

Britain

'History-shaping'

Rivals in final push before UK election

LONDON, Dec 9, (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and opposition leaders were pushing for the finish line in Britain's election campaign Monday, dashing through multiple constituencies to drum up support in the final 72 hours before polling day.

Johnson was touring Labour-held seats across England that his Conservatives have to win if they are to secure a majority in Thursday's election. Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn was in southwest and central England, where his left-of-center party is trying to hang on to key constituencies.

Opinion polls give Johnson's Conservatives a lead, but as many as one in five voters remain undecided. This election is especially unpredictable because the question of Brexit cuts across traditional party loyalties.



Johnson

Underscoring the significance of those shifting allegiances, Johnson's first stop was in the eastern port town of Grimsby targeting Labour voters who also backed voting the European Union in the UK's 2016 referendum.

Wearing a white jacket, hat and rubber boots, Johnson lugged a crate of fish across the floor of a fish market in a town that has been in Britain facing the most testing and significant period in its modern history since World War II.

The polarized electorate now has a critical choice to make — but it seems unlikely the result, whatever it may be, will heal deep and toxic divisions that could last a generation or more.

Impact

The 20th century saw Britain fight alongside and against Europeans and then help make the prosperous peace into the 21st century. This election will help determine where Britain's formal relationship with the European Union lands and what the impact will be on all walks of life.

In 1945, after punishing years of war, Nazi bombardment, human sacrifice, and rationing, the voting populace shifted in huge numbers after Victory in Europe Day, casting aside wartime leader Winston Churchill for a Labour Party committed to economic rebuilding from the ashes of war.

In the nearly 75 years since, there have been other pivotal polling days — in 1964, 1979, 1997 and 2010 — and now the "Brexit election" serves up another inflection point that will shape the country's future.

Churchill epitomized Britain in its war years: The bulldog spirit and features and the iconic victory sign are still well-ingrained on the national psyche.

That didn't count for much at the polls, though, in 1945 when a population weary from the German blitz and day-to-day suffering and shortages delivered the biggest election swing ever in Britain.

No elections had been held since 1935. Churchill's Conservatives, who had presided over a national government during the war years, were unceremoniously dumped with a stunning nearly 11% election tilt to the Labour Party led by Clement Attlee.

It was a landslide triumph based on an economic program which had some similarities to US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal. In Britain, the National Health Service and welfare state came into being, full employment was sought and social reform was at the fore. This became the bedrock of the nation for decades until Margaret Thatcher's rise in 1979.

The Conservative government began to come off the rails as the 1960s dawned. They were beset by economic problems, the Profumo Affair, a sex scandal that had threatened national security, and an old guard establishment in charge that seemed out of touch with modernity.

Voters wanted to move on. Labour's Harold Wilson, a pipe-smoking economist, made the then remarkable life journey from a northern town to 10 Downing Street. The year before his victory, Wilson had famously captured the now, in stark contrast to his opponents, with a speech extolling a new Britain that would need to be forged in the "white heat of a scientific revolution."

Export

London would swing later that decade. The Beatles were the country's greatest export. But as viewers of "The Crown" TV series will know, Wilson had to dig Britain out of a deep economic hole and eventually devalue the pound when the deficit he had inherited from his predecessors became too crippling. He faced plots against his tenure both in the 1960s and during a second, briefer stint as prime minister in the mid-1970s.

The "Winter of Discontent," a period in the late 1970s that saw Britain steeped in a mire of nationwide strikes by potent public sector trade unions, paved the way for a radical right-wing government led by Margaret Thatcher. Her rule would upend and divide the country.

She was dubbed "Iron Lady." The domineering right-wing press backed her to the hilt. Thatcher saw the unions as the "enemy within" and sought to destroy them.

She waged war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands, also known as Las Malvinas. She won both battles. But they came at a cost. When Britain sank an Argentinian ship, the Belgrano, which was sailing away from the area of conflict, hundreds of young conscripts were killed. One headline in a Rupert Murdoch-owned tabloid crowded, "Gotcha!"

Parts of society benefited hugely under Thatcher during the 1980s. But unemployment and poverty rocketed, especially in the north of the country where long-established industries, like mining, were destroyed and with them their communities. A dominant and divisive Thatcher won three consecutive elections. She was felled in 1990 by her own party over her belligerent stance over ties with the EU — a fate that would befall her Tory successors as well.

There was no love lost between Thatcher and Ted Heath, prime minister from 1970-1974 after she had ousted him as Conservative leader. When she was deposed Heath was said to have exclaimed, "rejoice, rejoice, rejoice!"

After 18 years of Conservative power, Tony Blair won over voters with a pledge of a fresh start: His "New Labour" would be a new incarnation of the party, no longer left-leaning as they had historically been, much more centrist and highly EU- and business-friendly.

