

Johnson's Brexit deal faces UK parliamentary vote Saturday

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The European Union (EU) agreed a deal over Brexit with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday, which was approved by all 27 EU leaders on the first day of a two-day Summit.

President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker sent a letter to the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, stressing that it was now time for Britain's parliament to do its part.

The deal means that the UK will leave the EU customs union and be allowed to sign free trade deals with non-EU countries. However, there will be a legal customs border between Northern Ireland (which is part of the UK) and the Irish Republic (which remains a member of the EU). This will mean a border in the Irish Sea, between mainland UK and island of Ireland. Goods will be checked at "points of entry" in Northern Ireland to be determined.

A convoluted tariff system is established, whereby duty will be paid on goods coming into Northern Ireland from the UK if deemed "at risk" of then being transported into the Republic of Ireland. A committee comprising UK and EU representatives will decide what goods should be on the "at risk" list.

Johnson arrived in Brussels yesterday afternoon to meet EU leaders.

Adding to the dismay of pro-Remain MPs, Juncker initially indicated that he wanted no part in planned moves by opposition parties in Westminster to delay Brexit until the new year—a plan laid out in the Benn Act, instructing Johnson to seek an extension if his deal was rejected at a special "Super Saturday" session of parliament or if there is no deal. On Wednesday, the government tabled a motion for Saturday's emergency session at which it will ask MPs to back the deal just agreed, or to sanction a no-deal Brexit.

As news of the deal emerged Thursday morning, the

hard Brexit-supporting Jacob Rees-Mogg told parliament that on Saturday there would be a 90-minute debate to either approve a deal or to approve a no-deal exit: "In the event of a motion to approve a deal, that motion, if passed, will meet the terms both of the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act [aka, the Benn act] and of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act [the main legislation governing the UK's exit]."

Juncker tweeted, "This is a fair, a balanced agreement. It is testament to our commitment to finding solutions." He told the press as he arrived at the summit that this was the only deal on the table. Asked if he thought British MPs would pass the deal, Juncker said "I hope it will, I'm convinced it will ... Anyway, there will be no prolongation ... We have concluded a deal. So there is not an argument for delay. It has to be done now."

After two hours of discussion, a senior EU official said that Europe's leaders would follow events on Saturday and reflect on the next steps if they were in a "different situation."

A second source said the EU had chosen not to interfere in a "sensitive domestic debate" (at least not publicly). However, "they leave the door open to the possibility of an extension, to be discussed at a later stage—if required."

Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, in a joint press conference, alongside Juncker, EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier and Irish Premier Leo Varadkar, said, "Now the ball is in the court of the UK. I have no idea what will be the result of the debate in the House of Commons on Saturday. It isn't for me to comment on political developments in the UK. But if there is a request for an extension, I will consult member states to see how they react."

The EU is telling Remain MPs that if they succeed in voting down Johnson's deal Saturday, there may be an extension. But if Johnson wins a majority then all bets are off, as the EU will not countenance a further extended period of uncertainty that is impacting on Europe's economy as well as the UKs. It is also undermining the ability of Germany and France, the EU's two main powers, to discipline governments such as Italy and prevent them from exploiting popular anti-EU sentiment to demand economic and political concessions.

Brexit is only the most developed expression of national and inter-imperialist tensions that are plunging the world into trade war and which now threaten to blow apart the EU—with US President Donald Trump's active support in furtherance of his "America First" agenda.

To finalise the deal, the Johnson government concluded that it was necessary to sideline the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), with whose 10 votes the Tories have had to rely on since becoming a minority government after the 2017 general election. As London edged towards a deal with Brussels, the DUP said it could not support Johnson's proposals, but would "continue to work with the government to try and get a sensible deal that works for Northern Ireland and protects the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom."

Johnson responded by dropping a proposed veto for the DUP for any deal to be agreed, which was contained in his original proposal. The prime minister's move was immediately accepted by EU negotiators. The DUP then announced that they would vote against a deal that "drives a coach and horses through the professed sanctity of the [1997] Belfast Agreement."

Also known as the Good Friday Agreement, this was instrumental in creating a stable platform for this flow of wealth from and through Ireland and brought three decades of civil war in Northern Ireland to an end by implementing power sharing in the north between Sinn Féin and the Unionist parties. It was signed by the British Labour government of Tony Blair, the Irish government and eight unionist and nationalist parties. The DUP complained that "the [Johnson] government has departed from the principle that these arrangements must be subject to the consent of both unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland."

Discussion is now focussing on the parliamentary arithmetic that would enable Johnson to pass the deal in parliament. Johnson is seeking to secure the backing of his pro-Brexit MPs despite the DUP's opposition, while also winning back 23 former Tory MPs who sit as Independents, including 21 he expelled from the party last month for trying to block a no-deal Brexit.

But Johnson also needs to win a section of Labour MPs who back Brexit outright or who represent constituencies that heavily voted Leave. Earlier this month, 19 Labour MPs wrote to Juncker declaring their "wish to see the British EU referendum result honoured without further delay." But there are possibly more who did not sign who might vote with the government anyway.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn said yesterday that he will not back Johnson's deal, stating that it was worse for the economy than the one which Prime Minister Theresa May was unable to get through parliament on three occasions. However, he has said he will not whip or discipline Labour MPs who do not oppose the Johnson deal.

It is a measure of the crisis facing pro-remain MPs that they are expected to shy away from demanding that a second referendum must be held to put Johnson's deal against a call to stay in the EU. Pro-EU Tories have supposedly withdrawn their support, while Corbyn refused to give it his explicit support, stating only that "We are unhappy with this deal and as it stands we will vote against it, although obviously we will need to see all of the last details of it."



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