

This woman is seen as a future rival to Boris Johnson

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October 27th, 2021

It is hard to make a splash as the British Secretary of State for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. But in her speech to the Conservative Party Conference in 2014, Liz Truss gave it her best shot. Awkward and enthusiastic in equal measure, Truss rattled off some of the highlights from her agriculture brief before launching into a section on British produce that would catapult her into internet infamy.

“We import two thirds of our cheese,” Truss said, followed by a long pause for dramatic effect. “That. Is. A. Disgrace,” she said as a look of true revulsion flickered over her face.

Liz Truss is tipped as a future candidate for party leadership. **Getty**

It became an instant meme after being picked up by the satirical BBC quiz show *Have I Got News For You*.

Seven years and a number of cabinet positions later, Truss is now a darling of the conservative grassroots movement and is tipped as a future candidate for party leadership. Earlier this month, she took to the stage in front of a room of blue lanyards at the party’s conference to give her maiden speech as Britain’s new foreign secretary.

Still no great orator, Truss’ speech was nevertheless more restrained and refined. The pantomime pauses were gone, but Truss’ enthusiasm for Brand Britain was still evident as she outlined her hope to make the country “more competitive, bolder, and more forward-leaning than any other country on Earth.”

Britain is in the midst of redefining its role on the world stage after leaving the European Union. And Truss is charged with carrying British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s message of a buccaneering “global Britain” overseas as the country finds itself at odds with its neighbours and beset with crises at home. Already, labour shortages, empty supermarket shelves, and spiralling energy costs have evoked comparisons to late 1970s turmoil.

Those who know Truss describe her as a staunch free marketeer and relentless optimist. Britain, she once said, is a nation “of Airbnb-ing, Deliveroo-eating, Uber-riding freedom-fighters”. Steering the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office through choppy waters will require every bit of her famous vim. But can Truss sustain it through what is set to be another “winter of discontent”?

An unfashionable move

Truss joined the Conservative Party after graduating from Oxford’s Merton College in 1996, a year when it was a particularly unfashionable move. Britain’s other major party, the Labour Party, was on the ascent as it tacked to the centre under then-party leader Tony Blair. The following year, Labour gave the Conservatives a drubbing in the general election that ended the party’s 18-year streak in power. “That was basically the utter nadir” for the Conservatives, says Mark Littlewood, director-general of the Institute of Economic Affairs, a libertarian think tank. Truss’ decision to join the Conservative Party in her early 20s was all the more unusual given her parents, who she has described as being to the left of the Labour Party.

In Britain, which remains deeply riven by class, Truss’ own biography straddles two traditions within the Conservative Party. She attended Oxford, but her state schooling and northern roots also satisfy the party’s romanticisation of the self-made. It wasn’t until the 2017 general election that the majority of Conservative members of parliament were not educated at fee-paying schools.

“She can work within the party’s traditions and yet bring something new,” says Bronwen Maddox, director of the Institute for Government. “And to the extent that there is a formula for success in the Conservative Party at the moment, that probably comes quite close to it.”

Truss is charged with carrying Boris Johnson’s message of a buccaneering “global Britain”. **Bloomberg**

Born in Oxford in 1975, Truss’ family moved to the outskirts of Glasgow, Scotland, when she was four years old. The town of Paisley was reeling from the manufacturing industry’s collapse, the region’s economic bedrock. Truss’ father, John, a professor of mathematics, taught at Paisley College of Technology. Her mother, Priscilla, was a nurse, teacher, and activist with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which advocates against nuclear weapons. In an interview with the BBC’s Nick Robinson in 2018, Truss recalled making a pretend bomb out of old rolls of carpet to take along to marches in Paisley, where the crowd chanted for then-British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to resign: “Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, out, out, out!”

“For me, it wasn’t ballet or My Little Pony. It was saving the planet and the CND,” she recalled of her childhood in the infamous 2014 so-called cheese speech.

During the 1983 general election, Truss was selected to play Thatcher in a mock election at West Primary School in Paisley. She got no votes and didn't even vote for herself. "Even at that age, we knew it was simply unpopular to be a Tory in the west of Scotland," she told the *Scotsman* in 2018.

A grasp of maths

The family later moved to Leeds in West Yorkshire, England, where Truss attended a state secondary school.

This experience laid the foundation for Truss' rejection of what she would later call the "soft bigotry of low expectations" as well as her distaste for what she describes as identity politics. This came to the fore when she was appointed minister for women and equalities in 2019, a role she continues to hold as foreign secretary. "At my comprehensive school, we had lessons in racism and sexism, but there was too little effort ensuring everyone had a grasp of maths and English," Truss wrote in an op-ed for the *Daily Mail* in 2020.

