

Britain : After Johnson : spartans propel Surge to the right

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Even if Steve Baker fails in his Tory Leadership bid, the pressure of the Spartan Brexiteers will be felt by the new leader, writes Phil Hearse.

STOP PRESS : This article was completed before it became known that Steve Baker had withdrawn his candidature in favour of Suella Braverman, another Brexit ultra. It will be interesting to see how many votes she gets. Baker and his team are hostile to Liz Truss because she was a Remainer, despite being an author of *Britannia Unchained*, the ultra-right manifesto. In preparing the final draft of this article, the author omitted Steve Baker's important position as co-ordinator of the hard right European Research Group, who's WhatsApp network has more than 100 MPs. Baker deleted Nadine Dorries from this network because of her pro-Johnson line. "Enough is enough" he said.

Finally, Boris Johnson has resigned. All the favourites to replace him—Rishi Surnak, Ben Wallace, Penny Mordaunt, Nadhim Zahawi, Tom Tugendhat, Liz Truss— would carry out policies even further to the right, insisting on 'sound money', downward pressure on public sector wages, postponed tax cuts and a plunge into deepening deflationary policies, which would mean a sharp rise in unemployment.

This was prefigured by the 2012 book '[Britannia Unchained](#)', which puts Britain's problems down to an 'entitlement culture', and a refusal to grasp that any comfortable living standard must be earned through effort. And British workers are the worst 'idlers' in Europe. The idea that all wealth comes from effort, rather than upper and middle-class 'entitlement', is straight from the [theories of Ayn Rand](#), the Russian-American theorist who demanded a minimalist state and the privatisation of everything.

The authors of the book were Liz Truss, Dominic Raab, Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, and Chris Skidmore. Four of these five held senior cabinet posts under Johnson. When their book came out, David Cameron had recently become Prime Minister and *Britannia Unchained* was generally regarded as the product of laughably extreme right-wing ideas, even in the Conservative Party. Now it is mainstream Tory thinking.

From an incoming Tory leader, we can expect a further round of vicious cuts, throwing the NHS into a massive crisis, and reducing Britain's niggardly benefits to total poverty levels. Expect more redundancies and more homeless on the streets.

On Thursday July 7, Steve Baker, leader of the extreme right, so-called '[Spartans](#)', announced that he was standing in the leadership contest, indeed that colleagues had 'implored' him to stand. Baker knows he has no chance of winning, although the bookies immediately put him at just 12-1, well in front of the pack and just behind Jeremy Hunt. But his candidacy is a signal that he wants a ministerial position in the incoming government. Even if Steve Baker does not get a cabinet post, the Spartans will put the incoming leader under constant pressure.

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So what exactly do Baker and key supporters like Mark Francois and Andrew Bridgen stand for ? Headline takeaways are Brexit and opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol ; opposition to climate science and green, environment-friendly policies ; strident nationalism and a Cold War attitude to China and Russia ; tougher immigration laws ; support for the military and rejection of any charges against British soldiers for alleged war crimes ; and opposition to all Covid 19 safety measures. Baker challenges the science of climate change and medical science on Covid-19 and likely future pandemics.

On economic questions, Baker and his team go for free-market populism, for example opposing the removal of the £20 Universal Credit bonus. Baker lieutenant Andrew Bridgen took to the television screens to threaten a revolt on this issue, but it was not something that the Spartans could mobilise many Tory MPs over, so opposition faded away.

The Spartans above all stand for nationalism and militarism. Andrew Bridgen made a special point last Thursday of banging the militarist drum, insisting that Ukraine, and the attempts by China and Russia to undermine British democracy, necessitates a strengthened military and higher defence spending. Bridgen was in the marines, Baker was in the RAF, Ben Wallace was an army officer as was Tom Tugendhat. After Ukraine, any candidate opposing higher defence spending would be dead in the water. The Tory right is in favour of a smaller state, but not when it comes to the military and police.

After the Tory leadership confidence vote in June, which really was the move that sank Johnson, many commentators talked about the breadth of hostility to Johnson in the party. It is a sign of the times when people like Matt Hancock and Jeremy Hunt can be considered on the 'left', and the wind is not in their sails. It is in the hands of the Tory right in general, and the Spartans in particular.

On the organisational front, in the dumping of Johnson, the most determined anti-Johnson organisers were the Spartans. As soon as the results of the leadership vote were known, Andrew Bridgen rushed to tell the TV and radio listeners that 'there will be a new Conservative leader by the party conference in October.'

Baker claims to be inspired by 19th-century theorist Richard Cobden. Cobden was a central campaigner against the Corn Laws, laws that restricted the import of cheaper foreign grain to the benefit of the domestic aristocratic landlord-farmers. The repeal of the Corn Laws was a decisive blow in favour of 'industry' against privilege, in other words in favour of the capitalist industrialists against the aristocracy.

Steve Baker's parliamentary speeches have held fast to a central issue : what is the central philosophy and purpose of this government, who are we and what do we stand for ? His reply has been simple : we stand for free enterprise and individual responsibility ; we stand against

Keynesianism, against subsidies, against the 'nanny state', against any restriction of individual 'freedom'. Baker was prominent among the many Tory MPs who viewed Johnson's lockdown and furlough with distaste and alarm.

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There were around 35 Spartans who voted down every version of Brexit put forward by Teresa May, and thus ensured her downfall. Having brought down May, they voted for Boris Johnson as someone who could get a hard-line Brexit done and as a front person who could win the 2019 election, but this was just a tactic. Few close observers thought that Johnson was a right wing ideologue and the long-term choice of the hard right. The Spartans' long-term plan is the complete winning of the Conservative Party for the most extreme form of Thatcherism, a thorough version of the 'free economy and strong state' philosophy, one that will have no truck with lockdowns, the welfare state, concessions to the EU like the Northern Ireland Protocol, mask-wearing, social distancing, massive subsidies to the NHS, higher benefits for the unemployed or any benefits for the poor in general. And of course, virulent hostility to anti-racist mobilisations like the Black Lives Matter movement. Any new Tory leader who weakens on any of these issues will face a new revolt.

The most determined interventions of the Spartans have been on the pandemic and Brexit. For them, supposedly secondary issues like 'Partygate' or the Chris Pincher scandal have been a means to get rid of Johnson. Johnson has served his purpose and now it is time to get on with the real business.

Baker is now 12-1 in the bookies' odds, and that is probably a bit generous. But the Spartans represent a relatively coherent ideological pole and well-practised publicity and networking machine. Any incoming Tory leader would do well to get their agreement on key issues.

The downfall of Boris Johnson cannot be anything but a shift to the right. The next leader of the Conservative government would be on course to put in place the most right-wing government today in Western Europe. The Tory hard right is not fascist, but many of their views are identical to the old National Front and British National Party. Their outlook is similar to Donald Trump in the United States, likely to come back to power in the November 2023 election. Steve Baker and his team are on the spectrum of creeping fascism. The scheme to deport 'illegal' aliens to Rwanda is just one symptom of the oncoming assault on democratic rights. We need a [united and fighting left](#) to counter the onset of a more consistently hard right government.

Phil Hearse

P.-S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 09 Jul 2022 :
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/after-johnson-spartans-propel-surge-to-the-right/>
- Phil Hearse is a member of Anti*Capitalist Resistance and joint author of both Creeping Fascism and System Crash.