

 bright blue

Centre Write

Summer 2022

State shifting?

Sir Ed Davey MP | Dr Gerard Lyons | Dr Hannah White OBE | Matthew Taylor CBE

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Bright Blue is the independent think tank and pressure group for liberal conservatism.

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UK Parliament
Interview: Sir Ed Davey MP (p.14)



UK Parliament
Pushing the political boundaries: Dr Hannah White OBE (p.26)

Editor's letter

Max Anderson introduces this edition

The Conservative Party has a vexed relationship with the state, with strong traditions of both paternalistic interventionism and market neoliberalism. Yet it has been under the Conservatives that the state furloughed millions of workers, and we have seen the tax burden rise to its highest level since Clement Attlee.

Paradoxically, Michael Gove recently admitted that basic aspects of the state are "simply not functioning." Whether you want a GP or dentist appointment, a new passport or driving licence, or simply to make a journey by train or plane, sometimes it feels as if nothing works anymore.

Maybe it's the pandemic, maybe it's the war in Ukraine, or maybe we are witnessing a particular British decay, exacerbated by Brexit, austerity, low productivity, or some other policy decision or failure. Perhaps the state has done too little for too long, or is now trying to do too much?

In an age of intensifying disruption, insecurity, and conflict, with an unprecedented cost of living crisis threatening to literally plunge Britain into darkness and a climate crisis leading to unbearably scorching British summers, the new Prime Minister will decide whether this greater role for the state will be a blip, or the start of a new normal.

This edition of *Centre Write* brings together thought leaders from across the political spectrum to give their thoughts on the future of the state.

Opening the magazine is the influential economist **Dr Gerard Lyons** (p.8), who outlines a steady roadmap to cut taxes to help foster economic growth.

The Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation, **Matthew Taylor CBE** (p.10), looks at the state of the NHS after the pandemic and the reforms necessary to

return it to fighting strength in the future.

The University of Oxford's **Professor Sam Fankhauser** (p.11) analyses how interventionist the state should be as we continue our fight against climate change and its effects.

Following the invasion of Ukraine and the continued rise of China, Co-Founder and Director of Strategy at the Council on Geostrategy, **Viktorija Starych-Samuoliene** (p.12), claims that interstate warfare has returned to the forefront of international relations.

Our interview is with the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, **Sir Ed Davey MP** (p.14). We discuss the Liberal Democrats' journey from the Coalition to its current vision for the future, his thoughts on the Conservative Party, both past and present, and what he has learned from the voters during a busy period of campaigning.

Tech UK's **Julian David** (p.18) leads us on to the start of our intelligence and technology section, explaining how digitalisation is the key to unlocking growth and productivity in the UK economy at a time when economic stagnation looks likely.

Anna Powell-Smith (p.19), Director of the Centre for Public Data, recalls the UK's relationship with data during the pandemic, and although she approaches the topic with a sympathetic tone, she does not undersell the importance of data in improving the future of policymaking.

A smooth customer is what **Dom Hallas** (p.20), Executive Director of Coadec, hopes the government will be, as he calls for it to explore a wider range of SaaS programs in order to improve its operations.

National Trust's **Patrick Begg** (p.22), explores the role the government and the Bank of England could play in restoring nature in the UK.

UK
Director
of More
in Common,

Luke Tryl (p.23), warns of the effect that culture wars are having on schools and calls for politicians to return their attention to the issues plaguing our education system following the pandemic.

The Acting Director of the Institute for Government, **Dr Hannah White OBE** (p.26), critiques the Johnson Government's relationship with the British Constitution after a tenure that pushed its political boundaries.

Nick Hillman (p.27), reflects on his time as a Special Adviser and proposes a number of solutions to find better, more well-rounded SpAds for future governments as well as improve SpAds' relationship with the Civil Service.

Graham Allen (p.29), the former Labour MP and now Convener of The Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy, calls upon democrats to unite against the populism that has arisen in the UK and beyond.

The Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform, **Darren Hughes** (p.30), argues the only way to guarantee the success of levelling up, whilst also improving England's democracy, is through further devolution.

Finally, our parliamentary supporter **Andrew Bowie MP** (p.32) explains what led him to become a Conservative, as well as analysing the current situation of his party, and outlines what needs to change ahead of a new Conservative Leader entering 10 Downing Street.

Enjoy the edition! 🎧

Max Anderson is Senior Communications Officer at Bright Blue



Director's note

There is no alternative to more state support this winter, argues **Ryan Shorthouse**



The state is a safety net, the only one for too many people. We pay for it via taxes so everyone can enjoy a degree of physical and financial security.

It provides protection, especially to the most vulnerable, during times of individual and national crises. Only three years into this decade, Europeans have been cursed with lots, thanks in large part to both COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine. Currently, inflation is rampant, driven mainly because of the spike in wholesale gas prices, which Russia has incredible influence over as the continent's lead supplier.

Throughout the 2010s, the Conservatives successfully argued that how we pay for the state needed to be made more sustainable; the budget deficit desperately needed shrinking, following the spending splurge of the New Labour years and, much more importantly, the billions committed to stabilise the financial system in 2008. It was not fair to future generations to borrow so much, nor was it conducive to growth and investment.

Then the pandemic swept over the world. Thanks to successive Conservative administrations bringing down the deficit, and sustained low interest rates from the Bank of England, we had the headroom to borrow big. Over £300 billion was borrowed to maintain livelihoods during the lockdowns. The public were reassured that, when it was desperately needed, the state could be relied on to intervene.

We have not had the luxury of a lengthy period in which to repair the public finances before another crisis has come along. Indeed, some of the current cancerous inflation has been driven by coronavirus, with restrictions slowing, sometimes strangling, supply chains.

With the eye-gouging energy prices

coming this winter, the Conservative Government has now no alternative but to borrow again to support households to heat their homes. Other European countries are already moving that way. The public do not believe government cannot step in, nor will they tolerate it not doing so.

Will such support be inflationary? A little, yes. But there are much bigger causes of current inflation. It just doesn't stand up to scrutiny to oppose more state support for those struggling because it will drive further cost increases for everyone. The same argument is often rehearsed to oppose subsidies for first-time buyers in the housing market, because it will just fuel extra demand when there is not enough new supply. So we don't support them then, prices still rise, and those with modest means just have to suck it up? Fix the big stuff instead, whilst helping those with the smallest budgets.

“ Our growth rates, like the rest of the Western world, have been anaemic for some time, and are forecast to be for some time too

The Conservative leadership race has centred around the timing and nature of tax cuts. Tax cuts can of course help, but both contenders have only offered regressive measures, where those on the highest incomes disproportionately benefit. The most targeted tax cut now would be raising the starting salary for paying both national insurance and basic-rate income tax. But the truth is that tax cuts can only help the poorest so much, considering they don't pay that much of it. The Government is going to have to expand the one-off cost of

living payments

through benefits and pensions and the energy bill and council tax rebates it committed to earlier in the year.

The twin crises of the twenties will have to be paid for, eventually. Of course economic growth should be pursued, which will help partly to pay our debts off. Expanding and upskilling the workforce will help most, requiring bolder policies on pensions, childcare, immigration, and higher education that conservatives instinctively might not be comfortable with.

But we also must be realistic. Our growth rates, like the rest of the Western world, have been anaemic for some time, and are forecast to be for some time too. So it looks like the Conservatives, unfortunately, will be offering the electorate pain now and pain again later. The books will have to be balanced again rather quickly, necessitating spending cuts this decade that could have been avoided when borrowing rates were lower. Although taxes, especially those on wealth, should also shoulder some of the responsibility, which they didn't really do in the last age of austerity.

Pretty miserable, right? Twelve years of Toryism for this. Ostensibly, it's not looking good for the new Prime Minister. Remember though, that in tough times, the Tories have historically done well at the ballot box, considering their reputation for making difficult decisions. It is still all to play for in 2024. Perversely, the Conservatives could well have been lucky to have had to deal with so many crises in recent years. 🗳️

Ryan Shorthouse is the Founder and Chief Executive of Bright Blue

Letters to the Editors

Submit your letters to max@brightblue.org.uk

Ellie Mae O'Hagan's piece ('Leaving nobody behind', Winter 2022) argues that the green transition and transformation of the energy sector have to envision a wider social transformation to address social inequalities. She gives historical examples of how deindustrialisation and the changing landscape of the labour market had previously left workers behind, such as coal towns turning into ghost towns in the twentieth century. The proposal to prioritise working people and have a clear strategy of how green technologies will affect blue-collar workers is sound, reminding us that the impact of climate change will have wider, social repercussions. However, the article largely ignores the fact that fossil fuel supply chains are completely different from renewable supply chains. Critical rare earth elements will play a crucial role and the UK's energy mix will be dependent on how it fares in the global race for them. The skills needed will also depend on the outcomes of this global competition.

Andrius Urbelis | Bright Blue member

Mary Friel's article ('Raising our resilience', Winter 2022) issues a compelling warning regarding the threats the UK population could face from climate change if the necessary improvements in forecasting and impact mitigation are ignored. The article highlights the effects climate change is already having on countries, with natural disasters becoming more frequent and more extreme. The focus should therefore be on adapting to the already forecasted warming because the greenhouse effect will mean that current greenhouse gas concentrations will continue to warm the climate even after net zero. The article not only acts as an early warning system for the UK in itself, but also paints pictures of success in countries such as Bangladesh. Clearly, the means are there; I hope the UK can heed Mary Friel's warnings after a summer in the UK which clearly demonstrated the UK's lack of preparedness.

Edward Forman | Bright Blue member



Lord Deben's and Baroness Bennett's exchange ('Are capitalism and climate action compatible?', Summer 2022) debates capitalism and climate change. Bennett argues that capitalism puts profit first regardless of the consequences, while Deben asserts that socialist governments have done the most damage to the environment. Socialism gives governments too much power, putting the state above all else. Deben is the more persuasive. Capitalism allows for greater regulatory freedom that, if exercised properly, will allow nations to better combat climate change and inequalities.

William Miller | Bright Blue member



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ESSAY

Going for growth

The old economic orthodoxy has been found wanting. Time for the new Prime Minister to cut taxes to turbocharge growth, argues **Gerard Lyons**

David Vincent

Tax policy should be seen within the context of a pro-growth economic strategy. We currently do not have such a strategy, but we need one. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, our growth rate slumped, and there is now a danger we are drifting towards a low growth, low productivity, low wage, and high tax economy. This is a problem confronting Western Europe.

Our pro-growth strategy should be built upon the three arrows of: a sound monetary policy that keeps inflation low; a credible fiscal approach that reduces the ratio of debt to GDP; and a supply-side agenda focused on the four Is: investment, innovation, infrastructure, and incentives - with smart regulation and low taxation.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, the UK was a high tax economy. That changed in the 1980s, when there was a political desire to not only lower taxes, but to simplify them and improve the economy's supply side. Recent years have witnessed an upward trend in the UK's tax take and it is now at a

70-year high.

The Treasury orthodoxy is that the UK is a slow growth economy. Thus, more of the budget deficit is structural, explained by underlying forces, as opposed to cyclical, linked to where we are in the economic cycle. If you believe that more of the deficit is structural, then the solution is to constrain government spending and have higher taxes.

“ Our growth rate slumped, and there is now a danger we are drifting towards a low growth, low productivity, low wage, and high tax economy

This bleak assessment has led the economic consensus to believe that there is limited scope to cut taxes now, or in the future. Indicative of this was this June's Office for Budget Responsibility's annual risk assessment. It assumed that the combination of weak growth and an ageing

population meant there would need to be additional tightening “of £37 billion a year in today's terms at the beginning of each decade” in order to stabilise the public finances over the next half-century.

This is far too pessimistic, but is indicative of the challenges faced by those advocating low taxes. The margin of error on only one-year ahead official budget forecasts is large. Thus, projections about what might happen by the middle of this century should not tie policy hands now - especially in the midst of a cost of living crisis.

But it goes to the heart of the current debate. The alternative approach is to raise our growth potential and ask what role taxes can play?

Taxes are frequently viewed primarily as a way to fund government spending. We need world class public services, but taxes should not be on an autopilot to rise in order to fund the state. It highlights the need for public sector reform as well as keeping public spending under control. It should focus attention too on the vital role

>> taxes play in influencing behaviour and determining how our economy works.

It is important to keep in mind some important principles to drive our tax system. Taxes should be neutral, simple, and predictable. They should also be easy to collect and pay. It is notable that the Federation of Small Businesses is calling for tax simplification, to ease the burden on small firms.

“ If inflation were caused by an overheating economy... then there would be reason to be wary of cutting taxes now, but that is not where we are

Taxes, too, should be efficient in raising the appropriate amount of money. Increasingly, as economic conditions change because of globalisation and technology, taxes also need to evolve.

Taxes should be fair. The UK's income tax system, for instance, is very progressive, with higher earners paying a significant proportion.

A final principle is that they should send the right incentives, such as rewarding work and encouraging investment. This is critical if we want to boost growth potential.

Since the last general election, there has been little credibility in tax policy. Outcomes have been different to the promises. Admittedly there has been a pandemic, but even allowing for this, a plethora of tax hikes have taken place that were unnecessary. For example: the tax on jobs through the national insurance increase; large numbers have been pulled into higher tax brackets through fiscal drag as tax thresholds have not risen in line with inflation; and next spring the UK will slump in international competitiveness as corporation tax soars.

For a Government committed to low taxes, it has not been an impressive performance.

Currently the UK faces the twin problems of rising inflation - which should be addressed through a tighter monetary policy by the Bank of England - and weaker domestic demand. This necessitates an easier fiscal stance focused on targeted tax cuts.

Timely, targeted, and fully costed tax cuts are not inflationary, but are affordable and necessary. At the time of the 2022 Spring Statement, the Treasury had about £30 billion of fiscal space that they did not use, and since then higher inflation has swelled the tax revenues.

It is the nature of the inflation shock



that explains why tax cuts will not be inflationary. If inflation were caused by an overheating economy, with buoyant demand, then there would be reason to be wary of cutting taxes now, but that is not where we are. Inflation has been triggered by supply-side pressures, and by an inappropriately lax monetary policy last year.