At first Blair declared his priorities to be "education, education and education." But military interventions followed on behalf of Kosovo against Serbia and in Sierra Leone in 1999/2000.



Railway workers gather for a union general assembly meeting at the Gare St-Charles station in Marseille, southern France on Dec 9. Paris commuters inched to work Monday through exceptional traffic jams, as strikes to preserve retirement rights halted trains and subways for a fifth straight day. (AP)

Traffic jams cripple Paris as pension strikes halt trains

Paris commuters inched to work Monday through massive traffic jams as strikes against retirement plan changes halted trains and subways for a fifth straight day.

French President Emmanuel Macron girded for one of the toughest weeks of his presidency as his government prepares to present a

redesign of the convoluted French pension system. He sees melding 42 different retirement plans into one as delivering a more equitable, financially sustainable system. Unions see the move as an attack on the French way of life even though Macron's government is not expected to change the current retirement age of 62.

Citing safety risks, the SNCF national rail network warned travelers to stay home or use "alternative means of locomotion" to get around Monday instead of thronging platforms in hopes of getting the few available trains running.

As a result, the national road authority reported more than 600 kilometers (360

miles) of traffic problems at morning rush hour around the Paris region — up from 150 kilometers (90 miles) on an average day.

The road traffic was worse Monday than when the strike started last week, because many French employees managed to work from home or take a day off then. But that's increasingly difficult as

the strike wears on.

Gabriella Micuci from the Paris suburb of Le Bourget walked several kilometers (miles) in cold rain and then squeezed into a packed subway on one of the two automated Metro lines that don't need drivers.

Other commuters used shared bikes or electric scooters. (AP)



Sweden's Prime Minister Stefan Lofven (right), welcomes Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali for a meeting in Stockholm, Sweden on Dec 9. (AP)



Rossi



Marin

Europe

Italy probes Maltese prof:

Prosecutors in Sicily are investigating suspected embezzlement by a mysterious Maltese academic who has been linked to a US probe of hacked emails.

Agrigento Prosecutor Salvatore Vella said by telephone Monday that his office is investigating Joseph Mifsud for suspected embezzlement of at least 100,000 euros (\$110,000) in connection with his role at a local public university.

Mifsud apparently disappeared in 2017. Vella says his office, which needs to formally notify the professor that he is under investigation, hasn't been able so far to locate him.

US prosecutors have alleged that a campaign adviser to US President Donald Trump had learned from Mifsud about stolen emails that figured in the FBI's probe into alleged hacking by Russia.

Last year, in a separate probe in Sicily, a Palermo-based auditors' court ordered Mifsud to return nearly 50,000 euros in over payments in connection with his university role. (AP)

Quake hits Florence area: An earthquake struck north of Florence on Monday morning, sending people fleeing from their homes, damaging some buildings and causing cancellations or severe delays to trains across Italy.

The magnitude 4.8 quake hit the central Apennine Mountains at 3:30 am (0230 GMT), the US Geological Survey said. There were no reports of casualties, the fire brigade said.

People in the area scrambled from their homes after the first tremors but there was no major damage "to people or places", the national civil protection agency said.

Regional governor **Enrico Rossi** said that there were problems with some buildings and Italian dailies posted pictures of cracks in the walls of the church of San Silvestro in the town of Barberino del Mugello, in the epicentre of the quake.

Train services were suspended as a precaution, including those on the national high speed line, Rete Ferroviaria Italiana said. However, they were resuming slowly several hours later.

High speed lines between Italy's largest cities "are progressively returning to normality", Rete Ferroviaria Italiana said. Slower, local lines were also starting to run again while checks continued on some tracks.

The company must conduct checks on the line in the area if an earthquake is registered above a magnitude of 4. (RTS)

Diplomacy

Peace in sight?

Paris summit seeks Ukraine war solution

PARIS, Dec 9, (AP) — A long-awaited summit in Paris on Monday is aiming to find a way to end the war in Ukraine, after five years and 14,000 lives lost in a conflict that has emboldened the Kremlin and reshaped European geopolitics.

The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France are holding a series of meetings at the Elysee Palace to try to revive a 2015 peace deal that's gone largely ignored, as Ukrainian soldiers and Russia-backed separatists continue to exchange fire across World War I-style trenches along the front line slicing through eastern Ukraine.

A major breakthrough is unlikely, but whatever happens, the summit is the biggest test yet for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who won the presidency this year in a landslide — partly on promises to end the war.

Monday's summit notably includes the first face-to-face meeting between Zelenskiy, a comic actor and political novice, with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

While Zelenskiy still enjoys broad public support, he has been embarrassed by the scandal around his discussions with US President Donald Trump that unleashed an impeachment inquiry. The US is an important military backer for Ukraine, which is hugely out-gunned by Russia.

