

UK ruling class considers whether to entrust Corbyn with overcoming Brexit crisis

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Parliament will meet in extraordinary session October 19 to discuss the almost inevitable failure to reach a Brexit agreement with the European Union (EU).

Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his intention to schedule the Saturday session—coinciding with the end of an October 17-18 European summit—after his proposed alternative to the EU Withdrawal Agreement was rejected because it includes provisions for a customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic in the south, an EU member state.

Johnson's office revealed details of a 30-minute phone call he held with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with a "Downing Street source" citing her saying there could only be a deal if Northern Ireland stays in the EU customs union. If not, then a deal is "overwhelmingly unlikely" by the October 31 deadline, she is said to have commented.

This was denounced as an EU "veto on us leaving the customs union." Talks "are close to breaking down," Number 10 said, with an EU-UK agreement "essentially impossible not just now but ever."

Johnson was backed by the Democratic Unionist Party leader Arlene Foster, who praised him for having "flushed out Dublin's real intentions to trap Northern Ireland in the EU customs union forever."

The Downing Street statement was denounced by Labour's Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer and other pro-Remain MPs—proving that Johnson knew his proposals would be rejected so he could then blame the EU for not reaching a deal.

European Council President Donald Tusk accused Britain of playing a "stupid blame game," when "At stake is the future of Europe and the UK as well as the security and interests of our people." European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has warned

that a no-deal Brexit would "lead to the collapse of the United Kingdom." Then, during a sitting of the European Parliament, its president, David Sassoli, said that any Brexit delay should only be for either holding a second referendum or a general election.

Making things worse for Johnson, according to the *Times*, five cabinet ministers, Culture Secretary Nicky Morgan, Minister for Northern Ireland Julian Smith, Justice Secretary Robert Buckland, Health Minister Matt Hancock and Attorney General Geoffrey Cox are poised to resign if it comes to a no-deal Brexit. Moreover, if the Tory Party commits to a no-deal Brexit in an election manifesto, the *Financial Times* reports that up to 50 MPs and three ministers could quit the party.

Fuel was added to the fire by a Downing Street briefing threatening to cut security ties with EU countries that support a Brexit delay—calling this "hostile interference in domestic politics."

However insincere, Johnson was forced to reassure Damian Green, leader of the One Nation caucus of Tory MPs, that no-deal would not be in the manifesto.

Parliament was prorogued Tuesday until October 14, when Johnson's legislative agenda will be outlined in the Queen's Speech. But debate on this will now run into whatever plans emerge from the opposition parties to stop a no-deal Brexit by the October 19 extraordinary parliamentary session.

The depth of the crisis is indicated by the fact that the Commons has only sat on a Saturday on four occasions since 1939—including to consider the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, during the Suez crisis in 1956 and on the last occasion in response to the invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas Islands in 1982, fully 37 years ago.

The collapse of talks with the EU should lead to

Johnson requesting an extension to the Brexit deadline until at least January next year, according to the requirements of the Benn Act passed last month. But there is widespread speculation that Johnson will refuse to do so to precipitate a no-confidence motion and a general election he hopes to win by posing as the defender of the “will of the people” against Westminster and Brussels.

The *Sun* ran an article asserting that Johnson is even planning to tell the queen she cannot sack him as prime minister if he loses a no confidence vote and MPs choose a caretaker replacement, so he can deliver Brexit on October 31. Legal advice is being sought based on the 70-year-old Lascelles Principles that the monarch should follow the prime minister’s advice.

On the Remain side, a Scottish Court delayed a decision on whether to sign a letter on Johnson’s behalf, as it can under Scottish law, if he refuses to request a Brexit extension. Amid calls for the prime minister to face arrest, from lawyers for the three petitioners led by Scottish National Party MP Joanna Cherry, judges at the Court of Session said they could not rule on the matter until the political debate has “played out,” but would sit again on October 21.

How events proceed is now primarily determined by whether it will be deemed necessary to finally move a no confidence motion in Johnson—a prerogative that rests with Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the main opposition party.

For weeks now, the pro-Remain majority in parliament has been paralysed by a refusal to contemplate placing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn as head of a “caretaker government” to prevent a no-deal Brexit. Corbyn has bent over backwards to reassure the ruling class that he stands four-square behind their strategic demands and would only stay in office long enough to stop Brexit and then call a general election pledged to holding a second referendum.

Even this has not been enough, given the pathological fear in ruling circles of giving any indication to the working class that there could be a break with austerity and militarism. Labour’s Blairites, the Liberal Democrats, pro-Remain Tories and the Independent Group for Change MPs have been urging that Corbyn stand aside and give way to an “acceptable” leader for a more long-term Government of National Unity.

There are, however, indications that powerful

sections of the ruling class have concluded that it is now necessary to call on the services of Corbyn—who has proven again and again to be a pliant political tool.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies annual audit of Britain’s public finances declares that a no-deal Brexit would be more damaging than a Corbyn government’s pledges to increase public spending—pushing the government’s annual borrowing bill to a 50 year high on top of the £66 billion lost already due to the Brexit vote. The report stresses that the best outcome economically would be for Brexit to be cancelled. “We assume this would require a Labour-led government,” the authors conclude.

The *Financial Times* ran an editorial declaring Johnson’s government to be a major threat to the interests of British imperialism. He was “purposely steering the boat towards the rocks of a no-deal exit” and “whipping up public anger against parliament, the courts, and Britain’s EU partners. This is a perilous course to follow... After 11 turbulent weeks in office, the sad conclusion is that this government cannot be trusted to act responsibly.”

In an op-ed piece, the FT’s editorial director Robert Shrimley insisted, “It’s Johnson’s Brexit or Corbyn—there is no third way.”

“This is not a roulette wheel with multiple outcomes. It is a final coin toss,” he wrote. “Remainers welcome the chance to avert Brexit. But the price is a Corbyn government...”

Shrimley predicts that this will be accepted. “There is no reason to doubt Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson’s contempt for Mr Corbyn or her promise not to put him in power. But if the alternative is Mr Johnson, she will be forced to acquiesce, at least, to not voting down a Labour-led coalition ... This is the miserable truth. We can all play all the fantasy politics, constructing scenarios in which a different, moderate Labour leader emerges. But it is most likely to stay a fantasy.”



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