

Making a Hasty Brexit? Ministerial Turnover and Its Implications

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Draft prepared for presentation at the European Studies Association Annual Meeting
May 9-12, 2019, Denver, Colorado
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By almost any measure, since the immediate aftermath of the June 16, 2016 Brexit referendum, the British government has been in a state of chaos. The turmoil began with then-Prime Minister David Cameron's resignation on June 17 and succession by Theresa May within days of the vote. Subsequently, May's decision to call a snap election in 2017 and the resulting loss of the Conservatives' parliamentary majority cast doubt on her leadership and further stirred up dissension in her party's ranks. Perhaps more telling, and the subject of this paper, is the unprecedented number of ministers¹—from both senior and junior ranks—that quit the May government over Brexit-related policy disagreements². Between June 12, 2017 and April 3, 2019, the government witnessed 45 resignations, with high-profile secretaries of state and departmental ministers stepping down to return to the backbenches. Of these, 34 members of her government, including 9 serving in the Cabinet, departed over issues with some aspect of Brexit, ranging from dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister's Withdrawal Agreement, to disagreements about the proper role of Parliament, to questions about the legitimacy of the entire Brexit process. All told, Theresa May lost more ministers, and at a more rapid pace, than any other prime minister in modern times. Their number, their reasons for departing, and the attention the resignations received in the media, raise important questions about what, if any, effect such rapid and wide-ranging turnover has had—and will have in the future—on the British system of government. In particular, what do these resignations tell us about the Brexit decision-making

² Included in the ministerial category are 1) ministers (also called secretaries of state) who head government departments; these individuals are the most powerful figures in British government. Ministers are joined by three ranks of junior ministers: minister of state, parliamentary under-secretaries of state and parliamentary private secretaries. Junior and senior ministers are all considered members of Government when it comes to House of Commons votes. The Ministerial Code clearly notes that they are expected to support Government in divisions in the House and that they cannot retain their positions if they choose to vote against the Government. All ministers retain their seats in Parliament while serving in Government.

process? What effects has turnover had on levels of expertise in government and the bureaucracy's efficiency? How has turnover affected public attitudes with respect to trust in government, legitimacy and authority? And, more broadly, what does this high rate of turnover suggest about the state of the country's governing institutions—especially political parties, the Parliament, and time-tested governing norms, such as collective and ministerial responsibility?

Of course, some might say that the high level of resignations and the political churn they generated—and the sense of political turmoil more generally—is simply business as usual on the European Union front. Since the late 1950s, there is no question that in both the Cabinet and Parliamentary arenas questions surrounding the European Union (EU) membership have routinely been highly contested—concerns about both national and parliamentary sovereignty vis-a-vis the EU have been the source of persistent divisions both within and between the two major parties. Time and again in this policy arena, intra-party divisions combine with inter-party adversarial politics to turn European integration into a conflictual issue in domestic politics. Arguably, however, the very large number of resignations over Brexit provide confirming evidence of the deep existing fault lines over the decision to leave the European Union within the Cabinet, the Parliament, and, of course, the British citizenry. By March 29, 2019, Theresa May had proven unable to bridge these fault lines, with what ultimately may be serious consequences not only for Britain's future relationship with Europe, but for its system of governance.

Literature Review

Our understanding of the implications of rapid ministerial turnover in the United Kingdom may be informed by two separate but related bodies of literature: one, discussions of

cabinet instability in parliamentary systems; and, two, considerations of turnover in government, not only at the cabinet level, but also in legislatures and bureaucracies.

Understanding Cabinet Turnover

Resignations over policy disagreements tend to be the exception rather than the rule in most parliamentary systems; as such, the literature on cabinet turnover has generally focused its more rule-based or strategic aspects: the supervisory and accountability responsibilities of ministers and their failure to meet these that lead to resignation, or the political conditions (e.g., government unpopularity) that might compel a Prime Minister to engage in a cabinet reshuffle or demand ministerial resignations (Alderman 1995, Dewan and Dowding 2005, Indridadson and Kam 2008, Thomson and Tillotsen 1999, Woodhouse 2004). We see little examination of purely political conflicts between a Cabinet member and the Prime Minister, between individual Cabinet members, or within the Parliament Party as drivers of ministerial resignation on policy grounds. Despite this lack of focus, some strands of this literature can be instructive with respect to the consequences of ministerial replacement, whatever its cause—that is, what do ministerial resignations suggest for political, institutional and policy outcomes?

