

## UK Project Management Round Up



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### INTRODUCTION

Here we are in a new decade and it is not free from controversy as decades are apparently a modern construct – more of this shortly. The big news here is that UK has survived another General Election so we need to look at what we can expect in terms of projects, portfolios and programmes from a national Government that has a majority in the house. There are some internal projects to look at and some random stuff that caught my eye over the holiday season. So let's get the nasty stuff out of the way first and start with the political situation here in UK.

### POLITICAL SCENE

This is good news for some and bad for others as the results were unexpected and how you view this outcome depends on your political orientation. It is rarely possible to forecast numbers in election results, a point that many involved with projects would do well to remember. The reason for this election inaccuracy is that forecasts are compiled from how voters say they will vote – and many resent the intrusion of pollsters and so do not report accurately. Does this sound familiar to any project managers out there?

Anyhow, come the day after, the results looked like this:

Party	Seats won	Change from 2017
Conservative	365	+47
Labour	203	-39
Scottish Nationalist	48	+13
Liberal	11	-1
Green	1	0
Others	22	0

For many voters, it was a question of voting for the least worst candidate. Magic Grandad, the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, led his party to its worst result since 1935, losing seats that had never been held by a Conservative since the seat was established, which must say something about the credibility of what was a largely Marxist manifesto. Similarly, many doubted the loyalty of their leader who has been a vocal supporter of both the IRA and various lost causes in South America.

The Liberal Democrats lost their leader who campaigned on a ticket to abolish BREXIT, thus ignoring the majority who had voted in favour some 3 years ago. So no real surprise there. We had a choice between the Liberals who proposed to ignore a democratic vote, the Conservative threatening a "No-Deal" BREXIT and the Labour party who were not entirely sure what they stood for but they would not support a Conservative push for exit.

Now we need to live with the consequences...

### **ELECTION CONSEQUENCES**

Now the rain has eased, threats of floods receded and the holiday season almost over (at the time of writing) the Great British Public (GBP) can take a longer and more dispassionate view of the election results and what they mean. GBP is realistic enough to know that the reality of election manifesto is likely to be less than the Utopian offering before the election. Nonetheless, some promises seem likely to be kept.

One of the big-ticket items is a super defence agency to be located in the North of England. This would benefit from Highspeed 2 (HS2), more of which later, and two prospects have emerged to level up investment outside the so-called "golden Triangle" of London, Oxford and Cambridge. The first is a new "advanced research projects agency" with £800 million to play with. This might seem a lot of dosh to the man in the street but is not a lot in terms of Defence research. Still, it is a start and the PM has said the Government will double research and development spending to £18 billion within five years in a "new wave of economic growth" after Brexit. *The Times* reported a government source as saying: "The will is there to ensure that we think beyond Oxford, Cambridge and London when we site these new bodies." Rumour has it that the new Agency might be modelled on the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, better known as DARPA. It is thought to be responsible for the development of GPS, stealth aircraft and, of course, its renown DARPANET – an early form of internet. The new agency provides an agile basis for investment, innovation and exploitation of promising technology.

The Government has also let it be known that there is a proposal "to rip up government investment rules". Under this plan, ministers would be able to reassess how value for money is calculated across a range of infrastructure projects, as well as business and scientific development. Decision-making would focus on improving wellbeing or narrowing the productivity gap between North and South and less on national economic growth. It seems a start has been made with the news that the troubled Northern Rail contract is to be terminated over concerns about its "nightmare" performance.



Transport Secretary **Graham Shapps** has said the franchise will be terminated after nearly four years of complaints. The Office of Rail and Road figures show that just 55.6% of Northern trains arrived at stations within one minute of the timetable in the 12 months to the start of December. Speaking at the end of December, *Shapps* said that the contract, currently held by Arriva, a German-owned consortium, would be “brought

to an end”, adding that “frustrated commuters will not have to wait long”. How this will be done is not yet clear, but one option is to re-nationalise the franchise as they did on the east coast mainline after stripping Virgin East Coast of its contract 18 months ago. However, this option is not so simple since Northern operates nearly 480 stations — far more than any other rail company — and carried 101.3 million passengers last year. There are other project issues on Northern linked to the introduction of new trains. Looks a good project for someone!

It is not all up-side under the new Government as plans to abandon the third runway at Heathrow and a £3.5 billion project for an expressway between Oxford and Cambridge have been in the headlines post-election. Both schemes are controversial and there is little confidence in the quality of the estimates (remember the problems with forecasting election results?). Both are challenged on environmental grounds. The road scheme attracts comparison with the pre-proposal for the £1.4 billion M4 relief road south of Newport which was scrapped amid concerns about costs and environmental impact. There have also been questions over the proposed road tunnel under Stonehenge, which will cost up to £2.4 billion.

One of the major talking points in post-election Britain is *Dominic Cummings*, the Prime Minister’s chief adviser, and his plans for a radical overhaul of the Civil Service. The topic was trailed extensively in the run up to the election so further rumors are perhaps to be expected but speculation in the broadsheets continues. Most recently, Cummings has been warned that his proposals risk “destabilising” the civil service and taking “several steps backwards” according to reports in *The Times*. This comes on the back of claims that he is seeking “weirdos and misfits” to work with him on radical ideas as he set out plans to transform the way the government is run. This includes the merger or reconfiguration of several departments. Up to a third of the cabinet could be sacked in a post-Brexit reshuffle in February. *Rachel Wolf*, who co-wrote the Tory manifesto, said recently that the civil service was “woefully unprepared” for the scale of changes planned by Mr Johnson and his chief adviser. Widely publicised plans to merge government departments are only a “tiny fraction” of changes being planned, she wrote in *The Daily Telegraph*.

