

European Union leaders consider three-month Brexit delay, as UK general election looms

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European Union (EU) leaders spent Wednesday formulating a response after MPs in Westminster, in a vote the previous evening, yet again delayed a British withdrawal from the EU.

MPs agreed to move Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement Bill (WAB) onto the next stage in Parliament, only to delay its passage with another vote by opposing Johnson's proposed timetable to get the necessary legislation through parliament in just three days.

Johnson then "paused" the legislation to hear the EU's response.

Brussels has said that it would respond to Johnson's request for a three-month extension to the present Brexit deadline, now set for October 31. Johnson was opposed to making the appeal by letter but was forced to last Saturday by the Benn Act passed by Remain-supporting MPs last month.

In order to prevent a no-deal Brexit, the Benn Act required Johnson to make the request by letter if his deal had not been agreed in Parliament by October 19. Johnson's deal was only moved onto debate and amendment once his request had been made.

On Wednesday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel added her voice to that of European Council head Donald Tusk in supporting the UK having a three-month Brexit delay. Tusk tweeted: "In my phone call with PM [Johnson] I gave reasons why I'm recommending the EU27 accept the UK request for an extension."

Johnson held talks with Merkel by phone yesterday, after which Downing Street put out a statement: "The prime minister made the same point [to Merkel] that he made to Donald Tusk that it is his long held view that we should not delay and we should leave the EU on October 31."

Also backing an extension to January 31, 2020, is Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, who agreed after a discussion with Tusk and European Parliament Brexit coordinator Guy Verhofstadt.

According to various sources, Johnson is amenable to a Brexit extension of 10 days, after having previously won substantial backing within the Tory's hard-Brexit wing with his pledge that the UK would leave the EU "come what may" on October 31.

Tusk is working to approve a Brexit extension without having to convene a full EU summit. EU ambassadors met Wednesday evening to discuss the extension request, with the *Financial Times* reporting that Tusk "wants the EU to formalise its decision around the end of this week, or the start of next week, and ambassadors are expected to meet again on Friday." The *FT* cited an EU diplomat who said the "mood in the room" was for an extension running to January 31, and there was "a unanimous view that an extension will be needed to overcome the deadlock in London."

However, to secure a consensus on any extension with whatever flexibility is allowed, Tusk must overcome opposition expressed by other EU leaders. French President Emmanuel Macron, according to reports, only supports allowing the UK an extension of a few days. Other EU heads of state are querying why London needs another three months to ratify the WAB after Parliament gave its assent in principle in the vote Tuesday.

Despite Merkel's statement, there is concern in German ruling circles at the impact on Europe of prolonging the Brexit crisis. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and the EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier said that more clarity was needed from London as to the purpose of an extension and on what basis their deal with Johnson could be passed in Westminster. Maas told an interviewer, "We have to

know what the reason for [an extension] is. What will happen in the meantime? Will there be elections in the UK?”

Speculation mounted that any new extension would be flexible, allowing the UK to leave the bloc at an earlier date provided the deal finally passes in Westminster and the European Parliament. Verhofstadt tweeted yesterday afternoon that the European Parliament’s Steering Group “met today & is of the opinion that a flexextension, not going beyond the 31st Jan, is the only way forward.”

With Parliament still in stalemate more than three and a half years since the 2016 referendum, speculation is growing about a possible snap UK general election.

Brexit has provoked a crisis of rule unprecedented in peacetime for the British ruling elite. Johnson is the Tories’ third prime minister to come to office in as many years. As with his fellow unelected predecessor, Theresa May, he has only been able to remain in power thanks to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Corbyn responded to Johnson’s travails after Tuesday’s votes by immediately offering, “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.”

This was a reprise of the role Corbyn played as he entered weeks of “national unity” talks with May and her collapsing government, after she failed to have her own Brexit deal passed by Parliament on three occasions.

On Thursday morning, Johnson and his main advisor, Dominic Cummings, opened talks with Corbyn and his Stalinist aide, Seamus Milne. Also involved was Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay, Tory chief whip Mark Spencer and his Labour counterpart, Nick Brown.

The talks were unable to reach agreement, with a Labour spokesman saying of the meeting, “Jeremy Corbyn reiterated Labour’s offer to the prime minister to agree a reasonable timetable to debate, scrutinise and amend the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, and restated that Labour will support a general election when the threat of a no-deal crash-out is off the table.”

Even now, Corbyn is avoiding any call for an immediate general election to satisfy the demands of Labour’s right-wing that nothing must endanger their efforts to reverse Brexit. The Blairites have demanded a second referendum as the means to overturn the 2016 vote and for Labour to commit to Remain.

Corbyn won the backing of Labour’s party conference last month for his position of seeking a general election and then renegotiating Brexit before moving to a second

referendum—with MPs free to back either Labour’s renegotiated Brexit deal or remaining in the EU.

Key Corbyn allies Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott have joined the Blairites in backing Remain. Moreover, whatever the balance of forces in the Labour Party membership the PLP is overwhelmingly pro-Remain and deeply divided even now about holding a general election—even with a January 31 extension in place.

Johnson has repeatedly called for a general election and again taunted Corbyn at Prime Minister’s Questions Wednesday, asking when the Labour leader would cease advocating another referendum on leaving the EU.

Johnson believes he can win a general election on a pro-Leave agenda denouncing his opponents for betraying the 2016 referendum. He faces a Brexit Party unlikely to perform well against him, while Labour is expected to lose votes to the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats—now almost neck and neck with Labour in opinion polls, with the Tories 15 points ahead of both.

In 2017, Labour defied the polls—winning its biggest swing since 1945 as a result of widespread anti-Tory sentiment. It might again perform better than expected, but Corbyn’s constant manoeuvres and accommodations have left enormous confusion in the working class over Brexit and the Labour Party deeply split.

Labour itself is in complete disarray and its membership disoriented thanks to Corbyn’s opposition to any struggle against his right wing and constant retreats on policy whenever they demand this of him.

This has left Corbyn advancing a convoluted mess of conflicting policies over Brexit—none of which have anything progressive to offer the working class. He wants to please the dominant pro-Remain wing of the ruling class represented by the Blairites. But he does not want to risk alienating the substantial minority of traditional Labour supporters who are pro-Brexit, without which he has no possibility of coming to power and acting as the saviour of the “national interest” he now never tires of proclaiming.



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