

## Welcome to 'Sunakworld'

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Politics is a curious business and 2022 will be remembered as the year when we had three Prime Ministers in almost as many months.

The chaos of Boris Johnson ended with his forced resignation and replacement with Liz Truss.

Truss's being in No 10 for only seven weeks means her place in history is now assured as the shortest serving PM ever not to die in office. Many in her party want to move on as quickly as possible from the damage inflicted on her party's reputation and, worse, the economy.

Like her predecessor, there were ample warning signs of Truss's character failings in general and, in particular, her unsuitability for highest political office. A new book, currently being serialised in the *Sunday Times*, paints a picture of an individual who, from an early age was driven by a need to succeed.

Ex-Conservative MP and now political commentator, Matthew Parris, in reviewing *Out of the Blue: The Inside Story of the Unexpected Rise and Rapid Fall of Liz Truss* by Sun political editor Harry Cole and diary editor at The Spectator James Heale and to be published by HarperCollins on 24<sup>th</sup> November, believes that their treatment may attempt to be sympathetic, what emerges from this biography is a "contrarian personality doomed her to fail in office" (2022).

Parris points out that one of Truss's vices, though common among those in the public eye, is an obsession with image.

As Cole and Heale's book demonstrates, she was prepared to cause annoyance to all around her as well as those she was meeting to ensure she was photographed in a way which showed her in the way she thought would be most advantageous to her career.

Notably, as Parris concludes, Truss recognised that being seen to project an image which inspires confidence, particularly in the televisual age we live in, is essential.

Truss' problem became that her image was associated with the theory of 'trickledown' economics which, as part of the now notorious 'mini budget' proved so devastating.

Aided by the press which, including outlets that had previously been supportive of her, Truss's credibility was undermined. Her demise became an inevitability and, for the second time this year, the Conservative Party was required to find a replacement leader.

Though it seemed former PM Boris Johnson was willing to attempt a miraculous return to Downing Street having been forced to resign in July by the fact that over 60 ministers were unwilling to continue working for him, his withdrawal of his candidacy meant a clear run for Rishi Sunak.

As such, Sunak, who as former Chancellor under Johnson, had resigned in apparent exasperation at his boss's involvement in the appointment of Chris Pincher scandal as Deputy Chief Whip, and against whom there had been allegations of sexual misconduct (Allegretti, 2022), could be seen as a new start.

Indeed, and whilst many reasons are advanced why Sunak, despite winning all of the rounds of voting among the Parliamentary Party (Conservative MPs), failed to achieve the backing of members (Jones, 2022), it's speculated that a major reason was his desire to stress quite how catastrophic Truss' economic approach would be.

Being the bearer of bad news is rarely welcomed.

Memorably, Sunak described Truss' stated intention of £50 billion of unfunded tax cuts as a "fairytale" that would, if implemented, would cause an "inflationary spiral" (Stone, 2022). Being proved absolutely correct meant Sunak, having decelerated his intention to replace Truss, became his party's MP's choice to attempt in rehabilitating its image among voters who considered she'd lost control of the economy,

Sunak, though far from being a 'new face' as far as the party was concerned, was able to draw on being perceived as someone able to capitalise on his reputation as being committed to decency and honesty, two traits many argued to have been absent in the leader who appointed him to be chancellor when Sajid Javid suddenly resigned as a result, it's reported, of being asked to sack all of his advisers "in a move by No 10 to seize control of the Treasury" (Mason, Stewart and Walker, 2020).

Sunak's first speech as PM, delivered in a deliberately sombre tone on 25<sup>th</sup> October in Downing Street, provides an explicit indication of his intention to deliver leadership in a way different to his two immediate predecessors. Some choice lines demonstrate this (Gov, 2022):

"I will place economic stability and confidence at the heart of this government's agenda.

This will mean difficult decisions to come.

But you saw me during Covid, doing everything I could, to protect people and businesses, with schemes like furlough.

There are always limits, more so now than ever, but I promise you this

I will bring that same compassion to the challenges we face today.

The government I lead will not leave the next generation, your children and grandchildren, with a debt to settle that we were too weak to pay ourselves.

I will unite our country, not with words, but with action.

I will work day in and day out to deliver for you.

This government will have integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level.

Trust is earned. And I will earn yours."

All very positive, one may conclude. However, as Andrew Carnegie (1835 –1919) Scottish American industrialist and philanthropist who, as a result of his involvement in the expansion of the American steel industry in the late nineteenth century became one of the richest people in history (Britannica, 2022) famously stated, "As I grow older, I pay less attention to what men say. I just watch what they do."

