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THE CURRENT: What does suspension of UK's Parliament mean for Brexit?

Wednesday, August 28, 2019

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network.

British PM Boris Johnson on Wednesday set in motion the suspension of the UK Parliament, starting the second week of September not resuming until October 14, just two weeks before the October 31 Brexit deadline.

With us today to discuss this is Amanda Sloat, Robert Bosch Senior Fellow, with our Center on the US and Europe.

Seen by many – including some who favor Brexit, but not a no-deal Brexit - as Prime Minister Johnson's way of attempting to limit the ability of members of parliament from preventing a no-deal Brexit. Prime Minister Johnson famously having sworn to see Brexit through at the end of October

SLOAT: Do or die.

PITA: Right. Can you tell us what is it that's going on here?

SLOAT: So in some ways what's happening is quite ordinary and part of normal procedure, and on the other hand what's happening is quite extraordinary.

So, if you think about here in the United States, our congressional sessions tend to run in two-year cycles because we have a two-year election cycle. So, next November, Congress will largely conclude its business, we'll have elections, then in January 2021, a new session of Congress begins. Any legislation that wasn't resolved in the last session goes away and would have to be introduced in the new session. Because Britain has a Parliament, there is not a natural stop-gap to end a legislative session and start a new one. In very simple terms, proroguing essentially just means we're going to stop one session of Parliament and we're going to start a new session of Parliament. The current session of Parliament has been sitting since June 2017, which followed the last round of elections in the UK. This is actually the longest parliamentary sessions that they've had in the UK in over 400 years. So, in many ways, it's time to have a new session of Parliament, Boris Johnson is the new prime minister, he wants to set out his legislative agenda that's going to be separate from what his predecessor Theresa May's legislative agenda was. So that's the normal part of it.

The part of this that is not normal is he's essentially looking to suspend Parliament for 5 weeks. Normal practice is that Parliament gets suspended for one week while things get reset. And so this is happening for a longer period of time than normal, and it's also happening at a very contentious political and constitutional moment, which as you said is leading many people to believe that the reason he's doing this is to block MPs from taking action to try and stop Brexit from happening at the end of October.

PITA: Can you explain one small aspect of this for us Americans who don't understand how the legislative body and the queen, the Crown, interacts. He technically writes to the queen to ask her to approve this, but apparently she can't actually say no. Can you get into that a little bit?

SLOAT: Right, it is a parliamentary system, although you still have a constitutional monarchy, and so technically it is the queen that asks the person who commands the largest majority in Parliament to form a government, and so technically, Boris Johnson had to go to the queen to ask her to suspend Parliament so that this new session could be resumed. Normally this is simply very pro-forma thing that is done, like I said, it simply resets things for about a week. Because this was being done for more politically motivated reasons, some people were questioning whether or not the queen would decide to side with Parliament and protect its sovereign right to debate legislation rather than siding with the advice of her government's ministers to prorogue parliament. So it was largely expected that the queen was going to grant consent to prorogue parliament and reset things, but there were some people engaging in speculation as to whether the queen was going to change her normal apolitical approach to things and believe this was such a massive constitutional crisis that she needed to get involved. But she didn't, as expected, she gave consent for this to happen.

PITA: We were able to host Speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow in May, and speaking Parliament's right to weigh in on these crucial issues, he said very clearly that "the idea that Parliament is going to be evacuated from the center stage of debate on Brexit is unimaginable. It is simply unimaginable." Today he's been calling the suspension of Parliament a "constitutional outrage." What are some of the steps that he or other MPs can take to either get around this or to deal w/ what's happening?

SLOAT: So there's not a huge amount that Parliament can do to actually stop Parliament from being prorogued, especially now that the queen has given her consent to this. But you're absolutely right that John Bercow was just as colorful in his language today as when he was at Brookings a couple months ago, saying, "it is blindingly obvious that the purpose of suspending Parliament now would be to stop MPs from debating Brexit and performing its duty in shaping a course for the country."

So, as you said, in the decision that was taken, Parliament will be suspended somewhere around September 9 to September 12, so that means Parliament is going to come back next week and will have a couple of days to sit. So, one thing that people are expecting Parliament to do next week is call a vote of no-confidence in Boris Johnson and potentially try and collapse the government. There's also legal challenges to this decision as to whether Boris can do this, and there's a case in particular that's going through the Scottish courts right now, although it again creates a somewhat complicated situation for Scottish courts to be ruling against this type of decision that the queen has blessed and that the government has put into place.

