The Ambiguous Ideology of Levelling Up

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Abstract
The Conservative Party’s ‘levelling up agenda’ has been deployed both as a tool for public communication and as a broad motif for the government’s policy programme, gaining a great deal of traction as a political message. Levelling up is a vision of a post-Brexit Britain in which there will be greater state investment, educational opportunity, regional equality, and regional independence. However, this vision invokes a wide range of disparate political ideologies without addressing the underlying tensions between them. It speaks to social democrats about tackling deprivation; it speaks to social liberals about equality of opportunity; it speaks to economic liberals about supporting the free market; and it speaks to conservatives about reuniting the nation. If levelling up develops from a political slogan into a fully-fledged policy programme, it will become increasingly difficult for the government to manage the ideological tensions inherent in the levelling-up agenda.

Keywords: levelling up, level up, Conservative Party, Boris Johnson, political ideology, one nation conservatism

Introduction
SINCE BORIS Johnson became Prime Minister, the phrase ‘levelling up’ has become the government’s all-embracing mantra in its attempt to pull together a divided electoral coalition. In addition to its long-standing political divisions over Europe and over ‘moral issues’, the Conservative Party subsumed two new political divisions into its midst with its 2019 election win.1 The first is a geographical division within England between a historically dominant South and an increasingly recalcitrant North. The second is between the tax-and-spend politics of former Labour voters and the low-tax politics of the Conservative base. In attracting blocs of voters from both sides of these political divides, the ‘levelling-up agenda’ may prove to be invaluable in holding together the Conservative Party’s unstable electoral coalition. However, this article argues that the power of ‘levelling up’ as a communicative tool lies in its ideological ambiguity, which may become a fundamental weakness as the government seeks to implement a levelling-up policy programme.

1R. Hayton, ‘British conservatism after the vote for Brexit’, British Journal of Politics and International Relations, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 232–238.
short term, it will become increasingly problematic in the longer term, as the government is required to manage the ideological tensions contained within.

The emergence of levelling up

The phrases ‘levelling up’ and ‘level up’ appear intermittently in Hansard records since the nineteenth century. While there are occurrences across all topics of debate, there is an association with social policy, and particularly with the distribution of school funding. This was the case during the New Labour era, when use of the term increased sharply. As a typical example, then Education Secretary, David Blunkett, explained that the government’s further education spending entailed ‘levelling up, not levelling down’.2 During the same period, Theresa May criticised New Labour’s education policy, arguing that ‘socialism is about levelling down. Conservatism is about levelling up’. Socialists believe that, if everyone cannot have something, no one shall. Conservatives reject that.3 Clearly, this is a contentious claim, but it is indicative of the appeal of levelling up to Conservative politicians.

The phrase died away from the mid-00s until a resurgence in 2016 when Theresa May became Prime Minister and Justine Greening became Education Secretary. Greening’s tenure was marked by an ongoing debate around per pupil funding in which the phrase levelling up played a significant role. This was driven by Greening’s agenda, in that she claimed to be ‘driving up social mobility by levelling up opportunity’.4 In this use, levelling up is more than a useful idiom or a technical term in education policy; it indicates a broader political agenda associated with equality of opportunity and social mobility. This agenda can be seen in the Department for Education’s White Paper Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential, which outlines how education policy can be used to address the opportunity gap between the most and least deprived children under the strap-line ‘levelling up opportunity’.5 After Greening left the post in January 2018, use of the term levelling up declined dramatically, and barely appeared in the Hansard records that year.

