

# Conservatives in office favourites in the general election on 8th June in the UK

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## Analysis

On 18th April the British Prime Minister Theresa May (Conservative Party) took everyone by surprise as she announced the organisation of a snap election (3 years before the normal date) for the 8th June next.

The head of government, who took over from David Cameron in 10 Downing Street without passing via a ballot, hopes to strengthen her parliamentary majority just before the Brexit. Indeed, according to the calendar, the UK will officially leave the EU in 2019. Several unpopular measures might be taken before and after this date, so Theresa May has an interest in avoiding an election at those particular times. "I have now come to the conclusion that the only way to guarantee certainty and stability for the next few years is to organise this snap election to achieve your support," she declared.

Nor does she want to run the risk of a sanction vote in the general elections following the UK's exit of the EU, which if the deadlines are respected, would take place in 2020.

In addition to this the present situation is particularly favourable to the Tories, who hold a significant lead over their Labour rivals in all of the polls. Just three weeks before the general election the Conservative victory seems to be guaranteed. The only remaining question is how what the margin will be.

The last YouGov poll for The Sunday Times, published on 11th May last credits the Conservative Party with 49% of the vote ahead of Labour, 31%; the Liberal Democrats (Lib-Dem), 9% and the UK Independence Party (UKIP), 3% for the Scottish National Party (SNP) is due to win 5% of the vote.

The weariness of the British, who will be voting on 8th June next for the third time in three years (after the general elections of May 2015 and the referendum on the country's exit of the EU on 23rd June 2016 (and 4th time for the Scots who voted on their independence on 14th September 2014), is a real danger which might spoil the success forecast for the Conservatives. This threat was incidentally brandished by the Prime Minister, at a time when she dismissed the possibility of convening a snap election.

The Scottish National Party's decision (SNP) to initiate the process for a new referendum

over Scotland's independence has undoubtedly played a major role in Theresa May's decision. Indeed she knows that she will not be able to satisfy both the supporters of the hard Brexit (i.e. which would lead the UK towards exiting the Single Market and the Customs Union as well as the end of all freedom of movement of workers and goods), and the Scots. The latter, who support the EU might, in the event of the hard Brexit, choose to vote to leave the UK, in short for independence in a new referendum. Conversely, a soft Brexit might challenge the support given by the most radical Brexiteers to the outgoing head of State.

Disunion is the other danger that hovers over the UK. Indeed although England voted mainly in support of the Brexit, Scotland and Northern Ireland however voted to remain. Ulster is suffering a political crisis and has had no government for the last two months. As for the Scottish nationalists, if they achieve a high score in the election on 8th June next they might pursue the organisation of a new popular consultation over Scotland's independence. Glasgow is dreaming of a Danish-style solution but in the Scandinavian kingdom, the region that does not belong to the EU, Greenland, is a tiny part of the country. For Scotland the situation would be the opposite and therefore not so easy to achieve.

The House of Commons, the lower house of parliament, where the Conservative Party has a majority of 16 seats with its allies from the Democratic Union Party (DUP) and Unionist Party (UUP) of Northern Ireland, was dissolved on 3rd May by 522 votes against 13 and around 100 abstentions.

### **Are we heading towards an overwhelming Tory victory?**

Hence via this election outgoing Prime Minister Theresa May wants to assert her legitimacy, within her own party and in the face of her European partners and to strengthen her own personal authority. She also wants to bring a final end to all hope of a return, even of a second referendum organised on the UK's exit of the EU. To do this she aims to exploit the divisions that are now rife in the Labour party and take advantage of the exceptional position – according to the polls – enjoyed by the Conservative Party. These polls were confirmed in the ballot on 4th May last since the Tories won 38% of the vote in the by-elections (the best performance of a party in power in the last 40 years), ahead of Labour (28%) and the LibDems (18%). Labour suffered major defeat, losing 10 local councils (out of 37) in England, 3 out of 7 in Wales and 3 out of 3 in Scotland, where the Conservatives won 164

additional council seats, Labour lost 133. Jeremy Corbyn's party also lost the town hall of Glasgow, a Labour stronghold for decades.

"Theresa May is presenting the general elections on 8th June next as another referendum over the Brexit. Her party is divided over the issue of the Brexit, but Labour is even more divided and may find it hard to present an alternative position," stressed John Curtice, a professor of political science at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. The election will indeed focus on this issue more than any other in terms of domestic policy. On 29th March last the British Ambassador to the EU delivered a letter to the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, thereby triggering article 50 and the UK's exit process from the EU.

A wide victory in the ballot might enable Theresa May to negotiate a strong position against the Europeans and also within her own party, without having to depend on the most radical wing of the Conservatives and without fearing the consequences of an agreement that would not give satisfaction to the supporters of a hard Brexit. "Each vote for the Tories will make me stronger when I negotiate with Brussels with the Prime Ministers, the presidents, the chancellors of the EU," repeats the head of government.

"Voters have the choice between a government that has brought stability and firm management and which is working in the national interest or a weak coalition government led by Jeremy Corbyn, supported by the LibDems, who want to re-open the divisions that appeared during the referendum on 23rd June last, and the Scottish nationalists led by Nicolas Sturgeon," she added.

Theresa May also hopes to count on the support of the widest possible majority to complete the reforms she intends for the country. She is targeting a 140 lead in the House of Commons. On 18th July last as she took office, the Prime Minister held an extremely social discourse that broke with the ideas of her predecessor in 10 Downing Street, David Cameron. She wants a

protective, social State. For the time being she aims to postpone the goal of budgetary balance until 2020 and increase the budget allocated to the British army (NATO is obliging States to commitments of 2% of the GDP to the defence budget).

Theresa May hopes to reduce immigration to the UK.

### **Labour: what future for Jeremy Corbyn?**

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn faces the general election in a bad position. Only 15% of the British (and less than a third of the Labour voters 30%) believe that he would make a better Prime Minister than Theresa May. The opposition party could also have prevented this election since the Prime Minister's decision absolutely had to be accepted by the majority of 2/3 of the House of Commons to be validated.

After the referendum on 23rd June last on the UK's exit of the EU nearly a dozen Labour ministers resigned from the Shadow Cabinet led by Jeremy Corbyn. The Labour leader was also challenged by ¾ of the party's MPs who rejected him, as they voted in a motion of censure, 172 votes against 40. Some weeks later on 24th September he was re-elected however as Labour's leader, opposite Owen Smith, with 61% of the vote, i.e. +2 points in comparison with his first election on 12th September 2015.

Finally at the beginning of the year three ministers from the Shadow Cabinet again resigned after the party signed a law notifying the establishment of the Brexit. 47 Labour MPs voted against it and around 7000 Labour Party members resigned in protest against Labour's position on the issue.

Jeremy Corbyn has been heavily criticised for having undertaken an extremely ambiguous, unconvincing campaign in the referendum on 23rd June last. Against the EU's membership of the EU in 1975, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe

in 2005 and the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the Labour leader, shaken by the campaign he had undertaken jointly with the Conservative during the referendum on Scotland's independence, defended the Remain campaign without any real enthusiasm.

After that he was careful not to go against – a major share (one third of the labour supporters voted for the Brexit according to the polls) of his supporters – who were favourable to the UK's exit of the EU.

The main opposition party is fighting for London to retain the advantages that result from its membership of the Single Market and for a management of migration in line with the economic interests of Britain and the local authorities.

Labour maintains that if it wins on 8th June next parliament will be consulted about the agreement to be negotiated regarding London's exit of the EU and that MPs will be able to send the government back to the negotiating table if they are not satisfied with the text. "Labour is trying to win back ground by offering a softer version of the Brexit in the face of the hard stance defended by Theresa May. This might convince some of the electorate but putting the economy ahead of immigration is a risking wager," indicates Simon Hix, a political expert at the London School of Economics (LSE).

"I am happy to have the opportunity to stand before the British, against this government and its failed economic programme that has left the National Health Service (NHS) in a dire situation, which has impoverished our schools, damaged our living standards and left many people in uncertainty. We just want present our arguments to the British people, we want a society that takes care of everyone, an economy for all and a Brexit that functions for all," declared Jeremy Corbyn.

The Labour leader is accusing Theresa May of wanting to use the Brexit to transform the UK into a tax paradise for some and a country of low wages for others. "It is the establishment against the people," he maintained. In Jeremy

Corbyn's opinion, the outgoing Prime Minister is leading a party of the privileged, who want to offer major tax rebates to big companies and to the richest, whilst cutting social spending and by turning immigrants and the beneficiaries of social aid into scapegoats.

Labour is putting forward an extremely left-wing programme that would like to represent the socialism of the 21st century and which highlights the defence of public services that are threatened by the budgetary austerity policy undertaken in its opinion by the Conservatives over the last 7 years.

Labour aims to increase the minimum wage, introduce free primary school education, build a million council housing, renationalise the railways, introduce a national education service that would last a lifetime, upgrade student grants and retirement pensions and reform the NHS. "We would no longer allow those at the top to live at the expense of others who break their backs with zero hour contracts or who are forced to make sacrifices to reimburse their loans or pay their rent," declared Jeremy Corbyn.

### The other parties

Fervent supporters of Remain the LibDems have campaigned for a long time for another referendum, a promise that they gave up in order to focus on the fight for a soft Brexit. Their leader Tim Farron called for pro-Europeans to seize the opportunity these elections provide "to change direction and avoid the disaster of a hard Brexit, which would lead to London's exit of the Single Market." The LibDems are hoping to win between 20 and 30 seats in the House of Commons on 8th June.

For its part the UK Independence Party (UKIP) almost lost its reason for being and has been experiencing some difficulty in establishing a programme since the victory of the Brexit on 23rd June last year. Moreover, the party has been undermined by its internal divisions and is now without its historical leader (Nigel Farage left the

party in November 2016; on 20th April last he announced that he would not stand in the general election) and of MPs that can represent it after its new leader Paul Nuttall was defeated by a Labour candidate in February in the by election in Stoke-on-Trent (one of the 30 biggest town councils in the country), a town where the highest majority had voted to leave the EU. Moreover its only MP Douglas Carswell, elected in the constituency of Clacton-on-Sea (Essex) left the party in March to re-join his former party, the Tories.

"UKIP is in total disarray. It is seeking another programme and does not simply want to put pressure on Theresa May, but in real terms it has nothing else to offer than a hard Brexit," indicated Brian Klaas, professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics. It will influence the election however since its decline in the ballot might allow the Conservatives to win, for the first time in more than a century, an absolute majority in Wales. Indeed although the electorate of the Paul Nuttall's party originally came from Labour many are now turning to the Conservative Party, notably in the North of England.

### The British Political System

The British Parliament comprises two Houses: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The House of Commons is elected for five years. For a long time the length of the legislature was not set and the Prime Minister could decide at any moment to convene an election. Since 2011 and the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the general elections (when they are not early) take place on the first Thursday in May of the fourth year following the previous election. The House of Commons is automatically dissolved 25 days before this date.

For the general elections the UK is divided into 650 constituencies: 529 in England, 59 in Scotland, 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland. The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act of 2011 provided for the electoral re-zoning and the reduction of the number of MPs from 650 to 600. Since the law was amended in 2013 the

rezoning of the constituencies will only occur in 2018. The vote takes place according to a majority single list in one round. Called First past the post, in reference to the jargon used in horse racing, this system privileges the candidate who comes out ahead in the election, whether he/she has won 80% or 30% of the vote. This system is fatal for the “small” parties which can only hope to win a seat if their votes are geographically concentrated as they are in certain regions (Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) and where they succeed in winning some seats.

Any person aged 18 and over can stand in the general election except for members of the clergy of the Church of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church, certain high ranking civil servants, soldiers, professional policemen, judges and officers of the court, and finally ambassadors. Candidate lists have to be supported by at least 10 voters and a deposit of £500 (595€) has to be paid per constituency.

11 political parties won seats in the House of Commons after the last general elections on 7th May 2015:

- the Conservative Party (Conservative), created in the 19th century and led since 2016 by Theresa May has 331 seats;
- Labour Party (Labour), founded in 1900 and led by Jeremy Corbyn with 232 seats;
- the Scottish National Party (SNP), a secessionist party led by Nicola Sturgeon, has 56 seats;
- the Liberal Democrats (LibDem), created in 1988 and led by Tim Farron, has 8 seats ;
- The Democratic Ulster Party (DUP), a Protestant Unionist party which defends the interests of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland, and supports the upkeep of the region in the UK, is led by Arlene Foster

with 8 seats;

- Sinn Fein (SF), an Irish republican, nationalist party led by Gerry Adams, has four seats;
- Plaid Cymru (PC), a Welsh regionalist party led by Leanne Wood, with 3 seats;
- the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), a Catholic party of Northern Ireland led by Colum Eastwood, with 3 seats;
- the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), a unionist party of Northern Ireland led by Robin Swann with 2 seats;
- the Green Party of England and Wales (G) an ecologist party led by Caroline Lucas and Jonathan Bartley, with 1 seat;
- the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which campaigned for the withdrawal of the UK from the EU led by Paul Nuttall with one seat.

The second house in the British parliament, the House of Lords, has 813 members at present (the figure is variable), of whom 257 are Conservatives and 207 Labour. It comprises life peers or people who have been knighted for their work done for the nation– former MPs, former high ranking civil servants, judges, industrialists – and hereditary Lords (hereditary Lords were abolished by the 1999 reform but 92 of them, chosen by their colleagues and the groups in the House of Lords, have temporarily retained their seats) and 26 Bishops of the Church of England. Every year each political party has the right to put forward the names of personalities that they want to raise to the rank of life peer. The Lords cannot block the vote on a law put forward by the government or the House of Commons but simply delay it, which they do very rarely.

