

U.K.'s Election Battle Begins as Johnson and Corbyn Test Slogans
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By Jessica Shankleman and Greg Ritchie

(Bloomberg) -- Boris Johnson and his arch rival Jeremy Corbyn traded attack lines in their first face-to-face clash of the U.K.'s general election campaign.

The prime minister called for the poll on Dec. 12 as a way to break the deadlock over the country's divorce from the European Union. He has no majority in Parliament and has failed to get his Brexit deal ratified in the House of Commons.

If he wins a majority, Johnson says he will be able to deliver the deal he negotiated with the EU and turn the country's focus onto his domestic agenda. But there's a risk his gamble backfires and Corbyn's Labour Party capitalizes, regaining power for the first time since 2010.

How Boris Johnson's Brexit Election Gamble Could Backfire
Offering a taste of the Conservative Party's likely message to voters, Johnson launched into an attack on the opposition Labour leader on Wednesday during what's likely to be their final question session in the Commons before Parliament breaks up for the election.

Johnson accused Corbyn of plotting to ruin what should be a "glorious" year in 2020 with another referendum on Brexit. "It's time to differentiate between the politics of protest and the politics of leadership," Johnson said. He claimed Corbyn would deliver an "economic catastrophe" for Britain. "The time for protest is over."

Johnson outlined his priorities of delivering Brexit and supporting the police service, health and the economy. Corbyn hit back, attacking the premier's record on the country's beloved National Health Service, accusing him of cutting funds and planning to privatize the institution by offering it up in a future trade deal with the U.S.

"This government is preparing to sell out our NHS," Corbyn said. "Our health service is in more danger than in any other time in its glorious history because of his government, his attitude and the trade deals he wants to strike."

Labour's campaign is expected to continue to focus on the impact of a decade of austerity to the country, while offering a renegotiation of Brexit followed by a second referendum.

Labour MP Jess Phillips issued a veiled attack on the prime minister's private life, while also criticizing his party's

record on education, which she said has led to over-sized classes and cuts to the school week.

A number of MPs asked their last questions to the prime minister, including former Chancellor of the Exchequer Ken Clarke, who has been a member of Parliament for 49 years and was expelled from the Conservative Party by Johnson for blocking a no-deal Brexit.

House of Commons Speaker John Bercow, who will also retire this week, paid tribute to Clarke as “one of the most popular and respected politicians” in the country and “a great man.” After the question session ended, the chamber saw a change of tone as Johnson led a debate on the 2017 fire at Grenfell Tower in London, which killed 72.

The fire came in the days after the last general election, and a report on the first phase of an inquiry into the disaster was published just as Parliament prepares to break up for another vote.

A subdued Johnson spoke for nearly an hour, setting out the report’s conclusions as survivors of the fire and bereaved relatives watched from the public gallery.

The report’s criticisms have focused on senior fire officers, who failed to understand that the blaze was spreading in a way they hadn’t expected, and to change their plans accordingly.

Labour MPs challenged Johnson about cuts to the fire service under the Tories, and particularly during his time as mayor of London. He replied that the inquiry “makes no findings as far as I’m aware about lack of resources.”

--With assistance from Robert Hutton.

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