'Brexit means Brexit': Theresa May and post-referendum British politics

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Abstract:

Theresa May became prime minister in July 2016 as a direct result of the Brexit referendum. This article examines her political inheritance and leadership in the immediate wake of the vote. It analyses the factors that led to her victory in the ensuing Tory leadership contest and explores both the main challenges that confronted her and the main features of her response to them. During his first nine months in office, May gave effect to the referendum, defined Brexit as entailing Britain's removal from membership of the European Union's single market and customs union and sought to reposition her party. However, her failure to secure a majority in the 2017 general election gravely weakened her authority and the viability of her plans. At time of writing, it is unclear how much longer her premiership can last or if she will be able to exercise effective leadership over Brexit.

Introduction

According to an old university friend, Theresa May had once wanted to be Britain's first female prime minister (Weaver, 2016). After David Cameron resigned as Conservative party leader and prime minister in the wake of the June 2016 Brexit referendum, she became Britain's second. The premiership stands at the apex of the British political system and confers on its holder great prestige, a place in the history books and enormous potential influence (King, 1991). It is the job that most ambitious career politicians want (Riddell, 1993). In becoming prime minister, May achieved her lifelong ambition but her prize resembled a poisoned chalice. She was now responsible for leading a government committed to taking the country out of the European Union (EU).

While the referendum's outcome may have been advisory in a strictly legal sense, it was politically binding on the new prime minister. The 2015 Conservative manifesto had committed the party to respecting the result, the campaign had been fought in that spirit, and Cameron's government, of which May had been part, had promptly accepted the decision. Despite having campaigned against leaving the EU, May was obliged to pursue this goal. Achieving it, however, would be fraught with difficulty. The paving legislation for the referendum had not explicitly authorised the government to give effect to the result, the vote in favour of leaving the EU had been won by narrow margin, and three-quarters of MPs had campaigned against Brexit (BBC News, 2016). To cap it all, no one was prepared for what came next, and there was little consensus in either May's party or the country as to what *should* come next. The political and practical difficulties of delivering Brexit threatened to overwhelm the new prime minister.

This article examines May's political inheritance and response to the Brexit vote. It focuses primarily on the period up to her fateful decision in April 2017 to call an early general election. No assessment of May's response to the referendum would be complete without reference to the subsequent loss of her parliamentary majority and her return at the head of a minority government, but nor should it be distorted by these events. During her first nine months in office, she showed herself to be cautious but dogged in pursuit of delivering Brexit. She provided her government and party with a sense of direction in the chaotic wake of the referendum, and she succeeded in overcoming the initial challenge of giving effect to its result. It should also be remembered that her party's share of the vote in 2017 increased by 5.5 percentage points on what Cameron had achieved in 2015. Had the vagaries of Britain's voting system been kinder to the Conservatives, the course of events, and evaluations of her leadership, might have been very different.

On this last point, expert surveys suggest that the most successful prime ministers are considered to be those who provide clear leadership at times of national emergency and/or set the political agenda for years to come (see Theakston, 2013). It also helps if prime ministers win elections (see Buller and James, 2012). Had the Tories won convincingly in June 2017, May could perhaps have joined the likes of Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher on the list of political 'weather-makers' (Hennessy, 2000, p. 531) by leading Britain out of the EU on the terms she had defined. Instead, she now looks set to join the list of prime ministerial failures. At time of writing, it remains to be seen what fate has in store for the remainder of May's premiership, including how long it will last, but it would be an enormous turnaround if she were

able to resurrect her long-term prospects in the wake of the election and her catastrophic loss of authority.

A vacancy in Downing Street

It was virtually impossible for David Cameron to continue as prime minister after nearly 52 percent of voters opted for Britain to leave the EU in the June 2016 referendum. He announced his resignation within hours, asserting that 'fresh leadership' was required to implement the result (Keate et al., 2016). While Cameron would remain in office until the Tories elected a new leader, his announcement multiplied a post-referendum sense of uncertainty. No one seemed to be in control.

The ensuing leadership contest was conducted according to rules introduced in 1998 in William Hague's *Fresh Future* reforms (see Quinn, 2012, pp. 97-130). Aspiring candidates would first need to be nominated by two Conservative MPs. Successful nominees would then participate in a series of eliminative parliamentary ballots, which would whittle the field down to two. Finally, these two candidates would face each other in a simple ballot of all Conservative party members.

