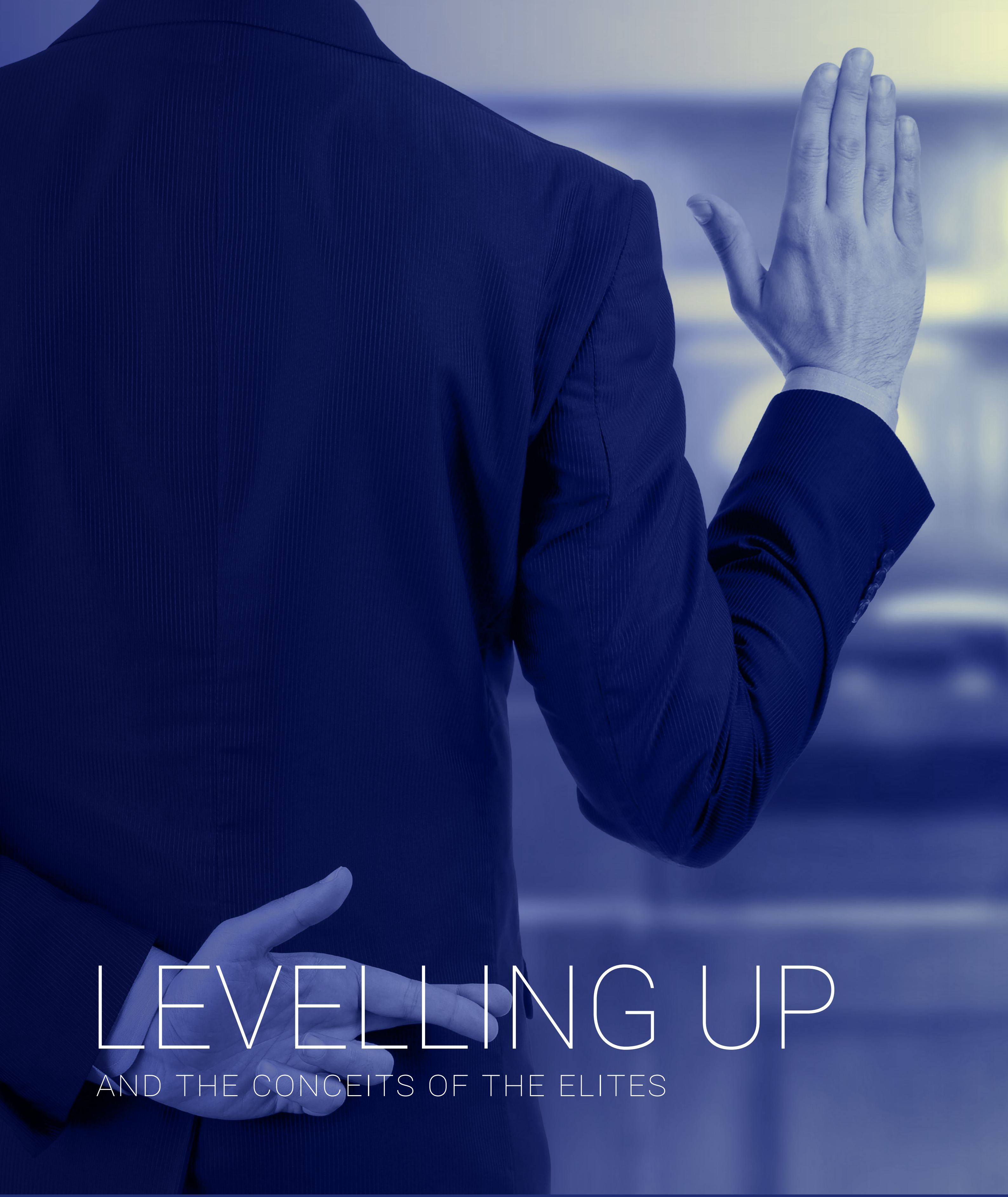

LEVELLING UP

AND THE CONCEITS OF THE ELITES

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Introduction

Ever since their victory in the 2019 General Election, Boris Johnson and his government have pushed their key manifesto pledge: the rollout of a new levelling up agenda, with the aim of 'spreading opportunity across the whole United Kingdom'.[1] The comprehensive nature of their victory in that election showed that people had heard their message and felt that it was one they could get behind.

Since then progress on achieving this agenda has been severely disrupted by the Coronavirus pandemic, requiring billions of pounds of unforeseen spending and nearly eighteen months of short-term crisis management, instead of the desired planning for the future. The economic growth achieved since the Brexit vote in 2016 was wiped out, and a major evaluation of public spending in many areas, including health and social care, is underway.

Nevertheless, the Government's rhetoric indicates that its levelling up agenda is still a top priority, with a statement from No.10 saying:

> *"The prime minister is determined to level up the UK and deliver a fairer, stronger society – one where whatever your background and wherever you live, everyone can access the opportunities they need to succeed."*[2]

While the agenda is admirable and is one that any and every government should seek to achieve, the policies of the Government and actions of parliamentarians indicate an apparent lack of commitment to achieving the goal of levelling up, and in fact seem to show a common trait running through Westminster - Conceit.

Self-promotion, grandstanding and posturing by politicians and the metropolitan elites are rife. All too often those with power take positions that do not represent the will of the majority, as expressed at the ballot box, but instead seek to satisfy their egos. The policies of the elites then work against "levelling up", adding insult to injury. Not only do they ignore the electorate, by their words, actions or neglect they undermine the very policies on which they were elected.

