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CHAPTER 13

BREXIT AND THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

Richard Hayton

Introduction

The vote for Brexit poses a fundamental challenge to Conservative statecraft, the most profound the party has faced since Edward Heath's administration secured entry to the EEC in 1973. The referendum result was the central failure of David Cameron's premiership, prompting his immediate resignation. It exposed the limitations of his efforts to modernise his party (Kerr and Hayton 2015), but also reflected deeper tensions that have animated Conservative politics throughout the democratic era. This chapter analyses these utilising Andrew Gamble's (1974) conceptual framework of the politics of power and the politics of support. In his seminal text, *The Conservative Nation*, Gamble argued that the Conservatives have traditionally sought to balance the demands of electoral politics with a desire to uphold the prevailing politics of power (through which the state reflects the interests of capital). The need to cultivate a politics of support that does not challenge the fundamentals of the economic system explains the 'Conservative wish to base their appeal to the electorate on a national rather than a class perspective', most famously articulated through the language of 'One Nation' conservatism (ibid.: 18). It also helps account for the historic

reputation of the party as one willing to compromise in order to secure power, and its self-image as a party of practical government rather than ideology. Managing the process of leaving the European Union raises the possibility of a major conflict between the politics of power and the politics of support. If the party leadership can navigate a way through this hostile terrain Brexit may be recorded by history as an exemplar of Conservative statecraft. However, the process is unlikely to be a smooth one, and threatens to destabilise British politics and cause ructions in the Conservative Party for years to come.

This chapter explores this firstly by exploring the politics of support, arguing that since the Thatcher era the Conservatives have become a largely Eurosceptic party, and considering the implications of this for the party leadership. It then moves on to consider the politics of power, which it is argued will likely have a restraining effect on the politics of support, tempering the form of Brexit the Conservatives are able to pursue while in office. Should the party find itself in opposition before the Brexit process is completed, however, it is likely to resort to an even harder Euroscepticism under a leader committed to an uncompromising Brexit. The conclusion outlines several possible scenarios as to what might unfold.

The politics of support

The politics of support, Gamble (1974: 6) tells us, ‘takes place in three main arenas – Parliament, the party organization, and the mass electorate’. An aspiring party leader needs to be capable of mustering the support of parliamentary colleagues and securing the backing of the party membership, before they have the opportunity attempt to win over the public at a general election. When David Cameron stood for the party leadership in 2005, he did so in the context of three consecutive electoral defeats which the Conservatives had suffered at the hands of Tony Blair’s

Labour. He consequently found a party reasonably receptive to his message that it must ‘change to win’. However, mindful perhaps of the rejection of the pro-European Ken Clarke in the leadership elections of 1997 and 2001, Cameron realised there were limits to the degree of change that the party would be willing to accept, with Europe being the touchstone issue for many of his fellow MPs and party members. He therefore sought to burnish his own Eurosceptic credentials by promising that, if elected, he would withdraw Conservative MEPs from the European People’s Party grouping in the European Parliament – something he eventually did in 2009 (Hayton 2012: 73). Cameron’s strategy for managing the European question was therefore embedded before he even won the party leadership. He sought an accommodation with his party’s Euroscepticism, and to downplay the salience of the issue, rather than seeking a confrontation with it. As Lynch (2015: 188) argues, as Leader of the Opposition, ‘Cameron approached the EU issue primarily in relation to the politics of support’ rather than in consideration of the wider politics of power he would come to face in government. As such, he continued the trend set by his predecessors (William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard) in offering a ‘harder but quieter’ stance on European integration (Bale 2006: 388).

Given he achieved his primary objective of returning the Conservatives to power after 13 years in opposition, we can credit Cameron’s handling of the EU issue prior to the 2010 election with some success. Although he did nothing to challenge his party’s Eurosceptic orientation, he was able to reduce the profile of the issue sufficiently so that it did not scupper his wider attempt to detoxify the Conservative brand through modernisation (Hayton 2012). It can also be argued that in some ways Cameron linked his European policy with modernisation, for example through his call for the EU ‘to focus on globalisation, global warming and global poverty’ (Lynch 2015: 189). Critically in terms of the politics of support, the Conservatives appeared relatively united under Cameron,

helping re-establish their reputation for governing competence as Labour's was hit by the 2008 crash.

