

Likelihood of UK general election before end of year 'higher than ever'

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News

A leading UK think tank says that the chances of a general election before the end of the year seem "higher than ever."



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The prediction comes with the Brexit standoff continuing between the EU and the UK, which is due to leave the bloc on 31 October.

According to reports on Monday, Downing Street believes rebel MPs will try to make a move to stop a no-deal Brexit in the second week of September, with the EU unlikely to respond until after that battle has played out.

It is thought Boris Johnson may meet key EU leaders, such as Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, but not Ireland's Leo Varadkar, ahead of the G7 summit in Biarritz, France at the end of August.

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Labour has been mulling an immediate confidence vote on the government in the first week of September, but they will only do so if they have enough Conservative MPs on board who are willing to bring down their own Prime Minister.

What is clear is that Boris Johnson’s threadbare majority has shrunk further after the Liberal Democrats took Brecon and Radnorshire from the Conservatives in a by-election.

His Government has a working majority of just three and Open Europe, a think tank based in London, says that with “scores of rebellious backbenchers, it is unclear whether Johnson can govern effectively for much longer unless he goes to the country.”

A no confidence vote seems likely when Parliament returns from recess on 3 September and Open Europe says that “the numbers are extraordinarily tight.”

“This raises the startling prospect that, unless an extension to Article 50 is sought and secured, a No Deal Brexit could take place in the middle of an election campaign”

Dominic Walsh, Open Europe

With the UK’s withdrawal at the end of October fast approaching, the timing of any election will be crucial and there is very little time for an election before the deadline, says the think tank.

The Fixed Term Parliaments Act mandates a 14-day cooling off period after a successful vote of no confidence in which a Government may be confirmed in office.

Dominic Walsh of Open Europe, said, “At the moment, the chances of an alternative government gaining the confidence of the House during the 14-day period look slim.”

“One plan is to find a unifying figurehead to lead a caretaker government, but this looks unlikely to win support from the Labour Party frontbench.”

The most obvious alternative, a Labour-led Government, would not only mean some Conservative rebels putting Jeremy Corbyn in Number 10 but would require the support of other various parties and independents.

What might the Scottish National Party’s price be for their support? A commitment to another referendum on Scottish independence?

Walsh adds, “If a new Government cannot be formed within this time period, an early general election

will take place and dissolution is triggered. The minimum length of an election campaign is 25 days.”

“In any case, the incumbent Prime Minister sets the election date. Downing Street sources have been quoted this week as saying that in such circumstances, Johnson would simply schedule the election for after 31 October.”

Walsh argues, “This raises the startling prospect that, unless an extension to Article 50 is sought and secured, a no-deal Brexit could take place in the middle of an election campaign.”

Some expect 9 September to be the first opportunity for a legislative battle, as the Government is bound in law to provide a report updating on Northern Ireland on 4 September and to then debate it in Parliament for five days.

If a confidence vote passed, MPs would first have 14 days to form an alternative government, but if unsuccessful, an election would be triggered.

In this event, Dominic Cummings, Johnson’s senior adviser, has threatened to press ahead with Brexit on 31 October with or without a deal and schedule the election for the days after that date, with Parliament shut down.

About the author

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