

## THERESA MAY

Theresa May's nerve-shredding, energy-sapping and joyless prime ministerial career serves as a warning to current and aspiring leaders: expect a hellish time, unless you have certain essential qualifications. May had a story to tell about Brexit and the rest of her agenda, but she was not a political teacher. She not only failed to tell her story, but did not even make an attempt. This was her fatal flaw – not only a failure to communicate, but an indifference to the art.

She also lacked a second qualification of leadership. She was not a smart reader of the political rhythms. She did at times have space on the political stage, but failed to see when she had the room to be bold and when she did not. In relation to Brexit she acted weakly when she was politically strong, and finally told her party of the need for compromise when she was hopelessly weak. Fatally she got the sequence the wrong way round.

She became weak after calling the early election in 2017, just a year into her premiership, and losing her party's overall majority. Many lessons of leadership arise from the collapse of her authority. Most fundamentally that early elections are dangerous – either contemplating them or holding them.

As May made her moves, she worked assiduously, and at times wilfully, to deliver her view of the form that Brexit should take. Soon the volcanic explosions began. Ministers resigned. Her Brexit deal was defeated in the Commons three times. There was a vote of confidence amongst Conservative MPs, in an attempt to remove her. The Brexit deadline was extended from March 2019, in spite of endless prime ministerial proclamations that the UK would be out of the EU by then. May was at the centre of it all and yet determinedly separate from the drama – a form of political isolation that was both a protective shield and a further source of her fragility.

Most incoming prime ministers have had some time to prepare for the tasks ahead. May had none. With dizzying speed, the UK had a new leader in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, one who had never had cause to think deeply about Brexit. Her direct ministerial experience of the European Union was acquired in the Home Office. She had not been a leader of the Opposition, where it is necessary to frame arguments and reflect more widely on the UK's relationship with Europe. She had no ministerial perspective from the Treasury or the Foreign Office. Her experience of the EU as a minister had been in the more straightforward, though highly charged and important area of security. On the whole, members of the EU agree that security concerns require coordination and the sharing of information. The UK was respected for its willingness to share and coordinate. As Home Secretary, if May wanted to opt out of some EU agreements and opt into others, she prevailed with ease. The Home Office tests many qualities in a politician, but it is not the best preparation for becoming an authoritative expert on all aspects of the European Union.

Theresa May also had no idea in advance that the Conservatives' whacky leadership battle of July 2016 was going to end almost

before it had begun. She assumed that she would face a second round of party members and would have until September to finalize her thoughts around Brexit, before entering Number Ten – if, indeed, she won. The immediate context of her rise is pivotal. As the contest got under way she was not to know that there would be no second round. Her thoughts about Brexit were on a single question: how to win a Conservative leadership contest when a majority of members were strongly pro-Brexit?

Her early post-referendum discussions, which were confined to her two special advisers of the time, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, focused largely on this narrow question: ‘How can we convince the party that we are deadly serious about Brexit?’ In reflecting on that question, May began to frame answers that led towards her fall. As is often the case with prime ministers, the seeds of her fragility were sown in the period in which she rose triumphantly to the top. She had no time to think for very long about what Brexit meant. She had no time to learn how the EU operates at the highest level.

Other prime ministers sought to find words to make sense of a chaotic situation, or tried to change the situation. May did neither. She was widely seen as dutiful, as she twisted and turned to stay on her chosen path – a triumph of deviousness. But her indifference to words and persuasion, essential arts of leadership, became the main cause of her undoing. Long-serving prime ministers are the ones who seek constantly to engage with MPs, voters and the media, telling stories that appear to make sense of what is happening. Margaret Thatcher was an instinctive teacher, reducing the complexities of monetarism to homilies about how her father never spent more than he earned. As she made her moves, Thatcher proclaimed that her aim was to set people free. And who is opposed to freedom? Wilson and Blair deployed the evasive term ‘modernization’ to explain

their early initiatives. Some of the shorter-serving prime ministers were more effective than May. Edward Heath was an adequate communicator in the 1975 Common Market referendum after he had ceased to be prime minister, explaining better than most why pooled sovereignty was not a threat to democracy. Gordon Brown sparkled as a speaker before he became shadow chancellor and even, at times, after he acquired the stifling, dehumanizing economic brief. He framed some of the enduring soundbites of the New Labour era, from ‘Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’ to ‘prudence for a purpose’. Nick Timothy devised May’s best lines and, after he left, there were no memorable lines at all. May was not a ‘teacher’ prime minister, with the language and performance skills to make sense of what – in the case of Brexit – could often be nonsensical.

There were times when May needed to be opaque in order to keep her government together, but a smart political teacher can be evasive while appearing to be clear. When Thatcher declared famously in October 1980 that the ‘lady’s not for turning’, she was, in reality, overseeing a U-turn in her economic policy. The lady *was* for turning from pure monetarism, but her skill as a teacher disguised the haphazard route she was taking. When Blair tormented John Major by asserting, ‘I lead my party, you follow yours’, he was referring to Major’s equivocations over the single currency. Blair was equivocating in precisely the same way, but he was a communicator who could deploy words to convey resolute leadership, when he was keeping options open. Words are a political weapon. May did not have the necessary ammunition.

At the beginning of her premiership in the summer of 2016, with Brexit looming large, she said there would be no ‘running commentary’ on the process. In the many months that followed,

both within government and outside it, May was the only person who followed this laughably unrealistic instruction. Standing apart from the political noise, there was no focus from May on strategy as the storms erupted. Instead, an unruly pattern emerged: as the latest crisis erupted, May kept going till the following day, when she inevitably became politically trapped again, wriggled awkwardly, spoke evasively and created a little more space until the next incarceration. She proved to be a durable political contortionist, but did not seek to explain what her latest painful position might be.

This determinedly insular pattern formed during the gradual phase of May's ascent. As with other modern prime ministers, the pattern of the early years recurred after May acquired the crown, and therefore merit further scrutiny. When an ambitious politician becomes prime minister, he or she often assumes that past patterns are a guide to future successful rule. But quite often they are a warning of how *not* to rule, when leading in the very different context of Number Ten. Most fundamentally, May assumed that the way she had operated as Home Secretary, and as a senior Opposition frontbencher, could be applied in Number Ten. In those previous roles she had kept public and media appearances to a minimum, decided on policies with a few trusted advisers and then made sure she prevailed, if colleagues sought to prevent her policies from being implemented.

May was not interested in engaging with journalists, either as an ambitious potential leader or as prime minister. She met them because her advisers told her to do so. No journalist can recall a noteworthy exchange. She was bewildered and disapproving of her colleagues who spoke endlessly to those in the media, assuming – often correctly – that they saw politics merely as a game. When she was Home Secretary in the coalition, and as prime minister, some

of her colleagues did become far too intoxicated with the fleeting thrill of engaging with political journalists, both in private and in the broadcasting studio. The exchanges were an affirmation of their significance and, they often assumed, a further boost to their ambitions to become more significant still. Quite often the sole consequences were to provide lines for journalists – lines that came and went in the daily hurly-burly of politics.

