



From fighter to quitter: the ‘weird’ rise and fall of Liz Truss

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It may not have been the most troubling feature of Liz Truss’s premiership but the need to check whether she was still in office was a gathering distraction for anyone, including her cabinet colleagues, interested in who was running the country. A month ago, after the disastrous mini-budget, no one was sure if she could survive until the next election. Thereafter, the timeframe rapidly narrowed until the question was whether she would last the day.

There was a brief holiday from reality during the party conference in Birmingham, when the ship had already hit the iceberg and yet, in a surreal atmosphere of denialism, the band played on. But on Thursday, six days after she had been forced to sack her ideological soulmate Kwasi Kwarteng as chancellor, and the day after home secretary Suella Braverman resigned, we got the answer.

But how did a politician with 12 years’ experience in government, almost 10 of them in the cabinet, someone who’d served as foreign secretary, international trade secretary, justice secretary, environment secretary and chief secretary to the Treasury, come to make such a historic mess of the top job?

When asked to describe Truss, two former Conservative government ministers both used the same word: weird. “She doesn’t have any friends. She’s just weird,” one said. “She sits far too close to you,” said another. “And when she talks to you, she keeps repeating your name. It’s weird.”

The most common definition of weird is to do with being unnatural, strange or awkward, all pejoratives that have been aimed in Truss’s direction. There is, though, another meaning that stems from the word’s Middle English usage, which is about having “the power to control destiny”. Although the politicians used the word in the former sense, perhaps it is in the archaic meaning that Truss would have most recognised herself.

For there was nothing inevitable about her progress. The eldest of Cambridge graduates John and Priscilla Truss's four children, Truss likes to tell the story of when, as a young girl, she was given a "junior air hostess" badge on a plane journey, while her brother was awarded a "junior pilot" badge. She says this patriarchal attitude made her more determined to succeed.

Arguably, a more revealing anecdote comes from her brother, who has said that Truss "had to win" at Monopoly, and if defeat looked imminent, she would "disappear rather than lose".

If from a young age she had a sense of herself as someone who was going places, it may have had something to do with her peripatetic family. By the time she was 13, she had moved from Oxford to Paisley in Scotland, and lived in British Columbia in Canada, and in Leeds. This was due to her academic father, who is emeritus professor of pure mathematics at the University of Leeds, and apparently not a fan of his daughter's politics.

Her mother, who has a doctorate in social history, was a nurse and teacher, and a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament with whom Truss attended Ban the Bomb protests as a child. Truss has described her parents, who divorced in 2003, as "left of Labour".

At her recent party conference, she spoke of herself as "the first prime minister of our country to have gone to a comprehensive school". The claim has been disproved by those who note that both Gordon Brown and Theresa May went to comprehensive schools. In any case, Truss has said that Roundhay School in Leeds "let down" children by teaching them "about racism and sexism" with "too little time spent making sure everybody could read and write".

Again, the notion that Roundhay, a consistently "outstanding" school, was unacademic has been strenuously contested, as has Truss's claim that her comfortable middle-class neighbourhood in Leeds was "at the heart of the red wall". Truss is not the first politician to massage her biography but she's unusual in attempting to establish her rightwing credentials by making her formative years seem more underprivileged than they were.

As with so many British prime ministers, the Truss story began in earnest at Oxford, where she read philosophy, politics and economics at Merton. She became president of the university Liberal Democrats, and a member of the national executive committee of the party's youth and student wing. Also at Oxford and another Lib Dem activist was Mark Littlewood, now director general of the free market thinktank most associated with Truss's political outlook, the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA). He remembers her as a "dynamo who exploded on to the political scene". At the time, the mark of a student's renown was how often they were mentioned in the John Evelyn gossip column of *Cherwell*, the university newspaper. Truss was a regular fixture.

She was forthright and outspoken, quite unlike other students who were looking to climb the ranks of political societies – the kind of people, says Littlewood, who would think twice, before saying nothing.

"If you spent any more than three minutes in her company, you had no doubt at all about what she thought of the particular topic you might be discussing," Littlewood says.

For others, like Neil Fawcett, a fellow committee member of the Lib Dems' student national executive, this trait of certitude came across as dogmatic and unbending. "She always had very strong views on everything," he recalls. "Sometimes they were based on knowledge or experience but quite often they weren't. "My main memory is that if she came up with something that simply wasn't going to work, and I was in a position where I had the experience to know that it wasn't going to work, she would still argue the case anyway.

"She was absolutely not for turning, whatever the evidence. I thought of that when I read about Treasury civil servants who have been completely ignored because she knew better."

She was more concerned to make a splash, he says, than to get things done. Littlewood suggests, in her defence, that Truss was not much interested in "delivering leaflets". Instead she spoke out against the monarchy at a Lib Dem conference, and protested against the BNP in Tower Hamlets.

While campaigning to become party leader, Truss made light of her youthful infatuation with the Lib Dems. "We all make mistakes," she told a hustings in Eastbourne. "Some people have sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, I was in the Liberal Democrats. I'm sorry."

