**Article:**
Marlow-Stevens, S and Hayton, R orcid.org/0000-0002-9899-0035 (2020) A Rhetorical Political Analysis of Theresa May's Statecraft on Brexit. Parliamentary Affairs. ISSN 0031-2290

https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa014

This is a pre-publication version of an article accepted for publication in *Parliamentary Affairs*, April 2020.

# A Rhetorical Political Analysis of Theresa May's Statecraft on Brexit

**Samuel Marlow-Stevens and Richard Hayton**
*University of Leeds*

## Abstract

By way of Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) this article argues that May's rhetoric on Brexit undermined her statecraft and with it her capacity to deliver Britain's departure from the EU. Utilising Jim Bulpitt's (1986) conception of statecraft, our analysis reveals how May's rhetoric prioritised party management and the politics of support, but in so doing yielded political argument hegemony to Brexiteers, impeding the passing of her Brexit deal and damaging her capacity for governing competence. We evidence these arguments by analysing the appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos in May's key speeches between July 2016 and July 2019, ranging from her first as Prime Minister to her last.

---

## Introduction

The premiership of Theresa May was a failure. The primary objective that she set herself, overseeing the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (EU), was left unfulfilled by the time she was forced from office. Her aspiration to develop a domestic policy agenda to tackle the 'burning injustices' she saw afflicting the nation was completely overshadowed by the pursuit of Brexit, leaving her to acknowledge as she vacated Downing Street that only by finding a way 'beyond the current impasse' could her successor hope to oversee 'national renewal' and forge 'a new beginning for our country' (May, 2019b). By way of Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) this article argues that May's rhetoric on Brexit undermined her statecraft and with it her capacity to deliver Britain's departure from the EU. Utilising Jim Bulpitt's (1986) conception of statecraft, our analysis reveals how May's rhetoric prioritised party management and the politics of support, but in so doing yielded political argument hegemony to Brexiteers, impeding the passing of her Brexit deal and damaging her capacity for governing competence. We evidence these arguments by analysing the appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos in May's key speeches between July 2016 and July 2019, ranging from her first as Prime Minister to her last. Our focus is on major speeches, for example at the Conservative Party conference, or at key moments in the Brexit

process, rather than media interviews or appearances in the House of Commons (for example at Prime Minister's Questions). This approach is justified as May adopted a 'submarine strategy' when it came to the media, surfacing only occasionally 'to make carefully planned set-piece interventions' (Shipman, 2017, p. xxxiii). Moreover, the process of writing these keynote speeches was, according to her aides, one she used to 'define policy' (Shipman, 2017, p. 11).

Bulpitt's statecraft theory has emerged as one of the dominant analytical perspectives on Conservative Party strategy. In sum, it argues that gaining and retaining power in the British political system is dependent upon the capacity of leaders to effectively manage their party, devise a winning electoral strategy, achieve political argument hegemony, and cultivate a reputation for governing competence (Bulpitt, 1986). It assumes a rational basis for political action, underpinned by a desire to win elections, which is elevated above other concerns (for example ideological ones). To critics this means the statecraft thesis is hindered by 'an ontologically narrow account of the goal to which politics is directed', meaning that it takes insufficient account of the role of ideas in shaping political action and outcomes (Griffiths, 2016, p. 737). Recent contributions to neo-statecraft theory have attempted to salvage it from such criticisms, notably the work of James (2018) whose 'realistic interviews' with party leaders sought to epistemologically buttress statecraft theory with experience-based knowledge. James found that the party leaders he interviewed accepted that winning elections was paramount, but emphasised the extent to which their strategies were shaped by 'beliefs and ideas' (James, 2018, p. 570). Thus, there is clearly potential for statecraft analysis to be interpretive and account for the ideational-material dialectic, as RPA does (Finlayson, 2007). The concept of political argument hegemony, which is achieved when a 'party's arguments become generally accepted, or because its solutions to a particularly important problem seem more plausible than its opponents' (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 21), also highlights the importance of the *content* of argument for statecraft, particularly for winning elections (Buller and James, 2012, p. 542).

RPA 'underscores the situated nature of ideas, that is, their presence in speech and argument delivered at, and in response to, specific times and places' (Martin, 2015, p. 25). Analysing keynote speeches by political leaders consequently offers a window into their ideas and strategic thinking as they seek to intervene in political discourse and frame debates through their rhetoric. RPA seeks to understand the arguments used in speech and the ideas that constitute them, and consequently enhances our understanding of the 'strategic dimension' of politics (Finlayson and Martin, 2008, p.452). When expressing ideas in speech, actors draw upon ideologies to establish 'proofs' of argument which can be categorised by ethos (character), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic or reason) (Finlayson, 2012, p. 759). Utilising RPA consequently offers a novel and potentially fertile avenue for analysing statecraft strategy, adding both to our empirical and theoretical understanding of political leadership. It is important to note, however, that our focus on the modes of appeal dwells on the *content* of argument, and this does not exhaust the range of rhetoric's concerns. Performance is

also important, and as Atkins and Gaffney (2020) have shown in relation to Theresa May, also contributed to the collapse in her stature as Prime Minister. All Prime Ministers, as Dennis Grube (2013) has demonstrated, face a similar set of challenges as rhetoricians, as they seek to articulate their authentic voice while facing a range of institutional constraints and needing to persuade multiple audiences. Analysing the content of their arguments via RPA helps explain how they fail or succeed in this regard.

