

If May fights on, a hard Brexit is inevitable. Only Boris Johnson might avert it

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*If Theresa May manages to carry on as Prime Minister, her precarious position within the Conservative Party and in Parliament will leave her a weaker negotiator. **Kevin Featherstone** argues that if she fights on – and either returns from Brussels without a deal, or is ousted after failing to secure an acceptable one – Tory party politics make a hard Brexit inevitable. Were Boris Johnson to take over before negotiations begin, he might have the political capital to make the compromises a less destructive Brexit would require.*



Theresa May's reputation for 'strong and stable' leadership has been shattered by the chaos of her election campaign and the loss of the Tory majority. No previous British prime minister has entered an election with such a commanding opinion poll lead only to see it evaporate when voters cast their ballots. Instead of securing a hundred or more extra Tory MPs, she lost 13 of them. Facing a Labour leader she and many others had ridiculed, she saw him achieve the biggest increase in vote share of any party since 1945.



Now, she appears as a liability to the Tories, and she has no political capital to deploy when the Brexit negotiations get critical, and tough choices have to be made. Such a position might be reached within months, as the UK is asked to commit to paying up to €100bn into the European Union budget to cover its current liabilities. In that situation, she cannot afford to be seen as making any significant concessions, lest her party rivals back home pounce and challenge her leadership. She will have little scope to make deals with her EU partners – a concession here for a gain there – as the negotiations will be structured to cover discrete items and leaks will likely tell the world the current state of play. 'No deal is better than a bad deal' has become an even more realistic proposition. Rather than make a concession in the negotiations, May would be impelled to walk away – otherwise, she might as well resign as party leader at the same time.

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Each of the most obvious rivals for her job as party leader come from the hard Brexit wing of the Tory Party. This is why expectations that she might seek solace from soft Brexiteers in her party or from Opposition MPs seem misjudged. Theresa May can only stay Tory leader if she occupies the same space as her hard Brexiteer rivals. She has become their 'poodle'.

The next few days and weeks are critical for Theresa May's leadership. Already she has been forced to get rid of her two closest aides, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill. She is isolated from the two people who have supported her as Home Secretary and, latterly, PM. Her position is fragile: the only thing that keeps her in No.10 is the sense that a leadership election is a lunacy when having to start the Brexit negotiations.

But the risk of her being replaced will be ever-present. That might revive the Conservative's electoral standing, but it would be unlikely to produce any softer Brexit. Having come to the premiership on the back of Theresa May's weakness or failure, a successor is barely in a better position to compromise. If David Davis or Liam Fox were to replace her, they would not be looking to make compromise deals with the EU27. Others who previously supported the Remain campaign would be less able to shirk from a hard Brexit stance. As Churchill famously put it, you can't 'rat twice'.

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All options other than Boris Johnson clearly risk a harder Brexit. So what is Boris' position on Brexit? He claimed to dither in his choice between Remain and Leave at the start of the Brexit referendum campaign. As London Mayor, he spoke positively at times about the importance of the EU to the UK economy and is rather more liberal on migration than others. Yet, he is the former journalist who invented rabidly Eurosceptic stories when a Brussels correspondent. If he were to succeed May in the coming weeks, he might be able to create more room to manoeuvre in the negotiations, using up past and present capital as the saviour of his party. He might develop scope to compromise on key Brexit issues as they arise.

But if Johnson were to replace May in the heat of the Brexit negotiations – presumably because she had failed to win the support of her parliamentary party for a key part of a Brexit deal with the EU27 – the expectation would be that he would have to be the hard Brexit champion, adopting a 'Cry Harry for England and St George!' persona. The risk of a Brexit crash would increase in those circumstances.

As the election taught us, ultimately leadership matters to political outcomes. If Theresa May had managed to deliver the large majority the polls seemed to be offering her, she would have commanded her party and the British political stage. The terms of the Brexit deal would have been hers to agree or reject. Instead, she's now the boxer in the ring who's bloodied and is staggering, barely able to throw a punch. Another Tory fighter in the ring would struggle to achieve a different outcome. It looks increasingly like a hard Brexit or a crash.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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