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# Theresa May: A Premiership in Crisis

The reversal of Theresa May's fortunes, following her catastrophic decision to call a premature general election, demonstrates the vulnerability of a Prime Minister who cannot command a parliamentary majority. Despite her flaws, May remains the least worst option for many Tories, writes Graham Goodlad.

**W**hen she came to power in July 2016, Theresa May seemed to occupy a commanding position. She entered Number 10 after a period of intense upheaval, with the surprise result of the EU referendum, followed by David Cameron's resignation as Prime Minister and the subsequent battle for the Conservative leadership. May was a reassuring figure, behind whom her party could reunite to get on with the urgent business of negotiating

Brexit. Although May had supported the Remain side in the referendum campaign, she had not done so as unequivocally as Cameron – there was no suggestion of 'Project Fear' in her public stance on the issue. She was thus well placed to unite the two warring factions in the Conservative Party. Although there were some rumblings that she lacked her own mandate, having inherited the slim parliamentary majority won by Cameron in May 2015, there could be no serious political or constitutional objections to her assumption

of office.

May brought to Number 10 the advantages associated with a long and steady career near the top of British politics. A succession of shadow portfolios had been followed by an unusually long six-year stint at the Home Office. Admittedly, this is not a post which usually acts as a springboard to higher things. In the previous half-century only one Home Secretary, James Callaghan, had become Prime Minister, and he did not move directly from one office to the other. May was, however, viewed as a 'safe pair of hands', displaying an unexciting pragmatism which suited the needs of a moment of uncertainty.

From her time as party chairman in 2002, when she had warned the Conservatives about their image as the 'nasty party', May had acquired a reputation as a moderniser,



prepared to speak uncomfortable truths. As Home Secretary she was seen as competent and dogged in the pursuit of her objectives. She had confronted the Police Federation about the need for institutional reform, and patiently negotiated the extradition of hate preacher Abu Qatada to Jordan in face of the obstacles presented by the Human Rights Act. She was not seriously damaged by problems which arose during her tenure, such as the government's failure to meet its targets for reducing immigration.

In tribute to May's quiet tenacity, a Financial Times article, a full two years before her arrival in Downing Street, asked whether she could become 'Britain's Angela Merkel'. Like the long-serving German Chancellor, it argued, May was 'another non-ideological politician with a ruthless streak who gets on with the job'. On the face of it this seemed like a winning combination which might equip her for the highest office. So where did it all go wrong? The erosion of May's position during the early summer of 2017 brings into sharp focus several key factors which determine prime ministerial fortunes: the ability of the office holder to control the House of Commons; the impact of unforeseen events; the part played by individual governing style and relations with Cabinet colleagues; and, quite simply, the role of personality.

### From slim majority to minority government

The immediate cause of May's troubles was, of course, her huge miscalculation in calling a snap general election which left her eight seats short of a Commons majority. The reversal in her parliamentary position between April and June 2017 has served to underline the ultimate dependence of all prime ministers on parliamentary arithmetic. Instead of securing the enhanced mandate that she had sought, May was left dependent on a controversial deal with the largest Northern Ireland party, the Democratic Unionists, for her very survival in office.

The decision to dissolve Parliament after just two years was difficult to manage because the Prime Minister had previously denied that she would do so, and it meant that she had to circumvent the provisions of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act. Nonetheless there was a persuasive case for an early election. May appealed to the electorate

to 'strengthen her hand' in the complex negotiations to withdraw the UK from the EU. At the start of the campaign she was widely tipped to win a landslide victory – perhaps in three figures – over Labour, led by the supposedly unelectable, far-left Jeremy Corbyn. To widespread amazement, the Conservative poll lead dropped as the campaign progressed. Although the party increased its share of the vote to 42.4 per cent, and still emerged with the largest number of seats in the Commons, the polling companies failed to detect the corresponding rise in the Labour vote, to 40 per cent of the total.

A number of factors combined to produce the election result. Crucially, Labour proved more sophisticated in harnessing the youth vote, using social media to an unprecedented degree to mobilise support. One survey, by the polling company YouGov, estimated that 58 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds turned out, compared to 43 per cent in 2015. The ten constituencies with the highest proportions of 18 to 24 year olds experienced increases of 14 per cent in the Labour vote. This is partly to be explained by the way in which Corbyn appealed to the young, notably with his pledge to end student tuition fees. More generally, the Conservatives ran a relentlessly negative campaign, focusing on Labour's presumed lack of governing competency and the unaffordability of its spending promises. This line of attack was only to be expected, but the Tories also failed to project a positive vision of their own. Reaching for an analogy with the book of the Bible most associated with catastrophe, one Conservative MP described the party's manifesto as 'more gloomy than the Book of Revelations'.