Moreover, tax cuts must be timely and targeted. For instance, taxes on fuel could be reduced, thus easing the cost of living crisis for many, while also lowering costs in the supply chain, keeping prices down. There is scope to help the squeezed middle, too, through raising allowances or cutting income tax.

Some tax cuts could be immediate. Other changes - like revisiting the planned corporation tax hike and recent national insurance increase - may need to wait until the Autumn Budget, to be fully costed and judged alongside other options.

After the Second World War, the UK's ratio of debt to GDP stood at 250%. Then it fell steadily, driven by stronger economic growth. Now our ratio of debt is around 90%, a peacetime high. As this ratio falls, there will be scope to fund public services and to let taxes fall. Growth is the key, and low taxes are a vital part of this. 

Dr Gerard Lyons is the Chief Economic Strategist at Netwealth and a Senior Fellow at Policy Exchange



Alisdair Hickson

A healthier system

Matthew Taylor CBE builds a bridge to the future NHS



Earlier this year, while preparing my speech for the NHS Confederation's annual conference, I came across two pieces of online content as I drank my morning coffee.

The first was a much shared video of a nurse in an A&E department telling the overcrowded waiting room they would have to wait several hours to be seen and that, anyway, there were no free beds in the hospital.

The other was a news item from America heralding what appears to be a major breakthrough in the treatment of that most unforgiving of diseases, pancreatic cancer.

As I said in the completed speech, the question for the health service is how we build a bridge from the grim situation of overwhelming demand and overstretched capacity in which we find ourselves, to the dramatically better future we can glimpse on the horizon. That future has many aspects, but perhaps the most revolutionary would be a shift from our current model of care, in which we wait to be ill to seek treatment, to one in which genetic profiling and the continual monitoring of our health enables us to prevent most illnesses before they even show symptoms.

So, what is needed for our health system to move from being reactive to proactive, from trying to treat to succeeding in preventing?

First, we have to learn the lessons of the recent past. The feast and famine

funding of the NHS has been disastrous. The near decade of austerity from 2010 saw health spending increase at around half the average rate since its creation and less than half the rate most health economists say is necessary to meet the demands of rising public expectations, expensive forms of treatment, and population ageing.

“ **Poor health and caring responsibilities are the single biggest reason for working age adults to be out of the labour market**

This meant the NHS went into the COVID-19 pandemic with around 100,000 staff vacancies and a crumbling estate.

The NHS spends around a third less in capital per staff member compared with the OECD average.

In the medium term, health spending can level off as a proportion of national income, but we need to be realistic about meeting the current capacity challenge, preparing, for example, for the fact that in a decade a third more of us will be entering the last - generally most health care intensive - year of our lives. We also need to see health through a wider lens, seeing the links with inclusion and prosperity. Our economy is suffering from widespread labour shortages, in which poor health and caring responsibilities are the single biggest reason for working

age adults to be out of the labour market. And to make matters worse, the sector hit hardest

when labour is short is care.

Conversely, our system and our best hospitals are still respected around the world, and health care is one of the world's fastest growing marketplaces.

But, of course, money must be matched by reform. At its best the NHS is making good use of digital tools and services, is at the cutting edge of cancer treatment, and is developing new models of care like virtual wards. However, performance is still patchy, and the NHS relies too much on hierarchical models of command and control to drive improvement.

“ **In the face of problems like long waiting lists and the difficulties of primary care access, public confidence in the NHS is at a historic low**

Unusually for major health reform, the recent NHS and Care Act had wide support across the system. The case for greater collaboration both within the NHS and with partners, particularly local government, is widely accepted. The experience of COVID-19 has led to a much deeper understanding of health inequalities and a shared commitment to tackle the factors that drive them. If they operate effectively, and are given the time and the freedom to be responsive to local needs, the 42 new Integrated Care Systems across England can achieve the big shifts the health service has long discussed, but not so far achieved; from incentivising medical activity to incentivising health outcomes,



Luke Jones

>> from meeting expressed demand to meeting population need, and from a concentration of resources in acute care to a greater investment upstream in community, primary, and public health.

In the face of problems like long waiting lists and the difficulties of primary care access, public confidence in the NHS is at a historic low. There is talk on the Conservative right that the NHS is a

bottomless pit, obsessed by wokery and staffed by 'feckless' managers. Instead, we need a mobilising vision of the completely different future model of health care, one in which what is in reality a National *Sickness* Service actually lives up to its proud name, and in which each of us are in control of how we avoid illness and thrive mentally and physically.

Getting to that future from where we are

now requires realism and determination. But surely, instead of perpetual crisis management, it is time for the health service policy to build a bridge to the future? 

Matthew Taylor CBE FAcSS is the Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation and a former Chief Adviser on Political Strategy to the Prime Minister

Big but not bossy

The only way to fight climate change is with an active state, stresses **Sam Fankhauser**

In his landmark 2006 review of the economics of climate change, Lord Nicholas Stern asserted that "climate change is the greatest market failure in the world." Market failures are a prime reason why governments intervene in the economy. It stands to reason therefore that addressing climate change will require state intervention.

Indeed, the fact that carbon emitters do not face the full environmental costs of their actions, and will therefore not curtail their carbon output without government intervention, is only one of many market imperfections, policy failures, and behavioural barriers that hold back the transition to a net zero, climate-resilient economy.

“The state will have to deliver more flood protection, better heatwave plans, and new phytosanitary measures against climate-related pests

Clean technologies are unlikely to become competitive fast enough without initial support from the state. Energy users have been notoriously reluctant to

adopt even straightforward efficiency measures, like loft and wall insulation. Flood protection and the creation of zero-carbon industrial clusters entails coordination problems and network effects that governments are best able to address. The list goes on.

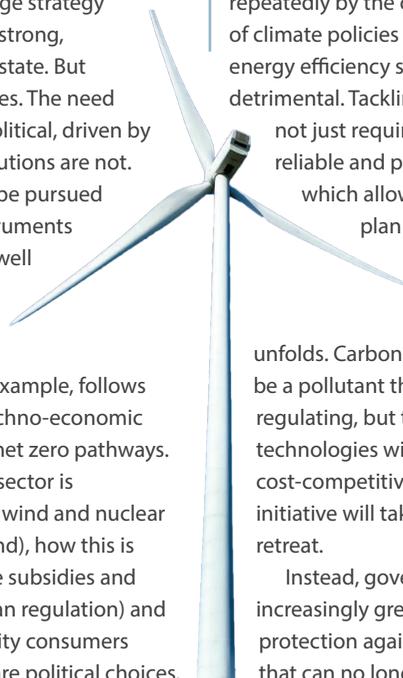
It is difficult therefore to imagine a successful climate change strategy that does not involve a strong, proactive, and decisive state. But there are political choices. The need for climate action is apolitical, driven by science, but climate solutions are not. Climate objectives can be pursued through the policy instruments of the political right as well as the left.

The need to rapidly decarbonise power generation, for example, follows analytically from the techno-economic evaluation of different net zero pathways. But the way the power sector is decarbonised (offshore wind and nuclear rather than onshore wind), how this is incentivised (renewable subsidies and carbon prices rather than regulation) and who pays for it (electricity consumers rather than taxpayers) are political choices.

The transition to net zero is complex, and private actors look to the state for leadership and direction. They do not always get it. UK investors have been spooked repeatedly by the chopping and changing of climate policies - from feed-in tariffs to energy efficiency support. This is hugely detrimental. Tackling climate change does not just require a strong state, but a reliable and predictable one. A state which allows decision makers to plan ahead.

The role of the state will evolve as the zero-carbon transition unfolds. Carbon emissions will always be a pollutant that requires taxing or regulating, but the need to support clean technologies will abate as they become cost-competitive. Eventually, private initiative will take over and the state can retreat.

Instead, governments will face increasingly greater demands for protection against those climate risks that can no longer be avoided.



>> The state will have to deliver more flood protection, better heatwave plans, and new phytosanitary measures against climate-related pests, and much else.

It is worth remembering that the state consists of more than just the national government. The devolved administrations and local authorities have major roles to play, both in reaching net zero and in managing climate risks. Many pertinent decisions are taken at the local level, including those related to planning, housing, and local transport. Climate change therefore requires competent local government.

A recent survey by the Climate Action

Network found “strong, vibrant, and broad support” for climate action at the local level. Three out of four local authorities, from across the political spectrum, have declared a climate emergency. Many are exploring new ways of engaging with civil society, including citizens juries and local climate commissions. These new institutions are intrinsically participatory, rather than state-led. Their aim is to create broad-based coalitions for climate solutions that benefit both local communities and the environment.

Both at the national and the local level, therefore, a way forward is emerging. Climate change clearly requires a more

assertive and proactive state, but not necessarily a more controlling one.

Governments have a critical role in incentivising, guiding, and coordinating the transition to net zero and climate resilience. However, their role is to encourage, not replace, private initiative. The innovation, investment, and behaviour changes that are needed to solve climate change will have to come from businesses, people, and communities. 

Professor Sam Fankhauser is Professor of Climate Economics and Policy at the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment, University of Oxford

A state of security?

Interstate warfare is back, warns **Viktorija Starych Samuoliene**



Over the past five years, much hay has been made out of the fact that geopolitics has returned with a vengeance, and that the free and open international order has come under threat. No doubt that the re-invasion of Ukraine by the Russian regime earlier this year only confirms this. Yet, it also reminds us that full scale interstate war, which has long been considered to have become a rare occurrence or a product of a bygone era, has in fact been a grim reality on European soil for some time.

Geopolitical competition began to intensify long before 2022. Back in 2008, the world witnessed the Russo-Georgian War. The five-day conflict took the world by surprise and drew attention to Russia's revisionism. Six years later in 2014, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and started a war in Eastern Ukraine, which eventually transformed into a full-blown attack on the country this year.

In the meantime, China has been

attempting to ‘continentalise’ the South China Sea by constructing an array of extensive military facilities - often on artificial islands built at great environmental expense - and has systematically eroded Hong Kong's freedoms. Alarming, it has also unequivocally asserted its aim to unify democratic Taiwan with mainland China, and threatens to do so by force if necessary.

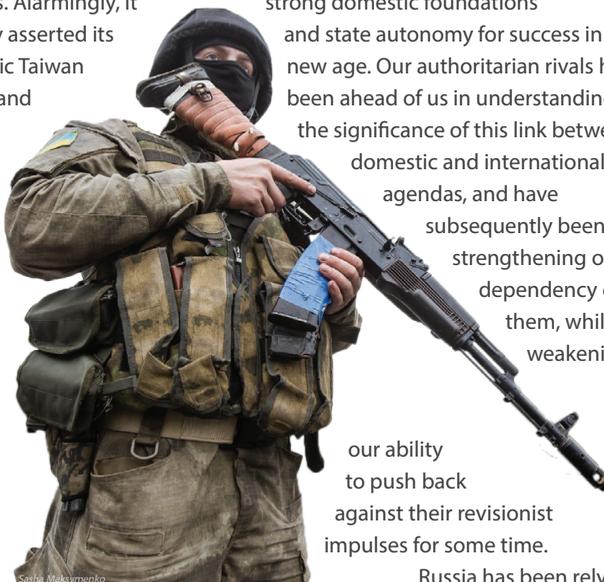
In this new reality defined by intensifying geopolitical competition, the return of full scale interstate war is of no surprise. First, it proves that the state is regaining its significance as an actor in the context of international

conflict. Second, it highlights the paramount importance of

strong domestic foundations and state autonomy for success in this new age. Our authoritarian rivals have been ahead of us in understanding the significance of this link between domestic and international agendas, and have subsequently been strengthening our dependency on them, whilst weakening

our ability to push back against their revisionist impulses for some time.

Russia has been relying



>> on the dependency of Europe on its abundant energy resources to pursue its geopolitical aims and has not shied away from weaponising them to respond to the sanctions imposed on it after the re-invasion of Ukraine. In 2021, it manipulated supply volumes to create an artificial energy crisis in order to pressure EU officials into approving its geopolitical project Nord Stream II, and pressured EU countries into signing further long-term contracts with Russian energy providers. In 2022, it halted natural gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria and cut electricity and gas supplies to Finland in response to the sanctions imposed by the EU and Finland's application to join NATO. Up to this day, Russia is continuously filling its war chest with the revenue generated by energy resources sales.

China, on the other hand, has coupled the impressive growth of its domestic economy and its hardening authoritarianism with an expansionist international approach. It has been extending its reach and influence outside its territory through its 'Belt and Road Initiative' - a euphemism for an opaque thirty-plus year £800 billion project to build multiple communication lines and nodes across much of central

and southern Eurasia, eventually reaching the core of Europe and even stretching to Africa and South America. An obvious intention has been to make participating nations more interdependent with the Chinese economy whilst simultaneously strengthening China's global economic and political influence; this process has been steadily taking place since the beginning of the initiative in 2013.

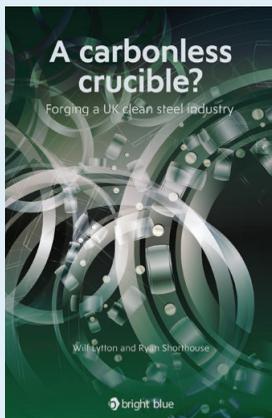
“ Our authoritarian rivals have been ahead of us in understanding the significance of this link between domestic and international agendas

The extent of the challenge posed by large authoritarian states to the free and open international order as well as the risk of full scale interstate wars in the era of intensifying geopolitical competition is clear. In order not only to keep up with the changing nature of the relationship between the state and increasing international conflicts, but also to successfully prevent them from occurring in the first place, free and open countries ought to become less dependent

on revisionist powers. Through embracing green technologies, democracies should bolster their own industrial base to ensure their energy independence from Russia and others. And they need to double down on strengthening the existing and building new resilient supply chains with like-minded allies and partners to make them autonomous from China.

The government-commissioned *Integrated Review* launched in 2021 argued that “the international order is more fragmented, characterised by intensifying competition between states over interests, norms, and values” and acknowledged that “our foreign policy rests on strong domestic foundations.” 2022 has already proven that the state is undoubtedly regaining its importance: only the state can marshal the power needed to overcome revisionist aggressors in the context of intensifying geopolitical competition. Under these circumstances, the state should not be feared: it is the foundation of our security, and prosperity. 

