The cold shoulder: Theresa May looks on as EU heads of state gather for a “family photo” at the leaders’ summit in Salzburg, Austria, on 20 September

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The Tory war without end

As the Brexit negotiations unravel, Conservative MPs are more convinced than ever that Theresa May is finished – but they can’t agree on when she should go or who should replace her.

By Andrew Gimson

In early September as MPs returned to Westminster I spoke to a former cabinet minister about the mood in the Conservative Party. “We are in a state of civil war – it was like coming back in 1640,” he said. His comparison was with the opening of the Long Parliament in November that year, when England was sliding towards conflict. He proceeded to describe Theresa May as “a very, very weak leader, who isn’t a leader at all”. But then came the paradox: “She has got to stay until Brexit is over. Were she to go, she would plunge the country into an absolute crisis. If she wants to go, we’ll have to manacle her to the gates of No. 10.”

May is useless, but she must see this through: a majority of Conservative MPs still accept this rather unsatisfactory proposition, for if she is so useless, it is curious to entrust her with such a difficult and important task. But the danger of forcing a leadership contest seems to them even greater, because it could produce such a crisis of confidence in the ability of the Conservatives to govern that a general election becomes unavoidable. And as the former minister explained, “None of us want a general election, preferably ever and certainly not for the next four years.”

Has the Salisbury debate now exploded the logic of sticking with May until after Brexit? At first glance, it might be taken to demonstrate that persisting with her is no longer possible, because her judgment has proven so hopelessly incompetent. She somehow managed to approve, and with cloying obduracy continued to promote, a compromise that many people warned her would be unacceptable both to her own Eurosceptic MPs and to European leaders. In Salisbury she suffered the public humiliation of having her Chequers proposals dismissed contemptuously as a 

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childish attempt at cherry-picking. The following day, the Prime Minister struck back with her broadcast from Downing Street, in which she drew herself up in front of the Union Jack and declaimed in incisive manner: "Throughout the process, I have treated the EU with nothing but respect. The UK expects the same."

The British press was infuriated by her treatment in Salzburg, and so was a shire Tory, a Remainer in the referendum, whom I consulted a few days later: "How dare they gang up on her like that? They've behaved very badly. I think they've shot themselves in the foot. Macron's a silly little pip-squeak. I think they've done Theresa May's service."

The European leaders have certainly helped to clarify matters. May's only chance now is to defend the British nation's right to run its own affairs. If she offers further concessions she is finished. She has to go in the direction of a Canada-style free-trade deal. This will produce howls of protest from the People's Vote lobby, which still hopes to reverse the referendum result, and from Conservative MPs such as Anna Soubry, who if they cannot accept Brexit, at least think it would be preferable to remain, like Norway, subject to EU rules.

Last weekend, Downing Street hinted that May manages, despite the difficulties that still exist over the Irish border, to strike a Canada-style deal with the EU, but finds it blocked in the Commons, she will call a general election and run as a Eurosceptic, or in plain terms as a nationalist, who believes, unlike Labour, that Brexit means standing up for national sovereignty. This part of the new approach looks rather far-fetched, for only last year the voter rejected her demand for a larger parliamentary majority.

From that failure proceeds her present weakness. She called the 2017 snap election in a vain attempt to liberate herself from such stern, unbending Eurosceptics as John Redwood, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Iain Duncan Smith. The Eurosceptics are neither as numerous nor as unified as their best organizer, Steve Baker - who resigned from the Brexit department in July along with David Davis in protest at the Chequers proposals - has striven to make them appear. A senior Tory who supports May reclines the 80 opponents of Chequers who were summoned by Baker could be baulked down to a hard core of 30.

But that is still more than the dozen or so MPs that the outspoken Soubry, and such elder statesmen as Ken Clarke and Dominic Grieve, would probably be able to muster to vote against a Canada-style deal. Nonetheless, May would still then need, in circumstances of high parliamentary drama, more support from the Labour benches than she has yet received, and she might well fail to get it.

