

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

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Body

Introduction

Since taking office in 1997, the Blair government continued to propose legislation that is consistent with "**New Labour's**" doctrine of the "Third Way." Generally, the "Third Way" is characterized as a policy outlook that is business friendly, but still sensitive to social welfare and a goal of greater democratization in the United Kingdom. Examples include legislation that made monetary decisions by the Bank of England independent from government decisions, various proposals for reforming British welfare programs, and different constitutional changes. These changes are outlined in the "Government" section of this country review.

Also as noted in the "Government" section, the maximum parliamentary term for the House of Commons is five years, but the prime minister may ask the monarch to dissolve Parliament and call a general election at any time. This may occur after a government has lost an important vote, or if the government feels a **new** election is necessary to increase or maintain its majority in Parliament.

Early in 2001, there was much speculation that Prime Minister Blair would call early parliamentary elections -- on May 3 -- to coincide with previously scheduled local elections. The February outbreak and subsequent spread of foot and mouth disease throughout the United Kingdom, however, caused the prime minister to delay both the local elections and calling parliamentary elections.

Foot and mouth is known to be an extremely infectious viral disease that affects livestock such as cattle, goats, sheep, and swine. It can be readily transmitted from place to place on clothing, shoes, tires, etc., and can even be spread by airborne dust particles. While it is believed to not affect humans - and usually kills only very young or very old animals - it is commercially devastating to farmers. Animals infected with the disease put on less weight, produce less milk, etc., and so become commercially unviable.

Since the disease is so highly contagious, the United Kingdom government instituted a policy whereby animals infected with the disease were culled - as were all other animals within the vicinity of those afflicted. By July 2001, there had been about 1,800 confirmed cases of animals infected with foot and mouth, and approximately 3.5 million animals had been culled. In an attempt to halt the spread of the disease, farms with - or near - infected animals were quarantined; travel throughout the countryside was severely curtailed; procedures to disinfect travelers and vehicles were implemented; and the military was called in to assist with the disposal of the culled animals. The British agricultural sector suffered terrible losses - as did the tourism industry and businesses in rural settings, more generally.

Prime Minister Blair delayed both the previously scheduled local elections and the call for parliamentary elections because the quarantines and travel restrictions would have made campaigning and voting in the countryside difficult. In addition, the Labour Party did not want to seem uncaring in the face of the farmers' and other rural residents' plight. Eventually, in early May -- when the foot and mouth crisis at last appeared to be coming under a semblance of control -- Blair announced that both local and national elections would be held on June 7.

Elections of 2001

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, Blair's Labour Party focused on further reforming public services, in particular, education, health care, and transportation and other infrastructure. In contrast, the Conservatives (also known as the Tories) ran a campaign based on "keeping the pound," that is, keeping the United Kingdom out of the European Union's Economic and Monetary Union.

The elections returned Blair's Labour government to power. With 40.8 percent of the vote, Labour took 413 seats (out of 659) in the House of Commons. Although a decrease from the party's showing in the 1997 elections (down from 43 percent and 419 seats), it was still a landslide victory over second-place finisher, the Conservative Party, which only managed 31.8 percent of the vote and 166 seats (up from 30.7 percent and 165 seats in 1997).

The Conservatives' loss was so crushing that party leader, William Hague, resigned in the aftermath of the election. The battle for leadership of the Tories became a long, drawn-out debate over the future direction of the party lasting well into the autumn.

One of the main points of contention was the Conservative Party's position on joining the European Union's Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), and adopting the single European Union (EU) currency, the euro. As noted above, the Conservatives campaigned against EMU membership, but key elements within the party, in particular, certain financial and business interests, are increasingly pro-EMU. Finally, at the party conference in autumn 2001, Ian Duncan Smith was chosen party leader.

Although Ian Duncan Smith was much more opposed to EMU membership than some of the other potential Conservative Party leaders - in particular, Kenneth Clarke, Duncan Smith's election should not necessarily be viewed as a decisive move on the part of the Conservative Party away from the euro. In fact, the party remained split over this issue; the internal divisions became deeper throughout 2002 when the reality of the euro -- as an actual currency -- hit home, both on the European continent and on the British Isles.

In contrast to the Conservative's election troubles, the other main opposition party, Charles Kennedy's Liberal Democrats, fared quite well, capturing 52 seats with 18.3 percent of the vote (up from 46 seats and 16.8 percent in 1997). Six other, largely regional, parties and an independent candidate shared the remaining 9.1 percent of the vote. The Scottish National Party (SNP) won five seats, down from its previous six. "Plaid Cymru" (the Party of Wales or PC) kept its four seats. David Trimble's more moderate Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) lost ground to the more extremist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley. The UUP only managed six seats at Westminster this time around, down from ten in the 1997 election. In contrast, the DUP won five seats, up from its previous two. The United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) lost its one seat. The moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) of John Hume kept its three seats in the House of Commons, while Gerry Adams' more radically nationalist Sinn Féin (SF) picked up two, for a total of four. These national election results were mirrored in the local elections, with both the Democratic Unionists and Sinn Féin gaining at the expense of the Ulster Unionists and the Social Democrats.

Despite Labour's strong showing, it was worth noting that voter turnout, at approximately 59 percent, was the lowest in a general election since 1918. In other words, more people failed to go to the polls than voted for Labour. This lack of participation may have been the result of many factors, among them the opinion polls in the run-up to the election indicating a commanding lead for Labour. Perhaps people simply did not bother to vote in a race that seemed to have a "foregone conclusion." Labour's opponents, primarily the Conservatives, suggested that the level of citizen apathy was indicative of a lack of support for the Blair government and its policies.

After the election, the Blair government promised to take seriously the "mandate" to reform public services. In keeping with this pledge, the initial agenda submitted to Parliament in the Queen's Speech in June 2001 focused on improving education, the National Health Service, the rail and road systems, the criminal justice system, and many other public services. (By tradition, the Queen delivers the opening speech to Parliament, known as the "Queen's Speech," although the cabinet government writes the text).

Presumably for the purpose of better implementing the government's election pledges, Prime Minister Blair reshuffled his cabinet after the election. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott retained his post - while also taking on the newly-created position of first secretary of state at the Cabinet Office. There, he was placed in charge of coordinating the implementation of the government's election promises. In the aftermath of the foot and mouth disease crisis, the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food was, in essence, taken over by a new ministry - Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. Former leader of the House of Commons, Margaret Beckett, assumed that portfolio. Perhaps the biggest change of all was the replacement of Foreign Secretary Robin Cook with former Home Secretary Jack Straw. Speculation about the cause of this particular change centered on disagreements over the United Kingdom's relations with Europe between then Foreign Secretary Cook and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. Cook was perceived to be more "pro-Europe" than Brown, especially with regard to joining the EU's Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Many view new Foreign Secretary Straw as more euro-skeptical than Cook.

Politics of the European Bloc

Although Labour played down this issue in the run-up to the election, persuading a skeptical public of the benefits of joining the EMU has currently been one of the most difficult challenges facing the Blair government. Along with Denmark and Sweden, the United Kingdom was not (and still is not) a participating member of the EMU. The other twelve EU states, however, do belong to the EMU. As of Jan. 1, 2002, euro banknotes and coins had become legal tender in the EMU countries. Within the next two months of 2002, these states' former currencies were phased out - leaving the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Sweden the last EU members states to retain their national currencies.

The Blair government has stated a willingness to join the EMU and adopt the single European currency, the euro, provided the United Kingdom's economy meets five economic tests. These tests, as laid out in October 1997 by Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, were as follows:

1. Are the United Kingdom's and the euro-zone's business cycles and economic structures compatible? That is, are these business cycles largely moving in unison, or not? Are economic structures sufficiently similar that business cycles could be expected to move largely in tandem? Joining the EMU means that U.K. interest rates, as for the entire euro-zone, would be set by the European Central Bank. If the U.K. economy were largely in sync with the EMU members, then the loss of control over this monetary policy instrument would be less of a concern. If, however, the U.K. economy were to experience a downturn, the inability unilaterally to adjust interest rates could be highly problematic.

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2. Is the United Kingdom's labor market flexible enough to absorb economic problems that might develop due to EMU membership?
3. Would EMU membership increase investment (both foreign direct investment and investment by U.K. firms) in the United Kingdom?
4. Would EMU membership positively or negatively affect "the City" (London), the center of the U.K.'s financial services sector?
5. How will EMU membership affect (un)employment in the U.K.?

Early in 2001, Prime Minister Blair promised that, if re-elected, the Labour government would assess these criteria within two years -- in essence, by a deadline of mid-2003. Provided that the United Kingdom's economy passed these five tests, EMU membership would then be put to the British public in a national referendum. The Blair government has repeatedly stated that the United Kingdom would only join the EMU if a majority of citizens vote in favor.

In addition to the five domestic criteria for EMU membership and the national referendum, the United Kingdom would have to meet the Maastricht Treaty's Growth and Stability Pact criteria. Those criteria, in brief, are as follows:

1. U.K. government debt cannot exceed 60 percent of the state's GDP.
2. The U.K. annual budget deficit cannot exceed three percent of GDP.
3. U.K. inflation can only exceed that of the three lowest-inflation EMU members by 1.5 percent.
4. The U.K. exchange rate must be stable for an agreed-upon period of time.

Unfortunately for the Blair government, the pronounced drop in the value of the euro since its inception (over 15 percent against the pound and over 30 percent against the United States dollar) increased the already strong opposition to joining the EMU. Opinion polls consistently indicated that a majority of the British continued to be highly skeptical, to say the least, about EMU membership. (Note: The rise in the value of the value of the euro against the United States dollar in 2002 and 2003, however, might well shift opinion in favor of EMU inclusion.)

Throughout 2001, the Blair government, in particular, Chancellor Gordon Brown, continued to insist that the United Kingdom would not put EMU membership to a national referendum prematurely, but as promised, the five economic tests of membership would be conducted by the aforementioned deadline of mid-2003. Such statements seemed largely a response to the precipitous, post-election drop in the pound (around 15 percent against the euro) caused, most probably, by financial markets' belief that the Blair government would push for an early referendum on EMU membership. Since the pound was widely believed to be overvalued against the euro (perhaps by 10 to 20 percent), the markets were anticipating a necessary, pre-EMU membership devaluation.

The Blair government's stance on EMU was part of a broader effort by the government to reverse Britain's isolation from European affairs, especially those in the European Union (EU). This effort has been impeded by the continuing situation regarding "mad cow disease." Although the EU lifted its 1996 ban on British beef in 1999, the French government continued its ban based on the recommendation of its own Food Safety Agency. The French policy strengthened anti-European sentiment in the United Kingdom and led to the European Commission taking legal action against the French.

Domestic Agenda

On the domestic front, despite dire predictions about the fate of the British pound and the effects of EMU involvement, in early 2002, the British housing market appeared to be in the midst of a boom period. Prices of houses increased at an exponential annual rate and economists and financial pundits wonder if the British housing market was out of control.

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Issues surrounding the British monarchy featured prominently in the media in the first half of 2002. In February 2002, Queen Elizabeth's sister, Princess Margaret, died at age 71, following a stroke and associated heart problems. Her death was followed by the death of the Queen Mother in March 2002. The Queen Mother, who lived to the age of 101 years old, had grown increasingly frail in the years leading up to her passing away. In the aftermath of her death, there were some inferences that she had accrued a substantial overdraft by the time she died. In fact, her overdraft was quite modest in comparison with the millions of pounds that she was rumored to have owed the bank. The summer of 2002 promised to be a more optimistic time for the reigning Queen Elizabeth II as she celebrated her Golden Jubilee -- 50 years on the British throne. Although periodic speculation abounds regarding the viability of the British monarchy in a post-colonial world, as was predicted, the Golden Jubilee shored up public support for this enduring institution.

Meanwhile, by mid-June 2002, the Blair government had reportedly lost a great deal of public support. The decrease appeared to be attributable to the ever-rising rate of crime, the perception that the Blair government was ensconced in a game of political spin-doctoring in the media, and the associated view that the Blair government could not be trusted. Whether or not these perceptions will have long-term political effects, including an increase in support for conservative factions, is yet to be seen. A political scandal involving a friend of Cherie Blair, the wife of the prime minister, did not help to rehabilitate a rather unfavorable view of Blair's government.

Geopolitics and Global Security

Meanwhile, following the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, the government of the United Kingdom pledged support for the global war on terrorism. The United Kingdom also contributed troops toward military action in Afghanistan aimed at removing the ruling Taliban regime, which had sponsored terrorist activities by the al-Qaida group.

In the spring of 2002, as the war in Afghanistan continued and as concerns over terrorism remained in the public purview, European law enforcement agencies were given extensive -- and arguably, indiscriminate -- powers to monitor telephone, internet and e-mail traffic. Detractors have condemned the measures as being some of the most disturbing in a generation; they note that they jeopardize privacy rights in a substantial manner.

At the start of 2003, the world was bracing itself for the possibility of a war against Iraq. Blair stated his country would not rush into such a war and that before embarking on any such action, the United Kingdom would seek approval from the United Nations.

Yet, the prime minister in January 2003 faced increasing scrutiny at home as people and parliamentarians wondered about military action when no conclusive evidence against Iraq had been found. As well, other European countries, such as France and Germany, expressed great resistance to the notion of military action against Iraq, especially as the weapons inspections process was ongoing.

In mid-January 2003, Prime Minister Blair asserted that he was committed to disarming Iraq via the United Nations. He said he believed that the United Nations Security Council would back military action against Iraq if it contravened against the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, which requires the relinquishment of weapons of mass destruction. Blair, however, warned against unilateral voting by any Security Council member. In the event of a veto, Blair reiterated the United Kingdom's right to take military action against Iraq if the country failed to give up its alleged weapons arsenal. By Jan. 20, 2003, up to 31, 000 British troops -- much more than initially expected -- were deployed to the Gulf for a possible war with Iraq.

Internally, the country faced its own turmoil. Also in January 2003, Prime Minister Blair expressed outrage over the death of a policeman who was killed during a terrorism investigation which centered on a discovery of the deadly poison ricin. Three North Africans were detained in a raid; one broke free and stabbed the policeman.

Shortly after the policeman's death, seven persons were detained in another terrorism-related raid at a mosque in north London. Those detained were believed to be tied to terrorist organizations and allegedly linked with the ricin

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discovery. Six of the seven detained men were North African and the seventh was reported to be east European. Police authorities asserted that the mosque had been instrumental in both the recruitment of terrorists, as well as the support of terrorism in the United Kingdom and abroad. Early investigations showed that some weapons and documents (passports, credit cards and identity cards) were found at the mosque. The significance of these items are not yet known.

Sheikh Abu Hamza, the cleric of the mosque that had been raided, insisted there was no terrorism connection to be found. Hamza, however, was facing expulsion from this very mosque for polemical preaching. The Charity Commission was hoping to have him removed as the agent of the mosque's trust because of his political and vitriolic speeches.

In the wake of the unfortunate death of the British policeman mentioned above, Blair pledged in early 2003 to redouble his country's efforts in fighting militant groups and terrorism. Both groups of detainees were arrested under the aegis of the United Kingdom's Terrorism Act 2000. As the year began, the United Kingdom was conducting a national operation to root out a network of Algerian militants. The United Kingdom's Home Secretary, David Blunkett, expressed complete support for such anti-terrorism efforts.

Meanwhile, the case for a prospective war against Iraq was emerging. As the United States and the United Kingdom faced opposition from various key European states, such as France, Germany, Belgium and Russia, on using military action against Iraq, they were hit with allegations of discredited intelligence. An intelligence report from the United Kingdom, which was also cited by United States Secretary of State Colin Powell to bolster his argument for military action against Iraq at a presentation to the United Nations, was criticized for gross plagiarism. A British academic recognized certain features in the report from an article in a journal called the Middle East Review of International Affairs. Further review showed that various excerpts from a thesis on the build-up to the Gulf War in 1991 by a California doctoral student, Ibrahim al-Marashi, had been copied verbatim and used in the intelligence report. The thesis was later published in the journal identified by the British academic. Other excerpts from the intelligence report were plagiarized from Jane's Intelligence Review. All of the plagiarized material showed consistent grammatical and stylistic errors, making it clearly apparent that the material had been copied directly and without editing.

British government representatives brushed aside criticism of the plagiarized report by stating they had never claimed the material to be original. They also maintained the view that the information was credible, regardless of its sources. Various critics, including some parliamentarians, however, observed that if the information came from open sources, such as published articles and reviews, it could hardly be classified as intelligence in the first place. They also questioned the credibility of the information, given the scandal surrounding its composition.

Other problems have also arisen for the government in regard to the report. First, it appears that the information cited was ten years out of date and as such, it hardly represented the current scenario in the area of Iraq. Second, the content itself in the original source had referenced "opposition groups" and not terrorists, yet in the plagiarized version, which was used for the intelligence report, the term "opposition groups" was replaced with terrorists instead. Both issues have been highly damaging to British intelligence, and by extension, to American intelligence sources as well. Moreover, they contributed to the argument that the "proof" about Iraq's weapons arsenal and connections to al Qaida may well have been specious allegations. Indeed, some critics in the United Kingdom have said that the intelligence report demonstrated an attempt to "mislead" the public as to the justifications for a war against Iraq. British parliamentarian Glenda Jackson went so far as to say, "And of course to mislead is a Parliamentary euphemism for lying."

A peace rally in London in Feb. 15, 2003, like many others held across the world, saw over a million people demonstrate against a prospective war against Iraq. Tony Blair was faced with opposition within his own party and mass opposition among the people of the United Kingdom.

On March 17, 2003, United Kingdom Ambassador to the United Nations Jeremy Greenstock announced that the diplomatic process in relation to Iraq had been concluded and that his country would withdraw its second draft

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resolution. Despite the unsuccessful effort by the Prime Minister Tony Blair to get a second resolution passed, the United Kingdom intended to pursue military action anyway, albeit under the aegis of the existing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, which warned of consequences in the event of Iraqi non-compliance. Although many legal experts disagree as to whether or not it is possible to preserve the legality of such action by relying on Security Resolution 1441, United Kingdom Attorney General Lord Goldsmith asserted that action against Iraq would be legal, based on the protections of this existing resolution. Contrary opinions by legal experts and the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan were not addressed by Lord Goldsmith.

Nevertheless, Blair faced a crisis within his own government as a consequence of his choices regarding Iraq. One of Blair's cabinet ministers, Clare Short, the Minister for International Development, announced that she would resign if the United Kingdom involved itself in a war without legitimate United Nations support. Saying that she could not "stay and defend the indefensible," Short explained that if there was no United Nations authority for military action, and if there were no provisions made for the reconstruction of Iraq, she would not uphold a breach of international law, and she would not condone the undermining of the United Nations (as stated in an interview with the BBC). Short also noted that she was quite shocked at Prime Minister Tony Blair's "recklessness" in regard to Iraq, and that despite the government's responsiveness to her concerns in private, she had seen no moderating shift in the current rush to war against Iraq.

Short's announcement came as an unwelcome surprise to the rest of the government, and other Cabinet Secretaries criticized her untimely lack of discretion. Nevertheless, Member of Parliament, Andy Reed, also announced that he was resigning as Parliamentary Aide to Environment Secretary, Margaret Beckett. Four other Parliamentary Secretaries -- Members of Parliament who assist Cabinet Ministers -- announced that they would also resign if military action was pursued without sanction from the United Nations. Earlier, Conservative Whip, John Randall, resigned after stating that the case had not yet been made for war. Robin Cook, the country's former Foreign Secretary and Leader of the Commons issued the most significant resignation.

Meanwhile, a group of parliamentarians were drafting amendments intended to express support for British troops, while challenging the moral authority of unsanctioned military action against Iraq.

Once British forces commenced fighting in Iraq, Blair reported to the British parliament that the war against Iraq was going according to plan. Still, he warned of "difficult days ahead" and predicted pockets of resistance in certain areas. In the early days of fighting, British troops had been killed and Blair expressed gratitude for their service. Three helicopters and a Royal Air Force Tornado had been lost in accidents. The Tornado may well have been shot down in friendly fire by a United States Patriot missile. An investigation was pending in this regard. There were also several combat casualties.

As the war ensued, the political developments at home did not bode well for Prime Minister Blair. In a recent vote, several Members of Parliament from his own Labor Party voted against him in regard to Iraq. Although he did not immediately face a threat to his leadership, the number of dissenting voices and the force of active opposition was sure to increase. Many Labor members who had either abstained from the vote on Iraq or agreed to go along with Blair's position for reasons of loyalty, promised that they would not take the path of least resistance again.

While not experiencing the resounding support for the war as his counterpart in the United States, Blair received a spike in support just after the start of the war. That spike lessened as the war progressed and new polls showed that the British public was reacting to inaccurate reporting about the fall of Basra, military casualties, and reports of Iraqi resistance. (Source: Daily Telegraph poll taken on March 30, 2003)

In April 2003, United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair and United States President George Bush met for a summit at Hillsborough Castle on the outskirts of Belfast in Northern Ireland. The summit focused on an administrative agenda for a post-war Iraq. The leaders of both countries concurred on the basis of a three-part strategy: (1) security and infrastructure control by the United States Pentagon; (2) a multi-ethnic Iraqi interim authority; and (3) transition to full Iraqi autonomy. Nevertheless, the details of the plan were largely unspecified and

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officials from both countries have issued contradictory statements about the role of the United Nations and other international bodies in a post-war Iraq. Middle East peace was also be on the agenda.

A Matter of Peace

The summit was followed with peace process discussions that included Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and the leaders of the three major Good Friday Agreement parties -- the Ulster Unionists, Sinn Fein and the SDLP. The talks aimed at restoring devolution and would prepare the political agenda for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly in May. A large anti-war protest was expected with demonstrators coming from all across Ireland to deliver their message to Blair and Bush of dismay regarding the controversial war in the Middle East.

Impact of Iraq on Domestic Politics

In local elections held in the United Kingdom in the spring of 2003, Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party suffered its poorest showing since 1979. Labor garnered only 30 percent of the votes cast while the conservative Tories garnered 34 percent themselves. While the Tories hardly commanded a victory, the real story of the election was not the showing of the Tories, but that of Labour. Indeed, despite growing support for Prime Minister Blair during the course of military action against Iraq, the war seems to have caused a backlash of sorts for the Labour party.

In some predominantly Muslim constituencies -- usually a Labour stronghold -- people felt that their voices of protest against the war went unheard. As such, these constituencies did not feel compelled to support Labour. Similarly, in areas such as Bristol, where public services have been severely degraded, the usual Labour party supporters did not feel compelled to show their approval for a party and a prime minister who (in their collective view) appeared to be more focused on international affairs than domestic concerns. For them, improving the lives of people in Basra did not seem to be quite as important as the improvement of the quality of life at home.

Compounding matters was the fact that statistic showed that about 60 percent of people in the United Kingdom did not believe that the war in Iraq would stave off terrorism. Instead, respondents and experts concluded that it has made the United Kingdom more of a target than before. People also feared that no weapons of mass destruction would be found -- the primary impetus for taking pre-emptive action in the first place. Should such weapons be found in the future, the discovery would be helpful to Blair, and by extension, his party. In the meanwhile, people have also been concerned that the war has damaged inter-European relations.

The convergence of all these factors were believed to have contributed to the abysmal showing of Labour in these local elections.

Post-War Issues

In May 2003, following the cessation of military action in Iraq, United Kingdom International Development Minister, Clare Short (mentioned above), resigned from the cabinet of the Prime Minister because of the United Nations' minor role in a post-war Iraq. In her resignation statement, Short blasted Blair for breaking promises and assurances about the role of the United Nations. Short also accused Blair of being unduly concerned about his political legacy and referred to his government as excessively controlled. Some political insiders suggested that Blair had already intended to sack Short.

In the aftermath of the war, the United Kingdom's coalition partner -- the United States -- presented a resolution to the United Nations Security Council in regard to Iraq. The resolution would suspend sanctions; legalize the sale of oil -- the revenues of which would be used for reconstruction purposes -- and transition the Iraqi "oil-for-food" program into the realm of United States control. The resolution would also ensure that products of Iraq and associated proceeds would be immune from judicial and administrative challenges. The interests of any entities not associated with the United States-led coalition in Iraq would be removed. The passage of the resolution would also facilitate the eventual involvement of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Although the United

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Nations would be involved in appointing a coordinator to help with reconstruction efforts, this role would be nominal in its authority. Moreover, any role for United Nations weapons inspectors would be officially eliminated.

The resolution would retroactively convey international approval to the United States-led coalition's endeavors in Iraq. The list of propositions exceeded the degree to which states opposing the war, such as France and Russia, have been willing to compromise. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom -- the United States' main coalition partner -- was believed to have found the tone of the resolution rather antagonistic. That very tonality, however, might have been intended to compel international concurrence on the issue of Iraq.

As questions increased about the credibility of its intelligence on Iraq in mid-2003, Downing Street was hit by another scandal. David Kelly, a scientist called to give testimony before a parliamentary inquiry panel on Iraq intelligence, was found dead from an apparent suicide. Kelly had been accused by panel members of being an informant who gave information to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which ultimately led to allegations that Downing Street had "sexed up" its dossier on Iraq. The matter led to a nasty row between the BBC and Prime Minister Tony Blair's communications director, Alistair Campbell. Kelly's family said the accusations by the panel had led to Kelly becoming very despondent. The actual cause of the apparent suicide, however, remained unconfirmed, but questions still arose as to whether pressure placed on Kelly by the panel members contributed to the suicide.

The BBC was not exempt from accountability and admitted that Kelly was the principal source of its allegations against the British government. As well, it was revealed that the account offered by Kelly to the inquiry panel on Iraq intelligence did not precisely correspond with claims made by the BBC. Kelly told the panel that he could not believe that he was responsible for the claim that the 45-minute deployment of banned weapons had been overstated. The 45-minute claim was precisely why the government was accused of inflating the evidence in the dossier. The disconnection between Kelly's account to the inquiry panel and what the BBC actually reported has evoked questions of the BBC's credibility. Although the BBC maintained it "accurately interpreted and reported" the information conveyed by Kelly, several board members resigned as a result of the episode.

A judicial inquiry regarding the apparent suicide by Kelly was set to begin in early August. Prime Minister Tony Blair said his government would fully cooperate with the inquiry.

Faced with the media firestorm both at home and across the Atlantic regarding allegations of spurious intelligence, however, Prime Minister Tony Blair began to suffer politically. At home, the general consensus has been emerging that the prime minister overstated the evidence about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Indeed, a poll by ICM for the Daily Mirror last week showed that about two-thirds (66 percent) of those questioned believe that Blair misrepresented the facts -- and either knowingly or unknowingly -- misled the British public before sending troops to fight a war in Iraq. A YouGov poll for the Daily Telegraph this week showed that 68 percent of those questioned believed that the government was not trustworthy on issues related to Iraq. The same poll also showed that over 70 percent of those polled thought it was wrong of the government to have allowed Kelly's identity to become public, thus subjecting the mild-mannered scientist to the stress of the media spotlight. The turmoil seemingly led to slide in the value of the British pound, possibly demonstrating a general climate of political uncertainty.

By early 2004, however, the judicial inquiry into Kelly's death exonerated the Blair government and heavily criticized the BBC for its coverage of the situation.

In May 2004, reports of abuse surfaced implicating United Kingdom forces in the mistreatment of Iraqi detainees. At first, officials denounced the incriminating photographs claiming they were inauthentic. With Downing Street's confirmation of a Red Cross report from February 2004 raising allegations of abuse and mistreatment, Prime

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Minister Tony Blair apologized in an interview on French television and promised punishment under military rules of those responsible. In London, Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon was expected to respond to questions by Members of Parliament in the House of Commons. The incriminating pictures, however, were later determined to be of questionable credibility.

Relations with European Union

The war in Iraq had been an illustration of the United Kingdom's "special relationship" with the United States, which, in and of itself, strained relations between the United Kingdom and other European countries.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom was still faced with the possible prospect of a referendum on EMU inclusion in 2003. The government continued to promise a referendum on this issue while cabinet ministers studied the United Kingdom's Treasury analysis about the possible implications of adopting the euro currency. One significant difference that has shifted perspectives on EMU inclusion has been the increasing strength of the euro against the United States dollar. By mid-2003, the British government decided to delay a possible date for a referendum on euro adoption. Ultimately, the decision regarding the adoption of the euro and disbanding the British pound has been a significant constitutional matter affecting notions of sovereignty.

In June 2004, early indications from the European Union (EU) parliamentary elections showed there had been a record low turnout of only 44.2 percent for the EU. Early indications also showed that turnout among the 10 new member states was even lower than the overall average at only 26 percent. Insofar as the actual election results were concerned, gains for opposition parties across Europe appeared to be on the horizon. Early results in the United Kingdom suggested that Tony Blair's Labour Party lost 10 percent of their expected voter share while the Conservatives fared little better, losing about 6 percent of the expected vote share. Meanwhile, the Independence Party, known for its skepticism toward the EU, won its first representative at the EU Parliament.

Domestic Scene

On the domestic political scene, in late 2004, following the resignation of David Blunkett from the cabinet post of home secretary, former British Education Secretary Charles Clarke was named as his replacement. Meanwhile, Ruth Kelly took over as education secretary. At the age of 36, Kelly became the youngest Cabinet minister in British history.

Elections of 2005

In April 2005, Prime Minister Tony Blair called a snap election to be held a month later in May 2005. On May 5, 2005, citizens of the United Kingdom went to the polls to elect its new government. Voters were to select members of parliament in 645 constituencies. The party that secured the majority in parliament was expected to form the government. Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Labour Party hoped to secure a third consecutive term in office. Turnout was predicted to be around 60 and was just over 61 percent in actuality.

Leading up to the elections, both Tony Blair's Labour Party and Michael Howard's Conservatives (or Tories) were expected to focus on matters pertaining to the economy. Whereas the Labour Party concentrated its campaign platform on the regeneration of the inner cities, the Conservatives chose to highlight tax incentives and a plan benefiting business interests. The Conservatives also wielded an anti-immigration platform. For its part, however, Charles Kennedy's Liberal Democrats decided to direct their efforts to the war in Iraq. Indeed, they repeatedly called for a full public inquiry into the Iraq war, and they also demanded that the attorney general's full legal advice on the war be released to the public. The demand by the Liberal Democrats came after a newspaper reported on a memorandum that allegedly raised questions about the legality of the war. The leaked memorandum was eventually published, and both main opposition parties stepped up their attacks on the prime minister for his perceived deceit.

over the legal implications of the Iraq war. Moreover, the media's attention remained almost singularly fixated on the matter.

Despite the preoccupation by the media with this issue of the war, Prime Minister Tony Blair launched a rigorous campaign across the country on the basis of his party's economic record and with a focus on domestic concerns. To his benefit, some voters who had been surveyed expressed scant interest in prioritizing Iraq as an election issue. Instead, they generally noted their decisions would be far more broad-based. Still, Blair and the Labour Party were faced with the prospect of a diminished majority in parliament due to the Muslim and pacifist voters for whom the war was a key concern.

Charles Kennedy's campaign schedule across the country was slightly more strenuous than Tony Blair's and garnered much positive attention. As the only major party to oppose the war, the Liberal Democrats also hoped to gain from the fact that they were the only main political party to stake out unambiguous anti-war terrain. Indeed, Kennedy and the Liberal Democrats were positioned uniquely to frame the election as a "referendum on the war." Kennedy's Liberal Democrats were also trying to push a strong challenge to the Tories in conservative areas where the Labour Party was not a factor.

Meanwhile, even though the Conservative Tories attempted to capitalize on the Iraq memorandum scandal, the fact that Howard's party did not actually oppose the war put them at a comparative disadvantage among the anti-war crowd. As such, Howard's Conservative Tories were hoping to yield positive results from their aforementioned anti-immigrant campaign. They also hoped to consolidate support in the south and southwest, where they have traditionally done well, despite the challenge from the Liberal Democrats.

Polls taken on the eve of the election in late April 2005 showed Blair's Labour Party commanding a lead over his opponents, but the same polls showed he might ultimately end up with a smaller majority in parliament. Some polls showed Howard's Tories holding steady while others showed the party losing ground somewhat. Finally, Kennedy's Liberal Democrats, according to the polls, showed increased support. A full 25 percent of those surveyed just prior to the election, however, said they were still undecided.

As exit polling data was released at the close of election day, it appeared that Tony Blair and the Labour Party could potentially assume an historic third term in office, albeit with a diminished majority in parliament. The exit poll trends held steady and in the end, Blair and the Labour Party garnered approximately 36 percent of the votes cast and held a majority in parliament with 355 seats. The Conservative Tories of Michael Howard had about 33 percent of the votes cast and a slightly enlarged presence in parliament with 197 seats. The Liberal Democrats had about 22.2 percent of the votes cast and 62 seats in parliament. Kennedy and the Liberal Democrats were confident they had met their goals of a better overall election performance than the last time. (Note: At the time of writing, six seats were undeclared).

Some of the key members of Blair's cabinet, such as Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, held their constituencies. But election night was also filled with several surprises. Ousted Labour Party member George Galloway, who had been an outspoken opponent to the war in Iraq, defeated Labour Member of Parliament Oona King in the Bethnal Green constituency. The Conservative Tories took back Putney and Wimbledon from Labour, secured Shipley, and seemed to have had a somewhat better showing in parts of London. The Tories also took Newbury from the Liberal Democrats. At the same time, an Independent grabbed Labour's safest Welsh seat of Blaenau Gwent. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats held on to Cheadle despite attacks by the Tories, and were victorious over Labour in key constituencies, such as Birmingham Yardley, Manchester Withington, and Cardiff Central.

Blair actually increased his vote share in his constituency of Sedgefield to win his seat convincingly. However, one of his opponents was the father of a soldier killed in Iraq. He ran against Blair purely to protest the war, its (perceived) questionable legality, and the loss of soldiers like his son. For Blair's part, his sober victory speech given at Sedgefield reflected his cognizance that Labour's overall victory was a muted one. Blair and the Labour Party's success has been likely due to his stewardship of the economy, but the diminished majority in parliament made it apparent that Iraq was a factor in the election outcome. This was something Blair took time to acknowledge in his speech thanking the voters for returning him as the Sedgefield Member of Parliament, and possibly as the

head of government. He said, "It seems clear ... that also the British people wanted the return of a Labour government but with a reduced majority."

Indeed, Blair went on to resume the leadership over government as the only Labour leader to ever achieve three consecutive election wins. But Blair also bore the responsibility of presiding over the lowest vote share for a ruling party in recent history.

As a result, some political experts initiated a debate as to how long Tony Blair would stay on as prime minister before he turned the reins over to a successor -- more than likely to be Foreign Minister Gordon Brown. Before such changes were made, however, the immediate business was the formation of a new government. A day after the election -- which was also Blair's birthday -- he was asked by Queen Elizabeth II to form a new government and went on to orchestrate a cabinet reshuffle.

In a similar case of "mixed results," even as the Conservatives could claim they had increased their popularity and seats in parliament, they were also faced with the reality that it was one of the worst performances for their party. The day after the election Tory leader Michael Howard said he would step down in order to make room for younger leadership of the party.

Likewise, Kennedy and the Liberal Democrats achieved both positive and negative election results. Whereas Kennedy's Liberal Democrats were not able to pick off certain key targets in Tory strongholds, they were able to enjoy the achievement of an overall improved election performance and increased popularity among voters.

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, there were fears that the moderate parties may be routed. Speculation abounded as to whether David Trimble of the Ulster Union would hold his Upper Bann seat. This news was later confirmed. Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party picked up Trimble's seat and enjoyed other gains. Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams held on to his West Belfast seat with an increased vote share. In general, Sinn Fein retained their seats. Largely due to the defeat of David Trimble and the Ulster Union in Northern Ireland, the prospects for peace, set forth by the Good Friday Agreement, were very much in doubt. Trimble, who resigned due to his party's showing, noted that the people had voted against progress on the peace process and "for stalemate." The depressed prospects for peace, however, were not long-lasting as several months later, the IRA officially announced an end to its armed campaign after three decades of violence. See the section titled "Northern Ireland" below, as well as the Appendix: Northern Ireland," for more details.

Developments in the Monarchy

In the backdrop of these political developments was the April 2005 wedding of Heir Apparent Prince Charles to Camilla Parker-Bowles -- a rather controversial figure since the death of the mother of the Prince's children, Princess Diana. After Bowles wed Prince Charles, she was to be known as the Princess Consort. Whether or not this position automatically makes her Queen when the Heir Apparent accedes to the throne is a matter of discussion.

Terrorist Attacks in London

At 8:51 a.m. GMT on July 7, 2005, the first in a series of blasts exploded through London's transport network. The first blast occurred about 100 yards from Liverpool Underground Station, in the direction of Algate East. Five minutes later between Russell Square and King's Cross Station, there was another explosion on a train. At 9:17 a.m., a third blast occurred at Edgware Road Station. Then at 9:47 a.m., there was a fourth blast -- this time on a double decker bus at the corner of Tavistock Square and Upper Woburn Place. All the explosions on the Underground appeared to have involved the Circle Line or possibly the Central Line. Both are older Underground lines located closer to ground level in the tube system.

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About 50 people were reported to have been killed and more than 700 injured. It was believed that several people died at each of the four blast sites although most appeared to have died in the blast on a train between Russel Square and King's Cross Station. It was unknown as to how many people died in the bus blast.

On the ground in London, emergency services said they had treated scores of injured patients. The types of injuries ranged from minor lacerations and smoke inhalation to more critical cases of burns, amputations, fractured limbs and chest injuries. While Underground train services were suspended for at least a day, bus service resumed within London's Zone One, and mainline train service was open. As well, many of the Metropolitan Police officers who had been sent to Scotland for the G-8 summit were expected to return to London.

When the explosions first occurred within the Underground, many early reports suggested they were due to a power surge. These initial assumptions were laid aside as it became increasingly clear that the blasts were the work of terrorists. Officials noted there had been no advance warning. They also said they were trying to determine if the blast on the bus had been the work of a suicide bomber, although they noted it could very easily have been a simple explosive device left on the bus.

Although there was no confirmation as to the validity of its claims, a hitherto unknown group called Secret Organization Group of al-Qaida - Jihad Organization in Europe claimed responsibility in a statement posted on an Islamist website. The group stated that its motivation for the attacks was to avenge the "massacres" committed by the United Kingdom in Iraq and Afghanistan. It also expressed the hope that the United Kingdom was "burning with fear and panic."

