

The Politics of Levelling-Up

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Abstract

'Levelling-up' is an expression of a realignment in British politics with the Conservatives presenting themselves as the new party of redistribution. This is not primarily concerned with redistribution between social classes, or even between regions, but rather targets communities that feel they have lost their centrality and standing. This seemingly surprising manoeuvre is facilitated by voters' distrust of politics, a geography of discontent that reflects uneven patterns of social and economic development, and the Conservative Party's capacity for pragmatic shifts in ideological direction. Yet the sustainability of this project is uncertain. Levelling-up creates opportunities for high-profile initiatives and symbols of change through which the government can craft a narrative of success. It may also help the Conservatives appeal to voters that lean one way on economics but another on social issues by targeting attention and interventions in specific places – in a way that speaks to some voters' feelings of having been neglected over many decades and having lost status to other groups in society. The tensions in delivering levelling-up reflect the complexity of the changes wrought by globalisation and technological change but the challenge for progressive forces is to develop a better alternative, a far from easy task.

Keywords: levelling-up, realignment, political distrust, spectacle politics

No one can seriously afford to ignore the seeming realignment of British politics – a swing to the Right on culture and a swing to the Left on economics. We may not yet fully understand its extent and its limits, its specific character, its causes, and effects.¹ But the forces behind this shift have been long in the making.² The Conservative Party's promotion of 'levelling-up' reflects and mobilises the ongoing transformation of British politics. On the morning following the 2019 general election, Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared the defining ambition of his government: "we are going to unite and level up". Can Johnson move the Conservatives onto terrain usually dominated by Labour to present itself as the new party of redistribution, with a specific emphasis on the reduction of geographical inequalities?

Some will be tempted, not without some justification, to view the matter as just the latest ploy by the ultimate charlatan politician,³ "the most accomplished liar in public life"⁴ in the words of a former ministerial colleague. Others have highlighted the incoherent nature of the levelling-up agenda and expressed scepticism that it will be a trigger for a transformation of economy and society.⁵ Even the Prime Minister seems to recognise confused state of this signature policy, belatedly appointing a new adviser to provide the agenda with focus.⁶ We concentrate on the insights that levelling-up offers into the current state of British politics and the changing terrain on which Labour must organise its challenge.

Just as Stuart Hall clarified about Thatcherism, so we argue about levelling-up "this is no rhetorical device or trick, for this populism is operating on genuine contradictions, and it has a rational and material core".⁷ As we explore in the first part of the article, levelling-up speaks to real concerns that people have about our changing society and captures elements of a wider realignment of politics. We begin by recognising the British public's Janus-faced stance on political trust. Citizens express deep negativity about politics and politicians but still cling to the belief that government can improve their lives. A political strategy of realignment must work with that contradiction. Realignment is also a reaction to long-term processes that have generated an uneven geographical pattern of social and economic development in the UK, between London and the rest of the country, between regions, and within regions between core cities and peripheral towns and rural areas. The capacity to speak (even if incoherently) to the concerns and grievances of a significant number of voters gives impetus to the politics of levelling-up. Further, this realignment fits with a longstanding willingness of the Conservative Party to shift its position to win power. Observers might reserve their shock not for the

¹ Our introduction here is a play on the opening to Stuart Hall's seminal 1979 article on Thatcherism, 'The Great Moving Right Show', published before Mrs Thatcher even took office but presciently identifying the nature and significance of the ideological shift that was already underway in British politics: Stuart Hall. 1979. 'The Great Moving Right Show.' *Marxism Today*, January 1979: 14-20, p. 20.

² Robert Ford and Maria Sobolewska. 2020. *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Peter Osborne. 2021. *The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

⁴ Rory Stewart. 2021. 'Lord of misrule. Boris Johnson: an amoral figure for a bleak, coarse culture.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 2020. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/boris-johnson-tom-bower-book-review-rory-stewart/>

⁵ John Tomaney and Andy Pike. 2020. 'Levelling Up?' *The Political Quarterly* 91(1): 43-48.

⁶ Sebastian Payne and Chris Giles. 2021. 'Confusion over the UK 'levelling-up' plan prompts Boris Johnson to hire new adviser.' *The Financial Times*, 3 May 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/22c5a8ed-e5be-4616-a944-ba2550faea78>

⁷ Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show.'

idea that the Conservatives stumbled and schemed their way to a new position, but rather focus on the awkwardness of the realignment that it has required. Johnson's Conservatives are in a state of ideological incoherence that is in stark contrast to the Thatcher years.

