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May's Bad Bet

What Losing the Conservative Party Majority Will Cost Britain

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British Prime Minister Theresa May, who promised to be a “bloody difficult woman” during her country’s upcoming divorce negotiations with the European Union, has been ruthlessly reminded that British voters can be bloody difficult as well. Her gambit to call an early general election in the hope of increasing the Conservative Party’s flimsy 17-seat majority in the House of Commons backfired badly on June 8, resulting in a hung Parliament and an uncertain political future for the country.

Although the ruling Tories managed to increase their popular vote share ^[1] by more than five percent from the last general election in 2015, earning 42.4 percent of the vote, they lost a good number of seats to Labour, which saw a bump of 9.5 percent from 2015, securing it a total of 40 percent. This translated into ^[1] 318 seats for the Conservatives (a net loss of 12)—and a loss of the party’s overall majority of 330—compared to 261 seats for Labour (a net gain of 29). The biggest loser of the night was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which was all but decimated, as its voters flocked en masse to both Labour and Conservatives. The Scottish National Party, which lost 21 of its 56 Westminster seats, also saw its vote share in Scotland plummet dramatically—from 50 to 36.9 percent.

A weakened May has chosen to forge ahead and cling to power by trying to cobble together a minority government with the tacit support of the ten members of Parliament of the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. DUP is strongly pro-Union and pro-Brexit and has traditionally leaned very closely to the Tories’ economic positions while being more to the right on social issues. Their priority will be to get the best deal for Northern Ireland. It is unclear, however, how stable such a government can be and how long May can stay at its helm.

At the moment, a giant cloud of uncertainty hangs over the country, but it is possible to draw three main conclusions from the shocking results of the general election. First, even though the election was not fought over the issue of Brexit but over bread and butter domestic issues, the shape of the United Kingdom’s future relationship with the European Union is again very much in doubt. Second, the vote signaled that many British voters are sick of austerity politics and are willing to embrace a much more radical and progressive agenda than most pundits had anticipated. Third, the future of the United Kingdom has once again become more complicated: the question of Scottish independence now seems dead in the water, but the issue of Irish unification may once again stir passions in Belfast.

THE BREXIT CLOCK IS TICKING

The two-year Brexit clock has been ticking ever since Theresa May’s government triggered article 50 on March 29 to begin the process of leaving the European Union. The idea of the snap election was for the Conservative Party to obtain a strong mandate to negotiate its vision of a “clean” break with Europe or a so-called hard Brexit, by leaving both the single market and the customs union. Given the narrow vote for “leave” last year, at just 52 percent, such a radical

vision was always based on a flimsy popular mandate. That being said, the majority of the British people now accept Brexit as a fact of life. It was not high on their priority list when it came time to vote.

The main problem is that large majorities of British citizens still fail to understand the trade-offs inherent in the Brexit process. They want to have their cake and eat it too [2]: roughly 90 percent want to stay in the single market and around 70 percent want to tighten the borders. Both wishes are mutually exclusive for the European Union, and officials in Brussels have made this clear time and again: either the United Kingdom remains in the single market and accepts freedom of movement or it leaves the single market and regains control over immigration. The EU's "four freedoms" are founding commitments rooted in the 1957 Treaty of Rome. They are not policy fads.

Since both May's Conservatives and Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party have accepted the Brexit referendum result and campaigned on immigration control, it is hard to imagine the country not leaving the single market. Where there may be more room for maneuver is in staying in the customs union, which would have the added benefit of avoiding a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. But to conclude that a so-called soft Brexit is now more likely is dangerous at worst and naïve at best. Staying in the customs union means accepting the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, continuing to pay substantial sums into the EU budget, and foregoing the opportunity of signing independent, bilateral trade deals while being unable to influence future EU trade deals. Indeed, if that is what is on offer, a lot of people in the United Kingdom may rightly wonder whether the game was worth the candle. Now that Article 50 has been triggered, it will be incredibly hard—if not politically impossible—for London to try to un-trigger it. In other words, the Brexit train has left the station, but the destination remains unknown.

CORBYN AND THE FUTURE OF THE LEFT

The most astonishing outcome of the general election is the unlikely rise of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. An old-fashioned left-wing firebrand—in the mold of Senator Bernie Sanders in the United States or the far-left former presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France—Corbyn has shown himself to be a formidable campaigner. His mild mannered personality and self-effacing style on the campaign trail contrasted sharply with May's aggressive promotion of her "strong and steady" leadership. Corbyn's authenticity as a leftwing politician, unabashedly championing progressive tax and spending policies, appealed to young voters worried about drowning in debt and the growing lack of opportunity. With 40 percent of the vote, it was Labour's best result since 2001.

Corbyn's unlikely success proved that there is indeed a future for the left and that it does not have to include the kind of triangulation practiced by former U.S. President Bill Clinton and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. A modern social democratic party can indeed combine a progressive social agenda on gender and race, while at the same time address the widening levels of inequality, chronic wage stagnation, and rising levels of poverty and offer more active state intervention and radical measures of redistribution. Social democrats all over Western Europe and in North America will take Corbyn's message to heart and be emboldened to question the perceived wisdom of the economic status quo.

GREAT BRITAIN IS BACK

Although the future of the United Kingdom—or the Union of the English, Welsh, Scots, and Northern Irish—has never looked more fragile than since the June 2016 Brexit referendum, the June 2017 general election seemed to reverse the momentum for Scottish independence. To some extent, Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party, had an even worse night than Theresa May. Not only did the SNP lose heavy-hitters like former leader Alex Salmond and current deputy leader Angus Robertson, it also had to face the strongest pro-Union performance of the Conservative Party in Scotland since 1983, as well as a revival of pro-Union Labour and

Liberal Democrats. It seems safe to say that a second referendum on Scottish independence is off the table for the foreseeable future. Scotland will be leaving the EU as an integral part of the United Kingdom.

The situation was further complicated by Northern Ireland, where the more moderate forces on both Unionist and Republican sides lost all of their seats to the more radical DUP, founded by ultra-unionist Iain Paisley, and Sinn Fein, the political arm of the Irish Republican Army, led by Gerry Adams. Ironically, the informal inclusion of DUP in a Tory minority government makes a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland a real possibility even though DUP wants to avoid one at all costs. Both DUP and Sinn Fein now hold quite divergent views about Northern Ireland's future, and the coalition negotiations in Ulster remain deadlocked. The prospect of ruling over a united Ireland has thus become slightly less of a distant dream for Sinn Fein after the June 2017 elections.

MAYHEM AND DISMAY

It is obvious to say that May badly miscalculated. Strong and steady leadership ended up being weak and wobbly. The Conservative Party has a merciless streak when it comes to failing and flailing leaders: they usually get unceremoniously defenestrated, and relatively quickly. May, after less than a year in power, could end up like Margaret Thatcher after eleven years. It is not clear that a minority government can make the necessary compromises with Brussels to secure a good deal for the United Kingdom. It is also not clear how long May can be at the helm of such a fragile cabinet. Her future hangs in the balance.

The only person who is not going anywhere in British politics is Jeremy Corbyn. Although the future shape of Brexit has grown less clear, the future of social democracy and the union with Scotland now seems more secure. Political uncertainty will hang over the United Kingdom for the foreseeable future, but the country has entered a new era of left-right politics, which will have repercussions for the rest of Europe and the world.

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