View from Westminster

September 2018

The macropolitical scene remains broadly as it has for some time. Brexit is still an unresolvable conundrum. Boris Johnson continues to author lengthy articles explaining everything he should have done when in Government. Future leadership candidates are still furiously jostling for position (Sajid Javid leads the race, but Jeremy Hunt, Dominic Raab and Penny Mourdant are making gains). The official opposition continues to shoot itself in the foot over antisemitism claims. UKIP are flirting with the idea of allowing Tommy Robinson to join their ranks. The Liberal Democrats appear to be going on about erotic spasms. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose… So well-trodden is this set of stories in previous columns that I will refer readers to those historical efforts and instead this month focus on departmental activities. For there have been some!

It is the Department for Transport (DfT) one must focus on first. The Office of Rail and Road (ORR) delivered its verdict on the timetable rollout and it represented the biggest kick in the cobblers any ministry has received for some time. Its headline conclusion, that nobody seemed to be in charge, was damning and there is a growing sense amongst backbenchers on all sides of the House that the rail industry has become a monolith of power without responsibility. Labour’s solution is nationalisation. The Government rejects that call but has launched the biggest root and branch review of rail in a generation. It’s fair to say the report, and the clamour for heads to roll that followed it, will be front and centre of minds for the foreseeable future. Expect fireworks at DfT Questions.

MHCLG (as nobody calls it yet, DCLG still reigns supreme in Westminster) has also seen a flurry of activity this month. The Northern Powerhouse appears to be back in fashion, with the participation of businesses in British Food Fortnight currently the lead headline on the departmental website… Of more interest perhaps is a new £7.5m digital innovation fund councils can obtain to help improve online service provision. £100,000 a go is the grant limit and I’m sure councils will avail themselves of the opportunity the fund presents. Extra money to tackle homelessness has also been announced and the shortlist for the Great British High Street revealed. Both these areas will see additional focus in the coming months, with small-town high-street regeneration becoming, I predict, something of a political football following the recent Labour Party Conference. It was however the £1bn partnership with Barclays to help small and medium sized property developers get building that caught the eye. It would appear Mr Brokenshire is intent in backing housebuilding over nimbyism in what remains the great domestic policy issue of our times…

All is quiet at HMT, aside from the announcement of an earlier than expected Budget (29th October). This has been scheduled to allow space for an EU Summit in November where hopefully some kind of deal will be announced. So I end the column with the annual plea…get your submissions in quick!