

## View from Westminster – September 2020

It wasn't that long ago when the biggest political stories of the day involved George Osborne putting VAT on pasties, Oliver Letwin chucking paperwork in dustbins and David Cameron leaving his kids in the pub. What innocent times they were! Alas, they've been replaced as stories by discussions on the merits of breaking international law, making leaving your home an illegal act and turning Kent into the Garden of France. If progress is the goal of humankind then politics has objectively failed in its endeavours.

Speaking of paperwork being discarded in dustbins, one wonders whether a quick sweep of the MHCLG trashcans is needed to locate the seemingly mythical devolution proposals. Touted as imminent for publication 8 weeks ago, there's plenty inside the local government arena keeping their fingers crossed this flagship policy has joined its biggest cheerleader, Simon Clarke, in heading for the exit door. I suspect those harbouring such hopes will be left disappointed. The cynical expectation is that they will emerge blinking into the autumn sunshine after conference season is over and a hoard of hostile councillor activists no longer have the opportunity to quiz the newly appointed minister about them. Expect a summary in this column next month...

Meanwhile, cv19 has predictably reared its ugly head for a second bite at the cherry now we are entering the respiratory season. Infection rates continue to skyrocket and politicians are again scrambling for answers. The Chief Medical and Scientific Officers continuously strike a sombre tone, but Boris is historically a social libertarian and avoiding a second national lockdown will be of paramount importance to him. The fact that we're seeing a plethora of local lockdowns instead is arguably merely an alternative way to skin the cat...but this exercise in party management is important. Parliamentary rebellion is incoming however and, with an increasing number of sceptical voices shouting "Sweden" at him, it's gloomy times ahead for Boris. One wonders if he still thinks the job he long dreamed about is quite what it's cracked up to be....

Brexit continues to be the gift that keeps on giving as Michael Gove informed a perplexed House of Commons that the Government was creating the People's Republic of Kent. One can fairly assume Tunbridge Wells will be disgusted at the prospect. Brexit means many things to different people, but it's fair to say having customs officers chase lorries through Sevenoaks was not on the ballot paper.

Of course, all of this was entirely predictable the moment the House rejected customs union membership. As soon as that was off the table, a method of checking goods was required just as it was prior to 1993 when we phased out the old reporting system. Using technology strikes me as reasonably sensible and it's worth pointing out that we didn't see queues of 7,000 truckers throughout the 1980s. Nevertheless, as the warning has been offered, I'd advise those who dabble in stocks to buy shares in the portaloos industry....

Over in Opposition Land, the Labour Party have been sharing the fun of letting as many frontbenchers as possible bash Boris. Ed Miliband took to the despatch box to gesticulate wildly and acquire some Twitter plaudits when critiquing the controversial Internal Market Bill. Angela Rayner meanwhile deputised for Sir Keir at PMQs and put

in the kind of solid performance that proves she's a genuine asset for the red team. On the yellow side of the chamber, it's the king is dead long live the king as Sir Ed Davey upgraded his interim leadership to permanent status. His immediate goal will be to remind voters that his party actually still exists. As for UKIP (remember them?), they've suspended their leader again. If you know their name without resorting to Google then you can join me in political geek club...