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Introduction

- 1 On 11 June 2021, at the G7 summit opening, Prime Minister Boris Johnson appeared to repudiate Tory austerity¹ insisting that it was vital not to “repeat the mistakes of the great crisis, the last great economic recession in 2008, when the recovery was not uniform across all parts of society” mistakes that, Johnson continued, had caused inequalities to be “entrenched”.² The solution he proposed was to “level up across our societies and [...] build back better”³ by introducing a New Deal⁴ for the United Kingdom. The implications were profound for a party that had been defined by minimal state intervention and what it, itself, called strict economic discipline, even austerity, for nigh on forty years.
- 2 The expression “Levelling Up” was not a new political slogan coined just for the occasion. On the steps of 10 Downing Street in July 2019, the newly elected Prime Minister had defined his job as being “Prime Minister of the whole of the United Kingdom” which meant:

[U]niting our country, answering at last the plea of the forgotten people and the left-behind towns by physically and literally renewing the ties that bind us together, so that with safer streets and better education and fantastic new road and rail infrastructure and full fibre broadband, we level up across Britain.⁵
- 3 This would be achieved by unleashing “the productive power not just of London and the South East but of every corner of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland”.⁶ Levelling Up henceforth became the signature phrase of a Prime Minister who had already presented himself as one who would unite or, as he put it, as a One Nation

Conservative. It was, again, a key objective of the government's plan to build a better Britain after Brexit and was therefore a major theme of the December 2019 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto: "*We have mapped out a fantastic programme for the years ahead: to unite and level up, spreading opportunity across the whole of the United Kingdom*".⁷ A year and a half later, it was the main theme of the Prime Minister's first "post-pandemic" speech in July 2021. The Prime Minister's Conference speech in October 2021 also focussed on Levelling Up.⁸

- 4 Obviously, the pandemic that broke out in Western Europe in the early days of 2020 had an impact on the Government's capacity to implement its political agenda. However, Levelling Up remained a vague policy for more than two years, with many broad and sometimes ill-matched projects loosely put together, as for instance "*better education*," "*fantastic new roads*" and the fight against obesity. Notwithstanding the impact of the pandemic, this apparent lack of coherence raised many questions. The members of the House of Commons Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, commented on their being "*disappointed at how little detail has been put forward to explain what the Government sees Levelling Up to mean and how it will be delivered*".⁹ Opposition and Conservative commentators alike,¹⁰ as well as fellow parliamentarians¹¹ and local politicians and stakeholders¹² all criticised the Levelling-Up agenda for its lack of substance.
- 5 Perhaps in response to those criticisms, the Rt. Hon. Neil O'Brien, MP, was appointed as Levelling Up Advisor in May 2021, and a Levelling Up Unit shared between Number 10 and the Cabinet Office was established. A Levelling Up Fund with a value of £4.8 billion over four years was created and criteria for eligibility were established. This was followed by Boris Johnson delivering a speech two months later to provide the long-awaited explanation of what he and the government considered Levelling Up to mean. Far from answering any questions, the speech raised many new ones with the government having to relaunch its political agenda post-pandemic. A Cabinet reshuffle took place in September resulting in Michael Gove being appointed Levelling Up Secretary. A White Paper on Levelling Up and Devolution is to be published in early 2022. Are these many prevarications the simple consequence of the pandemic? Are they evidence that Levelling Up is only an electoral message without political substance? Could they be the indication of a more profound shift within the Conservative Party? Levelling Up is definitely a policy that poses many challenges to those who seek to analyse it. Difficult to categorise to start with, it also tends to unsettle former, preconceived notions of what Conservatism, at least 21st century Conservatism, is. Indeed because it speaks to citizens – to those living in deprived, left-behind areas as well as to those who believe in a united Britain – of opportunity and of unity, Levelling Up blurs the lines between a supposedly right and left-wing vision. A simple analysis might be that it is ultimately no more than just a convenient catchphrase to win over the votes of the so-called red-wall areas of the north of England in the context of Brexit without alienating traditional Conservative voters. A more complex contention would be that in seeking to retain the votes of the red-wall areas, the government has had to reposition itself, to genuinely commit to socially equalising the whole of Britain, thus giving One Nation Conservatism a new lease of life.
- 6 This paper will first examine the context in which the Conservative Party deployed its Levelling-Up agenda and what policy programme underpins it. It will then consider

Levelling Up in the broader context of Boris Johnson's One Nation pledge and One Nation Toryism in general.

