
LABOUR LEADERSHIP CANDIDATES BATTLE FOR FUTURE OF UK'S OPPOSITION PARTY

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Britain's embattled Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was accused last night (4 August) of failing to provide a credible opposition to the government as he clashed with the man hoping to unseat him in the first debate of a bitter contest.

Owen Smith, a former member of Corbyn's top team, accused the veteran socialist of sloganising rather than holding the Conservatives to account, and of failing to campaign hard enough to prevent a vote to leave the European Union.

Corbyn hit back by accusing Smith and other Labour MPs who have rebelled against him in recent months of undermining their efforts to win the next election, telling his rival, You walked away.

Labour has been plunged into disarray since the Brexit vote on 23 June, when lawmakers dissatisfied at Corbyn's leadership seized upon the turmoil that followed to demand that he step down.

The 67-year-old refused, noting he was elected only last September on the back of strong grassroots and trade union support – prompting his critics to back the relatively unknown Smith as an alternative.

Corbyn has the support of many Labour members, and since February 2015 party membership has surged from 200,000 to 540,000.

People see in Corbyn a new form of politics, where people care for the poor and downtrodden, said Philip John Rosser, a 61-year-old former lecturer attending the hustings in Cardiff in Wales.

But Smith has strong support among Labour MPs, who argue that Corbyn, a long-time anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigner, cannot beat Prime Minister Theresa May's centre-right Conservatives.

In the debate, Smith, 46, repeatedly cited the latest opinion poll putting the Conservatives 14 points ahead, and another that found 29% of Labour voters would prefer May to Corbyn as premier.

For some party members, his message is getting through.

Id rather see Jeremy Corbyn but theres no point having him if hes not going to win, said Chris Jones, 28, a civil engineer.

Brink of a precipice

The battle for control of the party has exposed long-standing fault lines over Labours core values, and led to fears that it could split, with Smith warning this week that it was teetering on the brink of a precipice.

Local party meetings have been suspended during the contest due to allegations of intimidation levelled against Corbyns supporters.

Loud boos, cheers and heckling characterised Thursdays meeting, the first of several debates ahead of a postal vote by members that will see the winner crowned on September 24.

Smith promised to unite the party and said: I see very clearly that weve not been what we need to be in recent months - which is a powerful, credible opposition to the Tory party.

Corbyn defended his record, saying, When we work together we win.

The Labour leader is backed by Momentum, a mass movement of party members who have turned out in their droves to support him at events around the country in recent days.

They say hes unelectable, and no one has faith in him any more but his rallies feel very different, said Ciera Holmes, a 24-year-old who works in private healthcare.

Even if he loses hes brought socialist and leftist politics into the forefront, and got so many people engaged, the movement will carry on..

Anyone but Corbyn

Both men have promised to strengthen workers rights, tackle inequality and low wages, invest in infrastructure and nationalise the railways.

But they clashed over Britains nuclear deterrent, which Corbyn opposes, and whether Labour did enough to try to avert what Smith called the unmitigated disaster of Brexit.

Smith repeated his promise to call a second referendum once the terms of Britains exit from the EU were clear, but Corbyn would not back him.

Jo Kelleher, a 53-year-old university lecturer, said she had supported Corbyn but was left disillusioned after the Brexit vote.

She admitted to having little enthusiasm for Smith, a former lobbyist and radio producer who is barely known outside Westminster and his constituency in Wales.

He is the anyone but Corbyn candidate, she said, but added: I think hes probably a bit more in touch with the electorate.

Cameron controversy

Meanwhile David Cameron, the former prime minister who resigned after Brexit, rewarded his

political aides and allies with some of Britains highest honours, according to an official list published on Thursday.

Details of Camerons Resignation Honours list had already drawn accusations of cronyism when they were leaked to the media last week.

Cameron stepped down as prime minister last month after he failed to get a majority of voters to back staying in the European Union in a referendum he had hoped would shore up his position.

Outgoing prime ministers can put forward a list of people to receive honours, ranging from peerages and knighthoods to lesser honours such as membership of the Order of the British Empire.

Some of the most prominent names on the list are leading figures from the governments unsuccessful referendum campaign.

They include cabinet ministers Michael Fallon, Patrick McLoughlin and David Lidington, all of whom favoured remaining in the EU.

Also honoured is Isabel Spearman, a former fashion public relations executive who worked for Camerons wife Samantha as a stylist and assistant.

Brexit turbulence

The honours list was published as The Bank of England cut interest rates to next to nothing on and unleashed billions of pounds of stimulus to cushion the economic shock from Britains vote to leave the European Union.

A survey showed on Friday (5 August) that Britains labour market entered freefall after the vote to leave the European Union, with the number of permanent jobs placed by recruitment firms last month falling at the fastest pace since May 2009.

The monthly report from the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) showed starting salaries for permanent jobs rose in July at the slowest pace in more than three years.

Overall, the survey added to evidence that business confidence and activity slowed sharply after the June 23 vote to leave the European.

The UK jobs market suffered a dramatic freefall in July, with permanent hiring dropping to levels not seen since the recession of 2009, said REC chief executive Kevin Green. Economic turbulence following the vote to leave the EU is undoubtedly the root cause.

The survey suggested businesses were focusing more on hiring short-term staff because of the uncertainty.

Green said it was important not jump to conclusions from a single months data.

The truth is we dont know what long-term consequences the referendum result will have on UK jobs, Green said, pointing out that political stability and Bank of England action might bolster confidence in the labour market.

BANK OF ENGLAND CUTS RATES TO RECORD LOW AFTER BREXIT VOTE

The Bank of England on Thursday slashed interest rates to a record low 0.25 percent and announced a vast stimulus package to combat economic fallout from Britains looming EU exit.

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BACKGROUND

LIVE: BIRTH OF THE BREXIT GOVERNMENT

David Cameron has followed through with his pledge to resign and has been succeeded by Theresa May at 10 Downing Street. Follow EurActiv's live coverage as the new UK government is formed and begins to deal with the country's exit from the EU.

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