



Steering the course

CHURCH ENSTONE AND MAIDENHEAD

The making and meaning of a prime minister

AS A student at Oxford, Theresa May looked like a typical ambitious young Tory. The daughter of a vicar, she had been stuffing envelopes for her local Conservative association for years. She was a member of the Oxford University Conservative Association; it was at one of its discos that Benazir Bhutto, later the prime minister of Pakistan, introduced her to the man she would marry. She also joined the Oxford Union, a debating society where politicians in embryo learn to speechify, ingratiate themselves and stab each other in the back. She told a tutorial partner that she wanted to be prime minister.

Yet various things distinguished her from the classic Tory hack. For one, she did not read philosophy, politics and economics (PPE), the course designed to train future elites. She read geography. For David Willetts, who was minister for universities in the 2010-15 coalition government in which Mrs May was home secretary, this distinction is more than incidental.

He notes that PPEists (like David Cameron, Mrs May's predecessor, and indeed Lord Willetts) tend to concentrate on Britain's sectoral strengths—its booming service industries, its great universities, the City—whose success might trickle down to poorer areas, or into whose orbit residents of poorer areas might be persuaded to

move. By contrast Mrs May cares about places, their preservation and people's attachment to them, an attitude which makes her particularly concerned with down-and-out areas that need help picking themselves up.

In this she is well-suited to her times. Britain's vote for Brexit (the responsibility for whose realisation she inherited from Mr Cameron) was partly a cry of protest by parts of the country that felt left behind, excluded from its successes, or overwhelmed by rapid change. It showed how much people's sense of belonging in the place where they live mattered to them, and the value they placed on stability and order. The prime minister's talk of reviving manufacturing, reducing immigration and tackling corporate excess plays well to such feelings. The public likes her considerably better than it did Mr Cameron two years into the previous parliament, and much better than the lamentably led Labour Party (see chart on next page). In a YouGov poll published on January 3rd, every region, every social class and every age group said she would be a better prime minister than Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader.

The outlook, education and character of a leader always matter; but with Mrs May they matter more than usual. Most prime ministers travel on tracks of tradi-

tion, convention and precedent. The legal, political, economic and diplomatic complexities of Brexit have put paid to that. A costly and possibly bitter divorce must be negotiated. Trade deals with the remainder of the EU, and possibly the rest of the world, must be struck. A new immigration regime must be established, economic shocks contained, partners reassured, Scotland held in the union, peace in Northern Ireland preserved and painful fractures in British society closed. There are no precedents. It is for Mrs May to create her own; to make choices that dwarf most of those that confronted her predecessors.

A prime minister who had won a general election, or even a contested party leadership campaign, would have had to give some sense of how she would make such choices. But Mrs May has done neither of those things. Thus for an idea of how she reads the lay of the unknown land ahead, and how adept she will prove at navigating it, it pays to look closely at who she is and where she came from.

Onward Christian soldiers

Mrs May was born in 1956 to the Reverend Hubert Brasier and his wife Zaidee. When she was a girl her father became vicar of St Kenelm's in Church Enstone, a cinematically idyllic huddle of golden stone houses amid the drystone walls and rolling fields of the Cotswolds. Her ecclesiastical upbringing has prompted comparisons to Angela Merkel (whose father was a Lutheran pastor in East Germany) and Gordon Brown, Tony Blair's successor as Labour prime minister (whose father was a Presbyterian minister in Fife, near Edinburgh). All three grew up in households dominated ▶▶

by the moral and practical duties imposed by the life of the church; all were thereby furnished with an unflashy, serious and cautious character.

Her vicarage childhood lives on in Mrs May's very English traits. She drinks Earl Grey tea, reads Jane Austen, watches James Bond films, regularly attends church in her constituency (Maidenhead, a posh town in the Thames valley) and adores cricket. Echoes of this can be seen in her leadership. Anglicanism often combines stormy, kingdom-of-God language with a restrained conservative culture: hymns about crusaders and the devil belted out before tea and biscuits. In her first months as prime minister Mrs May, too, has been bolder in her rhetoric than in her actions—big ideas have received little follow-through, or been dropped altogether. There is a touch of her cricketer hero, Geoffrey Boycott, about her too. It is hard not to detect her admiration for the stolid style of the Yorkshire batsman in her matter-of-fact demeanour. When her aides say "She just gets on with the job" it is the sort of praise their boss would like.

