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The Undead

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Liz Truss promises to double down on policies that have been completely discredited.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 17th September 2022

Soon, the focus will return, and the collapse of many people's economic prospects will dominate once more. As winter approaches, it will become clear that our politics is spectacularly [lacking in answers](#).

Why? Because the doctrine destroying our condition of life is the doctrine Liz Truss has promised to extend to new extremes. She is fanatically devoted to an ideology misleadingly called Thatcherism or Reaganism (as if they invented it), but more accurately described as [neoliberalism](#).

This doctrine insists that politics submits to “the market”, which means, when translated, that democracy must submit to the power of money. Any impediment to the accumulation of wealth – such as public ownership, tax, regulation, trade unions and political protest – should be torn down, either quickly and noisily or slowly and stealthily. When consumer choice is unencumbered by political interference, the market is allowed to become a Great Winnower, sifting us into a natural hierarchy of winners and losers.

The doctrine has religious, quasi-Calvinist aspects: in the kingdom of the market we can see who is deserving and who is undeserving through the grace bestowed upon them by the god of money. Any policy or protest that seeks to disrupt the formation of a natural order of rich and poor is an unwarranted stay upon the divine will of the invisible hand.

For 40 years or so, neoliberalism in the UK has been unchallengeable. For the Conservatives, especially those populating the current cabinet, the dogma cannot be shaken by mere evidence of harm, even when this includes the destitution of millions and the collapse of Earth systems. For Labour, it sets boundaries that cannot be crossed, for fear of punishment by the billionaire press. As our politics has turned further and further

towards neoliberalism's glittering certainties, any deviation from the doctrine is akin to blasphemy. But the countries in which the ideology has been most fiercely applied are those that have seen the [steepest declines](#) in both their economic and civic prospects.

Neoliberalism promised that it would generate growth. The benefits of this growth would trickle from the rich to the poor, enhancing everyone's conditions of life. But growth, for better or worse, has been [slower globally](#) during the neoliberal era than during the years before Thatcher, Reagan and their many imitators came to power. And it has been overwhelmingly captured by the very rich. Far from ensuring that money trickles down, neoliberalism is the pump that shifts wealth from the poor to the rich.

In the US, for example, during the 1960s and early 1970s, the greatest beneficiaries of economic growth were [the poorest 20%](#). But from 1980 onwards, the proceeds of growth were transferred from the poorest people to the ultra-rich. Median income in the US rose at just one-third of the rate of GDP growth, while the income of the richest 1% rose at three times the rate. By comparison to the pre-neoliberal trend, the bottom 90% lost \$47tn between 1975 and 2018. Between 1990 and 2020, the wealth of US billionaires, adjusted for inflation, increased [roughly twelvefold](#). There's a [similar story in the UK](#). Of the poorest 10% of households, almost half now have [more debts than assets](#).

None of this is accidental. Neoliberalism is sold to us as a means of enhancing freedom and choice, but in reality it's about power. It shifts tax and regulation from those who are rich and powerful on to people who are poor and weak. The taxes the wealthy once paid have been transferred to those with far smaller resources.

Look at Truss's proposal for addressing the energy bills crisis. Instead of taxing the record profits of oil and gas companies, she's using the taxes [the rest of us pay](#) to allow them to keep raking in monstrous sums. Even this policy, presented as a means of helping poor people with their bills, will, when combined with the new [cuts in national insurance](#), ensure that the richest households receive [twice as much help](#) with their living costs as the poorest households.

The "[plan for growth](#)" on which Truss campaigned was pure neoliberal gospel: "cut taxes now, unshackle business from burdensome regulation, implement supply side reform ... create new, low-tax, low-regulation 'investment zones'". Her key advisers are drawn from covertly funded [neoliberal thinktanks](#). She will go as far as electoral politics allow in transferring wealth from the poor to the rich, attacking trade unions and protesters, opening the floodgates for pollution and greenhouse gases and dismembering the NHS.

Already, her government has floated proposals to scrap England's [anti-obesity measures](#) and to remove the [cap on bankers' bonuses](#), the purpose of which is to discourage the reckless gambles that caused the last financial crash.

After 40 years of this experiment, we can state with confidence that the economic success it proclaimed is illusory. Its buy-now-pay-later economics works by [inflating asset values and household debt](#) and burning through human relationships, conditions of employment and the living world. Now that there is little more to burn, Margaret Thatcher's fire is reduced to embers, as is much of the world we knew. Yet Truss seeks only to breathe life into the coals. And this is when it gets really dangerous.

As neoliberalism wages war on social security and the public sector, impoverishes millions and destroys conditions of employment, its political consequences could be as disastrous as its economic consequences. In the 30 years following the second world war, almost everyone in politics recognised that preventing the resurgence of fascism meant ensuring everyone's needs were met, through a strong social safety net and robust public services. But neoliberalism stripped these defences away, while shutting down choice in the name of choice. Thatcher proclaimed "[there is no alternative](#)" and Labour appears, ever since, to have agreed. Worse still, the dogma has at the same time promoted extreme self-interest and egocentricity. At its heart is a mathematically impossible promise: everyone can be No 1.

In the gap between great expectations and low delivery, [humiliation and resentment grow](#). In these conditions, it is easy for demagogues to blame the frustration of people's hopes on scapegoats: women, asylum seekers, Muslims, Jews, black and brown people, disabled people, LGBTQ people, unions, the left, protesters. [History shows](#) that when political choice is lacking and people see no prospect of relief, they become highly susceptible to the transfer of blame. The transfer – attacking refugees and fomenting culture wars – is already well under way. Truss's [techniques of distraction](#) open the door to fascism. I no longer find it impossible to see the far right swarming into the policy vacuum left by Conservative indifference and Labour timidity, and taking power in this country.

We need real, inspiring alternatives, positive visions of a better world, rather than competing modifications of the disastrous ideology that got us into this mess. We need hope.

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