

COMMENTARY ON THERESA MAY'S RESIGNATION

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To the bitter end: Theresa May steps down as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

In what may be a surprise for those who believed Theresa May would persist as Prime Minister for as long as it took to resolve Brexit – having survived multiple votes of no confidence, battled through a catastrophic snap General Election that resulted in a hung parliament and endured fifty ministerial resignations from her government, the most of any UK PM in history – this morning (24th May), she took to the lectern before No.10 Downing St. to communicate her resignation as Prime Minister and as leader of the Conservative Party effective on June 7th, 2019.

Theresa May's leadership of the United Kingdom as Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party will go down in history as one of the most difficult terms of office any UK Prime Minister has faced. Her office presided over the greatest peacetime crisis a UK government has faced in living memory, and with no clear resolution to the crisis – in what her critics have described as a term of office characterised more by personal ambition than selfless service – she leaves behind a chaotic political legacy that her successors will struggle to untangle.

Though the exact moment of its announcement may come suddenly, Ms. May's resignation has been expected for quite some time. Having made an ambiguous promise on 27th March 2019 to resign once Parliament passed her Brexit deal, the writing was clearly on the wall for her tenure as PM; although after the deal failed to be passed for a third time and no resignation was forthcoming, murmurs began to grow in Parliament of potential changes to leadership challenge rules to allow for an extraordinary vote of no confidence to remove her.

The policy nightmares posed by Brexit and the infighting and political backstabbing within the Conservative Party created an atmosphere of chaos any Prime Minister may well have struggled to overcome. Even sympathetic British media sources noted that Ms. May's leadership was effectively broken months before her resignation earlier this morning, and that her reluctance to accept it may have prolonged and worsened the national crisis facing the United Kingdom. It is significant that she was able to persist as Prime Minister under such conditions for as long as she did, and now the question must be asked whether, in so doing, she will have caused more harm or good for the prospects of the United Kingdom in future. In her resignation speech, Ms. May was clear that her chief regret as Prime Minister was that she had not delivered upon Brexit, and it would be down to her successor to seek a way forward that honoured the result of the 2016 referendum through finding consensus in Parliament. What may be most surprising about the Prime Minister's message for her successor, however, may be that she called upon her successor to seek compromise with "all sides" of those involved in the Brexit debate; something she herself resolutely refused to do until, grudgingly, in her very last weeks in power.

What Next?

Theresa May will formally resign on 7th June. After this point, she will remain in a 'caretaker' role until a leadership contest within the Conservative Party can be held, the winner of which will succeed her as Prime Minister. As of this morning, the Conservatives have stated they intend to have a new leader in place by mid-July. This indicates the leadership contest will take place soon after 7th June and that it will be a short one – strongly benefiting already well-known potential candidates for leadership.

...Who Next?

There are several potential candidates for leadership of the Conservatives. Jeremy Hunt, the current Foreign Secretary, has lost no time in announcing his own candidacy mere hours after Ms. May's resignation. Neither has Sir Graham Brady, stepping down as head of the 1922 Committee to run for Conservative leader. However, Boris Johnson – the former Mayor of London and Hunt's predecessor as Foreign Secretary – is, at the time of writing, by far and away the most likely potential candidate to succeed in a leadership bid. Johnson has already informally thrown his hat into the ring, publicly stating earlier in May that he intends to run for party leader, and has received the overt backing of at least ten Conservative MPs, including the chairman of the extreme Eurosceptic European Research Group, as well as the former defence secretary and others. Chiefly, Johnson is avowedly hardline on current issues; he is strongly pro-Brexit and anti-EU, having been one of the chief architects behind the Vote Leave campaign in 2016, and is viewed by other MPs as the most likely of the potential Conservative candidates to win against Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in a general election. In addition, Johnson's past rhetoric may position him as a strong threat to the voter base of Nigel Farage (formerly UKIP, leader of the Brexit Party), making him the most likely candidate by far to succeed in the Conservative leadership challenge.

Michael Gove is a distant second to Johnson, having been strongly rumoured to be planning a leadership bid in the past; however, whilst he enjoys reasonable support within the Conservatives, his electability has been questioned by some who query whether he would be able to meet the dual challenge of Labour under Corbyn or the populist vote commanded by Farage. Furthermore, Gove's refusal to openly challenge May in the past, and his support for May's thrice-rejected Brexit deal, will have weakened his position in the eyes of many Conservative MPs. Gove is not alone; Jeremy Hunt, along with other

hopefuls like Sajid Javid and Matt Hancock, may like Gove also be doomed in a future leadership bid by their past support for May's Brexit deal.

Where Now?

It is extremely likely – although not yet totally certain – that Boris Johnson will be prime candidate for Conservative Party leader, and therefore by default the next UK Prime Minister should his bid be successful. Barring a significant political upset – of which there have been many in the three chaotic years that Brexit has dominated British politics – there are several possible outcomes for Brexit under a Johnson-led Conservative government.

Firstly, and by no means unlikely, Mr. Johnson might well go to Brussels to attempt to renegotiate the Brexit deal, threatening a no-deal Brexit on October 31st if concessions are not made. Although a strong narrative in Conservative politics – and wider British society – exists about the potential success of this option, there is no logical or evidential basis for assuming the EU will “climb down” and give the UK a better deal than is already on the table.

In this scenario, Johnson – or the next Prime Minister – will be faced with three options: make good on his or her threat and commit to a no-deal Brexit and an economic disaster that will be felt in the UK for generations. Or pursue one of the other two options: commit to a second referendum – changing the existing narrative that to do so would be undemocratic, in the face of most polls suggesting Remain would now win by a healthy margin – or hold a general election.

A second referendum at this stage must seem utterly unconscionable to many within the Conservative party. However, some suggest it may be the only way to resolve the situation without either incurring a disastrous no-deal Brexit that will destroy Conservative electability for a generation, or without risking a general election that might – as it did for Theresa May – further weaken the Conservative Party's ability to govern.

As the effects of Theresa May's resignation ripple across Europe, EU leaders plan to hold emergency talks next week over the EU's future approach to a “different breed” of Brexiteer – revealing deep fears in the EU circles that the possibility of a no-deal withdrawal is once more a reality, presumably concurrent with fears over a Johnson-led UK government. Theresa May can look forward to one aspect, at least, of her legacy being untarnished by history: she will not be the Prime Minister to deliver a torturous no-deal Brexit, and may even be remembered, in comparison to the hardline Brexiteers who look set to seize the reins of the Conservative Party, as something of a moderate.