Given our focus on rhetoric the article is organised into three main sections, analysing the appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos in May's key speeches. We argue that across all of these dimensions May's rhetoric was Brexitist in nature, drawing on the beliefs and ideas of Brexitism. While Brexitism is not a fully-fledged ideology, it is an anti-political worldview 'organised around resentment at past losses and scepticism about promised futures' (Finlayson, 2017). At the heart of this creed is the principle of withdrawal, 'of expressing dissatisfaction through departure' as one might as a consumer in the marketplace (Davies, 2019, p. 9). Adjacent to this, Finlayson (2018) identifies three concepts that constitute the 'metaphysics' of Brexitism: the urgent present, heroism, and distinction. For Brexiteers, the present is 'the moment of redemption through heroic resistance' (2018, p. 601) which will restore national and cultural distinction, against the wishes of the elite. As we shall see, these themes recur throughout May's speeches.

**Ethos**

Ethos refers to those proofs of arguments which appeal to the character of a speaker (Toye, 2013, p. 14). As Finlayson notes, politicians actively seek to establish a positive ethos through 'image management' (2007, p. 558) and by establishing the authority of their voice (Finlayson, 2012). The rhetorician presents their character in such a way as to exemplify their principles, to convey to the audience a sense of authority and trust (Finlayson, 2014, p. 433). The effect of this can be so powerful that some, like the journalist Evan Davis, have argued that in contemporary politics the character of politicians now matters more than the substance of their policies (Davis, 2018, p. 260). Theresa May appealed to an ethos characterised by ordinariness, duty and determination, and sacrifice and weakness. These three themes are Brexitist in nature, and reflective of May's strategy of appeasing Brexiteers to maintain party unity and the support of Leave voters. May's entrenchment of this ethos as central to her arguments on Brexit, however, posed problems for her statecraft as her unpopularity rose and the inextricability of Brexit and her character hampered her capacity to build support for her deal.

The portrayal of ordinariness is a common feature of political rhetoric, used to establish authority (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013). May expresses ordinariness by positioning herself as a servant of 'ordinary' and 'working class' people (May, 2016a; 2016c; 2017d; 2018a). May constructs an identity between her government and

ordinary people, but relates it to her own ethos by blending it with pathos as she pits ordinary people against the elite. May denounces the 'rich and powerful' with whom people feel 'frustrated' and places herself on the side of the latter: 'I understand that because I feel it too' (May, 2016c). Politicians, May claims, 'find your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal' (May, 2016c). By addressing ordinary people as 'your' May fosters a sense of authority through association, not belonging. This is evident in her CPC 2017 speech in which she acknowledges her position among the elite, before distancing herself by locating her pride not in 'the positions I have held, the world leaders I have met, the great global gatherings to which I have been' but in 'helping those who couldn't be heard' (May, 2017d). For May this was a personal approach to politics more than an ideological one, reflecting her own upbringing and values. In contrast to her predecessor as Prime Minister, May's origins are relatively humble (Prince, 2017, p. 11). She made occasional reference to her background, notably when she referred to her grandmother, a 'lady's maid below stairs', who 'worked hard and made sacrifices, because she believed in a better future for her family' (May, 2017d). The clearest articulation of this outlook in ideological terms came from her close advisor, Nick Timothy, who argued that the Conservatives must adopt a 'relentless focus on governing in the interests of ordinary, working people' (Timothy, 2016).

Central to May's ethos was the notion of duty. She saw herself, as one biographer put it, as 'born to serve' (Prince, 2017, p. 10). May's interpretation of the referendum result as an 'instruction' from the people (May, 2017d) underpinned her claim that she had a 'duty to fulfil' it on their behalf (May, 2017d; 2018c). That May articulated this duty as 'a promise' that she made to the country demonstrates the centrality of delivering Brexit to her ethos (May, 2016b). Though duty isn't explicitly Brexitist, May's description of Brexit as her 'mission' (May, 2016c) is suggestive of Brexitism's concepts of heroism and urgency, and roots the articulation of Brexit as a duty in her ethos. The strategic function of this is to maintain May's authority on Brexit even as her approach came under greater scrutiny and criticism. This is evidenced by May's emphasis on the importance of her own determination. For example, in her 2016 conference speech May claimed 'a vision is nothing without the determination to see it through…' (May, 2016c), and praised the 'quiet resolve' of the British people (May, 2016c).

Atkins argues that the audience is not fixed, but 'imagined' by the speaker and so ideological positions are presented in ways compatible with that imagined audience (Atkins, 2015, p. 23). This can be seen in the way in which this 'quiet resolve' later becomes that of Leave voters (May, 2016c). May's perception of her CPC audience as a Brexitist one is consistent with her prioritisation of party management through appeasing the European Research Group (ERG) of hard-Eurosceptic Conservative MPs. Determination, for May, is equated with leadership (May, 2018a) and functions as the defining trait of her character; that she has been 'determined to deliver a Brexit deal that works for every part of our country' (May, 2018c). May's appeal to an ethos of determination self-justifies her evolving Brexit strategy, and also perpetually denies

the future in favour of the present struggle, which is consistent with Brexitism. When May was forced to delay Brexit beyond 29 March 2019, in a dramatic reversal of her strategy and rhetoric hitherto, she chose to address the nation directly in a statement from Downing Street. Amidst speculation that she was about to resign, she instead blamed MPs for the impasse, and told her audience:

> And of this I am absolutely sure: you the public have had enough. You are tired of the infighting. You are tired of the political games and the arcane procedural rows… You want this stage of the Brexit process to be over and done with. I agree. I am on your side. (May, 2019a).

Having positioned herself as on the side of the public against parliament, May again appealed to her ethos of duty and determination as an argument for continued support for her premiership, ending her speech with the claim that 'you want us to get on with it. And that is what I am determined to do' (May, 2019a).

