Research Article

Glass Cliff and Brexit: Theresa May's legacy as Prime Minister

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Abstract

Following the 2016 British referendum, Theresa May was officially appointed as Prime Minister. She was classed as a weak PM, and her legacy was considered as a huge failure on Brexit negotiations. Yet, few analyses focus on how she became a PM in such a challenging moment for UK-EU relations. This article explores the paths that lead May to this position, based on the glass cliff literature. Then, May's brinkmanship strategy on Brexit is analysed in light of Complex Adaptive Systems' approach to crises. We apply the Containers, Differences and Exchanges (CDE) model to understand May's response to the Brexit vote. Finally, the concept of 'male glass cushion' will be introduced to explain May's replacement by Boris Johnson. This work joins efforts to employ perspectives from other subject areas, such as public administration and psychology, to understand women in leadership roles and to contribute to the study of gender in politics.

Keywords

Brexit; Gender politics; Glass cliff; United Kingdom; Theresa May; Complex adaptive systems

INTRODUCTION

On 24 June 2016, following the outcome of the UK referendum on membership of the EU, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron (2016), resigned saying that a Brexit negotiation with the European Union would need to begin under a new Premiership. According to him, the country needed a fresh leadership to take the UK out of the EU. Although Cameron was the Prime Minister responsible for calling the in/out referendum, he stepped down at a crucial moment of the Brexit process, increasing uncertainty around the country.

It was expected that a political figure linked to the Leave campaign would be chosen as the new PM; however, the Conservative Party's internal selection process returned the former Home Secretary from Cameron's administration, Theresa May. Upon official appointment to the post, she adopted a narrative of 'hard' Brexit. During her term, she had the difficult task to negotiate UK withdrawal from the EU. Despite her efforts, May failed three times to approve a deal agreed with the EU in the British Parliament. Her defeats increased political polarisation within her party, leading her government to an unbearable situation. After her resignation, she was classed as a weak PM, and her legacy was considered as a huge failure in Brexit negotiations (Rohrich 2019; Prince 2020). Yet, few analyses focus on how she became a Prime Minister in such a challenging moment for the UK-EU relations.

This article explores the paths that led Theresa May to this position, based on the glass cliff literature, and investigates how she reacted to the Brexit crisis in this context. In order to meet these objectives, the paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, I introduce the debate around the glass ceiling and the glass cliff concepts. Secondly, I discuss Theresa May's appointment as Prime Minister in such a precarious situation, as an example of a glass cliff trend. Then, I analyse May's profile and positions as PM on Brexit as well as her brinkmanship strategy in light of the Complex Adaptive Systems' approach to crises. By applying the Containers, Differences, and Exchanges (CDE) model, elaborated by Glenda Eoyang (2001), I seek to understand Theresa May's response to the Brexit vote. I argue that May's tough approach aimed to demonstrate her compromise with a particular interpretation of the popular vote and to prove her leadership and authority in a difficult moment for the country's relation with the EU. Finally, the ideas of 'male glass cushion' and 'saviour effect' are used to explain the Conservative Party's election to replace Theresa May and, subsequently, Boris Johnson's appointment. This work joins efforts to employ perspectives from other areas, such as public administration and psychology, to understand women in leadership roles and to bring light to the study of gender in politics.

What's Glass Cliff? Previous Research and Theories

The term glass cliff, referring to risky and precarious leadership positions occupied by women, was first coined by Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam from the University of Exeter, in 2005, by extending the glass ceiling metaphor. According to them, the latter 'is often used to describe the invisible barrier that women face as they attempt to climb the corporate ladder' (Ryan and Haslam 2006: 3). In contrast, men seem to benefit from a glass elevator helping them to reach high-directive positions more easily. This phenomenon is related to implicit theories of gender stereotypes and leadership, such as 'Think Manager – Think Male', which associates leaders desirable characteristics with men, such as being emotionally stable, self-reliant, competitive, and ambitious (Ryan and Haslam 2007; Bruckmüller and Branscombe 2010).

In line with this theory, if management positions are seen to be inherently masculine, then, even if men and women hold the same technical qualifications, male candidates will appear to be more suitable than their female counterparts. However, the paradox lies in

the evidence that women leaders who held the above-mentioned 'masculine' leadership traits are often evaluated less favorably than men. For example, if a male manager acts assertively, he would be perceived as a good leader, whereas if a female manager behaves just the same way, she would be considered unacceptably 'pushy' or 'bossy' (Ryan and Haslam 2007). Thus, women are often in a lose-lose situation, because, on the one hand, if they hold the women's stereotypical characteristics, they would not be suitable for top leading positions; on the other hand, if they present male stereotypical traits, they would be negatively assessed.