Befitting the unusual circumstances of the contest, there was a dramatic twist even before nominations closed. Boris Johnson, the ambitious former mayor of London and a high-profile Leave campaigner, was set to run but suddenly withdrew after Michael Gove, the justice secretary, fellow Leaver and Johnson's own campaign manager, denounced him and announced his own candidacy. Facing a likely defeat, Johnson withdrew from the race. In the event, five candidates were nominated: Gove himself; Liam Fox, a former defence secretary and another Leave campaigner; Andrea

Leadsom, the energy minister and yet another Leave campaigner; Stephen Crabb, the work and pensions secretary and a supporter of remaining in the EU; and Theresa May, the home secretary and a seemingly lukewarm Remainer.

The first round of voting among Tory MPs was held on 5 July. May established herself as the clear frontrunner, receiving just over half the votes cast (165 out of 329). Leadsom (66 votes) was a distant second, ahead of Gove (48 votes) in third. Fox (16 votes) came last and was duly eliminated, while fourth-placed Crabb (34 votes) also withdrew (Elliott, 2016a). May, Leadsom and Gove then went through to a second round of voting among MPs on 7 July. May picked up nearly three-dozen votes, giving her the backing of more than 60 percent of the Conservative parliamentary party (199 out of 329 votes cast). Leadsom (84 votes) picked up some additional support, whereas Gove (46 votes) lost ground (Elliott, 2016b). Gove's elimination from the contest meant that May and Leadsom would proceed to a ballot of all party members.

Three factors help to explain May's clear victory in the first stage of the contest. The first was basic parliamentary arithmetic. During the referendum campaign, 56 percent of Conservative MPs had supported remaining in the EU, and 42 percent had supported Brexit (BBC News, 2016). A large proportion of the former were almost certainly now disposed towards backing a Remainer. May had kept a low profile ahead of the referendum (see Oliver, 2016), but she had still come out against Brexit. A second factor was May's success in presenting herself as the unity candidate. Her qualified support for EU membership and her immediate acceptance of the referendum result enabled her to win over some pro-Brexit MPs. More generally, May

sold herself as the representative of mainstream Conservatism. Her wider acceptability to all parts of the party was probably enhanced by her occasionally frosty relationship with Cameron and his 'modernising' allies (Laws, 2016, p. 274). Modernisation had been a central theme of Cameron's party leadership (see Bale, 2010). It had been both an agenda to make the party's policies and image more appealing to contemporary society, and a discursive device for justifying change (see Dommett, 2015; Kerr and Hayton, 2015). But modernisation had been only tolerated at best by the party's traditionalist base. Many were glad to move on.

A final factor, especially important in the chaotic aftermath of the referendum, was May's reputation as a 'safe pair of hands' (Coulson, 2016; Parker and Warrell, 2014). Much of this reputation stemmed from sheer longevity in office. She had been home secretary since 2010 and was the longest-serving holder of the post since James Chuter Ede in the 1945-51 Labour government. May's style as home secretary had won her few friends, however. For the former Liberal Democrat minister David Laws (2016, p. 276), she was 'instinctively secretive and very rigid'. For an unnamed Conservative, her team and working style were 'very closed, very controlling, very untrusting' (quoted in Day, 2014). For Kenneth Clarke, one of the former Tory ministers with whom she had clashed, May was a 'bloody difficult woman' (quoted in Savage, 2016). But if she was not much liked, she was respected. Compared to her rivals, May exuded experience and competence.

Having made it through the parliamentary stage of the contest, May was now the clear favourite to win the ballot of Tory members, which was planned to take place later in the summer. A YouGov (2016a) survey of the party's membership suggested that the

home secretary would beat Leadsom by 63 percent to 31 percent in a straight fight. Yet, there was one final twist in the leadership race. On 11 July, Leadsom suddenly announced her withdrawal from the contest following some ill-advised remarks about motherhood and the implication that she would make a better prime minister than the childless May (Sylvester, 2016). As the only candidate left, May was duly proclaimed the new party leader. On 13 July, she succeeded Cameron as prime minister.

May's challenges

Theresa May was the seventh prime minister since 1945 to take office after becoming party leader during the lifetime of a parliament (see Worthy, 2016). Like others before her, she faced a steep learning curve. She immediately had to form a government, and she would soon be expected to answer prime minister's questions in the House of Commons. She also had to escape the mindset of being a departmental minister: as head of government, she now had to see the bigger picture. Last but certainly not least, May now had to make good on her promise to deliver Brexit.

