Evaluating Theresa May as Prime Minister: Constraint and Choice in the Disjunctive Premiership

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1. Introduction

Theresa May's resignation statement on 24 May 2019 received an unsparing response from media commentators. The Daily Telegraph (2019) considered "Her list of achievements… pitifully short". The Guardian (2019) censured her "miserable and poisonous legacy". The Daily Mirror (2019) believed she departed with "the unwelcome distinction of having achieved almost nothing of any substance". Comparative judgments were even less generous. For Harris (2019) she ranked behind Chamberlain and Eden. For others she was the latest prime minister to deserve indictment as the 'worst PM since Lord North' (see, for example, Beattie, 2019; Macpherson, 2019; Jones, 2019).

In this paper, we propose that it is possible to undertake a measured analysis of May's premiership in comparison with other British prime ministers. We do not seek to dispute that May's premiership was a failure. However, we do fear that the problems of May's premiership may be too readily and easily written-off in terms of May's personal weaknesses. We argue instead for the shortcomings of her premiership to be better contextualised and understood. This demands recognition of the nature of the choices and constraints which May encountered in office. We understand these constraints by reference to Stephen Skowronek's 'political time' framework. We argue that May was a disjunctive prime minister. She was an affiliate of a regime already in a state of enervation before the 2016 European Union (EU) referendum. These vulnerabilities then multiplied and intensified as the UK prepared to leave the EU. We then consider the choices available to May by advancing a new framework of prime ministerial agency that shows how the conditions of regime vulnerability she encountered limited the feasibility, increased the costs, and compromised the effectiveness of her actions in office. We conclude that while she had a range of options, and often made poor choices, she was making decisions in conditions of unique constraint. May, to a degree not encountered by recent UK prime ministers, confronted "the very definition of the impossible leadership situation" (Skowronek, 1993: 39).

2. Theresa May as a disjunctive prime minister

Whereas much of the academic literature focuses upon the personal characteristics of political leaders (see, for example, Greenstein, 2001), Stephen Skowronek's account of leadership in 'political time' (1993; 2011) stresses the importance of political circumstances in determining the successes and failures of political leaders. For Skowronek, political leaders operate within the context of 'regimes' – sets of ideas, values, policy paradigms and programmes which are supported by a coalition of sectional and electoral interests. These regimes rise and fall in a cyclical fashion in which a regime is established, matures, encounters increasing problems, enters crisis and is subsequently replaced. Skowronek argues that the degree of regime vulnerability

or resilience are one determinant of the challenges of leadership. The other relates to whether the leader is an affiliate or opponent of the regime that they encounter. Skowronek argues that four types of leaders arise from this interaction (Table 1). Affiliated leaders of a resilient regime pursue a politics of articulation. They manage regimes to ensure that it continues to function well in changing times. Pre-emptive leaders aim to replace the regime but encounter political support for the status quo that frustrates their objectives. Disjunctive leaders are affiliated to a failing regime and challenged to govern an increasingly dysfunctional system. Finally, reconstructive leaders are those who, by building a new coalition around a new governing framework, are able to administer the coup de grace to a failing regime.

[Table 1 about here]

On these criteria we argue that May is best classified as a disjunctive prime minister. As we have argued elsewhere (Byrne et al, 2017) David Cameron bequeathed his successor a regime which was left in degree of deep vulnerability. This had several dimensions. Firstly, the political-economic foundations of the regime were increasingly enervated. 'Privatised Keynesianism' as a growth model was witnessing increasing difficulties – high levels of private indebtedness, an over-heated housing market, and the emergence of the precarious, low paid work in the 'gig economy'. Public trust in key institutions had been undermined by a succession of scandals. Territorially, the regime faced challenges from Celtic and English nationalist parties. Cameron's decision to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU then provided a mechanism by which dissatisfactions with this regime could become manifest. The result served to deepen existing and introduce new regime vulnerabilities. Political and economic uncertainty and further strains on the UK's territorial politics followed. His successor not only had to contend with this context but was also charged with undertaking some of the most complex negotiations conducted by the UK in peacetime. May's inheritance has to rank as one of the most challenging agendas confronted by any incoming UK prime minister of recent times.

We will show in more detail below that May was an affiliate of this increasingly enervated regime (see, in particular, section 5 (a)). For the purposes of establishing her stance at this point, we note firstly, she had served as a loyal member of both of Cameron's governments and secondly, that she had positioned herself as a 'reluctant Remainer' in the 2016 referendum campaign. May did express dissatisfaction with aspects of Britain's relationship with Europe but argued that to leave the EU would be to jeopardise Britain's economic prosperity, its international standing and the Anglo-American relationship with the US, and would threaten the stability of the Union.

3. Accounting for agency in political time

A prime minister is never short of advice. Theresa May, however, was besieged by advice, particularly where Brexit was concerned. Suggestions ran the gamut from President Trump's advice that the UK refuse to negotiate and sue the EU to Nick Clegg's (2017) proposals to repudiate the referendum result and halt Britain's departure. Indeed, as Brexit proceeded the potential options multiplied, such that analysts increasingly resorted to flowcharts to anticipate the range of political possibilities (see, for example, Zefferman, 2018; Barnes, 2019).

Furthermore, returning to the commentary following May's resignation statement we find a repeated insistence that she made disastrous choices and misused the agency available to her. She was "the author of her own downfall" (The Sun, 2019), "a mediocre, narrow-minded and unimaginative politician" (Beattie, 2019) who failed "because she lacked the requisite political skills of a national leader" (Financial Times, 2019). Such claims were implicitly and sometimes explicitly echoed by those vying to replace her. For example, Boris Johnson's resignation letter accused May of having sent "our vanguard into battle with the white flags fluttering above them."

That May's premiership has been understood so consistently in terms of her agency seems, prima facie, difficult to reconcile with Skowronek's account of political time. Skowronek's approach is predisposed to structuralist explanations of leadership behaviour (Byrne and Theakston, 2018). Yet, as we have argued elsewhere (Byrne et al, 2017, 2020a, 2020b), even disjunctive prime ministers have some options available to them. However, if we are to make robust comparative evaluations of prime ministerial performance we must be able to establish the repertoire of choices which are available to them and identify how political time shapes the exercise of this repertoire.

4. Domains of prime ministerial agency

In essence, we can think of prime ministerial agency as centred upon the following six sets of decisions:

(a) How to frame political problems,
(b) Whether to act,
(c) When to act,
(d) Where to act,
(e) How to act,
(f) How to justify action and inaction

This range of decisions is available to prime ministers regardless of their position in political time. However, the perceived feasibility, political costs and effectiveness of these options will vary according to whether the regime is vulnerable or resilient and whether the prime minister is an affiliate or opponent of that regime. As we argue below, disjunctive prime ministers confront particular constraints in successfully employing these options, much more so than prime ministers of resilient regimes or their reconstructive counterparts.

(a) How to frame political problems

Prime ministers attempt to frame political developments. In so doing they seek to establish their interpretation of events as the dominant narrative. This demands 'diagnostic framing' (Benford and Snow, 2000). Firstly, this defines how the nature, severity and significance of regime problems are characterised. Secondly, it attributes causality and responsibility for these difficulties. Such discursive framing has important implications for whether, when, where and how a prime minister subsequently acts. A prime minister will endeavour to present decisions made in each of these respects so

they are seen as warranted. This will depend, to a significant degree, on how the present conjuncture has initially been discursively framed.