Ryan and Haslam use the glass metaphor to draw attention to the invisible barriers encountered by women in their professional careers. For them, besides confronting glass ceiling obstacles and not having access to a glass elevator in their professional careers, women are also more likely to be placed in glass cliff situations (Ryan and Haslam 2005). By the glass cliff metaphor, women (and other minorities) are more likely to achieve leadership positions in precarious conditions, usually associated with an increased risk of failure, and to be blamed for negative results already set in motion before their appointment (Ryan and Haslam 2006, 2005; Bruckmüller and Branscombe 2010; Kulich and Ryan 2017).

One of the explanations for this phenomenon suggests that, due to the lack of opportunities for career progression, women are more inclined to accept risky leadership positions for fear of not having any other offers. By contrast, men feel more comfortable declining such precarious positions. Another more benevolent – but also stereotyped – theory claims that women may have appropriate skills to deal with crises ('Think Crises – Think Female'), such as being creative, understanding, helpful, and cheerful (Ryan and Haslam 2007; Bruckmüller and Branscombe 2010). So, the theory sees women as better able to motivate teams in crisis situations. Indeed, glass cliff explanations are composed of a complex mix of social, cultural, and psychological processes intertwined.

Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010), for example, investigated how organisational structures also contribute to maintaining these gender stereotypes when choosing a new leader. Since during crises the stereotypical 'Think Manager – Think Male' does not fit anymore, being replaced by the 'Think Crisis – Think Female', women are more often appointed to precarious leadership positions than men, finding themselves in a glass cliff situation. According to the authors, there is a double irony in this phenomenon. When women finally achieve a top leadership position: (1) it is not because they are seen to merit it, but mostly because men no longer fit on it; and (2) when it occurs, there are fewer spoils of the leadership to enjoy (Bruckmüller and Branscombe 2010).

Although many authors have focused mostly on business management cases, the glass cliff phenomenon was also identified in law, where women are more assigned to less lucrative or more dubious cases than are men, and in politics, where women are often selected to run for less winnable seats than men (Ryan and Haslam 2005, 2006; Ryan, Haslam and Kulich 2010). In the United Kingdom, for example, the first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, faced some glass cliff situations at the beginning of her political career (Ryan and Haslam 2004, 2005). As per Ryan and Haslam (2005:88):

Thatcher's first brush with politics was to run as a Conservative candidate (twice) in a strong, safe Labour seat, losing both attempts. She was made Education Minister in the early 1970s when student radicalism was at its peak, facing student riots and strong criticism. Lastly, in 1979 she became Prime Minister at a time when Britain was facing rampant unemployment and economic recession.

Margaret Thatcher managed to overcome those glass cliff situations and became the UK's first female Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, as well as the first woman to lead a major Western democracy (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2021). However, she did not

advocate for women's interests during her Premiership, neither encourage other women to power positions (Pilcher 1995). Indeed, she used to dismiss the significance of her gender: 'I don't notice that I'm a woman. I regard myself as "Prime Minister"' (Daily Mirror 1980 apud Wilson and Irwin 2015). She adopted a tough stance, being dubbed as the 'Iron Lady', and formed her first cabinet only with men. Thatcher was also portrayed as a woman with many male leadership traits (Wilson and Irwin 2015), such as strength and ambition. Her quick and successful military response in the Falklands War in 1982 forged her profile as a strong leader to her country (Wall, 2008). Besides many other difficulties she faced in the following years, Margaret Thatcher is broadly known for her relentless profile (Pilcher 1995; Wall, 2008).

Even though Lady Thatcher was able to surpass many glass cliff obstacles during her political career, she can be considered an exceptional case. An archival study of the 2005 UK general election showed that Conservative female candidates were still chosen to run for harder seats instead of their male counterparts, demanding, on average, the swing of more than 26% of the vote to win (Ryan, Haslam and Kulich 2010). This finding suggests a glass cliff situation in which Conservative women's poor performance was more related to the seat winnability than to their own political capacities. The Labour Party, on the contrary, by applying a gender equity policy, not only regarding the number of candidates, but the winnability of the seats for which they are running, did not present results consistent with glass cliff (Ryan, Haslam and Kulich 2010).

Despite some initiatives from the Conservative Party to increase female representation in the UK Parliament, such as the mentoring group Women2Win, created in 2005 with the support of the then-MP Theresa May (Prince 2020), the glass cliff trend persists. In the 2019 UK general elections, the Conservative Party registered the highest number of female candidates in the history of the party; however, they were twice as likely to be selected to run for unwinnable seats than for safe seats (Molloy 2020). Also, as the last glass ceiling index published by The Economist shows, there is still a long way to go toward gender equity in the United Kingdom. Only one-third of Parliamentary seats are held by women (The Economist 2021).

