**ADEPT View from Westminster March 2019**

The House of Commons has voted against the EU Withdrawal Agreement. The Prime Minister hinted at the despatch box that a General Election may be forthcoming. Will it, who knows…

Of course, we have arrived where we have through rather a somewhat meandering route. Truth be told, the prediction I foolishly made in the last column spontaneously combusted beneath the baritones of the Attorney General, who delivered a damming legal opinion that torpedoed the second meaningful vote. Parliament however is a theatre of politics as opposed to legal fact and its judgements change rapidly, circumstances change regularly.

Centuries of parliamentary tradition have been ripped up or reinterpreted. The Attorney General has updated his legal advice to take account of the Vienna Convention stipulations. The ERG has become split between the hardline and those now willing to cut their losses. Labour leavers have started to fear a backlash from their heartlands if Brexit doesn’t happen. The Prime Minister, who so desperately wanted to get this all done so she could move onto the Just About Managing agenda that truly motivates her, found that Europe is the all-consuming monster that feeds on Conservative Party leaders. By offering up the keys to Downing Street, she has persuaded hitherto hostile opponents’ insider her party to come onside.

But not enough.

One wonders what the watching public, already cynical about politics following the expenses scandal, makes of the prioritising of personalities over principles. For there can be no doubt whatsoever that, whatever was on the ballot paper, it wasn’t this. And nobody truly knows what the future holds know.  That decision rests in the hands of a PM we know no longer wishes to stay around and the EU Council who can keep squeezing until the pips squeak.

Away from the ridiculousness and folly, there has been some business as usual policymaking going on. Not however at DEFRA, where the normally energetic Michael Gove seems to have barely done anything this month if the inactivity on the departmental website is to be believed, despite his appearance at the select committee. Perhaps he has other things on his mind. The same is not true however of MHCLG, where a veritable splashing of the cash has been ongoing. £46m to help the homeless, £36m for coastal areas and £3.7m for 5 new garden towns has all been announced. Combined with the deluge of applications I’m sure everyone has made under the Future High Streets Fund, it’s enough to keep ministers preoccupied whilst the chaos elsewhere unfolds.

DfT has also been relatively quiet of late, although no doubt Mr Grayling will appreciate the break in what is a difficult role. That said, he has found some more cash (£23m) to boost cycling and walking. As for the Treasury, we have, of course, recently seen a Spring Statement. It says much about the times we live in that a set piece fiscal occasion came and went without anyone really noticing, but it did contain a few provisions worth dwelling upon. The Chancellor used the occasion to announce changes to planning laws and a raft of investments into research and development.  Future consultations on the high street will also be of interest, as politicians finally grapple to get this one right.

**John Moorcraft**