

UK Prime Minister Theresa May forced to backpedal on “dementia tax”

Robert Stevens
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Prime Minister Theresa May was plunged into political crisis Monday as she was forced into an embarrassing climb-down on a key manifesto policy on elderly care outlined just days earlier.

Last Thursday, the Conservative manifesto was launched for the June 8 General Election. This included proposals that those receiving residential or home care in their old age would be liable for the full costs if they have assets, including family homes. All that would be safeguarded is £100,000 of the value of the home. The policy replaced one enacted just two years ago by May’s predecessor, David Cameron, and a £72,000 cap on the overall cost of care to be paid by an individual set to be enacted in 2020.

Cameron was forced to impose a cap—as recommended by an independent commission in 2011—due to growing hostility to the current system, which is inherently unfair. As it stands, only the poorest people, with little or no assets, receive any state help towards social care costs. Those with assets over £23,250 must pay the full cost of their care. Under the current system, the value of a person’s house was not factored in if the house is shared with a spouse or the person involved still lives at home.

With average house prices in the UK at over £300,000, and at more than £500,000 in London, the policy amounted to a significant tax on many pensioners, unable to pass the value of their main asset to their children.

The policy—along with a string of other measures, including an attack on pensions—confirmed the appraisal made by the Socialist Equality Party. In its statement, “The class issues in the UK snap election,” the SEP explained that May had resorted to a snap election two years earlier than expected because “the financial oligarchy and the military-intelligence

apparatus, have determined that they cannot afford to wait. On the back of Labour’s crisis, they hope to install a government with the veneer of majority support to impose policies that add up to a massive escalation in the drive for austerity, dictatorship and war. This is a program for which there is no genuine democratic mandate.”

The new policy was dubbed the “dementia tax,” as those with long-term conditions—requiring years of care and treatment—such as dementia and arthritis would be devastated financially by the measures. Pensioners constitute a huge component of the Tories electoral support and the universal hostility the policies met with saw a collapse in their polling numbers.

At the beginning of the election campaign, numerous polls had the Tories’ lead over the Labour Party at anything up to 20 points. Such is their hubris that May and her advisers must have calculated that a sizeable victory was in the bag, so they could afford to outline this deeply regressive measure. Moreover, it won widespread support from the media, including the *Guardian* who lauded May for being prepared to grasp the nettle.

The backlash, therefore, came as a huge shock not only for the Tories but the media. By Monday, the Conservative lead had been reduced to single digits and there was open talk of the possibility that May could lose the election.

Nowhere was the crisis more evident than in Wales, where the media had forecast substantial gains for the Tories at Labour’s expense. They hoped to rely on Labour’s role in imposing Tory austerity cuts and leader Jeremy Corbyn’s retreats before his party’s right-wing. Instead, a poll Monday showed a 16-point shift in support for Labour within the space of two weeks. The *Independent* described it as a “stunning

reversal,” focusing in particular on the Tories’ “nightmare week after a poor reception to their planned ‘dementia tax’ care policy.”

So desperate were the Tories that they paid Google thousands of pounds in an attempt to prevent internet users from reading articles about their social care policy. Anyone searching for “dementia tax” would see an advert on the Google results page stating, “The so-called ‘dementia tax’—get the real facts.” The advert directed them on to a special page on the Tory web site.

May’s efforts to defend her policy only compounded the crisis. The woman who has based her electoral appeal on providing the “strong and stable” leadership needed in negotiations on the terms of Britain’s exit from the European Union went into a political meltdown.

At a hastily convened press conference, May said she would now “make sure there’s an absolute limit on what people need to pay” for social care, with a cap to be introduced. This had been necessary, she said, due to “fake claims” made about the manifesto policy by Corbyn and repeated by the media!

May’s adoption of Trump’s “fake news” rhetoric was made worse by her becoming visibly tense and angry after reporters had the temerity to point out that that their reports and Corbyn’s statements were both true. Journalist Michael Crick said that unlike her model, former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in May’s case, “The lady is for turning”. Rather than “strong and stable,” said Crick, she appeared “weak and wobbly”.

In a shambolic performance, May repeatedly insisted, as she raised her voice in ever more angry tones, “Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed.”

Later in the day, May, now appearing almost unhinged, was interviewed by BBC journalist Andrew Neil. He pointed out that it “must be the first time in modern history that a party’s actually broken a manifesto policy before the election.” May responded that she had to clarify her policy because “I’ve seen the way that Jeremy Corbyn wants to sneak into No 10 by playing on the fears of older and vulnerable people.”

Writing in the *Spectator*, Will Heaven wrote that the “dementia tax” was always going to run into trouble, mainly because, “I would argue, that people in this country—partly due to the NHS’s successes—prefer everyone to pay a little towards health and social care

rather than for most to pay nothing and for a few to shoulder massive burdens. Britons are, it turns out, comfortable with collectivism.”

For the most part, the complaint by the media was that May’s U-turn was a disturbing sign that she would not be able to push through the measures necessary post-June 8.

In the *Financial Times*, Janan Ganesh wrote that the U-turn would not matter to the election as the result was “safe.” If the policy was now a “mess, the ultimate problem is an unrealistic public, not her. The real worry concerns the future under this government. How many more times will it miscalculate and under-prepare, and on what stage?”

At the *Guardian*, Polly Toynbee complained that May had abandoned “one of her few brave and wise policies in a fit of election madness.”

“One weekend wobble in the polls and she collapses in a frightened heap,” Toynbee went on. “Plainly May scares easily... One puff of wind blows her over.”



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