

# EDELMAN POLITICAL BULLETIN: BORIS TAKES OVER

Decisions the new Prime Minister makes in the 100 days before 31st October will have more impact on British business than any equivalent period since the Financial Crisis. Boris has said the current 'deal is dead', that Britain is leaving on 31st October 'do or die', and – more reassuringly - that the odds of leaving without a deal are 'a million-to-one against'. Somehow, he has to get the new Withdrawal Agreement he wants or face the consequences of either no-deal or breaking his pledge to leave on time.

## HOW TO INTERPRET WHAT BORIS SAYS OR DOES ON BREXIT

Assuming the Prime Minister intends to keep his promise to leave on the 31st October, he has two ways to do it. He can either:

- Seek major changes to the Withdrawal Agreement and, if they are not forthcoming, hope to win a Parliamentary show-down to secure no deal Brexit.
- Seek modest changes to the Withdrawal Agreement, then try to persuade enough MPs to accept them rather than risk no-deal or a second referendum.

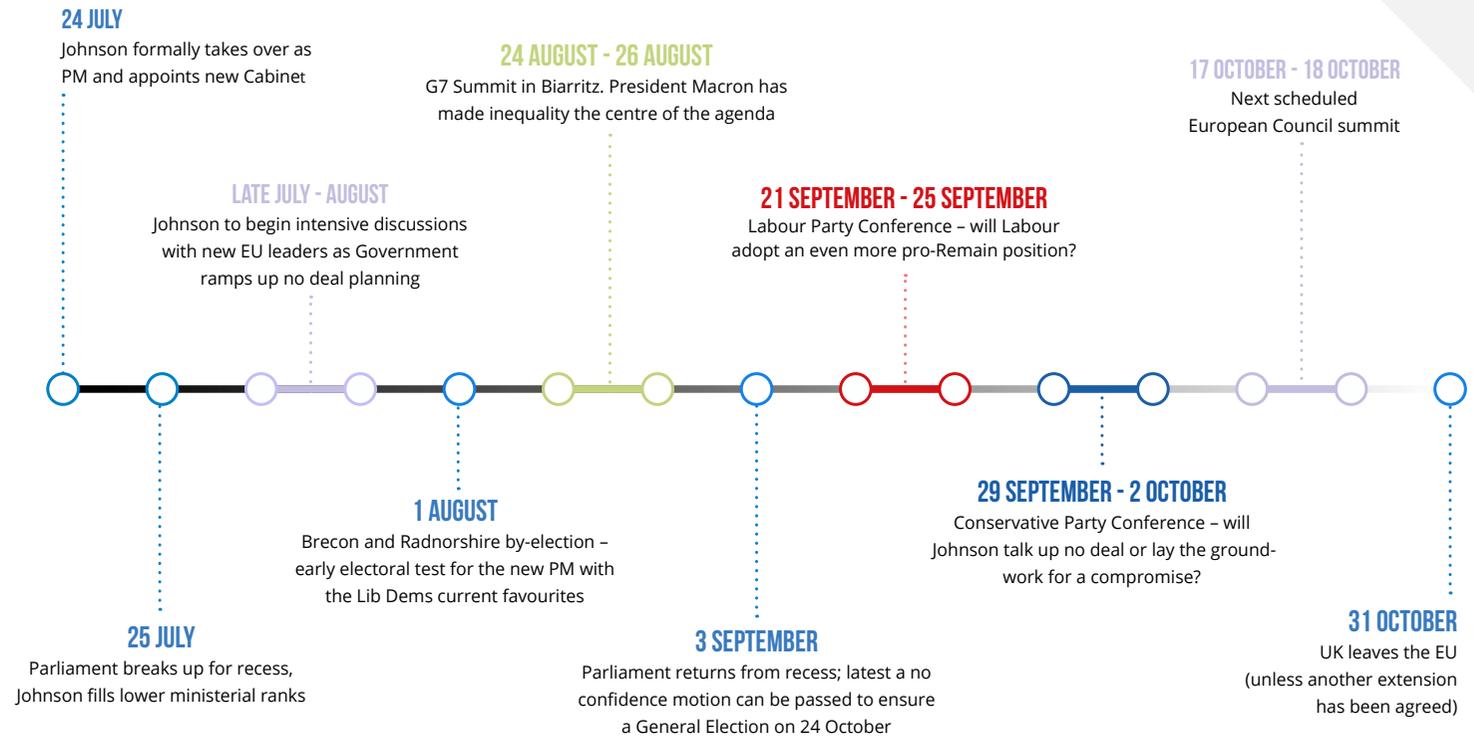
The problem with the first plan is that a 'can-do spirit' is not a sufficient condition for success. Two other criteria are particularly important. First, any major surgery would include ditching the backstop around the Irish border. That requires the Prime Minister of Ireland to accept the risk of a hard border. It is hard to see how the Taoiseach could make such a concession and the EU have shown they will not prioritise the interests of a departing member state over those of a loyal one. Second, assuming radical renegotiation fails, Boris would need to get to no-deal without Parliament blocking it. A clear majority of MPs are deeply opposed to no-deal, but Tory MPs' fear of ushering in a Corbyn administration means a vote could be very finely balanced.

