

Left- Horizons

Tory leadership election opens a new phase of political crisis.

As we enter the last few days of June, we can expect the current relative calm to give way to great political storms in the month that follows and beyond that into autumn. The geriatric membership of the Tory Party, representing, at most, a quarter of one per cent of the population, will be casting their votes for their new leader and their new Prime Minister. That election, however, will not signal the end of a process, but only the beginning of a new, more intensified phase of crisis in the Tory Party and in British politics as a whole.

The favourite to win is still Boris Johnson, who has been dubbed the worst Foreign Secretary there has ever been, while his opponent, Jeremy Hunt, has been universally acclaimed as the worst-ever Health Secretary. The last eliminated candidate, Michael Gove, was thought by teachers and educationalists to have been the worst Education Secretary there has ever been, as the Tory race to the bottom continues.

Both leadership candidates are threatening a no-deal Brexit, as indeed they must, if they are to win the votes of Tory Party members. Of the two, Johnson is the most gung-ho, declaring that it is 'do or die' on October 31st. Having said that, the following day he announced that a no-deal Brexit was a 'million-to-one' chance. Johnson has perfected to a fine art the practice of contradicting himself from one sentence to the next.

Brexit or Bust

In fact it has to be taken as read that *both* candidates will be lying through their teeth to garner the greatest number of members' votes. There will be no necessary connection between what they say in summer and what they might say or do in autumn, once elected. Although having said that, it would be extremely difficult to back-track on the Brexit promises being made now and there is the the Tory party conference to negotiate at the end of September.

The political backwardness of the Tory Party membership and its fixation with Brexit was revealed in a YouGov Poll of its members, taken between June 11 and 14. Remarkably, for the *Conservative and Unionist Party*, 63 per cent of members surveyed would support Brexit, even if it meant Scotland leaving the United Kingdom and for 59 per cent even if it meant Northern Ireland leaving the United Kingdom. Over sixty per cent would support Brexit even if it meant "significant damage to the UK economy" and, amazingly, by 54 per cent to 36 per cent, even if it meant the Conservative Party "being destroyed"! The only question that turned the Tory faithful against Brexit – and then just by a margin of 39 to 51 per cent – was if it meant "Jeremy Corbyn becoming Prime Minister".

The economic policies being put forward by Johnson and Hunt are an eclectic mix of tax cuts and hand-outs to the wealthiest in society. Hunt is promising to reduce Corporation Tax to the second lowest in the OECD. Both candidates have their 'magic money tree' – long claimed to be extinct by Theresa May – with which to bribe a party membership that is much older, wealthier and more male-dominated than the average of the general population.

The Conservatives are a party in terminal decline. It is like *Dad's Army* in the flesh – a party whose membership thinks a stiff upper lip and a Union Jack are all it takes to keep "Johnny Foreigner" at bay, as indeed he must be. Let the economy go to the dogs and let the mass of the population be impoverished...so long as blue passports come back. The Tories' desperate longing for Brexit is not borne out of a desire to develop the economy much less reverse the austerity that is blighting the lives of so much of the population: it comes from deep-seated racist and xenophobic tendencies that have long affected the more backward layers of British society for decades and both leadership candidates are pandering to it.

The press report that the Tory party membership is 160,000, but it will be interesting to see what the voting numbers are, because there are some indications that membership is far

less than the published figure. Before the recent local elections, the chairman of the 'Campaign for Conservative Democracy', a Tory pressure group, suggested that "*In at least half the parliamentary seats, there are fewer than 10 Tory activists*". He also added that "*the party's total number of activists was 10,000 to 15,000*" (interview with the *Financial Times*, May 2, 2019). It is true that the armchair Tory voters are not the same as 'activists', but these comments suggest that the figure of 160,000 is greatly exaggerated.

Political impasse looms in parliament

Whoever is elected Tory leader will face unprecedented constitutional and political obstacles and however long it may be delayed, further splits in the Tory Party look likely. There is not a parliamentary majority in the House of Commons for a no-deal Brexit, however much Hunt and Johnson may bluster and some Tory MPs are threatening to vote against a new leader who attempts to leave the EU without a deal. The EU leaders, for their part, are adamantly opposed to re-negotiating the deal that was worked out with Theresa May. So there is every possibility that Johnson or Hunt will lose a vote of no-confidence within days of being installed in Number Ten. There are dark rumours about proroguing (suspending) parliament to push Brexit through, although most MPs and the Speaker of the House of Commons are opposed to this. Moreover, the starting gun for this crisis Whitehall farce will be fired only days before Parliament is due to begin its summer recess for several weeks. From July and going into autumn, therefore, we have a finished recipe for political crisis and party splits.

While the Tory leadership candidates have been participating in their own lie-fest, another leadership fight has quietly been going on alongside this. The Liberal Democrats, the party that launched the austerity coalition with the Tories in 2010, are also in the throes of a leadership election. The favourite to win, Ed Davey, has put forward the idea of a 'government of national unity', led by a leading Labour back-bencher like Hilary Benn or Yvonne Cooper. The 'Labour' back-bencher would be interim Prime Minister only for as long as it was necessary to steer a course through the Brexit impasse and specifically to engineer a second referendum. By this means, Davey, is suggesting, the dreaded general election and a Corbyn Labour government would be avoided.

The 'Chuka-Umunnas-who-haven't-left-yet'

There is indeed a morbid fear of a Corbyn-led government among Tory ranks and this is entirely understandable, given the weight of the hopes and aspirations that a Corbyn government would carry. For all those millions of workers who have suffered Tory austerity and falling living standards for the last nine years there would be an expectation that policies 'For the many not the Few' would be carried through into concrete reality.

Unfortunately, as is always the case when the Tories are in crisis, the right wing of the Labour Party are stepping up their assault on the leadership of Corbyn, once again using the pretext of "anti-Semitism" to undermine him. The old Blairite right-wing, never reconciled to a radical leader and left policies, has little support among the party membership, but it still has a significant base in parliament and in the party apparatus. The dreams of Ed Davey would have an appeal among these people who have never seen their politics in *class* terms but rather in terms of their own careers. These are the 'Chuka-Umunnas-who-haven't-left-yet'. If there is any way to draw Labour's right wing MPs into a plan in the 'national interest' – which translated means the interests of capitalism – then it will be explored by the likes of Davey and even sections of Tory MPs.

However, even if large numbers of Labour MPs are secretly (and not so secretly) opposed to Jeremy Corbyn, the same does not apply to the Labour Party membership, who would be outraged if Labour MPs threw a life-line to the Tories. No matter how much pressure is put on Labour MPs and the Labour leadership to save the Tories' bacon by some kind of deal, the Labour Party leadership should offer no support whatsoever to this party of austerity and poverty. All Labour MPs without exception should be expected to support votes of no-confidence in whoever the Tories elect as leader. They have to oppose any Tory Brexit strategy, however it pans out, and they have to continue to demand a general election and an end to austerity. Any Labour MPs who participates in 'deals' or agreements with the Lib-Dems and Tories should be de-selected.

However the Tory leadership contest works out in the next few weeks, July will be the starting point of a very hot autumn, a period of political crisis and upheaval unprecedented in modern British politics. It is an opportunity for socialists to put forward *class* policies in the interests of workers and to argue that there is an alternative to the chaos of capitalism. In the immediate short term the road to that alternative goes through a Labour government committed to socialist policies and it is to that end we must put in the greatest efforts in the months to come.

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