

Theresa May wins Conservative leadership contest and will be new UK prime minister

By Robert Stevens
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Home Secretary Theresa May will be the next Conservative Party leader and Britain's prime minister following yesterday's decision by Andrea Leadsom to pull out of the party's leadership contest.

The contest was expedited, with a view to unifying the party and providing financial and political stability, following the shock June 23 referendum result for the UK to leave the European Union (EU) and the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron.

The winner of the contest, which had been whittled down from an initial five contenders to May and Leadsom, was to have been chosen by some 150,000 Tory party members, and announced on September 9.

With May confirmed as the Tories' leader Monday, she will now take over from Cameron as prime minister on Wednesday evening. Cameron announced Monday that he would appear for the last time at Prime Minister Questions on Wednesday afternoon, before going to Buckingham Palace to offer his resignation to the Queen.

Standing down, Leadsom issued a letter to the chair of the Conservative's backbench 1922 Committee, which she read out to the media. She emphasised that the main reason for quitting was that "A nine-week leadership campaign at such a critical moment for our country is highly undesirable."

"Business needs certainty," she continued. "A strong and unified government must move quickly to set out what an independent United Kingdom's framework for business looks like."

In the referendum campaign, Leadsom supported the victorious Leave campaign while May supported Remain. Nevertheless, Leadsom stated, "May carries over 60 percent of support from the Parliamentary party" and is "ideally placed to implement Brexit on the best possible terms for the British people and she

has promised that she will do so."

An important factor in Leadsom's decision was the threat that her winning the leadership could split the party. May had a commanding level of support in the parliamentary party, winning nominations from 199 MPs to Leadsom's 84. However, in the wider party, there was concern that Leadsom might become the focus for a dangerously Eurosceptic movement—especially after she indicated that Nigel Farage of the xenophobic UK Independence Party might have a governmental role. Following the second round of voting, a survey by *Conservative Home* found that Leadsom was more popular than May among the membership.

Leadsom was virtually unknown nationally until she entered the contest. Former London Mayor Boris Johnson led the official Leave campaign alongside Michael Gove. But Johnson was forced into a humiliating pullout, after Gove announced his own candidacy while taking many of the former mayor's backers with him. Leadsom was then pitted against Gove as the best candidate of the Brexit faction of the party.

Gove did not survive the second round of voting.

While Leadsom listed her reasons for quitting, the decision was made by others.

She launched her campaign by declaring that the next prime minister had to be a "Brexititeer" and not someone "who is reluctantly following the wishes of the people." However, May was always the choice of the ruling elite—with the Tory-supporting media, including the *Times* and *Sun* newspapers of billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, backing her, as well as the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*.

May was not only seen as the most experienced candidate, with six years as home secretary, but had

reassured both the pro- and anti-EU factions of the party by stating at the launch of her campaign, “Brexit means Brexit. The campaign was fought, the vote was held, turnout was high and the country 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.”

She advanced herself as the candidate of stability and renewed party unity, declaring in addition that there would be no snap general election in the autumn or spring and that the government, elected in May of last year, would serve out its full five-year term.

Last Wednesday, Murdoch’s *Times* called into question Leadsom’s ability to lead the party and be prime minister. Questioning her claimed past of managing “enormous teams” in the financial services sector, the article stated, “Andrea Leadsom has no experience as an investment banker despite claims from her backers that she managed billions of pounds’ worth of funds”. It added, “Mrs Leadsom, who has never held a cabinet role and has only been a minister since April 2014 and an MP since 2010, has placed her experience in the City at the centre of her candidacy to become leader and prime minister.”

On Saturday, the *Times* ran an interview with Leadsom in which she was asked by Rachel Sylvester whether she felt like a “mum in politics”. She replied that as a mother she had “a very real stake in the future of our country, a tangible stake.”

The *Times* then front-page headlined its article, “Being a mother gives me the edge on May,” and decried the statement as offensive to the childless May and said it was further evidence of Leadsom’s “lack of judgment, knowledge and decency.”

The *Telegraph* headlined one article, “Tory women turn against Andrea Leadsom as motherhood row deepens.”

Leadsom’s backer, former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith, described her as the “the victim of disgusting ‘black ops’ by the Tory establishment.”

The ruthless dispatch of Leadsom to ensure the favoured candidate of the ruling elite as prime minister is testament to the dire crisis facing the British bourgeoisie. Above all else, the ruling class requires stability in a situation of major economic, social and political turmoil following the vote to leave the EU.

As May launched her campaign, the *Daily Mail*

praised her as “somewhat reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher,” with “her political experience honed in the furnace of the Home Office—which finished off many a lesser cabinet minister.”

On Monday, Trevor Kavanagh, the political editor of the *Sun*, issued a comment declaring May to be “the new Iron Lady.”

This is not simply a reference to May being a woman. Her entire career in government has centred on imposing attacks on the working class, including assaults on democratic rights and civil liberties and support for draconian anti-strike legislation. As home secretary, May is primarily responsible for the Investigatory Powers Bill, known by critics as the “snooper’s charter”. To be made law by the end of 2016, the bill hands vast and unprecedented state surveillance powers to police and intelligence agencies.

As a staunch Thatcherite, she is tried and tested as far as the ruling elite is concerned, as opposed to Leadsom, who was deemed an unreliable lightweight.

May is now assigned the task not just of bringing stability or uniting a divided governing party. She must impose even greater levels of austerity and cuts in living standards than have been implemented in the eight years since the 2008 global financial crash as demanded by the fallout from Brexit. And she will do so through the ruthless use of repressive measures with which she has become so closely associated.

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