

## **Done and undone. David Cameron's built-on-sand legacy**

by Lily McNulty-Bakas ([@TheBigRedLil](#))



Once asked why he wanted to be Prime Minister, Cameron replied that he thought he'd be "good at it". One coalition, one short-lived majority government and a catastrophic exit from the European Union later, we can pretty much say Dave, that you weren't. His legacy will almost certainly be defined, like that of his role model Blair's with Iraq, by one word; Brexit. This though, is an inadequate representation of the 6 years that he was Prime Minister of the UK. Amongst a few policy victories there were many more miscalculations associated with his premiership and a politically and ideologically motivated austerity programme that inflicted pain on the most vulnerable in society that cannot be overstated, nor must it be overshadowed by Brexit. As Theresa May hammers home the message that she most certainly does not represent continuity, let's take a look at how Cameron wanted to be defined and the legacy he wanted, and what that legacy really is.

David Cameron, had up until 23<sup>rd</sup> June been known as the lucky PM. He slipped into government in 2010 without winning an outright majority but by forming a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

In 2011 he won the referendum against changes to the Westminster voting system followed in 2014 by the now notorious Scottish independence referendum. He won with a campaign known as Project Fear, which was also deployed for the EU referendum with different results. To top off his lucky run, the uber-privileged Etonian won an unexpected majority in the 2015 general election, the first Tory majority for 23 years, but then 13 months later, Cameron's luck runs out.

Surprisingly Cameron vowed to continue serving his constituents as MP until the next general election 2020. Finally he was signalling that he put importance in being a constituency MP and was honouring his commitments. You see a criticism consistently levied at our former PM from across the political spectrum is that he sees politics as 'a game' and cares little about anything other than keeping his job... Oops! Infamous for his U-turns, Cameron unveiled his last, and resigned as an MP in early September, so maybe it was just about the keeping the job after all. Although it probably also has to do with him finding it unbearable to witness the ruthless dismantling by May of many of his signature policies, like the grammar schools reversal, which he would have hoped would have been his legacy. Whichever or both of these factors persuaded him to abandon his commitment, we can be sure that it's not so that he's not a "distraction" to the new government, as Cameron doth protest.

In late July, the man who had spoken of forging a "new politics" where he pledged to "remove big money from politics", was then discovered to have nominated nearly 50 personal aides, political allies, pro-European campaigners and Tory donors to receive knighthoods and other rewards. A complete definition of cronyism if ever you needed one.

Interestingly, like his opponent Jeremy Corbyn of the Labour Party, he is seemingly derided across the political spectrum. Of course those who 'lost' the referendum on Brexit, and hold him ultimately responsible for bringing an unnecessary issue into the political agenda, and those who have opposed his austerity programme for years as a cynical way to protect the powerful and privileged at the expense of the most vulnerable, are happy to see him go. However, polls show people deem his successor to be more in touch with the public with 52%, in a ComRes poll in September saying May "understands what ordinary British people care about" more than Cameron. The right-wing press haven't been particularly kind to him and the eurosceptic wing of his party certainly don't miss him as they now frolic in giddy triumphalism guiding their puppet, May, over the rainbow and into glorious Hard Brexit Land.

During Cameron's six years at No. 10 he achieved some things that he can be proud of. He can be rightfully cast as a social liberal who fought against the conservatism of his own party by introducing same-sex marriage and pushing it through the Commons. He also agreed to spend 0.7 per cent of GDP on foreign aid, which had been a Labour target and both these achievements will be judged kindly by history. Now he would say that he started to balance the government's books, oversaw record levels of employment and led Britain to become the fastest-growing western economy. He undeniably brought his party out of the wilderness and into government twice and prevented the breakup of the Union, although now that scenario looks more likely than ever. Finally, he has a record of sustaining a higher standing in public opinion during most of his time as leader than most recent party leaders. However, born to wealthy parents and educated at Britain's most prestigious institutions, Eton and Oxford, Cameron was viewed by some as being too 'chillaxed' in his style. Former Conservative Party Treasurer Michael Ashcroft has argued that "the impression persisted that he [Cameron] was more interested in holding office than in using its power to achieve anything in particular". Now he did have political skills, he had charm and elegance, and a quiet authority which he used to project vague notions such as the 'Big Society' and 'One Nation' Conservatism, whilst George Osborne punished the poor and disabled for finance capitalism's failures. Cameron never settled on a larger purpose for his premiership. If anything he was incoherent projecting a hip moderate liberalism whilst crushing the most vulnerable with his economic austerity policies and espousing Christian family values for the shires.

The NY Times has correctly identified that the problem with Cameron and Brexit was that he became so consumed with placating the minority in his party that he "neglected to govern". This waste of a hard-earned Tory majority government means that most things that we can judge him on, besides Brexit, are located in the five years of coalition.

As mentioned previously, Project Fear was again deployed by Cameron but the declarations of economic catastrophe, weakening security and inferiority on the world stage were ignored by 17 million people, and you can't really blame them. Immigration, a key drive for Brexit, has been courted as a central policy by the Conservatives and Cameron for years. So he shot himself in the foot when he pledged he would get net migration down to the tens of thousands and never came near it, essentially handing the initiative to UKIP and eurosceptics in his own party. Furthermore, the inequality and suffering that the U.K endured during his six years in office made the EU

referendum impossible to win. It was a self-dug Catch 22 grave in that as the EU had been used as a scapegoat for the poverty and neglect felt by the UK public for years, Cameron could not credibly persuade the public otherwise without then exposing the truth that it was the ideologically driven devastating austerity measures that was responsible for their hardship.

By 2015 the Tories were claiming credit for economic stability and balancing the government's books, although many would argue that the early fiscal tightening counter-productively cut too deep and too fast. These public spending cuts disproportionately affected the poorest and most vulnerable leaving them financially worse off, with many resorting to food banks. Cameron's legacy is more than half a million more children in poverty since 2010, and that's not due to the "merry-go-round" of benefit dependency as Cameron calls it, two-thirds of the 2.9million children in poverty have parents in work.

Cameron's legacy is the "bedroom tax" that cut the housing benefit for public-sector tenants with a spare room, thereby forcing them to try to cover the cost themselves. His legacy is the disabled people who saw basic benefits cut that had allowed them a dignified standard of living. His legacy is an NHS that is at breaking point because of unsolicited top-down changes that were a waste of time and has left the service underfunded and overstretched. The legacy is the junior doctors who have had a contract imposition that they say wasn't safe and wasn't fair. His legacy are young people, who now have to pay £9000 a year for tuition at universities, and are finding it impossible to enter the housing market. His legacy is the xenophobia that increased year on year during his term and which he stoked by referring to refugees as a "swarm". It's his decision to go to war in Libya, a failure that a committee of mainly Tory MP's help the PM "ultimately responsible".

And Cameron isn't delusional, he knows his record is in tatters, which is why he said in June that we shouldn't try to pretend the EU referendum vote "was about the economy", by that he really means, we shouldn't try to correctly identify one of the main causes of Brexit as the poverty and neglect caused by his 6 years of brutal austerity.

**Picture:** a sand castle. **Source:** [Morguefile.com](http://Morguefile.com)