

International

Prankster and coughing fits mar Theresa May's speech

Critics, Twitter posters deride her performance

MANCHESTER: British Prime Minister Theresa May's bid to reassert her dwindling authority was marred yesterday by a calamitous keynote speech interrupted by repeated coughing fits, a prankster and even letters of her slogan falling off the stage. May had wanted to use the Conservative Party's annual conference to bring her divided party together and pitch herself as the only person able to deliver Brexit and keep opposition Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn out of power.

She started by apologizing for her botched bet on a snap June election which stripped her party of its majority in parliament, then pitched a revitalized "British Dream" for which she proposed fixing broken markets and uniting the country. But her flow was interrupted by British comedian Simon Brodtkin, who handed her a P45 letter, a document given to employees when they leave their job. The document had been "signed" by the comedian using the name of her ambitious Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

Then May began a coughing fit and was repeatedly forced to take drinks of water, even coughing into her glass, and was proffered a lozenge from her finance minister, Philip Hammond. While she was speaking, several letters fell off the slogans behind her on the stage. Some Twitter users seized on images of the missing letters to poke fun at the Conservatives: one said their glue was even failing to hold the party together.

The 61-year-old May won standing ovations for pressing on with the hour-long address, in which she took a more personal tone - saying she did not mind being called the "Ice Maiden" and describing her "great sadness" at not having children. Her speech sought to offer party activists a renewal of Conservative values while making new promises to a younger generation and those "just about managing".

"This is a Conservatism I believe in, a Conservatism of fairness and justice and opportunity for all, a Conservatism that keeps the British dream alive for a new generation," she told the cheering crowd. "That's what I'm in this for," she said, in a phrase she repeated at least eight times.

"That's what we must all be in this for." Brexit minister David Davis told Reuters it had been "a very good speech, it hit all the issues people care about". Other cabinet ministers also applauded May.

Many in the audience said her coughing fit and the sudden appearance by the comedian had helped to win them over. "Actually, if all that stuff hadn't happened, it would have just been another kind of wooden presentation," said Pippa Smith, a 26-year-old party member from London. "It was a good speech, but I think actually it did her a favor."

Opponents were less kind. Nigel Farage, the former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, said May was so useless that if she remained as leader then

British PM apologizes for botched vote

makers. Some activists fear that a divisive leadership contest would pave the way for an election that Corbyn's Labor could win.

May diminished

The conference in the northern English city of Manchester was a somber affair, light on policy and heavy on self-doubt. Despite coming second in the June election, the opposition Labor Party's annual meeting a week earlier was celebratory. After Labor's assault on some elements of capitalism, the backbone of Conservative policy, May sought to make the case for free markets and fiscal prudence. "The free market - and the values of freedom, equality, rights, responsibilities, and the rule of law that lie at its heart - remains the greatest agent of collective human progress ever created," she told members.

"Because there has rarely been a time when the choice of futures for Britain is so stark. The difference between the parties is so clear." She tried to compete with Labor on its pledges to voters, offering 2 billion pounds to build



MANCHESTER: Protester comedian Simon Brodtkin (right) gives a piece of paper written as a mock P45 (employee leaving form) to Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May as she was delivering her speech on the final day of the Conservative Party annual conference yesterday.—AFP

cheaper houses, proposing a cap on what she called "rip-off" energy prices and to ease the burden of student debt. Labor leader Corbyn said May had simply taken a few Labor policies and watered them down.

But most party members said that, rather than policy, they wanted to see a return of May's confidence, crushed in the June election, when she earned the nickname "Maybot" for repeating catchphrases. "We did not get the victory we wanted because our national campaign fell short," she told members. "I hold my hands up for that. I take responsibility. I led the campaign. And I am sorry." But she also told her party to unite, as divisions over Brexit

have come to the fore with a challenge by her foreign minister, Boris Johnson.

The run-up to May's speech was again overshadowed by Johnson, who once more dominated the airwaves after stunning some party members at the conference by saying Libya could become a new Dubai if it could "clear the dead bodies away". "Let us shape up and give the country the government it needs," May said. "For, beyond this hall, beyond the gossip pages of the newspapers, and beyond the streets, corridors and meeting rooms of Westminster, life continues - the daily lives of ordinary working people go on. And they must be our focus today."—Reuters

UK's Boris Johnson under fire for 'dead bodies' Libyan gaffe

MANCHESTER: British foreign minister Boris Johnson came under fire yesterday for saying Libya could become a magnet for tourists and investors - if it can "clear the dead bodies away" first. Reflecting on his August visit to Libya, strife-torn since the toppling of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Johnson said British businesses wanted to invest in the city of Sirte.

