

UK speaker quits Brexit hotseat

AFP, London

John Bercow stepped down yesterday after 10 years as speaker of Britain's House of Commons -- a role that rocketed him into the heart of the Brexit battle, and won him European fans.

The man in the middle of more than three years of fiery parliamentary debates has proved a controversial figure, loathed by pro-Brexit supporters and hailed by its foes.

Animated, verbose and with an idiosyncratic style, the 56-year-old Bercow has yelled "Order! Order!" more than 14,000 times during his tenure as the 157th speaker.

His detractors call him pompous -- one MP even branded him a "sanctimonious dwarf" but his backers say he has bolstered the rights of backbenchers to hold the government to account.

Both Britain's main party leaders paid tribute to Bercow Wednesday as he chaired the weekly prime minister's questions session for the final time.

"Although we may disagree about some of the



(From left, clockwise) A car burns in a garage yesterday as a home goes up in flames during the Hillside fire in the North Park neighborhood of San Bernardino, California; a picture taken aboard the International Space Station shows California fire from space; a firefighting jet drops retardant over a threatened neighborhood; and two women rescue a goat from a farm in the area. Firefighters in California struggled to contain a new fast-moving blaze that threatened thousands of homes and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, as rare "extreme" red flag warnings were issued for much of the Los Angeles region.

PHOTO: AFP



'If you eat meat, you may become cannibal'

Children who eat meat could grow up to become cannibals, according to Madhya Pradesh BJP leader Gopal Bhargava. Bhargava, the Leader of Opposition in the Indian state, made the comment on Wednesday as his party leader Kailash Vijayvargiya criticised the inclusion of eggs in food served to school children in Madhya Pradesh, describing it as "interfering with the faith and religious beliefs of the people". "What else to expect from this government? You see... in our Indian culture, eating of meat is not allowed. If we eat this from childhood then I don't know... when we grow up we could become cannibals," Gopal Bhargava told reporters. The 'egg debate' comes days after a report tracking hunger and malnutrition levels in the world listed India behind Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Quebec introduces 'values test' for immigrants

Economic migrants seeking to settle in Canada's mostly French-speaking Quebec will have to pass a controversial "values test," the provincial government announced Wednesday. "I think it's important that we understand the values and the society where you want to live," said Quebec Premier Francois Legault. Those include support for democracy, gender equality and a new secularism law that prohibits some public servants from wearing religious symbols such as veils or turbans, he said. The aim is to ensure better integration, said Quebec immigration minister Simon Jolin-Barrette, who announced a raised ceiling in arrivals from 40,000 this year to a maximum of 44,500 in 2020. The test, which starts on January 1 but does not apply to refugees.

Indonesia religious body staffer falls foul of own laws



An Indonesian man working for an organisation which helped draft strict religious laws ordering adulterers to be flogged was himself publicly whipped yesterday after he was caught having an affair with a married woman. On Thursday, a masked religious officer rained down 28 lashes on the back of Aceh Ulama Council (MPU) member Mukhlis after he was caught canoodling with a married woman last month. Flogging is a common punishment for a range of offences in the deeply conservative Aceh region on Sumatra island, including adultery, drinking alcohol, and having gay or pre-marital sex. Aceh is the only region in the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation that imposes Islamic law, part of a 2005 autonomy deal with the central government that ended a decades-long separatist insurgency.

SOURCE: AFP, NDTV

UK polls campaign starts on 'Brexit day'

REUTERS, London

On the day Britain was supposed to have left the European Union, voters instead faced the start of an election campaign, with opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn pledging to overthrow a "rigged system" he said was run by billionaires and tax-dodgers.

After failing to deliver Brexit by the Oct. 31 deadline, Prime Minister Boris Johnson called the Dec. 12 election to break what he cast as a political parlous and undermined confidence in the economy.

Opinion polls suggest the election is Johnson's to lose. His Conservative Party is leading Labour by 15 to 17 percentage points, according to IpsosMORI and YouGov. Yet the overshadowing issue of Brexit, which has divided both major parties and their voters, could confound conventional calculations.

While Brexit frames the election, with Labour pledging to hold a second referendum on it, it is being fought by two of the most unconventional British

politicians of recent years who offer starkly different visions for the world's fifth-largest economy.

