

View from Westminster

2021 was, if we're being honest, another shocking political year. This is not a reflection on the quality of politicians and advisers that we have. Any leaders from any era would have struggled to successfully address a worldwide pandemic under the constant glaze and glare of 24hr media and an online wild west where falsehood is fact long before the truth has left the starting gate. Instead, it is just a blunt assessment of where the world finds itself. It is in that context that one is hesitant to look at the year ahead, although there is a case that can be made that optimism (if not sunlit uplands) should be the cautious watchword.

Any assessment of 2022 must begin with Covid-19. It will dominate the political landscape again in a way that might make one unexpectedly nostalgic for Brexit parliamentary divisions! The UK Government ended 2021 successfully in its battle against Omicron, with a booster vaccination programme roll out that ensured additional restrictions beyond Plan B were unnecessary and Christmas wasn't cancelled. Having staggered through into January, there is an optimistic scenario where the high transmissibility, but low lethality and hospitalisation rates of Omicron allow us to transition from pandemic to endemic management. January and February look set to be dominated by staff shortages caused by isolation, which is suboptimal for our economy but fundamentally preferable to the same months being overtaken by busy funeral parlours.

One issue emerging however is the short lifespan of booster vaccinations and some nations have already adopted a fourth jab policy. How sustainable twice-yearly vaccinations are will become a live issue. As for Covid-19 itself, that will do as all coronaviruses do and continually mutate. The hope is that the current track to less problematic infection waves throughout 2022 and beyond is sustained. In the interim, HMT will need to support many an industry battered by the fallout, while the DHSC has quite the job patching up the nation and supporting a tired workforce. Even if the coronavirus sojourn through the remainder of the Greek alphabet proves to be a more manageable one, rebuilding the country in its aftermath ensures it will dominate our politics for some time to come.

For the Conservatives, there's troubled waters ahead even if Storm Coronavirus subsides. They had an objectively disastrous December. Partygate has shattered the Teflon that surrounded Johnson throughout his political career. Losing North Shropshire was borderline historic, polling has turned against them, and the backbench and frontbench fundamentally disagree on almost all aspects of government policy. Open speculation around Boris' successor reverberates across the grassroots, with Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss early front runners. Both have trouble on their hands as Truss takes on a Brexit policy far from oven ready as pledged and Rishi tries to dampen a massive inflation and cost of living crisis that looms large. Given that, one wonders if an outside bet is Penny Mordaunt, who has the brains and the backing for a tilt at the top but will largely avoid the spotlight in her relatively junior role. Long-time Johnson confidant Michael Gove will also no doubt be there or thereabouts, whilst previous runner-up Jeremy Hunt or Sajid Javid might also fancy another go. The real smart money though might just back Johnson to boomerang back. To do so though, he needs a win from somewhere...

For Labour, things are improving. Starmer finds himself 14 points ahead in key red wall seats on latest polling and continually in front on national trend. His tried and tested strategy of say little and wait for the implosion from Johnson has worked well, although he will now come under the added scrutiny that being a potential PM-in-waiting brings. Nonetheless, he begins 2022 with a momentum Labour hasn't seen for many a year and his task is to choose between capitalising or waiting for Boris to make another mistake. The Liberal Democrats had an objectively outstanding 2021, establishing themselves again as a natural protest vote for the disgruntled and dissatisfied and a new home for some of the Remain-voting conservatives. They'll be hoping 2022 brings some more by-elections while also preparing themselves for a real tilt at the Ring of Fire, EU-supporting, seats that surround London. Knocking out Dominic Raab is their big prize.

The one prediction that can hopefully be made is the Levelling Up White Paper should be with us by time the next column arrives. If so, then I look forward to summarising it. We have only a month to find out if the only prediction I am willing to make for 2022 turns out to be stone cold wrong...