"They have got a brilliant vision to turn Sirte into the next Dubai," he told Conservatives attending the party's annual conference in Manchester, talking up its "bone-white sands, beautiful sea" and "brilliant young people". "The only thing they have got to do is clear the dead bodies away," he added, before laughing. Johnson's political career has been characterized by outspoken comments and personal controversy, which have won voters over but also led to despair among both detractors and colleagues.

His comments on Sirte, from where Islamic State militants were driven out in December, were slammed by shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry. "For Boris Johnson to treat those deaths as a joke - a mere inconvenience before UK business people can turn the city into a beach resort - is unbelievably crass, callous and cruel," said Thornberry, a Labor MP. "There comes a time when the buffoonery needs to stop, because if Boris Johnson thinks the bodies of those brave government soldiers and innocent civilians killed in Sirte are a suitable subject for

throwaway humor, he does not belong in the office of foreign secretary," she added.

'Unbelievably crass'

Johnson travelled to Tripoli and Benghazi, becoming the first British foreign minister to visit the latter city since 2011, the year Gaddafi was overthrown and killed in a NATO-backed uprising. MP Jo Swinson, the Liberal Democrats foreign affairs chief, said Johnson lacked the diplomatic skills necessary for his role and called on Prime Minister Theresa May to fire him.

"This latest unbelievably crass and insensitive comment about an issue of such importance is further proof Boris is not up to the job. May needs to get her house in order and sack him," Swinson said. Johnson later turned to Twitter to defend his comments, accusing people "with no knowledge or understanding of Libya" of wanting to "play politics with the appallingly dangerous reality in Sirte". "The reality there is that the clearing of corpses of Daesh (Islamic State) fighters has been made much more difficult by IEDs and booby traps.

"That's why Britain is playing a key role in reconstruction and why I have visited Libya twice this year in support," he said in a series of tweets. Tory minister Damian Green said that "lessons needed to be learned" from Johnson's comments.—AFP



MANCHESTER: Protester comedian Simon Brodtkin gives a thumbs-up towards Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson (right).—AFP

'Christ-like' Che Guevara wanted to die a martyr

PARIS: Ernesto "Che" Guevara was not just a guerrilla fighting for his ideals, he was a man "haunted by death" according to Argentine-born author and academic Marcela Iacub. Her psychological study of one of history's most celebrated revolutionaries "Le Che a mort" (roughly translated as "Che to the Death") - has just been published in France to mark the 50th anniversary of his death.

Guevara a legend?

"There are two legends about Che: the Castro legend and the 'Christ' legend which you see in Steven Soderbergh's 2008 Hollywood film 'Che,'" Iacub said. "For many Che became a Christ-like figure through the photograph of his body taken after he was killed. Maybe the myth would never have existed without those shots taken a few hours after his execution by the Bolivian army (in 1967).

"Because the photographers who had arrived at the scene were using flashes, Che's eyes seemed full of light," she said. "The whole world saw this perfect photo, where Che seemed like a Christian martyr because it appeared that he had been delivered to his executioners in a state of grace and serenity." But in fact his corpse "had been cleaned up", Iacub said, (his hair was cut and formaldehyde injected into his face). However, other photos taken "just after his execution were hidden for 20 years", Iacub said. "They are horrible and would never have led to such a cult."

Was Guevara idealistic?

"When he was a teenager he was neither a Communist nor politically engaged but he had decided to die very young as a martyr, and you can see that from some of his poems. "He has condemned himself to die as hero. In 'The Motorcycle Diaries,'" which Guevara wrote about his 8,000-kilometre trip through Latin America in 1952, "he already imagined his destiny. "I based my psychological analysis of him on his writings. I wanted to let him speak for himself all the more so because he was a good writer. I think he invented this idea of himself very early from reading adventure stories. "He set the bar high for himself probably because his family had been aristocratic but had fallen on hard times. First he wanted to save humanity by becoming a great scientist. When that didn't work out, he studied to be a doctor. He wanted to save humanity and was ready to die in doing so."