In the second part of the article, we examine the uneasy union of the forces of realignment and the politics of levelling-up. Levelling-up delivers the organising slogan for the Conservatives' repositioning. It does so by focusing government attention and interventions in places where people feel politically, economically and socially marginalised: frequently former industrial towns, ailing seaside resorts or peripheral rural areas. As such the rhetoric of levelling-up offers an admission that some places have been neglected by political and cultural elites for some time. In his first speech as prime minister, Boris Johnson pledged to answer "the plea of the forgotten people and the left-behind towns", although the jury remains out on what has been delivered so far.⁸ Even allowing for how COVID-19 has preoccupied the government's agenda for most of its period in office, the lack of immediate results reflects how levelling-up is a policy problem characterised by complexity and uncertainty, requiring long-term thinking, imaginative solutions and sustained follow-through. There is a serious problem to address, a point which the Conservatives have recognised but taken only tentative steps to solve.

In the final section of the article, we argue that the prospects for levelling-up, as a political project reflecting and mobilising a broader realignment, hang in the balance. Yet it should not be assumed that either the ideological incoherence or incomplete delivery of levelling-up will necessarily lead voters to punish the Conservatives, even if opponents would like to cling to the belief that this political strategy will eventually exhaust itself through its contradictions. Levelling-up may succeed through redefining redistribution to be more about status, recognition and standing rather than resources or equitable outcomes. Furthermore, creating a *narrative* of success may be more important than major policy impacts.⁹ Levelling-up reflects an increasing tendency to govern through political spectacle, among a political class that no longer holds that it can change the world materially and through design, but instead seeks to shape our understanding of it through symbols, language, and tokens of action. The actions might include a few big infrastructure projects in the North of England, a scattering of freeports and gigafactories, refreshed high streets, or an exodus of civil servants to the regions. Those symbols and tokens will be used to frame a narrative of success. Beyond the delivery of tokens of success, the strategy will require managing divisions within the parliamentary Conservative Party and retaining a divergent coalition of voters.

The making of a politics of realignment

The dynamics of realignment are driven by lack of trust in politics, the impact of globalisation and the Conservatives' capacity to pragmatically respond to these forces.

Navigating the trust trap

A deep contradiction in the British public's approach to political trust is key to the present situation. Substantial evidence shows that distrust of politicians has increased over the past three quarters of a

⁸ The Financial Times. 2021. 'Editorial: The politics of the levelling-up agenda.' *The Financial Times*, 7 March 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/d29049ac-a47b-409f-a39c-8af59f1ec281>

⁹ Murray Edelman. 1988. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

century.¹⁰ Not only do more and more citizens lack trust in politics, but the scope of their grievances has grown, and the negativity of those attitudes has intensified. Further, citizens demand of politicians that they are simultaneously both *ordinary* and *extraordinary*, with tension in expectations of politics and government. Despite declining trust in the political class, there is less evidence that support for the democratic system has been eroded to the same degree – though satisfaction with UK democracy has become polarised between Leavers and Remainers as a result of Brexit (with Leavers expressing a higher level of democratic satisfaction since Boris Johnson came to power).

These tensions in political trust have been on display during the COVID-19 crisis. Aside from an initial ‘rally-round-the-flag’ around the period of the first lockdown, a majority of the public has tended to consider the government to be handling the pandemic poorly (though it has been given a boost by successful roll-out of the vaccine). Focus groups that our *TrustGov* project ran in towns and cities in England through the course of 2020 revealed that while citizens typically expressed specific points of criticism of the government’s performance, they also held a latent trust that it was acting in their best interests.¹¹ This leap of faith was considered *necessary* as there was *no alternative* to placing trust in the government. People may be cynical towards the process and outcomes of politics, but still desire a government that protects them in times of crisis.

This contradiction helps explain why Boris Johnson can simultaneously be perceived as untrustworthy and prone to lying by much of the public yet be trusted on Brexit and to some degree in his handling of COVID-19. In part this reflects the low expectations that many citizens have of their leaders but in addition it appears that distrusting citizens tend to favour politicians who are authentic. If they believe that no politician can be honest, sincere or trustworthy, then it follows that they will judge them against other criteria – not least their authenticity.¹² People assume politicians lie but retain a latent hope in government to act in their best interests. For the voters, Johnson may lack integrity and they may be unclear about his competence but in a world of low trust his secret weapon is his perceived authenticity. That quality helps give him the political space to manoeuvre on to different territories and makes him an ideal leader to steer his party through a process of realignment.