Viktorija Starych-Samuoliene is the Co-Founder and Director of Strategy at the Council on Geostrategy



Recent report

A carbonless crucible? Forging a UK steel industry *Wilf Lytton and Ryan Shorthouse*

Since the Industrial Revolution, steelmaking has formed a critical part of the UK economy. However, existing modes of steel production are carbon-intensive and will need to be rapidly decarbonised for the UK to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

UK steelmakers have faced significant challenges in recent years, especially higher energy prices and global trade distortions. But with the right policies and investment, the UK can have a competitive, world-leading 'clean steel' industry. This report outlines the pathways, challenges, and policies for the development of a commercial market for clean steel in this country.



THE INTERVIEW

The Rt Hon Sir Ed Davey MP

Max Anderson speaks with the Leader of the Liberal Democrats about coalitions, what it means to be a liberal, and what the future holds for the party he leads

In recent months, the Liberal Democrats have been very successful in local and by-elections. Is the yellow bird on the rise again?

Yes. It's been happening for quite a while. We made some reforms in the party. We are very focused on winning seats again and really engaging voters, and listening to voters. We have had three by-election successes in pretty strong Tory areas. We knocked on a lot of doors and spoke to a lot of concerned, normally conservative voters. That has given us a lot of understanding of where people are at.

I would actually add in and probably stress more the local election results because you couldn't target resources in local election results - those are pretty stretched - because the whole of the UK can have elections. And the local election results were way better than we had expected. The borough we were really defending hard was Sutton, because we got it in 1986. And the Tories were really chucking the kitchen sink at it. Both MPs had been working up a campaign for a long time and they didn't take it. So we had the full on Tory campaign, and we beat them off. And then we won five councils we weren't expecting to win. The one that we thought we might win was Hull, against Labour, but we didn't think we would do so well in Cumbria or in Somerset, or in Surrey. So, that was really encouraging that the reforms we were making, the change to the style of campaigning - it's paying off.

The low point of the Liberal Democrats in recent years was the end of the Coalition. Do you regret entering government with the Conservatives?

Listen, I fought the Tories every day in the Coalition and I defeated the Conservatives a lot in my day-to-day battles with them. Boris Johnson writing in *The Daily Telegraph* that "a wind turbine couldn't take the skin off a rice pudding": well he was wrong then and he is wrong now, and thanks to the Liberal Democrats standing up to the likes of Johnson, Osborne, Pickles, and all the rest of them, we now have cheaper energy bills for people. We are leading the world on offshore wind, so I don't regret making the biggest decisions to have the most successful use of technology, to cut climate change to make our country more secure and more independent of having to import fossil fuels, and for you to get cheaper energy bills. I don't regret that.

Do you think coalitions are too difficult and confrontational?

You've got to be realistic about other political parties and other issues, and you have to have your eyes open. But you can still, as I showed with offshore wind, win things. The Liberal Democrats produced the biggest tax cut in post-war history. For a sustained period we were saying we need to raise the income tax allowance to take the lowest paid out of tax all together. And we were told in the leadership debates that that was impossible by the Tory party leader - we delivered it and we delivered the biggest tax cut, bigger than anything the Conservatives have ever done. You've got to know what you want and know how to achieve it, and we did it.

After the Coalition and Brexit, what is the new vision for the Liberal Democrats?

Well you've got to both have an answer to the immediate challenges that are facing the

>> country, as well as some longer term issues. Let's just deal with the immediate, where we have a cost of living crisis, which is like nothing we've seen for decades. And I think the commentariat are completely underestimating the pain people are facing. And the rising energy bills are the elephant in the room.

In the short term, you have to have a proper strategy for dealing with higher energy bills for heating over winter, but also fuel bills and so on. I don't apologise for having a vision which is focused on what people are facing now. And, you know, we can have more esoteric debates about, for example, the role of the independent central bank, which actually the Liberal Democrats were the first party in British politics to advocate that. I know because I was part of the economics advisory group of the party that recommended it. In the 1997 election campaign: Conservatives and Labour opposed the independent central bank, we promoted it, and four days into the New Labour Government, they put it in and it's been a bulwark of monetary and anti-inflation policy.

So there's got to be debate about how we manage that. And I get worried that there are some Conservatives who are trying to undermine the independence of the Bank of England, which seems to be deeply against credibility and international validity in the fight against inflation.

Some argue that the Liberal Democrats are social democrats rather than liberals. Is there anything particularly liberal about your policy perspective?

We're the most liberal party in British politics by a country mile. I detect a tiny bit of liberalism in other parties, but not a lot. Whether it's being liberal on economic policy, liberal on social policy, liberal on personal policy, liberal on political policy - we're the true deal.

I see authoritarianism running rampant in parts of the Conservative Party and parts of the Labour Party. I don't see an agenda of freedom. One reason I'm a liberal is I believe in things like free trade, competition, and free enterprise. I see parts of the Conservative Party who don't seem to believe in that anymore. I make no apologies for being a liberal who cares about people less well off.

On housing, one of the reasons we won the Chesham and Amersham by-election was because the Conservatives wanted to give all the power to developers, who, in their developers charter, wanted to build houses for wealthier people. What do we need in housing at the moment? We need lots of, actually, council houses - that's what we need. My wife is a Councillor in Kingston. She represents the most deprived ward and she's building more council houses than we have in our borough for over 40 years. I consider that liberal because it's

actually trying to meet the real needs of people who are challenged in the free market.

I believe in markets but also recognise that they don't always deliver fairness, and that's where the state comes in. You call it liberal/social, I don't really care. But it's pretty obvious from anyone who's done first year economics.

Is there any area where the Government has been too interventionist?

They've tied up lots of businesses in red tape. This is the red tape government, red tape party: businesses who just want to sell their goods now have more forms to fill in than they've ever had.

Would you argue that is because of Brexit, or is it due to other factors?

Well it's actually the bad trade deal. They didn't have to do it like this. But they chose to do it like this. They chose to implement a trade deal which is deeply damaging to British interests, which means to consumers, which means to businesses, which means to employees, which means to the taxpayer. So they've intervened far too much by putting too much red tape on exporters and importers. I don't know which side of Jeremy Corbyn they're trying to copy but it's the wrong side.

“

There are some Conservatives who are trying to undermine the independence of the Bank of England, which seems to be deeply against credibility and international validity in the fight against inflation

What do you think is the challenge that the state will need to focus on and tackle ten years from now?

I'm going to choose technology, because it's relevant to productivity to grow the economy. It's relevant to how we tackle climate change. It's relevant to how we reform public services. It's relevant to the amazing contribution that Britain can play in the world. If you get technology right in its broadest form, and then apply it right to the different challenges we face, whether it's an ageing population, whether it's climate change, whether it's low productivity, whether it's the fact that we have more working age adults who can't work, because of the fact that they have special needs and disabilities, and mental health problems, you need to



UK Government

>> apply more innovative policies and technology is going to be a big part of that.

“ One of the reasons we won the Chesham and Amersham by-election was because the Conservatives wanted to give all the power to developers, who, in their developers charter, wanted to build houses for wealthier people

Who inspired you to develop your current ideology - was it a certain politician or philosopher? What was it that made you go “I want to be a Liberal Democrat”? What inspired that click moment?

I wouldn't say one moment, that would be wrong. It was a journey. And if I'm honest with you, I started my journey from the environmental perspective. My late cousin who worked in a whole range of different aspects of the environment. He got me really into that area and I read Jonathon Porritt's *Seeing green* and read a lot of green stuff. Which is not just about climate change. Actually, most of the time, it's more about the importance of nature in our world and that was a big part of my thinking.

Then I started studying economics, political philosophy, and then tried to place that. I came very strongly to the view that socialist solutions and statist solutions weren't going to work to solve the problems of society. That you have to find a way of marrying the power of individuals and incentives for the common good. And so it is true that the state has to be strong, but the state also needs to work with individuals and businesses, and investors for that

common good. It was really an evolution.

If there was any moment at all, it was when I listened to Paddy Ashdown in 1988. I realised what a true liberal believer would do. So I read about it. I read John Stuart Mill and the rest of it. And Rawls. I was very into Rawlsian liberalism: the veil of ignorance, all that sort of political philosophy. But it was Paddy who put it into the British context, and then got me over the line. I joined the party.

Would you ever enter into a coalition with the Conservatives again?

The answer is no. It's quite simple.

With all the Liberal Democrat success in recent elections, are you sad to see Boris Johnson go?

I'm a patriot first and foremost. I respected, not agreed with, every Prime Minister in my adult life. Some I disagreed on particular issues, and sometimes more generally, but I respected them. I had no respect for Boris Johnson. He was against the national interest in a profound way. I don't even think he thought about the national interest. There are some Conservatives, I'm sure, who think, "Oh, Johnson is gone and that's shot the fox for the opposition." They could not be more wrong. "Bring it on," is what I say, because we've knocked on a lot of doors in Tory heartland seats. Yes, there were some Tories, lifelong Tories, who say I'm not voting for Conservative while he's the leader. There were far, far greater who had a much greater sense of feeling that the Conservatives had moved away from where they were, feeling that the Conservatives were taking them for granted. For some, they didn't like the levelling up agenda. Some just felt they weren't answering the cost of living. Farmers were pretty cross with what's going on; a whole set of groups. 

Switched on?

Julian David thinks digitalisation is key to unlocking growth



The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the greatest tests the UK's economy and society have ever faced. One of the core strengths of the British people's response to the pandemic was the way individuals, businesses, and the government adopted technology to create new ways of working, connecting, and shopping.

Now, even with the lifting of economic and social restrictions, UK businesses and consumers continue to face an uncertain economic outlook as a result of COVID-19, the aftermath of Brexit, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leaving the UK in a position where economic growth is projected to be low and inflation is projected to be high and more persistent than other countries.

“ Additional incentives and support to enable SMEs to meet their desire for tech adoption would have a significant economic payoff

With the UK economy weakened as a result of these factors, digitalisation is seen as critical to the pathway back to growth, injecting greater economic dynamism and productivity gains that will allow the UK to break free from this slowdown while delivering on the Government's important long-term goals of net zero, Global Britain, and levelling up.

When businesses embrace digital technologies, they improve their efficiency, productivity, and resilience. However, despite the fact that the majority of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) believe that technology is vital to their long-term viability and growth, most of them face significant challenges that have

led to the situation where larger businesses are better able to utilise technology than smaller ones. Budgetary constraints, lack of time, 'know-how,' and even geographical barriers are preventing far too many smaller UK businesses from attaining their full digital potential.

The challenge remains in closing this digital divide. Providing additional incentives and support to enable SMEs to meet their desire for tech adoption would have a significant economic payoff. Economic modelling shows that a further £232 billion gross value added per year could be unlocked via effective action by government to encourage digital adoption.

The adoption and diffusion of technology across the economy is a key component of the Government's *Build back better: plan for growth*, where it has devised a welcome agenda to promote digitalisation through the Help to Grow: Digital Scheme. However, more can be done to accelerate the pace and depth of digitalisation in the UK economy.

To make the Help to Grow: Digital Scheme the true driver of digital adoption and productivity growth that it aspires to be, the Government should consider broadening the scope of the scheme in the future to include more software solutions, as well as multiples or bundles of software, and broadening the eligibility

criteria to include SMEs with fewer than five employees.

However, even after expanding the Help to Grow: Digital Scheme, there are two elements that the scheme does not address and are critical for wider digital transformation among UK businesses: the growing mismatch in the supply and demand of digital skills, and the adoption of more complex and sophisticated technology solutions, particularly among larger SMEs.

To address both these challenges, the Government might consider introducing a Digital Skills & Productivity Tax Credit to encourage businesses to invest



>> in digital skills training and to embrace productivity-enhancing technologies into their business models. This tax relief can also help SMEs reduce lost earnings for those periods in which the company is adapting to the new technology, as well as offsetting other costs such as the training itself.

The Government must also be consistent. For example, in a context where increased business investment is required to reverse the UK's current economic slowdown and the rising cost of living, it is unfortunate that the Government is considering an Online Sales Tax, which would raise costs for businesses and consumers while

discouraging companies from adopting e-commerce solutions.

The Government must ensure it works with the tech industry to find the best ways to incentivise digital transformation among companies and communities all over the UK. The starting point for this is a consistent way for regions in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to measure how they are placed as digital economies so they can compare notes, and examine relative strengths and challenges.

It was the absence of this that led us to develop techUK's Local Digital Capital Index, which outlines the building blocks

that allow strong local tech ecosystems to thrive, including digital infrastructure, digital adoption, digital skills, research and innovation, finance, and investment and trade support, as well as collaboration and data ecosystems. We intend to use this to bring together communities and companies, especially SMEs, to digitise and transform their local economies, and help capture the prize that awaits in terms of growth and jobs. [b](#)

Julian David is the Chief Executive of techUK

Technically better

Anna Powell Smith explains how data can improve policymaking



We live in an age of data, but government has not kept up. In fairness, it is not alone.

From Blockbuster to Blackberry, many large companies have struggled with digital transformation. And transformation is even tougher for governments, which have inbuilt safety mechanisms against rapid change.

It is perhaps also uniquely difficult for the British state - historically suspicious of scientific and technical expertise, a problem identified as far back as the Fulton Report of 1968.

So, should we despair? I argue not and propose some simple, technical fixes to help the UK government work better with data.

COVID-19 laid bare the UK's long-standing problems with data. In the panicky early days of the pandemic, Downing Street officials resorted to whiteboards to compile case numbers. Stories about data being copy-pasted from old versions of Excel led the News at Ten.

Yet there were also some successes. The

Government's COVID-19 dashboard was widely used and trusted with more than a million daily users at peak times. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) rapidly spun up a ground-breaking prevalence survey, providing accurate information on cases. And Ministers and officials became more aware than ever that good delivery relies on good data.

“ COVID-19 has shown us that in the modern world, data infrastructure is at the heart of all successful planning and service delivery

In the spirit of 'never waste a good crisis,' COVID-19 has provided us with an opportunity to create change. Look at the history of the ONS. The UK's central statistical body was created surprisingly recently in 1941, nearly a century after the French equivalent.

