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The stabilising hand of May

The Tories' chaos could ultimately strengthen Theresa May's position – and leave the Labour Party on the horns of a dilemma

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Brexit has divided British society, the Conservative Party, and now Theresa May's cabinet as well. Just days after the British Prime Minister presented a delicately balanced compromise, two of Brexit's most vehement backers – Brexit Minister David Davis and erratic Foreign Minister Boris Johnson – announced their resignation.

Their grandiose, pathos-ridden letters of resignation lamented the excessive concessions the Prime Minister has granted to the EU. Her proposal, so they claim, would give the United Kingdom the status of a *de facto* colony and slowly suffocate the Brexit dream. They were later echoed by US President Trump who, while visiting the UK, also undermined the Prime Ministers position. He stated in an interview that Boris Johnson would make good prime minister, the Brexit plan betrayed the will of the people and Theresa May needed to do things differently with the EU.

Moreover, Davis and Johnson were supported in their discontent by a certain number of their fellow Conservative members of parliament. Some of those were happy to openly communicate their anger at the proposed compromise, while others preferred to remain off the record. However, they were not so enraged as to attack the Prime Minister directly and trigger a vote of no confidence.

Paradoxically then, having initially looked like it could herald the beginning of the end for Theresa May, the resignation of two key figureheads of the Brexit movement and their support by the US President could ultimately end up stabilising her position. With the deadline for the Brexit negotiations looming ever closer, May might now be able to succeed in bringing her party into line.

One reason for this is that, to date, the Brexiteers have been unable to present a serious blueprint for the future of the United Kingdom that goes beyond vague fantasies and nostalgic statements. All the while, the business world, the unions and the civil society have been intensifying their calls for some kind of agreement to be reached. The prospect of a 'no deal' scenario, in which the United Kingdom leaves the EU without any kind of follow-up arrangements in place, is simply too alarming.

The dilemma of the Labour Party

If May does end up succeeding – and considering the turbulence within the Conservative Party, there remains a big 'if' – the focus of attention will turn from the Tory turmoil to the opposition Labour Party.

So far, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has done an excellent job of moving in the slipstream of the chaotic, divided Tories and criticising their lack of a Brexit strategy. Together with his justified fierce criticism of the state of British society, he has raised his profile and made up ground in the opinion polls, where Labour is now (back) on an equal footing with the Tories at around 39 per cent.

Corbyn's approach is now encountering strong criticism from within his own ranks.

But a closer look at Corbyn's Brexit strategy shows that it is only a bit contradictory than that of the Conservatives. His proposal of a 'jobs-first Brexit', with continued membership of the customs union and the single market but restrictions on freedom of movement for workers, is not that different from May's cabinet compromise and faces similar rejection by Brussels.

Moreover, Labour represents not only those constituencies that voted most strongly to leave the EU, but also those that voted most strongly to remain. Corbyn and his shadow Brexit minister, Keir Starmer, have not yet found a way to unite these two conflicting camps.

And yet this seems eminently achievable. Unlike the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, Labour has grasped the fact that the Brexit vote was at least partially rooted in social inequality, a topic that is close to Corbyn's heart. However, Labour appears to prefer to discuss matters of social and health care policy as if they were entirely separate from Brexit, thereby allowing the Conservatives to shape the debate on the latter.

Labour needs a credible plan

Corbyn's approach is now encountering strong criticism from within his own ranks. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that he will be forced to allow what would be a controversial debate on Labour's Brexit policy at the party conference in September. In any case, pressure from key grassroots movements like Momentum and the all-powerful trade unions is clearly growing.

This is precisely why May's shift towards a 'softer Brexit' puts Labour in a difficult position. While the Conservative parliamentary group is deeply divided on this matter, the fear of another general election and the possibility of a Corbyn victory has been enough to make them rally behind their Prime Minister to date. As such, May's strategy will necessarily amount to negotiating an agreement with the EU over the coming weeks that resembles Labour's vague proposals in several respects and presenting it to parliament as a 'sink or swim' ultimatum.

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Knowing that the hardcore Brexiteers would gladly accept a 'no deal' scenario, Labour would find itself in the tricky situation of having to either take political responsibility, or leave the country to face an uncertain future in the hands of the Johnson clique. After all, even if a general election were called at short notice, that would leave barely enough time to negotiate a new and improved Brexit before the deadline at the end of 2018. The crux of the matter is this: The only way Labour can reject May's plan is by coming up with a specific and credible plan of its own for leading the United Kingdom out of the mess in which it currently finds itself.

In other words, before Labour celebrates the latest chapter in the Tory drama too loudly, it should take a closer look at itself and recognise the need to refine its own Brexit strategy.

It is particularly important for Labour to avoid mirroring the Conservative logic of defining the EU negotiations as a 'battle for Brexit', a zero-sum game in which one party gains what the other loses. Instead, the country's relationship with the EU needs to be presented – at long last – as an act of solidarity in which like-minded nations join forces for the greater good.

The disruptive visit of President Trump in Brussels and London,

followed by the meeting with President Putin in Helsinki, should be a reminder of the necessity of European solidarity. As the US is regarding the EU as a 'foe', it is rather doubtful that a 'Global Britain' would be in a favoured position to strike trade deals with a protectionist US government. Labour can make a plausible case that a close relationship between the EU and the United Kingdom is more than the sum of its parts.

In order to achieve this, however, Corbyn will need to emerge from the shadows of the political circus surrounding Boris Johnson and his cohorts and offer the British population a truly credible alternative.



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