



# Intra-party dissent over Brexit in the British Conservative Party

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## Abstract

This article seeks to map the evolution of intra-party dissent over Brexit in the parliamentary Conservative Party between July 2016 and January 2020. It shows that dissent was primarily due to the relentless intra-party disputes over the fact that the Conservative Government failed to deliver Brexit during Theresa May's premiership. Brexit could not have been settled if Boris Johnson had not managed to reunite the party through the 2019 general election. This article gauges the intensity of intra-party dissent by drawing on three representative indicators, including the number of Conservative MPs quitting the party, the number of ministerial resignations and parliamentary voting records of the Conservative MPs over Brexit. Three dominant factional groups, namely hard Brexiteers, soft Brexiteers and Breainers, competed to shape the government's handling of Brexit. They diverged over issues of sovereignty, economic implication of Brexit, and the UK–EU future relationship. The research also finds that the hard Brexiteers and the Breainers appeared less compromising over Brexit, while the soft Brexiteers with a pragmatic mindset were relatively flexible and ready for concessions.

**Keywords** Intra-party dissent · Conservative party · Brexit · European integration · British sovereignty

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## Introduction

It has been challenging for the parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) to collectively formulate a foreign economic policy around the UK's future role in the global political economy (Baker et al. 1999, pp. 72–73). Apart from the ongoing intra-party dissent over the European issue, the PCP suffered two major serious intra-party dissents over foreign economic policy in history, one was the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the other the Tariff Reform in 1903–06 (Baker et al. 1993, p. 422). European integration has provoked the growth of factionalism and schism to an unprecedented level. To be sure, there has been so far no other issue that has exerted a more profound and long-lasting impact on the rise of intra-party dissent in the PCP than the issue of European integration.

The Conservatives' intra-party dissent over Europe emerged in the early 1960s when Harold Macmillan decided to apply for the membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) which outperformed the UK in promoting economic growth (Foster 2002, p. 14). Tory anti-Marketeters, such as Peter Walker, John Paul and Michael Shay, established the Anti-Common Market League (ACML) in 1961 to protect the free trade between the UK and non-EEC countries, especially the Commonwealth members (Crowson 2007, pp. 167–169). The supranational nature of the EEC also increased the worries of MPs, represented by Anthony Fell and then Enoch Powell, about sovereignty draining. Regardless of that, the European integration enthusiast Edward Heath pushed through the third application for the EEC membership. Having obtained the UK rebate, Margaret Thatcher was once confident in performing Thatcherite conservatism at the European level—with the UK remaining economically liberal and politically independent (Heppell and Hill 2005, p. 338). However, the projects proposed by the hard-driving Delors Commission jolted Thatcher out of her reverie that the Single European Act (SEA) was the termination of the European bloc's access to political union, which in fact was a further escalation of the erosion of the UK's sovereignty. As a result, there emerged the resurgence of divisions between Thatcherite nationalists and Tory integrationists, as exemplified by the contentious issue of the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). The ERM issue intensified the conflict not only between nationalists, including Thatcher and Bill Cash and integrationists like Geoffrey Howe, but also within the nationalist group itself with the rebellion of a small minority represented by Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor in Thatcher's cabinet who resigned in 1989 (Sowemimo 1996, pp. 84–85; Boucek 2012, p. 79). The division eventually resulted in Thatcher's downfall in November 1990. Despite the UK's opt-out of the European Social Charter and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the Maastricht Treaty exacerbated the split within the party in the Major era, which played no small part in the Conservative Party's debacle in the 1997 general election. Since then, the PCP has become increasingly sceptical about the value of the UK's European Union (EU) membership (Alexandre-Collier 2015, p. 104; Spiering 2015, p. 21; Heppell 2014, pp. 115–116; Sowemimo 1996, p. 81).

With the further deepening of European integration in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there came a further rise of Euroscepticism in the PCP (Dorey



2017, pp. 31–32). When David Cameron became the Conservative leader in 2005, the party had already been a soft Eurosceptic party, in which a bulk of MPs were considered as Eurosceptics (Lynch and Whitaker 2013, p. 321). The emergence of a coalition government formed by the Conservative Party and the pro-European Liberal Democrats in 2010 further incited the assertiveness of the hard Eurosceptics. To calm the simmering grievances from the hard Eurosceptics, Cameron finally promised to hold an in/out referendum on the UK's EU membership. In his second tenure, Cameron stuck to the Thatcherite strategy of repatriation and renegotiation (Emerson 2015, p. 1). To his chagrin, however, Cameron suffered a humiliating defeat in the 2016 EU referendum and chose to resign from the premiership as a result.

This article seeks to chart the course of the twists and turns of intra-party dissent over Brexit in the PCP between July 2016 and January 2020, and elucidates the reasons why the intra-party dissent played a large part in hindering the May government and the Johnson government from delivering Brexit. The first section puts forward a typology of varied factional groups and illuminates their divergences over Brexit. The second section elaborates the evolution of the intra-party dissent over Brexit in the May era which is further divided into three phases. The third section then explores the recent changes in Conservative intra-party dissent in the Johnson era. Overall it is argued that the three Conservative factional groups, namely hard Brexiters, soft Brexiters and Breainers, were sharply divided over three major issues—British sovereignty, the value of the UK's EU membership, and the UK's future relationship with the EU. It was largely due to their failure to narrow a perception gap that made Theresa May and Boris Johnson fail to deliver Brexit as they initially planned. Only through his big win in the snap election of 12 December 2019 did Boris Johnson manage to eventually break the Brexit deadlock.

## **Categorising the factional groups in the PCP over Brexit**

The 1980s witnessed a growing divide within the Conservative Party over the issue of Europe. Norton (1990, pp. 49–50) identifies four major groups (or seven sub-groups) within the Conservative Party based on their different attitudes towards Thatcherism, which include Thatcherites (including neoliberals and the Tory right), party faithful (including Thatcher loyalists and party loyalists), populists and critics (including wets and damps). While the wets and damps were largely pro-Europe, all other groups were more or less sceptical of the process of European integration in the 1980s.

Like Norton, Sowemimo (1996, pp. 82–88) puts forward a typology of Conservative groups in the Thatcher era, consisting of Thatcherite nationalists, neoliberal integrationists and interventionist-integrationists. What makes Sowemimo's view different from Norton's is that he categorises different Conservative groups according to their stances towards European integration and identifies the split of Thatcherites into Thatcherite nationalists and neoliberal integrationists over the EMU. As Sowemimo (1996, p. 83) rightly points out, 'the sovereignty conflict has ultimately proved to be the decisive factor in Conservative ideological alignments'.



Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008) make a distinction between soft Euroscepticism and hard Euroscepticism when exploring Euroscepticism in the Central and Eastern European countries. The dichotomy between hard Euroscepticism and soft Euroscepticism is of great value in elucidating the increasingly clear-cut demarcation between hard Eurosceptics and soft Eurosceptics in the PCP. According to Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008, 8), hard Euroscepticism refers to ‘principled opposition to the EU and European integration’, while soft Euroscepticism refers to ‘the expression of qualified opposition to the EU’. Since the late 1990s, it has been unavailing to make a distinction between Eurosceptics and Europhiles (or pro-Europeans) to understand the intra-party dissent in the PCP, given that the party has already become a soft Eurosceptic party (Lynch and Whitaker 2018, p. 40). The hard Eurosceptics–soft Eurosceptics dichotomy, by contrast, can better capture the dynamics of intra-party dissent in the PCP over the past two decades. The hard Eurosceptics were anti-Europeans and fought hard for the UK’s departure from the EU. By contrast, the soft Eurosceptics supported the UK’s EU membership but opposed key areas of integration which might compromise British sovereignty (Lynch 2012, p. 74).

According to Lynch (2012, pp. 85–86), the Eurosceptics fall into three major groups in the first term of Cameron’s premiership. The first is serial rebels supporting the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. The second is Eurosceptics wanting the European integration process to be reversed rather than stalled. The third is pragmatic Eurosceptics reluctantly accepting the coalition government’s position on Europe but opposing further integration.

This article roughly categorises Tory MPs into three groups, including hard Brexiteers, soft Brexiteers and Breainers against the backdrop of Brexit, based on their ideological policy divide over issues related to Brexit (see Table 1). It is not possible to pigeonhole all Conservative MPs precisely into each of these three groups. Nevertheless, the three groups can accommodate an overwhelming majority of the Conservative MPs.

The hard Brexiteers, the soft Brexiteers and the Breainers could be classified as three factional groups, given that each of them demonstrates some identifiable factional characteristics. Before explaining why these three groups are eligible to be factional groups, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between a tendency group and a faction. The concept of ‘tendency’ refers to shared attitudes expressed by an ad hoc group of politicians about certain issues, and the attitudes are held together by a more or less coherent political ideology (Rose 1964, p. 37). The issues around which tendencies gravitate are temporary in nature and can be resolved quickly (Smedley 1998, p. 9). A tendency group can thus be defined as an ad hoc group formed by some politicians who temporarily align with each other on issues of concern. A faction, by contrast, refers to an organised and cohesive group of politicians with similar tastes in a political party who adhere to a set of principles concerning current or anticipated issues in public policy and seek to shape and/or determine the policy of its leadership (Seyd 1972, p. 464; Smedley 1998, p. 12; Laver and Shepsle 1999, p. 27). Factions provide a structure for intra-party competition over contentious issues (Boucek 2012, p. 37).



**Table 1** The Conservative factional groups and their divergences over Brexit

	British sovereignty	Value of the EU membership	Future relationship with the EU
Hard Brexiteers	Absolute sovereignty	The EU membership is a complete liability for the UK	A clean departure from the EU with or without a deal
Soft Brexiteers	Qualified sovereignty	The EU membership can partially benefit British interests, though it is more like a liability than an asset	A sticky departure from the EU with a deal
Bremainers	Qualified sovereignty	The EU membership is mostly an asset for the UK	Better for the UK to stay in the EU



A tendency group and a faction differ from each other in three major aspects: first, while the former does not have an organisational infrastructure, the latter is organised and cohesive, as evidenced by a high level of political organisation; second, in stark contrast to members of the former who take no self-conscious and active actions to achieve a specific aim, members of the latter are highly motivated and actively seek to shape and/or determine the policy of a party; third, the former is a group of temporary duration which does not support the same tendency through a period of time, whereas the latter is a group of lengthy duration, persisting through time (Rose 1964, pp. 37–38; Smedley 1998, pp. 14–18; Heppell 2002, p. 306).

The hard Brexiteers have virtually become a faction within the Conservative Party, given that all the three aforementioned factional characteristics could be identified in this group. The group of hard Brexiteers has a highly cohesive organisational infrastructure, as evidenced by the coordinating and mobilising role played by the well-organised European Research Group (ERG) (Russell 2020, p. 10). This group has a lengthy duration, and has been active in pressuring the party leadership to take the hard Brexit approach ever since the 2016 referendum.

Both the soft Brexiteers and the Breainers are more than a tendency group, respectively. There exist some factional characteristics in each of these two groups. Albeit lacking a high level of political organisation, the two groups share the other two major factional characteristics with the hard Brexiteers. They are not temporarily organised and passively engaged groups. Like the hard Brexiteers, the soft Brexiteers and the Breainers persistently and actively sought to exert their respective impacts on the party's Brexit agenda under the premierships of Theresa May and Boris Johnson, albeit with mixed results. Members of each of the two groups tend to have a similar and distinctive form of parliamentary behaviour, collectively voting for or against the government's Brexit plans in most cases. Therefore, it is plausible to classify the hard Brexiteers as a strong factional group and the soft Brexiteers and the Breainers as weak factional groups.

Instead of separating the sovereignty lens from the economic lens (Heppell et al. 2017, p. 765), this article argues that a combination of the two lenses can provide a more nuanced understanding of the Conservative divisions over Brexit. All three factional groups perceive Brexit through both the sovereignty lens and the economic lens. What distinguishes them from each other is their divergent understandings of the impacts of the EU membership on the UK's sovereignty and economic interests (see Table 1).

Brexit is very much about British sovereignty vis-à-vis the EU, which touches upon British identity and Englishness in particular (Richards et al. 2018, p. 290; Henderson et al. 2017, p. 194; Wellings 2015, p. 39). As a top issue for voters in the 2016 referendum, the immigration issue manifested the British concerns over sovereignty. The border control and the restriction on free movement are closely associated with authority of the parliament (i.e. parliamentary sovereignty). As mentioned by Richards et al. (2018, p. 280), getting rid of the jurisdiction of the European Justice Court (EJC) and taking back control over immigration are both matters concerning sovereignty. It is primarily due to the seemingly unbridgeable gap of perceptions of British sovereignty that makes the Conservative divisions over Brexit hard to



manage. The three factional groups diverge over whether and to what extent British sovereignty can be shared with the EU.