Even so, an indifference to the art of being a political teacher is a form of neglect, and it is the media that mediates between leader and the electorate. May did not try to be a guide through the storms. If she had been an effective teacher, she would have had more followers, because there would have been a more clearly defined path for them to follow.

Instead, she saw her political past as a form of vindication. She had got to the top by focusing on policy implementation, while largely hiding away from the media and the public. This was how she had succeeded where others had failed. In her previous job she was used to making policy without great public scrutiny. She had often turned down interviews on the *Today* programme and BBC1's *Andrew Marr Show* as she navigated her course. On being made prime minister, May assumed that she could still get away with this evasiveness, even in relation to the most significant change in UK policy since 1945.

There is an important qualification to May's determination to lie low. Every now and again throughout her career she would surface dramatically, before hiding away again. For much of the time May made little public impact during her years on her party's frontbench, toiling away behind the scenes without feeling the need to explain very often what she was doing, or why. But, every now and again, she uttered words that would make waves. She was the equivalent

of the plodding tennis player who occasionally had a tantrum and played spectacularly.

May had wanted to be prime minister for much of her adult life, being ambitious for the top job for longer than Thatcher or Blair. She was brought up as an only child in Oxfordshire. Her father was a vicar and her mother was an active Conservative Party member. Like Thatcher, May was hooked on politics from her teenage years, becoming a member of the Conservative Party and active at Oxford. She met her future husband, Philip, at a Conservative social evening at the university. Even as prime minister, she liked nothing more than canvassing in Maidenhead, her constituency, and taking part in local political meetings. She seemed most at ease politically when canvassing at home. Coincidentally, the UK had both a prime minister and a leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, who flourished in their constituencies, while being much less at ease responding to national and international historic events. As Brexit raged on, both liked nothing more than to return to their home patch. May became an MP in 1997 – Tony Blair's first landslide victory – and slowly rose through the ranks as a solid, determined MP who had more time on her hands than most of her colleagues. Like Edward Heath, she had no children and few other interests to distract her from politics. Unlike Heath, she had a partner, in Philip, who shared her passion for Conservative politics. They were in it together. Heath was alone.

At the Conservative conference in 2002 May made her mark as the newish party chairwoman. Here was an early example of her making waves, before returning to semi-darkness away from the intense media glare. For a politician who rarely delivered memorable speeches, her words at that conference were never forgotten and were often quoted in the years to follow. In some respects, they

defined her in the most flattering light possible – as a figure brave enough to tell her party hard truths. She was speaking early on in Labour's second term, after the Conservatives had been slaughtered in both the 1997 and 2001 elections:

Yes, we've made progress, but let's not kid ourselves. There's a way to go before we can return to government. There's a lot we need to do in this party of ours. Our base is too narrow and so, occasionally, are our sympathies. You know what some people call us: the nasty party.

She was not posturing. She meant it. May was a politician who tended to say what she believed. Quite often her beliefs were pragmatic and uninteresting, but her speech stood out at the time, along with her daring leopard-skin shoes – exuberantly ostentatious footwear at odds with her reticent personality, as if she assumed that the wearing of attention-grabbing shoes would help her to acquire a public personality. In a way they did. The shoes were almost an act of disguise.

On the whole, May plodded on without becoming a big crusader for internal reform, after her 'nasty party' speech. As would later prove to be the case with the Brexit saga, she had uttered some words of apparent significance and then carried on, almost as if the words had not been said. Her chance for greater prominence came when she moved to the Home Office as part of the coalition in 2010. She remained Home Secretary until she became prime minister in 2016. To have survived as Home Secretary for six years was in itself a qualification for leadership. The Home Office is a tough testing ground, to the extent that few Home Secretaries become leaders. Only James Callaghan, among modern prime ministers, had served at the Home Office. In the final phase of

the New Labour era Home Secretaries came and went on a regular basis. May lasted the course – a genuine triumph.

Perhaps there is a reason why this senior post is not a natural part of the path towards Number Ten. The Home Office is, in some respects, atypical. The demands are nightmarishly intense and unpredictable. A terrorist threat can disturb a Home Secretary at any time. A prison escape can trigger demands for the resignation of a Home Secretary. Immigration is an emotive issue, as well as one that is politically and practically complex. But the Home Secretary is to some extent cocooned from the rest of the government, working tirelessly, with little time to reflect on economic policy and foreign affairs or wider public-service reforms. May worked with the smallest possible team, relying mainly on her two advisers, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill. They were utterly loyal to her and she was dependent on them, regarding them almost as oracles who were guiding her to the top. But May also worked well with senior Home Office officials, which is not always the case with Home Secretaries. Her civil servants respected her and broadly agreed with her own assessment, which was formed quietly, modestly and determinedly, that she was a potential prime minister.<sup>1</sup>

At the Home Office she kept a relatively low profile, compared with the more theatrical members of the coalition – the ones May regarded partly as players of politics as a game, rather than as a wholly serious vocation. Lunches with journalists or colleagues were awkward and unrewarding occasions. Shortly before the start of the 2016 referendum campaign David Cameron's director of communications, Sir Craig Oliver, took May out to lunch. He noted later, 'I tried every example of small talk I could think of in an attempt to get a conversation started. After around twenty minutes I started to feel physically sick.'<sup>2</sup>

Yet periodically, when she was largely hidden away as Home Secretary, May delivered a sensational speech, as she had done in opposition, lighting up the political stage in ways that made her more ostentatious colleagues seem shy and retiring. In May 2014 she addressed the Police Federation's annual conference and went for them. Referring to various topical and highly charged controversies involving police misconduct and racist attitudes, she declared:

If there is anybody in this hall who doubts that our model of policing is at risk, if there is anybody who underestimates the damage recent events and revelations have done to the relationship between the public and the police, if anybody here questions the need for the police to change, I am here to tell you that it's time to face up to reality... It is an attitude that betrays contempt for the public these officers are supposed to serve – and every police officer in the land, every single police leader, and everybody in the Police Federation should confront it and expunge it from the ranks... It is not enough to mouth platitudes about a few bad apples. The problem might lie with a minority of officers, but it is still a significant problem, and a problem that needs to be addressed... Polls show two-thirds of the public trust the police... We should never accept a situation in which a third of people do not trust police officers to tell the truth.

The speech was one of the most powerful to be delivered by a Cabinet minister during the coalition era – courageous, principled and, to deploy Cameron's favourite political term, 'modern'. Leading members of the Police Federation were taken aback, but their response was a tribute to the force of the speech. Once she had delivered her brutal message, May disappeared again from public view.

So it was with Brexit. May made a set-piece speech every few months and acted as if no more needed to be said for some time. With Brexit, much needed to be said – nearly every hour of every day. Ironically, May did have a strategy of sorts for Brexit, and a premise to justify her plan. The strategy, premise and plan were contentious and inelegant, but they were not as calamitous as her growing number of detractors were to claim. There was a case, but she never found a way of putting it: memorable phrases, the framing of an argument, a compelling narrative. Here was May's thinking on Brexit and how it evolved.

