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Focus

WILL ELECTION CALL
PROVE NIGHTMARE
FOR THERESA MAY?

By Florence Biedermann

When British Prime Minister Theresa May on April 18 called a snap general election, the smart money said she would be handed a crushing victory. May was deemed to have two massive advantages—the chance of portraying strong leadership for Brexit and, a rival, Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn, scorned by many voters as weak and fumbling. In such light, May was predicted to see her slender majority of 17 in the 650-seat House of Commons surge, quite possibly to triple figures.

But as the clock ticks down to polling day on Thursday, these expectations have become clouded by uncertainty. “She thought she was going to win comfortably, easily, and without much effort. She has been disabused of that,” said Iain Begg, a professor of politics at the London School of Economics (LSE). “She was expecting a very substantial increase in her majority. Anything short of 50 seats is going to look a very bad performance for her.” Campaign trail missteps and a better-than-expected performance by Corbyn have combined to melt May’s commanding lead.

‘Strong and stable’

Now, with just a few days of campaigning left, she may also face awkward questions about why Britain’s security services seem unable to thwart a string of terror attacks. In the past three months, three assaults in London and Manchester have killed 34 people and injured more than 200 others. On Sunday, pollster Survation gave the ruling party just a one point lead over Labor on June 4. Another poll, released a few days earlier by YouGov, even suggested the Conservatives could fall short of a majority and require the support of another party to govern—a so-called hung parliament.

As last year’s referendum on Britain’s EU membership showed, opinion polls can be hugely unreliable. Even so, talk of how Labor might be wiped out in some Brexit-backing seats has subsided, and some Conservative campaigners are saying candidates are struggling on the doorstep. May’s mantra of “strong and stable leadership” as Brexit looms has been the centerpiece of the Conservatives’ campaign. But the monolithic image has cracked in the face of an embarrassing policy U-turn and May’s starchy public manner.

‘Liar, Liar’

May backtracked on a manifesto policy on capping elderly social care, after a backlash from voters who feared they would have to sacrifice their wealth as they aged. The tabloids stingingly called it a “dementia tax.” “It has affected perceptions,” Paul Howell, a Conservative candidate in northeast England, admitted to AFP after the premier made a visit there last week. May has also come under fire for refusing to join a head-to-head debate with Corbyn—and when she does address the public directly, has been accused of offering only pat slogans.

She has sought to steer debate towards the question of who is best suited to get Britain through the arduous negotiations for Brexit. May likes to contrast her six years’ experience as interior minister with Corbyn’s lifetime of left-wing protest. But Brexit—for many a toxic and divisive issue—has featured far less in the campaign than might have been expected.

Instead, the biggest issues have been concerns about cuts to school funding and the overstretched National Health Service (NHS). Both heavily benefit Labor. Corbyn has promised a large increase in funding for public services, paid for by higher taxes for the rich and for businesses—an antidote to seven years of Conservative austerity. The state of the public services, and May’s U-turns, also feature heavily in a ska protest song, “Liar, Liar”, which reached number four in the UK charts on Friday.

‘Comfortable in his skin’

Just a few months ago, more of their supporters backed May as prime minister than Corbyn, a veteran socialist viewed as unelectable by a majority of his own Labor MPs. But he has put in a number of assured performances on television. “He has looked and sounded comfortable in his skin, in stark contrast to a prime minister who is brittle when she is not absent,” a Times columnist observed. He is a divisive leader, however, and some Labor candidates have said they are going out of their way not to mention his name to voters, stressing their own credentials. As the election appears increasingly to be a two-horse race, smaller parties are being squeezed out—except in Scotland, where the nationalist SNP is expected to retain most of the 56 out of 59 seats it won in 2015. The smaller Liberal Democrats look on course to make little progress, despite presenting themselves as the main anti-Brexit party. —AFP

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LONDON TERROR ATTACK: THE VICTIMS

