

View from Westminster February 2021

"There is light at the end of the tunnel and the Prime Minister will present us a roadmap out of lockdown". That quote was given by a government press officer and it stands proof that the pandemic hasn't diminished our politicians desire to raid the book of clichés. One also wonders how many roadmaps are required to successfully navigate out of tunnels, but let's park such pedantry for now.

As for the roadmap itself, it was a classic case of presuppositions informing conclusions. Lockdown supporters cheered to the rafters and urged all who would listen to put their shoulder to the wheel for one last heave. Lockdown hawks heard restriction extensions masquerading as a pathway to freedom. Unfortunately for the tired man and woman in the street, there is money and social media likes in peddling both extremities.

Schools however heard something else entirely. They heard the sound of gates reopening and playgrounds buzzing, whilst government scientists confirmed that vaccination rollout would continue to prioritise age over occupation. Nobody doubts that infection rates amongst groups in proximity to schools will increase. That is kind of how these things work. The debate is whether, should that happen in numbers, the government will plough on or reverse ferret. For the first time since the beginning of restrictions, the decision is not a foregone conclusion. There is a sense from Downing Street that the march to freedom might be a pathway with no exits.

Buried within the roadmap is a review into the merits - or otherwise - of domestic vaccine certification. Despite criticism from the aviation sector, most in Whitehall and Westminster feel international travel moving forward will be allowed based on some kind of vaccination passport, akin to what we see with yellow fever. Applying the same principles domestically though is far more controversial.

The government announced the review with cautious echoes, suggesting it might favour discretionary application by individual businesses. Such positions usually amount to a lawyer's charter, but it could also raise the unwanted spectre of public sector application. Would any councils, for instance, introduce the right for librarians to refuse entry to the unvaccinated? Logic says no - but rationality hasn't been a watchword of politics in recent times. It's certainly a debate local government might want to keep one eye on.

Later this week, Rishi Sunak will be informing the House of Commons how the pandemic recovery period might be paid for. Maxing out the credit card for the younger generations to worry about is the obvious answer here, although taxation rises are inevitable.

If asked to play Mystic Meg, I suspect we will see huge changes to Capital Gains Tax. I suspect we might see some additional council tax bands mooted and a consultation on what could be described as a mansion tax announced. Fuel duty is ripe for a hike after years of being frozen and sin taxes will probably head northwards. Online retail will be hit as the desire to save high streets is strong on the blue benches, whilst green projects will be subsidised to the hilt to prove credentials ahead of COP 26. It is unlikely that canning HS2 will happen, but one can always live in hope!