

Monty Python Politics

A Reflection on the Tumultuous Reign of PM Liz Truss

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So, in the month of September 2022, we had two monarchs and two Prime Ministers and, by the time you read this, we shall have a third prime Minister.

King Charles III now reigns. His recently appointed Prime Minister, Liz Truss has resigned after serving 6 weeks at her post. The coincidence of the new Prime Minister being received by the late Queen as her very last action in a very long and distinguished reign suggests what Her Majesty thought of the appointment.

Liz Truss was appointed through a labyrinthine process where Conservative MPs selected two of their number, and the Conservative Party members (a mixed bag) chose the one they wanted (pale, stale, and female?). As a result, Liz Truss did not command support from either the Party or the Parliamentary members. Her cabinet was selected by her, based more on whom she liked than on any cerebral ability. She wanted to think of herself modelled on



Margaret Thatcher, a totemic Conservative Prime Minister of the 1980s renowned for her insightfulness and dislike of fools.

To be fair, it was not her fault that Her Majesty's death and funeral overshadowed the first ten days of her administration, and politics was put on hold. She appeared in Westminster Abbey to read a lesson at the funeral but otherwise was very much out of the limelight.

Normal political life only resumed in the week beginning 19 September when we were introduced to the Monty Pythonesque Ministry of Silly Politics by the Prime Minister and her new Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng. The "Financial Statement" set off the fireworks in the markets, ultimately costing the Chancellor his job and the Prime Minister to appoint a former critic of her administration to pick up the reins, row back on all the decisions of the financial debacle and promise greater austerity.

Having put that jack back in the box, Liz Truss sacked her new Home Secretary over a row about immigration and almost lost her Chief Whip and her Deputy in an argument about Party discipline. Open revolt stalked the Conservative benches, and the Prime Minister's lifespan was measured not in months or days but hours. Finally, on 20 October, after a short 44 days' occupation of 10 Downing Street, she resigned.

What went wrong? To some extent, it is an issue about democracy in a Parliamentary system; the voters elect the Party they want to run the Country, with the Party choosing their leader. But, with modern Prime Ministers wielding almost Presidential power, voters want a more significant say in who might become leader, particularly when a leader changes out of the General Election cycle.

In 2015, the UK Labour Party set up a convoluted selection system for new leaders giving votes to Party Members, Trade Unions as well as Members of Parliament. This led to a sharp shift to the left and the election of Jeremy Corbyn and Labour's subsequent unelectability. In the Conservative Party, their chosen system was for MPs to select two candidates, which were then put to the Party faithful. So, in the recent election, Liz Truss appealed to the Conservative voter more than Rishi Sunak, her competitor.

The most significant influence, however, has been the growth of the right-wing element of the Conservative Party. This growth has held the party in such a malign grip as to defeat the best efforts of successive leaders and, unless there is a drastic realignment in the next few days, will condemn those who succeed her to similar defeat.

The roots of the problem were David Cameron's coalition government with the Liberal Democrats and the rise of the Brexit caucus. Instead of defeating them, David Cameron flirted with them to ensure he won the 2015 election and his price was to agree to hold a referendum on membership of the EU. He didn't take the threat of Brexit seriously. Instead of ensuring that any referendum demanded a significant margin for overturning the status quo (such as 60%), and the involvement of all British passport holders and permanent residents in the vote, he allowed for a simple majority so that the 52% in favour of Brexit carried the day. The result of the vote has opened up a massive chasm in the British political landscape. The Brexit campaigners talked up the perceived advantages of leaving Europe and, at the same time, accused those supporting remaining in the EU of "Project Fear" when they listed all the aspects of the EU which would be denied the UK after Brexit; they have been proven right on all key issues! Brexit has hampered the UK's ability to trade freely with Europe, paralysed political activity in Northern Ireland and poisoned the relationship between England and Scotland. Long queues formed at European borders delaying holidays, reaping chaos for British long-term residents in European countries. Brexit is still causing angst and discord, UK relationships with European allies are at an all time low.

A recent suggestion that the government might hold a formal inquiry as to what has gone well and what has not gone so well with Brexit was turned down sharply by the UK government,



presumably because the conclusions might be so negative about Brexit as to resurrect considerable ill-feeling.

With Prime Minister Liz Truss' resignation, the selection process swung into action. Lessons have been learned, only candidates with a minimum of 100 supporters were eligible to stand. To the horror of some and the glee of others, Boris Johnson announced that he'd be a candidate – he failed to make the grade. At the end of the day, Rishi Sunak, a finalist in the earlier contest with Liz Truss was elected by the Parliamentary Party with no need to go out to the membership. Sunak's cabinet is a reasonable balance between the different factions within the Party; he must be honest and open about the mistakes the Party had made over the last few years, he needs to look at several shibboleths that weigh the Party down and see how they can be eased out of the Party lexicon.

Whatever else happens, there must be no room for Monty Python and the Ministry of Funny Politics!

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