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Britain

Johnson's Tories = Brexit Party Mark II

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Theresa May resigned as leader of the Tory Party on June 7 having failed to win majority support in the British parliament for the agreement she had negotiated with the other EU member states on the terms of Britain's withdrawal. The Tory party subsequently carried out an election for a new leader which resulted in the most rightwing candidate, Boris Johnson, being declared the winner on July 23 and inaugurated as Prime Minister on July 24. [IV]

This is what Brexit looks like.

Boris Johnson's new Cabinet, shaped by purges and resignations, looks more like the arrival of a new party, which effectively it is, than the same party with a new leader. It is the most right-wing government in Britain since World War 2. It will shift the political centre of gravity further to the right, normalise racism, and drive through privatisations, deregulations, and inequality. Those on the left (the Lexiteers), who have refused to see Brexit as a project of the hard and far right, or who have even seen it as an opportunity for the left, should think again.

It is also the final takeover of the Tory Party by hardliners from the European Research Group and the 2016 Vote No campaign. It has Nigel Farage stamped all over it. [1] Qualification for membership of the Cabinet is a pledge to stand firm for a no-deal exit from the European Union at the end of October – for which Farage is the leading advocate.

Johnson's most enthusiastic support, unsurprisingly, came from Donald Trump – who dubbed him the 'British Trump' – and sees his arrival as a welcome addition to the growing number of hard right governments around Europe and the world. These include Modi in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duterte in the Philippines, Netanyahu in Israel, Salvini in Italy, Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, the Freedom Party in Austria and the rest. They are supported by Trump and operate within his reactionary nationalist and racist world view.

Johnson has created what is effectively a war Cabinet with a single purpose: to exit the EU at the end of October 'do or die'. The members of his Cabinet are willing to crash out at the end of October 'come what may', something they wanted in the first place.

He gave no quarters to the soft Brexiteers in the Tory Party, let alone Tory remainers, as he moved hardline ideologues into the key Ministries. Priti Patel, sacked by Theresa May for gross misconduct, who recently advocated capital punishment and was a big supporter of May's hostile environment, is now Home Secretary. [2] Sajid Javid, a hardline Thatcherite, admirer of the bizarre Ayn Rand and a hardline Brexiteer, becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer. Dominic Raab, Brexit hardliner and previous Brexit Secretary, becomes Foreign Secretary. Jacob Rees Mogg, chair of the European Research Group and its ideological leader, becomes Leader of the House – with key influence over its agenda which is necessary for when the battle in Parliament opens up.

Michael Gove, who is seen as a master manipulator, was made Minister for Implementing Brexit. Dominic Cummings, who was the leader of the Vote Leave campaign and found in contempt of Parliament for spreading fake news, becomes Johnson's senior personal adviser – in other words chief of staff for a no-deal Brexit. Even Liam Fox was not seen as reliable enough to be a part of the team.

Johnson – with some justification – sees 31st October as the last chance to force a hardline Brexit through under conditions where the majority of the country and MPs are against it. Everything else that he has to say is contingent

on this, since if Britain is still in the EU after that date anything could happen, including the final implosion of the Tory Party for which it will be very difficult for him to avoid responsibility.

His plan is to blame the EU for not acceding to his demands, but it won't be easy. By taking complete control of the Cabinet and the Brexit process he also takes complete ownership of the outcome of the whole thing – whether that is a failure to get Brexit through or the mayhem that is likely to follow if he succeeds.

Johnson's has declared that the Withdrawal Agreement that May negotiated is 'dead' and goes on to predict with great optimism that he expects to get a new agreement by the end of October. This is delusional. Both the EU and the Irish government were very quick to point out that the Agreement (an international Treaty actually) obtained by the May government is not going to change, except for possibly the Political Declaration of future relationship which is not legally binding. He continues to babble on about the EU changing its mind once it realises how much self-harm we are prepared to indulge in.

He also continues to insist that there will be no hard border in Ireland because no one is prepared to introduce such a border. This assertion was demolished by the Irish Foreign Secretary Simon Coveney on the Marr show recently when he said that once the Irish border becomes a part of the external border of the EU, then the EU will ensure that it is secure and the responsibility for doing that will be the EU and the Irish government jointly.

Can a no-deal Brexit be stopped?

Whilst it is not easy for Parliament to block Johnson's agenda, it is also not easy to take such a momentous decision as is a no-deal Brexit in defiance of Parliament. One way or another we are heading for a monumental constitutional crisis at the end of October, the parameters and the outcome of which are very hard to predict. The situation is completely polarised and we are heading for a brick wall. The Tory majority is smaller than it was the last time the issue was voted on, and the opposition is stronger – not least because most of the ministers who resigned or were sacked by Johnson are likely to join the opposition from the back benches.

A key stage will be when Labour decides to put down a motion of no-confidence in the Government, which is likely to be after the current recess. If that is adopted, there will be a general election or a second referendum or both – but it depends first on how many Tories are prepared to vote for it and (remarkably) how many Labour MPs are prepared to vote against it – and there are indeed some who would.

The Tories have big problems in terms of a general election. It is likely to be disastrous for them to hold an election either before they have 'resolved' the issue of Brexit, i.e. crashed Britain out, or have failed to get Britain out on 31st October. They also face a possible split-vote with the Brexit Party in a four-horse race. An electoral pact with Farage would involve the Tories standing down in a large number of seats, which they would be unlikely to agree to.

The biggest factor in all this, as it has been for some time, is the position that Labour would take in such an election. In other words, whether it fully supports a second referendum and present itself unambiguously for Remain. There are signs that things are moving in that direction, for example in Corbyn's reply to Johnson in Parliament, but it is not there yet. If Labour is able to go into such an election as the party of Remain with Johnson's Tories going in as no-deal Brexiteers, then Labour would be very well placed, and a Labour victory at the next election would be a major blow against the whole of the right-wing project from Trump and Salvini to Farage and Johnson.

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[1] Nigel Farage is the leader of the far right Brexit Party.

[2] The hostile environment was what Theresa May, when she was previously Home Secretary said she wanted to create towards migrants.