The glass cliff phenomenon is not restricted to UK politics. As Jalalzai's analysis of female prime ministers and presidents between 1960 and 2007 demonstrates, women took office predominantly in unstable periods, such as political transitions, sudden removal, resignation, or death of the previous head of government, and in political structures with limited power (Jalalzai 2008). Also, a significant number of them had family ties with important male political figures in their country, being seen as their heiresses. Additionally, studies on glass cliff show that choosing a woman for a leading position in times of crisis functions as a statement of a visible break from the previous, usually male, leadership (Kulich and Ryan 2017).

To sum up, glass cliff is not about gender *per se*, but about how gendered stereotypes operate in specific contexts. Glass cliff can take different forms because it relies on a complex interaction of three main factors: (1) the type of crisis; (2) the motivations by which a woman was appointed as leader; and (3) the resources available to her to deal with the situation (Kulich and Ryan 2017: 19). Of course, studies into the glass cliff phenomenon each have their own limitations, and not all women in leading posts face glass cliff situations; yet, in general, these studies shed light on how gender stereotypes function as an 'invisible' barrier to women access to top leadership positions. Theresa May's appointment as Prime Minister after the 2016 British referendum will be investigated in the next sections as an example of a glass cliff situation, highlighting the type of crisis faced, the motivations for her selection, and the resources and limitations she had in this position.

How Theresa May Became Prime Minister? The Challenging Brexit Crisis

After David Cameron's resignation, an internal election process in the Conservative Party was triggered to replace him. Although it was expected that one of the high-profile Leave campaigners would take the lead in this crucial moment, a dramatic twist happened even before the nomination was closed. The former mayor of London, Boris Johnson – who was one of the main faces of the Leave campaign - withdrew his candidature fearing a defeat after Michael Gove, who also campaigned for Brexit, announced he was running for the position (Allen 2018). In total, five candidates put themselves forward for the race. While three of them were Leavers: Michael Gove, the Justice Secretary; Liam Fox, the former Defence Secretary; and Andrea Leadsom, the Energy Minister; two had campaigned for Remain: Stephen Crabb, the Work and Pensions Secretary; and Theresa May, the Home Secretary (Allen 2018; House of Commons Library 2019a).

On 5 July 2016, at the first election round, May was already a clear frontrunner with over half of the vote, followed by Leadsom in second, and Gove in third. Fox came last and was, then, eliminated, while Crabb withdrew from the contest (House of Commons Library 2019a).

Table 1: First round of Conservative Party elections, on 5 July 2016

Candidate	Votes	%
Theresa May	165	50.2%
Andrea Leadsom	66	20.0%
Michael Gove	48	14.6%
Stephen Crabb	34	10.3%
Liam Fox	16	4.9%

Source: elaborated by the author, based on House of Commons Library, 2019a

Since the first ballot, both women, Theresa May and Andrea Leadsom, seem to be favourites to the Prime Minister post. One could ask if it is just a coincidence or not. The results of the first round may suggest a glass cliff trend, as a possible female rise to the UK high political position would take place in such a precarious situation, when the country and their own party were divided between Leavers and Remainers, and no clear plan for Brexit was outlined.

Then, in the second ballot, May achieved around 60 percent of the vote cast, whereas Leadsom remained in second, obtaining slightly more support than in the previous round. Gove, in contrast, lost ground and was eliminated (House of Commons Library 2019a).

Table 2: Second round of Conservative Party elections, on 7 July 2016

Candidate	Votes	%
Theresa May	199	60.5%
Andrea Leadsom	84	25.5%
Michael Gove	46	14.0%

Source: elaborated by the author, based on House of Commons Library, 2019a

Considering these results, Aida Hozić and Jacqui True (2017) highlighted the paradox between male dominance in the referendum campaigns – around 85 percent of press space and 70 percent of television coverage to Nigel Farage and four Conservative leaders, including Cameron and Johnson – and women's rise in the Brexit political crisis after the popular vote. According to them, women just became more visible and engaged actors in Brexit, as potentially PMs, to 'clean-up' the mess left by their male counterparts, particularly David Cameron, and to outline a plan for the UK withdrawal from the EU (Hozić and True 2017). To some extent, this bias may reflect a broader glass cliff situation, in which women are assigned to precarious leadership positions with a high risk of failure for events already set in motion before their appointment.

The final race between the two female candidates took a new twist on 11 July 2016, when Andrea Leadsom suddenly withdrew her candidature after a contentious statement about motherhood in an interview to the Times (Allen 2018). She said that she would be a good Prime Minister because being a mother gave her a real and tangible stake in the future of the United Kingdom (The Guardian 2016). Andrea Leadsom's appeal to her motherhood, even unconsciously, highlights a common stereotype applied to women when running for political positions that they would take care of their constituency as if they were their children. It also reinforces the female stereotyped characteristics to deal with crises, such as being helpful and understanding. As Theresa May does not have children, Leadsom's declaration was seen as a sensitive issue.

