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Britain

# British politics in tumult

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### **It is a tumultuous time in British politics. Parliament returned from its summer recess on September 3 to a new Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, elected by only Tory members following Theresa May resignation as Prime Minister.**

The Tory government had a working majority of 1 at this point (including the MPs of the Democratic Unionist Party; DUP). Johnson lost this the very same day when Phillip Lee (a Tory remainder MP) dramatically crossed the floor to join the Liberal Democrats while the Prime Minister was addressing Parliament. The Parliamentary Conservative and Unionist Party continued to shrink further over the days ahead.

Parliament closed again on September 9 after sitting for only 6 days. During that time Johnson suffered 6 consecutive defeats at the hands of both MPs and the Lords, provoked continued demonstrations across Britain and presided over what looks like the worst crisis the Tories have ever suffered.

And to add insult to injury, The Scottish court has found unanimously that the Prime Minister misled the Queen and that his actions were illegal. In effect, the court has held that Boris Johnson lied to the Queen so as to obtain prorogation. Some MPs are taking their normal seats, while others are demonstrating outside. Keir Starmer has demanded

Parliament is recalled immediately, prior to the Supreme Court considering all three legal judgements next week,

## What led to this?

Before Parliament reconvened, Tory privy councillors asked the Queen to prorogue (suspend) Parliament for 5 weeks, which she agreed to do. [\[1\]](#)

It's normal for Parliament not to sit when the main parties hold their conferences but this was a significant extension - and at a time of constitutional crisis. The idea this was to allow a 'new government' to prepare legislation for a Queen's speech was not taken seriously by anyone despite constant repetition by the government and Tory MPs. And the timing of the measure was telling - clearly an attempt to thwart any chance of blocking a no-deal Brexit.

When the possibility of prorogation was mooted by Dominic Raab during the Tory leadership elections, it was dismissed by others (including Boris Johnson and Michael Gove) as undemocratic and simply impossible. [\[2\]](#) Yet, this act was not only concluded during recess, it later came out that it was already being planned weeks earlier. [\[3\]](#)

This attempt to undermine Parliamentary sovereignty and hence democracy, led to protestors flocking onto the streets as soon as the plans were announced on August 28 and the opposition acted once Parliament returned.

The Labour Party, Scottish National Party (SNP), Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Change UK and the Greens as well as dissident Tories took control of the commons order paper. Johnson had stated that this was a vote of confidence in his government. But 21 Tory MPs, including the former Chancellor of the Exchequer Phillip Hammond, the "Father of the House" Ken Clarke, former Attorney General Dominic Grieve, former Cabinet member Rory Stewart, Oliver Letwin (who advanced the motion for debate and Winston Churchill's grandson, Nicholas Soames) voted against him to allow a Bill against no deal to move forward. They were expelled from the Parliamentary Tory

party - leaving Johnson with a majority of minus 21 and his first Commons defeat as PM.

The Commons then supported a bill in the name of Labour MP Hilary Benn to block no deal - til then was the legal default position for October 31. Another Tory MP, Caroline Spelman, joined the previous day's rebels and voted for the Bill. She said she would step down at the next election citing "Brexit abuse". [\[4\]](#)

The Bill was rushed through all stages in the Commons on September 4 and then went to the Lords. After 100 hostile amendments were submitted there was a fear it would be talked out before prorogation but in the end it cleared the Lords on Friday 6 and became law on Monday 9 after receiving Royal Assent.

## More humiliation

On August 29, the day after prorogation was announced, Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson had resigned from the party citing family issues and the handling of Brexit (Scotland strongly voted Remain in the EU referendum). [\[5\]](#) Given that she was responsible for the increase in Tory MPs representing Scotland in Westminster - essential to Tory numbers in Westminster - this spells trouble.

Facing his first Prime Minister's Questions on September 4, Johnson was asked by Labour MP, Tan Dhesi, when the inquiry on Islamophobia in the Tory party would commence (Johnson promised this during the leadership election) and demanded an apology from Johnson for his racist comments about Muslim women wearing the burqa looking like bank robbers and letterboxes. [\[6\]](#)

His stinging attack led to applause in Parliament. Johnson spluttered about his own ancestry and tried to turn the focus onto alleged antisemitism by the Labour Party. The "how can I be a racist given my family " defense cut little ice given his history of racist and misogynist statements. [\[7\]](#)

Once the Benn bill was sent to the Lords, Johnson introduced a call for a general election; under the Fixed Term Parliament Act (FTPA; passed by the Con-Dem government in 2011), needing 2/3 majority to succeed). [\[8\]](#) The government was defeated with the Labour Party abstaining in the vote. That was the fifth vote he lost in a week.