The resignation of a minister is big—and typically bad—news for a government. When the minister is a full cabinet member, or the issue over which they resign is controversial or scandalous, media coverage is ubiquitous. High profile resignations in particular are often viewed as political flares—conveying a message that is usually interpreted as a signal of political underperformance (Indridadson and Kam 2008, 621). This is the case regardless of whether the resignation is the product of a private or public scandal, a policy failure or bad performance, or a policy disagreement. Whatever its motivation, a minister stepping down reflects poorly on the government and prime minister, and, their resignation is likely to be interpreted as a signal that a

governance problem exists, rather than being seen as an encouraging corrective device. Because of this, governments tend to “batten down the hatches to weather the storm created...and try to produce some good news or new policy initiatives to move media attention on to better issues” (Dewan and Dowding 2005, 47). Further, when resignations involve cases of policy disagreement and/or protest, these are normally interpreted as being indicative of a split in the party in power and thus the resignation is likely to lower government popularity in the public mind (Dewan and Dowding 2005, 54).

A fair amount of the literature on cabinet change focuses on reshuffles—when a prime minister voluntarily chooses to re-arrange their Government. Here, there is considerable consensus that frequent cabinet reshuffles prevent ministers from developing the expertise and acumen needed to control a complex modern bureaucracy. Such moves destroy the informational gains and ministerial expertise that prolonged tenure in office can bring and undermine political performance, especially with respect to the Cabinet’s ability to control the bureaucracy (Headley 1974; Rose 1971, 1987). Despite this, prime ministers regularly reshuffle their cabinets, even when they are free of scandal, in acts of political opportunism.

Exploring this, Indridadson and Kam (2008) argue cabinet turnover is often driven by purely political motives. For example, they note that prime ministers will voluntarily reorganize their cabinets because they perceive it to be politically advantageous to do so, whether for policy reasons or as a prime minister’s reaction to threats from political rivals within their cabinet. Cabinet ministers, as career politicians, are inherently self-interested political actors who may readily place their own ambitions above the cabinet’s collective interests. While ministers are tied to their parties and depend on that party’s continued electoral success to stay in power, they also “have every incentive to serve their own private ambitions (for a more prestigious cabinet

post or even the leadership itself)” and their aspirations are often at least partly independent of the government as a whole (citation needed). Ministers are also natural rivals to the prime minister—the latter has power and many of the former want it (Luebbert 1986, Weller 1994). Further, ministers also often have their own policy interests (Laver and Shepsle 1994, Blondel and Manning). Divergent political aspirations and policy interests are clearly evident when the prime minister and cabinet are from different parties in a coalition, but it may also be observed in single party governments. Further, these aspirations cause competition among cabinet ministers and can make it difficult for prime ministers to maintain collective responsibility in the face of these tensions or to ensure that ministers remain committed to their party’s platform. Such conditions are always a test of the prime minister’s own strength as leader.

Thus, the political preferences of ministers and prime ministers can be imperfectly aligned. Again according to Indradson and Kam (2008), once this misalignment is recognized, “delegation within the executive, that is, from the prime minister, to Cabinet, to individual ministers, (can be viewed as) a problematic principal-agent problem” with two dimensions (p. 624). On the one hand, this relationship could be viewed as an adverse selection problem, “in which the prime minister’s task is to recruit ministers who are loyal, competent and who share the PM’s policy preferences. From this perspective, cabinet turnover can be seen as tool used by the prime minister to identify and select “good” ministers and weed out “bad” (i.e., incompetent, disloyal or ideologically incompatible ministers). On the other,

The prime minister’s situation could be seen as a moral hazard problem, whereby the prime minister’s problem is not a lack of information about a minister’s loyalty or competence. Instead, all ministers have the motive and opportunity to use their portfolios in a manner that runs against the prime minister’s interests. The prime minister must therefore manipulate the political environment in such a way that undercuts ministers’ incentives to engage in self-interested behavior (p. 624).

Where this situation exists, prime ministers are more likely to resort to job rotation rather than sacking ministers—as evidenced by that fact that most cabinet reshuffles involve the exchange of portfolios between incumbent ministers rather than replacing them with new recruits.

Understanding the Effects of Turnover

A substantial body of works exists that assess the impact of legislative turnover—both low and high rates of change—on institutional performance and system legitimacy. Often, low legislative turnover can be considered suboptimal in democratic systems because it can produce insufficiently representative institutions. In addition, low levels of elite level turnover may distance citizens from decision-making, with control effectively concentrated in the hands of entrenched and unaccountable rulers (Katz 1997). Finally, elected assemblies with lower rates of turnover may also be prone to underrepresentation—both numerically and in terms of policy outputs—of particular subsets of a population (e.g, women and minorities) (Norris and Lovenduski 1995, 197). At the same time, the continuity in service that low levels of turnover involve lends itself to the development of policy expertise among long-serving officials, which, presumably, may also lead to increased efficiencies in policy-making and implementation.

