

BREXIT 2019:

PRIME MINISTER MAY'S DIVISIONS OF DOWNFALL

By Michael C. Maibach

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From the moment MP Theresa May became the United Kingdom's 54th Prime Minister, her efforts to reach a successful Brexit solution were doomed. Her resignation came after failing to win Parliamentary support for her iterative Brexit plans. To understand this historic political debacle we can look to six "divisions of downfall" that combined to defeat the Prime Minister. This set of divisions make clear why Mrs. May could only fail, especially after her "snap election" of 2017 lost 13 seats and her majority in Parliament. This summary will also give us signs to watch as the next British Prime Minister takes office and confronts the uniquely problematic challenge known as Brexit.

"DIVISIONS OF DOWNFALL"

DIVIDED PEOPLE: By a vote of 52% vs. 48%, the British people voted to "Leave" the European Union after 46 years of EU membership. This vote followed a tumultuous campaign of dire economic warnings, and harsh, emotional accusations about prudence and nationhood all around. Those debates caused nationalistic pride to clash with the idea of being part of Europe and "the wider world", as they say in Britain.

DIVIDED REGIONS: Perhaps most important among these six divisions is found in the division of the four UK regions. England (53%) and Wales (53%) voted to "Remain"; Scotland (62%) and Northern Ireland (56%) voted to "Remain" - a United Kingdom truly divided. This was to have heightened ramifications in the 2019 Parliamentary Brexit votes, once the Conservative Party was forced to create a coalition government with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland in 2017 and the debate about "an Irish border backstop" was given full voice. Just look at the road from the town of Clones in Ireland to the town of Cavan in Northern Ireland. That six-mile drive crosses the Northern Ireland-Ireland border four times! The idea of re-dividing Ireland by customs posts was perhaps the seventh "division" in this unique set of contretemps.

PARLIAMENT vs. THE PEOPLE: In June 2016, a majority of MPs voted to "Remain", as did the majority of Prime Minister Cameron's Conservatives in Parliament – including Mrs. May. Brexit then became the kind of political question Edmund Burke would have relished examining. Does an MP stay true to their judgment as to what is best for their country, or stay true to the will of a popular mandate like this referendum?

DIVIDED MAY COALITION & A DIVIDED IRELAND: In June 2017 Prime Minister May imprudently called "snap elections", seeking to enhance her five-seat majority in Parliament. Instead, Conservatives lost 13 seats and were forced to form a minority government with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, the DUP. The DUP had endorsed a "Leave" vote in 2016, but when Mrs. May and the EU came up with the "Irish Backstop" proposal that would keep

Northern Ireland in the EU customs zone with Ireland, the DUP rejected this plan. The Irish Backstop would have separated Northern Ireland from the other three UK regions for customs purposes. Suddenly, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and even the idea of the reunification of Ireland seemed in play.

DIVIDED MAY UK PARLIAMENT: Since 2016 Mrs. May and her Cabinet have tried in vain to fashion a Brexit package acceptable to their party, the UK Parliament, and the European Union. In the process, over 25 members of her Cabinet resigned – an historic number of Cabinet desertions! In the end, Mrs. May could not fashion a Brexit deal acceptable to her party or Parliament in three failed floor votes. One of those votes, on January 15, was a 432 vs. 202 record-breaking loss - triggering a no confidence movement inside Mrs. May's party. Talks between Mrs. May and Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn then ensued but brought no resolution as Labour was for a Norway-like Brexit arrangement.

DIVIDED CONSERVATIVES MPs: A sixth division existed within the Conservative Party MPs and helps explain why Prime Minister May lost so decisively in multiple Parliamentary debates and votes. This was a division between "Hard vs. Soft" Brexiteers. Hard Brexiters sought an immediate break with the EU – no phase-out or departure fees. They would have accepted short-term uncertainty and commercial dislocations in exchange for the long-term gains of new free trade agreements, e.g. with the US, and instant freedom from EU business "red-tape". Hard Brexiters were responding to the voices of the voters. Soft Brexiters were more aligned with the City of London and the larger business community – both of which feared the loss of EU markets, foreign investment, economies of scale for industry, as well as supply chain breaks. They saw the instant customs and regulatory changes of a Hard Brexit as daunting for companies large and small.

Closing Comments: A life-long ambition of Theresa May was to have become Prime Minister of her beloved country. What a high honor and responsibility this would be for her. However, the divisions among the British people, regions, Parliament and political parties during her tenure were so deep and consequential that her dream job became a political nightmare from which her boundless energy and limited political skills could not escape.

It now falls to the next Prime Minister to assess this landscape with clear eyes and creative solutions heretofore untested. A new EU Parliament and Commission has now been formed. The new Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, may find a friendlier hand extended to him that was extended to Prime Minister May. If not, if the EU remains enamored with a zero-sum rather than a win-win solution, then a Hard Brexit seems a possible result. In any event, the stormy English Channel will have more political boats crashed upon its rocks before all of this Brexit affair is sorted out!

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