

UK: Johnson hails police as “bedrock of society” as Brexit crisis intensifies

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Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that tens of thousands of extra police would be the “absolute bedrock” of his government. He announced the measure Thursday in a speech in which a wall of police cadets were mobilised to provide a backdrop.

The move was modelled on the tactic of US president Donald Trump, whose inauguration ceremony saw military personnel appear behind him. Two years ago, Trump made a speech phalanxed by police officers as he warned “every gang member and criminal alien. We will find you. We will arrest you. We will jail you. And we will deport you.” Johnson’s speech was made just hours after he hosted Trump’s vice president, Mike Pence, at Downing Street.

The College of Policing in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, at which Johnson spoke, has official guidance that all officers must display political impartiality.

Johnson began his speech by telling the police that his ministers had announced extra spending for the National Health Service and public education (which nowhere near compensates for the massive austerity cuts made to both over the last decade), before stating that neither would be a main focus for his government.

“But in my view policing, safe streets, is the absolute bedrock of society,” he said. “It’s what drives a successful and productive economy. It gives people the confidence to invest ... to improve their neighbourhoods, safe streets are absolutely vital for our country.”

Declaring that as mayor of London, “I was effectively police and crime commissioner,” he insisted, “The most important thing politicians can do is back the police, give you the top cover for what you do. Where that is ensuring you have the proper legal protections for important things like stop and search and above all making sure you have the funding for what you need.”

His government would recruit 6,000 police and this “was just the beginning” of “a programme to recruit 20,000 more police officers.” This “first push” would cost £750 million and there would be more to come. Johnson stated that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was “now suggesting that we should spend an extra billion pounds a month, not £750 million pounds, but a billion pounds more a month, to stay in the European Union beyond October 31 and I don’t think that is a good use of public money and I’m going to make sure we don’t have that unnecessary delay.”

Johnson’s paean to the police must be understood in the context of the plans by the government, under Operation Yellowhammer, to deploy the full might of the state to contain social unrest post-Brexit. As far back as last January, Theresa May’s government ministers at a no-deal Brexit planning meeting were told by Junior Defence Minister Tobias Elwood that 30,000 regular troops and 20,000 reserves must be on standby for deployment as the UK departs the EU. In April, it was revealed that soldiers will be backed up by more than 10,000 riot police officers, who will be readied for mobilisation in whatever 24-hour period they are required. The first wave of 1,000 riot police will be made available for mobilisation anywhere in just one hour.

Labour responded to Johnson’s provocation by affirming its own commitment to law and order. Louise Haigh, shadow policing minister and a former volunteer police constable, described the staging of Johnson’s speech as “contemptible”, with police officers “used as props for naked electioneering after voting to cut thousands of their colleagues.” Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, part of Corbyn’s inner circle, declared, “When the Tories have cut the number of police to the bone, is it really a good idea for the PM

to then use a large number of them as props?” For months Corbyn has insisted on the need for thousands of extra police, with the party’s 2017 election manifesto pledging that in power it would recruit another 10,000.

During his speech, Johnson said that he would rather “die in a ditch” than agree to a Brexit extension beyond October 31—as demanded by Labour and the other main opposition parties, the Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru-Party of Wales. This came as the House of Lords agreed to send back unamended to the Commons the Bill, authored by Blairite Hilary Benn, ruling out MPs support for a no-deal Brexit threatened by Johnson.

The government knew it would be unable to stop the bill progressing and put a stop to Tory peers’ plans to filibuster it. The Bill compels Johnson to request that the EU agree to delay Brexit until January 31, 2020, unless MPs have approved a new deal or voted in favour of a no-deal exit, by October 19. It will now become an Act of parliament on Monday.

On Friday, Labour and four other opposition parties—the Scottish National party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Independent Group (consisting of Blairite former Labour MPs and pro-EU Tories), held a conference call to agree that they will not support the calling of a general election until the EU has agreed an extension on Brexit.

The opposition parties voted against Johnson after he put a motion Wednesday evening calling for an October 15 election under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act. Their latest deal means they will vote down the second attempt next Monday evening by Johnson to trigger a snap election.

The *Financial Times* (FT) reported, “They [the opposition parties] have also shifted away from the idea of moving a motion of no confidence in the prime minister on Monday, which could trigger an election later in October, according to two people familiar with the private conversation.”

Johnson’s government staggers on in power under conditions in which he has lost his already wafer thin majority and has also expelled 21 Tory rebel MPs after they refused to back a no-deal Brexit this week.

Last week, the *Financial Times* editorialised that the Blairites and Liberal Democrats may have to consider the proposal for “a caretaker government under

Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn” as the most likely means of preventing a no-deal Brexit. Corbyn had promised to carry out this single task before calling a general election, with Labour promising a second referendum on Brexit. The FT was arguing against the insistence of the Lib Dems on Corbyn ceding leadership of a caretaker government to pro-Remain Tory grandee Ken Clarke or Blairite Harriet Harman and a longer term plan to make such an arrangement the launch pad for a permanent government of national unity.

In the end, Corbyn agreed to abandon calls for a no confidence vote and a caretaker government and in favour of backing Benn’s Bill. He has now done his work for the pro-Remain faction of the ruling class so well that the FT feels it can stress its own hostility to any long-term governmental role for Corbyn.

On Thursday it warned that a Corbyn government would threaten “to undo much of the Thatcherite revolution of the 1980s...” Thatcher’s policies, it declared, “while often brutal, led to a necessary shift in the balance of power between labour and capital...”

The City of London doesn’t fear Corbyn himself, or his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell—who spends all his time reassuring the bankers that they don’t represent any threat.

Corbyn’s essential role since taking office, one that has been vital to big business during the current crisis, has been to prevent at all costs an independent social and political intervention by the working class. However, the concern in ruling circles is still to ensure that nothing is done that encourages workers, under conditions of a growth in the class struggle internationally, to demand Corbyn makes good on his pledges to end austerity and militarism. Better for him to continue to sow confusion and paralysis while the right-wing factions grouped around Remain and Leave fight over how best to assert the interests of British imperialism against its rivals internationally and the working class at home.



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