In leading this process, May would need to grapple with a number of challenges. The first of these was simply to make the most of her limited capacity to influence people and events. Prime ministers have little executive power and few institutional resources of their own. They must rely largely on ministers and officials to develop and implement policy. They are constrained too by their cabinet colleagues and MPs, as well as by public opinion. To be sure, May enjoyed an array of powers that ensured her primacy within the government, not least the right to hire and fire ministers and control over the cabinet's agenda and the rules of cabinet decision making (King, 1991). She could also use her office as a 'bully pulpit' to communicate directly with

the public and other audiences (Heffernan, 2006). Yet her ability to access these resources would be contingent on her own 'personal resources', including her skills, her standing in the party, and her wider popularity and prestige (Heffernan, 2003).

For the time being at least, May was in a fortuitous situation. The new prime minister may not have won a general election but she had convincingly won the leadership contest, and she faced no immediate threats from rivals. May benefited further from facing a demoralised and divided opposition. Indeed, a virtual civil war had broken out in the Labour party immediately after the June referendum. Already unhappy with the direction of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, three-quarters of Labour MPs now expressed their disapproval by supporting a motion of no-confidence in him as leader. Corbyn ignored the non-binding vote. Owen Smith, a Welsh MP, then mounted a formal leadership challenge against Corbyn. The contest dragged on until September, when Corbyn was re-elected with a resounding 62 percent of the vote (Rawnsley, 2016). Labour's strife paralysed the opposition and reinforced the Tories' comfortable lead in the polls. It also gave the new prime minister some initial extra room for manoeuvre.

A second and perhaps more fundamental challenge confronting May was more obviously political: to bring together her bitterly divided party. She inherited residual tensions between traditionalists and modernisers, or those who were socially conservative and socially liberal, and very pronounced tensions over Europe (see Heppell, 2013). For nearly three decades the Tories had been torn over Britain's relationship with the EU. The referendum campaign had only exacerbated these divisions. Colleagues had taken different sides and questioned each other's judgement

and integrity. Many of those who had opposed Brexit now felt a sense of resentment towards those who had campaigned for it. Looking ahead, May could expect dissent from Tory Leavers if there was any delay in implementing the result, and she could expect dissent from some Tory Remainers if doing so threatened Britain's economic interests. On past form, the risk of dissent was always likely to be greater among pro-Brexit Tories, whose opposition to the EU was almost an article of faith, than it was among anti-Brexit Conservatives, whose support for the EU was generally pragmatic and conditional (Lynch and Whitaker, 2013). Within weeks, pro-Brexit Tories had even formed a new campaign group, 'Leave Means Leave', which called for Britain to cut all ties with the EU as soon as possible (Ross, 2016).

Compounding the second challenge was a third: May inherited a working majority of only 16.[1] As a result, a dozen Tory MPs could hold her to ransom on any issue, including her plans for Brexit. Moreover, May would need to govern with this constraint potentially until 2020. As a consequence of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, the prime minister had lost the right to call an election at the time of her choosing (see Norton, 2016). Even if the electoral circumstances were favourable, there was no guarantee that May would be able to secure the two-thirds vote in the House of Commons needed to trigger an early election.

A fourth challenge confronting May was to establish what leaving the EU would actually entail. The referendum had asked voters whether or not the United Kingdom should remain a member of the EU. It had not asked voters what kind of relationship with the EU they wanted if Britain left. While many people now wanted to retain access to the EU's single market and membership of its customs union, there was

considerable disagreement over what Britain should concede in return. And there was little prospect of Britain enjoying such access or membership without making significant concessions to the EU (Wright and Coates, 2016). One position, soon dubbed 'hard Brexit', favoured complete control of national borders, laws and finances, even if this meant no free access to the single market and potentially falling back on World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules in future trade with the EU. The alternative position, termed 'soft Brexit', favoured compromise on these points in order to maximise access to the single market and the opportunity for free trade with the EU.

There were arguably good economic reasons for pursuing a soft Brexit. Being outside of the single market threatened growth and the City of London's pre-eminence in financial services. Leaked government papers suggested that a hard Brexit could cost the government £66 billion a year in tax revenues (Coates and Wright, 2016). But while economic logic pointed towards a soft Brexit, political realities pointed towards a harder version. The balance and relative intensity of opinion on the Conservative backbenches was one factor. So too was the mood among the Tory grassroots. A YouGov (2016a) survey of party members in July 2016 found that 57 percent said the new prime minister should try to negotiate a free-trade deal with the EU, but only if it could be done without allowing EU citizens the right to live and work in Britain. Meanwhile, there was little popular appetite for the concessions that might be needed to secure access to the single market. Controlling immigration had been a central promise of the Leave campaign, and survey data suggested that few voters were willing to compromise on this point (YouGov, 2016b). Any concessions would also

be pounced upon by the Tory press and especially those newspapers, such as *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, which had campaigned for Brexit.