Johnson's use of a homophobic and misogynist slur ("a big girl's blouse") against Jeremy Corbyn and calling him a "chlorinated chicken" for not agreeing to a general election was yet another example of the sophomoric behaviour of the current Prime Minister'. [\[9\]](#) Mooching around like a schoolyard bully, one actually was waiting for him to "double dare" Corbyn to agree to an election.

The failure of nannies to teach appropriate behaviour was also raised against Jacob Rees-Mogg's slouching in the House of Commons which spawned a whole host of wonderful memes on social media; Rees-Mogg's devotion to his nanny (who is raising his 6 children) is well known; he actually took her campaigning in his first attempt to become an MP in Fife. [\[10\]](#) The exhibition of such gross levels of privilege by Johnson and Rees-Mogg has not only led to many memes; it has reminded so many working class people exactly what it is about the Tories that they find repulsive).

Still on September 4; the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sajid Javid, introduced his spending review. This followed the trailing of announcements by Johnson that much money would be given to education, the NHS and to policing, looking like the launch of a general election campaign. And few of the announcements contain new money so should be relatively easy to challenge when anyone has a chance to draw breath.

Johnson's week and Tory fortunes continued to worsen. On Wednesday, Boris Johnson's brother Jo Johnson (a remain Tory who was also a member of the government) resigned from the party (and hence the government) and from Parliament (Tory "majority" now at minus 22). [\[11\]](#)

His plan to take the Brexit debate "to the people" with an appearance in Yorkshire was a fiasco with one member of the public politely asking him to leave the town and another man haranguing him in demanding to know why he wasn't in Brussels negotiating with the EU. [\[12\]](#)

A public statement in front of new police recruitments added to the shambles. A female police recruit became ill after waiting for him to begin for 20 minutes and was forced to sit down; after a quick glance at her, he continued his speech. [\[13\]](#) The use of the police as a backdrop in a political speech (undermining their neutrality) does not sell well at all in Britain. He came under criticism not only from other politicians and commentators but also from the Police chief in West Yorkshire. [\[14\]](#)

As if things could not get worse on Saturday, September 7, Tory MP Amber Rudd (who threw herself on her sword to protect PM Theresa May over the Windrush Scandal when she was Home Office Minister) quit both the Tory party and the government (she was Minister of Works and Pensions). She believed that Boris Johnson was not trying to get a deal with the EU and was instead concentrating on a no deal Brexit and also criticised him for the sacking of 21 MPs.

On Monday 9, Johnson introduced another motion for a general election in October but was upstaged by the resignation of Speaker John Bercow - who has been a thorn in the Brexiteers side all the way through the process. This followed the extraordinary announcement earlier the same day from Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Andrea Leadsom that contrary to convention the Tories would put up a candidate against him. This is particularly significant as Bercow was elected as a Tory prior to being elected speaker.

Johnson suffered yet another defeat on the election date meaning that while election will happen soon; it just will not be at a time of his choosing. Rumours that he could put a one line bill circumventing the FTPA which would only need a simple majority came to nought - probably because there was no likelihood of him getting even that much support.

While it would be politically preferable for the next election to follow a second referendum on Brexit in which Labour campaigned strongly for Remain, such an option is not open now given the way the last few weeks have panned out. Given the cards Labour were dealt, it is unclear whether it ever was.

## The Implosion of the Tory Party

While there is great pleasure watching the implosion of the Tory Party, we need to understand that what is happening is a fight over the heart (if they have one, dried up desiccated as it is) and soul of the Conservative Party.

There is an attempt by the Tory right to rapidly move the party from a centre-right broad church to a decidedly right-wing party (This is similar to what was done to the US Republican party without the participation of the religious right. This took decades in the US, following the creation of Ronald Reagan's coalition). This is what lies behind the purge of the 21 MPs; some of the most well-known and respected members of their party.

Part of this is strategic. It fits well into the furthering of the agenda by the international right putting them in control over what is currently a centre-right party; this puts them in the same camp of political leaders like Donald Trump,

Matteo Salvini (Italy), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), and Binyamin Netanyahu (Israel; who "coincidentally" dropped in to visit Johnson on the September 5).