Levelling Up: when and what

- 7 Although the expression was coined by Boris Johnson in July 2019, it is not a new expression invented by the Prime Minister and his political strategy and communication team. Jack Newman, a research fellow in sociology, traced it back to the 19th century where it appeared in Hansard records, usually in relation to the distribution of school funding and has been used on and off since then.¹³ For example, the term was used by New Labour governments to present their further education spending which was described as a means to level up.¹⁴ At the time, Theresa May gave the expression an ironical twist when she used it against the government to proclaim that: *“socialism is about levelling down. Conservatism is about Levelling Up. Socialists believe that if everyone cannot have something, no one shall. Conservatives reject that”*.¹⁵ Levelling Up then disappeared for some time replaced by new slogans and austerity when the Coalition Government led by David Cameron was formed in 2010. When she became Prime Minister in 2016, Theresa May revived the expression. It was used to speak to people about equality of chances and opportunities – a recurring Conservative theme – about giving everyone fair access to a good education regardless of their social background. When he replaced Theresa May as leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister in July 2019, Boris Johnson made the slogan his. Arguably, the association made by the Conservatives between Levelling Up and equality of chances and opportunity, again a common Conservative theme, makes it easy to understand how the expression could appeal to Johnson and his communication and strategy team. The traumatic aftermath of the Scottish referendum quickly followed by the Brexit referendum and the difficult negotiations with the EU set the stage. The divisions created by Jeremy Corbyn within the Labour Party and amongst his grassroots, provided the opportunity. This tense context was the perfect breeding ground for slogans that stressed the importance of healing the divisions, repairing a broken society, or mending the fractures, slogans that were about unity, about getting together. And, as a matter of fact, it was the perfect moment to speak about Levelling Up given that academic analyses made after Brexit had revealed that an important proportion of the population felt abandoned by the ruling elites, left behind, unable to profit from the wealth created by the more dynamic and prosperous regions, that is to say London and the South East. The objective was to reunite a divided Britain. And, although it only did so later, the Government provided a whole set of figures to demonstrate what it meant by divided:

The UK's highest productivity region (London) is nearly 60 per cent more productive than its lowest (Wales).

50 per cent of the population in London have graduate-level qualifications, compared to 33 per cent of the population of the north east of England.

Healthy life expectancy in Glasgow, Dundee, Blackpool and Middlesbrough is ten years shorter than in affluent local authorities in the South East.

People in the most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods in England are about 50 per cent more likely to experience crime and antisocial behaviour than those in the richest fifth.

Between 2007-2008 and 2018-19 capital spending on transport in London was around £6.600 per head, more than twice the average in the rest of England (£2.400)

Close to half of core research funding in England was spent in just three UK regions and sub-regions containing Oxford, Cambridge, and London.¹⁶

- 8 In July 2019, on the steps of 10 Downing Street, Boris Johnson explained that “uniting the country” meant “*physically and literally renewing the ties that bind us together*”. It was clear that Levelling Up would be about infrastructure with “*new road[s] and rail*”. And “*with higher wages, and a higher living wage, and higher productivity*”, the rest of the focus would be on the economy in order to “*close the opportunity gap*” in, as Johnson put it in his inimitable style: “*the corners of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the awesome foursome that are incarnated in the red white and blue flag*”.¹⁷
- 9 Those pledges were repeated in the Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto, *Get Brexit Done; Unleash Britain’s potential*, published a few weeks before the general election of December. The Prime Minister reaffirmed his will to level up: “*We have mapped out a fantastic programme for the years ahead; to unite and level up, spreading opportunity across the whole of the UK*”.¹⁸ The Manifesto set out various Levelling Up ambitions listed in a “New Deal for towns”¹⁹ which involved supporting small businesses, increasing cultural capital, investing in schools, in CCTV, enabling people and communities to takeover civic organisations and become real stakeholders in their community life and supporting the rebirth of a community spirit; a rather varied set of ideas only related to one another by their local dimension. The stress was still on infrastructure spending on rail and roads – with “*the biggest pothole-filling programme*”²⁰ for example –, promising “*A transport revolution*”²¹ with the example of Leeds, “*the largest city in Western Europe without a light rail or metro system*”.²²
- 10 With the promise to get Brexit done and Levelling Up, the Conservative Party won a historic victory at the December general election, historic because of its successful²³ incursion into the red-wall areas of the Midlands and the North, in places that were regarded as safe Labour seats. A lot of literature has been produced on this since including,²⁴ very recently, Sebastian Payne’s *Broken Heartlands: A Journey through Labour’s lost England*.²⁵ Payne, a Gateshead-born journalist, toured former left strongholds, interviewing people from various backgrounds, including some who, in 2019, voted Conservative for the first time in their lives. He concludes, amongst other things, that Johnson’s victory was importantly due to the Labour Party’s failure to understand that, as Theresa May had put it a few months earlier, “*Brexit means Brexit*”, only a more radical break than that she tried to pass through Parliament. When Labour leaders viewed UKIP as a far-right threat to the Tories, Payne argues that it was indeed they who were threatened. In addition, Jeremy Corbyn’s unpopularity and refusal to deliver a clear message regarding Brexit meant that many felt abandoned, betrayed, and eventually turned their backs on the party. Furthermore, and that is certainly where Payne’s work adds new insightful information to the debate, he also depicts how Johnson’s bonhomie, even shambolic demeanour, rendered him particularly appealing to white working-class Britain all the more as he was careful to exploit their sense of betrayal by posing, with his Levelling Up agenda and broad promises, as the champion of the left-behind communities – a feat given his own personal background! The last page of the 2019 Manifesto is rather interesting in this regard. It is a photo of a group of blue-collar workers holding a placard saying: “*We Love Boris*,” noteworthy in the instance being the fact that it’s Boris they claim they love rather than the Conservative Party.

