

No-deal Brexit may be the only way out for Boris Johnson

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Boris Johnson's triumphant victory over Jeremy Hunt in the Conservative Party leadership contest has opened the next chapter of the Brexit saga – yet as the endgame of the divorce is approaching, the new prime minister is set to face the same challenges and constraints as his predecessor, Theresa May. Whether he has the will and capacity to find a positive solution is highly questionable, indicating that a no-deal outcome is the most likely.

Johnson's constraints

The new prime minister's room for manoeuvre is limited by several factors. First, he has painted himself into a corner through the categorical promises he made on Brexit and his 'do or die' rhetoric.^[1]

Second and more fundamentally, he and the Conservative Party have little choice but to deliver Brexit. With the country still deeply split and both sides becoming increasingly polarised, Tory Leavers would be unlikely to forgive a reversal. In a recent YouGov poll, 61% of Conservative members said that they would be willing to stomach significant damage to the UK economy in order to see the withdrawal from the EU come to fruition. More than half (54%) have stated that they would be willing to see their party destroyed.^[2] While the Conservative Party's membership may not be representative of its voters, the results indicate the strength of feeling lying at the grassroots. If the Conservatives were to go into the next general election without having delivered Brexit, they would in all likelihood be severely mauled by Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, and Johnson's career would be finished. The recent European Parliament elections – which saw the Brexit Party come first with 30.7% of the UK vote and the Conservatives in fifth place with only 8.8%^[3] – offer a cautionary tale.

Third, the parliamentary arithmetic in Westminster means that any Brexit deal is unlikely to pass. Johnson has promised to renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement and in particular the backstop for the Irish border, but the EU has rejected this repeatedly. The closest margin by which May's deal was defeated was 58 in March,^[4] which means that Johnson would have to sway at least 29 Members of Parliament (MPs) without being able to offer any real concession from the EU in return. This would be extremely difficult, especially given Labour's fundamental opposition to a "damaging Tory Brexit".^[5]

Fourth, the EU27 are becoming increasingly unwilling to grant the UK another extension, even if there is no deal in place by 31 October. There is a sense of disillusionment in the Union about the way the current delay is being used by the UK, the growing polarisation in UK politics and society where anything short of 'no deal' or 'no Brexit' is seen as unacceptable by the two camps respectively, and the inability of the UK Government and Parliament to find a positive solution. Unless a request for another extension is well-justified (e.g. through a second referendum or general election), or follows a substantive decision made by the UK which requires more time for implementation, the EU27 is unlikely to approve it.

How to avoid no deal: Two narratives

These constraints imply that current narratives on how a no-deal Brexit can be avoided might not come to fruition.

The first narrative – which involves Johnson performing a U-turn by winning some concessions from the EU and getting the Withdrawal Agreement passed through Westminster – cannot be excluded, but appears unlikely given both Johnson's and the EU's categorical demands.

The second narrative depicts the UK Parliament once again expressing its opposition to a no-deal exit, which Johnson accepts before heading into an early general election without having left the EU, and possibly after requesting and being granted another extension by the EU27 to allow sufficient time to organise the vote. This would probably amount to career suicide for Johnson. His party would be unlikely to forgive any further delay, he would lose all credibility and support for the Brexit Party might surge. This could lead to the right-wing vote being

split between the Brexit Party and the Conservatives, thus paving the way for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to bag the ruling seat – an unmitigated disaster for Johnson, the Conservative Party and its voters.

This links to the third narrative: rather than accept the risk of a general election, Johnson ignores Parliament's opposition to a no-deal exit. With the 31 October deadline looming, a no-confidence motion is put forward. Desperate to avoid a no-deal Brexit, several Conservative MPs vote against their own party. Johnson is ousted and replaced by a unity candidate, who is granted another extension by the EU27 to find a solution.

However, events are unlikely to unfold as smoothly as depicted in this third scenario. The most likely moment for a rebellion by Conservative MPs would be after the European Council summit on the 17th and 18th October, once it becomes crystal clear that EU27 leaders will not cave. A successful no-confidence motion would trigger a two-week period during which Johnson and his would-be successors would try to assemble a majority. Given the increasing polarisation, the confrontational nature of politics in Westminster and the absence of an obvious Labour figure who could attract moderate Conservative MPs, it is hard to imagine that the current Parliament would agree on a unity candidate within a few days. This would mean that Johnson would probably still be prime minister when the UK is due to leave the EU on 31 October. All that he would need to do in order to trigger a no-deal Brexit is to *not* ask the EU27 for an extension of Article 50. Having already deployed their nuclear option, it is not clear how Parliament could stop him.

Moving towards the inevitable?

The first narrative whereby Johnson ends up performing a U-turn on Brexit by winning some concessions from the EU, then throwing his political weight behind the amended Withdrawal Agreement to get it through Parliament, is not impossible. It is unlikely, however, given his categorical demands to drop the Irish backstop and the EU's equally categorical refusal to revisit the Withdrawal Agreement. Similarly, it cannot be ruled out that a general election held well before the end of October will change the political landscape.

Nonetheless, the constraints Johnson and the other actors face mean that a reversal of Brexit or a further delay is unlikely, and that the ability of Parliament to prevent no deal is limited. Indeed, from the viewpoint of narrow party-political and personal interest lines, a no-deal Brexit on 31 October – by design, stealth and/or default – might be the rational decision for Johnson.

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[1] See e.g. Mason, Rowena and Walker, Peter, "[Brexit: Johnson says Britain will leave EU on 31 October 'do or die'](#)", *The Guardian*, 25 June 2019.

[2] Smith, Matthew (2019), "[Most Conservative members would see party destroyed to achieve Brexit](#)", London: YouGov.

[3] See *European Parliament*, "[2019 European election results](#)" (last accessed 24 July 2019).

[4] Thal Larsen, Peter, "[Breakingviews – Four lessons of Theresa May's third Brexit defeat](#)", *Reuters*, 29 March 2019.

[5] *BBC News*, "[Brexit: Labour to back Remain as it calls for a new EU referendum](#)", 09 July 2019.