

Election threatens United Kingdom

Future for Scotland, Northern Ireland is uncertain

by Philippe Legrain in London

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Theresa May owes her position as British prime minister to the parliamentary majority that her predecessor, David Cameron, won in 2015. But if the result of her surprise 8 June general election vindicates pollsters, May will wield a much stronger popular mandate than Cameron did.

The ruling Conservative party is unlikely to win more than 50% of the vote. Polls suggest she will receive around 44%, enough to secure a big parliamentary majority under Britain's electoral system. May could argue a substantial parliamentary majority amounts to an endorsement of her pursuit of a 'hard exit' from the European Union. That entails leaving the EU single market and customs union so the UK can control immigration by EU citizens, free itself from the European Court of Justice's jurisdiction, and pursue its own trade deals. Equally, a large majority might give May more scope to compromise in Brexit negotiations, as she will be less vulnerable to pressure from hard-line Brexiteers.

The timing of a Conservative victory would be opportune for May. She would not have to face voters again until 2022, giving her more flexibility in implementing Brexit. If Britain leaves the EU as planned in 2019, there could be a transition period before the next election during which the UK might remain in the single market and customs union while it negotiates a trade deal. This could delay most of the trade, investment and migration losses that Brexit is likely to cause.

But there are risks to May's strategy. By calling an early election, she is reversing a position she has maintained since announcing her candidacy to succeed Cameron as Conservative leader and thus as prime minister. May's justification for calling an early election – that the current parliamentary opposition could block Brexit – is nonsense. In March parliament unconditionally allowed May to initiate the EU exit process. If parliament tried to reject an exit deal, Britain would simply leave the EU without one. Moreover, a big parliamentary majority would not strengthen May's negotiating position with regard to the EU. If anything, the knowledge that she had scope to compromise would weaken it.

By breaking her promises, May could erode the public's trust in her. She obviously thinks she can get away with it. Even if swing voters have doubts about her, they are unlikely to support Jeremy Corbyn, the hard-left leader of the opposition Labour party.

The centrist Liberal Democratic party has an opportunity to attract support from Conservative and Labour voters by campaigning against a hard Brexit. Tim Farron, the Lib Dem leader, does not come across as particularly prime ministerial, but he did oppose his party's decision to join an unpopular coalition with the Conservatives between 2010-15. This could make him more appealing to voters fleeing Labour. In addition, the Lib Dems could appeal to more moderate Conservative voters, as the former are committed to maintaining EU single market membership.

May's authority in the Conservative party will be weakened if she fails to win a large majority. But even in the extremely unlikely event that she fails to secure a majority, Brexit would not be stopped, unless every anti-Brexit member of parliament supported a temporary government and a vote to hold a second referendum on EU membership. In practice the most one can hope for is that the result of the general election will soften the blow from Brexit.

However, the prime minister is taking a much bigger gamble with the future of the UK. May has rejected the Scottish government's request for a new independence referendum because, she alleges, it would be wrong for Scots to vote before knowing the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. This is in spite of the fact that she is asking Britons to do precisely the same thing in the general election.

May's position on Scotland is untenable. If the pro-independence Scottish National Party performs well in the general election, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon will be in a much stronger position to renew her demand for an independence referendum.

With many Scots – 62% of whom voted to remain in the EU – wary of being drawn into a hard Brexit by a Conservative UK government, the case for Scottish independence could be compelling. Questions are

being raised as well on the future of Northern Ireland. The EU has made clear that Northern Ireland could automatically rejoin the bloc if it became part of the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state. The prospect of the UK fragmenting, leaving only England and Wales united, is a genuine possibility.

Philippe Legrain is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a former Economic Adviser to the President of the European Commission. He is author of *European Spring: Why Our Economies and Politics are in a Mess – and How to Put Them Right*, and founder of the Open Political Economy Network, an international think-tank.