

Tory party on verge of leadership contest after disastrous conference performance by May

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After months of speculation over a leadership challenge against Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May following her disastrous general election campaign in June, the phony war has turned into a real one.

Just hours after May addressed the party's annual conference on Wednesday, it was revealed that former party chairman Grant Shapps has gathered around 30 Tory MPs, including five ex-cabinet ministers, to support a leadership contest.

Shapps stated that the 30 include a "broad spectrum" of the party, including "Eurosceptics" and MPs who favour remaining in the European Union's Single Market. He is an influential figure in the party, chairing it between 2012 and 2015. He told the BBC, "I don't think we can go on like this."

Speaking to the *Times*, he said, "I think having lost an election the party must look for a new leader to take us forward."

Shapps is referring to the loss by May of the Tories' parliamentary majority in the election, which forced her to rely on the support of 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs to remain in office as a minority government. Labour under Jeremy Corbyn benefitted from a surge of anti-Tory and anti-austerity sentiment.

At this stage, the number of MPs being cited by Shapps as supporting a leadership election are not sufficient to call one. Under Conservatives rules, 15 percent of MPs (at least 47) are needed to trigger a formal contest, which they would do by writing a vote of no confidence letter to the chair of the party's back bench 1922 Committee.

Among those is former minister Ed Vaizey, who said, "I think there will be quite a few people who will now

be pretty firmly of the view that she should resign."

In her conference speech, May spoke of "renewing" what she described as the "British dream," but the speech could only be described as a nightmare.

May was at times barely able to speak and had to stop on several occasions to clear her throat after coughing. This became so bad that Chancellor Philip Hammond had to offer a throat lozenge. As if this was not bad enough, comedian Simon Brodkin managed to get to the front of the stage and hand May a P45 notice [a formal document terminating employment].

Finally, as May reached the conclusion of her speech, letters began falling off the Tories' backdrop slogan on the stage—"Build a country that works for everyone."

May's is a premiership in a state of paralysis. The farce that was her speech is of a piece with the fragility of her government, with the UK's talks with the European Union's Michel Barnier over the terms of Britain's exit from the EU having reached no agreement after six months. The first stage of the talks were meant to be completed by the end of this month, with very little prospect of that deadline being met.

May claimed on Friday to have the "full support of my cabinet". This was allied with statements and articles backing her from senior cabinet figures, including Michael Gove, Amber Rudd and Damien Green. But given the rift within the government and wider party over May's Brexit strategy—which was openly attacked by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, a hard Brexit advocate and leadership contender, ahead of her set-piece speech in Florence last month—things can change rapidly.

Such is the scale of the Tories' internal warfare over Brexit that the *Financial Times* noted that May "barely

mentioned Brexit in her speech.”

Media reports also referred to the fact that Rudd had to prompt Johnson to stand up and applaud at the end of May’s speech.

May is not in a position to sack Johnson, as he has wide support in the party. The *Financial Times* stated that Tory chief whip Gavin Williamson “has warned the prime minister that a reshuffle [after dismissing Johnson] would only create more enemies on the Conservative backbenches.”

The *Guardian* reported Friday that the 30 MPs opposed to May are being advised by those involved in the last coup in which a Tory leader was removed. In 2003, Iain Duncan Smith was replaced by Michael Howard, just one month after a Tory conference speech in which he declared, “The quiet man is here to stay and he’s turning up the volume!”

On Friday, it was revealed that a Tory donor, Charlie Mullins, had withdrawn his support for the party, demanding that May step down.

While some cabinet ministers are in public backing May at this stage, the party is deeply and irrevocably divided over the essential foreign policy strategy of British imperialism. A number of senior Tories, including those representing its most right-wing layers—Johnson and Jacob Rees Mogg—have enough support to mount a challenge. Other names being touted are (pro-)Brexit Secretary David Davis, and former Remain supporters Hammond and Home Secretary Rudd.

They and others are more than likely keeping their powder dry and awaiting the formal beginning of a coup against May. The FT cited the comments of a “serving minister” on Friday, who declared that May was “terminally” damaged.

The plot against May being led by Shapps was revealed by May’s own party whips in a desperate attempt to nip things in the bud, with the hope that the rebels would not have adequate numbers at this stage and would be forced to retreat. On Friday, Shapps said, “Number 10 [Downing Street] knew this was going on, asked us to keep it private, so I was very surprised to see the whips briefing the newspapers yesterday about this happening.”

But May is a dead woman walking and her time is running out. She only remains in place to keep the party together and avoid an eruption of unrestrained factional

warfare. A significant section of the government calculate that to remove May now could precipitate another general election and the coming to power of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government.

Despite the repeated statements of his Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, that Labour is ready and able to satisfy the demands of big business—and meets regularly with them to assuage any of their concerns—powerful sections of business and the City of London fear that a Labour government could arouse mass anti-capitalist sentiment that Corbyn would not be able to control.

Such views were summed up by the anonymous cabinet minister who told the *Financial Times* Friday, “If she was removed there would be a meltdown, it would split the party and kill the government. We would be living in the socialist republic of lesser Britain.”



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