

Conservative Party leadership contest

Boris Johnson poised to replace May as UK prime minister

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21 June 2019

The Conservative leadership contest to replace UK Prime Minister Theresa May will be decided between the hard Brexiteer and favourite Boris Johnson and the soft-Brexit-supporting Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

Thursday saw the contest whittled down to the two after Home Secretary Sajid Javid and Environment Secretary Michael Gove fell after the last two rounds of voting by the party's 313 MPs.

In the fifth and final round, Johnson won 160 votes—more than half of all Tory MPs—Hunt won 77 and Gove 75.

The contest will now be decided by the Tories' 160,000 members, who will vote in a postal ballot to be held July 6-8, with the winner to be announced in the week of July 22. Former foreign secretary Johnson won each of the five rounds of voting after May stepped down as leader on June 7 and is the clear favourite among the membership. One recent poll by YouGov, when six candidates were left in the race, had 77 percent of Tory members supporting Johnson.

Given that whoever replaces May will be faced with an intensifying crisis over Brexit, with Britain's new exit date from the European Union (EU) set for October 31, the various candidates made their pitches on the basis that they could resolve it.

On Wednesday, Rory Stewart, the only Remain-supporting candidate to make it to the latter stages of the contest, departed the race. Backed by pro-Remain forces, including the *Guardian*, Stewart was a supporter of the deal that May agreed with the EU, but which she failed to get through Parliament. He was opposed to the UK leaving the EU in a "no deal" Brexit if the next prime minister fails to reach a new deal in the months ahead.

Johnson was understood to rather face off with Hunt in the final round as he was a Remainer in the 2016 EU referendum, whereas Gove is a hard-Brexit supporter. According to numerous sources, Hunt's vote would have been smaller without tactical voting against Gove encouraged by Johnson.

This testifies to the political sympathies of the Tory membership and a large swathe of Tory MPs adamant that the next prime minister, unlike May, had to be a Brexit supporter. Going into the last round, Hunt insisted that he was best placed to challenge Johnson and would be viewed as someone more amenable to the EU's leaders in negotiation.

Such is the fanatically anti-EU mood within the Tory ranks that a recent YouGov survey found that 46 percent of members would be happy to see Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage as Tory leader in order to enforce Brexit. Farage has offered an electoral pact with the Tories to secure Brexit.

The poll found that more than half (54 percent) of the party's membership would rather see the Conservative Party destroyed than the UK not leave the EU, with only 36 percent putting the party's survival above that of securing an EU exit. Almost two-thirds of party members (61 percent) would accept "significant damage" being done to the British economy if it meant the UK leaving the EU, and 63 percent would accept Scottish independence and the break-up of the UK to see Brexit happen.

It is understood that Johnson was willing to offer Home Secretary Sajid Javid the post of chancellor in a government he formed, with Javid noticeably shifting his position towards backing a "no-deal" outcome as promised by Johnson if he is unable to reach a new deal

with the EU.

For all the anti-EU rhetoric spouted by Johnson and the Tories' hard-Brexit wing, the reality is that further crisis must ensue from their coming collision course with the EU.

Johnson is seeking to ensure closer ties with the US, with the promise of a new free-trade deal with Washington post-Brexit. Under conditions in which the major EU powers are at odds with US imperialism over policies of trade war and confrontation with China, Russia and Iran, this can only intensify divisions between the UK and Brussels.

Germany's EU affairs minister, Michael Roth, arriving at this week's EU summit in Luxembourg, said, "I don't see any chances to renegotiate the [Brexit] package. The withdrawal agreement is the withdrawal agreement, and I don't see any appetite to start new negotiations within the European Union."

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte warned of the consequences of Johnson enforcing a hard Brexit: "With a hard Brexit—even with a normal Brexit—the UK will be a different country. It will be a diminished country. ... It is unavoidable. Because you are not any longer part of the European Union and you are not big enough to have an important position, important enough on the world stage, on your own."

Above all, the contest has made clear that a far more decisive conflict is being prepared—between the government and the working class.

Debate was framed around the necessity of defeating "socialism" and Marxism and preventing the election of a Labour Party government led by its nominally left leader Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn is held up as the bogey man, but the fear of the ruling class is of a resurgence of an interest in socialism among workers and youth amid a growth of class struggle internationally.

In his press conference, Johnson described Corbyn and the wider left as a "Marxist cabal" and "a real threat to our fundamental values and our way of life." As prime minister, Johnson would "protect this country from the red-toothed, red-clawed socialism." Corbyn was "far to the left of [former Labour MP and London Mayor] Ken Livingstone in his nihilistic determination to hike taxes to penal rates and attack wealth creation and private property and in his failure again and again to extricate anti-Semitism."

In a televised BBC debate, Gove's closing

contribution to a question that had nothing to do with Corbyn was to spit out, "Jeremy Corbyn, you discredited Marxist, get back into the dustbin of history where you belong."

Commenting on the prospects of a snap general election if Johnson was not able to secure a Brexit deal that could get through the UK parliament, the pro-Brexit *Daily Express* commented, "The hope would be that once the new PM [prime minister] is in the post and we are staring down the barrel of a Marxist government those [Tory Party] coffers [that big business refused to donate to with May as leader will] fill up again quickly."

Rory Stewart, a member of the Labour Party as a teenager before joining the Tories, is aware of rising discontent over savage austerity policies. In his election pitch, he questioned the advisability of his rivals outlining tax policies that would grant the richest in society and the corporations tens of billions in tax breaks.

Johnson has pledged to increase the threshold for paying the 40 percent rate from £50,000 to £80,000—covering a large swathe of the Tory membership who will be voting for him, at a cost of £9 billion a year. He said in declaring his candidature, "We should be cutting corporation tax and other business taxes."

Hunt said he wanted to slash corporation tax from its current levels of 19 percent to below the 12.5 percent in the Irish Republic. This would be a boon to corporations of up to £13 billion annually. Javid floated the idea of abolishing the top rate of income tax altogether.

Even the *Financial Times* felt obliged to editorialise that such policies were "irresponsible" at a time of growing social discontent. "Surveys show that after a near-decade of austerity most Britons would rather the government raised taxes and spent the proceeds on better services than cut them further."



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