A notable shift in May's appeals to ethos is the way in which determination is rearticulated with an emphasis on sacrifice and weakness. Runciman (2019) notes that May's 'quiet determination' was often expressed in a hostile context. From this observation one can see how May's rhetoric of determination increasingly distorts to one of sacrifice: her determination possesses value because of her weaknesses. After the debilitating results of the 2017 election, the Prime Minister opened her conference speech with an admission of responsibility: the campaign was 'too scripted. Too presidential… I hold my hands up for that. I take responsibility. I led the campaign. And I am sorry' (May, 2017d). Her statement implies not just the acceptance of guilt but the recognition of weakness. The phrase 'hold up my hands' is reminiscent of surrender, and suggestive of sacrifice. That this is countered with a challenge to the party to redouble its efforts to 'do our duty' (May, 2017d) supports the argument that the 2017 election changed the material, strategic realities of May's situation such that her ethos of duty and determination was transformed to one of weakness and sacrifice, which possess a greater potential for appealing to pathos as well as ethos, as indicated by the emergent 'cult of sympathy' expressed by political opponents of May for her capacity to 'battle on' (Serhan, 2019).

In her address to the party conference the following year, May referenced the incidents that plagued her 2017 speech, when a prankster accosted her at the podium, lettering fell from the slogan behind her, and she suffered sustained coughing fits: 'You'll have to excuse me if I cough during this speech; I've been up all night supergluing the backdrop' (May, 2018a). The recognition of weakness is given positive value by contrasting it with the act of sacrifice to atone. May uses her ethos to foster pathos, saying: 'I will always remember the warmth I felt from everyone in the hall. You supported me all the way — thank you' (May, 2018a). In the same speech, May blends ethos and pathos by referencing the death of her ancestor at the Battle of Passchendaele in the First World War (May, 2018a). The invocation of familial death

to foster an emotional connection is expressed with a sacrificial tone. Whilst Cameron had appealed to his character as a 'family man' (Bale, 2015, pp. 185-186), May's ethos is one of an individual for whom family implies a lack or loss. One sees this again in May's comments on her and Philip not having children. Her sincere expression of her 'great sadness' at having not been 'blessed with children' is contrasted with her belief in the British Dream that 'life should be better for the next generation' (May, 2017d). May's admission of pain and vulnerability, for a Prime Minister who in the same speech joked about her nickname of the 'Ice Maiden' (May, 2017d), again articulates family as a lack, but with a tone of sacrifice, positioning herself as willing to do her duty to those with children despite not having her own.

Generally, however, May's rhetoric of sacrifice is used in reference to her own labour. This is evidenced by her descriptions of the difficulties of being Prime Minister – 'the long hours, the pressure, the criticism and insults' which May endures in order to 'give everyone in our country a voice' (May, 2017d). May articulates her labour as a pain she dutifully endures in order to serve 'our country', and this plural pronoun transforms May's determined endurance into sacrifice through the specification of an identity for whom it is endured. As with May's ethos of ordinariness, the notion of sacrifice is not solely rhetorical; during the 2017 election campaign May adopted a 'masochism strategy' which involved taking unlimited questions from journalists (Shipman, 2017, p. 247). During the campaign May's speechmaking was plagued by issues of style and delivery that led to her being satirised as the 'Maybot' (Crace, 2017). This threatened the ethos of ordinariness that May had built through rhetoric but was the fitting precursor for the emergence of the ethos of weakness and sacrifice. Sacrifice increasingly became not just part of May's ethos, but a strategy in its own right, culminating in offering the 'ultimate sacrifice' of her resignation in order to try and pass her Withdrawal Agreement (Heffer, 2019).

As Prime Minister, May made herself central to the 'moment of national crisis' Brexit represents (Runciman, 2019), cultivating a Brexitist ethos as a key component of her strategy to manage her party and cultivate the support of Leave voters. Disastrously for May, the 2017 election produced a hung parliament and saw her personal ratings fall heavily (Bale and Webb, 2018, p. 48). Yet May subsequently upped the appeals to her ethos as part of her arguments for her Brexit deal, not only to her party, but also when addressing the nation (May, 2018b; 2018c) and the House of Commons (May, 2018d). That May's appeals to this Brexitist ethos become so dominant in her speeches suggests that she imagined the nation itself, not just her party, to be largely Brexitist. May placed herself at the heart of Conservative statecraft, tying the party's reputation for governing competence to her personal mission to deliver Brexit and prioritising the politics of support (Hayton, 2018a, p. 160-1). Yet May's appeals to ethos conversely challenged her statecraft by becoming an obstacle to the passing of her deal, and the source of electoral vulnerability.

## Pathos

Pathos refers to proofs of argument that relate to the evocation of feelings and emotions in the audience (Finlayson and Martin, 2014, p. 7). May appealed to pathos through the grievances of working-class voters, optimistic identities of post-Brexit Britain, and negative portrayals of enemies of Brexit. May's appeal to the grievances of working-class voters to foster pathos followed from her ethos of ordinariness. Upon becoming Prime Minister May spoke of the 'burning injustices' of contemporary Britain, and observed that 'If you're from an ordinary working class family, life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise' (May, 2016a). May's descriptions of 'People who have a job, but don't always have job security. People who own their own home, but worry about paying the mortgage. People who can just about manage…' functioned to elicit emotion to create identification with the audience and legitimise May's claim that the Conservatives are 'the true workers' party' (May, 2016b). The injustices endured by working-class voters are linked specifically to Brexit by May's claim that the referendum expressed the feeling 'that many people have today that the world works well for a privileged few but not for them' (May, 2016c). The referendum result was therefore about more than leaving the EU, but a 'call for a change in the way our country works – and the people for whom it works – forever.' By contrast, 'if you're well off and comfortable, Britain is a different country and these concerns are not your concerns' (May, 2016c).