Speaking to discontent

Levelling-up matters because it speaks directly to concerns about the uneven pattern of social and economic development that has reshaped the politics of England and Wales. In previous essays in *The Political Quarterly*¹³ we highlighted the divergent trajectories taken by places that have prospered in an increasingly globalised knowledge economy – namely large urban centres – and those on the periphery that have become locked in into long-term spirals of decline, often as traditional industries have been hollowed out and good jobs lost. Those residing in London and the South East are the main beneficiaries of this model of growth – with these regions dominating the UK’s economy in terms of their affluence and productivity – due to higher levels of connectivity to economic hubs and a greater

¹⁰ Nick Clarke, Will Jennings, Jonathan Moss and Gerry Stoker. 2018. *The Good Politician*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Jen Gaskell, Gerry Stoker, Will Jennings, Daniel Devine. 2020. *Will Getting Brexit Done Restore Political Trust?* London: UK in a Changing Europe.

¹² Viktor Valgarðsson, Nick Clarke, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker. 2020. ‘The Good Politician and Political Trust: An Authenticity Gap in British Politics?’ *Political Studies* doi:[10.1177/0032321720928257](https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720928257)

¹³ E.g. Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker. 2019. ‘The Divergent Dynamics of Cities and Towns: Geographical Polarisation and Brexit.’ *The Political Quarterly* 90(S2): 155-166.

concentration of skilled workers, larger-sized firms and R&D activity. Outside this area, the rest of England and Wales, especially smaller post-industrial and coastal towns, have tended to lag behind.

Levelling-up has a base in social and economic changes over the last few decades and finds reflection expressed in feelings of political marginalisation. Between 11th and 18th December 2020, we fielded a nationally representative online survey of 1,476 UK adults with Ipsos MORI. We asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that ‘the government cares less about people in my area than people in other parts of the country’. Nationwide, roughly two-in-five people endorse this view. However, when broken down by region, as seen in Figure 1, a stark pattern reveals itself. In the North of England, nearly two-in-three believed that government cared less about their area, falling to 36% in the Midlands, 31% in London and 23% in the South outside London. Furthermore, given a 7-point Likert scale, Northerners chose the most extreme ‘strongly agree’ option over any other alternative, indicating the intensity of their discontent. Even among a small sample of Northern Conservative supporters, people agreed with the statement by 45% to 30%.

