

View from Westminster

June 2021

The local election results are in and the ultimate conclusion is that existing political positions have been entrenched. Labour continues to enjoy support in our biggest cities, whilst Wales remains the sturdiest bricks in the red wall. The Conservatives swept the board everywhere else in England, making further inroads into hitherto socialist heartlands. The SNP juggernaut continues apace in Scotland, albeit still not quite at referendum provoking levels. The Liberal Democrats/Greens pick up the protest votes of the interested, but disaffected. All things considered; Mr Johnson would take that 11 years into Tory dominance at Westminster.

It is in that context of continued public support for the Government that the Dominic Cummings evidence session must be seen in. For the political purists amongst us though, his appearance was a Christmas gift wrapped early from a select committee corridor. A seven-hour score-settling exercise where the indignation and incompetent accusations hit most parts of Westminster and Whitehall hard and repeatedly. We had the F bomb dropped before 11am, tales of discussions on war being interrupted by dog stories and Matt Hancock so brutally criticised that the livestream should have come with a trigger warning.

And yet, as the dust settles, one reaches for the maxim made famous by Mrs May. Nothing had changed. Supporters of Boris still point to the vaccine rollout as the success that exonerates all other ills. Opponents cite Mr Cummings as additional proof that Downing Street is effectively winging its way through a pandemic that's claimed 100,000 lives. One suspects nothing said at the hearing changed minds, even if one can hope it might change policy and strategy once the TV cameras have moved on. The clear aspiration of Mr Cummings, aside from trying to end the careers of those who he despises most, is to drag forward the Covid-19 inquiry into the present. He might just succeed, as he left SW1 with enough unanswered questions to ensure his accusations won't fade from view.

The response from the Prime Minister was characteristically unpredictable. He decided to get married. I'm sure Mr Johnson is an avid reader of this column and I therefore offer congratulations to him and his better half for taking the plunge. More conventionally, the Government has simply doubled down on what is a radical Queen's Speech offering. The headlines are dominated by the culture wars bills around free speech in universities and voter ID, but these are drops in the ocean compared to the bigger stuff. Zonal planning is still alive and well, State Aid is being comprehensively replaced and, entirely separate from the speech, the railways are being reformed more than at any time since the 1980s. Throw in the push to rollout 5G and the return of the Environment Bill and you've got a government with a full agenda on its hands. It is this agenda that will, in the end, determine how deep the wide government opinion poll lead actually is. It's an old maxim in politics that oppositions don't win elections, governments lose them. Nobody knows that better than Johnson. So onwards they'll go.