

Toddlers, stop your running around: Liz Truss is coming for you ^[1]

Downing Street has childcare in its sights – and the PM has form on this one, complaining in the past that she had seen too many ‘chaotic’ nurseries. What does she expect from two-year-olds?

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Excerpts

Liz Truss, in any sane system, would already be toast, a tragic experiment, seen off by democracy the instant her needless havoc hit the headlines. Instead, we have to sit here and suffer untold amounts of drama and outrage, as Tory MPs perform the eternal wrestle between their self-interest and their consciences. This is quite painful to spectate, like watching an octopus arm-wrestle a seal.

Soldiering on with the fantasy that there is still anything to play for in the next election, Downing Street has apparently “inked in” eight supply-side announcements for the coming days: on childcare, immigration, business regulation, housing, mobile broadband, energy, financial services and agriculture. I could summarise them all, from kite-flyers at the Tory conference, as a regulation-bonfire. One plucky character said at the weekend that businesses employing fewer than 500 people would be subject to no regulations at all, which is great news if your kids are irritating the hell out of you and you would like to send them down a coalmine.

I want to linger, however, on childcare, since this is one area on which Truss has hinterland. Often, she seems as if she is discovering the world and all its fruits for the very first time, which is how we came about her magnificent peroration on cheese, for instance. On kids, however, she has form: she was made parliamentary undersecretary for education and childcare by David Cameron in 2012, and started making waves in the role the following year.

In what we would now recognise as a classic Trussism, she situated the problem with early years care – already, 10 years ago, punishingly expensive, with families typically spending nearly a third of their income on nursery fees; the issue was that staff were lazy. To give that some nuance, nursery workers weren’t lazy, as such, they were merely poorly educated and ought to have at least a C in GCSE maths and English. Toddlers, meanwhile, were “running around” in “chaotic settings”. Yes, I feel as if I made that up too, but I didn’t. Truss’s idea was to relax the regulation around ratios, so that a nursery worker could look after six toddlers rather than four, and to tighten the rules around qualifications, so that a typical child-carer, with better GCSEs, could bring order to the lives of six two-year-olds at once by explaining iambic pentameter to them, and how to calculate angles within a triangle.

It was, again in a way that we will now find familiar, completely batshit. It was bananas enough that it was amusing to test drive, which I did, borrowing five other toddlers to join my youngest (then three) for what I can cheerfully and without any doubt say were the longest four hours of my life. Has she ever met a toddler, I wondered? What kind of purpose ought a two-year-old to have? The irony was that her own daughters were around that age at the time of these wild assertions, a fact I studiously avoided, because it wasn’t very feminist to ask why the parent of toddlers would be talking about that age group in aggregate as though they were a recalcitrant workforce.

In retrospect, I wish I had taken the episode more seriously, rather than treating it as some absurd caper that was fun to watch. It distills so much about the fundamentalist libertarian mindset in general, and Truss’s in particular: respectively, a focus on “efficiency savings” so rigid that it forgets the humans at the heart of the process, and in so doing, misses the entire point; and an unhinged certainty that, when all the experts disagree with you, this means you are challenging tired orthodoxies rather than talking rubbish.

The writing was always on the wall, in other words, put there in felt tip by Liz Truss’s Imaginary Policy Toddler, sounding a warning I declined to hear.

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