The attempt to drag the Britain out of the EU on a no deal Brexit is an attempt to create an Atlanticist alliance with the US, furthering the continued deregulation and privatisation of the British public sector. Britain would clearly be the junior partner in this scenario - so much for the sovereignty nonsense that was such an important part of the referendum campaign. All economic, environmental, agricultural and employment regulations that exist in Britain as a result of to EU membership would be swept away. This is the real aim of the Tory right; a deal is of no interest to them, they want to eliminate the public sector and regulation for ideological reasons.

We know exactly how Johnson is planning to do this (he is about as subtle as an elephant); staging the next general election as "the people versus Parliament." This is risky; there is no guarantee that "the people" will recognise the Tories as their allies. The privileged behaviour of Tory MPs may backfire - their arrogance turning to ashes when working class people remember who have screwed them over for decades. It was mostly the Tory party that destroyed industry and manufacturing in Britain and promoted austerity with some help from the Lib Dems - not the EU.

Whether this will succeed or lead to a split in the Tory Party still is unclear. Whatever happens, as an understatement, Johnson is not off to a good start. The Tory right seem to be prepared to eliminate moderate Tory MPs which will strengthen the hand of the Liberal Democrats who will sweep up the votes of Tory Remain voters. There are many parliamentary seats where the Tories and Lib Dems are competing which Johnson et al seem would leave Johnson condemned to permanently dancing to his tune - which is not only a distressing prospect for us but for Johnson himself.

## Unionism under challenge

There is another area of political difficulty for the Tories. The use of English nationalism and quasi populism enabled the Brexit victory in the referendum and has been used to be happy to cede in areas where the Remain vote was strong.

Johnson's focus seems to be on competing with the Brexit Party. He hopes either to neutralise Nigel Farage's party by convincing Brexit supporters that his party is the party of Brexit or enter into an electoral agreement with them. He believes that he can win the next general election given the results of the referendum and the political divisions in the country; including by winning seats in some traditional Labour heartlands which voted Leave.

A pact with Farage or his neutralisation will only work if Johnson succeeds in pushing through no deal. Anything else would see the Brexit Party on the offensive against him. And further the Brexit Party is essentially a one man (sic) band under Farage - which by many Brexiteers since, but this does not translate into support for Brexit outside of England and parts of Wales. Scotland and North Ireland voted remain and there is no evidence whatsoever that they have changed their minds. With Davidson's resignation, the Scottish Tories are even more certain to lose seats which could undermine the Tories across Britain.

Johnson's push for a no deal is strengthening demands for another independence referendum in Scotland, with significant marches across the country in August and September; moreover Corbyn's team has indicated Labour at Westminster would not block such a call. [\[15\]](#) We have even seen some not insignificant protests supporting Welsh independence. [\[16\]](#)

Moreover, the main sticking point in Theresa May's Brexit Withdrawal Bill relates to the Good Friday Agreement and the British border in Ireland between the Irish Republic and the six counties. This is not up for negotiation by the EU and there are no proposals from the Tories to actually replace the Irish backstop which they claim to loathe.

Socialist Resistance supports the demand for Irish reunification, though we don't think it is on the cards given the opposition of the main parties in the Republic to a border poll. We campaigned for a Yes vote in the first Scottish independence referendum and would do so again given a second chance. That's because we believe the break-up of the imperialist British state is in the interests of all those who live under the butcher's apron.

We will cry no tears if we see the disintegration of British state brought about by the Conservative and Unionist Party. We also welcome the opportunity that the Queen's involvement in prorogation has brought to discuss republican ideas with a wider audience. We also think proportional representation should be pushed by the left, rather than leaving the Liberal Democrats to champion this democratic measure.

## The Labour Party

Corbyn has played good role in the fight against a no deal Brexit his stock has risen as a result.

On August 21 he proposed that to avoid no deal, others should back a no confidence motion against Johnson. Corbyn would then lead a caretaker government, ensuring the extension of Article 50 and a rapid general election. On August 27 a meeting took place among forces who opposed no deal but was unable to come to agreement due to the Lib Dems refusing to back a Corbyn government for however brief a period of time.

The fact that Corbyn finally moved; coming out clearly for a public vote on Brexit was an important turning point - but one long in the making. But the time it took to do so has weakened Labour's chances of winning an election.