The economic rationale based on a cost/benefit approach has been the long-held *raison d'être* for successive British governments to support an integrated Europe. The factional groups diverge over whether the economic benefits brought by the UK's EU membership outweigh the economic costs. While the hard Brexiteers argue that the EU membership is a total liability for the UK, the soft Brexiteers and the Remainers insist that keeping a close relationship with the EU is more or less an asset to British economic interests.

### **Hard Brexiteers in the PCP**

The hard Brexiteers define sovereignty in zero-sum terms and hold that sovereignty in no way should be compromised and diluted. They accuse the EU of salami-slicing British sovereignty without consulting the British people in the process of integration. The assertion of restoring parliamentary sovereignty appeals to the long-held British sensibilities. For most British people, Europe is a significant other. They rarely share we-feelings with people on the European continent and believe that the Europeans are the UK's collective neighbours who live near, but not in the UK (Bald et al. 2020, p. 222; Spiering 2015, p. 20; Ford and Goodwin 2017, p. 17).

Concerning the value of the UK's EU membership, the hard Brexiteers tend to overestimate the economic cost of the UK's EU membership and in the meantime underestimate the negative economic impacts of Brexit. They argue that it is worthwhile for the UK to accept the short-term disruption and potentially high costs of breaking free from the EU to conclude more lucrative free trade deals freely and quickly with countries outside Europe (Inman 2019).

The hard Brexiteers argued that the UK should have a clean departure from the EU, which means that Britain should take total control of its laws, borders and budgets after leaving the EU. More specifically, they insisted that the UK should leave both the single market and the customs union, and that the Irish backstop should be rejected for the sake of the integrity of British parliamentary sovereignty. Otherwise, the UK will become a 'vassal state' of the EU (Edwards 2018). The hard Brexiteers were more willing than the soft Brexiteers to support a no-deal Brexit to enable the UK to leave the EU as soon as possible.

Boris Johnson, who outshone David Cameron in the 2016 Referendum, is one of the most prominent hard Brexiteers. Apart from Johnson, most hard Brexiteers are from the ERG, which has been regarded as 'a party within a party' given its highly institutionalised structure (Roe-Crines et al. 2020, p. 8). Since the ERG does not disclose details about its memberships, it remains unfeasible to pin down the definitive number of Conservative MPs belonging to the ERG. Based on the ERG's email list on 17 July 2017 (Geoghegan and Corderoy 2019), the signatories on its open letter to Theresa May on 16 February 2018 and the BBC's report on the ERG members on 19 January 2018 (Doherty 2018), around 90 Conservative MPs have been or once were ERG members. There exist a few moderate ERG members who rarely rebelled against the May government in key Brexit votes, as exemplified by David Gauke



and John Penrose. Around 20 ERG members could be considered as the ultra-hard Brexiteers. The ultra-hard Brexiteers are serial rebels from the ERG who were more intransigent in pushing for a hard Brexit, as exemplified by their rebellions against the May government in all three meaningful votes. The most representative members of the ultra-hard Brexiteers included Steve Baker, Suella Braverman, William Cash, Mark Francois, Andrea Jenkyns, David Jones, Anne Marie Morris, Owen Paterson, John Redwood and Theresa Villiers (Tominey 2019; Walker 2019a, b, c).

### Soft Brexiteers in the PCP

The soft Brexiteers favour the idea of qualified sovereignty and argued that the pursuit of absolute sovereignty is far-fetched in this increasingly interdependent world. Unlike the hard Brexiteers, they believe that sharing partial sovereignty with the EU can offer more competitive advantages for the UK than standing alone. The soft Brexiteers take a minimalist view of pooling sovereignty and are only willing to pool the least possible sovereignty into the EU for the sake of British interests.

In stark contrast to the hard Brexiteers, the soft Brexiteers insist that the UK can still benefit economically from the EU in one way or another, and the economic value of the EU should not be totally denied. The soft Brexiteers stress the serious consequences of an abrupt and clear-cut departure from the EU for the British economy. Most of them strongly opposed a no-deal Brexit and instead supported a soft-version Brexit deal enabling the UK to keep a close economic relationship with the EU after Brexit. They preferred the UK to find an alternative to the single market, or partially stay in it by becoming a member of the European Economic Area (like Norway).

The soft Brexiteers accounted for more than 60% of the Conservative MPs. They usually took a flexible and pragmatic approach towards Brexit and therefore are more willing to make concessions than the hard Brexiteers and the Breainers. There were three main branches of soft Brexiteers in the PCP. The first branch was the majority of around 140 frontbench MPs on the May government payroll. Their motives in toeing the government line could be largely attributable to collective ministerial responsibility under the pressure of three-line whips. Some soft Brexiteers within the government were likely to rebel against the government's motion regarding no-deal Brexit.

The second branch included the Conservative backbenchers belonging to the Brexit Delivery Group (BDG). Andrew Percy and Simon Hart co-chaired the BDG, whose key supporters include Stephen Crabb, Damian Green, Nicky Morgan, Chris Skidmore and Tom Tugendhat (McDonald 2019). With more than 50 members (Payne et al. 2019), the BDG united against no-deal Brexit and once actively supported Theresa May's soft Brexit plan.

The third branch is a handful of Conservative MPs considered as ultra-soft Brexiteers who were not only struggling to avoid a no-deal Brexit but were also unhappy with Theresa May's soft Brexit plan. The ultra-soft Brexiteers stood out as a distinctive branch in the camp of soft Brexiteers considering their similar parliamentary behaviour with the Breainers. Unlike the Breainers, however, the





ultra-Brexiteers did not seek to revoke the result of the 2016 referendum, and were committed to delivering Brexit. The representative figures of the ultra-soft Brexiteers mainly included Nick Boles, Kenneth Clarke, George Freeman, Stephen Hammond, Oliver Letwin, Bob Neill and Sarah Newton. For them, the UK should keep a closer economic relationship with the EU after Brexit by staying in the single market or the customs union or reaching a similar arrangement. To achieve this, they were mainly in favour of a larger role of the parliament in the Brexit process at the cost of the government's executive power. It is worth noting that while some ultra-soft Brexiteers were sympathetic to a second referendum, most of them have eschewed from openly supporting it.

