"Chuck Chequers": Boris Johnson challenges May on Brexit

By Elizabeth Piper, Kylie MacLellian and William James, Reuters

Former British foreign minister Boris Johnson set out his stall to the Conservative Party faithful on Tuesday, stopping just short of an outright leadership bid to replace Prime Minister Theresa May but tearing into her Brexit blueprint.

To standing ovations, cheers and laughter, Johnson, May's most powerful critic in her governing party, said her so-called Chequers plan to leave the European Union was a "cheat" that would leave Britain "locked in the tractor beam of Brussels".

But May, who did not watch her former minister, again showed little sign of shifting away from her so-called Chequers plan to keep close ties with the EU after Brexit, the biggest shift in British foreign and trade policy for more than 40 years. With just six months before Britain leaves the EU, May's precarious position at the helm of her party has been further shaken by criticism of her Chequers plan, named after her country residence, at home and in Brussels. Johnson, the figurehead for the campaign to leave the EU and the bookmakers' favourite to replace May, has become the loudest critic, warning Conservatives that if they supported Chequers they could be signing up to the party's electoral death.

But despite seeming to rally party members to his cause by calling on Conservatives to return to their traditional values, he disappointed some supporters by saying he would stick by May at least for now.

"If we get it wrong, if we bottle Brexit now, believe me, the people of this country will find it hard to forgive," Johnson told the hundreds of Conservatives who queued to get a seat in a hall just across from the main venue where May will address the party's annual conference on Wednesday.

"Do not believe that we can somehow get it wrong now, bodge it now and fix it later," he said to cheers.

"This is the moment to chuck Chequers," he said. "If we cheat the electorate, and Chequers is a cheat, we will escalate that sense of mistrust."

LEADERSHIP BID?
May has shown little sign of moving away from her blueprint, and had tried to put on a show of unity at her party conference in the central English city of Birmingham.

But her bid to revitalise her domestic agenda and steal the initiative from the main opposition Labour Party has been overshadowed by the party splits over Brexit.

She told the BBC, she was a bit cross with Johnson but only because his alternative Brexit proposals would, she said, tear up the United Kingdom by forcing Northern Ireland to operate separately from the rest of the UK.

"Boris always puts on a good show but what matters to people is what we are delivering for them on the things that affect their day to day lives," she told Sky News.

Other ministers chimed in, with Justice Minister David Gauke doubting whether Johnson's credentials for leadership.

"Now is a time for a credible and serious leader. We have that from Theresa May, I think there are others who would struggle to provide that type of leadership," Gauke said.

Some of Johnson's supporters, while welcoming his speech, said they believed now was not the time to launch a leadership bid against May.

"He is absolutely right about the threat that Chequers poses to our democracy, our country and ultimately the fortunes of the Conservative Party if we stick with it," Andrew Bridgen, a Conservative lawmaker, said.

"Am I disappointed (that he didn't declare)? No, because I think we probably can't have the self-indulgence of a leadership challenge."

CHUCK CHEQUERS
But while Johnson may be holding his fire on the leadership for now, he gave both barrels to May's Brexit plan and set out his vision for the Conservative Party - one that returned to its traditional values of low taxes and a strong police. Read more
UK Conservatives gripped by 'Mogg-mania' as diehard eurosceptic draws the crowds

By Kylie MacLellan, Reuters

Sighing at the sight of a queue of hundreds of people that snaked its way around the conference centre and out of the door, one Conservative Party member complained: "They should have put him on the main stage". The hot ticket? Not Prime Minister Theresa May or any of her ministers, but a pro-Brexit rally with leading eurosceptic lawmaker Jacob Rees-Mogg.

It was a scene that played out every time he appeared at an event on the sidelines of the conference. With less than six months to go until Britain leaves the EU, May is yet to reach an exit deal and with her future uncertain, it is her potential successors who are drawing the crowds at the party's annual conference. Rees-Mogg, a millionaire who cultivates the image of an English gentleman, received a celebrity welcome: asked to pose for selfies with delegates and mobbed by press photographers. Fellow eurosceptic Boris Johnson, the bookmaker's favourite to replace May, is the only one to challenge him in the popularity stakes. Rees-Mogg backed Johnson for the leadership in 2016, before the former London mayor withdrew. Johnson ranks well above Rees-Mogg in grassroots website Conservative Home's poll of who should be the next leader, but with the former foreign secretary only appearing at conference for one day, it was Rees-Mogg who had the enduring following. "To those of you who I overtook in the queue, my apologies for queue-barging. I've always thought it is very un-English to push ahead to the front of the queue so you are all very kind to let me come in," Rees-Mogg greeted the crowd. Asked why he is such a draw, Rees-Mogg fans repeatedly used the same words to describe the willowy, bespectacled 49-year-old: "honest", "decent" and "genuine". Read more

'Brexit negotiations

'Don't bully us', Britain takes new combative tone to Brexit talks

Britain cannot be bullied, Brexit minister Dominic Raab said on Monday, sharpening the government's criticism of the European Union for taunting Prime Minister Theresa May and souring difficult Brexit talks.

