

The evolution of Theresa May sets Brexit Britain on course for a bright global future



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Theresa May has learned from early mistakes CREDIT: BLOOMBERG

By her standards, Theresa May was relatively restrained at the Davos summit. She loves enemies, and not in the Christian way. In front of her stood a congregation of the very people she holds up to ridicule: the plutocratic masters of the global economy, or, as she calls them, “citizens of nowhere”. On another day, she might have delivered one of the machine-gunnings that she reserves for the Police Federation or Boris Johnson. But this time she had another mission: to position Britain as the new global leader in free trade and reintroduce her country to the world.

The result was nothing short of a manifesto for a new British foreign policy and one of the best speeches given by a Prime Minister in recent years. It was a landmark not only in the evolution of her approach to Brexit, but in the development of her own political identity. It shows how far she has travelled in just a few months.

The traditional Davos speech involves clichés about the world's ills and abstract nonsense like the "fourth industrial revolution". The Prime Minister preferred to talk plainly. Rather than join them in lamenting populism, she sought to explain it: if people's legitimate grievances aren't addressed by established political parties, voters turn to insurgents. She could have added that Britain, virtually alone in Europe, has no problem with populism: the BNP dead, Ukip in crisis. And why? Because we had Brexit. It was not a Trump-style disruption; Brexit was how Britain avoids Trump-style disruption.

This is the point that European leaders find hard to understand. From Sweden to Sardinia, they are facing Eurosceptic insurgents whom they portray as barbaric and xenophobic. So they tell themselves (and their voters) that Britain has succumbed to a similar malady and is now sinking into a pit of hate crime, nativism and isolationism. This is not an anti-British agenda, necessarily, just the panic of politicians who can't think of other ways to fend off new challengers. Mrs May came to offer some gentle advice: if you respond to people's concerns, populism tends to go away. As Britain's recent mini-revolution has just demonstrated.

Still, the Prime Minister has arrived rather late to all this. One of the great risks of Brexit was that the vote would be portrayed as a once-great country in meltdown, retreating from the world. Such concerns needed to be answered clearly, calmly and repeatedly. Had Boris Johnson become Tory leader he would have done this from day one. But Mrs May arrived in office implementing what seemed to be a far meaner version of Brexit than the one compellingly articulated by the Vote Leave campaign. [We heard about EU nationals as bargaining chips](#), companies drawing up lists of foreigners, and new rules making it harder for foreigners to buy British companies.

With Boris observing an oath of silence, lest he inadvertently made rude jokes about foreigners and the war, there were some grim moments for globally-minded Leavers over the summer. It seemed that the Brexit agenda was being implemented by someone who never believed in it, who had grasped the wrong end of the stick and wanted to use it to beat her Tory enemies. Workers on company boards and grammar schools: it seemed Mrs May was serving up the past, rather than the future.

Since then Mrs May has shown a quality relatively rare in politicians: the ability to change her mind. She had little time to prepare for No 10 and took over at a time of chaos, when leadership and direction were needed urgently. She supplied plenty of both. Almost all of her bad ideas have been quietly abandoned. Interfering with company boards? No longer. A pay cap? An idea dropped so quickly it didn't have time to leak. And protectionism? On the contrary, her speech yesterday was an application for Britain to become the undisputed world leader in "genuine free trade".

A vacancy for that leadership role will be created [when Donald Trump is sworn in as the 45th president of the United States](#). He speaks about free trade as a plot against America, and promises tariffs and protectionism. So while Mrs May might have shared a few of his instincts, at first, she has now sees a far-greater prize awaiting Britain: to sign free trade agreements with the several countries now interested them. This is why she has now told the EU she has no interest in staying in its

customs union, as that would leave Britain unable to sign new deals with partners old and new.

So the rather angry protectionist who moved in to No 10 has been replaced by more a gracious, generous Prime Minister who was talking in Davos warmly about how immigration has enriched Britain. There is no real contradiction, just evolution: she has responded, quickly and deftly, to a changing political landscape. The Home Secretary who prided herself on intransigence is becoming a flexible Prime Minister.

Proof of this should come on Monday, when she announces her “modern industrial strategy”. This, of course, is a contradiction in terms. The methods of government departments would bankrupt most companies and over the years, politicians the world over have proved useless at picking winners or protecting losers. When Sajid Javid was business secretary, he rightly said that no Tory should use the words “industrial” and “strategy” in the same sentence. Mrs May has created a department dedicated to it.

So what’s it to be? Britain as the new world champion of capitalism, keeping the flame of free trade burning while it’s snuffed out in Washington? Or a Britain that fears foreign takeovers, and wants the state to step in with an “industrial strategy?”. As I understand it, the Prime Minister has gone with the first option. Her industrial strategy will use new words to describe old-fashioned pro-business Toryism. On Monday we’ll hear plenty about the good that active government can do, and a few left-wing phrases but no leftward lurch. In other words, the Prime Minister we saw in Davos yesterday was the real one.

In her speech, she quoted Edmund Burke, to the effect that if a state cannot change, it cannot survive. That good governments do not become wedded to mistakes, but scour the horizon for opportunities and adapt with the times. As she has worked out, the same is true of prime ministers.

At a glance | Theresa May's 12-point Brexit plan

1. Provide certainty about the process of leaving the EU
2. Control of our own laws
3. Strengthen the Union between the four nations of the United Kingdom
4. Maintain the Common Travel Area with Ireland
5. Brexit must mean control of the number of people who come to Britain from Europe
6. Rights for EU nationals in Britain and British nationals in the EU
7. Protect workers' rights
8. Free trade with European markets through a free trade agreement
9. New trade agreements with other countries
10. The best place for science and innovation
11. Co-operation in the fight against crime and terrorism
12. A smooth, orderly Brexit