We should expect that disjunctive prime ministers, as regime affiliates, will first attempt to frame problems in the narrowest possible terms and defend the status quo against criticism. They have an incentive to deny that difficulties represent fundamental problems or have major repercussions for the regime. If these attempts fail, then a disjunctive prime minister may be forced to acknowledge the problems as more significant. But, in so doing, they will need to avoid framing these problems in any way as symptomatic of regime-wide failures. Where questions of causality and responsibility arise, disjunctive prime ministers have an incentive to disavow or diminish the extent to which the regime can be held responsible. They will typically favour frames that 'exogenize' (Boin, et al, 2009) problems beyond the regime. For example, opponents of the regime may be assigned responsibility for difficulties, or problems may be presented as matters of chance or fate and, as such, placed beyond the scope of political agency.

Prime ministers may also seek to frame political problems heresthetically by re-framing the choice of political options to serve their strategic goals. For Riker (1986) this is achieved by manipulating a multi-dimensional issue space by either introducing new issues, or redefining or combining established issues. Re-framing the issue agenda may be advantageous for several reasons. Firstly, by re-ordering the salience of issues the prime minister may be able to suppress those issues which implicate the most central or intractable regime vulnerabilities. Secondly, the re-framing may succeed in uniting, or even broadening the coalition of regime affiliates (see, for example, Taylor, 2005). Thirdly, heresthetical manoeuvres may wrong-foot regime opponents even to the degree of trapping them into endorsing strategically disadvantageous decisions.

However, the capacity of disjunctive prime ministers to engage in framing of these kinds is constrained. Firstly, as regime affiliates they typically assemble frames drawing upon meanings, beliefs and practices which are accepted features of the regime. They lack the freedom of 'thinking outside the box' available to regime opponents when framing issues (Desrosiers, 2012: 4).

Secondly, all prime ministers are engaged in 'framing contests'. Their political opponents and the media will engage in counter-framing and also seek to control the meaning of events. In particular, they will seek to use these problems to disrupt dominant narratives and to undermine the legitimacy of the regime. The danger for disjunctive prime ministers is that regime problems are then successfully framed by their opponents in ways which render them as prominent and memorable political symbols of the regime's moribundity.

Thirdly, to be successful the frame must enjoy resonance. This depends on firstly, the consistency of the framing with the publicly declared beliefs, behaviours and actions of frame articulators, secondly, the credibility of the claims being advanced, and, finally, the credibility of those articulating the frame (Benford and Snow, 2000). It is not impossible for disjunctive prime ministers to develop resonant frames. However, we might expect that they face greater challenges in doing so than prime ministers of articulation or reconstruction. For example, as their incumbency lengthens and regime

vulnerabilities grow, consistency will present a greater challenge and the credibility of their claims is likely to diminish.

(b) Whether to act

In some senses the fundamental decision facing any political actor is whether to act or not. Barber (2016) has shown how politicians may conclude that doing nothing might be the preferable, or least-worst option. This inaction may arise from fear of the electoral consequences, the politician's philosophical position, fiscal constraints, or the acceptance of existing political and economic boundaries. Beyond Barber's account we might also add the limits of institutional capacity. Taking action in one area may diminish institutional bandwidth so that inaction follows elsewhere.

It is easy to anticipate how disjunctive prime ministers may prefer inaction as an option. As one British prime minister noted, "The moment you decide, you divide" (Blair, 2010: 28). Action carries the threat that the coalition of interests supporting the regime may fray or fracture. A further consideration in favour of inaction is that the vulnerabilities of the regime are also likely to present constraints, fiscal or otherwise, upon taking action. As ideational regime affiliates disjunctive leaders may also be unable to recognise the availability or, more likely, the viability of actions from outside the regime paradigm.

Inaction is a more viable strategy where problems have been framed as having minimal significance or as originating in causes which lie beyond the government's jurisdiction and agency. It is also more plausible if heresthetical manoeuvres succeed in presenting other issues as greater priorities. Thirdly, inaction may be credible if the regime's past practice has left such matters beyond government action. A disjunctive prime minister may then argue that to act would place unmanageable demands on government or jeopardise other valued policy outcomes.

However, there are powerful counter-pressures upon disjunctive prime ministers to take action. Firstly, inaction is a less credible option if a prime minister's predecessors have already taken action in an effort to address regime vulnerabilities. It might also be supposed that inaction is a luxury more affordable to prime ministers of resilient regimes. Inaction, or simply the perception of inaction, is a high-risk strategy for a disjunctive prime minister and potentially damaging to the regime. It is also difficult to resist the pressures generated by the issue-attention cycle (Downs, 1972). Finally, the scope for inaction is likely to be contingent on whether other actors within the regime, particularly opposition parties, are also regime affiliates. Confronted by an Opposition party committed to reconstruction, the potential to keep such regime vulnerabilities off the political agenda is likely considerably more limited than where opponents are regime affiliates.

(c) When to act

If inaction is untenable, prime ministers nevertheless possess some discretion over *when* to act. Time is a valuable political resource. Determining when to act, and in what sequence, is a matter of strategic calculation (Schedler and Santiso, 1998). By acting quickly, a prime minister may surprise and pre-empt opponents and set the terms of

debate. However, they may equally find themselves locked into commitments which subsequently become difficult to escape from.

Alternatively, slowing the tempo of decision making may buy a prime minister time and keep options open. This may permit the de-escalation of conflicts, allow an issue to run its course, or permit a change in previously unfavourable conditions. Incremental decisions may also forestall the opposition provoked by single, big decisions. By allowing the clock to run down, delay may reduce the options available to resolve an issue in a way that corresponds with the prime minister's objective.

However, the timing of action is not wholly under the control of prime ministers. Firstly, some political timetables, for example those associated with the procedures of parliament and the ultimate duration of the electoral cycle are beyond their control. Secondly, foreseeable events might be expected to offer greater scope for prime ministerial agency than the unforeseen. Thirdly, a prime minister confronts a range of actors who will present demands for and, in some cases, possess the ability to slow or hasten action. In crisis episodes, for example, a prime minister may be unable to resist demands from the media and political opponents for urgent action.

A further consideration is that political problems and dilemmas have differential time horizons (see, for example, Pollitt, 2008: 175). A disjunctive prime minister confronts deep-seated and accumulated regime vulnerabilities. Problems of this character are unlikely to be amenable to short-term 'quick fixes'. Yet short-term actions are most likely to be the options which are most available to, and readily delivered by disjunctive prime ministers.

(d) Where to act

'Venue shopping' is a strategy which is well established in the literature on interest group activity and multi-level governance. It is an attempt by political actors to shift decision-making to the forum which is most advantageous to them. Shifting venues is a means of escaping the constraints and opposition associated with the original decision-making venue.

Although this literature tends to overlook state actors, prime ministers may also have the opportunity of selecting the most appropriate venue for the resolution of conflicts or implementation of decisions. A prime minister may shift venues vertically, either 'uploading' by seeking action in supra-national or international venues, or 'downloading' responsibility to lower state levels. A horizontal shift can be characterized as 'lateral loading' by moving the venue for decision to nonelected state bodies or by 'offloading' a decision to nonstate actors (see, Banaszak et al, 2003).

We can consider 'lateral loading' as broadly equivalent to 'depoliticisation'. Indeed, as Flinders and Buller have noted, "Frequently, the processes or procedures that are commonly referred to under the rubric of depoliticisation might... more accurately be described as 'arena-shifting'." (2006: 296) Finally, in terms of offloading, the most obvious way in which prime ministers have sought to mobilise non-state actors in support of the regime is to call upon the electorate. In such cases a prime minister seeks

a mandate for an existing or prospective policy, either in a general election, or in a referendum.

A disjunctive prime minister may be tempted to engage in venue shifting for several reasons. Firstly, as noted above, venue shifting may circumvent veto points elsewhere which frustrate attempts at regime stabilisation. Secondly, they may calculate that prospects for successful regime preserving action are enhanced by shifting to an alternative venue. For example, action at the international level may be seen to have greater prospects of success than unilateral action. Thirdly, venue shifting may co-opt other actors to the cause. The legitimacy of the actions taken may thereby be increased, strengthening the prime minister's warrant for regime preservation.

