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Brexit: The Procedure and Timetable

On June 23rd, 2016, British citizens voted in favor of exiting the European Union (EU), commonly referred to as the British exit or “Brexit”. The EU is an economic and political union of 28 member states headquartered in Brussels, Belgium with its own currency, which is used by 19 of its member states. Following the vote to leave the EU after a 43-year union, Prime Minister David Cameron quickly announced that he would resign which sent the UK, long known for its political and legal stability, into its most uncertain period in decades.

Following the historic vote, Home Secretary and newly appointed Conservative Party Leader Theresa May was sworn in as the UK’s Prime Minister effective July 13th, 2016. Upon being named Conservative Party Leader days earlier, Ms. May, a “remain” supporter, was quoted as saying “Brexit means Brexit...there will be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it by the back door, and no second referendum.” Ms. May ascended to the office of Prime Minister unchallenged after British Energy Minister Andrea Leadsom and early favorite Boris Johnson, the former Mayor of London, dropped out of the race. Chancellor George Osborne and Justice Secretary Michael Gove were among other early contenders.

Ms. May is the second woman Prime Minister after fellow conservative Margaret Thatcher and has a political career that dates back to 1997 when she first entered Parliament. Ms. May was appointed Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities in May 2010 by then Prime Minister David Cameron as part of his first Cabinet. She became the longest serving Home Secretary in modern times with crime, policing, immigration and counter-terrorism being key areas of responsibility. Ms. May is considered to be a moderate in the Conservative Party and has a reputation as a serious-minded, hardworking and pragmatic politician among her colleagues and supporters.

Ms. May quickly began forming her new government after being sworn in as Prime Minister. Key senior cabinet appointments include Boris Johnson who was named Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss as Justice Secretary and Amber Rudd as Ms. May’s former role as Home Secretary. Additionally, Philip Hammond replaced Mr. Osborne as Chancellor, David Davis was named Secretary for exiting the EU (Brexit Secretary) and Liam Fox was named to the new post of Secretary of State for International Trade. Michael Fallon was retained as Defense Secretary.



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Depending on the nature of the Brexit, a variety of outcomes could affect crucial issues such as trade tariffs and agreements, access to the single market, adherence to EU regulations, control over immigration and contribution to the EU budget. The formal process of withdrawal from the EU can only begin after the UK invokes Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, a clause that allows member states to exit the bloc of nations and that thus far has never been used. An Article 50 declaration starts a two-year negotiating window to determine the terms for withdrawal. A majority of EU member states and the European Parliament would then have to agree on the details prior to separation.



Ms. May and other newly-appointed cabinet members have stated that Article 50 will likely be triggered before or by the beginning of next year to allow for time to carefully map out a strategy that would allow the UK to negotiate favorable exit terms and new trade and border deals with the EU. However, favorable terms could pose a problem for EU leadership as voters in other countries could push for similar outcomes. Formal rules can only provide a rough guide for how events will unfold as no country has ever left the EU, which leaves uncertainty for what the new political and economic relationship between the UK and Europe will be. The UK and the rest of the world will now look to Prime Minister May for leadership and vision for Britain's new relationship with Europe.

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