

“I don’t want an election”

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

Yesterday I was invited to speak on the BBC News Channel on the prospects of an impending General Election for the UK amidst rising media speculation that Prime Minister Johnson would call for a snap poll. Such was the media frenzy that expectations were at fever pitch when Johnson announced an impromptu Cabinet meeting followed by a statement to the press to be given at 6pm.



Picture: By Lyle Bignon for Birmingham City University

When Johnson duly appeared at 6pm in front of No 10 and dashed media expectations by stating that “I don’t want an election, you don’t want an election..” it left pundits surmising the sincerity of these comments.

Not that this has stopped them from continuing to talk up the prospects of such an election, for example, this tweet late yesterday from BBC Political Editor Laura Kuenssberg:

“Hard for Corbyn to come back from this and reject election in Government pushes for it later this week – he said tonight ‘I will be delighted when the election comes, I’m ready for it..”[\[1\]](#)

As such, I think that the prospect of a General Election before October 31st this year remains a distinct possibility – It’s just that it won’t be Johnson who gets to call the timing of such a poll (despite his threats to “rebel” Tory MPs to “back him” or face an October 14 election).

Such an election would never have been the unilateral decision of his to make anyway, given that under the provisions of the Fixed-Term Parliament Act, he would require a two-thirds majority of MPs to support this – only possible with support from Labour.

Whilst Jeremy Corbyn has stated that Labour’s want to fight a General Election, would they do so on Johnson’s terms? No. Indeed, for Labour, a desire by PM Johnson for a quick election would only be palatable if they could extract certain guarantees out of him – namely:

- that he would guarantee (as enshrined in law) that such an election were held before October 31st
- that he had explicitly ruled out No Deal – and by this I mean backed up by Parliamentary motions, as of the type to be put forward today by Hilary Benn and signed by Phillip Hammond and David Gauke amongst others, that would mandate him to seek an Article 50 period extension to January 31st next year: [see here](#)
- that he go back to Brussels to ask for an extension to the UK’s continued membership of the EU to allow time for an election to take place in such circumstances.

It comes as no surprise then to see then that via the amendment to be put forward today that Labour is essentially supporting the above stance, with shadow cabinet ministers Tony Lloyd and Shami Chakrabarti commenting that “Labour will only back general election after threat of ‘crashing out’ is removed”[\[2\]](#).

Whatever the sincerity of statements by the Government to hold an election before the next European Council meeting on October 17th, Johnson has been adamant that he will not ask Brussels for an extension beyond October 31st.

Combine this with Michael Gove's recent "failure" in a media interview that the Government wouldn't simply ignore amendments passed by Parliament of this nature then the prospect emerges that the UK could still end up with a No Deal scenario by default if the Government (as I expect) were to drag its heels on this.

Which reiterates that whilst Parliament can pass amendments calling for an extension to Article 50 to avoid No Deal, only the Prime Minister (or the Queen as Sovereign) can actually ask Brussels to do so.

In my mind then, it is the Opposition that then will dictate the timing of an election – either because they are satisfied that the criteria I outlined above are satisfied – or if they are not, then that a motion of No Confidence in the Government would be put forward.

Timing here would be an issue, given the current suspension by the PM (prorogation) of Parliament for 5 weeks due to take effect between September 9-12th. Delaying a vote of No Confidence until after returning from this would leave Parliament rather short of time to effect the installation of any alternative Government.

Nevertheless, both sides remain bullish about their prospects in a General Election. Polls however continue to point to a marked lead for the Conservative Party, with the last YouGov poll taken on August 28th/29th suggesting a 33% vote share for the Tories, with Labour on 22%, the Lib Dems on 20% and the Brexit Party on 12%.[\[3\]](#)

Under a first-past-the-post voting system this could well be enough for the Conservatives to win a majority, given a divided opposition. Against this, should Labour firm up their stance on Brexit towards a pro-remain stance (with Corbyn ruling out No Deal and the prospect of Remain as a Referendum option, should we have another one) then I would expect their predicted vote share to increase at the expense of the Lib Dems.

It could also be argued that Remain voters would be likely to vote tactically to try and avoid splitting the “remain vote”.

In contrast, the fact that some 30% of the British voting public continue to support exiting the EU with no deal is remarkable, given the volume of information that has emerged since the 2016 Referendum on the negative impacts of doing so.

Such attitudes continue to confound any rational economic analysis of the situation. Moreover, with public attitudes polarised over Brexit it is problematic at best to predict how such an election would unfold. We are in for a very interesting few weeks.

[1] <https://twitter.com/bbclaurak>

[2] https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/tony-lloyd-jeremy-corbyn-wont-fall-for-johnsons-snap-election-trick_uk_5d6d9990e4b09bbc9ef35b07?guccounter=1

[3] <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/voting-intention/all>