But Littlewood insists that the Lib Dems made more sense at the time to Truss because the Conservatives were authoritarian on civil liberties and Truss was primarily interested in personal freedom. This, he says, has been the constant in her political career.

"People say she was a Liberal Democrat and now she's a Tory. She was a remainer and became a Brexiter. She was a republican and she's a monarchist. But actually her overarching view of the world has always been a classical liberal one, that the state is too big and interfering in our lives," he says.

She joined the Conservatives in 1996 – when the "back to basics" morality campaign was still alive, if not very well – and 13 years later, it was her local Tory party that wanted to interfere in her life.

After working as an accountant for Shell, getting married to fellow accountant Hugh O'Leary, becoming economic director for Cable and Wireless and then deputy director of the Reform thinktank, she was selected to be the Conservative candidate for the safe seat of southwest Norfolk.

Several constituency association members, dubbed the "Turnip Taliban", objected, arguing that Truss had not disclosed the extramarital affair she had had with the Conservative MP Mark Field. A motion to cancel her candidature was defeated after the then-leader David Cameron came to Truss's aid.

The knowledge of the affair with Field has hung around Truss in a way that it probably would not have done with a male politician. There is a welter of parliamentary gossip and tall stories concerning Truss that MPs routinely refer to, off-the-record, although no one can ever name a source or witness. "She flirted with every man she comes across," says one (female) former Tory minister. "She almost even flirted with women." At the same time, so many of her colleagues

and former colleagues – including the one who speaks of her flirting – report that she was unapproachable and, as another put it, “she doesn’t have great interpersonal skills”.

What most MPs agree that she has always had is ambition. Four years after entering parliament in 2010, she joined the cabinet as environment secretary. The most attention she received in the post came with a bizarrely emphatic speech she gave to the Tory party conference.

“We import two-thirds of our cheese,” she told a bemused hall, “that is a disgrace.” She spoke the last half of the sentence as if there were full-stops between each word, an oratorical choice that cemented the “weird” reputation.

When Theresa May became leader, she replaced Michael Gove with Truss as justice secretary and Lord Chancellor, making her the first woman to hold either post. One insider says that it was obvious that “she was an entirely unsuitable appointment for the job”.

The justice minister, Lord Faulks, immediately resigned, complaining that she lacked the clout to stand up for judges. Sure enough, when the *Daily Mail* branded three high court judges “enemies of the people”, for ruling that the government required the consent of parliament to execute Brexit, Truss said that it was not her job to criticise newspapers.

Her other achievement was to recalculate the discount rate for personal injuries, leading to what the insider calls “a catastrophic increase in the size of claims”, so costly to the NHS that within two years the changes were recalculated again.

May then demoted Truss by making her chief secretary to the Treasury, which was not a full cabinet position. A cabinet member at the time recalls Truss as someone who wasn’t above undermining the government. “She was one of the worst leakers in Theresa May’s cabinet,” the former minister says. “She showed zero loyalty to May and perhaps zero understanding that he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.”

Loyalty is a flexible word in Westminster. Truss was loyal to Kwarteng, with whom she said she was in policy “lockstep”, but she soon sacked him to save herself. Former colleagues say her allegiance to Boris Johnson, who she voted for as leader, was about self-advancement rather than a shared vision – Johnson promoted her to international trade secretary before giving her the job she had expected to get, foreign secretary.

When she became prime minister herself, she selected a cabinet that was even less representative of the parliamentary party than Johnson’s. One former minister who was excluded says it was “full of sycophants and loyalists”. She made Thérèse Coffey, said to be her only friend in parliament, her deputy, a role for which she seemed almost as ill-qualified as that of health secretary.

While Truss may appear to possess an unshakeable self-confidence, many of her appointments spoke of insecurity, as well as debts that required paying. “Never forget that only 50 MPs voted for her in the first round of the leadership election,” says one former minister, who puts Truss’s ultimate triumph down to the fact that “she wasn’t Rishi Sunak”.

Perhaps, but, she still managed to get enough support from MPs to make it to the membership vote, a vote which she won comfortably. She did it without being a good speaker or communicator, without being clubbable, and having been a remainer. She must have had something going for her?

“Oh, she’s very clever,” the former minister acknowledges, admonishing those who think otherwise. “She may not be great at understanding nuance, and her political antenna is not very good, but her political skill is in being a survivor.”

Both as foreign secretary and prime minister, Truss was an outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin and his invasion of Ukraine. She expressed a wish to force Russia’s economy “back into the Soviet era”, and went so far as to support, against international law, British citizens volunteering to fight.

While she may not be one of life’s natural diplomats, nor was she by temperament a flag-waving jingoist. She disliked the Russian regime for many of the obvious reasons, but perhaps most of all because the autocracy crushes or at least corrupts enterprise.

It’s this issue that has long been the key to Truss. The Tory right is largely divided between the Eurosceptics and nationalists who supported Braverman’s anti-immigration stance and the libertarian wing which sees anything good for economic growth as good in itself. Truss is firmly in the latter group.

