

Johnson to suspend UK parliament to push through Brexit in a major assault on democratic rule

By Chris Marsden
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Elizabeth II, Queen of the United Kingdom, yesterday signed off on Prime Minister Boris Johnson's request to suspend parliament.

Known as proroguing, the move followed a visit by three Privy Council members, led by arch Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg. It means that parliament will stop meeting no earlier than Monday September 9 and no later than Thursday September 12, until Monday October 14. This is designed to cut the ground from beneath most MPs seeking to oppose Johnson's threatened no-deal Brexit—leaving the European Union (EU) without a trade and customs agreement in place if Brussels doesn't abandon measures including the Irish “backstop.”

Proroguing parliament for 23 working days would leave MPs just days, rather than weeks, after returning from recess on September 3, to carry out plans to block a no-deal Brexit. Parliament would then return on October 14 to hear a Queen's Speech outlining the government's legislative agenda. Johnson would travel to Brussels for talks October 17-18, threatening to crash out of the EU on October 31 if no concessions are made. This would leave MPs with one chance to oppose his new deal or a no-deal Brexit—in a vote on October 21-22 on the Queen's Speech.

Whether this ends in a no-confidence vote or not, there is speculation that Johnson might call a snap general election for as early as November 7 that he would fight on a “people versus parliament” pro-Brexit agenda. He would be backed by the Democratic Unionist Party, while Nigel Farage has offered a Brexit Party “non-aggression pact” if Johnson abandons plans to modify his predecessor Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement.

Johnson's efforts to bypass parliament threatens a constitutional and political crisis. Leading Conservative Remainers such as Sir John Major and Sir Malcolm Rifkind spoke of civil war, drawing parallels between Johnson and Charles I and warning that he too might lose his head. Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said, “Shutting down parliament in order to force through a no-deal Brexit which will do untold and lasting damage to the country against the wishes of MPs is not democracy. It's a dictatorship and if MPs don't come together next week to stop Boris Johnson in his tracks then I think today will go down in history as the day UK democracy died.”

Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell described Johnson's move as “a very British coup... once you allow a prime minister to prevent the full and free operation of our democratic institutions you are on a very precarious path.”

Yet up to now, talk in parliament has continued to focus on convoluted legal and procedural efforts to thwart Johnson's plan. Major said he would continue to seek legal advice on how to stop plans to “bypass a sovereign Parliament.” A legal case is proceeding in the Scottish courts, brought by the Scottish National Party's (SNP) justice spokeswoman, Joanna Cherry, and backed by around 70 MPs.

However, the scale of the catastrophe for British imperialism threatened by a no-deal Brexit has led to discussions about opposition parties switching to support for a no-confidence vote that could be moved by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and for him to lead a temporary “caretaker government” seeking an extension of the October 31 Brexit deadline.

Johnson has only been able to proceed with his plans

to create a low tax, free-trade zone UK wedded to a military/political alliance with the Trump administration in the US thanks to Corbyn. The Labour leader, elected to office based on a pledge to oppose austerity, militarism and war, has instead prostrated himself before the Blairite right-wing in his own party, adopting their policies and defending them from deselection by Labour's membership.

In response to Johnson winning the leadership of the Tory party, Corbyn offered to forge an alliance of all the pro-Remain parties to stop a no-deal Brexit and then call a general election with Labour promising a second referendum. Even this was not enough. When Corbyn met with the leaders of the SNP, Liberal Democrats and Green MP Caroline Lucas Tuesday, Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson again insisted that Corbyn was too divisive a figure to unite the anti-Remain forces and urged a government of national unity led by the Tory Ken Clarke or Blairite Harriet Harman. The pro-Remain Tories stayed away.

In response Corbyn promised to delay his plan to call a no-confidence vote until October and to back moves to thwart a no-deal Brexit by taking control of the business of parliament. That night he sent out a begging letter to around 114 Tories, including May, "to offer to work together, in a collegiate, cross-party spirit, to find a practical way to prevent no deal."

This left Corbyn and his allies thrashing around after Johnson unceremoniously determined that there would be no time for such manoeuvres by proroguing parliament. His response was pathetic. Yesterday Corbyn wrote a letter to the queen, stating, "There is a danger that the royal prerogative is being set directly against the wishes of a majority of the House of Commons," and begging her to "grant me a meeting, along with other privy councillors, as a matter of urgency and before any final decision is taken."

The *Financial Times* predicted further political problems for the moves against Johnson, because a vote of no confidence "would need about eight Tory MPs to think the virtually unthinkable and vote down their own government, with the potential consequence of a quasi-Marxist Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn."

However, some MPs are openly considering support for a no-confidence vote—at least as a back-up plan for October. Senior Tory Remainer Dominic Grieve said

that "bringing down the administration which is made up of a party of which I am a member is something I would only do as a last resort... But if there is no other way of avoiding it, it may be the only thing I can do."

For the SNP, Cherry said opposition parties may now have to review plans to go for primary legislation first rather than a vote of no confidence. But she added that a vote of no confidence could be used as "a ruse" by Johnson to call a general election after October 31 and that to counter this Corbyn should agree to whip Labour MPs to vote against an early election until an extension has been secured.

The situation created by Corbyn's political treachery is extraordinarily dangerous.

By colluding with the trade unions in the four years since he became leader to suppress strike action and confining political life to rotten manoeuvres to prove Labour can be entrusted to safeguard the interests of big business, he has prevented the working class from intervening in a fundamental crisis of rule for British imperialism.

His refusal to advance a socialist opposition to the rival pro-imperialist strategies of Brexit and Remain has allowed dangerous divisions to be sowed between workers that prevent any unified response to the agenda of austerity, trade war and militarism common to all factions of the capitalist class. Over a million have signed a petition opposing the suspension of parliament, but opinion polls give the Tories a 12-point lead over Labour thanks to the Brexit divide.

These divisions can only be overcome by advancing the call to unify the struggles of British and European workers against the common class enemy and for the United Socialist States of Europe.

Instead, Johnson has been emboldened to take a serious step on the road to authoritarian rule—under conditions where there are active plans to deploy thousands of troops and riot police in the event of a no-deal Brexit to deal with the social unrest that must inevitably result.

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