

View from Westminster August 2021

The summer recess column. Historically, the most difficult to write. Parliament is busy relaxing on its deckchairs and government departments scale back as senior civil servants jet off for sunnier climates.

Even since Blair and Bush took the western superpowers into Afghanistan, it has been the true epicentre of the one-time-called 'war on terror'. It is a two-decade excursion that has claimed over 400 British lives and many more minds. Some of its frontline protagonists have additionally served the House by being the loudest critics of an American administration that's chosen the rush of retreat over the patience of peace. The only thing that didn't rush as fast as the Taliban to Kabul or President Biden to its airport was the Foreign Secretary to his telephone. The fallout will be generational. Questions such as is the UK stuck in a special or abusive relationship, is this China's century, what does global Britain mean, and where now for Afghanistan will all be debated and asked. In the here and now however, the populism of the Johnson administration will be tested by the question of where and how do we house 20,000 refugees. Politics is a messy game. Geopolitics even more so.

Coronavirus, like the Taliban, is a disease that doesn't respect recess. Somewhat in the shadows of Afghanistan, one can observe small upticks in elderly infection rates, hospitalisation figures, and deaths. The mooted 100,000 cases a day didn't follow the great unlock...but there are now legitimate questions being asked around booster shot timing, 12-17yr old vaccinations, continued vaccine effectiveness against modern variants, and the impact of schools returning on case numbers. And that's before we again visit the well of populism to find complaints regarding excessive PCR testing costs and the cowboy behaviour of some testing companies soon to be removed from the government's website. Every month has been crucial in the Covid war, but one feels the next couple will set the tone for the winter to come.

It's been a while since an update on Brexit has been provided. The pandemic and Afghanistan have rather stolen its thunder. A quick look through the Brexit looking glass however reveals that McDonalds has run out of milkshakes, Nando's its chicken and warning noises from KFC. And that's before we get to waste services. A combination of the 'pingdemic' and a shortage of lorry drivers has deprived the masses of their favourite practically unsuckable drink. I'm confident this will be sorted soon as politicians McFlurry to deal with the problem...

Outside the bigger stories, how are things going as recess rumbles on? Well...the government has decided that the best possible trade envoy to Australia it can find is Ian Botham. The Good Law Project has won the right to drag the government to court over its Levelling Up Fund, suggesting it's actually a politically campaigning tool. The hydrogen strategy and decarbonisation of transport strategies have been published to such silent fanfare one thought one had momentarily gone deaf. Ed Davey has announced a Liberal Democrat tour of Blue Wall seats that includes...defending Tim Farron up in Cumbria. Mr Starmer is presumably doing another relaunch at some point. So, business as usual then!