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THE CURRENT: What does Boris Johnson's victory mean for the UK and Brexit?

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PITA: You're listening to the Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

Yesterday's elections in the UK returned a decisive Conservative Party victory with 44% of the vote, its largest victory since Margaret Thatcher's day. With us today to discuss the outcomes of the election is Amanda Sloat, Robert Bosch SF. Amanda, thanks for being back.

SLOAT: Thanks for having me.

PITA: Given how badly former Prime Minister Boris Johnson seemed to be floundering in parliamentary proceedings during the fall, was this a surprise, that they came back with such a big victory with him as the lead figure?

SLOAT: In some ways, yes. The opinion polls over the last couple of weeks had been suggesting that there was going to be a Conservative majority in the election, but the polls within the day or two before the election were showing it was within the margin of error.

If we take a step back, this is the third election that the UK has had in the last five years. There was a general election in 2015 that had a fairly sizable Conservative majority. Theresa May then held elections in 2017 to try and increase her majority before she started negotiations with the EU on the divorce deal, and she ended up losing her governing majority. So that was part of the challenge that Theresa May had with her Brexit deal was compounded by the challenges that Boris Johnson had once he took over in July. He actually ended up losing his governing majority in Parliament because the Northern Ireland Democratic Unionist Party that was propping him up did not like his Brexit deal. A number of Conservative MPs defected from the party, and he ended up expelling around 21 members when they voted against the government to try and prevent no-deal.

So to answer your initial question, a large part of the reason that Boris Johnson wanted elections was that he simply didn't have the support in Parliament in order to get his legislation passed. Now with these election results, it's very clear that he's going to be able to push through his election agenda.

PITA: How should we understand the major losses the Labour Party faced? Was this about Brexit and the mixed message that Labour had about Leave or Remain and how to deal with that? Was it about Jeremy Corbyn being the figurehead of the Labour Party? Or is it not actually about them and just

that more people believed the whole “the people vs Parliament” pitch that the Conservatives were selling?

SLOAT: That is absolutely the big question of this election, and something that a lot of post-mortems are going to be done on over the next couple of weeks. The official line coming out of the Labour Party seems to be that this was related to Brexit and how people felt about Brexit. But if you listen to some of the Labour MPs who lost their seats, many of them will argue that Jeremy Corbyn was simply extremely unpopular. Voters did not like him. They’ve been concerned about his poor handling of anti-Semitism within the party. They didn’t like the radical economic policies that he was planning to put forward. And they also found his Brexit position very confusing. He himself is not a supporter of the European Union, he wanted to negotiate what he saw as a better Brexit deal and then hold a second referendum. But he was very unclear about what the Labour Party’s position was going to be on that referendum until the initial campaign period in advance of that vote. So there were a lot of things that made Corbyn very unpopular.

If you look back at the 2017 election, Theresa May actually made inroads in some of these areas in northern England and Wales that Boris Johnson ended up winning. However, she had a number of missteps, including being a poor campaigner herself, having a manifesto that did not go over really well, and so Boris Johnson, as part of his strategy, really focused on a lot of these seats in northern England. Many of them had supported leaving the European Union, so he emphasized the need to get Brexit done, and he also engaged them very directly. Interestingly, he said in his victory speech that he recognized that many of these people may not have been natural Conservative voters, they may not stay with the Conservatives in the future, that this may have been in support of getting Brexit done and reflect some unhappiness with Corbyn.

But we’re certainly seeing an incredible amount of polarization within the British electorate, as this election really broke down much more along EU Leave-Remain lines rather than along traditional left-right lines.

PITA: So, now with Conservatives going to have a firm majority in Parliament, Brexit is definitely happening, there will be no second referendum. What do we know so far about how about the timing is going to fall out?

SLOAT: To quote Johnson again from his victory speech, he said, "This election means that getting Brexit done is now the irrefutable, irresistible, unarguable decision of the British people. And this election puts an end to all those little miserable threats of a second referendum." So very clear that a second referendum is off the table. Boris Johnson plans to convene Parliament for the first time next Thursday, December 19. The Queen will open the Parliament and present his government’s legislative agenda. He seems ready to fulfill the promise he made during the campaign, which is to bring the Brexit deal back to Parliament for a preliminary vote before Christmas. MPs will then leave for the holidays and return in January, and job number one is going to be passing the implementing legislation to get Brexit done. Once that is done, it will go to the European Parliament to similarly ratify the deal, with the aim of getting the UK out of the European Union by the current January 31 deadline, which given the majority that he has in Parliament, given the fact that there was already provisional agreement on this deal in the last Parliament, with the unpopular backstop for Northern Ireland having been removed, it seems very likely that the objective of leaving the EU on time will be met.