In such circumstances, some senior Tories believe, "parliament will take over on this issue", with the Speaker happy to facilitate this increase in the power of the Commons, and MPs on both sides concentrating on a series of motions on which they can agree. So Chuka Umunna will work with Dominic Grieve, and Frank Field with Jacob Rees-Mogg. One may note in passing that although this would be considered a tremendously dangerous crisis, it could also turn out to be good for representative democracy, in a way that a second referendum would not.

All this is highly speculative. But what already exists, and is known to exist, is the threat that May will seek Labour votes in order to defeat her own diehard opponents, whichever wing of her divided party they come from. Before Salzburg, Baker warned that if the government tries to push a Brexit deal through the Commons on the back of Labour votes, the Tory party will suffer the catastrophic split which thus far we have managed to avoid. Rees-Mogg said (in the "Moggcast"), his fortnightly conversation with Paul Goodman, editor of Conservative Home) that relying on Labour votes is not something a Conservative prime minister should attempt: "I think it is the most divisive thing you can do to a party, because the numbers are likely to be quite large. It's not going to be two or three Labour MPs, it's going to be a larger number."

The comparison most often reached for in these circumstances is with Robert Peel, who did more than anyone else to create the modern Conservative party, and in 1846 split it by defying his own backbenchers in order to get the repeal of the Corn Laws through with the help of opposition votes. I reached for that comparison myself when writing a somewhat triumphant piece, ("Why the Tories keep winning", 12 May 2017), for this magazine at the start of last year's general election campaign. But Brex-Moggs and Goodman also look at the more recent example of the early 1970s, when Ted Heath won a parliamentary vote to take Britain into the Common Market with the help of a substantial group of Labour MPs led by Roy Jenkins. And as Rees-Mogg said, "I don't think the 1971 precedent is a happy one for either party."

Enoch Powell, who waged a bitter battle against Heath, is the intellectual forerunner of today's Eurosceptics. It is doubtful the party could ever be led by such an intranquil believer in national sovereignty as Powell, but nor, if it wants to remain a party of government, can it afford to alienate that tradition.

Like Heath, May is not a naturally persuasive speaker. She battles ignobly by ejecting a screen ofgested platitudes, communicating instead a sense of uneasiness to her listeners, because any situation that calls for verbal spontaneity and rhetorical audacity is painful to her. Lord Lexden, the Conservative Party's official historian, makes the comparison with an earlier leader: "How Disraeli would have relished these circumstances with his love of verbal jousting (with words we govern men) and braved seduction of groups in the opposition party - different groups at different times - to bring him victory in 1867 over the Second Reform Bill when he had no parliamentary majority."

Perhaps at the party conference in Birmingham the right words will be presented to May by some obscure member of her staff, or will at least well up from inside her. Desperation, sometimes enables a leader to surpass low expectations, throw off artifice and strike the right note. John Major managed this during the 1992 general election campaign, when he got on his soap box. May signally failed to manage it during the 2017 election. Because of her counterproductive performances on the campaign trail, no Tory to whom I have spoken, and
quite likely none to whom I have not spoken, is willing to fight an other general election under her leadership. She is a lame duck, tolerated on the understanding that she will not stay beyond next summer, and speculation rages about who should fill the impending vacancy. The 48 letters which would trigger a leadership contest have not so far gone in to Graham Brady, chairman of the 1922 Committee, because the Tory tribe cannot agree who would take over.

"I can't see a natural successor," a long-serving Tory MP who supported Remain laments. "I don't think the latest Boris [Johnson] revelations come as a great surprise. I shall never vote for him. Colleagues will just look at how duplicitous he's been. The trouble with Boris is you can never be sure he's not going to disappear for a couple of hours. It's a serious step-change between being mayor of London and being prime minister. He's not Winston Churchill, he's Randolph, the father and the son."

Winston's father was Lord Randolph Churchill, a brilliant Tory democrat and loyalist who became chancellor of the exchequer, but then destroyed his own career by resigning, and died young. Winston's son, also called Randolph, was impossibly drunk and rude.

The MP ran through the rest of the cabinet, dismissed the brilliantly able and amusing Michael Gove as "tainted", and could see no potential leaders except for Sajid Javid "depending on how he performs as Home Secretary"; Jeremy Hunt - "always a possibility"; and Penny Mordaunt: "I'm always impressed by her."

