

EUROPE

Johnson's Brexit Deal Clears Hurdle in Parliament but His Timetable Is Rejected

Lawmakers endorse prime minister's divorce agreement with EU but won't rush to meet Oct. 31 deadline

By Max Colchester and Jason Douglas

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LONDON—U.K. lawmakers endorsed a Brexit deal for the first time on Tuesday, raising the prospect that the country's protracted divorce from the European Union is finally entering its endgame.

It was an important step that gave critical momentum to the deal negotiated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, but not a decisive one.

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In a vote minutes later, lawmakers rejected

Mr. Johnson's plan to rush his deal through Parliament, complaining it wouldn't leave them with enough time to examine the small print. As a consequence, the prime minister will likely fail in his oft-repeated ambition to pull the country out of the EU by Oct. 31. He said Tuesday he would try to trigger an election if Parliament moves too slowly.

"This is a hell of a big document. We cannot pretend that 2½ days is long enough to scrutinize it," said Rory Stewart, a former Conservative who voted for Mr. Johnson's Brexit deal but against the compressed timetable. If Brexit was intended as "an exercise in regaining the sovereignty of Parliament, then treat Parliament with respect," he said.

The second vote accords lawmakers more time to consider the 110-page divorce deal and hundreds of pages of related documents. There is still the potential for amendments that could attach conditions to the deal, including a possible referendum to gauge public support for leaving



Members of the House of Commons on Tuesday delivering the 329-299 vote tally endorsing Boris Johnson's Brexit deal.
PHOTO: PARLIAMENTARY RECORDING UNIT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

the EU more than three years after a majority voted to leave the bloc.

The first vote, which gave lawmakers an opportunity to declare whether they were in principle in favor of the deal, was passed by 329 votes to 299. The government was supported by 19 lawmakers from the main opposition Labour Party. The second vote rejecting the government's timetable was narrower, with a tally of 322 to 308.

Labour Brexit supporters "wanted to show constituents that they didn't want to block the process" of passing Brexit, said Thangam Debbonaire, a senior Labour lawmaker. But the temporary alliance that coalesced to pass the deal is fragile and could break up, for example, if these lawmakers back amendments the government can't accept.

Though there is a distance to go, the deal's progress marks a remarkable turnaround for the prime minister, who in the space of three months has managed to both renegotiate an agreement with the EU and persuade Britain's deeply divided House of Commons of its broad merits.

"Nobody thought that we could secure the approval of the House for a new deal. We should not overlook the significance of this moment," Mr. Johnson said, adding that he was disappointed that lawmakers rejected his proposed timetable.

Mr. Johnson said until EU leaders have decided whether to grant a delay to Brexit, which he formally requested on Saturday, he was putting on hold consideration of the legislation in Parliament.

"One way or another we will leave the EU with this deal, to which this House has just given its assent," he said in the Commons.

Lawmakers had by then rejected the government's plan to fast-track the legislation to get the country out of the bloc by the end of the month. That will give extra time for lawmakers to examine the small print of the deal and propose amendments that could frustrate it or try to tie the government's hand in other ways.

"The House has refused to be bounced into debating a hugely significant piece of legislation in just two days with barely any notice or an analysis of the economic impact of this bill," said Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the main opposition Labour Party.

Compelled by Parliament, the British government has already written to the EU to ask for a three-month delay to Brexit. Mr. Johnson said Tuesday he would accelerate precautions in case EU governments refuse the extension and the country leaves after all without a deal on Oct. 31.

But there was little prospect that the other 27 EU governments would refuse an extension. After Tuesday's parliamentary votes, European Council President Donald Tusk tweeted that he "will recommend the EU27 accept the UK request for an extension."

EU officials said the recommendation would be to grant the extension until Jan. 31, but any postponement could probably be cut short if a deal were in place.

Tuesday's votes leave many other outstanding questions. As the leader of a minority government, Mr. Johnson has previously pushed for an election before Christmas to capitalize on the Conservatives' lead in the polls. But he doesn't have the votes to trigger such an election, and Parliament's continued work on Brexit in the coming weeks makes that timetable more unlikely.

"It's the end of the beginning," said Conservative lawmaker Richard Graham.

"We are going into the last stage," said Labour lawmaker Hillary Benn. "Quite how this story turns out we shall see."

Mr. Johnson has already progressed further with his deal than his predecessor Theresa May ever did: Parliament voted her deal down three times. Mr. Johnson managed to build momentum behind his plan with a simple selling point: Britain wants to get Brexit done and move on.

The agreement Mr. Johnson negotiated last week with the EU covers payments to the bloc, citizens' rights and an arrangement to avoid a physical border from being rebuilt on the island of Ireland. It also allows a transition period until at least the end of 2020 during which U.K.-EU relations remain essentially unchanged and the U.K. follows the bloc's rules and standards.

Lawmakers have already begun published proposed amendments to the divorce deal. In what could be among the most problematic ones for the government, former Conservative minister Kenneth Clarke, now an independent lawmaker, has proposed the U.K. be more closely bound to the EU by remaining in a customs union with the bloc after Brexit. That arrangement would stick

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in Mr. Johnson's craw, but such an amendment wouldn't bind a future government elected after the national election that is likely in coming months.

Other amendments expected to be voted on include one to subject the deal to a public referendum that would offer the option of Britain staying in the EU. It is

uncertain whether either of these proposals would garner a majority, but if they come to Parliament's consideration, they will need time to be debated.

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Another issue is what happens after Brexit. Currently Britain is due to enter a transition period with the EU until the end of 2020—with possible further extensions until the end of 2022—while the two sides negotiate a trade deal.

Some lawmakers fear the U.K. won't have negotiated a comprehensive trade deal with the EU by the end of next year, creating a cliff edge beyond which Britain's ties with its biggest trading partner would be severely curtailed. They want a guarantee the U.K. will ask to extend the transition period until 2022, a step pro-Brexit lawmakers oppose.

Previous EU-related laws have taken a long time to pass. The EU Withdrawal Act, which paved the way for the U.K. to leave the bloc, took up 273 hours of parliamentary time before becoming law last year. The Maastricht Treaty, which accelerated the integration of the European bloc in the early 1990s, was debated in Parliament for 21 days.

—*Laurence Norman in Brussels contributed to this article.*

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