By Robin Millard

Seven people were killed in Saturday’s terror attack in central London and 48 taken to hospital, including 21 people who were critically injured. Three attackers in a van veered into pedestrians on London Bridge before going on a stabbing rampage in Borough Market. They were shot dead by police. Those killed and wounded were from countries around the world. Here is what we know about the victims:

Canadian killed on bridge

Christine Archibald, a 30-year-old Canadian woman, died in her fiancé Tyler Ferguson’s arms after being hit by the van on London Bridge. “My baby brother lost the love of his life on the London Bridge,” Cassie Ferguson Rowe wrote on Facebook. “In a split second his entire life was ripped away from him. Hearing his painful sobs on the phone while he’s alone trying to deal with this tears me apart.” Newspapers said she was a charity worker. Archibald’s family said in a statement: “We grieve the loss of our beautiful, loving daughter and sister. She had room in her heart for everyone and believed strongly that every person was to be valued and respected. “She lived this belief, working in a shelter for the homeless until she moved to Europe to be with her fiancé. “She would have had no understanding of the callous cruelty that caused her death.”

French bistro worker

A Frenchman was killed in the attack, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said. The man has not yet been formally named by officials or his family. He had family links in the Brittany port town of Saint-Malo on the northwest French coast but was not from the town himself, local mayor Claude Renoult said. Local newspapers said the man lived in London and worked in Boro Bistro, a Breton-run restaurant in Borough Market. Flags in Saint-Malo are flying at half-mast.

Le Drian said that in addition seven French nationals were taken to hospital, four of whom were in a critical condition, while another French national was unaccounted for. “Heroic” officer, journalist among wounded - An off-duty,

unarmed London police officer who was having a drink after work rushed to help but is now in hospital in a serious condition, London police chief Cressida Dick said. “Without hesitation, wearing his normal clothes, he dived in and tried to assist and I’m afraid I was severely injured but utterly heroic,” she told BBC television.

A uniformed British Transport Police officer was one of the first on the scene after responding to calls for help from the public. He was stabbed in the face, head and leg and taken to hospital but his injuries are not thought to be life-threatening. A further two London police officers were wounded: A plain clothes officer received stitches to a head injury and a uniformed officer sustained an arm injury. Geoff Ho, a business editor at the Sunday Express newspaper, was outside the Southwark Tavern pub. He

tried to help a bouncer who was being attacked but was stabbed in the throat himself. The martial artist was wearing his British Lions shirt after watching the rugby match on television and was filmed being led away from the scene by a policeman, clutching his neck and with his shirt off. “Don’t know whether it was stupid or noble to jump in and break up the fight outside the Southwark Tavern, but two a****s trying to do over the lone bouncer on the door isn’t happening on my watch,” he wrote on Facebook. Sunday Express editor Martin Townsend said: “We are all hoping and praying for a speedy recovery.”

Oliver Dowling, 32, from Christchurch in New Zealand, was stabbed in the face, neck and stomach and his girlfriend was also injured, newspaper reports said. He was put into a coma for four hours of surgery. — AFP



LONDON: People leave flowers at a police cordon in the London Bridge area of London yesterday in tribute to victims of terror attack on London Bridge and the nearby Borough Market. —AFP

UK ELECTION: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Robin Millard

Marked by two terror attacks during the campaign, Britain’s snap general election is set to go ahead on Thursday and will decide who shapes the United Kingdom’s future as it leaves the European Union. Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, who came to power without a national vote last year after David Cameron’s resignation, called the election three years early after just one year in charge.

Why is the election important?

The vote will determine who gets to negotiate Britain’s departure from the EU over the next two years, and the strength of mandate that the government will have in parliament for five years. Britain’s new leader will also have to deal with the aftermath of a terror rampage in a night-life hub in London on Saturday night, the third Islamist attack in the country in less than three months. Britain takes a leading role in global anti-terror efforts and is a key member of the US-led coalition bombing Islamist State group positions in Iraq and Syria. It holds veto power at the United Nations, where it is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council along with China, France, Russia and the United States. It is a NATO member with a nuclear weapons deterrent, the world’s fifth-biggest economy by gross domestic product and a member of the G7 group of leading industrial powers and the wider G20.