Although she didn't inherit her parents' liberal politics – her father reportedly refused to campaign for her first election – Truss' father's career in mathematics appears to have left a lasting imprint.

As undersecretary of state for child care and education in 2014, Truss led a fact-finding mission to Shanghai to understand how Chinese schoolchildren repeatedly topped international league tables in math.

When interviewing people for her political team, Truss makes a point of asking if they have sat for their A-level math exam, an advanced exam taken in the senior years of English high schools. "That mathematical, economist streak in her is very strong," says a source close to the foreign secretary.

In 1993, Truss enrolled at Merton College at the University of Oxford to study philosophy, politics, and economics (PPE), a degree that has long been a gateway into the British elite.

In her political journey from a left-wing upbringing to becoming Margaret Thatcher 2.0, as some have described her, Truss had a brief dalliance – a "youthful error," as she has described it – with the Liberal Democrats, Britain's third political party, which sits between Labour and the Conservatives on the ideological spectrum.

‘We all make mistakes’

While at Oxford, Truss served as president of the Liberal Democrats club. “We all make mistakes as teenagers. Some people take drugs. Other people join the Liberal Democrats,” she said during a *Spectator* podcast interview published in 2019.

Back then, her political ambitions were already evident. Littlewood, who knew her at Oxford, says she was very clearly a “hack” – “a badge almost of pride for the politically ambitious.”

Her belief in free market economics, which has become a central pillar of her political ideology, comes from her study of economics, Truss said. “That was when I realised that to have control over your own life, you needed to have control of your own money and that economics was actually incredibly important,” she told the BBC in 2018.

Ryan Bourne, who worked with Truss on a number of projects during her early years in Parliament and now works at the Cato Institute think tank in Washington, says the key to understanding Truss’ political evolution is not to think of it through the prism of party politics. Instead, Bourne says, her ideology was best seen as evolving out of classical liberalism and “the idea of freedom being the key kind of motivating value in politics”.

After graduating from Oxford in 1996, Truss got a job with energy giant Royal Dutch Shell through their graduate hiring scheme before joining Cable & Wireless Communications. In 2001, she made her first bid for parliament at the age of 25. After another unsuccessful attempt in 2005, Truss was added to then-British Prime Minister David Cameron’s A-list of priority candidates, which sought to diversify the party ranks, and was selected for a safe seat in Norfolk, England.

Truss faced a final challenge from within the Conservative ranks. Local party activists, dubbed the “Turnip Taliban” by the tabloids, sought to derail her nomination after learning she had an affair with her mentor, Conservative politician Mark Field, four years earlier, when they were both married.

Truss’ marriage survived the revelation, and she went on to have two daughters, Frances and Liberty, with her husband, Hugh O’Leary, an accountant. In 2010, Truss prevailed over her grassroots challengers and was elected to Parliament.

Those who know Truss describe her as a conviction politician. What they mean is her view of the world shapes her policy thinking. “I think she does see politics as philosophy in action, as a clash of values,” Bourne says.

‘People underestimate her’

She was quick to stake out her ideological ground in Parliament, founding the Free Enterprise Group in Parliament in 2011. Truss and around three dozen other members wanted to boost lagging enthusiasm for free market economics.

In 2014, at 38-years-old, she became the youngest woman to join the cabinet when she was appointed secretary of state for environment, food, and rural affairs. As foreign secretary, Truss has smashed another glass ceiling, becoming only the second woman – and first from the Conservative Party – to hold the job.

Not that Truss would necessarily see it in those terms. As minister for women and equalities, she has emphasised equality of opportunity, not outcome. She has also dismissed policies that focus specifically on race, sexuality, and gender as “fashionable”.

In previous cabinet roles, Truss earned a reputation for knuckling down and getting on with the job.

“I think people have always underestimated her,” says Garvan Walshe, a former national and international security policy advisor to the Conservative Party. “People make fun of her voice, people make fun of her enthusiasm, but what they don’t realise is that she is a very smart politician who has been making her way up the ranks of the party for the last 15 or 20 years.”

It was Truss’ turnaround from Brexit-skeptic to face of the “Global Britain” agenda as international trade secretary that would cement her as a favourite among Conservative Party loyalists.

