

Sound the Crime Klaxon!

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

News that the [UK Government intended to introduce new measures to “crack down” on crime](#), including the use of high-viz jacketed chain gangs served notice of the governing Tories’ intent to try and shift the political agenda back on to a domestic ground that they think works for them (not to mention Priti Patel’s own possible leadership ambitions post-Boris).

After the vacuous nostrums of Johnson’s “levelling up” speech, featuring that memorable quip “the ketchup of catch-up” but nothing of actual substance, here was an attempt by the UK Government to reset the agenda on to more comfortable terrain and try and address recent poll-slumps after the confusion surrounding the “Freedom Day” relaxation of Covid-19 legal restrictions. Indeed, with Labour trailing the Tories by only 4% (34% to 38%) according to [YouGov’s](#) July 20-21 poll of Westminster voting intentions, nervousness in the Government ranks can only be increasing.

However, is this really comfortable ground for the Tories? After all, a message of ‘Law and Order’ would at the very least rely on the support of the police and the justice system. However, if this response from Mr John Apter, the Chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales contained in a letter to Mr Johnson is any guide:

“We don’t need old ideas presented as new; we need genuine investment for the whole of the criminal justice system and genuine consultation over new ideas. Without that, this is just another ill-thought-out initiative.

Police officers are sick of gimmicks. Sick of underfunding. Sick of mixed messaging putting police at risk. Sick of Government contempt for police. It’s time for a total reset.’

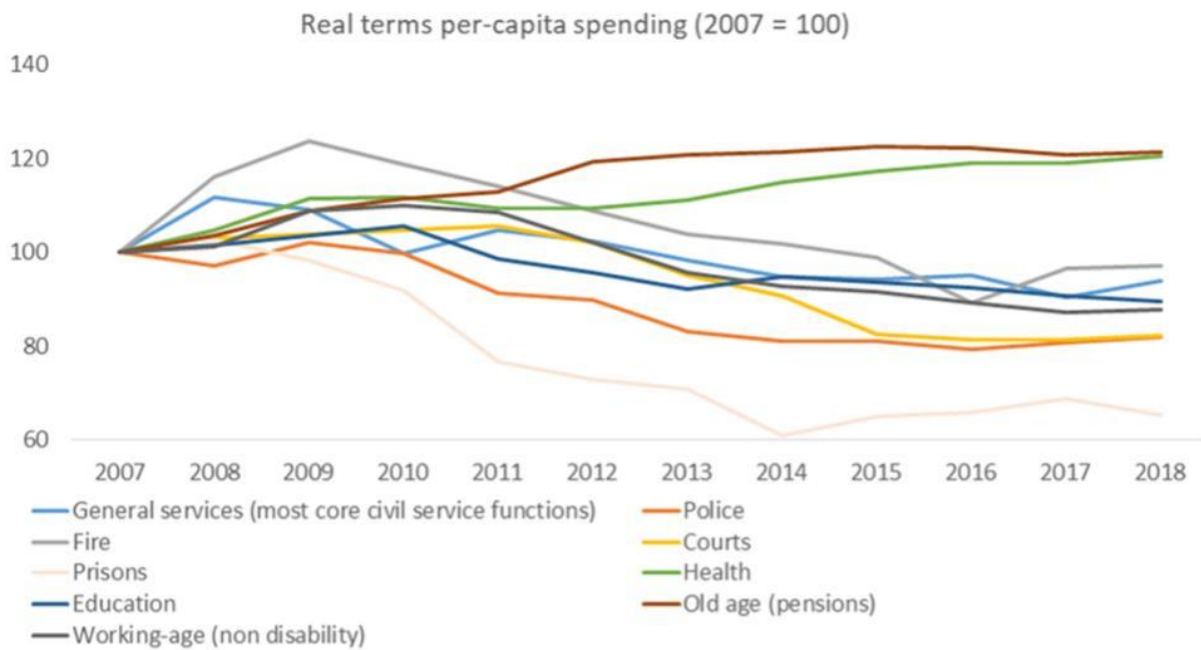
Then they have an uphill struggle, coming on top of a recent vote of No Confidence in Miss Patel (even more remarkable that these comments were reported verbatim in the [Conservative-supporting Daily Mail](#)). Indeed, it is worth pausing to note the antagonism between the Government and a group that would traditionally have been regarded as a core constituency.

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However, this shouldn’t be surprising. Mr Apter’s comments on “genuine investment for the whole of the criminal justice system” go beyond the well-covered cut to police numbers by the Conservatives over the past ten years and point to their chronic underfunding of the entire legal system – a legacy of the austerity cutbacks pursued by Johnson’s Tory predecessors.

As the chart below demonstrates, the impact of austerity has been severe on every public spending area outside of the ring-fenced NHS (which is still suffering in real terms from increased demand and the impact of Covid-19) and the sacrosanct old-age pension. The police, the courts and prisons have all suffered particularly severe cutbacks. As the Treasury look to further claw back government spending as we emerge from the pandemic, the knock-on effects to public service delivery and societal cohesion will only increase.



Source: Office for National Statistics.

In this context, a few billion pounds spent here and there over the coming months under the “Beating Crime Plan” or “Levelling Up” will not come anywhere near to making up for the deliberate neglect over the previous ten years.

And these cuts are having real impacts on those vulnerable individuals (e.g., children) most reliant on an underfunded courts system, as Polly Toynbee, recently writing in the Guardian documented the case of a four year-old alleged victim of sexual abuse, who could have to wait for up to four years before their case reaches court. With some 57,000 cases waiting for crown court sessions, and over 450,000 waiting for a magistrate’s court in May this year, as Toynbee notes, “[justice delayed is justice denied](#)” for an increasing number of people. Indeed.

That these inequalities display sharp regional disparities only further adds to their preponderant impact on already impoverished individuals and communities. Which brings me back to Boris Johnson’s bombast on “levelling up” (and in particular his citing of the German experience in addressing the East-West divide).

If this Westminster Government were actually serious about genuine levelling-up then that would call for a serious conversation around transferring income between the better-off parts of the UK and the so-called ‘[left behind](#)’ areas (to which may be added a whole debate around “meaningful devolution of power and resources away from Westminster). I have argued elsewhere about the merits of a solidarity tax on [better off](#) areas, but the German experience is particularly apposite in this regard.

Following the reunification of Germany, over 20 years well in excess of €200bn was transferred to the former East Germany by the solidarity tax. For most of its life, this tax effectively represented a surcharge of over 5% on most taxable income. (see Paterson, W. E. (2013). *Solidarity versus Sovereignty: The British View*. In K. Brummer & H. Pehle (Eds.), *Analysen nationaler und supranationaler Politik: Festschrift für Roland Sturm* (pp. 221-228). Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich.) In the UK this could take the form of the imposition of a Land Value Tax that would preponderantly affect the South of England. Scaled for the UK’s economy, that’s very roughly the

equivalent of £12bn every single year for the next 30 years – a total of £360,000,000,000. This is the kind of order of magnitude about which we must be talking.

Given that such measures would antagonise a large part of the UK Government's supporter base, don't expect any movement in this direction any time soon. Little wonder then that the Tories continue to trump the mantra around Law and Order. Expect the crime klaxon to be sounding for some time yet...