

# So Lucky?

**By Dr Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University**

The title of this blog is based on the song of the same name from 1981 album, *Magic, Murder and the Weather* from seminal post-punk Manchester band Magazine. As we're discovering, with resonance to the, not correct, belief that Napoleon selected generals on the basis of their apparent luck, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, known as a risk-taker, seems to possess this questionable 'attribute'.

Having presided over a dreadful rate of death in the UK, ranking among the worst countries in the world, as well as being in charge when the economy tanked, he'll take as much credit as possible for the success that the vaccine roll-out is achieving. My chapter, 'Does Vaccination offer Johnson a Way out of the Pandemic?', published in [Pandemic, A Year of Mistakes?](#) provides a distillation of the way in which the procurement of vaccines provides all of us with hope.

Regardless of whatever we may think of Johnson or the decisions he has taken in his career as a journalist and politician – not to mention his many misdemeanours and indiscretions – our collective future depends on the success of the vaccine. Though plaudits should actually be given to former venture capitalist Kate Bingham will matter little. It was Johnson who appointed her last May to be chair of the UK vaccine taskforce with, it seems, a pretty 'free hand' to make the critical decisions as to which companies the UK should invest in for vaccines then under development but with no guarantees of production.

A [Guardian](#) article, 'Kate Bingham: well-connected but under-fire UK vaccines chief' includes the following off-the-record quote from a 'Whitehall source' which, it may be argued, suggests that Johnson and Bingham share many character traits, "She is used to doing things quickly and without bureaucratic bullshit. But she also doesn't tell people at all times what she is up to. It means that others are having to pick up the pieces behind her."

Recent weeks have shown that vaccines are not only vital to the ability of this, and every other country, to escape the ongoing cruse that is Covid-19, but to, once again, derail relationships between this country and the EU. Some cynically suggest that the 'vaccine war' crisis was a useful distraction from the many stories emerging of companies suffering the impact of increased bureaucracy resulting from the end of the transition period following this country's departure from the EU.

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The basis of the UK's eventual departure from the EU, just over a year ago, was largely based on a document that'd been put together by officials working under Johnson's predecessor Theresa May. That it included the majority of provisions currently proving so difficult would have been obvious to Johnson if he'd bothered to immerse himself in appreciating the contents.

However, as many who've worked with Johnson over the years attest, reading documents forming the basis of crucial decisions is not something he dedicates a great deal of time to. Though we'll wait many years to discover the truth, perceived wisdom is that Johnson, having been instrumental in undermining May because of her Withdrawal Agreement and support for the 'backstop', having assumed leadership of the Conservative Party, was willing to do anything to "Get Brexit Done".

Problems with goods from GB to the EU, either across the English Channel or Irish Sea, is hardly a revelation. Detractors of Brexit might be forgiven for exclaiming "We told you this would happen!" Brexiters, on the other hand, regard any confusion and chaos to be due to Johnson's lack of attention to detail and naive egotism in completing what May could not. They may see an opportunity to put pressure on him in to ditch any continuing relationship with the EU.

Though some finessing may be possible, Johnson will be aware that attempts to renegotiate major aspects of terms of the UK's departure from the EU will be rebuffed. In Europe there is a sense that, for the immediate future, this is finished business. There are more important things to concentrate on for all concerned; most especially economic recovery following the pandemic.

Assuming the roll-out of the vaccination programme remains as successful as it's been so far, the emergence of variants of the virus notwithstanding, the UK may be able to look forward to return to normality sooner than the rest of Europe. However, this is where Johnson's luck may need to hold if he is to maintain his party's lead over Labour and the hope of leading it into the next general election.

Unemployment is likely to rise once the furlough scheme ends at the end of April. Unemployment is certain to rise.

The Office for Budget Responsibility predict that by the summer unemployment will be 7.5%, twice as high as this time last year. This would mean 2.6 million people out of work which adding urgency to the task of job creation. Equally worryingly, the number of those claiming benefit, but not necessarily out of work, increased by 113.2% since March 2020.

Though the vaccine may allow parts of the economy to open once again, and there's talk about a post-pandemic bounce, it's questionable whether this will be sufficient to achieve the number of jobs required to address increasing joblessness and underemployment. There'll be no rapid return to the sort of normality.

Analysis by [The Guardian](#) shows that the greatest loss of jobs has been among younger workers employed in those sectors most negatively affected by lockdown; hospitality, leisure and the arts. Restrictions on large gatherings will continue and, given the announcement on those visiting the UK from "[33 red list countries](#)" by health secretary Matt Hancock, tourism will be problematic for the foreseeable future.