It was set up by Winston Churchill,

frustrated by conflicting reports from departments about the availability of coal to support the war effort. Interestingly, Harold Wilson was a young statistician in the Ministry of Fuel at the time, and expanded the ONS's work greatly during his premiership. Eighty years later, it is impossible to imagine UK public life without the ONS's central, independent, and accurate statistics. So how do we follow this precedent and support similar reform after the upheaval of the pandemic?

The problem with data policy to date is that it has tended to consider data as a discrete, rather dull issue, a subcategory of tech policy or web delivery.

Instead, COVID-19 has shown us that in the modern world, data infrastructure is at the heart of all successful planning and service delivery, not to mention evaluation and innovation. The commentator Robert

>> Colville calls this the 'database state.'

Yet this recognition is still missing from the UK's approach. The National Data Strategy lays out, at length, the Government's vision for data, and contains many good ideas, particularly on skills.

But it is lacking a crucial central vision: mechanisms to ensure that the data aspects of new policies are routinely considered, just as say economic cost-benefit analysis is now a routine part of policymaking.

So, what to do? Currently, when a new policy is created, it tends to get written, then thrown 'over the fence' to digital teams to implement. Policy development and data are kept separate. Result: frequent data failures and gaps.

Instead, when a new policy is created, or a new service is proposed, we suggest departmental policy teams should be asked to consider the following questions.

First, in what way will the data be delivered? If existing state databases (of patients, vehicles, businesses or whatever it might be) will be used to deliver the policy change, will those databases do what

the policy teams think they can? If new databases are to be created, will they follow guidance to ensure that the data can be extracted, managed, and shared?

Second, how can we continue to evaluate the data? How will we know if the policy is working and precisely what data will the delivery team collect to answer this?

Finally, how can we ensure that the data will ensure innovation? Are there opportunities to make any data created more widely available - either across the government or publicly - to support research and innovation?

In practice, this would most likely need new sections in *Impact assessments*, supported by *Green book* guidance. New expertise will be needed in policy teams, and technical expertise in policy teams. And a central oversight and support body staffed by technical experts will be needed - this might most naturally sit in the Cabinet Office.

The final piece of the jigsaw will be data-literate scrutiny from Parliament and other scrutiny bodies like the Regulatory Policy

Committee. If necessary, MPs should be able to intervene before public money is spent.

None of this can happen overnight, but there are precedents - both in the history of statistics, and past policymaking reforms around financial management.

And the joy of such an approach is that it dovetails perfectly with the Government's post-Brexit philosophy. Earlier in 2022, The Benefits of Brexit laid out a vision of lighter-touch regulation and innovation.

These changes would create much better evaluation data on policies. So we can quickly junk policies that don't work and scale up policies that do - a much more lightweight, innovative, digital-era approach.

The time is now. Here at the Centre for Public Data, we will be scoping out these ideas more over the next six months - if you are interested in government modernisation and data, we would love to talk to you. [D](#)

Anna Powell-Smith is the Founder and Director of the Centre for Public Data

Smooth operator?

Government can be smarter by being a smarter customer, suggests **Dom Hallas**

Public procurement is the holy grail of 'boring but important'. Make the government a smarter customer and it has a foundation on which to build a smarter, more versatile, operation.

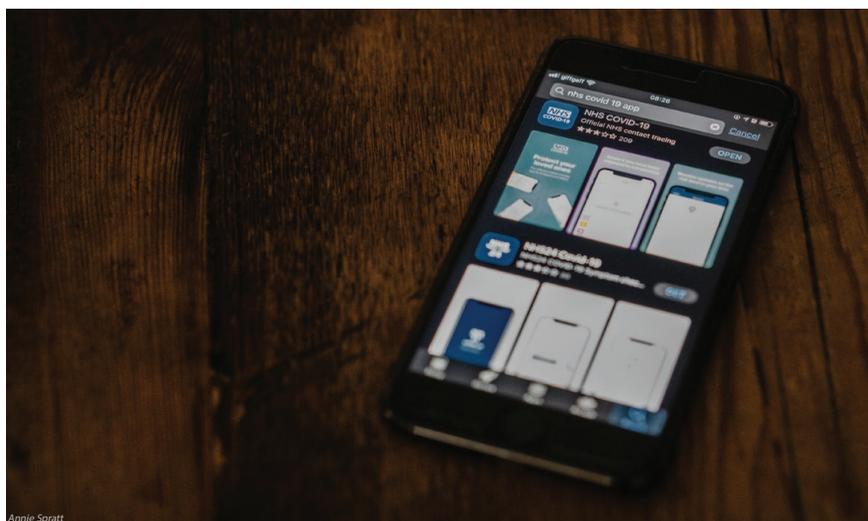
Gripes with government procurement is not new and complaints that the process favours the largest incumbents, ending up with the most inefficient solutions, is unlikely to surprise anyone. And yet, a recent cloud-computing revolution in the private sector has brought into painfully sharp relief how much the government and taxpayers are missing out.

Coadec has been fighting for policies that enable UK startups and scale-ups to grow, scale, and compete globally for about a decade now. When people think of the success of the British tech ecosystem, they usually point to the big names: Monzo, Wise, Deliveroo - all huge British success stories. But Software as a Service (SaaS) businesses are rarely mentioned. And yet, SaaS businesses make up 9.3% of the 34,815 high-growth businesses in the UK: making the average UK start-up SaaS based.

SaaS platforms increasingly power an incredible swathe of sectors - everything

from classic B2B productivity products right through to cybersecurity and AI-powered data analysis. Their platforms enable companies to become more responsive, adaptive, and competitive whilst lowering costs. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of SaaS companies in the high-growth ecosystem increased by an incredible 282%. This all means 'digital transformation' can be a rather bland phrase for what has





>> been a tidal wave of innovative disruption that has ripped through the private sector. And post-COVID-19, with flexibility now fundamentally intertwined with working life, SaaS startups are innovating like never before.

Despite all this, the public sector continues to procure mostly bespoke solutions. But while bespoke might be great for suits, it is bad for public services. Bespoke SaaS solutions can take years to build, often needlessly reinventing what is already on the market with a few extra unnecessary features. Bespoke also requires ongoing upkeep and uses tech that quickly falls into obsolescence - the UK Government spends just over £2 billion a year patching legacy IT. In contrast, SaaS platforms are 'plug in and play' - technical support is built in, not bolted on - and systems are updated and patched as standard. Crucially, bespoke builds tend to have limited bandwidth, making them both difficult to scale and integrate. SaaS platforms are the opposite. They are extremely versatile: customers can scale up and down depending on the surges in demand. And as governments emerging from pandemics now understand, the stress of demand surges like never before.

It is clear then that enabling SaaS platforms to fairly bid for public sector contracts would ensure government

can benefit from the latest innovations. And, having talked to SaaS founders and procurement officials, Coadec has concluded that the problems are not in the procurement rules per se, but rather in the ways in which these rules are applied.

“ Bespoke SaaS solutions can take years to build, often needlessly reinventing what is already on the market with a few extra unnecessary features

Repeatedly raised by SaaS platforms is the frustration that the public sector is too often blind to what is actually out there. This is a problem when there are great existing solutions on the market, but it also means officials can unknowingly build in blockers to the process itself. One SaaS founder told us they were barred from a tender process because the starting requirements detailed the need to have a data centre, unnecessary in the cloud era. A lack of meaningful pre-market engagement can also mean the resulting process is shaped around the interests of incumbents. When the Department for Transport recently contracted Deloitte to carry out its 'discovery phase,' no prizes for guessing who was promptly awarded the contract to build

the solution less than a year later.

Even when procurement officials are open to pre-market engagement, they can end up blocking the most effective ways to do this. To take an example that kept coming up amongst founders - 89% of SaaS vendors surveyed told us they use live demos to showcase their solutions, but as many as 38% of these said they were prevented from showing these to procurement officials. This speaks to a tendency to rely on proposals that are happier sitting in the abstract than in the real world, again advantaging incumbents who are well practised in 'telling' rather than 'showing'.

Making effective pre-market engagement mandatory would help give SaaS platforms a fighting chance. And to help shift the culture away from reaching for bespoke-as-standard, we should also look to upgrade from cloud-first to commercial-first. Government's 2013 cloud-first policy has radically lowered the barriers to entry for newcomers, but it needs to go further. Other countries have recognised this - commercial-first is increasingly the new gold standard.

The Procurement Bill, currently being put through its Parliamentary paces, is an opportunity to make this change. Procurement officials should have to produce a written explanation of why a bespoke solution was selected, detailing the steps taken before that decision was reached. Not only would this support meaningful pre-market engagement, it would hopefully lessen the chance that commercial-first will become a check-box exercise.

Procurement rules have the capacity within them to allow innovation to flourish - we just need to help them along. We can make government smarter by supporting it to be a smarter customer. 

Dom Hallas is the Executive Director of Coadec and a member of the UK's Digital Economy Council

Growing together

Government can be a crucial partner for the restoration of nature, asserts **Patrick Begg**



Most things in life work better when there's a partnership. In order to secure and sustain the highest quality land and landscapes, a partnership between three main actors is needed: government, society, and the private sector. So what is the government's role in the triumvirate?

Government's first job must be to secure the asset, and ensure its qualities are sustained and enhanced. Horner Wood in Exmoor, one of the last fragments of Atlantic Oak Woodland and our very own rainforest, is as grand and as essential to the UK's shared heritage and identity as any of our cathedrals. The same goes for the sweep of rough-hewn upland peat bog across the Peak, or the sinewed lowland wetlands of the Fens or Broads. Our woodlands, waterways, soils, grasslands, scrub, and bogs also provide so many basic services.

They are essential, not just for identity, but for a long list of fundamentals: clean, slow water; quality air; heat regulation; homes for pollinators; growing food; materials and fibre; and recreation; and mental and physical health. It must be the government's job to nurture these national assets which underpin enterprise as much as they do society's wellbeing.

Land and landscapes need formal protection to halt, and then help reverse, the declines that all the science tells us we are currently experiencing.

The Government



has already shown international leadership. Last May's G7 commitment to reverse biodiversity decline and protect 30% of each nation's land and oceans for nature by 2030 - the '30x30 pledge' - was a landmark moment. Although following that through and retaining a strong UK ecosystem of protections is the vital next step.

“ Land and landscapes need formal protection to halt, and then help reverse, the declines that all the science tells us we are currently experiencing

But great partners do not just help maintain quality, they grow it. Government has a unique role in raising the bar and helping enterprise and wider society enhance and benefit more from a flourishing natural environment.

There is no question that money matters in this equation. The cost of living crisis and the demands on state finances mean new sources of investment in nature will be needed. Sir Partha

Dasgupta, in his seminal and far-sighted 2021 analysis for HM Treasury of the economic case for investing in nature, equally makes it clear that unless we start to harvest and not mine the nature around us, we put our economies, livelihoods, and wellbeing in peril.

He recommends a re-gearing of economic systems and decision-making to ensure nature gain underpins core financial planning and investments made by government and beyond. This could sound like the signal for a technocrats' - or even a bureaucrats' - jamboree. I disagree. I don't think it is about

petti-fogging rules or constraints.

Rather, Sir Partha is shrewdly eyeing the significant leadership many businesses are now demonstrating on climate action and envisaging the same for biodiversity.

The Taskforce on Climate-related Financial Disclosure, led by the Bank of England and, since April this year mandated by government, has been a powerful catalyst. It has stimulated boardroom analysis, appreciation of risk and target setting, and crucially is helping companies spot green economic opportunities within their corporate transition plans to net zero. We now need the same for nature. The UK Government's support for the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosure is hugely welcome and needs to move towards more formal commitments. The UN's Convention on Biological Diversity (known as COP15) later this year would be a great place to again demonstrate the UK's leadership.

“ Regulation can and must help prevent careless or even malicious damage to natural assets, but it also has a role in catalysing new markets

Regulation may be seen as cramping innovation, and impeding development and investment. Of course, regulation can and must help prevent careless or even malicious damage to natural assets, but it also has a role in catalysing new markets, which we will need if we are going to fund restoration and harness the potential of a \$800bn worldwide market in nature-based

>> solutions. So there is significant danger in any temptation to pursue a deregulatory approach to our natural assets - we risk irreversible damage, as well as throwing the eponymous baby out with the riverwater.

A case study from the US is instructive. The Clean Water Act Compensatory Mitigation program is the largest environmental restoration program in the United States. In 1972, the Clean Water Act created a legal duty of 'no net loss' of aquatic resources and also a statutory duty for the US Environmental Protection Agency to enforce the regulations associated with the duty. But for decades its impact was limited. It relied on homespun 'mom and pop'

mitigation works delivered parochially and thus with limited scaling. The transformation came in 2008 with the government's new Compensatory Mitigation Rule.

This clarified performance standards, financial assurances, the geographical area within which credits could be sold, and many other technical issues. The result was a signal to big investors that there now existed a level playing field and assurance around measurement, standards, and impact, which in turn created a huge growth in the market for ecological credits. Appetite created scale, and scale has driven very significant benefits. Expertise has been drawn to this bright new sector,

with many new companies and jobs now servicing what has grown into a \$3.5 billion per annum industry. Government and its agencies make this system work. They are true partners to enterprise despite wearing the hat of a regulator.

We have ambitions to create a similar private market for nature. It can be done, and investors are poised. But we need government in partner mode, and not afraid to flex its regulatory muscles. As a senior colleague observed once, we need platforms made of oak, not balsa. 

Patrick Begg is the Outdoors and Natural Resources Director at the National Trust

Classroom concerns

Do not sacrifice COVID-19 catch up to the culture wars, implores **Luke Tryl**

Recently, the Government published the first external observations of primary school pupils' performance since before the pandemic. The results were not a surprise, but that did not make them any less shocking. They show a striking decline in performance from pre-pandemic levels, or put another way, at least five years of progress in improving attainment have been lost due to COVID-19.