- 11 It took the Government another year before any Levelling Up agenda was set out. Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced the Levelling Up Fund in the 2020 Spending Review²⁶ that promised “*a once-in-a-generation investment in infrastructure*” as well as “*creating jobs, growing the economy, and increasing pride in the places people call home*”.²⁷ Other measures were presented along with the Levelling Up Fund to regenerate Britain and “Build Back Better” after the COVID-19 pandemic such as, for instance, the National Infrastructure Strategy (to oversee the building of HS2, for example) and a new Towns Fund, using the Shared Prosperity Fund.²⁸ For the Levelling Up Fund alone – amounting to £4.8 billion over four years – several departments would work together: the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (“MHCLG”), HM Treasury and the Department of Transport. At least £800 million of the £4.8 billion were to be allocated for investment in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Although some details about the policy existed, one was still missing, that is a set of clear and detailed criteria for application. They were eventually published in the Levelling Up Prospectus of March 2021.²⁹
- 12 The Prospectus focused on three priorities: transport, insisting that “*infrastructure improves everyday life*”,³⁰ high street improvements and upgrades in local heritage to restore local residents’ pride in their community:
- People want to be able to look around their towns and villages and recognise that their homes and communities are better off than 5 years ago. In this vein, the most impactful projects – those that help bring pride to a local area – are often smaller in scale and geography: regenerating a town centre, local investment in cultural facilities or upgrading local transport infrastructure.³¹
- 13 The project is competitive with bids having to be supported and presented by the local MP, with only one lead bidder if the project involves several overlapping local areas represented by several MPs. The MP is supposed to prioritise bids as local areas are strongly advised to present only one bid. The amount that can be allocated per bidder is capped: £20 million. In the case of high-value transport projects, for instance, local areas are encouraged to get together to present a common bid, in which case they can obtain up to £50 million.³² As noted previously, the fund will set aside at least £800 million of its £4.8 billion over four years for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with at least 9% of total UK allocations allocated to them in the first round of bidding.³³ Using an index that takes into account need for economic recovery and growth, need for improved transport connectivity and need for regeneration, local areas have been placed into different categories. Category 1 is identified as that with the highest levels of need³⁴ therefore having the most chances of being allocated funds in the first round of bidding. This does not mean, however, that a category 3 bidder cannot be successful, the aim being for the Government to be able to say that wealthier areas with very good bids are not excluded from the whole project. Finally, to help bidders build their project, a flat amount of £125,000 in capacity funding will be allocated to all those who claim.³⁵
- 14 Four months after the publication of the Prospectus, on 15 July 2021, Boris Johnson made an expected speech to “*define Levelling Up more closely and in advance of a white paper*”.³⁶ He explained that COVID had “*entrenched problems and deepened inequalities*” admitting that:
- Even before the pandemic began, the UK had and has a more unbalanced economy than almost all our immediate biggest competitors in Europe and more unbalanced than pretty much every major developed country and when I say unbalanced, I mean that for too many people, geography turns out to be destiny.³⁷