This approach was accordingly carried forward by Cameron into government, where it would have far-reaching consequences. The dominance of the politics of support in driving Conservative policy towards the EU is critical for understanding the pathway to Cameron's decision to offer an in-out referendum. In the first of Gamble's arenas, parliament, Cameron had to manage a large group of increasingly restive Eurosceptic members of the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP), as part of his wider efforts to hold together a Coalition with the Liberal Democrats. October 2011 saw the largest ever rebellion on the issue of Europe, as 81 Conservative backbenchers flouted a three-line whip to support a motion calling for a referendum on EU membership (Cowley et al. 2016: 110). This came despite the Coalition legislating in 2011 for a 'referendum lock' on the ratification of any Treaty transferring powers to the EU (Menon and Salter 2016: 1301). A further mutiny over Europe saw the government defeated in October 2012, when Labour joined with 53 Conservative rebels in support of an amendment calling for the EU budget to be cut (ibid.: 111). In 2013, 'faced with what would have been an enormous rebellion' the government allowed backbenchers a free vote on amendment to the Queen's Speech voicing regret at the absence of a referendum bill (ibid.: 112). The degree of division over the issue was illustrated by Cameron's extraordinary decision to allow Ministers to abstain on the measure, leaving it to Labour and Liberal Democrat votes to ensure the motion was defeated.

Analysis of the PCP in the 2010-15 parliament confirms the depth of Eurosceptic feeling it contained. Three-quarters of Conservative MPs could be classified as Eurosceptics, with around a third of that number identified as 'hard' Eurosceptics favouring withdrawal from the EU (Heppell

2013: 345). Cameron also had to contend with widespread Euroscepticism in the second arena: the party organization. Here, a 2013 survey of party members found some 70.8 percent favouring withdrawal from the EU, although 53.6 percent were willing to back remaining after a renegotiation of the terms of membership (Bale and Webb 2016: 126). Eurosceptic sentiment could also be identified as a threat to the Conservatives in the third arena of the mass electorate. Under the leadership of Nigel Farage the UK Independence Party (UKIP) made significant advances in the opinion polls, particularly following the unpopular March 2012 budget (which was labelled an ‘omnishambles’). The fact that the Conservatives were in Coalition with the Liberal Democrats created political space to their right which UKIP were keen to exploit, and fuelled pressure within the Conservative Party for Cameron to try and counter their appeal (Lynch and Whitaker 2016: 128). This (historically unusual) competition on the right of British politics was illustrated by survey data suggesting that more than half of Conservative Party members – who it could reasonably be assumed would have a high degree of loyalty to the party – regarded themselves as possible UKIP voters (Webb and Bale 2014: 964). As UKIP support increased throughout the 2010 parliament, it appeared that this surge was largely at the expense of the Conservatives: estimates by pollsters in early 2013 suggested that at least half of UKIP’s supporters had voted Conservative at the previous general election (Webb and Bale 2014: 963). Cameron acknowledged that UKIP and intraparty divisions were key factors in his decision to offer an in-out EU referendum (Laws 2016: 237; Ford and Goodwin 2017: 23).

In the light of the referendum result Cameron’s approach to managing the European issue has been widely criticised. Menon and Salter, for example, argue that the UK has historically been quietly effective at shaping outcomes at the EU level in ways which suited British interests, but that this was hardly ever trumpeted to a domestic audience to make the case for membership:

“Rather than challenging the sceptics in his own party, the Prime Minister had pandered to them, to the point of claiming that he would reconsider his support for British membership if his renegotiation demands were not met. Small wonder, then, that shifts in the Union that suited the UK were hardly mentioned. An awful lot was going to rest on the outcome of the renegotiation” (Menon and Salter 2016: 1306)

On this reading, Cameron’s strategy of managing the European issue almost exclusively in terms of the politics of support was fatally flawed, as although it helped secure an unexpected outright victory in the 2015 general election it undermined his ability to make a powerful argument for remaining in the EU on principle during the referendum campaign. Rather, by suggesting that he would be willing to contemplate leaving the EU if he failed to secure satisfactory renegotiated terms of membership he implied that the existing arrangements were unacceptable and should be rejected. When the deal he came back with was strikingly similar to the existing terms, his ‘pirouette from potential Brexiter to committed campaigner for Remain lacked credibility’ (Menon and Salter 2016: 1308). The journalist Polly Toynbee (2016) commented: ‘Cameron enters the “in” campaign having spent his entire decade as party leader undermining support for it. He deserves to lose, but we have to hope to God he doesn’t.’ The perceived failure of Cameron’s negotiating strategy helps explain the fact that 144 Conservative MPs – a higher number than had been widely anticipated – eventually backed the Leave campaign. This number came particularly from the more socially conservative wing of the PCP where the most vociferous critics of Cameron’s leadership could be found (Heppell et al. 2017).