Social care for the elderly provided the worst policy blunder of the election. This major policy announcement had apparently been hastily cleared with the ministers responsible. The Conservative manifesto proposed that when pensioners needed care, their homes would not have to be sold during their lifetimes to meet the costs. Instead the money could be taken from their estates after death, and a guaranteed £100,000 of their assets would be left untouched. A fundamental flaw was exposed almost at once, with the realisation that no cap on the amount for which they might be liable had been stated. Those who received

assistance at home would also have the value of their residence taken into account as part of their assets. Faced with an outcry over this so-called 'dementia tax', for the first time ever a sitting Prime Minister was forced to announce an overhaul of a manifesto pledge midway through an election campaign.

The embarrassment instantly undermined a central plank of May's campaign. The key message from the start had been that she alone could offer 'strong, stable government'. The alternative was a 'coalition of chaos', with Corbyn in Number 10, propped up by an ill-assorted combination of Liberal Democrats, Scottish Nationalists and Greens. The clumsy U-turn on social care made her appear weak and unprepared. More generally, doubts increased over the wisdom of focusing the campaign so heavily on a single individual: 'Theresa May for Britain', read the slogan on her battle bus, with the word 'Conservative' barely noticeable. Essentially this was a presidential campaign – but with a leader at its centre whose personality did not fit with this approach. May came over as awkward and uncomfortable except when facing small, carefully controlled audiences. Meanwhile the ebullient Corbyn seemed to relish contact with large crowds, happily posing for 'selfies' with members of the public and appearing at ease in interviews. Perhaps most damaging for May was her refusal to take part in a televised leaders' debate in Cambridge, breaking with a practice established at the two previous general elections.

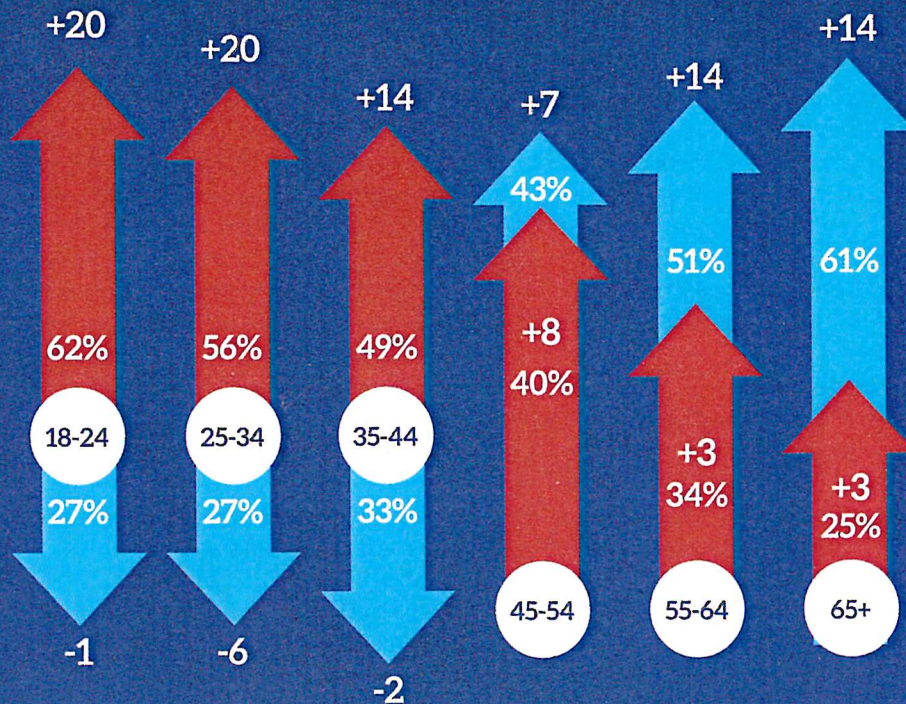
May's insensitivity regarding her public image was underlined once more, less than a week after the election. A terrible fire destroyed Grenfell Tower, a block of flats in Kensington, taking the lives of a number of the capital's poorest residents. Corbyn visited the scene and was pictured hugging and talking to those who had lost their homes, whilst May was seen protected behind a cordon of police and firefighters. Her apparent lack of empathy, in a political culture in which appearances matter so much, was significant. Only later did she meet some of the survivors, after negative publicity had seemingly forced her hand.

