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Only Boris Johnson can stop Boris Johnson now

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Boris Johnson will become Conservative Party leader and hence the country's next prime minister. At least, that's what Thursday's first voting round in the party's leadership race suggests. The former mayor of London obtained the support of 114 Conservative colleagues in the House of Commons, more than a third of the party's 313 members of Parliament.

Those MPs will whittle down the remaining seven candidates to just two in rounds of voting next week. Johnson's current numbers alone would therefore guarantee him a place on that final ballot already, where his pro-Brexit credentials make him the overwhelming favorite with the Conservative membership electorate. Indeed, the biggest barrier to Johnson winning is now an unforeseen campaign implosion hemorrhaging MP support before this final stage.

Fears that some MPs would publicly support Boris only to renege within a secret ballot Thursday proved completely unfounded. In fact, Johnson received over 30 votes on top of the public declarations of support he had before the vote. His leadership team ran an extraordinarily disciplined whipping operation, predicting exactly how many votes he would obtain.

This first hurdle required obtaining the support of 5 percent of the parliamentary party (17 MPs) to progress. Boris won 36 percent. His next challengers, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and Environment Secretary Michael Gove, came way behind, with just 43 votes (14 percent) and 37 votes (12 percent), respectively. Johnson's numbers are expected to swell in the second round next Tuesday as well, as two of three MPs eliminated Thursday were pro-Brexit, bringing their combined 20 supporters up for grabs.

Of course, a week is a long time in politics. Nothing is guaranteed. The leadership candidates have been invited for a televised debate Sunday, and others will be looking to exact a gaffe from Johnson or to land a major blow. Failing to appear in that debate (Johnson has not confirmed) might risk accusations of Johnson running scared. With journalists furiously digging through candidates' histories, a "June surprise" might surface before the final MP voting rounds.

Right now, though, Johnson looks unassailable.

MPs recognize he's a risky bet for prime minister, of course. But his leadership is increasingly seen as party's best hope of survival in a future election. ComRes polling data this week suggested the party would currently fall behind Labour in Commons seats at an election, as Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party eats into Tory support. Some leadership candidates could partially stem that tide somewhat, but the only candidate projected to be able to win a

Conservative majority (and a handsome one) is Johnson. Never underestimate the power of MPs' self-interest.

That talk is no doubt premature and overly optimistic. Yet something has to change to break the current Brexit parliamentary logjam. Johnson, one way or another, could achieve that. Parliament has voted down Theresa May's E.U. withdrawal agreement three times yet cannot agree on an alternative path. The most optimistic "soft" Brexiteers hope Johnson might obtain modest concessions from the European Union to revise May's withdrawal deal, and be the man to sell it to his party and country in a way May couldn't. Johnson himself is shoring up pro-Brexit support by pledging to leave the E.U. with a completely fresh deal, or without a deal at all, on the new scheduled Halloween exit date.

The House of Commons as a whole, of course, is keen to avoid a no-deal Brexit. Yet all the time the House is unwilling to vote "no confidence" in Her Majesty's Government (and many do not want an election through fear of losing their seats), Britain is scheduled to leave under existing law. Constitutional experts say the executive has the means to hold the line on delivering Brexit, maybe even proroguing Parliament (shutting it down temporarily) to ensure it isn't blocked.

This nuclear option would trigger all sorts of democratic and constitutional wrangling, and Johnson has played down its possibility. One Conservative leadership candidate has threatened to set up an alternative Parliament should Johnson pursue that option. What's striking, though, is that many who assured us a no-deal Brexit was "impossible" under May are petrified of a Johnson victory.

For sure, there are a lot of known unknowns here. We don't know if Johnson can exact changes to the current withdrawal agreement, or even if his changes would pass Parliament. We cannot know for sure whether he'd prorogue Parliament or if his government would fall before he got a chance. But these are uncertainties that would occur under any leader intent on delivering Brexit.

All Conservative MPs and members know for near-certain is that with the current impasse, and as October approaches, the possibility of an election is significant. For that, the optimistic and well-known Johnson is the most likely to be able to turn around the party's polling fortunes and defeat both Jeremy Corbyn's Labour and Farage's Brexit Party.

That's why he's now the clear favorite, and that's also why the biggest barrier to his victory is a self-inflicted cock-up.

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