The literature examining the effects of high rates of turnover, whether the focus is on cabinets, legislatures or bureaucracies, generally finds that rapid or frequent change can create a number of problems within governing institutions. In their study of ministerial turnover in the Council of the European Union, Scherpereel and Perez (2015) focus on three potentially negative outcomes, or perils, associated with high turnover: the perils of amateurism, poor-quality policy, and disunity. With respect to amateurism, the argument is that as the rate of turnover increases, the level of experience and knowledge in a legislature decreases. This is argued to weaken the legislature, as newcomers are less adept at navigating within their new institutional setting,

less knowledgeable about the rules of the game, and often times have fewer resources—including prior relationships with their peers, interpersonal trust, technical skills and institutional memory—at their disposal (see also Hibbing 1991, Matland and Studlar 2004, Niemi and Winsky 1987, Rosenthal 1974, Shin and Jackson 1979, Atkinson and Doherty 1992). Of particular relevance with respect to the impact amateurism may have on those in ministerial positions is an argument that institutional and issue expertise is necessary for negotiations and building coalitions. Further, it is also helpful to have an institutional memory of past laws and relevant governing procedures. Frequent turnover, however, may mean that new recruits to ministerial positions may be lacking in all of the above (Francis and Baker 1986, 120, cited in Scherpereel and Perez 2015).

High rates of turnover are also argued to potentially impact the quality of policy outputs since newer, and often less experienced, politicians (and ministers), will often lack the necessary substantive knowledge of the issues addressed by the legislature (or by their ministry) and also will often fail to have the resources required to translate ideas into laws and to ensure policy implementation. In considering legislators, Putnam (1976) also noted that legislators who expect to serve in office for a only short period may be less willing to invest in long-range policy projects and will almost certainly be less likely to take short-term risks to invest in long-term gains—one would expect this same pattern to hold true for government ministers, and, the more quickly they leave office, the more problematic this is likely to be.

Following along with Scherpereel and Perez (2015), the third hazard posed by high turnover is the potential for disunity. More specifically, the danger here is the presence of new, constantly changing members in the midst of longer-serving members—the experienced v. the neophytes—which may create difficult working conditions and perhaps even cleavages that will

serve as significant impediments to meaningful work being accomplished (see also Atkinson and Docherty 1992). These divisions may be such that older members come to resent newly-elected or newly-appointed members, especially if the latter have dramatically different agendas or broader ambitions. We can certainly envision this same scenario in the midst of a cabinet, where, just as in a legislature, animosity between old and new actors can make it difficult to work together and to reach consensus—in some instances, these gaps can be so wide as to prevent any forward motion, bringing the body to a halt. Presumably, these qualities are even more important for cabinet government, where consensus and collective responsibility are required.

In Britain, civil servants are unlikely to make decisions in the absence of clear messaging and instructions from their ministers; a perennial strength of their bureaucratic system has been the clear continuity between ministers' thinking and the work of their civil servants. To the extent that frequent turnover increases uncertainty for civil servants about their minister's preferences, we might expect a negative change in bureaucratic behaviors (Scherpereel and Perez 2017, 3). Further, because the British bureaucratic system has not been prone to rapid turnover at the top, we can anticipate that incumbent civil servants are less comfortable with frequent change. As such, it is reasonable to expect high rates of ministerial turnover might lead to inefficiencies in decision-making with respect to both timing and quality. In turn, such developments may also affect public attitudes towards institutions, as citizens recognize such inefficiencies in the form of public problems failing to be addressed—either effectively or, indeed, at all.

Putting Britain's EU Governance in Context

Because ministerial resignations in the UK have all been closely connected to the UK's EU policy arena, it is also worth reviewing the scholarly work that examines the British

government's past performance with respect to EU policymaking. The UK's experience with EU policy development since 2016 has been highly contentious, chaotic and ultimately ineffective, with one of the strongest representations of this being the steady stream of ministerial resignations. It bears noting that the process thus far stands in marked contrast to the country's prior approach to and experience with EU policy-making. That is, in respect to its administrative apparatus, the failure to reach agreement on an approach to leaving the EU by March 29, 2019 was not preordained. In fact, based on the civil service's past record with regard to European policymaking, one could have anticipated a high likelihood of success in the country's attempt to secure for itself the best possible deal.

The British civil service has long been hailed as one of the best administrative services in the world, and, within the EU, its record of dealing with European business generated envy in other member state capitals. While the results of the 2016 referendum suggest that a majority of the British themselves appear not to have realized it, the UK was routinely hailed as the most effective member state when it came to shaping what the EU did. Both in London and in Brussels, the effectiveness of what was called a "Rolls Royce" British administration was widely recognized. This view was based on the clarity of the positions that the British developed on particular issues, the speed with which the UK's EU representatives could deliver their views, the coherence with which the UK's stance was articulated by UK ministers and officials in Brussels, and the thoroughness of their preparation. Kassim (2016) notes: "ministers and officials arrive in Brussels with a settled negotiating brief and negotiating tactics and are not hampered by unresolved interdepartmental differences. When a UK representative takes a position, it is taken seriously." British negotiators were held in high regard for their efficiency and their ability to develop and communicate their government's preferences effectively. As a result, the UK was

not marginalized at the EU level in terms of outcomes—rather, it was more often than not at the heart of EU decision-making (Kassim 2016).