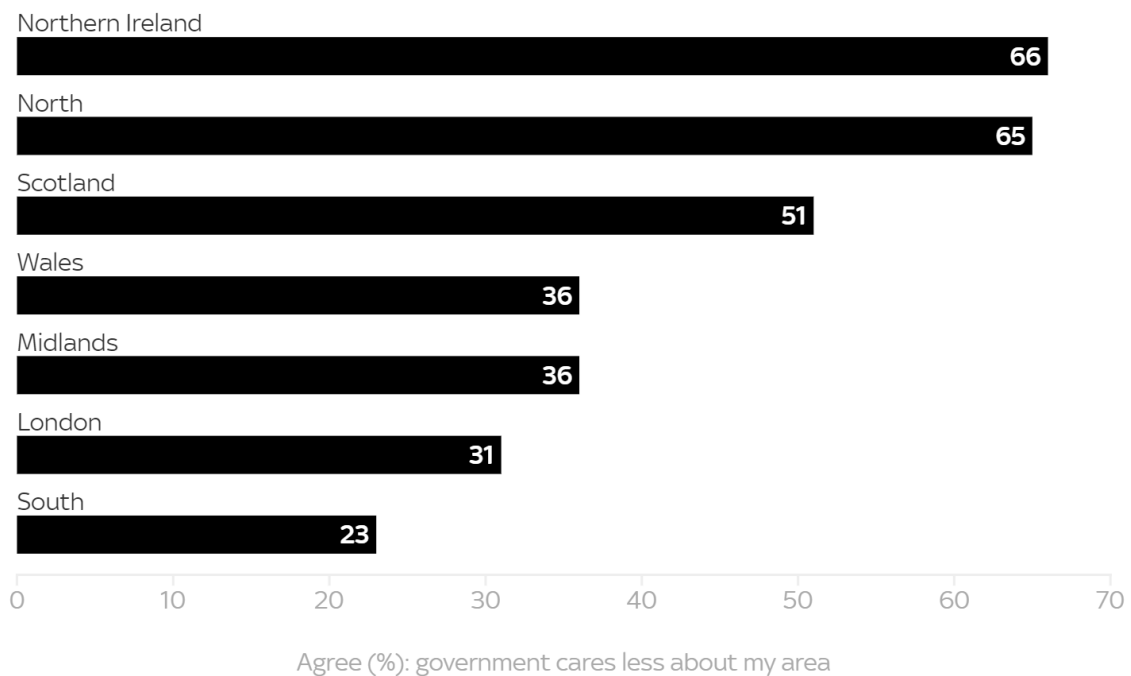


Figure 1. Feelings of political marginalisation, by region (December 2020)

In theory, then, the levelling-up agenda could offer a substantive programme of policy measures aimed at addressing the long-term impacts of processes of agglomeration, globalisation and technological change, which have reinforced uneven dynamics of economic development and cascaded into discontent with social and political life.

A pragmatic willingness to adapt

As a political party, the Conservatives are notable for their long-term historical commitment to an “accommodating instinct” which has made them “willing to shift in sometimes quite startling ways if they think it will help to win elections.”¹⁴ It is unclear how much of the reorientation of the party is a

¹⁴ Ben Jackson. 2021. ‘What We Have Learned About the Conservative Party.’ *The Political Quarterly* [92\(1\): 5-6](#).

product of strategic judgement and how much emerged as an instinctive response to the aftermath of post-Brexit referendum politics. What is clear is that historically it is not unusual for the Tories to trim their electoral appeal – what is stranger is the continued lack of philosophical or ideological underpinning for this new project. This is especially striking when compared to the relative ideological purity of the Thatcher years.

It is possible to trace the genealogies of the dominant ideologies of contemporary British politics – with the post-war consensus, the New Right and the Third Way all founded upon firm intellectual foundations, taking inspiration from key thinkers (e.g. Beveridge, Keynes, Hayek, Friedman, Giddens) and translated into programmes for government that have sought to change the fundamental basis of society and economy. It is arguable that the Conservatives have not developed a new, distinct strand of ideological thought since Thatcherism. Instead, the austerity state of David Cameron and George Osborne combined elements of the New Right and New Labour – offering a mixture of retrenchment, managerialism and the ring-fencing of protected public services and selected social spending (i.e. pensions). The period following the 2016 referendum saw a further drift from ideological coherence which it could be argued is a more normal stance for the party. Mayism and its focus on the ‘burning injustices’ fizzled out with the demise of the Prime Minister, having tried to mix an ideological tonic of One Nationism, Christian Democracy and Red Toryism.

Under Boris Johnson the move has been even more pronounced as the absence of ideological clarity has given way to a cynical pragmatism in which the Conservatives wear whatever ideological clothes suit them and do whatever is needed to assure their political dominance. As one-time Johnson ally and leader of the Northern Research Group (NRG), Jake Berry MP, notes: “The best politicians ... are pragmatic and prepared to mercilessly cross the political spectrum in terms of ideologies.”¹⁵

Levelling-up and political realignment: an uneasy union

Levelling-up may prove a rather awkward expression of realignment in that it has political value but also presents a range of intractable contradictions in formulating a policy agenda on levelling-up.

The political value of levelling-up

Levelling-up works well for the Conservatives in allowing them to strategically position themselves in the space opened up by the realignment of British politics – of a swing to the Right on culture and a swing to the Left on economics. As such it enables them to trespass on traditional Labour issues of public investment and redistribution and attract voters in their opponent’s traditional heartlands in former industrial towns in the North and Midlands. Indeed, it favours them by framing the debate around place, national identity and opposition to liberal metropolitan elites (themselves having been the target of such resentment in the past), as well as around how Brexit offers an opportunity to break from Britain’s existing social and economic settlement.