At the beginning she decided that she had a democratic duty to deliver the referendum. As far as she was concerned, the referendum was her mandate. Parliament had played its role by voting for the referendum to be held after the 2015 election. Now it was her duty to deliver and, in her view, Parliament's role would be peripheral. She did not want Parliament to have a vote on the triggering of Article 50, the move that formally began the Brexit process. MPs demanded a 'meaningful vote' on her deal. She did not want to grant them such a potent weapon. After she had negotiated her Brexit deal, she sought to bludgeon Parliament into submission with threats of far worse alternatives. As far as she was concerned, she was responding to the referendum result and, in doing so, saving the UK from a crisis of trust, if a 'Remain'-dominated Parliament took control.

In terms of the deal she sought, May had a point in claiming that Brexiteers won the referendum because of voters' opposition to free movement. Her final deal ended free movement and potentially allowed the UK to trade with other countries. As her negotiations intensified, May became more aware that the soft border in Ireland was threatened by the UK's departure from the customs union.

Acutely aware that the soft border was central to the peace process in Northern Ireland, she agreed a backstop compromise, whereby the UK remained in the customs union until alternative arrangements were agreed. Her position was not too distant from that of the Labour leadership, which sought membership of a customs union.

The flaws in May's strategy and assumptions were deep, and should have been more obvious to her. Parliament would not allow her to treat it with disdain. Her Brexit deal was a convoluted set of compromises. But given that there had been a majority in the referendum for 'Leave', and she had a plan for leaving, she did not necessarily have to endure the various forms of Brexit hell that followed. Her failure to make accessible sense of what she was doing was the main reason she struggled to prevail and her government fell apart. There were more ministerial resignations and sackings under May than any other modern prime minister, by a huge margin.

Unlike Margaret Thatcher, May was also a poor reader of the political stage. Thatcher perceived clearly when she had space to be bold and when she had no room for manoeuvre. Instead, as the Brexit prime minister, May made the right moves at the wrong times. Had she been assertive when she was politically strong, she might have suffered a slightly less draining nightmare in Number Ten. Instead, she endured a period of rule that made even James Callaghan's tempestuous leadership in the late 1970s, or Gordon Brown's after the 2008 crash, seem like a model of calm.

At the beginning of her leadership, in the summer of 2016, May was in a formidably strong and authoritative position. This was partly for the simple reason that there was not going to be another leadership contest in the months that followed her speedy victory. If she had announced that she was planning to fly to the moon, there

would have been no challenge. The party had just held a traumatic contest and was hardly going to trigger another. May was walking on water, according to the opinion polls, with soaring personal ratings. Popularity is authority-enhancing for a prime minister – if polls suggest a prime minister could win an election, then he or she becomes almost as commanding as when they do hold and win a general election. As a result of winning a leadership contest with ease, May's popularity among voters rose; thanks to her steely and distant manner, Cabinet ministers were in submissive awe of her. Even in private, few said a word against her. Instead they cited May as if she was the oracle. Ministers repeated her words to journalists as if they came from a political titan. With some justification at the time, ministers – and much of the media – assumed that May would be prime minister for a long time, another assumption that often feeds on itself.

But in relation to Brexit, May did not recognize her strength when she became prime minister. As a Remainer, she felt the insecure need to reassure her party that she would deliver on the referendum. Her senior adviser, Nick Timothy, invented the phrase 'Brexit means Brexit' – words that she repeated like a machine for the first six months of her leadership. She made the phrase seem like a defiant act, but Timothy meant the words to be soothingly reassuring for Brexiteers, a promise that she would deliver on the referendum.

May was too aware of her awkward position, as the Remainer who had leapt into Number Ten on the back of a Brexit victory in the referendum. Her acute awareness became a trap. Subsequently she felt a need to please hard-line Brexiteers far more than she did the smaller number on the other side of her party who had backed Remain. In doing so, she chose to be incarcerated, in relation to Brexit, at an early phase in her leadership when she had no need

to be. With reckless defiance she proclaimed her Brexit 'red lines': no customs union, no single market, no jurisdiction from the European Court of Justice (ECJ), no freedom of movement. In response, hard-liners in her party purred during those early months. Like John Major and David Cameron, Theresa May tried hard from the beginning to please her potential tormentors but, in doing so (as with Major and Cameron), she was sealing her fate.

By the beginning of October 2016 she had declared that the UK would leave the single market and the customs union and would no longer be under the jurisdiction of the ECJ. She had promised to trigger Article 50 by March of the following year. At the same time she envisaged retaining the benefits that were conferred on the UK on the basis of its membership of the EU. At no point in this early phase – her period of greatest untouchable authority – did May explain to her party that Brexit would involve some very tough choices. She could have done so in the opening months of her leadership. Some in her party would not have liked being told candid truths, but would have had no choice but to listen. She could have cleared some of the ground that became impossibly cluttered when she started to make the awkward choices that she had pretended were not there.

Instead, in the early months, May was having her cake and eating it. Later, when ministers were being publicly critical of her (in some cases defying the whip in Brexit votes) and MPs were calling on her to go, she had no choice but to be assertive, lecturing her stropky party about the importance of maintaining the soft border in Ireland, and on the need for the UK to consider being part of a customs union until the issue of the Irish border and the backstop was answered. But at that point she was telling hard truths when few would listen.

Leaders often get the sequence wrong. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were politically untouchable in 1997 and yet acted cautiously. When voters turned hard against Blair, he had no choice but to be strong in defending the calamity of Iraq. He became a crusading evangelical as voters were becoming restive. When he had much less to say, voters paid homage to him. Harold Wilson had more space than he dared to realize after winning a landslide in 1966. The example of May is more vivid. As prime ministers often do at the beginning of a reign, she made a series of rushed decisions when she was mighty. These decisions were the product of insecurity, but were hailed in the Eurosceptic newspapers as acts of Thatcher-like strength.

Yet prime ministers are complex human beings. May was both insecure about her relationship with the party in relation to Brexit, and over-confident on other matters. These are the kinds of contradictory forces that shape many early prime ministerial careers. Early over-confidence arises from the fact that prime ministers have reached the pinnacle that so many dream of attaining. They dare to wonder whether they are special. At the summit, the few who make it inhale a whiff of intoxicating power. During the coalition years, May must have heard much speculation that George Osborne might well be Cameron's successor, or maybe Michael Gove; or, days before she acquired the crown, she would have noted that Boris Johnson was the favourite to lead. Yet she was the one who got there. The victory gave her a partial sense of imperious triumph – as misjudged as her early insecurity about being a prime minister who voted 'Remain'.

With a ruthless swagger, she triggered a purge of Cameron's allies across Number Ten, the Treasury and the wider government. George Osborne was one of those who was brutally sacked – told

to go off and learn more about the Conservative Party, an early sign that sensitivity with colleagues was not May's greatest asset. The purge had many consequences. From day one, she acquired enemies who would never forgive her brutality, when it should have been obvious to her that she would need all the goodwill she could get in order to deal with Brexit.