British government officials themselves emphasize that the “the two main strengths (of the UK’s system) ...were good coordination and the ability to agree a coherent and united negotiating line.” As one senior practitioner with experience in both UK and EU institutions since accession put it, “the mechanism is admirable...that has worked pretty well” (Bulmer and Burch 2009, 215). To quote Bulmer and Burch again,

This is a general view endorsed by others who speak of the UK being “better coordinated than any other member states,” that the UK approach is “comprehensive and systematic” and that very little “escapes its grasp,” and that, unlike some other member states, “information is automatically circulated.” Good coordination is one of the factors that assists the development of an agreed negotiating position, thus ensuring “consistency and coherence across the board.” This ability, as the cliché has it, to “sing from the same hymn sheet” is often highlighted (Bulmer and Burch 2009, 219).

Another official, reflecting on addressing major cross-departmental issues right at the hub of the UK system, notes that,

The strengths are that we are presenting a united front across Whitehall and any position that has been worked up has taken into account every department’s concerns so that no department has been overlooked . . . In the process of coordination, you have thought out everything, the pros and cons and have really tried to work it out. So, once a position is agreed, departments are ready to accept it because they have had their say and they can see it’s a fair process . . . Also, each department reinforces each other, which is also good, which means that . . . once you have got an agreed position, there is no argument over briefing, it is more a question of how do you marshal your arguments. But the substance of the briefing doesn’t provoke rows. So, in terms of establishing a policy, I think the system works really, really well (Bulmer and Burch 2009, 220).

The key to the machinery’s success was having effective mechanisms to coordinate across Whitehall departments and devolved administrations and to ensure that all interested parties were included in the decision-making process.

As the UK approached the Article 50 process in 2016, the European policy-making network in Whitehall was extensive, drawing together a bigger collection of civil servants and

ministers than any other cross-departmental policy grouping that had existed on a long-term basis. Overall, the UK's EU network in Whitehall had become quite varied in its operation and composition, with the exact composition of any policy group depending on the business at hand. There were a core number of individuals in Whitehall who work on EU matters full-time and a much wider grouping of participants who are drawn into the network according to the issue being handled (Bulmer and Burch 2009, 184). Cumulatively, a substantial cadre of civil servants and ministers emerged who had through their regular participation in EU policy-making, built up a substantial awareness of EU issues, tactics and procedures (Bulmer and Burch 188).

Such descriptions suggest that, despite the enormity of the task, it might have been reasonable to expect that in 2016 the British were fairly well-situated to plan, negotiate and implement an approach to Brexit. However, it is difficult to overstate how far removed British EU policy-making today appears to be from this model. Significant reforms to the system to manage UK's relationship with the EU were introduced by the May government immediately after taking office. Specifically, a new ministry, the Department for Exiting the European Union (DEXEU) was created and the Department of International Trade (DIT) was completely overhauled. In addition, large numbers of civil servants were reassigned—both within and across ministries—and the size of the Whitehall workforce was dramatically increased. These reforms created major upheavals in the machinery of government and were accomplished with no advanced planning, and in the aftermath of six years of austerity policies that had strained the Whitehall machinery across the board. For a bureaucratic system accustomed to incremental change, and that had seen no fundamental disruptions since its beginnings in the 1960s, the creation of a vast array of new arrangements to negotiate Brexit ruptured existing mechanisms for managing the UK-EU relationship. From the outset, the new departmental structure risked

creating fragmentation and incoherence, and a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the new departments caused distractions and undoubtedly delayed work on Brexit (UK in A Changing Europe 2016, 17). It is fair to say that, today that no one would say that the government's Brexit policy apparatus feels like a Rolls-Royce operation. Perhaps more importantly, it is clear that British elites—in the Government, the Parliament and the civil service—are no longer “singing from the same hymn sheet”—as expressed most concretely in unprecedented levels of ministerial turnover.

The May Government: Patterns of Ministerial Turnover

While high rates of ministerial turnover are not unusual in the British system, ministerial resignations for policy and political disagreements are not commonplace. Between 2017 and 2019, Theresa May's loss of 34 members of her government due to policy and political disagreements was more than Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown combined experience in their 22 years in office³. In the first three months of 2019 alone, May had already lost more ministers in a single year than any other recent prime minister (with the exception of herself, in 2018) (Lloyd 2019). In addition, her government saw resignations by at least three ministers in the same 24-hour period three times from 2018 forward.⁴ Between 1979 and 2017, this had happened only once, with the resignation of Lord Carrington, Humphrey Atkins and Richard Luce in protest over the Falklands mission in 1982 (Freeguard 2019). As such, the May

³ The Thatcher government had 224 resignations 1979-1990; Tony Blair 29 from 1997-2010, Gordon Brown 13 from 2010-15, and David Cameron 12 from 2010-2016. In each case, only a minority of resignations were over policy differences.