- 15 This unbalance affected the economies of these regions, the way people lived, their health, their life expectancy. The PM insisted that the reason for this unbalance was not lack of talent which was “*evenly spread across the country*”, but lack of opportunity. In usual Conservative language, and in a way that was reminiscent of Theresa May’s rant against New Labour a few decades earlier, Johnson explained that his Government would not reduce inequalities by “*levelling down*,” insisting: “*we don’t think you can make the poor parts of the country richer by making the rich parts poorer*”.³⁸ The Prime Minister then went on explaining that the plan was to reduce crime, build new football pitches (in a move to reduce obesity), build new hospitals, build new metro lines, bike lanes, bus and rail networks, roll out gigabit broadband, remove chewing gum and graffiti from the high streets, give every schoolchild “*a fantastic teacher*”, roll out T-levels and apprenticeships, invest in green technology and devolve power to more “*metro[politan] mayors*.” The plan therefore included a list of unrelated projects, many of which were not mentioned in the previous versions of Levelling Up. This speech moreover raised more questions than it answered and revived the doubts regarding the motives of the governments with the Prime Minister himself, in answer to a pressing question about Levelling Up, admitting: “*in all fairness, there was at least a skeleton of what to do*”.³⁹ Was Levelling Up simple communication propaganda to cement gains in traditional Labour-voting areas without losing grassroots Conservative votes? Was it the indication that the Johnson Government was One Nation indeed or, as *The Guardian’s* economics editor Larry Elliott put it: “*ha[d] shifted the Tories left on the economy*,”⁴⁰ thus emulating Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal?

One Nation Conservatism or crowd-pleasing slogan?

- 16 In the Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019, Johnson stated that there were “*parts of the country that feel left behind*,” because opportunity was not “*uniformly distributed throughout the country*”.⁴¹ The remedy he proposed was “*to close that gap – not just because it makes such obvious economic sense, but for the sake of simple social justice*,” by Levelling Up across the nation, describing his future government as the “*new One Nation Conservative Government*”. On 13 December 2019, in Downing Street, a victorious Prime Minister Johnson announced the formation of what he called a “*new One Nation Conservative Government, a people’s government*”.⁴² The Levelling Up agenda was to be the essential tool with which Johnson’s government would be “*the people’s government*,” a “*One Nation government*”. Just as Levelling Up was not a new expression, it was not the first time that Johnson was describing himself as a One Nation Conservative either, in spite of having never been a member of the One Nation Group. In April 2010, for example, he explained to the *Telegraph*:
- I’m a one-nation Tory. There is a duty on the part of the rich to the poor and to the needy, but you are not going to help people express that duty and satisfy it if you punish them fiscally so viciously that they leave this city and this country. I want London to be a competitive, dynamic place to come to work.⁴³
- 17 Paul Goodman, editor of the centre-right political blog ConservativeHome, rather ironically defined Johnson’s One Nation label as: “*a way of describing his midlands-northern focus, infrastructure-friendly, pro-NHS, migration-suspicious, tough on crime and interventionist ‘boosterism’*”.⁴⁴ Apart from the reference to migration, this is a description of Johnson’s Levelling Up agenda, namely a top-down policy or unrelated projects with

a definite focus on infrastructure and transports. And just as “uniting the country” meant “physically and literally renewing the ties that bind us together” by Levelling Up, One Nation for Johnson is to be taken literally and uniquely, as one physical nation, *i.e.* his “awesome foursome” which he meant to bind together again thanks to an “infrastructure revolution” further completing his explanation arguing: “it is free trade that has done more than anything else to lift billions out of poverty.”⁴⁵ There is not much that is truly congruent with the One Nation tradition in Johnson’s own version of the brand, unless One Nation is an easy play on words meaning the whole of the nation, *i.e.* the United-Kingdom. Indeed, Johnson’s One Nation credentials seem rather limited, lacking the social-liberal dimension often associated with the original vision as well as the pro-Europe stance adopted by leading One Nation Conservatives. Importantly however, the prefix One Nation in front of Conservatism has often been a convenient label used for political gain.⁴⁶ It is very likely to be the reason why Boris Johnson used it at a time when Britain seemed more divided than ever, because of Brexit and of the tensions it was creating both between English people and between England and its British neighbours.