“ In focus groups, parents we speak to are often baffled at the idea that you could simply stop studying both history or geography at the age of 14

You might expect this news to dominate headlines on education, or politicians falling over themselves to talk about how we get school standards back up to scratch. Instead, the media seem more concerned with reporting on the outrage of 'woke'

curriculum changes, or to how schools handle (or mishandle) trans issues. It is clear that there are some who would like to make schools the next front in the so-called culture wars, something that not only risks creating division, but would also be a major distraction from returning to the education reform agenda that was the flagship mission of the Cameron Government under Michael Gove and Nicky Morgan.

There is no doubt that subsequent administrations have allowed that agenda to drift. Where is the ambition to ensure more young people study the EBacc subjects up until the age of 16? In focus groups, parents we speak to are often baffled at the idea that you could simply stop studying both history or geography at the age of 14. Or where is the thinking about how we build on Nick Gibb's triumph in introducing the phonics check to improve early reading to also improve young people's maths and numeracy? The standards drive seems to have fallen off the

agenda.

That is not to say no progress has been made.

Outside of central government, under Amanda Spielman's leadership, Ofsted has been filling the gaps the Government has left behind by directing inspectors to clamp down on teaching to the test and check children are actually studying a deep and rich curriculum. Within government, there has been an important drive to improve the quality of technical and vocational education post-16. But now is the time to turn back to an agenda focused on standards and doing so means ensuring the education debate is not caught up in energy sapping culture war rows.

Parents have little interest in these fights too. When polled what measures should be prioritised to help better prepare children and young people for adult life, the top





>> results were focusing on the basics like English and Maths, proper work experience and supporting young people's mental health. Clearly, the public think the focus should be on these key issues, rather than debates which only excite a minority.

When parents do talk about these cultural rows, they instead see the need for balance. In a recent focus group in Guildford, not a single one of our participants had heard anything about the proposed changes to the English GCSE curriculum - removing poets like Larkin to make room for those from ethnic minorities. When the 'row' was explained to them they accepted the need to update curriculum, but did not want it to be too excessive.

And the truth is that schools are already getting on and handling more tricky culture

wars issues. In More in Common's recent study, *Britons and Gender Identity*, we found that on issues like trans, parents thought that schools were broadly handling it sensitively and well.

Where schools get into trouble it tends to be when they adopt the wholesale views of campaign groups, without recognising the importance of teaching different perspectives, particularly on issues which remain contested. In particular, schools need to avoid the danger of importing American framings on issues that just do not fit the UK context. Our polling finds that, for instance, just 37% think that schools should be "teaching young people about white privilege." By comparison, "making sure the curriculum is diverse, including covering authors, and historical figures from

ethnic minority backgrounds" received 63% support. Using non-controversial, ideology-free approaches is much more likely to command parental support.

Schools can instead play a positive role in trying to tackle the culture wars of the future, by creating a space where children feel free to be able to express different points of view and to respectfully challenge and ask questions about the points of view of others as well. As part of schools' requirement to teach fundamental British values, they should find opportunities to encourage and foster healthy debate - recognising that an important part of becoming an adult is being able to show respect for people who approach things differently from the way that you do.

“ Schools are already getting on... we found that on issues like trans, parents thought that schools were broadly handling it sensitively and well

The fact the pandemic has set back years of progress in raising school standards is a travesty. But it would be truly unforgivable if the hard work and energy needed to repair that damage is instead diverted to overblown culture war battles that serve neither parents or children well. [🔗](#)

Luke Tryl is the UK Director of More in Common

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Putting customers at the heart of net zero

Our purpose

SGN keeps communities across the whole of Scotland and much of the South of England safe and warm. Our vision is to give our 6 million customers the best clean energy experience.

Achieving net zero emissions will require transformation across the whole economy. We are investing in world leading R&D projects in the UK, advocating for the solutions that meet our customers' needs and supporting industry make the transition to net zero to maintain jobs and skills here in the UK.

The scale of the challenge

The UK's biggest net zero challenge is decarbonising our homes and buildings. It's the second biggest emitting sector with around 30% of our national emissions coming from around 25 million homes which are connected to gas networks across the UK.

Millions of homes and people will be heavily impacted by this change. The decarbonisation of homes is first and foremost a customer challenge.

Customers react differently to the shared challenges we face: their own experience informs the choices they make. So when it comes to delivery of net zero we know we must put our customers' different needs at the centre of any solution that is offered to them.

We need to listen to and understand what our customers actually want from their future home heating solutions. By doing this, and really understanding our customers' needs, we can inform policy development and technological solutions that will help deliver a transition to net zero homes more quickly and at lowest cost.

So, what do our customers tell us?

Our customer attitudes research tells us that the willingness of customers to move to a zero-carbon heating system is high. Importantly, customers do not want to lose the attributes of heat that they have today. They want the

control, flexibility and immediacy of a heat source they can turn on and off, up and down.

But when you ask customers what action they will personally take and how much they are prepared to pay, that support for change drops to around a third. We call this the "action gap".

The case for change

For most customers, the technology itself isn't a relevant consideration for them. It's what it delivers and how it delivers which they are concerned with.

Some customers tell us they are worried about being left behind when it comes to adopting new technologies. But on the flip side, many customers are also worried about being the first mover. They see a world of uncertainty and risk and for many a do-nothing approach represents the least risk option.

Customers expect government and business to take the lead by providing clarity on what the choices are and a roadmap of how they can be made a reality.

If we are going to make progress on the decarbonisation of our homes in the 2020s, hydrogen needs to be part of the choices on offer to customers.

We know about the home heating technologies available in market today, and we're very clear - we will need all of them to reach net zero.

To maintain progress on decarbonisation, we in industry need to work alongside regulators and policymakers and ensure a customer centric approach is the backbone of the pathway we use to decarbonise our homes.

Get in touch

Please get in touch or visit our website if you would like to learn more about our world leading R&D or customer analysis, or how we are helping industry to meet net zero.

josh.aulak@sgn.co.uk

sgn.co.uk/about-us/future-of-gas

Pushing the political boundaries?

Hannah White OBE critiques the Johnson Government's approach to the constitution



The British constitution divides opinion. While some laud its gradualism, stability, and flexibility as having served the country well over centuries, others criticise it as both outdated excessively malleable, and now creaking at the edges as it is tested by those in power.

Like many Governments before them, most members of Boris Johnson's administration are firmly in the first camp, equally happy to appeal to the historic basis of constitutional principle to defend the status quo where it works to their advantage. Just think of Jacob Rees Mogg's approach to the role of Leader of the House, and to exploit the constitution's flexibilities where it suits them to explore its limits; think of Boris Johnson's willingness to test the duty of ministers to uphold national and international law.

But a growing and increasingly vocal number of people outside government, and even some - privately - within, allege that the Government has eroded previously established norms and principles - lacking a supply of 'good chaps' inclined to respect those principles, to the point where the constitution is under serious threat. Do such concerns about the health of the constitution reflect an alarmist overreaction by those opposed to the Government's policy agenda or are they legitimate and well-founded concerns?

There is no absolute answer to this question, but it is worth reminding ourselves of the purpose of a constitution. A constitution is a set of rules which deals with where power lies within a state, who can exercise it, and under what conditions. Some see the fundamental purpose of a constitution as placing limits on the power of the state and protecting citizens from the exercise of arbitrary power. Others tend to

emphasise the way in which constitutions empower the state to act on behalf of citizens. These ideas are not mutually exclusive - proponents of either would agree on the main objectives of the UK constitution, as enshrining the role of the UK parliament as the key source of power, embedding key rights and principles, and maintaining checks and balances to prevent power from accumulating in any single institution.

“How new powers... might be deployed by a Government of a different hue had proved a powerful constraint on constitutional adventurism

What is the evidence that these objectives are no longer being met? Critics point to the Government's attempts to sideline parliament - a theme I examine in my new book *Held in Contempt: what's wrong with the House of Commons?* - and Ministers' revealed preference to avoid scrutiny - the latest symptoms being a series of yelps from peers about the inadequacies of secondary legislation and from Commons Select Committees about the Government's casual attitude to accountability. They highlight attempts to

stretch or disregard previously established principles: the Prime Minister's attempt to prorogue Parliament for an extended period, his willingness to ignore his adviser on the ministerial code, and his removal of the references to the Nolan Principles from the most recent edition of the Ministerial Code. They question whether the Government - through a programme of legislation, for example increasing government control over the Electoral Commission, and more-than-usually-partisan appointments to public bodies - is attempting to weaken the checks and balances that constrain executive power.

Supporters of the Government would argue that this approach is not

only legitimate but necessary to enable it to deliver on its agenda. Ministers might suggest that their actions have been no different from those of previous Governments. Tony Blair, for example, was happy to transform the role of Lord

Chancellor practically overnight and eject the Law Lords from the House of Lords while defending a high degree of executive control over Parliament.

Today's critics, however, discern a qualitative difference between previous Governments'



UK Parliament

>> willingness to abruptly change the rules of the constitution, as is the right of any Government with a Commons majority, and the current Government's readiness to contest the legitimacy of any rules and conventions that constrain government action. As the Cabinet Secretary, Simon Case, told a parliamentary committee at the end of June 2022, this is a Government which "believes it has a mandate to test established boundaries."

One useful test of whether you believe

the current Government has gone too far in challenging the boundaries set by the constitution is to imagine a scenario where the flexibilities that Ministers have made much use of were put in the hands of their political opponents. Historically, a consciousness of how new powers, mechanisms, or precedents might be deployed by a Government of a different hue had proved a powerful constraint on constitutional adventurism by the governing party. But under the Johnson

Government, elation at having won a substantial majority for the first time in a decade appears to have dissolved any concern about how their changes to the rules of the game might come back to bite them under a future Labour administration. This is not a Conservative Government that is worrying too hard about the long-term conservation of the constitution. 

Dr Hannah White OBE is the Acting Director of the Institute for Government

Stronger SpAds

Nick Hillman reflects on the role of special advisers in supporting the state

My time as a special adviser was untypical. I spent almost four years as the SpAd to David Willetts while he was the Minister for Universities and Science. For the first couple of years of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, in power from 2010, I was the only Tory SpAd that had ever worked in a department led by a Secretary of State from another political party.

“ Many people think SpAds are a waste of space; the litany of abuse chucked in their direction is impressive in its volume and range

My job was partly to push my Minister's interests while liaising with Number 10, other Whitehall Departments, party HQ, and other SpAds. But I also had to help keep sufficiently good relations with our Coalition partners to maintain our freedom of manoeuvre in my Minister's areas of responsibility, which covered most of our department's expenditure.

Split loyalties are par for the course for

SpAds. The Coalition amended the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers to state they work for the whole government, not just their Minister. This tickled David Cameron; at the first meeting of Coalition SpAds, he went round the room asking each of us who we worked for. I said "David Willetts," and others mentioned their Ministers. Afterwards, he said, "You're all wrong. You all work for me!"

Perhaps this explains why Cameron's office expected me to spy on our Lib Dem partners. I spent ages preparing properly for my one and only appraisal as a SpAd, undertaken by a senior person in the Prime Minister's office. It was a waste of time. After some niceties, she put the paperwork aside and asked me just one question: "What's Vince [Cable] really like?"

Many people think SpAds are a waste of space. The litany of abuse chucked in their direction is impressive in its volume and range. Back in 2002, one Labour MP, Tony Wright, claimed special advisers rank "somewhere alongside paedophiles in the lexicon of media opprobrium."

But the fruitiest insults emit more heat than light. If SpAds were a waste of time,

an incoming government would abolish the role - and make a populist song and dance about it. Instead, each successive administration is tempted to increase the number of SpAds and to rely on them more.

Imposing an artificial limit on the number of SpAds is generally a bad idea as it limits the important role they play - including acting as a safety valve that stops the mainstream Civil Service from becoming politicised. It was Harold Wilson who introduced the general rule that Cabinet Ministers should not usually have more than two SpAds, but the historian Andrew Blick has shown this was done to block a particular appointment by Tony Benn rather than on grounds of principle.

In Cameron's case, there was initially a promise to reduce the number of SpAds, but this was bitterly regretted and made no sense when two separate parties were sharing power. So 'policy advisers' were brought in to work alongside 'special advisers' as a way of dodging the



>> self-imposed limit.

One reason why SpAds are so valuable is that they are pretty much the only senior appointment that Cabinet-level Ministers can immediately make themselves, as SpAds are exempt from normal recruitment processes. Before any special adviser criticises officials, they should recall that no other civil servants are officially “exempt from the general requirement that civil servants should be appointed on merit.”

Appointing a SpAd or two allows Ministers to get people they trust and know into post quickly. This is so useful that other professions have now pinched the special adviser concept. I work with universities and, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of policy advisers working directly to vice-chancellors.

Yet, even if having more SpAds makes sense, boosting their formal powers - as New Labour did - is a bad idea. It muddies the clear blue water between regular civil servants and political advisers.

While the public may think that the problem with SpAds is there are too many of them, and politicians in power may think the problem is that SpAds are not powerful enough, the biggest problem is different. The role currently attracts highly *committed* SpAds, whereas, with some tweaks, it could attract highly *effective* SpAds.

A traditional regular departmental special adviser is young, obsessed with politics, and has few family commitments. The average SpAd is caricatured as being a party animal in both the political and social sense and, as with all caricatures, this contains more than a grain of truth.

In contrast, the best special advisers are older, have a hinterland, and have seen a bit more of life. They are more interested in government business than party business. They have lived as an adult through more than one political cycle. They know the concerns of a wide spectrum of voters.

So the challenge is how to make it easier to recruit the right sort of SpAds, and I

would suggest three ways to do this.

First, enable a better work-life balance - too many SpAds leave soon after they have children, for example.