The politics of support continued to dominate Conservative Party activity in the aftermath of the referendum result. His credibility in pieces David Cameron immediately resigned, but as he did so he stressed that the outcome of the vote ‘must be respected’ (Cameron 2016). This set the tone for the leadership election that followed, with none of the contenders questioning the wisdom of the decision the country had just taken, or suggesting that it might in any way be revisited. This was most effectively captured by Theresa May, who although she had sided with Remain during the referendum, rapidly declared that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ (May 2016b). May presented herself as the candidate best placed to competently deliver Brexit and to reunify the Conservatives. Her overwhelming victory in the ballot of Conservative MPs (Table 1) suggested that she had successfully reached out across the ideological divide over Europe, perhaps helped by the fact her campaign for the leadership was run by a prominent campaigner for Brexit, Cabinet Minister Chris Grayling. However, analysis of the result indicated that although May had eventually attracted the support of around a third of the Conservative MPs who had publicly backed the Leave campaign, divisions over Europe were still the key determinant of voting behaviour. In the second round of voting May attracted the overwhelming support (91%) of MPs who had opposed Brexit, with the bulk of the pro-Brexit bloc dividing between the two Brexiteer candidates, Michael Gove and Andrea Leadsom (Jeffery et al. 2017).

Table 1: Conservative leadership election: result of parliamentary ballots

	<i>First ballot</i>		<i>Second ballot</i>	
	<i>MPs</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>MPs</i>	<i>%</i>
May	165	50.2	199	60.5
Leadsom	66	20.1	84	25.5
Gove	48	14.6	46	14.0
Crabb*	34	10.3	-	-
Fox	16	4.9	-	-

*withdrew after first ballot voluntarily.

Under the party's leadership election rules the top two candidates should have then progressed to a ballot of the full party membership, but Leadsom withdrew, recognising that it would be difficult for her to lead the PCP having won the support of only a quarter of MPs. This decision was greeted with relief by May's supporters, in recognition of the fact that the depth of Eurosceptic feeling amongst the wider membership meant that a May victory was far from certain. However, it left the new Prime Minister open to the charge that she lacked the legitimacy that a full endorsement from her party would have provided, and she faced calls from Labour and the Liberal Democrats for an early general election.

May fleshed out her position on Brexit in a speech to the Conservative Party conference in October. This again illustrated the extent to which the politics of support continued to drive policymaking in this area. Dismissing the notion of a 'soft' Brexit, the Prime Minister argued that: 'We are going to be a fully-independent, sovereign country, a country that is no longer part of a political union with supranational institutions that can override national parliaments and courts' (May 2016a). She also made it clear that the outcome of the Brexit process must involve regaining 'control' over immigration, and hailed the first steps in forging new trade deals with countries outside of the EU. The speech won warm applause from the conference delegates and placated backbenchers growing restless for Article 50 to be triggered – something she pledged to do by the end of March 2017. However, the stance adopted by May effectively ruled out continued membership of either the single market or the customs union before the negotiations had formally begun, significantly reducing her room for manoeuvre in the politics of power.

The politics of power

The politics of support and the politics of support are deeply interlinked. Theresa May's basic Brexit strategy was to mobilise the politics of support to give her leverage in the politics of power. Her sole argument for calling the 2017 general election, and her central contention to the electorate, was that the mandate derived from a big election victory would strengthen the UK's hand in the negotiations with the EU. This approach was blown apart by the election result, which deprived the Conservatives of their majority and left the government dependent on a confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland. May's catastrophic miscalculation led rapidly to the reopening of divisions within the Conservative Party and to widespread doubts about her capacity to conclude the negotiations successfully. It is likely that we will witness the reassertion of the politics of power, and that this will fuel intraparty rifts.

