

DON'T WORRY, it will be over soon. No, not the winter weather, or Keir Starmer's premiership (although come to think of it...). I mean the daily speculation about what will or won't be in Rachel Reeves' con-founded Budget.

The Chancellor presumably put off the event for as long as she could for two reasons: a forlorn hope that something would turn up and she would be spared coming back for a second helping of tax rises having promised not to; and to give her plenty of time to prepare the public for another raid on their finances.

No doubt this seemed like a good idea at the time. But the effect is that in terms of political news – apart from the odd entertaining resignation, the continued shambles over migration, sinister plans for compulsory digital ID and a spate of accidental prisoner releases that could be called a comedy of errors if it weren't so serious – the country has been talking about Reeves and her avaricious intentions since summer.

The business of managing expectations, or 'pitch rolling' as they like to call it in Westminster, has included rumoured new taxes on homes, cars, pensions, partnerships and gambling, as well as

‘She must explain why Labour are failing, and offer solutions’

changes to National Insurance and ISA allowances, and a new levy on overseas investors who have the temerity (or sense) to leave the country. The pitch was rolled for an income tax rise, then abruptly de-rolled. Even Commons Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle has started referring to it as the 'hokey-cokey Budget'. While the voters might not know what's coming specifically on Wednesday, they know in general.

Asked in one of my focus groups last week what she was expecting from the Budget, one woman said: 'A smaller Christmas present.'

Yet knowing what is on the way doesn't make people any less cross about it. I found the overwhelming majority of voters felt that they are already 'doing their bit', in the Chancellor's pitch-rolling words, and many resented being asked for ever-more tax with nothing to show in return.

The anger is compounded by the growing conviction that Britain's dire economic situation can no longer be blamed on the Tory inheritance. Most voters believe Reeves is planning to raise tax again because of decisions made by the Labour Government, rather than factors outside its control.

Most voters believe we spend too much, rather than tax too little. They remember Reeves and Starmer abandoning any attempt to control the ballooning cost of welfare. Hiking taxes while scrapping the two-child benefit cap,

As two-thirds of voters say they'll be worse off after the Chancellor's Budget tax grab, LORD ASHCROFT argues this is a huge opportunity for the Tory leader to show she offers a credible alternative

SEIZE THE DAY, KEMI

SPOTLIGHT:
Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch



COMMENT

By **LORD ASHCROFT**

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which Labour MPs loathe but most voters want to keep, would add insult to injury.

Despite all this, surprisingly little has moved in the past few months in the big political picture. Reform have taken the lead, the Conservatives have somewhat stabilised their position, and Labour have dropped gently into a battle for third place with the Greens.

But recent dramas have not really changed how people see the parties. Labour have disappointed many of those who elected them, but some still give them the benefit of the doubt after 14 years of the Tories.

Reform offers potentially dramatic change, but there are doubts over the coherence of the party's plans and whether they harbour elements of bigotry or prejudice.

And despite ideas such as scrapping stamp duty being noticed, the Conservatives are still battling to get a hearing or make an impression on the national consciousness. This was always going to be the case, whoever led the Tories and whatever they did or said. As I advised in the introduction to Losing It, my aptly named (if I say so myself) analysis of the party's 2024 defeat, 'Having just booted you out of office, people have seen and heard quite enough of you for a while... You won't be able to get

Bernie



anyone to look at you until they are ready. But when they do look, you have to be ready too.'

That moment may well be approaching. The 'push factor' away from Labour will need to reach a certain intensity before any 'pull factor' towards the Tories takes effect. The Budget – on top of the Government's other failings, not to mention growing doubts over the future of Starmer's leadership – could give many a reason to look more seriously at the alternatives.

The fact that the Budget response is made by the leader of

the official Opposition is a huge opportunity for Kemi Badenoch. More voters will see it than watch PMQs, or saw clips of her conference speech. Notoriously, it is one of Parliament's most demanding occasions. But answering a blizzard of announcements at perilously short notice is only one part of it, and the least important.

Nailing the Government's cack-handed economic management is another part, but this is the easiest – people do it every day, up and down the country. And while she needs to echo people's anger, this in itself just fuels the idea that new ideas are needed.

Most importantly, this is Badenoch's chance to show those ideas. She must have a serious analysis that explains not just how Labour are failing, but why: why spending is out of control, why public services get no better despite ever-higher taxes, why Britain is so unproductive and living standards so stagnant, and why successive governments have seemed powerless to do anything about it.

And she must show that tough solutions are there, if we have the appetite for them.

At her best, Badenoch is able to convey ideas in a way that combines principle, humour, and a knack for telling home truths. This is a moment for her to seize. Paradoxical as it may seem, the worse Labour get, the better the Conservatives have to be.

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QUOTES of the week

'When I enter, the house manager announces, "Meghan, Duchess of Sussex", even though we appear to be the only other two people in the house.'

Harper's Bazaar journalist Kaitlyn Greenidge recounts the bizarre moment she was introduced to the former Suits star ahead of an interview.

'Niamh and Saoirse.'

Two Irish names that top the list of 'how do I pronounce' internet searches. Niamh is pronounced 'Neev' and Saoirse is 'Ser-sha'.

'If I'm guilty of anything, it is having bad general knowledge. And that is better than being a cheat.'

Former England cricketer Monty Panesar hits back at Steve Smith – guilty of ball tampering – after the former Australian captain mocked his Mastermind performance.



'We've all had nights out we regret.'

Today programme host Emma Barnett's tongue-in-cheek aside after a report suggested Neanderthals and early humans may have kissed.

'Parasocial.'

Cambridge Dictionary's word of the year – it means a one-sided connection someone feels towards a famous person.

'I wish I had the privilege of walking around this country and not seeing the division the issue of migration and asylum is creating. Unlike him, unfortunately, I am the one regularly called a f*** P*** and told to go back home.'**

Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood hits back at Lib Dem Max Wilkinson as she outlines a new crackdown.

'She's much cuter than me.'

Renee Zellweger's verdict on a new statue of her character Bridget Jones in London's Leicester Square.