

Johnson wins vote on Brexit deal but MPs back further delay

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MPs last night backed UK Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement Bill (WAB) agreed with the European Union (EU) by a majority of 30. However, Brexit will be delayed again, as he lost a subsequent vote on his planned timetable to get the necessary legislation through parliament in just three days.

MPs voted in favour of the principle of Johnson's deal in a second reading by 329 votes to 299. Immediately after, the Programme Motion (timetable) was defeated by 322 votes to 308, a majority of 14. In response Johnson said that he would "pause" the WAB and consult with the EU on its response to events.

Had the programme motion gone through it would have forced through the House of Commons all the legislation required to enable Brexit by the end of Thursday. Johnson's plan was to then send the Bill to the House of Lords for their approval Friday, with the government expecting it back from the Lords by next Tuesday or Wednesday, to get it passed just days before the October 31 deadline and in time for the European Parliament to ratify.

The WAB—110 pages, and a total of 435 pages including explanatory notes—was only published Monday night, leaving MPs with little time to read it before last night's votes and only three days for the parliamentary scrutiny process.

Support for the WAB was the first time in more than three years that MPs have voted for a deal negotiated by the Tory government with the EU. Johnson's predecessor Theresa May agreed a deal with the EU last November but failed to pass it on three occasions—due to opposition from Leave and Remain supporting MPs—leading to her resignation in July.

Johnson's minority government was expected to pass the WAB with a small majority, thanks to the support

of expelled Tory MPs who had previously refused to back a no-deal Brexit outcome and a group of Brexit-supporting Labour MPs. His majority was significantly bigger after he won the support of all 285 existing Conservative parliamentary MPs and previously expelled pro-EU Tories, and secured the backing of 19 Labour MPs who back Brexit or represent constituencies that voted heavily to leave in the 2016 referendum.

The Programme Motion was defeated by a larger margin than expected as 10 Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MPs opposed to a deal creating a border in the Irish Sea between mainland Britain and Northern Ireland were joined by 15 MPs who sit as Independents, including 11 of the pro-EU Tories Johnson expelled last month for refusing to back a no-deal Brexit. His timetable defeat was secured as he was only backed by five pro-Brexit Labour MPs—Kevin Barron, Jim Fitzpatrick, Caroline Flint, Kate Hoey and John Mann.

Johnson was forced to table the two votes after suffering a setback Saturday when pro-Remain MPs by a majority of 16 (322-306) backed an amendment tabled by Conservative MP Sir Oliver Letwin calling for withholding approval of Johnson's Brexit agreement until all the necessary legislation had been passed. The intent was to ensure that Johnson would comply with the terms of the Benn Act, forcing him to send a letter to the EU Saturday evening requesting a three-month delay in leaving the Single European Market and Customs Union—given that Johnson's proposed deal was not passed with a no-deal Brexit still threatened.

Johnson sent the EU an unsigned letter formally requesting the extension, together with another letter to European Council President Donald Tusk stating that

he did not agree with an extension and would seek to overcome all legislative hurdles to departing the EU on October 31.

To get wavering MPs to back the bills, Johnson opened yesterday's debate in parliament by warning that he would pull the WAB entirely and seek an immediate general election if they did not pass. He declared, "I will in no way allow months more of this... And with great regret, I must say that the bill will have to be pulled and we will have to go forward to a general election."

This prompted a number of Tory MPs to make statements in support of the Programme Motion, including Letwin, who tweeted, "Getting seriously worried that HMG [Her Majesty's Government] will pull Bill if Programme Motion is defeated. Surely best for all of us who regard this deal as the least of the evils to vote for the Programme Motion, whatever we really think of it."

However, it was made clear by Downing Street and government sources that Johnson did not rule out accepting a short extension beyond the October 31 deadline if the EU put it forward.

Following last night's votes, Johnson told MPs, "One way or another, we will leave the EU with this deal to which this House has just given its assent." He made no reference to the October 31 deadline or to a general election.

Outlining the programme of business in the next few days, the hard Brexit Leader of the House Tory, Jacob Rees-Mogg, confirmed that it was "very hard to see how it is possible" for the withdrawal agreement bill to pass by that date.

In response to Johnson, and with 19 Labour MPs defying the whip and supporting the government, Jeremy Corbyn was left to make a pathetic appeal in line with his adopted persona as a defender of the national interest and the political cohesion of the UK: "Work with us, all of us to agree a reasonable timetable, and I suspect this House will vote to debate, scrutinise and, I hope, commend the detail of this bill. That would be the sensible way forward."

Corbyn has conceded Labour's Brexit policy to the Blairite right-wing, who have insisted there can be no vote of confidence in Johnson as this would precipitate a general election and the danger of Johnson enforcing a no-deal Brexit. They demanded that Labour's policy

shifted to calling for a second referendum on EU membership, overturning the Brexit policy voted for at Labour's conference only last month. At the conference delegates backed Corbyn in calling for a general election, a Brexit deal renegotiated by a Labour government and then a second referendum.

In response Corbyn's ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, joined openly with the Blairites in backing a second "People's Vote." As is the norm, Corbyn has followed dutifully on the same path.

On Tuesday, McDonnell penned an article for the *Daily Mirror*, which Corbyn later retweeted, laying down the conditions for Labour to support the WAB—if it was amended to include "A new Customs Union between the UK and the EU, with a UK say," that "can command a majority in the House. It is something that businesses and manufacturers have been calling for and would remove the need for a border down the Irish Sea."

He stressed that "if a compromise can be reached, Labour believes we should let the people decide." "Our preference" was for "a General Election... But as we have said—any deal should go back to the people [in a second referendum]."

After years of suppression of the independent interests of the working class that has allowed three Tory prime ministers to govern, two unelected, the latest round of political capitulations and complex and unprincipled manoeuvres have led to Johnson taking one step closer to implementing his Brexit plan—one based on deregulation, savage attacks on the working class and stepped up trade war. Moreover, Corbyn has disoriented and divided the working class and strengthened the right to such a degree that the Tories are far more likely than Labour to win a general election, if one is called.



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