As Gamble (1974: 208) explains, whereas in the political market the key function of political parties is the mobilization of electoral support, 'in the politics of power the function of parties is to be an instrument of government, and thereby to reconcile their supporters in the political nation to the existing state'. In this formulation, the state is conceived as the site where a consensus is reached between economic interests and political forces. Traditionally, the Conservative Party has sought to uphold the prevailing politics of power, and then 'appealed for support on the basis of national, not class issues, its capacity to provide national leadership, and its identification with national institutions' (ibid.). At times, however, when the established consensus has been deemed inadequate to the interests of capital, it has played a leading role in challenging and recasting it. The most striking instance of this occurred in the Thatcher era. Brexit is an acutely problematic issue for the Conservatives as it brings the politics of support into conflict with the politics of power, but also

as the latter is divided over the role of the EU in relation to the UK's Anglo-liberal political economy and how to respond the referendum outcome.

For the far left who came to advocate 'Lexit', European integration has been a vehicle for embedding neo-liberalism and depoliticising economic management through a rules-based system elevated above the democratic control of individual nation states (Gifford 2016: 780-2). This viewpoint is reinforced by some on the right who advocated membership of the EU on the grounds that it not only gave the UK unhindered access to European markets, but substantial influence in setting the rules of the game governing them. Arguably successive British governments have 'proved remarkably successful' at shaping European policy frameworks towards their preferences (Menon and Salter 2016: 1300). Ironically, given the association of Euroscepticism with Thatcherism, the most integrationist measure agreed by any UK government was the Single European Act (SEA) signed by Margaret Thatcher in 1986. However, the SEA (which created the single market and significantly extended qualified majority voting to enable the harmonisation of regulatory standards) played a vital role in embedding an agenda of liberalisation agenda in the EU, to the advantage of key sections of British capital, not least the City of London. As Scott Lavery (2017: 707) argues, business support for EU membership was premised not just on membership of the single market: 'the capacity to shape EU legislation was also a crucial strategic consideration'. The vote for Brexit consequently 'generates a series of dilemmas from the perspective of British capital' as the previous strategy of seeking to 'defend and extend a liberalising agenda' is no longer available to business lobbyists (ibid.: 707).

The general election result immediately prompted business groups to call on the government to soften its stance on Brexit and to reconsider its position in relation to leaving the single market and

the customs union (Savage 2017). Divisions within the Conservative Party were also soon on public display, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond (2017) telling the City that the government must ‘do a Brexit deal that puts jobs and prosperity first’ and raising the possibility of extended transitional arrangements. If the vote to leave the EU could be interpreted as politics prevailing over economics (Jensen and Snaith 2016), the election aftermath appeared to signal the resurgence of the imperative of political economy. However, identifying the interests of business and capital, or rather how these might be best protected outside of the European Union, is not a simple task. While a ‘soft Brexit’ retaining membership of the single market and the customs union would alleviate concerns over market access, it would also leave the UK as a ‘rule taker’, potentially vulnerable to the encroachment of EU regulation which might undermine British interests. Research suggests this would be unacceptable to key business organisations including the CBI and representatives of the financial sector (Lavery 2017: 708). Politically, any Brexit deal which preserved the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) on any long-term or far-reaching basis in the UK would be fiercely opposed by much of the Conservative Party, even if a majority could be found for it in the House of Commons.

Disagreement on the right over the location of core UK economic interests also manifests itself in debates over political economy. Chris Gifford (2016: 792) argues that the UK elites have ‘constructed the United Kingdom as a distinctive Eurosceptic political economy’ in opposition to the project of European integration, particularly in response to Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). As a consequence, in the referendum no serious case for European integration was advanced. Rather the key divide was ‘between those who consider that British power, and its neo-liberal political economy, is augmented by opposition from within the EU or those who advocate complete withdrawal’ (ibid.: 785). Following the referendum, the debate in terms of the politics of

power concerns not only how a ‘smooth’ Brexit can be achieved which does not cause a crisis of business confidence and an economic downturn, but also how competitive advantage can be retained by the UK economy, especially as the EU might seek to restrict the activities of the City of London which some regarded as damaging to the Eurozone (Thompson 2017: 439). While some Conservatives favour retaining something as close to single market membership as possible (essentially a continuation strategy), others envision a ‘global Britain’ carrying the torch for economic freedom and striking free trade deals around the world.