United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair responded by promising, "the most intense police and security service action to make sure we bring those responsible to justice."

He also made note of the contrast between the purpose of the G-8 summit he was attending and the purpose of the terrorists responsible for the London attacks. In this regard, he said, "It's particularly barbaric that this has happened on a day when people are meeting to try to help the problems of poverty and Africa." The prime minister then returned to London from the summit, vowing, however, that the meetings would go on.

Also in the United Kingdom, the British Monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, expressed deep shock at the events, and conveyed her deepest sympathies to those affected. She also ordered the Union flag to fly at half mast over Buckingham Palace. London's Mayor, Ken Livingstone, who was in Singapore for the announcement of London as the venue for the 2012 Olympics, extolled the strength of London's diverse people who have lived in harmony and who would not be divided by the "cowardly attack." From Vatican City, Pope Benedict described the blasts as "barbaric acts against humanity" and sent a message of condolence to the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor. United States President George W. Bush, who was in Gleneagles in Scotland for the G-8 summit, said: "The war on terror goes on."

Mohammed Sidique Khan, Hasib Mir Hussein, Shehzad Tanweer and Germaine Lindsay were the four men identified as the suicide bombers responsible for the July 2005 terrorist attacks in London. A report in the media revealed that MI5 had investigated Mohammad Sidique Khan, but concluded that he was not a threat. Nevertheless, no official inquiry was convened on the question of why the bombers were not tagged as threats by United Kingdom's security services. Instead, attention was focused on **new** anti-terrorism measures and legislation. These **new** laws included the following:

-Outlawing "acts preparatory to terrorism"

-**New** offence of indirect incitement to commit terrorist acts

-**New** law for those providing or receiving terrorist training

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Meanwhile, as the investigation about the attacks were ongoing, Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair expressed anticipation about a "clear al-Qaeda link." As well, the authorities were searching for those who supported, financed, or armed the attackers. In another development, an Egyptian chemistry student, Magdi El-Nashar, was detained in Cairo in connection with the attacks. Finally, explosives were found in a house in Leeds -- the town where most of the July 2005 suicide bombers lived.

In another development, Chatham House released a report in mid-July 2005 which said in its conclusion: "There is no doubt that the situation over Iraq has posed particular difficulties for the UK, and for the wider coalition against terrorism." Although it did not suggest that the issue of Iraq laid at the heart of the London attacks, it intimated that there was a connection. The report also noted that while the United Kingdom has been carrying out counter-terrorism policy in tandem with the United States, it was not an equal decision-maker in the relationship. Instead, directives were being driven by the United States.

Two weeks after the fatal bombings across London's transport network, an apparent attempt to replicate those attacks ensued on July 21, 2005 on three Underground trains and one bus. The bombs detonated but failed to ignite, thus sparing London of further tragedy. Four suspects fled the scene and authorities issued images of the men thought to be responsible for attempted suicide attacks. Three men were arrested under the Terrorism Act in connection with the attempted attacks and were being questioned. As the days wore on, all the apparent attempted suicide bombers had been apprehended along with several other suspects.

Meanwhile, a day after the attempted bombings, a man was shot dead at the Stockwell Underground Station after failing to respond to police who were pursuing him. Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair said at a news conference that the shooting was part of anti-terrorist operations. Days later, however, the authorities admitted that the man killed, Jean Charles de Menezes, was a Brazilian national who was not connected to any terrorist activities. Sir Ian Blair apologized to the man's family, characterizing his untimely death as a "tragedy," but also warning that more people could similarly be shot as the police searched for the suspects.

At the diplomatic level, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim met Foreign Office officials in London to seek an explanation for the killing of the 27-year old electrician. He noted that while Brazil stood in solidarity with the United Kingdom against terrorism, it deplored the loss of innocent life. He also said that Foreign Minister Jack Straw had promised a full investigation.

Death of a Political Icon

In early August 2005, former British Cabinet Minister and Leader of the Commons Robin Cook died after collapsing in north-west Scotland. He was pronounced dead at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness. As news of his untimely death spread, friends and colleagues paid tribute to the parliamentarian who was known for his strong opinions on the political issues of the day. Prime Minister Tony Blair characterized Cook as "an outstanding, extraordinary talent" in a statement released by Downing Street. Michael Howard, the leader of the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom said: "He is a very great loss. He was someone who made an immense contribution to our political life." Charles Kennedy, leader of the Liberal Democrats said: "Scottish, British and international politics have lost a good and gifted man."

Robin Cook first became a Member of Parliament for Edinburgh Central in 1974. He was appointed the shadow Health Secretary in 1989, and became shadow Trade and Industry Secretary in 1992. Two years later in 1994, he became the shadow Foreign Secretary and he held that position until the 1997 election. With the **Labour** Party's landslide victory, he then held the portfolio for the Foreign Secretary within the British Cabinet. In 2001, there was a reshuffle and he took on the job of Leader of the Commons instead, with Jack Straw replacing him at the Foreign Office. Cook's strenuous opposition to the war in Iraq led to his resignation from that post in 2003 (noted above). On the matter of the Iraq war, Cook notably said, "I cannot support a war without international agreement or domestic support." He then continued to be a strong critic of Tony Blair's foreign policy from the backbench of the British Parliament.

Regarding the Monarchy

April 21, 2006 marked Queen Elizabeth II's 80th birthday. The British monarch celebrated this personal milestone at Windsor Castle. Thousands of well-wishers were on hand to greet her while Irish Guards played the song, "Happy Birthday" in the background. She was scheduled to join her family for a private birthday dinner hosted by her son and Heir Apparent, Prince Charles.

State of the Blair Government

May 2006 was marked by a cabinet shakeup in the United Kingdom.

The changes appeared intended to highlight Prime Minister Tony Blair's continued governing power, even in the face of scandals and other negative news coverage.

Opposition leaders, however, said that cabinet shakeups could not mask the need for a new government altogether.

The most significant change centered on the dismissal of the country's Foreign Secretary. It was believed that growing philosophical differences and concomitant tensions between Prime Minister Tony Blair and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw precipitated the move. Indeed, there were reports that Straw had privately conveyed his concerns about the Iraq war. As well, he publicly rebuked the notion of military action against Iran, and even went so far as to characterize the United States' contingency plans for a tactical nuclear strike against Iran as "completely nuts." Prime Minister Blair replaced Straw with the head of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Margaret Beckett. Her appointment was notable since she became the first woman to hold the Foreign Affairs portfolio in the British government.

Another important change was the dismissal of Home Secretary Charles Clarke. It was believed that Clarke's dismissal was due to a politically-heated and particularly damaging imbroglio involving a failure to deport foreign criminals. That issue involved the government's acknowledgment that over 1,000 foreign criminals slated for deportation were not screened before freeing them from prison. Although Prime Minister Blair initially expressed support for Clarke, he subsequently made the decision to dismiss his Home Secretary saying, "I felt that it was very difficult, given the level of genuine public concern, for Charles to continue." Clarke was replaced with Defense Secretary John Reid, while Des Browne, Chief Secretary at the Treasury, took on the Defense portfolio in his stead.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's responsibilities were curtailed after his scandalous admission that he had an affair with a secretary. He was, however, allowed to keep his title.

The cabinet shuffle occurred on the heels of local elections, which were largely regarded as a referendum on the Blair government. The election resulted in a poor showing by the Labour Party and led to some calls for Prime Minister Blair to step down. In those elections, Labour suffered something of a rout -- exemplified by a loss of seats along with significant gains for the Conservative Party.

Within the Labour Party, there was increasing factionalism between the Blairists and standpoint Labour members. Gordon Brown, the Treasury Head and the de facto "heir apparent" to Blair, warned that in order to stem the political losses to Labour in the long term, voters' concerns regarding crime, terrorism, employment and financial security had to be addressed in the very near future.

Policy issues aside, there were demands for a strong shift in the direction of the party itself. Frank Dobson, a former cabinet secretary, called for new management of the party in short order. Even more radical were the emerging calls for Prime Minister Blair to step down from office. In fact, cabinet secretary John Reid said that there was a left-wing plot to oust Blair out of his leadership role. Certainly, there were reports that approximately 50 Labour parliamentarians issued a letter to Blair asking him to identify a departure date, for the purpose of ending the damaging speculation about the leadership of the party. Of course, the counterpoint argument was that changing the leadership would be terribly damaging at a time when party unity was needed.

On September 5, 2006, a week after British Prime Minister Tony Blair rejected the notion of a timetable for his departure, 17 parliamentarians from the Labour Party dispatched a letter asking him to resign. The call for Blair to resign had been increasing in mid-2006, prompting news that Blair might step down within 12 months. This timetable was deemed acceptable by several parliamentarians who signed a statement to that effect. However, another cadre of Labour parliamentarians said that Blair's resignation should be immediate.

These developments came amidst revelations about an apparent leaked memorandum, which suggested that Blair would embark on a farewell tour. The memorandum was reported to have been crafted by a number of Blair's allies, including pollster Philip Gould, and said, "He needs to go with the crowd wanting more." The document emerged around the same time that a Populus poll was published showing that Conservatives were advancing strong support over Labour, regardless of whether or not Blair stayed on in power.

On September 7, 2006, British Prime Minister Tony Blair confirmed that he will step down as prime minister within a year.

Speaking at a London school, Blair said, "The next party conference in a couple of weeks will be my last party conference as party leader."

Some members of Blair's Labour Party suggested that Blair would announce a timetable for stepping down from office in early 2007, followed by a handover of power in May. However, others noted that no specific timeline had been decided other than the general timeline of 12 months.

In late September 2006, Blair bid his party goodbye in final swansong speech as Labour Party leader. In his speech before the party faithful, he declined to give a precise date of departure, instead focusing on the accomplishments of the party while he was at the helm.

In the meanwhile, relations within the Labour Party remained rather fractious over the issue of Blair's tenure as prime minister, as well as the question of succession. In this latter regard, Blair and his possible successor, Gordon Brown, were reported to have had a contentious discussion on the prospective schedule for the prime minister's departure. Brown apparently advocated a faster departure, ahead of elections in Scotland, Wales and England, while Blair allies urged a later departure date. The matter led to something of a conflict between respective Blair and Brown camps within the Labour Party, as well as a spate of resignations from members of government.

Northern Ireland Developments in 2006

In 2006, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern traveled to Northern Ireland to reveal their plan for restoring devolution. To this end, they gave Northern Ireland Assembly members a deadline of November 24, 2006 to establish power-sharing governance.

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May 2006 marked the first time since October 2002 that Northern Ireland's politicians took their seats at the Stormont assembly. There was no expectation that a power-sharing executive government would be immediately formed. Still, it was hoped that the process of convening Assembly Members at Stormont would at least facilitate the possibility of an agreement being forged ahead of the November 24, 2006 deadline. Essentially, politicians were given six weeks to form an executive. Should the six week period pass without agreement, they would be given another 12 weeks to do so. But if the November deadline was reached without resolution, the salaries of Assembly Members would be halted. Ultimately, implementation of the Good Friday Agreement was at stake.

September 2006 saw the DUP begin an internal consultative process by which it was considering whether or not to share power with Sinn Fein. A month later, intensive multi-party talks were convened at St. Andrews in Scotland aimed at moving the sides toward a commitment to devolution. A deadline of November 10, 2006 was set by which all Northern Ireland parties were to respond to the St. Andrews Agreement. This new deadline was followed by the unveiling of a roadmap to devolution, in which the date March 26, 2007 was set for the establishment of a new operational executive. Also in October 2006, an anticipated meeting between Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley at Stormont was postponed after the DUP insisted on a pledge of policing in Northern Ireland. This issue came to the fore again at the close of 2006 when Sinn Fein announced that it was convening a special meeting to discuss possible republican support for policing. Such support would essentially remove a major obstacle to the devolution process.

In November 2006, in keeping with the aforementioned deadline, a transitional assembly was established. The transitional assembly was to be in effect until the close of January 2007. As well, March 2007 was confirmed as the time when elections would be held for the new executive. Proceedings to hear ministerial choices of the DUP and Sinn Fein were interrupted when an apparent loyalist assassin, Michael Stone, tried to enter into the compound at Stormont. He was subsequently charged with attempted murder.

Terror Attacks Foiled in United Kingdom

On Aug. 10, 2006, British authorities announced that they had foiled an attempt by terrorists to bring down several airliners, ultimately killing thousands of people. British police said that following a lengthy probe starting more than six months earlier, over 20 people had been arrested in connection with the terrorist plot, which, according to reports, involved approximately 10 airliners traveling from the United Kingdom to the United States. Details emerging about the plot suggested that the terrorists intended to carry concealed bomb-making materials with them in their carry-on luggage and, presumably, construct and detonate the bombs in-flight over the Atlantic. A day after the attacks were reported to have been foiled, Italian authorities detained around 40 suspects for questioning in connection with the planned terrorist attacks. A few days later, Pakistani authorities also arrested several people in that country, including two British nationals with Pakistani roots, in connection with the apparent terrorist plot. In the United Kingdom, even as suspects in custody were being interrogated, British police were still carrying out investigations, including the search for evidence in wooded areas of Buckinghamshire.

While United States spokespersons and media quickly speculated that the terrorist plan was, perhaps, carried out by the notorious Islamic militant group, al-Qaida, British counterparts were far more reticent about expressing ideas about who might be responsible. British analysts acknowledged that the terrorist plan bore the hallmark of typical al-Qaida operations -- complex and coordinated orchestration of attacks intended to be extensive in scope and yielding maximum carnage. That said, they suggested that if those responsible had not been trained at al-Qaida camps, they were at least likely to be al-Qaida inspired.

While little information was initially released about the individuals arrested, it appeared that many of them were British-born Muslims, many of Pakistani ethnicity. Two of the suspects were reported to have traveled to Pakistan and later received money from a source there. Another suspect was believed to be a worker at an Islamic charity. Yet another was reported to be an employee of Heathrow Airport with an all-area access pass. Two suspects apparently left "martyrdom tapes" typical of Islamic suicide bombers. Overall, it was surmised that this group of

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would-be terrorists were much like the self-radicalized types who carried out the attacks on London's s Underground in July 2005. (Although largely self-radicalized, even that group had links to al-Qaida, as was discovered some time after the attacks took place.)

It was also revealed that British police had ideally wanted to continue its investigation further, in order to glean even more information. However, when signs began to indicate that the terrorists were ready to activate their plan, the police had no choice but to immediately arrest those believed to be conspiring to carry out the terrorist attacks. Apparently following a number of arrests in Pakistan, information came to light suggesting that a terrorist act was imminent. Following the arrests on Aug. 10, 2006 came the revelation that while as many people were detained as possible, there was no guarantee that all members of the terrorist enclave had been taken into police custody. With a possible security threat still in the offing, the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States immediately raised their security threat indices to the highest levels. In addition, transportation authorities in the United Kingdom and the United States immediately instituted draconian measures on air travel.

In the United Kingdom, all hand luggage was immediately banned, forcing travelers to place only identity documents, cash, credit cards and keys into clear plastic bags during travel. In the United States, international travelers were to be subjected to stringent security procedures, while all travelers on overseas and domestic flights were prohibited from carrying all liquid, lotion, cream and gel-like substances in their hand luggage. These policies were instituted in response to revelations that the would-be terrorists intended to detonate a liquid-based explosive, composed of a sports drink and peroxide-based paste. Ignition of the explosion could, theoretically, be achieved using an electrical device such as a cell phone.

Air transport across the world was compromised. London's s Heathrow Airport -- the world's s busiest airport and the connection hub for global carriers -- was at the center of the plot. As such, air carriers flying from or to Heathrow cancelled or delayed flights. From Europe in the east and west across the Atlantic to the United States, repercussions were felt as air traffic came to a halt. At the same time, at airports where flights were still departing and arriving, passengers were dealing with particularly lengthy security lines.

While British Home Secretary John Reid acknowledged on Aug. 13, 2006 that the new regime of security restrictions was taking a particularly difficult toll on the air travel industry, he noted that it was necessary given the "substantial threat" posed by terrorists. Still, a day later, the United Kingdom's s threat level was downgraded from critical to severe, indicating that an attack was now considered "highly likely" rather than "imminent." The change was made by the Joint Terrorism and Analysis Centre on the basis of recent intelligence. The downgraded status indicated the possibility that some of the security restrictions might be eased, such as the re-introduction of limited hand luggage.

In the midst of these developments, a British Airways flight from Heathrow Airport en route to New York was forced to turn back when a mobile phone, which has been officially banned, rang on board.

Also on Aug. 13, 2006, Home Secretary Reid declared that the recent terrorist plot -- involving the use of liquid explosives on trans-Atlantic flights -- was among at least four such plots, which had been thwarted in the last year since the July 7, 2005 attacks on London's s transit system. Reid, however, noted that al-Qaida activities had been operational in the United Kingdom as far back as 2000.

In other developments, Reid responded to a letter written by a group of British Muslim leaders expressing the view that the country's s foreign policy was linked with the terror threat. He said that such a position was a "dreadful misjudgement that foreign policy of this country should be shaped in part, or in whole, under the threat of terrorism activity." Shadow Home Secretary David Davis reflected a similar sentiment saying, "There are plenty of people with legitimate arguments with the government's s foreign policy on Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Lebanon and the Middle East but none of them take the stance of attempting to murder many thousands of their fellow citizens."

Meanwhile, United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed his gratitude to security personnel for their efforts in foiling the terrorist attack. United States President George W. Bush reminded people that the United States was still at war with "Islamic fascists." Bush also thanked Blair for "busting this plot."

British Policy on Iraq

On February 21, 2007, British Prime Minister Blair announced the withdrawal of some troops from Iraq over the course of the following months. He said that the 7,100 British troops serving in southern Iraq would be reduced to 5,500 and he hoped that another 500 troops could leave by late summer. He expected the remaining troops to stay in Iraq until 2008. Prime Minister Blair defined a new objective for British troops in Iraq, saying that they would be expected to provide requisite support for Iraqi forces and securing the borders. He also made clear that Iraqis would write the next chapter" in their country's history.

The announcement by the British prime minister was soon followed with news that the few Danish troops operating in Iraq would also be withdrawn. As well, Lithuania said that they were considering the removal of their troops from Iraq.

Even as the news from these three countries was being made public, the United States was moving to increase its troop presence in Iraq under President George W. Bush's controversial plan for escalation. For its part, the United States characterized Blair's announcement as a positive sign of success in Iraq. Still, the fact of the matter was that the period had seen an exodus of coalition troops from Iraq, as the war in that country became ever more unpopular across the globe. Indeed, troops remaining in Iraq from countries belonging to the coalition numbered few in comparison with their United States counterpart. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice responded to criticism of the dwindling presence of foreign forces in Iraq by saying that that the coalition "remains intact."

Imbroglio with Iran

The British presence in Iraq was a key issue in March 2007 when 15 members of the British Navy were captured by members. The incident occurred on March 23, 2007 when the British Navy personnel boarded a vessel just off the coast of Iraq on the basis of suspected smuggling activities. The servicemen from the HMS Cornwall were apparently seized by gunpoint by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett demanded both the immediate and safe return of the servicemen, as well as a "full explanation" from Iran about its actions.

On March 26, 2007, the Iranian government in Tehran said that the British Navy personnel had illegally entered Iranian waters.

The Iranian government also noted that the 15 Navy servicemen were undergoing questioning, and offered assurances to the British ambassador about the good health of those captured. In addition, Iran dismissed the notion that they had been taken in exchange for five Iranian diplomats who had earlier detained in Iraq by the United States military.

The British government countered the claim made by Iran saying that its Navy personnel were conducting routine patrols in Iraqi waters. To this end, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said, "It simply is not true that they went into Iranian territorial waters and I hope the Iranian government understands how fundamental an issue this is for us." Blair characterized the detention of the 15 members of the Royal Navy as "unjustified and wrong."

To underline the gravity of the situation, the British government also suspended bilateral contacts with Iran.

It was yet to be seen how Iran would react, given the fact that the diplomatic climate abroad, as well as the political climate at home, were not particularly favorable in March 2007. First, new sanctions were being imposed by the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council on Iran in regard to its nuclear program. As well, students at home were reacting to the government's claims about the Royal Navy personnel entry into Iranian waters by calling for them to face trial.

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Days later, Iranian authorities published excerpts of letters by Leading Seaman Faye Turney -- one of the Royal Navy personnel captured. In the letters, Turney allegedly wrote that she was sorry that she and her fellow Royal Navy servicemen entered Iranian waters. On March 28, 2007, Iranian state television showed an interview with Turney in which she said, "Obviously we trespassed" into Iranian waters. Nevertheless, Iran said that Turney would be released within days.

British officials responded saying that they expected that Turney had been forced to express such a position, and they did not believe the letters or interview statements were willingly offered. As well, Prime Minister Blair told the House of Commons that the time had come to "ratchet up" pressure on Iran. Earlier, Blair warned of a "different phase" in diplomatic efforts if current initiatives to free the 15 crew members failed. Meanwhile, the Royal Navy offered Global Positioning Systems (GPS) evidence making clear that the 15 crew members, who were functioning under a United Nations mandate, were 1.7 nautical miles inside Iraqi waters when they were seized.

On March 29, 2007, following a request by the United Kingdom (U.K.), the United Nations Security Council issued a statement conveying "grave concern" for the capture of the British Navy personnel by Iran, and calling on Iran to ensure that the U.K. received consular access.

For its part, Iran released video footage depicting the 15 British crew members being seized in what it has claimed to be Iranian waters. Iran also announced that it was freezing the scheduled release of Leading Seaman Turney on the basis of the U.K.'s supposed "incorrect attitude."

A day later, Iranian state television aired an interview with a second British Royal Navy serviceman, Nathan Summers. In that footage, Summer apologized for "trespassing" in Iranian waters. Prime Minister Blair disparaged the footage, saying that the exploitation of the British crew would serve only to "enhance people's sense of disgust with Iran."

On the diplomatic front, Iran sent a formal note to the U.K. in which it condemned the Royal Navy's "illegal act" and called for guarantees that such trespassing would not be repeated. Meanwhile, the European Union expressed "unconditional support" for the position of the U.K. and urged the "immediate and unconditional release" of the 15 Royal Navy personnel.

On April 1, 2007, two other Royal Navy servicemen were shown on Iranian state television. Captain Chris Ayre and Lieutenant Felix Carman were respectively shown in front of an Iranian map of the Gulf. Ayre noted that the Iranian maps depicted the area in which he and his associates were captured as Iranian territorial waters. He said, "Approximately about ten o'clock in the morning we were seized - apparently at this point here from their maps on the GPS they've shown us - which is inside Iranian territorial waters." Carman expressed understanding for the Iranian perspective about the "intrusion."

On the ground in Iran, hard-line students hurled rockets and firecrackers into the compound housing the British embassy, presumably to protest the brewing dissension between the two countries. As well, about 200 students took to the streets to demonstrate against the alleged trespassing by the British Navy personnel into Iranian waters.

On the other side of the equation, the British Foreign Office decried the televised footage and characterized it as both "a charade" and "unacceptable." The statement by the British Foreign Office included the following assertion: "It is completely unacceptable for these pictures to be shown on television, given the potential to cause distress to their families."

A day later, the climate appeared to have calmed somewhat, despite the airing of new footage of the 15 who had been detained.

Iran noted that a shift from the U.K. could help to resolve the crisis, and in so doing refined its hard-line tone. Meanwhile, the U.K. Defense Secretary Des Browne said that diplomatic efforts to end the crisis were ongoing, and that London and Tehran were engaging in "direct bilateral communication."

On April 4, 2007, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmandinejad held a media conference in Tehran. At that media event, which was held to present medals of honor to the Republican Guard who had detained the British crew members, he also announced that the British Navy servicemen would be given amnesty and released. He intimated that the decision was gesture of goodwill to the British, and that it was being offered in honor of two upcoming events -- the birthday of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed and the Christian celebration of Easter. Iranian state television showed Ahmadinejad greeting the 15 servicemen in what appeared to be a climate of amity.

Some analysts characterized the display as being "a piece of theater."

Regardless, British Prime Minister Tony Blair reacted to the news saying that the release of the 15 Britons would be "a profound relief" to the crew and their families.

On the diplomatic front, the Iranian leader said that no concessions or deals had been made with the British government to secure the release of the 15 servicemen, although the U.K. made it clear that such an incident would not be repeated. Meanwhile, the British prime minister did not offer either an apology to Iran for the alleged intrusion into Iranian waters, or thanks for the release of the British Navy personnel. However, Blair addressed the Iranian people saying, "We bear you no ill will. On the contrary, we respect Iran as an ancient civilisation, as a nation with a proud and dignified history. The disagreements we have with your government we wish to resolve peacefully through dialogue. I hope - as I've always hoped - that in the future we are able to do so."

Note: The 15 released servicemen later noted that their statements to Iranian state media had been coerced.

Northern Ireland Developments in 2007

At the start of 2007, the issue of policing (discussed above) returned to the political purview when Sinn Fein accused DUP leader Ian Paisley of not providing a "positive enough" response to the special meeting its was convening to deal with the crucial issue of policing. The situation took another turn when Paisley denied ever agreeing to the transfer of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly by 2008. Paisley also noted that there was no provision for such a move in the St. Andrews Agreement.

Regardless, on January 28, 2007, at a special party conference in Dublin, Sinn Fein voted to support policing in Northern Ireland. The vote was carried overwhelmingly with 90 percent support. It was the first such move in the party's s history and was considered a key component in the progress toward devolution in Northern Ireland.

Another key aspects on the path toward restoring devolution has been the question of the DUP's s commitment to power-sharing with Sinn Fein in a devolved government by the target date of March 26, 2007.

In March 2007, the election for the new Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland took place. Results showed the two hard-line Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalists parties winning most of the seats at stake.

The election was intended to facilitate the creation of a new power-sharing government, which would represent diverse sectarian interests. That power-sharing executive entity had to be formed by a deadline of March 26, 2007, in order to move away from direct rule. However, a failure to do so would leave little chance of restoring the devolved government, and ultimately, it would result in the abandonment of the Northern Ireland's s Legislative Assembly at Stormont. At issue was the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Now, with the elections completed, and with the March 26, 2007 deadline looming ahead, Secretary of State Peter Hain said that he would require a status report from the parties within two weeks, in order to meet the deadline for

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devolution. He warned that the assembly would be abandoned if the parties were not signatories to a power-sharing executive. That power-sharing executive, if formed, would be made up of four DUP ministers, three Sinn Fein ministers, two UUP ministers and one SDLP minister. Absent from the executive would be the Alliance Party, the Green Party and the PUP

As midnight struck heralding March 26, 2007, Peter Hain signed an order restarting devolution and effectively restoring power to the Northern Ireland Assembly. But its revived existence could have had a short life if the deadline for the formation of the power-sharing executive was not met.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland warned that the assembly at Stormont would be dissolved if agreement on the power-sharing executive was not forged by the deadline.

That said, Hain also suggested that he was willing to consider alternative arrangement if the parties could come to some consensus on the issues at stake.

For its part, the DUP said that it would enter into a power-sharing government with Sinn Fein, however, it also issued a caveat of sorts by stating that it would not enter into such an arrangement until May. In response, Sinn Fein charged the DUP with attempting to "frustrate the will of the electorate." DUP parliamentarian Jeffrey Donaldson defended his party's decision by noting that the decision to agree to govern jointly with Sinn Fein was one of historic proportions, but that more time was needed to resolve outstanding issues, including departmental pre-briefings, the finalization of a government program, as well as raising confidence levels within the community regarding devolution.

Nevertheless, before the passage of the deadline, the DUP and Sinn Fein announced an historic agreement to form a power-sharing executive on May 8, 2007. Two main rivals -- the DUP's Ian Paisley and Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams -- met for direct talks to discuss the deal. It was agreed that Paisley would be the first minister in the new administration and Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness would be deputy first minister.

Following the unprecedented meeting between Paisley and Adams, the DUP leader expressed full commitment saying, "The DUP executive overwhelmingly endorsed a motion committing our party to support and participate fully in government in May of this year - this is a binding resolution." Paisley's nationalist counterpart, Adams, responded to the DUP's endorsement and commitment to joint governance saying, "I believe the agreement reached between Sinn Fein and the DUP - including the unequivocal commitment made by their party executive and reiterated today - to the restoration of political institutions on 8 May marks the beginning of a new era of politics on this island."

British Prime Minister Blair said that the agreement between the DUP and Sinn Fein was an important one for the people and the history of Northern Ireland. Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern reacted to the developments by characterizing the agreement as both unprecedented and very positive.

Then, May 8, 2007 saw the establishment of the historic power-sharing at Stormont in Northern Ireland. Direct rule ended as DUP leader, Ian Paisley, and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein, took office as the first and deputy ministers of the new executive respectively. Paisley marked the occasion saying, "Today we are starting upon the road which I believe will take us to lasting peace in our province." McGuinness expressed confidence that he would be able to work with Paisley despite the challenges of the past, saying, "We must overcome the difficulties which we face in order to achieve our goals and seize the opportunities that now exist." Witnessing the occasion, British Prime Minister Tony Blair noted that Northern Ireland now had the opportunity to be freed from "the heavy chains of history" while charting a new course. His Irish counterpart, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern expressed his gratitude to politicians who had worked hard to achieve peace.

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Note: The creation of a new power-sharing government at Stormount was intended to both restore the devolved government and to represent diverse sectarian interests. The historic occasion marked the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Developments on Domestic Agenda

May 2007 saw Tony Blair's Labour Party suffer some defeats in local elections. These defeats were largely blamed on the unpopular war in Iraq as well as a domestic scandal involving payments for honor. Nevertheless, Blair characterized his party's performance as being unexpectedly good noting, "You always take a hit in the midterm, but these results provide a perfectly good springboard to go on and win the next national election." Indeed, the Labour Party's performance was slightly better than in local elections of 2006.

These elections were held for local councils across England. As well, elections were held in Scotland for local representatives, as well as representatives to the Scottish Parliament, seated in Edinburgh.

In Wales, voters chose representatives to the National Assembly, seated in Cardiff.

While the Labour Party's overall loss was smaller than had originally been anticipated, the most significant shift was seen in the closeness of the election in Scotland, typically viewed as a Labour Party stronghold. There, the Labour Party lost its advantage over the Scottish nationalists. In fact, the strong showing of the Scottish National Party, which promised to hold a referendum on independence by 2010 if it won power, evoked questions about the political terrain there.

In Wales, the Labour Party lost some seats but still tallied twice as many in the end, as compared with the nationalist party, Plaid Cymru.

The election came ahead of Blair's anticipated announcement that he would resign as prime minister. There was some speculation that his likely successor, Gordon Brown, would benefit from the fact that despite the losses just suffered by the Labour Party, the Conservatives in opposition were hardly enjoying a notable ascendant trend.

On May 10, 2007, Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom issued his long-awaited announcement that he was stepping down from the Labour Party's leadership position and head of government. Blair's announcement made in his Sedgfield constituency and was of an emotional nature.

The prime minister made clear the triumphs achieved by the Labour Party under his leadership, saying, "There is only one government since 1945 that can say all of the following: more jobs, fewer unemployed, better health and education results, lower crime and economic growth in every quarter." At the same time, he also appeared to acknowledge with regret some of the failings of his administration saying, "I give my thanks to you, the British people for the times that I have succeeded and my apologies for the times I have fallen short." In what some interpreted as a nuanced reference to British involvement in the Iraq war, Blair also said, "I may have been wrong, but I did what I thought was right for our country."

Now with Blair's departure imminent, attention turned to his likely successor. The head of the Treasury, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, has been viewed as Blair's "heir apparent" for some time. With several leading members of the Labour Party bowing out, Brown was expected to win the party's internal contest for the leadership position.

In the third week of June 2007, Chancellor Gordon Brown officially became the new leader of the United Kingdom's Labour Party. The move came days before outgoing Prime Minister Tony Blair prepared to step down as the British head of government on June 27, 2007. On that day, Brown would become the new prime minister and head of government in the United Kingdom.

In his acceptance speech, Brown praised Blair for his service to the Labour Party and to the country, and promised to forge not merely political policies, but also a "soul" for the country's leading political party, as it responded to the changing needs of the British people. To this end, he began his speech stating, "It is with humility, pride and a great sense of duty that I accept the privilege and the great responsibility of leading our party and changing our country." On policy, he identified priority areas as being education, affordable housing, childhood poverty, constitutional reform, and modernizing the National Health Service (NHS). In the area of foreign affairs, Brown said that lessons had to be learned, and he acknowledged the divisive nature of the war in Iraq.

In other developments in the Labour Party, Harriet Harman won a slim victory over five rivals to take the position as deputy party leader, thus succeeding John Prescott. Brown announced that Deputy Leader Harman would also act as party chairman, and he noted that all party members would have a say in the development of policy initiatives. No deputy prime minister was announced.

Meanwhile, the change in leadership at the helm of the Labour Party appeared to be yielding positive results for a party that had suffered waning public support in recent times. Now, an Ipsos/Mori opinion poll showed that support for the Labour Party had risen to 39 percent in June 2007, while both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats had lost support, with the two parties slipping to 36 percent and 15 percent respectively.

On June 27, 2007, Tony Blair issued his resignation from office to the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, following a short private meeting. As he left parliament for the final time, Blair received a rousing standing ovation. He also traveled to his constituency of Sedgefield where he bid farewell to local party members following his tenure as their parliamentarian for 24 years. Blair was set to move on to work as the new Middle East peace envoy for the Middle East quartet, composed of the European Union, the United Nations, United States and Russia.

Blair's exit was followed by the Queen appointing Gordon Brown, as the head of the Labour Party, to be the United Kingdom's new prime minister. Queen Elizabeth II also spent almost an hour in a private audience with Brown. In his first address as head of government, Prime Minister Brown said, "Let the work of change begin." He pledged to meet his expressed policy goals "try my utmost" – a reference to his student motto. Just before entering 10 Downing Street, Prime Minister Brown said, "I will be strong in purpose, steadfast in will, resolute in action in the service of what matters to the British people, meeting the concerns and aspirations of our whole country."

A new cabinet was announced a day later on June 28, 2007, with significant changes at stake. Every portfolio in cabinet, with the exception of Defense Minister Des Brown, was changed. Certain key Blairites were leaving the political scene. John Reid was retiring as Home Secretary and Patricia Hewitt was resigning both as Health Secretary and from government. Margaret Beckett was leaving the role of Foreign Secretary. Of note was the fact that the country would have its first female Home Secretary Jacqui Smith. A stalwart of the Brown camp, Alistair Darling, was set to become the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, while David Miliband was the new Foreign Secretary. Jack Straw was to become the new Justice Secretary.

The new cabinet convened on June 28, 2007 for the first time.

New Prime Minister Confronts Renewed Threat of Terrorism

On June 29, 2007, two cars loaded with explosives, nails and gas cylinders, were found in London. Neither car detonated, thus sparing people from the potential violence and loss of life that might have been caused by the car bombs exploding. A day later, a burning vehicle, also loaded with gas cylinders, rammed into the main terminal of Glasgow Airport in Scotland. Again, that incident yielded no loss of life.

The attempted attack in Glasgow was deemed to be related to the two earlier attempted attacks in London.

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British authorities later said that all three incidences were clearly attempted acts of terrorism attributable to associates of al-Qaida. Several people were soon arrested in connection with the apparent terror plot, including the two individuals responsible for driving the burning Jeep into the airport at Glasgow. Also included in those detained were a handful of doctors studying or practicing medicine in the United Kingdom. Searches were being carried out across the country for others who might have been involved in these attempted acts of terrorism. At least one suspect was said to be "on the run." None of the suspects were said to be of British origin, with certain suspects being identified as being of Iraqi and Jordanian background.

The timing of the incidences -- about two years after the July 2005 terror attacks on London's s transit system, along with the fact that Gordon Brown had only assumed governing power days before -- appeared to be significant. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Brown signaled his intent to take the threat of terrorism in the United Kingdom seriously, raising the terror alert in the country to "critical," and urging the British people to stay "constantly vigilant" against what he warned would be a "long-term and sustained threat." In an interview with the BBC, Prime Minister Brown said, "It's s obvious that we have a group of people - not just in this country, but round the world - who're prepared at any time to inflict what they want to be maximum damage on civilians, irrespective of the religion of these people who are killed or maimed." He also noted that his country would not yield, despite the violent intent of al-Qaida.

Home Secretary Jacqui Smith was granted no grace period in her new position. She convened meetings at the government's s emergency response unit, known by the name Cobra. Following the fourth Cobra meeting within the space of days, Smith noted that the British people would not be intimidated and that life would go on as ever. She also announced that a formal statement would be offered before the House of Commons on July 2, 2007.

Meanwhile, attention was turning toward the authorization to hold terror suspects for up to 90 days without charges being levied. This measure had been defeated a few years prior in parliament by a coalition of Conservative, Liberal Democratic and Labour backbenchers, however, in light of the current landscape, it was expected to be revived.

Other Developments

The close of July 2007 saw new British Prime Minister Gordon Brown hold official talks with his American counterpart, United States President George W. Bush, for the first time since succeeding Tony Blair. The two heads of government met at Camp David in the United States. At issue was the state of the trans-Atlantic relationship, given Tony Blair's s exit from the office of the prime minister, and Brown's s entry into that role. Brown signaled goodwill by noting that the world owed the United States a debt of gratitude for its leadership in the global war on terror. Yet unknown was the matter of whether or not there would be a change in the United Kingdom's s role in Iraq.

Then, on October 8, 2007, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that his country's s troops in Iraq would be reduced to 2,500 by the spring of 2008. Speaking to parliamentarians, Brown said that the reduction was possible because Iraqis were now better positioned to take responsibility for their own security. He also noted that the handover of Basra would ensue on a phased basis.

Two days before British Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced the reduction of troops in Iraq, he said that he would not be calling an election anytime soon, since he needed time to put forth his "vision" for the United Kingdom. The political opposition blasted the move, saying that Brown was opting out of an immediate election contest because of his party's s poor polling numbers.

Special Entry:

Global credit crisis; effects felt in Europe

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Summary:

A financial farrago, rooted in the credit crisis, became a global phenomenon by the start of October 2008. In the United States, after failure of the passage of a controversial bailout plan in the lower chamber of Congress, an amended piece of legislation finally passed through both houses of Congress. There were hopes that its passage would calm jitters on Wall Street and restore confidence in the country's financial regime.