One constraint is that policy issues tend to be attached to a specific venue (see, Paquet and Larious, 2018) but perhaps the greatest difficulty are the risks attendant to moving an issue to another venue. A disjunctive prime minister needs to be reasonably confident that they can find amenable collaborators in the new venue. For example, when engaging in lateral loading, a prime minister can often control the terms of reference and membership of the non-elected institutions as a measure of insurance against politically awkward recommendations. However, elsewhere, such control may be absent. Acting in supra-national venues can open a two-level game (Putnam, 1988) generating the additional challenge of satisfactorily reconciling domestic and international imperatives. In conditions of regime vulnerability it is also often the case that regime opponents gain their first foothold in second order elections. Downloading responsibility to sub-national or local government may therefore not be feasible.

Calling upon the electorate in a referendum or a general election carries particular constraints and risks. Firstly, elections and referendums are likely to be once-only options to be taken in circumstances which will need to be presented as exceptional. Secondly, given their governing circumstances, disjunctive governments are unlikely to enjoy popular esteem and, so, an election or a referendum may be politically risky. Indeed, voters may view an early election as 'cutting and running' and as a signal that the prime minister expects conditions to deteriorate later in the current electoral cycle. The decision may therefore deliver electoral punishment and further weaken the regime's resilience. In the worst case scenario it may deliver an electoral mandate to reconstructive politicians.

(e) How to act

As the policy instruments literature acknowledges, there are a variety of different policy options available to all prime ministers. But before reviewing these it is worth noting some general characteristics associated with this dimension of prime ministerial choice. Firstly, there is the significance of path dependence. Disjunctive prime ministers inherit a particular institutional framework that renders some actions more feasible than others. For example, leaders of a liberal or neo-liberal regime are likely to lack the institutional capacity to pursue *dirigiste* economic policies. A regime is likely to predispose particular choices over others. But, within these constraints, the choice of a policy instrument also depends on how problems have been framed and what objectives have been set to mitigate or remove these problems.

A disjunctive prime minister also inherits an established mode of governance. These standard operating procedures and methods of managing political and societal conflicts are also likely to also constrain feasible action. But equally in exercising their agency disjunctive prime ministers can also set in train new forms of path dependence which constrain the subsequent options of themselves and their successors. For example, as Rose has noted, "Many crisis choices are choices at a crossroads, for once the Prime Minister starts going down one fork in the road, there is no going back." (2001: 59)

A regime is also sustained by a coalition of interests and a coalition of supporters in the electorate. A disjunctive prime minister is constrained by the need to maintain and preserve both coalitions. Yet, the capacity to deliver benefits to these supporters is likely to be compromised by the vulnerabilities of the regime. Indeed, regime stabilisation may directly challenge the interests, prerogatives and benefits of those who have previously been beneficiaries of, and supporters of the regime. A frequent challenge confronting the disjunctive prime minister is therefore to manage the expectations or alter the behaviour of these groups without losing their support or making them open to the appeals of populist or reconstructive leaders. This, in part, accounts for why appeals to national unity and shared sacrifice are so prevalent among disjunctive prime ministers.

(i) Organisational instruments

Prime ministers at any point in political time may pursue organisational change. This may include restructuring the state, for example, the creation, reorganisation or abolition of government departments, state enterprises and public-private partnerships. Additionally, procedural reforms may be undertaken including the creation or enhancement of central executive agencies (e.g. the resources and capacity of No. 10), the creation of analytic units (e.g. think tanks or research institutes), the establishment of government reviews, task forces, commissions, inquiries and public hearings.

Reconstructive prime ministers will often reconstitute the administrative and governmental structure as they seek to either enhance state capacity or slough off state responsibilities. For disjunctive prime ministers, changes to the administrative and governmental structure are more likely to be managerial, designed to improve the delivery of existing regime commitments. Such organisational reforms will operate within, rather than challenge, the existing administrative and governmental character of the regime. So, for example, the disjunctive prime minister of a *dirigiste* regime is unlikely to endorse extending public-private partnerships. Such organisational reforms provide a resonant response where regime difficulties which have been framed in terms of institutional shortcomings. They also have the benefit for the disjunctive prime minister of suggesting that regime can be saved without repudiating it or fundamentally changing it.

Structural organisational reforms, such as the creation or reorganisation of government departments are highly visible, offering some satisfaction to the mentality that "something must be done". Procedural organisational reforms, such as the creation of analytic units, incur few additional financial costs and are less visible. Appointing tribunals, commissions and inquiries are more visible, and, for the disjunctive prime

minister, have the potential merit of laterally and temporally shifting demands for more immediate action. However, they carry the risk of delivering findings which may embarrass the government or advancing recommendations which would undermine regime commitments. Given this, an effective disjunctive prime minister should attempt to exercise control over their terms of reference and the composition of their membership to minimise these risks.

An associated organisational strategy is the co-option of groups or individuals. In the context of increasing societal conflict and demands, co-option can perform a gatekeeping function, serving to manage demands on government. The resources possessed by co-optees may also be harnessed to the delivery of the government's objectives. Consent to co-option is also a visible expression of support for the government, enhancing government legitimacy. However, governments have a constrained range of choices on who to co-opt. The authority and resources of the co-opted are also enhanced. This may ultimately render them less amenable to government control. Furthermore, co-optees often anticipate that concrete benefits will follow. In conditions of regime vulnerability delivering such benefits may prove challenging and there is a danger that co-optees may withdraw, further damaging the government and the regime.

More broadly organisational reforms often underestimate the durability of organisational cultures and how standard operating procedures may re-emerge even in reorganised institutions. More fundamentally, organisational reforms presuppose that the principal problems of the regime are institutional in character. In the event that the causes of regime vulnerabilities lie elsewhere, organisational reform is unlikely to resolve or mitigate regime problems.

(ii) Authoritative instruments

Authoritative instruments involve the use (or threatened use) of state-enforced sanctions to compel action or behaviour. Such use of the 'stick' includes efforts to compel via primary and secondary legislation. Disjunctive prime ministers are likely to find themselves required to make concessions and amendments to secure their legislation since it is more probable that they will lack a parliamentary majority. In addition, in conditions of regime vulnerability securing compliance with these laws is less certain. Goodwill towards the government may be in short supply. Legislation may be perceived as illegitimate leading to greater costs in enforcing the law.

Alternatively, a prime minister may seek to resolve conflicts and compel behaviour by venue-shifting. A prime minister may use lateral loading to delegate an authoritative decision to non-elected bodies such as corporatist institutions and independent regulatory bodies. As noted above, such action may circumvent constraints elsewhere in the regime. Such bodies also enjoy a degree of flexibility. For example, they may be able to arrive at decisions more speedily than the ordinary legislative timetable permits. Delegation allows the government to displace a degree of responsibility for resolving regime difficulties onto actors outside government. The government ultimately retains the ability to legislate should this strategy of delegated decision-making fail. Indeed, this background threat may prove sufficient to motivate the actors concerned to modify their behaviour.

Lateral loading of this kind is likely to be a more viable option where precedents exist for the successful resolution of similar conflicts. Without such precedents the government may stand accused to evading their responsibility to act. As indicated above, venue shifting also increases the unpredictability of outcomes with the risk that decisions are contrary to the government's preferences or inimical to regime preservation. Furthermore, the difficulties noted above in respect of legislation also apply. Even if non-elected bodies can reach an agreed decision, conditions of regime vulnerability mean that compliance with that decision is uncertain.

