

## Who will the Tories turn on this time?

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*I was going to write about the importance of Marcus Rashford's work, and his success in overturning the government position on meals for vulnerable children over the summer, but then read Bew Wray's comment on Source Direct this morning and I really hope he will forgive me if I repost it and [plug this newsletter from the CommonWeal think tank](#) in exchange:*

The thing about the Tories is that, in the end, their essential Tory-ness always shines through. They are and always will be the nasty party because they are made up of people who got in to politics to defend the interests of the rich and powerful. As Boris Johnson's Special Advisor Dominic Cummings once put it: "Tory MPs largely do not care about these poorer people. They don't care about the NHS." They are ruthless political operators who are often able to disguise or deflect from their essence at election time, but who they are never really changes, and so it never stays hidden for long.

Cummings realised that by aligning the Tory party with the Leave vote, he could re-assemble the Conservative electoral coalition along cross-class lines, breaking into parts of Labour's 'red wall' in the Midlands and the North. But it would be wrong to think that this success in the December General Election would be easily replicated from now on, election after election. The next General Election will not be a Brexit election in the way 2019 was. Johnson vowed to build the 'northern powerhouse' in wake of his election win because he knew that he would have to offer his newly won constituencies something more than Brexit in 2024 if he is to hold on to them. But Tories will be Tories - they cannot do anything other than protect their own amidst an economic crash of such gravity. After a decade of declining living standards in the 2010s, the 2020s look set to be something far worse. In that context, all the Tories would appear to have to offer is their old classic formula of divide and rule, but applied in a modern context.

It has been reported that Johnson's advisers are pushing hard for the Prime Minister to embrace the 'culture war', which would explain a lot of their recent moves. Why merge the Department of International Development into the Foreign Office unless you want to send a message that "look, we only care about poor folk here now not poor folk in other countries?" Cutting the foreign aid budget has always been a dog whistle to reactionary

sentiment, so now Johnson is going one step further and cutting the whole department. And the appointment of Munira Mirza to head up a new government commission on racial inequalities also speaks to these priorities. Mirza, a long-time advisor to Johnson, does not believe there is such a thing as structural racism and has defended Johnson's Islamophobic barbs in the past.

It is rumoured to have been culture war politics which was driving the initial decision of No 10 to reject Man Utd footballer Marcus Rashford's call for free school meals in England over the summer holidays. As a rich, black footballer, the Tories may have seen a divide and rule opportunity, but it was clear Rashford was uniting people, backed up by his own personal story of growing up poor but lovingly supported by his mother who worked all hours of the day for poverty wages to try to put food on the table. Attempts by the likes of Katie Hopkins to stoke division fell flat. Johnson had U-turned by lunch-time.

There is something in the Rashford story which shows the difficulties the Tories are going to have in getting the country to blame each other for hardship, rather than the government. How can you blame the poor for poverty when unemployment had reached its lowest figure since the 1970s before the pandemic? In 2008 the Tories successfully displaced blame for the crisis onto public services, but who is the 'enemy within' this time? It can't and won't be public services again, since we have just spent months calling nurses and social carers heroes. And of course Britain will have Brexit'd by the year's end, so it can't be the European Union. While divisions rage online on all manner of culture war related issues, 'Twitter rows' remain niche territory, and not where elections are won or lost. Perhaps the rebellious Scots will be the enemy the Tories need, though Johnson has shown no signs of wanting to embrace such a fight yet.

The problem the Tories have is that the Britain of 2020 is their country; the nasty party has been winning for a decade, and this is the nasty outcome. Divide and rule politics will struggle to disguise that reality.