However, a volatile week on Wall Street followed, most sharply characterized by a precipitous 18 percent drop of the Dow Jones. With the situation requiring rapid and radical action, a new proposal for the government to bank stakes was gaining steam. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in Europe, with banks also in jeopardy of failing, and with no coordinated efforts to stem the tide by varying countries of the European Union, there were rising anxieties not only about the resolving the financial crisis, but also about the viability of the European bloc.

Nevertheless, European leaders were able to forge an agreement aimed at easing the credit crunch in that region of the world. Following is an exploration, first, of the situation in the United States, and, second, of the situation unfolding in Europe.

Report:

On Sept. 28, 2008, as the United States was reeling from the unfolding credit crisis, Europe's banking sector was also hit by its own woes when the Dutch operations of the European banking and insurance entity, Fortis, was partly nationalized in an effort to prevent its ultimate demise. Radical action was spurred by anxieties that Fortis was too much of a banking and financial giant to be allowed to fail. The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg forged an agreement to contribute more than 11 billion euros (approximately US\$16 billion) to shore up Fortis, whose share price fell precipitously due to worries about its bad debts.

A day later, the mortgage lender -- Bradford and Bingley -- in the United Kingdom was nationalized when the British government took control of the bank's mortgages and loans. Left out of the nationalization scheme were the savings and branch operations, which were sold off to Santander of Spain. Earlier, the struggling mortgage lender, Northern Rock, had itself been nationalized. The head of the British Treasury, Alistair Darling, indicated that "big steps" that would not normally be taken were in the offing, given the unprecedented nature of the credit crisis.

On the same day, financial woes came to a head in Iceland when the government was compelled to seize control of the country's third-largest bank, Glitnir, due to financial problems and fears that it would go insolvent.

Iceland was said to be in serious financial trouble, given the fact that its liabilities were in gross excess of the country's GDP. Further action was anticipated in Iceland, as a result.

On Sept 30, 2008, another European bank -- Dexia -- was the victim of the intensifying global banking and financial crisis. In order to keep Dexia afloat, the governments of France, Belgium, and Luxembourg convened talks and agreed to contribute close to 6.5 billion euros (approximately US\$9 billion) to keep Dexia from suffering a demise.

Only days later, the aforementioned Fortis bank returned to the forefront of the discussion in Europe. Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme said he was hoping to locate a new owner with the aim of restoring confidence in Fortis, and thusly, preventing a further downturn in the markets. Leterme said that the authorities were considering takeover bids for the Belgian operations of the company (the Dutch operations were nationalized as noted above.)

By Sept. 5, 2008, one of Germany's biggest banks, Hypo Real Estate, was at risk of failing. In response, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she would exhaust all efforts to save the bank. A rescue plan by the government and banking institutions was eventually agreed upon at a cost of 50 billion euros (approximately US\$70 billion). This agreement involved a higher cost than was previously discussed.

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Meanwhile, as intimated above, Iceland was enduring further financial shocks to its entire banking system. As such, the government of Iceland was involved in intense discussions aimed at saving the country's financial regime, which were now at severe risk of collapse due to insolvency of the country's commercial banks.

Meanwhile, on Sept. 4, 2008, the leaders of key European states -- United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy -- met in the French capital city of Paris to discuss the financial farrago and to consider possible action. The talks, which were hosted by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, ended without consensus on what should be done to deal with the credit crisis, which was rapidly becoming a global phenomenon. The only thing that the four European countries agreed upon was that there would not be a grand rescue plan, akin to the type that was initiated in the United States. As well, they jointly called for more greater regulation and a coordinated response. To that latter end, President Nicolas Sarkozy said, "Each government will operate with its own methods and means, but in a coordinated manner."

This call came after Ireland took independent action to deal with the burgeoning financial crisis.

Notably, the Irish government decided days earlier to fully guarantee all deposits in the country's major banks for a period of two years. The Greek government soon followed suit with a similar action. These actions by Ireland and Greece raised the ire of other European countries, and evoked questions of whether Ireland and Greece had violated any European Union charters. An investigation by the European Union was pending into whether or not Ireland's guarantee of all savings deposits was anti-competitive in nature.

Nevertheless, as anxieties about the safety of bank deposits rose across Europe, Ireland and Greece saw an influx of new banking customers from across the continent, presumably seeking the security of knowing their money would be safe amidst a financial meltdown.

And even with questions rising about the decisions of the Irish and Greek government, the government of Germany decided to go down a similar path by guaranteeing all private bank accounts. For his part, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that his government would increase the limit on guaranteed bank deposits from £35,000 to £50,000.

In these various ways, it was clear that there was no concurrence among some of Europe's most important economies. In fact, despite the meeting in France, which called for coordination among the countries of the European bloc, there was no unified response to the global financial crisis. Instead, that meeting laid bare the divisions within the countries of the European Union, and called into question the very viability of the European bloc.

Perhaps that question of viability would be answered at a forthcoming G8 summit, as recommended by those participating in the Paris talks.

A week later, another meeting of European leaders in Paris ended with concurrence that no large institution would be allowed to fail. The meeting, which was attended by leaders of euro zone countries,

resulted in an agreement to guarantee loans between banks until the end of 2009, with an eye on easing the credit crunch. The proposal, which would apply in 15 countries, also included a plan for capital infusions by means of purchasing preference shares from banks.

The United Kingdom, which is outside the euro zone, had already announced a similar strategy. Indeed, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown gained cachet for his steady handling of the financial crisis. Brown said that his government had to be the "rock of stability" during the crisis and explained that injections of capital by the British Treasury and the government takeover of banks was "unprecedented but necessary."

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy argued that these unprecedented measures were of vital importance. The French leader said, "The crisis has over the past few days entered into a phase that makes it intolerable to opt for procrastination and a go-it-alone approach."

He also tried to ease growing frustration that such measures would benefit the wealthy by explaining that the strategy would not constitute "a gift to banks."

While these developments were aimed at restoring confidence in the financial regime in Europe, Iceland continued to struggle. Indeed, the country's economy stood precipitously close to collapse. Three banks, including the country's largest one -- Kaupthing -- had to be rescued by the government. Landsbanki and Glitnir had been nationalized. A spokesperson for Iceland's Financial Supervisory Authority said, "The action taken... was a necessary first step in achieving the objectives of the Icelandic government and parliament to ensure the continued orderly operation of domestic banking and the safety of domestic deposits."

With the country in a state of economic panic, trading on the OMX Nordic Exchange was suspended temporarily, although it was expected to reopen on October 13, 2008. Once re-opened, the OMX Nordic Exchange experienced a high degree of volatility -- initially plunging before recouping some losses.

Iceland's Prime Minister Geir Haarde said that his country was considering whether to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund to weather the crisis. As well, Iceland's Central Bank drew upon more than half-billion dollars from Scandinavian swap facility, thus enabling access to euros as the stock exchange reopened after a temporary suspension, as discussed above.

Iceland was also courting financial assistance from Russia; to that end, Icelandic authorities were seeking a loan from Moscow of about four billion euros or \$5.5 billion USD.

Iceland was also ensconced in a mini-imbroglio with the United Kingdom over that country's decision to freeze Icelandic bank assets. At issue was the United Kingdom's reaction to the unfolding crisis in Iceland, which the British authorities said left deposits by its own citizens at risk. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown particularly condemned the government of Iceland for its poor stewardship of the situation and also its failure to guarantee British savers' deposits (Icelandic domestic deposits, by contrast, had been guaranteed by the country's Financial Supervisory Authority).

That said, the United Kingdom Treasury was eventually able to arrange for some British deposits to Kaupthing to be moved under the control of ING Direct. There were also arrangements being made for a payout to Landsbanki's depositors.

Europe facing financial crisis as banking bail-out looms large in early 2009:

According to the European Commission, European banks may be in need of as much as several trillion in bailout funding. Impaired or toxic assets factor highly on the European Union bank balance sheets, with credit default swaps on Irish debt running at 355 basis points higher at the time of writing -- the highest rate in Europe and well on its way down the path of Iceland. Anxieties were so high in Dublin that tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest the growing financial crisis.

Meanwhile, the fallout from the housing bubble was deleteriously affecting the United Kingdom, with anxieties being stoked about whether British banks could at all be saved.

In Spain, unemployment was in double digit territory and industrial production plunged 20 percent from where it was a year earlier. It was anticipated that credit default swaps for Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece would double over

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the course of the next year. In other parts of Europe, according to economist Nouriel Roubini, the economies of Ukraine, Belarus, Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania appeared to be on the brink of disaster.

Regarding Ukraine, there were fears that it would not abide with terms of a loan from the International Monetary Fund and thusly default on its debt. Meanwhile in Poland, the currency was falling and in Russia, even as the rouble fell, the Kremli warned of economic contraction.

Overall, Eastern European countries borrowed heavily from Western European banks. Thus, even if the currencies on the eastern part of the continent collapse, effects will be felt in the western part of Europe as well. For example, Swiss banks that gave billions of credit to Eastern Europe cannot look forward to repayment anytime soon. As well, Austrian banks have had extensive exposure to Eastern Europe, and can anticipate a highly increased cost of insuring its debt.

German Finance Minister Peer Steinbrueck has warned that as many as 16 European Union countries will require assistance. Indeed, his statements suggest the need for a regional rescue effort. Of consideration is the fact that, according to the Maastricht Treaty, state-funded bailouts are prohibited.

By the close of February 2009, it was announced that the banking sectors in Central and Eastern Europe would receive a rescue package of \$31 billion, via the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the World Bank. The rescue package was aimed at assisting the survival of small financial institutions and included equity and debt financing, as well as access to credit and risk insurance aimed at encouraging lending.

European Union backs financial regulation overhaul:

With the global financial crisis intensifying, leaders of European Union countries backed sweeping financial regulations. Included in the package of market reforms were sanctions on tax havens, caps on bonus payments to management, greater hedge fund regulation, and increased influence by the International Monetary Fund. European leaders also backed a charter of sustainable economic activity, that would subject all global financial activities to both regulation and accountability by credit rating agencies.

These moves were made ahead of the Group of 20 summit scheduled for April 2, 2009, in London. It was not known whether other countries outside Europe, such as the United States, Japan, India and China, would support the new and aggressive regime of market regulation. That said, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in Berlin that Europe had a responsibility to chart this track. She said, "Europe will own up to its responsibility in the world."

For its part, the Obama administration in Washington did not provide particularized feedback on the measures being pushed forward in Europe. However, the Obama administration indicated that it wanted to work with the international community to advance improvements, including regulation, to the financial regime.

Leaders forge \$1 trillion deal at G-20 summit in London

Leaders of the world's largest economies, known as the "G-20," met in London to explore possible responses to the global financial crisis. To that end, they forged a deal valued at more than one trillion dollars (USD).

Central to the agreement was an infusion of \$750 billion to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was aimed at helping troubled economies. Up to \$100 billion of that amount was earmarked to assist the world's very poorest countries -- an amount far greater than had been expected. In many senses, the infusion of funding to the IMF marked a strengthening of that body unseen since the 1980s.

In addition, the G-20 leaders settled on a \$250 billion increase in global trade. The world's poorest countries would also benefit from the availability of \$250 billion of trade credit.

After some debate, the G-20 leaders decided to levy sanctions against clandestine tax havens and to institute strict financial regulations. Such regulations included tougher controls on banking professionals' salaries and bonuses,

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and increased oversight of hedge funds and credit rating agencies. A Financial Stability Board was to be established that would work in concert with the IMF to facilitate cross-border cooperation, and also to provide early warnings regarding the financial system.

Aside from these measures, the G-20 countries were already implementing their own economic stimulus measures at home, aimed at reversing the global recession. Together, these economic stimulus packages would inject approximately \$5 trillion by the end of 2010.

United Kingdom Prime Minister Gordon Brown played host at the meeting, which most concurred went off successfully, despite the presence of anti-globalization and anarchist protestors. Prime Minister Brown warned that there was "no quick fix" for the economic woes facing the international community, but he drew attention to the consensus that had been forged in the interest of the common good. He said, "This is the day that the world came together to fight back against the global recession, not with words, but with a plan for global recovery and for reform and with a clear timetable for its delivery."

All eyes were on United States President Barack Obama, who characterized the G-20 summit as "a turning point" in the effort towards global economic recovery. He also hailed the advances agreed upon to reform the failed regulatory regime that contributed to the financial crisis that has gripped many of the economies across the globe. Thusly, President Obama declared the London summit to be historic saying, "It was historic because of the size and the scope of the challenges that we face and because of the timeliness and the magnitude of our response."

Ahead of the summit, there were reports of a growing rift between the respective duos of France and Germany -- and -- the United States and the United Kingdom. While France and Germany were emphasizing stricter financial regulations, the United States and the United Kingdom were advocating public spending to deal with the economic crisis. Indeed, French President Nicolas Sarkozy had threatened to bolt the meeting if his priority issues were not addressed. But such an end did not occur, although tensions were existent.

To that end, President Obama was hailed for his diplomatic skills after he brokered an agreement between France and China on tax havens. The American president played the role of peacemaker between French President Sarkozy and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao, paving the way for a meeting of the minds on the matter of tax havens.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that the concurrence reached at the G-20 summit were "more than we could have hoped for." President Sarkozy also credited President Obama for the American president's leadership at the summit, effusively stating: "President Obama really found the consensus. He didn't focus exclusively on stimulus ... In fact it was he who managed to help me persuade [Chinese] President Hu Jintao to agree to the reference to the ... publication of a list of tax havens, and I wish to thank him for that."

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel also expressed positive feedback about the success of the summit noting that the new measures would give the international arena a "clearer financial market architecture." She noted that the agreement reached was "a very, very good, almost historic compromise." Finally, Chancellor Merkel had warm words of praise for President Obama. "The American president also put his hand into this," said Merkel.

Note: The G-20 leaders agreed to meet again in September 2009 in New York to assess the progress of their agenda.

Special Entry:

"Real IRA" claims responsibility for attack on British army base

March 2009 was marked by an attack by two gunmen at an army base, which left two soldiers dead. Both soldiers were due to be deployed to Afghanistan. At the Antrim army base, the gunmen also injured four people, including two pizza delivery men. The incident marked the first killing of soldiers in Northern Ireland since the assassination of Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick in 1997.

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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown described the attack as "evil" and vowed that it would not impeded the peace process. He also promised to bring those responsible to justice saying, "We will do everything in our power to make sure that Northern Ireland is safe and secure and I assure you we will bring these murderers to justice."

Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Fein, characterized the attack as an attempt to derail the peace process and noted that it was "wrong and counter-productive."

Northern Ireland Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, who was a former member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), decried the attack saying, "I supported the IRA during the conflict, I myself was a member of the IRA but that war is over. Now the people responsible for that last night's incident are clearly signaling that they want to resume or restart that war."

Northern Ireland's First Minister Peter Robinson, who was also Democratic Unionist Party leader, said that cast the attack as a "terrible reminder of the events of the past."

In the aftermath of the attack, the "Real IRA" claimed responsibility. The "Real IRA" emerged due to a split within the Provisional IRA in 1997 due to Sinn Fein's decision to participate in the peace process. The "Real IRA" was behind the bombing of the County Tyrone town of Omagh that left 29 people dead in 1998.

Recent Developments

June 2009 saw British Prime Minister Gordon Brown try to hold onto power by carrying out a cabinet reshuffle. At issue was an unfolding scandal involving the expense accounts of parliamentarians. The matter contributed to a wave of resignations from parliamentarians within Prime Minister Brown's cabinet, including Home Secretary Jacqui Smith and Communities and Local Government Secretary Hazel Blears.

But the decision to keep Chancellor Alistair Darling in his post as the head of the Treasury, despite the allegations that he inappropriately charged services to his parliamentary account, was decried even from within the Labour Party. Indeed, Work and Pensions Secretary James Purnell said he was resigning "for the good of the Labour Party" and expressed no confidence in Prime Minister Brown himself. Defense Secretary John Hutton, however, expressed support for the prime minister, who himself was accountable for the saga. Prime Minister Brown said, "I admit mistakes have been made and I accept full responsibility." He promised an independent audit of parliamentarians' expense accounts, pledge to stamp out the abuses, and expend his effort on economic recovery and political reform.

In the background of the political chaos for Prime Minister Brown's government were local English elections, as well as elections to the parliament of the European Union. Observers noted that if Brown's Labour Party fared badly in these two sets of elections, it would intensify the calls for either the prime minister's resignation -- or -- snap elections. Either option would not bode well for the political fate of the Labour Party.

To that end, the Labour Party suffered a trouncing at the local level. Indeed, the party was no longer in control of any country council in the country. Results showed Conservatives winning 38 percent of the vote, the Liberal Democrats took 28 percent, and the Labour Party slid into decline with a poor 23 percent showing.

In European Union elections, Labour also suffered a weak third place performance. The Conservatives took little solace in the fact that they were unable to significantly increase their share of seats at the European parliament. Perhaps more important was the success of small parties, including the extreme right-wing British Nationalist Party, which gained representation to the dismay of both the Labour Party and the Conservatives. But that result was expected to hit Brown and Labour most hard, with those from within the party blaming the ongoing political chaos on the outcome that an extremist political party would have seats in Brussels.

With an increasing chorus for snap elections to be held, broader polling data indicated that the Labour Party (at 22 percent support) was now trailing the Liberal Democratic Party (25 percent) in popular support for the first time in more than two decades. The expense scandal was largely to blame for the loss of support, although the

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Conservatives, who polled highest (40 percent), were also viewed as having been damaged as a result of the scandal, suggesting that voters were generally disillusioned by the politicians of the two main parties. In this way, the Liberal Democrats were the only major party to see a marked amplification in political fortune.

Scotland's s jurisprudence came under fire in the aftermath of the decision to free Abdel Baset al-Megrahi -- the man responsible for the bombing of the Pan American flight that exploded over the town of Lockerbie in 1988. Scotland's s Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill justified the decision on compassionate grounds since al-Magrahi was terminally ill with prostate cancer. MacAskill said the decision "was not based on political, economic or diplomatic considerations" but was one that he made alone and he would have to live with the consequences. MacAskill conceded that Libya had acted wrongly by giving al-Megrahi a hero's s welcome when he arrived back home on Libyan soil. In an address to parliament, he said, "It is a matter of great regret that Mr. Megrahi was received in such an inappropriate manner. It showed no compassion or sensitivity to the families of the 270 victims of Lockerbie." Indeed, the matter has been a source of embarrassment for the Scots at home who were chagrined to see their flag being waved in Libya in support for the return of a convicted terrorist.

On the other side of the Atlantic -- and home to many of the Lockerbie victims -- the United States Department of State made it clear that it "passionately" disagreed with the decision. Still, the United States acknowledged that the matter would not rupture good relations with the United Kingdom. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said: "We made it quite clear that we disagreed passionately with this decision, because we thought it sent the wrong signal to, not only the families, but also to terrorists. But I really discourage you from thinking that we necessarily have to have some kind of tit-for-tat retaliation because of it. I just don't see it - not with Britain." That said, there remained grassroots rumblings of a trade boycott of Scotland as a result of the situation.

The case became marred by further controversy after a Times of London news story was published suggesting an "oil for freedom" deal between Libya and the United Kingdom. But on Aug. 31, 2009, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that al-Megrahi was not released as part of an oil exploration deal with Libya. The office of the prime minister insisted there was no deal associated with the release of al-Megrahi, and denied the Times of London charge that the move was made in order to facilitate oil exploration rights in Libya by the British energy company, British Petroleum.

In November 2009, former Prime Minister Tony Blair's s role in the rationale for the Iraq war re-emerged. According to the British newspaper, the Telegraph, secret documents indicated a "critical failure" in the government's s case for war in Iraq. The Telegraph alleged that in 2002, former Prime Minister Tony Blair misled the public and parliament when he said that the United Kingdom's s objective was "disarmament, not regime change" and there was no plan for military action. Instead, the documents reportedly showed that there was indeed preparation for the invasion and overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2002. The documents also reportedly showed that British forces were unprepared and poorly equipped for the 2003 invasion. The Telegraph did not confirm whether or not it would publish the secret documents that formed the basis for the news article.

In the first week of 2010, two former British cabinet ministers challenged the authority of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown by calling for a secret ballot on his leadership. The call, which was issued by Geoff Hoon and Patricia Hewitt of Brown's s own ruling Labour Party, came only months ahead of general elections in the United Kingdom. In a letter to fellow Labour Party parliamentarians, Hoon and Hewitt wrote: "As we move towards a general election, it remains the case that the Parliamentary Labour Party is deeply divided over the question of the leadership. Many colleagues have expressed their frustration at the way in which this question is affecting our political performance. We have therefore come to the conclusion that the only way to resolve this issue would be to allow every member to express their view in a secret ballot." The office of the prime minister rejected the call for such a vote on Brown's s leadership, in fact characterizing the move as "ludicrous" and unhelpful to the Labour Party ahead of the general election. While the chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Tony Lloyd, said there was "very little support" for a secret vote on Brown's s leadership, there were nonetheless elements within the party

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who have viewed Brown's performance as a likely death knell to their electoral prospects. Indeed, polling data ahead of the anticipated elections have shown the opposition Conservatives with a double-digit lead over Labour.

On January 29, 2010, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair defended his decision to draw his country into the United States-led invasion of Iraq and ensuing war, explaining that the September 11, 2001 terror attacks changed the way in which the threat of terrorism could be viewed. Speaking at a commission charged with inquiring into the events leading to British involvement in the Iraq war, Blair said: "Here's what changed for me: the whole calculus of risk. The point about this terrorist act was over 3,000 people had been killed, an absolutely horrific event. But if these people -- inspired by this religious fanaticism -- could have killed 30,000, they would have." He went on to explain that terrorism with a direct political purpose, such as violence by the Irish Republican Army, was "within a framework you could understand." He also suggested that before the terror attacks of 2001, the policy of containment against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq made sense. However, Blair testified that the terror attacks of 2001 were of such a different variety that it required action against countries such as Iran, Libya, North Korea, and Iraq.

On Feb. 23, 2010, a car bomb exploded close to a court house and popular cafes and bars in the city of Newry in Northern Ireland. The explosion was blamed on Irish republican dissidents, according to authorities on the scene. No one was hurt as a result of the attack. Anonymous warnings were issued to businesses and a hospital stating that a bomb would explode within 30 minutes. In actuality, the car bomb was detonated less than 20 minutes after the warnings were issued. The bombing occurred only weeks after a compromise deal was struck, aimed at transferring responsibility for the justice system (police and courts) to the government of Northern Ireland. That compromise deal was sanctioned by both the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein. Because the bombing occurred close to a courthouse, there was some speculation that it was motivated by republican dissidents' frustration over that agreement. For some time, the justice system in Northern Ireland has been a source of consternation with Catholics viewing the police and courts as unfairly favoring the majority Protestant population. See "Appendix" for more details related to Northern Ireland.

A spy scandal that implicated Israeli nationals on March 23, 2010 led to the decision by the United Kingdom to expel an Israeli diplomat. At issue was the use of forged British passports in the suspected Mossad assassination of a Hamas commander, Mahmoud Al Mabhouh, in a Dubai hotel room. The move came after an investigation into the matter and was made official with an address by British Foreign Secretary David Miliband to parliamentarians in the House of Commons. To date, Israel has neither confirmed nor denied involvement in the apparent targeted assassination of al-Mabhouh.

2010 Parliamentary Elections

Summary

With the votes counted, it was clear that the anticipated inconclusive election outcome had come to pass with no party winning a clear majority. The last time a British election produced such a result was in 1974. While the Conservatives or Tories were set to become the largest party in parliament, they were yet short of a parliamentary majority. As expected, Labour lost their majority. But with a "hung parliament" looming before the United Kingdom, all eyes were on the Liberal Democrats, whose party was likely to be the most influential player in the election. To that end, the Liberal Democrats entered negotiations with both potential coalition partners, yielding more positive results with the Conservatives rather than Labour. As a result, Prime Minister Gordon Brown resigned as head of government, paving the way for David Cameron to become the new prime minister of the United Kingdom.

Background

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On April 6, 2010, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced that a general election would be held on May 6, 2010. He said the anticipated elections would allow the British citizenry to decide whether to give his Labour Party a clear mandate for his main policy initiative: job creation. Prime Minister Brown sought consent from the head of state, Queen Elizabeth II, to dissolve parliament at a meeting in Buckingham Palace. He then said, "It will come as no surprise to all of you, and it's probably the least well kept secret of recent years but the queen has kindly agreed to the dissolution of parliament and a general election will take place on May 6."

The actual dissolution of parliament was scheduled for April 12, 2010, offering less than one month for an election campaign. To that end, Prime Minister Brown indicated that his roots derived from an "ordinary middle class family in an ordinary town" had informed his desire to fight on behalf of families of modest means. Prime Minister Brown also emphasized his economic credentials by noting that the country was on the road to economic recovery, and that the leader of government should get the "big decisions right."

On the other side of the equation, Conservative Party leader and opposition leader David Cameron expressed delight that he would finally be able to commence campaigning. For his part, Cameron offered up the Conservatives or Tories as the party that would offer the United Kingdom a fresh start. Speaking to this theme, Cameron said, "If we win this election, there will be real change. You don't have to put up with another five years of Gordon Brown."

Meanwhile, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg was quick to offer a far more substantive transformation for British citizens, noting that his party offered something completely new, as compared with the dichotomous old politics of the two main parties.

Ahead of election day, British citizens would for the first time be subject to three televised debates between the three main political leaders. Traditional election themes of economic development, deficits, taxation, and public service were expected to factor highly in those exchanges.

Polling Data and the Debate Effect

At the time the election was called, polling data showed the Conservatives were leading Labor, albeit by varying margins. An ICM survey showed the Conservatives (Tories) with 37 percent, Labour with 33 percent and the Liberal Democrats with 21 percent. A survey by YouGov poll gave the Tories a 10 percent lead over Labour -- a necessary margin if Cameron hoped to secure an outright parliamentary majority (326 seats) in the United Kingdom's "first past the post" system.

By mid-April 2010, following a televised debate among the three main parties' leaders, a shift of fortune had unfolded. A strong performance by Clegg -- hitherto an unknown commodity on the British political landscape -- appeared to have resulted in increased public support. Snap polls conducted after the debate showed that Clegg was the clear winner, according to the newspaper, the Telegraph. Indeed, a survey by YouGov for The Sun gave Clegg the most impressive polling result with 51 percent of respondents favoring him, as compared with Cameron, who had 29 percent, and Brown with 19 percent. Similar results were registered by a ComRes poll for ITV News, showing that 43 percent of respondents thought Clegg was the debate winner, compared to Cameron's 26 percent and Brown's 20 percent. Sky News' text-message poll showed closer results but, again, with Clegg as the winner with 37 percent; Brown was in second place with 32 percent and Cameron was in third place with 31 percent.

While the public's perceptions of which political leader won the debate was not a clear indicator of voting preferences, it certainly opened the possibility that the election contest was wider than originally conceived. To this end, Jeremy John Durham Ashdown, the former Liberal Democrats leader, declared that Clegg's debate performance had "made this a three-way race." He continued, "Nick made it clear that change to the Tories or to Labour is not change."

With an eye on electoral strategy, Ashdown said, "If the Liberal Democrats can win 25 percent in the polls and Labour gets 27 percent, then you have changed the dynamic of this election."

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Clegg's s success may have rested not only on his strong performance but on another factor. Specifically, the disaffection by the British electorate for the two major parties, partially fueled by the public's s disgust regarding a parliamentarians' expense accounts. That scandal, which forced several parliamentarians into early retirement ahead of the polls, appeared to be pushing many voters toward a third viable option in the form of the Liberal Democrats.

Indeed, by the third week of April 2010, it was clear that the public's s perception of the debate had actually translated into transformations in voters' preferences. A post-debate ComRes poll for the Independent showed the Conservatives with a receding lead of 31 percent, the Liberal Democrats now surging past Labour into second place with 29 percent, and Labour trailing with 27 percent.

A YouGive poll actually showed the Liberal Democrats now carrying a lead with 33 percent, the Tories in second place with 33 percent, and Labour again in third place with 26 percent. The polling variances notwithstanding, it was apparent that in the United Kingdom's first past the post system, these forthcoming elections could well end in a hung parliament. With the rising fortune of the Liberal Democrats, there was now no party likely to have enough seats in parliament to form a majority government.

Attention soon refocused on the second televised debate, which was to concentrate on foreign policy. The two institutionalized parties were banking on Clegg's s lack of expertise in this arena to reassert themselves in the electoral race. Indeed, the second debate was marked by fractious exchanges. Brown accused Cameron of being "anti-European" and Clegg of being "anti-American." Burnishing his internationalist credentials, Brown said: "I am afraid David is anti-European, Nick is anti- American. Both of them are out of touch with reality." But Cameron countered with a populist argument, saying that decisions made in Brussels -- the headquarters of the European Union -- should always be questioned in favor of the nationalist interests. Meanwhile, Clegg tried to outline what the Liberal Democrats' foreign policy would look like by saying, "I want us to lead in the world and I want us to lead in Europe, not complain from the sidelines."

Despite greater media scrutiny in the days leading up to the second debate, Clegg appeared to have pulled off another debate victory with post-debate surveys showing him to be the winner again in the eyes of viewers. A poll by ComRes showed that 33 percent of respondents believed Clegg to be the debate winner; both Brown and Cameron garnered 30 percent respectively. While Clegg's s held a more modest advantage the second time around, the public's s reaction nonetheless demonstrated that he had surpassed the critics' expectations that he would not fare as well, now that the novelty of a viable third choice had worn off. It was yet to be seen how the third debate, which would focus on the economy, would affect the impending elections.

In the backdrop appeared to be a growing sense of anxiety among the Conservatives who, until recently, had expected to defeat the incumbent Labour Party and cruise to victory. Now, their anticipated victory was slipping away. In many senses, the meteoric rise of the Liberal Democrats was translating into a far more complicated voting landscape, which would not benefit the Conservatives' fortune at the polls. Indeed, as noted by Foreign Secretary David Miliband, "There is deep panic in the Tory ranks and in Tory-supporting newspapers."

Miliband's s reference to Tory-supporting newspapers related to a new trend by conservative journals to pillory Clegg over bank account contributions, which ultimately was resolved when the Liberal Democratic leader disclosed all the banking details showing that there was no impropriety.

Ironically, as this dissonance was breaking out, Clegg and the Liberal Democrats had found an unexpected ally in the form of the Labour Party, which had suddenly jumped to the defense of Clegg. It was quite likely that Labour was realistic about its prospects at the polls; Labour likely realized that its only hope of hanging onto power would involve a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

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Fortune smiled on the anxiety-stricken Conservatives at the close of April 2010 when the party leaders participated in the third and final debate. Tory leader, Cameron, was perceived as having won the debate by 36 percent of those surveyed; 30 percent said Clegg won the debate, while 23 percent said Brown was the debate winner.

The Angus Reid poll also showed that Tory leader, Cameron, enjoyed the best performance in that debate, and was viewed as "a better person to handle most economic policy issues." Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg was viewed as having the best advantage when it came to connecting with undecided voters. Prime Minister Gordon Brown suffered his worst performance, despite his warning that a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats would put the economy "at risk." Brown's debate performance aside, his election prospects were not helped by the fact that around the same time, he referred to a voter as a "bigot" spurring controversy, and fueling the flames of suspicion that he had a temperament problem.

Indeed, days ahead of the election, some of the earlier bloom on the Liberal Democrats appeared to have faded with voters returning to their baseline preferences. Polling data by ComRes for ITV News and the Independent newspaper at that time showed that the Conservatives had 37 percent support, Labour had 29 percent, and the Liberal Democrats on 26 percent. This data appeared in line with survey results from YouGov/Sun showing the Conservatives with 35 percent, Labour with 30 percent, and the Liberal Democrats with 24 percent.

Election Results

With the votes counted, it was clear that the anticipated inconclusive election outcome had come to pass with no party winning a clear majority. The last time a British election produced such a result was in 1974. In 2010, there were suggestions that the inconclusive election result was tantamount to a no-confidence vote in government at large. That being said, the Conservatives or Tories were set to become the largest party in parliament, even though they had been denied a parliamentary majority by the British voters. As expected, Labour lost their majority and was relegated to the second largest force in parliament. But with a "hung parliament" looming before the United Kingdom, all eyes were on the third place finisher -- the Liberal Democrats -- who were very likely to become the most influential player in the election.

Quick to take control over the public relations aspect of the election result after winning his own constituency, Conservative leader, David Cameron said, "We have to wait for the full results, but it is clear the Labour government has lost its mandate to govern this country." But Foreign Secretary David Miliband of the Labour Party pushed back saying in an interview with British Sky News, "If no party has a majority in the House of Commons, no party has a moral right to a monopoly of power." Prime Minister Brown appeared to acknowledge that the election result delivered a message to the Labour Party, but stopped short of suggesting that the message was one of defeat. He said, "The voters have given us an injunction to talk to each other to see if strong and stable government can be secured." Meanwhile, Liberal Democratic leader, Nick Clegg, admitted his party's disappointment that his strong debate performance had not translated into more parliamentary seats. He called on all the political players to "take a little time" to ensure people got the government they deserved.

The full results ultimately gave the Tories 306 parliamentary seats -- short of the 326 needed to command control of 650-member House of Commons. The Labour Party placed second with 258 seats. The Liberal Democrats secured 57 seats and the right to play kingmaker in the quest for the future government. Also winning seats were the nationalist Welsh and Scottish parties that could also become crucial players in coalition deal-making that was sure to follow. As intimated above, a "hung parliament" would necessitate the formation of a coalition government, with the other parties expected to play crucial roles therein. Absent from that group of likely players was the ultra-right wing British Nationalist Party, often regarded as xenophobic in orientation, which suffered dwindling support at the polls.

Coalition Prospects

In regards to the formation of a coalition government, both Cameron and Brown made it clear that they were looking to the Liberal Democrats for partnership in forming a coalition government. In a clear call for cooperation from Liberal Democratic leader, Clegg, Cameron said, "I want to make a big, open and comprehensive offer to the Liberal Democrats." Cameron also urged a quick government formation process, noting the need to calm volatile

markets that were in dire need of stabilizing moves. Meanwhile, Brown made a similar overture to the Liberal Democrats. For his part, Clegg made clear that the country and not party politics were at stake. He said, "It is vital that all parties, all political leaders, act in the national interest and not out of narrow party political advantage."

Brown signaled quickly that he would welcome a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, and indeed a Labour-Liberal coalition would appear to be the easiest ideological alliance. For example, the Liberal Democrats and Labour have agreed that spending cuts should not be imposed until a time when economic recovery in the United Kingdom has been advanced. In contrast, the Conservatives have backed aggressive deficit reduction.

But Liberal Democratic-Labour synergy was especially emphasized by the fact that Labour has backed the Liberal Democrats' biggest demand -- that of electoral reform. Indeed, in a bid to show solidarity with the third place finisher, Brown said: "My view is clear - there needs to be immediate legislation on this to begin to restore the public trust in politics and to improve parliament's standing and reputation, a fairer voting system is central."

Nevertheless, Brown's cause would not be helped by the fact that Clegg made clear that he was not keen on Brown staying on as prime minister, although he did not dismiss the idea of a coalition with Labour under the stewardship of another leader. As well, Clegg said that with the Conservatives winning the most seats, they should have the first chance to try to form a government. But whether or not such a government could include the Liberal Democrats was yet to be seen. Of concern for the Liberal Democrats has been the Tories' opposition to the notion of electoral reform to a proportional system. Such a move would practically foreclose political domination of any one party going forward -- an idea that has left the Tories balking in dismay.

Nonetheless, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats entered talks aimed at forging a possible coalition arrangement. Liberal Democratic leader, Clegg, laid down the proverbial gauntlet as he asserted: "It is now for the Conservative Party to prove that it is capable of seeking to govern in the national interest."

His Tory counterpart, Cameron, offered his response saying, "I want us to work together to tackle the debt crisis, social problems and the broken political system." It was yet to be seen whether or not these two statements by Clegg and Cameron were signs of a foundation for a forthcoming coalition.

While both parties characterized their initial talks as "constructive," there remained several unresolved issues. Significantly, Cameron indicated that there would be little room for compromise in areas such as defense, relations with the European Union, immigration, and the timing of public spending cuts. On that latter issue, Cameron said, "The biggest threat is the deficit. Starting to deal with the deficit this year is essential." As well, the aforementioned matter of electoral reform continued to be a sticking point. The Conservatives were making clear electoral reform would only be considered in a committee of inquiry, while the Liberal Democrats were affirming its priority status.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Brown appeared to acknowledge the reality of the political landscape with the Liberal Democrats first engaging with the Conservatives. Opening the door for possible talks between the any of the other parties and his Labour Party, Brown said, "I understand and respect the position of Mr. Clegg in saying he first wishes to make contact with the leader of the Conservative Party." He continued, "Mr. Cameron and Mr. Clegg should clearly be entitled to take as much time as they feel necessary. For my part I should make clear I should be pleased to see any of the party leaders."

Political wrangling was expected to dominate the landscape for the immediate future. With no written constitution in the United Kingdom, the job was left to senior civil service to craft rules aimed at the government formation process. At the intra-party level, activists from all three parties were urging the respective leadership branches not to cede excessive accommodation in their discussions with potential coalition partners. Indeed, party loyalists were concerned about that seizing the levers of power would come at too high a price to pay -- specifically, in the way of core party principles.

By May 10, 2010, reports had emerged that a deal was in the works between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. Central to that deal was a "final offer" by the Conservatives to the Liberal Democrats to hold a

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referendum on electoral reform. Another possible option would be a "bare minimum" agreement in which the Liberal Democrats would agree not to bring down the Conservative government in a confidence vote.

Whether or not that deal would involve the Liberal Democrats as part of a coalition government, or, as the enablers of an effective minority Conservative government was yet to be seen.

With the Conservatives eagerly seeking to seal the deal via such overtures, there were suggestions that a new government might be afoot. Moreover, Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, appeared to place a stamp of approval on the deal-making process. He said that he was "very grateful to David Cameron and his negotiation team" and noted that the negotiations yielded a "great deal of progress." Nevertheless, Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, sought to calm such speculation, asking instead for patience as the negotiations process was exhausted. To that end, he said: "Bear with us a little bit longer and we hope we will be able to provide you with full announcement as soon as possible." At the same time, the Liberal Democrats were indicating that they would not shut the door on negotiations with the Labour Party, however, such a move would be contingent upon Brown stepping down as prime minister.