This report sets out some examples of the conceit of parliament and how this affects the levelling up agenda. The report then examines the concept of 'levelling up' itself, and how previous attempts to achieve it have often led to political point scoring and failure to deliver. Finally, an alternative strategy is set out to the, one which will go much further to meeting the needs of the local and regional communities that for too long have been ignored and whose potential has not been met.

John Longworth
Chairman, Independent Business Network

1 Conservative Party (2019), The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019, p. 2

2 HM Government (2021), 'Prime Minister to set out plans to level up the country', Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street

Policies of conceit

The key motivation for pursuing a levelling up agenda is to improve the lives of those in areas that have seen poor growth in comparison to other parts of the country. London and the South East have seen far greater growth and investment than any other part of the country, which has contributed to the feeling of many areas of being 'left behind', which the Local Trust outlines as the feeling of being:

> *'…neglected by politics and politicians and is… strongly associated with our vote to leave the European Union. But it is also about culture and economics.'*[3]

In practice, it is remarkable how adaptable the so called 'left behind' regions of the UK have been following their economic hollowing-out brought about by the demise of UK industry. Switching to services and adapting to high value manufacturing and design has meant that levels of unemployment in the left behind areas are surprisingly low despite serious competition from Asia and relative public and private underinvestment versus that seen in London. The so-called 'left-behind' areas have an enormous capacity to adapt and generate wealth given the correct economic policies.

A number of recent actions and policies that have come out of Westminster seem to give the impression that ministers and MPs, far from the levelling up of large parts of the UK being their primary concern, are more concerned about their public image, not prepared to do what is right for the British people for fear of it undermining their posturing. Their conceit shines through in five example areas of policy: foreign aid, High Speed Two, the salt and sugar tax, farming and agricultural funding, and protectionist trade tariffs.

Foreign aid

As a result of the pandemic, Rishi Sunak made the decision to lower the UK's foreign aid contribution from 0.7 per cent of GNI to 0.5 per cent, to go some way to mitigating the impact of the huge spending on pandemic-related measures. According to 2020 GNI statistics from the ONS[4], that would mean reducing foreign aid spending from £14.52 billion to £10.36 billion, still a huge sum. After the announcement of this cut, many MPs, including former Prime Minister Theresa May, came out strongly against it, with May arguing the cut would "have a devastating impact on the poorest in the world and damage the UK".[5]

The rebels also used the argument that the 0.7 per cent spending level was a 2019 manifesto pledge, and therefore should be protected from any cuts.[6] However, it is extremely doubtful that pledges made in the manifesto took into account the arrival of a global health crisis fewer than six months later, and quite simply, the situation has changed dramatically, and adjustments are justified.

3 Local Trust (2019), 'What does being "left behind" mean in practice?', Local Trust
4 ONS (2021), Gross National Income: Current price: Seasonally adjusted £m', ONS
5 Diver, T. and Hymas, C. (2021), 'Boris Johnson 'to deny Tory rebels vote on foreign aid cuts', The Telegraph
6 Ibid.

Writing in The Telegraph, Esther McVey, Conservative MP for Tatton, summarised it perfectly, stating the truth that "we simply don't have the same money now as we had a few years ago for foreign aid."[7]

McVey also outlined the reason behind foreign aid spending for politicians, arguing that:

"Ordinary people… are sick of politicians spending colossal amounts of taxpayers' money just so they can ingratiate themselves with the great and the good and strut around on the world stage."[8]

Overseas aid may be justified for humanitarian aid in disaster situations. In all other circumstances it should benefit the taxpayer in some way. This may be in promoting British influence, providing enhanced international security or promoting aid, for example. However, it is incumbent on the Foreign Office to demonstrate tangible benefits from the much vaunted and extremely vague promoting of British influence. Similarly for security and trade. It should be borne in mind that for the purposes of improving wealth and prosperity around the world, trade beats aid, as has been demonstrated by the effects of globalisation on reducing poverty.

There is certainly no justification for setting targets to spend taxpayers' money irrespective of need. In no other area of public life do we force a government department to spend for spending's sake.

The forced misallocation of funds is shown by the kind of projects that are recipients of British foreign aid money that has come out of the pockets of the British people, and where the money is actually being spent. In the 2020 Real Aid Index published by ONE, it was revealed that of the £851 million in Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocated to the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, only nine per cent of it was spent in LDCs and fragile states, and of the £633 million allocated to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, only 13 per cent was spent in LDCs or fragile states.[9]

This apparent lack of spending in countries that need it the most is further highlighted by programmes such as the Prosperity Fund, which ran until April 2021 and focussed on opening up markets in middle income countries such as India, China and Brazil. In 2017, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact expressed concerns that even though the funds were aimed at reducing global poverty, the £1.3 billion pot of money was becoming focussed on wealthier economies.[10] As well as this fund, China, which the UK has long deemed a security risk and is wealthy enough to have its own nuclear arsenal and space programme, received £71 million in funding for aid projects in 2019/20, according to the Department for International Development's annual report released in July 2020.[11]

The staggering sums of money being sent abroad could, and should, be used first and foremost to help those in the UK who struggle to even put food on their tables or keep a roof over their heads. After spending hundreds of billions of pounds on measures to ensure the UK did not become overwhelmed by the virus (and even then we still recorded the

7 McVey, E. (2021), 'Cut the aid budget - or risk betraying red wall Conservative voters', The Telegraph
8 Ibid.
9 ONE (2020), Real Aid Index 2020, p. 2
10 Quinn, B. (2017), 'Trade, not poverty, could become focus of £1.3bn UK aid pot, watchdog warns', The Guardian
11 Martin, D. (2020), 'UK gives £71m in foreign aid to China in just one year: MPs demand inquiry as it emerges we hand over a fortune even though their economy is FIVE times bigger than ours', Daily Mail

highest death toll in Europe), we need every penny we can spare to ensure we can continue to support those who need assistance, and to kickstart programmes which can lift people away from those situations.