A fifth challenge confronting May concerned the means by which Britain would actually leave the EU. Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty allowed for only two years of negotiations, but it was unclear if May's government could trigger the process through the use of the royal prerogative, or if parliament would need to pass legislation. If legislative authorisation were needed, MPs opposed to Brexit could disrupt and delay the whole process, opening up further divisions on the government benches. The uncertainty stemmed from the fact that British membership of the EU was established in statute, specifically the European Communities Act 1972. It was also recognised in the various statutes that provided for devolution (Douglas-Scott, 2016). The European Referendum Act 2015, which had legislated for the referendum, had not explicitly authorised the government to trigger article 50. Even before the first round of voting in the Tory leadership contest, a number of groups had announced plans to submit a legal challenge to the high court on the grounds that explicit parliamentary approval was needed (Zeffman et al., 2016).

The process of leaving the EU was further complicated by the fact that it would actually require a number of separate negotiations. The article 50 negotiations would cover the formality of withdrawal and matters such as the division of EU liabilities and assets—in effect, the 'divorce bill'—the rights of EU citizens living in Britain and the status of the Northern Irish border (see The Economist, 2016). Britain would then need to negotiate a new trade deal with the EU, and it would also need to negotiate new free-trade agreements with the 53 countries that Britain presently enjoyed by

virtue of being in the EU. Furthermore, Britain would also need to negotiate the terms of its WTO membership, since these were presently defined by its status as an EU member. Since all these negotiations were likely to take longer than two years, it was likely that Britain would need to negotiate an interim relationship with the EU. Frustratingly, the other EU member states refused to enter into pre-negotiations. Worryingly, Whitehall lacked the capacity and expertise to plan for and conduct all these negotiations simultaneously (Rutter and McCrae, 2016).

A sixth and rather more domestic challenge confronting the prime minister was to keep the country united as it left the EU. On the one hand, the referendum risked creating tensions between a pro-Brexit England and an anti-Brexit Scotland. Some 62 percent of Scots had voted to remain inside the EU, and Scotland's first minister Nicola Sturgeon immediately made it clear that a second independence referendum was now very much on the agenda (McIntosh and Macdonell, 2016). May's government could well face a constitutional struggle to keep Scotland in one union as it looked to secure Britain's withdrawal from another. On the other hand, leaving the EU would also have significant implications for Northern Ireland. Like their Scots counterparts, a majority of Northern Irish voters (56 percent) had supported remaining in the EU. More importantly, Northern Ireland shared a land border with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state, and the openness of this border was a major component of the Northern Irish peace process. Brexit now potentially threatened that process. In negotiating withdrawal, the British government would somehow need to devise a way of avoiding the re-imposition of border controls between the North and the Republic.

A final challenge facing May was to avoid being defined exclusively by Brexit. While leaving the EU would inevitably dominate politics for the remainder of the parliament, her government could not neglect other issues. Bread-and-butter concerns with the economy, public services and immigration would continue to structure domestic politics, and they were also likely to matter come the next general election. Voters would not judge the Conservatives solely on their handling of Brexit. May's government would need some sort of policy vision or long-term programme if it were to set the broader terms of debate. After the referendum, the Conservatives' mission could no longer be one of balancing the books and fixing Labour's alleged past profligacy, the narrative developed by David Cameron and his chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne (Gamble, 2015). As party leader, May would need to provide a new sense of purpose for her party.

Leading in the referendum's aftermath

Theresa May had very little time to develop a strategy for managing the politics of Brexit and overcoming the challenges she faced. She had to hit the ground running. Her response began to take shape before she took office, and it became clearer over the following weeks and months.

