

OPINION



OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

For the third time in six years, the UK's next Prime Minister is being chosen by way of a micro-election in which less than a quarter of one percent of the population get a vote.

Statistically speaking the Conservative Party's 160,000 odd members are mostly Brexit-backing males over 60, who live in the South of England. As we go to press this diverse and sophisticated electorate are deliberating between two 'continuity candidates', who both served as loyal cabinet members under the mendacious and incompetent soon-to-be-ex-PM.

Both endorse deregulation, privatisation, deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda, and obscuring economic meltdown behind a smokescreen of confected conflict with the EU. To the extent that there is an environmentalist wing of the Tory party, neither of these two belong to it. In fact they both seem to see more political mileage in, as a previous Tory PM memorably put it, cutting the green crap. But the projected winner is likely to cut deepest.

Market Fundamentalism

Polling strongly suggests that rather than a super-rich male ex-banker, the party faithful will pick a woman who started off as a LibDem and campaigned for Remain in 2016. Some suggest this is because they do not want a non-white leader, or perhaps because they have been won over by the other candidate's bizarre imitations of Margaret Thatcher's outfits and photo opportunities.

This version of the story sees Liz Truss, like her predecessor, as lacking any principles beyond self-advancement. It's certainly tempting to believe that modern politics makes this characteristic indispensable for high office. The internet is also awash with clips appearing to illustrate her failing to grasp complex issues, often to comic effect.

But a closer look does show, if not principles, then certainly a consistent political position which has been in plain view since her election in 2010. The picture is confused by her Remain vote, which arguably represents a significant anomaly. She seems to have toed the Cameron line for career reasons and then swiftly reversed course after the result, well before Johnson's eventual ruthless purge of prominent remainers.¹

She got away with this because she has always been strongly aligned with the now-ascendant right wing of her party. She is very popular with that element of the membership, which has grown significantly in influence following the post-Brexit influx of thousands of former UKIP (and later allegedly Britain First) members.² This is the dominant constituency that both candidates are wooing, and she is much better placed to do so.

She was one of five then up-and-coming Tory MPs who wrote the 2012 book *Britannia Unchained*. This sought to move the party's centre of gravity rightwards, away from the supposed wishy-washy centrism of the then Coalition government.

As the title suggests the book aggressively promotes deregulation as a key arena of international competition. The chains supposedly restraining Britannia are made of red tape. The authors declare that businesses here must be as free to innovate and take risks as those in 'emerging economies like Brazil, India and China', and that this will result in a booming economy as the UK surges back to its rightful position of global leadership. Tax must be lowered, and regulations cut, as far as is necessary to achieve this result.

Infamously claiming that "once they enter the workplace, the British are among the worst idlers in the world", *Britannia Unchained* called for tougher action against 'union militancy' and 'welfare dependency'. What others might call a race to the bottom is presented as the way to arrest Britain's 'national decline'.³

Truss was also a key member of the party's Free Enterprise Group, and remains a strong supporter of its successor the Free Market Forum, which claims to "champion classical liberalism and radical new ideas".⁴ As she recently spun it to the Tory house journal *The Spectator*, her allegiance to Thatcherite 'classical liberalism' neatly explains the other anomaly, her dalliance with the LibDems:

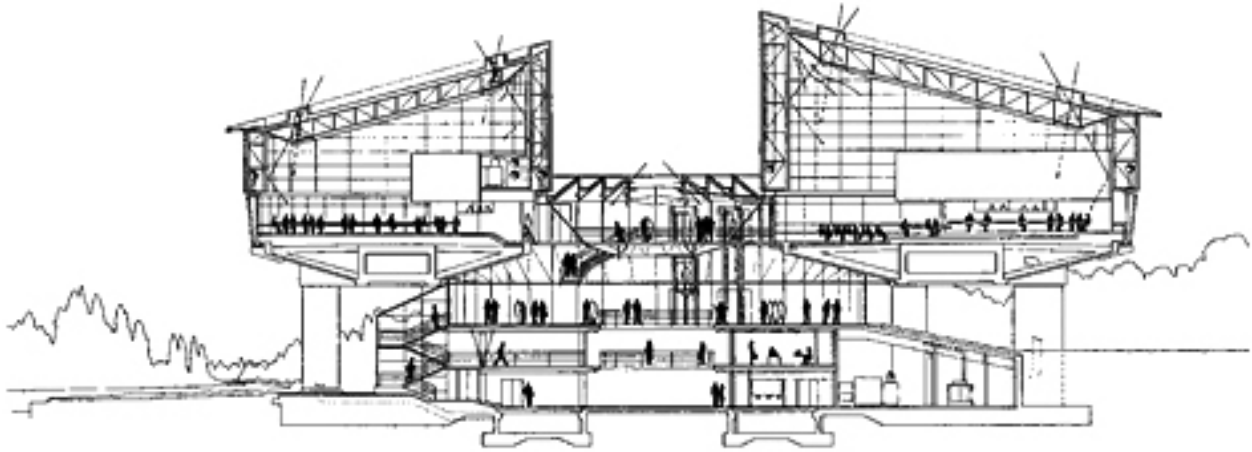
"I joined the Liberals under the false premise that they believed in freedom and low taxes; it turned out not to be true and then I moved to the Conservative party in my early twenties."¹

She has made clear in her leadership pitch that she has a "long term plan to bring down the size of the state" and intends to "cut taxes from day one".⁵

Rights and Freedoms

However for Truss and others of similar persuasion, while the state must be kept weak when it comes to regulation, it must be as strong as possible when it comes to military power, policing, and ensuring that the rights of capital triumph over those of people. 'Defence' spending must be increased, police powers strengthened, and whatever business desires provided.