Former Labour leader and Prime Minister Gordon Brown criticised the cuts on BBC Breakfast, stating that it was a "life and death issue" and that the cuts made "no economic or moral sense".[12] But this begs the question, how can it not make economic sense to free up funds to help the UK economy recover from the Coronavirus pandemic? Furthermore, how can it not make moral sense to ensure we have enough money to fund programmes that seek to improve the lives of communities all over the UK? This is the embodiment of self-indulgent conceit, pandering to a woke metropolitan elite rather than putting the needs of struggling British families first.

There is a very strong moral argument against overseas aid. Quite apart from the possibility that monies fall into the hands of tyrants and despots for their own use, the source of the money is key. Charitable giving is by its very nature a voluntary activity and politicians and Whitehall officials are at liberty to give their own money. By contrast the Government levies taxes (at least in principle) to be used to benefit the people of the country, the people that pay the taxes (income tax, VAT, council tax, corporation tax etc). We all pay taxes of some kind, not least family owned and/or run businesses and their customers. It is not the Government's money; even if the Government borrows money this ultimately has to be paid off by taxpayers.

Some payments of this money overseas may be judged on humanitarian grounds, or to promote UK exports, or provide security for Britain by maintaining stability, or eliminating disease – all of which is enlightened self-interest. However, this use of money must be justified specifically; any use of taxpayers' money for other purposes than to benefit taxpayers is theft and morally wrong – and all too often a conceit.

Eventually, the Government managed to bring down the rebellion over the cuts, bringing a vote in parliament on the 13th of July, and winning, though only by a majority of 35. 25 Conservative MPs rebelled against the Government[13], demonstrating that there are still a number of MPs, elected on the back of the promise of a levelling up agenda, who consider the need of those abroad more important than the need of their own constituents. Overseas aid is the antithesis of the levelling up agenda.

12 Whannel, K. (2021), Foreign aid: Aid cuts could see lives lost, warns senior Tory', BBC

13 BBC (2021), 'Government wins vote to lock in cuts to overseas aid', BBC

High Speed Two (HS2)

From the initial proposals and costings in 2009, the UK's new high-speed rail network, 'High Speed Two' (HS2) has been dogged by controversy and firm opposition. Phase 1 of the project from London to Birmingham is already under construction, and phase 2 'west', running from Birmingham to Crewe and through to Manchester, is hoping to receive royal assent and pass through parliament in 2024/2025. The aim of the project, according to the HS2 website, supposedly fits with the Government's wider levelling up agenda, calling it 'integral to rail projects in the North and Midlands – helping rebalance the UK economy'.[14]

After an initial budget proposal in 2012 suggested it would cost around £37 billion, this figure has been on an upward trajectory ever since. A 2015 official revision placed the cost at more like £56 billion, a second official revision in 2019 stated £88 billion, and the 2020 Oakervee review crossed the £100 billion threshold to a staggering £106 billion.[15] Advocates of the project will argue that these costs will end up being justified by the massively improved connection to London for the entire North of England, but this is looking more and more unlikely. Speaking to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee, West Midlands Metro mayor Andy Street believes there will be 'a serious delay' to the eastern link to the East Midlands and Leeds,[16] and HS2 Chief Executive Mark Thurston set out that after being proposed as one integrated project, '[the project] is not now playing out that way… we wait to be guided by the Department [for Transport] on what we do with the eastern link.'[17]

So, after all the rhetoric that the entire North of England would benefit from the new rail links, it appears this is likely to no longer be the case. Which begs the question, how can spending such vast sums of money on a major long-term project be justified if it is already clear the original aims are unlikely to be fulfilled? Furthermore, how can such vast sums of money be spent when so many parts of the UK stand to gain almost nothing from it? As well as the Eastern section of the line being discarded, the South West of England which, in 2019, contained some of the most deprived parts of the UK,[18] sees no benefit from the project, and Wales, which despite the project coming under the category of an 'England and Wales' project, sees none of the line within Wales itself and therefore sees no benefit according to the Welsh Affairs Committee.[19]

For a project whose aim is to rebalance the UK economy, that does not currently appear to be a likely outcome. The idea that one single infrastructure project from one city centre to another can kickstart major national growth is also the definition of wishful thinking; one only has to look at the growing number of airports around Spain that were built to stimulate regional growth that now lie derelict as proof that throwing money into big projects is no guarantee of success.[20] On top of the clear economic issues with the project, its environmental impact has been a focus of criticism.

