

UK: Boris Johnson gathers support for pro-Brexit Tory leadership challenge

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Parliament's summer recess has become an occasion for vicious infighting between the contending factions of the ruling elite, with the drive to remove Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn matched by preparations for a leadership challenge against Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May on the other side of the house.

The declared aim of the Labour right-wing challenging Corbyn is to secure a "People's Vote" aimed at overturning the referendum vote to quit the European Union (EU). May faces removal by her party's "hard-Brexit" wing, led, at this point at least, by former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

Both factional struggles have a series of crucial dates ahead—including upcoming party conferences and the resumption of parliament—but looming large in their calculations is the March 29, 2019 Brexit deadline, when a verdict must be delivered on whatever Brexit deal May finally strikes with the EU.

May's opponents have indicated that they want to mount a leadership challenge at the earliest when parliament reconvenes September 4.

Johnson has staked his claim to leadership against his rivals, including former Brexit Secretary David Davis, Michael Gove and Jacob Rees-Mogg, by stoking Islamophobia with attacks on the small percentage of Muslim women—estimated to be less than one percent of the female Muslim population in Britain—who wear the burqa.

In a column for the right-wing Conservative *Daily Telegraph* newspaper earlier this month, Johnson used deliberately provocative language to describe women who wear such garments as "looking like letterboxes" and "bank-robbers."

Given that the Tory Party is joined with the Labour right in its bogus anti-Semitism campaign against Corbyn, it proved impossible for it to simply ignore

Johnson's calculated Islamophobia. Finally, Conservative chair Brandon Lewis announced a formal investigation, while May reluctantly requested Johnson apologise. But Johnson and his backers have utilised these moves to portray him as a free-speech martyr, whose views are shared by most Tory Party members. The pose of outrage in the liberal media has only served to consolidate his position.

One of Johnson's supporters warned May not to continue with threats to discipline Johnson, as he could count on two thirds of the party's MPs to back him over the issue. Four unnamed members of May's cabinet made known their support for Johnson, with one declaring, "What he said wasn't that outrageous... and a lot of the party happens to agree with him."

"The sooner the party throws this investigation out, the better. Lots of people both on the front and back benches are really p***** off," the MP added.

According to Rupert Murdoch's pro-Brexit *Sun*, 38 MPs have already signed up to a leadership challenge out of a 48 needed to trigger a leadership contest against May. One Tory MP told the tabloid, "Any punishment beating [of Johnson] will be the tipping point. People [MPs] will send letters in. They can't believe what's happening."

Significantly, Johnson won support from Rees-Mogg, the most influential backbench hard-Brexit MP, who said the investigation launched into Johnson's comments was a "show trial."

Brendan O'Neill of the right-wing libertarian Spiked group, jostling for space in a slew of supportive articles in the Tories house magazine, the *Spectator*, described Johnson as the "victim of the modern inquisition."

A reported 100 Tory MPs, almost a third of the parliamentary party, are being primed to vote down any deal May reaches with the EU when it comes to a vote

in parliament this autumn.

Johnson himself is reportedly planning to speak on Brexit at a fringe event at the upcoming Tory conference in October, at which one party figure told Business Insider there would be a “bloodbath” atmosphere.

Johnson is often presented as a buffoon who shoots his mouth off without thinking, but he is a seasoned politician who for the most part tests out the water before jumping in. His anti-burqa comments and the leadership ambitions that informed them were spurred on above all by the effusive support he was given by US President Donald Trump and his former adviser and strategist Steve Bannon.

Prior to his July visit to the UK, Trump attacked the EU and Germany at the NATO Summit in Brussels before denouncing the deal struck by May with her cabinet that is meant to provide for a soft-Brexit, maintaining tariff-free access to the Single European Market. Johnson had followed David Davis in resigning from cabinet in protest. Trump made clear his support for their position in an interview with the *Sun*, declaring that May was threatening any future US/UK trade deal because the US “would be dealing with the European Union instead of dealing with the UK.”

“We are cracking down right now on the European Union because they have not treated the United States fairly on trading,” he said, adding that Johnson would make a “great prime minister.”

Bannon openly called on Johnson to challenge May and has been reportedly in secret talks with him ever since his resignation from cabinet. Bannon was also one of the first to rush to Johnson’s defence over his burqa comments, stating that he had “nothing to apologise for” and should refuse to “bow at the altar of political correctness” in an interview with Murdoch’s *Sunday Times* August 12.

Johnson would be a “great Prime Minister, not [simply] a good one,” he declared.

Amid an escalating trade war, including the imposition of US tariffs on EU imports of steel and aluminium and sanctions on China, Russia, Iran and Turkey, the Brexiteers feel they have been confirmed in their belief that compromise with the EU is either impossible if relations with America deteriorate still further, or unnecessary—because Brussels will be forced to accept the opening up of Europe’s markets by US

threats.

May, a Remainer, has only managed to avert a leadership challenge thus far because of continuous fudges she has carried out over her Brexit negotiation proposals—and because her opponents were not quite ready. But such is the rift within the Tories that any notion of May continuing to straddle the two warring camps is a pipe dream. Her standing among broad sections of the party was summed up in a column earlier this month by Sherelle Jacobs in the *Daily Telegraph*. Stating of May that her “populist instincts do not exist,” Jacobs continues, “[A]lthough it is not clear when or whether May will be ousted, one thing is certain: her successor must not be another liberal elite centrist.”

Johnson still faces rivals among the Eurosceptics and discussions are reportedly intense over how to proceed—including over whether he should first endorse Davis as a “stalking horse”—given that he who assumes the role of Brutus will not prosper. But over the weekend it emerged that Johnson’s backers are seeking to change party rules so that members and not just MPs are able to nominate leadership candidates to ensure that his enemies do not spike his leadership bid.

The Remain camp continues to present itself as a progressive alternative, including condemning Johnson’s burqa remarks. But this is pure cynicism. May’s record as home secretary is one of the most illiberal in British history, while Labour’s Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry said on the BBC’s Question Time in 2013, “I wouldn’t want my four-year-old looked after by somebody wearing a burka—I wouldn’t want my elderly mum looked after by somebody wearing a burka ... They need to be able to show their face.”

More generally, a policy of trade war and stepped up militarism in alliance with Europe will demand attacks on working people no less savage than if conducted in alliance with the US. On this agenda of ever deeper austerity, all factions of the ruling elite are in full agreement.



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