One problem is whether Labour can recover voters lost to the Lib Dems and the Greens in the general election. Reminding people of the Lib Dem role in the coalition which brought in austerity and their broken promises over tuition fees which has made university attendance far more difficult for working class children is essential but not necessarily sufficient. Voter registration campaigns - especially amongst young people who largely support remain will be critical. The BBC reported that 200,000 people registered to vote in the 72 hours up to September 5 and more than 50% are under 35. And Lib Dems sectarianism to Corbyn will not improve their position.

On the other hand there is still some lack of clarity as to whether Labour would try to negotiate a deal with the EU if they get into government. There are still people who believe that a Labour Brexit which defends working people is an achievable goal and the fact that Corbyn has still not confronted this myth makes the job of those of us who have said from the beginning that it is a contradiction in terms much harder.

Rather interestingly, while the Lib Dems and Tory rebels seem rather uncomfortable having Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister, the financial sector in Britain seems far more comfortable with the possibility of a Labour government especially compared to a no deal Brexit. [\[17\]](#)

## What's next?

The term "rebel alliance" (from Star Wars) has been used to describe those working together to stop no deal. But while all members of the alliance want to stop a no deal, they have big differences on other issues. The fact that Corbyn has been sure footed since Parliament returned has quietened some attacks on him from 'EurosÜallies' (and the PLP) but Tom Watson seems to be restarting that dynamic.

Labour, SNP, Plaid and the Lib Dems want a general election but not on Johnson's terms. For Change UK, if it still exists, it is less clear. For the most part they will lose their seats at the General Election which is why some of them joined the Lib Dems in the past few days. Tory rebels will either fight the election as Independent Conservatives or give up their political careers like Jo Johnson, Nicholas Hurd and Caroline Spelman.

Johnson's unpredictability and the fact he is a liar poses further challenge. While his mendacity is not at Trump's level (and Trump's lies often are to cover his own personal inadequacies), he has lost 3 jobs through lying and has lied consistently since May stood down. During the Tory leadership campaign (where prorogation was already being discussed) and in claiming that he is seeking a Brexit deal with the EU and that progress has been made - that was news to the EU). He has spent his life lying and seems to have no conscience whatsoever in doing so. As a result, his word is worthless and no one trusts him.

While many are hoping that he winds up dead in a ditch rather than ask for an extension; if he doesn't, he will be breaking the law. Much as many of us would love to see him carted off in handcuffs by the police, perhaps he thinks being a Brexit martyr could get him re-elected. This of course we want to prevent.

Whether he will submit the letter and ask for an extension to Article 50 is an unknown. If he does not, then he is appealing to the Brexit Party base. But this tactic could destroy the legitimacy of the Tory party and lead to a split with its centre-right base (This happened in the past over the Corn Laws in 1846, and over Tariff Reform in the early 20th century).

The lack of a written constitution does not help while the introduction of the FTPA has muddied the waters. The issue comes down to the fact that Boris Johnson is not behaving according to the rules that Prime Ministers are expected to follow. No other Prime Minister would have suggested that they would refuse to follow the law and not give the request for an extension of Article 50 to the EU. Who knows whether he is serious or just faffing about?

Here is a nightmare scenario: If Johnson quits right before the letter must be submitted (the October 19), we will not have a government to submit it to the EU unless a short-term government is agreed by the "rebel alliance" - will the Lib Dems and rebel Tories move beyond their distaste for Jeremy Corbyn's politics and allow the leader of the opposition to form a short term government or will we go out on a no deal Brexit in the absence of a government?

The Queen will certainly ask the opposition to form a government if Johnson quits (two weeks are allowed to form a government which if unsuccessful will result in a general election). Moreover, the letter cannot be submitted by the Head of State (the Queen) in the absence of a government. Will a technocratic government of senior civil servants be appointed (is that even possible in Britain, we are not Italy)? Elections take around one month; that is far too long a time when Britain is facing an imminent no deal Brexit.

There is always the nuclear option of revoking no deal as this could be voted by Parliament; but I believe that must be submitted by the government to the EU. That would certainly not help in "reuniting the nation" but I doubt that will be an easy task anyway. Your guess is as good as mine ... who knows?

Meanwhile Labour retains important assets in terms of a forthcoming general election. The 2017 manifesto, together with the huge campaigning membership to get out that message on the doorstep, can and must be repeated in

spades in any forthcoming poll. All those that joined Labour to campaign for Corbyn as leader, including some that have become somewhat disillusioned since with bureaucratic manoeuvres and slow pace of change, need to be involved in throwing out the Tories and establishing a radical Labour government and continuing the battle against the Labour right who want to undermine the dynamic of that project.

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