Considering the associations with equality of opportunity and increased education funding, it is easy to see why the phrase appealed to Boris Johnson when he came to power in July 2019, at a time when he needed to bolster support among his party’s moderate wing. Although the association with education policy remained, new dimensions of levelling up also emerged, centred around a commitment to greater regional equality in the post-Brexit era. Robert Jenrick, whose role in 2021 is central to the levelling-up agenda, was the first minister in Parliament to refer to levelling up in this way. Three weeks before Johnson won the Conservative leadership, Jenrick explained that the Shared Prosperity Fund (the fund designed to replace EU spending in the UK) ‘will seek to raise productivity, focusing on levelling up parts of our country whose economies are further behind’.6 Later that month, in Johnson’s first appearance at the dispatch box, the Prime Minister stated that his government will ‘use infrastructure, education and technology to level up across the country’.7

This same message was repeated in Johnson’s 2019 party conference speech, where a commitment was made to ‘level up and unify the entire United Kingdom through better education, better infrastructure and

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2House of Commons Debates, 6th ser. vol. 347, col. 518; https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2000-03-30/debates/ac93ae80-5565-4656-a37e-fed03d061fc5/LearningAndSkillsBillLords (accessed 8 December 2020).

3HC Deb., 6th ser., vol. 295, col. 1026; https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1997-06-10/debates/1af21869-629d-496c-bede-973babce2dee/PowerOfLocalAuthorityToContinueToAssistPupils (accessed 8 December 2020).

4HC Deb., 6th ser., vol. 617, col. 8; https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-11-14/debates/5f99b363-b6cd-4180-815d-49e9c01f217f/SocialMobility (accessed 8 December 2020).

5Department for Education, Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential, CM9541, London, HMSO, 2017; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667690/Social_Mobility_Action_Plan_-_for_printing.pdf (accessed 26 October 2020).

6HC Deb., 6th ser., vol. 662, col. 1042; https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-07-02/debates/BCCA28BF-7188-4323-8980-AP973BDFAE64/SharedProsperityFund (accessed 8 December 2020).

7HC Deb., 6th ser., vol. 663, col. 1490; https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-07-25/debates/D0290128-96D8-4AF9-ACFD-21D5D9CF328E/PrioritiesForGovernment (accessed 8 December 2020).
The association between levelling up and infrastructure was taken forward elsewhere, with Chancellor Sajid Javid insisting that the government’s ‘strategy will deliver better transport, faster broadband and wider mobile coverage. It will level up every region and nation ... and deliver an infrastructure revolution.’² The twin electoral pressures to cut public spending and improve public services has historically created a dilemma for the Conservative Party. After nearly a decade of prioritising spending cuts through the austerity agenda, and coming under electoral pressure about the quality of public services, the Conservatives’ 2019 election campaign was underpinned by an explicit shift away from austerity towards higher state spending.

The shift placed the levelling-up agenda at the centre of the party’s domestic policy offering, as demonstrated by its prevalence in the 2019 Conservative manifesto.¹³ In economic terms, levelling up entailed a commitment to public investment and specifically to ‘use this investment prudently and strategically to level up every part of the United Kingdom’.¹⁴ With this concern about the geographic distribution of public investment, levelling up featured prominently in the plan to ‘revive our towns and cities’, with a promise to ‘use this historic investment to level up and connect this country, so that everyone can get a fair share of its future prosperity’.¹⁵ In relation to ‘supporting rural life and coastal communities’, again, the manifesto committed the Conservative Party ‘to levelling up all parts of the United Kingdom’, and, in relation to deprived communities,

The proliferation of levelling up

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committed it to ‘levelling up the nation [by creating] up to ten freeports around the UK’.  

Therefore, during the 2019 general election campaign, levelling up was presented as the Conservative Party’s broader vision for a post-Brexit Britain, in which the government would address place-based inequalities. The focus on regional inequality and devolution chimes with Nurse and Sykes’s view that the levelling-up agenda is ‘sold as prioritising “left-behind” communities’.  

According to Pike and Tomany, the policy objective is ‘to achieve levelling up [by] connecting left-behind places to urban growth in big cities through better infrastructure’.  

Without making any simple causal claim, it is important to note that the outcome of the 2019 election shows Conservative Party support surging in those left-behind regions that they had promised to level up.  

Throughout 2020, the levelling-up agenda spread across Whitehall. It became one of the Department for Transport’s ‘five central objectives’ to ‘level up the economy’ by improving ‘connectivity across the UK’.  

The Department for Education has claimed that it is ‘levelling up the lowest funded schools’.  

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has used the phrase regularly in its publications, and claims that it is ‘using science and research to unite and level up our country’.  

