

## May: limping towards the finishing line?

Writing this on the Monday before the election only a mug would predict the outcome. The polls are all over the place. However, given the fact that May called the election to give herself 'a stronger mandate', if she does not secure an increased majority she will have suffered a big defeat. She went into the election with a working majority of 17, with predictions of a landslide, some suggesting she would outdo Thatcher's 1983 majority of 144 seats. The landslide looks increasingly unlikely and her campaign has been so bad that the usually Tory supporting media are deriding her performance.

"Far from being strong and stable, Mrs May has looked curiously brittle" said the Financial Times in its not very enthusiastic call for a Tory vote. Perhaps the only reason they adopt such a position is that "the alternative to Mrs May is worse." The FT bemoans the "sad indictment on the state of Britain that neither of the main party leaders is particularly impressive."

Still, even though Mrs May is "the safer bet" this "does not amount to a blank cheque (for Brexit)". Her ability to deliver "the best deal for Britain in terms of the closest possible relationship with the EU is worryingly unclear". The FT thinks that she "limps towards the election finishing line". Its verdict is that

"The Prime Ministers campaign has diminished her standing and unleashed recriminations within the Conservative ranks."

Interviewed by George Parker in the FT, "she appears oblivious to the gathering anger among Conservative candidates about the way the campaign has been conducted, with its focus on a presidential battle between an apparently impregnable Mrs May and the supposedly hapless left wing leader Jeremy Corbyn." She "gives not an inkling that anything has gone wrong with the campaign or that any mistakes have been made".

A former Tory Minister told the FT

"People don't like the cult of personality and the apparent Stalinist control. The public can see it and they don't like it."

"The Empress has no clothes," says a 'senior Tory' who backed her in last year's leadership contest. "We will have a bad campaign and win: Corbyn will have a good campaign and lose," says one Minister. But then he adds: "If she carries on like this she will destroy herself. That's the truth."

### **The Economist abandons the Tories and looks towards "a new liberal centre party"!**

Meanwhile, that other bastion of the Tory media the Economist is so impressed by May's campaign and her Manifesto that it has come out in support of the Liberal Democrats! It opines that both Tories and Labour want to "pull up Britain's drawbridge to the world" and abandon "free markets, open borders and internationalism".

“Whether left or right prevail the loser will be liberalism.”

The Economist complains that she wants to leave the single market, once cherished by Tories as one of Margaret Thatcher's “greatest achievements”. Needless to say they don't support her interference in to the working of the “free market”.

“It is a dismal choice for this newspaper, which sees little evidence of our classical, free market liberal values in either of the main parties”.

For them no party passes with flying colours, though the “the closest” is the Liberal Democrats because they want membership of the single market and free movement. The Economist makes a significant departure from its long held support for the Tories, expressing the hope for “a new liberal centre party”.

“Backing the open, free market centre is not just directed towards this election. We know that this year the Lib Dems are going nowhere. But the whirlwind unleashed by Brexit is unpredictable. Labour has been on the brink of breaking up since Mr Corbyn took over. If Mrs May polls badly or messes up Brexit, the Tories may split, too. Many moderate Conservative and Labour MPs could join a new liberal centre party – just as parts of the left and right have recently in France. So consider a vote for the Lib Dems as a down-payment for the future. Our hope is that they become one element of a party of the radical centre, essential for a thriving, prosperous Britain.”

The magazine's abandonment of its support for the Tories and hopes for a 'liberal' alternative may well be a harbinger of the break-up of existing political ground in the context of the 'whirlwind' of Britain's departure from the EU.

Even though the FT calls for a vote for the Tories their support is unenthusiastic. As with the Economist they are unhappy with her abandonment of the single market and free movement of labour which is conceived as being necessary for British employers. They are unhappy about the content of the Tory Manifesto with its 'Red Tory' language, sounding like something from the Blair lexicon.

“We do not believe in untrammelled free markets. We reject the cult of selfish individualism. We abhor social division, injustice, unfairness and inequality. We see rigid dogma and ideology not just as needless but dangerous....”

(Conservative Manifesto)

There is apparently such a thing as society. May even repeats Blair's mantra about “doing what works”. She talks of “a fairer Britain that works for everyone, not just a privileged few.” These are empty words, of course, when judged against their record, but that she has felt the obligation to use this language suggests a shifting of the political terrain against 'austerity' and its results. It is not just a question of 'parking her tanks on Labour's lawn' (borrowing policies from them) because she has declared that balancing the books will be put back once again, this time to 2025, fully ten years after Osborn's target of 2015.

### **A cult of personality requires...a personality**

May's inner Cabinet clique has completely miscalculated by choosing to centre on her

personality and character. The “strong and stable” motto has become a source of derision. Whether hubris or simple miscalculation the 'dementia tax' was an extraordinary mistake. Her ignominious U-turn has shown her weakness and misjudgement. This wasn't the first example. Indeed the Financial Times published an article entitled “Theresa May's 9 U-turns”. FT writer Janan Ganash put it nicely:

“In politics a change of mind is always a U-turn, but that image assumes a certain grace of movement. Cars reverse directions smoothly. This government does it with denial and recrimination. “Nothing has changed,” said May on Monday, like an Iraqi information minister playing down the fall of Baghdad even as American tanks trundle into town. For a moment there was panic. For a moment strength and stability looked like elephantine ponderousness.”

If you are going to promote a cult of the great leader you at least need a leader with an engaging personality and the appearance of strength. May finds it virtually impossible to engage with the 'ordinary people' whose interests she professes to represent. She comes across as shifty and not prepared to give a straight answer to a question. A young TV journalist in Plymouth after a recent interview with her confessed to coming away deflated. He described the experience as “three minutes of nothing”. As a member of the audience on Question Time pointed out to her, confronted with an irate member of the public in one of the rare uncontrolled moments of her public appearances she could not tell the difference between learning disability and mental illness. To a nurse bemoaning years of pay restraint she could only reply that there is no such thing as “a money tree”. Yet everybody is aware they found one when it was necessary to rescue the banks and financial institutions.

Whatever the outcome of the election, saving a big increase in her majority, if she remains as Prime Minister, her government will not have been stabilised and reinforced. Her failure to even discuss some of her policy initiatives with members of her cabinet, notably the 'dementia tax', has simply exacerbated the differences within the Tory ranks. For her to manage to persuade the Economist to abandon their traditional support for the Conservative Party and to raise the prospect of a new 'liberal centre party' is some achievement. Perhaps the Tory supporting Spectator is right that this is their worst campaign ever.

Obviously, those on the left want to see the Tories dumped out of office, but even if they manage to cling on, there is no reason to abandon all hope. The political terrain is shifting. It may not shift as much as we would want by June 8<sup>th</sup> but it is shifting nonetheless. She called the election to strengthen the government and to reinforce her position. She has failed miserably.

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