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By Robert Stevens
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UK: Johnson considers suspending parliament to enforce no-deal Brexit

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is considering every possible means to prevent a challenge to Brexit, up to and including the proroguing of parliament.

Johnson replaced Theresa May as prime minister last month by winning the backing of the party's pro-Brexit MPs and supporters with a pledge that the UK will leave the European Union (EU) on October 31 with no deal if necessary.

On Sunday, the anti-Brexit *Observer* reported that Johnson has asked the government's main legal adviser, Attorney General Geoffrey Cox, whether parliament can be shut down for five weeks from September 9.

The newspaper reports, "An email from senior government advisers to an adviser in No 10—written within the last 10 days and seen by the *Observer*—makes clear that the prime minister has recently requested guidance on the legality of such a move, known as prorogation. The initial legal guidance given in the email is that shutting parliament may well be possible, unless action being taken in the courts to block such a move by anti-Brexit campaigners succeeds in the meantime."

The *Observer* states, "The email examines whether the prime minister could thwart MPs' plans by shutting parliament until a Queen's speech would herald a new parliament on 14 October."

The antidemocratic implications of such a move—under conditions in which the Leave campaign based its argument for quitting the EU on claims that this was the only way to

ensure the UK was governed by a sovereign parliament and not Brussels—are such that Johnson’s official position is that he is “not attracted” to the idea.



President Donald Trump and Britain’s Prime Minister Boris Johnson (left) speak to the media before a working breakfast meeting at the Hotel du Palais on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Biarritz, France (Credit: Erin Schaff, New York Times, Pool)

However, the fact that the suspension of parliament to thwart opposition to government policy is being considered for the first time in more than 70 years underscores the crisis of rule wracking British imperialism. Such action has been described as the “nuclear” option, with the involvement of the queen in a constitutional crisis. Under the UK’s archaic unwritten constitution, proroguing parliament is a Royal Prerogative power. According to convention, the queen follows the advice of the prime minister on this question.

Closing down parliament until October 17 means that the end date would fall on the same day as the EU meets for a two-day summit that would be the last occasion to agree a deal with the UK on terms of exit. The hard Brexit wing calculate that by suspending parliament until then means it would be too late for parliament’s majority anti-no-deal Brexit wing to block a no-deal.

October 17 has additional significance and is pencilled in by Johnson’s advisers as a possible date for a general election. Johnson has a majority of just one MP. The pro-Brexit *Mail on Sunday* reported “Under the scenario, the PM would go to the country on October 17, win and then head to Brussels to demand 11th-hour Brexit concessions.”

Holding a general election “to stop MPs from blocking No Deal—involves first deliberately ‘losing’ a Commons no-confidence vote that the Tories engineer themselves.” This would represent an “extraordinary gamble” and would have to be held by September

12. The “‘lose-to-win’ strategy” was “one of several scenarios now being plotted by advisers in No 10,” reported the newspaper, “as Johnson prepares for a possible Labour no-confidence motion next month when MPs return from their summer break.”

The *Mail* reported that another election date being “war-gamed” is November 1—the day after the UK is set to leave the EU, presenting parliament with a *fait accompli*. “That would seek to capitalise on ... Johnson having achieved the UK’s departure from the EU by squeezing the remaining Brexit Party vote on the basis that there was no longer any point in voting for them.”

Suspending parliament would mean that any bills and motions would be “killed” until parliament sits again. It would stymie the ongoing moves by the cross-party pro-EU faction to take control of the “order paper” of parliamentary business which the government usually controls. Through a series of amendments and votes on motions, Remain MPs were able to set the order paper earlier this year and ensure that the Withdrawal Agreement May struck with the EU was not able to pass.

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The *Observer* said the Downing Street email “examines whether Johnson could circumvent a previous amendment, championed by [pro-Remain Tory Dominic] Grieve, that was inserted into a bill relating to the Northern Ireland Assembly earlier this summer. It requires ministers to report regularly to parliament on progress in restoring the Stormont Assembly. The email suggests the Grieve amendment does not necessarily prevent the prime minister activating the prorogation plan.”

A clear indication that prorogation is on the table is that hard-line Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg—who spoke in favour of suspending parliament as he opposed May’s EU deal—was handed the role of timetabling the government’s business when Johnson took office.

The pro-Remain faction are seeking to prevent Johnson’s plans on several fronts. There is the case due to be heard on September 6 at the High Court on the legality of proroguing parliament brought by 75 anti-Brexit MPs and peers, led by led by Scottish National Party MP Joanna Cherry.

The pro-Remain investment manager, Gina Miller, who successfully took legal action against May’s attempts to trigger Brexit without a parliamentary vote, said she will take immediate legal action if Johnson suspends parliament. Parliament’s pro-Remain Speaker John Bercow has repeatedly threatened opposition to parliament being shut down.

The main role in allowing Johnson to come to power, on a hard Brexit ticket that means a yet deeper onslaught against the social conditions of workers is Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Instead of alerting the working class to the gravity of the situation it confronts—under conditions where a reported 50,000 soldiers and 10,000 riot police are to be readied for deployments on the streets in just over two months to confront social unrest—Corbyn is doing all in his power to keep opposition to a hated government within safe channels.

For more than two weeks, Corbyn has been mired in discussions over the intricacies of calling a vote of no-confidence in the government and then heading a “caretaker government” that would have as its sole policy extending Article 50 and delaying Brexit.

Today Corbyn will meet leaders of the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Change UK, Plaid Cymru-Party of Wales and the Green Party, along with other invited cross-party backbenchers to war-game “all tactics available to prevent no deal.”

While the Blairites in his own party and other opposition leaders want Brexit delayed, and then reversed, few will at this point countenance him becoming prime minister—fearing an eruption in the class struggle that would escalate out of his control. Corbyn was twice elected leader on a mandate to oppose austerity, growing social inequality and militarism.

Lib Dems leader Jo Swinson insisted again in a letter to Corbyn, made public yesterday, that winning a no-confidence vote against Johnson and avoiding a no-deal is the main issue and not the Labour leader heading a caretaker government. But she is to insist that he has no chance of securing a parliamentary majority and should step aside in favour of pro-remain Tory grandee Ken Clarke or some other “unity” candidate.

It was even revealed that Swinson has made several phone calls to Johnson. The Lib Dems were coalition partners with the Tories from 2010-15 and helped impose crushing levels of austerity and the axing of the jobs of more than 1 million public sector workers.

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