

# UK prime minister Boris Johnson prorogues Parliament

By Robert Stevens  
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Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson prorogued Parliament Monday evening after opposition MPs voted to oppose, for a second time, his attempt to force a general election before the current Brexit deadline of October 31.

Although Johnson won the vote by 293 to 46 a motion to hold a general election requires the support of two thirds of all the more than 600 MPs and the prime minister was far short of that as opposition MPs abstained.

Johnson's anti-democratic suspension of Parliament was carried out to prevent opposition MPs from taking control of Parliament's order paper over the next five weeks and derailing his plans to withdraw the UK from the European Union (EU), without a deal if necessary.

The vote to oppose an early election took place after a Bill, put forward by Labour Blairite MP Hilary Benn, and designed to prevent Johnson imposing a no-deal Brexit, received royal assent to become an act of law. It compels Johnson to request from the EU an extension to the Brexit deadline until January 2020 if there is no deal agreed by October 19. The bill was rushed through both Houses of Parliament last week after cross-party MPs deemed it the best way to stymie Johnson's plans.

Despite being unable to prevent Benn's Bill passing, the government insists that it will not request an extension from the EU beyond October 31. At a press conference last week at a police training college Johnson stated that he would rather "die in a ditch" than agree an extension. As this would mean the executive were refusing to accept an act of law, speculation mounted over the weekend that this could result in legal action taken against Johnson by MPs.

According to pro-Brexit Tory MP Nigel Evans the government is war-gaming "about 20" different ways it can get around having to seek an extension. One option

being considered was for Johnson to write to the EU to formally seek a Brexit extension and then also send another letter stating that the UK does not want an extension. Another was to exploit the sentiments of one of the EU members not in favour of granting the UK an extension. France is reportedly poised to reject an extension with foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, stating at the weekend, "We are not going to do this [extend the Brexit deadline] every three months."

Other plans being considered were Johnson calling a vote of confidence in his own government, a provision usually reserved for the leader of the main opposition party under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act (FTPA) or for Johnson to resign, with another figure making the request in his place as a temporary prime minister.

Johnson spent part of Monday in Dublin in talks with his Irish counterpart Leo Varadkar. The Irish government, with the backing of the EU, insists that a backstop—the mechanism to avoid a hard border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland post-Brexit—is needed in any withdrawal agreement the UK agrees with Brussels. "No backstop is No Deal," Varadkar declared, as he stood beside Johnson, adding that the British government had come up with no "realistic" plans to replace the backstop. In response, Johnson was forced to say that a no-deal Brexit "would be a failure of statecraft for which we would all be responsible."

Johnson, under orders from the Tories' hard Brexit wing, opposes a backstop being part of a deal. A joint statement released after his meeting with Varadkar could only state diplomatically there was "common ground" but "significant gaps remain."

Monday also saw the resignation of Parliament's Speaker, the pro-Remain Tory John Bercow. The *Financial Times* noted, "During the past year, the

Speaker has granted several emergency debates to pro-Remain MPs that have broken with convention to allow backbenchers to take control of the Commons and pass legislation to avoid a no-deal Brexit. This resulted in the Conservative party announcing they would stand a candidate against him [for Speaker] at the next election, which may have played a role in his decision to retire.” It emerged that his local Conservative association, dominated by Brexiteers, planned to deselect him as their MP.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn could only complain about Johnson’s prorogation, “I think it is disgraceful. Parliament should be sitting.” He added, “Parliament should be holding the government to account. And the prime minister appears to want to run away from questions.”

Bercow stated that if MPs voted to oppose an early general election he would remain in place until October 31—the day that the UK is set to leave the EU. Giving a clear indication that he would oppose Johnson’s plans to the last, he said in his time as Speaker, “To deploy a perhaps dangerous phrase, I have also sought to be the backbencher’s backstop.” He would remain in place until the end of October as “that date will fall shortly after the votes on the Queen’s speech expected on 21 and 22 October. The week or so after that may be quite lively and it would be best to have an experienced figure in the chair for that short period.”

Bercow allowed two pro-Remain emergency “humble address” motions to be debated and voted on by MPs last night. The first was from Dominic Grieve, the former Tory attorney-general who was thrown out of the Conservative party last week by Johnson after he backed Benn’s Bill, along with another 20 Tory rebels. MPs voted by 311 to 302 in favour of Grieve’s request that the government publish all the documents related to “Operation Yellowhammer”—the planning documents for a no-deal outcome—and the private communications between Downing Street advisers on the decision to prorogue Parliament. The government said a revised version of Yellowhammer will be released, but is understood to be against publishing the proroguing information.

Johnson was able to go forward with the proroguing of Parliament with opposition MPs registering pro-forma protests. This was despite much hot air the previous week from MPs threatening to occupy the

chamber to prevent prorogation. The Remain camp will be secretly pleased that Parliament is suspended so they can try and formulate an effective counterattack against Johnson.

The other motion Bercow allowed was from Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, “That this house welcomes the completion of all parliamentary stages of the European Union (withdrawal) (No 6) bill [Benn’s Bill] and has considered the matter of the importance of the rule of law and ministers obligation to comply with the law.”

So pro-forma was Corbyn’s move that it was put through on the nod, without even a vote being called.

It was left to the *Financial Times* to give the Remain wing their marching orders. In an editorial Sunday, “A zombie government means an election must be held,” the City of London’s newspaper declared, “Boris Johnson’s Conservative government is in meltdown... it has thrown away its majority and cannot govern.”

It demanded an election even though there was a “hideous choice between a likely no-deal Brexit under Mr Johnson’s Conservatives, or the revolutionary socialist project of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour.”

All MPs opposed to a no-deal Brexit “should use the prorogation period to nail down an agreement on a caretaker government, headed by a more trustworthy and less divisive figure than Mr Corbyn, and on strategies for the following weeks and for an election.”

This including opposing Johnson “ignoring the law to block a no-deal, resigning,” or a “no-confidence vote in itself—that ... Johnson’s government may resort to.”

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