The return of the dinosaurs

As the planet burns, and Britain faces a massive cost of living crisis, writes Alan Thornett on his ecosocialist discussion blog, Jurassic Park has taken over in Westminster, with the climate denier – and 'hand-out' hater – Liz Truss as Prime Minister.

Truss has been cynically foisted on the British electorate against their will. Only 6 per cent expect her to make a good Prime Minister, even most Tory voters are not convinced. She was the choice of neither Tory MPs nor Tory voters. Most of them preferred Sunak or for Johnson to stay in office.

Despite such fragile support, she never hesitated in gifting all the top jobs to the cronies who backed her. Only one MP who backed Sunak is a cabinet member today, which is Michael Ellis, the new attorney general. How long such a concoction will hold together when the proverbial hits the fan, of course, is another matter. (She is also trying to model herself on Margaret Thatcher, though whether she is up to that one only time will tell.)

You couldn't make it up. Jacob Rees-Mogg, the climate denier in chief – who wants to squeeze the last cubic inch of oil and gas out of the North Sea, bring back fracking, and who has claimed that climate alarmism is responsible for high energy prices – is now Energy Secretary. His ravings are not only bizarre but completely unworkable, since anything that is extracted – at huge cost the environment – would have zero impact on UK oil or gas prices which are set by the international market.

Lurch to the right

Truss's election is yet another lurch to the right by an increasingly xenophobic Tory party – driven by the fundamentalists of the European Research Group.

She is to the right of her (corrupt and despicable) predecessor Boris Johnson, as he was to Theresa May. She was elected in what is now a well-established and dangerous charade. Candidates in a Tory leadership contest, are required, in order to win, to convince the ever-more-extreme Tory members that they are racist enough, little Englander enough, and anti-migrant enough, for the job. Truss fully understood this process and played it to the full.

Nor is Truss any better than Rees-Mogg when it comes to the environment. In fact, her record is appalling.

As Theresa May's Environment Secretary, Truss was an arch deregulator of environmental standards. She cut subsidies for renewables and banned on-shore wind farms – which was (and remains) a huge blow to the UKs renewable energy capacity.

She is also responsible for the catastrophic pollution of our rivers and beaches with raw sewage by cutting millions of pounds earmarked for tackling water pollution. She cut the budget of the *Environment Agency* by £235m, including £24m that had been allocated for the surveillance of water companies in order to prevent the dumping of raw sewage in rivers and on beaches.

Her newly appointed chief economic adviser, Matthew Sinclair – the Gaudian columnist Zoe Williams tells us – "wrote a book entitled *Let Them Eat Carbon* in 2011, in which he argued that "the temperatures we face today may not be the ideal conditions for humanity to live and flourish". Let warming go wild, in other words. It might be fun."

Trickle-down economics

Her version of low-tax trickle down, free market, economics will further devastate the UK economy. She told Laura Kuenssberg last week that she was OK with the obvious fact that her cancelation of the proposed national insurance rise would be worth twice as much to the richest 5 per cent of the

population as it is to the whole bottom half of taxpayers.

The scrapping of Sunak's planned return of corporation tax to 25 per cent will cost an estimated £19 billion and will be a bonanza for big business. Her approach will be tested to destruction as the crisis develops further.

She insists, moreover, that the only factors that are driving the current crisis – which is more acute in Britain than any other European country – are the Covid pandemic and Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Otherwise, she says, the British economy is "in good shape".

This is arrant nonsense. There are two other crucial factors as well. The first is that economy has been wrecked by 20 years of Tory rule of which she was an active and uncritical participant. The second is that and it has been ravaged by Brexit – a factor which is being deliberately ignored (or obscured) by both the government and by Kier Starmer.

The idea that Johnson 'got Brexit done' is a sick joke. The whole economy has been destabilised by the ending of free movement of labour and by the developing trade war with the EU – which is the UK's biggest trading partner many times over. Brexit permeates every aspect of British political and commercial life from restricting trade relations to boosting racism and xenophobia.

Sectors such as agriculture, fishing, hospitality, retail, health care and meat processing, have been traumatised by it, whilst racism and xenophobia have been boosted. The problems created by Brexit in the North of Ireland remain entirely unresolved.

Truss's pledge to rip up the North of Ireland Protocol if she does not get her way on it threatens both an all-out trade war with the EU, plus retaliation from Biden in terms of a future trade agreement with the US.

It remains regrettable that most of the radical left in Britain voted for Brexit. The claim that they were voting for a different kind of Brexit that did not exist makes no sense. The only Brexits on offer were those proposed by various sections of the Tory party.