One of the government’s flagship post-Brexit economic policies, the creation of freeports, has been justified on the basis that they ‘will help to level up the country by bringing jobs, investment and prosperity to some of our most deprived communities’.  

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has been developing the levelling-up agenda on two fronts: firstly, in relation to housing policy, it seeks to ‘level up England’s cities and provide much-needed new homes’; secondly, in relation to English devolution, it has hailed city deals as a ‘significant step in the government’s ambitious agenda to level up opportunity and prosperity across the country’.  

The cornerstone of the levelling-up agenda’s proliferation across government is its prominence at the Treasury. In March 2020, Rishi Sunak delivered his first Budget to Parliament, making numerous references to levelling up in relation to infrastructure (‘level up with new roads, railways, broadband and homes’), regional economies (‘level up with new homes, railways, broadband and homes’), and cities (‘level up with new homes, railways, broadband and homes’).
with completely new industries in our regions and nations’), education spending (‘levelling up further education’), and spreading opportunity (‘level up and spread opportunity’).\textsuperscript{25} The Spending Review of October 2020 promised ‘to put levelling up at the heart of policy making’ and ‘at the heart [of] an economic recovery for all’, with the agenda expanding into new areas of government, including the Department for International Trade, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.\textsuperscript{26} In addition to spreading to these new departments, the agenda continued to hold a significant role in its core areas. Perhaps of greatest prominence, ‘the government is launching a new Levelling Up Fund worth £4 billion’, which aims to ‘drive growth and regeneration in places in need’ by investing ‘in local infrastructure’.\textsuperscript{27}

Before moving to discuss the ideological implications of the levelling-up agenda, it is important to conclude this section by noting the growth of discussion about levelling up outside government. Rather than dismissing levelling up as an empty election slogan, media outlets and think tanks have engaged in widespread discussion about what it is and how it should be delivered. For example, the Centre for Cities has engaged in widespread discussion about levelling up outside government. Rather than dismissing levelling up as an empty election slogan, media outlets and think tanks have engaged in widespread discussion about what it is and how it should be delivered. For example, the Centre for Cities has embraced levelling up as one of its main research themes, publishing a report \textit{Why Big Cities Are Crucial To ‘Levelling Up’}.\textsuperscript{28} IPPR North, the Local Government Information Unit and Demos have all published major reports on levelling up.\textsuperscript{29} The centre-right think tank Onward has made it one of its central themes, and as of September 2020 has linked its research to a group of Conservative MPs calling themselves ‘The Levelling Up Taskforce’.\textsuperscript{30} Many of these MPs also belong to the recently established Northern Research Group (NRG), which primarily represents former Labour constituencies. In October 2020, the NRG wrote an open letter urging the government ‘to reflect carefully on [the] promise to people living in the North during the last election with the levelling up agenda’.\textsuperscript{31} Whatever the future of the levelling-up agenda, there will be a high political price to pay for backtracking.

\textbf{The ideological ambiguities of levelling up}

As the levelling-up agenda has developed from a Department for Education initiative to a key message in the 2019 Conservative manifesto, and then to a cross-departmental mantra, it has sprawled into many different sectors and taken on many meanings. It is possible that the term will eventually expand so far that it becomes merely a generic synonym for ‘make better’, but it is also possible that the government will continue to pursue it as a substantive overarching policy agenda. In doing so, it will need to negotiate a number of ideological tensions that the levelling-up agenda has thus far encircled. The ideological ambiguity of levelling up is precisely why it

