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Brexit and growing social divide dominate crisis-ridden Tory conference

Prime Minister Theresa May ended the Conservative Party conference with a speech that reeked of desperation, appealing for unity with her “hard-Brexit” opponents to avert the danger of a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

With the UK scheduled to formally exit the European Union (EU) in less than six months, divisions have reached breaking point in the Tory party with speculation that a leadership contest may be imminent.

Boris Johnson, the leading representative of the Tory’s hard-Brexit wing, gave an interview as the conference began to the *Sunday Times* in which he described May’s Chequers plan for a “soft Brexit” maintaining access to the Single European Market as “deranged.” Regarding May’s key proposals to have customs officials collect different tariffs on products depending on whether their final destination is the EU or Britain, he declared “nobody thinks it can work... It surrenders control.”

On Tuesday, Johnson spoke at a well-attended fringe meeting. His audience included most of the leading Brexiteers including David Davis, Iain Duncan Smith, Steve Baker, John Redwood, Priti Patel, Zac Goldsmith and Conor Burns.

The EU’s lead negotiator Michel Barnier has offered no lifeline to May, echoing statements that her proposals are unworkable.

Such are the divisions that May took 27 minutes to even mention the word “Brexit” and then only in the context of a warning that “If we go off in different directions in pursuit of our own visions of the perfect Brexit, we risk ending up with no Brexit at all.”

Despite their continual undermining of May, it is unclear as to whether the hard-Brexit faction, though having a sizable faction in parliament, have the numbers to begin, let alone win, a leadership challenge. The latest to declare no confidence in May was James Duddridge, who waited until the day of her speech to cause maximum embarrassment. However, to unseat her would need 48 MPs to submit letters of no confidence and then more than half of the party's 315 MPs to oppose her in a subsequent ballot.

To appeal to the MPs being wooed by her critics, May declared, "Britain isn't afraid to leave without a deal, if we have to." This was met with the most sustained applause.

In his intentionally provocative speech to the conference, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who could yet emerge as a leadership contender, warned that Brexit could accelerate the break-up of the EU. "It was the Soviet Union that stopped people leaving," he said. "The lesson from history is clear: if you turn the EU club into a prison, the desire to get out won't diminish it will grow, and we won't be the only prisoner that will want to escape."

He later told the *Telegraph*, "We are one of the great countries of Europe and there comes a point where we say, 'We're not prepared to be pushed around, if you're not serious about a deal then he won't be either' and that would be profoundly damaging."

With further critical talks with the EU just two weeks away, May could lose her majority due to the opposition to her Brexit plan by the Democratic Unionist Party, whose 10 MPs are required to give the government a working majority.

On Tuesday, DUP leader Arlene Foster, in a reference to Johnson, told the hard-Brexit-supporting *Daily Telegraph*, "Whoever leads the Conservative Party we will work with as it's in the national interest. The reason we signed the agreement [to govern with the Tories] was to ensure Brexit."

She added, again in tacit support of Johnson, "Our confidence arrangement is with the Conservative Party... It is a party-to-party agreement."

Speaking to BBC's Radio 4, Foster said the DUP had drawn a "blood red" line and would not accept a border arrangement that separates Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK in any deal reached with the EU. Foster refused to rule out voting down May if her plan was brought to parliament, adding, "We don't want to be in that position."

Among the main concerns of both wings of the Tories is that May's downfall would pave the way for a Labour government led by Corbyn that would be unable to keep a restless working class in check.

May played to these fears in much of her speech, describing Labour pre-Corbyn in the most flattering and politically revealing terms while reiterating every slander dredged up by the Blairites to demonise Corbyn.

May declared, “What has befallen Labour is a national tragedy.” Labour once had “some basic qualities that everyone could respect. They were proud of our institutions. They were proud of our armed forces. They were proud of Britain. Today, when I look across at the opposition benches, I can still see that Labour Party. The heirs of [Labour right-wingers] Hugh Gaitskell and Barbara Castle, Dennis Healy and John Smith. But not on the front bench.

“Instead their faces stare blankly out from the rows behind, while another party occupies prime position: the Jeremy Corbyn Party.”

Praising previous Labour leaders, she asked, “Would Neil Kinnock, who stood up to the hard-left, have stood by while his own MPs faced deselection, and needed police protection at their Party conference?

“Would Jim Callaghan, who served in the Royal Navy, have asked the Russian government to confirm the findings of our own intelligence agencies?

“Would Clement Attlee, Churchill’s trusted deputy during the Second World War, have told British Jews they didn’t know the meaning of antisemitism?”

Corbyn is a stooge of Russia and Iran who opposed war, and the main role of the Tories was to ensure that never comes to power, said May.

While attacking Corbyn for his own minimal reform proposals, the Tories are acutely aware of the need to recalibrate their agenda in the face of the growing opposition to austerity that has led to his popular support. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Tory MP Robert Halfon said, “If we don’t answer the growing unfairness and struggle in people’s everyday lives, Corbyn is going to sweep the board.”

Recognising these dangers, May concluded her speech with the pledge that “When we’ve secured a good Brexit deal for Britain... a decade after the financial crash, people need to know that the austerity it led to is over and that their hard work has paid off.”

With austerity ripping apart the livelihoods of workers, however, there wasn’t a single concrete proposal May could make to back up her ludicrous pledge. Indeed the only populist largesse offered during conference was a proposal allowing waiters to keep all of their tips and maintaining a freeze on fuel duty for another year. In contrast, the support offered to the major corporations is never ending. May promised “the lowest corporation

tax in the G20,” stating that “Britain, under my Conservative government, is open for business.”