### **Bremainers in the PCP**

It should be noted that only a dozen of Conservative MPs can be identified as the Bremainers after the 2016 referendum by inferring from their voting records and parliamentary statements in Hansard. The vast majority of the 187 Conservative MPs who voted Remain in the referendum became the soft Brexiteers, while most of the 140 Conservative MPs who voted Leave turned into the hard Brexiteers (Lynch and Whitaker 2018, p. 41). The representative figures of the Bremainers include Heidi Allen, Guto Bebb, Damien Collins, Justine Greening, Dominic Grieve, Sam Gyimah, Jo Johnson, Philip Lee, Amber Rudd, Antoinette Sandbach, Anna Soubry and Sarah Wollaston (Grieve 2018; Doggson 2018). Among them, Heidi Allen, Sam Gyimah, Philip Lee, Antoinette Sandbach and Sarah Wollaston joined the Liberal Democrats.

In line with the soft Brexiteers, the Bremainers were supportive of the idea of qualified sovereignty and were more enthusiastic than the soft Brexiteers to pool sovereignty into the EU. Despite this, the Bremainers were by no means whole-hearted integrationists. In a similar vein with the Thatcherite neoliberals, the Bremainers were also sceptical about the federalist nature of the EU project. They were only willing to share more sovereignty with the EU to the extent that it brings more tangible interests to the UK while staying in the EU. Guided by pragmatic Euro-scepticism, this group preferred the Cameronite reformist route to dealing with the sovereignty issue—renegotiation for continued membership (Jeffery et al. 2018, p. 271).

The Bremainers took a more sanguine view than the soft Brexiteers on the value of the UK's EU membership. They argued that Brexit will inflict untold damage on the UK, and the British economy will be better off and more jobs can be created in the long run by staying in the EU. Hence, most of them demanded a people's vote, advocating a second referendum on the final Brexit deal in the hope of reversing Brexit.

This article seeks to gauge the intensity of the Conservatives' intra-party dissent over Brexit among varied factional groups under the premierships of Theresa May and Boris Johnson by drawing on three representative indicators. The first is the number of Conservative MPs who quit the party voluntarily or under compulsion over Brexit. Some Conservative MPs resigned from the party, either sitting as



Independent MPs or joining the Liberal Democrats while others were expelled from the party due to their rebellions against the government. The second is the number of the senior and junior ministers and party whips who resigned or were sacked due to their opposition to the government's handling of Brexit. The third is the number of Conservative MPs who voted against the government in the House of Commons, a stronger measure than abstentions to show their disapproval of the government's handling of Brexit. By combining the three indicators, this article attempts to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the Conservative intra-party dissent in the May era and the Johnson era.

## Conservative intra-party dissent over Brexit in the May era

The evolution of Conservative intra-party dissent over Brexit in the May era can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase (July 2016–May 2017) was the pre-Brexit negotiation phase, featuring a low level of intra-party dissent. The second phase (June 2017–December 2018) was the Brexit negotiation phase, witnessing a rise of intra-party dissent. The third phase (January–June 2019) was the parliamentary ratification phase, in which the level of intra-party dissent reached a record high, culminating in Theresa May's forced resignation in June 2019.

### The first phase: intra-party dissent under restraint

May was largely successful in managing intra-party feuding over Brexit by leaning towards the hard Brexit camp in this phase. She tried to balance former Leavers with former Remainers in her first cabinet. To alleviate her vulnerability among the Brexit wing of the PCP and enable them to share responsibility with her in the coming Brexit negotiations, she appointed three prominent hard Brexiteers, including Boris Johnson, David Davis and Liam Fox to the most Brexit-facing jobs in government (Roe-Crines et al. 2020, p. 5; Lloyd 2019, p. 7; Allen 2017, p. 642). Between July 2016 and June 2017, no Conservative ministers resigned and no Conservative MPs quit the party for reasons related to Brexit.

In terms of voting records, the intra-party dissent was rather limited, with only 9 Conservative MPs rebelling against the May government's Brexit plan in the House of Commons. Between 1 February and 13 March 2017, there were 24 votes over the EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill (Notification Bill, hereafter) in the House of Commons (see Table 2). In these 24 votes, only 2.73% of the Conservative MPs (9/330 MPs) voted against the May government in at least one vote over the Notification Bill. Of the 9 rebellious Conservative MPs, Kenneth Clarke, who acted like a Remainer in this phase, was the most frequent rebel who cross-voted eleven times. It is noteworthy that Clarke was the only Conservative MP voting against triggering Article 50 of the Treaty on the EU. He was economically and socially liberal, insisting that the UK had substantially benefited from the participation in the European integration and leaving the single market and the customs union did not make sense (Hansard 2017a, b, Column pp. 829–831).



**Table 2** Conservative MPs voting against the May government over Notification Bill

	Number of votes	Conservative MPs cross-voting
Second reading	2	Kenneth Clarke (2)
Committee stage	17	Kenneth Clarke (7), Heidi Allen (1), Robert Neill (2), Claire Perry (2), Antoinette Sandbach (2), Anna Soubry (2), Andrew Tyrie (3), Tania Mathias (1)
Third reading	1	Kenneth Clarke (1)
Consideration of Lords amendments	2	Alex Chalk (1), Tania Mathias (1)
Programme motion	2	Kenneth Clarke (1)

In this phase, the May government was preparing for Brexit negotiations. Most Tory MPs, especially those who voted Remain, had accepted the result of the 2016 Referendum. Partly due to this, the intra-party discords were temporarily restrained (Lynch and Whitaker 2018). Another reason for the interlude of peace was May’s strategy of leaning towards a hard Brexit after taking office on 13 July 2016. In her first major speech on Brexit, May asserted that her government did not seek ‘partial membership of the European Union, associate membership of the European Union, or anything that leaves us half-in, half-out’ (The UK government 2017). At that time, May wanted the UK to be out of both the single market and the customs union, a clean departure from the EU. By following a hard Brexit strategy, May endeavoured to reunite the PCP after the party leadership election in the aftermath of the 2016 Referendum. The 52% of Tory MPs supporting Remain was dominantly on the side of May, while nearly 40% of Tory MPs chose to vote for Andrea Leadsom and Michael Gove who campaigned for Leave (Jeffery et al. 2018, p. 264; Jeffery 2018, p. 9).

