration. To this end, the Senate Intelligence Committee has begun investigating allegations of Russian involvement in the 2016 election campaign.

Moreover, the May government—and much of the British establishment—are sympathetic to the anti-Russian stance of Trump's opponents. Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon, and MI6 chief, Alex Younger, recently denounced Moscow as a threat to British sovereignty and "democratic" values. The bourgeoisie hopes to utilise the

UK's military weight and its position within NATO as a means of maintaining its influence in Europe after Brexit, and is indifferent to the consequences of such recklessness.

These life-and-death issues were not mentioned in Westminster Hall. The petition itself objects to Trump's state visit on the grounds that "it would cause embarrassment to Her Majesty the Queen." The president had only been in office for seven days when the invite was sent. It took 978 days for George W. Bush, Tony Blair's partner in crime in Iraq, to be extended the honour, and 758 for Barack Obama.

Concern for the queen animated much of the protest from Labour MPs. Labour MP Paul Flynn, a member of the petitions committee, spoke of his "enormous regard for the queen" and cited approvingly the complaint by *Observer* journalist, Andrew Rawnsley, against "Pimping out the Queen for Donald Trump."

Scottish National Party MP Alex Salmond referred to reports that Trump did not want to meet Prince Charles during the visit (in case the prince tries to discuss climate change), bemoaning that Trump must be the first person on a state visit to "pick" which royals he would meet.

Labour's David Lammy, said that Trump should have a state visit but not an official visit because the speed with which it had been organised made Britain look "desperate."

Conservative MP Crispin Blunt, who chairs the Commons foreign affairs committee, also fretted about the queen's position but from the standpoint that the withdrawal of the state visit would be more embarrassing.

Blunt said supportively, however, that May's invite to Trump had been aimed at getting the US president to affirm his support for NATO, after he had bitterly attacked the alliance. Likewise, Conservative MP Julian Lewis, who chairs the Commons defence committee, stressed that the promised state visit had been necessary to "lead him [Trump] down the path of righteousness" to restating his backing for NATO because "what really matters to the future of Europe is that [the] transatlantic alliance continues and should prosper."

Conservative MPs were the only ones to give any inkling of the broader foreign policy issues involved. Conservative James Cartlidge warned there would be "smiles all round in the Kremlin" if the UK withdrew the invite to Trump. Moscow did not "want a strong transatlantic relationship," he said, before adding that foreign policy is "best served by following the national interest, not through gestures or knee-jerk reactions" and

on this basis, he would also offer a state visit to Vladimir Putin.

Behind all the arguments over Trump's visit, the reality is that it has become a proxy battleground for rival factions within ruling circles, divided between those in favour of a hard Brexit and those opposed. That is why the main focus of the media was not the Trump debate, but the start of deliberations in the House of Lords on the government's bill to trigger Article 50, beginning Britain's exit from the EU.

May personally attended the start of the Lords debate, which is considered unprecedented for a sitting prime minister. She has warned the Lords not to hold up the legislation with amendments.

The soft-Brexit faction consists of sections of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Greens, the SNP and the pseudo-left groups who style themselves as a "progressive alliance." They were unable to reverse the EU referendum result in parliament due to the pledge by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party not to block Brexit, and look unlikely to do so in the Lords.

They have joined forces in the various coalitions that led the protests, hoping to utilise opposition to Trump's reactionary "America First" agenda to promote support for the EU as a supposedly democratic counterweight. This is window dressing for their no less reactionary drive to insist that the UK must retain its access to the European single market post-Brexit.

Speakers at the London rally included *Guardian* journalist Owen Jones, Green MP Caroline Lucas, Labour MP Diane Abbott and shadow chancellor John McDonnell. For McDonnell, the issue was that "we will not become a colony of the Trump regime." All were silent on the draconian austerity measures that have reduced Greece, Spain and other countries to penury. Nor did they mention the EU's vicious "Fortress Europe" policy that has left thousands of migrants to drown in the Mediterranean. Labour has accepted restrictions on freedom of movement and backed the government's Brexit bill despite the absence of protections for EU citizens in the UK.



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