The first and perhaps most obvious feature of May's response was her immediate and unambiguous acceptance of the referendum result. As she put it when announcing her candidacy for the Tory leadership:

> Brexit means Brexit. The campaign was fought, the vote was held, turnout was
>
> high, and the public gave their verdict. There must be no attempts to remain

inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it through the back door, and no second

referendum. (May, 2016a)

'Brexit means Brexit' became the prime minister's mantra. She repeated it on many subsequent occasions, including in her first speech at the October party conference: 'The referendum result was clear. It was legitimate … Brexit means Brexit' (May, 2016c). Like prime ministers before her, May used the bully pulpit of her office to articulate her intended direction of travel: Britain would be leaving the European Union. Her forceful tone served to provide some sense of certainty amidst the wider uncertainty generated by the referendum. It also served to reassure pro-Brexit MPs in her party, not to mention the 52 percent of voters who had opted to leave the EU. It did not, however, suggest any particular interest in reaching out to many of the 48 percent who had voted to remain or to the 74 percent of MPs who had previously declared their opposition to Brexit (BBC News, 2016).

A second feature of May's response was to rule out emphatically an early election. When launching her leadership campaign, May had insisted that 'there should be no general election until 2020' (May, 2016a). She downplayed the prospect of going to the country at every subsequent opportunity, even as the Tories opened up a double-digit polling lead over Labour in the spring of 2017 (Elliott et al., 2017). The line was unambiguous: an early election would create instability, and there was no need for one in any event. The prime minister might have felt constrained by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act; above all, she was probably mindful of the speculation that had damaged Gordon Brown's reputation in 2007 (Allen, 2011, pp. 9-10). By allowing expectations to build and then not calling an early election, Brown had appeared

indecisive and weak. His premiership never fully recovered. May was not going to repeat that mistake. Downing Street's line was always consistent and clear, and it successfully closed down destabilising speculation. When the prime minister changed her mind in April 2017, the surprise was complete.

A third feature of May's response was to delay as long as possible saying what form of Brexit she preferred and even when she would trigger article 50. If the prime minister was clear that Brexit meant Brexit, she was opaque on what Brexit would actually entail. When in early September David Davis, the new secretary for state for exiting the EU, suggested that Britain would probably leave the single market, the prime minister's spokeswoman made it clear that he was expressing his 'own opinion', not government policy (Pickard and Warrell, 2016). A few days later, in a statement to MPs, May refused to reveal her hand 'prematurely' and further refused to 'provide a running commentary'.

From May's point of view, vagueness was necessary. Her government needed time to explore its options and prepare for the negotiations. Vagueness also enabled her to avoid an immediate public confrontation with one section or other of her own party. Once she declared her position, she was bound to antagonise either those who favoured a softer Brexit, or those who favoured a harder Brexit. From others' points of view, however, vagueness added to the political and economic uncertainty. With demands for clarity mounting, May announced in October that article 50 would be triggered before the end of March 2017. She also hinted that her government was gearing up for a harder form of Brexit: 'We are not leaving the European Union only to give up control of immigration again. And we are not leaving only to return to the

jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice' (May, 2016b). The tone was red meat

for the Tory right. It was also perhaps part of a strategy to lower the expectations of

those clamouring for a soft Brexit.

Three months later, in a speech at Lancaster House in January 2017, the prime

minister confirmed her intention of pursuing a harder Brexit. She ruled out continued

membership of the single market and the contribution of 'huge sums to the EU

budget'. She also ruled out membership of the EU's customs union: 'I want Britain to

be free to establish our own tariff schedules at the World Trade Organisation,

meaning we can reach new trade agreements not just with the European Union but

with old friends and new allies from outside Europe too' (May, 2017). The opposition

among Tory MPs who advocated a soft Brexit was surprisingly muted.

A fourth feature of May's response was to co-opt some of the Leavers in her party and

oblige them to share the responsibility for delivering Brexit. Using her powers of

appointment, May dismissed or demoted no fewer than thirteen cabinet-level

ministers in a wide-ranging reshuffle, most notably George Osborne and Michael

Gove, and promoted or brought in to cabinet several high-profile Leavers, including

Boris Johnson, David Davis, Liam Fox, Andrea Leadsom and Priti Patel. Pro-Brexit

ministers now constituted over a quarter of her senior ministerial team.[2]

Even more important than numbers was May's allocation of portfolios. She gave three

key Brexit-related posts to prominent Leavers: Davis was made secretary of state for

exiting the EU with responsibility for planning Britain's withdrawal; Fox was made

international trade secretary with responsibility for cultivating post-Brexit trade

agreements; and Johnson was made foreign secretary with responsibility for representing British interests more generally. The appointment of 'the three Brexiteers' provided further reassurance to the pro-Brexit wing of her party. It also bound them to the prime minister and obliged them to defend the government in any dealings with awkward Leave MPs.

