

International

Eyeing elections, UK's Labor Party pledges more spending, less work

Opposition party sets out plan for socialist-run Britain

BRIGHTON: Britain's opposition Labor Party pledged yesterday to mobilize financial resources on a scale not seen since the post-World War Two reconstruction, promising a shorter working week and higher public spending with an eye on an early election. Labor is hoping to use the Brexit chaos engulfing Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government to win control of Britain's \$2.8 trillion economy at a national election expected to be called later this year.

Presenting himself as Britain's finance minister in waiting at Labor's annual conference in Brighton, veteran left-winger John McDonnell set out how he would reshape the pro-business, free-market orthodoxy that has guided the country for decades. "We're mobilizing financial resources on a scale not seen since the post-War reconstruction to achieve the twin goals of a sustainable future and a better today," he said. The 68-year-old, once considered to be at one extreme of Britain's political spectrum after a lifetime spent campaigning to tear up the capitalist system, is now seen by investors as a possible custodian of the world's fifth-largest economy.

The Labor Party's plans for widespread nationalization, higher public spending, higher taxes and forcing large corporations to give workers shares, have provoked deep concern among investors and business lobby groups. But with Johnson fighting a battle to keep his divided party together over Brexit and huge uncertainty over how and when Britain will leave the European Union - if it ever does - the result of a national election is hard to predict.

Shorter working week

McDonnell's most eye-catching policy announcement was a pledge to reduce the average working week to 32 hours within a decade from its current level of about 37 hours, as measured by the Office for National Statistics. "It will be a shorter working week with no loss of pay," McDonnell said to loud cheers from party members gathered in the English seaside resort.

Labor said this could be achieved by boosting the power of collective bargaining, raising holiday entitlements and ending a British opt out from European directives on how many hours people can work per week. McDonnell repeated Labor's promise to hold a second referendum on leaving the European Union, warning that Johnson's government was fuelling uncertainty and undermining democracy with its Brexit policy. He also pledged to pump billions into the country's social care system, primarily to provide the elderly with free assistance for basic tasks such as cooking meals and bathing.

"Nothing is more important than dignity in retirement for those who have built our country and given younger generations the world we live in today," McDonnell said. Labor's care policy is estimated to cost 6 billion pounds (\$7.5 billion) in 2020/21, rising to 8 billion pounds per year by 2030/31. The party did not explicitly explain how this policy would be funded but pointed to its manifesto at the last election which set out tax rises to pay for more funding for the wider social care system.

McDonnell has already backed new taxes on Britain's



BRIGHTON: A standing ovation is given for Unite Union General Secretary Len McCluskey after he delivers a speech at the Labor party conference in Brighton, on the south coast of England yesterday. —AFP

financial services sector, and, in the 2017 election campaign, said he would raise income taxes on the highest earners. The personal care policy addresses a sensitive subject for Britain's ageing population - a demographic that votes in high numbers and has the power to swing

election outcomes. In the 2017 election, a Conservative policy that was seen as unfairly penalizing dementia sufferers prompted a decline in the party's poll rating and was cited as a major factor behind a disastrous result for then-prime minister Theresa May. — Reuters

News in brief

Two Turkish soldiers killed

ANKARA: Two Turkish soldiers were killed yesterday in northern Iraq in an attack blamed on Kurdish militants, the defense ministry said. The soldiers died after an improvised explosive device (IED) "placed by PKK separatist terrorists exploded as a supply convoy was passing", the ministry said. Turkish soldiers have been in northern Iraq since May in a ground offensive and bombing campaign against the outlawed Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK has conducted a separatist insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, during which more than 40,000 people have been killed. Its leadership and rear bases are located in the remote mountainous Qandil region and other areas of northern Iraq. The group is listed as a terrorist organisation by Ankara and its Western allies. — AFP

