

View from Westminster November 2021

The world of geopolitical diplomacy is nothing if not populated with unexpected obstacles. Picking Greek letters to name killer plagues seems reasonably innocuous right until things have dragged on long enough that we reach Xi. In the interests of keeping the cash flowing from Beijing, that particular character has become an un-letter and we have therefore settled instead on Omicron...which sounds like a rogue Transformer. We have also seen social media explode in its usual partisan factionalism as the government announced reintroduced measures around face mask wearing in shops and on public transport to buy time for scientists to work out if Omicron is good or bad.

Politically, it was the only decision Boris Johnson and Sajid Javid could logically make. If Omicron turns out to be a highly transmissible potential killer of thousands, then additional restrictions will follow and it's easier to go from something to more than nothing to a lot. Conversely, if Omicron turns out to be the jackpot winner of a highly-transmissible, Delta-replacing, mild mutation, then it's better to remove restrictions ablaze a fanfare of good news. For now, the scientists must do science as we wait and wonder.

It is important to note that Boris Johnson was 100pct right to speak in such...stuttering...terms about Peppa Pig World. The truth, of course, is an audience of senior business people is not the best place for rhetorical flights of fantasy into children's television shows and going up that Faraway Tree really was a bit of a Clanger. Plenty of extremely cynical commentators suggest, rightly, that such distracting nonsense is constructed to divert attention away from more important stuff happening elsewhere in SW1. Inflation, for example, is currently somewhere through the ceiling at over 4pct, something that might well prompt the Bank of England to go for a mortgage-breaking, government debt interest-enhancing, rate rise. Energy suppliers continue to go pop, contributing to a cost-of-living squeeze as those surviving the economic storms hike prices. Social care provisions have been watered down, triggering a mass parliamentary rebellion as Red Wallers get squeamish over the impact on their working-class constituencies. Sleaze is also back with a bang as government attempted to sweep cash for 15 counts of lobbying under the House of Commons procedural carpet.

And in the middle of all that, Labour is at best 2-3 points ahead in the polls. Starmer's Corbynite critics, who have never got over the 2019 rejection of the Absolute Boy, are shouting things about being 20 points ahead. but the reality is current polling projections would likely turf Johnson out of Downing Street if Starmer could break bread with the SNP. For the Labour leader, it's time to keep holding the line...

Finally, one should spare a thought for rising star Bim Afolami. Acknowledged as one of the brightest from the new intake, he'd been serving as Liz Truss' PPS until he had the temerity to commit to print an article criticising Boris Johnson and recent government performance. It was, by Westminster standards, a spicy article and one that Sir Humphrey would have said it was brave and courageous for somebody on the payroll vote to pen. However, Downing Street decided not to sack their free thinking young upstart. Instead, he's been moved instead to PPS for Nadine Dorries...