\textsuperscript{25}HC Deb., 6th ser., vol. 673, col. 278; https://hansard. parliament.uk/ Commons/2020-03-11/ debates/ 72444685-77EB-4AB3-83C4-7AF234096ACD/ Financial Statement (accessed 9 December 2020).
\textsuperscript{26}HM Treasury, \textit{Spending Review 2020}, CP330, London, HMSO, 2020, pp. 2 and 33; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/938052/SR20_ Web_Accessible.pdf (accessed 12 January 2021).
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p.4.
\textsuperscript{28}Centre for Cities, \textit{Why Big Cities are Crucial to ‘Levelling Up’}, London, 2020; https://www. centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/ 02/Why-big-cities-are-critical-to-levelling-up.pdf (accessed 12 January 2021).
\textsuperscript{29}IPPR North, \textit{State of the North 2020/21: Power Up, Level Up, Rise Up}, Manchester, 2020; https://www. ippr.org/files/2020-12/state-of-the-north-2020-2021- dec-20.pdf; Local Government Information Unit, \textit{Power Down to Level Up: Resilient Place-Shaping for a post-Covid Age}, London, 2020; https://lgiu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Power-down-to-level-up-LGIU.pdf; C. Seafood, et al., \textit{Achieving Levelling Up: The Structures and Processes Needed}, LIPSIT Report, 2020; https://lipsit.ac.uk/project-outputs/ (all accessed 12 January 2021).
\textsuperscript{30}N. O’Brien, \textit{Measuring Up for Levelling Up}, Onward, 2020; https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Measuring-up-for-levelling-up-2.pdf (accessed 12 January 2021).
\textsuperscript{31}J. Berry, \textit{Open Letter to the Prime Minister}, 26 October 2020; https://www.scribd.com/ document/481708733/Jake-Berry-2#from_embed (accessed 18 November 2020).
has been so successful as a political slogan; it acts as an expansive container for disparate policies and priorities without the need to address the tensions between them. From an academic perspective, it is essential to identify and unpack these tensions, allowing us to consider the problems the government is likely to face in the future, and to begin to locate Johnsonian conservatism within the ideological debates of the British political tradition. The levelling-up agenda can be said to contain at least four distinct ideological strands: social liberalism; social democracy; economic liberalism; and one nation conservatism.

Firstly, with regards to social liberalism, levelling up entails a commitment to ‘equality of opportunity’, historically a central tenet of New Labour’s ‘third way’ and the ‘social liberal’ wing of the Liberal Democrats. Equality of opportunity is itself a term that holds a great deal of political flexibility, and could entail anything from minimal commitments to equality before the law through to major redistributions of wealth. While the Conservative Party has tended to focus on the former, Cameron’s ‘modernisation’ of the party set in motion a growing concern with a more expansive notion of equality of opportunity based on an acknowledgement of relative poverty and a realisation that a child’s early years are decisive for their life chances. Although austerity actually led to an increase in child poverty during Cameron’s premiership his leadership drew the Conservatives into the debate on how to tackle childhood inequality of opportunity.

Justine Greening took up these concerns during her two years as Education Secretary, outlining ‘a plan for improving social mobility through education’. The plan clearly subscribes to a liberal commitment to meritocracy, with the argument that ‘talent and hard work alone should determine how far people can go in life’. However, it also entails a wider critique of social inequalities, arguing that ‘talent is spread evenly across this country [but] opportunity is not’ and that ‘less-advantaged children fall behind their affluent peers’ and ‘disadvantage can become entrenched’. Despite an apparent shift away from Greening’s moderate wing of the party, much of this original definition of levelling up has been maintained under Johnson’s leadership, with the 2019 manifesto declaring that ‘Conservatives believe passionately that every child should have the same opportunity to express their talents and make the most of their lives’ and taking from Greening’s social mobility document almost verbatim: ‘Talent and genius are uniformly distributed throughout the country. Opportunity is not.’

Secondly, levelling up entails a commitment to more traditional forms of social democracy, historically associated with the postwar Labour Party. The government claims that its levelling-up agenda aims to tackle inequality and improve the material conditions of left-behind places. The focus on place-based inequality rather than individual inequality allows the Conservative Party to avoid making a stronger social democratic commitment to major wealth redistribution. However, the levelling-up pledge to address regional inequality does inevitably entail redistribution and economic restructuring, which will require state-led initiatives to counteract the free market’s tendency towards wealth concentration. In some ways, this approach chimes with Jackson’s definition of social democracy as the application of ‘the principles of freedom and equality … to the organization of the economy and society, chiefly by opposing the

