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BREXIT: (ANOTHER) BIG WEEK AHEAD

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Heading into another week of Brexit chaos, here are our four predictions:

1. The Queen will approve the 'delay Brexit bill'

This one is pretty much guaranteed. A so-called 'rebel' alliance of MPs (members of parliament) passed the Brexit delay bill through both houses of UK Parliament last week – the rebels, critically, include more than twenty senior Conservative MPs. It mandates the UK PM (Prime Minister) to ask EU leaders for a further Brexit delay if UK parliament has not passed a Brexit deal or voted in favour of no-deal by 19 October. Once the bill receives royal assent today it becomes law.

The much bigger question remains whether or not PM Boris Johnson will actually act in accordance with the law when the time comes. Rather melodramatically, Johnson has said he would rather 'die in a ditch' than ask for a further delay. If Johnson indeed refused, MPs may be forced to topple him before backing a new PM to do the job. However, The Times reports today that Johnson has admitted to cabinet that he would be forced adhere to the letter of the law if the rule is triggered.

2. The House of Commons will reject Johnson's second bid for a snap election

After kicking out 21 of his own MPs last week for voting in favour of a further Brexit delay - plus resignations - as of Sunday night, the official seat count for the Conservative Party was 289 – 28 down from result of the 2017 election. The Tories parliamentary partners, the Northern Irish DUP, continue to hold 10 seats. With the 299 seats in aggregate, Johnson is well short of the 326 needed for an absolute majority in the House of Commons.

Johnson is a toothless PM who desperately needs a snap election to give some credibility to his Brexit strategy. Last week he tried and failed to trigger elections. Because Labour abstained from the vote, he fell well short of the 2/3 majority required. Johnson will likely try his luck again today. But he will likely get the same outcome.

For the opposition parties it makes little sense to give Johnson the election on his terms. That would return the initiative to him. It would be better for the rebels to force Johnson cap in hand to go the EU Council on 17 October to ask for an extension first, or to let him refuse before toppling him in a vote of no confidence – that would give rebel MPs, if they can organise, control over the election timetable.

Therefore, while we expect a snap election before the end of the year, we do not expect it to be triggered before a further delay is secured – implying 17 October onwards. Hence, we doubt there will be an election ahead of the currently planned Brexit day on 31 October.



3. Parliament will be shut down at the end of the Monday session

This is less certain. The Queen is due to shut down parliament between 9-12 September. This follows the advice of Johnson on 28 August. The move was controversial, to put it mildly. Once closed, parliament will not re-open until 14 October.

Unless Johnson has a trick up his sleeve – unlikely but not impossible – he will seek to close parliament once MPs refuse his second bid for a snap election later today. After taking such a battering by rebel MPs last week, Johnson will be ready to temporarily put a stop to his fast-eroding power and re-group. Once parliament is shut rebel MPs will not be able to do any more damage to Johnson and his Brexit strategy for nearly a month.

4. Johnson will not secure any major changes on the Irish Backstop from Dublin

Today and tomorrow Johnson will meet with Republic of Ireland Prime Minister Leo Varadkar. It is hard to see how anything material can come from such talks.

First, the atmosphere will be tense. Until UK parliament pulled the rug out from under him, Johnson – since becoming PM – had argued that the EU had a choice between renegotiating ex-PM Theresa May's deal and a hard Brexit. That was squarely focused at Varadkar – who largely decides the EU position on the backstop. Lacking a majority to govern, it is hard to see how Johnson could try that tactic now and keep a straight face. Second, because Johnson has no majority, Varadkar could not be sure that any new proposal could get through UK parliament anyway.

As we argued then, Johnson should have made his first stop Dublin after becoming UK PM on 23 June. Instead, he will visit Dublin with no credibility and, according to the widespread quoting of No.10 insiders in the UK press, no real alternative plans for the Irish Backstop anyway.

One hypothetical change to the backstop would be easy to accept for the EU, namely to limit the customs union to Northern Ireland instead of the entire United Kingdom in case the backstop would need to be activated. As Johnson has lost his majority in parliament anyway, he may not longer be held back by the Northern Irish DUP. So far, however, London does not seem to have sent a signal that it would want such a change – which the UK parliament may not ratify anyway.

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