Speech

The Prime Minister's Levelling Up speech: 15 July 2021

Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave a speech on his vision to level up the United Kingdom.

From: Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
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I wish I could tell you that this pandemic that we're going through was over, I wish I could say that from Monday we could simply throw caution to the winds and behave exactly as we did before we had ever heard of COVID, but what I can say is that if we are careful if we continue to respect this disease and its continuing menace, then it is highly probable – and on this the scientists are almost all agreed – that the worst of the pandemic is now behind us. There are difficult days and weeks ahead as we deal with the current wave of the delta variant there will be, sadly, more hospitalisations and sadly there will be more deaths but with every day that goes by we build higher the wall of vaccine acquired immunity, a wall that is now higher and stronger in this country than almost anywhere else in the world, and with every day that goes by our economy is slowly and cautiously picking itself up off the floor, businesses are opening their doors, you will see the employment figures this morning, people are slowly coming back to the office and over the next few weeks more and more people will find themselves back on their daily commute and as Andy Haldane of the Bank of England has said – there is every prospect that this country is poised to recover like a coiled spring and it is the mission of this government to ensure that in so far as COVID has entrenched problems and deepened inequalities – we need now work double hard to overturn those inequalities so that as far as possible that everyone everywhere feels the benefits of that recovery and that we build back better across the whole of the UK. We need to say from the beginning that even before the pandemic began the UK had and has a more unbalanced economy than almost all our immediate biggest competitors in Europe and more unbalanced than pretty much every major developed country and when I say unbalanced I mean that for too many people geography turns out to be destiny.

Take simple life expectancy – even before covid hit, it is an outrage that a man in Glasgow or Blackpool has an average of ten years less on this planet than someone growing up in Hart in Hampshire or in Rutland why do the people of Rutland live to such prodigious ages? Who knows – but they do. There's a glaring imbalance- or take university entrance- if you are a child on free school meals in London, you now have more than double the chance of going to university than a child on free school meals growing up outside London. It is an astonishing fact that 31 years after German unification, the per capita GDP of the North East of our country, Yorkshire, the East Midlands, Wales and Northern Ireland is now lower than in what was formerly East Germany – and I remember going to former East Germany in 1990, just after the wall had gone down, and I remember being amazed at how far behind west Germany it then was a place of strange little cars with two stroke engines and fake coffee and yet we must be honest with ourselves – to a large extent Germany has succeeded in levelling up where we have not and it is vital to understand that these imbalances and inequalities are found within the regions of the United Kingdom– not just between them. A woman from York has on average a decade longer of healthy life expectancy than a woman from Doncaster 30 miles away – one stop away on the east coast mainline. In York nearly half the working population has a higher education qualification, in Doncaster that figure is only 25 per cent. Why is it that Leeds has 1 in 5 working age people not in work, while in Bradford next door the number is as high as one in three? Why should income per head in Monmouthshire be 50 per cent higher than in Blaenau Gwent?

No one believes, I don't believe, you don't believe, that there is any basic difference in the potential of babies born across this country. Everyone knows that talent and energy and enthusiasm and flair are evenly spread across the UK, evenly spread, It is opportunity that is not and it is the mission of this government to unite and level up across the whole UK not just because that is morally right but because if we fail then we are simply squandering vast reserves of human capital we are failing to allow people to fulfil their potential and we are holding our country back and so today I want to talk again about that project of levelling up and to define it more closely and in advance of a white paper later this year that will set out our plan to level up and we should begin by stressing – in all humility - that this is a huge undertaking that many governments have debated about and dabbled in before and though there have been some successes the overall results are disappointing and yet it could be so very different. We don't need to look at what has happened in the old East Germany which has now overtaken parts of our country, we can look at our own history and the ability of places to recover and regenerate – without natural resources, without discovering gold or oil under their streets and we should never forget that our national capital suffered a 50 year period of decline when its population shrank by as many as two million people between the 1930s and the mid 1980s and the same urban decay was seen in cities around the country and the inequalities were so acute that when I became mayor in 2008 you could travel from Westminster to Canning Town on the jubilee line and lose a year of life expectancy with every stop and yet at the end of my time as mayor that was no longer true- life expectancy had increased across the capital – but the gains had been greatest among the poorest groups and that is what I mean by levelling up.

