

Theresa May will find her way to a victory

Cameron didn't believe Britain would vote to leave and even after they did, Europe didn't believe the British were serious.

by Conrad Black



The front page of the *London Daily Mirror* undoubtedly had it **wrong** when it ran a front page on Wednesday with a full-length photo of Prime Minister Theresa May with the bold headlines covering the rest of the page: "No Hope No Clue No Deal No Confidence." A Guardian editorialist got somewhat carried away, as the *Guardian* almost always does in its lobotomous socialist biases, when he traced the present impasse back to Henry VIII's apostasy from the Roman Church, doled out blame

to Britain for all its wars with the Spanish and French, revisited the Suez fiasco of 1956, disparaged Margaret Thatcher without naming her, and then, closing in on a legitimate target, excoriated the previous prime minister, David Cameron, and concluded, like a dump truck raising the angle of its cargo area to ensure the cascade of the final detritus, on Theresa May. As usual with the (British) left, there is a great deal of overstatement in all of this. Theresa May has her limitations, but she is trying to build a bridge between a British referendum vote to leave Europe, a parliamentary majority to remain, and the unanimity on any relevant subject of the 27 states of the European Union.

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She has made some mistakes, and was handed a can of worms by Cameron, who deserves the opprobrium of the *Guardian*, but she has managed to fight her corner well. A few weeks ago, she retained the confidence of 200 of the governing Conservative Party's 317 members of Parliament, an unimpressive survival, but enough to shut her own MPs down for a year and keep a lock on her party's leadership. The defeat of her proposed Brexit compromise on Tuesday was 432 to 202, so she held the same people who supported her in the Conservative caucus plus two, and she won the confidence vote on Wednesday 325 to 306, indicating she regained all the Conservative and Democratic Ulster votes that have sustained the regime since the 2017 election.



The sun shines through a European Union flag tied onto a railing near British Parliament in London on Jan. 17, 2019. Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP

Despite the obloquy raining down on her, May has played her difficult hand well. It seemed to be a mistake to communicate to Brussels (the administration of the European Union) that she had to have a deal and did not want to leave with no deal,

as this emboldened the Brussels negotiators to be inflexible. This enabled her to cobble together a compromise that enjoyed the confidence of the “remain” majority of her party, solidifying her hold as prime minister, while losing the “leave” minority of her MPs, who assured the defeat of the compromise. Unless Brussels makes substantial concessions very soon, she will be able to tell her remain faction that she did her best to salvage an association with Europe, but two-thirds of the MPs wouldn’t have it; to tell Brussels to accommodate her countrymen or lose Europe’s most prestigious nation and second-largest economy, and since Brussels is unlikely to move quickly or far enough, she can then tell the leave majority in the country that she delivered what they voted for. Britain exits Europe, as it voted to do.



Brexit banners lie on the ground near British Parliament in London on Jan. 17, 2019. Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP

It has been a rather artistic performance, and as such things often are, is only discernible as such as it nears its complicated end. She is in a stronger position than the failed saviour of France, Emmanuel Macron, tussling with the yellow-vested protesters maintaining the tradition of Parisian boulevardiers of burning automobiles and smashing storefronts for no articulable reason except the perennial French pleasure of throwing paving stones at the police when their governments become exceptionally incompetent. May also now has a stronger hand than the long-standing heavyweight champion of German politics, Angela Merkel. She could have been Bismarck in drag but is now on her way out and is precariously at the head of a very fragile coalition.

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The European Union severely provoked Britain’s vote to depart by refusing to make the slightest concession to Cameron, who had promised “full-on treaty change” and came back from

Brussels (as I wrote at the time in Britain) with less than Chamberlain gained at Munich. Cameron deserves most of the blame for calling a vote to leave entirely or accept the pittance he had got as a compromise (variable benefit for some new arrivals in Britain from elsewhere in the EU, subject to approval of all 27 members). He didn't believe the British would take the drastic option, because he had no idea how exasperated the country was with the authoritarian pettifogging of the encrusted and compulsively meddlesome bureaucracy in Brussels, which is not answerable either to the major constituent governments or to the European Parliament (which has more interpreters than legislators most days). If Cameron had got what May got and put that to the country, he would have won 70 per cent of the referendum vote. Cameron didn't believe Britain would vote to leave and even after they did, Europe didn't believe the British were serious. Brussels gave too little to Cameron and he accepted it and vanished as if through a trap door. They gave too little to May and unless they come to their senses at the last moment, they will suffer a needless and possibly terminal amputation. It will be like the loss of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona to the U.S., or of everything west of Saskatchewan to Canada – a grievous blow.



British Prime Minister David Cameron addresses the media outside 10 Downing Street in London on July 11, 2016, when he announced that Theresa May would be Britain's new leader. Chris J Ratcliffe / Agence France-Presse / Getty Images

Because the Conservative MPs are mainly remainers and the Conservative voters are mainly leavers, it was impossible to get a parliamentary majority for any option. So it may be that the prime minister was right after all: she took her best guess at what the 27 European states would accept, let parliament reject it, and will tell Brussels to make more concessions or Britain exits, and let the clock run out. Theresa May will have delivered Brexit despite the wishes of the majority of her MPs but to the satisfaction of most of her voters. And her party can't sack her for a year, by which time

she will have executed Britain's departure and started good faith negotiations for new arrangements with Europe and the United States. The aftereffects of Brexit will be negligible, and there is no need for a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic as long as there is no plan to impose tariffs on the EU and Ireland retains a sensible immigration policy.

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There is no point padding around Europe again, from Lithuania to Bulgaria to Portugal to Ireland, trying to get everyone to agree to concessions in the hope that the British Parliament would find them acceptable. There is no point asking Berlin or Paris for anything or trying to round up free-thinking non-partisans in the opposition parties at Westminster; the Marxist anti-Semitic Labour Party leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, and the Scottish Nationalist and Ulster eccentrics are all impossible. The British prime minister has to invite Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg (head of the European Study Group) round to state their terms, and take the most tepid version of them she can get and present that to Europe. Brussels could be in no doubt that this was the last train leaving the station. Take it or Britain says goodbye in all of Europe's 21 languages. May appears the smartest of the main players except Johnson, Rees-Mogg, and Nigel Farage. They will probably get what they want. May will keep her job and claim to have been more or less of a leaver herself. The remainers had 48 per cent of the vote three years ago and they get nothing.

The remainers are still fighting the last war and calling for a second referendum, an idea that would be national suicide in terms of Britain being considered a mature political society, as it has been considered since the death of Oliver Cromwell.

If those who want to fold up the whole Brexit business as if it never happened got their way, it would bring on a total breakdown of government in Britain and would reveal the United Kingdom as a hopeless, incontinent, dithering political basket-case. Thus would vanish under a tidal wave of contempt the Mother of Parliaments. There would no longer always be an England, and God would have to save the Queen. It won't come to that.

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