⁴ July 2018: David Davis, Steve Baker, Boris Johnson; November 2018: Dominic Raab, Esther McVey, Richard Luce; March 2019: Steve Brine, Richard Harrington, Alistair Burt. Historically, only two other notable clusters of policy-related resignations: 2003 Robin Cook, Clare Short, Lord Philip Hunt, John Denham over the Iraq War decision; 2009 James Purnell, Caroline Flint, Jane Kennedy over Gordon Brown's leadership.

government navigated in uncharted waters when it came to visible policy disputes within its ministerial ranks.

At the Cabinet level, a tendency toward dissent was at least in part a function of the composition of the Cabinet itself, which was deliberately constructed to encompass both sides of the Brexit divide. Beginning in 2016, and continuing after the 2017 election, May made the decision to balance her Cabinet between Leavers and Remainers (those who voted to Leave the EU in the referendum and those who voted to Remain)⁵. Included among these were three of the most prominent actors from the Leave campaign, each placed in a key Brexit post: Boris Johnson (Foreign Secretary), David Davis (Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union), and Liam Fox (International Trade Secretary). These choices with respect to Cabinet membership reflected two strategies on May's part: one, balancing Leavers and Remainers allowed May to demonstrate her commitment to delivering on Brexit (since May herself had voted to remain), and, two, it followed the time-tested logic of keeping one's enemies close. This proved to be a fateful decision, since it is clear that the close proximity of the two camps within the Cabinet was a formidable obstacle to building consensus on matters related to Brexit or otherwise. Nonetheless, the Prime Minister continued to maintain this balance after the 2017 election, the 2018 Cabinet reshuffle, and in appointments following resignations, which continued to complicate Cabinet dynamics and impede decision-making.⁶ The presence of soft and hardcore Brexiters, as well as ardent Remainers around the same table meant that Cabinet agreement was elusive, as each faction competed for influence and rifts verged on the edge of warfare. When

⁵ In and of itself, this is not unusual. prime ministers have often looked to keep their opponents close within their Cabinets. For example, the Blair cabinets included Blairites and Brownites.

⁶ To further complicate Cabinet dynamics, some of those appointees who originally supported the Remain side subsequently hardened their positions and have become strong Brexit advocates (for example, Sajid David, Jeremy Hunt, Gavin Williamson).

such rifts became public, the Prime Minister did not move to dismiss her ministers, even when their public statements questioned her authority. As the first year of the new government wore on, it became increasingly clear that the Cabinet was both gridlocked and in disarray; a situation that clearly confirmed a growing sense that May's power and political authority had been undermined by the decision to hold a snap election in 2017.

The Brexiters Exit

Overwhelming, as Table 1 shows, it was supporters of a hard Brexit who made the decision to leave the Government on policy or political grounds. Of the 34 officials who resigned for policy or political disagreements in 2017-2019, 19 voted Leave in 2016, and, of these 19, 17 were members of the Conservative Party's European Research Group (ERG). This group of nearly 90 backbench Conservative MPs, one of several private membership voting groups within the Tory parliamentary party, became the primary pro-Brexit group in the House of Commons after the 2016 EU referendum. Led by Jacob Rees-Moggs, the ERG is unwaveringly committed to the cleanest possible break with the EU and, as such, is the home for the "hardest" Brexiters in the Party. Its efforts were the key driver behind May's record defeat on her Brexit deal on 15 January 2019 (the measure was defeated by a 230-vote majority), and at all subsequent Brexit junctures in the Commons they have worked to obstruct the Prime Minister's plans. Every resignation by an ERG member was based on a feeling that the PM's deal would keep the UK too close to the EU.

Table 1: Brexit-Related Resignations from Teresa May's Cabinet, June 2017 to April 2019

