

# It's time to curb triple-digit inflation

The use of abbreviations has gone too far



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On March 28th Sam Bankman-Fried was sentenced to 25 years in prison for fraud in the collapse of his crypto exchange. One particularly undignified aspect of the cryptocurrency crash has been the habit of referring to Mr Bankman-Fried as sbf. This triple-initialising has become ubiquitous in America. Hillary Rodham Clinton likes to be known as hrc, while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a progressive member of Congress, is widely called aoc (confusing the French, who take this to refer to wine and cheese of appellation d'origine contrôlée). On the far right Marjorie Taylor Greene, a conspiracy-theorist member of Congress from Georgia, styles herself on social media as mtg. The late Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a Supreme Court justice, became, to her bemused surprise, the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary entitled "rbg". Now the court has kbj (Ketanji Brown Jackson). The habit is global. Germans refer to Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, a former defence minister, as akk, and to Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger, a former justice minister, as sls (both are apparently too much of a mouthful even for native-speakers). French ex-politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn is called dsk. Russians know Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin as vvp, who got his

start in the kgb. The United Arab Emirates (uae) has as its de facto ruler Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, or mbz, and in Saudi Arabia the man in charge is Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, commonly shortened to mbs. In Mexico, meanwhile, the president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is known as amlo—an alarming escalation to four digits.

All this is getting out of hand, not least in politics. Initials can create more confusion than convenience. It is one thing to streamline discussions with abbreviations that everyone knows, such as cia or fbi, but many sensible people will have no idea who mtg is. Abbreviations have already infected the modern workplace (the cfo and coo are typically ooo wfh to consider roi), not to mention social media (tbh idk wtf a psa is). Politics is messy enough without gratuitous clutter.

At issue is substance as well as style. Triple-initialisation is all too often an attempt to claim iconic status. American politicians are tempted to capitalise on the greatest of their lot, Franklin Delano Roosevelt: fdr. He had had the nickname from birth but as president it proved helpful to journalists writing headlines. fdr's three-initial glamour was self-consciously mimicked by his fellow Democratic successors in the White House, John F. Kennedy (jfk) and Lyndon B. Johnson (lbj), as well as by jfk's younger brother, Robert F. Kennedy (whose son, Robert, is now a maverick presidential candidate seeking to brand himself as rfk junior). When Johnson was still an ambitious member of Congress he told his staffers, "fdr-lbj, fdr-lbj. Do you get it? What I want is for them to start thinking of me in terms of initials." Not leaving it to chance, he named his daughters Lynda Bird Johnson and Luci Baines Johnson and his dog Little Beagle Johnson. Richard Nixon, too, wanted the Kennedyesque cachet of initials, but botched the job: he entitled his memoirs "rn", to no avail.

Is it too much to ask that politicians go by their proper names? Exceptions should be rare and inspirational. Martin Luther King junior, the champion of the civil-rights movement, is properly honoured as mlk. If a leader should manage to do the equivalent of leading a great power through the Great Depression and the second world war—or to resolve the Cuban missile crisis, or to uphold the rights of oppressed minorities—then he or she will have earned those exalted three initials. But the digital currency is all too easily devalued. ■

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