

UK Prime Minister Johnson fails to secure Brexit concessions from Germany and France

By Robert Stevens
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UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson left Paris empty-handed Thursday following talks over Brexit with French President Emmanuel Macron. Johnson met Macron after departing Berlin a day earlier, having failed to secure concessions from German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Johnson, who replaced Theresa May as prime minister last month, has staked his premiership on the UK leaving the European Union (EU) on October 31, with or without a deal.

Johnson pleaded with Merkel and Macron to offer him a deal that he can sell to parliament, including the removal of the Irish border backstop that was agreed with May. The backstop is an integral part of the current withdrawal deal and is the EU's insurance policy against the return, post-Brexit, to a hard border between Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK, and the Irish Republic, which remains an EU member.

While Merkel told Johnson that changes to the deal's accompanying political declaration could provide a solution, at a later stage, to the backstop dispute, she applied maximum pressure by stating that "maybe we can find that solution in the next 30 days."

Her remarks were seized on by the UK's pro-Brexit media as evidence that Johnson had secured a major concession. But Merkel's statement was made in full knowledge that Johnson will be unable to square the circle over the Irish border question. He faces bitter opposition to any compromise from Conservatives and from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party MPs, who prop up his minority government.

Norbert Röttgen, a leading figure in Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and chair of the German parliament's foreign affairs committee, immediately shot down in flames any suggestion of a backdown by Merkel: "She did not move one millimetre... At no point did she suggest that Germany is ready to abandon the backstop. The

German position is the same as the European position... She is putting the onus on Johnson. But everyone knows that you cannot find a solution for something in 30 days that has not been found in three years."

Macron agreed with Merkel, saying that the "withdrawal agreement can be amended," while insisting that the "Irish backstop is indispensable." He warned, "We will not find a new Withdrawal Agreement in the next 30 days that is much different from the existing one... We have to respect what has been negotiated."

Macron told reporters after meeting Johnson, "Renegotiation of the terms currently proposed by the British is not an option that exists, and that has always been made clear by [EU] President [Donald] Tusk..." The EU was not to blame for a no-deal outcome as "A hard Brexit ... will be the responsibility of the British government."

Clutching at straws, the pro-Brexit *Daily Express* claimed that Johnson appeared to punch the air with both hands in a "victory salute" after returning to London. His meetings had seen a "stubborn EU crumble."

However, another pro-Brexit newspaper, the *Sun*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, warned that Johnson's meetings with Merkel and Macron had paved the way for a no-deal outcome. It editorialised, "It's clear that there is some flexibility on the Continent," before concluding, "We remain sceptical that the EU really has seen the light, and that they'll finally—after three long years—negotiate in good faith." It denounced Irish premier Leo Varadkar, who opposes any removal of the Irish backstop. "If Varadkar continues to insist that it's the only deal possible, what does he think will happen?"

On Friday afternoon, Johnson said he would "turbocharge" arrangements to find a solution to the backstop, but he played down chances of a breakthrough. While "progress" had been made, his government had to

“prepare to come out without an agreement. We can do that. We are very confident.”

Ahead of parliament’s return from summer recess, MP’s opposing a no-deal Brexit are finalising their manoeuvres.

Next Tuesday, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn will meet leaders of other opposition parties: the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Change UK, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party, along with other invited cross-party backbenchers. The meeting will discuss, in Corbyn’s words, “all tactics available to prevent no deal.”

Corbyn told reporters, “We’ll discuss the process by which we’ll put forward a motion of no confidence and others will bring up other suggestions, including the legislative proposal.

“[W]e’ll be having a serious discussion next week in order to prevent this country crashing out on 31 October with all the damage that will do to farming communities, to industry, to jobs...”

Labour’s majority Blairite wing represents the dominant sections of big business opposed to leaving the EU. Corbyn’s meeting with Remain-supporting parties and MPs is his latest capitulation to their agenda. Among the proposals being considered by Corbyn is support for legislation aimed at delaying Brexit, with MPs and not the government taking control of parliament’s “order paper” to decide what is debated prior to October 31.

Corbyn is seeking to win a no-confidence vote against Johnson on the basis that this would enable him to head a temporary cross-party “national unity” government. This would agree—on behalf of big business—an extension with the EU to Article 50 legislation triggering Brexit. With this in place, Corbyn supports the calling of a general election.

While Corbyn is able to get the opposition leaders around the table, virtually none of them will countenance him becoming prime minister. Twice elected leader on a mandate opposing austerity and militarism, MPs fear that once in office Corbyn would be unable to hold back a movement of the working class demanding he make good on his rhetoric.

Corbyn, at this stage, has refused to commit to personally campaigning for Remain in any autumn election. In this, he is opposed by two prominent nominally “left” members of his shadow cabinet, John McDonnell and Diane Abbott, who are both onboard with this central demand of the Blairites.

Attending next week’s talks from the Lib Dems and

Greens are party leaders Jo Swinson and Caroline Lucas. Swinson has stated she will not back Corbyn as the head of a caretaker government and would attend only to discuss “workable options.” On Friday, Lucas—knowing that Corbyn does not have the backing of the Blairites, or parliament as a whole to become prime minister—said that “if he cannot gain the support of a sufficient number of colleagues across parliament, I hope he will be prepared to back another MP from his party [to head a government], or another, who can.” The Remainers favoured candidates are pro-EU Tory Ken Clarke or Labour’s Harriet Harman.

A leading Tory Remainer, Dominic Grieve, said he could not attend, but that it was “a matter of public record that I am open to meeting with him at a mutually convenient time.”

Other pro-Remain Tories and former Tory MPs have yet to take up Corbyn’s offer. Some have refused outright to deal with Corbyn, including Nick Boles, who left the Conservatives this year after its MPs—bitterly divided over leaving the EU—refused to back May’s deal on three occasions. In a letter to Corbyn this week, Boles wrote, “I, for one, will not support a vote of no confidence while the Johnson government continues to pursue a Brexit deal. Nor would I be able to support any government in which you were prime minister, however temporary its mandate.”

He concluded it was “essential that you declare publicly that you will not facilitate an election before an extension of article 50 has been secured and a no-deal Brexit has been averted.” Boles said an unspecified number of Labour MPs backed his position.

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