

# A New Parliament Will Decide – Japan Times 05.11.19

LONDON – They said it could not be done. There was no way, claimed an army of experts, columnists and opinion-formers, that a new withdrawal deal could be worked out between the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union. It was quite impossible to solve the complex problems of Ireland's division, with the republic in the south staying in the EU and the north staying as part of the U.K. Well, they were all wrong. A new deal was worked out, as I predicted on Sept. 20, paving the way for both orderly British withdrawal and new trade agreements with the U.K.'s other world partners, such as Japan, China and America, as well as a new type of relationship with the rest of Europe.

In the jargon, this was “a soft Brexit.” The EU leaders and officials in Brussels agreed to it, the Irish government in Dublin agreed to it, business groups in Northern Ireland agreed to it and even the argumentative House of Commons at Westminster gave it majority approval. All was set for formal U.K. departure on Oct. 31.

But there the happy agreement stopped and the problems began. Having agreed to the new deal in principle, MPs refused to push through the legislation to make it happen. A prospect opened up of never-ending quarrels, amendments and delaying tactics that would postpone Brexit until kingdom come.

Utterly frustrated, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson took the final gamble. If this House of Commons, as at present composed, would not guarantee to pass the necessary legislation, then another House of Commons would have to be summoned. In other words there would have to be a general election. The Oct. 31 departure would have to be delayed (with EU consent). It would be a case not of people against Parliament, but of people against this Parliament and in favor of a new one.

Here at last Johnson got some agreement, with the small political parties leading the demand for an election, and the main Labour opposition reluctantly lifting their veto. It will take place on Dec. 12.

And what will be the outcome? Here again experts and analysts all round are pessimistic. The conventional wisdom is that the new Parliament could be as paralyzed and unhelpful as the old one, with no clear majority for anything or anyone.

Their argument is that Johnson will fail to get the decisive win he needs. His votes, they argue, will be sucked away on two sides – by the demagogic Nigel Farage and his kamikaze supporters, who want a crash exit from the EU and dislike the deal Johnson has so skillfully negotiated, and on the other side by the resentful Conservatives who never wanted to leave and will defect to the centrist Liberal Democrats, whose policy is to reverse everything and go back into the EU.

The result, they say, will be more indecision, with the U.K. failing once again to meet the exit deadline – this time Jan. 31 – and yet more and more delay – to the despair of industry and business, the general public and the wider world.

But are these dark and negative views right? This column, having already defeated conventional wisdom once, is prepared to remain defiant. So the prediction here is that the prevailing wisdom will be wrong again. Far from losing votes, Johnson will stand out clearly for the one thing everyone really wants — a soft and orderly withdrawal from the EU that keeps an open border in Ireland and a good long transition period in which the whole economy can gradually adjust while new trade relations across a changing world are hammered out.

Far from taking Conservative votes, the Farage farrago will crumble. Farage and his close chum, U.S. President Donald Trump, will be seen as the faintly clownish, although dangerous, populists they are. As for the Liberals who want to reverse history, they, too, will lose their backward-looking appeal for most people. Instead Johnson will emerge with a solid majority and press on successfully with his already agreed and negotiated deal.

Johnson's enemies keep depicting him and his supporters as on the political right. In fact he is very much a middle road, so-called One-nation Conservative, committed to social reform, top-quality public services and education, wider ownership, an active and caring state working with private enterprise, a green environment and a balanced welcome for immigrants.

Above all, he is bent on taking his party, and the nation away from harsh ideologies and into the totally new era that technology is shaping for us. His main opponents, the Labour Party, will be offering a brew of Leninist socialism, the kind that claims to be speaking for the people but in practice crushes the people, a right-wing, top-down socialism that brings not freedom but state oppression, and the misery that follows it. The British find this sort of recipe repulsive.

Instead, the bottom line outcome is plain — a moderate and modern government harnessing the best of good administration with the best of market enterprise.

A new policy stance will emerge, friendly to European neighbors but not too much so, friendly to the United States but not to the point of subservience, generous in decentralizing powers to the regions and the smaller nations within the U.K., but keeping it all united in a single U.K. market economy and kingdom, albeit under a new constitutional structure.

Above all, this will be a Britain that marches not just with the old West but with the rising East, the Asia of the future, where all the market growth is going to be — especially with its old friend Japan, with the vast Commonwealth network, with advancing Africa and with Latin America. There will be much work and many struggles ahead, but this is the path that is opening up.

Call it unattainable, impossible, absurd optimism? But that is what they called the Johnson Brexit deal. So now just wait and see.