A more serious and overlooked consequence of the purge was a sudden loss of collective memory in relation to the European Union. The mistakes David Cameron made in his renegotiation with the EU, and the lessons learned from that flawed negotiation, would have been invaluable to a novice prime minister suddenly exposed to the task of Brexit. To have had some ministers involved in the torrid twists and turns of the late-Cameron era in the room with May and her advisers, when they were having dangerously naive conversations about Brexit, might have made her approach more agile. Instead, those who had learned lessons from Cameron's renegotiation were largely in exile. May had felt confident enough to sack them.

The early over-confidence took a deeper form, which impaired her political vision. She hoped to lead a government that instigated many historic domestic reforms. She did not realize, or accept, that Brexit would overwhelm all other ambition. This was part of her early misreading of the overcrowded political stage. Some of the early ideas were substantial and marked a genuine leap from the Conservatives' recent past, but they did not have a hope of taking shape, with the Brexit mountain to climb. The early hopes for radical domestic reform took an ideological form, influenced greatly by Nick Timothy. As an adviser, Timothy had ideas that were a distinctive and interesting blend, combining a hint of Enoch Powell's Midlands nationalism and Ed Miliband's faith in the state. He was a genuine radical and innovative thinker, who was also a committed Brexiteer. There is

speculation as to whether May was a mere vessel for Timothy's bold ideas or whether she shared his distinct values. It does not matter greatly – she chose to share them, albeit erratically.

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Like most prime ministers, May was not a good judge of colleagues or how best to deal with them. Leaders, often more insecure than they seem, self-absorbed and with no choice but to become wholly immersed in the frenzied rush of each day, have little time or inclination to reflect on the characters around them. Most value loyalty as a winning characteristic. They are often poor at evaluating who will be an effective administrator or reformer, and rarely value those who challenge and question what is happening.

Some said of Margaret Thatcher that she liked nothing more than to be challenged by other ministers. There is little evidence of this. Her test, when making appointments, was the question 'Is he one of us?' – a theme so defining that an early biography by the columnist Hugo Young took the question as its title.<sup>3</sup> Her chancellors shared Thatcher's economic approach and, when they ceased to do so, they were gone. Those she promoted tended to be dotting admirers. Those who questioned her did not last very long. Tony Blair sought to promote 'Blairites', colleagues who had decided to agree with him in the internal battles with Gordon Brown. Cameron assumed that he had loyal colleagues until he called the referendum and discovered, in some cases – namely, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove – that their convictions or ambition trumped their loyalty to him. Wilson and Callaghan had to balance their Cabinets politically. The art of managing fascinated both of

them in different ways, but like other prime ministers they were not especially curious about what made their colleagues tick. Blair was a poor judge of who would flourish in government. At the beginning he was very keen on appointing as ministers those with experience of business. Few survived in the more brutal world of politics for very long.

Immediately after becoming prime minister, May appointed three controversial Brexit supporters to key Cabinet posts. Two of them were gone within days of May finally putting a Brexit deal to the Cabinet in the summer of 2018. At the beginning, Boris Johnson was made Foreign Secretary, David Davis was Brexit Secretary in a new department, and Liam Fox was given responsibility to pursue embryonic trade deals that would be ready when the UK left the EU. Nick Timothy outlined the thinking behind the appointments:

I can remember when we were planning the reshuffle and we went through all the different options and the way she described what she wanted to do, I remember sort of summarising it as Brexit abroad, social reform at home. And that was actually really the intent of that reshuffle. So there were leading Brexit supporters who were given the foreign-facing department, so Boris went to the Foreign Office, David Davis was in the Brexit department, Liam went to trade, Priti Patel went to International Development and then people like Amber Rudd went to the Home Office and Damian Green to DWP [Department for Work and Pensions]. And that was the logic and it was partly because I think Theresa felt that it was important that the people responsible for developing the Brexit policy should be people who really get it and really mean it. And to be honest, there probably was a calculation too that compromise would need to happen at some point and that it would be important that the leading Brexiteers were party to those compromises and that they'd helped to make the decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Timothy's assessment is illuminating. Here is further confirmation of May's early underestimation of the Brexit task. She assumed that Cabinet ministers in non-Brexit departments would have the space to embark on historic reforms. They never got the chance. Brexit swallowed up all political energy.

Davis had qualities as a campaigning and rebellious backbencher, but had shown limited interest in governing. Yet May gave him the brief of setting up a new government department, while negotiating Brexit with the rest of the EU and being the main navigator in a tricky UK Parliament. This was a gargantuan set of tasks. Davis was ill-equipped to accomplish them. They demanded patience, a mastery of detail, a form of administrative genius to make the new department work, a deep understanding of how the EU functioned and a capacity to work with a wilfully insular prime minister. Davis did not possess the range, experience or interests to meet any of these tasks, and his appointment reflected May's poor judgement of people.

Crucially, May did not go out of her way to engage with the new Brexit department. She reconfigured Whitehall and then proceeded to take decisions with her small group in Number Ten, as she had done at the Home Office. One of the few friends of David Cameron to be offered a post in May's first government, George Bridges, was the Brexit Minister in the House of Lords:

I found at times I was learning more from the *Financial Times*, in terms of its reporting of what was going on in Brexit, than I was from internal papers I was being shown. And I found at times I was being asked questions in the House of Lords, very searching questions, which, given a Member of the House of Lords could think that this is an important issue, we as government should have been able to answer. And the fact that I didn't – I was often skating on very thin

ice, or even trying to walk on water – I felt deeply troubled. Number Ten felt very, very closed. Should I have banged on the door more often? Every so often I did raise a flag saying: what is going on? But it felt very closed and I have to say that was one of the major frustrations that led me to resign.<sup>5</sup>

Bridges resigned after the 2017 election, one of many Brexit ministers who walked away during the years of May's rule.

May was taking the decisions in Number Ten, becoming trapped in stages. Having declared that the end of free movement was a 'red line', and having appointed senior Cabinet ministers with the obvious potential to make her life hellish, the next key step towards her incarceration was a special speech that she delivered on Brexit at the start of the Conservative party conference in October 2016. It was during the address that she pledged to trigger Article 50 by the end of the following March. She made the pledge not because she had a clear idea of the route ahead, once the Article had been triggered – she was in the dark about that. Like so many previous prime ministers in relation to Europe, May acted for reasons of party management. Unlike previous prime ministers, she was triggering a timetable from which there was no escape. Once Article 50 was triggered, the UK was scheduled to leave two years later.

Throughout the summer before the conference, Conservative MPs had been popping up, asking why she had not already triggered Article 50. They did so politely but firmly. In response to their demands, May thought she had hit upon a balanced approach – a third way. She rationalized to herself that she had not triggered Article 50 immediately when she became prime minister, as some of her MPs had wanted, but at the same time she was assuring impatient backbenchers and the newspapers that they did not have to wait beyond 31 March 2017 for Article 50 to be triggered.

Her third way was widely hailed again as a Thatcher-like act of assertion, by the Eurosceptic newspapers, but the opposite was closer to the truth. She could have waited longer and a delay would have been a display of courageous strength – a leader defying the foolish impatience of hard-liners in her party. Well ahead in the polls, May was in a strong enough position to resolve at least some of the internal differences within her Cabinet before starting the clock. An attempt at resolution would have been tough for her, but she could have prevailed at this early stage, the phase when she assumed she would be prime minister for a decade at least. Instead, the Article 50 clock was ticking, without May having any clear sense of how she would bring about her objectives of leaving the EU while retaining the benefits of the EU and keeping her Cabinet united.