14 HS2 (2021), 'Why HS2', HS2
15 Majid, A. (2021), 'How the cost of HS2 has surged', New Statesman,
16 Transport Committee (2021), Oral evidence: HS2: progress update, 14 July 2021, HC 487, Q20
17 Transport Committee (2021), Q14
18 Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019), 'The English Indices of Deprivation 2019', Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, p. 6
19 Welsh Affairs Committee (2021), Rail Infrastructure in Wales, 14 July 2021, HC 438, p. 29
20 Asquith, J. (2019), 'Welcome To The €1 Billion Abandoned Ghost Airport—That Just Received Its First Flight After Nine Years', Forbes

A report published in 2020 outlined the London to Birmingham stretch's effects, including the destruction of 33 Sites of Special Scientific Interest and over 100 areas of ancient woodland.[21]

The famous economist John Maynard Keynes noted in the 1930s that digging holes and filling them in again would constitute economic activity and thus generate jobs. If HS2 were to reach the North it might provide that amount of betterment but the regions want and need wealth not welfare, and such large sums of money characterised by the HS2 project could be much better spent on a true levelling up agenda.

The £106 billion the project has been forecasted to cost could be put to so many different uses that would no doubt have massive positive implications for levelling up. Tens of thousands of locally targeted projects could be funded, ranging from education funding to local infrastructure projects that would be of greater benefit to local communities to high speed internet and mobile signal rollouts and improvements. Or, even simpler, the money could provide tax cuts to promote growth. Instead, taxpayers are left to shoulder the bill of a project that, in its initial development stages, turned into the pet project of the Chancellor under David Cameron, George Osborne.

Osborne championed HS2 as part of his 'Northern Powerhouse' movement while in office, and after leaving office following defeat over Brexit has continued to champion it. However, it was revealed in 2019 that he knew back in 2016 that costs would overrun, and yet he persisted, allowing MPs to approve the project, so concerned was he with his reputation and not wanting to be seen as backing a losing horse.[22] More recently, MPs have been calling for an inquiry into whether more recent transport minister Nusrat Ghani and secretary Chris Grayling misled parliament in 2019 by suggesting that the project was 'on track' and that the budget was certain to be £55 billion.[23]

Those in government in charge of HS2 have been so conceited that they have been unwilling to admit when a project is no longer in the best interest of the country. They, and others in parliament, relish the idea of an iconic infrastructure project, and now UK taxpayers can do nothing but sit and pay the price.

Sugar and Salt Tax

In an effort to establish a policy framework to take forward to improve the health of the UK, the Government appointed Henry Dimbleby, founder of restaurant chain Leon and son of broadcaster David Dimbleby, to draw up a National Food Strategy (NFS). Finally unveiled in July 2021, it was backed by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, who called it 'an incredible opportunity to make the food system fairer'. [24]

It included a number of reforms that it said were 'needed to protect the NHS, improve the health of the nation and save the environment.'[25] These reforms included increasing

21 Barkham, P. (2020), 'HS2 will destroy or damage hundreds of UK wildlife sites, says report', The Guardian

22 Plimmer, G. (2019), 'George Osborne knew of HS2 cost overrun 3 years ago', Financial Times

23 Malnick, E. (2021), 'Calls for inquiry into whether ministers misled Parliament over HS2 costs', The Telegraph

24 Oliver, J. (2021), 'The National Food Strategy from Henry Dimbleby and his team is out today!! The Government now has 6 months to...' [Instagram], 15.07.2021

25 Bowden, G. and Rowlett, J. (2021), 'National Food Strategy: New tax on sugar and salt unattractive, says PM', BBC

spending on schemes to improve the diets of families and low-income families, and a 'community eat well' programme trial in which GPs can prescribe fruit and vegetables. The most notable reform, however, is a tax on quantities of sugar and salt, £3 per kilogram for sugar and £6 per kilogram for salt, sold wholesale for use in food production.

Dimbleby argues such a tax impacts products more than prices. He argued in 2020 that the introduction of a soft drinks levy in 2018, known then as the 'Sugar Tax', led to a reformulation of products that, in total, took 45,000 tons of sugar out of UK diets per year, instead of increasing prices.[26]

However, reaction to the report has been overwhelmingly negative. Christopher Snowdon, Head of Lifestyle Economics at the Institute of Economic Affairs, wrote in the Spectator that forcing consumers to pay between £3 billion and £5 billion extra per year for food should be considered a moral outrage'.[27] John O' Connell, Chief Executive of the TaxPayers' Alliance, stated "This is yet another case of middle-class meddling that will hit the poorest families hardest…"[28] Even the Prime Minister, despite himself commissioning Dimbleby to draw up the report, said that whilst he would consider the report and the Government would issue a response within six months, he was "not… attracted to the idea of extra taxes on hard-working people".[29]

Whilst tackling widespread obesity is a critical issue, simply lumping a tax on products is not a silver bullet. Such an approach, as touched upon by John O' Connell, would affect poorer families hardest, increasing the price of their food baskets and disproportionately affecting their remaining income. Middle class families in Oxfordshire are unlikely to feel the effect of an 87 pence rise in the price of a box of Frosties cereal, but families in 'left behind' areas like Cumbria certainly will.

Such a report, no matter the assurances form Boris Johnson that he does not think he supports taxing hard-working families, highlights the ease with which those behind policy ideas are willing to throw poorer people under the bus. Despite the prevailing winds pointing in the direction of levelling up, Henry Dimbleby is quite content to go in the exact opposite direction. Hiring an Eton-educated upper middle-class businessman to chair a report such as this was unlikely to ever yield a different set of recommendations. Never mind the tax, with a recommendation such as GPs prescribing vegetables to tackle obesity, he must think some of our hardest working families are stupid; he could not be more out of touch if he tried.

