



PROJECT ROME

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Editorial

As Boris Johnson gambles on his controversial 'Parliament vs The People' strategy to try to secure Brexit, he continues apace with the parallel part of that strategy based on wooing traditional Labour voters in swing Northern constituencies.

His frequent visits to the North since becoming prime minister culminated in a keynote address to the recent Convention of the North – the annual gathering of the North's political and business leaders. Dubbed by one Northern wag, perhaps unfairly, as 'The Lamentation of the North', last year's inaugural event was snubbed by the government and saw a succession of Northern political

leaders lambast prime minister Theresa May's perceived lack of interest in all matters Northern.

This year, the government decided not to afford them the same opportunity and instead used it as a stage for the prime minister to talk directly to Northern voters and to make a series of bold promises on transport investment,



Boris Johnson

rebalancing of the economy and political and economic devolution to the North. Mr Johnson's promises lacked detail, his speech lacked coherence and he walked off the stage to very muted applause from the 1,000 strong audience. Nevertheless, his 'Northern Strategy' is causing Labour's leaders in the North something of a dilemma.

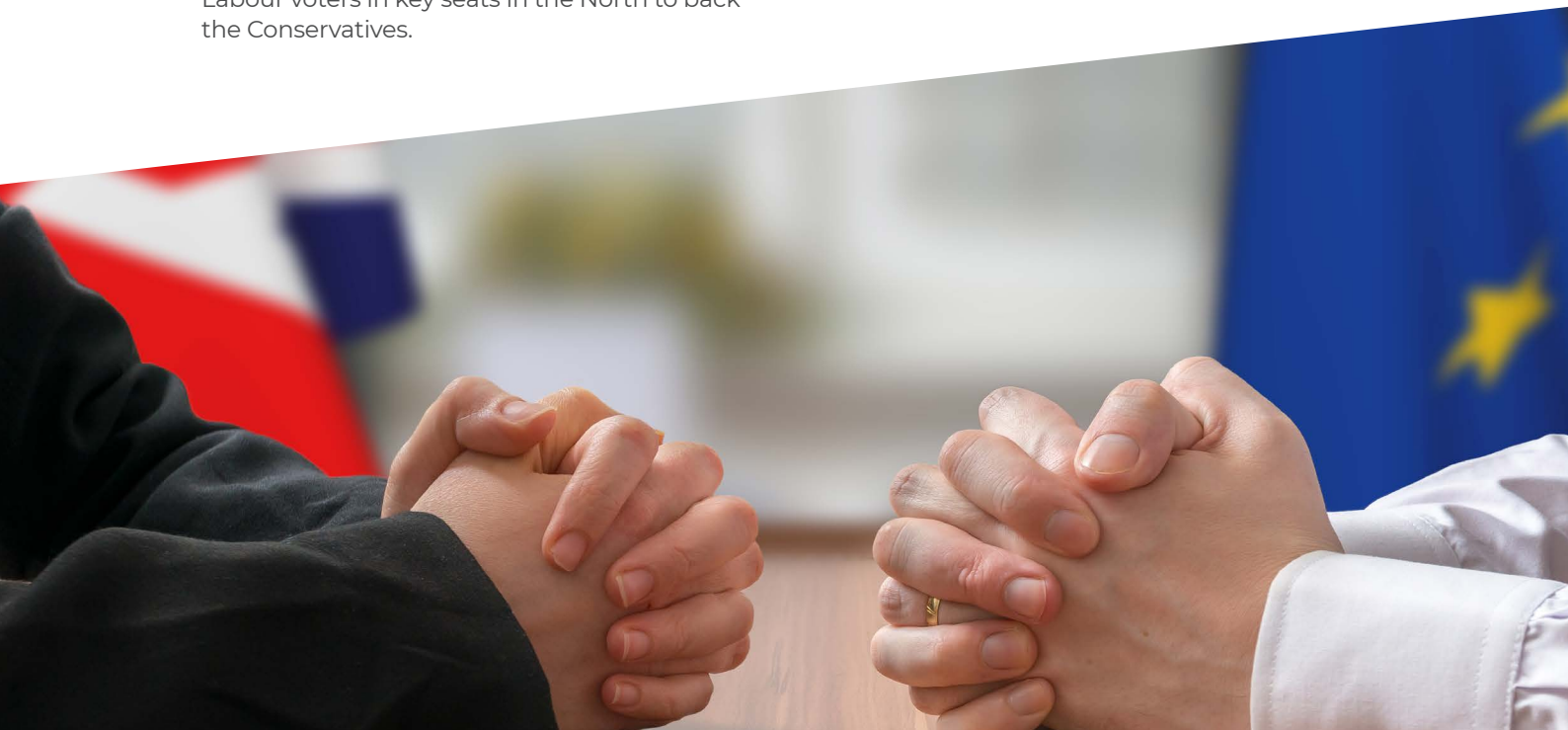
They are sceptical of his promises and do not believe that he will deliver. They see it as a short-term electoral tactic targeted at redrawing the electoral map in the North. Deliver Brexit come what may, 'love bomb' the North with promises of transport investment, a massive transfer of power and resources from Whitehall to the North, and populist policies based around crime, education and health. The government gamble is that this will be enough, allied with concerns about Jeremy Corbyn's suitability as a prime minister, for traditional Labour voters in key seats in the North to back the Conservatives.