PITA: And so that's January 31 of this year?

SLOAT: January 31 of 2020 is the current deadline. So there will be this first vote probably on around December 23, everybody will go back to their constituencies for around two weeks over the holiday, and then when they come back in January of the new year, the first legislative priority will be to conclude the ratification process, making Brexit happen. Now, contrary to what Johnson has been campaigning on, that does not mean that Brexit is done. That means the divorce deal will be finalized, but Boris Johnson will then need to spend 2020 negotiating the future relationship between the UK and the EU. The deadline for the transition period to end is December 31, 2020. Boris said in his campaign manifesto he was not going to extend that deadline further. Most people believe it is impossible for him to negotiate a new economic relationship within a one-year period. So there will be a question next summer about whether he chooses to extend that transition a bit longer.

PITA: Turning to Northern Ireland and the big question about what Brexit will mean for the relationship between Northern Ireland and the UK, and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party, who has in the past allied with Conservatives, they have lost their majority of seats, and the nationalist parties have now taken a majority for the first time. Although it should be said that not all the parties actually take their seats in Westminster, regardless of whether they win them or not. What does this new development there mean for that big question of all those relationships?

SLOAT: Certainly one of the big stories of this election was what happened in Northern Ireland. As you said, the DUP had ten MPs that had been propping up Theresa May's government. They also had been a very influential voice as to how the Brexit deal dealt with Northern Ireland. They forced Theresa May to change the deal. However, Boris Johnson then essentially threw them under the bus when he was negotiating his arrangement, which led them to say they were not going to support Boris Johnson if necessary. They lost two seats, and including most notably the one held by their Parliamentary leader in Westminster, Nigel Dodds, to Sinn Fein. So that was a significant blow for them. The other thing that's significant is there are now more nationalist MPs from Northern Ireland than unionist MPs, which is a significant change in how Northern Ireland is represented in the British Parliament. The results also indicate there's also a shift toward the center ground, as both DUP and Sinn Fein saw their vote shares drop significantly from 2017, and support for the cross-community Alliance Party increased.

So Johnson's decisive win, as we discussed, means that his Brexit plan, which includes these new provisions for Northern Ireland, effectively creating a border in the Irish Sea, and treating Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK, is going to move forward. So there's a lot of questions about what this is going to mean for the future of unionism in Northern Ireland, and there are also increasing number of calls to eventually have a border poll to have a look at the constitutional arrangements for NI, in terms of whether or not it remains part of the UK, or unifies with the Republic of Ireland.

PITA: Turning to the last major development, the Scottish National Party in Scotland gained seats in the representation in Westminster. Party leader Nicola Sturgeon said "Scotland has sent a very clear message: we don't want a Boris Johnson Conservative government. We don't want to leave the European Union. And we want Scotland's future to be in Scotland's hands." What does this mean for the possibility of a second referendum about Scotland's independence?

SLOAT: Another major headline coming out of this election was about how well the Scottish National Party did in Scotland. The party won 48 seats with 45% of the vote, which was an 8% increase in how they did two years ago. So the Scottish National Party really is continuing to be the defining party in Scotland. The Conservatives only won 6 seats, the Liberal Democrats won 4, and Labour, quite strikingly, is down to one.

So as you said, Nicola Sturgeon is essentially taking this as a mandate to continue advocating for a second independence referendum. She has pledged she is going to send a letter to Boris Johnson before Christmas req that the Scottish Parliament has the legal powers to hold a second independence referendum. Scotland held a referendum in 2014, which lost. She and others would argue that this was before the Brexit decision has taken, and so the question has qualitatively changed now that the UK is forcing Scotland to leave the European Union when 63% of those in Scotland had voted to stay. Boris Johnson made quite clear that during the campaign that he was opposed to a second referendum, suggesting that the 2014 poll was a once-in-a-lifetime vote. This is likely to be an ongoing source of tension between Edinburgh and London now that you're going to have a very clear divide between the SNP in the north and the Conservatives in the South. There's elections for the Scottish Parliament in 2021, and if the Scottish National Party gets re-elected with a sizable majority, you can be sure that this call for a second independence referendum is going to continue.

If listeners are interested in these broader issues of Scotland and Northern Ireland, I published a Brookings paper last year that looks at all of this, and the very real questions that Breixt is not only going to affect the Eu, but also on the constitutional unity of the United Kingdom going forward.

PITA: Big existential questions for Britain ahead. Amanda, thanks so much for being here.

SLOAT: Thank you.