

Potential Leadership Challengers

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Theresa May faces a vote of confidence in her leadership this evening. If she wins such a vote and chooses to remain as leader of the Conservative Party then she will be immune from challenge for 12 months, which should be enough time to see whether Brexit will actually go ahead and whether any Withdrawal Agreement can actually be ratified. In order to assess her chances, it is important to consider potential leadership challengers in the event that she loses the vote of confidence (or, indeed, wins so narrowly that she feels compelled to resign – as Mrs Thatcher did almost 30 years ago). Of all the potential Conservative leadership challengers, only two could realistically be described as out-and-out ‘Remainers’ who would be committed to delivering the softest of possible Brexits.

Justine Greening is probably the most “Brexit-sceptic” of all candidates. As such, she might command support from the ‘Remainers’ in the party (who make up a majority of Conservative MPs). Nevertheless, her socio-economic positions are notably to the left of most Conservatives and she is likely to face significant opposition from the anti-EU wing of the party, which includes the overwhelming majority of members. Greening might be persuaded to ask for an extension to the Article 50 period in order to grant time for a second referendum.

Amber Rudd – whose remarkable rehabilitation from a stint as Home Secretary that saw her resign over the ‘Windrush’ scandal – is seen as a potential ‘stop Boris’ candidate. Like Greening, she would face significant opposition from party members and is seen as an “easy scalp” due to her constituency’s small majority. Of the remaining candidates, three might be characterised as ‘Brexit converts’, although all three might face some ire for not being ‘true believers’.

Gavin Williamson, the ambitious Secretary of State for Defence, is seen as a potential long-shot candidate. Although a ‘Brexit convert’, his stance once in a leadership position is unclear. Faced with the same uncomfortable reality as Theresa May – namely an EU that

refuses to conclude a Withdrawal Agreement without a 'backstop' for Northern Ireland, it is unclear what he would do differently.

Jeremy Hunt is in a similar position, although his volte-face has been even more remarkable. Although a loyalist, Hunt has made a number of outspoken representations in the cabinet and has thus endeared himself to some Brexiters. Although he has supported May's deal in public, it is again unclear what he would do differently if in charge.

Sajid Javid is seen as a natural Eurosceptic, who backed 'Remain' out of loyalty to the party leadership under David Cameron and George Osborne. A loyalist, he is nevertheless likely to seek to avoid the hardest of Brexits and thus would come up against the same obstacles encountered by Theresa May (namely the difficulty – or perhaps impossibility – of negotiating a Withdrawal Agreement without some form of 'backstop' for Northern Ireland). He might be prepared to countenance a relatively hard Brexit, however. The remaining candidates are all committed 'Brexiters'.

Michael Gove was a significant face in the 'Leave' campaign, and is seen as a 'true believer' by many Brexiters. He has, nevertheless, remained loyal to Theresa May and has been a voice in favour of the proposed Withdrawal Agreement, arguing that voting against it could lead to 'no Brexit'. Gove is seen as toxic by some in the party and is known to have some strident views (being author of the "Celsius 7/7" book). Some of his policies have endeared him to avid readers of certain major media outlets, although he is also known to maintain close links to right-wing American organisations in favour of rapid and substantial deregulation.

Penny Mordaunt is on a similar position on the 'Brexit scale'. Like Gove, she has remained in the cabinet although she is known to have reservations about the negotiated Withdrawal Agreement. Although junior to Gove, she is seen as a marginally less polarising figure, perhaps due to being less well-known. She would be a long-shot candidate to lead the party. All candidates below would be likely to choose a 'no deal' Brexit in preference to one with a 'backstop' that could only be removed by mutual consent.

Dominic Raab is probably marginally less of a 'hard Brexiter' than candidates below. It is difficult to see how he would avoid the

problems faced by Theresa May and might well end up attempting to force 'no deal' through by default. Raab is known to go 'off-piste' on occasion as his statement regarding the importance of Dover to UK trade illustrates.

David Davis is another candidate who is strident in his opposition to the EU. Seen as a less able operator than Raab, he has made a number of public statements casting doubt on his grasp of certain rather basic tenets of the withdrawal process. A recent piece raised particular eyebrows when he wrote, "If we need to leave with no deal and negotiate a free trade agreement during the transition period, so be it."[\[1\]](#)

Boris Johnson is a darling of the Conservative Party membership and would thus stand a very good chance in any leadership election. He would, however, face considerable opposition amongst many of his own MPs.

Jacob Rees-Mogg has stated that he would not seek election as leader of the Conservative Party. However, he is popular amongst party members and is very much on the right of the party. Rees-Mogg is known as an unusually strident Brexiter and supports significant deregulation. He would probably seek a closer alignment with US standards, which might arouse opposition amongst many in the British public. Rees-Mogg openly supports leaving the EU with 'no deal'.

Candidates are eliminated in a series of votes by MPs before the final two candidates are put forward to the party membership. As at least one 'hard Brexiter' is likely to get this far (and party members are significantly stronger proponents of a hard Brexit than either the country at large or Conservative MPs), they stand an extremely strong chance of being elected. This suggests that Conservative MPs who wish either to see a softer Brexit or to remain in the EU (who between them make up a significant majority) are likely to vote for Theresa May in tonight's contest. This in turn means that she stands a very good chance of winning and remaining Prime Minister. Where that would leave Brexit, of course, is a much more difficult question to answer.

Reference(s)

[1] Davis, D. (2018) *There has long been an alternative to this discredited deal. It's the Canada-style plan that Tusk and Barnier offered us.* Conservative Home. Available at: <https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2018/11/david-davis-there-has-long-been-an-alternative-to-this-discredited-draft-deal-its-the-canada-style-plan-that-tusk-and-barnier-offered-us.html>