The blue-collar conservatism May expounded reflected the intellectual influence of her closest advisor, Nick Timothy, who, having previously worked for May as a special adviser in the Home Office, was appointed her joint Chief of Staff in Downing Street. The blue-collar conservatism advocated by Timothy – 'Erdington modernisation' as he termed it, after the working-class area in his home city of Birmingham – is anti-elitist in sentiment. It stresses the importance of controlling immigration, because of its impact on the wages of lower paid workers; and is wary of globalization if it means British industries being sacrificed to foreign competitors (Timothy, 2016). May's pitch for working-class votes was successful in so far as the 2017 election saw a significant upswing in support for the Conservative Party amongst the C2 (+13%) and DE (+12%) socioeconomic groups, albeit perhaps at the expensive of much smaller gains amongst AB and C1 voters (+2%) where Labour surged (Bale and Webb, 2018, p. 54). Yet given Brexitism's hostility to the interests of capital and the prevailing politics of power, May's working-class conservatism takes on new meaning. The Leave campaign in the referendum utilised anti-establishment rhetoric, with Nigel Farage later presenting the vote as the reassertion of control by 'hardworking people' over a 'self-serving elite' which came to encompass 'banks, large corporations, the EU bureaucracy' and Remainers (Buckledee, 2018, p. 54-56). This is echoed in May's working-class grievance pathos; 'people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road' (May, 2016c).

Through invoking a vision of post-Brexit 'Global Britain', the May government sought to elicit a pathos of optimism about the UK's future world role. As Oliver Daddow (2019) has explored, this was a reassertion of the traditional desire of British governments to have a noteworthy presence in international affairs, imbued with hard Euroscepticism. Using Brexitist language, May envisioned Global Britain as a future of 'self-confidence' and 'freedom' as a 'fully-independent, sovereign country' (May, 2016b). Withdrawal from the EU was recast as a process of transition, of Britain moving into the 'wider world' (May, 2016b). Andrew Gamble (2019, p. 181) identifies an Anglosphere orientation in Global Britain and the policy proposals associated with it, and the plans for trade deals with Commonwealth and Anglosphere nations after Brexit, were dubbed 'Empire 2.0' in Whitehall (Coates and Leroux, 2017). Indeed, Global Britain's Anglo-orientation is perceived by its supporters as a 'return to old friends' (Mycock, 2017), and so despite May's use of it to foster optimism about the future, the identity is fundamentally 'fraught with nostalgia' (Harrois, 2018), specifically for Britain's history of Empire (Davies, 2018a). The Anglosphere idea, as two of its most astute observers have commented, is 'politically implausible but ideologically potent' (Kenny and Pearce, 2016). May's language yielded political argument hegemony to the Brexiteers in her party in exchange for short-lived loyalty. Consequently, May's Brexit position was criticised by the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier for being 'nostalgic and unrealistic' (Shipman, 2017, p. 485).

May's rhetoric also sought an emotional response through her depiction of opponents of Brexit. Criticism of the Labour Party is a common feature of Conservative appeals to the emotion of fear in particular on issues like the economy and immigration (Hayton and Crines, 2015b, pp. 201-2). Atkins and Turnbull have argued that arguments based on pathos tended to be present through juxtapositions and constituted identities of 'us versus them' (Atkins and Turnbull, 2014, p. 174), and indeed May's attacks on Labour often came in tandem with calls for unity and positivity. After such an exhortation in her 2018 CPC speech, 'we need to come together' (May, 2018a), May then provokes fear by suggesting that Labour would 'accept any deal the EU chose to offer, regardless of how bad it is for the UK' (May, 2018a). May's language attempted to push Labour outside the realm of political acceptability, castigating them as an enemy by implying that they would seek to harm the UK's interests. In so doing, May restricted her own capacity to strategically adapt to changes in the political context in order to maintain governing competence. In April 2019, when May sought talks with Jeremy Corbyn on Brexit after her deal was rejected for the third time and Article 50 was extended for the second time, there was uproar in the PCP, with Dominic Raab's criticism reminiscent of May's own rhetoric: 'Corbyn… has no serious interest in securing an effective Brexit' (quoted in Kentish, 2019).

May deployed similar rhetoric in relation to Remainers, who she frequently equated with the political class. In 2016 May raised the spectre of 'democratically elected politicians' demanding a re-run of the referendum (May, 2016b). Later, as the People's

Vote campaign gained momentum May again denounced it: 'we had the people's vote. The people voted to leave. A second referendum would be a politicians' vote: politicians telling people they got it wrong' (May, 2018a). May's anti-establishment, demotic language works to incite the pathos of fear through evoking a Remainer-political elite intent on obstructing Brexit. Even when calling for unity, it implied that her 'we' referred only to Brexiteers: 'Those of us who do respect the result… need to come together now. If we don't… we risk ending up with no Brexit at all' (May, 2018a). Again, the Prime Minister pushed Remainers outside the realm of political acceptability, excluding them from the very principle of unity. The same is done with the invocation of Scottish nationalists as an enemy, when May claims they want 'to drive us apart' (May, 2017d) and facilitate a 'betrayal' of the people by blocking Brexit (May, 2018a).

The legal efforts to ensure a parliamentary vote to trigger Article 50 were also furiously condemned by May, who claimed that those arguing for it: 'are not standing up for democracy, they're trying to subvert it. They're not trying to get Brexit right, they're trying to kill it by delaying it. They are insulting the intelligence of the British people' (May, 2016b). Despite criticisms of the acrimonious tone of this speech to the Conservative conference in 2016 (Shipman, 2017, p. 15), May persisted with similar rhetoric throughout her premiership. In 2017 May utilised the contrast of winners and losers, again excluding Remainers from the process of Brexit itself, stating 'The losers [of the referendum] have the responsibility to respect the legitimacy of the outcome' (May, 2017a). Professor of political psychology Barry Richards argued that the Prime Minister's statement on Brexit following her reluctant request for an extension to the Article 50 deadline demonstrated use of a 'psychological defensive process called projection' to 'demonise… an enemy within, namely politicians' (Richards, 2019). Such rhetoric alienates those targeted, and led to a number of Conservative Remainer MPs resigning from the party. By utilising the language of Brexitism and a coercive approach toward these opponents of Brexit, May yielded control of the narrative to Brexiteers, and the extremity of her appeals to pathos ended up compromising her capacity for governing competence by reducing her majority through resignations, and estranging Remainer MPs across the Commons, the votes of whom she would later need.

