

Britain set for December 12 general election

By Robert Stevens
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Last night, MPs voted to hold what will likely be the most volatile general election in post-war British history.

MPs voted by 438 to 20; a majority of 418, for an election to be held on December 12. The election will be the first held in December since 1923. Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson won the backing of MPs after he introduced a short bill calling for a December 12 election. After passing its three readings in the House of Commons after six hours of debate last night, the legislation was sent to the House of Lords where it is expected to pass today and be presented for Royal Assent to become law. Parliament will be dissolved next week.

Johnson failed Monday night to secure enough support to secure a December general election under the Fixed Term Parliament Act (FTPA), as that required two-thirds of all MPs (434) to give their assent. The short bill—setting aside the FTPA—only required a simple majority.

Johnson knew he could win a majority as the anti-Brexit Scottish National Party (SNP) and Liberal Democrats agreed Sunday to back a December General Election, albeit on a preferred earlier date of December 9. On Tuesday morning, the Labour Party, led by the nominally “left” Jeremy Corbyn and the only major party not to come out in favour of an election—said it would be voting in support. In an attempt to ensure that Johnson had no parliamentary time left to put through a no-deal Brexit—as MPs have still not passed the deal he agreed with the EU earlier this month—and to secure more votes in the upcoming election, the opposition parties put forward a number of amendments to Johnson’s bill. One of these, from Corbyn, aimed at changing the date of an election from December 12 to December 9. Another was to allow the 3.4 million EU nationals to vote in an election and another to give the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds.

The government said during the day that if any of these passed, it would pull the whole Bill—threatening the opposition parties that a no-deal Brexit would then be the only route that Johnson would take. However, the only one amendment selected by the Deputy Speaker was Corbyn’s, and this was defeated by a majority of 20 (315 votes to 295)

Behind the bravado of the main parties, all express trepidations about going to the polls. Sky News correspondent Beth Rigby noted yesterday that it was “important to address the volatility of the election because in the last three elections, two of them were hung parliaments—in 2010 David Cameron has to deal with the Lib Dems and 2017 Theresa May is propped up by the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party].” A British Election Study found that there is the highest voter volatility in modern times, she added, with 49 percent of voters switching between parties in the last election. “Then when you layer this volatility onto an election when the Brexit Party will be trying to take the Conservative vote in key seats, the Remain vote can split between Labour and the Lib Dems, the SNP and potentially even the Greens. This is so, so unpredictable.”

Johnson calculates that he can win by campaigning on a message that only he will complete the Brexit agenda and fulfil the “will of the people” who voted to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum. He is emboldened by the stance of the Brexit Party, who have indicated that they will not stand against Tory candidates in marginal seats but will stand against Labour candidates in seats in the north of England that voted heavily in 2016 to leave.

The Liberal Democrats are seeking to increase their 19 MPs in Westminster by hoovering up the Remain vote. Johnson’s other main calculation, therefore, is that the Liberal Democrats will win votes at Labour’s expense in Remain voting areas.

The Scottish National Party are the main political force in Scotland. In whatever way the political map changes in the rest of the UK, the SNP will seek to work as part of a coalition to halt Brexit and will use the election as an argument for Scottish independence.

The election will be dominated by the political crisis wracking the Labour Party. Once again the working class are being told that Corbyn represents the only progressive alternative to a Johnson government. According to reports, Corbyn's close adviser Karie Murphy has not even drawn up a list of marginal seats that Labour will fight, insisting that everything will centre on meetings held nationally by Corbyn so that his "message" dominates.

As the epitome of a ruling elite that has overseen unparalleled levels of social inequality, Johnson is widely hated among millions of workers. It cannot be ruled out, despite Corbyn's role in propping up the Tories for years, that the Labour leader will therefore benefit from widespread anti-Tory sentiment.

However, Labour gains are far from certain—especially given that Corbyn leads a party that remains in a state of civil war despite his constant appeasement of its right-wing MPs. A substantial number of Blairites, who constitute the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party, have been opposing holding a general election for months and even more are opposed to Corbyn ever being prime minister.

Yesterday, one of the Blairites said of the Corbyn leadership to the pro-Tory *Daily Mail*, after Corbyn gave his backing for a general election, "They are f***ing mad. They think they are on the brink of a brave new Socialist dawn."

The MP added that Corbyn's decisions to back an election was "proof that turkeys vote for Christmas" and predicted there would be a "huge" revolt in the party against Corbyn.

The Labour right have spent months plotting as to how to bypass Corbyn in favour of creating a government of national unity comprising pro-EU Tories, the Blairites, Liberal Democrats and SNP, to be headed by trusted Remain supporting figures such as the Tories' Ken Clarke, or Labour's Harriet Harman or Margaret Beckett.

The scope of this revolt was made clear in the vote on holding a general election, which saw 117 Labour MPs either abstain or vote against Johnson's Bill—just 10

less than voted with Corbyn.

The Blairites have insisted that any failure of a "Corbyn bounce" to win an election must end in his removal as party leader—a position already accepted by Corbyn's ally, Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell.

More fundamentally, Corbyn offers no alternative for the working class, as with any of the other capitalist parties. He offers no programme that addresses the fundamental issues confronting the working class, including ever worsening austerity, poverty and social deprivation.

His programme offers no way forward against rising militarism under conditions in which Britain is being dragged into a maelstrom of inter-imperialist "great power" struggles that threaten a descent into a third world war and barbarism.

Even if Labour wins, this will offer nothing to the working class. As demonstrated over the past four years, in Corbyn's every action, including the formulation of programme, he tailors himself to the demands of his Blairite wing because they are a transmission belt for the dictates of big business and the City of London.

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