

The End of Theresa May

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The vultures of the British conservative party have gathered, and the individual who seemed to thrive in failure, to gain momentum in defeat, has finally yielded. UK Prime Minister Theresa May will leave the way for change of leadership on June 7. Never known for any grand gestures of emotion, the Maybot finally gave way to it.

It had begun rather optimistically in 2016. May would preside over a Britain leaving the European Union in good order. She even dared suggest that an agenda of domestic reform might be implemented. Neither has transpired, and clues were already apparent with the blithely optimistic trio in charge of overseeing the Brexit process: David Davis, as a fabulously ill-equipped Brexit Secretary, Liam Fox holding the reins as international trade secretary and Boris Johnson keeping up appearances at the Foreign Office. But for all that it was May who seemed to insist that all was possible: the UK could still leave the customs union and single market, repudiate free movement and wriggle out of the jurisdiction of the European Court. Independent trade deals with non-EU countries would be arrived at but similar trading agreements could still continue in some form with the EU. And there would be no Irish border issue.

Problems, however, surfaced early. May's leadership style problematic. Her cabinet reshuffles (read bloodletting) did much to create animosity. Some eight ministers were sacked in the first round, with all but one under 50 at the time. They were, as Stephen Bush [puts it](#), "right in the middle of their political careers, a dangerous time to leave them with nothing to lose."

Her decision to go to the polls in 2017 to crush the opposition was also another act of a folly-ridden leader. From a position of strength from which she could instruct her party on the hard truths of Brexit instead of covering their ears, she gave Labour's Jeremy Corbyn ample kicking room to revive his party while imposing upon herself a considerable handicap. EU negotiators knew they were negotiating with a significantly weakened leader.

Then came the cold showers, initiated by such wake-up alarms as shadow Brexit secretary Keir Starmer's suggestion in 2017 that a transitional phase would have to come into effect after the UK had thrown off the EU. As Starmer [observed at the time](#), "Constructive ambiguity – David Davis's description of the government's approach – can only take you so far."

May duly suffered three horrendous defeats in Parliament, all to do with a failure to pass the Withdrawal Agreement, and fought off the daggers of usurpation within her own party. She had also had to convince the EU that two extensions to Brexit were warranted. The last throw of the dice featured bringing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to the negotiating table. To a large extent, that had been encouraged by the third failure to pass the Withdrawal

Agreement on March 29th.

On May 21, the prime minister [outlined](#) the latest incarnation of a plan that has never moved beyond the stage of life support. It had that air of a captain heading for the iceberg of inevitability. She remained committed “to deliver Brexit and help our country move beyond the division of the referendum and into a better future.” It was spiced with the sweet nothings of forging that “country that works for everyone”, all with “the chance to get on in life and to go as far as their own talent and hard work can take them”.

She hoped for alternative arrangements to the Irish backstop. The new Brexit deal would “set out in law that the House of Commons will approve the UK’s objectives for the negotiations on our future relationship with the EU and they will approve the treaties governing that relationship before the Government signs them.” A new Workers’ Rights Bill would be introduced to guarantee equivalent protections to UK workers afforded to those in the EU, perhaps even better. No change to the level of environmental protection would take place, something to be policed by a new Office of Environmental Protection. But May’s concessions on the subject of a customs union and a proposed second referendum as part of the package, both largely designed to placate Labour, were too much for her cabinet. Her resignation was assured.

The [resignation speech](#) was a patchwork attempt to salvage a difficult legacy. It was “right to persevere, even when the odds against success seemed high.” But it would be for her “successor to seek a way forward that honours the result of the referendum. To succeed, he or she will have to find consensus in parliament where I have not.”

She had led “a decent, moderate and patriotic Conservative government on the common ground of British politics”. She spoke of “a union of people”, standing together regardless of background, skin colour “or who we love”. In an effort to move beyond a pure and exclusive focus on Brexit, she tried to single out such domestic achievements as gender pay reporting and the race disparity audit. This led such conservative outlets as *The Spectator* [to wonder](#) whether such initiatives had “invented victimhood where none existed.”

There will be as many post-mortems on May’s tenure as Brexit proposals. Steve Richards, writing for *The New European*, felt May never had a chance. It was a period of uncertainty made permanent. With each Brexit secretary resignation, with each parliamentary defeat of the exit plan, “nothing much happened, only an accumulative sense of doom.” That was a ready-made outcome.

The list of contenders seeking to replace May is a who’s who of agents, less of assuring stability than guaranteed chaos shadowed by enormous question marks. Furthermore, anyone willing to offer themselves up for replacement is likely to face similar treatment to that given May.

The current stable of contenders are of varying, uneven talents. Environment secretary Michael Gove and former Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab were rather late to the fold. They joined Matt Hancock, Jeremy Hunt, Boris Johnson, Esther McVey, Andrea Leadsom and Rory Stewart. Political watchers and the party faithful will be keeping an eye on wobbliness and wavering: foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt had campaigned in the 2016 referendum to remain in the UK; likewise the self-touted tech-savvy Hancock.

With an individual such as Boris Johnson, you are assured a spell of chaos. Incapable of

mastering a brief, his temperament is utterly hostile to stable ministerial appointments. He tries to make up for that with a buffoonish, public school air that treats certain character flaws as gifts of eccentricity. While he is liked amongst the conservative fan base, his parliamentary colleagues are not so sure. The Bold as British formula is only going to carry you so far; the hard negotiators in the EU will attest to that.

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