

Daily deaths near 1,000 as UK Parliament spends day ratifying Brexit treaty

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Yesterday was a continuing nightmare for the British population, as another 981 deaths were announced from COVID-19. A further 50,023 new cases of the disease were recorded. These numbers will rise as Scotland and Wales are yet to detail deaths over the Christmas period.

But in a world far removed from this death and suffering, Parliament and the House of Lords were engaged in a day long ratification of the Brexit treaty agreed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government with the European Union (EU). A foregone conclusion, the government won the vote in the House of Commons by 521 to just 73 against, a majority of 448. The Bill was sent to the House of Lords, where it was passed before receiving Royal Assent around midnight. With EU member states already endorsing the treaty, it will be implemented by Brussels and London from 11pm on December 31.

Straight after a Commons debate in which all parties and MPs for and against the treaty posed as loyal defenders of the “national interest”, the government confirmed its indifference to the public health catastrophe threatening millions by announcing that all primary school would open as planned on January 4, and all secondary schools would follow —after a meaningless two week delay—on January 18. This is despite the fact that they were forced to take, with the virus raging throughout the country, the token action of placing another 21 million people in England under Tier 4, the highest level of still limited restrictions.

The debate on the 85 page European Union (Future Relationship) Bill was in reality over the 1,246-page Brexit deal Johnson signed last week. It was rushed through in just five hours, with under 60 MPs called to speak. Not one had anything to say that did not uphold the interests of the City of London and Britain's major

corporations.

Johnson has a parliamentary majority of 80 and Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer had whipped his 200 MPs to back the government. The pro-EU Scottish National Party (47 MPs) and Liberal Democrats (11) and the Democratic Unionist Party (8) voted against but comprised a small minority in the 650-seat chamber.

Proceedings were dominated by mutual back slapping from the government benches, with non-stop gloating from its hard Brexit wing. There was mainly a collective sigh of relief from the Labour opposition benches.

Mark Francois, the chair of the anti-EU European Research Group (ERG), declared, “What I call the 'Battle for Brexit' is now over. We won.” Referring to the sections of the ERG who refused to back the “soft Brexit” deal Johnson's predecessor Theresa May agreed with the EU, leading to her downfall, Francois spoke of “my Spartan friends” who could now “lower our spears”. Inevitably alluding to the Second World War, he concluded, “We're about to write a new chapter in what Sir Winston Churchill called our 'island's story'.”

Starmer said that voting for a “thin deal is better than no-deal” and was in the “national interest”. This was a “simple vote with a simple choice: do we leave the transition period with the treaty negotiated with the EU or do we leave with no-deal?”

His only concerns were the impact on big business if the deal was not passed, “If we choose not to, the outcome is clear. We leave the transition period without a deal, without a deal on security, on trade, on fisheries, without protection for our manufacturing sector, for farming, for countless British businesses and without a foothold to build a future relationship with the EU,” said Starmer.

He then made a few criticisms of the treaty, saying it would lead to an "avalanche of checks, bureaucracy and red tape for British businesses".

Prior to his speech, Starmer pledged in the *Guardian* that he would be "supporting the government where it's necessary to do so and criticising and challenging where it is necessary to do so."

Summing up the debate for Labour, Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves complained that "Farmers, carmakers and our chemicals industry" would now all "all face extra delays, costs and bureaucracy when taking their goods to European markets." She declared, "More than 80 percent of our economy is made up of services, yet not one of the 1,246 pages of the treaty gives any additional opportunities for those sectors... The EU has a trade surplus in goods with us, and it fought to keep it. We have a trade surplus on services, and the Government have done nothing to protect it."

Nevertheless "a deal of any form provides a degree of stability, which is what businesses craves," she insisted.

Johnson was able to declare of Labour MP Peter Kyle, "It is great to hear a member of the Labour party not only backing the bankers and backing financial services—a fantastic development—but also backing this deal."

Prior to the vote, there was talk of a rebellion of up to 60 Labour MPs, including among the "left" in the Socialist Campaign Group's (SCG) 30 or so members.

In the event just 36 Labour MPs abstained—made up of Blairites who have never been reconciled to leaving the EU, along with a few supporters of the party's nominally left former leader Jeremy Corbyn. Three pro-EU right-wing junior front benchers in Starmer's shadow cabinet resigned after abstaining.

Only one of the MPs identified as a Corbyn supporter, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, actually voted against the Bill. Corbyn's former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell abstained, as did former shadow home secretary, Diane Abbott, after first announcing she would vote against. SCG chair Richard Burgon and Dawn Butler also abstained to ensure that they didn't fall foul of Starmer by directly opposing one of his diktats.

Corbyn too abstained on the vote, even though he doesn't have to abide by the Labour Whip after having been booted out of the party as part of the anti-Semitism witch-hunt being carried out by Starmer!

Those who abstained were as keen as Johnson and Starmer to profess their loyalty to British capitalism.

Corbyn made a pro-forma complaint that "protecting workers rights, and environmental standards" was "dependent on whether or not they have any effect on 'trade or investment'." But his main complaint was that the deal could not be backed as it "does not secure trade or conditions for our future outside the European Union. It paves the way in the future for very disadvantaged trade deals with other countries, particularly the United States."

In an article in the Stalinist *Morning Star*, SCG member Claudia Webbe complained, "This deal is also bad for British manufacturing," making it "very difficult for British car firms to export tariff-free into the EU." Saying that "British steel is an obvious example," she added, "This deal also makes it harder for the UK to step in and save firms that are of strategic importance to the UK economy."

Abbott listed among her reasons for abstaining the fact that the deal "falls short in many policy areas, but I want to talk about security." Johnson "claimed that they were going to get 'a security partnership of unprecedented breadth and depth'". Yet, "On the contrary, our access to Europol and to Eurojust has been compromised, and we will no longer have access to the European arrest warrant and to EU databases that allow for realtime data sharing, such as the Schengen Information System, and are valuable to our police and the National Crime Agency. The database was consulted over 600 million times by UK police forces in 2019."

The obscene spectacle in Parliament confirmed that the working class has nothing in common with any of the factions of the ruling class or its political parties, including the ever dwindling rump of the Corbynite "left". For working people protecting the safety of their families, their jobs and livelihoods can only proceed through a unified struggle with workers throughout Europe against Europe's ruling elites and their governments and for socialism.



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