## Logos

Logos refers to the way in which arguments and problems are framed and presented through appeals to reason and logic (Finlayson, 2014, p. 433). Theresa May's appeals to logos demonstrated the influence of Brexitism on her rhetoric. The dominant appeals to logos in May's arguments on Brexit — pragmatism, withdrawal, change and the urgent present, and heroism — are consistent with May's prioritisation of party management and the politics of support. Yet we will show that May's logos of radical change and heroism precluded the pragmatic compromise she would later appeal to in order to pass her Brexit deal.

Appeals to pragmatism are a common feature of Conservative rhetoric, rooted in claims to govern in the national interest (Hayton and Crines, 2015b, pp. 202-3). Consistent with this tradition, May professed her rejection of 'ideological templates' (May, 2016c), and argued that that the British people 'are not ideologues' (May, 2018a). In her Lancaster House speech, May attempted to smooth over the difficulties that her redlines of leaving the Customs Union and Single Market posed with regards to the Irish border and future security cooperation by resorting to unspecified 'practical' solutions and arrangements (May, 2017a). This logos of pragmatism presented May's Brexit position as non-ideological and legitimated her redlines, despite the unresolved problems they potentially posed. As the Prime Minister's deal was met with stiff resistance in Parliament, her appeals to pragmatism extended to a logos of 'TINA' reminiscent of Thatcher's logos (see Dorey, 2015, p. 114). May presents her deal as 'the choice' (May, 2018b), implying that it was the pragmatic course of action, 'the best that could be negotiated' (May, 2018b). The shift from May's pathos of optimistic post-Brexit identities to this portrayal of her deal as the realistic compromise option reflected the changing strategic context that saw May struggling to pass her deal. May's logos of pragmatism can be seen as an ideational shift away from the Brexitism that characterised her appeals to pathos, towards more traditionally conservative arguments.

Underpinning all of May's arguments on Brexit was an appeal to the logos of withdrawal. This notion of withdrawal defines the conceptual core of Brexitism, and as we have already mentioned, represents a fetishisation of the free market economics logic of choice (see Davies, 2019). May's rhetoric on no-deal shifted from presenting it as merely an 'eventuality the Government is preparing for' (May, 2017d) to an immediate 'risk' (May, 2018b; 2018d). Despite expounding the harmful consequences of no-deal, May retains it as a possibility for the purposes of managing party conflict over her Brexit policy. But further to this, the insistence that 'no deal for Britain is better than a bad deal' (May, 2017a) demonstrates the very notion of withdrawal as a logic of argument in itself: full withdrawal is justified regardless of the harm it might pose because of the inference that a bad deal would not achieve full withdrawal. The possibility of no withdrawal is excluded entirely by such logic, and thus the preference ordering reflects the degree of withdrawal achieved by each option. May's argument here is 'quasi-logical' to use Finlayson's (2012, p. 761) phrase, insofar as it represents an attempt to present any strategy May chose to pursue as logical, as long as it realises the ideal of withdrawal.

In practice however, a no-deal Brexit had the potential to cause significant disruption, at least in the short-term, and therefore constituted a serious threat to the Conservatives' reputation for governing competence and to the interests of capital and the prevailing politics of power. Further to this, May's strategy of keeping no-deal on the table galvanised a previously loyal faction of the PCP to oppose the government, culminating in the unprecedented seizure of the Commons order paper by cross-party

backbenchers to enact legislation to block it. The logos of withdrawal therefore demonstrates the influence of Brexitism in May's rhetoric, at the expense of successful statecraft. The self-defeating nature of this logos of withdrawal is exemplified in the tautology of 'Brexit means Brexit — and we are going to make a success of it' (May, 2016b), in which Brexit is both the content and logic of the argument. May appealed to a logic of withdrawal with this argument that because Brexit means Brexit, it will be a success, and because it will be a success, it will be Brexit. The tautology revels in the juxtaposition between specificity and ambiguity, and this 'conceptual malleability' is exploited and contrasted with the promise of success (Adler-Nissen et al. 2017, pp. 773), again echoing May's pathos of optimism on Brexit. Thus, May's tautology has the dual function of a coercive and seductive persuasion, to use Sornig's terminology (1989, p. 98). To Brexiteers, May's utterance was a seductive appeal to the ideal of withdrawal in which Brexit has a clear semantic content, whereas to Remainers it was a coercive reminder that under May Brexit would be realised without compromise.

May's appeals to logos had a temporal dimension which encouraged un-conservative radical change and emphasised the urgency of the present so as to diminish the desirability of pragmatic compromise. May's (2017d) portrayal of change, quoting Disraeli, as 'constant and inevitable' is typical of conservative ideology. Yet May utilised the notion of change as a logic underpinning her arguments for her Brexit deal, by stressing the risk of not embracing change. This was evident in May's invocation of the threat of 'no Brexit at all' to whip support for her deal (May, 2018b). The consequences of not facilitating the change of Brexit by voting for May's deal would be 'more division, more uncertainty' (May, 2018b). Another way in which May used the logos of change was to frame arguments by emphasising discrepancies between the descriptive and normative. May frequently offered descriptions of how British society is not working, as mentioned in our analysis of May's pathos, but then followed these with normative statements about how things should be, thus making arguments on the logic that change must come, regardless of what it is, on the basis of this discrepancy (e.g. May, 2016c). The logos perceives change as inevitable, and thus self-justifying, and represents a co-option of Thatcher's TINA into there is only *the* alternative, as it were. May's Brexit strategy was predicated on this logos of change, and indeed May's pathos of invoking optimistic identities of post-Brexit Britain demonstrated attempts to build support through imbuing this logically necessary change with positivity. Yet by predicating her initial Brexit strategy on this logos of change, on the promise of the inevitable 'revolution' (May, 2016c), May restricted her capacity to row back, as we have already argued in relation to her logos of pragmatism. The combination of the logos of change and the pathos of optimism in May's rhetoric made moot her later appeals to pragmatism. Our argument that May's rhetorical logos of radical change served to impede her Brexit strategy over time is strengthened by May's shift toward the logos of pragmatism, emphasising her deal in late-2018 as one that would 'protect' and preserve the country (May, 2018c), and thus eschewing the logic of change. May's logos of change, then, was consistent with her prioritisation of

party management and the politics of support, but fundamentally ended up as a constraint on her statecraft.