Beyond the rhetoric, Britain, EU preparing to move forward on Brexit

"Unworkable", "unacceptable", "impasse" - the words used to describe Brexit talks between Britain and the European Union do little to temper concerns that the two are heading for a chaotic divorce. But behind the scenes, both sides are preparing concessions as part of what one British official called "a constructive dialogue" that could yet lead to a deal.

As Brexit divisions widen, PM May challenges Brexit critics

Prime Minister Theresa May called on her party on Sunday to unite behind her plan to leave the European Union, making a direct appeal to critics by saying their desire for a free trade deal was at the heart of her Brexit proposals. At the start of what is set to be one of the Conservative Party's stormiest annual conferences, May's plans were once again attacked by two former ministers, with her ex-foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, calling them "deranged".

Britain's Hammond says UK can cope with no-deal Brexit

British finance minister Philip Hammond said on Monday the United Kingdom had the fiscal capacity to cope with leaving the European Union without any agreement but believed the mood in Brussels was to reach a divorce deal.
Backing out of the USSR? Theresa May says the EU is not the Soviet Union

British Prime Minister Theresa May said on Tuesday the European Union was not the same as the Soviet Union after her foreign secretary provoked anger by likening the 28-member bloc to the USSR.

Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt cautioned the EU on Sunday that it was set up to protect freedoms but the lesson from Soviet history was that if you turned it into a prison then the desire to leave would increase.

Asked whether Hunt was right to have made the comment, May said: "As I sit around that table in the European Union there are countries there who used to be part of the Soviet Union, they are now democratic countries and I can tell you that the two organisations are not the same."

With less than six months until Britain leaves the EU, May has yet to reach a deal with the EU on the terms the Brexit divorce and rebels in her Conservative Party have promised to vote down any deal she makes. Hunt's comment on the Soviet Union provoked anger in Europe, especially among some eastern members of the EU which only regained full independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Lithuania's EU commissioner Vytis Andriukaitis told Hunt he was born in a Soviet gulag forced labour camp and was jailed by the Soviet KGB state security agency.

"Happy to brief you on the main differences between EU and Soviet Union," he said. Read more

Carmakers step up warnings over disorderly Brexit

Carmakers ratcheted up their Brexit warnings on Tuesday, with France's PSA Group and Germany's BMW both saying UK production would suffer if Britain leaves the European Union without a deal. With less than six months before Britain is due to quit the EU on March 29, businesses are increasingly alarmed about the lack of agreement over future trading relations and the possibility of tariffs, delays at ports and extra red tape.

INTERVIEW-Brexit uncertainty weighs on Jaguar's electric car investment decision

Britain's biggest carmaker Jaguar Land Rover has yet to make an imminent decision on whether to build electric cars in its home market partly due to uncertainty over the final Brexit terms, its boss told Reuters on Tuesday.

Alternative Brexit conference shows threat to UK PM May from party rebels

A day after Prime Minister Theresa May urged her party to use their annual conference to unite behind her Brexit plans, rebel lawmakers were running out of patience with her decision to proceed with proposals many feel do not make a clean enough break from the EU.

French watchdog says EU market rules need overhaul after Brexit

Britain's departure from the European Union next March will force a full review of the bloc's sweeping new rules for markets, including tougher market-access conditions for foreign trading platforms, a top French regulator said on Monday.

Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May arrives at the ICC for the third day of the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham, Britain, October 2. REUTERS/Toby Melville

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Tracking the Brexit effect

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Boris and Brexit gym punchbags help Londoners vent their rage

Londoners fed up with Brexit can vent their rage with a special gym routine that includes high-intensity exercises like pummelling punchbags bearing photographs of some of the main players like Boris Johnson and Jean-Claude Juncker. The 30-minute circuit also features the "Theresa May Sack Race," "Jacob Rees-Mogg lifts" and "Politico Headslammer" in which participants slam balls on to pictures of British Prime Minister Theresa May and opposition Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn. There is also a "Cameron Quitters' Corner" named after May's predecessor David Cameron to take time out.

Read more

FACTBOX
Who wants to be Britain's next Prime Minister?

Possible successors to Prime Minister Theresa May are using the Conservative Party's annual conference this week to set out, with varying degrees of subtlety, their visions for Britain, turning the event into a parade of potential future leaders. May has vowed to fight on as leader to the next election in 2022, but with Brexit dividing her party and exit negotiations in Brussels deadlocked, the conference has been dominated by the possibility her government may fall or party members oust her. Read more

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