Thus, on 13 July 2016, May was officially announced as the new UK Prime Minister. According to Nicholas Allen (2018), three factors could explain May's appointment: (1) parliamentary arithmetic, since the majority of the Conservative MP's had supported remaining in the EU and would prefer a Remainer as PM (although Crabb, another Remainer, came only in fourth); (2) May's successful campaign as the unity candidate, as she promptly recognized the referendum outcome, despite her low-profile support for the EU membership; and (3) May's reputation as a 'safe pair of hands', in such turbulent times, due to her longevity in public service, particularly as Home Secretary since 2010. Allen (2018) does not make any reference to the glass cliff idea, however, as he classifies May as a 'safe pair of hands', one could inquire if the gender stereotypical theory 'Think Crisis – Think Female' applies to this case, since she would be considered reliable to face the difficult Brexit crisis.

Indeed, Brexit represents one of the most challenging moments in British politics, and, following the referendum results, the two major male Conservative political figures in the UK walked away. First, David Cameron, who was directly responsible for calling the in/out referendum and campaigned for remaining in the EU, and Boris Johnson, one of the main Leave supporters (McGregor 2016). As pointed out in the article 'Congratulations, Theresa May. Now mind that glass cliff©, written by Jena McGregor (2016) and published at The Washington Post, 'it's quite possible, even though Cameron called the referendum which created the current turmoil, that May will be remembered for it'.

Moreover, Theresa May had to cope with a divided Conservative Party and had to try to reconcile both Leavers' and Remainers' interests under her government. The political, economic, and practical obstacles of delivering the UK withdrawal from the EU would overwhelm the new Prime Minister's administration no matter who is in charge. Also, as there was no defined path to carry Brexit on after the referendum, May had to establish what leaving the EU really meant for the UK. When she launched her campaign to become the new UK PM, May declared 'Brexit means Brexit', but this was only a vague and generic statement recognising the referendum outcome without any real plan on it.

According to Theresa May's (2016) statement:

The campaign was fought, the vote was held, turnout was high, and the public gave their verdict. There must be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it through the back door, and no second referendum.

Another trouble May had to face during her premiership was the mistaken decision to call a general election in June 2017, when she lost her parliamentary majority and had to form a confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) from Northern Ireland in order to govern. Even though the Conservative Party increased their vote share by 5.5 percent, the party lost thirteen seats in Parliament (House of Commons Library 2019b). Besides her defeat, May's leadership was not directly contested. No one was actually willing to replace her at that time.

Additionally, due to the UK general elections, negotiations on withdrawing from the EU were delayed. However, the two-year deadline clock was ticking since 29 March 2017, when May triggered Article 50. To some extent, the minority government, and its dependence on DUP reduced UK bargaining power in negotiations with the EU constraining May's position since an arrangement to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland was one of the most sensitive topics of the Brexit negotiations. Furthermore, even among the Conservative Party, there were significant disagreements over what would be the best strategy for the Government, and the Prime Minister did not have broad support from her backbenchers.

Almost a year after the referendum, the withdrawal negotiations began officially on 19 June 2017. According to Felix Biermann and Stefan Jagdhuber (2021), May had to deal with irreconcilable demands from the British and the Europeans in a very politicised Brexit negotiation. Then, she was forced to play parallel and overlapping nested games, in which an actor plays simultaneously in interrelated and multiple arenas (Tsebelis 1990 apud Biermann and Jagdhuber 2021). Nested games occur in contexts of politicisation and contestation, when governments are continuously under pressure and need to regularly re-negotiate both in the domestic and international arenas, unlike the classic two-level games. By analysing the Brexit negotiations as nested games, Biermann and Jagdhuber (2021) conclude that May faced opposition both from the EU, at the regional level, and from the Brexiteers, domestically.

Theresa May endured an increasingly challenging Brexit context during her Premiership and she had not enough broad internal support, to overcome the crisis. In an interview with Vox in 2018, Michelle Ryan, one of the original researchers on glass cliff, stated that 'whatever one's feelings on Brexit, the situation is a difficult one to navigate, and her leadership popularity is suffering as a result' (Stewart 2018). Thus, all three main conditions to glass cliff, mentioned in the previous section, were met: (1) a major crisis, like Brexit; (2) May's appointment as Prime Minister while other men walked away; and (3) very scarce resources to deal with the situation.

How To Deal With The Brexit Crisis? Theresa May's Brinkmanship Strategy

Crises can be seen as 'turning points' because they represent a rupture of, or a detour from, the usual course of events (Lehmann 2011). In this vein, the outcome of the 2016 British referendum symbolises an unprecedented crisis in the European integration process, as, for the first time, a Member State decided to withdraw from the bloc (Nolte and Weiffen 2020). Brexit brought a sudden break to the UK-EU traditional relationship based on an internal differentiated integration pattern (Szucko, 2020). Until the referendum, the UK and the EU were able to overcome divergent interests within the regional bloc by granting, in some cases, derogations to the communitarian legislation.