Perhaps in a bid to advance their prospects with the Liberal Democrats, on that same day -- May 10, 2010 -- Gordon Brown announced he would indeed step down as Labour leader and prime minister by September 2010. This move made it clear that Brown was inclined to put party and progressive principles before personal ambitions. Indeed, Brown noted that the United Kingdom was home to a "parliamentary and not presidential system" and observed that there was a "progressive majority" of voters. In an attempt to show the Liberal Democrats that he would not be a key player for long, Brown

also said that he would not participate in a forthcoming leadership race within the Labour Party, saying, "I will play no part in that contest, I will back no individual candidate."

Clegg of the Liberal Democrats indicated tacit approval of the move saying. "Gordon Brown has taken a difficult personal decision in the national interest."

This statement came ahead of anticipated negotiations between the Liberal Democrats and Labour, with Clegg noting that such talks would be "sensible and in the national interest."

Political Change: Brown out; Cameron in

On May 11, 2010, it was clear there would be no Labour-Liberal Democratic coalition. Thus, Gordon Brown resigned as prime minister of the United Kingdom, ending 13 years of Labour rule in that country.

In his resignation address to the British people, Brown said, "I loved the job not for its prestige, its titles and its ceremony -- which I do not love at all. No, I loved the job for its potential to make this country I love fairer, more tolerant, more green, more democratic, more prosperous and more just - truly a greater Britain." It was clear that the Labour Party would move into the position of being the only progressive option among the major parties on the British political scene.

Brown's resignation paved the way for David Cameron to become prime minister. To that end, Cameron went to Buckingham Palace to officially accept Queen Elizabeth II's request to form the next government of the United Kingdom, and then entered 10 Downing Street at the country's new prime minister. David Cameron had the distinction of being Britain's youngest head of government in about 200 years.

Cameron lauded Gordon Brown for his years of public service and then gave some indication of the type of leadership to come. Cameron said that his government's priorities would concentrate on immediate challenges, such as the debt crisis as well as the loss of public trust in the political system. He warned that "difficult decisions" laid ahead, but struck a positive tone saying he looked toward "better times ahead" for the British people.

Indeed, Cameron said: "I think the service our country needs right now is to face up to our big challenges, to confront our problems, take difficult decisions, lead people through those decisions, so that together we can reach better times ahead."

On the matter of the type of government to be formed, it was yet to be determined if Cameron would be at the helm of a minority government, or would hold sway over a majority government with the help of the Liberal Democrats. To that end, Cameron said his objective was to form a "proper and full coalition" with the Liberal Democrats, in the interests of "strong, stable government." Cameron added that he hoped he and

Nick Clegg could "put aside party differences and work hard for the common good and the national interest."

That being said, Clegg had not yet received majority consent from members of parliament from his party, as well as the federal executive ruling body of the party, to enter a coalition with the Conservatives.

Meanwhile, members of both the Liberal Democrats and Labour began to offer explanations of the failure of their negotiations. From the perspective of the Liberal Democrats, the talks failed because Labour did not seem seriously invested in forging a reformist-minded, progressive government. In fact, according to BBC News, one spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats suggested that core members of the Labour team "gave every impression of wanting the process to fail." The spokesman said that some Labour cabinet ministers "were determined to undermine any agreement by holding out on policy issues and suggesting that Labour would not deliver on proportional representation and might not marshal the votes to secure even the most modest form of electoral reform."

But on the other side of the equation, Labour suggested that the negotiations were fatally hindered by impediments erected by the Liberal Democrats. Lord Mandelson of the Labour Party said in an interview with BBC News, that while his party sanctioned the notion of an agreement with the Liberal Democrats, that party "created so many barriers and obstacles that perhaps they thought their interests lay on the Tory side, on the Conservative side, rather than the progressive side."

Post-Election Policy Agenda

At the broader level, the issue of economic and financial stability was at stake. Indeed, the new government would have to deal with formidable challenges as the United Kingdom grapples with recession and budget deficit reduction.

On May 13, 2010, the new coalition government of Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg held an unprecedented news conference aimed at delineating its policies, and demonstrating a sense of coalition unity. At the rhetorical level, Cameron said that the coalition government was emblematic of a "historic and seismic shift" in the political landscape of the United Kingdom. He described the alliance as follows: "It will be an administration united behind three key principles: freedom, fairness and responsibility." He continued, "And it will be an administration united behind one key purpose ... the strong and stable and determined leadership that we need for the long term."

At stake would be the practical application of the allied interests of the center-right Conservatives and the center-left Liberal Democrats. Of particular note was the compromise struck on the timetable for a reduction of public spending. To that end, the Liberal Democrats made the concession of signing onto the Conservatives' aggressive agenda to address the United Kingdom's debt woes.

Such a move, while necessary in practice, was likely to come with a political cost. Resultantly, some analysts were casting the new government as a kind of sacrificial lamb that would enact difficult but requisite economic policies. Such moves, though, could enrage the public and exact a political price in the longer term.

Also at stake was the Conservatives' concession to the Liberal Democrats -- electoral reform. As noted above, agreement was forged on holding a referendum to ratify the proposed alternative voting system to replace the existing "first past the post" system. Should the move be ratified, then voters could specify two candidates in terms of ranking, with the vote for the top choice going to the alternate option if that top choice was ultimately eliminated. If implemented, the change could boost the presence of smaller party candidates in parliament. Still, even agreement on a referendum was not reform-minded enough for the Liberal Democrats, however, that party could take heart in changes to be made in the House of Lords where rolling elections would now be implemented.

One controversial proposal by the new coalition has been the plan for fixed term parliaments. In essence, the plan would commit a government to a five-year term, precluding the prime minister from calling an election at any time within a five year period. While the current threshold for a no-confidence vote to bring down a government has been 50 percent plus one parliamentarian, the new rule would provide for dissolution with the backing of 55 percent or more in parliament.

In the face of criticism, Cameron characterized the change as a good one. However, members of his own party, as well as the opposition Labour Party, have railed against it as potentially damaging for democracy. Indeed, Tory Christopher Chope went further in characterizing the rule change as a "recipe for anarchy." He explained in an interview with the BBC, "It could mean, in practice, that if the present government was to lose its majority in parliament, and wasn't able to operate as a minority government because it didn't enjoy the confidence of a sufficient number of MPs ... it would be able to carry on. But that would be basically a recipe for anarchy, because it would mean that the government wouldn't have a majority." Labour figures David Blunkett characterized the move as "a stitch up" while Jack Straw said that it was "completely undemocratic and totally unworkable."

In terms of representation, the Liberal Democrats were given several important portfolios in Cameron's cabinet, not the least of which was the position of deputy prime minister going to Clegg himself. Other than Clegg, these included the first secretary to the treasury David Laws, Chris Huhne as energy secretary; and Vincent Cable as business secretary. That being said, the three key ministerial roles -- finance, foreign affairs and the home office -- were to be held by Conservatives George Osborne, William Hague and Theresa May respectively.

The first test of the new Cameron-Clegg coalition government would come within 50 days with a vote on an emergency budget. It would be a sign of whether theoretical concurrence on policy could translate into practical application. It would also be a harbinger of the likely stability and viability of the Conservative-Liberal Democratic alliance.

On May 25, 2010, Queen Elizabeth II presided over the opening of a new session of Britain's parliament. Following tradition, the queen delivered the speech detailing the policy agenda of the incoming government, which in this case was that of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Consistent with the agreement forged between the two allied parties, that policy agenda included tackling the country's problematic deficit, restoring economic growth, and establishing a new Office for Budget Responsibility. There were also plans for certain reforms to the political system, such as a referendum on a new voting system for members of the House of Commons, and, a proposal to make the House of Lords "wholly or mainly elected," according to Queen Elizabeth II. As well, there was the intent to abolish the notion of a national identity card. Encapsulating the thrust of the reformist agenda, the Queen announced: "My government will propose parliamentary and political reform to restore trust in democratic institutions and rebalance the relationship between the citizen and the state."

Foreign relations were on the agenda months later as the British-based energy company, British Petroleum (BP)

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was in the news due to a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The disaster in Gulf intersected with global politics as BP was subject to increased scrutiny, ultimately resting on the question of whether that company played a role in the early release of the Libyan Lockerbie bomber al-Megrahi (discussed above), and spurring debate again as to whether or not BP lobbied for his release in exchange for lucrative oil deals in Libya.

In fact, BP acknowledged that it had conveyed concern over the slow action being taken to transfer Megrahi out of British jurisdiction and home to Libya. The company stopped short of admitting that it played a part in the release of the terrorist.

As well, British Prime Minister David Cameron, in the United States for meetings with President Barack Obama, dismissed a request for a new investigation into the matter. Scottish Secretary, Michael Moore, insisted before the House of Commons that the decision to release the Libyan terrorist was made "in good faith." Still, with this scandal brewing, pressure was building on both sides of the Atlantic -- in the United States for a investigation into the allegations against BP related to the bomber's release, and in the United Kingdom for a full and independent inquiry into the bombing itself and the decision to grant a terrorist freedom on compassionate grounds.

In the autumn of 2010, following a battle for the leadership of the United Kingdom's Labor Party, Ed Miliband claimed victory at the helm of the country's major opposition party. Ed Miliband beat out his older, more well-known brother former Foreign Secretary David Miliband, for the party's top post. For his part, David Miliband said that he would not be involved in Ed Miliband's leadership team, while the new Labor leader made clear that he would be forming his own shadow cabinet without his brother.

On May 6, 2011, British voters rejected electoral reform in a highly-anticipated referendum. Up to 69 percent of voters opposed the change while only 31 percent voted in its favor. At issue were proposed changes from a "First Past The Post" (FPTP) system to an "Alternative Vote" (AV) system. While Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron has eschewed this change, it was championed by his coalition partner, Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats and the referendum itself was a key component of the coalition deal formed between the two parties at the helm of power in the United Kingdom. Now, with the proposal going down to defeat, a season of discontent was expected to prevail between the two coalition partners. That coalition was formed in the aftermath of the inconclusive 2010 general election, which brought an end to the 13-year rule of the Labor Party but gave no party an outright majority to form a government. Following coalition talks, the Conservatives entered a pact with the center-left Liberal Democrats, and formed a government. As noted here, the coalition deal was contingent upon the holding of this referendum. With the vote out of the way and the cause of electoral reform almost lost, Clegg and the Liberal Democrats were being left in a weakened position in relation to Cameron and the Conservatives.

Other Recent Developments

On May 25, 2011, United States President Barack Obama made history by becoming the first United States president to address the British parliament at Westminster Hall. In that speech, President Obama emphasized the strong and enduring bond between the two countries -- the United States and the United Kingdom -- characterizing the trans-Atlantic relationship as "one of the oldest and strongest alliances the world has ever known." President Obama also noted that the primacy of the West -- of the United States and allied European countries -- would be "indispensable" in the 21st century, given the ascendancy of new world powers, and the spread of democracy. Linking these two themes, President Obama said, "There are few nations that stand firmer, speak louder and fight harder to defend democratic values around the world than the United States and the United Kingdom."

British Prime Minister David Cameron, as well as former Prime Minister Tony Blair, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and Sir John Major, were in attendance for President Obama's address at Westminster Hall. The reception

by British members of parliament and peers to President Obama was extraordinarily warm, with the United States leader receiving extended standing ovations at the start and at the close of the address respectively. The prior night, President Obama and Mrs. Obama were guests of the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, and her consort, Prince Phillip, at an official state dinner.

June 2011 saw riots rock Northern Ireland's capital of Belfast, with police saying that several hundred people had taken to the streets to participate in sectarian violence. The epicenter of the violence appeared to be a Catholic enclave in the eastern part of the city, which has endured tensions between Catholics and Protestants in the past. Still, with petrol bombs, fireworks, and missiles being hurled at police, and gunshots being fired, it was clearly the worst episode of violence in Belfast in at least a decade. Several people were reported to have been injured, including a photographer, and calls for calm had gone unheeded.

July 2011 saw a resurgence of sectarian violence as petrol bombs were hurled at police during rioting in the northern part of Belfast. The explosion of violence occurred at a parade by the Orange Institution, a Protestant fraternal order, in the area of Ardoyne, which is nationalist enclave. It should be noted that the nationalists are no longer united in Northern Ireland with those loyal to Sinn Fein pledging allegiance to the peace process, and other republicans who do not. It would seem that the latter group was involved in the fracas that ensued when riot police took up positions. Indeed, the presence of riot police appeared to raise the ire of people on the scene who began to throw stones, glass bottles, bricks, and even petrol bombs at the police as the security forces used water cannons to try to quell the angry crowds.

See "Appendix" for more information related to Northern Ireland.

At the start of August 2011, London was rocked by riots as young people took to the streets to protest the shooting death of a man in Tottenham at the hands of police. The situation began when the relatives of Mark Duggan, the man who died in the police raid, decided to participate in a peaceful protest, which soon turned violent. The situation escalated when a young man was searched by police who found nothing incriminating in the individual's possession. Soon, the protesters were embroiled in a rampage of street violence that was stretching from the British capital to parts elsewhere in the country. In London, angry youth set shops and a bus ablaze, threw rocks at police, and vandalized police vehicles. Widespread looting was also reported to have taken place. Bursts of violence erupted in Manchester, the West Midlands, and elsewhere outside of London.

The clashes with police left 35 police officers injured. By Aug. 11, 2011, more than 1,000 people had been arrested and more than 400 persons had been charged with crimes of violence, disorder, and looting in London. Elsewhere in the country, more than 330 people were arrested in the West Midlands and about 140 people were arrested in Manchester and Salford.

The uprising by youth appeared to be driven by a sense of outrage over perceived victimization by the Metropolitan Police Force. That is to say, the killing of Duggan may well have tapped into latent frustration from young minority and immigrant communities who have for some time been subject to particular scrutiny by the police over the years. Certainly, the Metropolitan Police Force has earned a notorious reputation for the beating death of a peaceful protester as far back as 1979, and the more recent killing of a man by police at the G-20 meetings in 2009. These incidences of apparent injustice were -- to some extent -- linked with broader social and economic grievances; however, the explosion of unrest and violence over a course of days soon overshadowed any notion of rational explanation or background causal factors. Indeed, what began as street protests to register discontent over police injustice had effectively been transformed into massive riots, rampant criminality, and a climate of chaos in pockets across the country.

In a perplexing twist, while many youth involved were described as individuals suffering from socio-economic challenges, a good many young people detained were university students pursuing professional paths without

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previous criminal records. Those records were set to change since most deemed to have committed crimes would face serious charges in the crown court.

In terms of security, riot police were being deployed across the city to try to quell the violence. Meanwhile, London's Mayor Boris Johnson and Home Secretary Theresa May were expected to meet with the Metropolitan Police (Met) to determine what action should be taken in regard to the unrest. For her part, Home Secretary May promised the London rioters would "be brought to justice" and would "face the consequences of their actions."

British Prime Minister David Cameron returned home from his vacation to monitor the unfolding situation, convened a special meeting of his cabinet, and initiated an emergency recall of the British Parliament. In an address to the House of Commons, he placed blame for the unrest gripping the country on "criminality pure and simple." Prime Minister Cameron also noted that the police had initially used ineffectual anti-riot tactics, which may have added to the destruction and harm suffered by innocent bystanders, homes, and businesses. Prime Minister Cameron additionally acknowledged that "there were simply far too few police deployed" on to the streets and "the tactics they were using weren't working."

More police were being sent to "hot spot" areas and the number of security personnel would be boosted with the inclusion of police officers from Scotland to assist in maintaining law and order. The increased deployment of police on the streets of London was expected to remain in place for the immediate future.

With an eye on responding with a firmer hand to the unrest, Prime Minister Cameron said, "To the law abiding people who play by the rules, and who are the overwhelming majority in our country, I say: the fightback has begun, we will protect you. If you've had your livelihood and property damaged, we will compensate you. We are on your side. And to the lawless minority, the criminals who have taken what they can get, I say this: We will track you down, we will find you, we will charge you, we will punish you. You will pay for what you have done."

The prime minister said that the authorities were banning the use of face masks, considering limits of social media among people known to be plotting acts of violence, reviewing the implementation of curfews, and readying the use of water cannons to disperse crowds. Also under consideration was the strengthening of court sentences, the expansion of powers for landlords to evict criminals from welfare housing, in addition to the introduction of anti-gang programs. Prime Minister Cameron emphasized that all efforts would be made to restore law and order to the streets of the country. It should also be noted that the prime minister announced a plan to assist and/or compensate people whose homes and businesses were vandalized or destroyed by youth rioters.

The unrest reached into the political dimension, as it drew attention to the Conservative government's plans to cut funding for police as part of the government's overall austerity thrust. Now, with the exacerbation of the unrest being partially blamed on insufficient police on the streets, questions were being raised about the wisdom of such spending cuts. In the House of Commons, Labour Party leader, Ed Miliband, called for a reconsideration of the plans to reduce police saying, "The events of the last few days have been a stark reminder to us all that police on our streets make our communities safer and make the public feel safer." He continued, "Given the absolute priority the public attaches to a visible and active police presence, does the prime minister understand why they would think it is not right that he goes ahead with the cuts to police numbers? Will he now think again on this issue?" For his part, Cameron maintained that the cuts could be achieved without reducing the visible presence of police on the streets.

On Oct. 14, 2011, British Defense Secretary Liam Fox resigned following a scandal involving one of his closest friends. Adam Werritty -- a self-proclaimed "adviser" to Fox -- was exposed for funding links to companies that might benefit from government decisions, and was reported to have been granted extremely close access to Fox, even accompanying him on foreign visits of an official nature. The situation resulted in questions about a conflict of interest for Fox. For his part, Fox said in his letter of resignation, "I mistakenly allowed the distinction between my personal interest and my government activities to become blurred. The consequences of this have become clearer in recent days. I have also repeatedly said that the national interest must always come before personal interest. I now have to hold myself to my own standard." The scenario also forced British Prime Minister David Cameron to

carry out a cabinet shuffle. Transport Minister Philip Hammond was given the defense portfolio, while Justice Greening replaced Hammond with the transport portfolio.

Special Report

Iran under isolation; effects on ties with the United Kingdom --

Due to revelations about Iran's nuclear development program, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) passed a resolution expressing "deep and increasing concern" about Iran's nuclear program, and demanded that Iran clarify outstanding questions related to the country's nuclear capabilities. The resolution was adopted following a vote at the United Nations nuclear watchdog agency, with 32 votes in favor and only Cuba and Ecuador voting against it. Iran's IAEA envoy, Ali Ashgar Soltanieh, dismissed the development and said the resolution would only strengthen Iran's resolve to go forward with its nuclear development. He said, "It will be business as usual... We will continue our work as before."

While Iran was not on the verge of a declaration of its nuclear breakout capability, clearly, these revelations would serve to reinvigorate the debate about what method could be used to stop Iran from accessing a nuclear weapon. Under consideration would be options ranging from sanctions, to sabotage and military action. Despite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's assertion that the report made clear the need for global action to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons, Russia wasted no time in foreclosing the possibility of its support for fresh sanctions. With United Nations sanctions unlikely, on Nov. 21, 2011, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada slapped fresh sanctions on Iran's financial and energy sectors.

In addition to the IAEA resolution discussed above, Iran was also subject to further diplomatic pressure and went further down the road to global isolation when the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution condemning an alleged assassination plot targeting the Saudi ambassador to the United States. The resolution stopped short of directly accusing Tehran of the plot, but nonetheless demanded that Iran "comply with all of its obligations under international law" and "co-operate with states seeking to bring to justice all those who participated in the planning, sponsoring, organization and attempted execution of the plot."

With international pressure being intensified against Iran, the Iranian regime appeared to be reacting by lashing out at the Western world. With hostilities already high between Iran and the United States, Tehran appeared to be taking aim at the United Kingdom. To this end, by the close of November 2011, Iran's Guardian Council of the Constitution unanimously voted to reduce diplomatic ties with the United Kingdom. The change would downgrade diplomatic ties with the United Kingdom from the ambassador level to the level of charge d'affaires within a two-week timeframe. Ratification by the Guardian Council came after a vote in the Iranian Majlis or parliament, approving this move. Iranian radio reported that during the vote, several members of parliament changed "death to Britain." Iran was reacting to pressure from Western countries, including the United Kingdom, to place greater political and economic pressure on Iran, and particularly, the Central Bank of Iran, in the wake of the aforementioned report by the IAEA.

In a further sign that Iran's relations with the countries of the West were on a downward slide, Nov. 29, 2011 saw militant students aligned with the hard line conservative government in Tehran storm the British embassy compound. This action appeared to be part of a violent demonstration against the government of the United Kingdom, which joined the United States in issuing new financial sanctions against Iran. The militant activists reportedly chanted, "death to England," vandalized the embassy offices, seized sensitive documents, briefly detained some diplomatic personnel, and burned the British flag in acts that constituted flagrant violations of diplomatic norms. A separate attack by militant students and activists on a British diplomatic compound in northern Tehran was also confirmed by the British Foreign Office. The scenario disturbingly recalled the shocking assault on the American Embassy in 1979 following Iran's Islamic Revolution.

Although Iran expressed "regret" over the attacks on the British embassy and secondary diplomatic compound, witnesses on the ground in Iran suggested that Iranian security forces did little to quickly end the outbreak of

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violence against a diplomatic interest. Indeed, police reportedly allowed the scene to play out for several hours before taking control of the situation. There were serious allegations mounting that the assault on the British embassy compounds had taken place with approval from Iranian authorities. Furthermore, speculation rested on the involvement of the regime-backed Basiji militia. For his part, British Prime Minister David Cameron said: "The attack on the British embassy in Tehran today was outrageous and indefensible." British authorities warned its citizens in Iran to remain indoors and await advice; they also warned of consequences for Iran in the offing, and summoned the Iranian charge d'affaires.

The United Kingdom on Nov. 30, 2011 officially downgraded its ties with Iran. The United Kingdom withdrew all its diplomats from Iran, closed its embassy in Tehran, urged its citizens to exit that country, and gave Iran 48 hours to remove all its staff from the Iranian diplomatic mission in London. Officials in the United Kingdom also went on the record to note that they believe the attacks on the British embassy in Tehran and the secondary compound were carried out with the tacit approval of Iran's leadership. British Foreign Secretary William Hague, asserted that there had been "some degree of regime consent" in the attacks on the embassy and the other diplomatic compound in Tehran. Dominick Chilcott, the newly-appointed British ambassador to Iran, said: "This was a state-supported activity." In an interview with BBC News, Ambassador Chilcott said that Iran was a country in which an attack on an embassy was conducted only "with the acquiescence and the support of the state." These moves collectively marked the worst deterioration of ties between the United Kingdom and Iran in decades.

The United Kingdom was backed by the 15-nation United Nations Security Council, which condemned the attack "in the strongest terms." Separately, United States President Barack Obama called for the Iranian government to ensure those responsible faced justice. Germany's Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle characterized the attacks on the British embassy compounds as "a violation of international law." French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe placed the blame on the Iranian government, saying: "The Iranian regime has shown what little consideration it has for international law."

Several European countries -- such as France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands -- wasted no time in joining the Western thrust to diplomatically isolate Iran by recalling their own ambassadors from Tehran. France took a further step by withdrawing its embassy staff from Iran. French officials said the move was being made out of an abundance of caution, given the security risks in Iran to Western interests. France's calls for a ban on Iranian oil imports and a freeze on central bank assets was expected to heighten bilateral tensions, and effectively place France in Iran's firing line, along with the United Kingdom. Russia, which has often been accused by the West of being "soft" on Iran joined the condemnation of the attacks.

At home in Iran, militant activist students in that country were at the airport in Tehran, waiting to welcome the expelled Iranian diplomats from London, and chanting slogans, such as "Death to Britain." The returning diplomats, however, never had any direct encounters with the students at the airport.

The situation appeared to highlight cleavages in the Iranian leadership regarding the diplomatic farrago. For example, in an interview with Iran's state-run IRNA news agency, Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi said, "There is no doubt that Britain is one of the oldest enemies of Iran." He appeared to offer a slight rebuke to the militant activists who attacked the British embassy, adding: "Young revolutionaries should not go beyond the law." Meanwhile, the Iranian government targeted the United Kingdom for exacerbating tensions between that country and the West, as Iranian foreign ministry spokesman, Ramin Mehmanparast, said: "The British government is trying to extend to other European countries the problem between the two of us."

Special Report

U.K. outside the European Union circle as bloc looks to new financial compact

In the first part of December 2011, the leaders of the two biggest players in the euro zone -- French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel -- issued a joint call for serious changes to Europe's governing treaties, aimed at ameliorated economic governance for the 17 countries that make up the euro currency

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bloc. French President Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel met for talks on the matter in Paris as the euro zone countries continue to grapple with the sovereign debt crisis, emanating from "ground zero" in Greece, but extending regionally across the European bloc. This crisis has left the euro vulnerable, risked fragmenting the currency union, and could yet imperil the fragile global economic recovery.

At issue has been the problematic debt to GDP ratio in countries across the euro zone of the European Union (EU), and concomitant anxieties about various countries, such as Portugal, Spain, Italy and even Ireland, defaulting on their respective debts. These mostly southern European economies were plagued not only by high deficits but also inherent structural economic weakness, which could affect other countries in the euro zone in something of a contagion. While rescue packages for Greece and Ireland were put into effect, such measures for larger economies, such as Italy and Spain, was simply unaffordable. General expectations were that Spain might barely escape default because its debt-to-GDP ratio -- while poor -- was still better than that of Italy. But at the broader level, attention began to rest on the need to expand a rescue fund for Europe's heavily indebted countries, which in September 2011 led to what is now known as the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF).

While the expansion of the EFSF breathed necessary life into the euro stabilization entity, it should be noted that the treatment for the debt ailment infecting the euro zone has become imbued by controversy. While the participants of the global economy have been anxious for action to be taken in response to the debt crisis, German stakeholders have been incensed that they would be the major contributors to the rescue fund, which would benefit countries, such as Greece. Stated differently, the debt crisis in Europe has led not only to instability in the international markets, but also to political imbroglios across the euro zone.

Of equally significant has been the growing chorus of complaints about the slow and protracted political response to the sovereign debt crisis in Europe and the associated euro zone challenges, which were largely due to the EU's institutional structure. It was with an eye on addressing that latter issue that French President Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel were meeting in Paris to seek a pathway to stabilizing the euro zone. That meeting resulted in the aforementioned call for radical changes to Europe's governing treaties, characterized by heightened economic governance in the EU.

Included in their proposal were: (1) the creation of a monetary fund for Europe, (2) automatic penalties for countries that exceed European deficit limits, and (3) monthly meetings of European leaders. The proposal entailed compromises by both European leaders. President Sarkozy had to accept the notion of automatic sanctions for countries in violation of debt limit rules, while Chancellor Merkel had to accept that the European Court of Justice will not be empowered with the power of veto over budgets. Meanwhile, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which was intended to replace the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) in 2013, would be advanced earlier in 2012.

President Sarkozy said that they were looking to March 2012 to complete negotiations on the new treaty. Ideally, the new treaty would be ratified by all 27 member states of the European Union. However, if concurrence at that level proved impossible, then the 17 states of the euro zone would have to approve it. It should also be noted that European Council President Herman Van Rompuy has said that tougher budget rules for the euro zone may not require changing any existing European Union treaties.

President Sarkozy emphasized the imperative that such a crisis not re-emerge in the future. He said, "We are conscious of the gravity of the situation and of the responsibility that rests on our shoulders." For her part, Chancellor Merkel said her country, working in concert with France, was "absolutely determined" to maintain a stable euro. She also advocated for "structural changes which go beyond agreements."

While the new measures would certainly go a long way to addressing the issue of improved economic governance in the euro zone, they did not deal with the question of how many euro zone countries would deal with their debt challenges in a climate of low growth. Nevertheless, in the short run, the steadfast and unified message of intent by the two European leaders was, at least, expected to calm markets and facilitate lower borrowing costs for debt-ridden economies such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

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The proverbial "fly in the ointment" emerged on Dec. 5, 2011 when the credit ratings agency, Standard and Poor's, placed the countries of the euro zone on a "credit watch" with negative implications.* Even power house economies of Germany and France were included in the move, which presaged a downgrade to come in the future. A day later, Standard and Poor's even warned that the euro zone bailout fund -- the EFSF -- could lose its own AAA rating. These moves have raised eyebrows across the world as regards the credibility of the ratings agency, which failed to warn the world of the sub-prime meltdown in 2008 that ultimately led to the global financial crisis. There were suggestions that this downgrade threat to euro zone countries, in conjunction with the downgrade of the United States months earlier following a particularly ferocious debt ceiling debate in that country, were evidence that the credit ratings agency was trying to "save face" by proving its tougher standards at this time. Standard and Poor's newly-discovered hard-line stance was being questioned by analysts, who pointed to the timing of the warning against euro zone countries. But this warning came precisely at a time when France and Germany were leading the charge in the EU to solve the regional debt crisis, as discussed here.

The move by Standard and Poor's aside, Europe re-focused on the task at hand: to institute ameliorated economic governance in the EU. By mid-December 2011, 26 out of the 27 EU member states backed the notion of a new tax and budget concord that would amend the Lisbon Treaty -- the EU's operational and constitutional foundation.

Included in the cadre of 26 affirmative countries were all of the 17 euro zone countries. Of course, for many countries, support was contingent upon additional political ratification either in parliament or via referendum. Still, the signals of positive joint action were clear from these 26 countries.

The United Kingdom emerged as the lone "holdout" with British Prime Minister David Cameron insisting that he had to act to protect key British interests, including the financial markets. French President Nicolas Sarkozy noted that the sticking point for Prime Minister Cameron involved a protocol that would allow the United Kingdom to opt-out of changes on financial services. President Sarkozy said that measure was unacceptable. Explaining his position, Prime Minister Cameron said, "We were offered a treaty that didn't have proper safeguards for Britain, and I decided it was not right to sign that treaty." He continued by noting that the United Kingdom remained in the EU, saying, "We're still in the single market."

Nevertheless, this move by the United Kingdom was an operational veto of the initiative to get all 27 EU countries to support changes to the bloc's Lisbon Treaty. As intimated above, it would effectively force the EU to go down the road of instituting a "fiscal compact," rather than a new treaty. While the institution of a fiscal pact could probably occur more quickly than ratification of a new treaty, it would entail far less rigor and strength as a guiding maxim of the EU.

Across Europe, the British government was being criticized for plunging the United Kingdom into a position of isolation, while economic analysts from the Economist and the Financial Times, warned that Europe was now being faced by fragmentation.

In the United Kingdom, the move by Prime Minister Cameron was creating tensions within his own coalition government. Notably, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg -- the leader of the Liberal Democrats -- said that David Cameron's veto of EU treaty changes was "bad for Britain" and he warned that it could leave his country "isolated and marginalized" in Europe. He continued, "I don't think that's good for jobs, in the city (re: London) or elsewhere, I don't think it's good for growth or for families up and down the country." Clegg's bitter denunciation of the veto by Cameron exposed fissures in the British ruling coalition between the Conservative Euro-skeptics and the pro-European Liberal Democrats. The Labour Party -- the main political opposition in the United Kingdom -- was more scathing in its rebuke of Cameron's decision. Labour leader, Ed Miliband, said of Cameron: "He did this because the Euro-skeptic wing of the Conservative Party has effectively taken over and that isn't good for the national interest." Miliband also appeared to encourage the Liberal Democrats to look to Labour to overturn the decision as he said: "What I say to Liberal Democrats and others is that we will work with anybody who thinks this position can not stand. We must find a better way forward for Britain."

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By the start of 2012, 25 of the 27 European Union member states agreed to join the new fiscal agreement. The two holdouts were the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic. Earlier in late 2011 (as discussed here), British Prime Minister David Cameron said that his country would not sign on to the notion of a new treaty, and effectively forced the European Union to go down the road of instituting a "fiscal compact," rather than a new treaty. But now in 2012, the United Kingdom was continuing its opposition, and said that the compact would threaten British interests and that there were "legal concerns" about the use of European Union institutions in enforcing the fiscal compact. Meanwhile, the Czechs said that there were "constitutional reasons" for their refusal to sign on to the compact. At issue was the fact that euro skeptic President Vaclav Klaus has been a vocal opponent to the compact.

*Note: In January 2012, the credit ratings agency, Standard & Poor's, downgraded the status of a number of European countries.

The stability of the euro zone and the European Union has become a major concern in recent years, largely emanating from the Greek debt crisis, but extending regionally, as discussed here.

Political Update (2010-2012):

After coming to power following close parliamentary elections in May 2010, the Conservatives formed a ruling coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Now, more than two years later in April 2012, polling data has found that the bloom was off the proverbial rose and British voters were now disenchanted with both ruling parties. Conversely, the opposition Labor Party, which lost the control of government in those elections, was enjoying a reversal of fortune as the favored political party in the country. According to a YouGov-Sun poll, Labor had a lead of 11 percentage points ahead of the Conservatives or "Tories." Another poll by Populus for The Times of London showed similar results with Labor ahead of the Tories by nine percentage points. The Liberal Democrats were slipping the most precipitously with the Euro-skeptic United Kingdom Independence Party edging into the third place slot in terms of popularity.

One of the policy issues that may have contributed to the ascendancy of Labor, along with the associated erosion of support for the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, included the budget put forth by Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne. At issue were policies such as the so-called granny tax that infuriated retirees, as well as the "pasty tax," which would involve a value-added tax on hot "takeout" food, and adversely affect wide swaths of the population. Also of concern was the proposal to expand value added taxes on repairs to listed historic buildings, which would affect the Church of England.

Policy aside, the ruling coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was experiencing cleavages at the end of April 2012. At issue was the announcement by British Prime Minister David Cameron that a referendum be held on converting the House of Lords to a largely elected body. This move evoked the tensions of Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, who pointed to the fact that all three of the country's main political parties promised reform of the upper house of parliament during the 2010 election campaign. Clegg said that those campaign commitments should make a referendum unnecessary. But in an interview with BBC News, Prime Minister Cameron appeared unwilling to step away from the notion of a ratification vote saying, "My view is that you shouldn't rule it out."

Political challenges for Prime Minister Cameron continued as April 2012 came to a close. At issue was the status of his Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt. At issue was Hunt's involvement in News Corp.'s bid to acquire BSkyB. Specifically, Hunt was accused of being improperly involved with the deal -- a claim that came to light after the Leveson Inquiry released e-mails between Hunt's special adviser, Adam Smith, and News Corp. Public Affairs Director Frederic Michel. The details of the email led to Smith's resignation but have so far left Hunt unaffected. For his part, Prime Minister Cameron said: "I don't think it would be right in every circumstance if a special adviser gets something wrong to automatically sack the minister. I think he's doing an excellent job on the Olympics and, frankly, I do think people deserve to have these things looked into properly."

Editor's Note on the Monarchy:

The year 2012 saw the ruling monarch of the United Kingdom, Queen Elizabeth II, mark the 60th anniversary of her accession to the throne. While the official celebration of Queen Elizabeth's six-decade long rein as the United Kingdom's ruling monarch was to be held mid-year, the official date of accession was at the start of February 2012. Of course, the date also marks the commemoration of the death of her father, the beloved King George VI. Queen Elizabeth II said that she was dedicating herself "anew" to the service of the British people and that she was "deeply moved" by the massive outpouring of popular support for her Diamond Jubilee. Those Jubilee celebrations ensued in the summer of 2012. Elizabeth II joins her great-great grandmother, Queen Victoria, as the only other British monarch to achieve this milestone.

Special Report:

London 2012 -- The Games of the XXX Olympiad

London -- the capital city of the United Kingdom -- welcomed the world on July 27, 2012, at the start of the Games of the XXX Olympiad. The Opening Ceremony on July 27, 2012, was witnessed by 80,000 people in Olympic Stadium as well as up to one billion people watching via broadcast across the world. That ceremony culminated with the symbolic lighting of the Olympic Cauldron from the Olympic flame that has journeyed across the host country of the United States for the previous months. National and international dignitaries, including the reigning monarch of the United Kingdom - Queen Elizabeth II - would be in attendance. Ahead of the ceremony, Big Ben -- one of London's landmark features -- rang for three minutes. It was the first such tribute to the historic nature of the event since the funeral of King George VI in 1952.

While attention on July 27, 2012, would rightly be on the highly-anticipated Opening Ceremony, which was being coordinated by Oscar-award winning film director Danny Boyle, the preparation for 2012 Olympics had been ongoing for several years, with attention to appropriate infrastructure, facilities, logistics, and security in one of the world's largest and most dynamic cities. Of particular note has been the revitalization effort of East London, which International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge lauded, saying that leaves London with a "tangible legacy" of the Games of the XXX Olympiad. While these costly and inconvenient preparations often raised the ire of Londoners in the period leading up to the 2012 Olympics, now most citizens appeared to be proud and excited about the historic event on their home country, with crowds dressed in national colors in a rare extroversion of patriotism.

Speaking in a tone of national pride, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron said of the London Olympics, "It's a great opportunity to show the world the best of Britain, a country that's got an incredibly rich past but also a very exciting future." Former United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair, who served as head of government in 2005 when London won the right to host the Olympics, said in an interview with BBC News: "It's a party atmosphere but also an immense sense of national pride -- of what we are and what we can show the world." London Mayor Boris Johnson spoke of the so-called "Olympic fever" spreading across the city in an interview with the BBC, saying, "What's so amazing is just the wave of excitement seems to pass from person to person like some benign form of contagion. Everybody is getting it."

The London 2012 Olympics included participation from about 10,000 athletes representing about 200 countries or national entities (operating under the aegis of National Olympic Committees). The athletes would compete in 26 sports, further sub-divided into 39 disciplines.

Visitors from across the world were present in London -- arguably the world's most cosmopolitan capital city already -- in a show of global goodwill and enthusiasm. The premise of the modern Olympics have been to provide a venue for individuals, rather than states or nations, to compete against each other in sports held every four years, and in peaceful competition, without the burden of politics, war, ethnicity, or religion.

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The ancient Olympics -- the roots of the modern Olympics -- can trace their origins to the eighth century before the common era (B.C.E.). The games were dedicated to the 12 Olympian Gods and were hosted on the ancient green plains of Olympia. Those games in Greek antiquity constituted a time of union, where athletes from across the Greek world came together to compete for the prize of the olive wreath and would return to their home city-states marked as heroes. Political and religious dynamics -- such as the conquest by the Romans and accusations about the Pagan connection to the games' origins in the post-Christian world -- contributed to the demise of the Olympics. They were revived as the modern Olympics in the late 19th century by the French Baron Pierre de Coubertin in the late 19th century.