Ms Wolf also attacked a “merry-go-round” which frowns on officials staying in a job longer than 18 months and scorns technical expertise. “This has catastrophic effects. It ensures the ‘Peter Principle’ — where everyone rises to their position of incompetence — is ever-present. It kills institutional memory and expertise. It allows officials an escape from accountability,” she wrote. “Instead, I would expect competent officials to be kept on projects where they know the background. I would also expect them to be rewarded and held accountable to a much greater degree. All this implies a rethink of incentives, numbers, and pay.”

Other reports cite a need for more and better trained project managers in the Civil Service. This despite the requirement for Senior Responsible Officers (the equivalent to Project Sponsors in industry) to successfully complete the highly regarded Saïd Business School MSc in Project Management. Those with long memories will recall the Sainted Tony Blair’s address to the SDA back in 2004 when he called for fewer generalists and more specialists – and specifically project management specialists – in the Civil Service. What goes around comes around.

And so we come to High Speed 2 (HS2). We still await the Oakervee Report into the long term viability of the programme but already we have dissenting view of the report by Lord Berkeley who has, it seems, declined to sign the main report on the grounds that it is “fiddling” the numbers to let the high-speed rail project go ahead. Press reports claim that he is to give ministers his own report, as he thinks the review will exaggerate HS2’s benefits by assuming 18 trains an hour – a feat not managed by any high-speed service in the world – although the report says 14 is more realistic.



“They have done their benefit cost analysis on 18 trains every hour. That cannot be operated by any railway in the world at the moment,” said Berkeley. “The more trains you run, the bigger benefit you get, but if you can’t run the trains, you are fiddling the figures.”

In his report, Douglas Oakervee, a former HS2 chairman, has endorsed the scheme despite revising down the benefits. These are expected to be between £1.30 and £1.50 for every £1 spent, compared with earlier claims of £2.30 – remember the earlier comment about accuracy of estimates?

The PM is known to be sceptical of the benefits of HS2 and may well give more weight to the arguments about the need for the new lines. He may be more supportive of an alternative approach to improve existing lines, particularly in northern England and the Midlands. He may also appreciate Berkeley's comments: "The average worker in the north or the Midlands needs a better commuter service that they can use daily. It's an awful service at the moment and it needs investment.

"I think it should be the same level of investment as the southeast has had over the years, and that doesn't need HS2. If the government wants to spend money on both, then that's fine."

This last comment seems to fit with the notions about "tearing up the rule book" mentioned earlier.

## **BREXIT**

I think we have all had enough of BREXIT for a while so I will skip the latest shenanigans as everything is still up in the air and other priorities have taken precedence. As Parliament returns with the new crop of Members this week, matters will turn back to the topic and we can report, hopefully with a little more accuracy, next month.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

I have two snippets on which to close this report. The first is a very serious problem for the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and the second relates to artificial intelligence; and both are clearly project related. MI6 has a potential problem: the plans for their site in London were "misplaced" by the Contractor. Some 100 classified plans detailing the layout of the building, possibly including such sensitive data as the location of alarms, electrical cabling, desking arrangements and office occupation. Most of the missing documents have been found but the concern remains that they may have been copied or fallen into the hands of the unfriendly. The contractors have been sacked...

And finally, Artificial Intelligence. We all know our jobs are under threat by AI but not quite how or what limits there might be so this should come as a wake-up call. Prominent scientists have warned that a national investigation is needed into technology that can connect the human mind to computers. These neural interfaces are expected to transform fields such as medicine and analytics. Typical examples, now available, include control of prosthetic limbs although this is still at an early stage of development. The Royal Society warns the field must not get out of control and the role of large technology companies defined. Unintended consequences come to mind here. At the same time, the Chief of the Defence Staff warned that AI weaponry is

developing so rapidly that future humans may have limited control over how battles are fought. This raises all sorts of ethical and moral basis on the conduct of conflict. This puts President Trump's newly announced Space Force into context.

What, you might wonder, has this to do with project managers? Well, it will bring us into the firing line on the ethics of our work. The consequences of what we do is our responsibility as well as that of the project owners so we will need to understand just what we are getting ourselves into. A little like the PMs at Volkswagen Audi Group and the software that defeated environmental measurements?

And finally, I return to the troubling issue of "decades". I, like many of you I suspect, have been happily using the term "decade" to indicate a 10-year period starting in a year zero – think 1990 or 1870. The woke readers of a national newspaper have claimed I am wrong to do so as no one knows when a decade should start. As our Queen stated that the 2020s would be an exciting period, I shall follow her example so for me, the current decade began on 1 Jan 2020 and will conclude on 31 Dec 2029. Having resolved this conundrum, I shall leave you to ponder how we shall manage the moral challenges that AI will bring to projects. Enjoy the new decade!

## About the Author



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