A social reformism rooted in her Anglican upbringing and practice ("part of who I am and therefore how I approach things", she has said) has been a constant of her career. When the voters of Maidenhead first sent her to Westminster in 1997 she was, in this respect, to the left of her party. In 2002 she warned her colleagues and their supporters that they had become known as "the nasty party". The following year, as shadow transport minister, she argued for more state intervention in the economy, a more nuanced relationship with trade unions and limits on fat-cat excesses.

All of this lives on in her premiership. When, having lost the Brexit referendum, Mr Cameron resigned, Mrs May enumerated the inequities of modern Britain as she launched her campaign to succeed him: boys born poor die nine years earlier than others; children educated in state schools are less likely to reach the top professions than those educated privately; many women earn less than men.

When she became prime minister she repeated some of these "burning injustices" on the steps of Downing Street. She has talked up a new generation of state-run grammar schools (schools, like the one she attended, that are allowed to select their pupils through competitive exams) to give clever children from poor backgrounds a leg up. She has hinted at worker representation on company boards; she has lamented the effect of the Bank of England's low interest rates on savers.

Mrs May patently stands apart from many of her colleagues in ways that go beyond this reformism; there is a social distance, too. Some say it has to do with the isolating shock of losing both of her parents when she was relatively young. Oth-

ers cite her experience of diabetes—the prime minister must inject herself with insulin several times a day. But the best explanation is her career as a woman educated at a provincial grammar-school (the granddaughter of domestic servants, no less) in a party dominated by public-school boys given to cavalier confidence and clever-clever plans. When her allies praise Mrs May's methodical style and her disdain for chummy, informal "sofa government", they are channelling her long-held exasperation with the know-it-all posh boys—particularly Mr Cameron and George Osborne, his chancellor.

The prime minister has little time for the parliamentary village, avoiding its bars and tea rooms, declining dinner-party invitations in London—let alone in Brussels, or Washington, DC. She is the opposite of cosmopolitan. "If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere," she told her party conference in October. She struggles with the small talk that oils diplomatic (and cabinet) wheels. The European Council summit on December 16th saw the prime minister fiddling awkwardly with her cuffs as fellow leaders air-kissed behind her. She is far more at home in her constituency on the banks of the Thames. Her house in the village of Sonning sits by what Jerome K. Jerome, a Victorian humorist, described as "the most fairy-like little nook on the whole river". Here, in her natural habitat, she is by all accounts witty, relaxed and gregarious.

Ordering their estate

Mrs May's time running the Home Office, a department institutionally obsessed with order and control, earned her a reputation for inscrutability, formality and obsession with detail ("she was always asking for more papers in her red box," says one lieutenant). She worked well with people with whom she had things in common, like Lynne Featherstone, the Liberal Democrat minister whose commitment to introduc-

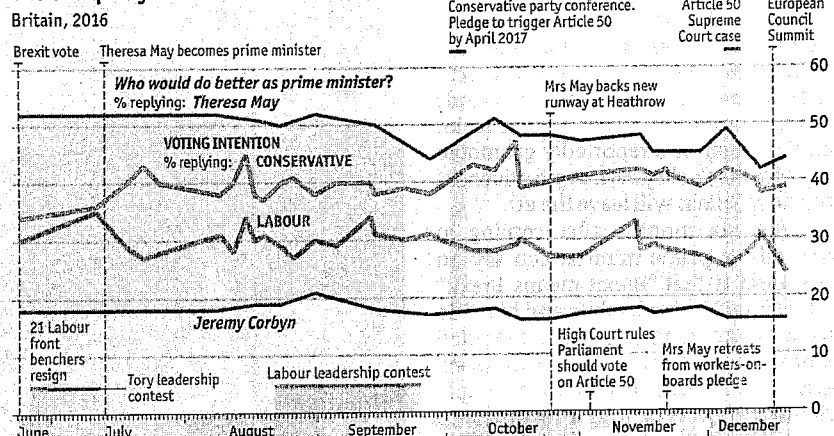
ing gay marriage she shared. But she excluded and ignored those—like Jeremy Browne and Norman Baker, Ms Featherstone's two successors in the department—with whom she did not.