Truss's energy package

Having refused to discuss rocketing electricity bills during the election campaign – bills that were set to more than quadruple by January – she has now been forced to make a dramatic U-turn after no doubt contemplating the alternative, which was the likelihood that the current strike wave would be joined by rioting on the streets over energy prices and increasing social unrest. She also, no doubt, hopes that the package will give her political breathing space to launch the programme she really wants. We will see.

The resulting U-turn was her so-called the *Energy Price Guarantee*, which she refuses to put a figure on – though some estimates put it at 150 billion pounds. It will freeze household bills for two years, at £2,500 a year. Businesses and public sector organisations like hospitals and schools will get an equivalent deal for six months, after that, only 'vulnerable' businesses will be supported. There will also be more licences issued to drill for oil and gas, and the ban on fracking will be lifted.

Whilst her package is better than nothing, given the scale of the problem, the average UK household will still be worse off, its energy bills will still be shockingly high, and the cost of living will continuing to rise. Many businesses see the package as little better than a stay of execution. The *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* has calculated that it will leave low-income families with around £800 shortfall this winter, leaving them at risk of poverty or at the mercy of high-interest loans.

Her method of repayment says it all. She refuses even to contemplate a wind fall tax on the eye-watering and unexpected super-profits that are being made by the oil and gas companies and insists instead on financing by government borrowing which means that it will be paid for by taxation. She has done this under conditions where three quarters of Tory voters say they would prefer a windfall tax to more government borrowing. The long-term consequences of such borrowing, however, might prove a very hard sell.

Starmer has challenged the method of payment, but he also ruled out the nationalisation of the oil companies, arguing, ludicrously, that to do so would be too expensive. His position is a huge liability as the possibility of a Labour government comes closer.

The big losers

The biggest loser in all this – along with the poorest in society as argued above – will be the planet and the future of life on it. The Truss premiership is a direct challenge to the zero carbon reduction targets that are crucial to the protection of life on Earth. And this, moreover, with COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh only two months away.

Her perspective was challenged on the *Today Program* on Tuesday September 6th by none other than John Gummer (now Lord Deben), who was John Major's Environment Secretary from 1993-97, and is now the chair of the *Climate Change Committee* – an independent body formed under the *Climate Change Act of 2008* (i.e. under Gordon Brown) to advise the government on tackling and preparing for climate change. The *Committee* has long been critical of recent Tory administrations on the issue.

Gummer argued that whatever the government chooses to do or otherwise the harsh realities remain the same. Human activity has caused the global temperature to rise by 1°C since

preindustrial times, and the disastrous consequences are clear to see. At the moment we are on course for an increase of 3°C and if we fail to reverse it the consequences we are seeing would at least treble.

The future, he argued, is with renewables – as is the way out of the current crisis. There are two crucial things, he insisted, that we have to do to defeat global warming and climate change – and we have to do them now. The first is to reduce carbon emissions to net zero, the other is to reduce the demand for electricity and gas via a major programme of energy conservation.

He is right, and the scope for both in the UK is enormous. Recent research by the *Institute for Government* found that the UK is particularly vulnerable to spikes in the price of gas since more than four-fifths of UK homes are still heated by gas boilers, which is much higher than most countries. The UK's housing stock is also the oldest and least energy efficient in Europe. More than 52% of homes in England were built before 1965 and nearly 20 per cent before 1919.

It found that the UK scored worse than other countries in Europe in terms of the energy efficiency of its homes. Citing analysis of a 2020 study, it found that a UK home with an indoor temperature of 20C and an outside temperature of 0C lost on average 3C after five hours – up to three times as much as homes in other European countries such as Germany.

Renewables are getting cheaper whilst fossil fuels and nuclear energy are ever more expensive. Renewables are also being weaponised – in terms of both economic and military conflicts. Putin is currently holding Europe to ransom by withholding gas supplies. In Ukraine the biggest nuclear plant in Europe is being fought over in a terrifying game of (actual) Russian roulette.

Gummer warned governments that they ignore this reality at

their peril. Whilst they can impede progress they can’t turn the clock back. Public opinion, he argued has moved on in recent years and people today are far more aware of the consequence if we fail to tackle climate change.

We need a programme for rapid transition to renewables on a war-preparation scale. We don’t want ‘transitional fossil fuels, or any other kind of prevarication, we want renewables and we want them now. Governments can make major changes fast when they decide to do so, economies can be transformed within months.

This is the message that has to be taken to COP27 in November. We have to ensure that the gains of Glasgow are defended and that that new nationally determined pledges (NDPs) that are to be adopted at COP27 are radical enough to turn the corner on climate change and break the addiction to fossil fuel.

Alan Thornett, September 13 2022.