

UK: Defence minister's sacking escalates Tory crisis amid rising UK/US tensions

Robert Stevens
4 May 2019

The sacking of Gavin Williamson as defence secretary has only intensified the disintegration of Theresa May's Conservative government, already mired in crisis over the UK's scheduled exit from the European Union.

Williamson was sacked after Cabinet Secretary Sir Mark Sedwill announced an inquiry into who leaked to the *Daily Telegraph* the deliberations of the April 23 National Security Council (NSC) meeting at which it was decided to approve Chinese telecom giant Huawei's participation in the UK's next generation 5G data network.

The policy, which is yet to be formally announced, is strongly at odds with the demands of the United States and was only passed with the casting vote of May. This was the first occasion that the deliberations of an NSC meeting had been leaked. Williamson is the first minister to be sacked over a leak in 70 years.

NSC members are bound by the Official Secrets Act, which covers cabinet ministers and senior officials involved in foreign and defence policy, as well as representatives from the intelligence agencies and the armed forces.

Among the ministers known to oppose the deal with Huawei were Williamson, Home Secretary Sajid Javid, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt and Trade Secretary Liam Fox.

On Wednesday afternoon, Williamson was sacked, with May informing him there was "compelling evidence" that he leaked details of the NSC's discussions. May confronted Williamson with the fact that an eleven-minute phone call between him and the journalist at the *Daily Telegraph*, Deputy Political Editor Steven Swinford, had been uncovered. Williamson has stated that he had briefed the *Telegraph* on the anticipated Tory leadership contest, Brexit and other minor issues. He refused to resign, saying May would have to sack him.

The Labour Party, having already called for an official

investigation into the leak, followed up with a call by its Blairite deputy leader, Tom Watson, for a police investigation. Watson said of Williamson, "The prime minister doesn't believe him... Now, if he didn't do it, that means that somebody else did it, which is why I think a criminal inquiry will get to the facts of this case. That's why I think the logical extension of what the prime minister has alleged in her letter is—a criminal act has taken place and the police need to examine the facts."

May's attempt to stem an escalating crisis is in tatters, with Williamson fired the day before local elections in which the Tories suffered a massive collapse, losing over 1,300 council seats and over 40 councils.

Rejecting calls for a police investigation, Cabinet Secretary David Lidington said Thursday that May considered the matter "closed" and "the cabinet secretary does not consider it necessary to refer it to the police." This was after former Tory attorney general Dominic Grieve said there was "certainly an argument" for the matter being referred to the police.

Williamson, a leading representative of the party's hard-Brexit wing, is wreaking havoc. Replying to May's letter, he wrote that "a thorough and formal inquiry" would clear his name. He added, "I appreciate you offering me the option to resign, but to resign would have been to accept that I, my civil servants, my military advisers or my staff were responsible: this was not the case." Speaking to *Sky News* Thursday, he said he had been "utterly screwed" and was "massively comfortable" with the prospect of a police investigation into the Huawei leak.

He was backed by Tory MPs, including former minister Sir Desmond Swayne, who said, "Natural justice requires that the evidence is produced so that his reputation can be salvaged or utterly destroyed." Hard-Brexit figurehead Peter Bone declared, "This seems to have been a kangaroo court reaching a decision in secret which we

have no evidence to base any decision on.”

As a former chief Tory whip, the chair of May’s successful 2015 party leadership campaign and defence secretary, Williamson is described as someone who knows where the “bodies are buried.” Speaking on the BBC’s “Newsnight,” political editor Nicholas Watt said, “Make no mistake, Gavin Williamson is on the warpath... I spoke to a friend tonight who said he is thinking of delivering a speech on the level of Geoffrey Howe’s [1990] resignation speech, which famously precipitated the downfall of Margaret Thatcher.”

Whether Williamson leaked the information or not, and whatever role he may play in May’s downfall, this row is only a symptom of the intractable crisis rending the British bourgeoisie.

Williamson held the Defence portfolio for less than 18 months, having replaced Sir Michael Fallon following his resignation. But he has staked out a claim to be the most bellicose advocate of the closest possible alliance with US imperialism, post Brexit, as it confronts Russia and China.

Just weeks after taking office, he provocatively declared that Russia was planning to kill “thousands and thousands and thousands” of Britons by seeking to control vital infrastructure.

As the crisis escalated over the March 2018 poisoning in Salisbury of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, Williamson responded to Moscow’s demand for information linking them to what May said was an attempted assassination by declaring that Russia should “go away” and “shut up.”

In a speech this February, he insisted that the UK should be prepared to confront Russia and China on all fronts. He denounced Russia for “rebuilding its military arsenal,” and warned that China is “developing its modern military capability and its commercial power.”

Williamson’s attacks on Russia, and more particularly on China, became increasingly unhinged—placing him in direct conflict with those sections of the ruling elite who view the development of commercial links with Beijing, including China’s financing of imperative infrastructure projects in the UK, as critical.

In February, Chancellor Philip Hammond was forced to cancel a trade visit to China and attempt to repair the damage after Williamson threatened to send the UK’s new aircraft carrier into the South China Sea to monitor Chinese naval activity.

Among those lined up against Williamson’s intervention was former Chancellor George Osborne, who, under May’s predecessor David Cameron, forged

close economic ties with China. Osborne warned, “You’ve got the defence secretary engaging in gunboat diplomacy of a quite old-fashioned kind, at the same time as the chancellor of the exchequer and the foreign secretary are going around saying they want a close economic partnership with China.”

Tensions around the post-Brexit strategy of the ruling elite will remain centre stage with the visit of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Britain next Wednesday. Pompeo will meet May and Jeremy Hunt, the foreign secretary, with the *Daily Mail* reporting that he will “deliver a speech on the state of the UK-US ‘special relationship.’” According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Pompeo will reiterate US threats that “allowing Huawei access to networks could endanger US-UK relations.” It cited a State Department source who said, “What we want to do with friends, allies, partners on this issue is share with them the things we know about the risks that the presence of Huawei and their networks present.”

The crisis over Huawei confirms that May’s dysfunctional government can only stagger on in office because it is being propped up by Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party.

Labour is continuing talks with the Tories in an attempt to reach an agreement that would see her EU withdrawal deal passed in Parliament, at the fourth attempt. How conscious this anti-working class agenda is was aired on the BBC Thursday, with Barry Gardiner, shadow trade minister, telling Tory Brexit Minister James Cleverly that Labour was “in there [the talks] trying to bail you guys out.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact