

# All too hard: understanding Brexit, Theresa May and the British humiliation

By [Matthew Flinders](#)

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In a [recent poll](#), 90% of the British public agreed that the way Brexit negotiations were being handled was a "national humiliation". A lot of people have described the current situation as a constitutional crisis but they are wrong: the word "crisis" is not strong enough to capture the gravity of the situation. What's being played out is the political equivalent of the Game of Thrones (or "[Game of Unknowns](#)" as the London Evening Standard labelled it recently). There's fantasy, despair, intrigue, betrayal and the likelihood that all the leading characters are going to suffer horrible fates.



European Council president Donald Tusk visits Downing Street in 2018. EPA

In fairness, if blame and ridicule is to be allotted for this sorry state of affairs, then it should really go to [David Cameron](#), the prime minister who led the UK into its Brexit referendum and then promptly exited once the result was returned. Never before has a prime minister cut and run to leave their successor with such a total and utter mess.

But life isn't fair and Cameron is no longer the lead character in this drama. That unfortunate role is now played by Theresa May. Despite Cameron's actions, she is the one who is most likely to go down as the worst prime minister in British political history. That is, of course, unless she can suddenly pull the biggest rabbit that anyone has ever seen out of her hat. Based on her premiership so far, that is clearly not going to happen. Period.

So how did May manage to dig herself into such a tight and apparently inescapable hole?

The answers to this question are as numerous as they are interwoven but all combine to create a tragicomedy of truly epic proportions. This is a prime minister who just can't stop digging.

Like Frank Sinatra, she'll always be able to say "I did it my way" but looking back it seems she made a series of mistakes.

The first mistake was that when faced with the needs of a divided nation and the needs of a party that has always been split over Europe, she put her party first. Although understandable, the problem with this strategy was that the distance between the hard-right anti-Europeans, at one extreme, and the softer core of the party (including Remainers), was always going to be too wide for any policy position or proposal to span.

The second mistake was that when faced with this dilemma she attempted to placate the right of her party. That immediately alienated almost everyone else. At the time she was at least cushioned by a small but relatively stable majority in the House of Commons (of 17 seats) but she made the surprise decision to call a snap election in June 2017. This may well be remembered as the ultimate folly. She asked the public for a mandate to deliver a [hard Brexit](#) and they [simply did not give it to her](#). In the blink of a political eye she went from a slim majority to a minority government, propped up with the [costly support](#) of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party. No clear mandate, no clear majority, authority badly weakened.

Looking back, the morning after that election was the moment to reassess and change tack towards a softer Brexit. The fact that May never took that option reveals a deeper flaw – her political antennae were broken. The description of her as a "[bloody difficult woman](#)" had once been viewed as a positive trait (it cast her as dogged, committed, relentless and the rest) but over time it morphed into her Achilles heel. She was engaging in a dangerous game of political brinkmanship with both the European Union and the House of Commons.

As Brexit day got closer, so her mantra of "my deal or no deal" simply got louder. I simply don't think she ever understood how European politics operates – she seemed genuinely shocked and puzzled when the European Union refused to accede to her demands and just kept marching forward gripped by a peculiar strain of that most dangerous political malady: hubris syndrome – an excessive confidence in a specific vision or policy, contempt for alternative advice, disconnection from day-to-day reality.

May has not been outmanoeuvred by the European Union. It's closer to the truth to say that the 27 European partners have simply stood together with a mixture of befuddlement and surprise at the UK's implosion. Let's not kid ourselves that Europe is to blame for the UK's situation. May made a conscious decision to "go hard" in an attempt to hold her party together and it is this that has brought the system to its knees.

Now, years after the referendum and with the originally planned Brexit day of March 29, 2019 missed, May is exhausted – physically and emotionally. How she copes with the burden of office and keeps going (head down, carry-on-regardless, battle on, stiff upper lip) is beyond me but the cracks are showing. Her [bizarre attack](#) on parliament at prime minister's questions a few weeks ago – ironically for MPs daring to block Brexit – may have united the House of Commons against her, but it was also a rare glimpse of May the person struggling under pressure.

She has no magic wand to wave. There is no Executive Order she can sign to end the impasse. The United Kingdom remains a parliamentary state and so if a prime minister cannot control parliament they are in office but not in power. And that is where Theresa Mary May finds herself at the moment. If promising to step down could not persuade enough of her own MPs to support her was not enough of a humiliation, the fact that parliament has effectively seized control of the agenda must be the ultimate disgrace for any prime minister.

She just went too hard.

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