Never an “enthusiastic integrationist,” Bourne says, Truss quickly got on board with Brexit after the 2016 referendum. “She’s one of those people who pivoted very effectively into, ’well that was then, and this is now,” says Robin Niblett, director of British think tank Chatham House.

After putting her own brief bid for party leadership on pause, she became the first cabinet member to endorse Johnson in his successful run to take up the Conservative Party’s helm in 2019. Her loyalty was not forgotten, and Truss was appointed to the trade job.

Gung-ho optimism

Truss criss-crossed the world, securing trade deals with 68 countries as well as the European Union. Critics of her trade record point to the fact that the vast majority of those deals were

carbon copies of the terms the United Kingdom had while it was a member of the EU and how she didn't secure any new benefits.

“Most of it was already happening before she was there, so I don't think she could take a great deal of credit for it,” says David Henig, director of the UK Trade Policy Project at the European Centre for International Political Economy.

“The thing that I can't help but admire about her is that she went about being trade secretary with this enormous brio, or energy or positivity, to do it. And I think that's what earned her the promotion more than anything she had actually achieved.”

Her unshakeable enthusiasm for Britain has earned comparisons to another former British foreign secretary: Johnson. “She plays to that very gung-ho optimistic soft nationalism that Johnson conveys quite successfully and has done quite successfully,” says Malcolm Chalmers, who served as a senior special advisor to former Labour Foreign Secretaries Jack Straw and Margaret Beckett. “It's not a dour, pessimistic, backward-looking nationalism. It's a ‘we can do it. We're the UK. Anything is possible,’ style of nationalism.”

“The challenge of course is that that gung-ho nationalist approach comes up against the reality of the UK's relationship with key allies, especially in Europe, which is worse than it has been in many years,” Chalmers adds, who is now deputy director-general of the Royal United Services Institute think tank.

Seen by many Conservatives as delivering on Brexit promises, Truss has for months topped popularity polls of party members, with an approval rating of 82.8 per cent in the most recent survey by *Conservative Home*.

Among those who study the palace intrigue of cabinet reshuffles, many saw her appointment to foreign secretary as Johnson's attempt to promote a loyal ally while simultaneously committing a potential future rival to be overseas and out of the domestic spotlight. “Despite being sent abroad, she'll find ways to insert herself into the domestic political debate,” Walshe says.

At the Conservative Party Conference earlier this month, Truss gave the most detailed foreign-policy outline since her appointment in September.

“What was very clear from the other day is that she intends to continue to bang the ideological drum for Thatcherism as foreign secretary,” says Anand Menon, professor of European politics and foreign affairs at King's College London.

She is widely expected to make deepening trade links a core part of her mission as foreign secretary, along with investing in developing countries to push back against authoritarian regimes – such as China, which has used overseas investment as a way to curry influence over emerging economies. A source close to the foreign secretary said the UK is expected to pursue more security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, but discussions were in the early stages.

Market values

In her conference speech, Truss laid out a vision for a “network of liberty” of economic, diplomatic, and security partnerships. It seemed to echo US President Joe Biden’s plan to hold a summit for democracy, but at a side event, Truss clarified that the network of liberty didn’t only apply to democracies but also encompassed countries that believe in trade and rules-based international orders.

“I’ve never really heard anyone before couching foreign-policy principles in terms of adherence to market values as opposed to democracy. But that was very striking,” Menon, who hosted the event, tells *Foreign Policy*. What is less clear is where human rights would factor in the network of liberty. “I got the impression that whether a state’s democratic or not doesn’t matter. Whether a state is abusing human rights or not doesn’t really matter because they are sovereign decisions. But for her, what matters is these are countries that abide by the rule of law.”

Like many senior cabinet members, Truss will now juggle one of the great offices of state while tending to her own political fortunes back home.

“She’s only really popular with the grassroots, and beyond that, no one really knows who she is. So this is going to be her chance to show the UK who she is and what she’s capable of doing,” says Georgina Wright, director of the Europe program at the Institut Montaigne in Paris.

It was the crisis in Afghanistan that proved to be the undoing of Truss’ predecessor, Dominic Raab, who was on vacation when the Taliban advanced on Kabul. Truss’ own legacy at the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office may also rest in fate’s hands as well as whether she confronts any major crises. Her track record so far suggests she is a competent leader. But she hasn’t yet been battle-tested by the kind of unexpected global crises she may face as foreign secretary.

“Just imagine, for instance, we had another Libya, a crisis that was too big for the European Union and too small for the United States,” Menon says. “Foreign policy is sometimes events-driven.”