In his first major speech of the campaign, Corbyn said the election was a once-in-a-generation chance to overthrow what he cast as a corrupt elite which profited by exploiting workers, lying to the public and polluting the environment.



Corbyn challenges vested interests of capitalism

Johnson warns Labour risks the United Kingdom

Johnson has 15-17 pct. point lead: surveys



"Together, we can pull down a corrupt system and build a fairer country that cares for all," Corbyn, a 70-year-old veteran socialist campaigner, said at a speech in London.

Corbyn named prominent billionaires such as landowner Hugh

Grosvenor, Sports Direct owner Mike Ashley, Ineos CEO Jim Ratcliffe, hedge fund manager Crispin Odey and US media tycoon Rupert Murdoch as representatives of Britain's "rigged system". He proposed nationalisation of rail, mail and water services and higher taxes on the bankers who have made London the pre-eminent international financial capital.

The first December election in Britain since 1923 will be one of the hardest to call in years. Brexit has variously fatigued, enthused and enraged swathes of voters while eroding loyalties to the two major parties.

IpsosMORI said the Conservatives

were on 41% with Labour on 24%. But that still leaves a third of the electorate up for grabs - and voter poaching could decide the final result.

A five-year flurry of two historic referendums - on Scottish independence in 2014 and Brexit in 2016 - and two national elections in 2015 and 2017 have delivered often unexpected results that ushered in political crises.

Johnson will be aware that the Conservatives under his predecessor, Theresa May, were polling at about 50%, double that of Labour, ahead of the last election in 2017 but then went on to lose their majority in parliament, eventually winning under 2% more of the vote share than Labour.

Johnson is pitching the election as a chance to get Brexit done, and he will accuse Corbyn of threatening the United Kingdom's future.

He says Labour's plan to hold another referendum on Britain's membership of the bloc, and the possibility of Labour agreeing to another referendum on Scottish independence, risk ripping the United Kingdom apart.



Twitter to ban political ads on its platform

AFP, Washington

Twitter will stop accepting political advertising globally on its platform, the company said, responding to growing concerns over misinformation from politicians on social media.

Chief executive Jack Dorsey tweeted that while internet advertising "is incredibly powerful and very effective for commercial advertisers, that power brings significant risks to politics, where it can be used to influence votes to affect the lives of millions."

But Social media behemoth Facebook looks unlikely to follow Twitter's lead, with CEO Mark Zuckerberg holding to his line that he would let political figures speak freely, and count on voters to judge truthfulness.

Dorsey said Twitter's new policy, details of which will be unveiled next month and enforced from November 22, would ban ads on political issues as well as from candidates.

Zuckerberg has said political advertising is not a major source of revenue but he believes it is important to allow everyone a "voice," and banning political ads would favor incumbents.

Dorsey said he disagreed with Zuckerberg's assessment. "We have witnessed many social movements reach massive scale without any political advertising. I trust this will only grow," he added.

CHINA'S COMMUNIST PARTY CONCLAVE Beijing promises to protect Hong Kong

AFP, Beijing

China's Communist Party elite yesterday concluded a key meeting in Beijing with a promise to protect the "stability" of Hong Kong, which has been rocked by months of unrest. The Fourth Plenum of the Party's Central Committee is a closed-door meeting of high-ranking officials where the country's future direction is discussed, and this week's meet was the first since February 2018.

This plenum came as Chinese President Xi Jinping battles a number of challenges, including months of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, a slowing economy, and a lingering trade war with the United States.

Semi-autonomous Hong Kong -- which was returned to China in 1997 -- has rights unseen in the mainland, including free speech, and is governed by the Basic Law, its mini-constitution.

But the city has been rocked by months of unrest from protesters who say those rights are being rolled back by an increasingly authoritarian Beijing.

In response, yesterday's communique said the plenum proposed "upholding and improving" the system of "one country, two systems", without giving more specific details. Despite its mention of increased "risks and challenges" abroad, the communique was notably silent on the ongoing US-China trade conflict.



A line of policemen stop Halloween revellers in the Lan Kwai Fong area in Hong Kong, yesterday. Hong Kong democracy activists donned Halloween masks lampooning the city's pro-Beijing leaders yesterday, defying an emergency law that bans face coverings and sparking renewed clashes with police.

