

View from Westminster, January 2021

One of the purposes of these columns is to attempt to bring some humour into what is often a prosaic political process. Let's face it, politics is not short of material deserving mockery. However, as COVID-19 claims its 100,000th victim, meaning 1 in 660 of our entire population has perished from the disease, it feels inappropriate to wisecrack about what is a sombre and serious set of circumstances. The time for an inquest into what went well and what manifestly didn't may not be now. There must however be a time and, when it comes, it must cover all aspects of our coronavirus response. Politics has a regrettable habit of avoiding difficult questions. Those of us involved in it have to remember there's 100,000 reasons why, when the time comes, those questions must be asked.

Given that, it is worth having a quick look "around the grounds" to see what Ministers are up to in the background as COVID-19 dominates the headlines. At Treasury, all attention is now switching to the March Budget, where more details of how the nation collectively pays for the great coronavirus spend will be revealed. Given the historically low interest rate levels, one suspects maxing out the credit card will be the preferred option and all references to debt reduction obliterated from political language. Austerity is certainly not flavour of the month given the last decade...but tax rises are on the agenda. Two kites being flown at the moment are corporation tax hikes and reform of council tax to encompass property wealth. The former is something of an easy win, even if business will profusely moan about it. The latter is however a hornet's nest of a policy area, particularly for a Conservative Party still scarred by memories of the Poll Tax. Either way, the era of the Santa Claus Chancellor is about to come to an end. The Budget represents the start of the big payback... the question is who will be doing the paying?

BEIS has a new captain at the wheel as Alok Sharma departs to focus on COP26 and all things macroenvironmental. In his place steps Mr Kwarteng, a longtime supporter of Mr Johnson and occupant of previous junior ministerial positions inside his department. He will therefore know what is a large and often unwieldy department well. The department itself has been predominantly focused on COVID-19, but it will be interesting to follow the progress of Mr Kwarteng once he has his feet under the table. DEFRA has also been quiet this month, with its focus perhaps understandably on alleviating flooding matters.

Robert Jenrick is rapidly becoming the "go-to" minister for Downing Street when it needs a prominent politician to do the rounds and defend its position. Given the line to take is often objectively indefensible, Mr Jenrick must be hoping that taking several for the team will bring elevation when the reshuffle eventually materialises. In terms of the day job, MHCLG has recently announced a right to regenerate programme that will permit derelict buildings and plots of land being turned into community spaces or housing. Standard tenancy agreements for those possessing well-behaved pets have also been pushed, something that, if widely accepted, could transform the rental market for those who own doggies and moggies. Some good work has also been done in reinforcing higher building regulations to ensure the country never sees another Grenfell.