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Rolling out the pork barrel

Deborah Mabbett

The 2021 Budget was notable for the Chancellor's assiduous name-checking. There is a long tradition of giving loyal MPs a boost by acknowledging their campaigning efforts in support of special causes, and some of the recipients of Sunak's blessings fall into this category. Thus North Dorset's Simon Hoare got a plug for ensuring continuation of thalidomide survivor funding, Richard Fuller of North-East Bedfordshire for a green finance initiative, and Caroline Nokes for care sector support. But the boosterism was laid on most thickly in policy announcements with specific local impacts. Pudsey's Stuart Andrew was invited to claim the new infrastructure bank in Leeds as a win, as was Darlington's Peter Gibson for the Treasury outpost there. The new freeports were an opportunity to mention the MPs for Redcar, Cleethorpes and Great Grimsby, along with the Conservative mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen. Only when it came to announcing new Town Deals did the Chancellor avoid drawing attention to the bias towards Conservative seats: tribute was paid instead to Andy Street, Conservative mayor for the West Midlands.

The localised targeting of largesse is not without precedent. George Osborne's 2014 budget did not pass up the opportunity to boost MPs fighting marginal seats in Dartford and Gravesham with the promise of new homes, while Weaver Vale got support for the Mersey gateway bridge. Michael Ellis in Northampton North was namechecked on the pothole fund, and his Wikipedia page records that Northampton got £3.3m from the fund. Osborne lost interest in the practice after the 2015 election was won, however. The sorry figure of Philip Hammond revived it in 2018 with a £2m bung for DUP MPs in Belfast to add to the dodgy financial deal that had been done to secure the confidence and supply agreement.

We can't be sure that pork barrel politics is getting worse: there's always been a bit of it around. Hugh Ward and Peter John found significant effects of constituency marginality on English local authority allocations in data for 1994/95, as well as a specific bonus attributable to 'being Essex' and favourable treatment for Tory flagship local authorities such as the London borough of Wandsworth.¹

However, there are several reasons to suspect that the current government will be an unusually determined distributor of pork. First among these is, of course, the levelling up agenda itself. As Jennings and Stoker note in this issue,² the present government is promoting the politics of place to an unusual degree. Furthermore, it seems to be attracted to highly visible building projects rather than the more diffuse and softer policies of supporting people through education, health and income support. These projects lend themselves to a politics of (literally) high-vis spectacle, and also to a politics of attribution, where individuals can claim credit for being the driving force.

Notwithstanding these political incentives, levelling-up could be done according to objective criteria relating to poverty and deprivation. But there is a reason why this has not been the government's approach so far. The Conservatives' 2019 gains were not in the deprived hearts of cities but more often in slightly more prosperous but stagnating towns. The desire to channel funds towards these not-quite-worst-off places has left civil servants struggling to devise a way to capture the

¹ Ward, Hugh and Peter John, 'Targeting benefits for electoral gain: Constituency marginality and the distribution of grants to English local authorities' *Political Studies* Vol 47, pp.32-52, 1999.

² Jennings, Will, Lawrence McKay and Gerry Stoker, 'The Politics of Levelling-Up' *The Political Quarterly*, forthcoming 2021.

government's political goals in a formula for levelling-up funding. There have been hints that they have found answers by giving high weights to low productivity and long commutes to work but not poverty or other deprivation indicators, but, at time of writing, the details necessary to replicate the allocations have not been disclosed. The announcements made so far provide strong evidence of pork barrelling. As Chris Hanretty has shown,³ it is pretty much statistically impossible that the allocation of the Towns Fund was not influenced by the marginality of the local constituency, despite efforts to cover this up with jiggery-pokery around rankings and priority groups.

The local election results in May 2021 may be taken to indicate that the public do not care much about this kind of low-level corruption. Indeed, it is arguable that an electorate with low trust in government expects it. As Jennings and Stoker also highlight, trust in politicians is at a low ebb, but this is accompanied by a belief that governments could and should do more to address issues of pressing concern to respondents. This is paradoxical: if politicians are not to be trusted, why expect them to resolve your problems? Pork barrel politics provides a resolution to the paradox. Politicians are just looking after their own interests when they bribe you to vote for them. Their behaviour is, in the deadly contemporary argot, 'authentic'. They are also not patronising you: they expect you, the voter, to be as opportunistic and calculative as they are, when you enter the transaction to exchange your vote for their largesse.

