



**‘I like elections.**



# Yes, I know. I'm a total weirdo'

She was the new kid on the block who reversed the Scottish Conservatives' fortunes and was hailed as a future PM. But in August, Ruth Davidson shocked the political world by announcing her resignation. Here, she talks to Kate Bussmann about life after politics and becoming a mother

Photography BENJAMIN McMAHON  
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IT'S A GREY, drizzly morning in Edinburgh, but Ruth Davidson is sunshine personified. She bounces into the *Stella* photo shoot, cheerily informing the photographer that he has a choice: either she smiles for the camera, or he gets her resting bitch face.

When we meet it's just over three months since Ruth resigned as leader of the Scottish Conservatives, having turned what was once described as 'the worst job in politics' into one of the most unexpected success stories of our time. That was evidently a lifetime ago, when this fizzing bubble of energy was, she says, so very, very tired. She quit, citing dual conflicts: the impossibility of being a remainder in a pro-Brexit party, being from a country where 62 per cent voted to stay in the EU; and of being the mother of a young baby in a job that barely allowed her to see him.

Politicians and commentators queued up to express their dismay at the loss of a woman whose authenticity, charisma and enthusiasm had charmed both left and right. The resignation – not just from the leadership but from politics itself, as she'll step down as an MSP at the Holyrood elections in 2021 – came as a huge disappointment to many. She'd been mooted as a future PM, ever since she found national fame in the 2016 Wembley Arena referendum debate – the proudly gay, improbably young leader of a party whose fortunes she had turned around.

But the strongest reactions came from an unexpected corner. 'Ruth Davison [sic] does a disservice to mothers,' tweeted feminist writer Polly Toynbee. 'Covering her resignation with "motherhood" excuses is deeply depressing.'

'You know, I really didn't expect that. I thought it was really harsh,' says Ruth, 41,



over the first of three Diet Cokes. 'I was like, "I'm not standing down!" I still have a full-time job. Finn has got two full-time-working mums. It's not that he's seeing us at home with our feet up on the chaise longue having the butler bring us a bloody Pimm's. I just have to be able to go home and tuck him in at night. I have to be there for him.' She shakes her head. 'You can't escape criticism, but you have to empower women to take the

**Above** Ruth in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, with fiancée Jen Wilson holding newborn son Finn

Previous page, Ruth wears: blazer, £179, roll-neck, £39, and trousers, £99, all Hobbs (hobbs.com). Hair and make-up, Jullie McGuire. This page: wool coat, £220, and top, £65, both Studio 8 by Phase Eight (phase-eight.com). Additional photography: PA



choices that are right for them and their family. Being a full-time politician takes up more time than being a columnist, love,' she says, now addressing Toynbee. 'And until you've walked a mile in my shoes, off you pop.'

The first year of parenthood is hard on anyone, but when she became pregnant with now 13-month-old Finn, her son with fiancée Jen Wilson, 38, who works for a charity, Ruth joined a very select club. Internationally, there are few MPs, let alone party leaders, who have taken time off to have a baby, fewer still who did it as an out gay woman. It presented very particular challenges all along.

'The worst thing would have been to be pictured at the IVF clinic and for people to find out, and for it to fail. I don't think I would have been emotionally strong enough to cope with people knowing in real time,' she says, although she admits to irrational confidence that it would work first time, as it did. (While she and Jen each plan to have a child, being older, Ruth went first.)

To buy a pregnancy test, she sent Jen out 'under cover of darkness to the 24-hour Asda when I knew nobody would be there'. When she started to show before 12 weeks, Jen was again despatched, this time to John Lewis to buy maternity trousers. The last trimester was a 'proper struggle', Ruth recalls. Towards the end of the pregnancy, Finn got bigger faster than normal, so he was born by C-section over a week early, already 10lb.

