

# Boris's masterstroke? The demise of the Tory Ultra-Remainers

*A year on since Anna Soubry, Heidi Allen and Sarah Wollaston defected from the Conservative Party to The Independent Group, CIB's communications manager **Dr Anna Bailey** reflects on the dramatic demise of the Tory Ultra-Remainers. Did Boris Johnson pull off an under-appreciated masterstroke? A longer version of this article originally appeared on Briefings for Britain.*

Incredible though it may seem, last Thursday, 20 February marked only a year since hardcore Tory Remainer MPs Anna Soubry, Heidi Allen and Sarah Wollaston defected to The Independent Group (later renamed Change UK).

A revolutionary change has taken place in the composition of the Conservative parliamentary party since then. The ultra-Remain wing of the party has been all but wiped out. In less than a year the fault lines of the party's divisions on Brexit have been completely transformed.

Change UK, meanwhile, is dead.

In order to appreciate the significance of the transformation that has taken place in the Tory party in last 12 months, it is sufficient just to read through the names in the list below. Less than a year ago, all 32 of them were Conservative MPs; a hard core of Conservative ultra-Remainers who hampered and undermined the Brexit process in a myriad of ways.

Today, not one of those 32 is an MP.

1. Heidi Allen \* ‡
2. Guto Bebb \* ‡

3. Richard Benyon \*
4. Nick Boles \* ‡
5. Alistair Burt \* †
6. Ken Clarke \* ‡
7. Alan Duncan ‡
8. David Gauke \*
9. Luke Graham
10. Justine Greening \* ‡
11. Dominic Grieve \* † ‡
12. Sam Gyimah \* † ‡
13. Philip Hammond \* †
14. Richard Harrington \* † ‡
15. Margot James \* ‡
16. Jo Johnson ‡
17. Oliver Letwin \*
18. Phillip Lee \* ‡
19. David Lidington
20. Jeremy Lefroy †
21. Nicky Morgan †
22. Anne Milton \*
23. Sarah Newton
24. Claire Perry †
25. Amber Rudd
26. Antoinette Sandbach \* ‡
27. Nicholas Soames \* †
28. Anna Soubry \* † ‡
29. Caroline Spelman
30. Rory Stewart \*
31. Edward Vaizey \* ‡
32. Sarah Wollaston \* ‡

*\* MPs who voted to block a no-deal Brexit on 31 October*

*† MPs named by Tim Shipman in Fall Out (2017) as part of 'Team 2019', the Europhile Tory version of the ERG formed in September 2016.*

*‡ MPs who voted to either revoke Article 50 or hold a second referendum during indicative votes (27 March & 1 April 2019)*

Yet, the trickle of defections was actually surprisingly slow after the much-hyped Soubry-Allen-Wollaston triple defection to TIG. Nick Boles crossed the floor a few weeks later on April Fools' Day, but without joining any party. There was then a gap of several months (and a change of prime minister) until another vocal ultra-Remainer, Dr Philip Lee, crossed the floor on 14 August, joining the Lib Dems.

The real catalyst for change only came on 3 September, less than six months ago. Twenty-one ultra-Remainer Conservative rebels supported an emergency motion taking control of the Commons timetable, to pass a bill blocking a no-deal Brexit on 31 October. It is a measure of the rebels' political seniority within the parliamentary party that only one of their number (Antoinette Sandbach) had not previously held a frontbench position. Johnson promptly responded by withdrawing the Conservative whip from the 21.

Johnson's (Cummings'?) decision was widely depicted at the time as a heavy-handed, knee-jerk overreaction that would only deepen the bitter divisions within the Conservative Party. But with the benefit of hindsight, it is beginning to look like a masterstroke. It cleared out the 'big name' ultra-Remainers: those with a high media profile who could act as ringleaders within the Conservative Party and carry others with them.

Perhaps the most significant departure from the Tory benches was that of Philip Hammond, who as Chancellor in the May administration ensured that HM Treasury continued its Project Fear output (see for example its claim that no-deal would cut UK GDP by 8%) and, according to numerous insider accounts, used his control of the purse-strings to obstruct adequate preparations for no-deal.

Amber Rudd was another highly significant departure. It is easy now to forget that, back in autumn 2017 when there were rumblings of a coup within the Conservative parliamentary party to replace Theresa May, Rudd was the favourite to

replace her, not Boris Johnson.

The former Attorney General Dominic Grieve QC was a different kind of threat. Grieve had masterminded many of Parliament's Brexit-blocking legal strategies in conjunction with senior figures in other parties. He was a dangerous conduit between the Tory ultra-Remainers and the other parliamentary parties, making it easier for the former to seep from the side of 'Government' to 'Parliament' as the great Battle for Brexit reached its climax in autumn 2019.

Ten of the rebels had the whip restored on 29 October following 'discussions between the chief whip and individual MPs' – as a Conservative spokesman tactfully put it. This presumably involved the MPs giving some kind of undertaking that they would not rebel again. Yet only four of the ten returned as Conservative MPs on 12 December (Caroline Nokes, Greg Clark, Stephen Hammond and Steve Brine). The other six decided not to stand for re-election.

For most of the six, including Churchill's grandson Sir Nicholas Soames, the decision to stand down would seem to be directly related to the experience of having the whip withdrawn, or at the very least to Brexit battle fatigue. Soames announced his decision the day after having the whip withdrawn; Richard Benyon followed suit a few days later. Margot James' statement in her resignation letter is telling:

"I was increasingly concerned about the drift of the party. *I realised this is the moment where I could break free of the Brexit mandate.*" [emphasis mine]

And so in the event, only ten Conservative MPs were forcibly removed from the party long-term. But the move brought Johnson something of a 'BOGOF effect' – for every MP forced out, at least one more MP was thereby discouraged from seeking re-election in December's election. The heavyweights were gone, and it was clear that the strength in numbers would no longer

exist. Once the number of ultra-Remainers with the Conservative Party lost critical mass, their dissolution was quick and arguably inevitable.