### A loner in Number 10

These experiences pointed to a deeper cause of May's difficulties as Prime Minister, which stemmed from her governing style and her



Figure 1: Age and voting, 2017



Source: Adapted from 'How Britain Voted 2017 – Ipsos MORI estimates' ([https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2017-election?language\\_content\\_entity=en-uk](https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2017-election?language_content_entity=en-uk)). All figures are percentages. Figures preceded by + or – indicate change since 2015.

intensely private personality. In the Financial Times article to which we referred earlier, May was characterised as a solitary figure: not concerned to build relations with the media, working through problems with a small circle of trusted advisers and wary of outsiders. She took with her into Number 10 the two individuals most closely associated with her at the Home Office, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, as her joint chiefs of staff. The pair had acquired a reputation for fierce loyalty and abrasiveness in defence of their boss's interests. This style of decision-making proved toxic as May moved into the spotlight of national leadership. The two advisers were resented by her Cabinet colleagues, and their influence on the policy process was increasingly mistrusted. They were blamed in particular for the social care debacle. Their departure from Downing Street, the day after the election, was the minimum price that May had to pay in order to retain the support of key colleagues for the time being.

Management of the Cabinet had at first seemed to be one of May's strengths. At the start of her premiership she differentiated herself from the Cameron era – associated in many people's minds with the dominance of a select clique of public school-educated 'chums' – by sacking its most prominent representative, Chancellor George Osborne. Another signal of a new start was the dismissal of Justice Secretary Michael Gove, who had alienated many by his self-destructive abandonment of Boris Johnson's cause during the leadership contest. In a classic governing tactic, May was also careful to appoint a balanced core of senior ministers, representing both sides of the toxic European debate. 'Leavers', such as Boris Johnson at the Foreign Office and David Davis at the newly created Department for Exiting the European Union, sat alongside 'Remainers' such as Osborne's replacement, Philip Hammond, and May's successor at the Home Office, Amber Rudd. There was a

deliberately business-like approach after the reputedly more casual Cameron style, with ministers meeting the Prime Minister in a formal setting and being given scope to talk whilst she reached her own conclusions.

From early in her premiership, however, there were indications of possible future problems. May appeared isolated within her Cabinet, with few political friends. Philip Hammond was initially described as an ally but their relationship lacked warmth, and differences of emphasis on policy were increasingly evident. Both before and during the election campaign, rumours abounded that May would sack him as part of a bold reshuffle intended to strengthen her hold over the Cabinet. The erosion of May's majority in the election made a drastic restructuring impossible. Hammond was confirmed in office as Chancellor, his new-found authority demonstrated by his independent public line on relations with the EU. He stressed the importance of securing a deal which protects economic growth and jobs, in contrast with May's professed belief that 'no deal is better than a bad deal'. His insistence that there would have to be a lengthy transition period after the official Brexit date suggested that he could defy his boss with impunity. This represented a remarkable turn-around for a Chancellor who might have been on the back benches by this stage, had the election produced a different result.

Another significant post-election Cabinet change was the promotion of Work and Pensions Secretary Damian Green to the position of First Secretary of State. Green had been a friend of the Prime Minister from their days at Oxford, and his elevation was interpreted as a sign of her need to have a dependable loyalist at the centre. Often described as Deputy Prime Minister in all but name, Green was allocated the same space in the Cabinet Office that was once occupied by Nick Clegg under the coalition and – in a perhaps closer parallel – by Peter Mandelson when he was recalled to shore up Gordon Brown's premiership in 2008. A quiet, often overlooked individual, Green has been given the task of co-ordinating domestic policy whilst May focuses on Brexit. In her absence he leads for the government at Prime Minister's Questions. According to a paper published by the Institute for Government, he is a member of all but two of the twenty



Cabinet committees, chairing eight of them – the same number as the Prime Minister herself

