

View from Westminster

It's fair to say there has only been one story in Westminster this month.

Indeed, it's been a while since an event has been so hotly anticipated within the corridors of power. Everyone has been on tenterhooks and, when the day finally arrived, the crowds gathered in good numbers, desperate to know what she was going to say. Fortunately, the President's Address to the ADEPT Conference was everything we expected and more.

The Sue Gray Report has also been published.....It represents a marvellous example of a document that can be legitimately described as importantly unimportant. It's important because (a) it revealed in greater depth the extent of regulation flouting that occurred, and (b) it demonstrated just how engrained the freewheeling booze culture has become at the heart of government. Abusiveness of cleaning staff, a sense of getting away with it and photos of prominent politicians and civil servants enjoying a wee dram whilst the country was in various stages of lockdown were there for all who wanted to see.

And yet...the report ultimately changes little as minds were long ago made up. Poll after poll suggests the court of public opinion has returned a verdict of "resign". And so, in the wake, a trickle of letters trundles in calling for a leadership contest. Special mention here to Anne Marie Morris, a Devonian parliamentarian who had the whip restored at 9am only to submit a no confidence letter 20 minutes later. There is, as always, hilarity in horror. As for Downing Street, one suspects they know the leadership contest is coming. They might even instigate it themselves. As the Ukrainian war rumbles on and the cost-of-living crisis escalates, the one thing we cannot afford (apart from our gas bills) is paralysis in central government.

Speaking of which, Rishi Sunak was spurred into action again following the announcement that average utility bills would soar by another £800 from October. Chuck in an inflation rate that's bumping around 10% and rising interest rates that will start to bite with every increase and we have not just a squeezed middle, but a top and bottom as well. Fortuitously, the Treasury sofa contains many coins and Rishi found fifteen billion of them to put around £1200 into the pockets of the poorest. We all get £400 to ease the memory of partying - I mean to help with our gas bills. It's another huge government intervention that, after furlough, has seen many fiscal conservatives wondering where the conservatism has gone. Rachel Reeves certainly enjoyed responding for Labour, making hay about the fact all this was her idea all along. Hollow mockery though. The public won't care who had the idea. All that matters to us proles is the pounds in our pockets.

DfT had its big moment in the sun as we finally saw real life paying punters on Crossrail. Of course, no self-respecting Londoner will ever call it Crossrail and it will forever be known as the Lizzie Line. Happy Jubilee Ma'am - here's a train set! It's also, with impeccable timing, knocked out its 10 year aviation strategy at the precise moment thousands of passengers are sleeping on terminal floors due to staff shortages. We've also seen puff pieces around electric vehicle sales and green shipping, proving that no department outside of BEIS has more responsibility to deliver on net zero than DfT.

Michael Gove has also had a busy month being Michael Gove...quietly going about doing lots of things that try to keep the government show on the road. Billions have been announced to build more garden cities, billions more have emerged under the Community Ownership Fund, and the Levelling Up Bill has seen the light of day. DEFRA has been somewhat quieter, with the big news here being that a South American "wonder weevil" has been released to protect against an invasive non-native species, floating pennywort. I'm sure it's why those ministers entered politics...