

Trump: soft Brexit will 'kill' UK's chances of US trade deal

President praises Boris Johnson and says that May ignored his advice on Brexit negotiations in extraordinary interview.

Theresa May will come under intense pressure to secure a future trade deal with the United States as she sits down with Donald Trump just hours after he warned that her soft Brexit blueprint would "kill" Britain's chances.

In an extraordinary interview that threatened to undermine her new Brexit strategy, painfully thrashed out with her cabinet last week, Trump questioned whether her plans upheld the referendum result and accused her of ignoring his advice.

Against a backdrop of furious protests across the country, the US president openly humiliated May by suggesting that former foreign secretary Boris Johnson, who quit in opposition to her Brexit plans this week, would make a great prime minister.

His intervention sabotages her attempts to placate Tory leavers, who are furious following the long-awaited release of her Brexit white paper on Thursday, by winning US support for her proposals.

On Thursday evening, as May told a dinner held in Trump's honour at Blenheim Palace that her policy would create an "unprecedented opportunity" for a free trade agreement, his damaging statements were revealed.

She now faces the challenge on Friday of persuading him that her strategy would "tear down" the bureaucratic barriers that Brussels had put in the path of business as she attempts to overcome US fears about the future trading relationship.

Asked about Trump's incendiary interview, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders insisted the president "likes and respects Prime Minister May very much".

"As he said in his interview with the Sun she 'is a very good person' and he 'never

said anything bad about her'. He thought she was great on Nato today and is a really terrific person," she added.

In the interview, which ignores all usual diplomatic conventions, Trump warned that her soft Brexit approach would scupper any hopes of a free trade agreement, a cherished prize of many Brexiters.

"If they do a deal like that, we would be dealing with the European Union instead of dealing with the UK, so it will probably kill the deal. If they do that, then their trade deal with the US will probably not be made," he said.

"We have enough difficulty with the European Union. We are cracking down right now on the European Union because they have not treated the United States fairly on trading."

Trump accused the prime minister of ignoring his advice on Brexit negotiations. "I would have done it much differently. I actually told Theresa May how to do it, but she didn't agree, she didn't listen to me. She wanted to go a different route," he said.

He cast doubt on whether the prime minister was delivering the Brexit that the British people had voted for in 2016. "The deal she is striking is a much different deal than the one the people voted on. It was not the deal that was in the referendum. I have just been hearing this over the last three days. I know they have had a lot of resignations. So a lot of people don't like it."

Earlier, Trump, speaking at the Nato summit in Brussels, had appeared to throw his weight behind a hard Brexit by suggesting the government was taking "a different route" from the complete break from the EU that he said the British people had voted for.

But May insisted: "We have come to an agreement at the proposal we're putting to the European Union which absolutely delivers on the Brexit people voted for. They voted for us to take back control of our money, our law and our borders and that's exactly what we will do."



May and Trump holding hands at Blenheim Palace. Photograph: Hannah Mckay/Reuters

However, he undermined her still further in his Sun interview by describing Johnson as “a very talented guy”, adding: “I am not pitting one against the other. I am just saying I think he would be a great prime minister. I think he’s got what it takes.”

The US president also attacked Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, with whom he has had a long-running dispute, suggesting he was a “terrible mayor” who had “done a very bad job on terrorism” by allowing so many migrants to come to the city. He said that he felt unwelcome in London after hearing of the “Trump baby” blimp.

The unpopularity of Trump’s visit was already apparent by Thursday night, with protests starting as soon as he landed at Stansted in Air Force One at 1.51pm. Shortly after he was met at the airport by the international trade secretary, Liam Fox, and by the US ambassador Woody Johnson, banners were unfurled opposite the US embassy questioning his human rights record. Protesters later gathered to create a “wall of noise” outside the ambassador’s residence, where he was due to stay.

Trump will largely avoid the capital and other cities that could host significant protests. He will instead be kept mainly insulated from the public at various

country estates or palaces and will travel largely by air.

Nonetheless, protesters will seek to gain his attention, with the blimp to be flown over Westminster on Friday morning before an estimated 70,000 people take to the streets. There will be rallies in Glasgow and Manchester as well as a women's march in London and the main Stop Trump protest, which will end in Trafalgar Square.



Protesters hold anti-Donald Trump signs during a protest in Queen Street, Cardiff. Photograph: Matthew Horwood/Getty Images

On Thursday night, Trump and his wife, Melania, attended a black-tie dinner at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, the birthplace of Winston Churchill, with business leaders as well as most senior members of the cabinet.

It is understood that he will join May on Friday for a counter-terrorism demonstration by UK and US special forces at Sandhurst, before the main business element of his trip: talks with the prime minister and the new foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, at the PM's Chequers country retreat.

Downing Street said that as well as trade and Brexit, the talks would cover Russia and the Middle East.

Later on Friday Trump and his wife - who will spend some of her time on separate engagements with May's husband, Philip - will have tea with the Queen at Windsor Castle before flying to Scotland, where they are expected to visit Trump's golf resorts in Aberdeenshire and Ayrshire and stay at the 120-room hotel at Turnberry.

While at the Nato summit, Trump said he had been reading up closely on Brexit in recent days, and he described the UK as "a pretty hot spot with many resignations". He had already described the UK as a country in turmoil.

He insisted he was popular in the UK, citing his strong line on migration. “They like me a lot in the UK. I think they agree with me on immigration.”

A Guardian/ICM poll released on Wednesday showed 53% of respondents disagreed with the idea Trump was doing a good job, and 63% disagreed with the statement that they would like to see a politician like him as British prime minister.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/12/may-bids-for-trump-brexit-backing-with-vow-to-rip-up-red-tape>

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