She clashed with Michael Gove, then the education secretary, over measures to deal with extremism in schools and with Mr Osborne over immigration—she wanted to tighten up Britain's student visa regime. She was typically one of the last ministers to agree on her department's budget in the annual financial round. She also had a run-in with Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, over three water cannon he bought without seeking the Home Office's necessary—and, in the event, withheld—approval. The incident serves her inner circle as a house parable showing the perfidy of civil servants (who talked Mr Johnson into the idea), the folly of ill-scrutinised decisions, the danger of informal structures and the comeuppance of those who do not do things Mrs May's way.

In Downing Street Mrs May has imposed the centralised, formal working practices that she honed at the Home Office. The day is governed by the 8.30am meeting, a shoeless free-for-all under Mr Cameron that now has a strict invitation list. Blue-sky thinking and speculation about the headlines that evening are out; firm instructions to staffers are in. In the prime minister's office a table and chairs (and vases of hydrangeas) have replaced the sofa. Ministers and staffers must submit papers earlier than under Mr Cameron, to allow her to work through them late in the evening (he would do them the next day). The whole machine is run by a small, powerful team centred on her two chiefs-of-staff, Fiona Hill and Nick Timothy.

Cabinet and sub-cabinet meetings are venues for serious discussion, not Potemkin forums with pre-decided outcomes. Having for the most part distributed ministerial portfolios evenly between Leavers and Remainers, Mrs May appointed three

The one-party state



Sources: ICM; Ipsos MORI; Opinium; YouGov

people who, unlike her, campaigned for Brexit to the departments most concerned with bringing it about—Mr Johnson to the Foreign Office, Liam Fox to a new Department for International Trade and David Davis to a new Department for Exiting the EU. Giving the Brexit-related jobs to paid-up Brexiteers insulates her from criticisms of not supporting the policy. It also cannily reduces the chance of a single Brexiteer emerging as a rival if the process's outcome disappoints the diehard Leavers.

One minister says that, whereas the cabinets of Mr Blair and Mr Brown were furious power struggles, and Mr Cameron's cabinets mostly shams, Mrs May's cabinet features open discussions in which the prime minister really listens. Another claims that she is more interested in evidence than her predecessor was and praises the fluency with which she shifts between subjects. Acolytes insist that the mighty chiefs-of-staff produce decisions that have been properly tested (not so under Mr Cameron) without prime ministerial overload (not so under Mr Brown).

Most of all, though, these arrangements give the prime minister what she most covets: control. Even close allies call Mrs May a control freak—and as is often the case, the freakery comes at the expense of trust and efficiency. The “Nick and Fi” filter on policies creates a bottleneck delaying urgent measures (new funding to soothe the social-care crisis was unveiled almost a month later than planned). Apparent priorities—like those grammar schools—have failed to turn into flagship policies. The suggestions of workers on boards, government meddling in monetary policy and obligations on firms to list their foreign workers have all come to nothing. More regrettably, so have hints of big new infrastructure investments and house-building schemes. Westminster feels dead.

Comments by ministers have been disowned, the Treasury feels sidelined, diplomats believe they are ignored. When a consultant's memo to the Cabinet Office criticising Mrs May's leadership style leaked, the prime minister reportedly demanded that Deloitte, the firm in question, be “punished”. It has since withdrawn from a series of bids for government contracts, and ministers' e-mails and phone records are to be seized to prevent further leaks. Even the queen has reportedly grumbled about Mrs May's slogan-heavy furtiveness about how Britain will leave the EU.