Mugabe died of cancer

HARARE: Zimbabwe's founding president Robert Mugabe had "advanced cancer" when he died in hospital in Singapore on September 6, the state-owned newspaper reported yesterday. The former guerrilla leader, who died aged 95, came to power at the end of white minority rule in 1980 and ruled Zimbabwe uninterrupted for 37 years and seven months. He was toppled on November 2017 in a military-backed coup, ending an increasingly iron-fisted rule marked by political oppression and economic ruin. Mugabe's health deteriorated rapidly after the ousting and he made regular trips to Singapore to seek treatment. "Mugabe had advanced cancer, and had to be taken off chemotherapy treatment because it was no longer effective," said The Herald yesterday. The information was revealed by President Emmerson Mnangagwa during an address to party supporters in New York on Saturday, according to the paper. — AFP

Attacks kill 9 in Burkina Faso

OUAGADOUGOU: Nine people have been killed in two attacks in northern Burkina Faso, a region bearing the brunt of a jihadist revolt, officials said yesterday. "Six people were killed by armed men overnight Saturday at Pissele, near Bourzanga," a security official said. Bourzanga is located about 50 kilometers south of Djibo, a hotspot for jihadist attacks. A local administrative official said three people "were shot dead in the village of Bool-Kiiba," and their bodies were found after the assailants left. Others were unaccounted for, the official said, adding that the attackers also looted possessions, including motorbikes. A security official confirmed that an attack on Bool-Kiiba had taken place but was unable to give a toll. Burkina Faso has become part of a seven-year-old jihadist insurgency in the poor, fragile Sahel region. More than 580 people have been killed since early 2015, according to an AFP toll. — AFP

Russia says CIA mole missing

MOSCOW: Russia has officially declared a former Kremlin official alleged to have been a CIA informant missing and is looking for him, according to an entry in the Interior Ministry's database, the RIA news agency reported yesterday. US media reports, confirmed to Reuters by two sources, have said a CIA informant in the Russian government was extracted and brought to the United States in 2017. The official may have been a man called Oleg Smolenkov, who disappeared with his wife, Antonina, and three children while on holiday in Montenegro in June 2017, Russian daily newspaper Kommersant has reported. RIA said the interior ministry's database showed that Smolenkov had now been declared missing and that the ministry was looking for him. US media reports have described the informant as a high-level CIA source. — Reuters

Trump, Modi vow relentless fight on extremists, terror

HOUSTON: US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday declared themselves united in a relentless fight against "terrorism," vowing a close, personal alliance in front of tens of thousands of Indian-Americans. The two leaders, like-minded nationalists fond of fiery rallies and skeptical of traditional media, heaped praise on each other in an unusual joint appearance inside a football stadium in Houston.

To the bhangra beats of four drummers in saffron turbans, Trump in his dark suit and Modi in a yellow kurta and vest made a grand entrance with arms clenched together to ecstatic cheers from a crowd estimated by organizers at 50,000. Trump won his biggest applause when he told the crowd, many wearing the saffron of India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, "We are committed to protecting innocent civilians from the threat of radical Islamic terrorism."

Taking the flavor of one of Trump's own boisterous rallies, Modi later asked the crowd to give a standing ovation to Trump for his stance. Trump has stood by the Indian leader during controversial decisions this year, including his revocation of autonomy for Muslim-majority Kashmir and his order for jets to enter Pakistani territory in response to a suicide bombing.

With Trump watching in the front row and listening to the translation, Modi made clear reference to rival Pakistan, which controls part of Kashmir and has sought to rally international attention over the Himalayan territory. Modi said he was seeking equal status and development for Kashmir, adding that his actions were "causing discomfort to some people unable to manage their own country" and who "nurture terrorism." "These people have put their hatred of India at the center of their political agenda," Modi said.

India accuses Pakistan of arming Islamic militants



HOUSTON: US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attend 'Howdy, Modi!' at NRG Stadium in Houston, Texas on September 22, 2019. — AFP

who have fought its rule in Kashmir. But India has also faced strong criticism from human rights activists for shutting down virtually all internet and cellular communications across much of Kashmir. Protesters gathered outside of the NRG Stadium with placards and shirts that said "Free Kashmir" and accused Modi of violating religious freedom - a cause frequently evoked by the Trump administration.