26 Lusher, T. (2020), 'UK food tsar Henry Dimbleby: 'I have a bugbear about Percy Pigs', The Guardian

27 Snowdon, C. (2021), 'A salt and sugar tax doesn't make much sense', The Spectator

28 TaxPayers' Alliance (2021), 'Salt & sugar taxes could cost shoppers up to £4.8 billion each year', TaxPayers' Alliance

29 Tubb, G. and Morris, S. (2021), 'Boris Johnson says he is not keen on placing 'extra taxes on hard-working people' amid calls for new salt and sugar tax', Sky News

Farming and Agriculture Funding

After leaving the European Union, the Government has drawn up new plans for farming and agricultural funding to replace the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Whereas the CAP was primarily based on the amount of land farmed, with the larger the land holding the larger the subsidy, the new Agriculture Bill maintains the same level of funding (£3.4 billion) until the next general election (from which point it will slowly be phased out to be replaced by the new system), but instead is based on Michael Gove's 'public funding for a public good'. This rewards farmers for improving areas such as air and water quality, and animal welfare, whilst maintaining productivity, with money from the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) Scheme.[30]

The key issue with the new funding is that it will drive up prices of food for consumers in the UK. With the temporary increase in Universal Credit funding during the pandemic coming to an end, spending will continue to be a key area of worry for low-income families all across the UK. The introduction of this new system of funding does nothing but inflate and massage the already sizeable egos of many MPs by telling them that they are doing the right thing by supporting farming, which only contributes 0.6 per cent to GDP,[31] and the environment, which is already a top priority for the government and on which more progress will be made via alternative channels, while at the same time forcing families to cut back on already limited spending. The very same people who criticise welfare spending are themselves recipients of state welfare, who are also those who purchase agricultural land merely to avoid paying death duties.

According to the Managing Director of Dyson Farming, Phillip Wynn, the changes to funding being introduced, once they take full effect, will require farmers to reduce their labour and power costs by around £100 per hectare in order to be profitable.[32] If farmers are not able to reduce these costs, they will inevitably end up being passed on to the consumer.

Another aspect of the funding is the proposal to pay older farmers to retire – up to £100,000 depending on the size of the farm to free up tenancies for young farmers to step into. The idea behind this is that bringing younger farmers into the industry (the average age of a UK farmer is 59 and four in ten are over 65[33]) will help kickstart innovation in an industry that in many areas is still very traditional. However, there are two key downsides to this. First, there is the potential that rather than allowing new entrants into the industry, allowing young people in deprived areas the chance to get into business, the land vacated by older farmers will simply be subsumed into larger farming businesses.[34]

Second, there are concerns about how land will be used when acquired by new owners or tenants. With the message of business diversification being emphasised and eco-tourism ventures such as camping and glamping becoming more popular, the Government believes this will be the main way younger farmers will seek income.[35] But if this becomes the

30 Eustice, G. (2020), 'Speech: Path to Sustainable Farming', HM Government

31 O'Neill, A. (2021), 'United Kingdom: Distribution of gross domestic product (GDP) across economic sectors from 2009 to 2019', Statista

32 Battle, L. (2021), 'New lay of the land — UK farmers face an uncertain future', Financial Times

33 Andersson, J. (2021), 'A red herring or desperately needed? Farmers react to Government plans to pay older farmers to retire', i News

34 Battle, L. (2021)

35 Harrabin, R. (2021), 'UK Government to pay older farmers to retire', BBC

priority, this will surely take time and land away from food production, reducing supply and increasing prices. Furthermore, as this would be seen as improving their land under the ELM Scheme, this would mean taxpayer money would be going into private businesses, rather than enabling food production.

How the Government will go about allocating this taxpayer money is also unclear. As previously mentioned, farmers will receive money based improving environmental aspects such as air and water quality, carbon capturing in soil and trees, and increasing wildlife. But how exactly are these supposed to be measured effectively to ensure farmers neither play the system to get more money than they deserve, nor are underpaid for the work they do put in?

In addition, by saying that the key to accessing more funding is greater environmental delivery, this will inevitably force farmers to divert more time to environmental work on their land. However, as Minette Batters, president of the NFU argues, "Expecting farmers to run viable, high-cost farm businesses, continue to produce food and increase their environmental delivery… is high risk and a very big ask."[36] Balancing the need to maximise production, whilst also spending enough time on environmental work will be a tough juggling act. By placing so much emphasis on the environmental delivery of farms, those that are not able to adequately deliver on top of their food production will miss out on funds, risking going out of business. Therefore, not only is the new funding bad for consumers, it could also be bad for farmers.

Taken together, the new farming and agricultural funding setup cannot be seen as compatible with the Government's levelling up agenda. Increased food prices for consumers, combined with less transparency as to where taxpayers' money is allocated in the new schemes, give little hope that this will benefit communities, even more rural communities, outside of recipient farms (if it even does end up benefitting farmers).

The policies do however constitute a conceit on the part of politicians and policy makers as they claim that they are helping poor farmers, and yet the policies are really a smokescreen of vested interests. This is being done at the expense of poor taxpayers and consumers and could easily be characterised as 'welfare for the rich'.

36 Carrington, D. (2020), 'Environment to benefit from 'biggest farming shake-up in 50 years'', The Guardian

Protectionist Trade Tariffs

Protectionist trade tariffs are introduced to protect British businesses from foreign competitors who might threaten to undercut industries with goods of a lower price, but also of a lower quality. These kinds of measures, however, are not overly common in UK trade policy. From 1848 onwards Britain adopted a free trade approach in line with the thinking of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The last time the UK was predominantly a protectionist policy-led economy was in the 1930s, when the 1932 British Empire Economic Conference established 'imperial preference'.[37] This saw the establishment of limited tariffs on Empire nations, and high tariffs on the rest of the world, with a 'home producers first, empire producers second, and foreign producers last' mindset. In any event, this policy was adopted in the midst of the economic crisis following the 1929 economic crash and protectionist measures appearing across the globe, including the USA.