A fifth feature of May's response was to assert the government's ultimate control over the Brexit process. She would proceed not by consensus but by taking advantage of what remained of Britain's traditional power-hoarding constitution (King, 2007). The most obvious manifestation of this approach was in the government's initial plans to trigger article 50 on the basis of prerogative powers (Swinford, 2016). It would seek neither parliamentary authorisation nor the consent of the devolved institutions in Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff. In October at the Tory party conference, May (2016b) spelt out her stance: 'the negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union are the responsibility of the Government and nobody else'. Parliament would, of course, have an opportunity to scrutinise the government's actions, and the Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh governments would be consulted. Parliament would also be asked to pass a 'Great Repeal Bill', which would repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and the primacy of EU law, and simultaneously transform all existing EU law into British law. Parliament would even be asked to vote on the final Brexit settlement. But no one would be allowed to dictate the government's negotiating position.

Political calculations drove this feature of May's strategy. In essence, she needed to prevent MPs and peers and the devolved institutions from delaying or even vetoing

Brexit, since either outcome could antagonise the most ardent Brexiteers and threaten

her government's survival. The simplest way to do so was to use prerogative powers

to trigger article 50. Once negotiations started, it would be virtually impossible for

anyone to halt them. Opponents of Brexit would then be bound to accept whatever

deal the government brought back, which meant in practice whatever the EU was

willing to offer.

The problem with this approach, however, was its potential illegality. A challenge had

been presented to the high court in July, as noted, which argued that the government

had no right to trigger article 50 through prerogative powers. The high court duly

ruled against the government in early November, prompting a wave of hysterical

headlines in some newspapers: the *Daily Mail*'s front page proclaimed the three

judges to be the 'enemies of the people' (Slack, 2016). The government immediately

appealed to the supreme court, which heard the case in December and issued its

judgment in late January. By a majority of 8 to 3, the judges ruled that legislation was

required to authorise the triggering of article 50 (Wright, 2017). The supreme court

also ruled on the question of whether or not the consent of the devolved institutions

was required. Much to ministers' relief, it unanimously decided that it was not.

The government, which had had plenty of time to prepare for the ruling, immediately

published a short bill that authorised the prime minister to trigger article 50. MPs

quickly passed the bill with surprisingly little fuss. The House of Lords then sought to

amend it, with provisions to guarantee the rights of EU nationals living in the UK and

to give parliament 'a meaningful vote' on the final Brexit deal—but peers ultimately

backed down. The European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act received royal

assent on 16 March. Its passage had been virtually guaranteed by the Labour party's decision to support it. Two weeks later, May formally notified the European Council of the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the EU. The whole episode ought to have been extremely embarrassing for the government. Instead, the political damage was limited. May's insistence on appealing to the supreme court after the initial ruling, rather than rushing straight to parliament, had had the effect of signalling her intent and reinforcing her reputation for persistence. It also bought the government some time to prepare.

A sixth feature of May's response to the referendum was to assert her personal influence over the Brexit process *within* government. To do so, she utilised many of the powers traditionally associated with the premiership. When initially forming her government, for instance, she sacked a number of senior ministers with whom she had previously clashed, notably Osborne and Gove. It served as a powerful statement of intent. At the same time, May created additional Brexit-related portfolios, as seen, thereby making it harder for anyone else to 'own' the issue. She also reserved to herself the most important policy statements on Brexit and made occasional public interventions to rebuke or correct her ministers if they deviated from her line. Lastly, May used her powers to set the rules of collective decision making, in particular reorganising the cabinet-committee system and making herself the chair of four core policy committees, including a new Brexit committee. Early reports suggested a return to 'traditional cabinet government' (Thomson and Sylvester, 2016). But while there might have been more discussion among ministers, it was abundantly clear who was calling the shots.

May's style of leadership was largely consistent with her conduct as home secretary. She demonstrated a characteristic stubbornness in pursuit of her goals, and a reluctance to be rushed into making decisions. She also demonstrated a characteristic disinterest in building coalitions. The way in which May dismissed Osborne and others in July 2016—and later her sacking of Tory grandee Lord Heseltine from a government advisory position after he voted to amend the then European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill—revealed an almost vindictive streak. She seemed set on following Machiavelli's dictum that it was 'better to be feared than loved' without heeding his advice to avoid 'hatred'. The continuity in May's operating style was further reinforced by the import into Downing Street of several long-serving advisers from her spell in the Home Office. She appointed Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, two loyal former special advisers, as her co-chiefs of staff, and a number of other trusted personnel to other key positions (Warrell et al., 2017). The result was to create a tight-knit circle around the prime minister but one that potentially isolated her from other senior figures in the government and alternative sources of advice.

