

# UK: Domestic row seized on in effort to block Boris Johnson premiership

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The *Guardian*'s release of recordings exposing a row by Boris Johnson with his partner Carrie Symonds has spearheaded a massive effort in recent days to prevent him succeeding Theresa May as UK prime minister. The political firestorm has united pro-Remain and soft-Brexit factions of the ruling class who oppose Johnson's threat to leave the European Union (EU) on October 31 without a deal if necessary.

Johnson was runaway favourite to replace May in a contest against his "soft-Brexit" rival, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt. But his domestic dispute early Friday morning with Symonds, a former Conservative Party communications chief, was taped by a pro-Remain neighbour, Tom Penn.

Penn called police after discussions with his wife, later sending his recording of the incident to the *Guardian* despite police having confirmed that both Johnson and his partner were safe.

The *Guardian* led the field in declaring an alleged statement by Symonds—"get off me"—as proof that Johnson cannot be trusted as prime minister. A column by chief political commentator Andrew Rawnsley declared, "This will be a contest, not a coronation, if Jeremy Hunt questions Boris Johnson's character" and urged Hunt to "do his party and the country a favour by interrogating his rival's flaws ... a Johnson premiership would be a hair-raising gamble with both the future of the Tory party and the future of Britain."

Newspapers including the *Independent* and the *Daily Mirror* joined in.

With Johnson losing ground to Hunt, the pro-Brexit media, led by the *Sun* and *Telegraph*, denounced a politically motivated "stitch-up." The Tory "hard Brexit" faction warned against any retreat on Johnson's part, with the European Research Group threatening, "If Boris reneges on his promises, he'll be

out quicker than May was."

The Remain tide continues to turn against Johnson. Taking Rawnsley's advice, the *Sunday Times* cited an anonymous senior pro-Remain cabinet member warning that Johnson was a security risk who could be exploited by a foreign power: "There will be things in his private life that we don't know about ... There's the danger that people leak what they have over him or blackmail him with it."

Johnson refused to answer questions about the incident at a hustings in Birmingham Saturday and decided not to appear in a Sky News debate against Hunt. His press backers were increasingly exasperated, with the *Sun* insisting that he should have put the issue "behind him."

Hunt and his supporters have gone on the offensive, joined by the party's pro-Remain wing. Hunt told the *Times*, "Don't be a coward Boris, man up and show the nation you can cope with the intense scrutiny the most difficult job in the country will involve."

There are reports that up to 12 Tory MPs are contemplating voting against the government if a no-confidence motion is brought by the Labour Party.

Tory whips were said to be on "high alert" for a possible vote on July 25, the day after Johnson would likely take power and immediately before Parliament's summer recess. The *Times* reported that chief whip Julian Smith and Tory chairman Brandon Lewis said Labour MPs have been put on a "hard three-line whip" and told they might not leave for their summer break.

This is a very real threat. The last no-confidence vote brought by Jeremy Corbyn in January failed by 19 votes. If a no-confidence vote against the government is successful, it could trigger a general election after 14 days.

The government only has a working majority of four

and might lose the upcoming Brecon by-election, dropping its margin to three. Former Tory attorney general Dominic Grieve MP has threatened to support a no-confidence motion, “I will not hesitate to do that if [No Deal] is what is attempted. Even if it means my resigning the whip and leaving the party.”

Chancellor Philip Hammond has made the same threat and Ken Clarke, the former chancellor, said last week, “If there’s no other way ... then you’ve got to bring the government down. If... some idiot was sailing onto a no-deal Brexit, I’d decide politics had finally gone mad and I was not going to support this.”

The numbers are far from certain, especially given the Democratic Unionist Party’s 10 MPs would likely come to Johnson’s aid. And no one should underestimate the political cowardice of Corbyn. Some Labour sources are already suggesting September or October might be a better time to move as the Brexit deadline looms.

But Grieve is urging Tories not to back away, despite their fear of Labour benefitting. “If an administration falls on a vote of no confidence, there is 14 days to set up a new one. ... It doesn’t have to be Jeremy Corbyn at the helm. It could be another Conservative prime minister.” The threat of a no-confidence defeat “might concentrate minds wonderfully on the need to have an administration run by somebody who has a tenable [Brexit] policy.”

To underscore the considerations of strategic orientation at stake, attention moved on Sunday from the domestic row with Symonds to Johnson’s relations with President Donald Trump’s fascistic former advisor Steve Bannon.

The *Guardian* was again chosen to release documentary film footage of Bannon, shot last July by US filmmaker and journalist Alison Klayman, boasting that he helped draft Johnson’s speech after resigning as May’s foreign secretary over Brexit.

“Today we are going to see if Boris Johnson tries to overthrow the British government,” he says in the film footage. “I’ve been talking to him all weekend about this speech. We went back and forth over the text. ... Basically, he [Johnson] was saying that June 23 was independence day for Great Britain. Their independence day being like our July 4.”

Johnson, preposterously, has previously denied his connections with Bannon as a “a lefty delusion whose

spores continue to breed in the Twittersphere.” But he has been caught out in a lie, made worse by Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage giving a press conference at which he stressed that Bannon “knows Boris, he speaks to Boris. Steve speaks to virtually everybody. ... I’ve known Steve Bannon since 2012. There’s no great secret about that.”

Despite the fulminations of the right-wing media about a “lefty” plot, the goal of the Remainers is to maintain vital access to the Single European Market and Custom’s Union. They fear that Johnson will tie the UK too closely to the US, at a time when Trump and Bannon’s “America First” agenda seeks the break-up of the EU—and have neither the intention nor the possibility of compensating the UK for such a massive loss of trade.

The working class cannot take sides in such a conflict between the warring factions of the ruling elite. The Remain wing of the bourgeoisie offers only an alternative route to trade war, whatever their hopes of balancing between Europe and America, and a continued descent towards military conflict. Both factions of the Tory Party are, moreover, equally committed to imposing billions of pounds in tax breaks for the rich and corporations and for a stepped-up assault on the working class to ensure that the UK can compete effectively with its global rivals.

Politics is only dominated by this filthy conflict thanks to the role played by Labour under Corbyn in refusing to mobilise the working class against not only the Tories but the banks and major corporations. Workers can only bring this dangerous situation to an end by consciously unifying their struggles with those of workers in Europe and throughout the world based on a socialist strategy.



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