(iii) Financial instruments

As an alternative to the 'stick', a prime minister may choose to use the 'carrot' of financial instruments. These include direct allocations to particular services and benefits, grants, subsidies, and taxation. Such instruments may be used to incentivise, or disincentivize, behaviours and activities which have an impact on the stability of the regime. In addition, they may be employed to reward regime supporters and groups within its electoral coalition, court popularity with the unaffiliated, and financially punish opponents of the regime.

However, as Hood argues, "cheque-book government may have something of the character of a 'fair weather' instrument." (1983: 53) When financial instruments are employed, the Treasury must subsequently be replenished. But the government of an economically vulnerable regime is likely to encounter increasing costs in renewing its resources. Loans to government are likely to involve increasingly punitive conditions while revenues from taxation are uncertain and prone to decline. Simultaneously, the payments necessary to buy off supporters and forestall opposition often grow as the price of securing compliance with the government's wishes increases.

(iv) Information-based options

A final set of instruments involve employing information as a resource to influence actors within the regime. So, in addition to the 'carrot' and the 'stick' prime ministers may use 'sermons'. Such efforts may aim to promote the internalization or reinforcement of norms and beliefs which are supportive of the regime, or, to modify the behaviour of actors within the regime. These efforts can take the form of exhortation, moral suasion and reasoned argument to persuade particular social actors or the electorate directly. Alternatively, they may take the form of information campaigns which, by increasing awareness of particular behaviours, seek to effect change among social actors or in attitudes towards them in the electorate indirectly.

There is also a 'dark side' to the information-based options available to prime ministers. Firstly, they may issue disinformation. This may, for example, portray opponents of the regime in ways which attempt to discredit them and their motives. Secondly, information may be withheld or selectively released to prevent or minimise disclosures which might be damaging to the regime. However, such activities carry significant political risks. If it is subsequently found that a prime minister has actively sought to supress information or mislead, the prime minister may be damaged and the regime further delegitimised.

Information-based options have the advantage that they are generally low cost, both financially and politically. Indeed, the costs are typically lower than organisational, authoritative or financial instruments. In addition, information-based options can typically be deployed quickly (see, for example, Vedung and van der Doelen, 1998). In view of these characteristics it is plausible to suggest that information-based options are both the first and the final option for disjunctive prime ministers. It is likely to be the first option because it holds in reserve more costly and coercive measures. 'Sermons' may prepare public opinion for and legitimate more costly and contentious measures at a later point. However, if more coercive measures fail prime ministers are likely to return to admonition as the only option then available to them.

The problem of employing information-based responses is that their prospects for success are limited. Changing the beliefs and challenging the interests of actors is profoundly difficult, even in the best of circumstances. Perverse effects where attitudes and beliefs shift in the direction opposite to those intended are not unknown. While effective communicators may be more persuasive, the prospects for compliance still remain low because responses are voluntary. The effectiveness of such options diminishes further in circumstances of regime vulnerability. The disjunctive prime minister and government is often distrusted and faith in the political regime is likely to be in decline. The credibility of the prime minister is likely to diminish over time. The prime minister's supporters in the media are also likely to be less reliable. Taken together these constraints suggest that the attempts of disjunctive prime ministers to persuade actors within the regime are more likely to be ignored or dismissed than for prime ministers at other points in political time.

(f) How to justify action

As discussed above, use of information was a domain of prime ministerial action in its own right. However, any action or inaction of prime ministers undertaken in the categories discussed above must usually be accompanied efforts to justify the decision taken. As Majone recognises, "To decide, even to decide correctly, is never enough in politics. Decisions must be legitimated, accepted and carried out. After the moment of choice comes the process of justification, explanation and persuasion." (1989: 31)

If diagnostic framing is integral to how prime ministers seek to win contests over the definition of regime problems, then they also seek, through prognostic and motivational framing, to win comparable contests over the justification for action. Prognostic framing identifies the implications of the problem for the future in the context "of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan." (Benford and Snow, 2000: 616) A successful disjunctive prime minister will need to convince others that they possess an appropriate and feasible solution to regime difficulties. They must also refute the solutions advanced by opponents of the regime. Additionally, prognostic framing allows the prime minister to set expectations regarding their solution, in particular of how fully and how quickly their measures will address regime difficulties. Failure to set these expectations appropriately will undermine the credibility of the prime minister and create further disillusion with the regime. Motivational framing – "a "call to arms" or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collection action" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 617) may also be necessary.

Where decisions require the support of key actors in the regime the prime minister will need to ensure that these actors believe that they have the efficacy and are motivated to act in ways which will promote regime stability. Given that many of the decisions taken in conditions of regime vulnerability call upon regime supporters to change their behaviour or lose benefits, successful motivational framing is likely to be particularly important for disjunctive prime ministers.

Justification, explanation and persuasion may not be a sufficient condition for successful measures to stabilise or preserve the regime. But, in the absence of compelling justifications for action, the effectiveness of action may not only be compromised but opponents are also provided with an additional opportunity to question the viability of the regime.

5. Choice and constraint in May's disjunctive premiership

In this section we employ this framework of prime ministerial agency in an attempt to identify how May selected among the options available to her and the constraints and obstacles which applied to her choices. We are conscious that our assessment inevitably has a preliminary character. Future scholars will have the advantage of access to the memoirs of members of the May governments and, in due course, to her government's papers. However, we would argue that the general character of the dilemmas of May's premiership and the key choices made by May can nevertheless be understood in the absence of such sources.

(a) May's framing of political problems

Some of May's most important decisions relate to how she framed the UK's political problems and the choices that followed. Whereas prime ministerial framing would typically be undertaken for a largely domestic audience, May was constrained to act in an environment where her framing of Brexit would also receive close attention from the EU.

May initially eschewed any diagnostic framing of the causes of Brexit, preferring to repeat her leadership campaign slogan: "Brexit means Brexit and we're going to make a success of it" (May, 2016a). Lest there was any doubt, she established from the outset of her premiership that she would not countenance any attempt to remain in the EU, re-join, or hold a second referendum. May's diagnostic framing nevertheless developed relatively quickly. By the time of her Mansion House speech, it had coalesced into a soundbite that the referendum was "a vote to take control of our borders, laws and money" (May, 2018). May framed a number of choices as following logically from diagnosis, at first tentatively (see, 2016b; 2016c) and then, at Lancaster House, much more explicitly (2017a). For May, restoring control over borders, laws and money, ruled out staying in, or very close to the Single Market which "would to all intents and purposes mean not leaving the EU at all" (May, 2017a). Although May sought trade as frictionless as possible, she also sought the freedom to strike trade agreements with non-EU countries, ruling out full membership of the EU's Customs Union. May also aimed to achieve these objectives without compromising the Union and without imposing a hard border between the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

May's initial framing of Brexit had several important implications for her subsequent options. Many in the EU had initially expected that the UK would attempt to renegotiate Cameron's deal. But, since Brexit meant Brexit, this option was quickly foreclosed. It also meant it was politically impossible for May to subsequently accept a secret offer in 2018 from Martin Selmayr to "put Brexit on ice for five years" (BBC, 2019c). Secondly, if ruling out a second referendum bolstered May's standing with Brexiteers, it deprived her of an important potential concession to Remainers. Thirdly, in setting her objectives she had committed to objectives which would, at very best, be challenging to reconcile – leaving the customs union and the Single Market, avoiding regulatory barriers divergence between Northern Ireland and the rest of Great Britain and avoiding the erection of a hard border in Ireland. These 'red lines' cheered Brexiteers but encouraged them to develop expectations of a Brexit deal which May would find both difficult to challenge and to extricate herself from.

Making a success of Brexit was the basis on which May proposed to unite her party and a nation left deeply divided by the referendum result. But her diagnostic framing also accepted the key propositions of the Leave campaign and focused upon the concerns of those who voted for Brexit. Concerns over free movement, the jurisdiction of the ECJ and budgetary contributions to the EU and the rhetoric of 'taking back control' had little resonance for Remainers.

