

Brexit 'inferno' lays bare a divided United Kingdom

House of Commons at boiling point in raucous debate

LONDON: The fury of Britain's Brexit "inferno" is so intense that it could encourage violence unless politicians tone down their rhetoric, the husband of a lawmaker murdered a week before the 2016 EU referendum said yesterday. Parliament reached boiling point on Wednesday when Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his opponents engaged in hours of vitriolic argument over Brexit, with lawmakers hurling allegations of betrayal and abuse of power across the chamber. Jo Cox, a 41-year-old parliamentarian from the opposition Labor Party, was murdered on June 16, 2016 by Thomas Mair, a loner obsessed with Nazis and extreme right-wing ideology. She was the mother of two young children. Cox's husband Brendan said he was shocked by the inflammatory language on display and both sides should ponder the impact of the words they used.

When asked how his late wife might have responded, Cox said: "She would have tried to take a generosity of spirit to it and thought about how in this moment you can step back from this growing inferno of rhetoric." "To descend into this bear pit of polarization is dangerous for our country," he told the BBC. "It creates an atmosphere where violence and attacks are more likely."

Brexit has illustrated a United Kingdom divided about much more than the European Union, and has fuelled soul-searching about everything from secession and immigration to capitalism, empire and Britishness itself. The rage and ferocity of the Brexit

debate has shocked allies of a country that has prided itself as a confident - and mostly tolerant - pillar of Western economic and political stability. Cox was clear that the language across the Brexit schism was troubling and that the United Kingdom needed to come together rather than tear itself apart.

Some on both sides of the debate are now using the politics of contrived outrage to argue their point. Johnson says parliament is betraying the will of the people over Brexit, while opponents cast him a dictator who has ridden roughshod over democracy to take the United Kingdom to the brink of ruin. Parliamentary speaker John Bercow told lawmakers to stop treating each other as enemies, saying the atmosphere in the House of Commons was the worst he had known since he was elected 22 years ago. "The culture was toxic," Bercow said in parliament.

Johnson returned to the chamber on Wednesday after the Supreme Court ruled that his decision to suspend parliament earlier this month was unlawful. He goaded his opponents either to bring down the government or get out of the way to allow him to deliver Brexit. His opponents roared "resign" and some cast him as a cheating dictator who should stand aside after the court ruling.

Johnson provoked anger by repeatedly calling a law that forces him to ask the EU for a Brexit delay unless he can strike a deal as "the Surrender Bill". Speaking to Conservative lawmakers yesterday, he defended his use of the term and received support



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson leaves number 10 Downing Street in central London to attend a meeting with the 1922 committee. —AFP

from the party. Johnson told the 1922 Committee: "It IS a surrender act," arguing that it hurt Britain's negotiating stance with the EU. The prime minister added that he took threats to lawmakers very seriously. But some were still furious over his Wednesday response to a questions about Jo Cox.

Labor's Paula Sherriff told the House she had received death threats, some of which echoed the

prime minister's own rhetoric, Johnson replied: "I have never heard so much humbug in my life", sparking uproar. "I actually don't feel anger towards the prime minister - I feel pity for those of you who still have to toe his line." Another Labour lawmaker, Jess Phillips, said Conservatives in the chamber "know how appalling it was to describe the murder of my friend as mere humbug". —Reuters

Five years on, 43 missing students still haunt Mexico

MEXICO CITY: Five years ago, 43 students in southern Mexico who were on their way to a protest were detained by corrupt police who handed them over to drug-cartel hitmen. Then they disappeared without a trace. Half a decade later, Mexico is still haunted by "the 43," a case that drew international condemnation and stained the government of ex-president Enrique Pena Nieto. The investigation has been marred by allegations of official incompetence or even corruption. Misconduct - especially the use of torture to extract supposed confessions - has resulted in the release of 77 detainees, including the main suspect earlier this month. New President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has promised to bring the case to justice, launching a truth commission. The new prosecutor general has meanwhile announced plans to reinvestigate "almost from scratch."