Name	Position	Resigned	Remain or Leave?
Lord George Bridges	PUS ⁷ Dept. for Exiting the European Union	12-Jun-17	R
Phillip Lee	PUS Ministry of Justice	12-Jun-18	R
Steve Baker	PUS Dept. for Exiting the European Union	8-Jul-18	L ERG ⁸
David Davis	Sec of State ⁹ Dept. for Exiting the EU	8-Jul-18	L ERG
Chris Green	PPS ¹⁰ to Transport Secretary	8-Jul-18	L ERG
Boris Johnson	Sec of State Foreign and Commonwealth Office	9-Jul-18	L ERG
Conor Burns	PPS to Foreign Secretary	9-Jul-18	L ERG
Ben Bradley	Conservative Party Vice-Chairman	10-Jul-18	R ERG
Maria Caulfield	Conservative Party Vice-Chairman	10-Jul-18	L
Robert Courts	PPS Foreign and Commonwealth Office	15-Jul-18	L ERG
Guto Bebb	PUS Minister for Defense Procurement	16-Jul-18	R PVG ¹¹
Scott Mann	PPS for HM Treasury	16-Jul-18	L ERG
Jo Johnson	MOS ¹² Dept. for Transport	10-Nov-18	R PVG
Suella Braverman	PUS Dept. for Exiting the European Union	15-Nov-18	L ERG
Esther McVey	Sec of State Dept. for Work and Pensions	15-Nov-18	L ERG
Dominic Raab	Sec of State Dept. for Exiting the EU	15-Nov-18	L ERG
Shailesh Vara	MOS for Northern Ireland Office	15-Nov-18	R ERG
Anne-Marie Trevelyan	PPS Department of Education	15-Nov-18	L ERG
Rehman Chishti	Government Trade Envoy to Pakistan	15-Nov-18	L ERG
Ranil Jayawardena	PPS at Ministry of Justice	15-Nov-18	L ERG
Sam Gyimah	MOS Dept. for Business, Energy Industry	30-Nov-18	R PVG
Will Quince	PPS at Ministry of Defense	8-Dec-18	L ERG
Gareth Johnson	Assistant Government Whip	14-Jan-19	L ERG
Eddie Hughes	PPS at Dept. for Exiting European Union	15-Jan-19	L ERG
Craig Tracey	PPS at Dept. for International Development	15-Jan-19	L ERG
Alberto Costa	PPS at Scotland Office	27-Feb-19	R
George Eustice	MOS for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	28-Feb-19	L
Sarah Newton	MOS for Disabled People, Health and Work	13-Mar-19	R
Paul Masterton	PPS at Home Office	13-Mar-19	R
Richard Harrington	PUS for Business and Industry	25-Mar-19	R
Alistair Burt	PUS for Foreign and Commonwealth Office	25-Mar-19	R
Steve Brine	PUS Public Health and Primary Care	25-Mar-19	R
Chris Heaton-Harris	PUS Dept. for Exiting EU	3-Apr-19	L
Nigel Adams	PUS for Wales, Asst. Government Whip	3-Apr-19	L

⁷ Parliamentary Under-Secretary

⁸ The European Research Group, the primary pro-Brexit group for backbench Conservative MPs.

⁹ Secretary of State

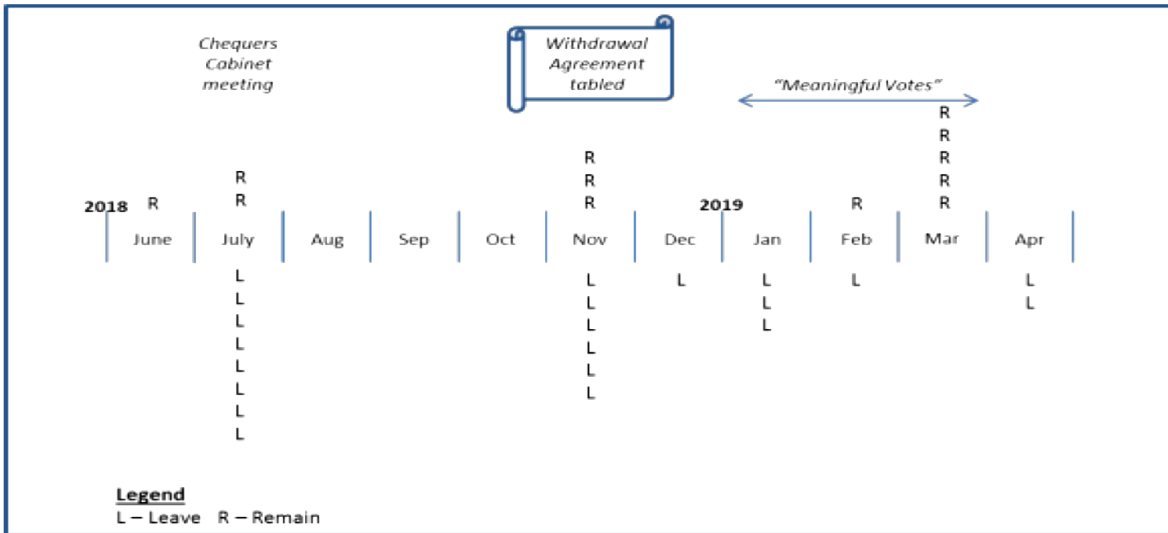
¹⁰ Parliamentary Private Secretary

¹¹ Conservatives for a People's Vote, supporters of a second referendum among backbench Conservative MPs.