The stratagem adopted by May seemed to work in this phase to tranquilise the hard Brexiters in the party. The rebellion was confined to several Breainers and ultra-soft Brexiters for whom a clean departure from the EU was totally unacceptable. May’s hard Brexit posture did not spark the full protest of Breainers, probably due to the lack of details of her plan before the triggering of the Article 50 in March 2017 and the imperative of intra-party unity before the snap election in June 2017.

**The second phase: intra-party dissent on rise**

In the second phase, the PCP was riven by its internal disagreements over Brexit in a more serious manner. The rationale for Theresa May to call the snap election in June 2017 was threefold: to win back the support of Eurosceptics; to strengthen her authority as party leader and Prime Minister; and to expand parliamentary approval on her Brexit plans (Roe-Crines et al. 2020, p. 6). Unfortunately, far from exerting a powerful effect on consolidating her leadership and outmanoeuvring Labour, the snap election backfired, presaging a series of humiliating defeats for the May government in dealing with Brexit (Russell 2020, p. 7). On the one hand, it weakened



May's leadership and fastened the breakdown of cabinet collective responsibility (McConnell and Tormey 2020, pp. 686–687; Dunlop et al. 2020, p. 714; Lloyd 2019, p. 10), leading to a significant number of ministerial resignations in protest of her management of Brexit. On the other hand, by losing a working majority in the House of Commons, it became more demanding for the May government to pass its Brexit plan in the House of Commons (McConnell and Tormey 2020, p. 695). Combined with the surge of Conservative intra-party dissent over Brexit, the minority government led by Theresa May was doomed to fail in delivering Brexit.

A total of 20 ministers resigned from the May government between June 2017 and December 2018, 13 of whom were hard Brexiteers. Five pro-hard Brexit ministers resigned in opposition to the Chequers plan, including Boris Johnson, David Davis, Steve Baker, Conor Burns and Chris Green. Johnson likened the Chequers plan to a 'suicide vest' around the British constitution. In addition, eight pro-hard Brexit ministers resigned to oppose May's Draft Withdrawal Agreement (Cooper 2018).

The voting records for the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (Withdrawal Bill, hereafter) also revealed the increasing intra-party divisions over Brexit in the second phase. There were a total of 81 parliamentary votes concerning the Withdrawal Bill between 11 September 2017 and 20 June 2018 (See Table 3). It was the ultra-soft Brexiteers and Breainers rather than the hard Brexiteers that played a leading role in rebelling against the May government in the parliamentary votes during this period. In these 81 votes, there was approximately 4.1% of the Conservative MPs (13/317 MPs) voting against the government, a preponderance of whom were identified as the ultra-soft Brexiteers and the Breainers. Two ministers, including Stephen Hammond and Philip Lee, lost their jobs due to their rebellion against the government in the House of Commons. By contrast, none of the ERG members rebelled on the Withdrawal Bill (Lynch et al. 2019, p. 60).

**Table 3** Conservative MPs voting against the May government over Withdrawal Bill

	Number of votes	Conservative MPs cross-voting
Second reading	2	None
Committee stage	40	Kenneth Clarke (16), Anna Soubry (6), Nicky Morgan (2), Heidi Allen (1), Jonathan Djanogly (1), Dominic Grieve (1), Stephen Hammond (1), Oliver Heald (1), Robert Neill (1), Antoinette Sandbach (1), John Stevenson (1), Sarah Wollaston (1)
Report stage	14	Kenneth Clarke (7), Anna Soubry (2)
Third reading	2	None
Consideration of Lords amendments	21	Kenneth Clarke (15), Anna Soubry (9), Dominic Grieve (2), Heidi Allen (1), Phillip Lee (1), Antoinette Sandbach (1), Sarah Wollaston (1)
Programme motions	2	Kenneth Clarke (2), Anna Soubry (1)



May suffered only one defeat in the second phase of the parliamentary vote over Dominic Grieve's amendment 7 ensuring MPs a meaningful vote on the withdrawal deal on 13 December 2017. It is noteworthy that 'meaningful vote' refers to a vote on a government motion to approve the withdrawal agreement, and only if the House of Commons passes the motion can the government ratify the withdrawal agreement (House of Commons 2018). There were a total of 12 Conservative MPs who cross-voted, leading to the May government's defeat by 309 votes to 305 (The UK Parliament 2017). The purpose of Dominic Grieve's amendment was to transfer the decision-making power from the government to the parliament on final terms of the withdrawal agreement by introducing statutory instruments. This amendment provided MPs, especially the Brexiteers and the ultra-Brexiteers, with the opportunity to block the government's hardline plans. Stephen Hammond sacrificed his political career to support the amendment in defence of parliamentary sovereignty (Hammond 2017). He was sacked as a vice-chairman of the Conservative Party after rebelling against the government on this vote. Kenneth Clarke drew a clear-cut line with his Eurosceptic colleagues who tried to speed up the Brexit process, insisting that the future trading and economic relationship between the UK and the EU must be scrutinised in detail and the parliamentary approval should not be a mere formality (Hansard 2017a, b, Column pp. 427–428).

The May government's release of the Chequers plan in July 2018 proved to be a turning point for its relationship with the hard Brexiteers. Since then, the hard Brexiteers had taken the lead in opposing the May government's Brexit plan. To the disappointment of the hard Brexiteers, the Chequers plan allowed the UK to selectively participate in the single market (retaining the free movement of goods) by creating a new free trade area and proposed a new facilitated customs arrangement to replace the customs union. David Davis thought it could only put the UK in an unfavourable position in Brexit negotiations, which would fall short of the Brexit demands (Davis 2018). Likewise, Boris Johnson noticed the 'self-doubt' over Brexit in the Chequers plan, which might result in the decline of the UK's status as a 'colony' of Europe (Mance 2018).

The Draft Withdrawal Agreement, which was released on 14 November 2018, ignited another wave of rebellion from the hard Brexiteers. Its most controversial arrangement was the Irish backstop designed to avoid a hard border on the Ireland Island and ensure the frictionless trade between the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In his resignation letter, Dominic Raab, who succeeded Davis as the Brexit Secretary, complained that the backstop would deprive the UK of the control over its border and free trade, making the UK trapped in a long-lasting arrangement but with no say in ending it (Raab 2018). The hard Brexiteers' opposition to the Chequers plan and the Draft Withdrawal Agreement exposed their ambition in pursuit of a Brexit deal without compromising parliamentary sovereignty. The grievances against the weakness of the May government in Brexit negotiations were fomented, resulting in a full-scale rebellion of the hard Brexiteers in the next phase featured by intensive voting in the parliament.