The sceptics backed up their argument by citing research conducted by the Manchester Evening News into the £3.6bn Towns Fund, a central element of the government's Northern strategy. The Fund will be targeted at 100 areas suffering from post-industrial decline who have traditionally not benefited from investment and economic growth, including 45 towns across the Northern Powerhouse region.

The MEN research indicated that 94 of the 100 areas voted leave in the referendum, and the remaining six are Conservative held 'super marginals'. A quarter of the areas are key marginal constituencies, which require just a 1% swing or less to switch them from Conservative to Labour or vice versa.

The cries of 'pork-barrel' politics could be heard across the North. One senior Labour figure told Northern Agenda, "It's an electoral bribe. It's blatant and it exposes the Tories strategy. They have no interest in Northern communities, just our votes."

Some Labour local government leaders are wary about falling into what they see as an electoral trap by embracing the Conservative's renewed enthusiasm for the Northern Powerhouse (Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham were reportedly ready to boycott the Convention over the prime minister's office giving them less than 24 hours' notice of their plans for a Northern Growth Board, announced during Mr Johnson's speech to the Convention). However, others think they will risk looking churlish and guilty of





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playing party politics if they dismiss out of hand the government's proposals. Northern Agenda spoke to some within this camp and they dismissed the MEN research and talk of electoral bribes.

"It's not surprising that these seats are in Leave-voting areas or marginal constituencies. They're the 'left behind' areas all politicians keep banging on about. Who cares if it's an electoral bribe, it's investment in areas that desperately need it. What should Labour say? Thanks, but no thanks, we don't need your money. Some people need to grow up", one Labour figure told us.

As Labour work out how to deal with this new threat to their Northern heartlands, the real question for the government is can they convince enough traditional Labour voters in the North to switch to the Conservatives to offset expected losses to Labour and the Liberal Democrats in Remain-voting areas?

We have spoken to several Labour MPs, including some defending marginal seats, and there is real concern that Labour could be hit on two fronts. Firstly, there is anecdotal evidence from the doorstep that the prime minister's strategy is beginning to peel away Leave-voting Labour supporters. The second front is of equal concern, the loss of Remain voters to the Liberal Democrats. One Labour MP told us, "Our confused Brexit policy is driving away both Leave and Remain voters. The next election could be a catastrophe in the North for Labour; 1983 all over again."

Meanwhile, Labour has suspended the selection of candidates in seats where there is currently no Labour MP, or where a sitting Labour MP will be retiring at the next election. The move could see Labour candidates imposed on constituencies, or a curtailed selection process with local party members presented with a shortlist drawn up by the national party.

Critics of the move claim it is in response to a lack of deselections of sitting Labour MPs deemed to be critical of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. Currently, only Diana Johnson in Hull North has failed to be automatically selected as a candidate (see below). Several Labour MPs in the North who were thought to be under threat of deselection have escaped unscathed, including Lucy Powell in Manchester Central.

One Labour insider told Northern Agenda, "The Corbynistas overestimated the appetite of Labour members in Northern constituencies to deselect their MPs, so they've moved to Plan B, to impose favoured candidates on local parties. It's jobs for the boys time."

As we head towards the inevitability of a general election, battle lines in the North have been drawn. Boris Johnson sees the former industrial heartlands of the Midlands and the North as his path to a parliamentary majority. If his gamble succeeds, it could redraw the political map of the country in the most significant way for a generation.

High-Speed Convention Conversations

A wholly unscientific straw poll of Convention delegates taken during the lunch break brought a mixed reaction to our question about how confident they were that Leeds and Manchester would ever see HS2 come to town. Some local authority leaders and senior officials held the 'party line' that HS2

will be delivered in conjunction with Northern Powerhouse Rail. However, a majority of political and business delegates we spoke to displayed little or no confidence that HS2 will ever arrive in the North. "Unless they start building it in the North, it will never arrive here", was a common sentiment.

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