There is a reason we have not seen widespread protectionism; it was uncommon until we joined the Common Market, and it does more harm than good, with free trade bringing lower costs of living in comparison. Protectionism drives up prices for consumers as it lowers supply but does not reduce demand. If protectionist trade tariffs were to be applied to UK food imports, which made up 45 per cent of food supply in 2019,[38] it would have a significant negative impact on food supply. This would drive up household expenditure and reduce disposable income for millions of people in the UK; not an ideal situation, and not in any way conducive to efforts to level up deprived areas. Using data from the IFS' 2018 briefing note on tariffs and the Customs Union, which suggested eliminating tariffs would lead to a price reductions of between 0.7 per cent and 1.2 per cent,[39] and ONS data on household consumer spending in 2016-17 that showed the average weekly household spend was £554.20,[40] we can identify that, without any protectionist tariffs in place, households would have saved between £144.04 and £345.80 – a not insignificant amount for Britain's poorest families.

Despite the major downside of pursuing a protectionist trade agenda, there has been much discussion and advocacy for a protectionist outlook with regards to post-Brexit trade arrangements. The UK has managed to negotiate rollover trade deals it had with 66 countries when it was part of the EU, as well as deals with Norway, Liechtenstein, Iceland and, most significantly so far, Japan and Australia. However, most notably with the UK-Australia deal, lots of noise has been made about the impact of tariff-free trade and the impact on British industry, in particular, farmers and food production.

Despite the clear advantages of a free trade deal with Australia, notable figures within and outside of parliament wanted to take a protectionist approach. George Eustice, the Environment Secretary, and Michael Gove wanted to adopt EU-style 'tariff rate quotas' to ensure demand remained for British products, while NFU president Minette Batters argued that allowing free trade with Australia would be 'the end' of large parts of British farming.[41] This way of thinking, however, assumes that consumers will ignore the origin of food and buy the cheapest option, which is simply not the case. In areas such as food, but also

37 TaxPayers' Alliance (2020), A Lesson from History: Free Trade Works

38 DEFRA (2020), 'Food Statistics in your pocket: Global and UK supply', HM Government

39 Levell, P. (2018), 'The Customs Union, tariff reductions and consumer prices: IFS Briefing note BN225', IFS, p. 2

40 ONS (2018), 'Family spending in the UK: financial year ending 2017', ONS

41 Bourne, R. (2021), 'Remainer hypocrisy on farming is a protectionist trap', The Telegraph

clothing, statistics show that people, especially post-pandemic, have a preference to buy British goods. The September 2020 Consumer Survey from Made In Britain presented figures that back this up. According to the survey, 90 per cent of consumers feel that it is important to buy British products generally, 44 per cent of consumers would buy British products regardless of the cost, and 66 per cent of consumers are more likely to buy British products since March 2020, as they see it as key to support British businesses and boost the economy post-pandemic.[42]

The additional argument that tariff-free trade would lead to the UK market being flooded with cheaper, poorer quality Australian Beef, as Minette Batters felt, was swiftly put to rest by George Brandis, the Australian High Commissioner. In a letter to Conservative MPs who held concerns over the trade deal, he stated that there was "no possibility" that an agreement would lead to markets being flooded with produce, as Australian production was already at "full capacity" with its supply to Pacific Rim countries.[43]

Australian Beef and New Zealand Lamb command higher prices in Asia than the UK market and there are added transport costs, which further questions the assertion that farmers in the UK will face unfair competition with these products. Furthermore, for other food products it makes perfect sense to have free trade with countries who have high standards and polar opposite seasons. Products which we do not produce (or certainly not in as large a quantity) in the UK like citrus fruit or wine will become cheaper for consumers. It is doubly ironic that we may now have GPs prescribing fruit and vegetables because poorer families cannot afford them and yet they would become more affordable given trade arrangements that are prevented in order to protect wealthy farmers. To add insult to injury a proportion of them are merely dodging inheritance tax by owning farmland in the first place. A conceit if ever there was one.

The whole point of free trade is to open up markets for businesses to increase profits, and to widen choice for consumers, decreasing the cost of living. Free trade deals like the UK-Australia deal will ensure that low-priced goods will continue to be available for those who need them. Preserving these low-cost choices is vital to make any kind of start on an impactful levelling up programme. Protectionism in the name of farmers and their produce, for which the statistics show demand will not be adversely dampened, will do nothing but drive up prices, with the greatest effect being felt by the poorest in society. It is hard to see how "protectionist" a policy can be if it has a negative effect on a country's people – such policies only ever serve to 'protect' vested interests.

