

Liz Truss: The human hand grenade who tragically blew herself up

She spent a lifetime defying the doubters. But the very personality that had powered her ascent ultimately led to her downfall

By [Harry de Quetteville](#) 20 October 2022 • 6:40pm



Liz Truss on Thursday became Britain's shortest serving prime minister,

lasting just 44 days in office CREDIT: TOBY MELVILLE

And like that she was gone. A politician known above all as a survivor, a bundle of contradictions elastic enough to survive and thrive under three very different prime ministers, came dramatically unstuck when the top job was finally hers.

How did it happen? How did the qualities that saw her elbow her way from comprehensive school to Oxford, get noticed on the lowest rungs of the political ladder, and help her outlast and outshine her fellow entrant MPs on David Cameron's 2010 A-list of new Conservative blood - how did that all sour once she was in No 10?

For when she said only on Tuesday that she was a fighter not a quitter, anyone familiar with Liz Truss would have known she was [speaking from the heart](#).

Yet less than a day later [she'd been forced to resign](#), her precipitous downfall wrought by the very personality that had powered her ascent.

Long-lauded resilience was painted stubbornness; her vaunted contrariness was derided as out-of-touch; her delight in controversy became market-shredding incompetence. Once dubbed "unembarrassable" [she became an embarrassment to her own party](#).

Above all, perhaps, her capacity for trimming her sails to the prevailing political winds, which had served her so well as a Lib-Dem turned Conservative, Remainer turned Brexiteer, Cameron turned Boris backer, left her all at sea when it was she who had to make the political weather.



Soon that weather became a squall. Then she was sunk. “Her most noticeable characteristic, her former Oxford tutor once said, “is a capacity to shift, unblinkingly, from one fiercely held belief to another.” In No 10 she said she would finally show what she was made of and stick to her guns. It didn’t work out so well.

Perhaps it was a question of presentation. She was certainly never particularly good at that, at least in public. And yet that too hadn’t mattered so much on the way up, when those in power found the woman who was [wooden and occasionally ridiculous at the lectern](#) was warm and funny in private. Heartily mocked for a speech in 2014 in which she lambasted British cheese imports (“That. Is. A. Disgrace!”) detractors were won round when they found that she could laugh and deploy the same phrase against herself. Admirers still claim she has a “fantastic sense of humour” and can even be “a bit flirtatious” in person. As PM, though, the public didn’t get to see that private charm.

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But above all it was her inflexible management of her party, and the institutions beyond - from the Bank of England to the financial markets - that sowed panic and ultimately led to her departure.

At each stage she seemed to display an iron will to pursue a radical course, until being forced - too late - to change direction.

It started on September 23 [after the mini-Budget](#), when she didn’t comment on the chaos for a week, only to come out in its defence. Three days later she blamed the chancellor for the 45p tax rate cut, [then reversed the measure](#). “We get it,” she said, making clear she apologised for nothing.

The fact that she was still defending the 45p cut in TV interviews shortly before the U-turn, added to the impression that - like a badly dubbed film - Downing Street’s words and actions were no longer in sync.

Ten days later, she said she would not cut spending to pay for the other tax cuts. Yet two days later she sacked her great friend and ally Kwasi Kwarteng, and appointed Jeremy Hunt to do just that.



Just days after the mini-Budget chaos, Ms Truss she blamed Kwasi Kwarteng, her chancellor, for the 45p tax rate cut and reversed the measure CREDIT: Stefan Rousseau

While Kwarteng looked shell shocked, backbenchers used to her “utterly ruthless” ability to claim credit and dodge blame on the way up were less surprised. By the time of the farce in Westminster on Wednesday night this week, however, [with jostling in the lobbies](#), a confidence vote that wasn’t, and resigning whips who hadn’t, most were left in genuine shock.

A prime minister who started her career indulging a taste, in her own words, for “exploring ideas and stirring things up”, “a controversialist” who other observers suggested “liked the attention from being a little bit outrageous” found herself the cause of genuine outrage.