Despite the sleepless nights, for which she admits she was 'woefully ill-prepared', Ruth is loving motherhood. 'It's tough, but I'm meant to be doing this,' she says. 'Being gay, I wasn't really sure it would ever happen for me. Then the switch flicks and you're rampant for a child.' Until Finn she was terrified

getting Finn fed, dressed and out, and Ruth will walk the dog on the beach near home. It used to be the other way round, but when she resigned the leadership, she lost her parliamentary parking space, so now Jen has the car.

Before she got pregnant, Ruth had limited herself to a weekly schedule of 'six and a half days and three nights' - meaning after parliamentary votes and receptions, she'd be home past midnight nearly half the week. When she went back to work after six months' maternity leave, it proved impossible. Four months in, she tendered her resignation as party leader, citing 'dread' at the thought of fighting the inevitable general election and Holyrood elections beyond. She described herself as having 'proved a poor daughter,

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sister, partner and friend. The arrival of my son means I now make a different choice.'

So it's not a little bizarre to hear her recount the many stops on the campaign trail over the past week, and her plans to visit every target seat in the country - and then to declare that she's having a brilliant time. 'Yes, I know, I'm a total weirdo, and I understand why the electorate are annoyed,' she admits, an embarrassed grin spreading from ear to ear. 'But I like elections.'

Until the general election was called, Ruth had been trying to 'chill' and not rush into a

## LIFE BEFORE POLITICS

*Below, from left*  
Ruth as a toddler with her mum Liz; with childhood pet, Blaze; in the Territorial Army, front row, third from left



of babies. 'I'm much less scared now. You very quickly become an expert in your own child, and hugely confident. I've lucked out. Lots of people have husbands who are incredibly willing and enthusiastic but a bit rubbish, whereas I've got a genuine partner who understands kids. It's a partnership of equals. We interchange: "He's done a poonami, whose turn is it?" Because we're both females, neither of us feels we have to rebel against the gender role. There's no stamping.'

They don't have a nanny - Finn goes to a childminder - nor any family nearby to help out. Jen is currently in charge of mornings,

decision about what her third career will be (she was a journalist before becoming an MSP aged 32). But chilling doesn't come naturally. 'I'm finding it so difficult. I'm glad this one came along, honestly. I'm a team player.'

Asked what she'd do about Brexit if she was in charge, Ruth admits she doesn't know. 'I don't have ready answers because it's a knotty problem. Anyone who says they've got answers in their back pocket is frankly lying to you. It's not been done before, not just by our country, but by any country.'

Brexit aside, her ambition always had a ceiling: she's never been keen on the idea of

moving to London ('I want my children to be educated in Scotland'), let alone into No 10. She has sympathy for Theresa May, for whom she was a staunch ally. 'She was in an almost impossible situation. I do think there were strategic mistakes – the withdrawal agreement is such a small part of this process, and it took on huge importance – but people could see how hard she was trying.

'I'm very lucky to have been able to see behind the door at No 10. Leadership has always been lonely – being the person who makes decisions that can be not just life-changing, but life-ending.'

May is one of the prominent women Ruth interviewed for her book, *Yes She Can*, which came out last year. A series of tales of women who beat great odds, it's also part memoir, detailing Ruth's own astonishing life story. With striking honesty, she describes her working-class childhood in a small village in Fife with an idolised big sister, who is now an NHS consultant.

To say Ruth's is a story of triumph over adversity doesn't even come close. At five, she was hit by a truck while crossing the road outside her home. 'It broke my leg, shattered my pelvis, crushed my main femoral artery, severed the main nerve running down the front of my right leg and inflicted internal damage,' she writes. The aftermath sounds just as traumatising: being wheeled into the teaching hospital's lecture theatre, medical students staring; the circular saw they had to use to remove her full-body cast.

A 'happy-go-lucky child' before the accident, afterwards, nothing could stop her. Her injuries left her with a wonky frame and forward-tilted posture that seemed to propel her on. A self-described 'joiner', she played clarinet in the school orchestra, joined ski, tennis and debating clubs, and set up a theatre club because there wasn't one. She worked in kitchens and tea shops from the age of 12, and won a place at Edinburgh University to study English literature. But there, things began to go very, very wrong.