As a nervy communicator, May's preferred form of address was the occasional set-piece speech on Brexit. There is much to be said for the long prime ministerial address, forcing a leader and advisers to put a case at length for what they are seeking to do. But speeches twice a year were not enough to persuade voters and MPs of May's chosen course. A Brexit prime minister needed to be communicating constantly and accessibly.

When she made her first big speech on Britain exiting the EU, at Lancaster House in January 2017, May was not clear what precise course she would take. Once again she outlined her 'red lines', to the delight of Brexiteers – no single market or customs union, and no ECJ rule – but even at her most defiant, there was ambiguity running through her careful words, in a speech that was still being written and rewritten the day before it was delivered. May spoke about the possibility of 'associate membership' of the customs union. The imprecise term papered over the cracks. She was smart enough to realize the potentially dark consequences of a complete

break with the customs union and yet she needed to declare, and genuinely wanted to assert, that the UK would negotiate its own deals. Liam Fox and others had convinced her that countries were queuing up to sign new deals. Although May spoke vaguely about future customs relations, Nick Timothy insists that if there was ambiguity, it was tactical. As far as he was concerned, there would be no customs union of any form under May's leadership – and he helped to write the speech. His exchange, in a BBC interview, highlights the multi-layered calculations:

It definitely wasn't the case that she was wrestling with the possibility of staying in the customs union. Theresa has an instinctive dislike of policy options being reduced to binary outcomes and so that was her way, I think, of trying to leave open the possibility of reducing the friction in trade between the UK and EU whilst still retaining the ability to pursue an independent trade policy.

When you say she has a reluctance of binary choice, is that another way of saying perhaps she has to be, or chooses to be, quite opaque at times in this Brexit journey?

Yeah, I think a bit of both. I mean I think it's partly she has had to deal in ambiguity because that's the reality of negotiating sometimes. It's also the reality of trying to hold together complicated coalitions of factions. So I think it's probably partly that, but it does genuinely also reflect a way of thinking, which is to not leap to a particular position because it appears like you have a choice between a and b policy options.<sup>6</sup>

Around the time May delivered her Lancaster House speech, many within her party, including David Davis, were advising her to call an early election. The reasons for this were twofold. Most obviously, the bigger majority that Davis and others assumed the Conservatives would secure would make the Brexit legislative path much more straightforward. Of equal importance, as far as Davis

was concerned, was that an election in 2017 meant there would be no need for another one in the immediate aftermath of Brexit. Instead, the government could breathe freely until 2022.

May listened to Davis and gave no indication of what she herself was thinking. She was an enigma to her Cabinet ministers, but also quite possibly to herself. She had publicly declared there would be no early election and, if she had kept to that position, she would have been much stronger. Before the 2017 election, May was one of the more commanding prime ministers of recent times.

At least she was in every respect apart from one. She had secured no mandate of her own, and yet she was openly pursuing an agenda that was different from David Cameron's. She wanted to leave the Cameron era behind. She faced the same problem Gordon Brown had faced in 2007, but with one key difference: Brown wanted to move on from Blairism without losing the support of the pro-Blair newspapers; May felt no need to worship at the altar of Cameron's leadership or to be seen doing so.

The early election of 2017 had a Shakespearean quality. For several reasons, it was the most significant since 1979, and arguably had more historic consequences than Margaret Thatcher's first victory. Unusually, the two main parties campaigned on manifestos that celebrated the potential of the state, which had the possibility of making the management of Brexit even more of a nightmare.

May is not to be compared with King Lear or Macbeth in terms of character, but there are parallels with Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Shakespeare had a theory, widely held at the time he was writing, that if leaders break with the natural order, they unleash forces that turn on them. Macbeth killed Duncan to seize the crown and began a sequence that destroyed him. Lear broke up his estate and became

homeless. May called an early election in order to win big, and almost lost everything. She had declared several times that she would not call an early election, and she meant it. A cautious leader in some respects, she was partly at ease with the natural order: she was a commanding figure, with several years before the next election was due. But in the end she succumbed and called an election. Expecting a sizeable majority to reinforce her dominance, she unleashed forces that turned upon her. The early election transformed the politics of Brexit under May, as she failed to secure the mandate she needed in order to deliver her version of Britain's withdrawal.

Voters in the UK tend to elect prime ministers who are partly actors, and although they (and much of the media) claim not to like the artifice of politics, they need the artistry. Margaret Thatcher was an actress. She was nowhere near as self-confident as her public stridency suggested. Tony Blair could have acted Macbeth and Hamlet simultaneously. David Cameron was an imitator of Blair – almost consciously an imitator, in the style of Rory Bremner. These prime ministers were all fascinated by their place on the political stage and how they appeared at any given time. May was not interested in politics as a performance. Her shyness and awkwardness were, in some respects, endearing qualities. Although self-absorbed, she was not mesmerized by the glamour and glitter of politics. But in spite of her reticence, her hired strategists made the election about her. When she was the star guest on BBC1's *The One Show*, in arguably the softest interview ever given, the toughest question to be asked of her and her husband was 'Who puts out the bins at night?' May looked fleetingly horrified at this question, as if she had been asked to reveal her whole hand in the Brexit negotiation. She was shy and uneasy throughout the contest and, in a twist of historic significance, lost her majority.

Her manifesto was crammed with radical ideas, including a strong defence of the state, and it dared to put forward a policy to raise much-needed money for elderly care. Yet at no point in the campaign did May expand on the radical spirit in her programme. Instead she repeated, in a machine-like manner, that her new government would be 'strong and stable', as if the daring manifesto had no connection with her robotic pitch. The specific policy for elderly care was misjudged and mistimed. Those who needed care would have to pay substantially more from the value of their property. The policy became known as the 'dementia tax' because, unlike patients in the tax-funded NHS, the sufferer would meet the costs. The details were flawed, but it was the manner of the announcement that was so bizarre. In the New Labour era – albeit in ways that were too cautious – Blair and Brown spent months, and sometimes years, clearing the ground before announcing a specific fund-raising policy. May introduced hers in the middle of an election campaign, without the capacity to explain. Instead, the Conservatives were forced to revise the policy in a panic, only for May to declare that 'nothing had changed'. This was an early example of her tendency to make statements at odds with what was happening around her. She lacked the language to manage and explain the eruption of wild events about her. There was no greater misreading than the introduction of a deeply contentious measure during a campaign.

After the election, May faced Brexit with no overall majority. Her fragility was unique. Normally when prime ministers lose their majorities, they cease to be prime minister. Ted Heath is one of the other prime ministers who called an early election, only to find forces turning on him. In February 1974 he lost his overall majority, tried to stay on, but was gone by the Monday. Although Harold Wilson then took over as a minority prime minister, he was seen

to have won. In this case, May, despite having won almost as many votes as Margaret Thatcher at her peak, was seen to have lost. It was in this context that she navigated Brexit. Yet her Cabinet stuck by her. In the months that followed, she endured more resignations than any modern prime minister, although none immediately after the election. She was no longer strong enough to act with ruthlessness, in terms of purging another batch of perceived enemies. In a Shakespearean contrast, having sacked Osborne and Gove as she acquired the crown, May was now forced to remove her two close advisers, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill. She was almost alone, comforted only by the presence of Damian Green as her unofficial deputy prime minister. Then she had to sack him, when he faced allegations of sexual harassment.