- 18 The ongoing Coronavirus crisis has also exposed many of these divisions and significantly widened the social gap between those who have the economic power to see it through and those who do not. The Prime Minister’s response has been to draw a parallel with the 2008 crisis, explaining that the way it was tackled, namely with austerity policies, had caused inequalities to become even more entrenched,⁴⁷ emphasizing that his government would not repeat his predecessor’s mistakes. Johnson pledged to address the social issue of inequality by Levelling Up “for the sake of simple social justice”⁴⁸ thus using a terminology often associated with the progressive left. However, the insistence on place-based inequality, left-behind regions, coastal communities, etc. rather than individual inequality is an indication that the government is not veering left on social issues. Levelling Up is not about helping people, it is about helping them help themselves by providing them with “a better education” and a better environment, by improving infrastructure and connectivity in regions with low productivity in the hope that local residents can benefit from the same opportunities – particularly job opportunities – as those that arguably exist in better off regions.
- 19 “Opportunity” is the keyword in both the government’s Levelling Up agenda and One Nation Conservatism. Indeed, it is necessary to specify that One Nation Conservatism is not about one nation of equal individuals. From Disraeli to Johnson, Conservatives have never believed in equality between individuals and do not support tax-and-spend policies meant to spur the development of a more socially egalitarian society. In fact, egalitarianism is seen as the antithesis to individual freedom therefore to a liberal democracy. In 1835, Disraeli explained: “The basis of English society is Equality. But here let us distinguish: there are two kinds of equality; there is the equality that levels and destroys, and the equality that elevates and creates...”⁴⁹ A seminal speech announcing Levelling Up? In 1975, Margaret Thatcher declared: “We are all unequal. No one, thank heavens, is like anyone else, however much the Socialists may pretend otherwise”.⁵⁰ In 2010, Theresa May stated:
- But even as we increase equality of opportunity, some people will always do better than others. And, certainly, I do not believe in a world where everybody gets the same out of life, regardless of what they put in. That is why no government should try to ensure equal outcomes for everyone.⁵¹
- 20 In his style, Johnson epitomised the Conservative definition of equality in 2013 when he argued: “Whatever you may think of the value of IQ tests, it is surely relevant to a conversation

about equality that as many as 16 per cent of our species have an IQ below 85, while about 2 per cent have an IQ above 130". He further developed this idea, explaining: "I don't believe that economic equality is possible; indeed, some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses".⁵² One of the differences between One Nation Conservatives and the more right-wing Conservatives, however, is the belief that to preserve social harmony is an important role for the government.⁵³ Johnson's adoption of the divisive rhetoric of the Thatcher era and his insistence on inequality being an engine of economic growth, is an indication that, at least in 2013, he was neither a One Nation Tory nor, for that matter, likely to be a strong proponent of social justice, if social justice is not just an empty label used to attract "left-behind" voters. When Mayor of London, Johnson was a neoliberal, free-market Conservative.

- 21 The problem with Boris Johnson, however, is that he is difficult to pin-point over time, having the tendency to adapt his message to the circumstances. He has often changed his mind, at least on the face of it. Levelling Up is definitely one of those commitments that, because of its ubiquitous nature, is difficult to categorise. For example, the degree of government intervention involved in setting up criteria, assessing and selecting bids and, eventually, distributing – or redistributing – resources in some areas rather than others, is not congruent with the laissez-faire policies of a purely neo-liberal, free market, agenda. And indeed, the HM Treasury's *Spending Review* of 2020 does not sit comfortably with more right-wing, neoliberal Conservative principles. Nor does the October 2021 one, for that matter. Such degree of economic intervention and spending sets the Johnson government apart, at least from its recent predecessors' and definitely indicates a shift away from a neoliberal 'small state' vision. So does the government's shift regarding tax-and-spend policies. On 7 September 2021, the government announced a £12 billion-a-year tax rise including a 1.25 percentage point increase in national insurance contributions for both employers and employees in the whole of the UK,⁵⁴ thus breaking the pledge made in the 2019 manifesto not to raise national insurance.⁵⁵ The decision prompted immediate response from both Conservative MPs and the corporate world, with opponents describing the decision as "un-Conservative," describing the increase as a "job tax"⁵⁶ and Tory donors threatening to turn off the funding taps.⁵⁷ Rebel MPs argued that this decision would trigger a Tory rebellion. A rebellion that did not actually materialise since it was voted by 319 to 248. Admittedly, this was indeed quite an un-Conservative gamble at least for a 21st-century Conservative Party. However, in parallel, the government also announced that the £20-a-week increase to Universal Credit introduced at the height of the pandemic would end by 6 October 2021. Although this increase was always temporary, it was originally set to last until April 2022. Its abrupt end shortly before the winter may mean added hardship for those struggling to pay the bills in every pocket of poverty across the UK. This perhaps comes as a contradiction given that the same week these announcements were made, the Cabinet was reshuffled to, amongst other reasons, enable the government's Levelling Up agenda to finally pick up.
- 22 Boris Johnson seems to be an expert at muddying the waters in order to escape any label – maybe apart from that of populist. As already mentioned, Levelling Up is neither a new political slogan nor one that was borrowed from the Labour Party's playbook for the sole purpose of attracting Labour voters. It has been used on and off by all political parties since the nineteenth century, probably because of the ambiguous nature of the term as well as because of its positive undertones. Levelling Up is a tool used to unite,