In the article 'Crisis foreign policy as a process of self-organization', Kai Enno Lehmann (2011) applies the Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) approach and the CDE model to understand governments' reactions in times of crisis. By using the 9/11 terrorist attack in the US as an example, the author demonstrates how a traditional and linear response from the US Government was inadequate to deal with the complexity of the international relations system. Linear responses tend to be simplistic, centralized, and focused only on some parts of the problem, disregarding a wide range of effects. The UK government stance following the 2016 referendum was guided by a linear perspective to deal with a complex issue, that is, the reformulation of the country's relationship with the EU. The same logic of CAS combined with the CDE model can be applied in the UK case to analyse British approaches to the Brexit negotiations.

CAS are characterized as non-linear systems, in which the recursive endogeneity of feedback loops operates (Geyer 2003; Kavalski 2007, 2015; Orsini et al. 2019). CAS opposed the Newtonian linear logic of cause and effect, predictability, and scientific reductionism (Lehmann 2012). Also, complex systems have adaptive agents that trigger emerging patterns of self-organisation, alternating between old trends and new dynamics. For this reason, the rationality and predictability of the system's responses are limited. The relationship between the UK and the EU, which culminates in the Brexit process, is an example of the complex interactions in the international system whose analysis is not restricted to traditional scientific reductionism.

The CDE model, elaborated by Glenda Eoyang (2001), identifies three fundamental conditions for self-organising Complex Adaptive Systems: (1) containers; (2) significant differences; and (3) transforming exchanges. The interaction between these three conditions shapes the self-organising patterns that emerge from the nonlinear systems (Eoyang 2001; Lehmann 2011).

Table 3: Conditions for self-organisation

Conditions	Definition
Containers	Ties that bound and hold the system together
Significant Differences	Distinctions among the agents in the system
Transforming Exchanges	Transactions and connections between and among the agents

Source: elaborated by the author, based on Eoyang, 2001; Eoyang and Yellowthunder, 2005

While containers restrict the agents of the system, they also allow new relationships and structures to be formed between them (Eoyang 2001: 34).Then, significant differences establish possibilities of tension and change within the system. In addition to potential changes, differences also shape emergent patterns in the system via exchanges (Eoyang and Yellowthunder 2005: 6). Those transforming exchanges enable the agents' adaptation and self-organising processes. Based on these three conditions, Eoyang and Yellowthunder (2005) proposed a model to analyse the emergence of self-organisation processes in three degrees: high, medium, and low or no constraint, as table 4 shows. CAS are those presenting medium constraints for self-organisation.

Table 4: Implications of CDE model

Conditions for self-organisation	High constraint	Medium constraint	Low or no constraint
Container	Small and few	Many and entangled	Large and many
Difference	Few	Many, some significant	Innumerable
Exchange	Tight, clear	Loose, ambiguous	Arbitrary, meaningless
Emergent behaviour	Predictable pattern, rigid structure, clear cause and effect, tight coupling	Emergent patterns, emergent structure, non-linear cause and effect, loose coupling	No patterns, random, no cause and effect, uncoupling

Source: Eoyang and Yellowthunder, 2005: 9

The CDE model is applied in this article to understand May's management of the Brexit crisis. Following the 2016 referendum, which was not legally binding, Theresa May undoubtedly accepted the Leave outcome (May 2016). As pointed out by Allen (2018), one of the most important characteristics of May's response to the referendum was her immediate and unambiguous acceptance of its result. At that time, there was no clear Brexit strategy outlined. Her vagueness, before triggering the official withdrawal procedure contained in Article 50, was fundamental to give time to her government to explore Brexit options and prepare for negotiations (May 2016; Allen 2018). However, May (2016) asserted, in her candidature launch statement, the referendum interpretation that there was 'clearly no mandate for a deal that involves accepting the free movement of people', limiting her scope for action in the future.

In her speech on 17 January 2017, while presenting the government's twelve guiding objectives for the negotiations with the EU, Theresa May spoke up for a hard Brexit strategy (May 2017; McGowan 2018). This option sought to provide a direct response to the main issues of immigration and the economy raised by the Leave side during the referendum campaign. The hard Brexit option advocated the UK exit both from the EU Single Market, seeking to halt the free movement of people to the country, and from the Customs Union, longing for an independent trade policy to sign free trade agreements with third countries (Menon and Fowler 2016; Schnapper 2020).