The first two weeks of Sunak's premiership are, it must be acknowledged, not terribly auspicious.

Firstly, Sunak's appointment of Suella – she is actually Sue Ellen in homage to the *Dallas* character as the series was top of the ratings when she was born in April 1980 – Braverman is shocking in that how does that square with the commitment to lead a government with "integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level".

Braverman's reputation and, it must be stated, limitations, are well known.

Having had a less than stellar legal career, Braverman became an MP in the 2015 general election in the same intake as Sunak and is widely believed to be out of her depth.

As Richards, writing in *Prospect* in February 2020 argued on her appointment as attorney general by Boris Johnson because, as many speculated, she'd tell him what he wanted to hear, "there is legitimate concern regarding her attitudes towards the judiciary".

Braverman's elevation to the post of Home Secretary by Truss was seen as a sop to the right wing of the party who'd ensured the latter's elevation to PM. Her sacking by Truss, for security breaches, viewed as inevitable given her inability to stick to rule (a trait she shares with the person she replaced who'd been sacked by Theresa May for having unauthorised meetings with the Israeli government).

The latest news that Braverman is being investigated by the barristers' regulator on the basis of claim she "contributed" to a legal textbook when working as a lawyer suggests that her second stint as Home Secretary will be dogged by controversy (Barradale, 2022).

Whatever the reasons for Sunak's appointment of 'Leaky Sue', his decision to rehabilitate her undermines his image as 'Mr Credible'.

Equally, the concern being expressed at Sunak's decision to bring Sir Gavin Williamson back into government as a Cabinet Office minister. Like Braverman, Williamson came with an extensive list of alleged misdemeanours and gaffs (Barradale, 2020).

That Williamson has been sacked by both Theresa May – as Defence Secretary in May 2019 as a consequence of an inquiry into a leak from a top-level National Security Council meeting – and Boris Johnson as Education Secretary because of his mishandling of school examinations during the pandemic in 2020, must rank as something of a record (Mathers, 2022).

Anger surrounding Williamson's intemperate emails to former Chief Whip Wendy Morton and, when Defence Secretary, telling a senior civil servant to "slit your throat" and "jump out of window" (Scoot, 2022), suggests another individual within Sunak's cabinet whose suitability for high office is, to say the least, highly questionable.

Even Sunak's ability to remain consistent is, following his *vote face* in deciding to attend the UN Cop27 Climate Change Conference in Egypt, undoubtedly, caused by the fact that Boris Johnson had stated he was going, strongly suggests he needs to be clear about what's really important in the long-term.

One cannot imagine Margaret Thatcher, who became leader in particularly difficult economic circumstances in May 1979, being seen to flip-flop in this way.

Thatcher, it should be acknowledged, surrounded herself by cabinet ministers who were regarded as experienced and 'big beasts' with an ability to hold their own and most definitely not the sort individuals Sunak has appointed.

As *Guardian* columnist Simon Jenkins argues in his latest column, previous PMs, including Thatcher, actively sought counsel from advisors who were unafraid to tell hard truths. In Thatcher's case her 'Willie' was Conservative grandee William Whitelaw who she trusted to provide her with sensible advice that would serve her and the country well. Sunak, Jenkins contends, needs to do similarly (2022):

“In the past 10 years, Britain has seen five prime ministers, plus seven chancellors, six home secretaries and 10 education secretaries. It has been government as a joke. In the process, ministerial experience and the essence of wisdom have been exterminated. Yet on parliament’s backbenches are sitting men and women of ability whose only crime was their disbelief in Brexit and Boris Johnson. It is hard to believe Sunak could not gather a handful of them together to sit round his fire of an evening and give him the benefit of their advice. He badly needs a Willie [Whitelaw].”

The immediate future, certainly following 17<sup>th</sup> November when the Chancellor sets out his plans on the economy, look decidedly difficult. There will be some tough decisions to be made and it’s essential that Sunak’s image is regarded as someone whose only motivation is what is best for the country, not for him or the coterie of ministers around him.

Greek philosopher Aesop, over 2,500 years old, stated, “A man is known by the company he keeps”.

Sunak should be aware he should seek the advice and guidance of the best possible people within his party and, should he wish to be really radical in what’s becoming a national emergency, within the opposition benches.

Failure to achieve this objective will, as Matthew Parris points out, will allow the last PM but one, Boris Johnson, someone who understands the way image can be manipulated to suit the desired narrative, to undermine him.

Another leadership change of the governing party, especially one which results in Johnson’s return, is most definitely not in the collective national interest.

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