### The third phase: intra-party dissent at the zenith

The Conservatives' intra-party dissent reached its zenith after May concluded a seemingly soft Brexit deal with the EU in December 2018. There erupted a myriad of serious collisions between the hard Brexiteers and the soft Brexiteers, culminating in May's humiliating defeats in the House of Commons and the downfall of her premiership in June 2019. If there were no recurrent civil wars in the PCP, the UK would have left the EU by 29 March 2019.

Between January and June 2019, a total of 16 Conservative MPs holding ministerial posts resigned from the government due to their disappointment over the government's handling of Brexit, making May lose more ministers than any other recent Prime Minister had in a single year (Lloyd 2019, p. 8). To make matters worse, four Conservative MPs quit the party during this period, including three Breainers and one ultra-soft Brexiteer. On 20 February 2019, Theresa May suffered the first Brexit defections when three Breainers, including Anna Soubry, Sarah Wollaston and Heidi Allen, resigned from the Conservative Party to join the Independent Group in protest of the hard Brexiteers' virtual control of the party from top to toe. On 1 April 2019, the ultra-soft Brexiteer Nick Boles became the fourth Conservative MP who quit the party after his 'Common Market 2.0' proposal involving a Norway-style single market membership was defeated for the second time in the House of Commons.

The Conservative infighting was best manifested in the 52 parliamentary votes related to Brexit between 15 January and 9 April 2019. Of the 52 parliamentary votes, there were 30 votes directly concerning a variety of Brexit plans, which consisted of 6 votes on the government-supported Brexit plans (3 meaningful votes included), 11 votes on the alternative Brexit plans and 13 votes on no-deal Brexit (see Table 4).

The level of party discipline reached its nadir, as shown by the unprecedented number of rebellious Conservative MPs in the 30 parliamentary votes mentioned above. The Conservatives' intra-party dissent appeared most intense in the six parliamentary votes over the government-supported Brexit plans (three meaningful votes in particular). Around 65.6% of the Conservative MPs (208/317 MPs) cross-voted in at least one of the six votes, 74 of them cross-voted in at least three of the six votes. By contrast, there were 64 and 154 Conservative MPs voting against the government in at least one vote over the alternative Brexit plans and no-deal Brexit plans, respectively (See Table 5).

The Breainers appeared more united than the hard Brexiteers in opposition to the May government's Brexit plan. To prevent the May government from delivering Brexit, they overwhelmingly voted down May's Brexit plan in the three meaningful votes. Nine current or former Conservative Breainers were in the list, including Heidi Allen, Guto Bebb, Dominic Grieve, Jo Johnson, Justine Greening, Philip Lee, Sam Gyimah, Anne Soubry and Sara Wollaston. The Breainers rarely supported the revocation of Brexit in public. They, however, did not exclude the option of a second referendum. On 14 March 2019, the former Conservative MP Sarah Wollaston tabled a motion calling for a second poll, which was supported by Heidi Allen and Anna Soubry who quit the PCP. This motion was defeated by 334 votes to 85, in which 301 Conservative MPs voted against this motion. There were 10 Conservative



**Table 4** House of Commons votes over varied Brexit plans, January–April 2019

	Voting results
Government-supported Brexit plans	<p>First meaningful vote (15 January) defeated by 202–432</p> <p>Brady amendment (29 January) passed by 317–301</p> <p>Government Brexit motion (14 February) defeated by 259–303</p> <p>Second meaningful vote (12 March) defeated by 242–391</p> <p>Government motion on extending Article 50 (14 March) passed by 412–202</p> <p>Third meaningful vote (29 March) defeated by 286–344</p>
Alternative Brexit plans with a deal	<p>Labour frontbench amendment (29 January) defeated by 296–327</p> <p>Labour frontbench amendment (27 February) defeated by 240–323</p> <p>Labour frontbench amendment (14 March) defeated by 302–318</p> <p>Clarke motion (27 March) defeated by 265–271</p> <p>Corbyn motion (27 March) defeated by 227–307</p> <p>Beckett motion (27 March) defeated by 268–295</p> <p>Clarke motion (1 April) defeated by 273–276</p> <p>Kyle-Wilson motion (1 April) defeated by 280–292</p> <p>Boles motion (1 April) defeated by 261–282</p> <p>Second reading on EU (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill (3 April) passed by 315–310</p> <p>Third reading on EU (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill (8 April) passed by 313–312</p>
No-deal Brexit plans	<p>SNP amendment (29 January) defeated by 39–327</p> <p>Cooper amendment (29 January) defeated by 298–321</p> <p>Spelman-Dromey amendment (29 January) passed by 318–310</p> <p>SNP-Plaid Cymru amendment (27 February) defeated by 288–324</p> <p>Government motion to reject ‘no deal’ (13 March) passed by 321–278</p> <p>Spelman amendment (13 March) passed by 312–308</p> <p>Green amendment (13 March) defeated by 164–374</p> <p>Wollaston amendment (14 March) defeated by 85–334</p> <p>Beckett amendment (25 March) defeated by 314–311</p> <p>Baron motion (27 March) defeated by 160–400</p> <p>Cherry motion (27 March) defeated by 184–293</p> <p>Fysh motion (27 March) defeated by 139–422</p> <p>Cherry motion (1 April) defeated by 191–292</p>

The UK Parliament. 2019a, b, c. ‘Votes in Parliament’, 15 January–1 April

MPs abstaining in the vote. Of these 10 MPs, 8 were in the list of the Breainers or ultra-soft Brexiteers, such as Guto Bebb, Kenneth Clarke, Justine Greening, Dominic Grieve, Joseph Johnson, Philip Lee, Sam Gyimah and Antoinette Sandbach (The UK Parliament 2019a, b, c).