The other temporal dimension of May's logos is the appeal to the urgency of the present, a facet of May's rhetoric that can be characterised as firmly Brexitist. As we have noted, Brexitism exists within this 'urgent present' that is inextricably related to its concepts of heroism and enemies (Finlayson, 2018). Ascherson identifies this aspect of May's Brexit strategy when he writes that her government is 'backing into the future' (Ascherson, 2016). Though Brexit is invariably recognised as partly existing in the future, May's focus was on the present, hence the invocation of enemies of Brexit to foster pathos, against whom Brexit must be defended in the present. May articulated Brexit with this urgency, emphasising Britain's present as a moment of 'great national change' (May, 2016a), 'our generation's moment' (May, 2016c), a 'pivotal moment in our history' (May, 2018a). The urgency did not ease, regardless of the progress in negotiations; 'we need to get on with Brexit now' (May, 2018c); we must 'seize' the opportunity of Brexit now (May, 2016c; 2017c; 2018a). The emphasis on the urgent present constitutes a logos appeal precisely because it was used to justify May's Brexit strategy. Brexit is portrayed not as a concrete point to be moved toward, but rather an ideal of withdrawal that never materialises, requiring constant and urgent attention in the present moment; Brexit is a 'prize' to reward these exertions (May, 2017a). May thus legitimised any shifts in her Brexit strategy on the logic of present urgency that demands change. The material and strategic consequences of this focus on the present is, as Finlayson characterises Brexitism, a 'rejection of the future' (Finlayson, 2017), which can be seen in the way in which May spoke of her vision of Global Britain in the present tense, as though it were already a reality: 'It's a new deep and special partnership' (May, 2017d).

In May's rhetoric on Brexit heroism became not just a facet of May's ethos, but an appeal to logos itself. May's 'no deal is better than a bad deal' claim (May, 2017a) was later rearticulated as 'Britain isn't afraid to leave with no deal if we have to' (May, 2018a). This argument rests on the logos of withdrawal, but also on an appeal to heroism. The implication of 'if we have to' is that no-deal would be the result of the EU's failures, and the invocation of Britain as fearless and heroic in resistance to this serves to justify no-deal. Here, heroism becomes a mutually reinforcing logos beside that of withdrawal. This logos of heroism is again evident when May states that it is in the 'tough times' that we discover that 'our capacity to rise to the challenge before us may well be limitless' (May, 2017d). This argument draws upon the Brexitist perception of 'toughness and pain' as a motivator (Davies, 2018a) and rests upon the logic of heroically enduring pain in order to realise the 'limitless capacity'. May utilised the same logos when trying to canvass support for her deal in the Commons, emphasising the need to pass it: 'If we will the ends, we must also will the means' (May, 2018d). In some ways this represented a co-option of Brexitist rhetoric; however, May was appealing to the heroism of enduring pain to justify the compromise of her deal, opposed by the ERG. The logic represented a re-articulation of those optimistic post-

Brexit identities as contingent upon the implicit heroism of compromise, thus demonstrating a blending of the logos of heroism with that of pragmatism. Yet the Brexiteer endures pain through struggle, not compromise. Indeed, May's pathos of enemies vindicated this Brexitist ideology by using a near-populist rhetoric that implies compromise to be akin to betrayal (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). As such, May's utilisation of the logos of heroism can be seen as a form of scorched earth strategy, precluding the successful use of the conservative logos of pragmatism.

May's appeals to Brexitist logos demonstrate the influence of Brexitism and are consistent with her prioritisation of party management and the politics of support. Yet in tandem with her appeals to pathos, the appeasement of the ERG with such rhetorical logos later challenged May's statecraft by precluding pragmatic compromise, to which she would later appeal. By framing her Brexit position with Brexitist logic May impeded her capacity for governing competence and yielded political argument hegemony to Brexitism, as well as heightening the chances of a Brexit that would challenge the politics of power in her pursuit of the politics of support.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of Theresa May's rhetoric on Brexit has found it to be fundamentally Brexitist in nature, displaying appeals to ethos, pathos and logos that prioritised the politics of support, primarily in relation to the hard-Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party. The ideational influence of Brexitism can be observed notably in her ethos of heroic determination and sacrifice, her pathos of nostalgic British identities and enemies of Brexit, and her logos of withdrawal, radical change and heroism. In statecraft terms, May's rhetoric exposes her prioritisation of party management, and her (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to devise a winning electoral strategy by mobilising Brexit as partisan issue, which her successor would later pull off at the December 2019 general election. Our analysis has also exposed how May's rhetoric constrained her statecraft, undermining her capacity for governing competence, yielding political argument hegemony to Brexiteers, and alienating other parties whose support she would come to need. As such, it has added to understanding of why May behaved in the way that she did, and why her premiership ended in failure.