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inequality and oppression created by laissez-faire capitalism’.37

Addressing longstanding place-based inequalities inevitably relies on an increased role for the state in terms of investment, taxation, and planning. The use of state planning to redress structural inequalities is a central social democratic idea. As a key symbolic example, the government’s 2020 Spending Review promised to ‘put levelling up at the heart of policy making, including by updating the Green Book and its application’.38 For decades, the Treasury’s ‘Green Book’ has set the guidelines for cost-benefit analysis of government investment, ensuring that investment concentrates on areas with high productivity, especially London and the South East.39 On the explicit justification of delivering levelling up, the government has promised a ‘refreshed Green Book’ that will ‘help achieve the aim of addressing regional imbalances’, establishing the principle of ‘redistribution’ within the Treasury’s spending decisions.40 Other examples of redistributive policies include the Levelling Up Fund and the Towns Fund.41 These state-led redistributive policies speak to a social democratic ideology in a way that is notably uncommon for a post-1979 Conservative Party.

However, two important caveats must be made. Firstly, the funding pots established to drive regional redistribution are based on a competitive bidding system, which tends to favour those regions that already have the resources to put together strong bids. There have also been accusations that this money has been allocated according to electoral calculation, with two MHCLG ministers signing off money for one another’s own constituencies.42 Secondly, tackling regional inequality does not necessarily reduce other inequalities, such as the economic differences between individuals, or intersectional inequalities based on gender, race, age, sexuality and disability. Indeed, a regionally equal country is perfectly compatible with stark economic and social inequalities. Therefore, with the levelling-up agenda, the Conservative Party is able to stand against inequality, and thus speak to social democrats, without committing itself to redistributing wealth among individuals or to tackling intersectional structural disadvantage.

Thirdly, despite the shift towards a greater role for the state, the levelling-up agenda simultaneously contains a commitment to economic liberalism and the ‘dry’ economics of Thatcherism. In this strand, levelling up is not cast as an end in itself but as a means to a stronger free market economy, so the Conservatives seek to invest in ‘public services and infrastructure, not just because they are good things in themselves, but because they are the bedrock of a dynamic free market economy’.

Therefore, levelling up is cast as a step towards a free market economy in which all areas of the country are given the foundations necessary to realise an expanding private sector. This commitment to economic liberalism through major spending projects contrasts with the Cameron-Osborne austerity project of major spending cuts, but it retains the same ideological preference for the private sector and a market driven society.

While state spending is justified because of its positive implications for a free market economy, a free market economy is justified because of its positive implications for increased state spending, with Johnson arguing that ‘there is only one way to pay for world class healthcare and outstanding infrastructure—and that is to foster and encourage the millions of British businesses, large and small, that create the wealth of the nation’.44 As a key example of its

37B. Jackson, ‘Social democracy’, in M. Freedan and M. Searns, The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
38HM Treasury, Spending Review 2020, p. 2.
39D. Coyle and M. Sensier, ‘The imperial treasury: appraisal methodology and regional economic performance in the UK’, Regional Studies, vol. 54, no. 3, 2020, pp. 283–295.
40HM Treasury, Spending Review 2020, p. 34.
41HM Treasury, Budget 2021, HC1226, London, HMSO, 2021; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/966868/BUDGET_2021__.web.pdf (accessed 17 May 2021).
42The Andrew Marr Show, interview with Robert Jenrick, transcript, BBC1, 11 October 2020; http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11102001.pdf (accessed 19 April 2021).
43Conservative Party, The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019, p. 3.
44Ibid.
While this socioeconomic dimension distinguishes one nation conservatism from other conservative approaches, the central appeal to ‘nation’ has historically made the slogan an invaluable link to the conservative commitment to national continuity. With the levelling-up agenda and the explicit reference to one nation conservatism, it is clear that Johnson’s government is appealing for national unity on at least three counts. Firstly, in the aftermath of the divisive Brexit referendum and political polarisation, levelling up offers a post-Brexit vision that promises greater national unity, and an interlinking of public spending with national pride. Secondly, in relation to the breakup of the nations of the UK, levelling up can be seen as an attempt to placate the growing calls for independence in Scotland and Wales, and the increased possibility of Irish reunification. Thirdly, in relation to the left-behind communities that are increasingly disconnected from the political and national centre, levelling up promises increased political representation at the regional level. All three can be understood as electoral calculations of the Conservative Party, but they are also broader attempts to realise a central tenet of conservative ideology: the defence of the nation, especially at a time when it appears to be fracturing.