A final feature of May's response to the referendum was to make Brexit part of a new governing narrative, an account of what her government was doing and why. May had set out the narrative's key themes at the start of her leadership bid: the referendum was a vote to regain control over laws and immigration, Britain would withdraw from the EU but continue to be a global player, and it was her 'mission' to create a more meritocratic society that worked for everyone, especially those who were 'just about' managing and not just the 'privileged few' (May, 2016a). Put another way, leaving the EU would be an opportunity for a national fresh start.

May promoted this narrative at every opportunity. Immediately after taking office, she again talked of her 'mission to make Britain a country that works for everyone' (May, 2016b). In the first of two speeches at her party's autumn party conference, she called the referendum 'the biggest vote for change this country has ever known', and set out a positive vision of an 'independent, sovereign' Britain (May, 2016c). In her second conference speech, she hailed this 'once-in-a-generation chance to change the direction of our nation', and promised a government that 'steps up—and not back—to act on behalf of us all' (May, 2016d). Three months later, when introducing her 'plan for Britain', the prime minister promised to 'use this moment of change to build a stronger economy and a fairer society by embracing genuine economic and social reform' (May, 2017).

In some respects, May's rhetoric was standard fare. All new prime ministers try to persuade voters that they stand for something new, all give hints of moving to the centre ground of British politics, and all promise to do more for ordinary working people. But in other respects, May's narrative was remarkable. In making her own pitch to the centre ground, May sought to accommodate those voters who resented or felt 'left behind' by globalisation and the mainstream political parties (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). She did so by distancing herself from some of the prevailing orthodoxies of neoliberalism, as well as the party modernisation agenda associated with her predecessor. In an interventionist break with Cameron and recent Conservative party policy, she called for workers to be represented on company boards, for shareholder votes on executive pay to be binding, and for the country to develop a 'proper industrial strategy' (May, 2016a). This rhetorical enthusiasm for greater intervention certainly marked a departure from the party's Thatcherite

commitment to the free market. So too did May's decision to prioritise immigration controls over economic growth and access to the EU's single market.

The prime minister's narrative was also remarkable, if only in the sense of meriting comment, because of the tension between its vision of a 'global Britain', underpinned by free trade, and its simultaneous and potentially conflicting commitment to 'a better deal for ordinary working people at home', underpinned by controlled immigration, greater state intervention and the reassertion of national sovereignty (May, 2017). The difficulties in squaring this circle were highlighted during May's November 2016 trip to India, where British hopes of greater access for its financial services clashed with Indian hopes for relaxed immigration controls (Coates, 2016). They were also highlighted in the prime minister's 2017 threat to set 'competitive tax rates' in a bid to 'attract the world's best companies and biggest investors to Britain' (May, 2017). It was not immediately clear how such a position would address the concerns of the 'left behind'.

Finally, May's narrative was remarkable in being premised on a contested and contestable interpretation of the June referendum. Apparently disregarding the 48 percent who rejected Brexit, she insisted that: 'the message from the public before and during the referendum campaign was clear: Brexit must mean control of the number of people who come to Britain from Europe' (May, 2017). Such an interpretation was not shared by everyone in her party, let alone the country. There were long-term risks in claiming a mandate to change the general direction of government policy on the basis of a narrow referendum result.

Throwing it all away?

Theresa May's first months in office were a critical period for the new prime minister. She came to power off the back of a referendum result that she had campaigned against, that no one had planned for, and that a majority of MPs and peers had opposed. Her response was to embrace Brexit and to make it her mission to deliver it. By the end of March 2016, May had at least cleared her first major hurdle. She had secured parliamentary authorisation to trigger article 50, and had then done so. May had also defined what form of Brexit the UK would pursue: it would be a harder Brexit, with Britain outside of the EU single market and customs union. Neither of these achievements was insignificant.

Nevertheless, many challenges still lay ahead. Brexit negotiations had not started, and her party and the country remained divided over what form of Brexit the government should pursue. May's parliamentary majority also remained wafer thin. Indeed, its precariousness had been reinforced by the resignation in late 2016 of two Tory MPs, Zac Goldsmith, who quit in protest at the government's decision to proceed with the development of a third runway at Heathrow, and Stephen Phillips, who resigned over the government's approach to Brexit (Keate, 2016). While the Conservatives had retained Phillips' Sleaford and North Hykeham seat in the subsequent by-election, they had lost Goldsmith's Richmond Park constituency to the Liberal Democrats.

