

# Prime Minister Theresa May Takes the Lead

by Michael Curtis



Perhaps the most disagreeable trait in Machiavelli's controversial writings were his misogynous comments on women.

In *The Prince*, published in 1532 but written earlier, he wrote, "Fortune is a woman. And if you wish to keep her down, it is necessary to beat and ill-use her." What would he have made of British women who were not kept down, if sometimes ill-used?

He would doubtless have admired the Machiavellian nature of the remarks of Queen Elizabeth I to the troops in Tilbury on August 9, 1588: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too."

It is less certain that two modern women Prime Ministers would

have been similarly admired by Machiavelli. Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Prime Minister who became the "Iron Lady," successfully campaigned to keep Britain in Europe at the 1975 referendum on the issue that was approved by 67 % of the electorate. Importantly, she changed her mind and became a Euroskeptic.

Now, another Conservative woman prime minister, Theresa May, in relation to the same issue, the European Union, was not "kept down," but in April 2017 changed her mind and decided to call a British General Election to be held on June 8, 2017. Her decision was upheld by a House of Commons motion, 522 to 18, agreeing to the election date.

The British constitutional system has for more than a century provided for parliamentary five year terms but traditionally allowed the existing prime minister to decide at will, on the basis of prerogative right, to dissolve parliament, and give notice of only six weeks, without requiring the assent of either House of Parliament.

Theresa May acted in accordance with this tradition.

However, she evaded the spirit of a new law, the Fixed Term Parliaments Act of 2011, which laid down not only that elections would be held every five years but there would be five year fixed terms for governments unless a call for another election would be triggered by two thirds of the MPs in the House of Commons.

A month earlier, in March 2017, Prime Minister May thought that calling an election, not due technically until 2020, would be self-serving and would create uncertainty and instability. However, on April 18, 2017, after a walk with her husband in the mountains of North Wales, she concluded a new election for the House of Commons was desirable for political reasons. It is Machiavellian political practice that prime ministers call elections when they believe they will win.

Presently, the Conservative government has an overall majority of 17. Like all prime ministers Theresa May is politically opportunistic and believes she will easily win the election since public opinion polls show positive voting intentions: Conservatives are at 44% the Labour party at 23%, the pro EU Liberal Democrats at 12%, and UKIP at 10%. Labour is doing badly with an unpopular leader. The Labour Party is ideologically badly divided, and is fighting for its life as a serious party. Indeed, the election might lead to the emergence of a new center-left party, with moderate Labour plus Lib Dems. It is this that resembles a similar possibility in France if Emmanuel Macron becomes President.

May made the electoral decision in order to strengthen her hand in bargaining regarding Brexit with the EU. A larger parliamentary majority and anticipation of a five year term of office will give her time to negotiate a transitional arrangement, satisfactory to herself, not to the hardliners in her own Conservative party, as well as the other parties and the Scottish National Party. May has to deal with the thorny issue, the possibility of Scottish secession from the UK. This is made more difficult because at present the Conservatives have only one MP representative in the whole of Scotland.

May has a clear point of view. She is determined to build a truly Global Britain, and restore British national self-determination, and a confident country that is in control of its destiny once again. In this of course she resembles Donald Trump.

She is anxious to propose her own agenda, not that of former Prime Minister Donald Cameron, especially on a key issue for her, selective grammar school education.

Everyone now recognizes that negotiations over Brexit and any deal with the EU will take a long time. Theresa May faces the fact the main parties are split on the issue and that tensions

are rife within her own party and proposes a softer transition than Conservative extremists. As a result of the new election she will have up to June 2022 to reach a final settlement. She also recognizes that business interests need a transitional period after the UK leaves the EU.

May is conscious that Britain has a choice over Brexit, a trade deal of some kind or an extreme one of total divorce from the EU. One is a sharp, complete break from the EU. The other is a softer option, with minimal disruption from the EU, and retaining links with the EU not only in trade but on numerous specific issues, such as immigration, single market, and climate change.

Whatever the choice, there are obvious problems. A free trade deal is unlikely to be acceptable while UK is still a member of EU. May has already showed her resolve. with her past view that “no deal is better than a bad deal,” and outlining her chief arguments; ending the jurisdiction of European judges over British law, and more difficult and controversial, exiting from the single market but keeping the door open for future relationships.

However, irrespective of her past view Theresa May is anxious to make a deal though she has stated that a failure to get a deal would not be “catastrophic.” It is the EU that is unwilling to start talks over a future free trade deal while discussing terms of a “divorce,” though prepared to enter into negotiations later in the year. Those negotiations will be difficult. Prime Minister May has changed her mind on a number of issues concerning the EU, but so has President Donald Trump on issues that are important to him.