

International

British PM Johnson puts Brexit on top of government's agenda

Queen Elizabeth II reads out PM's plans in a parliamentary ceremony

LONDON: Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Thursday put Britain's departure from the EU at the top of the agenda, as Queen Elizabeth II read out his plans for government in a parliamentary ceremony following a sweeping election win. The monarch formally opened parliament with plenty of traditional pomp and pageantry before ermine and red-robed members of the upper House of Lords, and MPs from the lower House of Commons.

But before the monarch's set-piece speech, Scotland's first minister called for a new vote on independence, signalling a looming constitutional battle between London and Edinburgh.

Nicola Sturgeon said Brexit and election results north of the border made a clear "constitutional and democratic case" for a fresh look about whether Scotland should end its more than 300-year-old union with England and Wales. Top of Johnson's to-do list is a bill to ratify the terms of Britain's exit from the European Union, which he negotiated in October but could not get through a deadlocked parliament.

Now with a comfortable majority in the 650-seat House of Commons, he hopes to push through the deal in time to fulfil his election campaign pledge to "Get Brexit Done" on the next EU deadline. "My government's priority is to deliver the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union on 31st January," the queen confirmed from a gilded throne.

She added: "Thereafter, my ministers will seek a future relationship with the EU based on a free-trade agreement that benefits the whole of the

United Kingdom." In a sign of the government's vow to keep to the Brexit timetable, a spokesman said the Department for Exiting the European Union "will be wound up once the UK leaves the EU on 31 January".

Brexit cliff-edge?

The Queen's Speech normally takes place about once a year but there was one in October after Johnson became Conservative leader in July following an internal party vote.

Rebellions over Brexit left him without the Commons support he needed to govern so he called a snap election—and won a landslide. As a result, yesterday's speech was scaled down, with the 93-year-old monarch eschewing her horse-drawn carriage for a car and her regalia for a matching coral green hat and coat. The highlight of the proposed legislation was the Withdrawal Agreement Bill (WAB) to ratify the terms of Brexit, which will be put to a first vote among MPs today.

It covers Britain's financial obligations to the EU, the rights of European expatriates and new arrangements for Northern Ireland. The bill will also enshrine the dates of a transition period, which will keep EU-UK ties largely unchanged until December 31, 2020, to allow both sides to sign a new trade deal. The period can be extended for up to two years but London insists this will not be necessary.

Johnson, a leading figure in the 2016 referendum vote for Brexit, says it is time to end years of political wrangling over the result.



LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and her son Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales arrive in the House of Lords chamber during the State Opening of Parliament in the Houses of Parliament in London yesterday. — AFP

But the EU has warned the timetable is extremely tight to agree a new relationship after Britain leaves the bloc's single market and customs union. The WAB also includes plans to allow courts other than the Supreme Court to overturn European Court of Justice rulings, to ensure Britain can more swiftly extricate itself from European case law.

Scots away?

Johnson's Tories may have won a majority

countrywide in the December 12 poll but lost more than half their seats in Scotland on a campaign opposing a fresh independence vote. First Minister Sturgeon said sweeping victories by her Scottish National Party in the three general elections since 2015 made the case for a new referendum "unarguable". "Scotland made it very clear last week it does not want a Tory government led by Boris Johnson, taking us out of the European Union," Sturgeon told a news conference. — AFP

South Africa still hobbled by abusive legacy of domestic work

JOHANNESBURG: For three years, Siyamthanda Dube lived in a shed outside the house where she cleaned, cooked and babysat for a South African family. Her employers asked her to move to "be with the kids" after their mum started a new job in 2014.

Dube complied, bringing her two daughters and reluctant husband from their home in a Johannesburg township. "We put the bed up on top of buckets so that we could put the kids' mattresses underneath," she said.

"The house was under trees and all the jojos (bugs) would come inside." Domestic workers in South Africa often live on the premises of their employers, in subpar conditions, without job security and on low wages. "Living in" is a legacy of the apartheid era when non-white South Africans were banned from residing in cities.

To avoid treacherous commutes from far-away townships, black women employed by

white households would live at work. Today, despite apartheid having ended 25 years ago, most domestic workers' homes are still a long way from their workplace.

The distance and a lack of reliable transport keeps the live-in set-up going. And, say advocacy groups, that makes it easier for employers to ignore post-apartheid labor laws.

'We don't want her anymore'

"Employers often feel that if someone is living on their property, they have free rein to use them whenever they need," said Amy Tekie, who co-heads the domestic workers' network, Izwi. It has helped more than 200 women speak up against poor treatment, low pay and unfair dismissals over the past year.

"People don't realise that you can't just fire your domestic worker at will," said Tekie. Dube, 31, says she was beaten and then dismissed in 2017 after taking her feverish daughter to the chemist one morning, making her late for work. "(My boss) started fighting at me, shouting at me, swearing," she recalled.

She was knocked unconscious, she said, and taken to hospital. Her employer offered her 200 rand (less than \$14) to "keep quiet", she said. When she returned, the house keys had been removed from her key chain. "I knew I was fired," Dube said.

"They called my husband and said... we don't want to see her anymore."



JOHANNESBURG: A domestic worker walks through the Parkwood Suburb of Johannesburg. — AFP

Lack of awareness

Labor rights in South Africa are enshrined in the constitution and domestic workers by law should receive a work contract stipulating their hours. It is also one of three African countries to have ratified the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention, which places a duty on governments to ensure fundamental rights and prevent abuse. But enforcement still poses a challenge. "You can have a good law on paper," said ILO country office director Joni Musabayana.

"But how do you ensure that domestic workers and employers are fully up to date?"

he said. There are still too few labor inspectors despite a recent hike in their numbers and access to private homes and farms depends on the owner's willingness, he added. Tekie said that today most employers were "decent people" who had just grown up in a culture where domestic workers had no rights.

For Fazlyn Toeffie, it took years to realize that her family's relationship with live-in staff was "not normal". "I grew up in a household... where domestic workers were not respected," said Toeffie, 39, who lives in Johannesburg. "The helper had to eat out of the maid's plate in her servant quarters... and then was called back to wash the dishes." Toeffie told AFP that when she decided to hire a housekeeper under "better conditions", she had "no idea" where to start.

South Africa has about 1.3 million domestic workers, the ILO says. Government figures are slightly lower, at one million. The sector is mostly made up of black women from neighboring Zimbabwe and Lesotho, according to Musabayana.

But many work without permits, leaving them even more vulnerable. "It is not a group of people who are going to speak up and say 'no'," said lawyer Chrissy Blouws, who helps women take legal action. Itumeleng says she was sexually assaulted by her employer this year. — AFP