

Secretively open: identifying patterns in Theresa May's approach to secrecy



Theresa May presides over one of the leakiest governments in British history, with claims from ministers often undermined by a leak saying the exact opposite. [Ben Worthy](#) reads the runes of May's approach to secrecy and attempts to find a common pattern from her Home Office years and into her premiership.

Most prime ministers have an awkward relationship with the truth. The murky worlds of intelligence, spin, and politics often meet for them in uncomfortable ways. Some became renowned or infamous for their ability to manipulate reality and facts: think of Tony Blair having to reassure us that he was a 'pretty straight kind of guy'. Machiavelli captured the difficulty for leaders when he cautioned that those with power must 'live by integrity and not by deceit', should surround themselves with advisors who would tell them the truth but should be a 'dissembler' when necessary.

Theresa May was supposed to be different. She was the plain speaking Vicar's daughter who would tell the uncomfortable, unspun truth. She would bring [the values of the vicarage](#) to Downing Street. For some, the lingering image of May as the honest clergyman's daughter lasted [even up to the 2017 manifesto](#) when, with a 'clear ethical – even Christian – tone, this vicar's daughter took the riskier option: to be unremittingly honest with the public about the great challenges this country faces, to spell out how she intends to confront them and to promise only what she can deliver.'

Almost two years on it seems May, [like Trump](#), is both secretive, but also strangely transparent. Her blend of secrecy, closed decision-making and blame avoidance was honed in the Home Office, and came with her to Downing Street. Her 'submarine' strategy of set-piece interventions served her through crisis after crisis in the Home Office. Yet it has proved her [undoing as Prime Minister](#). Her secrecy led her to try (and fail) to carry out Brexit 'without a running commentary' and without Parliament. It also meant she consulted too few on her snap election and her manifesto.

May's secrecy is of an oddly transparent kind, easily caught out and exposed. One commentator observed that May had behaved with Brexit as if no-one else in Europe had the internet. Similarly, in domestic politics she recklessly gives poor answers or excuses as if no-one has access to Hansard or YouTube. Despite her liking for information control, she also presides over one of the leakiest administrations in history. A stream of unauthorised disclosures flow, continually, from her divided and disloyal Cabinet and unhappy officials. Leaks go from the sublime – such as DExEU's own analysis that every Brexit scenario [would leave Britain worse off](#) – to the ridiculous – such as [Hammond's view of female train drivers](#). The rabbit hole of leaks and failed attempts is summed up by the headline '[Leak inquiry into leaking of letter warning about leaks](#)'. Time and time again, May's 'secretively open' approach leads to a self-reinforcing pattern of attempted secrecy, exposure, poor justification and worsening crisis.

The Windrush scandal is a case in point. As it unfolded, May's initial claim was that it was a Data Protection issue ([it wasn't](#)) or that it was Labour that did it ([they didn't](#)). Each claim from Amber Rudd was artfully undermined by a leak saying the exact opposite: there were no targets (yes there were, [said a leak](#)) and she was not aware of them (yes she was, according to [this letter](#) from Rudd to May). At this point, May's former (ish) advisor Nick Timothy, with his familiar brand of Powell-esque politics and Kamikaze-esque strategy, decided to defend May's record. He claimed she was against the famous '[Go Home](#)' [illegal immigrant vans but that they were implemented 'while she was on holiday](#)'. Even Blair, through five Iraq war inquiries, didn't dare try that as an excuse. In fact, another judicious leak showed that May was only against the vans because the language [wasn't tough enough](#). All these smokescreens of failed excuses hid the truth that the Windrush deportations came directly from May's own dog whistle rhetoric and bid to create a [hostile environment](#).

May and her government seem unable to comprehend what's known as [the Streisand effect](#), namely that trying to hide something often draws attention to it. David Davis is a past master. He began his time as minister in 2016 promising not to be 'Rasputin-like' in holding back, and admitted that Brexit would be '[as complex as the Schleswig Holstein affair](#)' (exactly) and as difficult '[as the moon landing](#)'. But in 2017, Streisand struck when he bragged of '50, nearly 60 sector analyses already done [with] planning work going on 22 other issues which are critical, 127 all told'. This led to a long battle to get hold of them, involving freedom of information requests and obscure parliamentary procedures, which led to Davis, explaining six months later, that 'already done' actually meant '[don't exist](#)'.

What makes the secrets fall apart so rapidly is that the reasoning or excuses are so poor, easily disprovable or outright odd. In case you had forgotten, May called the General Election in 2017 because, [in her own words](#), the EU, Liberal-Democrats in the Commons (all eight of them) and the House of Lords were trying to swing the election for Corbyn:

Threats against Britain have been issued by European politicians and officials. All of these acts have been deliberately timed to affect the result of the general election... there are some in Brussels who do not want these talks to succeed, who do not want Britain to prosper.

She added, in [another version of the statement](#), that 'Britain simply will not get the right Brexit deal if we have the drift and division of a hung parliament'. May now has said hung parliament and the House of Lords, according to various irate Brexiters, doing its level best to stop her Brexit.

Any politician must navigate the tricky grey area between what Chekov called the conventional truth and conventional lies. The problem for May is that her failed attempts take her far into Trumpian territory. Time and time again, her attempts at secrecy reveal the truth and demonstrate a worrying amount of dissonance and denial. Over everything from Windrush to the Irish border, she resembles a leader constantly attempting to persuade the public that $2+2=5$. After a year and a half of May's attempted secrecy, the revealed truth is that the UK government has no plan and no strategy.

May's instinctive and poorly-handled secrecy is one part of a movement away from how she claimed her premiership would be. Her premiership has resembled nothing more than an embattled retreat, a rearguard action as she backed away from promises, positions and, seemingly in some senses, from power itself.

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