

Johnson government in meltdown after Biden US election victory

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Boris Johnson's Conservative government is in meltdown as the Brexit crisis reaches its endgame and the Tories prepare to end the limited one-month national lockdown put in place on November 5.

Every political calculation of Johnson's is being ripped asunder by the victory of the Democratic Party's Joe Biden in the US presidential election. The UK prime minister's entire Brexit strategy was largely reliant on the continued occupation of the White House by the pro-Brexit Donald Trump.

On Sunday, Johnson was forced to go into self-isolation after the National Health Service Test and Trace system informed him that he had been in contact with someone who had since tested positive for COVID-19. This was Tory Ashfield MP Lee Anderson, who Johnson spent around 35 minutes with last Thursday. By Monday evening it was revealed five other Tory MPs who were present at the Downing Street meeting with Johnson and Ashfield were also self-isolating. Another five Tory MPs beyond them are likewise in self-isolation.

In April, Johnson nearly died after being hospitalised with COVID-19 and spending three nights in intensive care.

Johnson's inner circle was blown apart last week, as the pro-European Union (EU) Biden's victory resulted in the departure from Downing Street of the prime minister's chief adviser Dominic Cummings and Director of Communications Lee Cain. Cummings was the head of the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum, which Johnson backed, and was then brought into Downing Street after Johnson replaced the pro-Remain Theresa May as party leader and prime minister. Cain was headhunted by Cummings and it was understood that Cain would eventually take on the position of Downing Street Chief of Staff post-Brexit.

The Brexiteers' strategy was based on the UK reaching a trade deal with the US, under Trump, and using this as

leverage in negotiations with the EU. Johnson had no allies for this plan internationally, with the exception of the fascist in the White House.

As a Biden victory looked more and more likely in the run-up to the US elections, Johnson's government was thrown into crisis. The *Times* reported in October that Cummings had to make a sharp about-turn, instructing Tory MPs to begin a charm offensive with the pro-EU Biden.

Johnson's Brexit negotiator Lord Frost continued talks with the EU yesterday, with no sign that any agreement on a post-Brexit trade pact forthcoming. Already this year a number of "deadlines" for an agreement to be made have come and gone, the latest at the end of October. This Thursday's European Council online summit is touted as the new deadline for a draft deal, even though Brexit is not formally on the agenda.

Any deal must be reached before the end of the post-Brexit transition period on January 1. It requires ratification by the EU and UK parliaments. To enable this, the European parliament has scheduled a vote during the last session of the year, in the week of December 14.

It is widely reported that the departure of Cummings is seen in European ruling circles as proof Johnson is shaping up to conclude some kind of agreement, in order to avoid an economically disastrous "no-deal Brexit".

Manfred Weber, the head of the conservative parliamentary group in the European Parliament, who is politically close to Angela Merkel, told the BBC, "I see what is happening now in Downing Street. We can see this as a quite chaotic situation where we don't have any idea what is really the line. I think it's now time for leadership, having all the developments in America in mind, where London has understood it will be not so easy for Boris Johnson to achieve an easy trade deal. Now it's time to take responsibility and come to a common understanding."

Philippe Lamberts, a Belgian Greens MEP who sits on the European parliament's Brexit committee, said that Cummings's departure was "probably the sign that Johnson has begun his U-turn and will in the end accept EU conditions".

But ahead of the talks with his EU counterpart Michel Barnier, Frost played down any suggestion of a possible agreement this week. "We also now largely have common draft treaty texts, though significant elements are of course not yet agreed." Among the areas of disagreement are fishing rights in British waters and "level playing field" conditions for businesses operating in the UK and EU. He added, "We will work to build on these and get an overall agreement if we can. But we may not succeed. Either way, as the Prime Minister Boris Johnson made clear on 16 October, people and businesses must prepare for the change that is coming on 31 December, most of which happens whether there is a deal or not." He warned that a deal must be "compatible with our sovereignty" and take back control of "our laws, our trade and our waters".

It is indicative of the crisis overwhelming the Tory government that none of this is particularly different from the strategy advanced by Cummings, yet it is now considered essential that he is no longer running Downing Street given events in the US and the need not to alienate Biden.

Britain and the EU remain at loggerheads over Johnson's plans to tear up the existing Brexit Withdrawal Agreement. The Conservative government is being threatened with legal action by the European Commission over Johnson's Internal Market Bill, which aims to use domestic law to overwrite the Withdrawal Agreement. The Bill makes it illegal for the EU to impose controls on trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The Irish trade elements were a key component of the deal that took three years to agree and which was signed by Boris Johnson only at the start of this year—allowing the current trade talks to begin.

On Sunday, Irish foreign minister Simon Coveney insisted there was "no way" the EU would ratify a free trade agreement and allow the UK to break the previous deal. Coveney told Sky News, "Even if we do get a new trade deal negotiated on both sides, if the British government is determined to continue with their internal market bill, to reintroduce parts of that bill that were removed by the House of Lords this week, then I think this is a deal that won't be ratified by the EU." To do so "would be breaking international law... So there are real obstacles to getting this deal done."

Last week, the largely pro-EU House of Lords defeated the government by a large majority to amend the bill and remove the offending clauses. Johnson leads a rabidly pro-Brexit parliamentary party and was forced in response to the Lords vote to immediately placate the Brexiteers and pledge to re-insert the clauses.

Whatever happens regarding the Brexit talks, the government is committed to its central programme of defending the interests of the corporations and financial oligarchy and escalating its offensive against the working class. The *Financial Times* reported Monday that Johnson held talks with Tory Party donors the previous evening and that Johnson assured one of them "that further coronavirus lockdowns could be avoided."

The FT reported that Cummings/Cain's departure will see the "dead-cert" return to the Cabinet of the Thatcherite multi-millionaire former city banker, Sajid Javid. Javid was forced to stand down as chancellor in February after being instructed to sack all five of his advisers and replace them with ones recommended by Cummings. Prior to that, Johnson had agreed with Javid that austerity had to be continued, with ministers required "to go through every line of departmental budgets assessing value for money..." and present "radical options" to cut spending.

Johnson's dysfunctional government is only able to remain in office because it is propped up by the Labour Party and trade unions who are smothering all opposition to it.

They are allowing the government to stagger on despite its own heavily manipulated COVID-19 death tally passing, last week, the grim milestone of 50,000 fatalities—with hundreds more dying on a daily basis. In the week to November 6, an estimated 654,000 people had Covid-19 in the UK, with 12,033 people in hospital by November 10, with 1,010 of them on mechanical ventilation. Much of the transmission is through workplaces, schools, colleges and universities which remain open only due to the collaboration of Labour and the unions.



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