

UK: Johnson set to win new vote to hold December general election

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MPs voted last night to reject British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's motion to call a snap general election on December 12. Johnson won the vote by 299 to 70 but the Fixed Term Parliament Act (FTPA) requires that general elections can only be called with the votes of two thirds (434) of MPs.

This was the third time that Conservative Party leader Johnson has lost a motion for a general election, after the main opposition Labour Party confirmed earlier in the day that it would abstain on the vote. Labour has 244 seats to the Tories' 288. The anti-Brexit Scottish National Party (SNP) also abstained.

The motion that MPs voted on was to back an early general election and did not include a date. But Johnson said last week he would put the motion, promising MPs adequate time to scrutinise his Withdrawal Agreement Bill (WAB) deal with the European Union (EU), provided they supported holding a December 12 election. MPs had backed the WAB going forward for debate but refused to back Johnson's proposed timetable of just three days so Parliament could enact Brexit by October 31, the date the EU had set for the UK to leave the bloc.

Johnson has been calling for a general election for weeks, believing he can win on a campaign message that he represents the will of the people in seeking to "Get Brexit Done" against a recalcitrant Remain-supporting Parliament.

Monday's vote followed just hours after national ambassadors from the 27 other EU member states approved an extension to the Article 50 legislation—delaying Brexit until January 31. The "flection" allows the UK to leave the EU earlier if Johnson is able to get his WAB ratified by MPs.

To prevent a no-deal Brexit, the Benn Act, passed in Parliament by Remain-supporting MPs, required

Johnson to make the request by letter for a three-month delay if the deal he agreed with the EU was not passed in Parliament by October 19.

French President Emmanuel Macron, concerned about the continuing crisis over Brexit and its impact on the EU's trade war and militarist agenda, had insisted on an extension of just a few weeks. But in the end, the prospect of a snap election in the UK swayed Macron, with an EU official cited by the *Financial Times* saying, "It's true that France had a fairly tough position. ... But there is now the [prospect] of quick British elections, which changes the picture."

After the EU passed the extension, Johnson wrote to European Council President Donald Tusk accepting the EU's new deadline, but requesting that it rule out any further extensions beyond January.

Immediately after his general election motion was defeated, Johnson told MPs that the government would put forward a short bill calling for a general election on December 12. A vote is to be held today. A short bill—setting aside the FTPA—only requires a simple majority.

Johnson's move for another vote on a December general election was prompted by the agreement of the anti-Brexit SNP and Liberal Democrats Sunday to back a general election, earlier on December 9, if a number of conditions were met: that the EU extended Article 50 until January 31, that Johnson promised to adhere to the extension, that a no-deal Brexit was taken off the table and that Johnson committed to not bringing his Brexit deal back to Parliament before an election.

Downing Street utilised the SNP/Lib Dems' proposal as its Plan B, with a spokesman saying, "We will look at all options to get Brexit done including ideas similar to that proposed by other opposition parties."

Were Johnson to enlist the support of the SNP and

Liberal Dems for a December general election, he would comfortably win the vote even if every Labour MP abstained or voted against. In addition, the Democratic Unionist Party's 10 MPs are likely to back him. According to the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph*, "Arlene Foster, the DUP leader, appeared to give tacit approval to the [SNP/Lib Dems] plan. ..."

After discussions yesterday in Downing Street between Johnson and leading figures in the Tories' hard-Brexit European Research Group, aimed at reassuring them that Brexit would go ahead after a general election and before January 31, a number said last night they had accepted that Brexit and the WAB would have to be temporarily shelved.

Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson told *Sky News* after the vote, "I want to stop Brexit." She had wanted cross-party MPs to back a second referendum to overturn the 2016 vote to leave, "but in the absence of the numbers to deliver that and deliver the legislation for that, then a general election may be the way of giving the public the say and having the choice to stop Brexit."

A December 9 vote is favoured by the pro-Remain parties as it would allow more students—who in the main back staying in the EU—to vote in their university towns. Swinson added that the main reason a December 9 election was preferred by the Lib Dems and SNP is because it would tie Johnson's hands in preventing a no-deal Brexit, "as the House of Commons would discuss this Bill and then dissolve this week. There wouldn't be any time for the government to try to force through their Brexit deal Bill."

With no possibility that the UK can leave on the October 31 deadline, and in a sign that Johnson is gearing up for a general election amid signs he can win a vote in Parliament this week, the government confirmed last night that it was standing down its no-deal Brexit planning operation—Operation Yellowhammer.

Labour's pro-EU Blairites MPs are a substantial proportion of the party and for months have demanded that a second referendum be held on Brexit, not a general election. Were an election triggered, they would welcome major Lib Dems' gains against their own party, in the hope of securing a pro-Remain coalition government. They would, moreover, happily see a Labour defeat that would guarantee nominally left

party leader Jeremy Corbyn's resignation and the return of the party to their absolute control.

The author also recommends:

The socialist answer to Brexit: For the United Socialist States of Europe
[27 September 2019]



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