

# Theresa May's House of Cards

Either the British have twisted themselves politically into confusion worthy of resolution by Alexander the Great's slicing of the Gordian Knot, or they are about to demonstrate more than ever before their talent at muddling through. As most readers will recall, last summer, Scotland voted 55 per cent to 45 per cent not to secede from the United Kingdom. It was a straight in-out question, refreshingly unlike the dishonest questions the Quebec separatists put to that province in 1980 and 1995, effectively offering all the benefits of being in Canada while becoming independent and exchanging embassies with every country in the world. In last month's referendum on whether the United Kingdom should withdraw from the European Union, Scotland voted by almost two-to-one to Remain, while the United Kingdom (10 per cent of whose citizens live in Scotland), voted 52 per cent to secede.

The prime minister at the time, David Cameron, had promised a full change of the European treaty to accommodate British concerns about immigration, over-regulation and the dumping of European manufactures in the U.K., and brought back from Brussels a very slender concession to "consider" British "applications" to vary social benefits to migrants. Cameron had bought peace in his party with the promise of a referendum, and having won a majority last year after five years of minority government, led his party and his government in seeking a vote to Remain in the EU. When he lost, he did the honourable thing and resigned as prime minister. His political capital had been squandered and he had no other practical choice, but political leaders cannot always be counted on to do what is honourable, especially when it is deeply inconvenient.



AFP / Getty Images Cameron (centre) speaks in Parliament

Wednesday, flanked by incoming prime minister Theresa May (right) and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne.

The leading member of the Conservative Party among the Leavers, Boris Johnson, just retired after two successful terms as mayor of London, prepared to seek the leadership, but astounded his supporters by declining at the close of nominations to follow through after his campaign manager, Michael Gove, decided on the eve of the deadline to withdraw from the Johnson campaign and run himself.

While this was proceeding, the official Opposition Labour Party determined, through a vote of 75 per cent of its MPs, that its loopy-left leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who makes Bernie Sanders seem like a Minuteman member of the John Birch Society, had to go. Labour almost disintegrated in internecine acrimony, only eight months after the voters had virtually exterminated the Liberal Democrats, outgoing coalition partners of Cameron's, and technically the heirs of great prime ministers such as W.E. Gladstone and David Lloyd George.

The British Conservative Party chooses its leaders by the members of Parliament determining in secret ballots who are the two top candidates; then those names are put in secret ballot to the paid-up members of the party associations. There are 330 MPs and about 150,000 Conservative Party members. Gove came fourth of five on the first ballot, third of three on the second, behind the home secretary, Theresa May, who had been a tepid Remainer, and the energy secretary, Andrea Leadsom, who had been a keen and demonstrative Leaver.

It appeared to be a vintage slugfest between two women representing the two options that had split a party – the majority of the MPs wanted to Remain and the majority of the Conservative voters clearly opted to Leave. May appeared to be the Cameron candidate, whose muted support for the Remainers, coupled to her comparatively placatory personality, could muster the Remainers without disgusting the Leavers. Leadsom

had entered the race, having been a Johnson supporter, after Johnson had written her a note saying that if he won, she would be a cabinet member, but forgot to have the message delivered. Leadsom considered the size of May's lead and withdrew, leaving May unopposed (and thus triggering her elevation to the post without a full vote of the party membership).

The turnover of 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's official residence (and 11 also, residence of the chancellor of the exchequer), was brought forward from September to this week. May took Cameron's place, becoming Britain's second female prime minister, and Johnson, who had been consumed in obloquy and ridicule the week before, has become foreign secretary.

Is it masterly political manoeuvre, or low farce? It is possible that Cameron stitched it up for May, and Johnson read it correctly and traded his candidacy for the Foreign Office, leaving Gove as the fall guy, but only the players themselves know. The British Conservatives are the only British political party capable of governing, and they are in danger of splitting on this issue, as they did famously twice before in British history, over the tariffs on wheat and corn in the 1840s (Robert Peel and Benjamin Disraeli) and over free trade in the 1900s (Joseph Chamberlain and Arthur Balfour). May said as she entered Downing Street that she would carry out the people's mandate to exit Europe, and Cameron said as he departed it, that he was making way for a person who would lead firmly to the exit from the EU. But a large swath of opinion doesn't believe either of them. The pattern when the EU has lost referenda in individual countries before has been to redouble the fear campaign and return six months later with a new referendum as if the earlier plebiscite had not occurred.

This will be harder here because the government is the principal source of the Leave sentiment, even if the old and

new leaders of the government were Remainers. Either May will quietly extort such concessions from Brussels that she can carry her party and the country in a new referendum for a substantively different participation in the EU, or she will have to focus with ruthless disregard for former principles and lead the Leavers out, guided by the grace of conversion through the parliamentary and electoral minefield. It is not clear whether the new prime minister will set out to leave, frustrate the Leavers, try to convert the Leavers or reconcile the Remainers to Leave.

Probably Brussels will decide. It has plenty of time to change its tune, but if it does not, Britain will leave. Theresa May, whatever her personal views, will bring the government down around her head if she stalls and, with nothing new from Brussels, tries to fumble her way out of the people's referendary mandate. Brussels will also discover, whatever happens behind the doors of Whitehall, that much of the rest of Europe is restive. The EU, as now structured by its incomprehensible constitution, is anti-democratic. The apparatus of arrogant trans-national civil servants in Brussels is not accountable to the member countries' governments, or to the Tower of Babel of a European Parliament in Strasbourg.

At the moment, Brussels is commanding perfidious and ungrateful Albion to be gone; if it does not change its tune, Britain will go, and Brussels will take a long step toward reverting to a capital of only a small country that recently went more than a year without a government (quite successfully). The leaders of the EU forget that Belgium owes its existence to the statesmanship of Lord Palmerston, and to British and Canadian soldiers for defending and liberating it in both world wars.

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