or re-unite, the nation, and indeed four nations, around a common goal which is to bring left-behind, underfunded and economically depressed regions up to the level of the more dynamic, economically competitive South East and London. As such, this is a means for Johnson to reach out to Labour heartlands. However, Levelling Up also speaks to Conservatives about equality of opportunity and social mobility. And by insisting on the fact that rural and coastal communities also need Levelling Up, Boris Johnson strikes in more traditionally Conservative areas thus giving the impression that Levelling Up, in the end, is a bipartisan policy. This very bipartisan, crowd-pleasing aspect of Levelling Up definitely gives the policy a populist colour. However, it may also be its biggest liability and is a source of concern given that over the two years between the announcement of Levelling Up and its being set up, the PM – who is known for his lack of message discipline – made several speeches that, each time, seemed to introduce new elements, some of which were difficult to add to the Levelling Up puzzle. The July 2021 speech is a case in point in this instance with the Prime Minister throwing education, roads, broadband, football pitches, graffiti, and the fight against obesity in the same pot and inevitably opening himself to accusations of lack of substance. Attacks to which, as we have already seen, he responded in a less than convincing manner, which prompted disgruntled Dominic Cummings to comment that it was a “*crap speech supporting crap slogans*”.⁵⁸

- 23 Nevertheless, this lack of direction is not surprising. It fundamentally stems from the lack of coherence of an inherently flawed project. The set of metrics used to determine which areas need Levelling Up, only measures the economic output of these areas. The economic circumstances of their residents, such as income deprivation, for example, are not included. What this means is that some places with high productivity but low-income residents are left out, on account of the fact that the jobs are not necessarily done by local people. Conversely, some areas with low productivity but high-income residents who commute to work elsewhere are priority areas. Eventually, the residents of left-behind communities who voted Conservative for the first time may not reap the benefits of Levelling Up and the left-behind residents of wealthy areas may also feel as abandoned as ever because Levelling Up is not about people, it is about places. Furthermore, the fact that bids are competitive in nature and supposed to be presented by the local MP is also controversial. This means that MPs who have a direct access to the Government and the former MHCLG may be at an advantage. This leaves the process open to the problem of possible favouritism and/or political expediency not only regarding the ranking of local areas by priority but also regarding the selection of the bids themselves. And indeed, when the criteria, procedures and lists of local authorities by priority zones were eventually presented in the Levelling Up Prospectus published in March 2021, accusations of blatant favouritism towards Conservative seats were made. *The Financial Times*, hardly a left-wing paper, reported that “14 areas that were wealthier than average ranked in the most needy category (category 1) and all had at least one Conservative MP”.⁵⁹ They concluded: “There are 345 Conservative and 179 Labour MPs in England. Of the 93 local authorities in priority one, 51 have just Conservative MPs, 16 Labour and 26 both”.⁶⁰ Opposition leader, Keir Starmer, charged the Johnson Government with “*Pork barrel politics*”⁶¹ and indeed, it is noticeable that many Government ministers’ constituencies were ranked in the priority category for allocation of fund, including Robert Jenrick’s, the former Communities Secretary.⁶² This competitive nature also says nothing about the future of left-behind communities whose bids are rejected thus leaving them even more left-behind.