Partly, those observers say, her failure to change course until too late, is down to a thick skin, a quality developed in a political age in which she had astutely discerned, as her one-time colleague David Laws told The Times, that “it is better to be “noticed even if it is for the wrong things.” Hence her hunger for publicity. Her Instagram and other social media accounts. That hunger often rubbed party colleagues up the wrong way. Her thick skin ensured she didn’t care. That helped her get ahead. But later, when elected leader of a party most of whose MPs had not supported her candidacy and she needed friends, it most certainly didn’t.

To many who know her, however, the greatest shock is still perhaps that she made it to the top at all. By going to Oxford and reading PPE, she may have followed the establishment route to power, but there many others seemed to shine brighter than her.



A young Liz Truss stands outside Merton College in Oxford University where she was a student CREDIT: David Hartley

Indeed her route to Oxford was far from orthodox. At her comprehensive, Roundhay School in Leeds, she was “geeky” and later in office railed against state students taking low-value A-levels like media studies instead of maths (which she took).

Race and gender discrimination were endlessly debated, she thought, while poverty and geographical disparity were not.

Like her predecessor, [Boris Johnson \(a scholarship boy at Eton\)](#), she had to prove herself among a host of entitled, traditional public-school men. It led to a rather eccentric self-

confidence. Despite her Oxford essays being “self-consciously unconventional”, Mark Stears, her tutor, noted “how she insisted her judgement mattered just as much as anyone else’s.” At university she ran the Lib Dem society and debated politics with fierce but studied intensity, which fellow students thought affected to win attention. One has described it as “incredibly annoying” but admitted, “it was an incredibly male-dominated world and she was probably the only visible woman Lib Dem activist. Maybe some of it was driven by the compromises of having to try and get ahead in that world.”

Later when she began to prosper and endure even as the rest of her class of 2010 began to fall away, it is tempting to believe the same effect at work. Some colleagues dismissed her as not bright enough. She was said to have a “chip on her shoulder” and be “talked down to” by men in the Cabinet. But she worked supremely hard. Famed for her energy and determination, she outlasted them. And when she emerged on top, she had little desire to be emollient.



Certainly, her brother, Francis, remembers his sister’s steely determination. “She had to win,” he once said of their childhood games of Monopoly. “She would create some special system on how to win and then if she was losing, she might disappear rather than lose.”

Now she will have to disappear, a casualty of political brinkmanship that in 2017 began, say onlookers, to take the place of the malleability that had served so well until then. In that year she had been bruisingly demoted from justice secretary and according to one advisor speaking afterwards to The Times, “felt that her biggest mistake was that she didn’t listen to her own judgement. From that moment she developed a ‘f— it’ mentality. It was like, ‘I am going to be me. And I’m going to believe in myself.’”

That person, that future and now past prime minister, said David Laws, “is quite ideological and has a reasonably clear philosophy around competition, free markets and low taxes.” But there was a problem. “The downside is she is not always as interested at looking at the evidence.”

Her great tragedy is that having spent a lifetime building the confidence, defying the doubters and ascending to the position to do what she wanted - to be herself - it has taken only six weeks for that personality - finally unleashed - [to bring her dreams crashing down.](#)

Liz Truss: What the world is saying about UK turmoil

2 days ago oct/20



The world has been watching the political and economic upheaval in the UK over the past few weeks.

The havoc caused by Prime Minister Liz Truss's tax-cutting plan, followed by its withdrawal this week, made headlines around the globe.

Even US President Joe Biden waded in, breaking diplomatic norms in doing so.

But what impact has it really had outside the UK? BBC reporters from Berlin to Washington explain how it's being viewed where they are and what's changed.

