

'A Very British Coup'

Boris Johnson's shutdown of parliament could spark an early general election, but that's nothing to feel sanguine about, writes Vanessa Baird.

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Global Research, August 29, 2019

[New Internationalist](#) 28 August 2019

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

One must be Boris Johnson's lucky number. He has been subjected to just one day of parliamentary scrutiny since being 'crowned' prime minister by the tiny fraction of the British electorate that happen to be paid-up Conservative party members.

He has a majority of just one in parliament, thanks to the £1-billion plus 'confidence and supply' bung paid out to Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) by his predecessor Theresa May.

And now his singular dreams of autocracy have come a whole lot closer with his request to Queen Elizabeth to prorogue parliament until 14 October, thereby throwing into disarray plans by fellow MPs to devise a way to halt Britain crashing out the European Union without a deal on 31 October.

Parliament was due to open next week after the long summer recess, and MPs who believe a no-deal Brexit spells chaos for the UK economy, shortages of food and medicine, and subservience to a trade agenda determined by US president Donald Trump, were due to try and devise legislative ways of avoiding a reckless no-deal Brexit.

Labour's John McDonnell called Johnson's move: 'A very British coup.'

Boris Johnson, for his part, maintains that MPs will still have time to discuss Brexit and that the proroguing is just normal at this time of year.

But Conservative Speaker John Bercow called it 'a constitutional outrage'. 'However it is dressed up, it is blindingly obvious that this is a way of stopping the parliament debating Brexit,' he said. It was 'an offence against parliamentary democracy'.

Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon said it was the action of a 'tinpot dictator' and mourned 'the day that democracy died'. To Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn it was a 'smash and grab' of our democracy.

So, what happens now? The Queen was constitutionally bound to follow the advice of her prime minister – in other words, she could not say no to Johnson.

The chances of a vote of no confidence in the prime minister is increased, as is the possibility of an early election.

But there are profound dangers in having an election now. Questions about electoral fraud

have not been dealt with. There are strict limits to how much parties can spend on advertising during elections or referendums. The Electoral Commission has proved itself incapable of effectively tackling the issue of Facebook campaign advertising that allegedly broke the law during the referendum campaign. Mastermind of the Vote Leave campaign was Dominic Cummings, who [MPs accuse of contempt of parliament](#) for refusing to attend a key select committee inquiry into the Cambridge Analytica scandal. He is now Boris Johnson's senior adviser – and busy buying up Facebook ads for his new boss.

The Metropolitan Police has also moved at a glacial pace when it comes to conducting criminal investigations, in spite of information supplied to them by investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr and openDemocracy about the 'dark money' behind Brexit.

Cadwalladr, who spoke at the recent Byline festival, is currently being pursued by arch-Brexiteer and business entrepreneur Aaron Banks, who is suing her for libel.

Boris Johnson's bid to suspend parliament is being resisted strenuously. But at least it's blindingly obvious.

It's the things going on under the surface, that are not being addressed, that we really have to worry about. The foreign interference from East and West, the dark money behind election campaigns, the lobbyists, the thinktanks, the special interest groups, that are the deepest threats to our democracy.

And if these forces come to play in the next election – or referendum, if there is one – we will have done little to protect British democracy from them.

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Vanessa Baird lived and worked as a journalist in Peru during the tumultuous mid-1980s, and she maintains a passionate interest in South America. She joined New Internationalist as a co-editor in 1986.

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