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Brexit and Britain's Snap-Election: "Post-Democracy Has Evolved Into Undemocracy"

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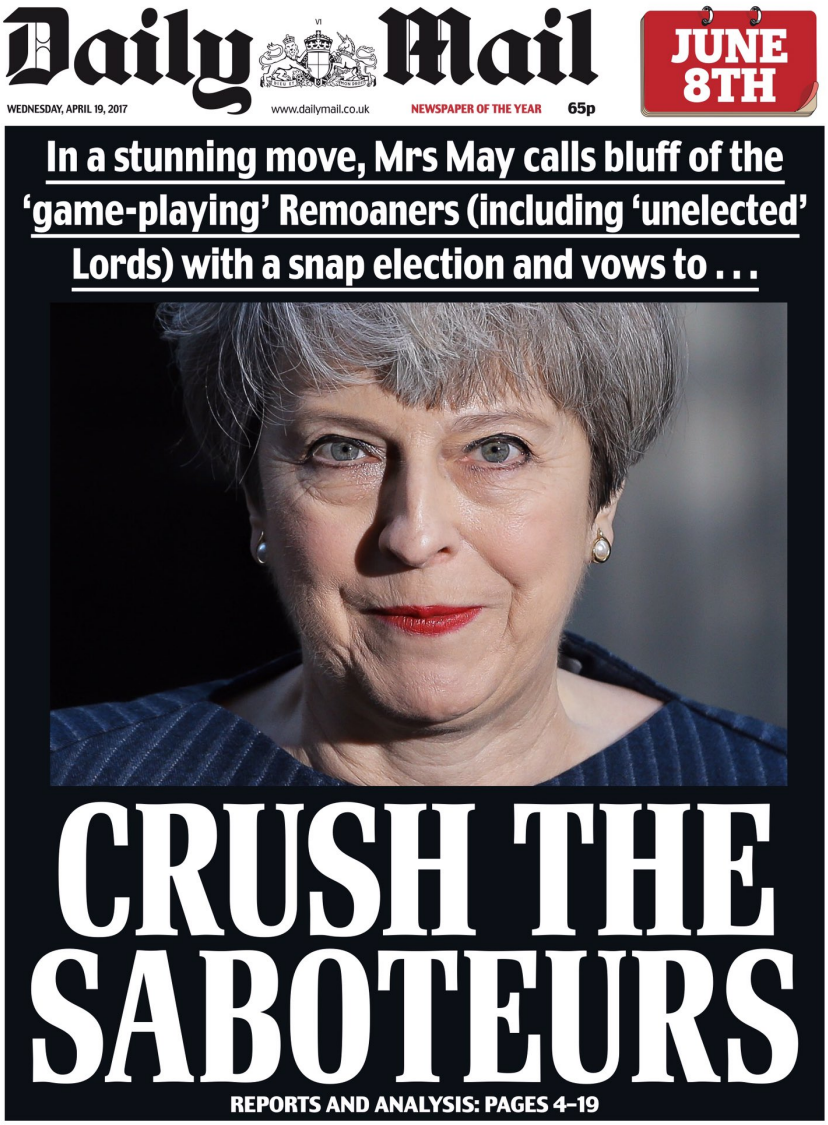
Approaching its second general election in two years, with a referendum squeezed in between, you would be forgiven for thinking that Britain was in the midst of a democratic bonanza. Think again, writes ***Craig Berry****. He argues that the Prime Minister's decision to call a snap election signifies a rather cynical, undemocratic turn in British political culture, alongside a revival of conservative norms of statecraft.*

It has become conventional wisdom in British politics since the passage of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act (FTPA) – a final, futile attempt to modernise British democracy – in 2011 that 'snap' elections, held at the convenience of the sitting government, are a thing of the past. May's move exposes the flaws in the FPTA. She was required to gain a two-thirds majority in the Commons to dissolve Parliament's lower house, but this is hardly insurmountable given that it would clearly be difficult for any opposition party to vote against the prospect – however far-fetched in practice – of replacing the governing party in office.

But it is doubtful that any Prime Minister would have had the audacity to undermine the *spirit* of the FTPA so unashamedly before the Brexit vote. Respecting the spirit of the FTPA might have meant that May politely requested that the opposition acquiesce to an election, perhaps on the basis that the 2016 referendum had settled the issue of *whether* to leave the EU, and an election was therefore needed to determine *how* this decision should be implemented.