Levelling-up thus provides an agenda for those who favour a more interventionist state but also lean right on cultural issues. But this is not primarily concerned with redistribution between social classes, or even between regions, but rather picks *the places* that are to be levelled-up. Alternative visions of levelling-up might emphasise the sharing of resources and devolution of power, following a long line of government attempts to address deeply ingrained social and economic geographical inequalities in Britain. The Johnson government’s levelling-up agenda offers something slightly different, targeting

¹⁵ Freddie Hayward. 2021. ‘What do Jake Berry and the Tory Northern Research Group want?’ *The New Statesman*, 1 March 2021. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2021/03/what-do-jake-berry-and-tory-northern-research-group-want>

political attention and interventions in specific places – in a way that speaks to some voters’ feelings of having been neglected over many decades and having lost status to other groups in society. By crafting appeals to those who feel left behind in coastal and post-industrial towns, as well as some rural and suburban communities, the Conservatives are able to expand their electoral coalition – especially among those who are older, working class and have lower educational qualifications and tend to hold socially conservative values. This is aimed at the heart of Brexitland, places that voted strongly for Leave in 2016 and which swung heavily to the Conservatives in 2019.

It is essential to understand the politics of levelling-up as part of a dynamic of realignment in British and Western politics more generally that is a product of structural changes in society and the economy. A process of dealignment where many voters more readily switch between parties, unburdened by long-standing party loyalties (traditionally formed through social identity and class ties) is giving way to realignment. That realignment oriented around a divide between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation, with those from areas of industrial decline abandoning social democratic parties that traditionally had represented the interests of labour. This divide reflects actual changes in social and economic structure and subjective perceptions of deprivation and status loss. Levelling-up provides another lever for the Conservatives to attract cross-pressured voters: people who hold socially conservative attitudes on culture and left-leaning views on economic issues.¹⁶ It makes (re)distributive politics about the places that have been neglected, economically and politically, in a way that cuts across traditional party lines and identities. This enables the Conservatives to occupy political space with a framing of issues that favours them – offering voters in those left-behind towns a restoration of status (of being recognised by government) and responsiveness to their concerns on cultural liberalism.

The policy contradictions of levelling-up

Current thinking about levelling-up is inchoate, lacking a clear ideological anchor, and is struggling to wrestle with a number of inherent contradictions. There are five tensions to consider. Firstly, it remains ambiguous whether levelling-up is about the productivity gap between regions (or more specifically between London and the South East and the rest) or is a more fundamental attempt to offset forces of agglomeration that have opened a divide between core cities and more peripheral areas. Equalising regional imbalances may address one aspect of geographical inequality, but there is substantial variation within regions as well as between them. A policy focus on city-growth as the engine of levelling-up may only reinforce socio-economic divides between major cities and outlying towns – failing to address the economic decline felt by more peripheral areas. If left as a regional productivity and city growth-focused agenda, levelling-up could end up reinforcing inequalities within regions, failing to counteract the ‘geography of discontent’.

Secondly, levelling-up requires a theory about whether and how to connect urban areas. Is the goal to connect lagging places with centres of growth or to make local economies more self-sufficient and resilient? In key respects, geographical forces holding back levelling-up lie in the distinctive processes of historical development of the North and the South of England. London forms a centripetal urban area, having developed outwards from the Pool of London over many centuries – with outlying towns and suburban sprawl, and the links between them, having been built up incrementally. In contrast, the explosive centrifugal process of urban development during the Industrial Revolution left a more scattered and less tightly connected urban area in the North. This means that many lagging behind areas that are the focus of levelling-up need better infrastructure and connectivity *both locally and nationally*. A comprehensive levelling-up agenda might therefore seek to enhance mobility within and

¹⁶ Noam Gidron. 2020. ‘Many Ways to be Right: Cross-Pressured Voters in Western Europe.’ *British Journal of Political Science*. doi:10.1017/S0007123420000228

between regions, enabling higher levels of commuting and internal migration to economic hubs in core cities (either from outlying towns or from regional cities). Extension of Manchester's tram system to outlying towns in Greater Manchester is an example of building within-region connectivity. The HS2 project connecting London to Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester seeks to address between-region connectivity. Both are designed to open up the UK economy, but may also reinforce geographical inequalities outside the hubs and spokes of this model.

