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UK politics

Case study: Liz Truss

What can Truss's rise and fall tell us about the nature of prime ministerial power, and how can she be used as an example in UK politics questions?

Liz Truss's term as prime minister lasted 44 days, the shortest in UK history. Despite – or in many ways, because of – the brevity of her time in office, Truss serves as a fascinating case study that can be used as an example to illustrate strengths and weaknesses within the UK's political systems.

How democratic?

The process by which Truss became prime minister raised questions about the legitimacy of her mandate from the outset. When a vacancy occurs for party leader within the Conservative Party, MPs participate in a series of votes until only two candidates remain. These candidates are then put to party members. This hasn't always been the case. Until a secret ballot was introduced in 1965, Conservative Party leaders were simply announced after a private discussion among MPs. Only in 1998 did the Conservatives introduce reforms which put the vote to party members. We might therefore conclude that the current process is more democratic than the one before. In a healthy democracy we expect to see power dispersed, and by giving party members a voice, it ensures that candidates can command support outside the corridors of Westminster.

However, the process is also problematic, particularly given the declining numbers of members within the UK's main political parties. Truss was chosen by a group of 98,000 individuals. This could be seen as unrepresentative, particularly since party members tend to be more ideological than, and socially unrepresentative of, the wider population. In this instance, the party members did not even share the views of Conservative MPs who had supported Rishi Sunak over Truss. This prompted calls for the party to revert to its former process, on the basis that it is more important for the party leader to be able to command the support of the parliamentary party than party members. Others pointed to the fact that some of the policy pledges made by Truss contradicted the 2019 Conservative manifesto. It could therefore be argued that the process by which Liz Truss was appointed as party leader was flawed, and that it provided her with a weak mandate from the outset.

Prime ministerial power

When Liz Truss entered Downing Street on 6 September 2022 she was brimming with confidence, stating that she was 'determined to deliver'. Just 44 days later she was delivering her resignation speech. What does this reveal about prime ministerial power?

In some ways, Truss demonstrated just how powerful the UK prime minister can be. Using her powers of patronage she reshuffled the Cabinet, appointing loyal supporters above those who had backed Rishi Sunak. With a healthy Commons majority, she confidently embarked on a new economic agenda, coined 'Trussonomics' by the media. Alongside her Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, she announced a mini-budget within 3 weeks of taking office, side-stepping the Office of Budget

Responsibility. This demonstrates the capacity for a UK prime minister to set the political agenda and to operate, at least in theory, with very little restraint.

However, Truss's swift downfall points to the limitations of adopting such a quasi-presidential style of leadership. In appointing only loyal supporters to her Cabinet, she alienated MPs within her own party. Liberated from collective responsibility, it was easier for big names such as Michael Gove to speak against her. External pressures also played a part: the Bank of England was forced to step in to calm the markets and media headlines such as 'In Office but not in power' (*Daily Mail*) undermined public confidence. As support drained away, she sacked her chancellor and made a policy U-turn on the budget. Days later, her home secretary resigned and a chaotic vote took place in Parliament on fracking, in which 31 Conservative MPs abstained. It was clear that Truss had lost the support of her own party and she resigned on 20 October.

As a case study, Liz Truss demonstrates that the prime minister has considerable power at their disposal. However, the combination of a weak mandate, opposition from within her own Cabinet and party, an unstable economic policy and external pressure such as media scrutiny all combined to undermine her, ultimately making her continuation as prime minister untenable.

What does this reveal about Conservative policy?

There was speculation as to whether 'Trussonomics' heralded the return of neo-liberal economic policies within the Conservative Party. Recent party leaders had been more likely to advertise their one nation credentials: for example, Boris Johnson said that under him the party would speak 'as a one-nation Conservative Party'. In contrast, Liz Truss stated in her party conference speech that tax cuts were the right thing to do 'economically and morally'. Her focus on economic growth via tax cuts led to speculation as to whether she was seeking to revive 'trickle-down' economics. However, 'Trussonomics' was short-lived. Criticism from within her own party forced Truss to make a U-turn on the majority of her tax cuts. Liz Truss's economic policy demonstrates that neo-liberalism continues to exert influence within some wings of the Conservative Party but overall, its influence is limited.

Questions to consider:

- 1 What are the main arguments for and against the current process for appointing new leaders within the Conservative Party? Which do you agree with?
- 2 In what ways did Liz Truss demonstrate the theoretical power of the prime minister?
- 3 What reasons are given for her eventual resignation? Which do you think was most important?
- 4 What does the failure of Liz Truss's economic policy reveal about the influence of neo-liberalism within the Conservative Party?

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