

Brexit Impasse Shows No Sign of Ending Soon

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‘Super Saturday’ as it was coined, should have seen perhaps the most significant vote take place in the House of Commons since the drama of Brexit began as MPs prepared to vote on the deal brought back from Brussels by Prime Minister Boris Johnson. But nothing is certain in this Brexit saga, with events changing by the hour. As it happened, MPs voted instead for the so-called Letwin Amendment, which proposed to defer the Brexit vote, compelling Johnson instead to write to the EU to request an extension to the Brexit negotiation period.

Such a letter Boris Johnson did indeed write, although seemingly in protest he did not sign it, prompting Deputy Labour leader John McDonnell to refer to him as a ‘spoilt brat’. More significantly however, Johnson sent a second letter to the EU in which he stressed that his personal view and that of the government is that an extension would in fact be harmful for both Britain and Europe. This of course effectively undermines the first letter sent by Johnson, which have begged some to ask the question if the Prime Minister could face legal repercussions for sending such a letter.

Indeed Monday brought with it fresh developments in the Brexit story, as the Scottish courts heard another case put forward by the Scottish Nationalist Party’s Joanna Cherry and others which seeks to prove that the Prime Minister is ‘frustrating the Benn Act’ by penning a letter to EU leaders urging them to ignore his first letter requesting a Brexit extension. The judges have delayed their ruling on this however, as Scotland’s most senior judge, Lord Carloway, said that they needed to wait to ensure that Johnson did not try to block or sabotage the application he was forced to make on Saturday night asking for an extension.

On Monday it was also decided by John Bercow, Speaker of the House of Commons, that the much-awaited vote on Johnson’s negotiated Brexit deal expected on Saturday, would not take place, as he cited it would be ‘repetitive and disorderly’ for MPs to debate and vote on the deal, so soon after heated discussions took place on Brexit in the House of Commons at the weekend. He said: “Today’s motion is in substance the same as Saturday’s motion, and the house has decided the matter. Today’s circumstances are in substance the same as Saturday’s circumstances.” This action, together with the passing of the Letwin amendment, means that the EU has to seriously consider Johnson’s letter asking for an extension. Had the Prime Minister won a vote on Monday, the letter could have been rescinded.

In a further blow to Boris Johnson’s ‘do or die’ Brexit on 31st October, the leaders of the Scottish and Welsh governments have compiled a joint letter to both the UK government and European Council President Donald Tusk, asking for a Brexit extension long enough to allow for a Second referendum on Brexit. They stated that “It is simply impossible for us to fulfil our constitutional responsibilities in this timescale, which is dictated by the way in which the Prime Minister delayed tabling formal proposals.” The letter also states that they

find the latest deal brokered by Boris Johnson to be even worse than the previous one achieved by Theresa May.

With Boris Johnson's planned exit on 31st October seemingly being blocked on a variety of fronts, it's now less obvious how he will achieve his Brexit 'come what may' at this end of this month, despite the balky rhetoric coming out of 10 Downing Street. For some time it looked as if the Prime Minister couldn't be stopped. His strategy of pushing the UK's constitution (albeit unwritten) to the limits, initially took everyone by surprise as he dared to enter territory which no PM had dared to enter before. But fairly soon, opposition MPs got wiser at predicting Johnson's next steps in this fast moving game of political chess. A few court rulings and parliamentary amendments later, and Johnson's path to No Deal Brexit is facing obstacles at every turn.

But with so many different agendas at play, the alternative path to No Deal is no clearer. A general election, a People's Vote, a Brexit deal, or no Brexit at all – there is no consensus on what the best choice for the UK's future is. On Tuesday MPs are due to vote finally on Johnson's deal, but the numbers indicate that he's unlikely to get support for it in the House of Commons. All sides may be tired of the stagnation of the last three years of negotiations but there's no sure sign that the stalemate is likely to end any time soon...

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