May was often described as 'weak'. The term is close to useless in casting light on a leader, but as far as it means anything, it points us in the wrong direction here. Politically she was in a much weaker position, but as a personality she remained the most stubborn prime minister to occupy Number Ten for many decades – arguably more so than Margaret Thatcher. Often Thatcher was more expedient than she seemed. May was a wilful leader in a weak position: an explosive combination.

She mistook being stubborn for integrity. If she committed publicly to an absurd immigration target, she felt she had to stick to it. If she said that the UK must leave the single market and, ultimately, the customs union, then the UK would have to depart at the assigned date. She was not a leader of guile. May's aims in relation to Brexit were more or less constant and publicly expressed.

Yet she could not escape her early 'red lines'. The hard-liners clung to them with exuberant hope, even when May came to realize that she could not wholly deliver the contradictory objectives. The

post-election sequence – ‘red lines’ becoming blurred, a divided party and a hung parliament – was something of a roller-coaster ride. May was one of the least ostentatious prime ministers in modern history and yet, without a great ego or a hint of narcissism, her ride was spectacular.

Leadership is partly a conjuring trick. Leaders can get away with a huge amount, if they are popular and able to win elections. For most of the time they are in power, colleagues judge them largely on this limited basis. Jack Straw once sought to explain the lack of intense Cabinet scrutiny of Blair’s conduct in the build-up to Iraq by pointing out that he had made a lot of correct calls. He had won a landslide for a second time. Thatcher won elections, so the Cabinet went along with her, even when some ministers had doubts about what she was doing.

While personally stubborn after the early election, May was in a weak position because she could perform no tricks. She had been seen to be useless during an election. She would not be allowed to contest another, and therefore the art of appearing to rule into the long-distant future had gone. Instead of being the new political fashion, May became immediately the frail leader. When she proclaimed her thoughts on Brexit, the ministerial and media instinct was to question what she was saying, rather than to pay homage. If she had returned from Brussels with her Brexit deal after a landslide election win, much of her party and the media would have hailed a negotiating triumph. We choose to see what we want to see. After the 2017 election, it was the default position of Conservative MPs and May’s opponents to declare her efforts to have been a disaster.

May’s moves towards her Brexit deal were made even more complex by her own growing insights into what Brexit meant for Ireland and the peace process. Soon after the election, she

came to realize that her early Brexit assumptions had been too simplistic. In January 2017 the UK’s EU ambassador, Sir Ivan Rogers, resigned, complaining in his resignation letter of ‘muddled thinking’ and ‘ill-founded arguments’. He went on to give a series of illuminating talks on the muddle, touching on the fundamental misunderstanding of how the EU worked, the false hope of playing some members off against others, and the unjustified swagger. He left while May still assumed that the UK could have its cake and eat it. Rogers’ concerns were unwelcome to her. At that point she did not want to hear that Brexit would be more complicated than she wanted it to be. By the early autumn of the same year May came to realize that some of what Rogers had been warning her about was urgently pertinent, and that the simplistic assertions of her Brexit Secretary, David Davis, were unreliable at best. In September 2017 the senior official at the Brexit Department, Olly Robbins, moved into Number Ten. This was a symbolic and practical move of great importance. Number Ten was taking control because Davis had failed to do so at his new department. After his resignation in the summer of 2018, Davis told journalists that a key moment for him was when May changed her approach to Brexit from his fantasy version. As ever with May, she said nothing to indicate any fresh thinking. That is partly because she was incapable of articulating what she was doing.

Even if May had won a landslide, she would still have faced mountainous problems in delivering an impossible ‘have your cake and eat it’ strategy. She would still have found the negotiations almost impossible, and she would still have had to make her speech in Florence at the end of September 2017 on the eve of the party-conference season. Her Florence speech was intended to secure a breakthrough with the EU, as she started to appreciate that the early

flourishes of UK machismo were wholly unrealizable. Tonally, the speech was conciliatory and internationalist. May agreed that the UK would pay a Brexit bill – the sum conveniently unspecified. In interviews surrounding the speech she made clear what was implicit in it: she ached for a deal. The UK machismo around ‘no deal’ had gone. There was no reference to ‘no deal’ in the speech, only a warning about what such an outcome would mean.

The Florence speech was elegantly constructed. Reading it retrospectively makes sense of all that followed: May’s determination to avoid no deal, a recognition that the Irish Question must be answered, and her intention to regain a degree of democratic control, as she saw it. For her, above all that meant ending free movement, the element of Brexit that she believed in with unyielding conviction.

It was only in December 2017, when she signed up to phase one of the Brexit deal, that her willingness to compromise became more tangible. Both the UK and the EU agreed that there must be no hard border separating Northern Ireland from the rest of Ireland. Barring a technological breakthrough that no one could confidently envisage in the short term at least, that meant the UK remaining in a customs union or Northern Ireland being treated differently from the rest of the UK. When this issue surfaced the following year, it seemed to come as a surprise to some hard-line Brexiteers, but although May remained evasive and vague, the words were there for them to read in the December document. Her hard-liners were not assiduous at reading them, or chose not to reflect on what the words implied. May did not encourage any such reflections. Instead she did what she always did and kept going, hoping the dissenters would be won round at the final moment.

May might have told Osborne to get to know the Conservative Party better, but she displayed a lack of understanding herself –

namely, the degree to which the parliamentary party had changed from being largely pragmatic and expedient to becoming an ideological crusade, one in which a purist view of accountability and sovereignty meant far more to them than loyalty to a national leadership.

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In the summer of 2018 May outlined her proposed Brexit deal. Although based on the Florence speech and the December agreement, the proposals came as a shock to her Cabinet and a lot of her MPs. But the alarm that greeted what became known as her ‘Chequers plan’ was also a reflection of her closed, insular style of leadership. May did not explain her thinking in the months leading up to Chequers. There was no attempt to prepare the ground. With good cause, she knew she had to sideline David Davis, but she lacked the skills to make her hard-liners feel fragile and insecure. On the contrary, she returned them to their comfort zone. They flourished as evangelical dissenters and martyrs to their imprecise cause.

The contrast between May’s approach and Tony Blair’s, in relation to Iraq, is striking. Blair gave a constant running commentary as he sought to persuade his party, the media and the wider electorate to support his timid decision to back the Bush administration. He spoke at regular press conferences, gave many interviews and delivered a vast number of speeches. His call to back Bush was weak and misjudged, but he showed how a leader can persuade by the power of argument. He framed arguments about the weapons of mass destruction, and about his conviction that Iraqis would hail the imposition of democracy. In some respects May had a better case than Blair’s shaky one, as she sought to deliver Brexit while protecting the Irish soft

border and the supply chains for the manufacturing sector. Her Chequers plan, though deeply flawed, had points in its favour. But she never made the case for it, neither before nor after it was published. By the time MPs came to vote on whether or not to support Blair in relation to Iraq, he had succeeded in the art of persuasion, admittedly helped by the willingness of most Conservative MPs to back him before he had uttered a word. He knew little about Iraq or the wider region, but could deploy words to make a case. On Brexit, May could not – and did not – deploy words artfully.