If anything, she has more in common with that strand of American conservatism that thinks of government as a sinister intrusion on personal liberty. It was while she was at the Treasury that Truss made a trip to America in which she met with a series of libertarian thinktanks, including the Cato Institute, co-founded by one of the billionaire Koch brothers, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation.

In her recent conference speech, Truss took aim at thinktanks that she said promote vested interests, but she had a long track record of engagement with groups that seek to remove government protections and regulations, the better to enable profits for certain vested interests, not least in the tobacco and carbon fuel industries.

“If I were fortunate enough to be prime minister of this country,” says Clive Lewis, who was her shadow at the Treasury, “you could probably work out from the kinds of groups I meet what kind of agenda I have. And the same obviously applied to Liz Truss, only more so.”

One thinktank Truss regularly returned to was the IEA, although many of her meetings were struck from the public record, having been recategorised as “personal discussions”.

Littlewood recalls that a few weeks after she became an MP, Truss walked into his office at the IEA and informed him that he was going to help her in a new project.

“‘Mark,’ she said, ‘we are going to set up a new caucus of free market liberals within the Conservative parliamentary party,’” he recalls, adding that it was a “classic Trussy fait accompli”.

Over the following 12 years, says Littlewood, she attended “more IEA events than any other single member of parliament. Politicians are involved in the art of the possible and thinktanks in thinking the unthinkable. But in broad ideological overview, there’s not really a cigarette paper between us.”

That Truss is a proponent of free markets and lower taxes, and against government intervention, has never been a secret. In 2012, she, along with her co-authors Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab and Chris Skidmore, published a book arguing for increased economic growth, lower taxes and a reduced welfare state, and against government regulation, bureaucratic inertia and the laziness of British workers.

Britannia Unchained is a remarkable document, not least because it was written in the long shadow of the financial crisis of 2007-8. Many observers believed that the near-collapse of the banking system, and its crippling expensive bailout by taxpayers, was the product of too little government oversight and an ethos in the financial markets that encouraged reckless behaviour and richly rewarded greed.

But not the authors of *Britannia Unchained*. They spared barely a word for the excessive risk-taking of Wall Street and the City of London, or the devious methods they devised to conceal bad debts. As far as they were concerned, the real culprit was the Labour government, not for its lack of regulation, but its failure to cut spending, which left it exposed when having to borrow to plug the monumental hole in banking finances.

Whatever is said of Truss, there can be no doubt that she inherited a difficult political and economic situation, with a cost of living crisis, the war in Ukraine, a huge national debt following the pandemic, and the forecast of a major recession.

But, says Littlewood, she played a bad hand badly. He remains bewildered about why she staked so much political capital on reducing the top rate of income tax. “Why select that as the hill you want to die on?”

Similarly, he doesn’t understand why, if she was looking for tax reductions, she didn’t cut VAT, which he argues would have been counter-inflationary and broadly progressive. He puts her undoing down to her tendency to rely on just a handful of trusted advisers, which may have worked when she was trade secretary, but not as PM. “That’s when you need squadrons of very senior and experienced people advising you,” he says.

Of course, squadrons of experienced people *did* advise her not to cut taxes – perhaps that’s why she didn’t consult them.

“I was utterly amazed by the complete inability to politically execute anything,” Littlewood adds. “It was totally shambolic.”

It makes you wonder what went on in all those IEA meetings, if Littlewood was taken so thoroughly by surprise. But perhaps a bigger mystery is why both Truss and Kwarteng ignored their own strictures in their 2012 book *Britannia Unchained* about never borrowing your way out of trouble.

Could it be that the woman who has always prided herself on doing what she's told she shouldn't do, the politician who loved to view herself as the enemy of the status quo, really did begin to believe that she had the power to control destiny?

When she gave the press conference nine days ago announcing that she had sacked Kwarteng and appointed Jeremy Hunt, she appeared broken, as if she were already mourning her political career. On Thursday, outside Downing Street, although she looked exhausted as she delivered the news of her resignation, an incongruous smile played on her lips and she seemed almost relieved. She was quitting the Monopoly game before she was forced out.

It's not easy to see where she goes from here. Although we've grown used to short-lived Tory PMs in recent years, there is no precedent for what to do after resigning due to total incompetence after just six weeks. At the moment, she is a toxic political brand, and the new leader won't want her anywhere near the cabinet.

She could bide her time and attempt a comeback in some shadow role when her party returns to opposition. But even for someone with the thickest political hide, who often seemed detached from the maelstrom she created, that's an awful lot of humiliation to live down. Given her limitations as an orator, it's doubtful she'll take to the public speaking circuit. And if she were to return to her business life, what company would feel comfortable appointing her as economic director? Perhaps a thinktank might be the answer.

"I think she needs to disappear gracefully," says an ex-minister. "She looks shattered and on a human level you can only feel sorry for her and her kids."

Whatever unfolds from here, hers has been a tale of almost classical hubris. In thrall for so many years to free enterprise, she seemed to expect as prime minister that the compliment would be repaid. Instead, she received from the hedge fund managers and bond traders she lionised an ignominious lesson in the most basic rule of capitalism: you can't buck the market.