The dilemma is that not every place can be connected. An alternative course to levelling-up might, therefore, be about enabling people to continue to live and work in more peripheral areas – through local economic development. This version of levelling-up might focus on community wealth building, encouraging smaller towns to build the foundations of their local economies and to mine a distinct niche, whether that relates to micromanufacturing, small businesses, tourism, creative industries, etc. This sort of approach is different to the focus on connectivity, instead looking to revive places from the bottom up, rather than through mega infrastructure projects. To be successful, this nevertheless requires investment in local amenities that attract workforces: quality housing, good public services, cultural offerings and public spaces.

A third contradiction is whether levelling-up relates to investment in physical capital (such as the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, aimed at what the Chancellor Rishi Sunak has described as 'the infrastructure of everyday life': town centre and high street regeneration, local transport, and cultural and heritage projects) or in human capital (such as in skills and education). The UK suffers from deep geographical inequalities in social and economic outcomes, such as health (including in the impact of COVID-19), education¹⁷ and social mobility.¹⁸ To date, the focus has been on physical capital, where impacts of infrastructure investments are only likely to be discernible over the long term – though a requirement of the levelling-up fund is that projects must be completed within the current parliamentary term. As a result, levelling-up may not transform the life chances of people in left behind areas despite leaving a material legacy.

Fourthly, levelling-up is often pitched as part of a national debate about where to locate political power in England in the context of devolution and wider threats to the Union. Examples of this include plans to move civil servants outside London. However, to date much of the levelling-up investment has been heavily centralised with key decisions taken in Westminster, with controversy that the allocation of funds have been influenced by partisan considerations.¹⁹ The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MCHLG) managed the original Towns Fund, while the levelling-up fund is jointly managed by HM Treasury and MCHLG and has prompted outcry from the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales for encroaching on their responsibilities. There must remain considerable doubt, therefore, whether the levelling-up agenda will deliver a meaningful shift in power from Whitehall and Westminster to the regions and below, or if it instead will reinforce the UK's highly centralised system of governance – but with an increasing number of outlying outposts in the regions.

The fifth and final contradiction in levelling-up is that it implies a redistributive programme based on expanded public spending and a bigger, more interventionist state, and yet it comes at the end of a

¹⁷ Michael Donnelly and Sol Gamsu. 2018. *Home and away: social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility*. London: The Sutton Trust.

¹⁸ Social Mobility Commission. 2020. *The long shadow of deprivation: differences in opportunities across England*. London: Social Mobility Commission.

¹⁹ Chris Hanretty. 2021. 'The Pork Barrel Politics of the Towns Fund.' *The Political Quarterly*. Early view. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12970>

decade of austerity in which local government has experienced substantial cuts. What will a levelled-up state look like as local public services continue to be cut back? This dynamic is already playing out as the government looks to 'life after COVID-19', with the Chancellor using his March 2021 Budget speech to warn of the need to pay off pandemic debt via tax rises or spending cuts. How is levelling-up sustainable in the shadow of continued austerity politics? If levelling-up is to deliver on promises of investment, it would represent a significant reversal of a decade of Conservative policy. There is even potential to create a fundamental ideological schism within the parliamentary party – since it goes against the Thatcherite economic orthodoxy that has dominated since the 1970s.

These five contradictions reflect the underdeveloped nature of this agenda and the difficult policy choices that would underlie a coherent response to the challenge of levelling-up. But those contradictions do not automatically make levelling-up an unsustainable programme, because of the politics that could be used to manage them.

What are the chances of political success for the Conservatives?

Governing as political spectacle

Levelling-up is not just a matter of ideological positioning. It also reflects a tendency of political elites to focus on symbolic politics, rather than on the business of governing.²⁰ By its essential nature, the levelling-up agenda generates an abundance of complimentary spectacles for the Conservative government, such as photo-ops with politicians wearing hard hats and high vis jackets in factories and on construction sites. Boris Johnson, the ultimate spectacle politician, exploited such opportunities to brilliant effect during the 2019 election campaign, most notably in the defining image of the PM driving a union flag branded digger with 'Get Brexit Done' emblazoned on its front through a wall of boxes at the JCB factory in Uttoxeter.

Governing through political spectacle thus encourages a focus on symbolic acts and projects, rather than the more difficult business of constructing a levelling-up agenda that resolves the contradictions identified above. The attraction for the Conservatives is that a narrative of success can be woven from the catalogue of large infrastructure projects, new factories and government buildings in the regions, regenerated high streets and other monuments to government investment. As such, spectacle politics may enable the government to muddle through on levelling-up despite its incoherence and may avoid scrutiny on the degree to which real long-term change is delivered for the areas that need it. It is aided in this endeavour by a media and political ecosystem that is struggling to get to grips with this new ideologically fluid world and the steady stream of spectacles – shining little light on the contradictions.

