

The Brookings Institution

5 on 45: On the UK General Election

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PITA: You're listening to five on 45 from the Brookings podcast network analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

WRIGHT: Hello my name is John Wright and the senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and director of the Center on the U.S. and Europe and also author of the recent book All measures short of war: the contest for the 21st century and the future of American power.

So I'd like to talk today about the rather extraordinary results in the U.K. general election last night where Prime Minister Theresa May came in under a majority having called the election six weeks ago in the expectation of having a massive majority to be able to implement a hard Brexit said she actually felt quite a bit short. She ends up with 318 seats she needed 326 as late as yesterday. About 5 p.m. U.S. time just before the exit polls came out everyone expected that she would end up what about a majority 60 or 70 so this was a stunning reversal for the first couple of hours. No one quite believed the exit polls. And then over the course of the night it turned out that they were remarkably accurate. Jeremy Corbyn who was dismissed really as somebody who would lead the Labor party to ruin did far better than expected. And today we have many postmortems about why that happened and what it means for the future. I'd just like to spell out a few points that I think are particularly useful as we sort of navigate this new landscape. The first is that there will be a coalition government but it is unlikely to last. It's actually not a formal coalition. The Democratic Unionist Party which is a small socially conservative pro-union party in Northern Ireland has 10 seats they added to the conservatives number of 318 give you and 28 which is majority of about 2 over there 326.

But a slightly more if you are a comfort factor Shin Fein MP seven of them will abstain as they have done for almost a century and because of their objection to the oath of loyalty to the queen. So that is a very small majority and it is not a formal coalition the DP have what they call a confidence and supply arrangement where they will get certain concessions from the conservatives in exchange for support. They are mainly looking for large sums of money I think for Northern Ireland. There are other issues around Brexit in Northern Ireland that may come to the fore. But the main thing is sort of the transfer of funds which they will receive at this government will not be stable because the Conservative Party has many people in ASH who are very Hard-Brexiteers and those are quite moderate Brexiteers and those votes cannot be counted on for any negotiation the result of any negotiation with the rest of the EU. So we may see another election sooner rather than later. And the second point is that the implications of this election for the Brexit vote are very severe. Theresa May felt as if she did not have enough of a majority to be in a strong enough position to negotiate or break that agreement. She now comes back with a far smaller majority not even an overall majority for her own party and no one knows quite what that means. Does that mean that she will pursue a softer Brexit. And one might think that that this is a vote of no confidence in her Hard Brexit position. But on the other hand there are many hardliners who actually will insist on her maintaining a tough position or whoever her successor may be if she were to step down because of internal party dynamics that they would insist on a Hard Brexit to petition so the rest of Europe is looking at this confused.

They don't quite know what the U.K. government wants the UK government doesn't know what it wants and all the while the article 50 clock of two years to negotiate an

agreement is ticking away. So we may if we have another election early in the fall find that this entirely new government with a very different set of objectives and that I think will complicate the negotiations further. It's possible that they will be extended. They can be extended by the unanimity of the 27 but the rest of Europe is a little bit exasperated with the U.K. because they don't know quite what they want and they don't want they have other problems on their agenda. In addition to Brexit so that merits watching to the third point is Jeremy Corbyn and the Labor Party here Corben was assumed to be a goner after the election. Many of his colleagues believe that they will be able to get rid of him if he lost the election by a lot. He comes back in a stronger position not having once he is around for some time to come. His position in the Labor Party is now unchallenged he will be in a good position to compete to be prime minister at the next election. But he still has many many many problems in terms of the radicalness of some of those positions perceived lack of preparation to actually govern those things will be front and center I think in the next two months as the Labor Party expects and prepares for a new election. But I think make no mistake that in the next election Corben will be a credible contender for the prime ministership. Side as a conservative counterpart and that will be one of the most stark choices in British history you have a conservative party that will be campaigning on breaks a traditional conservative platform and maybe the most left wing of any Labor Party platform since World War II. And finally just a word on President Trump because President Trump of course intervened in effect in the British election after the London attacks with his criticism of the London mayor. He did not play I think a critical role in the election result but the lessons as people look at it will be that they pay a political price for cooperating with him. And Theresa May I think will be somewhat frustrated with

the role that he played and we will see I think it much more difficult for this conservative government to be as close to the Trump administration as Theresa May has been for the last six months or so.

So this will continue over the next few months because we still don't know whether trees may remain in power. New prime minister will be and how long this will last. And look forward to having opportunity to talk with you about that again in the months ahead. Thank you very much.

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