

Johnson Secures a Brexit Deal; but Does It Change Anything?

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In what has been deemed a boost for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a Brexit deal has finally been agreed with the EU, just a fortnight before the UK's planned withdrawal date of 31st October. It was unclear right till the very last minute whether a deal could be achieved, with differences over issues such as the Irish border question having prevented another draft agreement from being reached for months. Yet Johnson stood defiant at the press conference with EU Commission President Jean Claude Juncker in Brussels on Thursday, calling it a 'very good deal' and 'a reasonable and fair outcome' after all the intense negotiations of recent weeks. He said: 'Now is the moment for us to come together' to pass a Brexit deal. Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar hailed the deal as 'unique' as it respected the specific history and geography of the island of Ireland.

There are several key points of this deal which set it apart from the previous agreement reached by former Prime Minister Theresa May earlier this year. The first is the status of Northern Ireland, which under this deal would remain part of the customs territory of the UK, instead of being in the EU as previous drafts had proposed. Yet the situation is not altogether black and white, as in legal terms, Northern Ireland will still be effectively within the EU. If goods are, for example, passed from Belfast to Dublin, the UK will still be required to collect tariffs and excise duties on these items on behalf of the EU. The most important aspect of this set-up however is perhaps the fact that there will be no checks at the land border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Instead checks will take place at Irish ports, therefore not provoking any tensions on the border between north and south.

The Irish border question was a real obstacle to a deal being passed by the UK parliament in the past. This time the withdrawal agreement proposes that the Northern Ireland assembly must provide democratic approval for the deal in the form of a majority vote. However, the Northern Irish DUP has said it will not vote for such a deal as it 'undermines the integrity of the union' and also would, it claims, harm the Northern Ireland economy; and it is far from the only party to take this stance.

The reality is that, despite the celebratory atmosphere in Brussels on Thursday, Boris Johnson is likely to hit the same brick wall as Theresa May did when he brings the deal back to Westminster for a vote on Saturday. The Liberal Democrats, SNP and Labour party have already said they will not vote such a deal through, and even some arch Brexiteers such as Nigel Farage have already termed it as not being 'Brexit enough', saying 'we will not be making our own laws in our own country' and that the treaty "binds us in to other commitments". Commentators are already number crunching to estimate just how many Westminster politicians are likely to vote for the deal, and so far it's not looking good. There

have been suggestions that a clause could be attached to the draft agreement stipulating a second referendum, but it's unlikely that Johnson would do this as it would be deemed a further delay to his 'come what may' Brexit date of October 31st.

As it stands, Johnson should have around 259 votes for the deal, but he needs around another 60 to get it over the line. This would involve securing the votes of the 28 Conservative Eurosceptic 'Spartans' who rejected Theresa May's deal, plus some of the Tory rebels who lost the Tory whip, along with some Labour MPs. But the chances of winning over enough are slim. Already several have indicated that they consider this deal to be even worse than the one proposed by Theresa May.

Jean Claude Juncker for his part has indicated that 'no prolongation' to the Brexit negotiation period would be necessary with such a deal in place. Therefore, at this stage it is unclear whether an extension period would be granted by the EU if this deal is rejected by Westminster MPs. The fact is, that Brexit fatigue has long set in for the EU. This puts further pressure on Westminster to pass Johnson's proposal or face the dreaded No Deal Brexit, for which preparations are being made in any case. Already many are complaining about the lack of time given to them to analyse the 600 page withdrawal agreement which they are due to vote upon on Saturday and the fact that there has been no time to create economic forecasts based on the withdrawal proposals.

And so on the day Boris Johnson finally achieved what was thought impossible - a Brexit deal with the EU - it is still too early to celebrate. Britain is no closer to a Brexit deal than it was yesterday and a No Deal scenario is still very much on the horizon.

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