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Going, going... but not quite gone!

Theresa May is in a stronger position than it appears

It's a truism these days to say that Theresa May is done for; that her credibility is shot to pieces and she is on her way out. Of course, before June, it was also a truism to say that she was in the strongest of positions, able to do as she pleased and in control of her destiny.

Of course, the thing about truisms is that they're often not that true.

While it might be agreed that the decision to call a snap general election – followed by a very poorly executed campaign – lies at the heart of the change in views, it's also important to acknowledge that things were never so clear cut.

May has always operated under very constrained circumstances. A Remain supporter at the head of a Leave government that never had a huge majority, she was always in a less-than-comfortable situation, even as she seemed to be stamping her authority.

But it is the project of withdrawal from the European Union that most accurately exposes this. At no point in her premiership has May ever been able to advance beyond the empty rhetoric of 'Brexit means Brexit' to articulate a coherent and detailed plan of what the UK's future relationship with the EU should be, and how that might fit with a vision of what the UK might become.

Ironically, that absence of a plan served May well in the first part of her time in Number 10. She could claim that she was interested in all the things that others were interested in, while being able to hide behind the need to keep her hand covered for the coming negotiations.

But now, as Brexit approaches, politicians of all stripes, businesses and citizens all demand clarity and precision on myriad points. Constructive ambiguity only works if all parties are happy to keep things ambiguous.

A parliamentary majority

At the same time, it's important not to overestimate the weakness of May's position.

May still has a functional majority in the House of Commons. As much as the Conservatives now rely on the Democratic Unionist Party, that partnership is bolstered by the latter's profound unwillingness to let Labour – or more specifically, Jeremy Corbyn – into power. Moreover, the opposition parties have yet to coordinate their opposition to the government majority effectively, which would be a necessary precondition for Tory rebels to vote down legislation.

This matters because even a tight majority is better than no majority. As long as party discipline can be maintained, then the government holds a lot of power. Consider the government of 1992-1997, led by John Major, which managed to get a great amount done, despite its vanishing majority and a determined opposition.

Nor is there an obvious successor to May within her party. None of her Cabinet have acquitted themselves very strongly and to universal acclaim among members. The three Brexiteers – David Davis, Boris Johnson and Liam Fox – might seem to have the strongest claims, but the nature of the withdrawal process means that any failure of May on that front is also their failure.

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Coupled to this is the simple observation that whoever replaces May also faces the same basics that she does: the DUP arrangement, the Article 50 negotiations. Assuming none of them want to face the public for another general election to try and increase their majority in the face of a bullish Labour party, then it makes more sense now to let May continue to take the heat.

Finally, matters are not fully in the UK's hands now. Article 50 will conclude in March 2019, unless there is an agreement otherwise: that agreement needs the rest of the EU to buy into it, too. Likewise, the conclusion of new trade deals with third countries also requires the agreement of those countries.

Given the scale of such activity and the degree to which it constrains any programme of government, the opportunities for any successor to make a mark look very limited. Just as several credible contenders for the Labour

leadership melted away in 2015, so too might they in the Tory ranks, waiting for a more propitious moment.

Poisoned chalice

Theresa May's position is thus bound up in a paradox. The depth of the difficulties that she faces – on Brexit, on errant Cabinet members and on parliamentary sleaze to name but three – actually makes it less likely that anyone wants to try to remove her from office.

One might want to dress this up as people not wanting to rock the boat in a storm, but that would be to neglect just how much boat-rocking has already taken place. Whether it's ministers exploring the extent to which they can act as free agents, or the endless briefings against colleagues, there is no real doubt that individuals are seeking to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves.

Perhaps May will be able to pull together an Article 50 deal – that central project of her government – but the moment she does it she is likely to find a long line of people ready to remove her. The only real question is whether she cares more about staying in office or about shaping the fundamentals of the UK's post-Brexit future.

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