**Reminder of the General Elections of 7th May 2015 in the UK**

Turnout : 66,10%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats
<b>Conservative Party (Conservative)</b>	11 334 576	36.90	331
<b>Labour Party (Labour)</b>	9 347 304	30.40	232
<b>Scottish National Party (SNP)</b>	1 454 436	4.70	56
<b>Liberal Democrats (LibDem)</b>	2 415 862	7.90	8
<b>Democratic Ulster Party (DUP)</b>	184 260	0,60	8
<b>Sinn Fein (SF)</b>	176 232	0.60	4
<b>Plaid Cymru (PC)</b>	181 704	0.60	3
<b>Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP)</b>	99 809	0.30	3
<b>Unionist Party (UUP)</b>	114 935	0.40	2
<b>UK Independence Party (UKIP)</b>	3 881 099	12.60	1
<b>Green Party of England and Wales (G)</b>	1 157 613	3.80	1
<b>Others</b>	343 850	1.20	1

Source : BBC <http://www.bbc.com/news/election/2015/results>

## In the UK outgoing Prime Minister loses her absolute majority

07

### Results

Outgoing Prime Minister Theresa May (Conservative Party) lost her wager. Whilst she convened a snap election (early by 3 years) to assert her legitimacy, to strengthen her personal authority and to extend her majority in order to negotiate the best possible exit for the UK from the EU, the Tory leader lost the absolute majority that her party held in the House of Commons. The Conservatives lost ground in the ballot box: on 8th June they won 42.3% of the vote and took 318 seats, i.e. -13 in comparison with the previous election on 7th May 2015. 8 outgoing government ministers lost their seats.

Conversely the Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn emerged strengthened in this election winning 40% of the vote and 262 seats (+30).

The Scottish National Party (SNP) the secessionist party led by Nicola Sturgeon, also suffered losses winning 3% of the vote and 35 seats (-21). The party achieved a record result in 2015. But surprisingly however the SNP electorate this time round preferred the Conservatives to Labour to whom they are close however. With 13 seats the Tories led in Scotland with Ruth Davidson as the party leader, thereby becoming Scotland's second biggest party with their highest result since 1983. The LibDems led by Tim Farron improved their number of seats, taking 7.40% of the vote and 12 seats (+ 4).

To stay as head of the government and to win a majority in the House of Commons, Prime Minister Theresa May has chosen join forces (agreement on parliamentary support but not a government coalition) with the Democratic Ulster Party (DUP), a unionist movement which defends the interests of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland and led by Arlene Foster. This party won 0.9% of the vote

and 10 seats (+2). The DUP is said to have achieved a promise from the Tories stipulating that there will be no special status for Northern Ireland in the negotiations over the Brexit (we should recall that 56% of the electorate in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU).

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) led by Paul Nuttall lost its only seat in the House of Commons. Since it campaigned for the UK's withdrawal from the EU it is now suffering from the majority voting method but especially it has lost its reason for being.

Finally Sinn Fein (SF), a republican, nationalist Irish party led by Gerry Adams won 0.7% of the vote and 7 seats (+3); Plaid Cymru (PC), a Welsh regionalist party led by Leanne Wood, 0.5% of the vote and 4 seats (+ 1) and the Green Party of England and Wales (G) led by Caroline Lucas and Jonathan Bartley 1.3% of the vote and 1 seat (=).

Turnout was one of the highest since the general elections in May 1997. It totalled 68.7% i.e. +2.60 points more in comparison with the election on 7th May 2015.

**Results of the General Election of 8th June 2017 in the UK**

Turnout: 68.70%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
<b>Conservative Party (Conservative)</b>	13 632 914	42.30	318
<b>Labour Party (Labour)</b>	12 874 985	40	262
<b>Scottish National Party (SNP)</b>	977 569	3	35
<b>Liberal Democrats (Lib-Dem)</b>	2 371 772	7.40	12
<b>Democratic Ulster Party (DUP)</b>	292 316	0.90	10
<b>Sinn Fein (SF)</b>	238 915	0.70	7
<b>Plaid Cymru (PC)</b>	164 466	0.50	4
<b>The Green Party of England and Wales (G)</b>	525 371	1.60	1
<b>Others</b>	887 551	3.60	2

Source : BBC <http://www.bbc.com/news/election/2017/results>

Theresa May did not pass comment on her failure. "I shall form a government. This government will guide the country through the vital negotiations over the Brexit which will start in just 10 days' time. And now, back to work!" she declared.