There is much more to do in London, and there are still huge inequalities – but deprivation levels have been dramatically reduced and let us be clear about the difference between this project and levelling down. We don't want to level down. We don't want to decapitate the tall poppies, we don't think you can make the poor parts of the country richer by making the rich parts poorer and you can't hope to stimulate growth around the country by actually constraining companies from developing as the Labour government did in the 1960s, with the ludicrous industrial development certificates.

Levelling up can only be achieved with a strong and dynamic wealth creating economy. There has got to be a catalytic role for government, and government is there to provide a strategic lead but that requires consistency from government – not chopping and changing - in the last 40 years we have had 40 different schemes or bodies to boost local or regional growth- we had the Abercrombie plan in London, the new towns, the economic development committees, the urban regeneration corporations, the new deal for communities, the regional development agencies, and yet none of these initiatives have been powerful enough to deal with the long term secular trends- de-industrialisation or the decline of coastal resorts and that basic half-heartedness has been coupled with an unspoken assumption by policy makers that investment should always follow success- so that to use a football metaphor the approach has always been to hang around the goal mouth rather than being the playmaker. Or to borrow from the Bible, for biblical comparison, governments have created a sort of Matthew effect to him that hath shall be given so you end up investing in areas where house prices are already sky high and where transport is already congested and by turbo charging those areas, especially in London and the south east – you drive prices even higher and you force more and more people to move to the same expensive areas- and two thirds of graduates from our top 30 universities end up in London – and the result is that their commutes are longer, their trains are more crowded, they have less time with their kids, they worry at the same time that the younger generation won't be able to get a home and that their leafy suburb or village will be engulfed by new housing development but without the infrastructure to go with it.

And so the process of levelling up is not just aimed at creating opportunity throughout the UK, it is about relieving the pressure in the parts that are overheating and to those who seriously worry that levelling up could in some way be to the detriment of London and the south east let me make some obvious points and I speak as someone who has spent more than a decade now campaigning to extend the lead of London as the greatest city on earth. Does anyone really think it has been bad for London to have the BBC growing and flourishing in Manchester as well? Is it bad for JP Morgan that they have a back office Bournemouth that is one of the biggest private sector employers in Dorset? That's not bad for London. Of course not. And it is obvious that greater regional prosperity means more customers and more business for our national metropolis that already leads the world in financial and business services and so many other sectors of the 21st century economy, and so levelling up is not a jam-spreading operation, it's not robbing Peter to pay Paul, its not zero sum it's win win for the whole United Kingdom and so here is the plan for levelling up. And I believe we will have made progress in levelling up when we have begun to raise living standards, spread opportunity, improved our public services and restored people's sense of pride in their community.

We've got to begin by getting the basics right, begin with fighting crime because we will never level up our country while some kids face the misery of dealing with the county lines drugs gangs, and some kids do not and that is why we are putting rings of steel around towns that are plagued by these gangs – and steadily driving them out and so far we have squeezed more than a thousand of these county lines out of business and that's why we have tough sentences, we are recruiting 20k more police, and we will be ruthless in fighting crime because it is the poorest and most vulnerable who suffer the most, and to give kids alternatives to these gangs we will invest in grassroots sports of all kinds.

And I can today announce another £50 m for football pitches so that we give new opportunity to the stars of the future and so that ultimately you are never more than 15 minutes away from a high quality football pitch and we won't level up when so many people are sick, or off work because they are stressed, or because they suffer from obesity or problems with their mental health and that's why we are tackling the problems of junk food and rewarding exercise and that's why we are building 40 new hospitals and recruiting 50,000 more nurses, and we are going to deal with the backlog of those waiting for elective surgeries and the single biggest thing we can do of course, is investing in public services to change their lives to give them the confidence and the natural serotonin they need to deal with the day is to help them into a good job on decent pay and that means the private sector has to invest to create those jobs and we must create conditions for business confidence and when people look at the west midlands, here where we are today, the birthplace of the industrial revolution, the place that changed the world, they remember that – unbelievably – the number of private sector jobs actually fell three per cent under the last Labour government in the West Midlands, and they know that one of the problems holding the west midlands back has been the lack of mass transit, public transport, the basic difficulty of getting from your home to your place of work and so that's why I support the mayor's plan to put in those new metro lines, and that's why today I am fulfilling my promise to give eight city regions like the west midlands the funding to start making their bus and train networks as good as London by launching our city region sustainable transport fund with £4.2 billion that local leadership can spend on projects like contactless ticketing new tramlines, bike lanes – massively popular in this country, believe me as part of the biggest infrastructure investments in history.