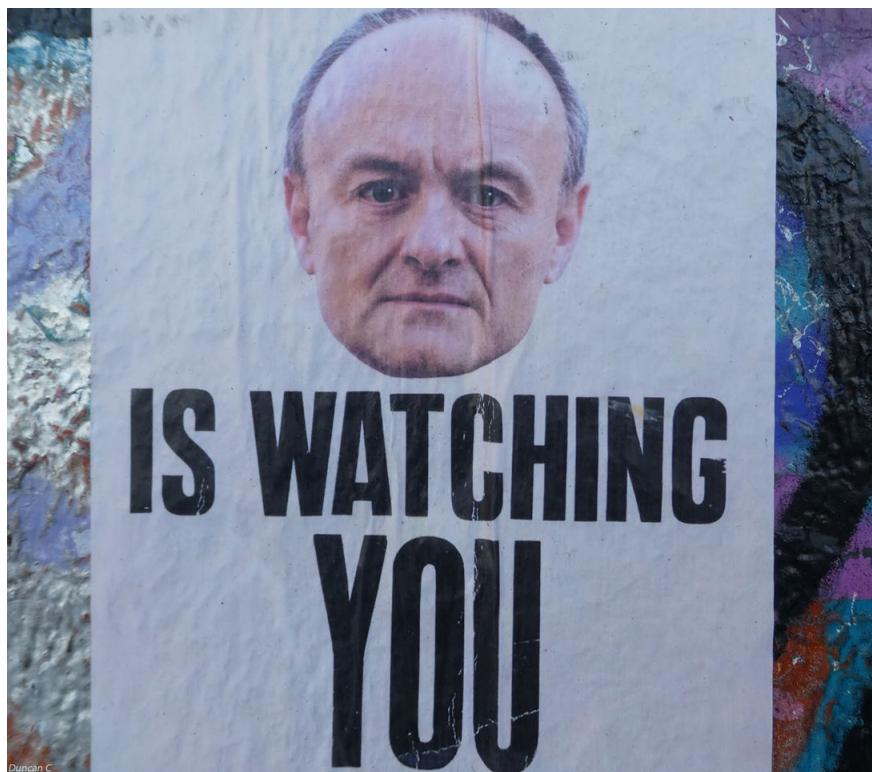
Second, professionalise the role somewhat to ensure the political adviser role feels more like a career in itself and less like a stop-gap role - perhaps in the first instance by providing structured induction, clear rules on salary progression, and more access to in-service training.

Third, introduce a more appropriate regime for departing SpAds. When I left, I saw just how absurd the independent Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACOPA) process is. While it is effective at embarrassing people when they leave Whitehall for something else, it is completely ineffective at actually stopping inappropriate behaviour. No wonder Lord Pickles, the Chair of ACOPA, has warned the Government that the current system is “toothless” and that “without further reform, there is an ever-present risk of another scandal which the system is ill-prepared for.”

If sensible changes were to happen, it could have one particularly useful side effect: reducing the distance between politics and academia. The political biographer, Michael Crick, has noted how rare it is to find academics embedded in Whitehall these days. Under past Prime Ministers, such as Harold Wilson, it was relatively commonplace.

Indeed, it is almost inconceivable now to envisage significant numbers of academics decamping to Whitehall. Yet the job of a SpAd is to provide an alternative source of knowledge for Ministers, so our world-class university sector should be a big lake in which they can fish for support. If it were to become so, perhaps the anti-intellectual tide that has engulfed so much of modern politics might start to recede. 

Nick Hillman was a special adviser between May 2010 and December 2013 and is now the Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute



The death of democracy?

Graham Allen calls upon democrats to unite against populists



US President Joe Biden was right to say in his inauguration week and repeat after that the greatest political battle we have to confront is between autocracy and democracy. While it is fashionable in some UK circles to mock the current President, would a British political leader be able to pitch a vision as clearly and for once leave tomorrow's short-term headlines aside?

This defining battle has been played out ever more intensely over recent years. This is now seen at its rawest and most violent where Putin's autocracy meets the new democracy of Ukraine. It is not, however, limited to this most extreme example, but is finding form across the democratic world, from the USA to India and Hungary, and to all stations between; and increasingly in the UK.

The UK was once the consummate model of informal democracy. Now, hidden behind the face of a clown, our country and democracy has been threatened by an embarrassing rump, unrecognisable to

traditional One Nation democrats. Boris Johnson's ideology owes less to Churchill, Macmillan, and Major and is drawn more from Trump, McConnell, and Bannon. The required reading is not so much Disraeli's *Sybil*, but Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The anti-democratic right think it is cool to imitate their US brethren. The imports include a contempt for debate and deliberation, a cynicism about truth and honesty, and the fixing of the political process. These fixes range from making it harder for your opponent's supporters to vote, to curbing their civil and personal rights, to using diversion and misinformation through a largely pliant media, to weakening or even intimidating independent referees from the Electoral Commission and the UK Supreme Court. This is not the knock-about of party politics but steps - indeed strides - towards autocracy. Repairing these deliberate rips in our democratic fabric is the equal and onerous responsibility of democrats of all

political parties and persuasions.

Of course the best and easiest time to strengthen and maintain the habits of democracy is not when it is in crisis, but as part of a culture of constant maintenance and evolution. It should be done purely because it is the right thing to do. Instead, there have been few of us who, in better times for democracy, acted without complacency and elitism. This bordered on neglect by failing to gently and consistently renew our democracy when we had the chance. Some of the powerful and influential even had the temerity to mistake their own entitled elevation for our collective arrival at 'the end of politics.' This blissful social and Christian democratic nirvana did not need thoughtful and sustained improvement, but just the occasional dabbling to the inherited 'Rolls Royce residual process.' The opportunities and moments available to Blair, Brown, Clegg, and Cameron were spurned. We now have the consequences, which become harder to put right as the populist and autocratic genies are out of the bottle.

While the task is more difficult than it needed to have been, it still has to be tackled. At the heart of that is restoring the health of our democratic ideology, putting back the pieces, but also having the self-awareness to understand what we must do to improve democracy itself. The battle between democracy and autocracy is not merely about being content to criticise autocrats abroad, it is about remaking democracy at home in the UK, in the USA, and in every democracy on the planet.

Making a transcending UK democratic

>> coalition and basing it on a solid and practical democratic culture is the greater good that unites democrats of all parties. If we are lucky enough to get another chance - and that is by no means a certainty - democrats must act together to renew the ideology and practice of democratic governance and make it fit for purpose. It is the key to enable the resolution of all our other questions, up to and including climate change. It is a coalition of democrats, including Conservatives, many of whom have already acted with great courage at high personal cost, that has to be put together now and in public, so as to lessen the impact of misrepresentation in the final days of a General Election campaign.

Central to that mission is to win back the trust of voters. Polling shows us that in many countries there is an increasing disdain for democracy when compared to strong and clear autocracy. There is

an innovative way to strengthen the fabric of trust. That is to build on one of modern democracy's few success stories: deliberative democracy.

Over 600 successful Citizens' Assemblies have taken place in recent years. Here a balanced microcosm of a population, independently selected, facilitated, deliberated, and resolved some of our most difficult political problems from abortion in Ireland to nuclear waste in Australia. Democratic renewal and climate change are popular issues amenable to deliberation too. Such questions often defeat whipped and lobbied legislators, yet they too can become liberated by partnering the legitimate and non-partisan deliberations of the public.

Deliberative democracy can make an impact even if isolated in one country. However, President Biden once again set out a vision for global democratic renewal

by creating the Summit for Democracy. We should support this institution, as it now steps up from bureaucracy and box-ticking to some hard work on deliberative democracy and Citizens' Assemblies. This could include a global What Works Centre on deliberation, or the Summit's own year round global Citizens' Assembly on democratic renewal, or even pitching an inspiring declaration to reunite our democratic system of government with its electors around the world, and much more.

British, and indeed global, democracy is not dead, but you and I as democrats have to choose urgently and with courage the path to renewal. [👉](#)

Graham Allen is Convener of The Citizens' Convention on UK Democracy and was previously a Labour MP and Chair of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform from 2010 to 2015

Levelling up by devolving down

England needs proper devolution, argues **Darren Hughes**

England is the poor relation of the UK when it comes to democracy. Despite a decade that has had a raft of elected mayors, metro mayors, and police and crime commissioners created, large areas of the country still have no real political agency to truly shape their future.

Meanwhile, people across large swathes of England have watched as their counterparts in Scotland and Wales, London too, have been offered a choice over how they wish to be governed and then seen Westminster devolve meaningful powers, as well as billions in budget responsibilities, to regional and national assemblies.

This is not a sustainable situation as it has created a yawning inequality at the heart of Britain's constitutional settlement.

This inequality is not just an esoteric concern for academics. It is a fundamental question for one of the most pressing issues of British politics: levelling up. Devolution is central to that debate as it asks: how can communities that have been left behind rebuild themselves?

The 2019 election was a *cri de coeur* from dozens of communities who felt neglected and let down by the centralised Westminster system. The causes of decline are complex and longstanding, from the Beeching rail cuts of the 1960s severing transport arteries to small towns, to the withering of legacy industries resulting in thousands of lost jobs that have never been replaced.

An exacerbating factor in this story of decline has been the lack of agency that the

affected areas have had to better their situation.

A recent report by the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) on the state of English devolution, entitled *Democracy Made in England*, highlighted how the areas outside of London have been held back by an underpowered system of local government that was built for the nineteenth century rather than the twenty-first.

The theme of this system for the last two centuries has been that 'Westminster knows best,' with local authorities treated as little more than the delivery arm for central government policies. A survey for the report



>> of almost 800 local councillors found that over two-thirds (68%) feel they do not have sufficient powers to represent the needs of their local community.

Yet, while the consensus is that parts of England need to be urgently levelled up, the question is now how this Herculean task can be achieved. Levelling up cannot simply be writing a cheque. Communities know best and know what they need in order to rejuvenate their areas - they need powers to act for themselves. What is required to level-up areas in Yorkshire will be very different to parts of Devon.

“ The 2019 election was a cri de coeur from dozens of communities who felt neglected and let down by the centralised Westminster system

This is a fundamentally conservative principle: decisions are best made by those most affected by them, rather than remote centres of power.

Over the last decade, the Coalition and then successive Conservative Governments have recognised this and created a host of elected mayors and devolved bodies in England. However, this has resulted in an uneven patchwork of devolved powers, with many areas of England still having no real means of regional development bar a distant central government or small local authorities.

The Johnson Government had already committed to going much further on devolution. In 2019,

Boris Johnson was explicit in the need for radical devolution in England, pledging “to give greater powers to council leaders and to communities.”

The *Levelling up white paper* reaffirmed this commitment, stating its intent to “extend, deepen and simplify devolution across England.” These are steps in the right direction, but to succeed, there needs to be a fundamental refit so local authorities, not Whitehall, steer levelling up.

The ERS’ *Democracy Made in England* report lays out some of the fundamental principles that are required to shape English devolution and ensure English communities have the same autonomy as other parts of the UK.

The first is subsidiarity: decisions should be made at, as well as power and resources devolved to, the lowest level of local government possible. The closer to the communities these decisions are made, the better they will be.

Next, local representatives need to be given genuine autonomy to act in the best interests for their residents. Central government will always set up the framework and the overall plan for levelling up, but local councillors will know where a new bus route can regenerate a town’s economy or where a new school is most badly needed.

Devolution also needs to be grounded in communities’ sense of place. It needs to reflect and represent the areas that people identify with. One reason voters rejected New Labour’s plans for a North East England Regional Assembly in the early 2000s is that very few people see themselves as North East Englanders.

Lastly, devolution needs to be done in an accountable and transparent way. That means deals should not be done in

backrooms over new powers and voters need to be asked about what forms of devolution would serve them best.

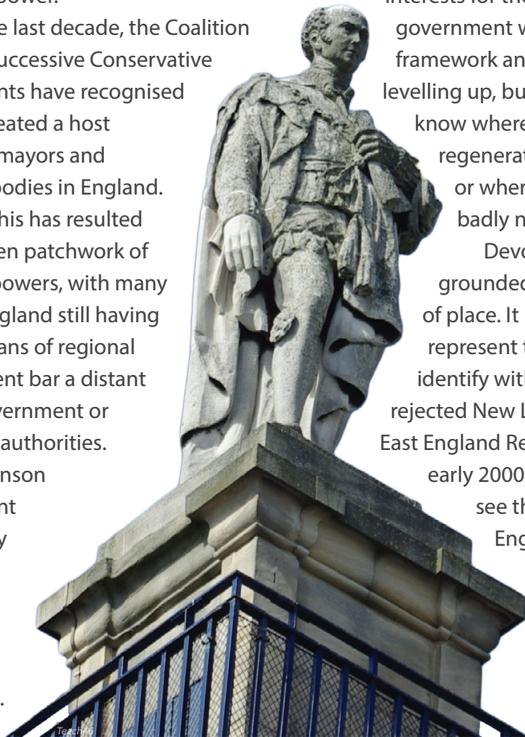
In a similar vein, local authorities themselves need to be made more accountable. The ERS argues that a key way to do this would be through introducing proportional representation in local elections to avoid the stagnant one-party states that First Past the Post produces. For instance, last May’s local elections saw results such as Camden, where Labour took 85% of the seats with just 51% of the vote. First Past the Post has also led to absurd situations such as in Newcastle where no Conservative councillors have been elected for thirty years.

Results like these create town halls that do not fully represent the range of views in the local community, and also ones where decisions are not properly scrutinised. However, a proportional system such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV) used in Scotland’s local elections would create more competitive, responsive, and representative town halls.

“ First Past the Post has led to absurd situations such as in Newcastle where no Conservative councillors have been elected for thirty years

Devolution, as a broad policy, is built on the conservative principle that people know what is best for their own communities. Yet, centuries of over-centralisation has contributed to the decline of large areas of England by enfeebling local democracy. Levelling up needs to right this historic wrong with a radical devolution settlement that makes local areas masters of their own destiny again. For levelling up to work, it cannot be top down. 

Darren Hughes is Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society



Why I'm a Bright Blue MP

Andrew Bowie MP shares his hopes for the Conservative Party



When I am conflicted about an issue, a policy or a vote; when I, not infrequently, question why I do what I do, why I am here, what drove me into politics and, particularly, into the Conservative Party, I recall these words by David Cameron in 2005:

"People in this country are crying out for a Conservative Party that is decent, reasonable, sensible, commonsense, and in it for the long term of this country. And that is the party we are going to build, and I want everyone to join in.

"If you want to build a modern, compassionate Conservative Party, come and join us. If you want me and all of us to be a voice for hope, for optimism, and for change, come and join us. In this modern, compassionate Conservative Party, everyone is invited."