PHOTO: AFP

IS confirms Baghdadi's death

Appoints successor; US releases raid video, details

AGENCIES

The Islamic State militant group yesterday confirmed its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been killed, the group's news agency Amaq said in an audio tape following a US weekend raid.

Baghdadi, an Iraqi jihadist who rose from obscurity to declare himself "caliph" of all Muslims as the leader of Islamic State, was killed by US special forces in northwestern Syria, President Donald Trump said on Sunday.

The group had been silent until now. As successor it appointed someone Amaq only identified as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi.

Aymenn al-Tamimi, a researcher at Swansea University focused on Islamic State, said the name was unknown but could be a top figure called Hajj Abdullah whom the US State Department had identified as a possible successor to Baghdadi.

"It could be someone we know, who perhaps has just assumed this new name," said Tamimi.

The group, which controlled swathes of Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017 and carried out atrocities that horrified most Muslims, also

confirmed the death of its spokesman Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir. Baghdadi was killed in Idlib in northwestern Syria.

US special forces carried out the Syrian operation in which Baghdadi killed himself and three of his children by detonating a suicide vest when he was cornered in a tunnel, according to US officials.

The Pentagon on Wednesday released its first images from last weekend's commando raid in Syria that led to the death of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and warned the militant group may attempt to stage a "retribution attack."

The declassified, grainy, black-and-white aerial videos from Saturday's raid showed US special operations forces closing in on the compound and US aircraft firing on militants nearby.

The most dramatic video showed a massive, black plume of smoke rising from the ground after US military bombs leveled Baghdadi's compound.

Marine General Kenneth McKenzie said Turkey's incursion into Syria this month, and the U.S. pullback from the border, was not a factor in deciding the timing of the raid.



Israel approves more than 2,300 settler homes: NGO

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has approved the construction of 2,342 settler homes in the occupied West Bank, settlement watchdog Peace Now said yesterday. It said the decision was taken on October 10 and that 59 percent of the new homes will be erected in "settlements that Israel likely may evacuate under a peace agreement" with the Palestinians.

According to Peace Now, which closely monitors Israeli settlement building, plans for 8,337 housing units in the settlements have been approved since the beginning of the year.

It said this represented an increase of close to 50 percent compared with 2018 when plans for 5,618 housing units were approved.

"This brings the average number of housing units approved in the three years since President Trump was elected, to 6,899 housing units, almost twice the average in the three years preceding them," said the NGO.

All settlements are considered illegal under international law and are built on land that the Palestinians see as part of their future state, but Israel distinguishes between those it has approved and those it has not.

Peace Now said that settlement construction has increased under Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is fighting for his political survival after failing to form a coalition government following September elections.

Included in the 2,342 new housing units are 182 that are due to be built in Mevoot Yericho, a former outpost near Jericho which the Netanyahu government legalised before the September polls, Peace Now said.

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin has tasked ex-military chief Benny Gantz to form a government after Netanyahu failed to set up a coalition for the second time this year.

Some 600,000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank and Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem among around 2.9 million Palestinians.

German govt in the dock over farmers' climate case

AFP, Berlin

A Berlin court yesterday began hearing a case brought by three farmers against Chancellor Angela Merkel's government over its failure to meet climate protection targets, the first such legal challenge in Germany.

Citing cattle stressed by heatwaves and huge crop losses due to extreme weather swings, from lasting droughts to torrential rains, a fruit-grower and two livestock farmers backed by environmental group Greenpeace are seeking to force the government into action.

"We are suing to get the government to keep to its targets and implement its measures," co-plaintiff Franziska Blohm, whose family manages an organic fruit farm near Hamburg, told AFP ahead of the hearing. The aim of the exercise is not to obtain "damages or anything similar," she stressed.

"We feel that our livelihoods are threatened. We are afraid that if we don't do something, the fruit farm won't survive. The government must now show the way," she said.

But Merkel's government last year admitted it would fall short of its climate target of slashing greenhouse gas emissions in Germany by 40 percent by 2020 compared to 1990 levels.

Rather, it expected to achieve only 32 percent in reductions compared to 1990.

With climate shooting up the political agenda after two blistering summers and a wave of Fridays for Future student strikes, Berlin has since rolled out a new environmental protection package, with Merkel pledging that Germany should be climate neutral by 2050.