News of the suicide of a boy from her village, who'd also been in a car accident on the same stretch of road, affected her hugely – whether it was survivor's guilt, or the underlying conflict of being a deeply religious woman (she is a member of the Church of Scotland) ill at ease with her unacknowledged sexuality, Ruth fell apart. 'I really struggled with the idea that I deserved to live,' she writes. 'I started hurting myself: punching walls, cutting my stomach and arms with blades or broken glass, drinking far too much and becoming belligerent and angry, pushing people away.'

Aged 18 she was diagnosed with clinical depression and prescribed antidepressants – a type that was later proven to cause increased suicidal behaviour in adolescents. Instinctively, Ruth decided to stop taking the pills and willed herself out of the hole by drinking less, exercising more, giving her life structure, going back to church – a routine she still pursues if she feels 'the weight of the black blanket start to descend'.

Her drive and sense of purpose is palpable. 'I'm cussed and dogged and chippy, and if somebody tells me I can't do something then I'm just going to try harder to do it,' she says. She joined the Territorial Army, where she had the second major injury of her life, breaking her back on a training exercise – she still suffers occasional pain as a result.

With no journalism experience she got a job on a newspaper, working her way up to become a BBC Radio Scotland presenter. After a decade as a journalist, she answered David Cameron's call for fresh talent in the wake of the expenses scandal, and was a Conservative MSP by 32. When the party leader stepped down, she stepped up. 'I had to learn how to be a bit of a streetfighter. Scotland's a hard beat for politics. We're quite tough up here. And I'm tougher than I used to be, but I'm not sure I wholly like that. I'm happy to take abuse off people, but it's the attrition of it.'

She says can get 'between 100 and 1,000 abusive tweets a day. It wears you down. I've had a lot of "string her up by a lamppost" type



in its absence from the book. 'It's absent in interviews as well,' she nods, before haltingly continuing, eyes glistening. 'I've never really spoken about it because the relationship I have with my family [now] is not the same as the [one] I had with them at the time I came out. It's to protect them. I put myself in this position. I'm not naive. But there are people in my life who didn't choose that.'

'I was in my mid-20s [when I came out] – quite late. I didn't know for ages, which is surprising, looking back.' She laughs loudly for a long time. 'Stereotypes probably exist for a reason.' Her path to self-acceptance 'was a really long process. I came out to one member of my very close family, it didn't go well, so I didn't come out to the rest for two years.' At the time, she was dating a woman: 'I justified to myself that I'd fallen for the person, not the gender... the idea of being able to own the label of gay as well as being gay, it took me a few years. Part of that was wrapped up in my faith and my church and my family upbringing and all the rest of it.'



Left At the Wembley referendum debate with Boris Johnson. Above Her resignation in August

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stuff; "unionists, turncoats, traitors". The ones I have difficulty with are when people take a photo of you without you being aware and put it on the internet. And I had an incident where someone got my phone number and made threats. It turned out not to be that sinister, but I didn't know that when I was being told they wanted to burn all gays.'

While it has made her a target, her sexuality has also, to her surprise, made her a role model. After she became party leader, her inbox filled up with emails from young gay people that began, 'I'm not a Tory but...' before describing how powerful it was to see her reach that position. In *Yes She Can*, Ruth recounts writing back to each of them, revealing her own painful experiences, and how pleased she was that none of those emails made it into the papers.

The story of her own coming out is glaring

Today, she says, there's 'a sort of equanimity' in her relationship with her faith, and she would 'dearly love' to have a church wedding. While she and Jen had set a date, they postponed after their dog was hit by a car and the vet bills wiped out their savings. 'We'll get there,' she says. Perhaps when she's less busy, when they've had their much-wanted second child, perhaps even once both kids are in school. Perhaps then Ruth will be able to focus on her career again, which may be in international development or, possibly, back in politics.

'It may well be that my time in politics doesn't come again until we're in opposition. I've probably got more experience than anyone in the party on how to lead from opposition,' she says, ever the fighter. A woman who, when backed into a corner, should never be underestimated. ▀