The critical juncture in May's premiership was the 2017 general election. Her decision to call an early election was driven by a realisation in Downing Street that with a majority of just twelve seats the government would struggle to pass its legislation on Brexit (Seldon, 2019, pp. 194-199). With the Labour opposition seemingly in disarray and far behind the Conservatives in the opinion polls, an election offered the Prime Minister the prospect of a clear mandate for her Brexit policy to strengthen her hand not only in parliament but also with the EU (Allen, 2018, p. 117). The disastrous result for the Conservatives, depriving the government of its majority and leaving it dependent on a confidence and supply arrangement with the DUP, meant that May's

'initial Brexit stance was all but doomed' (Seldon, 2019, p. xviii). It should, therefore, have marked the moment that May shifted position (as she eventually did almost two years later) to seek cross-party consensus for a softer Brexit. Instead, trapped by her own Brexitist rhetoric, May's statecraft was characterised by an inability to square the practical demands of negotiation and governing with the pressures of party management.

In highlighting how May's rhetoric shaped and constrained her statecraft, this article has contributed not only to the growing literature on Brexit but has also added to that on Prime Ministerial leadership both empirically and theoretically. As we have demonstrated, by bringing together for the first time the established statecraft approach and RPA new insights can be generated about how attempts to persuade through rhetoric have consequences for a leader in their efforts to establish and maintain political argument hegemony and a reputation for governing competence. We have also demonstrated how RPA can provide a more interpretive, ideational dimension to statecraft analysis.

## Acknowledgements

The authors thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this article.

## References

Adler-Nissen, R. Galpin, C. and Rosamund, B. (2017) 'Performing Brexit: How a post-Brexit world is imagined outside the United Kingdom', *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 19(3), 573-591.

Allen, N. (2018) 'Brexit means Brexit: Theresa May and post-referendum British politics', *British Politics*, 13(1), 105-120.

Atkins, J. (2015) 'Narrating One Nation: The Ideology and Rhetoric of the Miliband Labour Party', *Politics*, 35(1), 19-31.

Atkins, J. and Finlayson, A. (2013) '… A 40-Year-Old Black Man Made the Point to Me: Everyday Knowledge and the Performance of Leadership in Contemporary British Politics', *Political Studies*, 61(1), 161-177.

Atkins, J. and Gaffney, J. (2020) 'Narrative, persona and performance: The case of Theresa May 2016–2017', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, doi: 10.1177/1369148120910985

Atkins, J. and Turnbull, N. (2014) 'Conclusion: Rhetoric, British Identity and

Interdisciplinarity'. In: Atkins, J. Finlayson, A. Martin, J. and Turnbull, N. (eds) *Rhetoric In British Politics and Society*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 173-184.

Ascherson, N. (2016) 'England prepares to leave the world', *London Review of Books*, [Online]. 17 November. [Accessed 23 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.lrb.co.uk/ v38/n22/neal-ascherson/england-prepares-to-leave-the-world

Bale, T. (2015) 'The oratory of David Cameron'. In: Hayton, R. and Crines, A. (eds) *Conservative Orators from Baldwin to Cameron*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 182-197.

Bale, T. and Webb, P. (2018) 'We Didn't See it Coming': The Conservatives', in Tonge, J., Leston-Bandeira, C., and Wilks-Heeg, S. (eds) *Britain Votes 2017*, pp. 46-58.

Buckledee, S. (2018) *The Language of Brexit*, London: Bloomsbury.

Buller, J. and James, T. (2012) 'Statecraft and the Assessment of National Political Leaders: The Case of New Labour and Tony Blair', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 14, 534–555.

Bulpitt, J. (1986) 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft', *Political Studies*, 34(1), 19–39.

Coates, S. and Leroux, M. 2017. Ministers aim to build 'empire 2.0' with African Commonwealth. *The Times*. [Online]. 6 March. [Accessed 23 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ministers-aim-to-build-empire-2-0-with-african-

Daddow, O. (2019) 'GlobalBritain™: the discursive construction of Britain's post-Brexit world role', *Global Affairs*, 5(1), 5-22.

Davies, W. (2018a) What are they after? London Review of Books. [Online]. 8 March. [Accessed 23 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n05/william-davies/what-are-they-after

Davies, W. (2019) 'Leave, and Leave Again', *London of Review Books*, 41(3), 9-10.

Davis, E. (2018) *Post Truth*, London, Abacus.

Dorey, P. (2015) 'The oratory of Margaret Thatcher', in Hayton, R. and Crines, A. eds. Conservative Orators from Baldwin to Cameron. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 103-120.

Finlayson, A. (2007) 'From Beliefs to Arguments: Interpretive Methodology and Rhetorical Political Analysis', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9(4), 545-563.

Finlayson, A. (2012) 'Rhetoric and the Political Theory of Ideologies', *Political Studies*, 60(4), 751-767.

Finlayson, A. (2014) 'Proving, Pleasing and Persuading? Rhetoric in Contemporary British Politics', *Political Quarterly*, 85(4), 428-436.

Finlayson, A. (2017) 'Brexitism', *London Review of Books*, 39(10), 22-33.

Finlayson, A. (2018) 'The Metaphysics of Brexit', *Third Text*, 32(5-6), 598-604.

Finlayson, A. and Martin, J. (2008) 'It Ain't What You Say…: British Political Studies and the Analysis of Speech and Rhetoric', *British Politics*, 3(4), 445-464.

Finlayson, A. and Martin, J. (2014) 'Introduction: Rhetoric and the British Way of Politics', in Atkins, J. Finlayson, A. Martin, J. and Turnbull, N. eds. *Rhetoric In British Politics and Society*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-13.

Gamble, A. (2019) 'The Realignment of British Politics in the Wake of Brexit', *The Political Quarterly*, 90(S2), 177-186.