Coubertin's background in philosophy and education informed his emerging advocacy for sports. Particularly, he drew upon the notion of competition among amateurs rather than professional athletes. The legacy of a political truce during the ancient games also imbued its own flavor onto the modern games, influencing the emerging understanding of the Olympics as an international venue to promote peace and spread cultural understanding. These ideals have been transposed into the purpose of the modern Olympics that go forth in contemporary times. Indeed, according to the Olympic Charter, the Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries. Moreover, as expressed in the Olympic Creed: "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

It should be noted that contentious politics and shocking world events have, occasionally, often crept into the domain of this international sporting event. There have been boycotts including that of African countries to protest apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s, and the Cold War boycotts of the Moscow and Los Angeles games in the 1980s. There was also the domestic terrorist bombing at the Atlanta games of 1996. Perhaps more importantly, there was the notorious massacre of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

In these London 2012 Olympics, a Greek athlete, Paraskevi Papachristou, was expelled from the games ahead of the opening ceremony because of a racist Twitter message. As well, United States Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney set off a blaze of controversy when he questioned London's readiness for the 2012 Olympics, during a trip intended to burnish his foreign policy credentials against incumbent President Barack Obama. Such incidences aside, attention of the world was quickly refocused on the Olympics themselves, and the rare opportunity for the world to come together to compete in the interests of sport and amity.

The closing ceremony of the Games of the XXX Olympiad would commence on Aug. 12, 2012, and include a handover by London Mayor Boris Johnson to Eduardo Paes, Mayor of Rio de Janeiro -- the host city of the 2016 Olympics.

Special Report:

Ecuador grants asylum to WikiLeaks founder; U.K. threatens to storm embassy

On Aug. 16, 2012, the government of Ecuador announced it would grant asylum to Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks. In June of 2012, Assange took refuge at the Ecuadorian embassy in the United Kingdom to avoid extradition. Now, months later, the United Kingdom was making it abundantly clear that Assange would not be granted safe passage out of the country.

WikiLeaks is an online database of leaked classified documents and private diplomatic cables from government sources, news organizations, and whistleblowers. Launched in 2006 by Assange, an Australian Internet activist, WikiLeaks has led to outrage across the world, embarrassment for several governments, and accusations that the dissemination of classified materials constitutes a threat to global security. Assange's personal legal problems (as regards to alleged sexual offenses in Sweden) has been viewed as the means to apprehend him, with the possibility of extradition to the United States to face charges related to WikiLeaks' publication of private diplomatic cables.

To these ends, and with news emerging that Ecuador was providing sanctuary to Assange via its embassy in London, the United Kingdom wasted little time in warning that it would fulfill its "obligation" to extradite Assange. Indeed, the United Kingdom did not foreclose the possibility of storming the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

In response, Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino said during a news conference: "Today we received from the United Kingdom the express threat, in writing, that they could assault our embassy in London if Ecuador didn't hand over Julian Assange. We want to make this absolutely clear. We are not a colony of Britain."

But the United Kingdom was in no mood to back down, posting a message via social media that read: "We have consistently made our position clear in our discussions with the government of Ecuador. U.K. has a legal obligation to extradite Mr. Assange to Sweden to face questioning over allegations of sexual offenses." The Foreign Office continued, "Throughout this process we have drawn the Ecuadorians' attention to relevant provisions of our law. For example, extensive human rights safeguards in our extradition procedures, or to legal status of diplomatic premises in the U.K."

Amping up the rhetoric, United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague said, "Under our law, with Assange having exhausted all options of appeal, the British authorities are under a binding obligation to extradite him to Sweden. We must carry out that obligation and, of course, we fully intend to do so." Explaining that the United Kingdom was not bound by legal instruments requiring the recognition of diplomatic asylum by a foreign embassy, Hague said that diplomatic asylum "should not be used for the purposes of escaping the regular processes of the courts."

For his part, Assange himself entered the debate on Aug. 19, 2012, when he appeared on the balcony of the Ecuadorian embassy and offered a statement. In that statement, he urged the United States to end its "witch-hunt" against Wikileaks. He specifically demanded that the United States stop going after whistleblowers, saying: "The United States must pledge before the world that it will not pursue journalists for shining a light on the secret crimes of the powerful." Assange also called for the release of Bradley Manning, who faces trial due to accusations that he [Manning] leaked the classified documents to Wikileaks.

Note that as the end of August 2012 was near, the diplomatic standoff between the United Kingdom and Ecuador came to a close.

Ecuador's President Correa announced that the United Kingdom had withdrawn its threat to enter Ecuador's embassy in London to arrest Assange. Ecuador's government said it had received a message from the British Foreign Office confirming that "there was no threat to enter the embassy."

Special Note on the Monarchy

At the start of December 2012, legal measures were underway to change the rule of royal succession. At issue was the prevailing principle of male primogeniture, by which male heirs take precedence over women in line to the British throne. The new measures were intended to ensure that the first born of monarch would be the heir apparent, regardless of gender. The new measures would effectively end the dictate that privileges males over females in the line of succession and ensure that the first child of the current Duke and Duchess of Cambridge would become monarch, whether that offspring is a boy or a girl. To that end, all Commonwealth realms concurred with the proposed legislation, facilitating the path for the British parliament to introduce the new Succession to the Crown Bill in the House of Commons.

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That succession bill would require certain amendments to constitutional documents, including the Bill of Rights and Coronation Oath Act of 1688. Passage of the legislation would come at a time when the Duchess Catherine of Cambridge was hospitalized for acute morning sickness, or hyperemesis gravidarum, ahead of the birth of the child who would be third in line to the throne after Heir Apparent Prince Charles and the Duke William of Cambridge respectively. It should be noted that the Succession to the Crown Bill would also end the prohibition of anyone in the line of succession from marrying a Roman Catholic.

Special Note on Economy

In the last week of February 2013, the credit ratings agency, Moody's, downgraded the United Kingdom from its top AAA rating to AA1. It was the first downgrade since 1978. Moody's said that the United Kingdom's austerity measures were contributing to subdued growth, and that the British government's debt reduction program faced significant challenges, cautioning the United Kingdom's debt burdens were not likely to be reversed until 2016 anyway. Moody's further said that all expectations were that growth would "remain sluggish over the next few years." Still, Moody's maintained that the United Kingdom's outlook was stable.

The downgrade did not appear to deter the conservative government from following the path of austerity. Instead, Chancellor George Osborne said that Moody's decision was "a stark reminder of the debt problems facing our country." He continued, "Far from weakening our resolve to deliver our economic recovery plan, this decision redoubles it. We will go on delivering the plan that has cut the deficit by a quarter." Shadow chancellor, Ed Balls, wasted no time in blasting the government for its measures. He said the decision by Moody's to downgrade the United Kingdom's credit rating was a "humiliating blow to a prime minister and chancellor who said keeping our AAA rating was the test of their economic and political credibility."

Special Entry: Death of Britain's conservative "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher

On April 8, 2013, Baroness Margaret Thatcher died following a stroke at the age of 87 years. The conservative icon, known as the "Iron Lady," served as the United Kingdom's prime minister for 11 years, starting in 1979.

Thatcher has been regarded as a transformational figure, not only on the British political landscape, but also socio-politically across the world in modern times.

As the first female head of government of a major world power, Thatcher was culturally regarded as a trailblazer for women in politics. And on the matter of policy, her austere and hardline conservative outlook shifted the British political and economic scene by breaking open the path towards greater privatization. As well, her alliance with former United States President Ronald Reagan has been credited with ending the Cold War. At home, she was lauded for leading the charge to win the war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands in 1982.

Her record as a female leader and champion of capitalism and democracy aside, Thatcher's domestic policy record has to be understood as deeply divisive. Indeed, her poll tax proposal and anti-union policies led to protests, and ultimately to her exit from the leadership faction of the Conservative Party. It could also be argued that Thatcher stood on the wrong side of history in the international realm as regards apartheid South Africa. She did not back sanctions against apartheid South Africa and famously referred to Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) as "a typical terrorist organization."

This mixed record aside, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron paid tribute to Thatcher's legacy, characterizing her as "a great Briton." He said, "Margaret Thatcher succeeded against all the odds. The real thing is she didn't just lead our country; she saved our country." Queen Elizabeth II expressed sadness over the news of Thatcher's death, while United States President Obama noted that "America has lost a true friend." Meanwhile the Union Jack at Number 10 Downing Street was being flown at half mast, and the country prepared to say goodbye to her at a formal funeral at London's St Paul's Cathedral, where she would be accorded full military honors.

Special Note on Attack by Islamic Extremists in London

In the last week of May 2013, two men attacked and brutally murdered a British soldier in the south eastern London suburb of Woolwich. The victim was identified as Lee Rigby, while his two attackers were identified as Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale -- British citizens of Nigerian descent who were adherents of Islam. The two men did not seem eager to flee the scene of their vicious and bloody assault on Rigby; instead witnesses on the scene were able to film one of the two suspects justifying the murder of British soldiers on the basis of the fact that they killed Muslims during the course of their military duties abroad. The grizzly attack on Rigby notwithstanding, Adebolajo was shown on the footage claiming, "These people are mistreating us, we are innocent." Both Adebolajo and Adebowale were reported to be in police custody.

While British citizens awaited news over what type of charges the two men would ultimately face, the British Foreign Office soon acknowledged that Adebolajo was given consular assistance when he was arrested in Kenya in 2010. It was now believed that Adebolajo had been in Kenya en route to Somalia where he may have intended to join the al-Qaida affiliated terror group, al-Shabab.

The British government would undoubtedly face criticism for their consular assistance to an individual with terrorist connections.

Special Note on Northern Ireland

It should be noted that sectarian violence erupted in Northern Ireland in January 2013 as a result of a contentious debate over flying the British flag at City Hall in Belfast. Officials voted to limit the number of days the British flag might be flown at City Hall. The decision spurred outrage by loyalists and sparked an outbreak of riots, which were marked by violent clashes between protesters and police that left more than 100 police officers dead and as many as 120 arrests made. A banned loyalist group, the Ulster Volunteer Force, was blamed for fueling the ire of people and even orchestrating some of the riots and chaos that ensued as a result of the outrage. With passions inflamed and a rising casualty list in what was now being called the "Union Flag crisis," government ministers convened talks with the Northern Ireland secretary of state and the Irish foreign minister.

Secretary of State Theresa Villers then released a statement that read as follows: "The violence is intolerable and these protests have to come off the streets. They have to be replaced by dialogue." Meanwhile, a number of political groups from varied backgrounds echoed the call for an end to the violence. Indeed, appeals for an end to the crisis were backed and sanctioned by dozens of organizations, including loyalist entities, Irish paramilitary cadres, community groups, and church leaders.

In mid-July 2013, the capital of Northern Ireland -- Belfast -- was rocked by riots. On July 12, 2013, alone, more than 30 police officers and member of parliament, Nigel Dodds, were injured in the violence unfolding in Belfast. Indeed, despite his appeal for calm and an end to the violence, Dodds was knocked unconscious when loyalists hurled missiles in the direction of the police. He was hospitalized at the Royal Victoria Hospital as a result of the incident.

At issue was a ban on a proposed march by the Orange Order (i.e. the Protestant unionist movement). Police moved to enforce that ban but were met with resistance in the northern part of the city as the Orange Order called for mass protests along the thoroughfare that divided Republican (Catholic Irish nationalist) and Orange Order (Protestant unionist) communities. Although the Orange Order subsequently said it would suspend its demonstrations, violence nonetheless erupted and engulfed families and children. Weapons ranging from bricks and stones to petrol bombs and ceremonial swords were hurled at police; in response, police attempted to disperse the crowds by using water cannons and plastic batons.

Typically, Orange men march from April to August, with particular attention on the July 12 date, which marks the occasion when William of Orange won victory over the Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland in 1690. The July 12 annual parade commemorates that victory. For Catholic Irish nationalists, the marches, and particularly, the July 12 parade, denotes triumphalism. As such, power brokers have noted that they serve only to stoke sectarian and political tensions between Catholic nationalists and Protestant loyalists. The decision to ban the parade in northern Belfast was intended to prevent an outbreak of violence but resulted in outraging unionists and particularly the Orange Order, ultimately resulting with the riots discussed here.

The rioting went on for a second day, with hundreds of police being deployed to quell the violence. Although the unrest continued on July 13, 2013, the violence was not as acute as the day before. Authorities appeared to blame the Unionists for using reckless language and behavior to spark hostilities. Secretary of State Theresa Villiers "utterly condemned" the rioting and urged the Orange Order to call off its mass action saying, "It is the clear responsibility of everyone who has influence, including the Orange Order, community leaders and politicians, to do what they can to calm the situation. We need temperate language over coming days."

But unionists were quick to defend their ranks with Ulster Unionist councilor Mark Cosgrove suggesting that it was "irresponsible" of police to blame the Orange Order for the unrest. He said, "There were hundreds of thousands of people from both the loyal orders and the bands, the supporters out in Belfast and all over Northern Ireland yesterday and, I think, to try and apportion blame to the Orange Order is totally wrong." Not surprisingly, nationalists had a very different view of the events unfolding in Belfast. Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein said: "In my opinion, the leadership of the Orange Order failed the Orange Order and they failed these communities." He continued, "The decision announced some hours ago, that they are suspending their protests, was a massive admission by themselves that they were culpable for what happened here last night."

Just ahead of the "marching season" in Northern Ireland in 2014, police were investigating a 1972 murder arrested Irish nationalist leader, Gerry Adams. He was released following several days of extensive interrogations. At issue for the police was the murder of Jean McConville, who was kidnapped in full view of her children in 1972 when the Irish Republican Army was carrying out its violent and hardline nationalist campaign.

In the background of this particular investigation were prevailing accusations that Adams was involved in the Irish Republican Army's more nefarious activities. For his part, Adams has denied being involved in the murder of anyone -- including McConville. Regardless of the veracity of his statement, the police referred the case against Adams -- a member of parliament in the Republic of Ireland -- to prosecutors who would decide whether charges should be advanced.

But the investigation into Adams appeared to have sparked sectarian tensions between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland with supporters of Adams' Sinn Fein party outraged over his arrest, and pro-unionists angry that he was released from police custody. Indeed, unionists blockaded a road and threw petrol bombs to register their anger over Adams' release.

While the tensions did not immediately contribute to a fierce outbreak of violence, there were fears that the overall political climate was negatively affected ahead of the so-called "marching season." The summer "marching season" typically featured Protestants parades marking their historic victories against Catholics. Of particular importance was the July 12 march marking the victory of William of Orange over the Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland in 1690.

For their part, Catholics regard the parades as provocations and they have been particularly incensed over the July 12 march, saying that it smacked of triumphalism. As such, power brokers have noted that the parades serve only to stoke sectarian and political tensions between Catholic nationalists and Protestant loyalists. The decision in

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2013 to ban the parade in northern Belfast was intended to prevent an outbreak of violence but instead managed to outrage the unionists and particularly the Orange Order. Ultimately, violent riots erupted in Belfast in 2013. Indeed, it was the worst outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland since the late 1990s.

Now in 2014, with the Gerry Adams case featuring prominently ahead of the marching season, anxieties were elevated along with renewed Catholic versus Protestant tensions.

2014 Political Update

At the start of February 2014, Minister of Immigration Mark Harper of the United Kingdom resigned from office amidst revelations that he employed an illegal immigrant as a house cleaner at his home.

The discovery that Harper -- a Conservative member of parliament and immigration minister since 2012 -- had employed a worker in the United Kingdom illegally to clean his home caused an embarrassing quasi-scandal, reflecting negatively on Prime Minister David Cameron's government. Of note was the fact that the Cameron government was trying to stave off a threat from the anti-immigration far right flank by promising to reduce immigration. This revelation about the immigration minister employing an illegal immigrant undoubtedly cast a negative light on the Cameron government's seriousness on the issue.

As a result, Harper announced his resignation from his cabinet post, although he would continue to function as a member of parliament. In his resignation letter to Prime Minister Cameron, Harper insisted that he had, in fact, checked the cleaner's immigration status when he first employed her in 2007. He added, "When you then appointed me as Immigration Minister ... I went through a similar consideration process and once again concluded that no further check was necessary." According to Harper, the problem was that he had not checked the worker's credentials more "thoroughly."

For his part, Prime Minister Cameron, whose Conservative Party was languishing in pre-election polls, accepted Harper's resignation saying, "There is no suggestion that Mr. Harper knowingly employed an illegal immigrant."

In April 2014, United Kingdom's Culture Minister Maria Miller was forced to resign from office amidst an emerging scandal over her expense accounts. At issue were allegations that Miller over-claimed mortgage costs and other expenses amounting to as much as 45,000 pounds (\$75,400). She was cleared of the allegation that she used her expense allowance to fund her parents, however, the other accusations appeared to hold merit. The issue of expense accounts by politicians has been a controversial one in the United Kingdom since 2009 when legislators' expense reports were leaked to the press thus exposing gross abuse.

At the political level, the resignation of Miller exposed United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron to criticism over his bad judgment and political leadership. Cameron's critics excoriated him for his failure to take charge of the situation by simply sacking Miller from the onset. Instead, Cameron clung to the fact that Miller was cleared of one - but not all -- of the allegations against her (as discussed above), and continued to tout Miller as being an excellent public servant. For her part, Miller prevailed for some time, hanging onto her portfolio and delivering a weak apology that only did further damage to the already dismal image of the Conservative Party. Ultimately, Miller bowed to public pressure and resigned from office, saying that she believed the scandal was becoming a distraction from the work of the government.

Opposition parties wasted little time in casting the Conservatives (also known as "Tories") as elitist and out of touch with the common populace. As stated by Labor leader, Ed Miliband, of Prime Minister Cameron: "He still doesn't

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understand what she (Miller) did wrong..." Miliband continued, "The reason the public was so appalled was if it had happened in any other business there would have been no question about them staying in their job. Why was he the last person in the country to realize her position was untenable?"

Note: Prime Minister Cameron named Sajid Javid -- a rising star in the Conservative Party -- as the person to replace Miller as the new Culture Minister. Prime Minister Cameron also announced other cabinet changes such as the appointment of Nicky Morgan as financial secretary at the Treasury, and the appointment of Andrea Leadsom as the new Economic Secretary.

In July 2014, United Kingdom (U.K.) Foreign Secretary William Hague announced his resignation as the country's top diplomat after four years at that post. He was set to assume the position of Leader of the House of Commons where he would be tasked with coordinating relations between the executive government and the lower parliamentary chamber. Via the social media outlet, Twitter, Hague wrote: "Tonight I am standing down as Foreign Secretary after 4 years to serve as Leader of the House of Commons." The move was part of a cabinet shuffle undertaken by Prime Minister David Cameron. That overhaul of the cabinet appeared to be in preparation for parliamentary elections, which were scheduled to be held in 2015.

A year ahead of those elections, it was not Prime Minister Cameron's governing Conservatives who had the edge, but the opposition Labour Party. Led by Ed Miliband, Labour was in the lead in terms of voters' preferences by about four percentage points ahead of the Conservatives. That being said, Miliband was being weighed down by the fact that most British voters did not view him as a future prime minister. At issue for Miliband was the public's perception that he was socially awkward, overly-intellectual, and a clear contrast to telegenic Cameron, whose public relations background aided his self presentation style. Cognizant of this contrast, Miliband took on his "image" problem in a direct fashion, saying that if the focus was on policies and substance rather than photo opportunities and superficialities, he would have no trouble leading his left-leaning Labour Party to victory.

In a speech to supporters, Miliband said, "David Cameron is a very sophisticated and successful exponent of a politics driven by image. I am not going to be able to compete with that. And I don't intend to. I want to offer something different." He continued, "If you want the politician from central casting, it's just not me, it's the other guy. And if you want a politician who thinks that a good photo is the most important thing, then don't vote for me ... I believe people would quite like somebody to stand up and say there is more to politics than the photo-op."

Special Note on Northern Ireland

In the second week of September 2014, Ian Paisley, the former leader of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party died at the age of 88. Known for his decision to enter a power-sharing executive with the Irish nationalist Sinn Fein movement at Stormont, Paisley was one of the keystone figures of the decades-long struggle between unionists and republican nationalists in Northern Ireland. United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron paid tribute to Paisley saying he was "one of the most forceful and instantly recognizable characters in British politics for nearly half a century." Cameron continued, "In particular, his decision to take his party into government with Sinn Fein in 2007 required great courage and leadership, for which everyone in these islands should be grateful." Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein expressed sadness over the news of Paisley's death, saying, "Over a number of decades we were political opponents and held very different views on many, many issues but the one thing we were absolutely united on was the principle that our people were better able to govern themselves than any British government." He continued, "I want to pay tribute to and comment on the work he did in the latter days of his political life in building agreement and leading unionism into a new accommodation with republicans and nationalists."

Special Report on Scottish Independence:

The Union holds as Scotland votes "no" in landmark independence referendum --

Summary:

A referendum on Scottish independence was held on Sept. 18, 2014. The referendum posed the following question: "Should Scotland be an independent country?" Scotland's future status was at stake. In the months leading up to the independence vote, the pro-unity side of the debate had the advantage; however, in the weeks just before the referendum was set to take place, nationalist passions flared to the benefit of the pro-independence flank. Pre-referendum polling data showed a close race to the finish with the current structure of the United Kingdom poised for possible transformation. Would that transformation be limited to increased autonomy within the preserved United Kingdom, or would that transformation see a fully independent Scotland emerge on the global scene? The answer to these questions came democratically on Sept. 18, 2014, with a decisive "no" to independence and in favor of holding together the United Kingdom. That being said, there would be changes afoot for increased self-determination for Scotland under the aegis of a unified British nation state. With a voter turnout rate of between 85 and 90 percent, the Scottish independence vote stood as a reminder to the world of how participatory democracy works in a mature nation state.

Background:

Going back to February 2013, the Scottish National Party declared that if voters ratified sovereignty and independence in a referendum to be held

in 2014, Scotland would become an independent country in March 2016. Scottish nationalists released an ambitious timetable for independence that included a detailed itinerary of measures to be undertaken that would remove Scotland from the United Kingdom, establish a separate Treasury, and apply for accession to the European Union in less than 20 months after ratification.

A year later in February 2014, with an independence referendum set to be held in September 2014, the government of the United Kingdom made an impassioned plea for Scotland to stay within the union.

At the start of 2014, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron said, "We would be deeply diminished without Scotland." He continued, "If we lost Scotland, if the U.K. changed, we would rip the rug from under our own reputation. The plain fact is we matter more in the world together." If his positive and affirmative message of unity failed to resonate with Scottish nationalists, Prime Minister Cameron was also willing to argue for a unified country on the basis of negative consequences. To that particular end, his government warned that an independent Scotland would not be able to use the British pound sterling as its currency.

The Liberal Democratic Party (in a coalition government with Prime Minister Cameron's Conservatives), as well as the opposition **Labor** Party, joined the Conservatives in issuing a warning to Scottish nationalists. Regardless of their partisan divisions, all three parties closed ranks to caution Scottish nationalists that an independent Scotland would be prohibited from retaining the British pound sterling as its currency. As noted by the United Kingdom's Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, "There's no legal reason why the rest of the U.K. would need to share its currency with Scotland."

The pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) seemed undeterred by the threat, casting it as just an attempt "to bully and intimidate." However, the notion that an independent Scotland would not have access to the established British pound sterling as the national currency would likely cause some referendum voters to think

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critically about the costs of sovereignty. Already, they would have to consider the ambitious independence timetable of holding a referendum in September 2014, followed by independent nation state status in the first part of 2016.

For its part, the SNP has said that its aggressive plan for independence was in keeping with other shifts in the status of nation states in Europe, such as the splitting of the former Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. But representatives of the government of the United Kingdom were not quite so sanguine about the prospects of a sovereignty and independence schedule of less than two years. Alistair Darling, the former press secretary of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and current leader of an anti-independence group, Better Together, was on the record dismissing the timetable as unrealistic. He said, "Even with the best will in the world, even if there is no disagreement over some of the major issues like what happens to our currency, how we divide up our pension system, and how we split the national debt, achieving this timetable is a tall order."

Indeed, in less than 20 months after ratification (assuming there was a "yes" vote), Scotland would have to be removed from the United Kingdom, and then establish a separate Treasury, and apply for accession to the European Union. Other issues would be the division of military interests, such as the United Kingdom's submarine fleet, which was based in Scotland, as well as the United Kingdom's claim to a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council.

Regardless, the Sept. 18, 2014, date set for a referendum on Scotland's independence from the United Kingdom was moving forward. The date was set to coincide with a re-enactment of the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, a historic Scottish victory over the English. In accordance with the Scottish Independence Referendum Bill, the referendum would pose the following question to voters for a "yes" or "no" response: "Should Scotland be an independent country?"

On the issue of the Scottish independence, Salmond said, "It will be a historic day and one on which this ancient nation decides its place in the world." For his part, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron has said that Scotland would be better off if it remained under the collective flag of the United Kingdom. He warned that fragmentation of the United Kingdom would result in diminished economic strength, national security, and international influence. Perhaps not surprisingly, Scottish First Minister Salmond held a different view, believing that Scotland would be better positioned as a sovereign nation state. To this end, Salmond argued: "Only the powers of an independent parliament with control of the economy, of international representation and of security will allow us to make the most of our huge national potential."

The road to the Independence Referendum --

At the start of March 2014, with the independence referendum only months away, Salmond -- the Scottish leader -- called on British citizens to support the independence campaign. He argued that

an independent Scotland would act as a countervailing power against London-centered domination. He said, "After Scottish independence, the growth of a strong economic power in the north of these islands would benefit everyone -- our closest neighbors in the north of England more than anyone." He continued, "There would be a 'Northern Light' to redress the influence of the 'dark star' -- rebalancing the economic center of gravity of these islands."

But British Prime Minister David Cameron was carrying out his own pro-unity campaign (colloquially referred to as "love bombing") in which he called on British citizens in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland to remind their Scottish friends and relatives that they were all better off together.

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Former United Kingdom Prime Minister Gordon Brown -- a Scot -- entered the debate in mid-March 2014 to join the non-partisan call for national unity, and to advocate for more increased autonomy for Scotland rather than independence. Speaking from Glasgow, Brown said, "The majority of Scottish people do not want separation but equally they do want change." He continued, "I want to move us from the old highly centralized, uniform Britain dominated by out-of-date ideas of an undivided Westminster sovereignty to a new diverse power-sharing, risk-sharing, resource-sharing U.K. which is best defined ... as a modern, constitutional partnership of nations."

Polling data has -- for some time -- indicated that most people in Scotland actually do not favor independence from the United Kingdom, preferring to maintain the current union. In March 2014, an Ipsos-Mori poll showed only 32 percent support for Scottish independence, with 57 percent against it, and 11 percent undecided. Nevertheless, the pro-independence forces planned for a robust campaign and with the intent of persuading people of their sovereignty argument.

In August 2014, with only a month to go before the referendum on Scottish independence was set to take place in September 2014, the advantage appeared to reside with the pro-unity side. This advantage was displayed during an initial debate between Alex Salmond, the head of the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) and the leader of the campaign for Scottish, and Alistair Darling, the leader of the campaign to retain Scotland as part of the United Kingdom.

The energetic debate, which was broadcast in the media, ended with the conclusion that Salmond -- usually a powerful speaker -- had not effectively made the case for independence, particularly as regards the economic path for a sovereign Scotland. On the other hand, Darling -- not known for his command of rhetoric -- offered a solid performance by challenging Salmond's vision for post-independence currency and revenue. Drawing attention to the fact that an independent Scotland would not be allowed to use the British pound sterling, Darling posed the following question to Salmond: "What is plan B?" Salmond was unable to substantially address this challenge, and instead asserted, "I am in favor of keeping the pound sterling," while claiming that that the pound belonged to both England and Scotland. But the fact of the matter was that the United Kingdom had already rejected the notion of a currency union that would allow Scotland to use the British pound sterling as its legal tender. To this end, Darling noted that the use by an independent Scotland of the British pound would be like another country in the Americas using the United States or Canadian dollar. He declared: "That's using sterling like Panama or Ecuador uses the dollar."

It should be noted that a second debate was held in the last week of August 2014. During that engagement, Salmond enjoyed a much better performance with most observers concluding that he had "won" the argument against Darling -- at least for the night. It was to be seen if this strong rhetorical presentation would persuade voters to move to the pro-independence position ahead of the actual referendum.

Note that as August 2014 was coming to a close, polling data showed little movement in the views of voters. While there was some mild improvement towards the pro-independence side of the equation, the pro-unity faction continued to command the advantage. A so-called "poll of polls" in mid-August 2014 showed that support for Scottish independence stood at 43 percent while support for United Kingdom's unity stood at 57 percent.

At the start of September 2014, the landscape shifted significantly. A YouGov survey for the Sunday Times showed that, for the first time, the pro-independence side had taken the lead. The "Yes" to Independence campaign now was yielding 51 percent of support while the unionists had close to 49 percent. Clearly, for advocates of Scottish independence, the movement was peaking at precisely the right time -- just two weeks ahead of the referendum. The shift was attributed to the strong performance of pro-independence orchestrator, Salmond, in the second televised debate.

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Underlining the reality that the referendum would go down to the wire and that Scots might, in fact, opt for independence, a INS poll showed the "no" vote dropping to 39 percent with the "yes" vote within the statistical margin of error with 38 percent. Several other polling surveys at the start of September 2014 showed momentum for the "yes" vote.

Independence for Scotland would involve negotiations over usage of the pound sterling currency -- something the "Better Together" unity camp has warned would not end well for a sovereign Scotland, as discussed above. Also to be determined would be the division of the national debt of the United Kingdom, control over oil in the North Sea, and the fate of the nuclear submarine base located in Scotland. Other likely consequences of an independent Scotland would be the loss of defense and financial sector jobs, along with obstacles to European Union accession.

Politically, the consequences of a successful "yes" campaign in Scotland would create dire consequences for both of the two major parties in the United Kingdom. Should Scotland vote to exit the United Kingdom, the humiliation for Prime Minister David Cameron would be great, and would likely include demands that the Conservative leader resign from office. But the situation would be no rosier for the Labor Party, which would lose key support since the current Scottish members of parliament would be effectively removed from the scene.

With such possible ends at hand -- especially given the sudden burst of support for the independence movement -- there were plans afoot from the "Better Together" unionist campaign. At issue was an attractive package that would offer more powers to Scotland over its taxes, as well as its social and economic affairs. This so-called "devolution" plan was intended to regain support of Scots looking for more autonomy and control, while not entirely interested in exiting the United Kingdom. It was to be seen if this federal powers package would gain support.

Former United Kingdom Prime Minister Gordon Brown called on fellow Labor Party supporters to consider his party's plan for devolution of powers, saying, "This moves us as close to federalism as we can. Scotland is already a nation. We are proud of our history and culture. Do we want to sever all constitutional links with our friends, our neighbors, our relatives in England, Wales and Northern Ireland?"

A week later, on the eve of the referendum, the official devolution package (brokered by former Prime Minister Brown) offered Scotland a guarantee of high levels of public spending as well as self-determination over health care spending. At the end of the day, even if Scotland were to vote "no" to independence, as shown by this package, the structure of the United Kingdom was destined to change. That change would involve the devolution of powers away from the central government in London.

Meanwhile, the British political establishment was making an impassioned plea for unity. United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron declared, "In the end, it is for the Scottish people to decide, but I want them to know that the rest of the United Kingdom -- and I speak as prime minister -- want them to stay."

Prime Minister Cameron subsequently emphasized the significance of a "yes" vote to ratify Scotland's independence aspiration. He warned that saying "yes" to independence would be a final stance with no room for reversal, as he declared: "There's no going back from this. No re-run. If Scotland votes 'yes' the U.K. will split and we will go our separate ways forever. "

The Bank of England issued a stark reminder to Scots that an independent Scotland would not be able to keep the British pound sterling currency. The bank's governor, Mark Carney, warned that a currency union between an independent Scotland and the remainder of the United Kingdom would be incompatible with the very notion of sovereignty.

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The fact of the matter was that there would be nothing stopping an independent Scotland from using the British pound sterling as its currency. However, without a currency and monetary arrangement -- something the Bank of England has said it will not entertain -- an independent Scotland would need a stockpile of pound sterling. As well, there would be potentially disastrous consequences for Scotland since the Bank of England would no longer be last lender of resort for Scotland's banking industry. Moreover, Scotland would have no say in monetary policy, which would be dictated by the Bank of England.

Meanwhile, in an open letter, 14 former heads of the United Kingdom's Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force warned that a "yes" vote for independence would be detrimental to the defense of both the United Kingdom and a future independent Scotland. As stated in the piece, "The division of the U.K. may or may not be politically or economically sensible, but in military terms we are clear: it will weaken us all."

On the eve of the referendum, a slate of polls showed a close race to the finish, with the "no" vote recouping a slight advantage. The closeness of the pre-election polls suggested that there was no known guarantee of the outcome of the referendum. Three pollsters -- ICM, Opinium, and Survation -- showed support for independence at 48 percent while support for retaining the union stood at 52 percent. With a significant share of Scotland's voters (around 10 percent) still undecided, the result could conceivably go either way.

Referendum and Result

Ultimately, on Sept. 18, 2014, Scottish voters were set to give their answer -- "yes" or "no" -- to the question, "Should Scotland be an independent country?"

Regardless of the outcome, the current structure of the United Kingdom was destined to change. Would that transformation be limited to increased autonomy within the preserved United Kingdom, or, would that transformation see a fully independent Scotland emerge on the global scene?

The answer to these questions came democratically on Sept. 18, 2014, with a decisive "no" vote to independence and in favor of holding together the union. The pro-union vote share outperformed the pre-referendum polling data with 55 percent voting "no" and in favor of remaining in the United Kingdom, and 45 percent voting "yes" and for Scottish independence.

Of the 32 councils in Scotland, only four voted "yes" in favor of independence, while 28 voted "no" and in favor of staying in the United Kingdom. The divided sentiment of the electorate was illustrated by the fact that Glasgow -- the largest city in Scotland -- was a stronghold for the "yes" vote while Edinburgh -- the capital of Scotland -- voted "no." That being said, the breakdown of the vote results from the 32 councils in Scotland suggested that the "no" vote was stronger in constituencies with better socio-economic conditions than in less comfortable constituencies where the "yes" vote saw a better performance.

At the end of the day, the Scottish independence referendum on Sept. 18, 2014, was marked by the highest voter turnout rate -- between 85 and 90 percent -- in a national election. As such, the Scottish independence vote stood as a reminder to the rest of the world of how participatory democracy works in a mature nation state.

Alistair Darling, the head of the "Better Together" pro-unity campaign declared victory, saying, "We have chosen unity over division, and positive change rather than needless separation."

Meanwhile, Scottish nationalist leader Alex Salmond conceded defeat but warned that the government in London would have to honor its commitments to extend greater powers to Scotland. He said, "There are 1.6 million people

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who made a choice for independence. I think the 1.6 million people will speak and speak loud if there is a retreat from the commitments made." Salmond also announced that he would resign as leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party, saying: "For me as leader my time is nearly over but for Scotland the campaign continues and the dream will never die." Salmond's deputy, Nicola Sturgeon, was seen as a likely successor and the favored choice to be the future leader of the Scottish Nationalists.

For his part, Prime Minister David Cameron issued a public statement hailing the referendum result, and noting that the question of Scottish independence had now been settled for a generation. He said, "There can be no disputes, no re-runs, we have heard the settled will of the Scottish people." Cameron also promised to honor the commitments to convey greater powers of self determination to Scotland, while also addressing nationalist sentiment in Northern Ireland, Wales, and England, as he asserted: "Just as Scotland will vote separately in the Scottish parliament on their issues of tax, spending and welfare, so too England, as well as Wales and Northern Ireland should be able to vote on these issues."

Queen Elizabeth issued a statement of national unity, declaring: "Knowing the people of Scotland as I do, I have no doubt that Scots ... are able to express strongly-held opinions before coming together again in a spirit of mutual respect and support, to work constructively for the future of Scotland and indeed all parts of this country."

While the question of Scottish independence was now settled, there would nonetheless be changes afoot for increased self-determination and autonomy for Scotland under the aegis of the United Kingdom. The question of how those proposed transformations would go forward remained a matter of debate.

Of note was the fact that Prime Minister Cameron's proposal was not being embraced by former **Labor** Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who lobbied hard for unity. Brown and other **Labor** leaders were highly skeptical of Cameron's call for increased autonomy for the other member state of the United Kingdom -- particularly in England, where **Labor's** influence could be diminished. **Labor** Leader, Ed Milliband, made it clear that his party -- which helped to seal the "no" vote -- would not sign on to Prime Minister Cameron's plan to use the Scottish devolution measures to give more power to English members of parliament. Instead, he has called for a national constitutional convention that would be tasked with crafting a plan to move forward.

Prime Minister Cameron was also facing headwinds from within his own Conservative party with some members of parliament angry that Scotland should be "rewarded:" for its independence aspirations and at the expense of the rest of the United Kingdom, particularly England. It was for this reason that Cameron had introduced the notion of special provisions for all parts of the union. But, as discussed here, that was a proposition was not being embraced by the **Labor** Party.

At the same time, Cameron's proposal caused grave consternation among Scottish nationalists, with the outgoing leader, Salmond, accusing the prime minister of "tricking" Scottish voters with promises of enhanced autonomy and special powers over taxes, social welfare, and spending before the vote, only to subsume those pledges as part of a restructuring plan guaranteed to help his own Tory base with English constituents. Addressing this complaint, Cameron was forced to respond with a promise that there would be no linkage between an eventual Scottish self-determination plan and a deal to assuage English conservatives. His office was compelled to issue a statement confirming that Scotland would receive more autonomy with no "ifs or buts."

In practical terms, the scale of constitutional changes that would be necessitated to meet Scotland's needs for greater autonomy and self determination would be significant, and thus promised to be a laborious endeavor.

Editor's Note on the United Kingdom:

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Located in Western Europe, between the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, just to the northwest of France, the United Kingdom is made up of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is to be found on the northern one-sixth of the island of Ireland.

It should be noted that the terms "Great Britain" and "United Kingdom" cannot correctly be used in an interchangeable manner.