¹² Minister of State

Not coincidentally, the vast majority of the Brexiters' resignations corresponded to key markers on the withdrawal process timeline. As Figure 1 indicates, the Brexiters' exodus generally came in waves: (1) in the aftermath of the revelation of May's blueprint plans for Brexit at a full Cabinet meeting at Chequers in July 2018; (2) the tabling of the Withdrawal Agreement in November 2018; and (3) in concert with "meaningful votes" on the Agreement in January and March 2019. For example, following the Cabinet meeting at Chequers, two Cabinet level and three junior ministers resigned in a 24-hour period. All told, there were nine resignations by Leave-supporting ministers between 8 July and 16 July. The resignations of Davis and Boris Johnson—two of the three original hard Brexiteers in the Cabinet— were viewed as a heavy blow to the Prime Minister's authority. At this point, Brexiter outrage over the Chequers Plan and May's approach to her cabinet came into in full view and the backbench ERG caucus was undoubtedly strengthened by Davis and Johnson returning to its ranks. Once May tabled her Withdrawal Agreement in November 2018, the floodgates of ministerial resignations re-opened with even greater force, with seven Leave resignations on a single day, 15 November, including two by Secretaries of State. Subsequent resignations by hard Brexiters around the first "meaningful vote" on the Withdrawal Agreement on 15 January and the vote to delay Brexit on 3 April continued the ministerial exodus in opposition to May's deal.

Figure 1: Timeline of Resignations from May government, June 2018 to April 2019



The return of the hard Brexiters—in particular, David Davis and Dominic Raab, both Secretaries of State for DEXEU, and Boris Johnson, the Foreign Secretary, to the backbenches marked the end of May’s strategy of keeping her enemies close. The resignation over policy disagreement by some of the Conservative Party’s leading members, not to mention the most important members of her Cabinet on Brexit matters, was a tangible articulation of the outrage among committed Brexiters in the ERG and on the backbenches more broadly. Their return to these ranks provided additional leadership to and strengthened the resolve of both groups. In addition, their resignations arguably inspired Leave-supporting junior ministers to follow their lead and quit the Government. Upon leaving office, Davis, Raab and Johnson engaged in very public attacks on the Prime Minister and her plan, and they continued to orchestrate a behind-the-scenes as well as a public assault on the Government. Two of the three, Raab and Johnson, also worked tirelessly to position themselves for the prime ministerial post once May steps down (as she promised to do once an agreement is approved).

Even Remainers Leave

Ministerial resignations by those who supported Remain followed a different pattern. This smaller group of ministers' Brexit-related exits were more often based on quarrels with the Government's approach to the Brexit decision-making process itself, rather than with the substance of the Prime Minister's deal (although dissatisfaction with the substantive content of the Government's Brexit options might also be in evidence). These departures came, for example, from those who disagreed with the Government over the parliamentary process or who were advocating for May to support a second referendum. The latter, in particular, involved members of the small Conservatives for a People's Vote group (PVG). The exceptions to this pattern were two ministers who originally supported Remain, but transferred their allegiance to the Leave side and joined the ERG once joining the Government—like the other Leavers, these ministers exited in dispute with May's Brexit plan.

The first Remain supporter to leave the May government was Lord George Bridges, a pro-EU peer and minister at the Department for Exiting the European Union in June 2017. He had served the Government since 2016 and in his role at DEXEU was charged with pushing Brexit legislation through the House of Lords, as well as working out the fine details of the Great Repeal Bill. After a falling out with May on the lack of consultation between No. 10 and DEXEU, Lord Bridges quit on policy grounds and was quoted as being “convinced Brexit couldn't work.” His departure was viewed as an early indication of the turmoil within DEXEU.

Remain supporters who were affiliated with the Conservatives for a People's Vote group resigned airing concerns about the Withdrawal Agreement, but the precipitating events for their resignations were matters of procedure. In his July 2018 resignation, Defense Minister Guto Bebb, quit his frontbench role in the government to vote against an amendment to Brexit customs

legislation tabled by the ERG's leader, Jacob Rees-Mogg. Bebb said he felt duty-bound to oppose the amendment because he could not support the Prime Minister's willingness to accept a series of backbench "wrecking amendments" to the blueprint offered at Chequers. In Bebb's view, the amendments were a procedural maneuver intended to publicly undermine May's authority to craft a Brexit deal. The Transport Minister Jo Johnson, another PVG member and committed Remainer, stepped down on 10 November 2018, as the debate over the Withdrawal Agreement was heating up. In his resignation letter, he told the Prime Minister:

It is now my intention to vote against this Withdrawal Agreement. I reject this false choice between the PM's deal and "no deal" chaos. On this most crucial of questions, I believe it is entirely right to go back to the people and ask them to confirm their decision to leave the EU and, if they choose to do that, to give them the final say on whether we leave with the Prime Minister's deal or without it.

Johnson's resignation made clear his intention to ardently campaign for a second referendum because of his discomfort with how the Brexit decision-making process had unfolded since 2017. In a similar vein, and also in November 2018, Sam Gyimah, the Universities Minister and a PVG member, resigned in protest after the Withdrawal Agreement had been revealed and, like Johnson, actively campaigned in his resignation letter for a second referendum.