She put her Brexit deal to the Cabinet at Chequers in July 2018. Ministers were told that if any of them resigned, they would lose their cars and would have to book a taxi home. Their mobile phones were confiscated. At the end of a long, hot summer's day, May issued a statement asserting that her proposals had the backing of her Cabinet. This was the beginning of another pattern. The vicar's daughter with a sense of moral duty uttered words that were true at the time, but were to prove to be untrue very quickly. The Chequers gathering was on the Friday. Davis and Johnson resigned the following Monday, and May responded as she always did: she replaced the two outgoing ministers and carried on as if nothing had happened.

En route to the torrid summer of 2018, May had largely stopped reading the newspapers, relying on a daily digest from media advisers. She was cocooned in Number Ten, dealing only with colleagues who served her. Prime ministers tend to enjoy elements of the role, even when they appear to be under impossible pressure. With the exception of Wilson, none have left voluntarily. May flourished when faced with long hours of work. She had got to the top, when so many others had not. She looked better than when she was twenty years younger – slimmer and more coiffured. This is all part of a pattern of leadership: prime ministers tend to look good

until they leave, and then they very quickly show signs of decline. In power, the adrenaline fires them up. A diabetic who had to inject insulin, May was not short of energy-enhancing adrenaline, but she was attempting the impossible.

On one level, her Chequers plan was a work of art in its attempt to bind together conflicting and contradictory forces. But May had done nowhere near enough between September 2017 and July 2018 to clear the ground. Perhaps there could be no clearing of the ground, given the circumstances, and her dogged, insular focus was the only option available. We will never know. What we do know is that May began to lose control – or even more control – after her day-long Cabinet meeting at Chequers in July 2018.

The final deal that May and her senior negotiators secured with the EU was partly based on Chequers, but inevitably some of her more contorted proposals were dropped. Instead of guaranteeing a soft border in Ireland, through impossibly complex trading arrangements, there would be a so-called 'backstop', to come into effect if no other solution was found during the transition. The UK would remain in a customs union until such a solution was found. There could be no unilateral withdrawal from this arrangement, or else it would not be a backstop. Again the proposition arose directly from the phase-one agreement the previous December, when both sides were committed to the soft border. As long as May secured an end to free movement, she was ready to accept other compromises. Again the compromises came as an apparent shock to her Cabinet and MPs, when she unveiled the deal in November 2018.

The dramas that erupted after May had published her deal highlighted once again her inability to persuade, her failure to read the political stage and her unique detached wilfulness. Through the months that followed she was both the most fragile of modern

prime ministers and yet the most pivotal. She continued to make the key decisions, often without much consultation, that would shape her country's history. Yet she could have fallen at any point, and at one stage in the spring of 2019 offered to resign under certain circumstances. In true May tradition, she made the offer and then carried on as if nothing had happened.

The immediate aftermath of the Cabinet meeting that discussed her Brexit deal for the first time in November 2018 was typical. May gave a statement declaring that the Cabinet had supported the deal. The words were true at the time, but as she must have known as she delivered them, they would not be true for more than a few hours. The following morning the Brexit Minister, Dominic Raab, resigned, along with several other ministers. May had become even more of an unreliable narrator. Shortly after Raab's resignation, she gave a statement to the Commons on her deal. For an hour not a single MP had a good word to say about it. May might have thought, at the end of such a draining session, one that followed ministerial resignations, that her deal was doomed. Wilson, Blair, Brown and Cameron would have been in a state of neurotic hyperactivity after such a sequence, working out what the hell to do next, contemplating a thousand different ploys that might change the situation.

May was quite different. Instead, she acted as she always did – as if the volcanic eruptions were separate from her, and from what she was doing. She appointed a new Brexit Secretary and made other replacements. Then she conducted a bizarre nationwide tour to put the case for her deal, as if she were fighting a general election. Those warning May that her deal would be defeated in the Commons included the chair of the 1922 Committee, Sir Graham Brady. He was one of the few politicians May listened to and liked. It was his

job to convey the views of backbenchers. On the several occasions when Brady warned her about a terrible defeat over her deal, May gave nothing away. She looked at him and then moved on to other issues.<sup>7</sup>

May was a sheltered prime minister, hearing only what she wanted to hear. In discussions with a small number of advisers, she calculated that her threat of no Brexit, or no deal, would bludgeon MPs into backing her deal. She devised no memorable phrases to make her deal accessibly appealing. Indeed, her deal was spoken of as if it were an abstract art form, rather than a dense, detailed document. Yet in spite of the density of the Withdrawal Agreement itself, it proved to be another evasive exercise in kicking the can down the road. The Irish Question was still to be resolved. The much thornier issue of the UK's future relationship with the EU was not addressed. May was asking MPs to take the historic decision to leave the EU without having a clue as to what would happen next.

Inevitably, she pulled the vote on her deal the day it was due to be held in December. When the vote eventually did take place the following month, her deal was defeated by a historic majority of 230 votes. Her senior advisers looked on in alarm when the vote was declared in the Commons. The margin of defeat was higher than any of them had anticipated. May returned to Number Ten and carried on as if nothing much had happened, once again behaving as though she was separate from such seismic events.

After the vote, May said she would reach out in order to get parliamentary approval. She did not mean it. Her sole focus was to persuade her Brexit hard-liners and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to back her. She hoped also to secure the support of some Labour MPs, but she was not going to pivot significantly. She

had never done so in her career, and she did not consider doing so now. During the leadership contest back in 2016 the former chancellor, Ken Clarke, had been recorded, when he was off air, describing May as a 'bloody difficult woman'. He meant that she was obstinate to the point of destructiveness at times. She clung to her deal, whatever the external circumstances.

In two more votes she failed to win the support of the DUP or a sufficient number of her hard-liners. Only a few Labour MPs were gullible enough to back her, not least after a televised statement in which May placed herself on the side of 'the people' against Parliament. The misjudged TV statement, delivered in March 2019 on the eve of another vote on her deal, was the most vivid example of her inability to read the rhythms of politics. She needed to woo MPs and she attacked them live on TV.

To be defeated three times, on the most significant proposition since the Second World War, normally would – and should – trigger a prime ministerial resignation. But May led in a weak parliament of largely half-formed politicians. Her internal opponents enjoyed the limelight, appearing on the media so often they appeared to be numerically stronger than they were. But they were hopeless strategists, not having had to think strategically very often in the past, and unable to do so when their moment came. Crucially, her critics mistimed their vote of confidence on May, holding it in December when her deal had not been put to the vote, and when she was evidently regarded as the least-bad option to most Conservative MPs. May won the vote of confidence – another event that would have traumatized most prime ministers, but one she characteristically treated as if it was just another drama that had little to do with her. In theory, Conservative MPs had no formal means of removing her for another twelve months – she was, briefly,

the least secure and most secure prime minister of modern times.