May's speeches usually made passing reference to the scale of the challenge involved in delivering Brexit. Nevertheless, she repeatedly argued that constructive and positive engagement on both sides would deliver a calm and orderly departure. She refused, as some Brexiteers recommended, to threaten to abrogate the UK's obligations towards the EU. Nor did she seek to exogenize responsibility for Brexit or the shortcomings of the deal, by blaming the EU.

May was rightly aware that she was reliant on the EU's goodwill to deliver the kind of deal she sought. Yet, this also managed expectations poorly. By downplaying the challenges involved, May was able to avoid setting out for parliamentarians and the public the constraints and trade-offs associated with her negotiating objectives. Secondly, had the negotiation of Brexit been presented as a more profound political challenge she would have been able to sell her deal in more triumphal terms, potentially muting some critical voices. However, both approaches would have necessitated an early and robust challenge to the optimistic counter-framing of Brexiteers.

Indeed, one profound challenge for May was responding to the counter-frames of both Brexiteers and Remainers. The referendum campaign had seen a bewildering variety of models for Brexit emerge. May responded by proposing that Britain should not seek to replicate the model of any other nation's relationship with the EU. She would seek a bespoke British model. Yet, in the midst of intra- and inter-party divisions, May's framing was continually in competition against a plurality of counter-frames. Indeed, it is hard to recall another prime minister who was so assailed from so many different positions on a major political issue.

Furthermore, many of these alternatives bore the imprint of the tendency towards the unsophisticated and ill-informed that has long characterised British political discourse on Europe. Accordingly, May confronted Brexiteers who presented Brexit as a

straightforward process. Statements such that "the day after we vote to leave, we hold all the cards and we can choose the path we want" encouraged expectations which any prime minister would have difficulty meeting. When May's negotiations proved less than straightforward or faltered, it invited accusations that May and those around her, were acting in bad faith, intent on delivering 'Brexit in name only'. Remainers, bent the stick in the opposite direction maintaining that 'Project Fear' would now be realised. On their account, May's negotiations stood little chance of success and Britain's departure would lead to negative, potentially disastrous economic and social consequences. The action recommended from these quarters, including holding a second referendum and renegotiating May's deal to guarantee a 'jobs first Brexit', also tended to downplay the substantial political and practical obstacles involved.

However, May's diagnostic framing of post-referendum politics extended beyond the UK's relations with Europe. The referendum result was symptomatic of "a far more profound sense of frustration about aspects of life in Britain and the way in which politics and politicians have failed to respond to their concerns" (2016d). May highlighted the belief that the political system too often served privileged interests rather than those of "people who can just about manage". Irresponsible behaviour by big business and the dysfunctionality of key markets also generated popular discontent. The pace of globalisation and a lack of genuine social mobility frustrated those who felt left behind. In addition, she detected a growing sense of inter-generational injustice.

May continued to assert that free and open markets were the motor of prosperity. However, she argued that "if you want to preserve and improve a system which has delivered unparalleled benefits, you have to take seriously its faults and do all you can to address them." 2017b) The preservation of the regime she was affiliated to demanded "a different kind of Conservatism". This would address social divisions and a lack of social mobility by making Britain "the Great Meritocracy". The governance of business would be reformed to promote responsibility, transparency and to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. Intervention in dysfunctional markets, such as the energy and rental housing markets, was warranted. A "modern industrial strategy" was needed to support industries of strategic value to the economy. Defects relating to labour markets also needed addressing by, for example, protecting those working in the 'gig economy' and increases in the National Living Wage.

We noted above the heresthetic options available to prime ministers. In theory, May could have reframed political options to diminish the salience of Brexit. This agenda of tackling the political and distributional shortcomings of the regime might have been used to shift the axis of political contestation in her favour. Certainly, the architects of this agenda conceived of it as a means to extend Cameron's electoral coalition to small 'c' conservative working-class voters.

[Figure 1 about here]

This agenda fell victim to conflicts within Downing Street and her party. Nevertheless, this heresthetic prospectus would have confronted significant obstacles even had it been pursued with greater determination. Firstly, it is difficult to imagine that Brexit could have been fully suppressed as an issue. As figure 1 shows it was persistently, and by some margin, the most important issue for the public throughout the duration of

May's premiership. Secondly, the attention which the negotiations with the EU were destined to receive posed a significant obstacle to shifting the political agenda. Thirdly, as May found, focusing on such issues without a concerted attempt to 'roll the pitch' beforehand risked handing the political advantage to the Labour Party who were seen as more convincing on these issues.

(b) May and the choice of whether to act

Even were a heresthetic manoeuvre more feasible, May remained politically compelled to take action in respect of Brexit. Inaction was politically impossible in the context of Brexiteer demands to deliver on the "will of the people". Effectively deprived of the choice of whether to act on the referendum result, other implications followed. Brexit was a political thermobaric. Its explosive power depleted much of the remaining political oxygen in the British political system. The implementation of Brexit also overloaded the institutional bandwith of the British political system. May's government had to introduce 13 pieces of primary legislation to prepare for Brexit. Consequently, many of the government's manifesto pledges were deliberately not legislated upon (Lilly, White, Haigh, 2018: 32). Whitehall also had to deal with over 300 Brexit related workstreams (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2018) requiring the redirection of staff and the deferral or abandonment of other projects (see, for example, Freeguard et al, 2019: 5-6). In this context, the capacity to pursue many elements of May's non-Brexit agenda was limited. Measures including the NHS 10-year plan, the immigration white paper and the Domestic Abuse Bill all consequently arrived substantially later than promised. Others, most notably the social care green paper, never arrived at all.

(c) May's timing of action

During the 2016 referendum campaign Frank Field had suggested that "A first task of our new prime minister will be to stir up apathy. It is crucial that nothing is done quickly or without the most careful thought of its repercussions." (Field, 2016) May heeded this advice by quickly declaring there would be no immediate invocation of Article 50. This was sensible. Whitehall was completely unprepared for a Leave vote and needed time prepare for the negotiations. This pause also helped calm the febrile political atmosphere immediately following the referendum.

On the 2nd October, under internal party pressure, May announced Article 50 would be triggered by the end of March 2017. To delay triggering Article 50 beyond this date would have been problematic. It would have taxed the patience of the EU27 whose goodwill May needed. Given the timetable for negotiations under Article 50, delay beyond March would also likely prevent the UK from departing before the next European Parliament elections. However, some regarded the timing of the announcement as a mistake which sacrificed useful leverage over the EU (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019).

After 29 March 2017, the playing field tilted further in the EU's favour. Article 50's two-year timetable gave the EU the chance to extract maximum concessions from a government seeking to leave with a deal. Secondly, the EU gained control over the agenda and sequence of the negotiations, insisting on a two-stage process dealing first

with the UK's financial settlement, EU citizens' rights and the Northern Ireland border before talks began on the future settlement. David Davis regards the failure to challenge this sequencing more vigorously as a major mistake (House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, 2019). May did attempt to do so, most notably at a dinner in Downing Street on 26 April with Juncker, Barnier and Selmayr. However, it is difficult to see how the UK might have persuaded the EU to abandon a format for negotiations which delivered them such leverage over the UK. May's critics claim that threatening non-payment of the UK's financial obligations would have been sufficient. Yet May reportedly made such a threat that evening and failed to shift the EU position (Shipman, 2017).

That the negotiations came to be sequenced in this way, led to further consequences for May. Firstly, it definitively ruled out British hopes to complete the two-stage negotiations and a full-trade deal within two years. Secondly, as a further consequence, it meant that to avoid a 'cliff-edge' departure, May would then need to seek a transitional period. Not only did this hand further negotiating leverage to the EU, it further angered Brexiteers by delaying the UK's final departure from the EU.