42 Made In Britain (2020), Two-thirds (66 per cent) of British consumers are more likely to buy more British goods post Covid-19 to support the economy, Made In Britain

43 Ashworth, L. (2021), 'Australia insists free trade deal will not hurt British farmers', The Telegraph

The concept of 'levelling up' itself

The reason behind promoting a levelling up agenda is straightforward to understand. In terms of regional economic inequality, the UK is one of the most unequal countries in the developed world, beaten only by Turkey, Italy and Belgium on some measures, and coming out on top in others.[44] This is nothing new; deeply-held grievances that London and the South East have it better than other parts of the country have origins back in the Victorian era and beyond, with data from 1901 showing that GDP per capita was 34 per cent higher in London than the British average.[45]

As such, neither is the idea of levelling up new. In fact, the latest push is simply the next in a long line of studies and policies that stem right back to the 1930s. In 1934, the Special Areas Act was passed in order to provide extra support to areas of high unemployment. The 1940 Barlow commission identified that economic growth was concentrated in the South East of England. The 1960s and 70s were filled with rhetoric promising what would amount to levelling up of areas suffering from deindustrialisation; the most notable being Harold Wilson's 'White Heat of technology' speech, promising the modernisation of British industry in order to try and win back skilled workers who Labour feared were drifting away from the party (despite the rapturous reception, the promised renewal was not delivered, and Wilson was in fact responsible for scrapping a number of high-profile technology projects[46]).

Under Thatcher's Government of the 1980s, urban regeneration, led by a number of Urban Development Corporations (UDCs), aimed to revitalise deprived urban areas through redevelopment of both old industrial sites and existing properties. Beginning in London's Docklands and Liverpool, the idea was that such redevelopment would arrest urban decay create trickle-down benefits for the wider local economy and community.[47] The effects were purely superficial, however, and according to Neil McInroy did not do enough to tackle the underlying causes of British economic imbalances.[48]

The efforts made by New Labour in the early 2000s to make inroads into tackling these underlying issues through more regional governments ultimately failed. The referendum on devolution in the North East of England, spearheaded by former Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, was resoundingly rejected by voters,[49] and the regional development agencies introduced by New Labour to enhance economic development in English regions were abolished in 2010 by the Coalition Government.

44 Davenport, A. and Zaranko, B. (2020), 'Levelling up: where and how' in Emerson, C., Farquharson, C., and Johnson, P. (eds.) The IFS Green Budget October 2020, p. 322

45 Idem, p. 320

46 Francis, M. (2013), 'Harold Wilson's 'white heat of technology' speech 50 years on', The Guardian

47 Carpenter, J. (2014), 'Regeneration and the Legacy of Thatcherism', Metropolitics

48 McInroy, N. (2021), 'Governments have been promising to 'level up' the UK for 80 years', The Guardian

49 Mulholland, H. (2004), 'North-east voters reject regional assembly', The Guardian

We are able to see what progress has been made to level up more deprived regions of the country by comparing the areas that were the focus of the Special Areas Act of 1934 to those areas seen today as being the most deprived or 'left behind'. The Special Areas Act focussed on industrial areas such as Cumbria, Tyneside, and South Wales.[50] According to the IFS' left-behind index, based on employment statistics the five lowest ranked areas are Middlesbrough, Barrow, Nottingham, Ceredigion, and Birmingham.[51] Such close similarities between then and now indicate just how much has been 'achieved' by the various governments wanting to level up the country.

The lack of previous achievement in this policy area gives even less hope to those relying on Boris Johnson's levelling up agenda, and feeds in to the narrative that rhetoric and policy agendas aiming to achieve widespread social and economic growth are merely empty promises. In fact, so lacking in substance is Boris Johnson's levelling up agenda that one cabinet minister has described feelings of 'widespread cluelessness' within government as to what levelling up means, and staff in No. 10 jokingly see it as 'a slogan without a purpose'.[52] This was further confirmed by reaction to Johnson's speech on levelling up on the 15th of July 2021, with Madeline Grant writing in the Telegraph,

> *'Levelling up is both everything and nothing. It is a cliche wrapped in a soundbite inside an inanity… it is fundamentally meaningless…'*[53]

The lack of clarity over a precise approach is allowing the agenda to potentially be exploited by MPs. The organisation of the £4.8 billion levelling up fund initially set out in the March 2021 budget was criticised as it appeared, through its categorisation of areas into different levels of priority, to put a number of Conservative MPs seats into the highest priority category. This included the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak's own seat of Richmond in Yorkshire being placed in category one (highest priority), ahead of ex-industrial areas such as Barnsley and Sheffield, which were placed in category two, a move labelled a "political ploy" by the Labour mayor of the Sheffield city region Dan Jarvis.[54]

Given the lack of previous progress made with similar agendas, the inability of Boris Johnson so far to actually flesh out the policies that will make up his levelling up agenda, and the accusations of MPs jumping the queue for funding, it is clear the Government's current plan for levelling up is flawed. The presence of a number of MPs in the development of this agenda who, as shown by the aforementioned examples, have demonstrated blatant conceit and self-interest in recent policy decisions indicates the need for a completely different approach to achieving the goal of widespread levelling up.

50 Kenny, M. and Garling, O. (2021), 'Levelling up: lessons from history', Bennet Institute for Public Policy
51 Davenport, A. and Zaranko, B. (2020), p. 326
52 Payne, S. and Giles, C. (2021), 'Confusion over UK 'levelling-up' plan prompts Boris Johnson to hire new adviser', Financial Times
53 Grant, M. (2021), 'Is Boris Johnson off his shopping trolley when it comes to levelling up?', The Telegraph
54 Bounds, A. and Parker, G. (2021), 'UK chancellor accused of playing politics over 'levelling-up' fund', Financial Times

The Alternative Plan

Taken together, the four policies of current foreign aid spending (even with the reduction to 0.5 per cent of GNI), HS2, the proposed salt and sugar tax, and farming and agriculture funding (until at least the next general election) will cost a total of £124.6 billion. That figure, along with the potential £345.80 per year families miss out on due to tariffs, is an obscene amount of money, all being wasted on policies that do not benefit the country as a whole and which only serve the interests of a few, despite the Government arguing these are part of the wider levelling up agenda. It is abundantly clear that these policies will not aid this agenda in any way, and a new outlook and approach is needed.

