

UK: Johnson government considers post-Brexit snap election, while Labour's Blairites plot "national unity" government

By Chris Marsden
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Plans by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government to force through a no-deal Brexit threaten to embroil the UK in a major constitutional crisis.

Tensions within ruling circles are such that the pro-Remain Thatcherite and former defence secretary, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, in a letter to *The Times*, warned, "If the prime minister refused to respect the normal consequence of losing a confidence vote and if he sought to prevent both parliament and the electorate having a final say on no deal, he would create the gravest constitutional crisis since the actions of Charles I led to the Civil War.

"I have great confidence that the prime minister will ignore the advice of Dominic Cummings. King Charles lost his head by flouting the constitution. Mr Johnson will wish to keep his, while some around him are, clearly, losing theirs."

Johnson has been reduced to a single seat majority. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has indicated that he will trigger a vote of no-confidence in Johnson sometime after parliament resumes from summer recess on September 3. If defeated, Johnson would normally have 14 days, under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act, to win another vote of confidence or face a general election.

Rifkind was responding to comments by Cummings, campaign director of Vote Leave and now a special advisor, that Johnson would not quit but instead schedule a snap general election shortly after the October 31 deadline for the UK leaving the European Union (EU). This would make a no-deal Brexit, without a trade and customs deal with the EU, an accomplished fact. Johnson would then wage an election campaign based on nationalist rhetoric about defending the "will of the people" against Brussels, "treacherous" and undemocratic Remainers in Westminster and the "metropolitan elite."

Everything Rifkind says about the anti-democratic course being contemplated by Johnson is true. His readiness to defy parliamentary convention is indicative of his belief that

Brexit faces major opposition, both in ruling circles and among many working people that he is seeking to bypass.

However, the scheming of the Remain faction of the Tories and their allies on the opposition benches is just as undemocratic. By tradition, a successful no-confidence vote would see the leader of the main opposition party attempt to form a government. Corbyn would therefore have two weeks to secure enough support for a "caretaker" government—based on promises to seek an extension on Article 50, that would delay the UK's exit from the EU—before announcing a general election with Labour pledged to hold a second referendum.

But a Corbyn government is anathema to the Tory Remainers who are conspiring with Blairite Labour MPs and the Liberal Democrats to form a "government of national unity." They plan to seek the queen's approval, through a "Humble Appeal," for Johnson's removal.

Dominic Grieve, the former Conservative attorney-general, told *The Times* that the queen "has sought to keep herself well away from the cut and thrust of politics, but at the end of the day there are residual powers and responsibilities which lie with her. She might have to dispense with [Johnson's] services herself."

This too has an historic precedent in Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald crossing the House with 12 other MPs to form a national government in 1931. This paved the way for the savage austerity measures of the "Hungry Thirties" by four successive national governments until the onset of World War II. A new national government would be just as hostile to the interests of the working class, would strengthen the right-wing under Johnson and deepen the dangerous divisions in the working class already sowed by Brexit.

Corbyn is desperately seeking to maintain the grip of the right-wing pro-business Labour Party over the working class. This involves a fresh round of parliamentary manoeuvres to avoid any possibility of workers intervening

independently and in their own interests in this mounting crisis.

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell told the BBC that “there will be a majority” among MPs for a caretaker Labour government to avoid a no-deal Brexit and that Johnson would have to step aside. “I don’t want to drag the Queen into this, but I’d be sending Jeremy Corbyn in a cab to Buckingham Palace to say we’re taking over,” he said.

He made great play of rejecting any formal coalition with other parties, but his improbable plan depends on winning support from the Blairites, Lib Dems, Scottish National Party (SNP), dissident Tories and even the monarchy. It would depend on Corbyn doing what was demanded of him. McDonnell knows very well, stressing that securing support for a “caretaker government ... will be about saying: ‘Yes, as Labour said, to block a no-deal, we will go back to the country in a referendum’.”

McDonnell has also promised to support a second referendum on Scottish independence to secure the backing of the SNP—at the cost of sowing further national divisions in the working class.

For his part, Corbyn has busied himself writing to Cabinet Secretary Sir Mark Sedwill, urging the civil service to block a no-deal Brexit if a general election is called under “purdah” rules designed to prevent the government taking major policy decisions during a national poll. He has asked the mandarins of Whitehall to determine whether the government must seek a time-limited extension to Article 50 to allow voters to decide.

While Corbyn and McDonnell conduct their pathetic manoeuvres, the Blairites are left free to plot and scheme with the Tories. The press is filled with reports of around 100 Labour MPs, fronted by deputy party leader Tom Watson, discussing who should head the proposed government of national unity. Among the names suggested are anti-Corbyn coup plotters and witch-hunters of the left, Margaret Beckett, Hilary Benn and Yvette Cooper, as well as the Tories Ken Clarke and Dominic Grieve.

The former Blairite and now Liberal Democrat treasury spokesman Chuka Umunna told the press, “I know, because I have spoken to them, there is a substantial minority of Labour MPs at the very least who simply would not countenance Jeremy Corbyn being the prime minister of this country.”

The new Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson backed up Umunna, saying that her party would not back Corbyn, while an unnamed leading Lib Dem MP told the *Financial Times*, “I can’t conceive of any circumstances under which we would put Jeremy Corbyn into No. 10. He’s not only dangerous for our national security but for our economic security too.”

Corbyn’s refusal to carry out the wishes of his supporters and drive out the Blairites, coupled with his adoption of their every policy demand, means that it is the right wing that is planning a possible split from a position of strength within the party when they are hated by the majority of workers. There are, moreover, reports that up to 30 Labour MPs, who are pro-Brexit or in pro-Brexit constituencies, who might come to Johnson’s rescue by opposing a no-confidence vote.

Four years of Corbyn’s leadership has not proved to be Labour’s rebirth as a reformist party, as his pseudo-left apologists claimed. It has seen him suppress the class struggle while paving the way for the sharpest right-wing turn in post-war British politics. It is thanks to Corbyn that every likely outcome in parliament ends in governments which, despite their differences on Brexit, are committed to further austerity, militarism and war.

The only way out of this political impasse is through a rejection of all alliances with either the pro- or anti-Brexit sections of the ruling class and the building of a unified movement of the British, European and international working class for socialism.

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