The notion of ‘global Britain’ was embraced by Theresa May (2016a) and is a key element of the government’s ‘Plan for Britain’ setting out its objectives for Brexit. Indeed, in the text of the Prime Minister’s speech launching that plan the phrase ‘Global Britain’ appears eleven times and ‘global’ a further half dozen, as May (2017) promised: ‘A country that reaches out to old friends and new allies alike. A great, global, trading nation. And one of the firmest advocates for free trade anywhere in the world.’ However, this concept is not a new one in Conservative circles – the ‘Global Britain’ group, which campaigned for withdrawal from the EU, was founded in 1997 by amongst others Lord Pearson (who later left the Conservative Party to join UKIP). The ideology behind the Global Britain view is one of hyperglobalist Euroscepticism: ‘the legacy of the exercise of hegemony in the global economy in the 19th century through an “open seas” policy which emphasised free trade and free movement of capital and labour’ (Baker et al. 2002: 422). From this standpoint, European integration is opposed as an essentially protectionist regionalist project, placing unwelcome restrictions on neoliberalism both domestically and internationally. The globalist view by contrast contains a nostalgic appeal to Britain’s ‘great’ past, but also links strongly to ‘Atlanticism’ (ibid.). Proponents of Anglo-America and the Anglosphere were prominent in the Leave campaign, and continue to be at the forefront of calls for a ‘hard’ or in some

cases even a unilateral Brexit, willing to countenance withdrawal from the EU with no exit deal.

For some the argument goes beyond free trade and is also a cultural one, in which the English-speaking world is viewed as sharing essentially the same liberal values. This leads some to endorse an integrative political union to rival the EU between Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK – ‘CANZUK’ (Lilico 2017).

Encompassing as it does cultural ties, international relations, and a political economy perspective, the Anglosphere ‘furnishes staunch Eurosceptics with a ready-made vision of a post-EU future’ (Bell 2017). However, there is little to suggest that the idea commands widespread popular support, or that the electorate would wish to swap freedom of movement with the EU for a similar arrangement with a more far-flung collection of countries in CANZUK. As such, it highlights the disjuncture between the Euroscepticism of much of the Conservative Party elite (with its concerns about national sovereignty, political economy and trade) and the more populist variant, mobilised in the referendum campaign primarily around the issue of immigration. While business organisations have generally been supportive of freedom of movement as a feature of the UK’s flexible labour market, controlling immigration was the single biggest driver of the vote for Brexit (Clarke et al. 2017). Conservative hopes of marginalising UKIP as a significant electoral threat on their right flank in the light of Brexit are reliant on a settlement that allows them to claim that they have re-established ‘control’ of immigration. However, without a radical improvement in productivity a sizable reduction in immigration looks likely to harm UK economic competitiveness and growth. The issue of immigration is likely therefore to be the source of a major conflict between the politics of support and the politics of power.

Conclusion

As Philip Lynch has argued, ‘For more than 50 years, European integration has posed significant problems for Conservative statecraft in both the politics of support and the politics of power’ (2015: 186). Brexit represents the culmination of a long-standing difficulty for the party, an ideological clash that has threatened its unity and plagued successive leaders. For a brief interlude, following the referendum and the election of Theresa May as Conservative Party leader, it appeared as if the three-decade-long warfare within the party over Europe might have finally come to an end, with the vast bulk of the PCP endorsing her leadership and swinging into line behind her assertion that ‘Brexit means Brexit’. Following the 2017 general election however, it is difficult to foresee how May (or her successor) can navigate a path to Brexit that can command the support of the House of Commons while also satiating the demands of the hard-core Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party.

In the politics of support, it is vital to the Conservatives to be seen to deliver on Brexit, as the party’s electoral fortunes are now heavily dependent on Brexit supporters. Exit polls at the 2017 election found that 68 percent of those who voted Conservative said they had voted Leave in the referendum, whereas 64 percent of Labour voters, and 78 percent of Liberal Democrat voters, had voted Remain (Ashcroft 2017). Looking at it the other way, the Conservatives attracted the support of some 60 percent of Leavers, but only 25 percent of Remainers. 70 percent of Conservative voters were enthusiastic about Brexit, saying they wanted to see it happen ‘as soon as possible’, with just 7 percent resistant to it. By contrast only a third of Labour voters wanted to get on with Brexit swiftly, with 43 percent saying they would still like it prevented if possible. The Conservative strategy of targeting the UKIP vote enjoyed considerable success: of those who had voted UKIP in 2015, some 57 percent backed the Conservatives in 2017, while 18 percent voted Labour and 19

percent stuck with UKIP (ibid.). It leaves the electorate polarised however, and the Conservatives poorly positioned to reach across the divide to Remain voters.