24 Finally, the lack of coherence can be summarised in the following question: is Levelling Up a social project or is it a political one? Levelling Up has indeed caused a lot of controversy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which should benefit from £800 million of the £4.8 billion allocated to the fund. They always appear in a separate category in the Prospectus. This may, on the face of it, indicate that their separate political identities are considered. However, it is clear that the allocation of the fund rests solely with the central Government in London and the former MHCLG, the prospectus merely specifying that the Scottish and Welsh Territorial Offices will be consulted in the assessment of relevant bids. Furthermore, in order for the British Government to be able to directly finance such projects in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – thus streamlining the devolved governments of the aforementioned countries – the UK Internal Market Act was enacted in December 2020. This piece of legislation, that was described by the British government as necessary to preserve the territorial integrity of the UK post-Brexit, was decried as a power grab by both the Welsh and Scottish governments. Mark Drakeford, the First Minister of Wales, described Levelling Up as “*a plan for Wales without Wales,*” adding that the UK Government was trying to chip away at the Senedd’s powers.⁶³ The Scottish National Party accused Westminster of “*naked power grab*” over levelling-up plans.⁶⁴ Paradoxically, devolution sits at the heart of the Government’s plan to level up and the White paper that is expected in early 2022.⁶⁵ Alister Jack, Secretary of State for Scotland, commented about Levelling Up: “*Scotland has two governments,*” further adding, however, that direct funding of councils was “*real devolution*”. Michael Gove, the former Minister for the cabinet Office and one of the architects of the UK Internal Market Bill, is the newly appointed Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations. He is the most notorious Scotsman in Johnson’s Government and a strong proponent of the Union. Gove’s appointment as Levelling Up Secretary seems to be an indication that Levelling Up is part of a plan to keep Scotland within the Union at a time when Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP are pushing for another Scottish independence referendum (but might be weakened by Alex Salmond’s fierce campaigning against the First Minister).

Conclusion

25 Levelling Up is not the first time a 21st-century Conservative Government attempted to address the issue of entrenched inequalities in Britain’s society, a society also divided physically or geographically with regions that seem much wealthier, more competitive and productive than others. As early as the 1960s, Harold Macmillan was already showing some concern regarding: “*the imbalance between south and north – between ‘rich’ areas and the ‘poor’ regions*”.⁶⁶ In 1998, Tony Blair oversaw the creation of the Regional Development Agencies. More recently, on becoming leader of the Conservative Party in 2005, David Cameron presented his brand of Conservatism as compassionate and his party as one that was deeply concerned with inequalities, poverty, and the Big Society. The Big Society failed and was replaced by a new initiative launched in 2015, *i.e.* the Northern Powerhouse from which Levelling Up borrows most of its focus on infrastructure and productivity. It is of course impossible to compare the Northern Powerhouse and Levelling Up as the former never really materialised and the latter has not really started yet. Obviously, Brexit so shortly followed by the pandemic have

meant that Johnson's Governments have had to postpone most of their agenda, hence the two years during which Levelling Up was announced and launched several times without really coming into existence. Two years that may well reinforce the most pessimist in contending that there is no real reason why Johnson would succeed where all his predecessors failed.

- 26 The Cabinet reshuffle of September 2021 is said to have been triggered by the Prime Minister's desire to form a more effective government, one that can deliver the promises of 2019. However, his own very poor performance in the Levelling-up speech of July 2021 and his acknowledging that the government only has the "*skeleton of what to do*" cannot be brushed aside as just another mishap. The impression is that, with all the inequality issues – and devolution – clustering under the phrase "Levelling Up", it is a catch-all policy designed to include all the social, structural, economic, cultural, and political problems of the so-called left-behind areas as if they were equivalent. Those who argue against Levelling Up – amongst them senior Conservative figures such as Michael Heseltine – often point to its lack of coherence, lack of direction, lack of coordination, and, eventually, lack of measurement for evaluating progress. The result is that, just as the public never bought Cameron's Big Society, they do not seem to understand Johnson's Levelling Up any better. A poll carried out by YouGov in the early days of Levelling Up revealed that "*only 33% of people knew what it meant; 24% had heard it but felt unsure of what it meant; 12% had heard of it but had 'no idea' what it meant, and 31% had never heard of it at all*".⁶⁷ Can the rebranding of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (LUHC), with Michael Gove as the department's new secretary of state change people's perception? Undoubtedly, the Prime Minister now seems very keen to advance the Levelling Up agenda which Michael Gove described as "*the defining mission of this government*" interestingly combining Levelling Up and One Nation again to explain that people:

[V]oted for a new Government.....this PEOPLE'S Government.....to make opportunity more EQUAL. And that social justice mission is a deeply CONSERVATIVE mission. Making opportunity more equal is what drove Disraeli to want to bridge the divide between two nations..... the rich and the poor. Making opportunity more equal is what Margaret Thatcher did when she allowed working people to buy their own homes.⁶⁸

