

## View from Westminster: February 2020

Politics was supposed to retreat to its technocratic and mundane self, following the reappearance of large majority government. It was all supposed to be so uneventful...and yet...

A reshuffle has taken place where the Chancellor of the Exchequer resigned having discovered some principles. The Home Secretary joins the former Speaker of the House of Commons in facing serious bullying accusations. The Labour Party and Liberal Democrat leadership contests are dragging on longer than The Irishman. A Downing Street adviser resigned having stretched the weirdo and misfit label to destruction. Most of the country is commuting to work by canoe and, to end on a positive note, we all face the immediate prospect of death by coronavirus. Given the next job in my in-tray is to summarise the latest Brexit skirmishes now negotiation documents have been published, the prospect of an early pandemic-related demise is reasonably tantalising...

Politics therefore remains a veritable smorgasbord of absurdity. And that's before we get to the fact select committees have still not been properly constituted, support for Scottish independence is topping 50% in opinion polls, the local government financial settlement has landed, and Heathrow airport expansion has seemingly taxied off the runway.

The one to briefly dwell on is the reshuffle. Bolder predictions regarding departmental rejigging proved to be spectacularly wrong at ministerial level. BEIS, DfID and DfIT still walk amongst us. The amalgamation of Downing Street and Treasury Special Adviser teams has however been touted as a bold and controversial move...despite a similar arrangement emerging during the coalition government merely 5 years ago. Liam Booth-Smith has been tasked with uniting Number 10 and 11, no doubt spurred on by the star turn he put in at our conference a few years ago!

The headlines were understandably dominated by the departing Mr Javid. His resignation was not a "Classic Dom 4d chess" moment. Nobody in Downing Street wanted him to walk and most clearly felt he would accept P45s for his advisers and agree to the new proposed arrangements in exchange for keeping the keys to the Treasury. Principle is in short supply in Westminster and the fact this rarest of commodities has been momentarily discovered will take some time to process. Like man arriving on the moon, we live in hope rather than expectation that we will see it again in our lifetimes...

For ADEPT, the ministerial merry-go-round brings with it the usual mixture of familiarity and difference. HMT sees change at the top with Rishi Sunak moving to the big chair and Steve Barclay becoming Chief Secretary. Mr Barclay is genuinely considered to have performed well at the defunct DExEU and therefore his stint in the Treasury will be interesting to observe. Jesse Norman, John Glen and Kemi Badenoch respectively bring intellectualism, stability and reformist zeal to the junior ranks. DEFRA now has departmental stalwart and farmers' friend George Eustice running the show, with Rebecca Pow, Lord Gardiner and Victoria Prentis taking up junior positions. Zac Goldsmith, fresh from another electoral defeat, finds himself boomeranging back into the department clad in his new resplendent ermine.

The infrastructure fanatics amongst us still have Grant Shapps to engage with at DfT. Chris Heaton Harris will be looking after railways, Baroness Vere gets roads, Kelly Tolhurst gets sea and air, Andrew Stephenson gets HS2 and Rachel Maclean gets to try and make it all adherent to our climate change obligations. MCHLG sees Robert Jenrick defy my prediction of being promoted to higher office (sorry, Rob) and retain his role. Chris Pincher becomes the 1,563th housing minister in the last decade (I exaggerate only slightly), Luke Hall takes local government and homelessness and Simon Clark takes an unspecified role that presumably encompasses whatever is left. Next, the Budget. No pressure then...