Javid's supporters point out that as the son of an immigrant who arrived in this country with one pound, he has "a wonderful back-story", but concede he has not yet demonstrated an ability to connect with the wider public. Hunt, who has been foreign

if one is put up to stop someone who is a known quantity (for example, John Major defeating Michael Heseltine in 1990). I cannot help admiring Mordaunt's courage, having been summoned one evening by my children - "Dad, there's a Tory MP on the telly" - and watched her, not once but twice, do a belly-flop after diving backward off a very high board.

George Freeman, who entered the Commons in 2010, and used to chair May's policy board, has said the Prime Minister should stand down next March, the moment Brexit has occurred, and make way for "a new generation". Tom Tugendhat, who entered the Commons in 2015, chairs the Foreign Affairs select committee and is himself spoken of "as a future leader, has likewise said "it's time for a generational shift". And it is certainly true there are quite a few Tory MPs from the last three intake, 2010, 2015 and 2017, who have the potential to rise to high office, including Javid and Mordaunt, both of whom were elected in 2010.

There have been only four prime ministers without any previous ministerial experience: David Cameron and Tony Blair (after their respective parties had spent years in opposition), Ramsey MacDonald (the first ever Labour PM), and in the 18th century the Marquess of Rockingham (invited by George III in 1765 to form an administration). For a party already in power to choose such a leader would look extremely odd.

No wonder the Camerons, geared northwards in search of a plausible "Stop Boris" candidate, and hoped they had found one in Ruth Davidson, who has revived the Scottish Conservatives. But Davidson is not even a Westminster MP, is committed to taking on Nicola Sturgeon at the next elections to the Scottish parliament in 2021, and with characteristic candour replied, when asked if she would ever run for the prime ministership: "No. I value my relationship and my mental health too much for it. I will not be a candidate." It's worth adding that as a robust Remain campaigner during the EU referendum, she inspired a good deal of irritation among Tory Eurosceptics, and would be unlikely to receive from them an enthusiastic welcome.

Johnny Mercer, who served three tours in Afghanistan with 29 Commando before capturing the Labour seat of Plymouth Moor View at the 2015 general election, said when I interviewed him before Salzburg that he regards the Chequer's plan as the worst of all worlds: "It's totally in character with this current administration - it's right in the middle, it doesn't commit either way"
A Conservative MP who calls himself a reluctant Remainer volunteered to me his total loss of faith in May: “I think Boris is the last roll of the dice between us winning and losing the next election.” Deep in one of the English shires, an elderly Tory member told me, “Never have I felt so alienated from the Tory establishment.” He complained that he can get no sense out of his MP, and said he would like Johnson to take over.

“It’s difficult to think of two names to send that don’t include Johnson”

That may sound feverish, but these are fevered times for the Tory tribe. It is uneasily aware of the anti-establishment mood, and knows that May, a dutiful daughter of the established church, cannot appeal to that mood. Even in her inner circle, she has little in the way of real loyalty to fall back on. Support for her is prudential. It could endure for a long time yet, and see her into happier days, when she has reached some sort of half-decent Brexit settlement and can emerge once more as a social reformer.

But she could at any moment be swept away by a sudden avalanche, perhaps triggered by herself or one of her entourage once again putting a foot wrong as they inch with painful slowness up the exposed slope of Brexit. With brutal suddenness, the most quick-witted of her cabinet colleagues, a group that includes Gove, Javid, Dominic Raab and Matt Hancock, could then decide the time has come to cut the rope attaching them to their leader.

For Theresa May the game would be up, and what happened next would depend on the timing as much as on the personalities. Tory MPs have the task of whittling down the leadership contenders to the final two, who are put before the party membership for its decision. No less an authority than Michael Heseltine has recently said of Boris Johnson that he finds it “difficult to think of two names to send that don’t include him”. Who then will be the Stop Johnson candidate around whom the party establishment, including the remnants of the Camerons, will endeavour to unite? “None of the above” is not a good enough answer to that question, for unless confronted by a serious opponent, Johnson will romp to victory.

The author’s most recent book is “Gimson’s Prime Ministers: Brief Lives from Walpole to May” (Square Peg, £10.99)

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