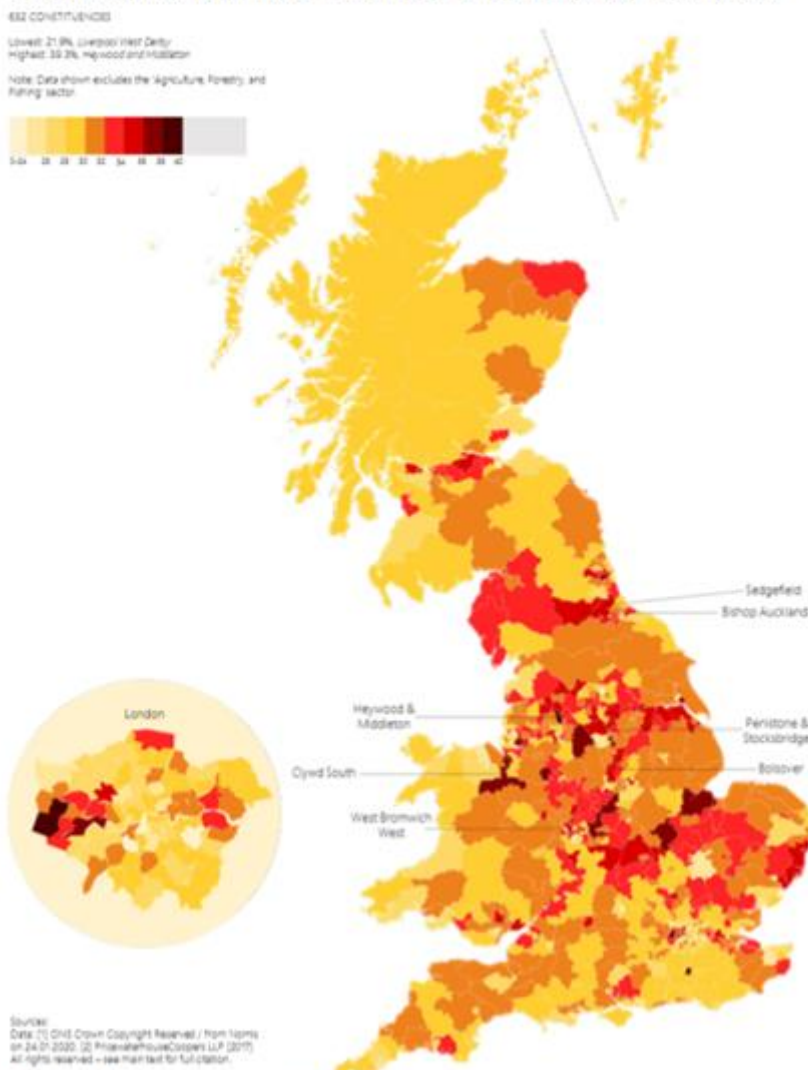
As many commentators are pointing out, the full effects of Brexit are yet to be seen and, potentially, may result in the loss of jobs in manufacturing in so called former '[red wall](#)' seats. Losing jobs better paid than those in the transactional sectors of hospitality and leisure would be a bitter pill for those seduced to believe that leaving the EU and voting for Johnson to "Get Brexit Done" in December 2019 would be beneficial.

Notably, in early January, [The Telegraph](#) reported that it was workers in such areas, potentially up to ten million, who face the greatest

threat because of the government's green targets. Moreover, the much-vaunted investment in the green economy, supposed to produce jobs for the future, is not impressive. Research by Michael Pollitt, a business economist at the Judge Business school, Cambridge University, believes that for the average number of jobs produced for each £1 million spent on green manufacturing is five.

Increased automation, already responsible for greatly reducing the number of workers employed in manufacturing, will continue this trend. Thinktank, Future Advocacy, in a report published in February 2020, [\*Automation and Britain's New Political Landscape\*](#), make it clear that developing automation will have an unduly negative impact on 'read wall seats'.

## Geographical differences in the impacts of automation Jobs at potential high risk of automation by parliamentary constituency



**Figure 1:** Heat map showing how the impact of automation could vary across Great Britain. Each constituency is colour-coded according to the percentage of current jobs that are at high risk of automation by the early 2030s. Highlighted are some of the heavily impacted 'red wall' seats. An interactive version is available on our website.

**Source: *Automation and Britain's New Political Landscape (2020)***

Future Advocacy estimate that the national average of jobs lost due to automation by the early 2030s could be 30%. However, in former 'red wall' seats, this average rises to 32%. Though not an especially large difference, the total number of jobs that could be lost is, up to eight million. Sectors likely to experience greatest impact are retail (1.2m jobs), manufacturing (1.1m jobs) and transport (800,000).

An illustration of this conundrum is a recent announcement by owners of world-famous chocolate maker Cadbury, Mondelez International who are going to invest £15 million in the historic Bournville [factory in](#)

[a garden](#)' in Birmingham. Chocolate was first made there in 1878 and never ceased even during two world wars. On the face of it, this is a good news story.

The £15 million investment will allow Bournville to produce an additional 125 million bars of *Dairy Milk* moved to European plants owned by Mondelez five years ago. This switch was justified by Mondelez because the cost of production of chocolate at Bournville was a staggering three times higher than its other European facilities.

However, though an additional 12,000 tonnes of chocolate will be produced, representing an increase in output by Bournville of 30%, and representing a vote of confidence in Bournville's efforts to reduce cost and increase efficiency, not a single new job will be created as a result in Birmingham.

This is the challenge to Boris Johnson.

Getting through a once-in-a-century pandemic was never going to be easy.

It required immense sacrifices by many.

The cost of personal suffering can never be adequately measured. However, if, following the pandemic, those who voted for Brexit discover they're at increased risk of losing their livelihoods and reduced income, may feel they've paid an very high price for Johnson's gambles.

***Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). He has contributed chapters to a number of texts in the last year (in 2020 unless otherwise stated): *Brexit Negotiations after Article 50: Assessing Process, Progress and Impact* (published in 2019 by Emerald Publishing, ISBN: 978-1787697683); *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Hindley and Hishman (published in 2019 by Social Liberal Forum); *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and***

***Tait (published by Abrams Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644); The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824); The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong? edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326); BBC, A Winter of Discontent? edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8694863117) and The Pandemic, Where are We Still Going Wrong? edited by Mair, (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8563726338). His latest chapter, 'Does Vaccination offer Johnson a Way out of the Pandemic?' is published in Pandemic, A Year of Mistakes? Edited by Mair to be published by Bite-Sized Books (ISBN-13: 979-8702357799).***