We cannot expect voters to be outraged by pork barrel politics, but the government may still find itself hoist by its own opportunism. Two issues stand out: likely tensions in relationships with local and devolved governments, and simmering discontent in the parliamentary party. The distribution of pork is all about control at Westminster: it is not primarily designed as a strategy for winning at the local government level. On the contrary, the Levelling-up Fund Prospectus is explicit that successful bids for money should be attributable to MPs' efforts. Paragraph 3.2 states: 'We expect Members of Parliament, as democratically-elected representatives of the area, to back one bid that they see as a priority.' Paragraph 3.7 begins equally robustly: 'The Government recognises the important role of Members of Parliament in championing the interests of their constituents.'

The attention lavished on Andy Street and Ben Houchen may give the impression that the Johnson government supports the mayoral model assiduously promoted by George Osborne, but the devolution of authority and financial responsibility that Osborne favoured is not happening. On the contrary, central government has been keen to ensure that the money it distributes is attributable to it, and not to some rival level of government. Ultimately, local government is more likely to be a nuisance than a support for the pork barrel strategy, as high-profile mayors demand backing even when they are not representing areas with marginal Conservative seats at Westminster.

The government at Westminster has also been ruthless in sidelining the Scottish and Welsh governments. The Levelling Up Prospectus invokes the financial assistance powers in the UK Internal Market Act – the leading instrument of Westminster's post-Brexit 'power grab' from devolved governments – to specify that funding will be allocated across the whole of the UK by decision-makers in Whitehall. They may 'seek advice from the relevant devolved administrations' but only 'where appropriate'.

The distribution of pork will also come under pressure from competing claims outside marginal seats. In parliamentary systems, pork is expected to go to marginal seats because there is assumed to be strong party discipline, which ensures that the allocation is designed to strengthen the party's overall electoral position. MPs from safe seats which miss out on the largesse should be mollified by the knowledge that, if their party fails to win or hold the marginal seats, it will not form the next government. Individual interests are thereby aligned with the party's interest. This contrasts with

³ Hanretty, Chris, 'The Pork Barrel Politics of the Towns Fund' *The Political Quarterly*, Vol 92(1), 2021.

the US case, where the allocation of pork is related to power within the political system, which accrues to individuals broadly according to their length of service in Congress. This produces an allocation which is biased towards safe seats, as safe seats support long political careers.

Several factors could undermine the efficient use of pork to buy marginal votes at Westminster. One is the egoism of some MPs, keen to demonstrate their personal influence. The decision to favour the constituencies of the ministers involved in allocating the Towns Fund, Jenrick and Sunak, suggests this element cannot be ignored. Neither of their constituencies is the least bit marginal. Jenrick and Sunak seem to have fallen victim to the need to demonstrate that they really are powerful and important men. Perhaps they are trying to impress their constituents, but more likely their eyes are on potential donors with business interests in the projects that the funds support.

There is also the problem that the centralised political system is a magnet for blame. The government has been keen to ensure that pork is attributed to local MPs, but it does not follow symmetrically that failure to get pork will be blamed on the local representative. Behind the name-checking, everyone knows that decisions about which areas get what are made centrally. Ultimately, this is why centralised governments tend to revert to formula-based allocations, despite the perpetual tendency to tweak them for opportunistic political advantage.

Furthermore, the claim that MPs from safe seats should be content to see pork go to marginal seats is a static argument. Over time, MPs from safe seats will ask themselves what their party does for them. The answer should be that its control of government is largely directed to wide purposes: pursuing an ideological agenda they favour, and undertaking public policies with a nationwide impact that produce desired outcomes across the country. But if the governing party is entirely transactional rather than ideological, and its policies targeted and particularistic rather than general, then its MPs from safe seats may become disillusioned. This disillusionment will be heightened if safe seats start to look less safe, a process that may already be underway in parts of the South, going by the 2021 local election results.

Those election results are not a verdict on levelling-up. The government has enjoyed a boost from being in office as the impact of the pandemic eases – an advantage inconveniently shared by Labour in Wales and the SNP in Scotland. It continues to reap votes by turning Brexit into a wider culture war. But both these sources of support will diminish with time. Many voters, invited to take a hard-nosed view of what levelling-up means for them, will become dissatisfied. This is not to say that the pork barrel strategy will sink the government, but its new politics of place will struggle to deliver on its promises.