

# **‘Boris Johnson accused Theresa May of being scared’: Ex-No 10 chief of staff reveals inside story of Brexit**

Mrs May’s ex-chief of staff Gavin Barwell tells i his inside story of the Brexit wars, including a very “difficult” Mr Johnson who often “crossed a line”.



Britain’s former Prime Minister Theresa May with then Number 10 Chief of Staff, Gavin Barwell on a visit to in Belfast, Northern Ireland (Photo: PAUL FAITH/AFP via Getty Images)

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Gavin Barwell is angry.

You can hardly blame him, having been in the eye of the political storm of the century that was Brexit, and crashing out of it in failure alongside his former boss Theresa May.

Especially when he believes many of the arguments he, as Downing Street chief of

staff, and the then-prime minister made at the time were now being proven right.

If only Boris Johnson, Tory backbenchers and Labour had listened to the former prime minister, we could have avoided the dangerous instability now being experienced in Northern Ireland, and even perhaps the humiliation in Afghanistan, Lord Barwell suggests.

The Tories may also have fared a better chance of avoiding the “demographic dead end” that is its Brexiteer, older electorate.

But ultimately, what he saw as a battle for compromise and realism in the raw political chaos between Mrs May’s snap election loss in 2017 and Mr. Johnson succeeding her as PM two years later, was lost.

They say that history is written by the victors but in his new book, *Chief Of Staff: Notes from Downing Street* (£20, Atlantic Books), the former housing minister and Croydon Central Tory MP attempts to give his side of the very bitter story of Mrs May’s doomed Brexit deal.

In an interview with *i* ahead of the book’s launch today, he describes opponents of the ill-starred withdrawal agreement as being like “Alice in Wonderland”, unable to grasp what the “actual real choices were” and proposing fantasy solutions.

The worst offender was Mr. Johnson, who pops up in the book time and time again to dismiss the thorny Northern Ireland problem that was and still is at the heart of the Brexit conundrum.

“The Northern Ireland issue is a gnat,” the current PM is quoted as telling Mrs May in one key meeting.

And while Mr. Johnson may have succeeded in replacing Mrs May and driving through a hard Brexit after agreeing to unique half-in-half out terms for Northern Ireland that his predecessor refused to countenance, the consequences are now clear with the well of EU relations poisoned, riots in Belfast and the potential collapse of the Northern Irish government.

“The Northern Ireland issue is the one that I am most angry about,” Lord Barwell says.

“Because [Mr. Johnson’s] deal is a very bad deal and it has led to all of the

negative consequences Theresa predicted that it would, it's why she fought tooth and nail to get a Northern Ireland-only arrangement out of the deal."

Not only that, but our current PM was "incredibly difficult and challenging" to deal with when he served as Mrs May's foreign secretary.

At one point, he veered dangerously close to sexism as he accused Mrs May of being "scared of the Treasury" as she tried to explain the consequences of trade barriers with the EU and the difficult position of Northern Ireland.

This was, Lord Barwell writes, "just about the worst thing he could have said to her", especially as it held "the implication that, as a woman, she was easily scared".

So is Mr. Johnson sexist?

"You'd have to ask her if she thought it was because she was a woman but she definitely took offence," Lord Barwell says.

"I wouldn't want to make a comment about his general attitude."

This rude approach once even forced Lord Barwell to stop a meeting as Mr. Johnson was "constantly interrupting and not treating the prime minister with any respect".

"In that particular meeting, it crossed a line."

Lord Barwell also bemoans the current Prime Minister's wider approach to Brexit, saying "it's so sad and wrong" that the deal he agreed with Brussels junked the commitments Mrs May and the EU made to security coordination.

This would have helped a trading relationship that's "not good and doesn't look like it's going to get better".

And Lord Barwell suggests it even might have helped avoid the humiliation in Afghanistan, noting that the Government tried and failed at the last minute to stitch together a coalition to keep troops in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal.

"On foreign policy, on how we view Russia or China or Iran or climate change, the two sides remain very well aligned."

He added: "It really would make sense if we were better coordinated.

"Not only would it maybe have helped in Afghanistan but I think over time, it will help with the trading relationship if we've got that other element (security) to (the deal) which is easier for both sides."



Mr. Johnson's pursuit of a hard Brexit and what Lord Barwell sees as divisive politics has also left the Tories in a potentially dangerous place, he argues.

The splintering of voters along Remain versus Leave and more starkly along old versus young lines presents a "massive opportunity" for the party in the short and medium-term but "my question is where does it leave you long-term?"

"You could be driving yourself down a demographic dead end basically," Lord Barwell says.

"And I think there is a significant risk that the party is running."

He urges Mr. Johnson to return to the morning after his stunning 2019 election victory, where he spoke about forming "a One Nation government and trying to bring the country together".

"That Boris Johnson I admire," says Lord Barwell.

And if he's learnt anything from one of the most fractious and polarized periods in modern British political history, it's this: "I care less now about the colour of the rosette that someone wears and I care more about whether they are engaging with complexity and whether they are trying to bring people together or draw dividing lines to pull people apart."

It is serious stuff about a serious time, but Lord Barwell isn't totally averse to a joke.

When I ask him about the recent conversion of hardline EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier to the Eurosceptic cause, launching a French presidential bid with a call to be free from European court rulings in the same way Mrs May once sought, he quips: "It sounded a lot like cherry-picking to me."

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Source:

<https://inews.co.uk/news/boris-johnson-accused-theresa-may-of-being-scared-ex-no-10-chief-of-staff-reveals-inside-story-of-brexit-1201540?ITO=newsnow>

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