- 27 However, the tensions set out in this article both about both One Nation Toryism and Levelling Up remain. Is there a real thrust towards equality, a will to close the gap or is Levelling Up business as usual dressed up in crowd-pleasing rhetoric? Even so, is it possible to please everyone? Arguably, the task is monumental and the means rather inadequate. In addition, the biggest failing of Levelling Up may yet be in the making. A recent YouGov poll⁶⁹ carried out in collaboration with the Cambridge-University-based Bennet Institute, revealed that "*more than half of people across England (53%) think the government's 'Levelling Up' strategy will either make no difference locally or result in less money for their area*" with differences of perception between people in the South East and London and residents of the Midlands and North: "*47% of people in London and the South East think 'Levelling Up' will mean less government investment in their area*" and "*41% [in the Midlands and the North] believe their local area will see more money as a result*".⁷⁰ Ultimately, what this poll also reveals is the perception that Boris Johnson is pitting red-wall seats (Midlands and North) against traditional Tory ones (South East), with traditional Tory voters in the South East believing that the government is favouring the North over

them and that this might mean less money for their local areas. With Levelling Up, the Prime Minister's supposedly bipartisan approach may definitely be a risky one, if traditional Tory voters feel alienated and if there are no visible results in the short term in the Midlands and the North.

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NOTES

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ABSTRACTS

Presented as an essential aspect of the Conservative Government's agenda, Boris Johnson's Levelling Up policy was announced several times between July 2019 and the creation of a Levelling Up Department in September 2021. Notwithstanding the pandemic's impact on the Government's capacity to implement its political agenda, for almost two years, Levelling Up remained a vague policy with many broad and sometimes ill-matched projects put together under a heading that increasingly sounded like an empty electoral slogan. To quote but a few of the proposals made in that lapse of time, Levelling Up was to unite the country by "bringing opportunity and wealth in every corner of the United Kingdom", it would restore "local pride", "answer the plea of the forgotten people and the left-behind towns", "erase deep inequalities", provide "a beautiful education" to all schoolchildren, "unleash Britain's productive power" and enhance devolution: in a nutshell, widespread government intervention to "build back better" with a Roosevelt-style New Deal. This was a rather novel commitment for a contemporary Conservative Prime Minister. Was Levelling Up just a crowd-pleasing mantra or was it a genuine commitment to end austerity and to give a new, One Nation, direction to the Conservative government? This paper examines the context in which the Conservative Party deployed its Levelling-Up agenda and what policy programme underpins it. It then considers Levelling Up in the broader context of Boris Johnson's One Nation pledge and One Nation Toryism in general.

Présenté comme un programme phare du gouvernement conservateur constitué en juillet 2019, le *Levelling Up* (nivellement par le haut), a été lancé à plusieurs reprises avant que la création, en septembre 2021, d'un ministère du *Levelling Up* n'augure un vrai départ. La pandémie a inévitablement eu un impact sur la politique générale du gouvernement. Il n'en reste pas moins que pendant pratiquement deux ans, le *Levelling Up* en est resté au stade de projet, constitué de grandes lignes ambitieuses mais peu cohérentes. A grand renfort de slogans, le gouvernement promet beaucoup, proposant « d'unir le pays en créant des opportunités et de la richesse aux quatre coins du Royaume-Uni », de « restaurer la fierté au niveau local », de « répondre aux supplications des laissés pour compte et des villes abandonnées », de « combler les profondes inégalités », de fournir une « superbe éducation à tous les élèves », de « libérer le pouvoir productif de la Grande-Bretagne » et d'optimiser la dévolution. Johnson promet une augmentation importante – et pour le moins surprenante pour un conservateur contemporain – de l'intervention de l'État afin de « reconstruire mieux » : un New Deal dans la lignée de celui de F.D. Roosevelt. Simple mantra pour apaiser les foules ou réel engagement à tourner la page de l'austérité et à donner une nouvelle ligne, plus proche du conservatisme One Nation, au gouvernement ? Cet article revient sur le contexte qui a précédé l'annonce du *Levelling Up* et explique en quoi ce programme consiste avant d'être évalué à l'aune du *One Nation Toryism* et de la promesse de Boris Johnson d'être le chef d'un gouvernement *One Nation*, un gouvernement pour le peuple.

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