It seems likely that levelling-up is destined to succeed at least according to the standards of spectacle politics. Over the coming years, this agenda will offer the government numerous opportunities for symbolic policies and projects that enable it to narrate a national story of levelling-up, of 'unleashing' the potential of the country – generating a steady flow of images of the PM and ministers visiting manufacturing firms, science labs, R&D centres, and sites of infrastructure projects that let voters know the government is hard at work. The opening of a new HM Treasury economic campus in the North of England is one of the latest examples.

Complementary to the spectacle of levelling-up is the spectacle of the 'war on woke' – in practice a technique of picking fights with the liberal-left on niche cultural issues, such as the history of Empire.

²⁰ Michael Moran. 2003. *The British Regulatory State. High Modernism and Hyper-Innovation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Such a tactic is reminiscent of Conservative attacks on political correctness and ‘loony left’ councils in the 1980s. Even without the intensity of partisan polarisation found in America, ‘culture war’ style politics serve as rope-a-dope strategy for the Conservative Party against its liberal-left opponents, aided by the 24/7 political engagement afforded by social media (and the disproportionate presence of the left on Twitter). By engaging opponents with policy decisions and initiatives trailed to provoke outrage, the government is able to paint them as radical and polarised against the silent, common sense majority. American political scientist E.E. Schattschneider argued that the ability of politicians to ‘expand the scope of conflict’ determines the outcome of political competition. Thus, by embroiling opponents in these spectacles on the Conservatives’ own terms, the government is able to fashion a policy agenda that signals a swing to the left on economics, at the same time as emphasising a shift right on culture.

Political chances of success are not preordained

The electoral fortunes of the Conservative Party under Boris Johnson have to date been defined by his political mastery of Brexit. While Brexit may yet be a machine to stoke perpetual grievance against the EU,²¹ over the longer-term the politics of levelling-up will determine how long the current period of Conservative ascendance will be sustained. Its success will likely depend on four factors: (i) delivering a steady supply of governing spectacles, (ii) effectively managing divisions within the parliamentary Conservative Party, (iii) preventing fraying of the party’s electoral coalition (keeping on board voters in the Home Counties and suburban Britain as well as new voters in former ‘Red Wall’ seats), and (iv) delivering in programmatic terms – realising change in social and economic outcomes for left behind areas.

There seems little doubt that for the immediate future levelling-up will continue to generate a stream of symbolic projects and investments that enable the Conservatives to claim the mantle of the party of the neglected parts of the country. Throughout his political career, Boris Johnson has been the Heineken politician, reaching the parts that other Tory politicians cannot reach thanks to perceptions of his authenticity. His spontaneous and unspun qualities – projecting an image of bumbling positivity – have enabled him to connect outside the Tory party’s heartlands with voters in a way that presents him as a breath of fresh air from his ‘out-of-touch’ predecessors. But recent controversies engulfing the government over sleaze and refurbishment of the PM’s Downing Street flat reveal the potential vulnerability of that image. Voters have low expectations of their politicians in terms of truthfulness, but the levelling-up project depends on their feeling that the government respects and cares about them. Perception of a decadent, self-serving and out-of-touch Westminster elite could yet undermine the image that Johnson and the Conservatives have been able to cultivate. The ultimate danger for Johnson is that he becomes seen by the public as *just another politician*. It also remains questionable whether the silent social liberalism of metropolitan elites within the Conservative Party, including Johnson himself, can be reconciled indefinitely with greater demand for social conservatism from the party’s new supporters.

Navigating divisions within the parliamentary party may also prove to be tricky. The resounding election victory of December 2019 brought over a hundred new MPs to Westminster – many representing ‘Red Wall’ seats that have quite different concerns and priorities than the traditional Conservative heartlands. The growing bloc of Northern MPs in the party has led to the establishment

²¹ Rafael Behr. 2021. ‘Brexit is a machine to generate perpetual grievance. It’s doing its job perfectly.’ *The Guardian*, 23 February 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/23/brexit-machine-perpetual-grievance-britain-brussels>

of the NRG, led by former northern powerhouse minister and Johnson ally Jake Berry. It has campaigned for greater investment in the North and argued that the COVID-19 pandemic “has exposed in sharp relief the deep structural and systematic disadvantage faced by our communities”. More recently the NRG has called on the Chancellor not to raise business taxes in the budget.²² While the group have not been significantly rebellious to date, its emergence does reflect a shift of power within the parliamentary party – and could yet result in tension with Conservative MPs representing other parts of the country.