Having brought her deal back to the UK, the prime minister then engaged in a series of delays. The first meaningful vote was delayed when it became clear that she was unlikely to secure a majority. This, and her repeated attempts to bring her deal back to Parliament without successfully addressing the concerns of her opponents were widely interpreted as delaying tactics. By 'kicking the can down the road' and 'running down the clock' it was supposed that May vainly hoped either that 'something would turn up', or that delay would reduce the options to a choice of no-deal or her deal. In the event, neither option altered the parliamentary arithmetic.

Indeed, late in her premiership May's timing served to actively undermine her capacity to secure a deal. In response to intra-party pressure May told the 1922 Committee on March 27th that she would resign once her deal was approved by Parliament. However, in responding to her internal critics she weakened her position in relation to the Opposition parties who realised that she could not bind her successor to any commitments which she made concerning matters beyond the Withdrawal Agreement.

(d) May's choice of venues for action

May's premiership also demonstrates the importance of prime ministerial venue selection. May was forced to fight more of her Brexit battles in the parliamentary arena than she wished. Aware of the constraints that this presented, she fatefully chose to move to the electoral arena in search of a larger majority. When this backfired, she found herself subject to even greater constraints in Parliament.

May initially attempted to diminish the challenges involved in playing a two-level game in the Brexit negotiations by seeking to keep Parliament at arms-length. She declared Parliament would not receive a running commentary on her negotiations. Although primary legislation was necessary to give effect to withdrawal, for example, by repealing the European Communities Act, May sought to maximise her freedom of manoeuvre by using prerogative powers to limit parliamentary involvement. The Supreme Court's January 2017 decision in *R (Miller)* necessitated a change in approach.

Although it minimised one potential obstacle by confirming the devolved institutions possessed no veto, it established that primary legislation was necessary to trigger Article 50. May also conceded that there would be a parliamentary vote on the final deal with the EU. Indeed, she was legally compelled to provide one when the Grieve amendment was passed in December 2017. This, and other votes by the Commons, strengthened parliament's role in the Brexit process. Consequently, "the UK parliament has become a central focus for debates about the nature of Brexit, and the key location for ultimate decision-making in this matter" (Christiansen and Fromage, 2019: 10).

In April 2017 May decided to shift venues by asking the electorate to provide her with the mandate and increased parliamentary majority to deliver Brexit. This was motivated, at least partly, by her whips' concerns that the working majority of 17 inherited from Cameron would prove insufficient to secure parliamentary approval for Brexit (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018: 14-15). As the 'meaningful votes' of early 2019 were to show, these concerns were justified. The majority won in 2015 would have been insufficient to approve any of the variations on the deal which May presented to parliament in early 2019. The timing of the election was also sensible. It came after Article 50 had been triggered and before negotiations started in earnest. With the threat that Corbyn might be imminently deposed by his party, it also made sense in partisan terms. However, if the rationale and timing for an election was sound, the subsequent campaign decisions, as shown elsewhere (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018; Shipman, 2017), were disastrous. The outcome further reduced May's agency. She had now lost her slim parliamentary majority and was forced to co-opt the DUP into a confidence and supply agreement. The already slim prospects of securing parliamentary support for a deal with the EU were reduced further still.

Some have suggested that this was the juncture for May to adopt a different approach. For example, Julian Smith, then Deputy Chief Whip, has argued May should have communicated that "the parliamentary arithmetic would mean that would be, inevitably, a kind of softer type of Brexit" (BBC, 2019a). However, this overlooks the atmosphere within the Conservative Party immediately following the 2017 election. To have pursued this path would have invited Conservative Brexiteers to depose her (see, for example, Shipman, 2017). May was unable to publicly retreat from the approach she had laid out in her Lancaster House speech.

Alternatively, Keir Starmer has suggested that May should have approached Labour immediately following the 2017 election rather than waiting until early 2019 (BBC 2019c). However, there must be doubt about the willingness of Labour to engage with the Government even at that early stage. Under Corbyn's leadership, Labour was always likely to be ill-disposed to cooperation with the government. Corbyn, it should be remembered, had refused to share the platform with Conservatives during the referendum campaign. It is difficult to see how he could have been persuaded to be seen to facilitate a 'Tory Brexit'. Indeed, David Davis has suggested that he did seek out informal discussions with Labour but found "it was hard to engage". Labour was also internally divided and "went through about 11 different policy positions. It was not exactly in a position to debate either" (House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, 2019).

(e) How May chose to act

May's organisational reforms

May's premiership saw some notable organisational reforms. For example, to deliver her industrial strategy, a new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was created. May also cut the number of Cabinet committees, choosing, at least initially, to chair more of these herself than her predecessor.

However, Brexit represented a formidable, whole-of-government challenge for Whitehall. May's primary and most visible response was the creation of the Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU) and the Department for International Trade. This organisational reform demonstrated that 'something was being done' at a stage when she was otherwise reliant on her 'Brexit means Brexit' mantra. DExEU was designed to increase 'bandwith' in Whitehall (Shipman, 2017). However, its creation served to increase the complexities and difficulties of negotiating with the EU. Since DExEU's permanent secretary, Oliver Robbins, was also the prime minister's chief negotiator, it meant DExEU "was in effect working as an adjunct to No. 10" (House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, 2019). When Philip Rycroft replaced Robbins as permanent secretary, DExEU was even further marginalised. That seven DExEU ministers resigned during May's premiership is testimony to the problematic position of the department.

For its part, the Department for International Trade was hamstrung in its core task. It found itself legally unable to negotiate new trade agreements until the UK had formally left the EU. It was therefore left with the task of making continuity trade agreements. Progress here proved disappointing. By the time of May's departure only 64% of the trade covered by EU agreements was covered by completed continuity agreements.

May's use of financial instruments

May publicly endorsed her predecessor's commitment to sound public finances. She presented on-going cuts to the deficit as essential to secure economic stability. Here at least she had some scope for manoeuvre as the deficit continued to fall, even if debt remained at high levels. Indeed, despite her Chancellor's reservations, her ability to employ financial instruments was objectively greater than for many of her disjunctive predecessors. This was clear when, at the 2018 Conservative conference she declared that "a decade after the financial crash, people need to know that the austerity it led to is over and that their hard work has paid off." (2018b) May's difficulty was that 'ending' austerity was politically both too late, and too little. Corbyn's Labour had long since abandoned austerity and had employed this to their advantage in the 2017 general election. Furthermore, in a context where she, and above all her Chancellor, remained determined to maintain sound public finances, she was limited in how far she could respond on several key non-Brexit issues. For example, a freeze on tuition fees was easily outbid by Corbyn's pledge to eliminate fees altogether. Similarly, measures such as 'Help to Buy', a holdover from the Cameron era, were inadequate to address the scale of the dysfunctions in the housing market.

Where Brexit was concerned, May was pragmatic in her use of financial instruments. Sound finances did not prevent her approving £1bn of funds for Northern Ireland to secure the DUP's support for a confidence and supply agreement. However, her use of financial instruments to help secure her deal proved unsuccessful elsewhere. For example, the £1.6bn Future Towns Fund announced in March 2019 was seen as an attempt to win support from Labour MPs in Leave seats in northern England. However, these MPs noted that the resources amounted to considerably less per constituency than the DUP had secured and fell far short of addressing the long-run effects of austerity. Indeed, many of May's financial inducements were 'jam tomorrow' conditional on departing the EU. For example, the United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund would only come online when the UK had access to the money it previously used for EU structural funds. Similarly, the money pledged to end austerity in the 2019 Spring Statement was a 'Brexit dividend' contingent on leaving the EU with a deal.