As often noted, such free market ideologues are also quite happy to push back against market forces when it comes to the movement of people. Truss is a strong supporter of the current Home Secretary's inhumane and illegal plan to deport refugees to Rwanda without allowing them to claim asylum, in clear breach of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Priti Patel, another *Britannia Unchained* author, is likely to stay in the cabinet under Truss.



The European Court of Human Rights is based in Strasbourg in the building shown above. It enforces the European Convention on Human Rights and any person who feels their Convention rights have been violated can bring a case to the Court. Its jurisdiction is recognised by all 46 member states of the Council of Europe (CoE), an international organisation founded in London in 1949 to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. The CoE is separate from the EU and many of the 46, like the UK, are not EU member states. Russia was a member from 1996 to 2022, but was expelled following its invasion of Ukraine.

The fantasy of untrammelled sovereignty which makes this seem acceptable also underpins Truss's repeatedly declared willingness to pull the UK out of the European Convention on Human Rights. Withdrawal has been heavily trailed as a possible response to 'interference' by the European Court of Human Rights (the ultimate guarantor of the Convention), such as its dramatic last minute prevention of the first proposed Rwanda flight. That flight was stopped in order to allow time for judicial review of the Rwanda policy's legality, because the Convention protects the right to due process.

Since the Convention also protects many other rights currently threatened in the UK, including rights to protest and (as interpreted by caselaw) to live a nomadic lifestyle, further such conflict does seem likely. Politicians like Truss and Patel are likely to seize on any conceivable excuse to claim that dastardly Europeans are still meddling in British affairs. Many people mistakenly believe the Convention and Court to be something to do with the EU, so they serve as easy targets for post-Brexit rabble-rousing. But no-one should be under any illusion that replacing the ECHR with a 'British Bill of Rights', as proposed, would be anything other than a major downgrading of human rights protection.

Environmental Implications

Against this background, it seems reasonable to expect environmental and climate policy under a Truss premiership to also move further away both from effective regulation and from respect for international agreements.

Truss herself may not be actively anti-environmentalist, or a climate sceptic, though fellow travellers of hers certainly are.⁶ But she does have a quasi-religious conviction that deregulated markets are the answer to pretty much everything. This is potentially disastrous where environmental issues are concerned, as 'market solutions' have a nasty habit of making problems worse, rather than solving them. It also marks a significant change from Johnson's vacuous populism, which shamelessly pretended to embrace strong environmental regulation, when it seemed expedient to do so.

Truss has already been responsible for 'free' trade deals leading to imports of food and agricultural commodities from countries with lax environmental regulations, notably Australia. Although she hasn't said much about this, she is thought unlikely to support the emerging environmental subsidy regime which is set to replace CAP payments to UK farmers. She wants to scrap local authority housing targets and instead give developers tax incentives to build more new houses for sale at market prices. They will no doubt happily oblige, resulting in more low quality greenfield building and zero impact on the housing affordability crisis.

She has announced the alarming intention to purge all remaining EU laws from the UK statute book by the end of 2023, including environmental regulations like the Habitats Directive, in place of which she says she wants to "develop a stronger British biodiversity target". As with the proposed Bill of Rights, the word 'British' here seems to have acquired a new meaning approximating to 'weakened'.

As to carbon reduction and plans for 'Net Zero', perhaps the clearest indication so far of Truss's intentions is that she wants to lift the current moratorium on fracking, and allow it to proceed where "local communities support it". How this support might be measured is not clear, but on the other side of the coin it seems likely that effective protest *against* fracking will no longer be tolerated.

There will be well-justified celebrations as the current tenant of Downing Street departs. But they may not last long.

MH

1. www.spectator.co.uk/article/liz-truss-on-taking-on-rishi-and-what-she-s-do-in-no-10
2. www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/28/britain-first-far-right-members-5000-have-joined-tories
3. <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/07/08/the-britannia-unchained-gang-why-the-uks-next-prime-minister-may-be-its-worst/>
4. www.freemarketforum.org/history
5. www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/07/10/liz-truss-launches-leadership-bid-tax-cut-challenge-rishi-sunak/
6. See www.opendemocracy.net/en/liz-truss-heritage-foundation-lobbyists-climate-obama/ and www.desmog.com/2022/07/21/liz-truss-cites-economist-linked-to-climate-deniers-in-defence-of-her-tax-cut-plan/