

UK's Brexit conflict reignited by US election crisis

Thomas Scripps
11 November 2020

The US presidential elections crisis has reignited the factional warfare in the British ruling class over Brexit.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's nationalist programme for a UK independent of the European Union (EU) rested heavily on an alliance with Donald Trump's "America First" agenda and declared hostility to EU. His strategy was that, through a close relationship with Trump's White House, Britain could gain an upper hand in relation to France and Germany and dictate the terms of its access to the EU's single market while supporting American imperialism's increasingly unilateralist actions on the world stage.

In the run-up to the US elections, as a victory for Biden looked more and more likely, Johnson's government was thrown into crisis. The *Times* reported in October that Johnson's chief adviser and a leading figure in the Brexit campaign, Dominic Cummings, was ordering Tory MPs to begin a charm offensive with the Democratic candidate.

Biden is expected to return to America's traditional approach of pushing its interests within the EU, rather than adopting an openly confrontational stance. The UK has previously played a pivotal role in this strategy, serving as America's point-man in Europe. Brexit threatens to destroy that role, leaving Britain cut off from the EU and of considerably less use to the US.

The Democratic Party is also concerned to maintain the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland that ended decades of civil war in Northern Ireland, of which they were leading authors. The Irish American lobby is a significant force in the party and Ireland is a low-tax haven for billions of dollars-worth of US companies' European operations. Brexit's endangering of the agreement by creating a customs border across Ireland or in the Irish Sea is considered a red line.

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab was given a dressing down by House Democrats along these lines during a visit to the US this September. Biden tweeted at

the time, "We can't allow the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to Northern Ireland to become a casualty of Brexit. Any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the Agreement and preventing the return of a hard border. Period."

The US elections of November 3 and their aftermath, which have seen Biden declared the winner and Trump and the Republicans engage in an attempted coup to overturn the result, have brought the Brexit crisis to a head.

In his first call with Johnson since being named President Elect by the news networks, held on Wednesday, Biden again stressed the importance of the Good Friday Agreement. Last Sunday, Democratic Senator Chris Coons, tipped as a likely candidate for Biden's Secretary of State, told Times Radio that a UK-US trade deal was also reliant on a UK-EU agreement. "These are interlocking concerns," he said. "The timing of the resolution of the current issues between the UK and EU and the prioritization that could be given to a US-UK FTA [free trade agreement] have to speak to each other."

These events have spurred on the pro-EU majority in the British ruling class. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer penned an opinion piece in the *Observer* on Sunday using Biden's victory to urge Johnson to come to an agreement with the EU and drop its Internal Market Bill proposals, set to be voted on in the House of Lords the next day. Clauses of the Bill allow the UK to overrule parts of its agreement with the EU, especially in relation to Northern Ireland, breaking international law.

The morning of the vote, former Labour prime minister, Gordon Brown, told BBC Radio 4 Today that Biden opposed Brexit and that "He is also worried about the Good Friday agreement—he is not going to allow a trade deal with Britain to happen if we in some way breach the Good Friday agreement."

Labour Lord Falconer, the shadow attorney general,

said on Sky News a few hours later, “What on earth is the point of making the United Kingdom an international pariah, just at the moment a new president of the United States emerges saying, not only do I want the British government to comply with the Northern Ireland protocol, but I want a law-abiding world?”

“To make ourselves an international outsider, somebody who will become low down the list of the people who the United States will want to do business with, is a very big mistake for the United Kingdom.”

In a lecture Monday evening, former Tory prime minister John Major joined the chorus to say he was left “incredulous” by his own party’s actions and warned, “Our hefty international influence rested on our history and reputation, buttressed by our membership of the European Union and our close alliance with the United States.

“Suddenly, we are no longer an irreplaceable bridge between Europe and America. We are now less relevant to them both.”

Johnson ultimately suffered a massive defeat in House of Lords as the peers voted to remove the disputed sections of the Internal Markets Bill. Many Tory Lords, led by former party leader Michael Howard, were among the 433 votes in favour of their removal, against just 165 opposed.

Johnson, however, is beholden to his fanatically pro-Brexit Tory party, backed by pro-Brexit donors, whose leadership he won on a Brexit at all costs ticket. Number 10 has already signalled the government’s intention to reinsert the clauses removed by the Lords when the Bill returns to the House of Commons, where the Tories have an 80 seat majority. A government minister told the *Financial Times* following the Lords vote that the clauses “are popular with the backbenchers. To remove those clauses would risk causing great upset, particularly among those who vigorously defended the bill in the first place.”

The prime minister is also caught in the game of brinkmanship he has been playing with the EU since becoming prime minister. Only a month ago the UK government threatened to pull out of talks altogether. Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief negotiator, privately warned last week that talks were not on a “trajectory” for a deal and that “very serious divergences” remained between the two sides. After a call between EU President Ursula von der Leyen and Johnson over the weekend, Number 10 announced that “significant differences remain” and an EU source told the *Guardian*, “we are nowhere.”

Under these conditions, the Johnson government was clearly holding out for a Trump victory and even entertained barely concealed hopes for a successful Trump coup. Raab refused to acknowledge, let alone condemn, Trump’s anti-democratic plotting on election night, as he falsely declared himself the winner and made unsubstantiated claims of ballot fraud.

Asked on Sunday whether he believed the US elections had been fair, after tweeting that “some of the processes are still playing out” in his congratulation message to Biden, Raab replied, “We really don’t want to get drawn into the cut and thrust, the controversies, the claims, the counter-claims, either in the election or in the immediate aftermath...”

The question is open as to how far Johnson was actively engaged in discussions with the Trump administration about their plans to stay in office. But yesterday Johnson finally referred to Trump as the “previous president” after his first telephone conversation with Biden—an indication of how deeply he has been undermined.

Johnson is caught between the fierce divisions in the American and British ruling classes, generated by rapidly sharpening geopolitical and class conflicts. The crisis in the US has brought tensions in the UK over Brexit to breaking point. In the coming weeks and months, it will send shockwaves throughout the British and international working class, who will be radicalised by the ongoing collapse of American democracy.

Just as American workers and youth have no representative in either the Democrats or the Republicans, and must build an independent socialist party against both, so British workers and young people must reject both wings of their own ruling class in their noxious Brexit conflict. The only political means of doing so is the common struggle with the working class on the continent for the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact