

View from Westminster – July 2020

This column is the reflections of an independent observer of Westminster and does not set out an official ADEPT view.

It's difficult not to feel sorry for the Secretary of State for Transport. When the House of Commons looked fragile at the height of the Cummings controversy, Mr Shapps was there to face the cameras and hold the line. I'm sure he will flinch at the comparison, but he has become the new David Gauke. Every government must have one. A reliable media performer Downing Street can turn to when the chips are down, and the bombardment is seemingly overwhelming. Arguably, if anyone had justified their sunbed and sangria in sunny Spain, it was the Transport Secretary.

However, COVID-19 is no respecter of those who take one for the team. Consequently, the Transport Secretary faced the prospect of announcing that everyone's overseas holidays had been ruined whilst holidaying in the very country the masses were desperate to fly to themselves to. What inevitably follows is two weeks of impeccably observed quarantine enforced by tabloid long lens, and a succession of media interviews demonstrating that, rather than tucking into the paella, he is instead dealing with ministerial boxes. Politics is a harsh mistress sometimes.

Mind you, one suspects sympathy will be in short supply – the public are cruel like that – and there is much for government ministers to be getting on with. The Comprehensive Spending Review being top of the pile. The decision to make it a traditional three-year settlement is surprising given current economic uncertainties, but it does ensure the great Secretaries of State lobbying race has begun as senior politicians scramble to protect their budgets. All eyes will no doubt be on Robert Jenrick as it's fair to say MHCLG has taken more than its fair share of hits since the onset of austerity...

We also have the Planning White Paper to look forward to and, if parliamentary scuttlebutt is to be believed, the prospect of significant local government reform on the horizon. The latter is often where angels fear to tread... Mr Cummings is however no angel and is clearly keen to see the local government sector shaken up as much as Whitehall. Recent speculation that Simon Clarke has indicated a 600,000-population cap will disappoint and delight in equal measure, but it remains merely a mooted and unsubstantiated possibility. As for the Planning White Paper...we expect that to arrive imminently and suspect much will be made of regulations being significantly loosened to encourage additional housebuilding. What they might mean for town centres in the post-pandemic age and the fields so beloved of shire Tories remains to be seen.

Backbench parliamentarians meanwhile find themselves commencing the COVID-19 retrospective analysis; with the Public Accounts Committee citing serious concerns around care home management. Always at the punchier end of the select committee spectrum, PAC's report will hurt if it gets traction. The APPG for coronavirus meanwhile is talking to anyone and everyone with a point to make. Normally, APPGs don't make headlines...but such is the vast swathe of parliamentarians involved in this one, it's one to monitor.