I first heard them sitting in my mum's car outside Morrisons supermarket in Inverurie, the town I grew up in. I was 18 years old, had passed the Admiralty Interview Board for the Navy, and was awaiting entry. As the rain came down on that car in that supermarket car park, I heard on Radio 5 the result of the Conservative Party leadership election.

No one in my immediate family were Conservative voters in the 2000s. Not one of my friends voted Conservative in the 2000s. In Scotland, where I grew up, a Conservative

voter was rare.

But when I heard those words from David Cameron, I knew then that the Conservative Party was my party. I knew then that the country I wanted to see - a country built on positive, compassionate, optimistic foundations, could only be built by a Conservative Party that spoke to a new generation. A generation fed up with Labour's failures but unsure of the Tories' 'out of touch' policies, built with the words and actions of a new generation of Conservative MPs - Cameron, Osborne, and a guy called Boris Johnson.

“ A country built on positive, compassionate, optimistic foundations, could only be built by a Conservative Party that spoke to a new generation

And in 2010, I was so excited to read the foreword to the Conservative Manifesto:

"A country is at its best when the bonds between people are strong and when the sense of national purpose is clear. Today, the challenges facing Britain are immense. Our economy is overwhelmed by debt, our social fabric is frayed and our political system has betrayed the people.

"But these problems can be overcome if we pull together and work together. If we remember that we are all in this together.

"Some politicians say: 'give us your vote and we will sort

out all your problems.'

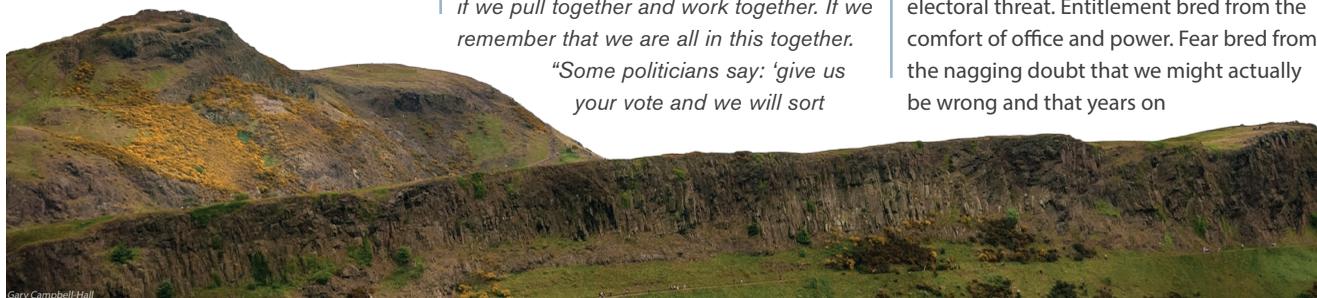
We say: real change comes not from government alone. Real change comes when the people are inspired and mobilised, when millions of us are fired up to play a part in the nation's future. Yes, this is ambitious. Yes, it is optimistic. But in the end, all the Acts of Parliament, all the new measures, all the new policy initiatives, are just politicians' words without you and your involvement."

This is what I believed. It is what I still believe. And those words inspired me not only to vote for the Conservatives in my first General Election, but to later join them.

But something has gone wrong. In May 2022, Charlotte Ivers, columnist for *The Sunday Times*, wrote a column entitled 'The Tory party hasn't had an idea since 2005.' In it she suggested that, secure in power for over a decade, we in the Conservative Party have no motivation to innovate.

I cannot disagree.

We see this is evident now in the Conservative Party: a strange mix of complacency, entitlement, fear, and exhaustion. Complacency bred from the fact that the Labour Party, after more than a decade in turmoil and opposition, pose no electoral threat. Entitlement bred from the comfort of office and power. Fear bred from the nagging doubt that we might actually be wrong and that years on



Gary Campbell/Hall

>> the opposition benches do await.

Exhaustion from 12 hard years of Government with economic crises, migrant crises, an independence referendum in Scotland, Brexit, snap elections, a global pandemic, and war in Europe.

It is a toxic combination. Made even more difficult by the need to keep on side the majority of that strange and unwieldy coalition of electors that returned the Conservatives to Government in 2019.

So we end up here. Talking the talk of lowering tax whilst increasing National Insurance. Giving investment incentives to increase our domestic oil and gas production whilst imposing a windfall tax. Making the right noise about cutting the size of government while not recognising it was our party that created two new departments in the last six years. Espousing the values of Global Britain whilst shrinking our diplomatic presence overseas.

Where's the spirit of 2005? Where's the big idea? What's the challenge to us? What's the offer to the country?

I often say I am an optimist. Being an Aberdeen FC fan, a Scotland Rugby fan, and a Scottish Conservative, I have to be. And I firmly believe, whoever is leader of my party, the Conservative and Unionists remain the only party capable of tackling the challenges that face us as a nation.

But we need to rediscover that confidence. We need to look back to our recent past. We need to reach out, think radically, and be bold. Explain again and again that taking our country forward requires all of us, not just the government, to make a difference. Understanding that just chucking money at a problem rarely solves the issue but that targeted investment can. We need to be proud of ourselves and our past, but also be understanding of different opinions of it.

We need to build a new, positive relationship with the EU. Never compromising on our sovereignty or the integrity of our Union, but working with them to resolve shared challenges.

We need our Foreign Office to shout from the rooftops in every capital in the world how great a country this is, how great an enabler for change, and how positive a force the United Kingdom is.

That is why I am a Conservative. That is why I joined this great Party - the most successful political party in the history of the world. And that is ultimately why I am a Bright Blue conservative.

Because I truly believe, if we start doing all this now, our future is bright, blue, and certainly Conservative. 

Andrew Bowie MP represents West Aberdeenshire & Kincardine and is a former Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party

Research update

Max Anderson provides an update on Bright Blue's research programme

Although the job of government may have slowed in recent weeks and months as a result of the fall of Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party leadership election, Bright Blue has been very busy with a wave of new reports, analyses, and events.

At the start of the year, we launched *Rightfully rewarded*, which was the third and penultimate report of our multi-year tax reform project. The report made recommendations on reforming taxes on work and wealth, arguing the burden of taxation should be shifted from the former onto the latter.

We then published the fourth report of our tax reform project, *Energising enterprise*, concluding that our tax system

needlessly discourages investment and entrepreneurship, and makes recommendations to reform and simplify Corporation Tax, business rates, and business tax reliefs.

Our whole tax reform project concluded with our final report, *A vision for tax reform in the 2020s*, proposing nine key principles that should underpin an ambitious programme of tax reform. This paper was launched at a major conference, which included a keynote speech from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Lucy Frazer QC MP, who commented: "I want to congratulate Bright Blue for the pioneering work you've been doing."

A jam-packed first half of the year for Bright Blue was capped off by *A carbonless*

crucible.

The report lays out a roadmap to ensure a thriving and decarbonised steel industry in the UK, which could also prove key for the Conservative Party to retain the Red Wall seats it won in 2019.

Now we turn to the party conferences, when our events team will be very busy as ever, but that does not mean the research output will be any quieter, with upcoming reports on welfare, self-employment, and littering and fly-tipping. 

Max Anderson is Senior Communications Officer at Bright Blue



Innovating Up

Unlocking growth in towns and cities



Kulveer Ranger,
Senior Vice President, Head
of Strategy, Marketing,
Communications and Public
Affairs – Northern Europe & APAC

For decades, governments of all shapes have sought to reduce inequality by unleashing the creativity and industry of communities across Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

From the 1980s, Development Corporations transformed areas across Britain including Canary Wharf, Cardiff Bay and Central Manchester.

Under Tony Blair, devolution in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London along with regional development agencies and assemblies in England all looked to promote local jobs and growth. Local Enterprise Partnerships, Metro Mayors and city region and growth deals followed.

Today, we have a patchwork of different democratic and funding models targeted towards the needs of individual areas.

The Government's Levelling Up agenda is an ambitious programme that brings together a range of initiatives under one umbrella, underpinned by legislation. The aim is to raise productivity levels, improve health outcomes, increase incomes and spread opportunity in every corner of the country. This objective is a shared endeavour that cuts across political parties and one that will take many years to achieve.

At Atos, we believe that new technologies like artificial intelligence and cloud services, combined with new ways of working following the pandemic, mean that the UK can finally and meaningfully level up.

That's why we have launched our Innovating Up project, examining the challenges attached to bringing high-quality digital jobs, backed by a skilled workforce, to every town and city in the UK.

Innovating Up focuses on three key themes:

- 1. Innovating Digital** considers how business, local community partnerships and government can implement digital transformation programmes to deliver sustainable growth.
- 2. Innovating Jobs** asks what the jobs of the future will look like and how we can deliver them.
- 3. Innovating Skills** questions how businesses can work with government to make sure we have the skills needed to do the jobs of the future.

With colleagues in almost every part of the UK, Atos has a significant stake in improving the prospects of communities across the country. From Belfast to Bristol, Inverness to Ipswich, Atos is working with government and business to improve services and goods for citizens. Ensuring that pay, employment and productivity is rising everywhere is beneficial to us and the people who work for us as well as for the country as a whole.

Our view is that Levelling Up can only be achieved by creating sustainable jobs for the future through business innovation.

Innovating Up sets out our initial thoughts on how we can deliver on this ambitious agenda. We will be meeting with business leaders, political representatives and communities across the UK to gain a more local perspective on how we can increase skills, employment and productivity in our towns and cities.

By gathering industry perspectives, we plan to develop a set of recommendations on how Government can work with business and communities to encourage innovation and appropriate targeted investment. To find out more about Innovating Up or to contact us about this exciting initiative please visit our website by following the link below.

Discover more



atos.net/innovating-up

TV: *Stranger things* 4

The hit Netflix series by the **Duffer Brothers** successfully takes a new direction



Sam Robinson

Senior Research Fellow, Bright Blue

After a long wait, *Stranger things* recently returned to our laptop screens for its fourth - and penultimate - season, kicking off our summer with a hefty dose of nostalgia.

Stranger things 4 had a lot to deliver. When it burst onto the scene in 2016 *Stranger things* was fresh and innovative, but by the end of season three the eighties clichés were starting to feel a little overdone and the plotlines too repetitive. The question as the latest season started was whether it would spice up the show with new ideas, or simply demonstrate that *Stranger things* has already peaked.

Besides doing absolute wonders for the popularity of Kate Bush and Metallica (and, to paraphrase Dustin, delivering one of the most metal scenes ever to our screens), this season has taken the show in a new direction and shaken up what was becoming a stale formula.

The series broadly follows three parallel plotlines. In California, we follow Eleven as she struggles to adjust to her new life without her powers. In Russia, Hopper is trying to escape a hellhole Soviet prison, which also happens to have a

pet Demogorgon. The pet Demogorgon is, of course, not house-trained. And in Hawkins, the residents (to no one's surprise) have still not caught a break as a spate of paranormal murders breaks out. After being haunted for days by debilitatingly terrifying hallucinations, victims are lifted into the air and there meet with a gruesome, and particularly crunchy, demise.

These parallel plotlines do at times feel unwieldy, and it's hard at times to see how some - particularly the Russia plotline - are relevant. But all the various plotlines come good in the end, and each plays a tangible role in the finale.

It was also a decent way of splitting the show up. One of the enduring - and fairest - criticisms of *Stranger things* is that the cast is too bloated; new characters come on board at a faster rate than they're killed off. In the end, season 4 didn't fundamentally address the cast bloat problem (read: not enough blood was spilt), but it did at least manage this intelligently.

Perhaps the best aspect of this season was the villain. In previous seasons, the antagonist has been, in various guises, 'the Mindflayer'. While this was suitably supernatural, it made it difficult to give the antagonist any personality beyond 'mysterious yet menacing alien entity.'



This time round, the villain has a name, a backstory, and a motivation. The demonic murders in Hawkins turn out to be the work of Vecna, a powerful sorcerer in the Upside Down with similar powers to Eleven. It turns out Vecna has a few (quite strong) grievances against Eleven, the people of Hawkins, and indeed the world in general. And far from the animalistic behaviour of monsters we have seen in *Stranger things* previously, he has a methodical plan to achieve dominance.

The character of Vecna also added more colour and variety to the show. Obviously, we get to see the Upside Down in all its familiar, tendril-covered glory. But Vecna's mind-invading powers also serve to mix things up a bit. As well as brutal, hideous Upside Down creatures, we also see surreal dream sequences filled with some classic horror tropes.

My one criticism in this department would be that we find out too much about Vecna too quickly: it's not long before it's revealed why he keeps attacking Hawkins, not much longer before we know who he is (plus, viewers are able to guess for a while before that), and by the end of this season we know pretty much his entire backstory. Villain-wise, the pendulum arguably swung from too much mystery to too much detail. But at this point I'm splitting hairs: the addition of Vecna to the Upside Down not only personalised the hellish force that Eleven and her motley crew of heroes are fighting, but it added a string to the show's proverbial bow, allowing it to incorporate different aesthetics and different styles to its brand of horror.

Stranger things needs to work on its

>> pacing for the final season. As with all the other seasons, this season started off all guns blazing until the plot was becalmed in the middle episodes, before ending with a bang in the finale. The denouement after the final boss fight, too, was unnecessarily

long - very much reminiscent of the endings-within-endings-within-endings of Lord of the Rings' Return of the King.

To be sure, *Stranger things 4* was not without its flaws. But it deserves praise for successfully pivoting the show in a

new direction. As I hovered over the play button on Episode One, I was wondering if this season would convince me to stick around until the next and final season. And after watching it, I can say I'm looking forward to *Stranger things 5*. 

Film: Everything everywhere all at once

Daniels deliver a special and one-of-a-kind film that leaves a lasting impression



Joshua Marks

Senior Researcher, Bright Blue

Everything everywhere all at once is a film that can be described in a multitude of ways. A story of an immigrant family struggling to do their taxes, a multiversal action film reminiscent of the latest Marvel flick, and an absurdist's take on nihilism.

In reality, the film is all of these and more. It delivers a gripping, touching, and genuinely hilarious time that will have you laughing hysterically one moment and contemplating the purpose of existence the next. It really is like no other movie I have ever seen.