The lack of consensus around what Brexit meant and the high politicisation of the issue both in the Conservative Party and in wider British society led to May's own interpretation of the referendum results and the definition of the UK 'red lines'. The hard Brexit approach was mainly controlled by the Prime Minister in an attempt to set a plan for the withdrawal negotiations. As per Lehmann (2011), there is a recurring belief from policy-makers that any response to a crisis demands or could be better handled via the centralization of decision-making authority, particularly in the executive body. At that time, there was no real parliamentary or public debate neither about the alternatives for leaving the EU nor about the future of the relationship. And the Prime Minister rejected the possibility of an open dialogue regarding the UK strategy on Brexit negotiations. As per Theresa May (2017):

That is why I have said before – and will continue to say – that every stray word and every hyped-up media report is going to make it harder for us to get the right deal for Britain. (…) So, however frustrating some people find it, the government will not be pressured into saying more than I believe it is in our national interest to say. Because it is not my job to fill column inches with daily updates, but to get the right deal for Britain. And that is what I intend to do.

By applying the CDE model, we argue that the attempt to control the Brexit process through centralisation in May's cabinet gave limited scope for the expression of the 'significant differences' between various agents of the system, particularly within the UK. In addition, the setting of the UK 'red lines' in negotiations with the other EU Member States and the British Government's steady fighting stance reduced the chances of 'transforming exchanges'. Table 5 sums up the application of the CDE model to this case.

Table 5: CDE model applied to May's response to the Brexit referendum

Containers	UK decision to withdraw from the EU – hard Brexit option
	Centralization of the Brexit negotiations under the PM Theresa May
Differences	Few – suppressed by government hard Brexit option
	Limited scope for alternative exit models
Exchanges	Negotiations with the EU – UK "red lines"
	Fighting stance
Emerging behaviour	Incoherent – disorder

Source: elaborated by the author

The linear and centralized strategy of high constraint adopted by May's Government ended up hiding the existence of other elements that intervene in the organisation of the UK-EU complex system as a whole. Thus, we observed an emerging behaviour characterised by disorder and chaos, instead of adaptive actions. Despite the attempt to control and simplify the Brexit negotiation process, the discussions were, indeed, embedded in political passions and entangled with bounded rationality and a willingness for a technocratic approach (Figueira and Martill 2020) on both sides, not just from the UK. Also, May had to deal with parallel and overlapping nested games during the negotiations, which increased the pressure on her government, and she ended up failing to reconcile EU and Brexiteers demands (Biermann and Jagdhuber 2021).

Moreover, several factors disregarded by the British government during the negotiations created additional pressures on the reorganisation of the UK-EU relationship, such as the demand for a new Scottish independence referendum; the Northern Ireland border issue; the 2017 UK general elections; the foundation of two new groups in the British political system (the then Brexit Party and Change UK); the role of Parliament in approving the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by Theresa May; among others. Those factors reinforced the 'significant differences' between the various agents from the British side involved in the Brexit process who were not directly taken into account.

The centralisation of PM's approach resulted in constant tensions both within her cabinet, culminating with the resignation of two Brexit secretaries – David Davis, on 8 July 2018, and Dominic Raab, on 15 November 2018 –, and with the UK Parliament, which rejected three times the deal negotiated by Theresa May (Schnapper 2020). It is worth mentioning that both Brexit secretaries worked as male glass cliff pushers by undermining May's leadership as they resigned due to disagreements with the PM and just after she released, respectively, the Chequers Proposal and the Withdrawal Agreement (WA) negotiated with the EU. To some extent, their resignations challenged May's Brexit choices weakening her Premiership.

In the end, despite her brinkmanship strategy, May did not receive the approval for the WA. Brinkmanship means to force a highly dangerous situation until its imminence to

obtain a result that is advantageous to you. In the case of Brexit, the Prime Minister initially declined the possibility of extending the UK withdrawal deadline, scheduled to 29 March 2019, keeping the 'no deal' option on the table, in order to force British MPs to approve the WA negotiated with the EU. By employing this strategy, May disregarded other feasible scenarios to the Brexit path, such as a new referendum, general elections, or, even, the unilateral revocation of Article 50.

In spite of May's defeats in the Parliament, the difference of votes decreased in each new round: 230 in the first, on 15 January 2019; 149 in the second, on 12 March 2019; and 58 in the third, on 29 March 2019 (UK Parliament 2019). This change in the voting patterns corresponded to the Conservative MPs swing since the other parties remained substantially against the agreement. Thus, to some extent, the brinkmanship strategy had an effect of reducing internal opposition in the subsequent votes; and, more than that, it engendered a debate within the House of Commons about other alternatives for the reorganisation of the UK-EU relationship.

On 13 March 2019, after the second refusal of May's deal, and less than two weeks before the UK's departure deadline from the EU, British MPs voted against a 'no deal' exit by 321 to 278. Although this vote had just a symbolic political value, since it would have no legal effect on the EU and the possibility of a crash-out on 29 March 2019 would remain if no agreement was approved, it was followed by the approval (412 to 202), in the next day, of the deadline extension for leaving the European Union (UK Parliament 2019).