In the politics of power the Conservatives also face considerable problems, with powerful business interests pressing the government to prioritise macro-economic stability and address sectoral concerns. Here the government faces competing and at times contradictory demands, whether that be prioritising the retention of ‘passporting’ rights for the City of London or the availability of seasonal migrant labour in agriculture. While the primacy of the UK’s neoliberal growth model remains largely unchallenged in Conservative circles, disagreements exist over how this can be best sustained post-Brexit. For some, such as the ‘Economists for Free Trade’ campaign group, Brexit is an opportunity for a further bout of neoliberalism, re-orientating the UK’s economy towards global free trade – quite possibly with unilateral tariff free access to UK market, combined with tax cuts and deregulation (Worth 2017).¹ Others by contrast want to retain or closely reproduce existing trade arrangements with the EU such as the customs union, either for a transitional period or indefinitely.

The contingency of political events makes any attempt to foresee the eventual outcome of the Brexit process futile. Nonetheless, an appreciation of the politics of the Conservative Party outlined in this chapter look set to be crucial to understanding whatever ultimately materialises. While the party remains nominally united in the objective of delivering Brexit, there is no settled view as to what form it should take or what could be realistically achieved. The emerging conflict between the politics of support and the politics of power looks set to pose major difficulties in party management terms for the Conservative leadership, and threatens the electoral coalition the party mobilised at the 2017 general election. More broadly, the government’s perilous position in the

House of Commons, lacking an overall majority, leaves it highly vulnerable to parliamentary rebellions. While the DUP are committed to Brexit and their ten MPs are ‘likely to prove a solid and reliable voting bloc’ the same cannot be said of the Conservative backbenches (Tonge 2017: 413).

A stark illustration of this came in December 2017, when Theresa May suffered her first parliamentary defeat over Brexit. Eleven Conservative MPs backed an amendment tabled by the former Attorney General Dominic Grieve to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, asserting parliament’s right for a ‘meaningful vote’ on any Brexit deal struck by the government with the EU. While the rebels insisted that they were not acting to block the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, their move was widely interpreted as increasing pressure on the government to strike a softer Brexit deal which might attract cross-party support. Following this vote, and facing the prospect of another parliamentary defeat, the government also backed down on its intention to set in legislative stone the UK’s departure date from the EU, accepting an amendment to the legislation allowing MPs to alter it later on. The emergence of this relatively small, but well-organised and determined group of rebellious Conservative Remainers provides a new dimension to intra-party divisions over Europe, where traditionally it has been the hard-core Eurosceptics who have caused problems for the party leadership. If anything, in the early stages of the Brexit process it has been the rebels on the Remain side that have caused the government the most problems, rather than the Brexiteers. Even the agreement struck with the EU in December 2017 on the terms of the UK’s departure, which included a ‘divorce bill’ running to some £39bn, and the promise to ‘maintain full alignment’ with EU internal market rules in the absence of an agreed solution to the Irish border issue, was largely welcomed by Conservative Brexiteers. It was instead left largely to Leave campaigners from

outside of the Tory party, most vocally Nigel Farage, to condemn the deal as a ‘humiliation’ (quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, 8.12.17).

The acquiescence of the Brexiteers within the Conservative Parliamentary Party is strictly conditional however, and underpinned in significant part by the fear that should Theresa May fall pressure for another general election would rise, possibly paving the way to a Corbyn-led Labour government. That could, in turn, lead to sustained pressure for a second referendum, or alternatively a form of soft-Brexit which would be unacceptable to Conservative Leavers. May’s continued tenure in Downing Street is therefore dependent on her carrying forward the Brexit process within the broad parameters she set early in her premiership, of leaving the Customs Union and the Single Market, and the jurisdiction of the ECJ. As the details of a possible future relationship with the EU are negotiated and begin to emerge, the Prime Minister will come under intense pressure from the Brexit wing of her party not to compromise overly on those principles. The outcome of the 2017 general election therefore leaves Theresa May’s government seeking to perform an incredibly delicate balancing act to ensure the passage of its legislation and deliver Brexit. The behaviour of the Labour Party in Parliament is likely to be crucial (see Chapter 14). If Labour seeks alliances with Conservative rebels to derail the Brexit process the situation could rapidly become unmanageable for the government. In such circumstances, the only option might be to appeal directly for a mandate from the people via another referendum or general election, but given recent experience the Conservatives’ enthusiasm for either prospect is likely to be non-existent. Ironically, Theresa May’s best ally in all of this might yet prove to be Jeremy Corbyn.

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¹See for example <https://www.economistsforfreetrade.com/about/> [Accessed December 15, 2017].