So there is the legal challenge, and then on the political side, I think there's going to be a lot of action next week in terms of this question of whether or not Parliament tries to bring down the current government and potentially have either a national unity government to stop Brexit or to potentially move toward new elections.

PITA: On the point of new elections, there was an op-ed in the Guardian today that suggested that Prime Minister Johnson might be in favor of new elections because he thinks that in a fight between the people versus parliament, that he can spin it that way, so that they win. Can you talk about how those political currents are running?

SLOAT: Sure, so there's essentially, if you look on Twitter, essentially two different debates that are happening about how this plays out. One is suggesting that this is a gambit by Boris Johnson to try and get the EU to make concessions on Brexit by essentially saying Parliament can't do anything for the next five weeks to stop it, why don't we talk, we'll have the next European Council summit in the middle of October right after the queen's speech, which by that time I'll have this great new deal all worked out and then I can force Parliament to jam it through in two weeks, and we'll leave by the deadline with a deal. There's that school of thought.

The other school of thought I think is closer to what you laid out, and I think probably is more likely, which is that he's essentially daring the opposition to call this vote of no-confidence and to end up leading to a new set of elections. It's important to remember that BJ only has a majority of one in Parliament, and that is being propped up by the 10 members of the Democratic Unionist Party from Ireland. Theresa May did not have the parliamentary math to get her deal through Parliament, and BJ has an even more precarious situation because he has this smaller majority now. So there is also a school of thought that this is essentially a way of rolling the dice, forcing this people-vs-Parliament vote, essentially making this a referendum on Brexit. The Conservative Party has been going up in the polls in the last couple of weeks since he's become prime minister. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour opposition party is quite unpopular within the country and has quite a waffle-y position on Brexit. And so Boris may also be gambling that this is a way for him to strengthen his parliamentary majority and then be able to push Brexit through. At the same time he's watching to see what Nigel Farage does, who's the head of the Brexit party, advocating very strongly to have a hard Brexit, a no-deal Brexit if necessary, and so Boris may also want to be delivering on Brexit before he goes to elections to make sure the Brexit Party does not threaten the right flank of his Conservative Party. So, a lot of domestic politics at play here.

PITA: Yeah. No chance that the anti-Brexit combination of Liberal Democrats and Labour, that they would make a big enough coalition together to threaten them, or is that part of the rolling the dice?

SLOAT: That's an excellent question, and that's a big part of the debate. Actually, earlier this week, Jeremy Corbyn, the Liberal Democrats, the other opposition parties, got together to try and discuss what their strategy was going to be. One of the thoughts had been, if you have this vote of confidence in the government, once the government loses that, there's a two-week period in which other parties in Parliament can try to form a new govt. And so there had been this aspiration to form a national unity government with the express purpose of going to the EU and asking for an extension on Brexit. The problem is, people do not want to rally behind Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of this national unity government, and it's going to be v difficult for some Conservative MPs who are rebels against the

government, don't want a no-deal Brexit, but can't stomach the idea of backing Jeremy Corbyn to be prime minister, even if for a very temporary position. So this became so contentious in these meetings earlier this week that everybody decided that would become the nuclear option. Some people were suggesting it would be better to find some long-term mother-of-the-House, father-of-the-House neutral figures to head a unity government, but Jeremy Corbyn, of course, not so keen on that.

So they put that plan aside and they decided what their strategy for next week was, was going to be to try and find legislative ways to prevent no deal. Some of that was done earlier this year in terms of trying to have Parliament – what they say is take control of the order paper – take control of the parliamentary agenda to pass legislation to force the government to ask for an extension. That was the plan as of earlier this week, but now with Boris Johnson's move, it limits the amount of time Parliament has to do some of that, and makes it more likely that they're now actually going to have to go the nuclear route, call the no-confidence vote and then fight amongst themselves and see if they can cobble together a national unity govt. And if they can't within two weeks then we end up moving to new elections.

PITA: Well, for our listeners who want to know more, you regularly post on our Order from Chaos blog, found on [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu), recommend people go and check that out.

SLOAT: Thanks so much. Stay tuned, it's going to be a crazy fall!