As levelling up develops from a political slogan into a policy programme, it will become increasingly difficult to disguise and manage the tensions between these four ideological strands. Most prominently, the balancing of taxation and spending poses a major challenge. Levelling up will require huge increases in public spending, but the government has yet to outline a clear future plan for taxation. While increased borrowing allows for a short-term ‘best of both worlds’, the longer term will force the government into a choice between social democratic tax rises and economic liberal spending cuts. A related tension arises on the question of state planning, which comes about partly because of the increased commitment to infrastructure spending, but primarily because infrastructure spending will be used to address regional inequalities rather than following the flows of the market. Planning infrastructure spending to achieve regional regeneration requires a great deal more state involvement than spending on the basis of cost-benefit metrics.

Another tension arises with a social liberal commitment to creating equality of opportunity...
in education. Not only will this require yet more spending commitments and, therefore, inevitable tax increases, it will also require greater state involvement in the education sector to address the variations created by the more marketised and fragmented academy system. Furthermore, achieving equality of opportunity in education entails not just improving conditions for disadvantaged students, but also unpicking the privilege of the UK's elite educational institutions. This ultimately creates a tension between the meritocracy of social liberalism and the traditional hierarchies inherent to one nation conservatism.

Finally, the four ideological strands of the levelling-up agenda clash on the question of regional politics, in relation to both devolution and regional inequality. A one nation approach stands in tension with a programme of devolution, especially now that Johnson has declared devolution a disastrous tactic for maintaining the Union. A traditional social democratic ideology also tends towards central planning, and the commitment to levelling up through infrastructure investment and educational equality will create a further tendency towards centralisation. With regards to the ideological strand of economic liberalism, the Cameron governments demonstrated the potential of a complementarity between free market economics and political decentralisation. This entailed the creation of business-led regional institutions, significant reductions in local authority budgets, and limitations on local taxation. However, it is unclear how this solution could be made compatible with the commitments of the levelling-up agenda, especially as the agenda contributes to the growing voice of politicians in the UK's nations and regions. These tensions indicate that the question of decentralisation could be the defining issue of what it really means to 'level up'.

Conclusion

The levelling-up agenda has achieved an almost total reach across government departments, while also retaining the same core features as in the early days of Johnson’s premiership. At its heart, it is a vision for a post-Brexit (and post-Covid) Britain that promises a realisation of Brexit opportunities, and promises to spread those opportunities more equally across the UK's nations and regions. Three central aspects continue to be at the heart of the levelling-up agenda: firstly, an attempt to challenge unequal educational opportunities; secondly, an attempt to challenge regional inequality through targeted infrastructure investment; thirdly, a commitment to devolve power, especially in seeking to increase the powers of the English regions.

Broadly, levelling up marks the latest shift in the Conservative Party’s dilemma between high quality public services and a low tax economy. Levelling up by no means solves the dilemma, but it does imply a greater role for the state in terms of spending and planning. Reminiscent of Cameron’s ‘big society’, Johnson’s levelling-up agenda has been deployed both as a tool for public communication and as a broad motif for the government’s policy programme. Unlike the big society, however, levelling up has gained a great deal of traction as a political message, to the extent that it has become a policy agenda reaching almost every department of government. This article has argued that the success of levelling up as a political slogan is partly a consequence of its ideological ambiguities. While there are some overlaps and complementarities between its four ideological dimensions, there are also unavoidable contradictions that the government will be forced to negotiate in the already challenging post-pandemic political landscape.

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45BBC News, ‘Boris Johnson “called Scottish devolution disaster”’, 17 November 2020; https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54965585 (accessed 17 May 2021).