

How to depose a Conservative leader

What is the 1922 Committee and how might its members remove Theresa May from office?

By [Joseph Silke](#), Editor

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Theresa May faces the decisive fight for her political life next week as the so-called “meaningful vote” looks set to go against the Prime Minister’s deal [Image: Raul Mee]

Members of Parliament will vote on the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement with the European Union on Tuesday. The so-called “meaningful vote” will decide the course of the United Kingdom’s relationship with the continental bloc for many years to come. Up to one hundred of Theresa May’s backbench Conservative MPs, however, have declared that they intend to vote with opposition MPs against their leader to stop the deal becoming law. With no majority in the House of Commons, it is more likely than not that the deal will be voted down.

Many Conservative MPs have been biding their time since the disastrous result of the 2017 General Election, which saw the Conservatives lose their majority in the House of Commons, waiting to remove the leader who squandered the opportunity to trounce the opposition. The vote on Tuesday provides the opportunity not only to defeat what multitudinous MPs see as a rotten deal, but also a chance to finally change leadership. While many were initially content enough to wait and see what deal Mrs May could achieve, the product of the negotiations has cemented their desire for a change.



The so-called “meaningful vote” comes as a result of a proposed amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 tabled by Remain-backing Conservative MP Dominic Grieve which led the Government to concede an opportunity for MPs to vote on the Prime Minister’s deal [Image: Avaaz]

The Prime Minister’s political life now seems intrinsically linked to the deal that she has spent her tenure negotiating since she moved into Number 10 in 2016. Many believe a defeat of the deal in the Commons must precipitate Theresa May’s downfall as Conservative leader, and by extension Prime Minister. A defeated Mrs May might decide to resign willingly, but has so far often affirmed that she has no intention to step down. How, then, might her internal party rivals depose her?

Theresa May’s fate could well be determined by one of the most powerful groups in the realm many voters have never heard of: the Conservative Private Members’ Committee. The body, colloquially known as the 1922 Committee, is the collection of Conservative backbench MPs with the power to bring down any Conservative leader. Unlike in the Labour Party, MPs in the Conservative Party have it in their power to compel their leader to resign from office, disqualifying them from standing in the election that follows.



Sir Graham Brady is Chairman of the 1922 Committee [Image: Chris McAndrew]

This managed regicide can occur if 15 per cent of Conservative MPs submit a letter of no confidence to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee, currently MP for Altrincham and Sale West Sir Graham Brady. Under current parliamentary arithmetic, this is 48 Conservative MPs. An MP can submit his or her letter at any time, and these letters remain on file until they are withdrawn. All submissions occur privately, unless the MP decides to publicly declare it as many have. Only Sir Graham truly knows how many have been submitted.

If the 15 per cent are submitted to the Chairman, this automatically triggers a vote of no confidence in the party leader. The vote is won or lost by a simple majority. The Conservatives currently have 315 MPs in the House of Commons. If a vote of no confidence in Theresa May is triggered, this means 158 MPs will be required to force her to resign as party leader and Prime Minister. There is a saving grace, however, which is that all leaders who repel a coup attempt are immune from challenge for a whole year. This makes triggering a vote a risk for rebels.



The 1922 Committee was founded after the Conservative Party split from coalition with the Liberals and won the 1922 General Election under leader Andrew Bonar Law [Image: James Guthrie]

The 1922 Committee meets every Wednesday at 5pm and it began, as its name might suggest, following the 1922 General Election. From the beginning of the War Coalition in 1915 until 1922, the Conservatives had been in partnership with the Liberals. Now independent again, the group began as a dining club for new MPs elected in 1922. The group was eager to help steer the direction of the party after coalition and, as subsequent elections were held, the group expanded to become the collection of all backbench Conservative MPs we know the 1922 Committee as today.

Should Mrs May be forced to resign as party leader, she would automatically be unable to ‘command the confidence of the House of Commons’ and would be compelled to notify Her Majesty The Queen of her inability to govern in her name. The Conservatives would then hold a leadership election to decide who would become the next leader and Prime Minister. Steve Baker, the former Brexit Department minister and a key backbench organiser against the Prime Minister has said it is “now or never” for colleagues to submit their letters to Sir Graham and trigger a vote of no confidence.

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My letter to Sir Graham Brady of 22 October, when the Prime Minister's article in The Sun persuaded me we could not separate the person from the policy. Sadly, the situation has only worsened in the intervening period. pic.twitter.com/43HWJgneVb

— Steve Baker MP (@SteveBakerHW) **November 15, 2018**

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The last Conservative leader to be ousted from office by this method was future Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and prominent eurosceptic Iain Duncan Smith on 29 October 2003. The vote, which he lost by 90 votes against him versus 75 votes in support, forced him from the leadership barely two years

after he had taken the reins from William Hague. The subsequent leadership election was won uncontested by Michael Howard, after other potential candidates including David Davis and Ken Clarke declined to stand. Michael Howard would go on to lose the 2005 General Election and be replaced by David Cameron that year.

Theresa May cuts a lonely figure within her own party. The Democratic Unionist Party, which ostensibly supports the government she leads but has declared that they cannot support her agreement with the EU, have stated that the 'confidence of supply' arrangement with the Conservative Party can survive, but perhaps not with Theresa May herself. With her parliamentary allies deserting her and so many of her own backbench MPs in open rebellion, one wonders how she can survive. That being said, it has become the cliché of her premiership to prematurely predict Mrs May's demise.



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