

# Boris Johnson gets short shrift from European Union leaders in Brexit talks

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Boris Johnson's first visit to meet senior European Union (EU) figures since he took power in July ended with the UK prime minister sent packing without receiving any concessions on Brexit.

After meeting Johnson, his host, Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel, was forced to address the press alone next to an empty podium—as Johnson had crept out the back door to avoid noisy protesters.

Speaking to the *Mail on Sunday* in advance of his trip, Johnson had sought to present a tough-guy image, ridiculously evoking the Marvel superhero, the Incredible Hulk. He told the paper that if Brexit negotiations broke down, he would ignore the Commons vote ordering him to delay the UK's exit from the EU on October 31. Like the Hulk, Britain would break out of the “manacles” of the EU, adding, “The madder Hulk gets, the stronger Hulk gets.”

The European Parliament's Brexit coordinator Guy Verhofstadt dubbed his comment “infantile,” asking, “Is the EU supposed to be scared by this?” with an EU diplomat saying Johnson less resembled the green giant than “Rumpelstiltskin,” who loses his power when his true name is revealed.

In the end, Johnson became instead the Invisible Man. On his arrival, he faced boos from a small crowd of largely ex-patriate British citizens opposed to Brexit. Then, following face-to-face talks with EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker over lunch in Luxembourg, there was no press appearance by Johnson.

Finally, after a lengthy discussion with Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel, it was Bettel who stood alone at the podium outside his office to face the press, as Johnson skulked away rather than face anti-Brexit protesters. In a pointed remark aimed at the absent Johnson, he said you “can't hold the future hostage for

party political gain ... One party, the Conservative Party, decided to organise a referendum,” which then happened with “no clear information” about what leaving the EU would entail.

Bettel said that for any meaningful negotiations to take place, “we need a text,” but that there were “no concrete proposals on the table.” Asked by a journalist why this was the case, he replied curtly, “Ask Boris Johnson.”

When Johnson finally spoke to the press at the British Embassy, he reiterated that the “Irish backstop”—the mechanism insisted on by the EU to avoid a hard border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland post-Brexit—would “have to go” in order to reach a new agreement with the EU. If that was not the case, then “we will make sure we come out on October 31 deal or no deal.”

Belgium's public service broadcaster RTBF described the meeting between Johnson and Bettel as a “dialogue of the deaf.” The headline in Germany's *Bild* tabloid was, “They ate well, nothing achieved.”

Both Juncker and Johnson said afterwards that they would “work intensively” to try and reach a deal, with meetings at a technical and political level taking place “daily.” According to the *Daily Telegraph*, however, “The Brexit circle remains a long way from being squared.”

Business circles are increasingly alarmed at the prospects for the UK economy. Even assuming Britain avoids no-deal, the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) has cut its economic growth forecast for 2019 and 2020. According to a Reuters poll of economists, the BCC prediction for 2020 “would represent the slowest growth since the 2008-09 recession.”

Uncertainty due to Brexit has adversely hit business investment, which faces its longest period of decline in

17 years. The Institute of Directors reported that almost 30 percent of its member companies either had or were about to set up operations outside the UK due to Brexit, with only 9 percent considering moving back to Britain.

In an article headlined, “The British economy is not ready for Brexit,” the *Financial Times* put it bluntly: “As a hard Brexit becomes a reality, expect the economic outlook to dim further.”

Whitehall insiders who spoke to the *Telegraph* said panic buying could lead to shortages of many essential items. “It is the end of the supply chains that will be at risk. Care homes, but also poorer areas reliant on small shops, many of which serve poorer, older customers.”

The chief executive of the Food and Drink Federation, Ian Wright, warned there could be “random shortages,” as a report revealed “the grisly crisis facing the UK’s food and drink supply chain,” with food prices rising by up to 14 percent.

Johnson and the hard-line Brexit faction of the Tories and ruling elite he represents are seeking to establish a “Singapore on the Thames,” offering tax breaks for employers and launching “free ports” where wages can be driven down and labour protections cut to the bone. German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned last week that a post-Brexit Britain, in alliance with the United States, would be “a competitor right outside the front door.”

Johnson’s trip to Luxembourg was largely a sham, as his government is actively looking to circumvent the law passed by Parliament last week that would force the prime minister to seek a delay to Brexit from the EU—if MPs have not approved an exit deal by October 19. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab told the BBC “Today” programme Monday that the “precise implication of the legislation needs to be looked at very carefully” but “we’re also going to be very clear with our EU partners that we leave at the end of October.”

As the recently disclosed “Operation Yellowhammer” document shows, the Johnson government is planning for savage austerity and state repression post-Brexit. To this end, it plans to mobilise 50,000 troops backed by 10,000 riot police, ready to be deployed in 24 hours to deal with “public disorder.” Legislation to handle national emergencies will, according to the *Sunday Times*, enable “curfews, bans on travel, confiscation of property and, most drastic, the deployment of the armed forces to quell rioting.”

Workers cannot counter the reactionary plans of the Johnson government by turning to the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn is working hand in glove with his party’s Blairites, the Liberal Democrats and pro-EU Tories to ensure that Johnson’s threat to leave the EU without a deal is defeated. But in this they act in the interests of powerful sections of big business who are opposed to Brexit and the adverse effect it would have on their profits, not its impact on the working class.

The political crisis wracking the ruling class is set to intensify this week with the Supreme Court in London to rule on three judgements made by courts in London, Edinburgh and Belfast that were brought by Remain supporting forces opposed to Johnson’s authoritarian move to prorogue Parliament.

The Scottish Court of Session ruled in favour of the Remain camp declaring that the prime minister acted unlawfully, while courts in London and Belfast agreed that Johnson’s prorogation was lawful.

Johnson prorogued Parliament for five weeks until the middle of October to prevent opposition parties—all of whom oppose a no-deal Brexit or who want to reverse Brexit entirely—from taking over Parliament’s order paper and forcing him to delay Brexit. They calculate that this is the best means to ensure the eventual defeat of Johnson, who oversees a fractured minority government, and the installation of an unelected government of “national unity” that would move to prevent Brexit.

*The author also recommends:*

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