Many political analysts believe that Theresa May led a poor electoral campaign. It was severely disrupted by two terrorist attacks the responsibility for which was claimed by Islamic State, the first being in Manchester on 22nd May, which led to the deaths of 22 and injured 116; the second occurred in London on 3rd June (8 deaths, 2 disappeared and 48 injured). After these two attacks many voices were raised to challenge the austerity policy undertaken by the Conservatives since 2010. Between 2010 and 2016, around 20,000 police jobs were effectively cut; the police budget was also reduced by 20%. At the time Theresa May was Home Secretary in the government led by David Cameron. "Enough is enough. There is too much tolerance of extremism in our country," stressed the head of government. After the attack in London she also said something quite surprising: "We must not live as separate, segregated com-

munities but as a united kingdom," seeming to challenge British multiculturalism. Jeremy Corbyn called in vain for Theresa May's resignation. "Austerity must stop at the threshold of the emergency services and the police stations. We cannot have low cost protection and health-care," said the Labour leader, promising the immediate creation of 10,000 police jobs and the employment of a 1000 additional agents in the information services.

But from the very beginning however Theresa May undoubtedly made the mistake of focusing her campaign on her personality and rejecting debate with the other candidates and sometimes refusing to answer to the media. She appeared over confident and, a fatal mistake, she neglected her labour rival. "A 'file' woman, Theresa May has no charisma, and is ill at ease with both the public and journalists. She has never been involved in public debate before," noted Chris Bickerton. "Self-assured, disdainful of her rival, her refusal to take part in the TV debates only increased her image as a leader who fears confrontation," maintained Philippe Marlière, professor of political science at the University College of London.

at over £100,000 would have to fund their dependency via an inheritance tax. This project disturbed even the most loyal sympathisers of the Conservative Party.

Whilst all political analysts thought that the Labour Party was in the abyss, the latter was able to surf on the shortfalls in Theresa May's electoral campaign and finally achieved a result that no one would have imagined just a few weeks ago. Jeremy Corbyn made the right choice by placing emphasis on socio-economic issues and by offering reforms supported by many British, such as the renationalisation of the railways and the postal services and even free higher education, which remobilised the Labour electorate. The Labour leader's result, higher than predicted in the polls recalls that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France Unbowed, FI) in the first round of the French Presidential election on 23rd April last.

Jeremy Corbyn managed to establish a real relationship with the British public, which his rival has never been able to do. At one moment in the electoral campaign the dynamic changed sides. After this the two terrorist attacks forced Theresa May to return to a more traditional campaign of Tories vs Labour, which she had tried her very best to avoid.

According to the exit polls Labour owe their results to the youngest in the electorate (18-24), who turned out in strength and mainly voted for the opposition. Nearly three-quarters of them (72%) went to vote on 8th June (there were only four in ten in the last general election on 7th May 2015); the response on the part of the young people can undoubtedly be explained by the "shock" that some felt in the choice made by some of their fellow-countrymen to quit the EU on 23rd June 2016.

In 2010, Labour fell victim, amongst other things, to its length of time in office; five years later in 2015 the British undoubtedly

voted more for there to be a referendum on their country's exit of the EU promised by the Tories rather than voting for the Conservative Party itself.

Many political analysts believe that the British voted in expression of their wish for a "soft Brexit". *"I believe that the majority of those who voted for the Brexit on 23rd June 2016 did so hoping for an exit of the EU whilst remaining close to it, with participation in the single market and customs union. The option of the hard Brexit privileged by Theresa May was not what they wanted,"* declared Simon Hix, professor of political science at the London School of Economics (LSE). Theresa May's counter performance, supporting an exit of the single market, the end of customs union and free movement, now leads a relative majority in the House of Commons, but this is strengthening however the supporters of a hard Brexit within the Tory party.

Without a doubt the UK has emerged weakened after the general elections on 8th June. Just 10 days before the launch of negotiations by London with its 27 European partners over Brexit (planned for 19th June), the country will be difficult to govern. *"We do not know when the negotiations will start but we do know when they have to end (29th March 2019 since the British government triggered the withdrawal clause, article 50 of the Treaty on European Union on 29th March last)"* recalled the President of the European Council Donald Tusk.

*"Theresa May will not be able to stay in power, and she will have to resign; she has lost all credibility within her own party,"* indicated Simon Tilford and John Springford, of the think tank Centre for European Reform. Many political analysts are indeed anticipating further elections deeming that the British Prime Minister will not be able to govern whilst the coming months will be vital for the future of the country.

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