The hardline ERG was instrumental in defeating the May government in the parliamentary votes in the third phase. Of the 74 Conservative MPs voting



**Table 5** Conservative MPs voting against the government over varied Brexit plans

	The government-supported Brexit plans	Alternative Brexit plans with a deal	No-deal Brexit plans
Number of votes	6 votes	11 votes	13 votes
Number of MPs cross-voting in at least 50% votes	74	6	12
Number of MPs cross-voting in at least one vote	208	64	154

The UK Parliament. 2019a, b, c. 'Votes in Parliament', 15 January–3 April

against the government in at least three of the six votes, there were around 40 from the ERG. There were, respectively, 118, 75, 34 Conservative MPs who voted against the government in at least one meaningful vote, at least two meaningful votes and all three meaningful votes. Of the 118 Conservative MPs voting against the government in at least one meaningful vote, there were more than 50 from the ERG. Of the 75 Conservative MPs voting against the government in at least two meaningful votes, there were around 40 from the ERG. Of the 34 Conservative MPs voting against the government in all three meaningful votes, there were more than 20 from the ERG. The three meaningful votes also exposed the split within the ERG. Facing the risk of losing Brexit altogether, there were increasingly more ERG members who chose to support the May government in the second and the third meaningful votes.

The progressive reduction of the number of rebellious hard Brexiteers in the three meaningful votes indicates that most hard Brexiteers did not truly embrace a no-deal Brexit, and they sought to avoid an endless delay of Brexit in the meantime. Tracey Crouch, one of those hard Brexiteers who supported Theresa May in the second meaningful vote but rebelled in the first, claimed that the second proposal was 'flawed and imperfect' but better than a no-deal Brexit (Francis 2019). As one of the more than 40 hard Brexiteers who compromised to back May's third bid, Iain Duncan Smith made it clear that endless extensions would be more 'destructive' than May's unsatisfactory deal (Hansard 2019a, b, c, Column p. 721).

Although May secured 'legally binding' assurances from the EU to prevent a permanent backstop, she failed to win the support of the ultra-hard Brexiteers who rebelled in all three meaningful votes. To justify his rebellion in the third meaningful vote, the ultra-hard Brexiteer William Cash condemned the May government's 'capitulation' to the European Council by accepting the backstop arrangement (Hansard 2019a, Column 710–711). As another veteran ultra-hard Brexiteer, John Redwood regarded the Irish backdrop as the most unfortunate arrangement which rendered the withdrawal agreement to be 'a fully binding treaty with no exit clause', far from helping the UK to take back control (Hansard 2019a, b, c a, Column pp. 725–726).





## Conservative intra-party dissent over Brexit in the Johnson era

Boris Johnson took office as the new Prime Minister on 24 July 2019, triggering a host of ministerial resignations from the soft Brexiteers who were firmly against Johnson's seeming willingness to leave the EU with no deal. In terms of the number of MPs quitting the party, the Conservatives' intra-party dissent over Brexit in the Johnson era was more serious than that in the third phase of the May era. A total of 13 Conservative MPs voluntarily or were compelled to give up their party membership between 24 July and 6 November 2019, 3 of which joined the Liberal Democrats eventually (Walker 2019a, b, c). The three Brexiteers defecting to the Liberal Democrats were Phillip Lee, Sam Gyimah and Antoinette Sandbach, who rebelled against Johnson in a bid to prevent a no-deal Brexit on 3 September 2019 (Proctor et al. 2019; Walker 2019a, b, c).

In terms of the number of ministerial resignations and Conservative rebellions in the parliamentary votes, the intra-party dissent over Brexit in the Johnson era was less severe than that in the third phase of the May era. Only two senior ministers from the Johnson government, including Jo Johnson and Amber Rudd, resigned in protest of Johnson's hardline approach to Brexit. Both Jo Johnson and Amber Rudd were Brexiteers who openly supported a second referendum. There were a total of seven votes related to Johnson's Brexit plan in the House of Commons between 24 July and 6 November 2019, in which 79 Conservative MPs voted against the Johnson government in at least one vote (See Table 6). In stark contrast to the third phase in the May era, the hard Brexiteers rarely rebelled against the Johnson government in the parliamentary votes. During this period, only 5–8 Conservative rebels came from the ERG. A vast majority of the ERG members were loyal to the Johnson government.

Johnson suffered his first defeat in the House of Commons on 3 September 2019 when a cross-party alliance of MPs, including 21 Conservative rebels, voted for the Letwin motion. This motion aimed to seize control of the parliamentary timetable in a bid to prevent a no-deal Brexit by 31 October. As mentioned by Oliver Letwin, the motion on 3 September was 'the parliament's last chance to block a no-deal exit on 31 October' (Hansard 2019a, b, c, Column pp. 85–86). Johnson's decision to prorogue the parliament left extremely limited time to rush out a deal which could satisfy both the UK and the EU. Loss of confidence in Johnson's commitment to leaving with a deal contributed to a rebellion of the 21 Conservative MPs. As far as Philip Hammond was concerned, Johnson's promises on 'leaving with a deal' and 'leaving with no delay' were incompatible (Hansard 2019a, b, c, Column pp. 228–229).

Johnson suffered triple defeats in the House of Commons on 4 September in the second and third reading of the EU (Withdrawal) (No. 6) Bill (No. 6 Bill, hereafter) and his bid to trigger a general election on 15 October. The Johnson government voted down the amendment 19 to the No. 6 Bill together with a vast majority of MPs from the opposition parties by 495 votes to 65, despite 57 Conservative rebels, Theresa May included, voted for this amendment. The amendment 19 aimed to stop a no-deal Brexit on 31 October by asking the government



**Table 6** Conservative MPs voting against the Johnson government's Brexit plans

	Voting Result	Number of Conservative MPs cross-voting
Oliver Letwin Motion (3 September 2019)	The government was defeated by 328 votes to 301	21
EU Withdrawal (No. 6) Bill: Second Reading (4 September 2019)	The government was defeated by 329 votes to 300	1
Amendment 19 to EU Withdrawal (No. 6) Bill (4 September 2019)	The government succeeded by 495 votes to 65	57
EU (Withdrawal) (No. 6) Bill: Third Reading (4 September 2019)	The government was defeated by 327 votes to 299	1
Letwin Amendment (19 October 2019)	The government was defeated by 322 votes to 306	None
EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill: Second Reading (22 October 2019)	The government succeeded by 329 votes to 299	None
EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill: Programme (22 October 2019)	The government was defeated by 322 votes to 308	None

The UK Parliament. [2019a](#), [b](#), [c](#). 'Votes in Parliament', 3 September–22 October



to have a vote on Johnson's new deal or May's deal on 21 October and then seeking an extension from the EU purely in order to get the legislation through parliament (Port 2019). Johnson suffered another serious blow when all 11 Supreme Court judges unanimously ruled that his suspension of the parliament was unlawful on 24 September. After that, the House of Commons reconvened, throwing Johnson's Brexit plan into disarray.

