

Mrs May is the epitome of all that is wrong with British politics

The rise of the Brexit Party has changed everything, and the PM must be forced out of office immediately

Allister Heath

If she had even a shred of dignity left, Theresa May would have resigned last night. She has ruined the Conservative Party, turb charged the return of Nigel Farage and her disgraceful Withdrawal Agreement stands no chance of getting through Parliament. Her temperament, character and interpersonal skills have been cruelly exposed as not up to the standard required for the job. Her record is one of unmitigated failure, and a Prime Minister with more self-respect would have stepped down of her own accord, if only to put a stop to this horrific, never-ending humiliation.

Instead, she chose to lock herself away in her bunker, surrounded by her coterie, refusing to meet hostile ministers, pretending not to hear calls for her to quit, better to convince herself that nothing had changed. Mrs May's Withdrawal Agreement is a veritable booby trap, designed to blow up her successor, and her party is in open, angry revolt.

Rarely has such a senior figure been so deluded; even Gordon Brown, who sought to cling on in Downing Street after his time had gone, had more self-awareness. Andrea Leadsom rightly chose to quit the Government rather than continue to play along with this farce.

But it's not just the Prime Minister who is letting the country down: the Tory party's institutions are failing just as badly and threatening its very viability as the dominant force on the centre-Right. The 1922 Committee once again passed up on the opportunity to change its rules: at least Mrs May is due to meet Sir Graham Brady tomorrow, where he will hopefully turn up the pressure. But will that really be D-Day? Or will the tin can be kicked down the road again?

The root cause of the problem is that too few Tories realise that we are in the midst of the political equivalent of a bank run: the depositors are queuing to take their money out, and the whole system is about to implode. The choice is either urgent, decisive and painful action, or a Canadian-style collapse for the Tories when the inevitable general election comes. Every passing day is an embarrassment, further toxifying the Tory brand, and each one of Mrs May's pronouncements costs the party yet more support that it will struggle ever to recover. The European elections will be a catastrophe.

Tory MPs and the remaining members of the Cabinet need to understand the depth of their predicament, and do anything they can to accelerate Mrs May's ejection from office. They should snap out of their debilitated stasis, pull out their fountain pens and get writing to Sir Graham. The other Cabinet members must realise just how badly their own reputations are being damaged: they are propping up Mrs May, and they are still far too obsessed with their own leadership prospects to want to rock the boat. Do they really want to lead a rump opposition party, or even lose their own seats, which is where their cowardice and excessive caution could eventually lead?

There may be a chance of a Tory-Brexit Party pact at some point but zero chance that supporters of Mrs May's deal or her allies will be spared the full force of Nigel Farage's party. Any Cabinet minister with a sense of self-preservation must therefore follow Mrs Leadsom in repudiating both. It is their only chance.

The reality is that nobody who believes in Brexit can possibly vote for this deal. There is no longer any excuse, no longer any room for doubt. Mrs May's latest version is an admission that the established parties will never allow us to leave the EU. It is an attempt to entrench the status quo, the symbol of a broken Westminster stuck on a doom loop. It is designed to thwart any real progress, to muddle and to confuse. It symbolises everything that is wrong with the old politics that still governs Westminster: MPs trying to negotiate with each other to adulterate Brexit as much as possible, rather than responding to the electorate's instructions.

In its denial of democracy and its decision to put process above substance, it is also a provocation: it tells Brexiteers that they will only get change if they elect a new generation of MPs from new parties. Many will oblige, keen to usher in a fresh, more responsive politics.

Lest we forget, the pressure to back Mrs May's deal on its third airing was immense; the world has since changed dramatically, courtesy of Mr Farage. It was only a few weeks ago that one after the other, most pro-Brexit commentators succumbed, as of course did Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Dominic Raab. They hated the deal, which they realised was tantamount to the worst, most punitive treaty we would ever have signed, but they felt that they had no choice but to grudgingly support it.

The dilemma was acute: back the deal and hope that a new PM will somehow improve things, Brexiteers kept being told, or you will end up with no Brexit at all. Even worse, No 10 insisted in one of its unforgivable attacks that the Brexiteers would get the blame for it. Parliament was taking control, and would never allow Britain to "leave" any other way.

I never bought the argument, and neither did a hardcore of heroic MPs, but supporters of the deal waged a surprisingly powerful Psy-ops strategy to bully sceptics into submission. Even Steve Baker, the deputy chairman of the European Research Group, admitted to having sleepless nights about the possibility that blocking the deal could kill off Brexit completely, though he didn't waver in the end.

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The rise of the Brexit Party has changed all of these calculations, which is why those Eurosceptics who backed Mrs May last time must U-turn and denounce the deal. It is now clear that several million voters would never tolerate a fake, May-style Brexit, and that a sell-out would guarantee that Mr Farage's party would become a permanent feature of the political landscape on at least 15-20 per cent of the vote, if not a lot more.

The Tories must deliver a real, clearly identifiable Brexit by the end of the year, or they will be destroyed. If Remainer Tories block this or ensure the election of a leader who is unwilling or unable to achieve a proper break, the party will collapse, with pro-Brexit MPs joining Mr Farage. The Tories are out of time. They must throw Mrs May out by the weekend at the latest, and finally start listening to their voters again.