In April 2017, and reversing her earlier position, May suddenly announced her intention to seek an early election to be held on 8 June. The reasoning seemed impeccable. Her party had long enjoyed a comfortable lead over Labour in the opinion polls, and she enjoyed a considerable personal lead over Jeremy Corbyn

(YouGov, 2017). The Tories had even taken the Copeland constituency from Labour in a by-election in February 2017. Assuming the polls were accurate, May now looked certain to increase significantly her majority. This would strengthen her position vis-à-vis both her parliamentary party and the EU. It would also give the prime minister a clear electoral mandate to pursue her vision of Brexit, not to mention extra time to achieve a deal before the next general election, now due in 2022. In terms of 'statecraft', her decision seemed to be an act of strategic genius (Buller and James, 2012).

At first, everything went smoothly. The prime minister easily secured the parliamentary votes needed to hold an early election, and the Tories performed strongly in the local elections on 4 May. The Conservative campaign also had a seemingly clear focus: May's reputedly 'strong and stable leadership' and ability to secure a good Brexit deal. But the Tories' campaign was soon shown to be wanting. On the one hand, May struggled to construct a likable public persona. Introverted by nature, she seemed robotic and temperamentally unsuited to being the centre of a highly personalised campaign. On the other hand, May also struggled to live up to her billing. Days after her party's manifesto launch, the prime minister performed an embarrassing U-turn on the issue of funding for domiciliary social care. Doubts about the strength and stability of her leadership grew, exacerbated by her refusal to participate in a televised leaders' debate. Terrorist attacks in Manchester and London further shifted attention away from Brexit and onto May's past record as home secretary. Labour and Corbyn, meanwhile, had a good campaign. Indeed, Labour's leader came into his own in front of enthusiastic crowds of supporters. Gradually, the polls narrowed.

In the event, the Conservatives won only 317 seats, 55 more than Labour but 13 fewer than in 2015. Even though initial expectations of a Tory landslide had faded, the final outcome was still something of a shock. To be sure, the Tories polled 42.4 percent of the popular vote, their highest share since 1983 and a significant increase on the 36.9 percent achieved two years earlier. They also did very well in Scotland, winning no fewer than 13 seats. But the fact remains that May lost her parliamentary majority in an election that she had called and which had been framed around her abilities as a leader. She was able to continue in office at the head of a minority government thanks to a confidence-and-supply agreement reached with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). She was also able to continue for the good reason that she had made the premiership even more of a poisoned chalice than when she had inherited it. Who in their right mind would want to usurp her as the head of a divided minority government? Even for an ambitious career politician, it was possibly the worst time to become prime minister. Crucially, there was no obvious successor around whom her divided party could unite. May's personal authority, however, was left in tatters. She was obliged to sack her key advisers, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, and she was unable to conduct a wide-ranging reshuffle of her government. She had squandered most of her ability to provide prime ministerial leadership.

At the time of writing, it would be unwise to make too many predictions about the ultimate fate of Britain's second female prime minister or the final outcome of the Brexit negotiations. Much will depend on the durability of the Conservative-DUP agreement. Britain still seems destined to leave the EU, but the result of the 2017 general election has made it more difficult for May to strike a deal that reflects her

vision of Brexit. Indeed, it has made it more difficult for her government to strike any deal with the EU. Even with the DUP's backing, May is utterly reliant on the support of the most ardent Leavers in her party, some of whom are reluctant to pay a large divorce bill to the EU. In the language of Putnam's (1988) two-level game, the 'win-set' among Tory MPs for a deal is thus very narrow. The result of the 2017 election also casts doubts on the feasibility of May's attempts to reposition her party and take it in a more interventionist direction. Lastly, the result casts obvious doubt on the viability of May continuing as Conservative leader and prime minister. The Westminster consensus is that May is on borrowed time. That may well be the case; but as both the Brexit referendum and 2017 general election have taught us, events can often confound general expectations.

Notes

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[1] Although the Conservatives' 330 MPs (out of 650) suggested an absolute majority of only ten, the four Sinn Féin MPs refused to take their seats in the House of Commons, and neither the speaker nor his three deputies—one Tory and two Labour MPs—would be expected to vote. As a result, the government's majority was 16 in practice.

[2] This proportion refers to the seven out of 27 ministers entitled to attend cabinet.

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