How does election work?

There are 650 constituencies across the UK, meaning 326 MPs are needed for an absolute majority in parliament’s lower House of Commons. May had a slim working majority of 17 at the dissolution of the last parliament and called the election in a bid to strengthen her position going into

the Brexit talks. Each constituency is won on a first-past-the-post basis, meaning the candidate with the most votes in that seat becomes its MP. Despite the focus on the

party leaders, voters are not directly choosing their prime minister, only their local MP. A parliament is elected for a maximum of five years, meaning the next general elec-

tion must be held by June 2022 at the latest.

Voting

The polls are open from 7:00am (0600 GMT) until 10:00pm (2100 GMT) on June 8. British, Irish and Commonwealth residents aged 18 and over can vote, plus British citizens and Irish citizens from Northern Ireland living abroad who have been registered to vote in the UK within the last 15 years. Citizens must register to vote and voting is not compulsory.

The options

The main parties across the whole of Britain are the Conservatives (centre-right), led by May, and Labour (left), led by Jeremy Corbyn, followed by the Liberal Democrats (centre-left), the UK Independence Party (populist) and the Greens (left). The Scottish Nationalists (left), Welsh nationalists Plaid Cymru (left) and four parties from Northern Ireland also won seats at the last general election in 2015. Polls suggest the Conservatives are on course for victory. However, Labor might be able to form a government with backing from smaller left-wing parties. The main issues are Brexit, terrorism, the state-run National Health Service, immigration and the economy, according to polls. Some 3,303 candidates are standing. A £500 deposit is required to stand, which is refunded if candidates get five percent of the votes cast.

What happens afterwards?

The vote-counting begins immediately after the polls close and by dawn on June 9 the picture of who has won should be clear. As soon as possible, the head of state, Queen Elizabeth II, asks the person most likely to command the confidence of the Commons to become prime minister and form and administration. This will typically be the leader of the largest party and would happen only once the likely nature of the government is clear. — AFP

WHAT THE POLLS SAY

With just a few days to go until Britain’s general election, opinion polls reveal the outcome could be a lot tighter than had been predicted when Prime Minister Theresa May announced the vote six weeks ago. Although surveys show the gap between the main two political parties narrowing, May’s position as prime minister seems secure.

What the polls say

May surprised the country in April by calling for the snap election, seeking to increase her majority before Britain enters into two years of grueling negotiations over its departure from the European Union. Polls initially supported her gamble, giving her Conservative Party a double-digit lead over its nearest rival, the main opposition Labour Party. However, the Conservatives’ advantage has eroded over the campaign, with pollster Survation giving the ruling party just a one point lead over Labour on June 4. Another poll, released a few days earlier by YouGov, even suggested the Conservatives could fall short of a majority, meaning they would need the support of another party to govern.

Can the polls be trusted?

Pollsters got the outcome of the last general election, held just two years ago, very wrong. In the months leading up to the May 2015 ballot, polls consistently put the Conservatives and Labor neck-and-

neck, suggesting neither party would be able to form a government alone. But the Conservatives, who had been in a coalition government with the smaller Liberal Democrat Party, secured a majority in the 650-seat House of Commons.

A year later, polls also failed to correctly predict the outcome of the Brexit referendum, expecting the “In” vote to win. “One of the things that happened in 2015 is that the polls underestimated the age difference in turnout,” John Curtice, professor of politics at Strathclyde University said. That underestimated Conservative support among older voters. Pollsters have therefore adjusted their methodologies by widening their pools of respondents, asking them more questions and weighing the result with high-quality academic research done since the last election, explained Curtice. Why are predictions so tough?

Part of the reason is Britain’s electoral system.

“There is no automatic relationship between votes cast at the national level and seats won,” because of the first-past-the-post constituency system, Curtice said. The system makes it especially difficult for smaller parties with support evenly spread nationally to increase their share of seats in parliament. But smaller parties whose support is concentrated in key constituencies—such as the Scottish Nationalist Party—can do very well. — AFP