But it is uncertain whether the world will ever know what happened to the young men from the teacher training institute in the rural village of Ayotzinapa, in the violent state of Guerrero. "I don't think (a new investigation) will achieve a radically different result from the original," said Alejandro Hope, a security expert and former Mexican intelligence officer. "There are two facts that don't seem to be in doubt: the students were kidnapped by police and handed over to the Guerreros Unidos cartel." What happened after that, he said, might remain a mystery forever.

'Historic lie'

The students attended a college with a history of radical protest. They had a habit, among other rowdy behavior, of commandeering buses to drive themselves to protests. Dozens of them did that on the night of September 26, 2014, traveling to the nearby city of Iguala and hijacking five buses for a march in Mexico City. However, they did not get far. Local police opened fire on the buses, killing six people. Then they rounded up the remaining students and handed them over to Guer-

ros Unidos, which apparently had the police on its payroll. Under Pena Nieto, the federal prosecutor's office - which at that time answered to the president - concluded the cartel mistook the students for members of a rival gang. According to this version of events, which the administration called "the historic truth," hitmen took the students to a garbage dump, executed them, burned their bodies and threw the ashes into a river. However, a team of independent investigators from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights found that was impossible, based on forensic analysis of the supposed crime scene. Their conclusion led the students' families to rebrand the government's version "the historic lie." And it left Mexicans to wonder: if the government's gruesome explanation was a cover story, how horrific was the truth?

Missing bus

The government did not renew the mandate of the international experts, who never finished their investigation. However, they hypothesized the students may have inadvertently hijacked a bus loaded with heroin bound for the United States. Of the five buses the students took that night, it was the only one stopped by federal police, rather than shot up by municipal police, the experts concluded. All mention of the bus later disappeared from the official case file. In Mexico, where murky links between government officials and organized crime are routine, it is anyone's guess who may have been in on such a plan. But it will be virtually impossible to find evidence, Hope said. "There is zero possibility of proving that the army or federal police were responsible or acted on Pena Nieto's orders," he said.

New lead

The men's families continue to hope for justice, and even to find their sons. "I don't know if this is just a mother's heart talking, but I don't feel like my son is dead. I want to see him come back and hold him in my arms — him and the other 42," Blanca Luz Nava said through tears Wednesday at a protest against the lack of justice in the case. The families plan a new protest in Mexico City. Investigators meanwhile began chasing a fresh lead this week: they are excavating at a different garbage dump near Iguala, in the town of Tepeacoacuilco, where witnesses reportedly say some of the men were executed. —AFP

Student lay dead in N Zealand university dorm for 2 months

WELLINGTON: A teenager lay dead in his campus dorm room for up to two months, a New Zealand university said yesterday, with the young man's body only discovered after fellow residents complained of the smell. The remains of the first year University of Canterbury student were so badly decomposed that specialist disaster investigators were brought in to identify them. "Clearly there's been quite a big failure here," New Zealand Education Minister Chris Hipkins said.

"And if that means that things need to change to make sure this sort of thing doesn't happen again in the future, then we will do that." The 19-year-old, who has not been publicly identified, was described by friends as a "good and confident guy", but who would sometimes "go off the grid for a week or so." The undergraduate began his course in July—the start of the academic year in New Zealand—having opted to live on Canterbury University's leafy campus in Christchurch.

Single rooms at the halls of residence where the student's body was found cost NZ\$17,000 (US\$10,000) a year, the university's website says, boasting they offer a "close knit community". The halls of residence is run by Campus Living Villages (CLV) - a company that operates student accommodation with more than 45,000 beds in the US, the UK and Australia, as well as New Zealand, according to its website.

"The thing that haunts me is how did we miss him?" CLV managing director John Schroder told reporters. "I'm very perturbed. If indeed the young man was deceased for as long as he was... then I would say that is a failing on our part and we have to adjust our processes and systems." Local media reported the dead man's stepfather had raised concerns with police after being unable to contact the student via friends. —AFP