Keeping together the Conservatives’ new electoral coalition presents a challenge. In both 2017 and 2019, Brexit was the deciding factor that led many to vote for the party. As a result, the party’s vote is now split evenly across those from the working class and professional occupations, and higher among those with no qualifications (a group which mostly supported leaving the EU). While the party did not tend to suffer defections in large numbers of its Remain voters in 2019, this remains a vulnerability in the longer-term. Demographic shifts in southern commuter towns and suburbs held by the Conservatives – increasingly home to younger, more educated and more diverse populations – may yet see those seats drift away from the party. An exodus of left-leaning voters from London in the wake of the pandemic could tilt the balance in Conservative-held marginal constituencies, though Labour would be foolish to take any ‘demographic destiny’ for granted.

More immediately, repaying the trust of new Conservative voters (especially those in ‘Red Wall’ seats) will potentially be important for reaping the political benefits of levelling-up. The success of levelling-up will, of course, in part hinge upon how effectively the policy is delivered by the government – in terms of whether it effects real change in social and economic outcomes for those places that have seen sustained decline over decades. The North-South divide is hardly new and numerous policy reforms and agencies have attempted to tackle the deep regional inequalities that characterise the UK’s economic history. This government will need to be exceptional in its imagination and execution of the levelling-up agenda to be any different to its predecessors. Past governments have sought to regenerate ailing regions, cities and towns, and even those achieving some success find that impacts of the projects are slow to come to fruition. There is no guarantee of delivering change before the next election and while the spectacles we have described can help manage this under-delivery, the further they are from the reality of people’s lives the more likely they are to ring hollow.

As a broad aspiration for the country, levelling-up will eventually crash into the hard fiscal reality that not everywhere can be levelled-up. Not everywhere can have a new bypass, rail link, town centre revamp, and library restoration. Even a government that is willing to significantly increase public spending will have to pick winners and losers. Some towns will be chosen as showcases of levelling-up, but plenty will still be left behind – or alternatively will receive smaller subsidies that are sticking plasters for the structural challenges they face. So far, the government has exhibited a proclivity for pork barrel politics in distribution of the Towns Fund – favouring towns in constituencies held by Conservative MPs. Public impressions of unfairness or bias may undercut the attempts of levelling-up to address longstanding grievances, if the mechanisms and criteria for allocating funding prove to be controversial.

²² Sam Coates. 2021. ‘Conservative MPs in the North call on Johnson and Sunak not to raise business taxes in Budget.’ *Sky News*, 26 February 2021. <https://news.sky.com/story/conservative-mps-in-the-north-call-on-johnson-and-sunak-not-to-raise-business-taxes-in-budget-12228819>

Conclusions

Few can now doubt that British politics is in the midst of a dynamic of realignment and that levelling-up is playing a significant role in reflecting and mobilising those forces. That realignment has seen a shift in political competition that enables the Conservative Party to appeal to 'cross-pressured' voters who lean left on economic issues (favouring greater spending and a more interventionist state) but right on cultural issues (most obviously Brexit, but also a wider range of concerns about social change). Despite the absence of strong ideological foundations underlying the Conservative Party's strategy and the inconsistencies of levelling-up as a programme, we should not assume this current moment will pass without fundamental consequences for the British state, economy and society.

Labour's immediate challenge is to forego complacency that the Conservatives' newfound conversion to redistribution and tackling regional inequality will quickly collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. Moreover, it as yet has no real answers to tensions created by globalisation and technological change – and how it can continue to be the party of labour interests under an increasingly fragmented class structure, where social liberalism is increasingly associated with the 'winners' of the global knowledge economy (among degree holders) but social conservatism tends to be most prevalent in areas that have experienced sustained economic decline. In levelling-up, the Conservatives have a political strategy that speaks to these concerns, even it fails to fully address them. In its response, Labour needs to develop a strategy that resolves the fundamental tensions faced by social democratic parties in the 21st Century.

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