May's use of informational instruments

May was predisposed to a secretive working style and she sought to avoid disclosure of information relating to Brexit to parliament and the public. She claimed greater transparency would compromise her negotiating position. Similarly, she resisted demands to fully disclose her Attorney General's legal advice, claiming that to do so would undermine the candour of counsel in the future. But, as Heide and Worthy (2019) have shown, such an approach was undermined by the EU's transparent approach to negotiations and the determination of Parliament to extract information from May and her ministers. The prime minister's resistance served only to make her appear evasive and damage her reputation further.

In theory, May could have strategically employed the release of information to her advantage. For example, the disclosure of information on preparations for, and the consequences of a no-deal exit from the EU might have been employed to persuade wavering parliamentarians to support her deal. However, this overlooks the depth and rigidity of the positions adopted in the Brexit debate. New information was habitually interpreted to fit these pre-existing positions. Discordant information could usually be easily dismissed. For example, Brexiteers dismissed unwelcome information as just the latest iteration of 'Project Fear'.

Although a vigorous attempt was made to sell May's deal, particularly on social media, there was little evidence that this cut through to the public. In any case such measures failed to shift votes in Parliament, without which May had no prospect of success. As Ivan Rogers (2019) put it, it could not be argued "that by applying lipstick to the pig of the Chequers proposal, or the Prime Minister's proposed deal, the course of history would have been changed. You can't redeem a bad deal by advertising on Facebook."

May's use of authoritative instruments

The outcome of May's premiership could only have been changed had she possessed greater command of the authoritative instruments necessary to deliver Brexit. May's chief dilemma was that she could not mobilise the votes in Parliament to endorse the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration.

The 'backstop' applying to Northern Ireland has become the most remarked upon reason why parliamentarians refused to endorse May's deal. As has been well-rehearsed, the backstop was neuralgic for May's opponents for several reasons. It was perceived as a threat to the Union and the Northern Irish peace process. The lack of a unilateral means of exiting the backstop generated fears that the UK would not be able to free itself from customs union with the EU. May's subsequent attempts to mitigate the issue revealed one of her difficulties to be the absence of authoritative means of resolving this issue in a context of multi-level governance. Given that the Attorney General advised that there was "no internationally lawful means of exiting" the backstop, May's critics were unwilling to trust her or the EU's assurances. Similar considerations arose from the Political Declaration's lack of legal authority. 'Constructive ambiguity' had served some of her predecessors well in negotiations. In May's case it served to cast the Political Declaration as a "syrup of warm sweet words" that would lead to a "blindfold Brexit".

However, parliamentary opposition to May's was not simply limited to the backstop or the shortcomings of the Political Declaration. The rebels in her own ranks discovered a wide range of other reasons to justify opposing her deal. These included convictions that the deal neither reflected the spirit of the referendum, nor the detail of her party's manifesto. Others feared that the UK would remain in the EU's regulatory orbit. The size of the UK's financial settlement motivated further opposition (see, People's Vote, 2019).

Given intra- and inter-party divisions May found not only that there was no majority for her deal, there was no majority for any other variety of Brexit either. The closest the Commons came to endorsing an alternative was Kenneth Clarke's motion for a Customs Union in the second round of indicative votes which was rejected by 3 votes and a further 85 abstentions. The only position on which a majority of MPs could agree was that they did not wish the UK to depart without a deal.

It is not clear that May could have done much differently that would have engineered a parliamentary consensus. Unlike 1931, for example, none of the leaders of opposition parties believed that there was a partisan advantage to be gained in coming to the government's rescue. Nor could she convince members of the opposition parties to rebel in sufficient numbers to overpower the rebels in her own party. May's misjudgment was to believe that, in the last instance, sufficient numbers would shift. As she reflected in her final broadcast interview:

> one of the things that I underestimated was that I thought Parliament having voted to give the people the choice, 80% of people in the 2017 general election voted for parties that said they would respect the referendum, Parliament overwhelmingly voted to trigger Article 50 and I hoped and expected and assumed that Parliament therefore wanted to come together to agree on a deal and get us out of the European Union." (BBC, 2019b)

May's justifications for action

It has been well-established that May was a poor communicator (see Shipman, 2017; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018). She lacked spontaneity, was repetitive and often uncomfortable in the media spotlight. She fully deserved her sobriquet 'Maybot'.

However, the substance of what she said was just as problematic. A number of shortcomings became evident in the motivational framings she employed during her premiership.

May persistently justified her actions as serving the 'national interest'. Other disjunctive prime ministers have made similar claims. However, May faced particular challenges in successfully employing this framing. Firstly, it was problematic to talk of 'the national interest' in circumstances where Parliament, the political parties, and the public continued to be profoundly divided over the meaning of, and response to, the 2016 referendum. Secondly, May's rhetoric overlooked the multi-national character of the UK. Many Scots, in particular, saw their national interest in rather different terms to May, a divergence encouraged by the repeated conflicts over Brexit between May and the Scottish Government. Thirdly, May's claim to serve the national interest had been undermined by calling a general election in 2017. Nick Robinson's question to her the following day spoke of how her actions were easily construed as partisan: "What is it about the recent 20 percent opinion poll that first attracted you to the idea of a general election?" (BBC, 2017)

When it became clear that she lacked the parliamentary support to win the 'meaningful votes' May shifted her motivational framing. One technique available to disjunctive prime ministers has been the creation and exploitation of a sense of crisis. May played this card relatively late in her premiership. Shortly before the second 'meaningful vote' she noted "if MPs reject the deal, nothing is certain. It would be a moment of crisis." (May, 2019a). She elaborated on this theme on several occasions, most infamously in her Downing Street statement of 20th March where she presented the rejection of her deal generating "irreparable damage to public trust – not just in this generation of politicians, but to our entire democratic process" (May, 2019b). May had been constrained in invoking a sense of crisis up until this point because it inevitably damaged the image of 'strong and stable' government which she had sought to convey. The other difficulty was that divisions over Brexit were not just inter- but intra-party in character. Indeed, May quickly realised the effort had been counter-productive when Conservative Brexiteers reacted with fury to her presenting Brexit as 'people vs Parliament'.

The other motivational strategy which May employed was to seek out inter-party cooperation. However, presenting herself as the apostle of compromise also lacked credibility. She had spent most of her premiership condemning the inflexible opposition of those whose cooperation she now sought. Indeed, she had justified the 2017 election by portraying the opposition parties as prospective saboteurs of Brexit. Furthermore, by the time that May had undergone this deathbed conversion, opinions amongst opposition parties had, if anything, hardened. As her proposals of 21st May recognised, winning over opposition parties required concessions on a second referendum and a customs union. Her difficulty was that in making what she presented as a compromise, May further alienated Brexiteers who could only perceive her proposals as surrender. May announced her intention to resign just three days later.

Assessing May's premiership

At a distance from the events, future commentators may easily overlook that May's premiership had some outcomes which can be construed as successes. She managed to secure a deal for withdrawing from the EU. Many had believed that there was a significant risk of her being unable to do so. Her financial settlement with the EU was considerably lower than many had envisaged. Many of the objectives which she set herself were achieved in the negotiations. She negotiated a 'bespoke Brexit'. Her deal ended free movement and involved no mandatory budgetary contributions to the EU. The UK would leave the jurisdiction, although not the influence of the ECJ. A transitional arrangement was secured to prevent a 'cliff-edge' departure. All this was achieved from a standing start and even her critics could recognise it was a "disgrace" that she inherited no Brexit planning from her predecessor (House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, 2019). Ultimately, however, she was unable to secure support for her deal in Parliament. The circumstances in which the UK would leave the EU remained unresolved. As opinion polling showed, the nation remained as, if not more disunited than it had been on the morning of 24th June 2016.

