

## View from Westminster

It is testament to the terrible times we live in that the end of the beginning of the Brexit melodrama is not the defining news of the hour. Brexit has been a long and winding road since those of us who form the lumpen proletariat elected to poke accepted political consensus right in its ballot box. A succession of grandly titled speeches, meaningful votes, dubious prorogations, court cases and general elections have littered the intervening years between then and now, sweeping before them Prime Ministers and supposed political big beasts. After all those fireworks, not to mention the thousands of descriptive words spewed forth in this column, the end proved something of a whimper... A routine vote in the House of Commons and the process was concluded. Brexit has finally, to use modern campaigning parlance, got done. The talking, of course, continues. International agreements are live and evolving creatures that see amendments made continuously. Supranational tweaking is however of limited interest to most who voted to leave and put their faith in Boris to deliver on the referendum result. Their judgement on its meaning will come. If many still feel left behind and unlevelled up when they enter the polling stations, it will be game over for the governing party.

As Big Ben bonged for Brexit, the true story of the ages was unfolding in St Thomas' ICU just over Westminster Bridge. Like most ICUs across southern England, it finds itself stuffed full of patients fighting Covid-19. Nothing has defined a year as Covid has in 2020 since Churchill was fighting them on the beaches. The nation has buried around 70,000 of its own people because of an illness largely unknown outside of Wuhan wet markets this time last year. Stories of full hospitals, burnt out medical professionals and elongated ambulance waiting hours have become so commonplace their shock currency has plummeted. News of 50,000 cases a day, or the thick end of a small parliamentary constituency, are regrettably so routine they no longer surprise.

Science, of course, has provided the prospect of salvation. Two vaccines are ready to roll, with a handful more waiting in the wings. As the world gears up to immunise 7 billion people, the magnitude of the task ahead is becoming ever more apparent to those in government. Forecasts on vaccine numbers go from headline grabbing to vague utterances, while dose frequencies are changed just two weeks into the rollout. Salvation isn't of course always easy to accomplish. It promises to still be a long, hard winter.

In the middle of all of this is Boris Johnson. Only the stoniest heart cannot feel something for a man who wanted the keys to Downing Street for so long...and now must wish he never inherited them at all. The polls, for what they're worth right now, have shifted and Starmer and his party find themselves the new frontrunners. The public, ungrateful buggers that they are, famously turfed out the aforementioned Churchill despite his heroic war efforts. Plenty in the Conservative Party are fearful that lightning might strike twice. Johnson may elect to shuffle his ministerial pack...but, to reference Macmillan, it will be events that determine his fate from here, some of which he cannot control.

Underneath all of that is us. Local authorities. Heading out to provide services and invest in our communities. Providing a degree of stability in what are the most uncertain of times. And we will do so again throughout 2021. As Auld Lang Syne fades into the haze of another hangover, let not old acquaintances be forgot. Let's keep working together and finding a way. Our role is just as important as any other organisation. Let's do it well.