

'Wounded' Theresa May vows to stay as UK PM, says 'will stick to Brexit timetable'

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London: Spectacularly punished by voters who took away her majority in Parliament, a politically wounded but defiant Theresa May soldiered on Friday as Britain's Prime Minister, resisting pressure to resign after the failure of a high-stakes election gamble that made the massive challenge of untangling Britain from the European Union only more complex and uncertain.

Theresa May addresses the press in Downing street, London

Having called an early election in hopes of getting an increased majority that could have strengthened her hand in Britain's exit talks with the EU, May instead saw her majority evaporate completely – leaving her fortunes hanging by a thread and dark clouds over the Brexit negotiations just 10 days before they are due to start.

She insisted that she would stick to the Brexit timetable. But she was forced into an alliance with a small party in Northern Ireland just to stay in power. Grim-faced, May said her Conservatives and the Democratic Unionist Party would together form a new government – that can provide certainty and lead Britain forward at this critical time.

“Brexit talks to go ahead”

“This government will guide the country through the crucial Brexit talks ... and deliver on the will of the British people by taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union,” she said after seeking Queen Elizabeth II's approval for the new, hastily cobbled-together arrangement.

May's snap election call was the second time that a Conservative gamble on the issue of Britain's relations with Europe backfired. Her predecessor, David Cameron, first asked British voters to decide in 2016 whether to leave the EU or stay in, triggering the divorce that will leave the bloc with 27 members when Britain leaves in 2019.

Cameron, gambling that Britons wouldn't want to sever their network of ties with the continent, had promised the Brexit referendum during a 2015 election campaign that gave Conservatives a surprise Parliamentary majority. When voters stunned him and Europe by voting to leave, he resigned, leaving May to deal with the mess.

Perplexed EU leaders, unexpectedly faced with the prospect of dealing with now-shaky British leadership, sought Friday to make sense of the drama, but also made clear that while Britain might be accorded time to regroup, it should not expect an extension of the two-year deadline for the Brexit talks to end.

Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier tweeted that “negotiations should start when U.K. is ready.” But EU Council President Donald Tusk said: “We know when they must end.” Mostly, the EU mood was one of frustration that the already tough Brexit talks were likely to become only more difficult.

The election shock is “yet another own goal” that will make “already complex negotiations even more complicated,” said the European Parliament's top Brexit official, Guy Verhofstadt.

May's ruling Conservative party wins 318 seats

With 649 of 650 seats in the House of Commons declared, May's bruised Conservatives had 318 – short of the 326 they needed for an outright majority and well down from the 330 seats they had before May's roll of the electoral dice.

Rather than resign, May quickly grabbed the lifeline of an alliance with the DUP, which won 10 seats. But even that arrangement seemed shaky. Before May went through the largely symbolic process of seeking the queen's approval for the new government, DUP leader Arlene Foster had told British media that it would be "difficult for (May) to survive" and that "it is too soon to talk about what we're going to do."

In May's camp, recriminations were immediate and stinging.

"This is a very bad moment for the Conservative Party, and we need to take stock," Conservative lawmaker Anna Soubry said. "Our leader needs to take stock as well."

Labour Party wins 261 seats

The biggest winner was Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Labour's increase in seats from 229 to 261 – with one seat still undecided – confounded expectations that his left-wing views made him electorally toxic.

In a buoyant mood, Corbyn piled on pressure for May to resign, saying Friday morning that people have had enough of austerity politics and cuts in public spending. He ruled out the potential for deals or pacts with other progressive parties in Parliament.

"The arguments the Conservative Party put forward in this election have lost, and we need to change."

Initially blind-sided by May's snap election call, and written off by many pollsters, Labour surged in the final weeks of the campaign. It drew strong support from young people, who appeared to have turned out to vote in bigger-than-expected numbers.

The fast-moving events both flummoxed and fascinated voters.

"It's a bit of a mess," Peter Morgan, 35, said in London. "I was kind of hoping it would just go the way that the polls suggested it would and we could have a quiet life in Westminster but now it's going to be a bit of a mess."

Many predicted May would soon be gone. Steven Fielding, a professor of politics at the University of Nottingham, called her "a zombie prime minister."

"Clearly if she's got a worse result than two years ago and is almost unable to form a government, then she, I doubt, will survive in the long term as Conservative Party leader," former Conservative Treasury chief George Osborne said on ITV.

May wasn't the only big loser.

In a blow to its hopes for another referendum on whether Scotland should leave the United Kingdom, the pro-independence Scottish National Party lost about 21 of its 54 seats. Its casualties included Alex Salmond, one of the party's highest-profile lawmakers.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said the idea of a new independence referendum "is dead."

European leaders grappled with the question: what next? French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said the election shock didn't necessarily mean that Britons have changed their minds about leaving but also predicted that "the tone" of negotiations may be affected.

"These are discussions that will be long and that will be complex. So let's not kid ourselves," he said on Europe 1 radio.

EU budget commissioner Guenther Oettinger said the EU is prepared to stick to the timetable that calls for negotiations to start in mid-June, but also said: "Without a government, there's no negotiation."

May, who went into the election with a reputation for quiet competence, was criticized for a lackluster campaigning style and for a plan to force elderly people to pay more for their care, a proposal her opponents dubbed the "dementia tax." As the polls suggested a tightening race, pollsters spoke less often of a landslide and raised the possibility that May's majority would be eroded.

Then, attacks in Manchester and London that killed a total of 30 people brought the campaign to a halt "twice," sent a wave of anxiety through Britain and forced May to defend the government's record on fighting terrorism. Corbyn accused the Conservatives of undermining Britain's security by cutting the number of police on the streets.

Eight people were killed near London Bridge on Saturday when three men drove a van into pedestrians and then stabbed revelers in an area filled with bars and restaurants. Two weeks earlier, a suicide bomber killed 22 people as they were leaving an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester.

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