Some Ukrainians fear Zelenskiy will surrender too much to Putin in Monday's meetings, and around 100 opposition activists set up protest tents outside government buildings Monday in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. Activists are offering free food in the tents and building a stage in front of Zelenskiy's office, with banners reading "No to capitulation!"

"Russia started the war, and any

negotiations with the aggressor elicit our suspicion and vigilance, especially when we're being forced into peace on Russian terms," one of the protesters, 21-year-old student Igor Derbunov, told The Associated Press.

"Any secret agreements with the Kremlin behind our backs will lead to protests all over Ukraine," said Denis Krutinskiy, a 36-year-old former serviceman.

Russia wants to use the summit to increase pressure on Zelenskiy to fulfill the 2015 Minsk peace accord, which gives the rebel-held regions more autonomy in exchange for ending the fighting.

Control

Zelenskiy wants to tweak the timeline laid out in the Minsk accord, which calls for Ukraine to be able to regain control of its border with Russia only after local elections are held in the separatist regions and the regions receive autonomous status. Zelenskiy says Ukraine must get control of its border before local elections are held, instead.

The Kremlin insists that's not an option, and the separatists hope that Russia, France and Germany refuse Zelenskiy's requests.

"There are expectations that three guarantors of the Minsk agreements will explain to Zelenskiy that the agreements can't be revised," Natalya Nikonorova, foreign minister of the separatists' unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic, was quoted Monday in Russian daily Kommersant as saying.

French officials say potential changes to the timeline will be discussed Monday, but stressed that the summit is aimed at fulfilling the Minsk accord — not writing a new peace deal.

Germany and France helped to broker the Minsk accord, in hopes of end-

ing a conflict on Europe's eastern edge that has complicated relations with Russia, a powerful trading partner and diplomatic player. The four countries' leaders held a series of meetings starting in 2014 in Normandy as what is known as the "Normandy format" peace process.

But with progress stalled on the ground, the leaders haven't met since 2016. Monday's summit is the first involving Zelenskiy and Macron, who has sought to improve relations with Russia and pushed for the renewed talks, encouraged by Zelenskiy's determination to end the war.

Ukraine and Russia struck a prisoner exchange deal in September and agreed on a troop pullback from two locations in eastern Ukraine to pave the way for the Paris talks. Russia has also released three Ukrainian navy ships seized a year ago.

Zelenskiy said before Monday's talks that he hopes they will help achieve a lasting cease-fire, and that he hopes to negotiate a quick deal to exchange all prisoners held by the warring parties.

An end to the conflict in the region known as the Donbass could also lead to an eventual lifting of EU sanctions against Russia linked to the eastern Ukraine fighting, which the Kremlin and European businesses have pushed for. The EU and US imposed separate sanctions on Russia over its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea.

The EU is expected to extend sanctions this week by another six months. Arriving for meetings in Brussels on Monday, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said: "At the moment I see no grounds to change anything in the European Union's sanctions policy toward Russia in this matter. It would be good if we could get there at some point."

Finland next PM breaks mold:

Finland's next prime minister is breaking the mold of government leaders in multiple ways.

When **Sanna Marin** takes over the reins of the country, likely on Tuesday, she will become the youngest leader of a govern-

ment in the world — at 34 she beats Ukraine's 35-year-old prime minister, Oleksiy Honcharuk.

What's more Marin, who was tapped Sunday by Finland's ruling Social Democratic Party, will head a five-party, center-left coalition. All of her four coal-

ition partners are led by women — and three of them are in their early 30s.

And like New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern — another government leader who is below 40 — Marin is a new mother, having given birth to her daughter Emma last year. Raised by a single mother, she has told Finnish broadcaster how she felt discriminated against when her mother was in a relationship with another woman.

A lawmaker since 2015, Marin is the party's vice-chairwoman and was minister for transport and communications in the outgoing government.

Lawmakers are likely to approve the appointment of Marin and her government this week so she can represent Finland at the Dec 12-13 EU leaders' summit in Brussels. Finland holds the European Union's rotating presidency until the end of the year.

Antti Rinne, the incumbent prime minister whom Marin is replacing, plans to stay on as the Social Democrats' chairman until a party congress next summer.

Rinne stepped down last week after a key coalition partner, the Center Party, withdrew its support, citing lack of trust. The Center Party also criticized Rinne's leadership skills prior to a two-week strike by the country's state-owned postal service in November that spread to other industries.

Rinne's resignation prompted the formal resignation of the coalition of the Social Democrats and the Center Party and three junior partners: the Greens, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People's Party of Finland. (AP)



Migrants wash outside a tent at the Vucjak refugee camp outside Bihać, northwestern Bosnia on Dec 9. It has been reported that Bosnian officials will close the makeshift tent camp in northwestern Bosnia where hundreds of migrants remain stranded despite snow and freezing weather. (AP)