### A narrowing of options

The weakening of May's position was further demonstrated by the removal of the most controversial aspects of the Conservative manifesto from the Queen's speech. The unpopular social care proposals had disappeared, together with plans to remove free primary school lunches, expand grammar schools and end the 'triple lock' on pensions. Instead, the programme was dominated by the all-important and unavoidable issue of Brexit. Even on this issue, however, May faces a difficult set of challenges. At home, any attempt to water down the prospect of a 'hard Brexit' risks incurring the wrath of most Conservative MPs. There was a mixed reaction to her Florence speech in September, when she talked about Britain honouring its obligations to the EU during a transition period. Some diehard Brexiteers feared that May was willing to accept the jurisdiction of Brussels for an unacceptably long period. On the other hand, a reversion to a hard-line Brexit agenda would be resisted by opposition MPs – and possibly some Tory Remainers – in the Commons. Nor is there any guarantee that the Lords, where the Remain camp enjoys wide support, will observe the Salisbury convention in the case of a minority government. In the EU itself, there are indications that as the head of a weakened administration, May is finding it hard to get a hearing for her own demands.

May has survived as Prime Minister, at least in the short term, largely because potential leadership contenders fear the disruptive consequences of another political upheaval. For Conservatives of every shade of opinion, the priority has been to avoid any scenario in which a second general election is called, in which the likely beneficiary would be Corbyn. This concern has so far stayed the hands of those who might otherwise have acted against the Prime Minister.

The parliamentary situation has been stabilised by the conclusion of a 'confidence and supply' deal with the Democratic Unionist Party. The bargain, struck after an unexpectedly long 18 day period of

negotiations, committed the DUP to vote with the government on key legislation. It guaranteed the passing of the attenuated Queen's Speech in the debate on 29 June, and the DUP also agreed to support financial bills and measures linked to Brexit and national security. But the arrangement came at a high price: a promise of £1 billion of funding for Northern Ireland, which drew complaints from Scotland and Wales that they had not been treated equitably. Carwyn Jones, First Minister of Wales, bluntly described it as a 'straight bung to keep a weak Prime Minister and a faltering government in office'. The money had to be channelled to Belfast through so-called 'city deals', in order to circumvent the need to pay corresponding sums to other parts of the UK under the Barnett formula, which still governs public spending across the Union. In addition, doubts were expressed as to whether the DUP would be satisfied with this amount in the long run, with critics noting that the deal was scheduled for review after just two years. The agreement also gave the DUP an effective veto on Conservative legislative proposals, with the setting up of a 'co-ordination committee' to align the two parties on policy matters.

A further consideration, looking back at the experience of earlier minority governments, is the possible impact of by-elections. The Callaghan government in the late 1970s, and John Major's administration in the mid-1990s, saw their parliamentary bases eroded by the cumulative effects of death, retirement and defection, leaving them in a dangerously vulnerable position.

### A 'dead woman walking'?

Many of May's critics were quick to write off her chances of political survival in the wake of the election reversal. George Osborne, who had left Parliament to become editor of the London Evening Standard, described her as a 'dead woman walking' whose days were numbered. Of course neither he nor former Education Secretary Nicky Morgan, another victim of May's Cabinet purge a year before, had reason to show support for her. Morgan suggested that it would be sensible to replace her as leader in the autumn of 2018, once the Brexit deal had been largely completed and in good time for the next general election.

Time scales in politics are of course notoriously hard to define. Much depends on the success of the Brexit negotiations, and on the attitudes of May's Cabinet colleagues and her parliamentary party. And of course there is another unknown: how resilient is May herself? She remains hard to know and assess; as we have seen, this was one of the reasons why the electorate did not warm to her. A worrying development, from her point of view, is the way in which the election made her an object of ridicule. One Youtube spoof, for example, superimposed her head on the figure of King Arthur in a series of clips from the comedy film, Monty Python and the Holy Grail, showing her debating the source of supreme executive power with peasants in a field, and mocked by a French knight from the walls of a castle representing the EU. She was further damaged in October by a conference speech that was hit by every kind of disaster: a prankster handed her a P45 form; her delivery was crippled by a persistent cough; and lettering from the stage set fell down during this lamentable performance.

Although this understandably led to renewed speculation about May's future, with former party chairman Grant Shapps claiming the support of 30 MPs for a leadership contest, it does not signify that her departure is imminent. Behind the scenes the more consensual style of the new Downing Street chief of staff, former MP Gavin Barwell, and the parliamentary management skills of the chief whip, Gavin Williamson, have brought some stability to Number 10. Although Boris Johnson is often touted as a possible successor, he is a divisive figure. That does not of course mean that May will necessarily lead the party into a general election in 2022. One thing is certain: if recent political developments have shown anything, it is the danger of making any hard and fast predictions.

### Author Biography

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