In addition, the House of Commons held two indicative votes on alternative options for the Brexit process, although unable to achieve a majority in any of them. Indicative votes refer to non-binding parliamentary consultations that aim to test the Parliament's predisposition towards different propositions on a specific topic. On 27 March 2019, eight selected proposals were subjected to vote: (1) Customs Union (271 noes – 265 ayes); (2) Second referendum (295 – 268); (3) Labour's alternative plan (307 – 237); (4) Common Market 2.0 (283 – 189); (5) Revoke Article 50 to avoid no deal (293 – 184); (6) No deal (400 – 160); (7) Contingent preferential agreements (422 – 139); (8) European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and European Economic Area (EEA) (377 – 64). On 1 April 2019, four of them were again put to vote: (1) Customs Union (276 noes – 273 ayes); (2) Second referendum (292 – 280); (3) Common Market 2.0 (282 – 261); and (4) Parliamentary supremacy (292 – 191) (UK Parliament 2019).

Holding these votes when the official deadline for leaving the EU was about to expire demonstrates the interference of a relevant actor, the House of Commons, in an attempt to reroute the previous linear and centralized approach of Theresa May's government. The different alternatives presented by UK MPs highlight the complexity of the Brexit process in redefining the UK-EU relationship, as well as the need to include other actors in this debate.

Discussions in the UK Parliament have further sharpened the divisions between and within parties, particularly for the Conservative Party. Indeed, the more Eurosceptic wing of the party, the European Research Group - whose many members officially took part in the Vote Leave campaign - contributed to May's downfall, by dismissing her efforts in the negotiations with the EU and pushing for a harder Brexit, and played an important role on Boris Johnson appointment (The Economist, 2018). Trapped in an increasingly tough position, Theresa May requested to the EU two deadline extensions for the UK withdrawal, and, in early April, she offered cross-party talks to the opposition leader, Jeremy Corbyn, to try to find a way forward on Brexit. By doing that, she upset her cabinet and most of the Conservatives, leading her government to an unbearable situation. At that moment, it was no longer possible to cope with the pressure from the

'significant differences' among the actors of the system regarding the reorganisation of the future UK-EU relationship.

Cross-party talks failed to produce concrete results, fostering further disorder and instability in the United Kingdom, as well as undermining May's government (Schnapper 2020). The Prime Minister resigned on 24 May 2019, just after the European Parliament elections, in which the UK participated since the country had not yet left the bloc. Theresa May remained in office until 24 July 2019, when her replacement by Boris Johnson became official.

This section of the article argues that Brexit worked as a crisis that broke up the previous self-organising pattern of the UK-EU relation based on internal differentiated integration. In charge of carrying the UK withdrawal from the EU, May's linear and centralised response to the referendum outcome was characterised by the hard Brexit option and provided limited scope for alternative paths. Furthermore, the adoption of 'red lines' and a combative stance prevented the emergence of more adaptive actions. This example shows the inefficiency of simple and linear solutions to complex issues. Theresa May's government strategy, based on brinkmanship as a way of dealing with a domestic and regional environment of high politicisation, coupled with the EU punishment posture, aiming to discourage other Eurosceptic movements in the EU Member States, made it almost impossible to overcome the 'significant differences' via 'transformative exchanges' to build a more adaptive solution for the negotiations.

This paper does not aim to investigate the Johnson administration; however, it is worth mentioning that the Conservative internal election process to replace Theresa May was characterised by a return to male dominance. Both women running for the PM post, Andrea Leadsom and Esther McVey, as well as Mark Harper, were eliminated in the first ballot, as candidates needed at least 17 votes to proceed to the next round.

Table 6: First round of Conservative Party elections, on 13 June 2019

Candidate	Votes	%
Boris Johnson	114	36.4%
Jeremy Hunt	43	13.7%
Michael Gove	37	11.8%
Dominic Raab	27	8.6%
Sajid Javid	23	7.3%
Matt Hancock	20	6.4%
Rory Stewart	19	6.1%
Andrea Leadsom	11	3.5%
Mark Harper	10	3.2%
Esther McVey	9	2.9%

Source: elaborated by the author, based on House of Commons Library, 2019a

These results may be indicative of the 'saviour effect', when a woman or other minorities perceived to have failed are pushed out of a leadership position and replaced, usually, by a white man – majority group – to mark a return to the *status quo* (Rohrich 2019; Ryan et al. 2016; Stewart 2018; Kulich and Ryan 2017). There is also another glass metaphor

that could be applied in this case: 'men glass cushion'. It means that after a woman's failure, it easier for men to step in because they would have more support from their in-group to cushion their fall if they failed.