Johnson's plan to pass his new Brexit deal, which was concluded with the EU on 17 October, was thwarted by the House of Commons on 19 October when a majority of MPs voted for the Letwin amendment, making Johnson unable to get the clean yes or no vote on his Brexit deal (Proctor 2019). In this vote, none of the Conservative MPs voted against the Johnson government. Only Caroline Spelman and Edward Leigh abstained in this vote. However, Johnson was doomed to lose in this vote, given the minority status of the PCP and the opposition of the 10 DUP MPs. It is noteworthy that there were ten former anti-hard Brexit Conservative MPs, who sat as Independent MPs, voted for the Letwin amendment.

The parliamentary votes over Johnson's new Brexit deal on 22 October had a mixed result. The Withdrawal Agreement Bill (WAB) passed its 'second reading' by 329 votes to 299 in the House of Commons, but on the same day Johnson's plan to fast-track the WAB in a three-day timetable was rejected by 322 votes to 308, resulting in his broken pledge to leave the EU by 31 October. In these two votes, the Conservative MPs were rather united, and none of the Conservative MPs (288 in total) cross-voted. Only one Conservative MP, Dame Eleanor Laing, abstained twice.

In the seconding reading, there were 25 Independent MPs, including 19 former Conservatives, who voted in favour of the WAB. Among them, 16 were soft Brexiters or Breainers who were ejected from the Conservative Party due to their support for the Letwin motion on 3 September. The support of 19 Labour MPs for the WAB was crucial for the success of the Johnson government in this vote. The Johnson government failed to win the vote on the programme motion when only 18 Independent MPs and 5 Labour MPs voted with the Johnson government. Of the 18 Independent MPs, 13 were former Conservatives, 10 of whom were expelled from the Conservative Party on 3 September. Six former Conservatives who voted for the WAB in the second reading, including Kenneth Clarke, Philip Hammond, Richard Harrington, Anne Milton, Antoinette Sandbach and Rory Stewart, withdrew their support for the Johnson government in the vote on the programme motion. Worse still, 14 of the 19 Labour MPs also withdrew their support on this occasion (Voce 2019).

Facing the imminent danger of his Brexit plan being fundamentally altered by the potential amendments from the opposition parties at the committee stage, Johnson had to pull the WAB and instead seek an early election. The House of Commons approved his fourth bid for a snap election on 12 December by 438 votes to 20 on 30 October. The parliament dissolved on 6 November, and the WAB would have to be reintroduced from scratch in the next parliament after the 12 December election.

The snap election of 12 December was a watershed moment for the Brexit process in the Johnson era, prior to which the alliance between the ultra-soft Brexiters and the Breainers stirred up another wave of rebellion to undermine the morale of the Johnson government as the Brexit deadline approached. Boris Johnson could be



regarded as the first Conservative leader to triumph over the European question and achieved the aim of breaking the Brexit deadlock by securing a majority of 80 seats in the House of Commons after the election (Cutts et al. 2020, p. 20; Sobolewska and Ford 2020, p. 4). The Labour Party experienced the most disastrous defeat ever since 1935, becoming too impotent to hinder the Johnson government's hard Brexit plan. More importantly, the PCP became much more united after the election. Boris Johnson faced no opposition to his WAB within the party, given that the former ultra-soft Brexiteers and Breainers either stood down before the election or lost their seats in the election. He managed to get his second WAB through Parliament in just five weeks, and not a single amendment was made into the final text of the WAB (James 2020, p. 24). None of the Conservative MPs quit the party and none of the Conservative ministers resigned over the issue of Brexit in Johnson's second tenure. Moreover, between 20 December 2019 and 22 January 2020, there were 19 votes on the WAB in the House of Commons in which none of the Conservative MPs rebelled against the Johnson government. On 31 January 2020, the UK officially withdrew from the EU, which brought the Conservatives' intra-party dissent over Brexit to a temporary end.

## Conclusion

The past four years have witnessed the ups and downs of the Conservatives' intra-party dissent over Brexit among hard Brexiteers, soft Brexiteers and Breainers. There remains a persistent perception gap among these three factional groups respecting British sovereignty, the value of the UK's EU membership and the UK's future relationship with the EU.

The hard Brexiteers, a majority of which affiliate with the ERG, was the most influential factional group in the intra-party dissent. Their relentless pursuit of a hardline Brexit dealt the heaviest blow to the May government and has pushed the PCP to become more radical and lean much farther right under the leadership of Johnson, edging closer to the Brexit Party. In the May era, a majority of ministerial resignations came from the hard Brexiteers.

The soft Brexiteers, accounting for a bulk of the Conservative MPs who voted Remain in the 2016 Referendum, took a more pragmatic and conciliatory approach towards Brexit between July 2017 and January 2020. This factional group was very much like a broad church providing shelter for moderate Conservative MPs who had an antipathy towards both a hard Brexit and a second referendum. The soft Brexiteers preferred a deal enabling the UK to maintain the closest possible relationship with the EU after Brexit. Most of them were ready to support either May's deal or Johnson's deal when facing a stark choice between a no-deal Brexit and a Brexit with a deal, no matter a hard one or a soft one. In the Johnson era, most ministerial resignations came from the soft Brexiteers.

The Conservative Breainers lost confidence in both the May government and the Johnson government's handling of Brexit. They were unsatisfied with both the soft Brexit deal and the hard Brexit deal, trying to reverse the result of the Brexit Referendum. Some radical Breainers even quitted the Conservative Party and



joined the Liberal Democrats in a strong protest of the Conservative government's Brexit proposals.

By purging the moderates and relentlessly pursuing a hard Brexit plan, Johnson has converted the Conservative Party into the actual 'party of Brexit' dominated by Right-wing populist Conservatism (Alexandre-Collier 2020, p. 5; Heppell 2020, p. 17). As Dominic Grieve sadly pointed out, 'We are seeing the complete collapse of moderate Conservatism' (Toynbee 2019). Johnson managed to keep the intra-party dissent under restraint and reunited the party by calling the snap election of 2019 and eventually completed Brexit. After numerous rounds of heated negotiations spanning ten months, the UK and the EU finally succeeded in reaching a post-Brexit trade deal days before the end of the transition period. No further division or any evidence of defiance in the Conservative Party could be detected in the vote on European Union (Future Relationship) Bill on 30 December 2020, and thus a possible return of the Conservatives' intra-party dissent over Brexit has been prevented.

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