If you have seen the directors' Danial Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (affectionately known as the Daniels) previous work *Swiss Army Man*, this will not come as a surprise. That film's seemingly crass premise hid a much deeper reflection on relationships and the meaning of life and death. That is the beauty of the films they create and *Everything everywhere all at once* constantly surprises. Just when you think it can't get any crazier, it ups the ante with a new bombastic, over-the-top set piece. And just as it hits the crescendo it gives you whiplash and suddenly becomes an emotional introspective about acceptance and motherhood.

Michelle Yeoh plays Evelyn Wang:

an angry, bitter, and exhausted Chinese woman living in America. She lives with her dim-witted but well meaning husband, Waymond, played by Ke Huy Quan, and her antagonistic daughter Joy, played by Stephanie Hsu. Together the family try to please tax official Deirdre Beaubeirdra, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, while also trying to reconnect with one another and overcome the difficulties they all face in their lives. Evelyn resents the choice she made to leave her family in China and settle down in the USA and give up her dream of being a successful actress. Meanwhile, Waymond feels trapped in his loveless marriage with a wife who resents him, whilst Joy wants her mother to accept her same-sex relationship.

“ Just as it hits the crescendo it gives you whiplash and suddenly becomes an emotional introspective about acceptance and motherhood

The plot starts slow with a buildup introducing us to the characters before suddenly blasting off. Waymond suddenly transforms into an action hero version of himself from another multiverse, explaining to the universe-hopping Evelyn that she is the key to defeating an evil multiversal threat known as Jobu Tupaki. What follows is

almost two and a half hours of action, laughs, and heartbreak as Evelyn connects with her multiversal selves in order to defeat Jobu.

The film had a rather paltry budget by modern movie standards of only \$25 million dollars; nothing when compared to *Dr Strange's* \$200 million, *Top gun maverick's* \$170 million, and *Stranger things'* average episode cost of \$30 million. The directors should be commended for the delight they managed to produce on such a small budget.

The fight choreographers deserve a whole heap of praise, as do the costume, set, and graphic designers. All aspects of this film ooze quality, from long shots and heavily choreographed action sequences to the fast-paced frenetically edited frenzy of multiversal combat equipped with visually overwhelming special effects and outlandish costume design.

Everything everywhere all at once is a special and one-of-a-kind film. It combines all manner of genres, messages, and styles into one immense viewing experience. The result is an admittedly slightly long and perhaps slightly overstuffed movie, but at the end of the day it has left a lasting impression on me in a way few other films have managed to emulate. 

Film: Rocks

Sarah Gavron offers a solid insight into multi-ethnic, cross-class East London

Ioana Diac

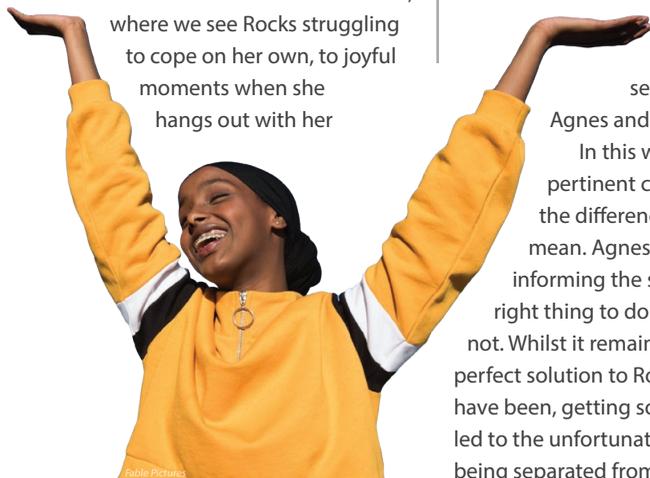
Researcher, Bright Blue

As a child, what would you do if your mother suddenly disappeared on you and your younger brother, leaving behind a couple of scrunched up £20 notes and a short apology explaining that she had to “go away again to clear her head”? With no immediate family to turn to for help, would you tell your neighbours, your school, your friends, or even social services?

This is the dilemma that 15 year-old Olushola, nicknamed Rocks, faces as a young Black, British girl living in a council flat in Hackney. The film follows her (played by rising talent Bukky Bakray) as she looks after her younger brother and tries to escape the detection of social services, determined that her mother will eventually return just as she did the previous times she left them.

Released in September 2020, *Rocks* is a 93 minute British coming-of-age drama that showcases the resilience, intelligence, and resourcefulness of teenage girls. The film

switches between difficult scenes, where we see Rocks struggling to cope on her own, to joyful moments when she hangs out with her



tight-knit group of friends. We watch them selling sweets and charging for Rocks to do other girls' make-up during school break times, freestyle rapping over handmade beats, dancing, and excitedly planning the food they're going to order from the local chicken shop. 'Real queens fix each other's crowns' reads a sticker on Rocks' bedroom wall, and there truly is a real sense of solidarity amongst the girls, especially between Rocks and her best friend Sumaya (played by Kosar Ali).

Nevertheless, Rocks' predicament puts a strain on her friendship with Sumaya, who comes from a relatively well-off Somali family. When Rocks asks to sleep at Sumaya's house to avoid being found by social services, Sumaya encourages Rocks to tell an adult about her situation. Their disagreement quickly spirals into a heated argument where Rocks bashes Sumaya for “having everything” and “leading a perfect life” whilst Rocks has nothing.

Interestingly, Sumaya nevertheless decides to keep Rocks' secret and not tell anybody about her situation. It is only when Rocks turns to her white, middle class friend

Agnes for help that she eventually gets found by social services as a result of Agnes and her mum calling them.

In this way, the film offers pertinent commentary about the differences race and class can mean. Agnes clearly thought that informing the social services was the right thing to do whilst Sumaya did not. Whilst it remains unclear what the perfect solution to Rocks' situation could have been, getting social services involved led to the unfortunate outcome of Rocks being separated from her younger brother

because there were no local foster parents available who could house the both of them together.

There are other moments in the film when class and race shine through. When Agnes asks Rocks to do her make-up, Rocks has to refuse because she doesn't “have stuff for [her] colour” since she never gets white clients for her make-up business. Equally, when the girls are asked in school about their future job aspirations, Agnes confidently tells the teacher she wants to be a journalist. This answer is instantly praised and not questioned in the same way the teacher doubts another Bangladeshi girl's ability to become a lawyer because “her grades aren't high enough.”

“The result is a film that places young women of colour at the very centre of the storytelling process and showcases them in all their youthful complexity

Ultimately, what the film does so well is to provide an authentic look into life in multi-ethnic East London. With a crew consisting of 75% women and director Sarah Gavron dedicating an extensive period of research to workshoping with young Londoners across girls' comprehensives and youth hubs, the result is a film that places young women of colour at the very centre of the storytelling process and showcases them in all their youthful complexity. If you're looking for a hard-hitting yet hopeful movie about the realities of navigating life as a young, working class, teenage girl, look no further than *Rocks*. 



At the table

Claire Powell produces a scathing yet refreshingly human family tale

Phoebe Arslanagic-Wakefield

Senior Research Fellow, Bright Blue

The acidity of the vinegary crisps makes your tongue sore. The milky, sticky sweetness of the chocolate grows nauseating. The smell of your warm, white wine becomes reminiscent of acetone. Have you had enough? You know what you want the answer to be, but the real answer comes when you dip your hand into the crisp bowl again, unwrap a sixth chocolate, lift your glass for another sip.

This was my experience reading *At the table*, the pointy-elbowed debut novel from Claire Powell. "Is this fun? Do I want more?" I asked myself. The answer came: yes.

At the table is about a family: the Maguires. After decades of marriage, Gerry and Linda Maguire announce their separation. The news blindsides their adult children: Nicole and Jamie.

Nicole has a successful career in a tech company and an unacknowledged, functional alcoholism that teeters on the edge of dysfunctional. Afflicted by shame, she is a stranger to herself and her life.

Nicole's brother Jamie is a teacher.

Engaged to a perfectly nice woman, it is increasingly clear he dreads his impending marriage. Feeling cornered, Jamie seeks to alleviate his emotional claustrophobia by flirting with a fellow teacher. He then self-medicates further by developing a nascent eating disorder that gives him a vague semblance of control.

Powell realises her cast of characters with tremendous psychological insight. We have all met the Maguires before. We have seen shades of them in others, perhaps even been them at times. In fact, sometimes they are too real.

This realism means that the Maguires' foibles and failures provoke agonising levels of self-scrutiny that transform the role of reader from one that is passive (and safe) to something more closely resembling a difficult session with a psychotherapist. "I wouldn't do that, would I? That couldn't happen to me, could it? Am I becoming that person?" As a result, reading *At the table* is often an uncomfortable experience. Yet, it is testament to Powell's genius that it is a tremendously enjoyable one.

Powell makes her flawed characters compelling - rather than repulsive - by

treating her wayward creations with compassion, humour, and subtle tenderness. She does not hate them, and so, neither do we. So sharply illuminated are the Maguires as people, to hate them would be an act of self-harm. It would be like hating ourselves. That also means that when we laugh at the Maguires, we laugh at ourselves - it is healthy and cathartic.

A less brilliant author may have allowed the story to lapse into dour pathos. But Powell avoids that. This sour, refreshing lemon drop of a novel is a tale of growth and change. So great is Powell's power over her reader, that when they realise this, they breathe a self-interested sigh of relief. "Ah," you think to yourself as you close the book, "there's hope for me too." 

At the table;
Claire Powell;

Fleet;

336 pages.

Published 31 March 2022.



How to be a liberal

Ian Dunt offers an erudite and entertaining read on how liberalism has shaped history

Ryan Shorthouse

Chief Executive, Bright Blue

Although published a few years ago, I finally got around to reading Dunt's book earlier this summer. It is a

book I have long thought about writing, to be honest. But I would not have matched the impressive research and gripping storytelling in this.

How to be a liberal charts how liberal philosophers in the West have responded

to and influenced major political events over the centuries. We start with Descartes in the



>> middle of the seventeenth century, whose doubt about the existence of everything but the thinking self, popularised the concept of the rational individual against unquestioning religious stricture.

Soon the old monarchical order was creaking, with liberal ideas snowballing through The Levellers, John Locke and Benjamin Constant, shaping three revolutions - the Glorious, French and American. The first two descended into authoritarianism. The last had a better legacy, although not perfect: Dunt tells us that the number of slaves in North America actually increased after its unshackling from the British.

The description of the colourful lives of some of the great liberal philosophers, and the unearthing of the essence and limitations of their argument, produces both an entertaining and erudite read. There's colourful childhoods and eccentric relationships. Little wonder John Stuart Mill, who we are rightly reminded had an oft-forgotten intellectual and romantic partner in Harriet Taylor, thought that "the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service." Or that Constant boomed: "Variety is life, uniformity is death." The biggest lesson, Dunt concludes, is that the liberal "refuses to move with the crowd... who resists the pressure of convention, the passing winds of consensus."

Liberalism became more successful in the nineteenth century. John Stuart Mill, the only philosopher-turned-politician, boasted: "It is commerce which is rapidly rendering war obsolete." Indeed, from 1871 to 1914, Dunt tells us, no European power ordered its troops to fire on those of another European power. But we of course know what horror came next. It serves as a prescient warning to any current complacency from western liberals, especially now that Putin has invaded Ukraine.

Since the twentieth century, liberalism has had to defend itself more. First from the twin evils of fascism and communism.

Jumping from the atrocities ordered by Stalin and Hitler, the same stories and statistics are still mind-bogglingly shocking for such recent history. Ukrainians have long been in the sights of Soviets: many of them back in the 1920s became the enemy kulaks, running modestly successful arable farms. Stalin sought to collectivise grain production, sending millions of them to the gulags. Between 1931 and 1934 alone, 3.9 million Ukrainians died of systematic starvation, in what they call the 'Holodomor' - extermination by hunger.

Liberalism has had to fight gentler battles in the prosperous post-war period. Mainly from the political right, there have been attacks on liberalism as individualistic, corrosive of social cohesion. Dunt admits the blind spot. But argues how thinkers such as the exuberant Isaiah Berlin and earthy George Orwell tried to weave belonging into liberal thought.

“ Different values, among and within all of us, need to be respected and reconciled, with freedom ensuring and sitting above them all

Orwell tends to be situated more in the socialist tradition. But his stirring depiction of temperate Englishness puts liberalism centre-stage: "It is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements." Contemporary communitarians are mistaken in their suggestion we need to move beyond liberalism in order to strengthen social bonds.

The left's deconstruction of liberalism as white, male and heterosexual has been trickier. Here Dunt is desperate to find common ground. He argues communitarian thinking - derived not just from tempestuous nationalism, but academic intersectionality too, pitching different social groups against one another - has

sown culture war and identity politics, "with no notion of the individual and no acceptance of shared values." But the persecution experienced by many minorities has been endemic and deep, depriving them of their liberty and uniting them in a common cause. He highlights how queer theory is a good exemplar for uniting the liberal and social justice movements: "How much human misery, over how many centuries, had centred on the demands of insisting people were either 100 per cent heterosexual or 100 per cent homosexual?"

The big battle in liberalism, of course, has been on economics: between the laissez-faire liberals such as Hayek wary of state intervention and high public borrowing, and the radical liberals such as John Maynard Keynes who think it can maximise liberty. Dunt does not sit on the fence. He regards Hayekian thinking, which most recently he believes manifests in anti-lockdown attitudes, as primarily interested in market freedom rather than individual freedom. It is the minority view; even Adam Smith, he writes, thought the state should be active in creating and maintaining "public works, and certain public institutions, which it can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals" to do so.

It is Isaiah Berlin's pluralism that seems to be most compelling to Dunt, and to me in fact: different values, among and within all of us, need to be respected and reconciled, with freedom ensuring and sitting above them all. "Claims can be balanced, compromises can be reached," Berlin wrote. It is with moderation, civility, and inclusiveness towards other people and ideas - but without sacrificing on foundational principles - that liberals can keep winning over hearts and minds. 

How to be a liberal;

Ian Dunt;

Canbury Press;

486 pages.

Published 17 September 2020.