Great Britain refers to the island to the west of France and east of Ireland that consists of three related regions -- England, Scotland, and Wales. However, Great Britain is not the proper name of any current sovereign nation state, as it excludes Northern Ireland, which is also part of the country called the United Kingdom. In fact, the official name of the country is "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."

Scotland and England were joined in 1603 when King James VI of Scotland succeeded his cousin, Queen Elizabeth I, to claim the British throne. In 1707, the Act of Union created a new country, Great Britain. Ireland had been conquered by the early 17th century, and the 1801 British Acts of Union established the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1922, 26 counties of Ireland gained independence from London, with the other six counties remaining in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the Northern Ireland Assembly were established in 1999. The latter was suspended until May 2007 due to wrangling over the peace process, but devolution was fully completed in March 2010.

In 2013, a process was started to allow for a referendum for Scottish independence. That vote was to take place in 2014.

The result of that referendum gave a decisive victory to the pro-union side, effectively squashing the independence thrust at least for a generation in favor of increased Scottish autonomy. It should be noted that in order for Scotland to become independent, regardless of the result of the internal referendum, the British Parliament would have to dissolve the Acts of Union.

At the beginning of the 20th century the British Empire had been the foremost global power, stretching over one-fourth of the earth's surface. But World War I significantly weakened the United Kingdom, and the years following World War II saw the demise of the empire with many colonies gaining independence. Nevertheless, the country remains a major world economic and military power, with considerable political and cultural influence around the world. As the world's first industrialized country, the economy of the United Kingdom is one of the largest in the world as well as one of the strongest in Europe, and is considered to be a leading trading power and financial center.

It should also be noted that the United Kingdom has historically played a leading role in developing parliamentary democracy and in advancing literature and science. The country has a long history as a major player in international affairs and fulfills an important role in the European Union, the United Nations and NATO. The United Kingdom is also an active member of the European Union, although it chose to remain outside the Economic and Monetary Union. The government has said a series of economic criteria must be met before the issue can be put to a referendum.

Last British combat troops exit Afghanistan

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In late October 2014, United States and United Kingdom forces exited their main military bases in Helmand province, effectively turning security over to Afghan forces. While the complete withdrawal of United States forces would not ensue until 2016, a phased draw-down was certainly taking place and would continue over the course of the next year. At the same time, this particular exit from Helmand was significant for the United Kingdom as it marked the withdrawal of the last British combat forces from Afghanistan after being in the Afghan combat zone for more than a decade. For its part, the Afghan military said that it was prepared to take responsibility for the security of the country, pointing to the fact that increasingly, support from United States and United Kingdom forces had become more psychological than in the battlefield.

United Kingdom and United States announce plans for counter-terrorism cooperation

During a state visit to the United States, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron joined his American counterpart, President Barack Obama, in announcing a plan for counter-terrorism cooperation. Among the measures to be implemented were the establishment of a counter-terrorism task force and the deployment of more drones aimed at targeting the terror group, Islamic State. In the effort to track terrorists, the two leaders were advocating greater cooperation with technology companies, with an eye on accessing encrypted communications that terrorists may use to plot attacks.

The leaders of the two countries emphasized the closeness of the trans-Atlantic partnership, with both men offering fulsome assurances of their personal friendship as well as the strength and depth of the United Kingdom-United States alliance. Prime Minister Cameron and President Obama made clear that their two countries were committed to sharing information, intelligence, and expertise in the effort to prevent Islamist radicalism and to address "violent extremism" in their respective countries.

Speaking of the threat posed by Islamist terrorists in the wake of the Paris attacks, Prime Minister Cameron noted that his country, along with the United States, faced a "poisonous and fanatical ideology." He said: "We face a poisonous and fanatical ideology that wants to pervert one of the world's major religions, Islam, and create conflict, terror and death. With our allies we will confront it wherever it appears." President Obama struck a similar tone, saying that his country would work with the United Kingdom and other allies "seamlessly to prevent attacks and defeat these terrorist networks." Explaining the challenge posed by radicalized extremists who carry out acts of terror, he said "This is a problem that causes great heartache and tragedy and destruction. But it is one that ultimately we are going to defeat."

2015 parliamentary elections in United Kingdom

Citizens of United Kingdom make their choice in parliamentary elections; PM David Cameron's Conservatives secure decisive victory while the **Labour** Party is routed by nationalists in Scotland --

Summary:

The citizens of the United Kingdom were set to go to polls to vote in parliamentary elections to be held on May 7, 2015. While the major dividing line in the election stood between the Conservative Party (known colloquially as the Tories) and the **Labour** Party, the traditional political dichotomy was cross-cut by popular support for the nationalist parties -- the right-wing United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) and the the left-leaning Scottish National Party (SNP).

Going into the election, pre-election polling data suggested that no one party would secure an outright majority, and instead the election was likely to produce yet another "hung parliament." The expected election discussion was to

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focus on the party receiving the plurality of seats, and thus being positioned to form a coalition government. Despite their contracting support, the Liberal Democrats -- the junior party in the outgoing Conservative-led government -- insisted they would again play a kingmaker role. In truth, however, the Scottish Nationalists were hoping that they would gain that kingmaker status even as the major contest would be set against Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservative Tories and Ed Milliband's Labour Party.

In reality, however, pre-election polling data turned out not to be predictive of what actually happened on election day. Instead, Prime Minister David Cameron and the Conservative Party secured a decisive election victory and a parliamentary majority. For its part, the Labour Party endured a disappointing performance, as well as a rout in Scotland where the Scottish Nationalists won the lion's share of seats. This result augured the end of Ed Milliband's career at the helm of Labour. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats -- the junior partner in the outgoing Tory-led government -- saw a spectacular erosion of support, albeit not complete decimation. The leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, quickly made clear that it was time for his exit at the helm of his party. Finally, while Nicola Sturgeon could celebrate the triumph of the Scottish Nationalists, it was to be seen what role that party would play in the political environs of parliament.

In Detail:

Parliamentary elections were set to be held in the United Kingdom on May 7, 2015. At issue would be control over the legislative branch of government. In the United Kingdom, the bicameral parliament consists of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The House of Lords has 788 seats; there are approximately 670 life peers, 92 hereditary peers, and 26 clergy; membership is not static. The House of Commons has 650 seats; members elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms unless the House is dissolved earlier. Political leadership is based on control over the lower chamber -- the House of Commons -- where the leader of the majority party or coalition is the prime minister and head of government. As such, in the United Kingdom, election action is concentrated on the House of Commons.

Since the last elections, which were held in May 2010, the United Kingdom has been politically led by Prime Minister David Cameron (of the Conservative Party or "Tories") and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (of the Liberal Democrats) in a coalition government. In those 2010 elections, no one party had control over the House of Commons. Cameron's center-right Conservatives garnered a plurality of the vote count but not an absolute majority; they entered a coalition government with the third place center-left Liberal Democrats, while second place left-leaning Labour Party moved from being the party in power into the party in opposition. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown stepped down as leader of the Labour Party and moved to the position of backbench member of parliament.

In 2015, it was to be seen which party would be victorious. The main parties expected to contest these elections included the center-right Conservative Party (known colloquially as the Tories), led by Prime Minister Cameron; the center-left Liberal Democrats and junior partner in the outgoing coalition, led by Deputy Prime Minister Clegg; the left-leaning Labour Party, led by Ed Milliband, who was aspiring to become the new prime minister; the right-wing United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage; and the left-leaning Scottish National Party, led by Nicola Sturgeon. Also contesting the election would be a number of other nationalist parties, such as the Democratic Unionist Party or DUP (Northern Ireland); Ulster Unionist Party (Northern Ireland); Sinn Fein (Northern Ireland); Social Democratic and Labor Party or SDLP (Northern Ireland); and Party of Wales, also known as Plaid Cymru.

Survey data released in February 2015 ahead of the elections indicated that no one party would likely gain an absolute majority at the polls. The research compiled by the pollster group, Populus, and the public affairs company, Hanover, suggested that while Labour would lose several seats in Scotland to the Scottish nationalists, it

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would nonetheless have a better chance of forming a majority leftist or center-left coalition than the Conservative Tories, who would likely have to rely on consolidating their seats with the Liberal Democrats again in order to control parliament. They might also have to look to the Democratic Unionist Party or DUP in Northern Ireland to hold a majority. The Conservatives would themselves lose seats to the right-wing UKIP.

However, polling data by Ashcroft in early February 2015 gave Prime Minister Cameron's Conservative Party a three percentage point lead over Miliband's Labour Party -- 34 percent to 31 percent respectively. In third place was UKIP with 14 percent, followed by the Liberal Democrats with nine percent, and then the Greens with six percent. While this polling result offered a more positive pathway to victory for Prime Minister Cameron, he would still need a far more significant lead to win an outright majority in parliament. As before, were he to secure a plurality of the vote share but not a majority, he would once again have to form a coalition government.

By mid-February 2015, two polls gave contradictory forecasts of the elections to come. The Guardian/ICM poll gave the Conservatives (Tories) 36 percent -- an increase of six points from the previous month and the highest level since 2012. Labour had fallen one point to 32 percent. The Liberal Democrats were at ten percent, UKIP was at nine percent, the Green Party was at seven points. However, a Populus poll gave the Labour Party with lead with 33 percent, with the Conservatives slightly behind with 31 percent.

At the start of March 2015, these trends remained roughly in place with the Tories holding a slight lead over Labour, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP in competition for the right to play "kingmaker" in the case of a "hung parliament." Of note was the consistently significant vote share being carried by the Scottish Nationalists to the detriment of the Labour Party. It was apparent that in the aftermath of the Scottish Independence referendum, and the slow movement in achieving the promises advocated by the pro-unionists, Scottish voters were going their own way in these polls.

Also of note at the start of March 2015 was the fact that a political imbroglio was unfolding. At issue was the fact that the Conservative leader David Cameron would consent to only one 90-minute televised debate ahead of the elections. His rivals from other parties, including Labour leader Ed Miliband, Liberal Democratic leader Nick Clegg, UKIP leader Nigel Farage, Natalie Bennett of the Green Party, Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party and Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru, pilloried the Tory leader for refusing to engage in a thorough competition.

A spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats noted that it was not right for one party to "dictate their terms" regarding the debates. A UKIP spokesperson offered a more painful rebuke, saying, "After praising what a good thing debates were for democracy as recently as 2014, why is David Cameron now acting chicken and running as far away from them as possible?" Meanwhile, Douglas Adams of the Labour Party said, "This is an outrageous attempt from the prime minister to bully the broadcasters into dropping their proposals for a head-to-head debate between David Cameron and Ed Miliband."

Meanwhile, another issue was brewing as regards the splitting of the right-wing vote between the Conservatives (Tories) and UKIP. At issue was the South Thanet constituency of southern England, which has been a Conservative stronghold held by the Tories for most of the last 130 years. In 2015, polling data indicated that UKIP's leader, Nigel Farage, had a decent chance of winning this seat and grabbing control of a parliamentary seat long-thought to be a safe win for the Tories. For his part, Farage said if he failed to win the South Thanet seat, he would resign as the leader of UKIP. As stated by Farage, "The consequences of me failing to secure a seat for myself in the Commons would be significant for both myself and the party." He continued, "It is frankly just not credible for me to continue to lead the party without a Westminster seat ... If I fail to win South Thanet, it is curtains for me. I will have to step down."

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Tory leader Cameron entered the fray with his own pledge. The prime minister said that if his Conservative Party were to win the forthcoming parliamentary elections, then he would not seek a third term in office. Instead, Cameron said he would serve the full five-year term in government, if his party were to gain victory; however, he would not seek to lead the country beyond that next five-year term. In the interview with BBC News, Cameron said, "There definitely comes a time when a fresh pair of eyes and fresh leadership would be good, and the Conservative Party has some great people coming up." Cameron's pledge did not resonate positively with the main opposition Labour Party. David Alexander, the head of Labour's election campaign, said, "It is typically arrogant of David Cameron to presume a third Tory term in 2020 before the British public have been given the chance to have their say in this election."

Playing to the nationalists and euro-skeptics -- an ultra-conservative voting base that might be vulnerable to transferring their support to UKIP -- Cameron was promising to hold a referendum on European Union membership. The move was yielding results and boosting Cameron's prospects (as noted below) to hold onto his job as his Tories were now advancing a lead over Labour. In response, Miliband was warning voters that a win for the Conservatives could herald the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, with financial and business woes to follow. The fact of the matter, however, was that in late March 2015, the advantage appeared to be with Cameron and the Tories as discussed below.

Polling data by ComRes for ITV News and the Daily Mail newspaper in late March 2015 showed Prime Minister Cameron's Conservatives leading Miliband's Labour Party by four percentage points. The Conservatives were now sporting 36 percent support, with Labour holding onto 32 percent support. UKIP was at 12 percent; the Liberal Democrats were sitting just short of double digits with nine percent; and the Greens had five percent. It was to be seen if this trend would hold until election day.

A televised political debate on April 2, 2015, produced no clear winner, with post-debate data showing that Prime Minister Cameron, Labour leader Miliband, Scottish Nationalist leader Nicola Sturgeon and UKIP leader Farage, all scoring well in terms of performance.

That debate performance was translating into a similarly close pre-election polling results with a Guardian/ICM poll showing Miliband slightly ahead of Cameron -- 25 percent to 24 percent -- in terms of which candidate was viewed as the debate winner. A separate YouGov opinion poll surveyed overall voting preferences and showed Cameron's Conservatives slightly ahead of Miliband's Labour Party -- 37 percent to 35 percent respectively. Meanwhile, a poll for the Daily Mirror publication gave the reverse result with Labour slightly ahead of the Conservatives -- 33 percent to 31 percent respectively.

By mid-April 2015, YouGov polling data showed a close race between Labour and the Conservatives. A series of polls by YouGov showed Labour hovering about 34-35 percent, just slightly ahead of the Conservatives, who had 33 percent. UKIP was in third place with 13 percent, the Liberal Democrats had eight percent and the Greens had five to six percent.

Taken together, these results presaged a close election, with no one party likely to gain an outright parliamentary majority, and with many citizens opting for other parties, such as UKIP and the Scottish Nationalists. That being said, research by Deutsche Bank in mid-April 2015 suggested that while the election would very likely produce no clear winner and thus a "hung parliament," Labour might be better positioned to form a government than the Conservatives.

Labour, in pure numbers, would lose significant seats in Scotland to the Scottish Nationalists due to Scottish outrage that few of the pre-independence referendum promises were kept. But the Scottish Nationalists would nevertheless throw their support behind a Labour-led government, whereas they would shun the Conservatives. While the Liberal Democrats -- the junior partner in Cameron's Conservative-led government -- were actually eroding support; they remained aware that they could play kingmaker in either a Labour-led or a Conservative-led government in the future. By contrast, the Conservative Party was losing support to UKIP, an unlikely coalition partner, while its current coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats was not likely to see a particularly strong performance, and so could provide only limited (albeit crucial) support in a future Conservative-led government. Stated differently, even with its outgoing coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats, the road to a coalition would thus be comparatively more difficult for the Conservatives. As such, the conclusion was that in a close election, Labour would have more options of secondary parties in forming a sustainable coalition government.

Labour received a boost in the third week of April 2015 following a final televised debate. Post-debate surveys -- which actually did not include Cameron -- concluded that Miliband, the Labour Party leader, had won the rhetorical exercise. However, that success was not necessarily translating into a boost at the polls. Instead, most polls taken during this period actually gave the Conservatives the edge. The daily YouGov poll gave Labour a one point advantage -- 35 percent -- to the Conservatives with 34 percent, but its assessment in the next few days showed the Conservatives gaining support. A subsequent poll by YouGov showed the two main parties ties at 34 percent, while another one showed the Conservatives capturing the lead and holding 35 percent with Labour at 34 percent. A separate poll by Survation showed a similar result with the Conservatives holding 34 percent and Labour down to 33 percent.

As April 2015 came to a close, the daily YouGov poll showed the Tories with a single percent lead of 35 percent to 34 percent ahead of Labour. That one percent advantage was also reflected in an Opinium poll for the Observer newspaper that showed the Tories with a single point lead of 34 percent to 33 percent ahead of Labour. But soon thereafter, another daily poll by YouGov showed Labour with the one point lead -- 35 percent -- against the Conservatives, who had 34 percent. As before, neither party could claim it was on track for an outright majority in parliament.

In the final days before the election, the two parties made their final case for support. For Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservative party, the emphasis was on their stewardship of the economy, matched by dire warnings of increased taxation, should the country be led by Milliband and Labour. In an attempt to curry favor with the euro-skeptics and xenophobes that the Tories were losing to UKIP, Prime Minister Cameron also promised that, should he hold onto power, a referendum would be held to decide whether the United Kingdom should remain in the European Union.

The prime minister also mocked a move by Labour leader Milliband to burnish his leadership credentials by producing campaign promises literally engraved "in stone" upon a stone block. To this end, some critics acerbically cast Milliband as the biblical Moses. For his part, Cameron referred to the stone block as a "tombstone," suggesting that Milliband's political ambitions were about to see a death of sorts. But despite Cameron's glib words, the fact of the matter was that his Tories were unable to advance a notable lead against their main rivals, the Labour Party.

It was apparent that Milliband's passionate advocacy of the United Kingdom's revered national health service had strong resonance among a significant portion of the population. Likewise, Milliband had managed to challenge Cameron's claimed accomplishments on the economy by reminding frustrated voters that all too often, impressive macroeconomic data points did not translate into improved economic conditions in the quotidian lives of people. Labour's effort to cast the Tories' budget, which cut welfare spending, as mean-spirited also bolstered the argument that the Conservatives were not just indifferent to those struggling to make ends meet, but also balancing the budget on the backs of the poor.

Indeed, the final pre-election polls continued to show a close race, consistent with the slate of polling data discussed above. For example, both the daily YouGov poll and the Populus opinion poll showed the two parties tied at 33 percent and 34 percent respectively, while the Survation opinion poll showed Labour Leading by a single point -- 34 percent -- to the Conservatives with 33 percent; the Ashcroft poll had the Conservatives ahead slightly with 32 percent against Labour with 30 percent.

As the voters of the United Kingdom prepared to go to the polls to cast their ballots on May 7, 2015, the political landscape remained static: No one party expected to secure an outright majority, and instead with the election likely to produce yet another "hung parliament." Accordingly, all expectations were that the party receiving the plurality of seats would have the chance to form a coalition government. Despite their contracting support, the Liberal Democrats -- the junior party in the outgoing Conservative-led government -- could again play a kingmaker role. In truth, however, the Liberal Democrats would compete with the UKIP and SNP for that kingmaker status, even as the major contest would be set against Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservative Tories and Ed Milliband's Labour Party.

Note on Political Procedure:

Typically, the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons is the head of government and is appointed officially by the British monarch. The government (prime minister and cabinet ministers) must maintain the support of a majority of the members of the House of Commons to remain in office.

If an election produces a "hung parliament," there is the possibility of another election being called -- presumably with the objective of garnering a more decisive result in the Round 2 election. However, the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act of 2011 makes it difficult for early elections to be called. In the past, a prime minister could simply choose to dissolve parliament and call an election. Since the advent of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, there are only two routes to an early election. One option would require the parliament to approve the early election with the support of a two-thirds majority. It was conceivable that the two-third majority support would only be secured with some sort of alliance across party lines. The second option would involve a motion of no confidence in the government, requiring only a simple majority. If the no confidence motion passed successfully, a 14-day timeline would follow in which there would be attempts to form a new government. The failure of those attempts failed would facilitate an early election. Given those parameters required for early elections to be called, the more attractive (and practical) option would be to form a sustainable coalition government.

Election Results:

With most constituencies reporting their results, it was apparent that Prime Minister David Cameron had won a shock victory and would form a Conservative government.

In contrast to the predictions of the pre-election polling data, which forecast that no one party would likely secure a majority, the voters in United Kingdom had a different idea on election day and instead delivered an outright majority to the Conservative Party. With very few constituencies yet to count at the time of writing, the Tories won 330 seats -- just over half of the 650 parliamentary seats in total needed for a simply majority -- and 37 percent of the total vote share.

The Labour Party saw a slight decline in the overall popular support from what was expected in the pre-election data and secured about 31 percent of the vote share. The Labour Party was on track to secure approximately 232 seats. It should be noted that Labour's best performance was actually in the London area.

The Liberal Democrats appeared to have been punished at the polls, presumably for being the junior party in the outgoing Cameron-led coalition government. The Liberal Democrats were on track to win less than ten seats and saw about eight percent of the vote share.

The Scottish Nationalists enjoyed an overwhelmingly strong performance at the polls, wiping out the Labour Party from this northern stronghold and winning all but a handful of seats there. Indeed, the SNP garnered 56 seats.

Despite all the nationalist and sometimes vituperative rhetoric, there were only limited gains for UKIP to celebrate. Indeed, UKIP was on track to win only one or two seats.

Other smaller parties, such as the Greens, as well as the regional parties, such as Plaid Cymru, Sinn Fein, and the Democratic Ulster Union were also expected to gain representation in parliament.

Prime Minister Cameron celebrated the victory of his Conservative Party, which outperformed the polling surveys with impressive results. On the morning of May 8, 2015, he traveled to Buckingham Palace for an audience with Queen Elizabeth II, the head of state in the United Kingdom, where he was asked to lead the next government.

Meanwhile, Nick Clegg resigned as the head of the Liberal Democrats, citing the disastrous performance and "catastrophic losses" of his party at the 2015 polls. He noted that it was the worst election experience of Liberal Democrats since the founding of the party.

While Labour's defeat was not quite so punishing as the Liberal Democrats' experience at the polls, Ed Milliband nonetheless took responsibility for the losses endured by his party, offered his congratulations to David Cameron, and tendered his resignation, saying, "I am truly sorry I did not succeed."

Nigel Farage of UKIP, who did not win his own seat, indicated there would have to be a fresh leadership contest within the party to set the course moving forward.

The only party leader other than Cameron celebrating was Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish Nationalists, who saw a rout in Scotland, winning almost every seat there. Of course, it was hard to say how the strength of the SNP would translate into political strength since the SNP has made clear it would never work with a Tory government, while the Tories were not in need of assistance in parliament from the Scottish Nationalists to advance their agenda.

Nevertheless, the election result for the Scottish Nationalists, juxtaposed against the Scottish independence referendum earlier in the year, showed that the position of Scotland in the Union would have to change in some form or fashion. It was to be seen how that change might be envisioned. For his part, Prime Minister Cameron quickly foreclosed the notion of another independence referendum for Scotland, saying in an interview with the media: "We had a referendum. Scotland voted emphatically to stay in the United Kingdom. There isn't going to be another referendum."

Meanwhile, with Cameron making a campaign promise regarding a future referendum on the United Kingdom's participation in the European Union, it was also clear that regional relations were on the agenda. Of course, given the close friendship between David Cameron and President Barack Obama in the United States, the trans-Atlantic relationship was expected to remain strong.

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

Since early 2011, anti-government protests have spread and escalated across the Arab world; Syria emerged as an addition to the list of countries experiencing unrest in 2011. At first, protesters stopped short of demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, instead demanding greater political freedom and efforts to end corruption. But over time, as protests continued, and as the Assad regime carried out a hardline crackdown on dissent, tensions escalated between the government and the protesters. The result was a full-scale civil war.

As of 2015, Syria was beset by two sets of intersecting challenges -- the ongoing civil war between the Assad regime and rebel forces on one end, and the horrific dangers posed by the notorious terror group, Islamic State, which had seized wide swaths of territory in Syria and left an appalling death toll. It was generally understood that the civil war conditions in Syria, to some extent, facilitated the emergence of Islamic State in that country. Syrian President Assad's priority to hold onto power, and thus the center of power in Damascus, had allowed a power chasm to flourish in other parts of the country, which Islamic State has been able to exploit. The result has been a mass exodus of Syrians fleeing the country and seeking refuge in Europe. The so-called migrant influx in Europe has raised questions as to how to legally and humanely deal with a burgeoning humanitarian refugee crisis.

Following devastating terror attacks by the Islamist terror network that killed hundreds of Russian and French citizens in the autumn of 2015,

Russia and France intensified their efforts to go after Islamic State targets in Syria. At issue was the fact that Islamic State was claiming responsibility for a bomb that exploded on a Russian jet flying from the Egyptian resort of Sharm-el-Sheikh, killing more than 200 Russians on board.

Also at issue was the Islamic State claim of responsibility for a spate of appalling terror attacks in the French capital city of Paris, which killed approximately 130 people. Islamic State made clear that its brutal acts were being carried out because of the international community's engagement in Syria. Islamic State also promised that attacks were to come in the United States and other Western countries.

In response to what could only be understood as acts of war by Islamic State, in November 2015, Russian and French warplanes had wasted no time before stepping up their respective air campaigns in Syria, targeting Islamic State targets in the terror group's stronghold of Raqqa in a sustained manner.

France also deployed its air craft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle, to the Middle Eastern region for the purpose of supporting the effort against Islamic State. Of note was the fact that France was not limiting its air strike campaign from the Charles de Gaulle only to Islamic State targets in Syria, such as the terror group stronghold of Raqqa; indeed, France soon expanded its scope to hit Islamic State targets in Ramadi and Mosul in Iraq.

While the United Kingdom was not, at the time, engaged in the Syrian crisis, the British government gave France the use of its air base in Cyprus from which it could strike Islamist terror groups in the region.

United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron said that his country would provide air-to-air refueling services and that he would recommend that the British parliament vote in favor of the his country joining the United States-led air campaign to strike Islamic State targets.

To that end, a vote in the United Kingdom's House of Commons on Dec. 3, 2015 ended with overwhelming support for that country to enter the multilateral air campaign against Islamic State in Syria. Following more than 10 hours of passionate debate in the British legislative chamber, 397 members of parliament voted in favor of the measure while 223 members of parliament voted against it. The vote tally was bipartisan with 66 members of parliament from the Labour Party siding with Prime Minister Cameron's Conservatives.

Prime Minister Cameron hailed the vote outcome, saying that the House of Commons had "taken the right decision to keep the country safe." British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said the vote was a move in the right direction as he declared, "Military strikes alone won't help Syria, won't keep us safe from Daesh. But this multi-strand approach will." Of course, the vote outcome generated outrage from

both inside and outside parliament. Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, insisted that the United Kingdom's engagement in Syria would only make the country less safe. Outside the parliamentary buildings, anti-war protesters from various groups including the "Stop the War" Coalition gathered to oppose the move.

Special Entry on "Brexit" and Political After-effects

Summary

In July 2016, in the aftermath of a referendum on the United Kingdom's engagement in the European Union, the political landscape was marked by tectonic political shifts. Notably, following the decision by the people of the United Kingdom to ratify its withdrawal from the European Union, known as "Brexit," there was also a concomitant transformation at the political level. Of note was the turmoil within the opposition Labour Party over leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and more significantly, the decision by Prime Minister David Cameron to step down. Suffering a catastrophic loss of political capital over the Brexit vote, which did not go his way, he noted that the time was right for new leadership. To that end, he was succeeded on July 13, 2016, by Theresa May as the new Conservative leader and prime minister.

In Detail

A highly anticipated referendum was set to take place on June 23, 2016, on the future of the United Kingdom's participation in the European Union (EU). The choices before the people of the United Kingdom (UK) was either to opt out of the EU with a "leave" vote, or, to "remain" in the EU.

The so-called "Brexit" vote promised to be a close contest with anti-immigrant sentiment and a Syrian refugee crisis fueling intensified support for nativism, and thus boosting the "leave" vote. Indeed, at the start of June 2016, polls showed that it could go either way, with a small but significant advantage for those opting out of the EU.

The UK's exit from the EU, from which it was a part since 1973, was being viewed through the lens of trepidation, with far reaching consequences of the political and economic variety at hand.

The chance of a Brexit was contributing consternation to the business front, with fears arising about the devaluation of the UK's pound sterling currency, and concerns emerging about the effects on the value of British government bond yields. Other anxieties revolved around the country's trade deals -- all of which would have to be renegotiated, as well as the country's investment prospects. Indeed, the Bank of England entered the fray to warn voters in the UK that there would be dire consequences and significant financial disruption to come from a Brexit -- indeed, it would be a deleterious move on the economic front not only in the UK but internationally.

These warnings appeared to be falling on significant deaf ears, with immigration-based anxieties and arguments of national sovereignty trumping the reality of catastrophic economic consequences.

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

The dynamics shifted in mid-June 2016 when a British member of parliament was assassinated by an ultra-right anti-immigration activist. The death of Jo Cox, a member of parliament from the Labour Party, who was known for her advocacy of Syrian refugees and for her advocacy of the "remain" campaign, was stabbed and shot to death in West Yorkshire by an assailant screaming "Britain First."

The assailant was later identified as Thomas Mair and was reported to have connection to far-right and extremist hate groups, along with a record of psychiatric problems.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron expressed horror of Cox's assassination, saying the country was "rightly shocked." He also praised Cox's legacy of community and tolerance, as well as her reputation for compassion for those in need. Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, cast Cox's murder as "extreme political violence" and "an attack on democracy." Members of parliament from the major parties joined in mourning for their late colleague with multi-partisan sobriety over not just the loss of life -- but the loss of someone whose generous character embodied the most respected national values.

Overall, there was some restraint from expressly linking the death of Cox to the Brexit referendum. But there was nonetheless a sense that the ideological struggle between inclusion and xenophobia very likely fueled the tragic scenario. There was also a feeling of shock that gripped not only the UK but the entirety of Europe where such assassinations have been a rarity for decades.

By the last week of June 2016, with the Brexit vote only days away, the climate in the UK had shifted somewhat. It remained unclear if the shocking death of Cox had been a factor in the change in dynamics, although it was clear that the country was weary from the bitter and divisive debate that had gone on, and a national trauma had swept the nation with Cox's murder.

Regardless of whether this played a role or not was unknown, but now the "remain" camp had the advantage in deciding whether or not the UK would stay in the EU.

Note: On July 23, 2016, after British voters cast their votes in the Brexit referendum and their choices were tallied, it was clear that people had chosen to leave the European Union. The final vote was 52-48 in favor of "leave" over "remain."

With his political capital expended, and now with his legacy now tainted with the distinction of being the prime minister under whose stewardship the United Kingdom left the European Union, David Cameron resigned as the head of government. Cameron said he would stay on as prime minister for three months and would step down ahead of the Conservative party's conference. In a national address, he said, "I love this country and feel honored to have served it. Will of British people must be respected."

He continued, "The British people have spoken....This was not a decision taken lightly. There can be no doubt about the result." He urged new leadership, saying, "I will reassure the markets that British economy is strong. This will require strong leadership. I've been proud to be prime minister for six years."

It should be noted that the news of Brexit immediately spurred a financial meltdown in the global markets with observers noting that in the Bank of England was poised to play a crucially important stabilizing role.

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

In the days after the Brexit referendum and Prime Minister Cameron's announcement that he would be resigning, there was a meeting of the European Parliament in the Belgian capital of Brussels. On the agenda was the impending withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

Of note was the fact that some EU leaders were making it known that the UK would not be allowed to "cherry pick" aspects of the regional bloc to retain for its own benefit. As well, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said that the bloc would "respect the result" of the vote, but that the UK needed to flesh out its exit strategy as quickly as possible.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker echoed this sentiment, saying that the UK did not have "months to meditate" on its exit schedule and strategy.

To that end, the EU argued that the UK had to formally invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to trigger the withdrawal talks. However, outgoing UK Prime Minister Cameron said Article 50 should only be invoked by his successor, who would have the duty of guiding the country through that process.

Of course, that successor would not likely be chosen until the autumn of 2016.

Meanwhile, there were reverberations on the domestic political landscape in the UK from the Brexit vote. In particular, the vote appeared to have spurred intra-party turbulence and turmoil within the ruling Conservative Party and the official opposition party, Labour, with leadership struggles anticipated to ensue.

As discussed above, Prime Minister Cameron had announced his resignation, thus triggering a leadership fight among the Tories (Conservatives). One of the first aspirants for Tory leadership was Liam Fox, the former Defense Secretary and a well-known "Leave" campaign advocate. Other contenders included Work and Pensions Secretary Stephen Crabb and Home Secretary Theresa May. But it was former London Mayor Boris Johnson -- a prominent "Leave" advocate -- was believed to have the edge thanks to the support of 100 members of parliament.

However, Johnson shocked the country by eventually stating that he did not intend to run for the leadership post, this generating criticism for his role in sending the country into chaos and bailing before the hard work needed to be done.

With the Labour Party, the leader -- Jeremy Corbyn -- was being pilloried with many of his own party in revolt against him. At issue was the perception that he had not doing enough to prevent the "Leave" campaign from winning. In fact, on June 29, 2016, Corbyn lost a confidence vote within the party, while a large swath of his shadow cabinet resigned. Although Corbyn vowed that he would not be pushed out, the fact of the matter was that he has limited power and influence at his disposal at the close of June 2016.

With both the Tories and Labour in the midst of these respective power struggles, Liberal Democrat leader, Tim Farron, said in an interview with BBC News "The last thing we need" was for the country's two major parties confronting leadership crises. That being said, Farron seemed willing to leverage the situation to the benefit of the Liberal Democrats as he declared his party to be "the gathering place for progressives." Farron called for a political realignment, warning that without it, "We will be left with a Tory government forever."

By mid-2016, the post-Brexit political drama was unfolding. Within the Labour Party, political plots were being hatched to oust party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who lost a confidence vote but remained in place. Labour member of parliament, Angela Eagle, soon indicated that she would be willing to challenge Corbyn for the party's leadership.

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

By mid-July 2016, Eagle had lodged her official bid to take Labour's leadership reins. In a speech making her announcement, she said, "Today I am announcing my decision to stand for the leadership of the Labour Party." She continued, "Jeremy Corbyn is unable to provide the leadership that this party needs – I believe I can. I am not a Blairite, I am not a Brownite and I am not a Corbynist, I am my own woman."

Fallout was also occurring within the nativist UK Independence Party where "Leave" champion, Farage, announced his resignation as the party's leader.

As one of the UK's most passionate advocates for leaving the EU, Farage's announcement was met with shock. Farage defended his move saying that he had achieved his goal -- that of exiting the EU. He said, "I have never been, and I have never wanted to be, a career politician. My aim in being in politics was to get Britain out of the European Union." He added, "During the referendum campaign, I said 'I want my country back.' What I'm saying today, is, 'I want my life back,' and it begins right now." The truth of the matter was that his departure left a gap to be filled in the "Leave" camp.

For the Tories, party stalwart, Theresa May, and an advocate of the "Remain" campaign was regarded as a frontrunner to succeed Cameron now that Johnson telegraphed that he did not want the job of leading the party or the country on its path out of the EU. Following a leadership race in the first part of July 2016 involving Andrea, a junior energy minister, Michael Gove, another junior secretary, and former defense minister, Liam Fox, it was May who emerged victorious after successive waves of internal party votes.

By July 13, 2016, David Cameron formally stepped down as prime minister, and after a meeting with Queen Elizabeth II, the UK's head of state, May became the new head of government and the second female to hold that post since Margaret Thatcher.

In her first address after becoming prime minister, May stood outside 10 Downing Street and declared that her goal was said to "build a better Britain." In an appeal to the British people, she said, "The government I lead will be driven, not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours. We will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives. When we take the big calls, we'll think not of the powerful, but you."

In her initial round of cabinet appointments, May retained Philip Hammond -- the foreign secretary under Cameron -- but with the position of chancellor. Meanwhile, she shocked the public by selecting Boris Johnson -- not known for his international statesmanship and notorious for his Brexit advocacy -- as the new foreign secretary. Another appointment of note was that of David Davis, a Euroskeptic, who was selected to lead negotiations on exiting the European Union.

Meanwhile, there were also effects of the Brexit vote on the status of Scotland, with some analysts suggesting that perhaps there might be a renewed push for independence. However, a post-Brexit poll indicated there was no appetite for another independence referendum, despite the fact that Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon made a declaration about another referendum being "highly likely."

Former UK PM Cameron announces resignation as MP; UK readies for Brexit

In September 2016, former United Kingdom Prime Minister Cameron announced that he was resigning his post as a Member of Parliament.

Going back to mid-2016, in the aftermath of the "Brexit" vote that heralded the exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union, Cameron said that he would be stepping down as prime minister. With his political capital

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

expended, and with his legacy tainted with the distinction of being the prime minister under whose stewardship the United Kingdom left the European Union, Cameron resigned as the head of government.

Cameron said he would stay on as prime minister for three months and would step down ahead of the Conservative party's conference. In a national address, he said, "I love this country and feel honored to have served it. Will of British people must be respected."

He continued, "The British people have spoken....This was not a decision taken lightly. There can be no doubt about the result." He urged new leadership, saying, "I will reassure the markets that British economy is strong. This will require strong leadership. I've been proud to be prime minister for six years."

By July 13, 2016, David Cameron formally stepped down as prime minister, and after a meeting with Queen Elizabeth II, the UK's head of state, May became the new head of government and the second female to hold that post since Margaret Thatcher.

In September 2016, Cameron further announced that he would be resigning from his position as an elected Member of Parliament. Cameron said that he would step down from his role as the elected representative of his Oxfordshire constituency, and allow someone else to take on that role. He explained that his presence as a "back bencher" in parliament was something of a distraction. A by-election would be called to fill his seat.

In October 2016, UK Prime Minister Theresa May announced that her country would trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and begin the formal process of her country withdrawing from the European Union. May also foreclosed the notion of an early general election, noting that such a course would only augur instability in the UK. Instead, May said that she would advance the repeal the 1972 European Communities Act which took the United Kingdom into the European Common Market, now known as the European Union. She said in an interview with the media, "We will introduce, in the next Queen's speech, a Great Repeal Bill that will remove the European Communities Act from the statute book." The act would become effective upon the formal exit of the UK from the European Union.

UK formally commences Brexit process of withdrawing from the European Union

On March 29, 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May formally began the process known colloquially as "Brexit" of withdrawing the United Kingdom from the United Kingdom.

In keeping with Article 50 of the European Union's Lisbon Treaty, Prime Minister May notified European Union Council President Donald Tusk via a hand-delivered letter that her country would exit the European bloc after decades of participation dating back to 1973.

In a speech to parliament, she declared, "The United Kingdom is leaving the European Union." She added, "This is an historic moment from which there can be no turning back."

A difficult process lasting up to two years was in the offing whereby the United Kingdom would seek to negotiate the terms of its exit from the European Union. Those negotiations would largely center on the United Kingdom's relations with the European Union with regard to trade and security.

