

View from Westminster August 2020

Pity our poor parliamentarians. It's recess...but their preferred tropical locations represent somewhere between a public relations disaster and two weeks of quarantine. So, they find themselves having to holiday alongside the riff raff here in good old Blighty. For the beleaguered Prime Minister, a weekend in Bognor wasn't going to quite cut the mustard; no matter how good the bluecoats may be. Instead, he headed for one of the most isolated parts of the UK and went Carry On Camping. The pictures that emerged were touching...although I'm sure I wasn't alone at expressing disappointment at the quality of his erect tent.

However, it hasn't all been jolly japes for our most senior parliamentarians. For poor old Gavin Williamson, there's been a full blown, bona fide, scandal to attend to. The qualifications fiasco was remarkable in the failure to act on the disadvantage it placed on working-class children. The Red Wall trembled in fury and the U-turn was swiftly forthcoming. In its place rolled in teacher assessment, which suggests this year's cohort of children are more intelligent than all their predecessors despite living through an unprecedented pandemic and subsequent shutting of their schools. Quite a remarkable feat all round. At the heart of the ridiculousness is Ofqual, who designed the original algorithm. Its Chair, Roger Taylor, had previously run a business that helped Mid Staffordshire Hospital appraise its mortality rates. One can't help but wonder if some of the downgraded mathematics students would have done a better job...

Over at MHCLG, Inspector Morse is needed to solve the case of the missing devolution proposals. Everyone knows that the government wishes to again entertain the idea of amalgamated local authorities, preferably under the jurisdiction of an elected mayor. There's been so many leaks on this that the water board need to dig up the pavement outside MHCLG to carry out emergency repairs. Confirmation of the inevitable was expected to be announced already...and yet here we are still waiting for great reveal. Last minute revisions one wonders...or maybe the minister on duty just forgot to push send on his press release.

Our friends at the Treasury meanwhile are still engaged in Operation Save Pret – as the city slickers are continuously encouraged to return to their offices. Unfortunately for the Minister of Eating Out, office workers seem to have decided that working from the comfort of their own gardens is somehow preferable to standing eye level to a fellow commuter's armpit on a packed commuter train for 60 minutes. No surprise there, but the question for all policymakers must be “is this permanent”? If it is, then the implications on matters, such as the recently published Planning White Paper, become monumental. A London exodus might then see a Home Counties exodus that, in turn, will facilitate a need for significant investment in more rural locations to ensure new arrivals have homes, schools, hospitals and transport infrastructure. Arguably a great thing for the levelling up agenda, but it begs two important questions. Firstly, what will become of the landscapes that make rural locations so desirable when demand for houses kicks into gear. Secondly, what becomes of London should offices become more dispensable. These are live questions that, when seen through the prism of multibillion infrastructure investments, perhaps make the Chancellor's desire to save the office more understandable.

The View From Westminster is the opinion of an independent observer of Westminster, not the official ADEPT view.