Nor could her ultimate failure to deliver Brexit be redeemed by a record of substantial achievement elsewhere. Her ambitions of making Britain a "Great Meritocracy" and tackling the nation's "burning injustices" stalled. Her boldest proposal, to reform social care, did not survive the 2017 election campaign. Her modern industrial policy was likely to only have an impact in the medium term, but its success was also likely to be determined in large part by the circumstances in which the UK ultimately leaves the EU.

She also left as her legacy a regime rendered even more vulnerable than the one she inherited. The economic disaster foretold by 'Project Fear' was not realised during May's tenure. The stock market remained strong, despite the domestic political turbulence. Employment remained high and earnings grew at their highest rate since 2008. Yet, the underlying economic vulnerabilities of the regime were not far from the surface. An 8% devaluation of the pound relative to the dollar and the Euro during her premiership, and a rise in inflation, meant real wages fell. Productivity remained stubbornly low. UK economic growth fell behind both the US and the Eurozone and, in the final quarter of her premiership, GDP fell for the first time in over six years. Elsewhere, there was little progress in addressing vulnerabilities of the regime such as the precarity of work, levels of private indebtedness, and high levels of poverty and inequality.

May's fears that the failure to deliver Brexit would profoundly damage public trust also showed some signs of realisation. Popular trust in the UK political system fell to levels lower than during the expenses crisis (Hansard Society, 2019). 81% believed that the political system in Britain was broken (YouGov, 2019). This paralleled a growing mood of distrust in sections of the political class. Brexiteer journalists and MPs began to publicly question the motives and loyalties of the judiciary and civil service in ways not seen since the collapse of the post-war settlement.

Indeed, May's premiership saw the coalition of interests and voters supporting the regime placed under increasing strain. Conservative relations with the business community deteriorated significantly. May's model of Brexit threatened the interests of

sections of the business community who benefited from the Single Market and customs union. Her rhetoric criticising business ethics and behaviour served to generate further antagonism. Neoliberal ideas and the economics of austerity were increasingly questioned although not wholly rejected by the public. Most notably, May's premiership was witness to an extraordinary degree of electoral volatility which held out the prospect of a potential far-reaching electoral realignment. In the 2017 general election, the combined Conservative-Labour share of the vote in Great Britain was 84.4%, the highest proportion since 1970. On the eve of May's departure by contrast, the 2019 European Elections saw the two major parties secure a combined 23.2% of the vote.

Conclusion

We noted at the outset of this paper that the criticism as May left office focused primarily upon May's shortcomings as a decision maker. As we have seen, May's premiership was a failure, many of her decisions were flawed and contributed to that eventual outcome.

Yet, it is also worth noting that it was in the interests of the majority of her opponents, whether those seeking to replace in her in No.10, or those seeking a different outcome for Brexit, to present the failures of her premiership in terms of her agency. A would-be prime minister has to construct a warrant for authority on the basis that agency matters. They are therefore compelled to find fault with their predecessor. Those seeking a different exit from the EU (or none at all) approached the future in greater comfort knowing that May provided an identifiable scapegoat should their plans go awry. Indeed, as May departed Downing Street it was not hard to see some beginning work on the construction of a Brexit *dolchstoßlegende* with May at its centre.
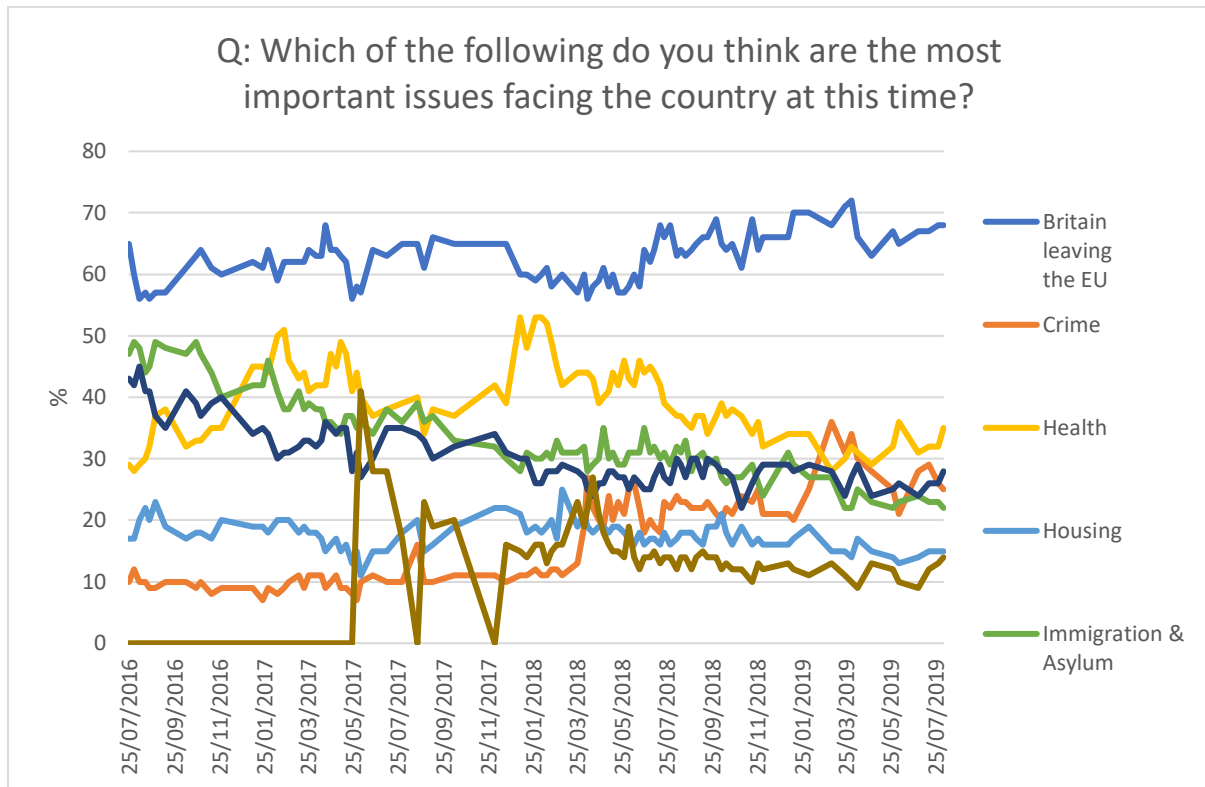
Much of the criticism of May was unspecific and amounted to the suggestion that she should have tolerated a greater degree of risk in her negotiations with the EU. As the foregoing analysis demonstrates there were sound reasons for May to make a more conservative calculation of risk. When pressed, at least some of her critics have been prepared to identify particular decisions where they believe May could have chosen differently and which would have led to a different outcome. But, as we have argued, these critics tend to significantly underplay the constraints and overplay the prospects for success of their alternative course of action. It is hard to disagree with the assessment of one minister in December 2018 who likened May's position to zugzwang in chess: "It's a position where you have to move and whatever you do it makes things worse." (Shipman, 2018)

If, as we conclude here, May's premiership confronted an almost impossible leadership situation, then her successor in Downing Street provides an interesting and immediate test of that evaluation. Boris Johnson sought a warrant for the premiership which stressed his ability to bring a different approach to the resolution of Brexit. It will be interesting to see whether Johnson's premiership is distinguished solely by a different more confident rhetoric, or whether it is able to resolve or circumvent the deep-seated obstacles which May encountered in her premiership.

Table 1. Skowronek's typology of leaders, regimes and patterns of politics

	Affiliated leader	Opposed leader
Resilient regime	Articulation	Pre-emption
Vulnerable regime	Disjunction	Reconstruction

Figure 1: The salience of political issues during May's premiership

Q: Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time?

Source: YouGov

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