Some Democrats take distance

The event - dubbed, with a Texan twang, "Howdy, Modi!" - was billed as the largest gathering ever by a foreign leader other than the pope in the United States. Hoping to ensure that it remains bipartisan, organizers also invited prominent Democrats. Steny Hoyer, the sec-

ond-top Democrat in the House of Representatives, pledged that both major US parties wanted strong relations with India - but gently voiced concern, pointing to India's historic "respect for secularism and human rights."

"Americans and Indians must strive to make our promises and aspirations a reality for all our citizens," he said with Modi at his side. Presidential contender Bernie Sanders, who did not attend, was more direct, saying that Trump showed a "deafening silence" on the clampdown in Kashmir. "I know that when a president stays silent in the face of religious persecution, repression and brutality, the dangerous message this sends to authoritarian leaders around the world is, 'Go ahead, you can get away with it,'" Sanders wrote in the Houston Chronicle. — AFP

Go East: Germans return 30 years after Wall's fall

GLINDENBERG: For years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the mantra for millions of former East Germans was to "Go West" for better jobs and opportunities. But three decades on, an increasing number are returning to their roots to seek a fresh start. With new industries taking shape and offering a variety of career paths, better childcare options and relatively cheap housing, the former communist states are starting to look a lot more attractive to young families. Take the Hoffmanns for instance. Peggy, 29, had wanted to return to the office full-time after having two children, but in western Germany, she felt a stigma associated with working mums.

Undeterred, she looked all over and finally found a job in insurance in the eastern city of Magdeburg last year. Crucially, another key piece of the puzzle fell into place quickly - a full-day childcare spot for her two sons rather than the half-day offers in the west. "For a woman who works, that's the dream," said Peggy, in her apartment in Glindenberg, a village in the suburbs of Magdeburg. Despite the initial reluctance of her husband Carsten, the family moved back to the couple's native state of Saxony-Anhalt.

Brain drain

A decade ago, she had joined Carsten in Stuttgart, where he had gone for his studies, driven, he said, by a wish to "discover something new". The return "was very difficult for me in the beginning," said the 33-year-old, explaining that he had to give up a full-time job in the knowledge that wages in the east lagged behind those in the west. But he, too, managed to find employment and without taking a pay cut. The Hoffmanns are the



GLINDENBERG: Carsten Hoffmann plays with one of his two sons outside their temporary flat in Glindenberg, near Magdeburg. — AFP

kind of family that Saxony-Anhalt and the other former communist states badly need.

While regional and federal governments have pumped hundreds of billions of euros (dollars) into reviving the east, companies drawn by subsidies and other favorable conditions complain that any investment plans are often hampered by the severe lack of skilled workers. The east "lost about 1.2 million people between 1991 and 2017", said Nico Stawarz, researcher at the Federal Institute for Population Research in Wiesbaden.

The first exodus wave came right after reunification, when the communist-run industries collapsed. The second wave happened in 2000, when unemployment shot up to almost 20 percent among the working-age population. And it was the young and well-educated who fled, leaving a fast-ageing population behind. The researcher noted the difficulties of making up for such a dramatic brain drain, but said that the

positive trend was that the outflow has stopped.

'Better quality of life'

In a recent study, the institute noted that in 2017, for the first time, the number of arrivals in the east was higher than departures - even without taking Berlin into account which for years has seen this trend. "We see positive developments in the east," Stawarz said. The economy is perking up, unemployment rates are falling and attractive urban centers with universities are gaining attention. Even though there are no global statistics, several reports document a rise in the returns of the so-called "Ossis" (after the word Ost for East). Most are between 29 and 45 years old, having spent about a decade in the west, started a family and are returning "for a better quality of life", said Stawarz. Among the pull factors are more comprehensive childcare, lower property prices and proximity to older relatives. — AFP