

Unhinged before the Fall: Boris Johnson, Parliament and Brexit

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The Brexit no deal prospect is engendering an element of lunacy fast seeping into every pore of the British political establishment. As with all steeped in such thinking, some of it made sense. Prime Minister Boris Johnson had been inspired by a mild dictatorial urge, seeking to suspend the UK parliament five weeks out from October 31. This has been described as nothing short of a coup, or, if you are the speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, a “constitutional outrage”.

Legal expertise was called upon to answer the question whether Johnson’s proroguing of parliament was, in fact, constitutional. This was itself a tricky thing, given that the UK has a “political constitution” that resists being inked into written form. To be British is supposedly to be reasonable, and codifying such convention suggests a fear that reason might be lost. As Professor Michael Gordon of the University of Liverpool [explains](#), three avenues are open to evaluate the constitutionality of a government action in the system: “compatibility with the law, political convention and constitutional principle.”

On the first point, it was near impossible to challenge Johnson. For all the matters of convention, the monarch remains the figure who ultimately holds the power to prorogue parliament. And the argument here by the prime minister is that this is the penultimate step to announcing a fresh legislative agenda in the monarch’s speech on October 14.

As far as the second point was concerned, Gordon had to concede that the Queen would never have constituted herself as a “constitutional safeguard” to reject Johnson’s request. That would have done more than repudiate the long held convention on staying above politics and acting on the advice of the prime minister.

This only left the nebulous notion of “constitutional principles”: as the government draws support from the House of Commons, it must duly abide by the body if its wishes are out of step. As the House of Commons rejects the idea of a no deal Brexit, Johnson should have engaged parliament on the issue. Well, that’s the view of the pro-parliamentarians, and as the current prime minister has a very flexible set of values both personal and political, few should have been stunned by the latest antics in subverting parliamentary scrutiny.

Beyond the legal pecking, a swathe of reaction were in agreement with Bercow. Novelist Philip Pullman went one further, [suggesting that](#), “The ‘prime minister’ has finally come out as a dictator.” Britain best be “rid of him and his loathsome gang as soon and as finally as possible.” This had a certain whiff of a coup of its own, the sort of thing that Westminster systems have been vulnerable to in history. (Australia offers an apt, if undistinguished example of the overthrow of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975, ably assisted by opposition leader Malcolm Fraser and then governor general John Kerr.)

The prorogation ploy was taken so seriously by the *Financial Times* that a humble suggestion was made lest Britain comprise his airy position as law-abiding obsessive and exemplar of order to the world. “If Mr. Johnson’s prorogation ploy succeeds, Britain will forfeit any right to lecture other countries on their democratic shortcomings.” (Hadn’t it already done so?) Imperially sounding, the FT suggested that Britain’s singular disposition lay in “constitutional arrangements” long bound by “conventions.”

Momentum, the Labour faction supporting Jeremy Corbyn, the man who would be usurper, [was laying the ground](#) for a challenge, albeit tumbling into the oxymoronic. “An unelected prime minister looks set to approach an unelected monarch to ask her if he can shut down parliament to force through a disastrous no deal Brexit.” The assessment? “Make no mistake – this is an establishment coup.” All fine, except that monarchs are known for being humanity’s unelected specimens, and that this coup was being countered with a proposal for a counter-coup. Messy be the conventions of the land.

For those long linked to Britain’s gradual and seemingly natural integration into European affairs, the move by Johnson was near criminal. Hugh Grant, summoning up a certain primal rage, was furious. On [Twitter](#), he launched a ferocious firebombing of Johnson’s position.

“You will not fuck with my children’s future. You will not destroy the freedoms my grandfather fought two world wars to defend. Fuck off you over-promoted rubber bath toy. Britain is revolted by you and you little gang of masturbatory prefects.”

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— Hugh Grant (@HackedOffHugh) [August 28, 2019](#)

Comedian and all round brain box Stephen Fry could not stomach it, [asking](#) for a good cry for Britain, and deeming Johnson’s effort as those of,

“Children playing with matches, but spitefully not accidentally: gleefully torching an ancient democracy and any tattered shreds of reputation or standing our poor country had left.”

Unfortunately, such comments betray an old tendency in self-referential Britishness, a Britannia-rules-the-waves smugness. The world admires, the world respects. But that world died some time ago, if, indeed, it ever existed. Britain made a pact for security and wealth with a Europe often reluctant to accept its suspicions and reservations. Both are now parting ways.

Far milder assessments have also been offered to hose down the Grant ire. Johnson’s attempt to schedule a Queen’s speech for October 14 [was seen](#) in *The Spectator*, a magazine he once edited with carefree indifference, as “normal” and part of the operating processes of a new government. At the very least, it would also “bring to an end one of the longest parliamentary sessions in history”.

The Queen was hardly going to refuse, stratified by, well, convention. Had she done so, breaking the crust, and holding forth over the prime minister, there would been howls of a different sort. The only conclusion to arise from this latest bit of chess play by Johnson is that, come October 31, Parliament will have a minimal a role to scrutinise the agreement, or non-agreement, as it might well be.

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