We are spending £640 billion on roads and rail, on housing and clean power generation and we will use the findings of Sir Peter Hendy's union connectivity review to see how we can strengthen the sinews of the whole United Kingdom getting HS2 trains to Scotland and giving new impetus to projects that benefit the whole country the A1 that links Scotland and England, and the A75 that links Scotland and Northern Ireland, the links into wales along the M4 corridor and the A55 and dozens of other crucial and overdue projects like the A303 to the greater south west. We have made huge progress in rolling out gigabit broadband throughout the UK. When I became Prime Minister almost exactly two years ago, 7 per cent of the country, that I never tired of saying at the time, had gigabit connection. By the end of the year we will be hitting 60 per cent and that has the potential to revolutionise our patterns of work and provide a tail wind for levelling up and no matter how frustrating we may find a life on zoom we can see how this technology – and its successors – will allow the places that have been left behind to become places that retain their talent, and professionals will be able to stay and bring up their families and enjoy a higher quality of life without the need to move to the supposedly fashionable conurbation and we are also helping young people to fulfil their dream of owning the home they live with our 95 per cent mortgage guarantee and reserving a portion of homes in some new developments for first time buyers at a discount of at least 30 per cent and this government is backing the improvement in the lives of people growing up in those areas, with the levelling up fund worth £4.8 billion – to be spent across the whole of Britain – England, Scotland and Wales and with town deals – with another 15 of them announced today, helping local people to renew they live from the civic square in Tilbury to the hippodrome theatre in Todmorden, removing chewing gum and graffiti, breathing new life into town centres through our new High Streets Strategy, published today and though each change may be small the overall effect can be transformed in making that environment attractive as a place to live and bring up a family and to invest and what is the key question that young families ask themselves about a neighbourhood- not just whether it is safe – but whether the schools are good and we need to give all our children the guarantee of a great education with safe and well disciplined classes and fantastic teachers so we are literally levelling up funding for primary and secondary education, with a higher level of funding per pupil and so that every teacher starts on a salary of £30,000 and we must face the reality that in loss of learning, and loss of life chances, some children have been hit harder by this pandemic than others and so we have put in place the biggest tutoring programme anywhere in the world to help them catch up, a catch up programme that is already worth £3 billion that was invested as soon as this government came in.

But it is in post 16 education where the differences across our society are the starkest It cannot be right that Bath has 78 per cent with a level three or a level equivalent qualification and Bradford has only 42 per cent, and that is why this government is obsessed with skilling up our population. We love our universities and we believe they are one of the glories of this country but we need to escalate the value of practical and vocational education that can transform people's lives. And that is why we are rolling out T-levels and apprenticeships because we know that higher level apprentices earn more than the average graduate five years after graduation. That's why we're creating the lifetime skills guarantee and so as we improve skills and cut crime and upgrade transport and ensure that gigabit broadband is probing its invisible electronic tendrils into every home in the land and opening limitless vistas of information and opportunity. By that process, we want to make the whole country more attractive for investment. We are turning this country into a science superpower, doubling public investment in R and D to £22 billion and we want to use that lead to trigger more private sector investment and to level up across the country so that we have hubs or research and innovation like the one we are in today which is actually driving battery technology. This battery industrialisation sector is helping to drive battery technology and we're going to need huge numbers of these batteries. We need 70,000 skilled individuals to be making the batteries alone. This battery development will drive investment from Cornwall to Thurso, so that without in any way detracting from the golden triangle of Oxford London Cambridge – the greatest scientific constellation anywhere in this hemisphere – we drive high tech high wage jobs across the UK and we will use new post Brexit freedoms – such as freeports – to drive those investments across the UK especially in green technology, from wind turbines to batteries we've seen being developed here today, to zero emission planes to solar to nuclear power , hydrogen – all of which is set out in the ten point plan for a green industrial revolution and our new office for investment will land investments and continues to land investments in all parts of the UK, like– Nissan in Sunderland and the new gigafactory for batteries, Stellantis in Ellesmere port, Fujifilm in Teesside, Ciner Glass in Ebbw vale – all just in the last few weeks. Not forgetting the wise decision of Heinz tomato ketchup to relocate back to Wigan from Holland and now is the time to scrutinise those incentives that we offer against those offered by other countries.

