

Britain after the referendum: The Brexit hard-liners take control of government

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Alan Thornett analyses the composition of new government, in which Brexit hard-liners have gained key positions.

The Theresa May administration is a sharp shift towards the xenophobic right. May has as had a remarkable clearout of Cameron ministers in order to shape the government in her image: Osborne is gone (replaced by Phillip Hammond), Nikki Morgan gone (replaced by Justine Greening), Michael Gove gone (replaced by Liz Truss), Amber Rudd is home secretary, Jeremy Hunt remains at Health (for confronting the doctors no doubt) and possibly the most frightening, hard line Brexiteer Andrea Leadsom goes to the environment (DEFRA).

Most significantly, however, the key positions in terms of Brexit—the issue that will define the May administration—go to hard-line right-wing Brexiteers. David Davies comes in as minister for Brexit, Liam Fox is brought in in the newly created Minister of foreign trade and Boris Johnson comes in as Foreign Secretary. It means that these people have been handed the reins of power to reshape British politics and Britain place in the world for the next generation if they get their way.

The central objective of this Brexit dominated government is to cut immigration to the bone. Even set against a previous administration that was itself xenophobic it is an overall and very significant shift to the right.

Given those named, do not expect a change in economic policies; believers in neoliberalism have been strengthened, not weakened, in this new government. Phillip Hammond is more sympathetic to the needs of small and medium manufacturing businesses, which were far more sympathetic to leave on the basis of the elimination of rules protecting workers and working conditions.

There are big changes in the structure of government as well. Most significantly, the Department for Energy and Climate Change has been abolished as a separate department and merged with the Department of Industry — this is a potential disaster for the environment.

Socialist Resistance argued for remain on the basis that the referendum would be a carnival of reaction leading to a major shift to the right in British politics, and we have been right on both counts. Those on the left who voted for exit on the basis that it would create a better situation for the left will need to think again.

The wider aftermath of the referendum is also clear, if it was clear before the vote. That this referendum was not, at the end of the day, a referendum on the EU, despite the formal question on the ballot paper; it was a referendum on migration into this country: i.e. how many migrants do you want to come to come here In interview after interview in the streets, the overwhelming response to the question why are you voting Brexit was: too much immigration.

As a result racism has been strengthened, hate crimes against migrants have doubled, the political

situation has moved to the right. The Tory Party has moved to the right, UKIP has been strengthened, a Labour pro-remain MP was gunned down during the campaign by a fascist shouting 'put Britain first, and we are heading for an exit from the EU shaped by the xenophobic right in which ending free movement of people and cutting immigration to the bone will be the order of the day.

At the same time the future of EU citizens living in this country is set to be used as a bargaining chip in the Brexit negotiations with the EU—an issue that the Lexit campaign refused to take up, or regard as any kind of problem, during the campaign.

There was a backlash from the dispossessed, and the victims of austerity as may have argued. But it was vulnerable to the racist argument that migration was responsible and was not the overall driving force of the Brexit vote.

Whether there will be an early general election is now entirely in Theresa's May's hands, and she will only go for one if she is confident that she can mobilise the Brexit vote behind the Tories and win a big majority. Without that she will be quite happy to go on until 2020.

All this makes the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Leader even more crucial. The only answer to the kind of government that May is constructing is the kind of radical anti-austerity and anti-racist alternative that Corbyn represents. It is only that which has a chance of cutting through the fog of the referendum and inspire mass support for an alternative.

Alan Thornett

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/8610/the-brexit-hard-liners-take-control-of-government>