Note that Brexit set to be finalized in May 2019.

Terror attack at Ariana Grande concert in Manchester leaves more than 20 dead

On May 22, 2017, a terror attack after a concert for pop singer Ariana Grande in Manchester in the United Kingdom left more than 20 people dead and approximately 50 others injured. Among the dead were children, teenagers, and young people attracted to Grande's music.

The blast occurred just after Grande left the stage at Manchester's largest indoor arena. The pop star expressed her shock and grief via the social media outlet, Twitter, saying, "Broken. From the bottom of my heart, I am so so sorry. I don't have words."

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

Authorities soon announced that a suicide bombing caused the bloodshed. The assailant was identified as 22-year-old Salman Abedi -- a United Kingdom-born son of Libyan refugees. The terror group, Islamic State, soon claimed responsibility for the bombing, which was deemed the worst terrorist attack in the United Kingdom since the deaths of 56 people in the July 7, 2005 London bombings.

Given the horror of the 2017 attack, the Conservatives, Labour, Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrats temporarily suspended campaigning for the general election. Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Theresa May condemned the attack, convened an emergency meeting, and raised the terror alert level nationally to "severe."

Terror attack on London Bridge; Islamic States says its fighters responsible

On June 3, 2017, the British capital city was struck by a terrorist attack when Islamist extremist assailants in a white van rammed their vehicle into people on London Bridge. After that initial attack, three male assailants wearing fake suicide vests exited the van and attacked the crowd using knives while screaming, "This is for Allah." They then ran towards Borough Market where they continued their rage of terror, attempting to stab random people at restaurants and bars in the area.

Police arrived on the scene, opened fire, and ultimately killed the attackers in short order. However, by that point, at least seven people in total had died and approximately 50 others had been injured -- about half of them being in critical condition.

It should be noted that the notorious terror group, Islamic State, soon claimed responsibility, saying its "fighters" carried out the attack. To that end, the killers were identified as Pakistan-born Khuram Butt, Rachid Redouane of Barking in the United Kingdom, and Youssef Zaghba, a Moroccan-Italian man.

United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May convened an emergency meeting in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, where crisis response discussions are typically held. Prime Minister May decried the "evil" ideology of Islamist terrorists who carried out the bloodshed. She warned of counter-terrorism measures to come, saying that her country "cannot and must not pretend that things can continue as they are." Of particular note was her call for regulation of the Internet where Islamist extremists have been radicalized.

In the aftermath of the attack, a global political imbroglio had been sparked when United States President Donald Trump accused London Mayor Sadiq Khan of offering "pathetic excuses" when Khan assured Londoners that there was no reason for people to be alarmed. In fact, the London mayor was assuring the people that they should not be alarmed by the increased police presence. However, Trump used the truncated quote to further his oft-repeated claim that politicians are often too politically correct regarding terror. Trump appeared to suggest that the London mayor -- a Muslim -- was downplaying the horror of the act of terrorism, even though there was a misrepresentation of Khan's actual words.

For his part, Khan's spokesperson initially dismissed Trump's accusations saying that the mayor "has more important things to do than respond to Donald Trump's ill-informed tweet that deliberately takes out of context." Later, in an interview with BBC News, Khan said: "We've got to recognize that some people want to divide our communities, some people thrive on fueling division. That's not me, that's not the London I know, and we aren't going to allow anybody, whether it's Donald Trump or anybody else to divide our community."

The issue was becoming a political one with the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tim Farron, saying: "This is a man insulting our national values at a time of introspection and mourning." Meanwhile, other politicians were urging that the invitation to Trump for a state visit be revoked.

Primer on 2017 parliamentary elections in United Kingdom

The citizens of the United Kingdom were set to go to polls to vote in parliamentary elections to be held on June 8, 2017 -- two years ahead of schedule. At issue for Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May was the desire to seek a governing mandate as she guided the country through the process of exiting the European union, known colloquially as "brexit."

Political Conditions United-Kingdom

While the major dividing line in the election stood between the Conservative Party (known as the Tories) and the Labour Party, the traditional political dichotomy was cross-cut by popular support for the nationalist parties -- the right-wing United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), the left-leaning Scottish National Party (SNP), and to a lesser degree, by the center-left Liberal Democrats.

At issue would be the composition of the lower parliamentary chamber in the bicameral legislature - the House of Commons. With that 650 seat body, members are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms unless the House is dissolved earlier.

In the previous elections, the Conservatives (Tories) won the most seats.

Going into the 2017 contest, polling data gave the Tories a wide lead over Labour. The main problem for the Labour Party appeared to be intra-party fighting over its leader Jeremy Corbyn. Labour was also finding that it was on track to be obliterated in its former stronghold of Scotland, and quite possibly in Wales as well. Conservative Prime Minister May would also be helped by voters who had been inclined towards the nationalist UKIP party, which was strongly in favor of Brexit, but who were now turning to the Tories.

In the week ahead of the election, however, with Labour fighting back with a series of well produced advertising, an inspired manifesto, and a rousing debate performance by Corbyn, some of the polls tightened significantly. That tightening of the polls was also partially due to weakening support for the Tories following a harsh policy manifesto. That manifesto included a widely pilloried plan to make the elderly pay more for their care and was unfavorably blasted as a "dementia tax."

As such, in the days ahead of election day, some polls indicated that Labour was trailing the Tories only slightly -- and within the margin of error. Still others, though, suggested that the Conservatives would win. It was to be seen if Labour could pull off a shock surge, or, if a terrorist attack in London on London Bridge would be the decisive factor in returning the Tories to power.

Once the votes were counted, it appeared that the polls showing a close race were predictive as the United Kingdom was headed for a "hung parliament." Indeed, while the Tories won the most seats -- 318, they remained short of an absolute majority in the 650 seat parliament. The Labour Party appeared to have put forth a valiant effort, winning several marginal seats, even winning seats in Wales that were forecast to be lost, and ultimately denying Prime Minister May the mandate she was seeking. Indeed, the Labour Party, under the leadership of leftist Corbyn, had consolidated its vote share and won 261 seats.

For her part, as she delivered a subdued speech from her Maidenhead constituency, Prime Minister May telegraphed that she would not be stepping down, despite the humiliating performance of her party after leading by double digits in the polls. She made no mention of the fact that her party had squandered the opportunity to secure a landslide victory. Instead, May was insistent that she hold onto power and be the person who would manage the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union.

The following day, Prime Minister May expressed regret for the loss of Conservative seats, saying, "I'm sorry for all those candidates and hard working party workers who weren't successful." She added, "As I reflect on the results I will reflect on what we need to do in the future to take the party forward."

May also confirmed that she would stay on as prime minister at the helm of a minority government, and she would seek support from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) from Northern Ireland to hold onto power. While the DUP would not be part of a formal coalition with the Tories, it would nonetheless offer operational support for the Queen's Speech and to pass a budget (effectively, a confidence vote).

Speaking of this arrangement, May said, "Our two parties have enjoyed a strong relationship over many years and this gives me the confidence to believe that we will be able to work together in the interests of the whole United Kingdom." It should be noted that DUP leader Arlene Foster offered a less than enthusiastic statement on the proposed alliance, saying: "The prime minister has spoken with me this morning and we will enter discussions with the Conservatives to explore how it may be possible to bring stability to our nation at this time of great challenge."

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Nevertheless, Prime Minister May went to Buckingham Palace to ask Queen Elizabeth for permission to form a government -- albeit of the fragile variety. She also made clear that Brexit negotiations would commence on June 19, 2017, as scheduled.

Meanwhile, Labour leader Corbyn, who was enjoying political vindication as a result of his party's surprisingly strong performance, made May should step down. He also indicated that he was prepared to form a minority government. He said, "The mandate she's got is lost Conservative seats, lost votes, lost support and lost confidence." Corbyn added, "I would have thought that's enough to go, actually, and make way for a government that will be truly representative of all of the people of this country."

Corbyn and the Labour Party would be looking towards the Queen's Speech, which outlines the governing agenda, and the ensuing vote after as a sign of whether May could continue as head of government. Should the vote at the end of debate after the Queen's Speech go favorably by winning a majority of support in parliament, May could then conceivably pursue passing a budget, which would also be a confidence measure of sorts. However, if May were to be foiled after the debate on the Queen's Speech, then Labour could, quite possibly, be given a chance to form a government.

Hurricanes devastate the Caribbean

Early September 2017 was marked by the wrath of monster Hurricane Irma, which decimated several islands of the Leeward Caribbean before raging across the state of Florida in the United States. Irma had the dubious distinction of being the most powerful Atlantic storm in a decade.

As a Category 5 hurricane, Irma slammed into the island of Barbuda - part of the two-island state of Antigua-Barbuda -- with maximum sustained winds of 185 miles per hour. But the massive storm's wide expanse of external bands hit neighboring islands such as St. Martin/St. Maarten and St. Barthelemy in the Netherlands and French Antilles, Anguilla in the British Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the United States territories of the Virgin Islands and

Puerto Rico with destructive force. The storm's path continued on across the northern coasts of Cuba, across portions of the Bahamas, and then sweeping over the Florida Keys with maximum sustained winds of 130 miles per hour, before covering the rest of the state with dangerous floods and winds.

In the Caribbean, dozens of people were killed but no place suffered worse destruction than Barbuda. According to Prime Minister Gaston Browne of Antigua and Barbuda said Irma had wreaked "absolute devastation" on Barbuda, which was now "barely habitable" with 95 percent of the island's infrastructure completely destroyed.

Up to 90 percent of St. Martin's infrastructure had also been utterly decimated, essentially destroying the French/Dutch territory's tourism industry.

Cuba's north coast, which was home to much of its burgeoning tourism industry, had now suffered a massive setback in the already-struggling Communist country. Particularly hard-hit

Havana, Matanzas, Camagüey and Ciego de Ávila. Ten people were confirmed to have been killed in Cuba alone with authorities noting they had not evacuated to shelters, as instructed to do so.

Across the Leeward Caribbean, island nations and territories were being faced with dozens of deaths widespread damage and destruction to infrastructure, as well as a humanitarian crisis.

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Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom pledged 32 million in British pounds for recovery assistance in the Caribbean. The Dutch monarch King Willem-Alexander, visited Netherlands Antilles affected by Irma, including the Dutch side of St Maarten to show solidarity with the people. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte promised an intensified security presence in affected Dutch territories to ensure order, and noted that security forces had been authorized to function with a "firm hand." French President Emmanuel Macron was criticized for the lateness of his response to St. Martin and St. Barthelemy, but was also expected to make his way to the region to survey the damage and offer assistance for French Caribbean territories' recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Independent Caribbean island nations such as Cuba and Antigua-Barbuda would have a more difficult time on their limited resources to recover from Irma's wrath. In Barbuda more than 1,300 Barbadians were in shelters in Antigua with no suggestion of when they might return home. Assistance was coming from regional neighbors such as Jamaica, St Lucia, and Trinidad and promised assistance while a team from the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) was on the ground in Barbuda carrying out an assessment. A Go Fund Me fund had been established to try to rescue animals left to roam free in Barbuda in the aftermath of the storm.

Later in September 2017, the islands of the Caribbean were bracing for yet another strike by Mother Nature -- this time by Hurricane Maria. The Category five hurricane was forecast to hit the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean on Sept. 18, 2017. Hurricane warnings were issued for the islands of Dominica, St. Lucia. St. Kitts-Nevis, the French overseas territories of Guadeloupe and Martinique, the United Kingdom overseas territories of Montserrat and the British Virgin Islands, as well as the United States Virgin islands. Hurricane watches were issued for the French territories of St Martin (also partially under Dutch jurisdiction) and St Barts, as well as the United States territory of Puerto Rico. The islands of Saba, St Eustatius and Anguilla were also under hurricane watches. Of concern was the fact that some of these islands were still suffering the effects of Irma, and were about to be struck again.

Note that on Sept, 19, 2017, it was reported that Hurricane Maria had almost completely destroyed the Caribbean island nation of Dominica. The tiny island of less than 80,000 people was viciously struck with maximum sustained winds of nearly 160 miles per hour, which according to Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerit, had decimated most of the country's infrastructure. His own home suffered catastrophic failure - as was the case for most Dominicans. Via the social media outlet Facebook, Skerit said, "So far we have lost all what money can buy and replace. My greatest fear for the morning is that we will wake to news of serious physical injury and possible deaths as a result of likely landslides triggered by persistent rains." He added that the island nation's immediate priority was the rescue of people trapped by the damage of the hurricane, and provision of medical care to the injured.

In the longer run, though, Dominican authorities would have to deal with the reality that the entire country was left in "war zone" conditions.

Following Maria's destruction of Dominica, the hurricane went on to strike Puerto Rico -- home to close to 3.5 million Americans -- with brutal force. In the aftermath of Maria, the island was dealing with destructive and e-coli infested flooding. That situation was exacerbated when dams were breached. At the same time, large swaths of physical infrastructure were left destroyed. Meanwhile, the communications networks, including cellular phone and internet service, were largely compromised.

U.K. Prime Minister May and Dutch embassy publicly chastise U.S. President Trump for sharing anti-Muslim videos

In late November 2017, President Donald Trump shared anti-Muslim videos from a known extremist entity, Britain First, on his favorite communications outlet, Twitter. Britain First seeks to end all immigration, establish a ban on Islam, and deport all persons found to be promoting Islamic ideology. The videos were initially posted by the ultra-right xenophobic deputy leader of Britain First, Jayda Fransen. Of note was the fact that Fransen was charged for aggravated harassment and convicted of abusing a Muslim woman.

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Trump, whose campaign platform included a Muslim ban, has been known to tweet controversial content in the past. Indeed, he retweeted material from white nationalist groups before. But the White House defended these retweets of Franzen's anti-Muslim videos, emphasizing that the president was elected for his national security views of immigrants and other groups viewed by his base as a threat to the United States.

White House spokesperson Sarah Sanders said, "Look, I'm not talking about the nature of the video. The threat is real and that's what the president is talking about is the need for national security, the need for military spending, and those are very real things. There's nothing fake about that."

The controversy surrounding Franzen's videos surrounded the fact that she convicted of abusing a Muslim woman.

Members of parliament, as such, reacted with outrage at the notion of a United States president disseminating content from a discredited source such as Fransen, with a clear incendiary purpose. Some members of parliament lamented Trump's reckless use of Twitter, while others called for the state visit invitation to the U.S. president to be revoked.

The conservative prime minister herself weighed in, issuing a statement in which Theresa May declared: "It is wrong for the president to have done this." May's office added: "Britain First seeks to divide communities through their use of hateful narratives which peddle lies and stoke tensions. They cause anxiety to law-abiding people."

Even the Dutch government entered the fray as one video posted by Franzen and retweeted by Trump depicted was titled "Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches!" The embassy of the Netherlands reacted via Twitter with the following tweet: "@realDonaldTrump Facts do matter. The perpetrator of the violent act in this video was born and raised in the Netherlands. He received and completed his sentence under Dutch law."

Brexit: United Kingdom and European Union forge framework for "long divorce"

With Brexit set to be finalized in 2019, intense negotiations went into effect in 2017 to set the conditions for the United Kingdom to disentangle itself from the European Union.

Going back to mid-2016, in the aftermath of the "Brexit" vote that heralded the exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union, then-Prime Minister David Cameron said that he would be stepping down as prime minister. With his political capital expended, and with his legacy tainted with the distinction of being the prime minister under whose stewardship the United Kingdom left the European Union, Cameron resigned as the head of government.

Cameron said he would stay on as prime minister for three months and would step down ahead of the Conservative party's conference. In a national address, he said, "I love this country and feel honored to have served it. Will of British people must be respected."

He continued, "The British people have spoken....This was not a decision taken lightly. There can be no doubt about the result." He urged new leadership, saying, "I will reassure the markets that British economy is strong. This will require strong leadership. I've been proud to be prime minister for six years."

By July 13, 2016, David Cameron formally stepped down as prime minister, and after a meeting with Queen Elizabeth II, the UK's head of state, May became the new head of government and the second female to hold that post since Margaret Thatcher.

In September 2016, Cameron further announced that he would be resigning from his position as an elected Member of Parliament. Cameron said that he would step down from his role as the elected representative of his

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Oxfordshire constituency, and allow someone else to take on that role. He explained that his presence as a "back bencher" in parliament was something of a distraction. A by-election would be called to fill his seat.

In October 2016, the new prime minister, Theresa May, announced that her country would trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and begin the formal process of her country withdrawing from the European Union. May also foreclosed the notion of an early general election, noting that such a course would only augur instability in the UK. Instead, ay said that she would advance the repeal the 1972 European Communities Act which took the United Kingdom into the European Common Market, now known as the European Union. She said in an interview with the media, "We will introduce, in the next Queen'ss speech, a Great Repeal Bill that will remove the European Communities Act from the statute book." The act would become effective upon the formal exit of the UK from the European Union.

On March 29, 2017, United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May formally began the process known colloquially as "Brexit" of withdrawing the United Kingdom from the United Kingdom.

In keeping with Article 50 of the European Union'ss Lisbon Treaty, Prime Minister May notified European Union Council President Donald Tusk via a hand-delivered letter that her country would exit the European bloc after decades of participation dating back to 1973.

In a speech to parliament, she declared, "The United Kingdom is leaving the European Union." She added, "This is an historic moment from which there can be no turning back."

A difficult process lasting up to two years was in the offing whereby the United Kingdom would seek to negotiate the terms of its exit from the European Union. Those negotiations would largely center on the United Kingdom'ss relations with the European Union with regard to trade and security.

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By December 2017, the two sides had reached some concurrence on a framework that would ensure an orderly exit by the United Kingdom from the European bloc. The framework also outline the terms of future trade ties.

United Kingdom Prime Minister May hailed the achievement, saying, "I very much welcome the prospect of moving ahead." The head of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, declared: "I believe we have now made the breakthrough we needed."

A continuing wrinkle would be the matter of disconnecting the British mainland from European Union regulations while maintaining those rules for Northern Ireland. But for European negotiators, that was a problem for the United Kingdom to sort out.

The Brexit transition would commence on March 29, 2019, when the United Kingdom would leave the European Union, but would ensue over a phased basis of two years. This process was thus dubbed "the long divorce."

Prime Minister May retaliates after nerve agent poisoning of former Russian spies in UK

March 2018 was marked by international spy intrigue worthy of a motion picture movie. At issue were the alleged assassination attempt by Russia on Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy living in the United Kingdom (U.K.), and his daughter, Yulia Skripal.

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U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May publicly accused Russia of being behind the attempted assassination, casting it as "an unlawful use of force" by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, and warning of consequences to follow if Russia did not answer for its actions by a specified deadline on March 13, 2018. She declared: "We will not tolerate such brazen attempt to murder innocent civilians on our soil."

For its part, Russia dismissed the charges and indicated that it would not be adhering to any such deadline to furnish an explanation. Moreover, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted that Moscow was "not to blame" and asked for information about the nerve agent believed to have caused the poisoning of Skripal and his daughter.

It should be noted that the particular nerve agent used against Skripal and his daughter was linked with a constellation of chemical weapons identified as Novichok, which was developed by the former Soviet Union in the 1970s. It should also be noted that the Skripal case was not the first time poisoning of former Russian agents on British soil had ensued. In 2006, the former Russian spy, Alexander Litvinenko, who was poisoned using radioactive tea. A British inquiry into the case found that Litvinenko's death was very likely orchestrated by the Russian state.

Days after Prime Minister May's deadline elapsed, the British head of government announced the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats from the United Kingdom. There would also be a cessation of high level bilateral meetings with the Russians, as well as a boycott of the World Cup to be held in Russia later in 2018.

Explaining her decision before parliament, May said, "It is not in our national interest to break off all dialogue between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. But in the aftermath of this appalling act against our country, this relationship cannot be the same."

The move was the initial gesture of reprisal by the government of the United Kingdom to the poisoning spy fiasco, which was quickly being understood as a quasi-act of state-sponsored terrorism.

But Russia remained undeterred, with the Foreign Ministry issuing a statement that read: "The British government has opted for confrontation with Russia. To be sure, our response will not be long in coming."

Note that Skripal and his daughter remained hospitalized and in critical condition at the time of writing. Also note that as Prime Minister May was speaking about the Skripal case, UK authorities were opening a new investigation -- this time into the mysterious death of Nikolai Glushkov, an associate of the deceased oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who was regarded as quite a rival of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Cabinet shakeup amidst Windrush scandal

In late April 2018, Amber Rudd, the British Home Secretary, resigned from office amidst what had come to be known as the Windrush scandal.

At issue was a plan to deport illegal

immigrants, and the ensuing discovery that some immigrants from Commonwealth countries who had settled in the United Kingdom over the course of decades from the late 1940s to the 1970s were declared to be illegal immigrants. Those immigrants were known as the "Windrush generation" and the plan that would see them ejected from the only home many of them had ever known evoked outrage.

Rudd claimed that she was unaware of the existence of the Home Office targets to remove illegal immigrants. Rudd then said that she "inadvertently misled" members of parliament over those targets. However, the Guardian

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newspaper published a letter showing that Rudd had, in fact, established an "ambitious but deliverable" goal of deporting 10 percent more illegal immigrants over the course of the "next few years."

The full letter brought the scandal to a head and made Rudd's continued tenure impossible without considerable political damage, so she resigned.

With Rudd gone, pressure from the opposition would now refocus of United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May, whom they have long viewed as the "architect" of the scandal. The Labour Party particularly has emphasized the fact that the crisis was the fault of May and that conservative government would now have to find a way to quickly grant citizenship to the Windrush generation, ensuring they not be subject to deportation.

Facing defeat in parliament, U.K. PM May delays Brexit vote

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Cameron said he would stay on as prime minister for three months and would step down ahead of the Conservative party's conference. In a national address, he said, "I love this country and feel honored to have served it. Will of British people must be respected."

He continued, "The British people have spoken....This was not a decision taken lightly. There can be no doubt about the result." He urged new leadership, saying, "I will reassure the markets that British economy is strong. This will require strong leadership. I've been proud to be prime minister for six years."

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In October 2016, the new prime minister, Theresa May, announced that her country would trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and begin the formal process of her country withdrawing from the European Union. May also foreclosed the notion of an early general election, noting that such a course would only augur instability in the UK. Instead, May said that she would advance the repeal the 1972 European Communities Act which took the United Kingdom into the European Common Market, now known as the European Union. She said in an interview with the media, "We will introduce, in the next Queen's speech, a Great Repeal Bill that will remove the European Communities Act from the statute book." The act would become effective upon the formal exit of the UK from the European Union.

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By December 2017, the two sides had reached some concurrence on a framework that would ensure an orderly exit by the United Kingdom from the European bloc. The framework also outlined the terms of future trade ties.

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A continuing wrinkle would be the matter of disconnecting the British mainland from European Union regulations while maintaining those rules for Northern Ireland. But for European negotiators, that was a problem for the United Kingdom to sort out.

The Brexit transition would commence on March 29, 2019, when the United Kingdom would leave the European Union, but would ensue over a phased basis of two years. This process was thus dubbed "the long divorce."

By mid-2018, had forged a business-friendly strategy to enact the Brexit transition in a manner intended to yield the least amount of economic upheaval for the United Kingdom. The plan was formulated after years of discussion and advanced at a gathering of government at the country residence of the prime minister at Chequers.

The agreement won the support of most of Prime Minister May's government. But the Brexit strategy was in crisis following an address to parliament by Prime Minister May about the plan to exit the European Union.

At the center of the Chequers proposal was a strategy that would allow the U.K. to depart the European bloc while adhering to the Brexit commitments on borders, finances, and jurisprudence, but at the same time, retain a stable economy with as little turbulence as possible. Indeed, the plan was deemed to

The plan appeared to have raised the ire of Conservative members of parliament, spurring the resignations of at least three within hours of one another. Among them was Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

While the details of their objections were not fully aired, the belief was that the continuing influence by the European Union in areas like taxes, jurisprudence, and migration were regarded as dealbreakers of sorts. Indeed, Johnson soon released a letter detailing his objections, in which he explained that May's exit strategy would cause the United Kingdom to become a colony to the European Union. Of particular concern to Johnson were continued close trading ties between the two sides.

The general consensus was that either the prime minister would have to abandon her Brexit plan, or Conservative members of parliament would abandon her.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn cast the resignations of the cabinet ministers as escapees abandoning a "sinking ship," and declared: "The Chequers compromise took two years to reach and two days to unravel. We have a crisis in government... it is clear this government cannot secure a good deal for Britain."

By the end of August 2018, Prime Minister May was holding fast to her Chequers Brexit plan, which would enable a soft exit from the EU bloc, but without additional compromise to the EU, which was sure to enrage hardline eurosceptic factions at home.

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In an opinion editorial in the Sunday Telegraph, the prime minister made clear that she would "not be pushed" into compromises on her Brexit proposal that were not in the "national interest." At the same time, she said she would not give into a call for a second "re-run" referendum on Brexit. She indicated that such a move would be a "gross betrayal of our democracy and trust".

In her piece, May stated, "We want to leave with a good deal and we are confident we can reach one."

As before, May was faced with objections from those within her own Tory ranks. Nick Boles - a former minister and Conservative who was part of the "Remain" faction that eschewed Brexit - said that he could no longer the Chequers exit strategy. He warned that the U.K was facing "the humiliation of a deal dictated by Brussels." Boles, instead, advocated for the U.K to become part of the European Economic Area for three years -- a time horizon lengthier and more flexible than the two-year exit schedule being advanced by May. His view was that more time was needed to negotiate a solid trade deal with the EU.

In late October 2018, the United Kingdom was bracing for mass protests as demonstrators demanded a new Brexit vote.

By November 2018, even as Prime Minister May was championing the Chequers Brexit plan, there was significant skepticism that it would have support in parliament. In fact, more than one cabinet minister was expressing doubts about it, with some warning that Prime Minister May's continued pursuit of the Chequers plan as a "self-harming" move by the head of government.

Writing a column in the Daily Telegraph, Boris Johnson characterized the prime minister's plan as "a recipe for continued strife, both in the Tory Party and the country." Former cabinet minister John Whittingdale warned that May's viability as prime minister would be in doubt if parliament failed to endorse her plan. In an interview with BBC Radio, he said, "I think if the PM's Brexit plan doesn't get through parliament, I think it's quite difficult to see how the prime minister can continue because she has staked her credibility."

For her part, though, Prime Minister May appeared dogged in her pursuit of finalizing a Brexit plan prior to an impending summit, expected to be held in Brussels, Belgium later in November 2018. From the point of view of the prime minister, the deal "delivers what people voted for."

By Nov. 14, 2018, Prime Minister May won the backing of senior cabinet ministers for a draft deal to exit the European Union. Speaking outside 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's residence, May said, "The collective decision of cabinet was that the government should agree the draft withdrawal agreement and the outline political declaration." She added, "I firmly believe that the draft withdrawal agreement is the best that could be negotiated."

That hurdle cleared the way for the prime minister to try to procure approval from parliament.

To that end, Prime Minister May would need approximately 320 votes of 650-seat parliament where she commands a minority government supported by Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). But May's agreement included a provision that would prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. May's DUP allies were not likely to embrace this element.

May would not be helped by the opposition Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who described the prime minister's Brexit plan to be a "botched deal."

On Nov. 15, 2018, Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab announced his resignation. Via the social media outlet, Twitter, Raab said, "Today, I have resigned as Brexit Secretary. I cannot in good conscience support the terms proposed for our deal with the EU. Here is my letter to the PM explaining my reasons, and my enduring respect for her."

Pensions Secretary Esther McVey also quit over the prime minister's Brexit agreement.

With Raab gone, the prime minister was apparently looking to Minister of Environment Michael Gove to make him the new Brexit secretary. But reports from BBC News indicated that Gove had rejected the offer because he would not be allowed to make changes to the deal.

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It should be noted that junior health minister, Stephen Barclay, was soon appointed as the new Brexit secretary; however, the portfolio was downgraded.

Via Twitter, Barclay said, "We now need to keep up the momentum to finalize the Withdrawal Agreement and outline political declaration, and deliver a Brexit that works for the whole UK."

Despite rejecting the offer to become Brexit Secretary, Environment Minister Gove offered Prime Minister May some support by remaining in the cabinet and stating in no uncertain terms that he had confidence in the prime minister's leadership. In response to questions from journalists on this issue, he replied, "I absolutely do."

Trade minister Liam Fox also boosted Prime Minister May by making clear his support for her.

Support did not extend across party lines. Labour leader Corbyn told May, "The government simply cannot put to parliament this half-baked deal that both the Brexit secretary and his predecessor have rejected." Liberal Democrat leader, Sir Vince Cable, mused that the prime minister was "in denial," and took the opportunity to extrapolate that May had "rightly conceded that no Brexit is the real alternative."

Even in the face of criticism and a crumbling government, May remained defiant. From 10 Downing Street, she declared, "I believe with every fibre of my being that the course I have set out is the right one for our country and all our people." She also asserted: "Leadership is about taking the right decisions, not the easy ones."

By December 2018, Prime Minister May's Brexit deal was facing failure by a significant margin in parliament, with dozens of Conservative (Tory) members of parliament set to join the Welsh Plaid Cymru, Northern Ireland's DUP, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, and the Scottish National Party, in voting down the deal.

With the various opposition parties were expected to reject the proposal, rejection by the DUP and several Tories would put a period to the Brexit deal. Their opposition was largely focused on the proposal for Northern Ireland to have a customs arrangement with the European Union, if the two sides could not come to an agreement that would prevent the establishment of a visible Northern Ireland border. The prospect of new regulatory barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, as well as the continued influence of the European Union were considered objectionable.

Regardless, with the failure of the Brexit deal vote looming, Prime Minister May canceled the vote in parliament scheduled for Dec. 11, 2018. But as before, May continued to champion the deal saying, "It is the right deal for Britain. I am determined to do all I can to secure the reassurances this House requires, to get this deal over the line and deliver for the British people."

Prime Minister May said she would return to Brussels to try to negotiate changes with the EU that might be more palatable to her party members at home. But it was difficult to see if that effort would be successful since European Council President Donald Tusk made clear that the other EU countries would not "renegotiate the deal."

At home, Prime Minister May's decision raised the ire of key opposition leaders. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, said May had "lost control of events" and urged her to stand down.

Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable was even more excoriating, as he asserted, "With the fiasco today, the government has really lost all authority. I and my colleagues will fully support the leader of the opposition if he now proceeds to a no confidence vote as duty surely calls."

But Corbyn and the Labour Party were not indicating they would immediately move forward by tabling a no confidence vote against May and her government. Instead, a Labour Party spokesperson said: "We will put down a motion of no confidence when we judge it most likely to be successful."

Special Brexit Report:

UK PM May steps down amidst Brexit chaos; leadership contest commences with pro-Brexit Johnson as the favorite to become the next PM

Summary

On June 7, 2019, as scheduled, Theresa May stepped down as prime minister of the United Kingdom. May was exiting from leadership with the core goals of her government unfulfilled -- to lead the United Kingdom out of the EU and unify the country. All attention would now be on the leadership contest within the Conservative Party.

That new prime minister would be tasked with doing what May failed to do -- deliver the country out of the EU. The question was whether the U.K. would leave with a deal or in a "no deal" hard landing scenario by the newest deadline of Oct. 31, 2019.

Background

With Brexit set to be finalized in 2019, intense negotiations have been in effect to set the conditions for the United Kingdom to disentangle itself from the European Union.

Going back to mid-2016, in the aftermath of the "Brexit" vote that heralded the exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union, then-Prime Minister David Cameron said that he would be stepping down as prime minister. With his political capital expended, and with his legacy tainted with the distinction of being the prime minister under whose stewardship the United Kingdom left the European Union, Cameron resigned as the head of government.

Cameron said he would stay on as prime minister for three months and would step down ahead of the Conservative party's conference. In a national address, he said, "I love this country and feel honored to have served it. Will of British people must be respected."

He continued, "The British people have spoken....This was not a decision taken lightly. There can be no doubt about the result." He urged new leadership, saying, "I will reassure the markets that British economy is strong. This will require strong leadership. I've been proud to be prime minister for six years."

By July 13, 2016, David Cameron formally stepped down as prime minister, and after a meeting with Queen Elizabeth II, the UK's head of state, May became the new head of government and the second female to hold that post since Margaret Thatcher.

In September 2016, Cameron further announced that he would be resigning from his position as an elected Member of Parliament. Cameron said that he would step down from his role as the elected representative of his Oxfordshire constituency, and allow someone else to take on that role. He explained that his presence as a "back bencher" in parliament was something of a distraction. A by-election would be called to fill his seat.

In October 2016, the new prime minister, Theresa May, announced that her country would trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and begin the formal process of her country withdrawing from the European Union. May also foreclosed the notion of an early general election, noting that such a course would only augur instability in the UK. Instead, May said that she would advance the repeal the 1972 European Communities Act which took the United Kingdom into the European Common Market, now known as the European Union. She said in an interview with the media, "We will introduce, in the next Queen's speech, a Great Repeal Bill that will remove the European Communities Act from the statute book." The act would become effective upon the formal exit of the UK from the European Union.

On March 29, 2017, United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May formally began the process known colloquially as "Brexit" of withdrawing the United Kingdom from the United Kingdom.

In keeping with Article 50 of the European Union's Lisbon Treaty, Prime Minister May notified European Union Council President Donald Tusk via a hand-delivered letter that her country would exit the European bloc after decades of participation dating back to 1973.

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In a speech to parliament, she declared, "The United Kingdom is leaving the European Union." She added, "This is an historic moment from which there can be no turning back."

A difficult process lasting up to two years was in the offing whereby the United Kingdom would seek to negotiate the terms of its exit from the European Union. Those negotiations would largely center on the United Kingdom's relations with the European Union with regard to trade and security.

Business-friendly Brexit framework in place but at risk

With Brexit set to be finalized in 2019, intense negotiations went into effect in 2017 to set the conditions for the United Kingdom to disentangle itself from the European Union.

By December 2017, the two sides had reached some concurrence on a framework that would ensure an orderly exit by the United Kingdom from the European bloc. The framework also outlined the terms of future trade ties.

United Kingdom Prime Minister May hailed the achievement, saying, "I very much welcome the prospect of moving ahead." The head of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, declared: "I believe we have now made the breakthrough we needed."

A continuing wrinkle would be the matter of disconnecting the British mainland from European Union regulations while maintaining those rules for Northern Ireland. But for European negotiators, that was a problem for the United Kingdom to sort out.

The Brexit transition would commence on March 29, 2019, when the United Kingdom would leave the European Union but would ensue over a phased basis of two years. This process was thus dubbed "the long divorce."

By mid-2018, had forged a business-friendly strategy to enact the Brexit transition in a manner intended to yield the least amount of economic upheaval for the United Kingdom. The plan was formulated after years of discussion and advanced at a gathering of government at the country residence of the prime minister at Chequers.

The agreement won the support of most of Prime Minister May's government. But the Brexit strategy was in crisis following an address to parliament by Prime Minister May about the plan to exit the European Union.

At the center of the Chequers proposal was a strategy that would allow the U.K. to depart the European bloc while adhering to the Brexit commitments on borders, finances, and jurisprudence, but at the same time, retain a stable economy with as little turbulence as possible. Indeed, the plan was deemed to

The plan appeared to have raised the ire of Conservative members of parliament, spurring the resignations of at least three within hours of one another. Among them was Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

While the details of their objections were not fully aired, the belief was that the continuing influence by the European Union in areas like taxes, jurisprudence, and migration were regarded as deal-breakers of sorts. Indeed, Johnson soon released a letter detailing his objections, in which he explained that May's exit strategy would cause the United Kingdom to become a colony to the European Union. Of particular concern to Johnson were continued close trading ties between the two sides.

The general consensus was that either the prime minister would have to abandon her Brexit plan, or Conservative members of parliament would abandon her.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn cast the resignations of the cabinet ministers as escapees abandoning a "sinking ship," and declared: "The Chequers compromise took two years to reach and two days to unravel. We have a crisis in government... it is clear this government cannot secure a good deal for Britain."

By the end of August 2018, Prime Minister May was holding fast to her Chequers Brexit plan, which would enable a soft exit from the EU bloc, but without additional compromise to the EU, which was sure to enrage hardline eurosceptic factions at home.

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In an opinion editorial in the Sunday Telegraph, the prime minister made clear that she would "not be pushed" into compromises on her Brexit proposal that were not in the "national interest." At the same time, she said she would not give into a call for a second "re-run" referendum on Brexit. She indicated that such a move would be a "gross betrayal of our democracy and trust".

In her piece, May stated, "We want to leave with a good deal and we are confident we can reach one."

As before, May was faced with objections from those within her own Tory ranks. Nick Boles - a former minister and Conservative who was part of the "Remain" faction that eschewed Brexit - said that he could no longer the Chequers exit strategy. He warned that the U.K was facing "the humiliation of a deal dictated by Brussels." Boles, instead, advocated for the U.K to become part of the European Economic Area for three years -- a time horizon lengthier and more flexible than the two-year exit schedule being advanced by May. His view was that more time was needed to negotiate a solid trade deal with the EU.

In late October 2018, the United Kingdom was bracing for mass protests as demonstrators demanded a new Brexit vote.

By November 2018, even as Prime Minister May was championing the Chequers Brexit plan, there was significant skepticism that it would have support in parliament. In fact, more than one cabinet minister was expressing doubts about it, with some warning that Prime Minister May's continued pursuit of the Chequers plan as a "self-harming" move by the head of government.

Writing a column in the Daily Telegraph, Boris Johnson characterized the prime minister's plan as "a recipe for continued strife, both in the Tory Party and the country." Former cabinet minister John Whittingdale warned that May's viability as prime minister would be in doubt if parliament failed to endorse her plan. In an interview with BBC Radio, he said, "I think if the PM's Brexit plan doesn't get through parliament, I think it's quite difficult to see how the prime minister can continue because she has staked her credibility."

For her part, though, Prime Minister May appeared dogged in her pursuit of finalizing a Brexit plan prior to an impending summit, expected to be held in Brussels, Belgium later in November 2018. From the point of view of the prime minister, the deal "delivers what people voted for."

By Nov. 14, 2018, Prime Minister May won the backing of senior cabinet ministers for a draft deal to exit the European Union. Speaking outside 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's residence, May said, "The collective decision of cabinet was that the government should agree to the draft withdrawal agreement and the outline political declaration." She added, "I firmly believe that the draft withdrawal agreement is the best that could be negotiated."