The challenge with the second, more modest, route is that Boris' political strategy has been to hug Brexiteers close. It will take all the credibility he has amassed with this notoriously bellicose group to get them to accept tweaks as real changes – and that is assuming any change at all is possible (the EU has said it is not). The hope would be that when Brexiteers see the risk of their dream dying, they will hold their nose and vote to leave the EU, even under less-than-ideal conditions.

The question for business planning for 31st October is **how to know which course we are on**. The problem is that there is every incentive to step up no-deal planning, whichever strategy the Prime Minister holds. He would need the plans to work if we bounce out on 31st October, and if he wants to win over Brexiteers he needs to look tough, so they see him as a true believer. With differences of opinion within his team, and on all sides of Parliament, it will take a well attuned ear to the ground to understand which way we are heading.

To stand any chance of achieving his objective of an orderly Brexit on 31st October, Prime Minister Johnson cannot afford to lose any time.

## TIMELINE: 100 DAYS THAT WILL MAKE OR BREAK BORIS' PREMIERSHIP





## HOW TO KNOW IF BORIS IS SUCCEEDING POLITICALLY

While reading the runes on Brexit policy will take intelligence from inside Westminster, it will be a bit easier to see if Boris is succeeding more broadly. If he is, his hand will be strengthened and he may feel better able to pursue a no deal strategy. If he isn't, he will face pressure from both sides – both arguing that their agenda is the route to a future Tory majority. Below are three key signs of success to watch out for:

**A significant poll bounce:** The transitions from Blair to Brown and Cameron to May both resulted in significant leaps in the incumbent party's support. With millions of former Tory voters now piled up in the Brexit Party's numbers, Conservatives hope that Prime Minister Johnson can achieve a similar feat. In the past, Boris was one of the most popular politicians in Britain, but today his appeal has waned – to the point that YouGov found that [voters preferred Jeremy Hunt by a margin of 41% to 29%](#). That said, the stock of Brexit Party voters should make rich pickings – Johnson polls more strongly with Brexit Party voters than he does with Conservatives.

**A quiet party:** One reason Jeremy Corbyn has struggled is that his party has never truly united behind him. While Theresa May faced consistent criticism from hard Brexiteers, she had relatively little trouble from moderates. Boris may have trouble on both flanks. Without a united party, his preferences will become less important and those of Parliament will become more important. This is likely to push towards a softer approach, or even a second referendum or early election.

**A domestic agenda:** At the start of the leadership campaign [we focus group tested several of the candidates](#). The standout film was Boris' – in which he makes a fleeting mention of Brexit before moving on to the domestic agenda. Voters are bored of Brexit. If the Prime Minister succeeds on shifting focus from Brexit to meat and potatoes policy issues, it will be a sign he has political momentum. He has begun that effort [today](#).

For Boris Johnson, success has never come through policy. It is the [carefully contrived](#) public image that has allowed him to thrive despite failures that would have sunk other politicians. As the Edelman Trust Barometer has found, someone who comes across as an improvised speaker is almost twice as likely to be trusted as a prepared one. Boris Johnson proves the rule.

The question is whether he can use his light-hearted approach to good effect in the firepit that is the premiership. There are times where Johnson has stepped over the line, for example in relation to [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), a British woman imprisoned in Iran, who Johnson carelessly said had been training journalists over there.

Johnson is lucky in that domestically, he faces a fractured opposition. Geopolitically, however, the situation is far from benign given the volatile tendencies of US President Donald Trump and the challenge posed by the likes of Iran – as evidenced by its recent seizure of UK oil tankers. Meanwhile, [global](#) and [domestic](#) economic indicators are also not as rosy as they were; a major external shock could have a significant negative impact on the UK.

## CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS

Few Prime Ministers have come to power with as little political philosophy as Boris Johnson. Thatcherism and Blairism were both rooted in strong academic traditions. Even Theresa May had David Goodhart and his theory of traditional community-rooted values clashing with cosmopolitan values. Johnson's approach is likely to be much more erratic and so less predictable. In that context:

- **Expect a bumpy ride.** Brexit will likely go right down to the wire, and it is important to know how that will play out for your business – from the supply chain to internal comms.
- **Don't take reporting at face value.** Every player in the debate will be trying to use the media to advance their cause. With publications lined up on different sides of the Brexit debate, not all news will be equally meaningful.
- **Expect change.** Each policy area will be fought on its own. The Government will be hands-off in some areas, interventionist in others and there may be no overarching rhyme or reason.
- **Don't bank on government supporting business.** The trust of business was a cornerstone of David Cameron's regime. For Boris Johnson, it is just one player among money. Businesses can expect to be political footballs at times and will need to decide where the best approach is to lean into a debate and where it is to let it roll past.
- **Mobilise supporters.** In a hung Parliament, every MP's vote counts. In the run-up to a potential election, every favourable word in the media counts. Businesses can engage with these trends to shape a more evidence-based debate and build support for sensible policy change. The Edelman Trust Barometer finds that, globally, [76 percent of people agree that CEOs](#) should take the lead on change rather than waiting for government to impose it. Therefore, in response to a Johnson government, businesses will need to think very carefully about which spokespeople they put forward.

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## MOBILISING THE RIGHT SPOKESPEOPLE

Company voices   
Year to year change 

Percent who rate each source as very/extremely credible