GERMANY



*Britain's political troubles have raised eyebrows in Germany but few are shocked, says the BBC's **Jenny Hill** in Berlin.*

For many in Berlin, the drama in Westminster is viewed - with some sadness - as just the latest episode in the political and economic upheaval which many Germans suspected would be the inevitable consequence of Brexit.

Neither Chancellor Olaf Scholz nor his ministers have commented publicly on the mini-budget or its repercussions.

But columnists have been scathing in their assessment; the selection of Liz Truss, said one, was a "fatal choice" made by the Conservatives who ignored warnings about her policy.

Another expressed incredulity that MPs were plotting to replace the beleaguered prime minister without a general election, warning that such a "coup" risked turning Britain into a "Banana Republic".

There was a time when some German politicians would tell me of their admiration for British politics, for the cut and thrust of a system which seemed far more exciting than the compromise-driven, coalition-based German model. It's an opinion few hold now.

JAPAN



*With Japan's own currency trading at a low, Tokyo is paying attention to the British pound, writes **Mariko Oi**.*

Japan was once known for its own revolving door of prime ministers so the current political turmoil in the UK doesn't feel unique to many.

Some in local media have labelled her "fake Thatcher" and say she has tried to gamble with the government's finances. Others are asking how this may affect the UK's policy towards Asia - most notably its tough stance against China.

- **Will UK chaos spark a global meltdown?**

In the financial markets, traders have been closely paying attention to the pound as Japan's own currency is also trading at its 32-year low.

On social media, some people have been comparing her approval rating to Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, saying that he's still got some room to grow, while others are amused by the British sense of humour behind the "can Liz Truss outlast a lettuce" live stream.

Posting a photo of the stream, **one user wrote**: "There is not enough humour in Japanese media".

USA



*The White House usually makes an effort to stay out of British drama but this president took the plunge, writes **Anthony Zurcher** in Washington.*

The bar that foreign news has to clear to penetrate into the American consciousness is quite high.

Special relationship notwithstanding, the British turmoil has garnered little attention in the US, although **one commentator saw Truss's plummet in the polls** as a sign of a healthy British democracy because partisanship would prevent such a change in fortunes for a US president. **Others have asked** what it means for Margaret Thatcher's ideology.

One American who was giving Liz Truss's predicament some consideration, however, was President Joe Biden who called her tax-cutting plan a "mistake".

American presidents typically avoid getting too involved in the domestic disputes of other countries. This one, however, took that plunge - even if he seemed to acknowledge he shouldn't have.

"I think that the idea of cutting taxes on the super wealthy at a time when," he said, before cutting himself off. "Anyway, I just think - I disagreed with the policy, but that's up to Great Britain to make that judgment, not me."

Of course, Mr Biden has his own political challenges to face, with the midterm elections just a few weeks away, Republicans threatening to win majorities in Congress and Americans facing many of the same economic troubles currently bedeviling the British.



*The focus in India is on its own economy, writes **Rajini Vaidyanathan** in Delhi.*

News of the turmoil in the UK has barely made the front pages here in India - a sign of how officials in Delhi no longer look to Britain in the way they once did.

Seventy-five years since India gained independence, the focus is on how the economy here is growing, rather than the financial woes of its former coloniser.

The big news of Jeremy Hunt's reversal of the tax cuts made it to page 12 and 15 in two of the country's most read papers on the day after, though only as stories in the global sections. "PM Truss humiliated" was the headline which accompanied one of the write-ups.

That's not to say there's no interest in Conservative politics or politicians. When British Home Secretary Suella Braverman said Indians were the largest group who overstayed their visas, she sparked an angry reaction, as well as speculation her comments could derail a UK-India trade agreement.

And the real fascination in the summer came when Rishi Sunak entered the final phase of the Conservative leadership contest.

Many in the country wondered whether Mr Sunak - the son-in-law of Narayana Murthy, one of India's wealthiest and best-known businessmen - would take charge at Number 10. It didn't happen then but could it now, ask some of the latest headlines. "Is a Rishi Sunak comeback imminent?" said one.