



THE TIMES

The PM's wise decision to stand down after Brexit paves the way for a cross-party Withdrawal Agreement and a New Generation Conservative to lead post-Brexit Renewal.

RED BOX | GEORGE FREEMAN MP
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Some claim that last week's leadership vote hasn't changed anything. Wrong. It's changed everything. By taking the selfless step of publicly vowing to stand down once Brexit has been delivered — the basis upon which many MPs like me supported her last week — a path is now clear for us to end the Brexit civil war and get back to governing in the national interest.

How? Why does that pledge so change the landscape?

First, the prime minister is now liberated from having to deliver a Tory Brexit that can win a leadership contest. She is no longer in the grip of the European Research Group's "true Tory Brexit" strategy.

Having been saved by One Nation Tories from an attack by the ERG, she can finally pursue Brexit in the national, rather than party, interest as she should have done all along.

Second, in her search for a cross-party Brexit withdrawal agreement she can now afford to lose votes — as she will have to — without fearing for her job. It's likely to take many votes if we're to find a Brexit deal that can get through.

Finding a Brexit that commands a parliamentary majority will be a messy process. After the loss of our majority last year, the mandate is, inconveniently, now in parliament, not the party.

Only by testing the options can we find out if there's a Brexit solution that can command support from a majority of MPs. Labour MPs are unlikely to vote with a Conservative PM unless he or she is fatally wounded. This is the brutal reality of parliamentary politics.

Third, her pledge to step aside after overseeing the withdrawal means that as Conservatives we can show that we have respected the result of the EU referendum (delivered by voters from all parties), and then elect a new leader and prime minister who is untarnished by the chaos and compromise of this process.

Once Theresa May has overseen the process to March 29, we can choose a new leader in the summer, before party conference and the autumn parliamentary session, with a new mandate to set out and oversee the “post-Brexit” renewal we will urgently need.

This time, however, we will have the room for a proper contest from April and through the summer. Unlike in 2016, there mustn't be a rushed coronation or power grab from any faction of the Conservative Party.

In the summer we can and should have candidates from across the spectrum of Conservatism setting out their visions for our country's future.

Vision, ideas (and the crucial ability to communicate them) must be tested in public so that our membership can decide who is best placed to take us forward into the next general election, to heal the wounds of Brexit and set out a positive Conservative vision of renewed opportunity for the many, not the few.

To reframe this as a moment of positive change for a new generation of voters who have been alienated by eight years of inevitably painful post-crash austerity, and a divisive Brexit.

Can we do it? Yes we can. By overseeing a moderate Brexit in the national interest, respecting both the 48 per cent and the 52 per cent, and recasting Brexit as a moment of bold domestic policy renewal — on housing, modern public services, tax, infrastructure and the other issues voters care about most — we can harness this as a change moment to renew Conservatism for a new generation.

In the past eight years, the Conservative Parliamentary Party has been transformed by the arrival of MPs from three recent intakes — 2010, 2015 and 2017 — bursting with positive ideas about our country's future. With the prime minister's selfless pledge to sacrifice her own career for the sake of national and party unity, she has created the opportunity for us to recast Brexit as that moment of national renewal led by One Nation Conservatives.

Now that would be a legacy to be proud of.

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