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GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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Food for Thought - Will Johnson Cabinet Break the Brexit Impasse?

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Report Highlights:

Former Northern Ireland Secretary and Brexit advocate, Theresa Villiers, has been appointed Secretary of State at USDA's UK counterpart, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), by the new UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. Her predecessor at Defra, Michael Gove, has been put in charge of Brexit 'no deal' planning. And his predecessor at Defra, Liz Truss, has returned as International Trade Secretary, succeeding Liam Fox. With Johnson and his appointments has come a new sense of Brexit urgency, albeit many challenges remain if the United Kingdom is to leave the European Union on October 31, 2019.

General Information:

Following his appointment as Prime Minister on Wednesday, July 24, Boris Johnson has been quick to name his new Cabinet. In the biggest change of faces seen in modern times, Johnson has appointed a Cabinet that is widely seen as one that will assist him deliver on his promise to have the UK leave the European Union on October 31, 2019. Whether this will prove possible only time will tell.

Johnson has increased the number of Brexiteers in the Cabinet and put them in key positions such as Home Secretary (Priti Patel) and Foreign Secretary (Dominic Raab). Former Home Secretary, Sajid David, who campaigned for Remain in 2016 but has since fully embraced Brexit, takes over as Chancellor. All the top appointments go to Johnson supporters.

The newly appointed Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Theresa Villiers, voted for Brexit and comes from her previous role as Northern Ireland Secretary. She is the second most experienced member of the new Cabinet, with just over 4 years, and given the importance of the Northern Irish border with Ireland for food and agriculture in both countries, will come with some useful personal insight. She has spoken out against the backstop element of Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement, this being the currently proposed border arrangement between Northern Ireland and Ireland in the event of no negotiated future trading relationship. Villiers has also said she would be prepared to back a 'no deal' Brexit.

The only more experienced member of the Cabinet is Villiers' predecessor at USDA's UK counterpart, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), Michael Gove. A veteran of over 6 years in the Cabinet, Gove is a politician with his own ambitions to be Prime Minister, previously foiling a 2016 attempt by Johnson to become Prime Minister and a candidate this time around too. Gove has been put in charge of 'no deal' Brexit planning.

A third appointment of significance is Liz Truss, Gove's predecessor at Defra, who now succeeds Liam Fox as International Trade Secretary.

Finally, it is worth noting that Johnson has appointed Dominic Cummings as his key advisor. Cummings is a political strategist and was the Campaign Director of Vote Leave, the successful campaign in the 2016 referendum. He has also previously worked as a Special Advisor to Michael Gove when the latter was Education Secretary.

With regards to Brexit, the UK Parliament has thus far demonstrated its lack of appetite for permitting a 'no deal' Brexit. On the other hand, the European Union has thus far shown no willingness to renegotiate Johnson's predecessor's (Theresa May) Withdrawal Agreement which includes the backstop element which Boris himself has described as dead. The prospect of the UK withdrawing Article 50 and remaining in the EU seems as unlikely as ever, and there is no guarantee that the EU will grant the UK a further extension beyond October 31, even if the UK were to request it.

Elected by members of the Conservative Party, there is also the question of whether Johnson will take the country to an early General Election in an attempt to shore up his mandate, but unless he does so very soon any vote would take place after October 31. Of course, this approach was attempted by his

predecessor, achieving the opposite effect, and with the country divisively split on the issue of Brexit, this strategy presents its own challenges.

As has been the case for many months, the UK's future remains in a state of uncertainty, albeit with a new, energized and pro-Brexit leadership team.