

Britain's new prime minister makes no apologies for favoring the wealthy



London, September 14 (RHC)-- Forty-seven-year-old Truss served as Boris Johnson's foreign secretary, establishing a reputation for speaking off the cuff and for being uber-hawkish vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine. In the first week of the war, she publicly voiced her support for British citizens choosing to go and fight on behalf of Ukraine.

When Johnson was forced out in July, following months of scandals, his foreign secretary promptly entered the Conservative Party leadership contest, which consisted of a series of votes by members of Parliament (MPs) aimed at winnowing the number of contenders down to two, and then a six-week contest among those two to win the support of a majority of the roughly 160,000 Conservative Party members around the country.

Although Truss came second in the Parliamentary contest to Rishi Sunak, it was clear from late July onward that she was the more popular of the two among the party's voters. She pushed a traditional conservative agenda of cutting regulations and slashing taxes — despite the precarious state of the U.K.'s economy, the pressures on the pound, and despite the clear need for massive public expenditures to stave off wholesale misery resulting from double-digit inflation, soaring energy prices and the accelerating climate crisis. And she made no apologies for policies that favored the wealthy.

Truss also went out of her way to channel Britain's first female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, who remains as iconic among the Tory Party base as Ronald Reagan is for Republicans in the United States. Truss has studied Thatcher's body language, has adopted her dress style — as Twitter users were quick to point out — and has reached for many of the same rhetorical tools. Yet, style notwithstanding, she has nowhere near the ideological consistency or heft of a Thatcher.

Truss was once a Liberal Democrat — she was president of the Oxford student Lib Dems while studying for a degree in politics, philosophy and economics at Merton College in the mid-1990s. (The Liberal Democrats are the third party in the U.K., and while they are progressive on issues such as the environment and opposing Brexit, it was their decision to form a coalition with the Conservatives in 2010 that ushered in more than a decade of Conservative Party rule.) She was also formerly an opponent of Brexit. Her parents were left-wing anti-nuclear protesters. As a student, she gave speeches against the monarchy.

Perhaps in an effort to prove her bona fides as a conservative to a hard-right base, during the leadership election campaign this summer she marketed herself as even more willing to burn bridges with Europe than was Johnson (if that is possible). Seeking to shore up her support among Conservatives (which is about as representative of the U.K. as a whole as are the most rabid of GOP primary voters in the U.S. as a whole), she came out in favor of a wholesale legislative dismantling of Britain's remaining EU-era regulations by 2023. She also opined, sanctimoniously, that the “jury is still out” on whether French President Emmanuel Macron is a friend or foe to the British; as if it were the French who had exiled Britain from Europe, rather than Britain inflicting a grievous wound on itself through the entirely unnecessary Brexit process.

By the time the votes were counted and the verdict delivered on Tuesday, it was clear that Truss had won. Of the just over 140,000 party members who returned their ballots, 81,326 threw their support to the erstwhile foreign secretary.

It's possible that Truss will confound her critics and become as formidable a party leader and prime minister as was Thatcher. It's possible that, like Thatcher, she will buck predictions and end up using the looming economic crisis and the escalating industrial action initiated by trade unions to her advantage, crafting a new electoral coalition capable of transforming the country and winning a series of elections over the next decade-plus. Possible, but not likely.

Truss is inheriting an almighty mess, not from a Labour or Lib Dem government, but from her own party, and from a discredited prime minister who abused his power shamelessly throughout his time at 10 Downing Street. On Tuesday, a day before the monarch's health dramatically deteriorated, she visited an already ailing Queen Elizabeth in Balmoral to be formally invited by the head of state to form the next government. She then returned to London as the new prime minister, and set to work inviting MPs to join her new cabinet.

So far, it looks like she will rely fairly heavily on many of Johnson's ministers, especially those who represent the hard-right of the party. Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng looks set to become chancellor of the exchequer; Education Secretary James Cleverly is going to be made foreign secretary; and Attorney General Suella Braverman, who during the leadership election campaign did her utmost best to channel Donald Trump, is apparently going to be the new home secretary. As the Times of India noted, none of the top cabinet positions will be white men, marking a symbolic changing of the guard, even if the

substance of the policies promoted remains as radical-right as ever.

Truss and her new team will, at speed, have to find ways to bring inflation under control, and to find ways to subsidize the millions of families at risk of destitution due to high heating bills this coming winter.

In one of her first official acts, the new prime minister imposed a sweeping price freeze on energy, a move long supported by the opposition Labour Party. It's a vital concession to the realities of Europe's economic war with Russia; yet her economic team seems to believe they can pay the tens of billions of dollars that this will cost the Treasury by borrowing rather than by raising taxes or even maintaining taxes for the wealthy and for corporations at their current levels — this despite the pound's swoon in recent weeks against the U.S. dollar. She also announced plans to ramp up drilling for oil and for natural gas in the North Sea, and to increase fracking within the U.K.

Unlike the German plan announced this week to spend 65 billion euros to curb energy prices and mitigate cost of living increases for pensioners and other vulnerable sectors of the population, Truss's plan isn't an across-the-board effort to rein in the profits of energy corporations and to redistribute wealth to poorer residents; rather, it looks to be a one-off intervention — essentially a subsidy to consumers — that won't address the fundamental problems at play during this inflationary crisis.

The day Truss was declared the winner in the Conservative Party members' popularity contest, polls showed her party was trailing the Labour Party by close to 9 percent.

It will take all of Truss's shape-shifting talents, and then some, to turn around the election ship for the Conservatives over the coming two years, which is the time span that Truss has before the next general election must be called. In the meantime, as the U.K. grapples with a deepening economic crisis, all of the new prime minister's public statements suggest that the country is going to be dragged ever-further rightward into a deregulated, anti-union, Brexit-hued future.

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