That hurdle cleared the way for the prime minister to try to procure approval from parliament.

To that end, Prime Minister May would need approximately 320 votes of 650-seat parliament where she commands a minority government supported by Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). But May's agreement included a provision that would prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. May's DUP allies were not likely to embrace this element.

May would not be helped by the opposition Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who described the prime minister's Brexit plan to be a "botched deal."

On Nov. 15, 2018, Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab announced his resignation. Via the social media outlet, Twitter, Raab said, "Today, I have resigned as Brexit Secretary. I cannot in good conscience support the terms proposed for our deal with the EU. Here is my letter to the PM explaining my reasons, and my enduring respect for her."

Pensions Secretary Esther McVey also quit over the prime minister's Brexit agreement.

With Raab gone, the prime minister was apparently looking to Minister of Environment Michael Gove to make him the new Brexit secretary. But reports from BBC News indicated that Gove had rejected the offer because he would not be allowed to make changes to the deal.

It should be noted that junior health minister, Stephen Barclay, was soon appointed as the new Brexit secretary; however, the portfolio was downgraded.

Via Twitter, Barclay said, "We now need to keep up the momentum to finalize the Withdrawal Agreement and outline political declaration, and deliver a Brexit that works for the whole UK."

Despite rejecting the offer to become Brexit Secretary, Environment Minister Gove offered Prime Minister May some support by remaining in the cabinet and stating in no uncertain terms that he had confidence in the prime minister's leadership. In response to questions from journalists on this issue, he replied, "I absolutely do."

Trade minister Liam Fox also boosted Prime Minister May by making clear his support for her.

Support did not extend across party lines. Labour leader Corbyn told May, "The government simply cannot put to parliament this half-baked deal that both the Brexit secretary and his predecessor have rejected." Liberal Democrat leader, Sir Vince Cable, mused that the prime minister was "in denial," and took the opportunity to extrapolate that May had "rightly conceded that no Brexit is the real alternative."

Even in the face of criticism and a crumbling government, May remained defiant. From 10 Downing Street, she declared, "I believe with every fibre of my being that the course I have set out is the right one for our country and all our people." She also asserted: "Leadership is about taking the right decisions, not the easy ones."

In December 2018, Prime Minister May's Brexit deal was facing failure by a significant margin in parliament, with dozens of Conservative (Tory) members of parliament set to join the Welsh Plaid Cymru, Northern Ireland's DUP, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, and the Scottish National Party, in voting down the deal.

With the various opposition parties were expected to reject the proposal, rejection by the DUP and several Tories would put a period to the Brexit deal. Their opposition was largely focused on the proposal for Northern Ireland to have a customs arrangement with the European Union if the two sides could not come to an agreement that would prevent the establishment of a visible Northern Ireland border. The prospect of new regulatory barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, as well as the continued influence of the European Union were considered objectionable.

Regardless, with the failure of the Brexit deal vote looming, Prime Minister May canceled the vote in parliament scheduled for Dec. 11, 2018. But as before, May continued to champion the deal saying, "It is the right deal for Britain. I am determined to do all I can to secure the reassurances this House requires, to get this deal over the line and deliver for the British people."

Prime Minister May said she would return to Brussels to try to negotiate changes with the EU that might be more palatable to her party members at home. But it was difficult to see if that effort would be successful since European Council President Donald Tusk made clear that the other EU countries would not "renegotiate the deal."

At home, Prime Minister May's decision raised the ire of key opposition leaders. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, said May had "lost control of events" and urged her to stand down.

Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable was even more excoriating, as he asserted, "With the fiasco today, the government has really lost all authority. I and my colleagues will fully support the leader of the opposition if he now proceeds to a no-confidence vote as duty surely calls."

But Corbyn and the Labour Party were not indicating they would immediately move forward by tabling a no-confidence vote against May and her government. Instead, a Labour Party spokesperson said: "We will put down a motion of no confidence when we judge it most likely to be successful."

With headwinds against her, Prime Minister May was subject to a leadership challenge from within her own Conservative Party. Her apparent failures on Brexit led to hardline Tories wanting to see her removed as party leader, and thus, as prime minister.

May, however, survived that challenge, winning the support of 200 Tories in the party's 317-seat conference within parliament; 117 voted against her. There was to be no new leadership challenge for another year, and as such, pending a confidence vote in the full parliament, May was set to remain in place as the United Kingdom's head of government for the immediate future.

Empowered by this show of support, she declared, "We now have to get on with the job of delivering Brexit for the British people and building a better future for this country."

May, nonetheless, emphasized that she intended to step down as prime minister prior to the next general election set for 2022. It was unclear if she could command a majority in parliament until that time. Indeed, a tough test for her would be the March 29, 2019 deadline by which she would require parliamentary ratification for a draft Brexit deal, with the actual exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union scheduled for March 29, 2019. To exit the EU without a clear agreement in place would risk severe disruption to the country.

PM May's Brexit deal crumbles leaving fears of a "no deal" hard landing for the U.K.

Prime Minister May's Brexit deal came to a head in mid-January 2019 as it faced ratification in parliament. The prime minister's Brexit strategy went down to crushing defeat with 432 members of parliament voting against her deal and only 202 members of parliament voting for it.

In fact, more than 100 of Conservatives (Tories) from her own part joined with the opposition to kill the deal. As such, they outperformed the record set in 1924 when a 166-vote defeat margin was set. In this way, the Brexit deal vote was the worst political defeat in modern British history.

Addressing parliament after the vote, May declared, "It is clear that the House does not support this deal, but tonight's vote tells us nothing about what it does support." She added that there was little indication if parliament wished "to honor the decision the British people took in a referendum parliament decided to hold."

May appeared to carry some notion that aspects of her Brexit deal could still form the basis of an accord with the European Union. But many within her own party, including Boris Johnson, emphatically disagreed, saying in no uncertain terms: "This deal is dead."

Meanwhile, there was action on the domestic political field. With an eye targeting a clearly weakened prime minister, opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn called a vote of no confidence in May's government. But even after the humiliating defeat of her Brexit deal, all expectations were that May would manage to cobble together sufficient votes to stave off the detractors hungry to bring down her government. Indeed, to that end, May survived the no-confidence motion and was able to hold on as the head of government although the extent of her political power was expected to be limited.

May's call for working with opposition parties to craft a new agreement with Brussels was likewise being dismissed. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn said,

"After two years of failed negotiations, the House of Commons has delivered its verdict on her Brexit deal, and that verdict is absolutely decisive. Her governing principle of delay and denial has reached the end of the line."

Given its failure to bring down May's government, the opposition Labour Party signaled that its next move would be to shift to lobbying for a new referendum.

With no clear sense of the path forward, the Brexit vote result raised anxieties about a tumultuous "no deal" exit from the European Union. A "no deal" exit would mean a hard landing and was certain to cause turmoil not only in the United Kingdom but quite possibly cause catastrophic shocks across the global marketplace.

U.K. PM May's wins mandate to return to Brexit negotiations but EU stands firm

With a deadline looming on March 29, 2019, for the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, there was little hope that a replacement agreement could easily be forged. According to a spokesperson for the Labour Party, it was more likely that the United Kingdom would have to request that the European Union delay the departure date

required under the Article 50 withdrawal notice. To that end, there were indications that Labour would back such a move.

Meanwhile, there was an effort afoot to try to find some concurrence on a new vision forward, that would yet include a turbulence-free end to the Brexit drama. Michael Barnier, the European Union chief negotiator issued the following warning: "There appears to be a majority in the Commons to oppose a no-deal but opposing a no-deal will not stop a no-deal from happening at the end of March. To stop 'no deal', a positive majority for another solution will need to emerge."

Prime Minister May's effort to find a soft landing was on life support as the House of Commons handed her a mandate to return to Brussels and try to renegotiate a Brexit accommodation that would satisfy her critics at home. Specifically, members of parliament voted in late January 2019 to send May back Brussels to secure the removal of the Irish border "backstop" clause and replace it with "alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border."

At issue here was the European Union's interest in preserving the Irish peace process, but which would also entail the maintenance of European bloc trade rules in order to continue to free flow of commerce across the Irish border. While this element might make good commercial sense, it was considered objectionable by nationalists and other pro-Brexit factions in the U.K.

Prime Minister May indicated that she would demand a change to the Irish border backstop clause. But May's interest in negotiating a new deal with the European Union was clearly messaging aimed at her domestic audience and not balanced by reality in Europe.

Philippe Lamberts, a member of the European Parliament's six-member Brexit steering group, disparaged the U.K.'s stance on the backstop issue saying, "Saying you're against the backstop is like saying you're against bad weather. You might not like it, but you can't change it."

At the broader level, the European Union was signaling that there would be no further renegotiation. As well, the European Union Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker made clear that the vote in the United Kingdom's parliament served only to set the path for a "disorderly withdrawal." Juncker added that preparations should be made for a no-deal Brexit.

Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney characterized the U.K. landscape as "an extraordinary situation when a prime minister and a government negotiates a deal and then goes back and during the ratification process votes against their own deal." In an interview with RTE, he offered this scathing commentary: "That's like saying in a negotiation, 'Well either you give me what I want or I'm jumping out of the window.'"

Donald Tusk, the chairman of European Union leaders, suggested the United Kingdom should reverse Brexit altogether. Via Twitter, he said, "If a deal is impossible, and no one wants no deal, then who will finally have the courage to say what the only positive solution is?" Tusk later removed all doubt from the EU's position saying via Twitter, "My message to PM @theresa_may: The EU position is clear and consistent. The Withdrawal Agreement is not open for renegotiation."

U.K. PM May tries to buy time; Labour pushes back

In the aftermath of a meeting on Feb. 8, 2019, between United Kingdom (U.K.) Prime Minister Theresa May and European Union (EU) officials regarding an orderly exit from the European Union, there was no immediate breakthrough forged.

EU Council President Donald Tusk said via Twitter, "Still no breakthrough in sight. Talks will continue." Prime Minister May appeared to bristle from this assessment but sources inside Tusk's circle said that he simply responded by noting, that the "truth hurts."

With the EU standing firm against changes to the Brexit schedule and plan, U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May was still promising that she would negotiate a deal to please opponents of the controversial Northern Irish backstop by limiting its applicability. To be clear -- these opponents in parliament have rejected May's plan, believing that it

would indefinitely link the U.K. to EU rules and thus limit the U.K.'s sovereignty. Others including unionists have been concerned that Northern Ireland would exist under a different system to the rest of the country.

For her part, with time running out on an orderly path forward, the only concrete promises Prime Minister May could offer were a series of non-binding votes in parliament through the end of February 2019 on possible Brexit alternatives.

The Labour Party was accusing May and the Tories of running out the clock and setting the country on a course towards a "no deal" exit.

Sir Keir Starmer, Labour's shadow Brexit secretary, said Prime Minister May was "pretending to make progress" on the Irish backstop issue while her true intention was to wait until the last possible moment -- after the European Council summit in May 2019 and just before the scheduled Brexit in late March 2019 -- thus forcing members of parliament into a "binary choice" between May's deal or no deal. In an interview with The Sunday Times, Starmer said, "We can't allow that to happen." As such, Labour was pushing for a final "meaningful" vote on whether to approve or reject the Brexit by the end of February 2019.

Labour was joined by the Liberal Democrats in opposing such a course with that party's leader, Sir Vince Cable, saying that a delayed final vote on the Brexit deal was "worse than irresponsible."

It should be noted that Labour was also advancing its own Brexit plan, which provides for the U.K. to remain in a customs union with the EU. That plan, Labour has argued, would likely get support from a majority in parliament.

Following negotiations with the May on Feb. 8, 2019, EU officials were urging the prime minister to take advantage of the moves being made by the Labour opposition to end the impasse over the terms of the U.K.'s EU exit. The EU officials were signaling clearly that Labour's proposals for a permanent EU-U.K. customs union could be a way to end the deadlock on the Irish border "backstop" controversy.

Last chance for a Brexit deal

In the last week of February 2019, with only five weeks left before the U.K. was set to leave the EU, Prime Minister May was facing a revolt within her own party if she failed to delay the country's exit from the European bloc. Conservative members of parliament who had given May repeated chances to try to find a resolution to the Brexit conundrum had lost patience.

Having voted repeatedly to support May in negotiating a Brexit solution with no results delivered, and with May threatening a "no deal" exit, the prime minister had lost the trust of her party. Indeed, three members of her cabinet resigned in protest. Although May's threat of a "no deal" exit was largely understood as a negotiating tactic - it was being used against her own parliament, with ramification for the British people whose livelihoods were now being used as pawns. As such, without a promise of a Brexit delay, or, a viable option on the table on Feb. 27, 2019, May was in danger of losing a vote on that day. That vote was intended to give her more negotiating space but it seemed that she had exhausted the patience of many within her own party.

But as before, May weathered the storm and won support in parliament for a plan that would give members of parliament the opportunity to vote to stop a "no deal" Brexit and extend the deadline to withdraw from the EU, should an agreement not be reached.

The shift from the prime minister came due to pressure from her own party as cabinet ministers led by Pensions Secretary Amber Rudd warned that if the prime minister did not foreclose a "no deal" departure, they would vote against her — essentially voting in favor of a plan to remove Brexit policy from her quarters. It was a radical move aimed at making clear to the prime minister that they would effectively "defang" her and curtail her powers as the head of government.

To be clear: It seemed increasingly possible that a "no-deal" Brexit could be avoided, with more time being given to forge a possible "soft landing" to ease the transition. Action could be taken in attempting to extend Article 50, thus delaying the exit from the EU and allowing for more time to reach an agreement.

On March 11, 2019, Prime Minister May had forged an agreement to revise the terms of the U.K.'s withdrawal from the EU. Central to the deal were three documents intended to legally ensure that the U.K. would not be beholden to the backstop arrangement (and subject to EU customs protocols) on an indefinite basis. Among these documents was a unilateral declaration on untangling the U.K. from the backstop.

The deal was struck after Prime Minister May met with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker for just over two hours; the two leaders emerged after and at a joint press conference to announce the plan. Juncker said, "Let's bring the U.K.'s withdrawal to an orderly end. We owe it to history." He added, "The choice is clear: it is this deal, or Brexit may not happen at all."

May addressed her country, and specifically the U.K. parliament, as she declared, "Now is the time to come together, to back this improved Brexit deal, and to deliver on the instruction of the British people."

It was not clear that the terms of the new deal would be sufficient to gain majority support in parliament where her own Conservative Party remained terribly divided on the issue. The blueprint was expected to face scrutiny from skeptical members of parliament, along with a formal legal assessment, ahead of a vote scheduled for March 12, 2019. Should parliament reject the deal in a vote on March 12, 2019, then there would be a second vote in the House of Commons to ratify a "no deal" exit from the EU. If that path was rejected by members of parliament, then there would be a third vote — this time to ratify a delay in the U.K.'s exit from the EU.

In mid-March 2019, the parliament of the U.K. held a series of key votes on Brexit. Among the most significant was another humiliating defeat for President May's proposed compromise Brexit deal, which she lost by 149 votes. Subsequently, the U.K. parliament voted against a no deal withdrawal from the EU with a final vote of 321-278.

With those votes out of the way, parliament took another vote -- this time on the issue of asking the EU for a delay on Article 50, which was passed favorably. The verdict based on these vote results was that the U.K. was in favor of an exit from the EU with some kind of deal in place -- just not the one crafted by the prime minister.

Meanwhile, although there was concurrence on requesting an extension on the Brexit deadline, the move would still have to be approved by all 27 EU member states and could not be a foundation for further negotiations with the EU.

For her part, May was taking a tactical approach in her delay strategy to force another vote on her Brexit deal. Specifically, she was requesting a short extension until June 30, 2019 -- but only if parliament passed her Brexit proposal by March 20, 2019 -- nine days ahead of the official exit deadline.

Before parliament, the prime minister declared, "If you don't like my deal, and you don't want to leave without a deal, then Parliament "needs to face up to the consequences of the decisions it has taken."

Prime Minister May's plan to force another vote within parliament on her Brexit deal was thwarted in the third week of March 2019 due to an intervention from the speaker of parliament. At issue was Speaker John Bercow's ruling that May's deal had to be "substantially different " to be voted on again by parliament. Bercow noted that the government still had the option to recraft its proposal. It was also possible that the parliament could vote to overrule him. Nevertheless, Prime Minister May's next move was to ask the EU to delay Brexit by at least three months.

The EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, noted that an extension would be useful if it helped May's deal to be ratified by the House of Commons. Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney warned that a detailed plan would have to be offered on how May intended to get her deal approved by parliament before she could secure the EU's approval for an extension. The office for French President Emmanuel Macron was more forceful and warned France would veto any request for a Brexit delay if there was no feasible exit strategy presented out of the existing

conundrum. President Macron himself said, "It is up to the British to sort out their own internal contradictions. As for us, we don't have any."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that time was of the essence, saying: "I will fight until the last minute of the time to March 29 for an orderly exit. We haven't got a lot of time for that."

Following negotiations with European counterparts in Brussels, an agreement was forged to give Prime Minister May a two-week reprieve - until April 12, 2019 — upon which the United Kingdom's would exit the EU. It would be up to May to persuade members of parliament to support the withdrawal arrangement she forged with the European bloc. According to reports, Prime Minister May had sought a longer extension — until June 30, 2019 — while some European leaders had their eye on a May 22, 2019, date (the eve of EU parliamentary elections). But May's failure to convince them that she could actually win a vote in parliament, along with pressure from French President Macron that the United Kingdom exit the union with or without a deal by May 7, 2019, resulted in the decision to offer a two-week reprieve.

The result was May would have until April 12, 2019, to either get her country behind a new withdrawal agreement or take the "no deal" plunge. If she was able to secure parliamentary support, then the United Kingdom would leave the EU on May 22, 2019, in an orderly manner, with an agreement forged with the European bloc. Without an exit on that day, then the United Kingdom would be compelled to participate in European parliamentary elections. The final exit date under those conditions would be June 30, 2019 — ahead of the convening of the new EU parliament.

In late March 2019, Prime Minister May told members of parliament from her own Conservative Party that she would resign as leader, pending parliament's approval of her Brexit deal, which would usher the United Kingdom out of the EU while facilitating discussions on a future trade agreement. May appeared to be trying to coax Conservatives to back her deal in exchange for her resignation. The move failed, however, as on March 29, 2019 - the day the United Kingdom was scheduled to leave the EU, members of parliament rejected May's plan 344 votes to 286. It was a humiliating defeat for May who had offered up her own resignation and was presented instead by another defeat in parliament over her Brexit plan.

Political implications over May's impotence aside, the move meant that the country was no longer in a position to delay Brexit until May 22, 2019, and leave with an agreement in hand. The loss for the prime minister emboldened Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who said "this deal now has to change" or the prime minister would have to step down. For her part, Prime Minister May said, "I fear we are reaching the limits of this process in this House". She also added that the country would have to find "an alternative way forward." It was not clear what that path would involve although May would have until April 12, 2019, to try to secure a longer delay from the EU.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, European Council President Donald Tusk tweeted: "In view of the rejection of the Withdrawal Agreement by the House of Commons, I have decided to call a European Council on 10 April."

In the meantime, May would have to deal with the fact that she would not be helped by the Democratic Unionist Party, which was increasingly concerned about the Irish backstop, which could create a de facto split between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Nigel Dodds of the DUP said in an interview with BBC News, "I would stay in the European Union and remain, rather than risk Northern Ireland's position. That's how strongly I feel about the Union."

The Brexit Path Forward

At the start of April 2019, the reality was that the United Kingdom was at high risk of a "no deal" exit from the EU - a scenario guaranteed to carry with it no shortage of tumult and turmoil. Members of the Conservative party appeared to be moving towards this conclusion, regardless of the likely damage. But this was not the feeling of everyone in parliament, although it was unclear if there was enough consensus in the body to force the British electorate to return to the voting booth. James Cleverly, the deputy chair of the Conservative Party, said that there was no plan for a fresh election. However, Tom Watson, the deputy leader of the Labour Party, indicated that his party was, in

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fact, getting prepared for an election. Furthermore, Emily Thornberry, a spokesperson for the opposition party on matters of foreign affairs, indicated that a vote of no confidence in May's government was in the offing. She said, "We don't know if she is going to remain prime minister, if we are going to get somebody else, who that other person is going to be - it is a mess."

Elections aside, the prime minister was faced with the reality that she would have to do something to ensure that the United Kingdom could exit the EU with a deal, as she noted that she had reached out to Labour with that goal in mind. Explaining her outreach to Labour, May said via a statement that after doing "everything" in her power" to persuade her party and its Northern Ireland's DUP partners- to approve her deal, she had been compelled "to take a new approach." She said, "We have no choice but to reach out across the House of Commons." For some members of May's Conservative Party, Prime Minister May's outreach to Labour was viewed as undesirable. The Commons Leader, Andrea Leadsom, went so far as to say that "no deal" would be preferable to canceling Brexit. Leadsom also condemned the notion of a fresh Brexit referendum, saying, "It is appalling to consider another referendum"

For its part, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was reported to be taking a "wait and see" approach although he was under pressure from his party not to agree to anything with the prime minister without the party's concurrence. Furthermore, shadow business secretary, Rebecca Long-Bailey, noted that if the country edged towards a "no deal" exit, then Labour would have to consider "very, very strongly" voting to cancel Brexit.

In an interview with BBC News, Long-Bailey said that Labour would "keep all options in play to keep no deal off the table." All options included a vote on revoking Article 50 - the legal provision authorizing the United Kingdom's exit from the EU. The reality was that the United Kingdom was now on track to leave the European Union on April 12, 2019, and, without a deal in hand, Prime Minister May indicated that she would seek an extension from Brussels to delay Brexit until the end of June 2019. As before, there were differing views from various EU member states as to whether this should be allowed.

Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, pre-empted May's request while also seeking to mitigate the concerns of EU states by proposing a broad "flexextension" until April 2020 for the United Kingdom. But such a move would require that the United Kingdom participate in EU elections set to take place in May 2019. The country's participation in that exercise has been considered to be highly unpalatable for pro-Brexit conservatives.

Labor abandons Brexit talks and PM May's government edges towards collapse

On May 17, 2019, the Labour Party of the United Kingdom (U.K) walked away from negotiations with the government of Prime Minister Theresa May, which had been aimed at reaching a Brexit deal.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn informing Prime Minister May that the Brexit talks, which had been ongoing for more than six weeks, had "gone as far as they can" given the intractability of her positions and the inherent instability of her government. Corbyn wrote in a letter, "We have been unable to bridge important policy gaps between us." He added, "Even more crucially, the increasing weakness and instability of your government means there cannot be confidence in securing whatever might be agreed between us."

Corbyn made clear that the Labour Party would oppose May's deal in parliament. At issue was an impending vote on May's exit strategy, which was agreed upon with the European Union in 2018 but which was already rejected by British members of parliament three times. But May was bringing the Withdrawal Agreement Bill once again in early June 2019 in the hopes that a fourth vote would end in approval. It was difficult to see how that would transpire with the opposition Labour Party making clear it would be voting against the deal. Indeed, in remarks to reporters, Corbyn foreclosed the notion that any part of a Brexit deal could be ratified by the end of July.

Prime Minister May was nonetheless planning to go forward with the June vote. She said, "When we come to bring the legislation forward we will think carefully about ... the outcome of these talks, we will also consider whether we have some votes to see if the ideas that have come through command a majority in the House of Commons."

The failure of the Brexit negotiations came after Prime Minister May set forth a timetable for her to step down from her post as head of government in June 2019.

Boris Johnson, the most well-known pro-Brexit politician in the U.K. telegraphed that he would be a candidate to replace May as the new Conservative leader. Polling data indicated that he very likely had the votes to achieve that end. As the leader of the Conservative Party, should he be successful, Johnson would then become the prime minister. It would then be his responsibility to lead the U.K. through the Brexit process.

Meanwhile, the clock was ticking with Oct. 31, 2019, being the new deadline for the U.K. to exit the European bloc.

May out as PM after failure to deliver Brexit setting the stage for a leadership contest

On May 24, 2019, United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May announced that she would resign as the leader of the Conservative Party, effective June 7, 2019. May ended her national address declaring in choked tones and tears that serving as prime minister had been "the honor of my life."

May would continue to serve as the head of government until a leadership contest could take place within the Conservative Party. Once a successor was selected, he/she would become the new prime minister of the country, given the fact that the Conservatives and their allies held a narrow majority in parliament.

The leadership contest within the Conservative Party would likely occur through July 2019 when Sir Vince Cable, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, was himself slated to step down. A new leader of that party would thus have to be selected.

The new Conservative leader and thus, the prime minister, would be charged with accomplishing what May failed to do -- deliver the country out of the EU. The question was whether the U.K. would leave with a deal or in a "no deal" hard landing scenario by the newest deadline of Oct. 31, 2019.

With Jeremy Corbyn under some fire for Labour's handling of its cooperation with May over Brexit, there was also speculation about his political future. The poor performance of the Labour Party in European Union elections would likely place additional pressure on Corbyn and quite possibly force the party to take a stronger line on Brexit, maybe even with them standing squarely in the "remain" camp.

Indeed, it was not accidental that the Liberal Democrats had seen some success in the EU elections as left-leaning voters opted to rebuke Labour and go to the Liberal Democrats instead.

On June 7, 2019, as scheduled, Theresa May stepped down as prime minister of the United Kingdom. May was exiting from leadership with the core goals of her government unfulfilled -- to lead the United Kingdom out of the EU and unify the country.

May would continue to function as the head of government until a new leader could be selected. As stated by her spokesperson, "For the remainder of her time in office, she will be building on the domestic agenda that she has put at the heart of her premiership."

May's resignation set the stage for a leadership contest within the governing Conservative Party. Nominations were expected to commence on June 10, 2019, with the selection process completed by late July 2019.

Possible successors likely to enter the leadership contest included Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris Johnson. It should be noted that Johnson, who was viewed as the "favorite" to win the leadership contest, was championing a hard "no deal" Brexit, if necessary. By contrast, a surprise entrant to the contest was former U.K. Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah, who was campaigning as the "second referendum" candidate. (Note: Gyimah later decided to refrain from contesting the leadership election.)

Home Secretary Sajid Javid, who was also running to be the new leader of the Conservatives, appeared to concur with the view that a delay could very well be in the offing, although he didn't want one. Javid, who was against a

second referendum, a fresh general election, or revoking Article 50, supported May's negotiated EU exit, along with a technological solution to the Irish border issue. To this end, he said in an interview with the BBC: "What I would do is make a grand gesture to Ireland that we would cover all their costs -- the upfront costs, the running costs -- of a new digitized border."

Other candidates included Health Secretary Matt Hancock, former Leader of the Commons Andrea Leadsom, and Environment Secretary Michael Gove. Hancock's Brexit plan contained the assumption that "no deal" was unrealistic and a solution to the Irish border problem would have to be found. Leadsom's proposal, though, roughly covered a "managed exit" by the existing Oct. 31, 2019 deadline. Gove was warning that people should be prepared for a Brexit delay until 2020.

In a first round of the leadership contest on June 13, 2019, Boris Johnson secured the most support from Conservative members of parliament. Johnson won the support of 114 Tory lawmakers from a total of 313 votes.

His closest rivals were Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt, who garnered 43 votes. Environment Minister Michael Gove took 37 votes; former Brexit minister Dominic Raab carried 27 votes; Home Secretary Sajid Javid secured 23 votes. Matt Hancock and Rory Stewart won 20 votes and 19 votes respectively. Three candidates, Andrea Leadsom, Mark Harper and Esther McVey, were knocked out of contention.

Via Twitter, Johnson said, "Thank you to my friends and colleagues in the Conservative & Unionist Party for your support. I am delighted to win the first ballot, but we have a long way to go."

A second round of voting was set to be held on June 18, 2019, with further ballots expected on June 19, 2019, and June 20, 2019, leading to a final ballot of two candidates. Voting by mail would then ensue from among the wider Conservative Party membership to select the leader. That new Conservative leader would become the new prime minister, quite likely before the end of July 2019.

Johnson's main rival, Hunt, warned Conservatives against Johnson, saying that "the stakes have rarely been higher for our country." He also urged the following via Twitter: "This serious moment calls for a serious leader."

For his part, Johnson continued to emphasize his pro-Brexit credentials, promising that the country would be out of the European Union by Oct. 31, 2019, as scheduled. He said that the U.K. had to be prepared to depart without a deal, and that it was only in so doing that a no-deal Brexit could actually be prevented.

In an interview with the BBC on radio, Johnson said, "All those who say that we should delay ... I think they risk doing terminal damage to trust in politics. We have to get on and do this. We've got to be out by Oct. 31." He added, "If we have to get out on what is called no-deal terms, or WTO (World Trade Organization) terms, then it is our absolute responsibility to prepare for it. And it's by preparing for it that we will prevent that outcome."

On the second ballot, Johnson won 40 percent of the votes and 126 out of 313 votes, taking him to a third ballot. The real battle was for second place finisher as the ultimate alternative to Johnson. To that end, the likely prospects were Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Environment Secretary Michael Gove, International Development Secretary Rory Stewart, and Home Secretary Sajid Javid.

On the ensuing ballots, the leadership contest was whittled down, eliminating the rest of the field, most notably with Stewart, Javid, and then Gove removed from contention. With each ballot, Johnson was increasing his share of support from other members of parliament, working his way up to 160 affirmative votes in his favor.

Ultimately, Boris Johnson and Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt emerged as the only two candidates left in the race after the fifth ballot to lead the Conservative Party and become the new prime minister.

Johnson remained the favorite to win the Conservative leadership contest and become the new head of government, although the decision would be made by the grassroots membership of the Conservative Party via postal ballot. The winner was set to be announced during the week of July 22, 2019.

Boris Johnson becomes the new U.K. prime minister as fractures emerge within the opposition

With pro-Brexit United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson promising his country a divorce from the European Union with or without a transition agreement, there were indications that opposition parties were ready to bring down the government with a vote of no confidence. But those plans to topple the fledgling Johnson government were marred by fractures within the opposition ranks. In short, there was no consensus over how that path would be traversed, how that next government would be envisioned, and who would lead it.

Going back to July 23, 2019, the winner of the Conservative Party's leadership contest was announced with Boris Johnson, as expected, securing victory and thus becoming the new prime minister of the United Kingdom. Johnson garnered the votes of 92,000 members of the Conservative Party -- close to twice the tally for Foreign Secretary Hunt. This victory meant that Queen Elizabeth II, the reigning monarch of the U.K., officially called on Johnson at Buckingham Palace to become the new head of government. This would thus trigger the departure of Theresa May in that post.

The reality was that any new prime minister would have to confront the prevailing question of how to deal with the Irish border issue. At issue here was the European Union's interest in preserving the Irish peace process, but which would also entail the maintenance of European bloc trade rules in order to continue to free flow of commerce across the Irish border. While this element might make good commercial sense, it was considered objectionable by nationalists and other pro-Brexit factions in the U.K.

Johnson has, throughout, been very clear that his intent was for the U.K. to exit the EU by Oct. 31, 2019, with or without a deal. Meanwhile, there was very little likelihood that parliament in the U.K. would ratify a no-deal exit, raising questions as to how this would be accomplished in the first place. On the other side of the equation, the EU has insisted that the withdrawal agreement already negotiated with former Prime Minister Theresa May could not be re-negotiated. Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel emphasized this aspect when he said props to the vote within the Conservative Party: "If they choose Boris Johnson, he will have to deal with us on the agreement we have done with Theresa May."

But following his intra-party victory, Johnson was steadfast on the path forward as he declared, "We are going to get Brexit done on Oct. 31, and we are going to take advantage of all the opportunities it will bring in a new spirit of 'can do'. He added, "Like some slumbering giant, we are going to rise and ping off the guy-ropes of self-doubt and negativity."

It was to be seen if newly-inaugurated Prime Minister Johnson's promise to deliver Brexit would ensue with a new deal or without one -- and thus ensure a "hard landing" for the economy of the U.K.

In the first week of August 2019, the prospect of a "no deal" exit from the European Union increased when that body made clear that there was no basis for "meaningful discussions" over changing the terms of Theresa May's deal. Of particular significance was the fact there was no possibility of removing the Irish backstop.

At the heart of the Irish backstop issue was the provision preventing a hard border from being implemented between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Keeping the backstop in place would mean that some aspects of the European Union single market would remain in place. In this way, the United Kingdom would effectively be subject to the European Union customs union. For some Brexit hardliners, such a prospect was regarded as unacceptable.

United Kingdom Prime Minister Johnson attempted to flex his new muscle as head of government, as he pressured the European Union to "change its stance." But the European Commission made clear that there was no reason to return to the negotiating table since the agreement forged with Johnson's predecessor, May, was the "best possible deal," and changes to it would not be entertained.

The new prime minister was undaunted and continued to promise a "divorce" of sorts from the European Union by Oct. 31, 2019, and without a transition plan to ease the anticipated economic shockwaves.

With the ominous "no deal" Brexit looming, there was the possibility that members of parliament in the United Kingdom could bring down the Johnson government with a vote of no confidence. To that end, by August 2019, the opposition parties were launching their plans to topple the fledgling government of pro-Brexit Prime Minister Boris Johnson. While there was no shortage of will from rivals of Johnson to prevent him from fulfilling his "do or die" vow and withdrawing the United Kingdom from the European Union, there was also no consensus on how that might be accomplished.

The leftist leader of the Labor Party, Jeremy Corbyn, was calling of lawmakers across party lines to support a vote of no confidence in the Johnson government. The Corbyn proposal would see him then lead a "strictly time-limited temporary government" that would postpone Brexit and pave the way for fresh elections. Corbyn articulated his intent, declaring, "This government has no mandate for No Deal, and the 2016 EU referendum provided no mandate for No Deal." He continued, "I therefore intend to table a vote of no confidence at the earliest opportunity when we can be confident of success."

For his part, Prime Minister Johnson condemned Corbyn's call for a no confidence vote and an ensuing temporary government. A spokesperson for the prime minister's office said,

"Jeremy Corbyn believes that the people are the servants and politicians can cancel public votes they don't like."

Still, Corbyn's temporary government idea found resonance among his own party and was also supported by some of Prime Minister Johnson's own Conservative Party who were wary of a hard "no deal" landing for the country. In an interview with BBC News, Guto Bebb, a Conservative member of parliament, said, "A short-term Jeremy Corbyn government is less damaging than the generational damage that would be caused by a no-deal Brexit."

As well. Nicola Sturgeon, the leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), indicated that her party and SNP members of parliament would entertain all options to prevent Brexit from going forward. Accordingly, Sturgeon was not foreclosing the notion of backing Corbyn.

But Corbyn would not be helped by the Liberal Democrats, despite that party's anti-Brexit orientation. Jo Swinson, the head of the Liberal Democrats, railed against the notion of Corbyn leading a temporary "emergency" government. Swinson said, "We are facing a national crisis. We may need an emergency government to resolve it but if Jeremy Corbyn truly wants that to succeed, surely even he can see, he cannot lead it." Swinson was instead championing the idea for a veteran member of parliamentarian to lead a national unity government. That concept, however, was not expected to be well received by Corbyn.

The reality was that there would have to be some consensus among the opposition ranks to successfully defeat Johnson working majority in parliament of just one seat -- slim as it might be. The clear fractures within the anti-Brexit movement could, thus, make it very difficult for any of them to succeed against Johnson. Nevertheless, should there be success in bringing down the Johnson government via a successful no-confidence vote, there would be a 14-day window to allow a party with a majority in parliament to form a new government.

All eyes would be on parliament when members of House of Commons returned to the legislative chamber on Sept. 3, 2019 to take up the Brexit battle.

EU offers no leeway as deadline looms

Meanwhile, on the agenda was the G7 summit in France in late August 2019. Ahead of the G7 summit, European Council head, Donald Tusk, and United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson were ensconced in a contretemps over who would be to blame for a "no deal" Brexit with both men saying the other would be dubbed "Mr. No Deal," if the impasse prevailed.

Johnson's meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron ahead of the summit presaged little progress on the matter. Indeed, the two most powerful European Union leaders emphasized that the deal brokered with Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, was the end of the line and there would be little room to alter it. In fact, Macron declared in unambiguous terms: "I want to be very clear. In the month ahead, we will not find a new withdrawal agreement that deviates far from the original."

Editor's Note on the United Kingdom:

Located in Western Europe, between the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, just to the northwest of France, the United Kingdom is made up of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is to be found on the northern one-sixth of the island of Ireland.

It should be noted that the terms "Great Britain" and "United Kingdom" cannot correctly be used in an interchangeable manner.

Great Britain refers to the island to the west of France and east of Ireland that consists of three related regions -- England, Scotland, and Wales. However, Great Britain is not the proper name of any current sovereign nation state, as it excludes Northern Ireland, which is also part of the country called the United Kingdom. In fact, the official name of the country is "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."

Scotland and England were joined in 1603 when King James VI of Scotland succeeded his cousin, Queen Elizabeth I, to claim the British throne. In 1707, the Act of Union created a new country, Great Britain. Ireland had been conquered by the early 17th century, and the 1801 British Acts of Union established the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1922, 26 counties of Ireland gained independence from London, with the other six counties remaining in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the Northern Ireland Assembly were established in 1999. The latter was suspended until May 2007 due to wrangling over the peace process, but devolution was fully completed in March 2010.

In 2013, a process was started to allow for a referendum for Scottish independence. That vote was to take place in 2014. In order for Scotland to become independent, regardless of the result of the internal referendum, the British Parliament would have to dissolve the Acts of Union.

At the beginning of the 20th century the British Empire had been the foremost global power, stretching over one-fourth of the earth's surface. But World War I significantly weakened the United Kingdom, and the years following World War II saw the demise of the empire with many colonies gaining independence. Nevertheless, the country remains a major world economic and military power, with considerable political and cultural influence around the world. As the world's first industrialized country, the economy of the United Kingdom is one of the largest in the world as well as one of the strongest in Europe, and is considered to be a leading trading power and financial center.

It should also be noted that the United Kingdom has historically played a leading role in developing parliamentary democracy and in advancing literature and science. The country has a long history as a major player in international affairs and fulfills an important role in the European Union, the United Nations and NATO. The United Kingdom is also an active member of the European Union, although it chose to remain outside the Economic and Monetary Union. The government has said a series of economic criteria must be met before the issue can be put to a referendum.

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