

View from Westminster

Westminster is simultaneously a delightful and dreadful place to spend time. Dedicated public servants and talented parliamentarians rub shoulders with those who hide their inabilities with the mask of conviction. Excellence and ego can be found in equal measure, with almost all possessing an unfathomable inability to admit error. The dictionaries in Westminster don't contain the words "wrong" or "sorry".

So, you can imagine the ministerial joy at discovering their expensively assembled crack teams of special advisers and superforecasters are outmanoeuvred by some bloke who kicks footballs for a living. Marcus Rashford is rapidly transforming himself from promising footballer into the millennial Joanna Lumley. His ambition to eradicate childhood hunger sets the bar laudably high. After all, even Jesus stopped at 5000. His disciples didn't own smartphones though and the Rashford campaign has swiftly mobilised an online, as well as school gates, army. It's certainly got Boris reaching for the headache tablets, as he discovers that populism is the revolution that eats its children if it means children have something to eat. The Government is running out of road on this and the Red Wall Tories will ensure the U-turn is inevitable.

One of the more interesting political fallouts from the Rashford campaign is that resistance to his proposals is strongest inside the Treasury. Saint Rishi has been the Santa Claus Chancellor since taking up office, dishing out limitless goodies to a beleaguered nation and enjoying the fruits of popularity such generosity brings. The moment was always going to come when the Treasury rediscovered its fondness for prudence. As Sunak cops some flak for delaying the inevitable, it will be interesting to see if his halo fades amongst those in the Conservative family who have him pegged as the best hope to tackle Starmer.

In a more exciting development, the boffins at NASA have announced water has been discovered on the sunnier surfaces of the moon. This opens the possibility of a lunar base camp, or a resort hotel as Elon Musk probably sees it. In what are austere times, it is a landmark scientific discovery and a genuine feelgood story. Perhaps the world's most prominent scientists can turn their powerful telescopes to matters of local government significance and investigate the black hole of Whitehall to see where those devolution proposals have gone!

In other news, and in case you might have missed it, the country is currently collectively watching Coronavirus 2; The Second Wave. The sequel is equally as unwelcome as the first one... The Government managed to get itself into a right pickle over £5m (otherwise known in government expenditure terms as a rounding error) in its discussions with the Greater Manchester authorities. Andy Burnham, proficient politician that he objectively is, successfully united the region behind his position and took the fight to Boris Johnson. On this occasion, he lost the battle over money, but might have helped Sir Keir start to win the Red Wall war. If the North is indeed to rise again, it might start reflecting on who is best place to assist with the resurrection. Against a backdrop of deadly serious infection numbers and hospitalisation figures north of Birmingham, we are about to see if we are indeed one nation.

From the deepest corners of MHCLG however did come some good news. The first seven locations for the multibillion Towns Fund have been announced. The Future High Streets Funds should be hot on its heels, whilst Brexit necessitates that more details on what is replacing Structural Funding will have to be forthcoming. Small drops in the pandemic ocean perhaps, but as the debt collectors start demanding the UK pays its borrowed cash back, even the crumbs are welcome when they fall off the table. Winter is Coming...