Yet May's tone was defiant rather than deferential. Her remarks in front of 10 Downing Street in announcing the snap election did not speak of asking for guidance from the electorate, but rather of punishing opposition parties for daring to raise concerns about May's approach to EU withdrawal. Or, in the words of the *Daily Mail*'s front page, an opportunity to 'crush the saboteurs' (helpfully, the *Mail* later clarified 'for the avoidance of doubt, neither the [Prime Minister] nor this peace-loving newspaper proposes genocide').



For May, the referendum provided her with all the mandate she needed, and the election is an invitation to the electorate to simply rubber-stamp her interpretation of the Brexit vote.

That the Labour opposition continues to offer no substantive opposition to Brexit or May's handling of withdrawal hardly seems to matter. The election, where the Leader of the Opposition is clearly obliged to criticise the Prime Minister's agenda in hyperbolic terms, is an opportunity to cast May, and May alone, as the bringer of Brexit. Such claims would not withstand the white heat of a leaders' debate – which is why May has refused to participate in any (as well as appearing to be minimising engagements with pesky journalists).

> We are witnessing, in short, the undermining of longstanding democratic norms in the British polity. While the notion of 'post-democracy' signals the marginalisation of democratic processes within the policy-making machinery of Western societies, with Britain an exemplary case, the present moment sees 'the people' invited back into politics to collaborate in their own subjugation.

Accordingly, the narrow referendum result is treated as the inalterable will of the people. Any attempt to scrutinise the manner in which the newly reconfigured political elite implements the result through normal democratic processes is deemed intolerable. Asking

the people to reiterate their apparent instruction less than a year later ensures Brexit acquires further democratic legitimacy, while in practice reinforcing the government's ability to operationalise Brexit as they see fit. Post-democracy has evolved into undemocracy.

We must keep reminding ourselves of course that May campaigned *for remain* – whereas Eurosceptic **Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn** was asked to confirm by his own shadow cabinet that he had voted in line with long-settled Labour policy in favour of EU membership. But Brexit has become about much more than EU membership for May and her allies.

Its greatest impact therefore may be in vindicating a conservative revival in British political culture and norms of statecraft. The protestant ethos of British conservatism has long been set in contrast to the continent; only Europe's apparent crime is now one of liberal inter-governmentalism, rather than Catholicism.

The influence of the Church of England is very much identifiable in the politics of May, the vicar's daughter. She recently joined Church leaders in condemning the National Trust for removing the word 'Easter' from the name of its annual Easter egg hunt (having sold the naming rights to American-owned brand Cadbury's). Tellingly, as **Stephen Bush** of *The New Statesman* reports, the incident was also an opportunity for May to embarrass an old enemy from her Home Office days (**Helen Ghosh,** now in charge of the Trust). The politics of populism and personal enmity are never very far apart.

The conservative cultural revival is not purely inward-looking. Civil servants may have coined the term 'Empire 2.0' in order to ridicule the notion, at the heart of the May agenda, of a 'global Britain' centred on the Commonwealth. But the pseudo-imperialist sentiment of British exceptionalism is deeply-rooted in British statecraft.

It is interesting also, especially from a democratic perspective, to see the English local elections completely over-ridden by the general election timetable – and for the election to have been announced barely a month after telling the First Minister of Scotland that now is 'not the right time' for a second referendum on Scottish independence. Conservative modernisers such as May's predecessor **David Cameron** and former **Chancellor George Osborne** had been strong advocates for devolution (albeit with many strings attached), but May is clearly using Brexit to re-establish Westminster as the centre of political authority in both formal and informal terms.

> For conservatism, democracy has always been something to accommodate rather than embrace. The greatest democratic paradox is that Brexit might not mean Brexit after all: the election to finalise Brexit is also a chance to put some political distance between the May premiership and a strict reading of the Brexit vote. One of the reasons May is keen to secure a larger majority in Parliament is to enable her to emasculate her party's most ardent Brexiters (as well as the committed Europhiles).

Accordingly, an election victory now, in the name of delivering Brexit, will give May the space she needs to significantly soften her position on Britain's withdrawal from the EU. It is becoming abundantly clear that single market access of any degree – a red line for the British business elite – will be impossible to achieve without concessions around free movement, budget contributions and European Court of Justice jurisdiction, and certainly not before 2020 when the next mandatory election would have been held, given the remaining

EU's insistence on settling the terms of withdrawal before a new trade relationship is discussed.

This is not an election, rather an inoculation: just a little democracy now so that there is no danger of catching a more virulent strain of democracy later.

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