Indeed, six months after coming to power all the prime minister can say on that subject is that “Brexit means Brexit” and that it will be “red, white and blue” (ie patriotic, rather than Caucasian, bloodied and bruised). Her fear of losing control explains why, instead of holding a simple parliamentary vote on triggering Article 50 of the EU Treaty (the process by which Britain will leave the union), she stubbornly

plunged into a legal bunfight to prevent it. As the Deloitte memo put it, she seems to have no coherent plan for Brexit, her government is “struggling” and still she is prone to “drawing in decisions and details to settle matters herself”.

Some confirmation of this came on January 3rd when Sir Ivan Rogers, Britain's ambassador to the EU, left his job ten months early. In a leaked e-mail he took aim at “muddled thinking” on Brexit (see page 35). He is not the first senior civil servant to leave early; Helen Bower, the respected chief spokeswoman at 10 Downing Street, went first. A senior minister in the upper house, Jim O'Neill, has also walked out.

All of which is a reminder that, although the Labour Party's disarray makes Mrs May look unassailable, her position is not entirely safe. She has a very small parliamentary majority and the Conservative Party has a knack for regicide. It looks quite likely that the Brexit talks will founder; Mrs May insists that she wants to maintain certain economic benefits of EU membership but end free movement of labour, a deal deemed unthinkable in Brussels. That could lead to economic chaos and expose her to a challenge from Mr Osborne, who is remaking himself as the backbench standard-bearer for liberal Toryism. Alternatively, a final deal could involve trade-offs unpalatable to her most keenly Brexiteer MPs, who would then cut up rough.

When things start to go south the defensive and needlessly belligerent tone shown in her tenure to date will serve her ill. For most of her end-of-term grilling by the liaison committee—a panel of MPs which scrutinises the government—she wore an aquiline scowl, quibbling with the questions and, when pushed, cleaving to evasive platitudes: “I gave the answer I

gave.” Mr Boycott, one feels, might approve such dogged defensiveness; but few would look to him for lessons on team building.

On coming to power it was not enough for Mrs May to fire Mr Osborne and Mr Gove: she capriciously gave each a dressing down in the process. Close observers say she is allergic to cutting deals and that in cabinet she sees eye-to-eye only with ministers who, like Philip Hammond, her chancellor, and Damian Green, her welfare secretary (and the husband of her Oxford tutorial partner), she has known for decades. Her sporadic attempts to lighten up are hit-and-miss: her frequent public mockery of Mr Johnson is making an enemy of him—and feels weird coming from the woman who gave him his powerful job in the first place.

Many a conflict, many a doubt

There may be lessons as to Mrs May's possible longevity and success from her fellow children of the cloth, Mr Brown and Mrs Merkel. Mr Brown, whose brief premiership was dominated by the global financial crisis, never unified his party and was up against a strong opposition led by Mr Cameron. Mrs Merkel has faced crises, too—but for more than a decade has grown through them, outwitting or co-opting her opposition, maintaining unquestioned supremacy in her party.

Like Mrs Merkel, Mrs May has seen off rivals through canny manoeuvring; she bides her time, knowing when to speak up and when (as in the referendum campaign) to stay quiet. Like Mr Brown, she is prone to overblown rhetoric, irritability and indecisiveness. The biggest worry, though, is that she may also share his inability to adapt—the key difference between Mr Brown and Mrs Merkel.

Mrs May shows few signs of the ability to assimilate the new that has made Mrs Merkel so successful. Her vision of leadership, it seems, is focused on giving statements, installing processes, gathering up information and control—and little else. This makes it worryingly easy to imagine the Britain of 2018 or 2019 in disarray: her party in revolt, her ministers and partners alienated, her government sclerotic, Brexit talks breaking down, the economy tanking and Number 10 in bunker mode.

For there is more to leadership than Mrs May's procedures. There is also what Peter Hennessy, a contemporary historian, calls “the emotional geography” of power. This means adapting to events and institutions, building networks and—yes—being judiciously informal sometimes: a dose of instinct, a snap decision, a deal cut, a risk taken on a wing and a prayer. It means sharing information, accepting dissent, seeking alternative opinions, staking out a position and persuading people of it. It is this emotional landscape that Britain's geographer prime minister must master, if she can. ■



Very well, alone