Thus, women and ethnic minorities are not only more likely to be appointed to high risk positions, but they are more likely than white men to get negative evaluations and they are given less time to prove themselves, which lays out a more stressful and risky context for these groups. (…) Taken together, these observations suggest that women on a glass cliff are likely exposed to higher risks to fail and to higher psychological strain not simply because it is more difficult to manage a crisis, but because the conditions in which they are asked to work are not comparable to those of men. (Kulich and Ryan 2017: 17-18)

Additionally, the precariousness of glass cliff situations is not only related to potential risks of failure, but it can also increase the incidence of a career trauma (Ryan et al. 2016). Besides being characterized as a weak Prime Minister, Theresa May will probably be remembered by many as the PM who failed on Brexit negotiations, unable to deliver UK withdrawal from the EU.

Boris Johnson, on the contrary, who also pushed through a brinksmanship strategy on Brexit negotiations, was able to approve the deal he renegotiated with the EU after getting a majority of the UK Parliament in the general elections he called for 12 December 2019. Although the main lines of the Withdrawal Agreement had not changed compared to May's version, he had more internal support to get the text approved. On 20 December 2019, the House of Commons passed Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement by 358 to 254 (UK Parliament 2019).

As mentioned in the first section of this article, a glass cliff situation comprises a complex interaction between (1) the type of crisis faced; (2) the paths that led to a woman's appointment to a leadership position; and, particularly, (3) the resources given to her to deal with this crisis (Kulich and Ryan 2017). Brexit is considered a major and unprecedented crisis both for the United Kingdom and for the European Union. And Theresa May's nomination as Prime Minister, at the time when both David Cameron and Boris Johnson stepped away, highlights a glass cliff trend, in which a highly risky position is offered to a woman while men feel more comfortable with declining it. Also, to some extent, May was blamed for negative results which were already set in motion before she took office, since any Prime Minister would have to cope with a divided country and nested games on negotiations. Finally, during her administration, May had limited capabilities and scope for action. May's lack of resources was fundamental for her defeat three times in the UK Parliament when she submitted the deal negotiated with the EU for approval.

In contrast, Boris Johnson benefited from May's downfall to present himself as someone who would 'get Brexit done' (Johnson, 2019), recalling the 'saviour effect'. He also capitalised on the Brexit fatigue both from the UK Parliament and society three years after the referendum. In addition, he had the support from his backbenchers as a 'glass cushion' if he failed to deliver a deal and if UK-EU negotiations ended up in a crash-out. Although this article does not explore Johnson's administration in detail, these comparisons based on the glass cliff literature shed light on important aspects usually ignored when assessing Theresa May's performance as Prime Minister.

CONCLUSION

An old university friend of Theresa May said that, since her Oxford days, she wanted to be Britain's first female Prime Minister (Weaver 2016). Although Margaret Thatcher's election may have put a damper on her dreams, it also made it more feasible for women to achieve top leadership positions. However, as pointed out by Allen (2018: 105-106), 'in becoming prime minister, May achieved her lifelong ambition but her prize resembled a poisoned chalice'.

This article aimed to discuss Theresa May's appointment as PM and her strategy on Brexit negotiations showing evidence on glass cliff. Indeed, May was assigned to a precarious leadership position with a high risk of failure in such a challenging moment of the UK-EU relation. The country and even her party were divided on the matter, and there was no clear plan to guide the Brexit process. By acknowledging it, I do not want to exempt Theresa May's mismanagement choices, but to take these poor leadership conditions into account when evaluating her government.

The CAS approach and the CDE model helped to analyse how the interpretation of the referendum outcome and the Brexit approach to withdrawal negotiations under Theresa May's administration bounded their alternatives. The UK strategy based on linearity and centralization as well as the adoption of a fighting stance limited their scope for negotiation and hinder more adaptive actions. The increasing pressures culminated with her resignation in May 2019 following three defeats of her deal in the UK Parliament, two Brexit deadline extensions, and one European Parliament election.

Even though Brexit was the most important issue of her administration, May should not be remembered only for it. By Rosa Prince (2020), 'Theresa May's other legacy' was being a champion of women in politics. As mentioned before, May was a co-founder of the Program Women2Win, a Conservative initiative to boost female political careers and increase representation in parliament. In her last Question Time as PM, May stated: 'I'm sure that amongst the women in this House today, there is a future prime minister, maybe more than one' (Prince 2020). Albeit she was not a strong advocate for gender equality at the beginning of her career as MP in 1997, she was gradually becoming more interested and supportive of gender policies. However, she was criticized, mainly by her Labour rivals, for not doing enough for women during her administration and for her low-feminist profile. Unfortunately, this more positive May's legacy was overshadowed by the Brexit crisis. As Prince (2020) underlines, 'May found herself held hostage by her own daily fight for survival, unable to set the agenda, her time almost entirely consumed by Brexit'.

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