Like all prime ministers, May clung to power for much longer than the surrounding political and media frenzy suggested was possible, but her approach to survival was unique. Most prime ministers who know they are in deep trouble become obsessed by the political noise erupting around them. They scheme and then watch obsessively the consequences of their manoeuvrings. In contrast, May stood apart from the noise as if she was separate from it. The detachment was breathtaking, because her fate was to become the Brexit prime minister, the most darkly demanding destiny of any post-war prime minister.

To take one emblematic example, during Prime Minister's Questions on the day her MPs held a confidence vote on her leadership in December 2018, the Liberal Democrat leader, Vince Cable, asked her a mischievous question. Cable wondered whether she preferred her own MPs condemning her or the entire House of Commons doing so, in a vote of confidence in her government. Characteristically, May did not recognize mischief, and neither could she respond to provocative questions with wit. She responded to Cable by pointing out, in a matter-of-fact way, that there was a vote of confidence in her leadership taking place amongst Conservative MPs that day. It was as if she was talking about items on a shopping list – somebody else's shopping list. She then sat down and awaited the next question on another issue. For May, detachment of this kind was constant, to such an extent that the disconnect between her public words and what was happening around her became stark.

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Context partly determines the fate of leaders, and May faced the toughest set of tasks of any modern prime minister. Yet her approach to leadership made the demands more mountainous. Tellingly, she became the third modern prime minister, following Blair and Cameron, to announce her departure from Number Ten in advance – the most humiliating of pledges. The announcement is a symptom of disorder and fuels the sense of crisis, rather than alleviating it. Immediately after May told MPs she would resign if they backed her Withdrawal Agreement in March 2019, potential successors of unproven mettle made their moves. None of them were remotely qualified. Sajid Javid had been Home Secretary for a few months. Jeremy Hunt was a similarly short-serving Foreign Secretary. Boris Johnson had his chance at the Foreign Office and blew it. Others were measured by their views on Brexit, as if the fact that Penny Mordaunt had been equivocal about May's Brexit deal meant she was ready for the epic demands of leadership. Thatcher had big figures breathing down her neck, ready to lead. Blair had one big figure breathing down his. May had none.

Looking back, as a Labour politician responsible for his party's economic policy from 1992, Gordon Brown faced the most persistent set of external challenges. The markets and the media in the UK set a much higher bar for Labour, in relation to the economy. Edward Heath had to deal with the consequences of the quadrupling of oil prices, a seismic event over which he had no control. In 1974 Harold Wilson inherited raging inflation and industrial chaos. James Callaghan took over in 1976 with none of those challenges remotely resolved. Yet, by some distance, May faced the biggest mountain of the lot. Brexit would have challenged a leader of titanic qualities. When she first became prime minister she inherited a tiny majority of fifteen, nowhere near big enough

to avoid parliamentary trouble. After her 2017 election she had no majority at all, although that was her fault for the way she had conducted the campaign.

There are some myths about May's misjudgements. From her exhausted chief whip, Julian Smith, to many Labour MPs, she was unfairly accused of failing to reach out to other parties after the general election. Smith told the BBC that a softer Brexit was inevitable after the election.<sup>8</sup> Many others have observed it was obvious, after the election, that May's approach to Brexit was doomed in a hung parliament, and as a result she should have engaged formally with Labour in the summer of 2017, as she finally did in April 2019 when, in theory, the UK was about to leave the EU.

The accusation of self-interested tribalism fits the stereotype that May could only think of her party and never beyond its fractious boundaries. In truth, she was trapped after the election. If she had opened talks with Jeremy Corbyn in the aftermath of what, for her, had been a terrible campaign – one in which Corbyn had fared better than most assumed – and she had performed much worse, she would have been removed.

Her internal Cabinet critics were strategically inept and, for all their macho posturing, dreaded taking responsibility for Brexit. Even so, they would not have allowed May to give Corbyn even more credibility than he had already acquired after the election, by being consulted over Brexit. That option was not available to her. The likes of Johnson, Davis and others, who had contemplated telling May that she had to resign on the night of the election, would have acted to remove her.

Instead of leading with Labour in the new hung parliament, she behaved with a degree of political courage by sidelining Davis in his Brexit department, fantasizing about a deal that the EU

would never have agreed to. In private meetings she also dared to challenge the likes of Jacob Rees-Mogg on the seriousness of the Irish Question. Indeed, it is hard to sustain the common thesis that May put her party before the national interest, when much of her party was incandescent with rage over her Withdrawal Agreement. If May had the wit of Wilson or Blair, she would have made a virtue of the internal defiance by joking that if she had put her party first, it did not seem to be working. But May never joked, at least not spontaneously. Wit is an important weapon for leaders. May did not, or could not, deploy humour.

Looking back, that first Cabinet points to the tragedy of May's premiership. Nick Timothy's explanation of the appointments highlights an early reforming zeal that was never to be realized. May hoped that the likes of Amber Rudd, Damian Green and Greg Clark might assist her and her senior advisers to move the party on from Thatcherism. Indeed, nothing irritates Timothy more than reading commentators or hearing broadcasters observe, as if a matter of fact, that May's leadership marked a move to the right after Cameron and Osborne. Timothy had planned for a domestic agenda that was to the left of what had preceded it. Without Brexit, May might have been a genuine modernizer, the first 'one nation' Tory leader since Heath. Instead, she was doomed to become the Brexit prime minister. By the time the UK was supposed to have left the EU in March 2019, voters were more divided than when the referendum was held, and her party was in turmoil. Brexit in a hung parliament demanded a leader of imagination, empathy, tenacity, guile and mesmeric persuasive gifts. Instead it was Theresa May, emerging from the relative shelter of the Home Office: shy, stubborn, detached and inflexibly wilful.

In some respects, May was the dullest of modern prime ministers, and yet her premiership was by some margin the closest to an impossibly gripping thriller. During her misjudged early election, May told an interviewer that her most daring venture had been to run through a wheat field. Yet as prime minister, she played the starring role in the political equivalent to a James Bond film, confronting many villains (mainly in her own Cabinet and parliamentary party), racing around European capitals, sometimes flying out suddenly in the middle of the night. All the while, no one knew how the drama would end – May became utterly compelling, in spite of herself.

Finally, May ran out of road. She tried to revive her deal a fourth time, presenting a Withdrawal Bill aimed at wooing Labour MPs with various imprecise concessions that may or may not have taken effect if her bill was passed. Her MPs were alarmed at the concessions, while Labour MPs were unimpressed by the tentative nature of her offer to them. The bill was doomed and so was she. May announced her resignation tearfully on Friday 24 May 2019, stressing the need for compromise and a parliamentary solution to Brexit. If those themes had been her focus when she was politically strong, she might have been Prime Minister for longer. Instead, at the beginning, she had sought to please her hardliners. Three years later she was making her resignation statement from more or less the same spot outside Number Ten where Cameron had announced his departure. Within a day or so, more than ten Conservatives had expressed a passionate interest in replacing her. So many ached still to wear the thorny crown.