

Mrs May's position

On Wednesday Mrs May gained 63% support from Conservative MPs, or as Jacob Rees Mogg points out lost the support of around 70% of all those MPs who do not have some job granted to them by her. This assumes all those who express public loyalty to her in office voted accordingly. I imagine most of them did. Most of those who could not do so have already resigned.

Earlier in the day it appeared that her team was worried about the vote. She therefore changed her position on two important matters. She told us she no longer planned to lead the party into the next General election, assuming that is in 2022. There were various MPs prepared for her to carry on for a bit longer who were nonetheless saying they wanted a new leader for the election. She also told us she was returning again to the continent to seek legal changes to the Irish backstop arrangement. This was different from previous language, when in line with the EU she was talking about gaining clarifications and reassurances without changing the text of the Withdrawal Agreement.

She did not clarify if she would lead the Conservatives were there to be an earlier election. Nor did she clarify what kind of legal change she was seeking or how she will persuade the EU to re open the text of the Withdrawal Agreement. She also has said that any re opening could re open features of the Agreement like Gibraltar and fishing that some in the EU want to make worse from the UK point of view, so it is an option with risks.

What difference does this make? It has revealed to the government and public that there are 117 Conservative MPs who lack confidence in the PM, which is largely related to their opposition to the Withdrawal Agreement she has made her own. It is therefore difficult to see how Mrs May can present her Agreement to the Commons and secure support for it. She says she plans to get a change to the Irish backstop. The first test of any new words forthcoming from the EU will be the reaction of the DUP. If the DUP do not accept the revisions as sufficient to banish the Irish backstop, the government will remain with no reliable majority, subject to endless alarms over trying to sustain its position in Commons votes. The DUP have always made clear the whole backstop has to go. Many Conservatives want it out or want a clear legal ability of the UK to cancel it unilaterally, which of course means it is not then the kind of backstop the EU insists on. The significance of the backstop is it would treat Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK, and would create a border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. I and others have made clear our opposition to the backstop, but also to several other important features of the Agreement. Even if they could delete the backstop I would still oppose the Agreement.

The Prime Minister needs to rebuild her support amongst Conservative and DUP MPs as an urgent priority. Winning the confidence vote is only a first step. She now has to adopt an EU policy that can command support within her coalition, which the current Agreement lamentably fails to do. Any attempt to find a way of harnessing Labour votes to offset the large slice of

Conservative and DUP votes she does not command on this issue is likely to be a fruitless quest, given Labour's understandable wish to have a General election and unwillingness to name a particular proposal for exit that they can unite to support. Any attempt to woo Labour would also increase the numbers of Conservative MPs who oppose the Prime Minister.