Yes business already overwhelmingly chooses Britain and it was good to see the London stock market recover its edge over Amsterdam the other day. But now is the time to do even better and then there is one final ingredient, the most important factor in levelling up, the yeast that lifts the whole mattress of dough, the magic sauce – the ketchup of catch-up and that is leadership and this brings me to the crux of the argument- this country is not only one of the most imbalanced in the developed world, it is also one of the most centralised – and those two defects are obviously connected. We are making progress… we have created metro mayors, I used to be one, and the best of them are relentless champions for their communities like Andy Street and Andy provides the answer to the question of who you going to call in the West Midlands– if you are an EV pioneer- and you want a brownfield site and you want someone who can put together the transport, the skills, the utilities– then you know exactly who to ring- you ring Andy- and already after 20 years of trial and error we are starting to the see the results of this devolution.

It is not entirely a coincidence that our great cities that had seemed to be in long term decline are now seeing a resurgence in population and a growth in productivity that outstrips the rest of the country and we need this levelling up to go much further and faster. Because the UK is outstandingly successful in spite of its handicap. If you look at France or other G7 economies the levels of productivity are much more comparable across all their big cities.

Imagine if we could level up – not just lengthening London's lead around the world. but closing the gap between London and the rest of the UK's great cities. That would increase the national GDP by tens of billions, the opportunities for millions of people and then we should go further. The political geography of this country is as rich and as diverse and as idiosyncratic as the very landscape itself. The UK will never fit into some cookie cutter division into regions named after points of the compass.

But where there are obvious communities of identity and affinity and real economic geographies – there is the chance to encourage local leadership and I want to return to this point. It is not just that this country is the most economically imbalanced – it is the most centralised. That's because for many decades we relentlessly crushed local leadership and we must be honest about why this was necessary, it was because we were in the grip of a real ideological conflict in which irresponsible municipal socialist governments were bankrupting cities and were so genuinely hostile to business in such a way that government was forced to intervene. Now, with some notable exceptions that argument is now over and most of the big metro mayors know that private sector investment is crucial. They know that one of their jobs – for which they will be attacked in their local media – is to get on a plane and go to the big trade and property fairs and hustle for their hometown and today we want to go a step further, because if the big cities are beginning to catch up it is the rest of the country, those historic towns, our shires where local leaders now need to be given the tools to make things happen for their communities and to do that we must now take a more flexible approach to devolution in England.

We need to re-write the rulebook, with new deals for the counties. There is no reason why our great counties cannot benefit from the same powers we have devolved to city leaders so that they can take charge of levelling up local infrastructure like the bypass they desperately want to end congestion and pollution and to unlock new job or new bus routes plied by clean green buses because they get the chance to control the bus routes. Or they can level up the skills of the people in their area because they know what local business needs, and they are working with them every day and of course you can see risk and the catch in all this, we have to learn lessons of the last 50 years. Ken Livingstone of the 2000s was a very different creature from Ken Livingstone of the 1980s, but the loony left remains pretty loony and we need accountability.

As I say, we will not be proceeding with a one size fits all template. One possibility is a directly elected mayor for individual counties but there are other possibilities. We could devolve power for a specific local purpose like a county or city coming together to improve local services like buses. So my offer to you – and I am talking to all those who see a role for yourselves in this local leadership- come to us, come to Neil O Brien or to me with your vision for how you will level up, back business, attract more good jobs and improve your local services.

Come to us with a plan for strong accountable leadership and we will give you the tools to change your area for the better, and it can be done, because there is no intrinsic reason why one part of this country should be fated to decline or indeed fated to succeed. The towns and cities that people say have been left behind have not lacked for human ingenuity, they have not been short of people with courage or intelligence or imagination, and there is no place in this country that does not have something special, something about their scenery or culture or history, some selling point unlike anywhere else in the world and they don't think that they are left behind and they are right. They think that they are the future or could be the future and they are right about that too, all they need is the right people to believe in them to lead them and to invest in them and for government to get behind them and that is what we are going to do.

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