Gimson, A. (2016) 'Profile: Nick Timothy, May's thinker-in-chief and co-Chief of Staff', ConservativeHome, 15 July [accessed 7 January 2020], https://www.conservativehome.com/highlights/2016/07/profile-nick-timothy-mays-thinker-in-chief-and-co-chief-of-staff.html

Griffiths, S. (2016) 'Statecraft as a Straightjacket: A Reply to Gamble and Hayton', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 69(3), 735-743.

Grube, D. (2013) *Prime Ministers and Rhetorical Governance*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Harrois, T. 2018. Towards 'Global Britain'? Theresa May and the UK's Role in the World after Brexit. Observatoire de la société britannique. 21, no pagination.

Hayton, R. (2018a) 'Brexit and the Conservative Party'. In: Diamond, P. Nedergaard, P. and Rosamond, B. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Brexit*, London, Routledge, pp. 157-166.

Hayton, R. (2018b) 'British conservatism after the vote for Brexit: The ideological legacy of David Cameron', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 20(1), 223-238.

Hayton, R. and Crines, A. (2015b) 'Conclusion: Oratory and rhetoric in Conservative Party Politics', in Hayton, R. and Crines, A. (eds) *Conservative Orators from Baldwin to Cameron*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 198-204.

Heffer, G. (2019) 'Theresa May promises to quit if Brexit deal passes' *Sky News*, 27 March. [Accessed 12 April 2019]. Available from: https://news.sky.com/story/theresamay-agrees-to-quit-once-brexit-deal-is-delivered-sky-sources-11676664

James, T. (2018) 'Political leadership as statecraft? Aligning theory with praxis in conversation with British party leaders', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 20(3), 555-572.

Kenny, M. and Pearce, N. (2016) Could the idea of the Anglosphere tempt voters towards Brexit? [Accessed 10 January 2020] https://www.ippr.org/juncture-item/could-the-idea-of-the-anglosphere-tempt-voters-towards-brexit

Kentish, B. (2019) 'Brexit: Furious Tory MPs tell Theresa May her 'desperate' decision to seek talks with Corbyn will 'damage the Conservatives' for years. *The Independent*, 7 April. [Accessed 23 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/ politics/brexit-theresa-may-corbyn-talks-eu-deal-customs-union-a8858556.html

Martin, J. (2015) 'Situating Speech: A Rhetorical Approach to Political Strategy', *Political Studies*, 63(1), 25-42.

May, T. (2016a) 'Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May', 13 July. London: Prime Minister's Office. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https:// www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may

May, T. (2016b) 'Speech to Conservative Party Conference', 2 October. PoliticsHome. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/ political-parties/conservative-party/news/79517/read-full-theresa-mays-conservative

May, T. (2016c) 'The good that government can do', Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 5 October. [Accessed 11 November 2019]. Available from: https://press.conservatives.com/post/151378268295/prime-minister-the-good-that-government-can-do

May, T. (2017a) 'The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU', 17 January. London: Prime Minister's Office. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech

May, T. (2017b) 'Response to the 2017 General Election', 9 June, *The Independent*. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-election-results-response-speech-hung-parliament-read-in-full

May, T. (2017c) 'PM's Florence speech: a new era of cooperation and partnership between the UK and the EU', 22 September. London: Prime Minister's Office. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-florencespeech-a-new-era-of-cooperation-and-partnership-between-the-uk-and-the-eu

May, T. (2017d) 'Speech to Conservative Party Conference', 4 October. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.conservatives.com/sharethefacts/2017/10/theresa-mays-conference-speech

May, T. (2018a) 'Speech to Conservative Party Conference', 3 October, PoliticsHome. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/conservative-party/news/98760/read-full-theresa-mays-speech-2018

May, T. (2018b) 'PM's statement on Brexit: 14 November 2018', 14 November. Downing Street, London. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-statement-on-brexit-14-november-2018

May, T. (2018c) 'PM letter to the nation: 24 November 2018', London: Prime Minister's Office. [Accessed 17 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pm-letter-to-the-nation-24-november-2018

May, T. (2018d) 'PM's statement on exiting the European Union: 10 December 2018'. London: Prime Minister's Office. [Accessed 12 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-statement-on-exiting-the-

May, T. (2019a) 'PM statement on Brexit', 20 March. London: Prime Minister's Office. [Accessed 12 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-brexit-20-march-2019

May, T. (2019b) 'Theresa May's final speech as Prime Minister: 24 July 2019', [Accessed 12 October 2019]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/theresa-mays-final-speech-as-prime-minister-24-july-2019

Mudde, C. (2004) 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541-563.

Mycock, A. (2017) 'Brexit, the Anglosphere and the emergence of Global Britain', British Academy Blog, 5 May [Accessed 23 April 2019]. Available from: https:// www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/brexit-anglosphere-and-emergence-global-britain

O'Sullivan, N. (2013) 'Conservatism', in Freeden, M. and Stears, M. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 293-311.

Prince, R. (2017) *Theresa May: The Enigmatic Prime Minister*, London, Biteback Publishing.

Runciman, D. (2019) 'A Change is Coming', *London Review of Books*, 41(4), 10.

Seldon, A. (2019) *May at 10*, London, Biteback Publishing.

Serhan, Y. (2019) 'The End of the Cult of Sympathy for Theresa May', *The Atlantic*, 13 March. [Accessed 25 April 2019]. Available from: https://www.theatlantic.com/ international/archive/2019/03/failed-brexit-vote-theresa-may-sympathy/584770/

Shipman, T. (2017) *Fall Out: A Year of Political Mayhem*, London, William Collins.

Timothy, N. (2016) Nick Timothy: What does the Conservative Party offer a working-class kid from Brixton, Birmingham, Bolton or Bradford? *ConservativeHome*, 23 March. https://www.conservativehome.com/thecolumnists/2016/03/nick-timothy-what-does-the-conservative-party-offer-a-working-class-kid-from-brixton-birmingham-bolton-or-bradford.html

Toye, R. (2013) *Rhetoric*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.