Some, such as the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Devolution, believe that the time is right for a reincarnation of John Prescott's ideas of widespread English devolution, believing it to be key to delivering on the Government's levelling up ambitions.[55] However, the last thing we want is more local government; the 2004 referendum was rejected on the basis that people did not want 'more politicians',[56] and the same would happen again.

Levelling up can only be achieved if we get more high value, sustainable jobs in the regions. These come with:

1. Productivity improvement which is best achieved in manufacturing or in high value services including technology, design and engineering
2. Investment and entrepreneurship in the regions
3. High value jobs being transferred – or allowed to be remote by employers – from the South East to the regions

To actions these successfully requires a number of things to be in place. Firstly, we reiterate our calls for cuts in VAT for the 2021/22 financial year and reducing the standard rates of income tax from 20p to 15p to help those on lower and middle incomes. Furthermore, we call for the following 6 point plan to be put into place, namely:

1. The introduction of 5G connectivity across the nation. There are currently areas that do not even have fibre broadband, let alone 5G mobile signal; this needs rectifying as soon as possible to ensure all regions are on an equal footing.
2. Long term, patient loan capital and low rates of interest for next stage and start-up businesses, and equity capital that does not require a loss of control.
3. Training and skills in business, business creation, and high value manufacturing and services technical skills including life sciences, AI, coding and engineering.
4. Continued regional rail and road infrastructure investment. Specific investment on a more local level, such as a cross-Pennine link and improvements to Welsh railways, is a far better use of money and will have a far greater impact on local areas than enormous projects like HS2.

55 APPG on Devolution (2021), Levelling-up Devo: The role of national government in making a success of devolution in England, p. 4

56 Mulholland, H. (2004)

5. A simplified regulatory regime lowering the cost of entry, making it easier to create and run businesses and employ people; a simplified tax code; and a streamlined and less arbitrary planning system.
6. Air routes from the regions, not least to London.

We must not consider setting up new versions of the disastrous Regional Development Agencies (shut down by Vince Cable in 2010) or any equivalents; they simply soak up money and are talking shops. Chambers of Commerce already exist and can be a low-cost conduit, but they are often too self-serving. Extra government is simply not the answer (even metro mayors end up begging for government welfare); the left behind want and need wealth creation, not welfare. National policies like tax cuts, deregulated access to finance and trade deals will end up delivering real, tangible benefits to UK regions. They will expand capacity for growth in a sustainable long-term way that a basic pot of money will not be able to achieve.

The importance of a long-term approach

To achieve the desired results of levelling up, the Government needs to take a long-term approach to policy. This does not mean long-term deadlines for policy success; this means looking at actual policy and the impact in the long run. Take HS2, it looks great on paper – a huge new infrastructure project that by the middle of the century will bring the nation closer together and improve business links – but in fact is a long-term drain on finances that could be better used elsewhere.

This is in stark contrast to polices such as tax cuts in the long term. In the short term, tax cuts will increase the deficit, this is true. However, examining these policies with the long term in mind, such supply-side tax cuts will bring the debt ratio down – in effect they pay for themselves.

This is shown by data from Dr Patrick Minford and his team at the University of Cardiff,[57] which underlines the merits of a strategy which will not impact public sector solvency, but also will not neglect one part of the country over another.

Dr Minford's data shows that GDP in both the South and the North will benefit from tax cuts. A general income tax cut of £10 billion would be fiscally affordable in the long run, as it would raise GDP by 0.8 per cent, bringing in extra tax of about £10 billion (the average marginal tax rate in the UK is about 0.6 per cent); hence in the long run roughly paying for itself. The long run tax yield of regulatory reform plus cuts in top marginal rates is far higher still: with a boost to GDP of about 15 per cent, the gain in tax is an astonishing £180 billion.[58]

Three things are immediately striking. First, all these measures bring worthwhile gains in GDP due to their supply-side effects. Second, the biggest gains by far come from cutting the tax and regulative burdens on entrepreneurs. These work by improving incentives to innovate and so raise productivity, and because they cost the Treasury relatively little, their effectiveness per pound of taxpayer cost is very high.

57 Minford, P., Gai, Y. and Meenagh, D. (2020), Working Paper No. E2020/14: North and South: A Regional Model of the UK, p.28

58 Ibid.

Furthermore, they have their largest effect on GDP in the North, while also strongly reinforcing growth in the South, where enterprise is heavily entrenched. These policies remain in absolute terms the best booster for the North, while spreading growth nationally as well.[59] Third, the data amply demonstrates that appropriate national policies to boost growth will disproportionately boost the regions as the regions have greater capacity than the South East, dispelling fears that policy from London will not be able to meet the needs of the regions. The regions have demonstrated resilience over recent decades as manufacturing has modernised to compete with China, and policies like these will only serve to boost the regions further.

Is this not exactly what the Government is aiming to achieve through its current levelling up agenda? Evidently, those at the Treasury feel the short-term pain outweighs the long-term gain. As long as that kind of thinking persists, the dream of truly levelling up the country, a dream that has long occupied the great minds of government, will continue to be just that.

59 Idem, p. 6

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