What is his legacy today?

"We are a much more pacifist society now than we were in the 1960s and 1970s. It is no longer accepted that armed struggle is a way of imposing political ideas," Iacub argued. "What remains of him is the myth of the martyr, the idea that if he killed and eliminated his opponents, it was to stop something worse happening. If it is not that, you have to ask why there so many other Communists been forgotten but not him?"

"In his relationship with death I believe that Che had perhaps something in common with today's jihadists—the hunger for glory, the idea that he was already dead... "The two phenomena are not exactly the same but there are resemblances, the idea that death is an act of propaganda to send a message. "He was looking for a total and definitive war with capitalism... he felt humanity should die fighting even if that combat ended in defeat."—AFP

Eyeing more states in EU

PARIS: Catalonia, which has threatened to declare independence from Spain, is only one of several regions in the European Union demanding more autonomy or even independence. Here is a rundown of some of the others.

Scotland, Britain

An historic 2014 referendum on leaving the United Kingdom shook the country to the core and resulted in a narrow 55 percent vote against a split. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, head of the pro-independence Scottish National Party, wants a second referendum once the outlines of the deal for Britain's exit from the European Union become clear. Scotland, home to 5.2 million people, has been semi-autonomous since 1998 with a devolved parliament that handles matters of education, health, environment and justice, while diplomacy and defense remain the domain of London. After scores of people were injured in Catalonia during its banned referendum on independence on Sunday, Sturgeon called on Spain to "change course" and condemned the police intervention.

Flanders, Belgium

Born in 1830 as an independent state to act as a buffer between France and Germany, Belgium is an uneasy mix of a Flemish-speaking, conservative north and a French, left-leaning south. With Flemish nationalist sentiment more powerful than ever, the separatist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) has emerged as the biggest party in the country and a key partner in the coalition government. Aiming

for the eventual creation of a Flemish republic, the N-VA believes it could emerge strengthened from elections in 2019. On Sunday Flanders' Minister-President Geert Bourgeois called on Madrid to start talks with "the legitimate leaders of a peaceful people".

Basques, Spain

The separatist group ETA was founded in 1959 to promote the culture of the Basque region straddling the French-Spanish border but veered into a violent independence campaign blamed for 829 deaths. The group carried out its last attack in 2010 and disarmed in April this year. Some former ETA members have joined a Franco-Spanish Basque political party called Sortu that is working for "full freedom" for the region's 2.2 million people. On Sunday 40,000 people demonstrated in Bilbao in support of Catalonia's referendum. The regional president, Inigo Urkullu, called on September 24 for the recognition of the Catalan and Basque nations.

New Caledonia, France

The South Pacific archipelago with a population of around 280,000 is due to hold a referendum by November next year on independence from France. A French possession since 1853, it reached an agreement in 1998 with Paris for greater autonomy although activists say this has yet to yield concrete results. New Caledonia boasts a quarter of the world's known resources of nickel but wealth is not evenly spread and backers of independence want major economic reform.



BARCELONA: A woman wrapped in a Catalan pro-independence 'Estelada' flag listens to Spain's King Felipe VI address to the nation on a television set in a bar on Tuesday during a general strike in Catalonia.—AFP

Corsica, France

The Mediterranean island of 330,000 people is a part of France with its own language and a troubled history. The separatist National Liberation Front of Corsica (FLNC) ended its armed struggle in June 2014 in favor of a political process and since 2015 nationalists have been leading the island's assembly. Corsica today has a special administrative status that grants its certain powers and retains a strong sense of autonomy. On September 22 the Corsica assembly underlined "the indisputable legitimacy of the government of Catalonia".

Faroe Islands, Denmark

Denmark's Faroe Islands, home to 48,000

people, will hold a referendum in April 2018 on a new constitution that would grant self-determination. The islands have been autonomous since 1948, although foreign affairs and defense are still the domain of Copenhagen.

Lombardy, Veneto, Italy

These wealthy regions in northern Italy are to hold non-binding consultative referendums on October 22 to ask voters if they favor more autonomy from Rome. Politicians in Lombardy and Veneto, which together account for nearly a third of Italy's economy, are fighting for a bigger share of tax income and, in some cases, for secession.—AFP