

# If Tory MPs wish to change the 1922 committee no confidence vote rules there is nothing standing in their way

- [MICHAEL SPICER AND ARCHIE HAMILTON](#)

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Sir Graham Brady (centre), chairman of the 1922 Committee, announces that Theresa May has survived an attempt by Tory MPs to oust her CREDIT: PA

The rules surrounding the leadership of the Conservative Party were once unwritten, governed by conventions and overseen by party grandees.

Times have changed. But in doing so the rules have developed their own folk law. ‘Stalking horses’, ‘magic circles’ and ‘men in grey suits’ all feature in any discussion.

It is as the latter we write – former Chairmen of the Conservative Party’s 1922 Committee – to set a few matters of wider importance straight.

The key principle of the rules as developed in our time places the primary responsibility for the leadership of the party where it should be and has always been: Squarely with the Conservative Party’s Parliamentary Party.

The current rules are not designed to facilitate the toppling of a sitting Prime Minister, but nor are they designed to protect a Prime Minister in office from the Party’s elected representatives in the House of Commons.

The rules as they stand are the product of evolution. There was a time when the Conservative party leadership rules were enveloped in mystery. A ‘magic circle’ of senior MPs oversaw a process that saw new leaders ‘emerge’. The emergence of all Conservative Prime Ministers up until Churchill, Eden, Macmillan and Alex Douglas-Home happened without the need for MP’s ballots. This changed in 1965.



CREDIT: AFP

It became accepted that Conservative MPs had the ultimate responsibility for the choice of their leader. These new rules led to challengers – the ‘stalking horses’ and serious challenges to sitting Prime Ministers. One such was challenge led to the downfall of Margaret Thatcher despite her gaining 54.7 per cent of the Parliamentary Party.

It was the reaction to our Party’s defeat in 1997 that oversaw the latest set of rule changes. The 1922 Committee oversaw new rules that allowed for no confidence votes in the leadership, but only if 15 per cent of the Conservative Party MPs requested one. The Stalking Horses were put out to grass. It was this rule that triggered the no confidence vote on 12th December last year. The Prime Minister went on to win a majority confidence vote. The 1922 Committee rules state that if a Conservative Leader gains a simple majority of MPs in such a vote then “no vote of confidence shall be called for a period of at least twelve months”.

This rule has been interpreted as being immovable. It is reported that in order to change this rule the whole Conservative Party Constitution must be opened, a Nation Convention called and even that a petition of 10,000 members is required. This is not the case.

The Conservative Party, does have a constitution, but that is largely confined to the management of the national party; local associations; conventions; staff; finance and the like. It was never foreseen that the Party at large would have primary responsibility over the choice of a sitting Prime Minister. MPs as represented by the 1922 Committee should and do bear this responsibility.

We make no comment on the current Prime Minister or what, if anything, the 1922 Committee should do in the current situation. We only note that there has been discussion concerning the current Brexit impasse citing the supposed inflexibility of the rules as an impediment.

We would like to make two simple points. Firstly, the 1922 Committee drew up the current rules concerning confidence votes and have thus have ownership of them. These rules state that there is a 12 month period. This may or may not be a good provision. However, if MPs believe that this rule is an impediment to their proper function and responsibilities for the leadership of their Party it is quite within their right to change these provisions.

While as Conservatives we understand that properly functioning organisations require rules, we also understand that rules are there to serve their organisation. They are not the master. Conservative MPs are responsible for their party. If they wish a change these rules there is nothing standing in their way.

**Michael Spicer (now Lord Spicer) was chairman of the 1922 committee, 2001- 2010**

**Archie Hamilton (now Lord Hamilton of Epsom) was chairman of the 1922 committee, 1997 - 2001**