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Just who exactly is playing games?

Theresa May and political opportunism

For the second time in less than 12 months, the UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, has performed a breathtaking political U-turn. This first took place in June 2016 when she transformed from solid Remainer to fervent Leaver – all in the name of securing the position of Tory leader and PM. Her second came the moment she stood in front of Downing Street to call a snap general election – an election she had repeatedly claimed she would not trigger in the interests of political stability.

According to May's statement, she now thinks an election is necessary because of what she described as the "political game playing" of the UK's other parties. "The country is coming together", May said (apropos of no evidence it should be noted), "but Westminster is not". A general election, then, would supposedly produce a healthy Tory majority that would bring that much needed unity.

But who is really playing games here? Take a look at May's statement again. It was an incredible display of party-political manoeuvring. She called out explicitly the three main parties of opposition – Labour, the Lib Dems, and the SNP – for their own, particular criticisms of her vision for Brexit. And, for good measure, she included a slight against the unelected House of Lords, who have also dared scrutinise her Brexit plan.

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According to May, her government has worked tirelessly since June solely in the national interest, and that these other forces have been working against this effort. "Our opponents believe that because the government's majority is so small our resolve will weaken and that they can force us to change course," she claimed.

However, despite this image of a plucky government with a small majority standing up to a large, unreasonable opposition, this is nowhere near the whole story. May conceded as much herself, whether she knew it or not, in her opening comments.

After saying she would explain her decision to go for an early election, her first substantive point was this: "Despite predictions of immediate financial and economic danger, since the referendum we have seen consumer confidence remain high, record numbers of jobs, and economic growth that has exceeded all expectations."

A strange starting point indeed. This was not even in the same ball park as an explanation of why the UK needs its third national plebiscite in just over two years. It was in fact a piece a political point scoring of a kind last seen during the EU referendum campaign.

So why start with this? The answer is clear: the real impact of Brexit is yet to come and the negotiations ahead are going to be very difficult indeed. If the Conservative party wants to consolidate its grip on the levers of government, a popularity contest between the parties must happen now – not in six months, when the whole of Westminster will be battered by the forces of Brexit.

The PM also knows one other thing for sure (as, in truth, do the majority of the electorate): that the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn is in a dreadful state. Note Corbyn's initial statement in response to May's announcement. Despite the snap election being a direct response to the Brexit vote and its fallout, he didn't mention Brexit once. Not once. A clearer sign of the rudderless nature of the Labour ship in Brexit waters is hard to imagine.

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Any party apparatchik worth their salt would be foolish in the extreme to not drive home the kind of advantage the Tories presently have over a terribly weak opposition, so there is no shame in May's approach as such.

But there are two major problems with her move. The first is the sheer belligerence of her statement. May named Corbyn directly as the end result if people chose to vote Labour and not Tory, and she accused the Liberal Democrats of wanting to "grind the business of government to a standstill". This was a full frontal attack on anyone who has challenged her authority as PM in any way.

The second problem is the double-speak involved here: again, throughout, she described an election as a necessary response to the game playing of unreasonable parties and politicians. But as even elements of

the Brexit supporting press have conceded today, this was first and foremost an opportunistic attempt to cement her position and her party's position in government.

And this last problem is the more serious one, I fear. We have been told repeatedly since June last year that the vote to leave the European Union was in large part a product of the widespread disillusionment with the Westminster political elite. What impact, then, can result from this blatant example of the political elite saying one thing yet meaning another? One cannot help but worry that the seeming continuation, post referendum, of politicians putting party and power above national concerns will only increase that disillusionment.

This article first appeared in *The Conversation*.



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