Other Remain supporting ministers left the government in protest over strictly procedural matters. None of these officials were members of the PVG, and their decisions to leave their posts were focused on very specific votes in the Commons. The resignation of Phillip Lee, Minister for Justice, in early June 2018 happened right before a key vote in Parliament about whether to give the House of Commons a role in approving the final Brexit outcome. In his departure letter, Lee said,

The main reason for my taking this decision now is the Brexit process and the Government's wish to limit Parliament's role in contributing to the final outcome in a vote that takes place today For me resigning is a last resort—not something I want to do

but something I feel I must do because, for me, such a serious principle is being breached that I would find it hard to live with myself afterwards if I let it pass.

Alberto Costa, the Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Scotland Office, resigned (27 February 2019) to table an amendment in opposition to the Government's position to protect EU citizens in Britain if the UK left the bloc without a deal, while Sarah Newton, the Minister, defied the Conservative Party whip (13 March 2019) to vote in favor of an amended government motion that called for a no-deal Brexit to be ruled out in all circumstances, not just at the end of March 2019.

In a similar vein, junior ministers Brine, Harrington and Burt resigned from the Government to vote to give Parliament control of the Brexit process. All quit their posts in April 2019 to back a cross-party amendment to allow a series of indicative votes on possible solutions to the Brexit impasse. Notably, Harrington had been one of May's earliest supporters, serving as Treasurer for her 2016 leadership campaign, so his resignation announcement, in which he accused the Prime Minister of "playing roulette" with the lives of the British people suggested that May had lost control over not just the parliamentary process, but her party. Brine was also a 2016 May loyalist. Burt said he "opted to defy the whip for the country's sake" and that parliament should seek other options without the instruction of party whips and the government and "should adopt any feasible outcome on its own." Taken together, such words and actions were a clear rejection of the Government's authority, while the mass resignation of individuals who had previously been ultra-loyal to the Prime Minister strongly suggested a crisis of confidence within her party.

Only two Remain supporters, Ben Bradley, a Conservative Party Vice-Chairman (10 July 2018) and Shaleish Vara (15 November 2018), the Northern Ireland minister, resigned over strictly substantive objections. Here, though, although each voted Remain in the 2016

referendum, they had made their ardent support for a hard Brexit clear once they joined the May government, as demonstrated by their membership in the European Research Group. In that sense, their motivations for resignation were closely aligned with those of the Leave supporters.

Bradley's position in this regard was quite clear:

I admit that I voted to Remain in that ballot. What has swayed me over the last two years to fully back the Brexit vision is the immense opportunities that are available from global trade, and for the ability for Britain to be an outward looking nation in control of our own destiny once again. I fear that this agreement at Chequer's damages those opportunities, that being tied to EU regulations, and the EU tying our hands when seeking to make new trade agreements, will be the worst of all worlds.

Vara was the first minister to quit the government after the draft deal was revealed in November, noting that the result of the referendum was "decisive" and that the Government "must deliver."

Vara indicated that he could not support the Withdrawal Agreement because "it leaves the UK in a halfway house with no time limit on when we will finally be a sovereign nation."

Location Matters

It is also important to consider the patterns observed in the distribution of resignations across ministries and ministerial ranks. With respect to the distribution across ministries, the highest number of resignations were from ministers in the Department for Exiting the European Union. Of greatest significance here is the fact that, in less than three years, three different people served in the Secretary of State position—David Davis, Dominic Raab, and Stephen Barclay. Further, between June 2017 and April 2019, the ministry lost seven officials overall, including these top positions, to resignations over policy disagreements with the government. Only one junior DEXEU minister has been in post since the Department was formed in 2016. Such a high rate of turnover created a notable level of instability in the department that has primary responsibility for coordinating Brexit. Notably, the pattern observed at DEXEU was not

mirrored in the top positions at any of the other ministries considered critical for managing the withdrawal process—the Departments for International Trade; Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; Treasury; and Transport—all maintained their senior ministers and also experienced little turnover via resignations from their junior ranks.

Looking across the entire body of resignations, one other clear pattern presents itself: the reshuffling of ministerial ranks was greatest at the junior level. On the face of it this may seem less significant than the turnover of Cabinet level officials given the “junior” status of these individuals. But, in fact, the high rate of turnover of junior ministers is at least as significant as those of the senior ministers because of the key role these officials play in the British system of government, especially regarding policy-making. Junior ministers are responsible for driving policies through their ministries and both houses of Parliament. They are also frequently called upon to represent their departments in Parliament, serving as important channels of information and accountability. So, the potential impact of churn at this level merits consideration. In addition, the prime minister has been slow to replace many of these ministers, further increasing the likely effects of these resignations.

The May Government: Effects of Ministerial Turnover

Section will assess the effects of ministerial turnover. Significant impact is evident on each of the following:

Leadership

Brexit Decision-Making

Government Expertise and Experience

Public Confidence/Trust/Effects on Legitimacy and Authority

Institutions: Cabinet/Ministerial Responsibility, Parliament, Civil Service

Functioning of Government

Conservative Party

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